



## TYRE: AN INTERMEDIATE HARBOR IN INTERREGIONAL TRADE

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### ABSTRACT

The founding of a small fortified center on the island of Tyre in the Early Bronze Age cannot be explained without the complicity of a continental center on the nearby coast. Although it is a rocky island with no arable land, it has nonetheless provided an important volume of Combed Storage Jars, cereals, olive pits, and grapes. As an outpost in the sea of a continental center controlling a fertile plain, the island was at an excellent intermediate position between the southern Lebanese coast, the Bay of Akko, and Egypt. Here, we present the preliminary results of the 2019–2020 excavation seasons in Tyre.

### KEYWORDS

Insular center; economic autonomy; processing of agricultural resources; local metallurgy; close relationship with the mainland

The area on the ancient island where the new project presented here is carried out, the so-called “acropolis,” lies between the famous Crusader cathedral and the sectors excavated in the early 70s of the 20th century by Bikai.<sup>1</sup> This area coincides with the highest and central point of the ancient island (FIG. 1). Here, during the excavation of a large surface area with Byzantine, Roman, Hellenistic, and Iron Age structures, at 5 m above sea level, we discovered part of an old sounding (FIG. 2), whose record and results remain unknown to us. It seems that this sounding was done at the end of the 60s by Maurice Chehab and never published (Aubet 2020).

First, the west section of that sounding was cleaned to verify its extension, characteristics, morphology, and depth. Samples of organic remains and geological sediments were collected for analysis and radiocarbon dating. The resulting section, slightly over 5 m in depth, produced a

comprehensive sequence of the history of Tyre (FIG. 3), spanning from its very origins in the Early Bronze Age to the last stages of the Iron Age.<sup>2</sup>

Among other aspects, it was observed that the Late Bronze Age levels rested directly upon an almost 0.5 m thick layer of fine sand (FIG. 3). This sandy stratum, of Eolic origin, did not produce any organic remains or archaeological evidence, clearly representing a rather long occupational break in human settlement during the Middle Bronze Age, during which the island shows no sign of permanent human occupation.

Underneath, the Early Bronze Age stratigraphic sequence was unexpectedly rich and complex. Although the study of the materials is still ongoing, we can say that EB III is very well documented at the site, with the possible presence of an EB II horizon in the lower strata directly above the bedrock, at 1 m above sea level. The Early Bronze Age in Tyre ended

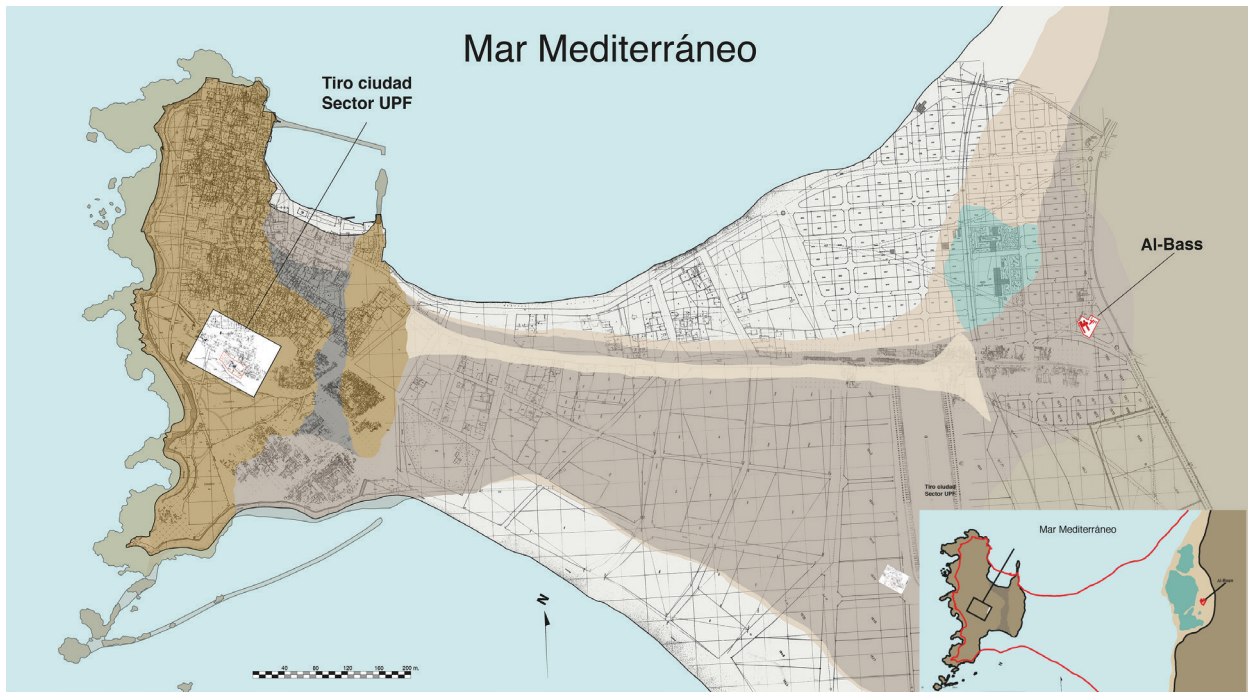


FIGURE 1: Map of Tyre with the location of the 2019 excavation area and the island of Tyre before the Hellenistic period.



FIGURE 2: The acropolis of Tyre with the Crusader cathedral (left) and the excavation area (right).



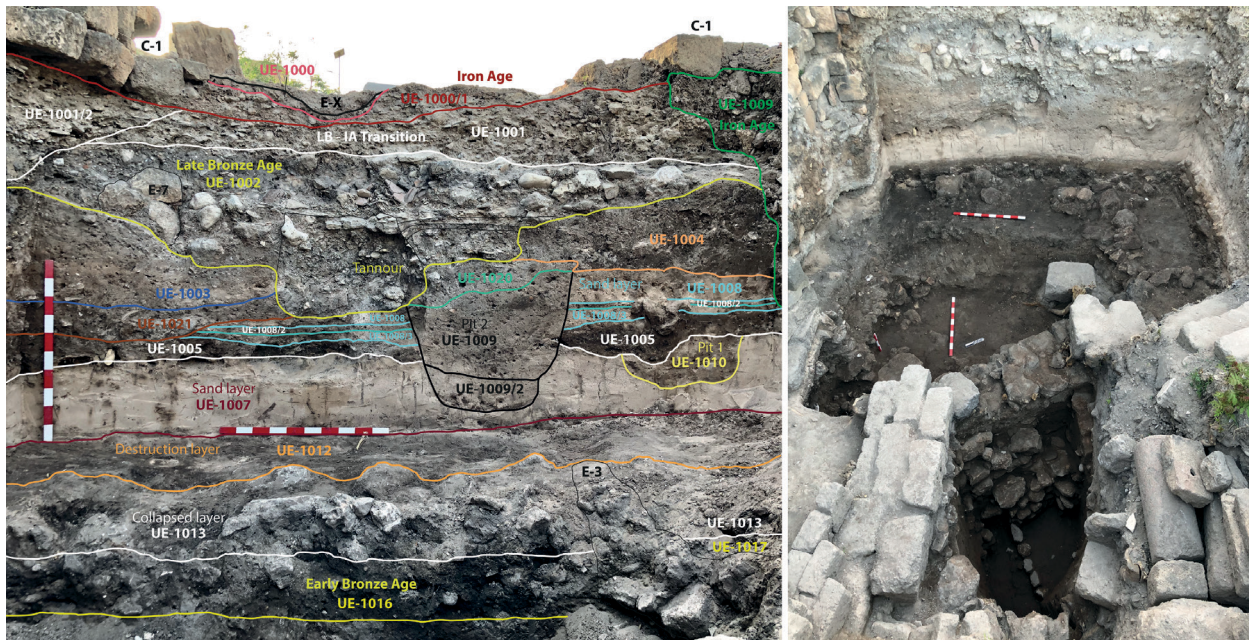


FIGURE 3: Chehab's sounding in 2019 and the western section.

in a stratum of destruction and fire, associated with a possible fortification, which provided some EB IV pottery.

Several layers corresponding to the Early Bronze Age appeared underneath this layer of sand and directly above the bedrock. They contained some clearly differentiable horizons and solid buildings. These levels produced typical Early Bronze Age materials, such as Combed ware of domestic type and storage jars (FIG. 4), as well as sherds displaying cylinder seal impressions (FIG. 5), pot marks (FIG. 6), and the so-called pattern burnished ware. It should also be noted the presence of non-local materials, undoubtedly imports, such as a black stone bowl and a faience sherd (FIG. 6).

Three aspects should, however, be taken into account regarding the EB of Tyre:

1. First, the regularity and monumentality of some structures, with clear indications of imprints of wooden pillars on stone supports.
2. Second, a local and developed lithic industry, based on the carving of flint and quartz cores inside some buildings, at a domestic level; the abundance and presence of cores show an intensive local and self-sufficient production of lithic tools (FIG. 7).
3. And last, the presence of crucibles with remains of copper slags to melt tools for

local use, such as fishing hooks and needles (FIG. 8); that is, activities typical, once more, of a small-scale local and self-sufficient metallurgy production that indicates some degree or will of permanence, autonomy, or stability on the island.

Thus, the founding of Tyre in the EB can only be understood if considered an offshore projection of a continental site, probably of the Paleo-Tyros or Ushu from the written tradition, mainly the Amarna Letters. Its founding was most certainly a response to new strategic needs: having a protected and safe anchorage for maritime navigation and interregional trade.<sup>3</sup>

However, the large buildings of the EB III occupation levels at Tyre and the local flint and metal production suggest a deliberate choice toward permanence on a small rocky islet to serve as an outpost for a nearby center on the mainland. Given its characteristics, the density of its stratified deposits, and its location in a fertile plain, all signs point to the tell of el-Rachidiyeh, located on the coast just 4 km southeast of the island of Tyre and close to the important freshwater springs at Ras el 'Ayn (FIG. 9).<sup>4</sup> The Amarna Letters<sup>5</sup> mention that, during the Late Bronze Age, drinking water and wood were regularly transported in boats from Ushu, on the mainland, to the island of Tyre.

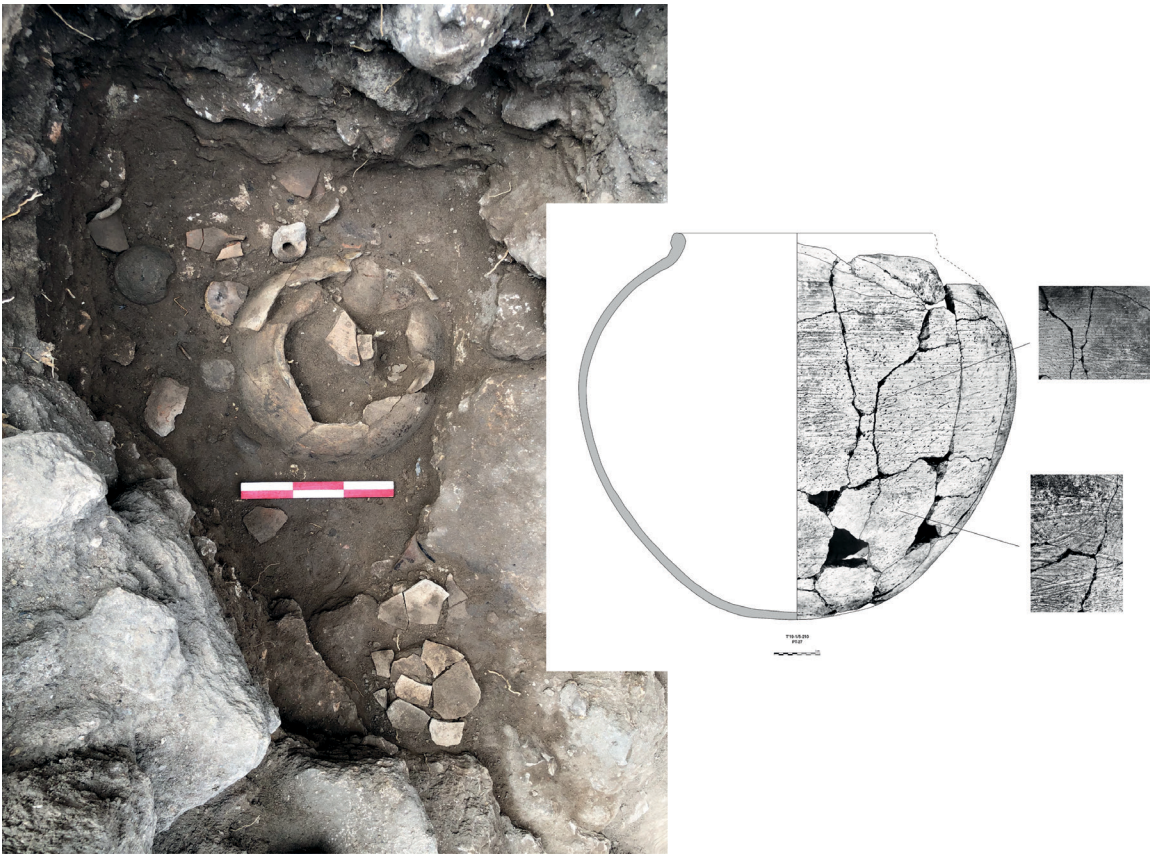


FIGURE 4: A domestic area near the bedrock and Combed ware.

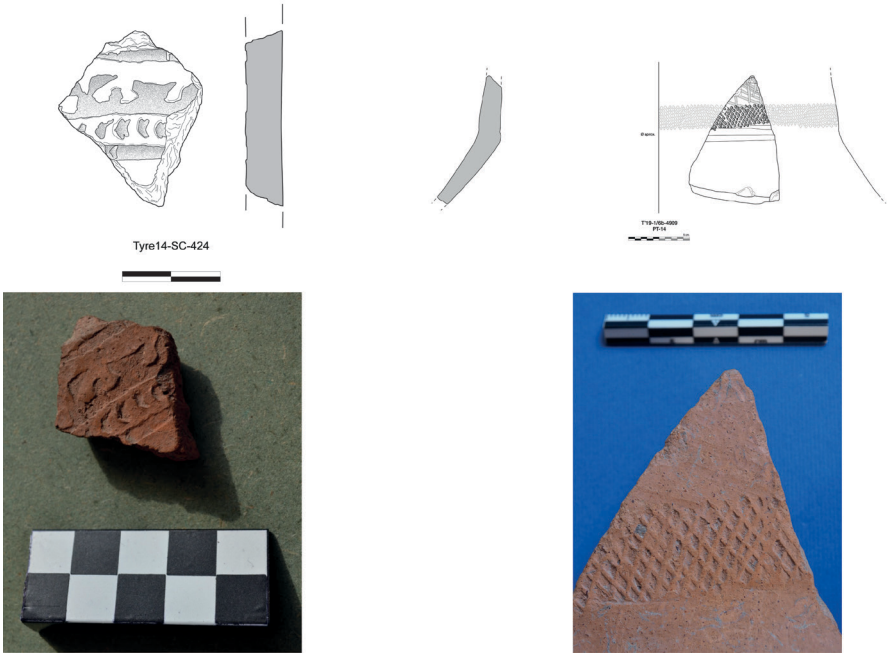


FIGURE 5: Cylinder seal impressions.



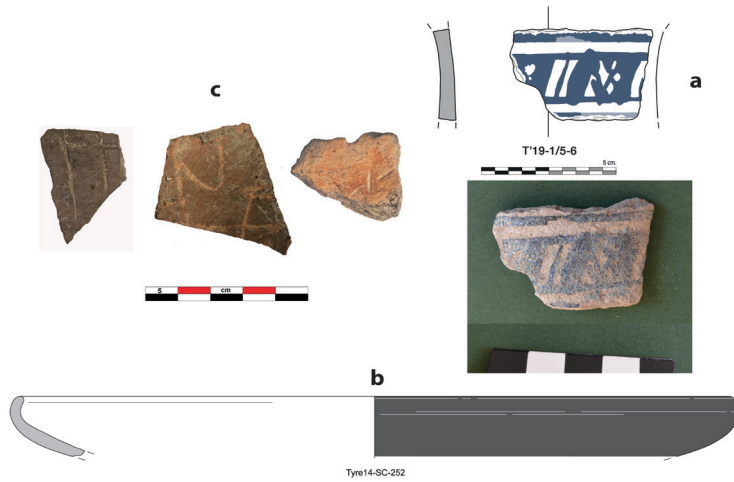


FIGURE 6: Pot marks, a faience sherd, a stone bowl, and a pattern burnished jug.



FIGURE 7: Quartz core and flint industry.

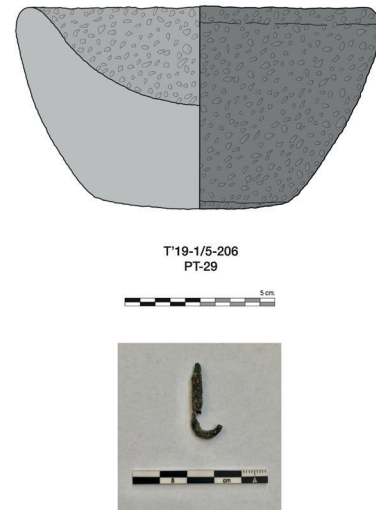


FIGURE 8: Basalt crucible and copper fishing hook.

The island also served as a citadel where agricultural resources—olives, grapes, cereals—from the mainland and planned for exporting overseas were probably processed and stored (FIG. 10). Products, natural resources, and raw materials found on the island depended on a fertile and well-communicated hinterland during a period when urban centers with public structures and fortifications were thriving on the Lebanese coast.<sup>6</sup>

One wonders what specific circumstances forced the coastal population to establish a new fortified settlement on an island in the middle of the sea (a garrison?) with specialized functions: a protected harbor, a storage place, and certain autonomy. In this sense, we must not forget that from the third millennium BCE onward, almost the entire history of Tyre was that of a safe and inexpugnable site (FIG. 9).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to thank the close collaboration and technical support of the people who participated in field and registration work during these excavation seasons in Tyre: Ana M. Arruda, Ali Badawi, Amelie Beyhum, Patricia M. Bikai, Ramón Buxó, Hermann Genz, José M. Lopez Garí, Stefania Mazzoni, Alfredo Mederos, Ianir Milevski, David Montanero, Francisco Nuñez, Kosmas Pavlopoulos, Karin Sowada, Laura Trellisó, and Rami Yassine. We also thank the institutions that supported the project: the Ministry of Culture (Madrid), the Direction Générale des Antiquités du Liban (Beirut), the Palarq Foundation (Barcelona), and the Municipality of Tyre.



FIGURE 9: Map of Tyre and the mainland; ideal reconstruction of ancient Tyre.



FIGURE 10: Storage jar and seeds: cereals, olive pits (*olea*) and grapes (*vitis*).



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# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Bikai 1978.
- <sup>2</sup> Aubet, Badawi and Nuñez 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> Sowada 2009; Carayon, Marriner and Morhange 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> Badawi 1997.
- <sup>5</sup> Moran 1987, EA n° 149.
- <sup>6</sup> Thalmann 2003; Genz et al. 2016.

