

# Chhîm

## Chhîm – an ancient settlement in the mountains of Iqlim el-Kharroub

Around 40 km south of Beirut, in the mountains of Iqlim el-Kharroub, lie the ruins of Chhîm village, known locally as Qasr Chhîm. Situated at a height of 450 metres above sea level, the village consists of a temple, basilica, residential houses and olive presses. Chhîm was the first systematically excavated rural site; its buildings, which date from the early Roman period (1st century BC) and which remained in use up until the times of the Islamic conquest (8th century AD), survive in excellent condition.



Panoramic view of the Byzantine basilica.



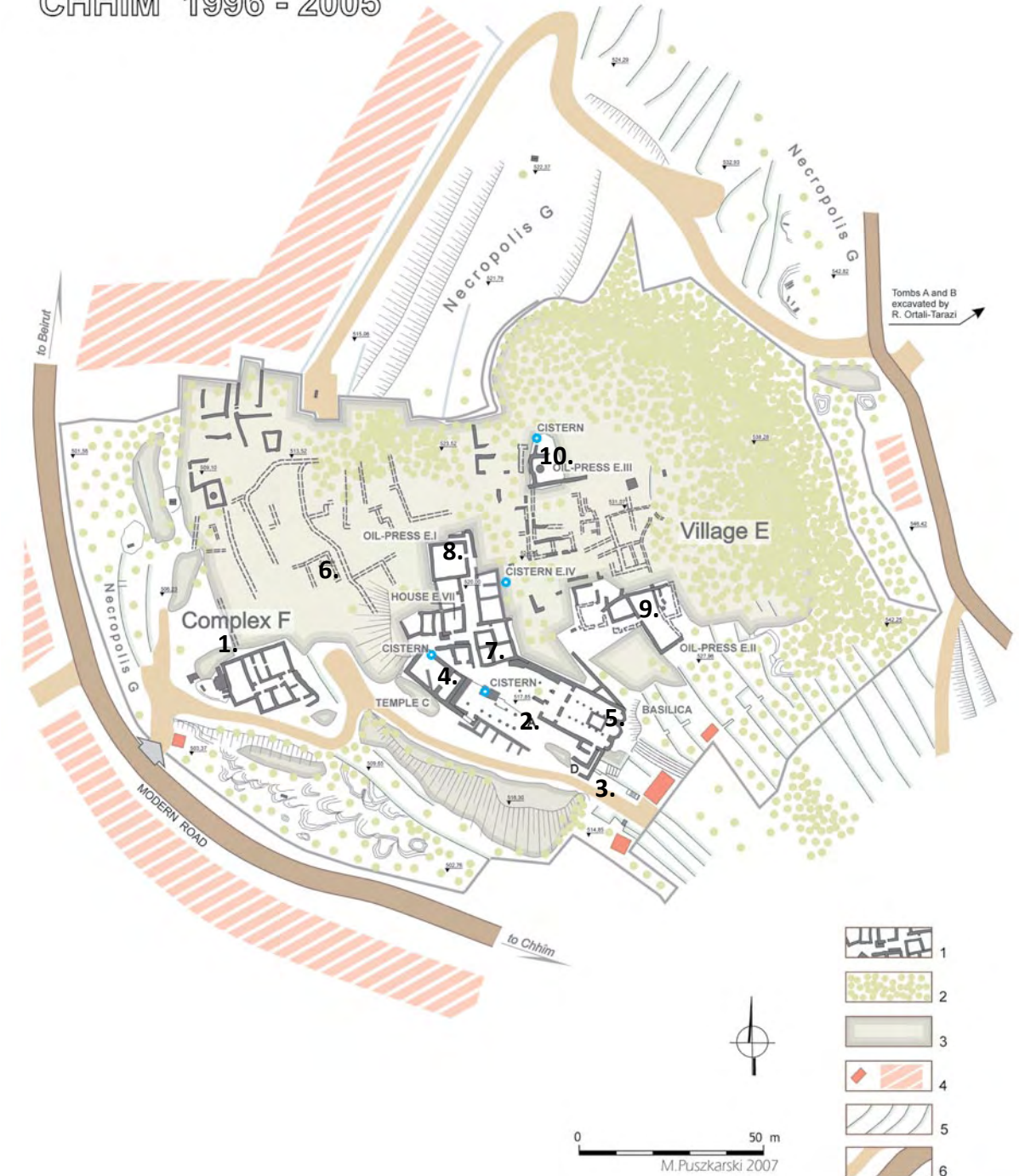
Plate, terra sigillata (1st century AD).

### The archaeological site at Chhîm:

- 1/ Roman period house (Complex F)
- 2/ Temenos – the sacred enclosure of the Roman shrine
- 3/ “Tower” D
- 4/ Roman temple (2nd century AD)
- 5/ Byzantine basilica (AD 498)
- 6/ Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic village (1st – 8th century AD)
- 7/ House E.VII dating from the Roman period
- 8/ Olive press E.I dating from the Roman period
- 9/ Olive press E.II dating from the Roman period
- 10/ Olive press E.III dating from the Roman period



## CHHÎM 1996 - 2005





## Roman shrine

The temple at Chhîm is located deep within a space of irregular and sometimes poorly-defined outlines which should in theory be a temenos – the sacred enclosure of a temple. This small sanctuary took shape on the relatively flat ground of a narrow terrace below the Romano-Byzantine village. The essential part of the temenos should be located between the façade of the temple and “Tower” D. It was here that a walkway was revealed flanked from the north and south by porticos. The Christianisation of the shrine most probably led to the destruction of the temenos, as the basilica situated in the north-east corner of the enclosure was partly built of re-used blocks from the temple and columns from the portico, which was almost entirely dismantled.



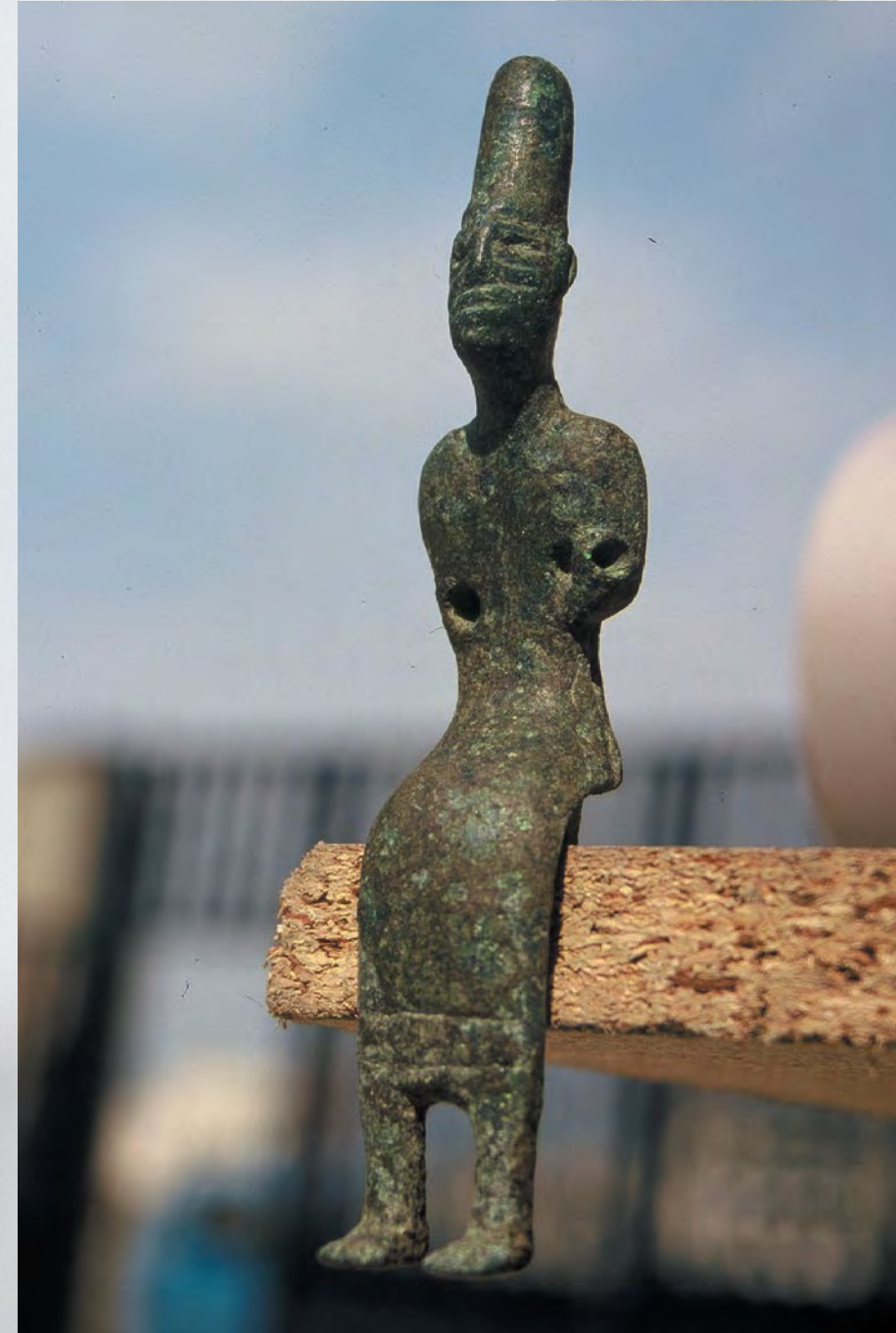
Roman temple ( 2nd - 3rd century AD).

## Roman temple

In the 2nd century AD a small temple (11.06 m x 9.24 m) was raised to the south of the village. It replaced the earlier shrine. Evidence of this area having been occupied in the Hellenistic period, and even earlier, was discovered beneath its foundations. The significance of this building lies in the figural representations which adorn its façades: a solar bust above an incense altar, and to the left a priest performing his duties. The monumental entrance with a moulded doorframe is surmounted by a lintel decorated with garlands and an Egyptian cornice on which a winged disc is depicted. The disc is shown in the middle of a crescent moon flanked by two uraei. A floor made of lime mortar was revealed in the north corner of the cella. A cylindrical basin dug into this floor probably represents the settling tank of a wine press dating from the 6th century. No trace is left of the area where grapes were pressed, though it must have been located somewhere to the south.



Earlier sanctuary (1st century AD.) beneath the Roman temple.

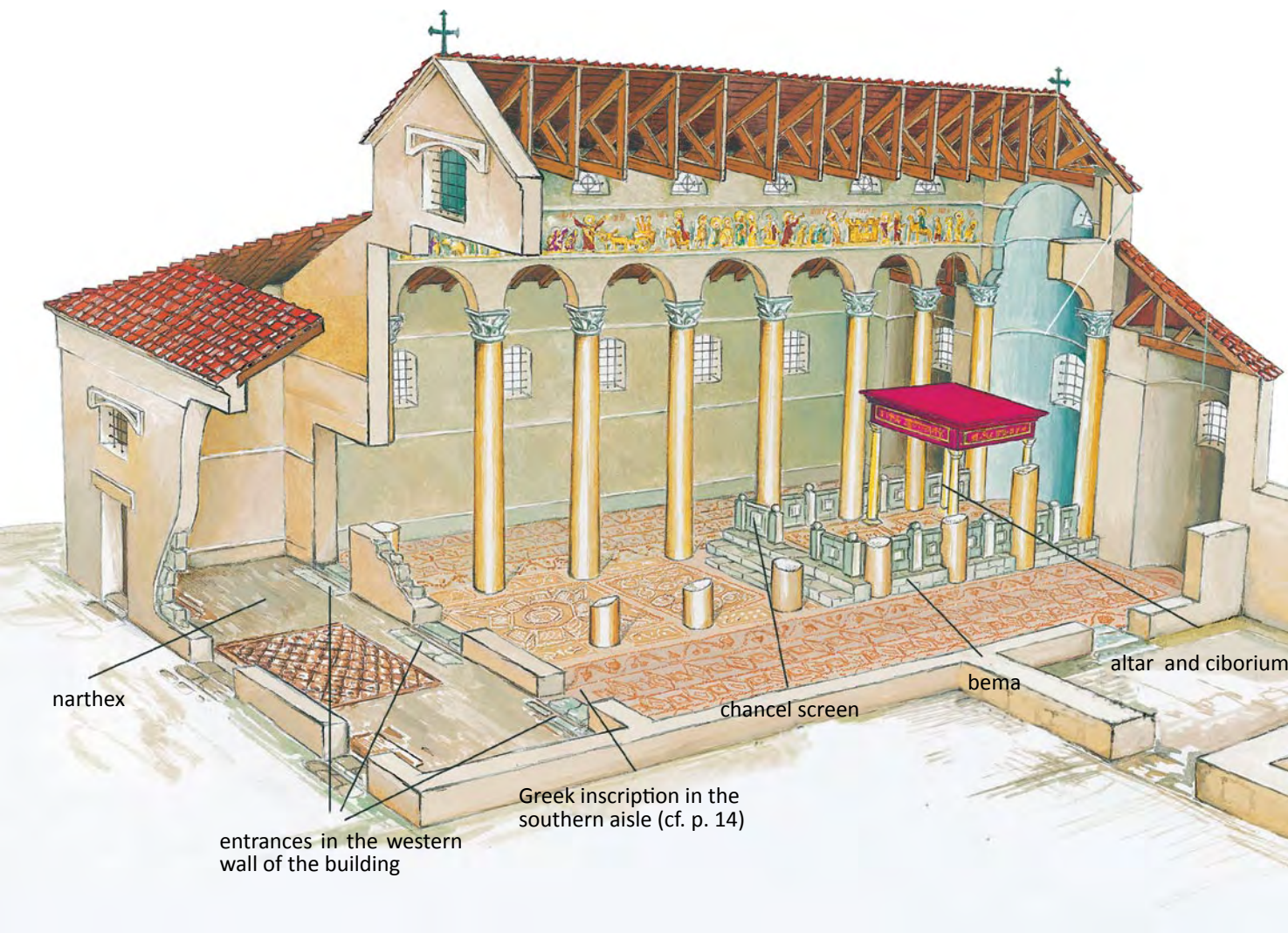


Bronze figurine of a deity found beneath the temple at Chhîm (19th–18th century BC).



Byzantine basilica

The basilica at Chhîm is a small rural church (18.40 x 13.10 m), of which there were many in ancient Lebanon’s coastal and mountain settlements. At its west end three entrances led through the narthex into the church, which was divided into a nave and two side aisles by two rows of six columns. Another doorway was added in the region of the presbytery, in the south wall of “Tower” D. In the Byzantine period “Tower” D served as a sacristy.



Chhîm basilica and its mosaics, probably laid in AD 498.

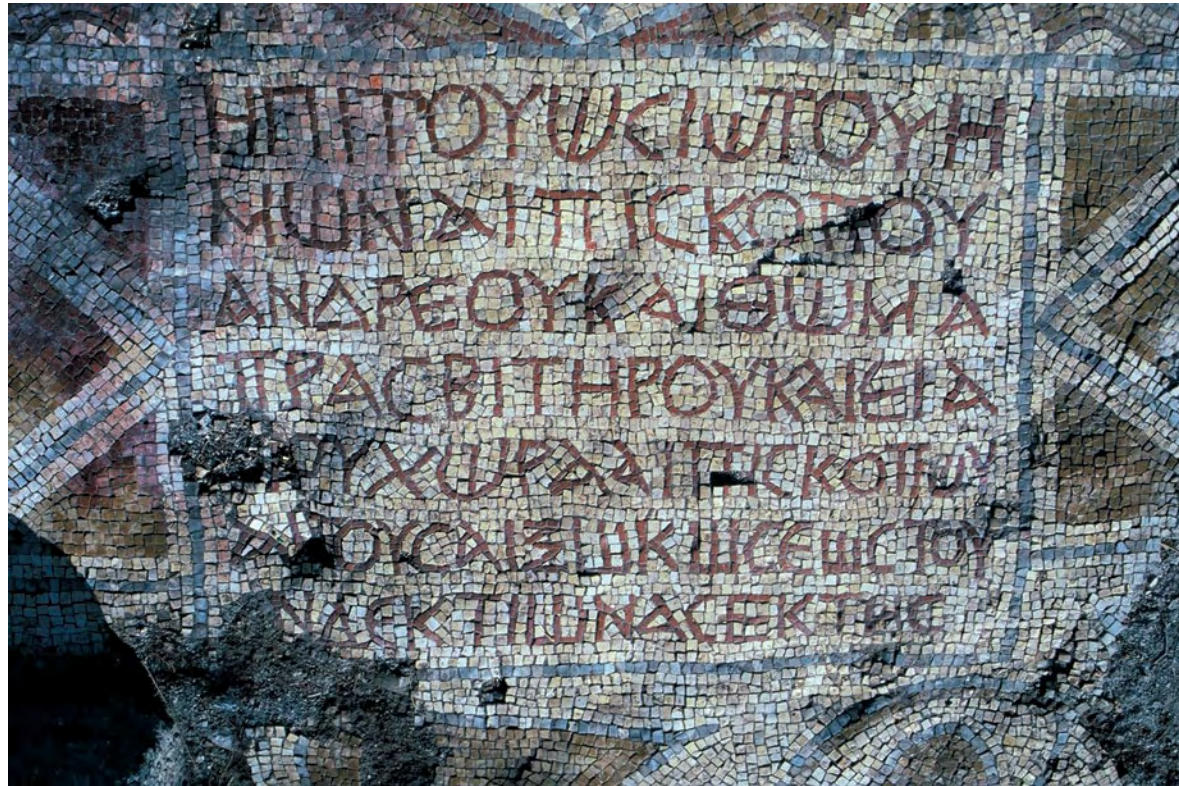


Reconstruction of the Byzantine basilica at Chhîm.



## Byzantine mosaics

Numerous mosaics depicting geometric and animal motifs lined the floors of the basilica. The mosaics in the south aisle feature a motif of coloured diamonds and squares surrounded by foliate borders. The north aisle is paved with a well-preserved mosaic depicting a popular pattern composed of rows of flowers. An exception to this geometric design is the rectangular panel at the centre of the aisle, which shows two antelopes, drawn by the hand of a skilled craftsman, around a chalice filled with red tesserae. In a later phase (6th century) a new mosaic of a lioness, a fish and birds within a geometrical frame was laid in the presbytery.



*Under our most holy Bishop Andrew, Presbyter Thomas and Chorepiskopos Ianos, in the 600th year, sixth indiction (AD 498).*

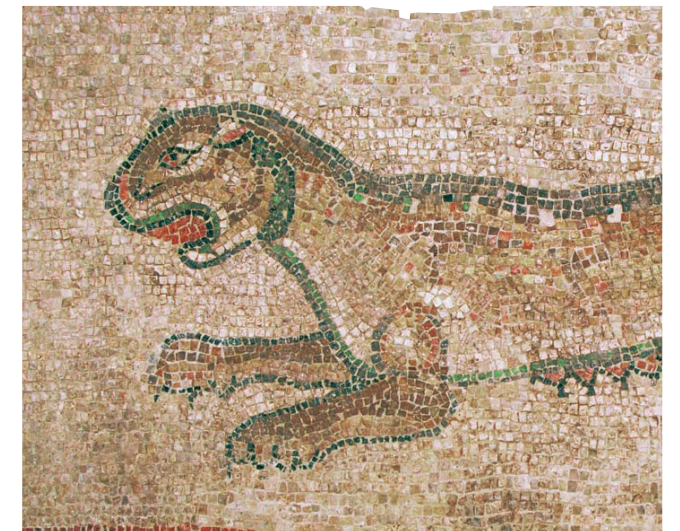
An inscription found in the south aisle gives the date of the mosaic, calculated both according to the era of Sidon (Saida), the nearest bishopric, and with reference to the operation of recalculating income tax, known as indiction. Thus, the mosaic appears to have been executed in the year 498.

Written in colloquial Greek, the text demonstrates that the community living in Chhîm was a rural and poorly educated one whose members spoke a Semitic dialect.



The Byzantine mosaic adorning the floor of the basilica was discovered in the course of excavation in 1996. Over several successive seasons the mosaic was systematically cleaned and consolidated. Having been appropriately secured, sections of the mosaic in the presbytery were removed to reveal any earlier decoration. Sadly, in 1999 part of the mosaic was stolen. The valuable fragment bearing a dating inscription was never recovered and although fragments from the nave were found these were in calamitous condition.

Following this incident it was decided to lift the three most valuable sections of mosaic and transfer them to a new, portable substrate. They are currently on permanent display in Beiteddine Palace.





The ancient village

Excavation behind the temple revealed a residential quarter centred around a stone-paved main street (1.5 to 2 m wide) with a system of side streets leading to houses and olive presses. Although only a small part of the village was excavated, the walls visible across the entire surface of the site enable its general layout to be recreated. This plan is constantly being enhanced with the addition of new buildings and the revision of earlier recorded ones. One of the houses discovered here (E.VII) gives an insight into the living conditions at this ancient village. This roughly square building was raised at the junction of two streets. The stairs abutting its exterior wall, next to the entrance to the house, led to a flat roof probably made of compacted earth applied over a timber framework waterproofed with branches. This house remained in use for at least six centuries, during which it underwent a series of adaptations.



Artist's reconstruction of the house E. VII.



Entrance to the house E. VII.

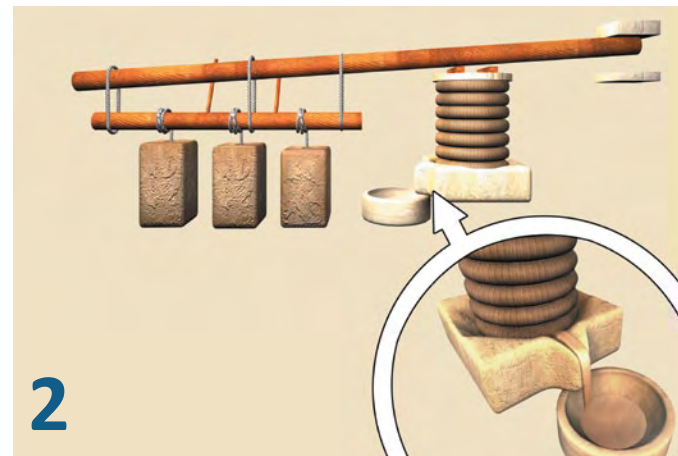
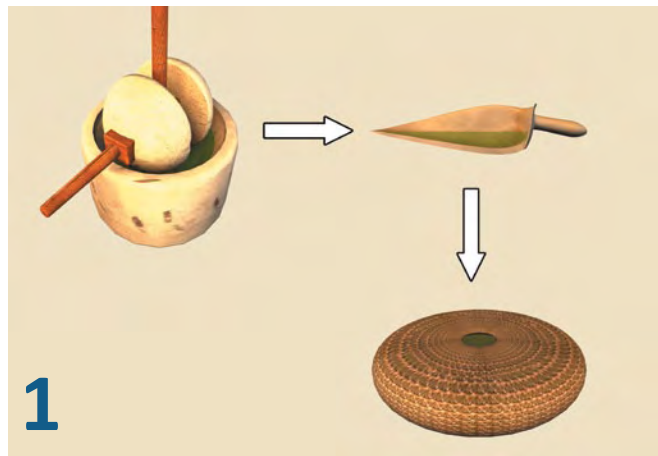
General view of the ancient village beside the Roman temple.



Artist's reconstruction of the ancient village in the Byzantine period.

- 1. Byzantine basilica (AD 498)
- 2. Ruins of the Roman temple
- 3. House E.VII
- 4. Olive press E.I
- 5. Olive press E.II

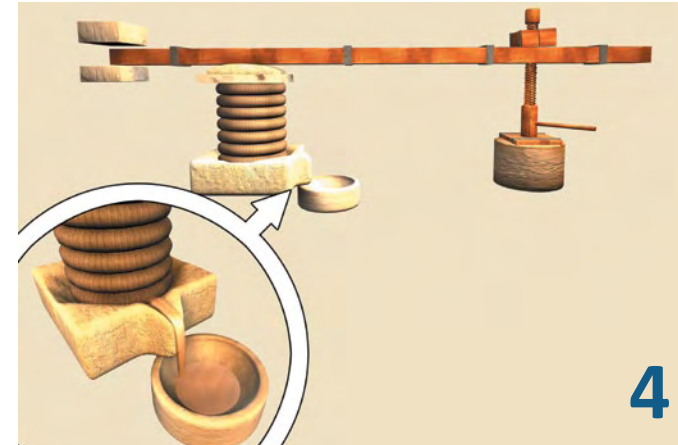
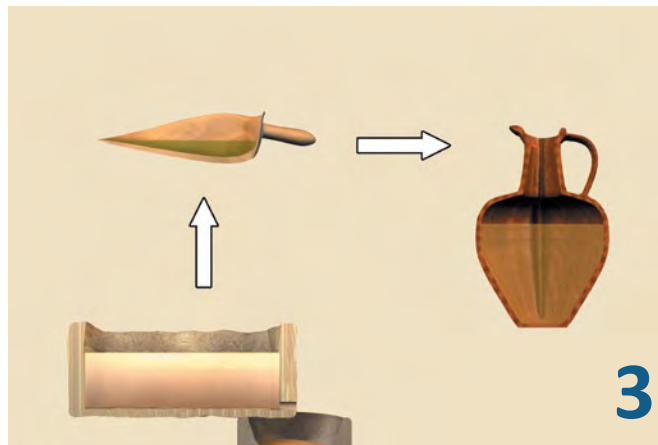




### How was olive oil made at Chhîm?

The first phase involved washing the olives, sorting and transporting them to the press, where they underwent the first process – being placed in the olive-crusher. The resultant pulp was packed into sacks. The next step saw these sacks placed in the press. The first extraction was of the cold-pressed variety, meaning that only cold water was used in this process. This yielded the most highly valued and best quality product. The extracted liquid was collected into a basin before moving on to the next stage – the second pressing, which was carried out with the addition of hot water. The pressing process was repeated until the last drop of oil had been extracted. Pulp, olive stones, water and residual oil were left inside the sacks.

Near the entrance a large stone basin was discovered, its size and shape reminiscent of a sarcophagus. It was probably used for purifying the oil, which was repeatedly poured into a lower basin in order to remove any water and impurities. During the final phase of use of the E.I press improved techniques were introduced to the extraction process. Some of the installations at the north end were replaced by a new system: a horizontal, wooden beam exerted pressure created by a lever and screw anchored to a stone.



### Olive oil production

Evidence of economic activity at Chhîm is represented by a surprising number of olive presses. To-date four buildings located in various parts of the village have been identified. The first complex to be discovered was press E.I – a virtually square building (10.00 x 10.10 m), situated on the road which leads north-west from the Roman temple. Opposite its entrance was an olive-crusher, essential in the first phase of olive oil production. Olives were crushed by manually rotating two stone wheels around a central axis. On either side of the olive-crusher stood a press with a counter-weight of a type commonly noted in Antiquity.