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A note on excavations in central Beirut 1994-96

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The purpose of this note is to bring to the attention of a wider public the results of over two years of intensive excavations carried out in the centre of Beirut by a team of British and Lebanese archaeologists under the auspices of the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) of Lebanon. Work was entirely funded by the individual developers, though an initial grant for work on the Souks was awarded by the Leverhulme Research Trust.

The excavations were undertaken in advance of the redevelopment of the Beirut business district, which is presumed to cover the entire area of the ancient city. Three areas have been excavated (an area of some 33,000 m²) by the American University of Beirut/Archaeological Collaboration for Research and Excavation–Leverhulme team: the former Beirut Souks (DGA code BEY 006); the Waterfront area around the Majidiyeh Mosque (BEY 007); and a large Roman bath-building east of the Omari Mosque (the former Crusader cathedral) (BEY 045) (figs. 1-2). Numerous other excavations in the central district, not discussed here, have been undertaken by both other Lebanese and foreign teams.

The sheer scale of the areas excavated and amount of material culture recovered means that it will be some years before final reports appear. What is discussed below represents preliminary findings. Much of the stratigraphy and material culture is still being examined and interpreted, and the outline provided here will need to be updated and modified in the light of further research. This report does not, therefore, constitute a formal excavation report, interim or otherwise, but presents a series of impressions by those engaged in the study of the three sites. The reader is asked to note that all plans are preliminary, drawn directly from working copies.

The Souks (BEY 006)

Between June 1994 and January 1996, the team excavated in excess of 15,000 m² of highly complex urban deposits constituting a substantial portion of the classical urban landscape of ancient Beirut (Williams *et al.* 1996; Perring *et al.* 1996). The excavations comprised a large part of the former Beirut souks, between rue Trablous on the N and rue Weygand on the S, E and W of the former Souk Tawile (fig. 4).

The earliest deposits so far examined, located in the SE part of the site (between Souk Tawile and rue Allenby), suggest that development on the site first took place in the early Hellenistic period. Foundations were constructed of ashlar blocks founded on water-worn pebbles interspaced with small ashlar. This construction technique seems to have been typical for Hellenistic and early Roman Beirut. The layout of the buildings was rectilinear. This settlement does not appear to have covered the entire souks area and was concentrated on the E side of the site, around the area presumed to have been the ancient harbour. During the late 3rd or 2nd c. B.C. the settlement was extended, spreading westward. The alignment of buildings (and therefore, presumably, of streets) was rectilinear, and the later Hellenistic buildings were constructed using unmortared, well-cut ashlar blocks. The area excavated contained no monumental public buildings: this part of Hellenistic Beirut was evidently given over to modest houses and workshops. There is as yet no evidence that occupation was interrupted at any point during the Hellenistic period (e.g., by the supposed sack of the city by Seleucid usurper Diodotus Tryphon) or that anything arrested its development up to the foundation of the Augustan colony.

The colonial phase is marked by a number of characteristics. There is much evidence for construction between the late 1st c. B.C. and 1st c. A.D. (perhaps continuing into the 2nd c.). The alignments of the Hellenistic structures were in general respected, and new buildings were constructed on Hellenistic foundations. Properties remained fairly modest, with no high-status buildings found in the area excavated. Fragments of wall plaster (mainly from dumps rather