

= Temple of Eshmun =

The Temple of Eshmun (Arabic : ????? ?????) is an ancient place of worship dedicated to Eshmun , the Phoenician god of healing . It is located near the Awali river , 2 kilometres (1 @. @ 2 mi) northeast of Sidon in southwestern Lebanon . The site was occupied from the 7th century BC to the 8th century AD , suggesting an integrated relationship with the nearby city of Sidon . Although originally constructed by Sidonian king Eshmunazar II in the Achaemenid era (c . 529 ? 333 BC) to celebrate the city 's recovered wealth and stature , the temple complex was greatly expanded by Bodashtart , Yatan @-@ milk and later monarchs . Because the continued expansion spanned many centuries of alternating independence and foreign hegemony , the sanctuary features a wealth of different architectural and decorative styles and influences .

The sanctuary consists of an esplanade and a grand court limited by a huge limestone terrace wall that supports a monumental podium which was once topped by Eshmun 's Graeco @-@ Persian style marble temple . The sanctuary features a series of ritual ablution basins fed by canals channeling water from the Asclepius river (modern Awali) and from the sacred " Ydll " spring ; these installations were used for therapeutic and purificatory purposes that characterize the cult of Eshmun . The sanctuary site has yielded many artifacts of value , especially those inscribed with Phoenician texts , providing valuable insight into the site 's history and that of ancient Sidon .

The Eshmun Temple was improved during the early Roman Empire with a colonnade street , but declined after earthquakes and fell into oblivion as Christianity replaced paganism and its large limestone blocks were used to build later structures . The temple site was rediscovered in 1900 by local treasure hunters who stirred the curiosity of international scholars . Maurice Dunand , a French archaeologist , thoroughly excavated the site from 1963 until the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 . After the end of the hostilities and the retreat of Israel from Southern Lebanon , the site was rehabilitated and inscribed to the World Heritage Site tentative list .

= = Eshmun = =

Eshmun was the Phoenician god of healing and renewal of life ; he was one of the most important divinities of the Phoenician pantheon and the main male divinity of Sidon . Originally a nature divinity , and a god of spring vegetation , Eshmun was equated to Babylonian deity Tammuz . His role later expanded within the Phoenician pantheon , and he gained celestial and cosmic attributes .

The myth of Eshmun was related by the sixth century Syrian Neoplatonist philosopher Damascius and ninth century Patriarch of Constantinople , Photius . They recount that Eshmun , a young man from Beirut , was hunting in the woods when Astarte saw him and was stricken by his beauty . She harassed him with her amorous pursuit until he emasculated himself with an axe and died . The grieving goddess revived Eshmun and transported him to the heavens where she made him into a god of heaven .

From a historical perspective , the first written mention of Eshmun goes back to 754 BC , the date of the signing of the treaty between Assyrian king Ashur @-@ nirari V and Mati 'el , king of Arpad ; Eshmun figures in the text as a patron of the treaty .

Eshmun was identified with Asclepius as a result of the Hellenic influence over Phoenicia ; the earliest evidence of this equation is given by coins from Amrit and Acre from the third century BC . This fact is exemplified by the Hellenized names of the Awali river which was dubbed Asclepius fluvius , and the Eshmun Temple 's surrounding groves , known as the groves of Asclepius .

= = History = =

= = = Historical background = = =

In the 9th century BC , the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II conquered the Lebanon mountain range and its coastal cities . The new sovereigns exacted tribute from Sidon , along with every other

Phoenician city . These payments stimulated Sidon 's search for new means of provisioning and furthered Phoenician emigration and expansion , which peaked in the 8th century BC . When Assyrian king Sargon II died in 705 BC , the Sidonian king Luli joined with the Egyptians and Judah in an unsuccessful rebellion against Assyrian rule , but was forced to flee to Kition (modern Larnaca in Cyprus) with the arrival of the Assyrian army headed by Sennacherib , Sargon II 's son and successor . Sennacherib instated Ittobaal on the throne of Sidon and reimposed the annual tribute . When Abdi @-@ Milkutti ascended to Sidon 's throne in 680 BC , he also rebelled against the Assyrians . In response , the Assyrian king Esarhaddon laid siege to the city . Abdi @-@ Milkutti was captured and beheaded in 677 BC after a three @-@ year siege , while his city was destroyed and renamed Kar @-@ Ashur @-@ aha @-@ iddina (the harbor of Esarhaddon) . Sidon was stripped of its territory , which was awarded to Baal I , the king of rival Tyre and loyal vassal to Esarhaddon . Baal I and Esarhaddon signed a treaty in 675 in which Eshmun 's name features as one of the deities invoked as guarantors of the covenant .

= = = Construction = = =

Sidon returned to its former level of prosperity while Tyre was besieged for 13 years (586 ? 573 BC) by the Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar II . Nevertheless , the Sidonian king was still held in exile at the court of Babylon . Sidon reclaimed its former standing as Phoenicia 's chief city in the Achaemenid Empire (c.529 ? 333 BC) . During this period , Xerxes I awarded king Eshmunazar II with the Sharon plain for employing Sidon 's fleet in his service during the Greco @-@ Persian Wars .

Eshmunazar II displayed his new @-@ found wealth by constructing numerous temples to Sidonian divinities . Inscriptions found on the king 's sarcophagus reveal that he and his mother , Amashtarte , built temples to the gods of Sidon , including the Temple of Eshmun by the " Ydll source near the cistern " .

As two series of inscriptions on the foundations of the monumental podium attest , construction of the sanctuary 's podium did not begin until the reign of King Bodashtart . The first set of inscriptions bears the name of Bodashtart alone , while the second contains his name and that of the crown prince Yatan @-@ milk . A Phoenician inscription , located 3 kilometres (1 @.@ 9 mi) upstream from the temple , that dates to the 14th year of Bodashtart 's reign , alludes to water adduction works from the Awali river to the " Ydll " source that was used for ritual purification at the temple .

= = = Roman era & Decline = = =

The Eshmun sanctuary was damaged by an earthquake in the fourth century BC , which demolished the marble temple atop the podium ; this structure was not rebuilt but many chapels and temples were later annexed at the base of the podium .

The temple site remained a place of pilgrimage in the classical antiquity during the early Roman Empire and until the advent of Christianity , when the cult of Eshmun was banned and a Christian church was built at the temple site across the Roman street from the podium . Remnants and mosaic floors of a Byzantine church can still be seen on the site .

A Roman colonnade was built in the third century , probably by emperor Septimius Severus , and a Roman Villa showed a period of renewed relative importance for the city during the late period of Phoenicia under Roman rule . Furthermore , within the original Phoenician temple site the Romans added the processional stairway , the basins for ablutions and a nymphaeum with pictorial mosaics , that are still largely intact . Worn statuettes of three nymphs stand in the niches of a Roman fountain .

Another earthquake hit Sidon around 570 AD ; Antoninus of Piacenza , an Italian Christian pilgrim , described the city as partly in ruins . For many years after the disappearance of the cult of Eshmun , the sanctuary site was used as a quarry : Emir Fakhr @-@ al @-@ Din II , for example , used its massive blocks to build a bridge over the Awali river in the 17th century .

The site later fell into oblivion until the XIX century

= = = Modern discovery = = =

Between 1737 and 1742 , Richard Pococke , an English anthropologist , toured the Middle East and wrote of what he thought were ruins of defensive walls built with 3 @. @ 7 @-@ metre (12 ft) stone blocks near the Awali river . When the French orientalist Ernest Renan visited the area in 1860 , he noticed that the Awali bridge abutments were built of finely rusticated blocks that originated from an earlier structure . He also noted in his report , Mission de Phénicie , that a local treasure hunter told him of a large edifice near the Awali bridge .

In 1900 , local clandestine treasure hunters digging at the Eshmun Temple site haphazardly discovered inscriptions carved onto the temple 's walls . This discovery stirred the interest of Theodore Macridy , curator of the Museum of Constantinople , who cleared the temple remains between 1901 and 1903 . Wilhelm Von Landau also excavated the site between 1903 and 1904 . In 1920 , Gaston Contenau headed a team of archaeologists who surveyed the temple complex . The first extensive archaeological excavation revealing the Eshmun Temple remains was undertaken by Maurice Dunand between 1963 and 1975 . Archaeological evidence shows that the site was occupied from the seventh century BC to the eighth century AD .

= = = After 1975 = = =

During the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon (1985 ? 2000) , the temple site was neglected and was invaded by vegetation overgrowth ; it was cleared and recovered its former condition after the Israeli withdrawal . Today the Eshmun sanctuary can be visited all year round and free of charge , it is accessible from an exit ramp off the main Southern Lebanon highway near Sidon 's northern entrance . The site holds a particular archaeological importance since it is the best preserved Phoenician site in Lebanon ; it was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List 's Cultural category on July 1 , 1996 .

In literature , the temple of Eshmun figures in Nabil Saleh 's 2009 novel , The Curse of Ezekiel as the setting where Bomilcar falls in love and rescues princess Chiboulet from the evil design of one of the temple 's priests .

= = Location = =

A number of ancient texts mention the Eshmun Temple and its location . The Phoenician inscriptions on the sarcophagus of Eshmunazar II , a Sidonian king , commemorate the construction of a " house " for the " holy prince " Eshmun by the king and his mother , queen Amashtart , at the " Ydll source by the cistern " . Dionysius Periegetes , an ancient Greek travel writer , identified the Eshmun temple by the Bostrenos River , and Antonin de Plaisance , a 6th @-@ century AD Italian pilgrim recorded the shrine as near the river Asclepius fluvius. Strabo and other Sidonian sources describe the sanctuary and its surrounding " sacred forests " of Asclepius , the Hellenized name of Eshmun , in written texts .

Located about 40 kilometres (25 mi) south of Beirut and 2 kilometres (1 @. @ 2 mi) northeast of Sidon , the Eshmun Temple sits on the southern bank of the modern Awali river , previously referred to as Bostrenos or Asclepius fluvius in ancient text . Citrus groves , known as Bustan el @-@ Sheikh (Arabic : ?????? ????? , the grove of the Sheikh) , occupy the ancient " sacred forests " of Asclepius and are a favorite summer picnic location for locals .

= = Architecture and description = =

Built under Babylonian rule (605 ? 539 BC) , the oldest monument at the site is a pyramidal building resembling a ziggurat that includes an access ramp to a water cistern . Fragments of marble column bases with Torus moldings and faceted columns found east of the podium are also attributed to the Babylonian era .

The pyramidal structure was superimposed during Persian rule by a massive ashlar podium constructed from heavily bossed limestone blocks that measured more than 3 metres (9 @. @ 8 ft) across by 1 metre (3 @. @ 3 ft) thick , which were laid down in courses 1 @- @ metre (3 @. @ 3 ft) high . The podium stands 22 metres (72 ft) high , runs 50 metres (160 ft) into the hillside , and boasts a 70 @- @ metre (230 ft) wide façade . The terrace atop of the podium was once covered by a Greco @- @ Persian style marble temple probably built by Ionic artisans around 500 BC . The marble temple has been reduced to a few remaining stone fragments due to theft .

During the Hellenistic period , the sanctuary was extended from the base of the podium across the valley . To the east base of the podium stands a large chapel , 10 @. @ 5 by 11 @. @ 5 metres (34 ft × 38 ft) , dating to the 4th century BC . The chapel was adorned with a paved pool and a large stone throne carved of a single block of granite in the Egyptian style ; it is flanked by two sphinx figures and surrounded by two lion sculptures . The throne , attributed to the Sidonian goddess Astarte , rests against the chapel wall , which is embellished by relief sculptures of hunting scenes . The once important Astarte basin lost its function during the 2nd century AD and was filled with earth and statue fragments . The west base contains another 4th century BC chapel ? centered on a bull protome topped capital ? that remains preserved at the National Museum of Beirut .

Widely known as the " Tribune of Eshmun " because of its shape , the altar of Eshmun is a white marble structure dating to the 4th century BC . It is 2 @. @ 15 metres (7 @. @ 1 ft) long by 2 @. @ 26 metres (7 @. @ 4 ft) wide and 2 @. @ 17 metres (7 @. @ 1 ft) tall . Unearthed in 1963 by Maurice Dunand , it stands on a limestone socle plated with marble blocks that rest against a retaining wall . The altar is adorned with Hellenistic style relief sculptures and is framed by decorative moldings , one of which divides the altar into two distinct registers of symmetrical composition . The upper register portrays 18 Greek deities , including two charioteers surrounding the Greek god Apollo , who is depicted playing a cithara (a type of lyre) . The lower register honors Dionysus , who leads his thiasos (his ecstatic revenue) in a dance to the music of pipe and cithara players . The Tribune is displayed at the National Museum of Beirut .

Northeast of the site , another 3rd century BC temple stands adjacent to the Astarte chapel . Its 22 @- @ metre (72 ft) façade is built with large limestone blocks and displays a two @- @ register relief decoration illustrating a drunken revelry in honor of Dionysus , the Greek god of wine . Among the temple reliefs , one shows a man attempting to seize a large rooster which was the common sacrificial animal for Eshmun @- @ Asclepius .

The Eshmun Temple complex comprises an elaborate hydraulic installation channeling water from " Ydll " spring that is made up of an intricate system of water canals , a series of retaining basins , sacred ablution basins and paved pools . This system demonstrates the importance of ritual ablutions in Phoenician therapeutic cults .

Later vestiges date from the Roman epoch and include a colonnaded road lined with shops . Of the large marble columns bordering the Roman street only fragments and bases remain . The Romans also built a monumental staircase adorned with mosaic patterns that leads to the top of the podium . To the right of the Roman road , near the entrance of the site stands a nymphaeum with niches where statues of the nymphs once stood . The floor of the nymphaeum is covered by a mosaic depicting the Maenads . Across the colonnaded road , facing the nymphaeum , are the ruins of a Roman villa ; only the villa 's courtyard has survived along with the remains of a mosaic depicting the four seasons . To the right of the processional Roman staircase stands a cubic altar , also of Roman construction . Other Roman period structures include two columns of a great portico leading to pools and other cultic installations .

= = Function = =

Eshmun 's cult enjoyed a particular importance at Sidon as he was the chief deity after 500 BC . Aside from the extramural sanctuary at Bustan el @- @ Sheikh , Eshmun also had a temple within the city . The extramural Eshmun Temple was associated with purification and healing ; ritual lustral ablutions were performed in the sanctuary 's sacred basins supplemented by running water from the Asclepius River and the " Ydll " spring water which was considered to have a sacred character and

therapeutic quality . The healing attributions of Eshmun were combined with his divine consort Astarte 's fertilizing powers ; the latter had an annex chapel with a sacred paved pool within the Eshmun sanctuary . Pilgrims from all over the ancient world flocked to the Eshmun Temple leaving votive traces of their devotion and proof of their cure . There is evidence that from the 3rd century BC onwards there have been attempts to Hellenize the cult of Eshmun and to associate him with his Greek counterpart Asclepius , but the sanctuary retained its curative function .

= = Artifacts and finds = =

Apart from the large decorative elements , carved friezes and mosaics which were left in situ , many artifacts were recovered and moved from the Eshmun Temple to the national museum , the Louvre or are in possession of the Lebanese directorate general of antiquities . Some of these smaller finds include a collection of inscribed ostraca unearthed by Dunand providing rare examples of cursive Phoenician writing in the Phoenician mainland . One of the recovered ostrakon bears the theophoric Phoenician name " grntn " which suggests that veneration of the lunar @-@ goddess Tanit occurred in Sidon .

A number of fragmented votive life @-@ size sculptures of little children lying on their side and holding a pet animal or a small object were also recovered at the temple site ; among the best known of these is a sculpture of a royal child holding a dove with his right hand ; the boy 's head is shaved , his torso is bare and his lower body is wrapped in a large cloth . The socle of this sculpture is inscribed with a dedication from Baalshillel , the son of a Sidonian king to Eshmun , which illustrates the importance of the site to the Sidonian monarchy . These votive sculptures appear to have been purposely broken after dedication to Eshmun and then ceremoniously cast into the sacred canal , probably simulating the sacrifice of the sick child . All of these sculptures represent boys . A 31.5 cm x 27 cm (12 @. @ 4 in x 10 @. @ 6 in) limestone bust of a Kouros dating from the 6th century BC was found at the site , but unlike the archaic Greek kouros this figure is not bare .

Among the notable finds is a golden plaque showing a snake curling on a staff , a Hellenic symbol of Eshmun. and a granite altar bearing the name of Egyptian Pharaoh Achoris uncovered in the Eshmun sanctuary . This gift attests to the good relations between the Pharaoh and the kings of Sidon .

The repute of the sanctuary was far reaching . Cypriot pilgrims from Paphos left marks of their devotion for Astarte on a marble stele inscribed both in Greek and Cypriot syllabary at Astarte 's shrine ; this stele is now in the custody of the Lebanese directorate general of antiquities .

= = Pillaging = =

Treasure hunters have sought out the Eshmun Temple since antiquity ; around 1900 artifacts bearing Phoenician inscriptions from the temple site found their way to Beirutine antiquities markets where they stirred the interest of the Ottoman authorities and prompted a series of archeological digs . During the civil war , upon a request from then Lebanese director general of antiquities Maurice Chehab , Maurice Dunand moved more than 2000 artifacts from Sidon to a subterranean chamber at the Byblos crusader castle , 30 kilometres (19 mi) north of Beirut . In 1981 , the depot was looted and around 600 sculptures and architectural elements were stolen and smuggled out of Lebanon . Rolf Stucky , ex @-@ director of the Institute of Classical Archeology of Basel affirmed during a conference in Beirut in December 2009 the successful identification and return of eight sculptures to the Lebanese national museum .