

GEBAL (גְּבַל, *geval*). A Phoenician seaport and major trading center. Also known as Byblos.

Overview

The port city of Gebal takes its name from the Semitic word for “mountain,” an etymology retained in its modern Arabic name Jubayl (“little mountain”). The El Amarna Letters, written in Akkadian, refer to the city as “Gubla,” while the Greeks referred to the city as Byblos (Βύβλος, *Byblos*). The city lies on the Mediterranean seashore, approximately 18 miles northeast of Beirut, in modern Lebanon. Philo narrates that the deity Kronos (identified with the Phoenician god El) ostensibly founded the city, and the site was often a place of sacred celebrations.

Biblical Relevance

The biblical texts mention Gebal four times:

1. God mentions the “land of the Gebalites” (הָאֲרֶצַּת הַגְּבַלִּי, *ha'arets haggivli*) as territory that Joshua had failed to conquer during his lifetime (Josh 13:5).
2. Solomon hires the men of Gebal to shape huge stones, quarried by forced Israelite laborers in Lebanon, into suitable foundation stones for the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 5:18).
3. In a lament for the city of Tyre, Ezekiel discusses experienced craftsmen from Gebal who were making repairs in the city, holding them as exemplars of professional and artistic excellence (Ezek 27:9).
4. A city named Gebal, with a different Hebrew vocalization (גְּבַל, *geval*) appears in Psa 83:8 (Psa 83:7 in some English translations). The place name is linked poetically with Moab and Ammon in Transjordan and Amalek in the Negeb and Edom, none of which correspond to Gebal’s location in Lebanon. Most scholars therefore believe that Gebal in Psa 83 is unrelated to Gebal/Byblos. Most likely, this psalm references a location in Transjordan north

of Petra and southeast of the Dead Sea. Josephus mentions a subsection of Idumea called Gobolitis (Γοβολίτις, *Gobolitis*), which would have been in the area of the Dead Sea and Transjordan, supporting the scholarly claim (see Josephus, *Ant.*, 2.1.2). However, a minority of scholars argue that all occurrences of Gebal reference the Phoenician location, with or without emendations to the Hebrew text in Psa 83.

History

Gebal's history is well-documented in extrabiblical sources dating as far back as the Egyptian Old Kingdom in the third millennium BC. Moreover, excavations show that the area was inhabited at least 2,000 years before these written confirmations. The city served as the principle trading port between Egypt and Phoenicia, harboring ships carrying oil, cedar, papyrus reeds, and other items valuable for trade. Gebal was also a commercial hub between Mesopotamia and Syria. However, scholars debate whether Egypt or Mesopotamia and Syria were the more important trading partners in this period (Nibbi, *Ancient Byblos Reconsidered*; Saghieh, *Byblos in the Third Millennium*). The port was able to stay in continual operation for an unusually long period because its surrounding sea level was particularly stable.

The Amorites defeated Gebal at the end of the third millennium BC, but the city was rebuilt and thrived during the period of Hyksos domination in the Levant and Egypt (ca. 1800–1600 BC). Soon after the Egyptians expelled the Hyksos, Egypt reasserted its dominance in Phoenicia and Gebal.

By the 14th century BC, Hittite imperial expansion again brought war to Gebal. The Amarna Letters, a trove of clay tablets preserving communication between Egypt and other major powers, include dozens of requests from Rib-Hadda, the lord of Gebal, for his Egyptian backers to send support garrisons and archers (Pritchard, *ANET*, 483–84). Positive relations between

Gebal and Egypt were inconsistent throughout the end of the second millennium. Records indicate that rulers of Gebal paid tribute to the Assyrians at various points between 890–680 BC; they also successfully rebelled in the 850s.

Archaeology

Excavations at Gebal in 1923 by Pierre Montet revealed, among other things, the sarcophagus of Ahiiram, a Phoenician king of Byblos circa 1000 BC (on the dating of this discovery, see Albright, “Phoenician Inscriptions,” 154–55). An inscription on the sarcophagus, identifying its occupant and cursing anyone who might disturb the king’s rest, is significant for being among the oldest known examples of the Phoenician alphabet.

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