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The Eshmoun Valley Survey 2004 : Interim Report

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ESHMOUN VALLEY

THE ESHMOUN VALLEY SURVEY, 2004 INTERIM REPORT

Krzysztof Jakubiak, Michał Neska

The Polish-Lebanese survey in the upper part of the Auali (or Eshmoun) river valley was initiated as a salvage project necessitated by the projected building of a dam in the valley to collect water from the Lebanese mountains. Field walking took place on September 6-24, 2004.¹

The valley, which reaches the sea a few kilometers north of ancient Sidon, may have served this important Phoenician city as a natural economic hinterland. It was likely important also because of the sacredness of the river itself, as witnessed by its ancient name, referring to the god Eschmoun in the Phoenician period and to Asklepios during Greco-Roman times.

¹ The project was initiated in agreement with the Direction Générale des Antiquités and with the personal support of the Director, Mr. Frédéric Hussein. Participating in the project on the Lebanese side were: Mr. Assad Seif, co-director; Dr. Corinne Yazbek, archaeologist; Mr. Abdallah Ala'Eddine, ceramologist; Mr. Ziyad Al Murr, archaeologist. On the Polish side, the team comprised, apart from the authors, both archaeologists, Mrs. Kinga Bigoraj, archaeozoologist; Mrs. Olga Wasilewska, archaeologist and documentalist; Mrs. Dorota Świerczewska, documentalist; Mr. Maciej Krajcarz, geologist.

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The survey extended from the Mar Mousa Chapel situated on the northern valley slopes several kilometers up the Barouk gorge, then several hundred meters along the Wadi Bhannine in the direction of Jezzine, finishing on the southern river bank opposite the Chapel of Mar Mousa.² The team effected a survey of the slopes and a substantial part of the valley floor.

Estimating settlement density in the valley at all periods, the 20th century included, was a key objective [Fig. 1]. Consequently, the ruined stone buildings, which were quite common in the valley, were surveyed with equal attention despite their recent date (probably late Ottoman and 20th cen-

ture). At least 27 houses of this kind were recorded on 16 of the 42 sites registered this year. Rich country residences were in evidence likewise as simple rural houses. The structure designated as site 13, situated on the northern slopes of the Auali Valley, was among the most exceptional because of the huge ashlar, possibly salvaged from older buildings, used in its construction [Fig. 2]. Another structure (site 20), located near the road from the Roman temple at Bisri to Barouk, was a very well preserved two-story building with traces of a wooden terrace on the northern side. Another two houses (sites 26, 30) were of similar construction with arched vaults and remains of an upper floor. The ruins of a farm on site 6 (Al Faulkhara), which occupies an excellent position from the strategic point of view [Fig. 3], were not the only remains there; collected pottery testified to occupation already in the Late Roman period.

Three relatively big settlements were located. The village on site 10 comprised five houses scattered a few hundred meters apart, on the northern slopes of the Auali Valley, east of Al Faulkhara. The architectural remains were of generally turn-of-the-19th century date, but Late Roman and Early Byzantine pottery found in one of the houses testifies to at least a part of the settlement being built in that period.

Site 38 on the southern slopes of the Auali Valley consists today of three or four structures, but there is every reason to believe that it was bigger once. Some of the buildings were probably destroyed and the stone used for the construction of agricultural terraces. A small cave nearby could have been a tomb, but there is no evidence in support of this idea. Examination of col-

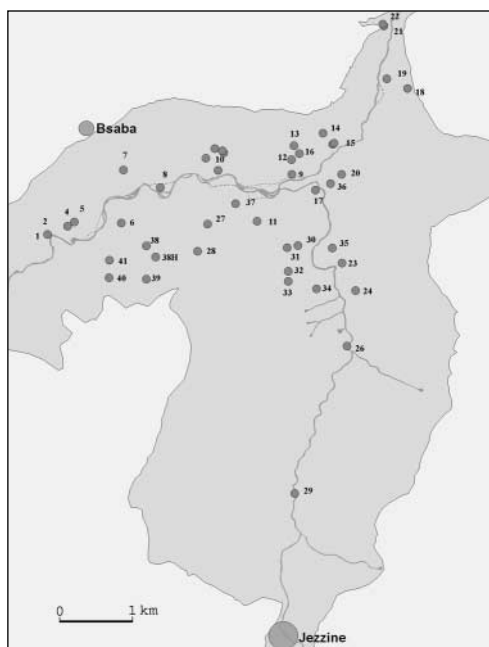


Fig. 1. Sites located during the survey in Auali (Eshmoun) Valley (Drawing K. Jakubiak, M. Neska)

2 A detailed overview of the survey will be published in an upcoming volume of BAAL.



*Fig. 2. Site 13, view from the northeast
(Photo K. Jakubiak)*



*Fig. 3. Site 6 (Al Fankhara), view from the east
(Photo K. Jakubiak)*

lected sherds placed the origins of the village in Late Hellenistic times and its continuation under Roman rule. It was inhabited until the late 19th, possibly even first half of the 20th century.

The several stone-built houses occupying the upper part of a rocky saddle identified as site 40 were probably not the only structures there; thick bushes and high grass in the area may conceal still other buildings. The dating evidence suggested the same or similar period of use as in the case of the above mentioned villages. Several hundred meters north of the site, a small stronghold or residence was located, dated on similar grounds as the village above. Perhaps it acted as the local manor house. It was certainly sufficiently well finished and had relatively monumental doorways.

Two rock cut tombs were documented during the survey. The first was visible from the road leading east from the Mar Mousa Chapel. The entrance to the chamber, 0.85 by 0.90 m, was blocked originally with a square stone block, now lost [Fig. 4]. The grave was completely looted, human bones

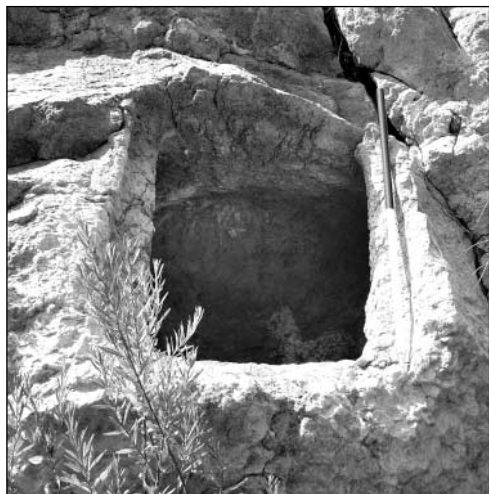


Fig. 4. Site 2, entrance to a Roman tomb
(Photo K. Jakubiak)

being observed scattered around the grave and inside it. The stone-dressing technique in this case betrayed Roman influence.

The second tomb, located c. 500 m northeast of the Roman temple at Bisri, also dates from Roman times. The chamber has two niches and four 'sarcophagi' cut into the walls and floor and the pottery evidence from the tomb attributed its use to the late 3rd-early 4th centuries AD. The pottery may have been imported from Pergamon.

The remains of a Roman temple at Bisri were one of the easternmost and most important sites in the surveyed part of the Auali Valley. Today only four standing granite columns are visible. Many stone elements, once decorating a temple, were found in the vicinity, including part of a pillar and a fragment of capital.

Southwest of the temple, a stone Late Roman/Byzantine(?) bridge can be seen. It was repaired repeatedly with stone bricks, last time supposedly during the Ottoman period, but the big limestone ashlars from the lowermost parts of the structure were originally Roman. Moreover, some remains of a small stone dam are still visible in the river, about 50 m upstream from the bridge.

Another, bigger stone bridge was noted going further south along Wadi Bhennine in the direction of Jezzine. The building technique suggests a Late Roman date at the earliest, but the bridge was probably constructed later. One of the blocks built into the bridge bears architectural decoration, too eroded at present for dating on the grounds of style [Fig. 5]. It could be late Hellenistic or, more likely, Roman in date.

Three of the relatively big sites identified in the course of the season were the most remarkable. These were site 1 near the Mar Mousa Chapel, site 23 near the Ain Mayasr source, and site 25 situated several hundred meters farther south.

Site 1 was probably a big farm or residence, possibly connected with a small cult place [Fig. 6]. The earliest pottery is of Persian age, but the main occupation here was in Late Roman times. Dating from this period is a rusticated stone wall. It appears to have been repaired in the times of the Crusaders.

Site 23, covering several hectares, was probably a settlement in the 18th and 19th centuries, possibly also at the beginning of the 20th, to judge by the pottery evidence. No architecture of any kind was noted, however, demonstrating how even relatively modern sites could be completely destroyed by recent agricultural activity.

The very promising site 25, which is situated very favorably on the eastern slopes of a valley running to Jezzine, between two springs, could not be surveyed because of

the owner's refusal. It covered an area of several hectares and appears to have been occupied from the late 2nd or early 1st century BC through the Byzantine period and into the modern age.

Geological observations carried out during the survey led to five geological terraces being distinguished. These terraces were formed in effect of erosion and accumulation processes. Of greatest interest from the archaeological point of view were the artifacts found in the upper part of a second-terrace section. The sediments of this second terrace had been cut by an erosional event and the resulting channel was filled with deposits of terrace number one. Pottery evidence from the upper part of the second terrace sediments dated them to the 3rd century AD. In other words, these deposits were formed either during



Fig. 5. Roman temple area at Bisri. Architectural molding, presumably of Roman date (outlined in the photo) observed on one of the blocks built into the span of a bridge (Photo K. Jakubiak)

or after the 3rd century AD. The process was observed equally distinctly at the Roman temple in Bisri. The thick-grained alluvial deposits, which now cover the ruins of the temple and neighboring area, started accumulating in the 3rd century. These sediments clearly eroded the underlying silts, on which the temple had been built. This observation suggests a significant change in the river regime, from accumulating to eroding, and strong current accumulation (2-3 m thick) caused by either climatic, tectonic or eustatic change in the area.

It should be added that the oldest material found in river deposits comprised stone axes and big flint flakes, the latter going back probably to the Middle Palaeo-

lithic. The axes are most likely Neolithic or even Chalcolithic in origin. Human activity in the area was obviously much earlier than previously suspected and it is to be expected that sites earlier than Hellenistic could be concealed from view today by alluvial deposits accumulating on the valley bottom.

To summarize the first season of the Polish-Lebanese survey in Auali (Eshmoun) Valley, it should be noted that the upper parts of the valley and its immediate surroundings played a role of importance starting from the Late Hellenistic period and especially in Roman times. Surprisingly, no trace of an occupation earlier than Persian (apart from incidental Palaeolithic and Neolithic flints) was discovered.

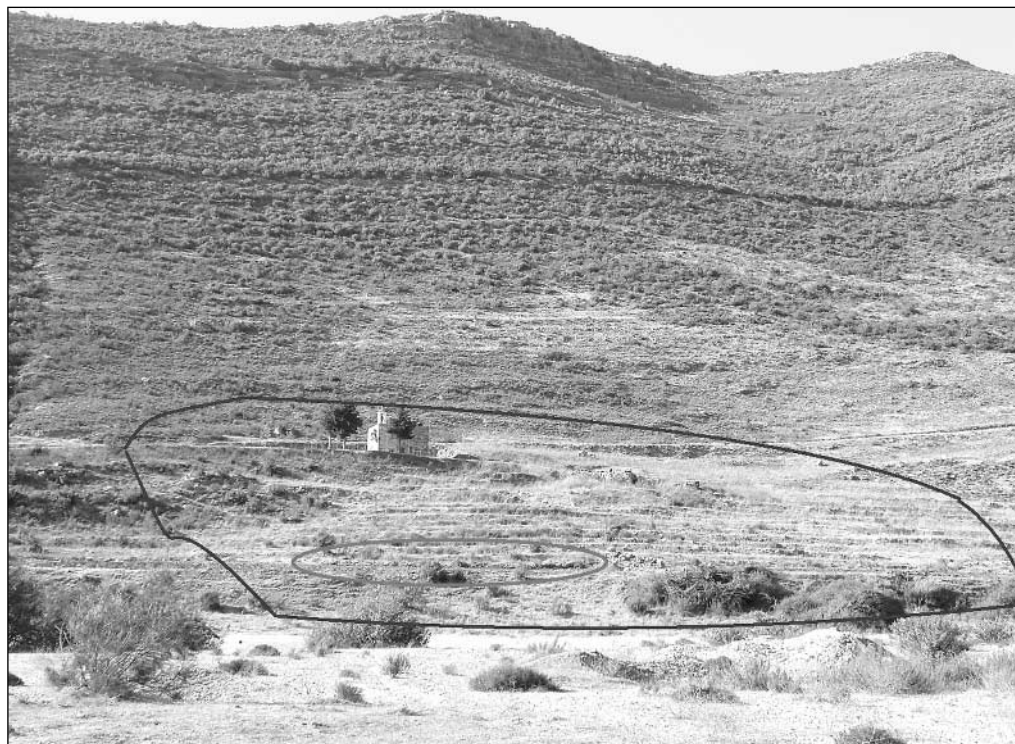


Fig. 6. Site 1, general view from the south
(Photo K. Jakubiak)