

CHHIM-JIYEH

EXCAVATIONS 1996

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A joint Polish-French-Lebanese mission conducted from July 1 to August 23, 1996, the first season of archaeological investigations on two sites, Chhim and Jiyeh, situated some 30 kilometers south of Beirut.¹ Our main effort was concentrated on Chhim, a site in the hills some 8 km west of the Mediterranean coast, in the vicinity of a village of the same name. The first more detailed account of this site: a Roman sanctuary, Byzantine village and basilica, was written in 1968 by M. Tallon,² and some clearing and restoration works were conducted there by the Direction Generale des Antiquités in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At Jiyeh, a promising archaeological project

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² M. Tallon, *Sanctuaires et itinéraires romains du Chouf et du sud de la Beqa'*, *MUSJ* 43, 1968, pp. 233-250.

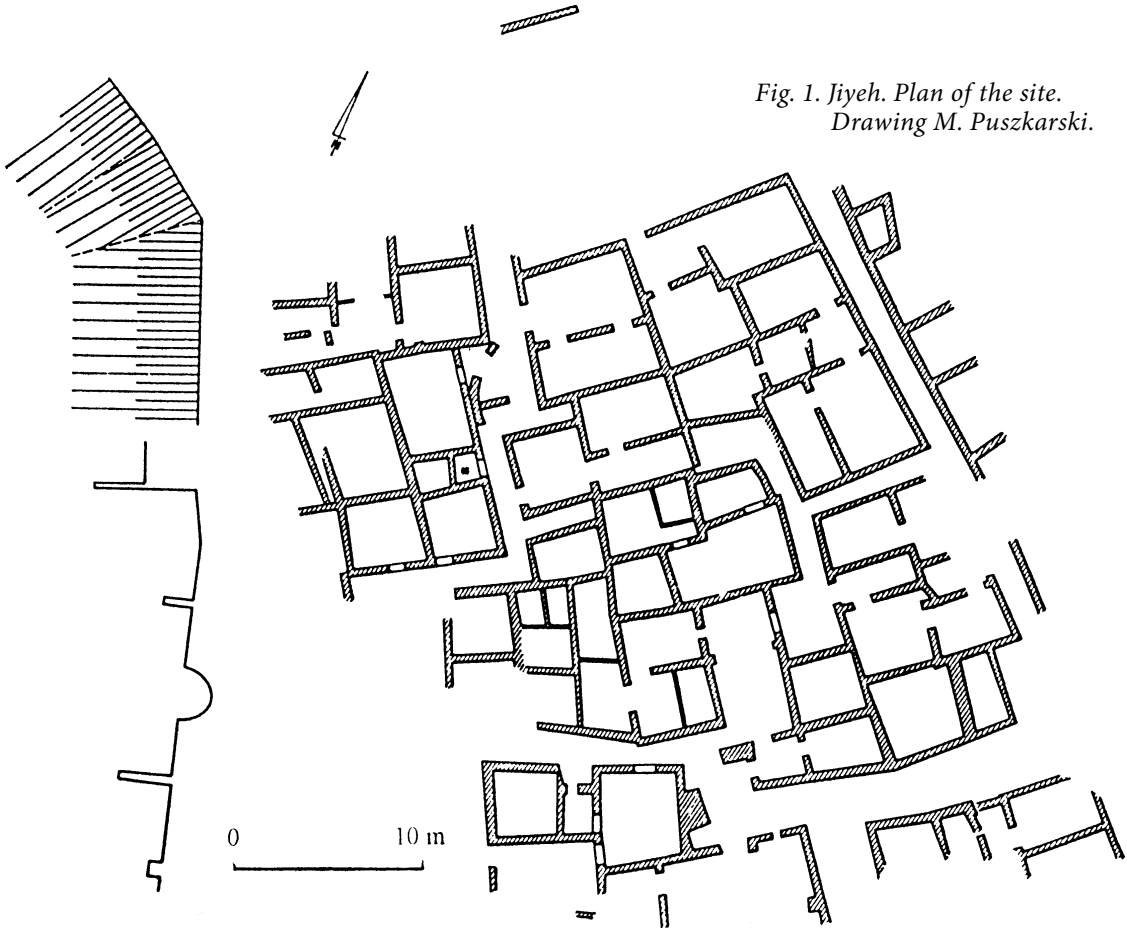


Fig. 1. Jiyeh. Plan of the site.
Drawing M. Puzskarski.

was begun in 1975 by R. Saidah on behalf of the DGA, but it was interrupted by the recent war in Lebanon. At Jiyeh, the mission conducted a preliminary survey of the site and prepared a plan of the complex, which includes a Christian basilica, some habitations and a necropolis (Fig. 1).

CHHIM – TEMENOS A

The temple and basilica at Chhim are both enclosed in a temenos (Fig. 2). The entrance to the courtyard fronting the sanctuary is in the southern temenos wall, which starts at the south-eastern corner of the temple. Traces of two porticoes have been identified in the western part of the courtyard.

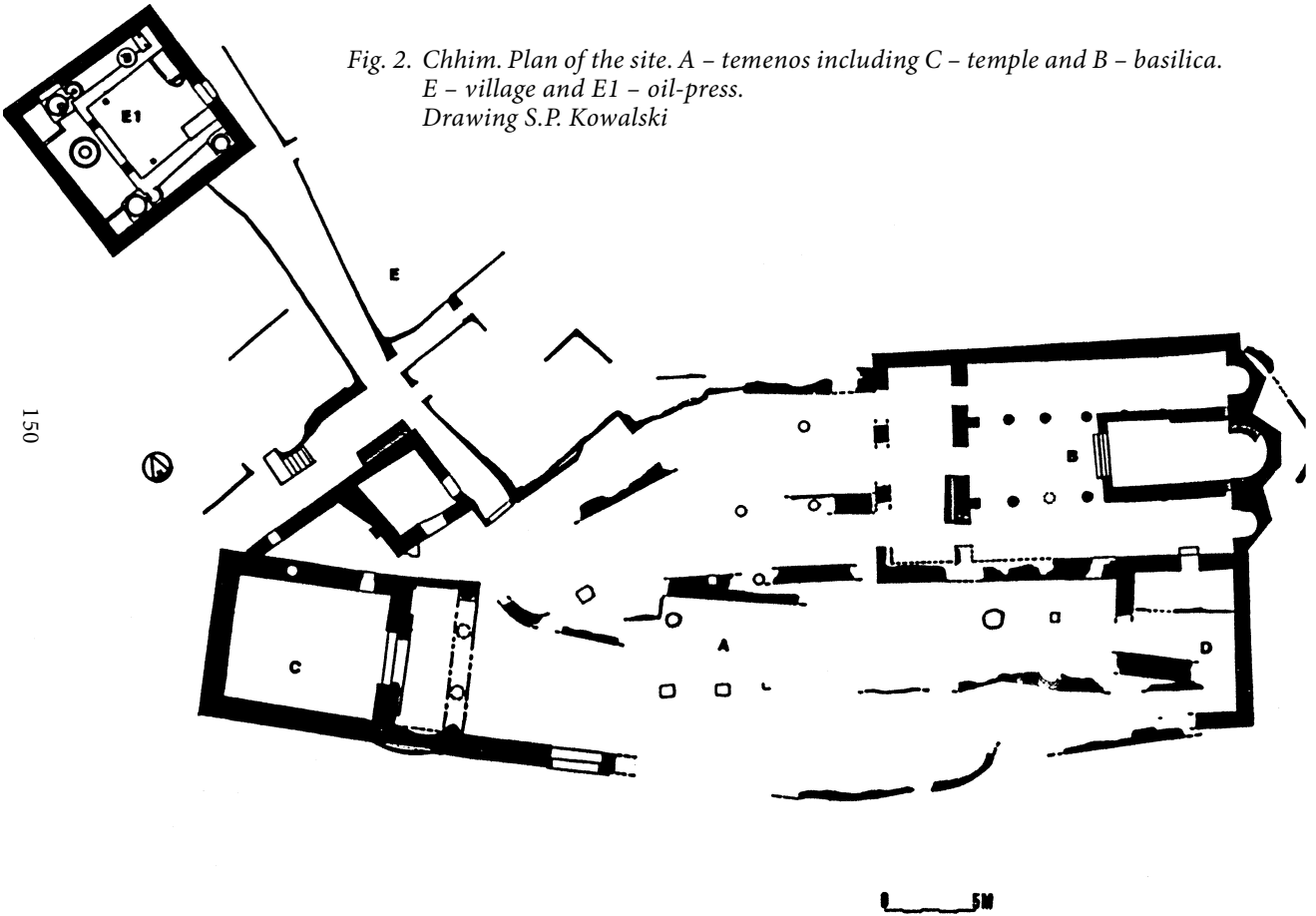
CHHIM – TEMPLE C

A small sanctuary (15.00 x 9.20 m; Fig. 2) situated in the south-western corner of the temenos consists of a pronaos and a rectangular cella, practically without any pavement inside. A test trench (6 x 3 m) opened in its northwestern corner revealed three main occupational levels. Phase I, preceding the erection of the temple, is represented by a structure in mortar and cistern below the northern wall of the building. The foundation trench of the temple (Phase II) cut through the earlier structure and its fill contained several fragments of terra sigillata bowls dated to the 2nd century AD. The last period of occupation is marked by the remains of Phase III: a circular vat (diam. 1.32 m, 1.20 m deep) in the plastered floor of a small room, in use at the same time as the basilica and the village. The pottery from this layer contained wares and forms typical of the 6th century AD. In Byzantine times the temple was used apparently in a new, economic capacity.

CHHIM – TOWER D

Sometime after the construction of the temple and before the appearance of the Christian basilica, a new building was erected in the southeastern corner of the temenos. Tower D (9.50 x 7.20 m;

Fig. 2. Chhim. Plan of the site. A – temenos including C – temple and B – basilica.
E – village and E1 – oil-press.
Drawing S.P. Kowalski



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Fig. 2), restored in the 1970s by H. Kalayan, was built of big well-dressed blocks. Rectangular openings on the inside wall surfaces are evidence of a second storey. The building's function and detailed chronology is still obscure, but it is clear that a new door was pierced in its northern wall at the time when the church was in existence in order to provide direct communication between the two structures.

CHHIM –

BASILICA B (CHURCH OF THE PRESBYTER THOMAS)

Upon excavation, the rectangular basilica (18.40 x 13.10 m) in the northeastern corner of the temenos turned out to follow a typical Byzantine plan with two rows of six columns each dividing the interior into three aisles. Three doors in the western wall assured access to the building; a fourth entrance was cut in the southern wall abutting Tower D. Three apses set to the east resulted in an uncommon, polygonal outline of the eastern exterior wall that has very few parallels in the region (e.g. churches in Khalde and Baalbek). The bema, or the sanctuary of the church, is elevated some 0.40 m above the floor level and projects into the nave, occupying more than half the available space, a feature that is common in Phoenician churches and reflects local liturgy. Preceding the basilica entrance was a narthex (3.60 m wide). The mortar floor uncovered outside the church, along the southern wall, is probably evidence of a portico.

The building is in a rather poor state of preservation. The northern wall still stands almost 2 m in height, but the rest of the building is much less well preserved, with a single course of stones marking the line of the southern wall. Once the stone rubble and the topmost layer of brown-grey soil (0.20-0.40 m thick) were removed, the basilica was found to have a mosaic pavement extending over the entire surface, although heavily damaged in some places (as in the nave).



*Phot. 1. Basilica, general view.
Photo T. Szmagier.*

Most of the mosaics are geometric. A composition of polychrome lozenges and squares enclosed in a border of leaves was found in the southern aisle. A panel in the western part of the nave contained geometrical figures concentrically arranged around a bird representation in the centre. Another mosaic panel, originally surrounded by a chancel screen, marked the space that was reserved for the clergy in front of the bema. Representations of birds and a variety of vessels filled the spaces between the columns. The mosaic in the sanctuary comprised a central panel decorated with a magnificent depiction of a lioness, surrounded by water-birds, fish, baskets brimming with bunches of grapes (Phot. 2). The iconography of the mosaics reveals many common features with the other churches of the Byzantine province of Phoenicia, the complexes in Zahrani and Ghiné constituting good examples.



Phot. 2. Basilica, fragment of a mosaic with a depiction of a lioness.
Photo T. Szmagier

Important evidence of remodeling in the sanctuary, that is, the dismantling of the chancel screen and the blocking of spaces between the columns, presumably corresponds to changes in the liturgy.

Based on this season's finds, it is possible to date the building. A complete Greek inscription mentioning the bishop Andrew, *chorepiskopos* (E)ianos and presbyter Thomas, was found in the south aisle, near the western entrance. The date on the mosaic should be calculated according to the era of the nearest metropolitan see, i.e., Sidon; thus, it would correspond to AD 489/490. The church itself might be even earlier. A fairly homogenous set of oil lamps that was found on the floor of the sanctuary, below the remains of a collapsed roof (broken tiles, roofing nails and traces of carbonized wooden beams in the topmost layers) is typical of the Early Islamic period. Thus,



*Phot. 3. Basilica, mosaic in the western part of the nave.
Photo T. Szmagier.*



*Phot. 4. Oil-press complex E.1: northern press.
Photo T. Szmagier.*

it seems likely that the church was abandoned sometime toward the end of the 7th or the first half of the 8th century.

CHHIM – VILLAGE E AND OIL-PRESS E.I

Ruins of a village with walls preserved up to 1.50-2.00 m extend over the area north of the temple and temenos. It was possible to identify groups of rooms constituting houses and a number of oil-presses. A narrow passage (1.20 m wide) leads from the temenos to oil-press complex E.I. This almost square structure (10.00 x 10.20 m) which was already cleared by H. Kalayan and R. Tarazi, needed further excavation. The open courtyard in the middle is surrounded by the installations of an oil-press. In front of the entrance, just beside the western wall, a crushing basin (diam. 1.70 m) was found. Two oil-presses were situated along the north and south wall. The northern press was of the lever-and-screw type and consisted of a pressing area, collecting vat inserted into the floor and cylindrical-screw weight, which operated the beam (Phot. 4). The southern oil-press was similar except for the three stone weights, which took the place of the screw weight. Remains of pillars suggest that the working zone, i.e., oil-presses and crushing basin, had a roof over it, leaving the courtyard open. A vaulted room in excellent condition was found under the courtyard.

There is no need to recall the importance of oil in the economy of Byzantine Syro-Palestine. The oil-presses from Chhim share features with similar installations in the immediate vicinity, e.g. those at Khan Khalde.

Pottery finds from the area of the oil-presses and village range from imported Cypriot, Phocaean and North African Late Roman Wares to the gray amphorae from Beisan, indicating that the village flourished in the 6th century.

CHHIM – PROVISIONAL SITE CHRONOLOGY

The early phases (1st-2nd centuries) are represented by the structure in mortar and the temple with its temenos, no doubt a village sanctuary. Tower D is later, and the village gradually grew around the complex. By the end of the 5th century (or maybe earlier) the basilica had been erected. The temple lost its function and was probably incorporated into the village economy, which must have been based mostly, if not exclusively, on oil production, judging by the presence of at least ten oil-presses. In the end, the village was abandoned in a slow process that took place in the 7th and 8th century.