

# Echmoun

## A Unique Phoenician Site in Lebanon

The Temple of Eshmoun, less than an hour from Beirut, is situated one kilometer from Sidon in a lush valley of citrus groves on the Awwali River. The site is known locally as "Bustan esh Sheikh". Whether you visit it in spring when the air is fragrant with blossoms, or early winter when the fruit is ripe, Echmoun is a special place to visit.

This Phoenician temple complex, dedicated to the healing god Eshmoun, is the only Phoenician site in Lebanon that has retained more than its foundation stones. Building was begun at the end of the 7th century B.C. and later additions were made in the following centuries. Thus, many elements near the original



Aerial view of the site



Relief of children procession

temple site were completed long after the Phoenician era, including the Roman period colonnade, mosaics, a nymphaeum and the foundations of a Byzantine church. All of these buildings testify to the site's lasting importance.

## The History of Echmoun

Legend has it that Eshmoun was a young man of Beirut who loved to hunt. The goddess Astarte fell in love with him, but to escape her advances he mutilated himself and died. Not to be outdone, Astarte brought him back to life in the form of a god. It is also said that the village of *Qabr Shmoun* (translates the Tomb of Eshmoun), near Beirut, still preserves the memory of the young god.

Known primarily as a god of healing, Eshmoun's death and resurrection also gave him the role of a fertility god who dies and is reborn annually.

As the god of healing, Eshmoun was identified with Asclepius, the Greek god of medical art. It is from

belief in the healing power of Eshmoun-Asclepius and the snake that we get the sign of the medical profession that is now used worldwide. Our modern caduceus, a staff entwined with two serpents, is derived from these symbols. The caduceus can be seen in a gold plaque of Eshmoun and the goddess Hygieia (Health Goddess) which was found near the temple. It shows Eshmoun holding in his right hand a staff around which a serpent is entwined. There is also an early 3rd century A.D. Beirut coin depicting Eshmoun standing between two serpents.

Each Phoenician city state had its own gods, and Eshmoun was one of the favorites of Sidon. The site of his temple must have been chosen because of the nearby water source which was used in the healing rituals. It was the custom to offer statues to the god that bore the names of those who came for healing. The fact that most of these votive pieces depict children suggests Eshmoun may have been regarded as the pediatrician of the times.

During the Persian era, between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C., Sidon was the first Phoenician city to be noted for the opulence of its kings, the advanced culture of its intelligentsia and the excellent reputation of its industry. The Persian kings held the kings of



Phoenician inscription





Roman colonnade

Sidon in great regard and granted them many rewards, especially for the Sidonian fleet's active participation on their side during their wars against Egyptians and Greeks.

It was at that time that **Eshmounazar II**, the son of **Tabnit I**, acceded to the throne. Inscriptions found on the sarcophagus of Eshmounazar (discovered in 1858 and now in the Louvre Museum) related that he and his mother Amashtarte (servant of Astarte) built temples to the gods of Sidon. One of these was the temple of the Holy God "Eshmoun at the source of Ydlal near the cistern".

The temple of Eshmoun, built by Eshmounazar II and rediscovered in this century during the excavations at Boustan esh-Sheikh, was destroyed around the middle of the fourth century B.C. Although the temple was never rebuilt, some small buildings, chapels and pools were restored. This allowed visitors, pagan as well as Christian, to attend the sanctuary. The site

remained popular until the end of the third century A.D., even though it was largely in ruins and littered with debris.

## The Excavations

For centuries before its excavation, the site of the Temple of Eshmoun was a quarry. Emir Fakhreddine II, for example, used its massive blocks to build a bridge over the Awwali River in the 17th century. Today only the foundations of this bridge remain.

In 1900, an ottoman expedition found phoenician inscriptions in the area of the yet undiscovered temple. Twenty years later successful soundings were made on the site and in 1925-26 excavations near the river uncovered the Roman mosaic floor and several marble statues of children dating to the persian period. Another inscription in Phoenician letters bearing the name of Eshmoun was found near the river a short time later.



"Tribune of Eshmoun", left side (National Museum of Beirut)



View showing various levels of construction

A few kilometers from the site inscriptions bearing the name of Bodashtart were found, probably incised on the occasion of the completion of an important canal system.

Although the land around the site was purchased in the mid-1940. Serious excavation work did not begin until 1963.

## Visiting The Site

**Roman Stairway (13)** : The most imposing ruin at Eshmoun site is the temple complex. An overall view can be seen by climbing the mosaic-covered Roman stairway (13) that reaches the Podium.

**The Roman Road(10)**: The approach to the temple site is along a Roman processional colonnaded road.

**The Neo Babylonian Structure (1)** : The oldest section is a pyramid-shaped structure with a short flight of stairs on its summit and a wall to its right dating back to the 6th century B.C., when Phoenician city states were under the political and cultural influence of Babylon.



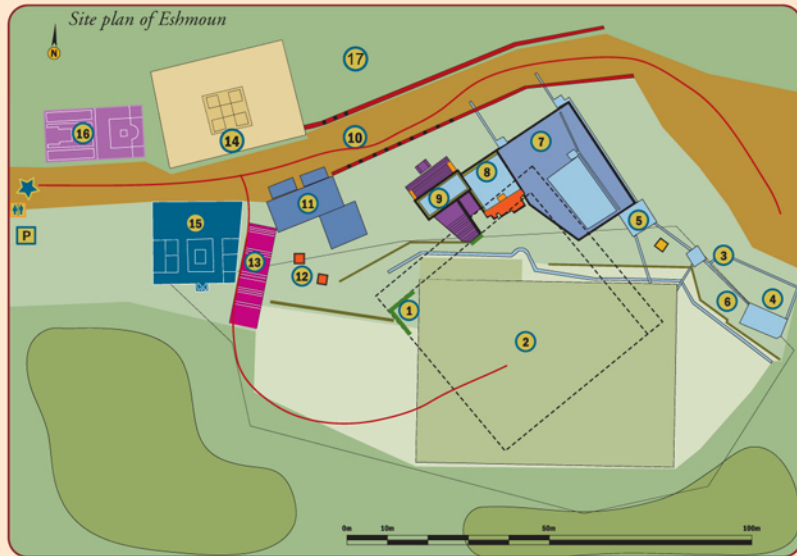
The throne of Astrate, flanked by two sphinxes

**The Persian Achaemenian Podium (2):** The second and largest podium was built by the Sidonian King Eshmounazar in the 5th century B.C. and probably enlarged later by the King Bodashtart whose inscriptions can still be seen on one of the inner slabs of the massive retaining walls of the temple.

**Two Shrines (12):** built in the yard of the temple. Where once two marble bull protomes, dating back to the Persian time, were set and are nowadays exhibited at the National Museum of Beirut.

**The Water System (3):** The site's healing waters were channeled through a canal system to the sacred basins (4, 5, 6, 9, and 11).

**The 3rd century B.C Temple (7) & the Pool of Astarte (8):** Another temple was added in the 3rd century B.C. . You can still see part of the original frieze representing worshippers, hunting scenes, and children's games. Near the far north-west angle of the temple



Site Plan: Assaad Seif

#### Plan of the Site:

1. Original Neo-Babylonian podium (6th century B.C.) and stairway
2. Podium of the later Achaemenian period
3. Canal system
4. Sacred basin (5th century B.C.)
5. Secondary basins
6. Site of sacred rituals
7. A temple of the 3rd century B.C.
8. Pool of Astarte's throne (3rd century B.C.)
9. Tiers of seats and basins
10. Roman colonnade (3rd century A.D.)
11. Ablution basins
12. Two shrines
13. Stairway
14. Courtyard with porch and mosaics depicting the Four Seasons (3rd century A.D.)
15. Nymphaeum and mosaics of the Maenad (3rd century A.D.)
16. Byzantine church
17. Remains of the residential area



is a sanctuary of Venus/Astarte (8), also from the Hellenistic period (333-64 B.C.). Inside this small area measuring 11 x 10 meters, is a throne flanked by two sphinxes which is known as the "Throne of Astrate". The throne stands on a single block of stone with a cornice sculptured in the Egyptian style. A frieze, unfortunately very mutilated, depicts a hunting scene.

A later addition to the temple is a small mosaic room guarded by a now headless sphinx. An inscription dates this section to 335 A.D.

To the left of the pool stands a 22 meters long wall with reliefs of drunken revelry and a man attempting to seize a large plumed rooster. It was apparently common practice among the Greeks to sacrifice cocks to Asklepios (Eshmoun).

**The Roman Colonnade (10) and the Nymphcum (15):** During the roman and early christian eras (64 B.C. to 330 A.D.) the site of the Temple of Eshmoun and its miraculous waters continued to serve as a place of pilgrimage. Within the phoenician temple site, the Romans added the processional walkway, basins for ablutions and a nymphcum with pictorial



The four seasons mosaic (detail)



Capital of a bull protomes (National Museum)

mosaics (15), largely still intact. Worn statuettes of three nymphs stand in the niches of the fountain (9).

**The Four Seasons Mosaic (14):** On the left side of the roman road, opposite the temple complex is a courtyard with the remains of mosaics depicting the Four Seasons.

**The Byzantine Church (16):** To the left of the roman courtyard are the foundations of a byzantine period basilica, the last major period represented at Eshmoun. To the northwest side are the remains of a residential area (17) that was set out during the byzantine period.

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