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The Phoenician Cemetery
of Tyre-Al Bass
Excavations 1997-1999

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MINISTÈRE DE LA CULTURE
DIRECTION GÉNÉRALE DES ANTIQUITÉS

Contents

Preface	5
Part One: The 1997 excavation season	
I. The Iron Age cemetery, <i>María Eugenia Aubet</i>	9
II. Catalogue of urns, <i>Francisco J. Núñez</i>	63
Part two: The 1999 geological survey: ancient landscape and palaeogeography	
III. Geomorphological and geoarchaeological evolution of the coastline of the Tyre tombolo, <i>Pilar Carmona and José M. Ruiz</i>	207
IV. Palaeoecological analysis of the sedimentary remains from the Phoenician necropolis, <i>Manuel Millán, Enrique Villate and Marina Bernuz</i>	220
Part three: The human remains	
V. The anthropological study on the human skeletal remains, <i>Laura Trellisó</i>	247
Part four: The pottery	
VI. Preliminary report on ceramics, <i>Francisco J. Núñez</i>	281
VII. Hellenistic and Roman pottery, <i>Raghida Abillamaa</i>	374
Part five: The stelae	
VIII. The stelae, <i>Hélène Sader</i>	383
Part six: Terracottas and small finds	
IX. The scarabs, <i>Ingrid Gamer-Wallert</i>	397
X. The terracottas from Urn 8	414
X.1. The mask, <i>Vassos Karageorghis</i>	414
X.2. The terracotta horseman, <i>Kirsten Lehmann-Jericke</i>	417
X.3. Two architectural models in terracotta, <i>Martin Metzger</i>	420

XI. Palaeobotanical and fish remains	437
XI.1. An example of olive stone from Urn nr. 42, <i>Nuria Rovira and Ramón Buxó</i>	437
XI.2. Ichthyofauna from the funerary urns, <i>Gaël Piqués</i>	441
<hr/>	
Discussion and conclusions , <i>Maria Eugenia Aubet</i>	449
<hr/>	
Appendix	
Appendix A: Radiocarbon dating from samples of urns nr. 35, 45, 49 and 54	469
Appendix B: Radiocarbon dating from sedimentological samples	472
<hr/>	
Bibliography	
Abbreviations	477
Bibliography	479
<hr/>	

III. Geomorphological and geoarchaeological evolution of the coastline of the Tyre tombolo. Preliminary results

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1. Introduction

Throughout 1999 field work was carried out on the coastal plain of South Lebanon, around the tombolo of the historic city of Tyre (**Fig. 119**). The aim was to investigate the morphogenetic evolution of the coastline in recent millennia, based on a geomorphological study and on information from the geoarchaeological record of a necropolis of the Phoenician period (VIIth century BC) situated 800 meters from the coast. The city of Tyre is Phoenician in origin and lied on an island 2 km from the coast, consisting of pleistocene sandstone. The island was joined to the continent in historic times by a large sandy tombolo. The formation of the tombolo is linked in historical tradition (there is no archaeological proof of its existence) with the mole Alexander the Great ordered to be built during the siege of the Phoenician city in 332 BC (Nir, 1996).

The geomorphological characteristics of the Lebanese coastline have been analysed by Sanlaville (1977 and 1982), who provided a great deal of information about the quaternary morphogenetic levels, physical geography and dynamics of the coastline (winds, currents, etc.). The geological aspects have been treated by Combaz *et al.* (1961) and Dubertret (1961). General information about the

continental shelf and the distribution and provenance of sediments have been treated by Boulos (1961), Emery *et al.* (1963), Beydoun (1976), Davie (1980) and El Kareh (1981) among others.

2. Method of working

The geoarchaeological record of the necropolis provided us with a valuable sedimentary sequence dated between the IXth century BC (the Phoenician necropolis) and the Vth century AD. Sediment samples were taken and subsequently analysed and compared with present day samples from the coast. Their texture, colour, carbonate and organic matter content were determined in the geomorphology laboratory. During 2002 field work were carried out two manual sounds on the depression of Al-Bass near the Phoenician necropolis, and two samples of organic silts were dated.

The geomorphological study was based on field work and analysis of topographical maps (scale 1:20.000) (Rachîdiyé, Soûr and Ez Zrârîyé from the Ministry of National Defence) and on aerial photography, scale 1:18.000, of the area. The field work consisted of recognising the coastal formations, such as beaches, sand ridges, dunes, beach rocks, swamps, scarps, alluvial fan and sheet wash deposits. A large quantity of archaeological remains (remains of buildings and potsherds) from different periods and cultures (Phoenician, Hellenistic, Roman, palaeochristian, medieval, etc) that came to light among the sediments of the tombolo structure and the nearby coastline, were used to date the depositional forms.

All the information from cartographic sources (maps and aerial photos) and the data collected in the field were digitalized and georeferenced in a Geographical Information System (GIS). On this digital base we were able to superimpose all the topographical, geomorphological, geoarchaeological and fieldwork information which facilitated the interpretation of the formation sequence and the palaeogeographic reconstructions.

3. Geomorphological study

The coasts of the south east sector of the Mediterranean basin (**Fig. 119**) lie on the western



Fig. 119 - Aerial photography of the Tyre tombolo. Contour line 5 m above sea level. See legend in figure 120.

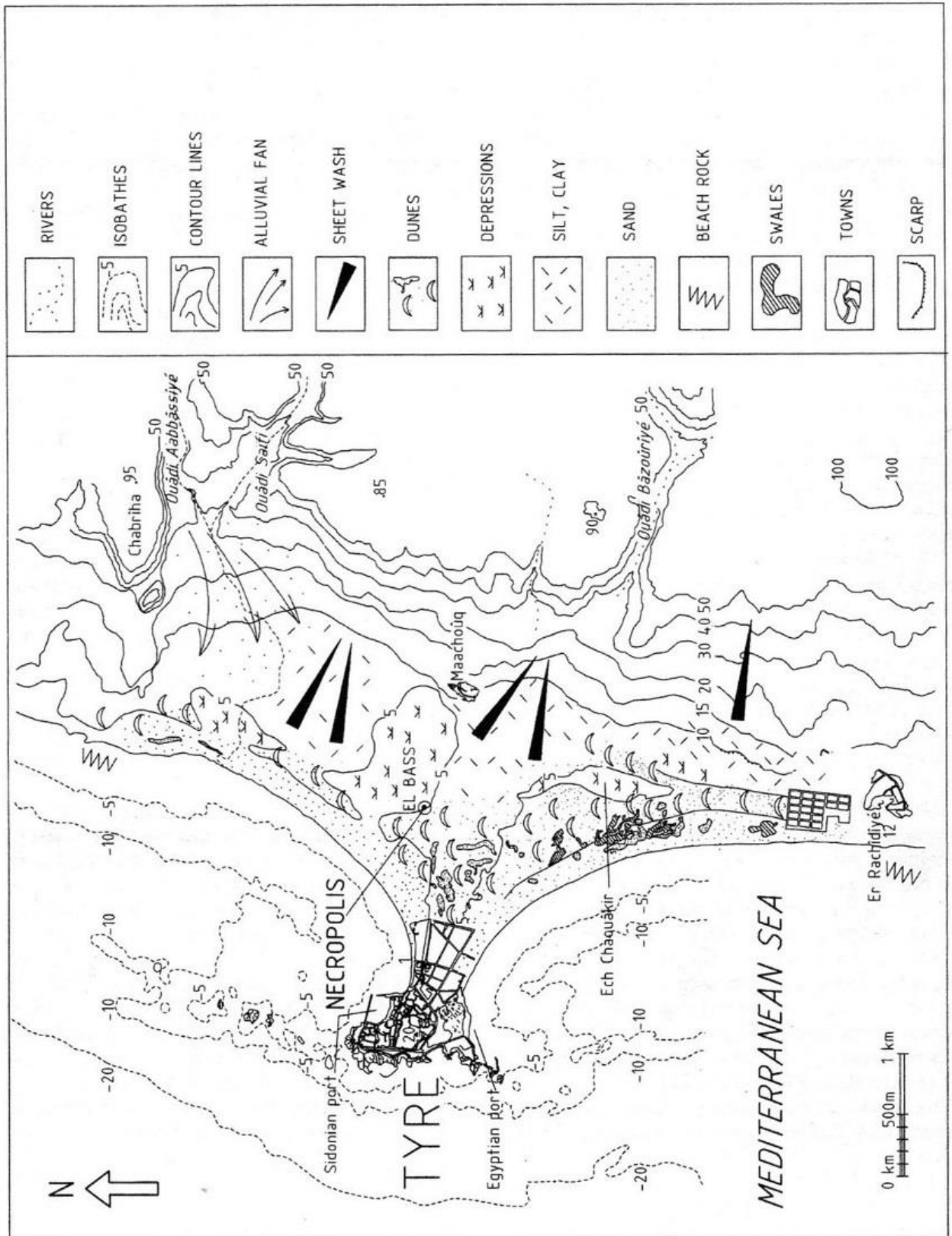


Fig. 120 - Geomorphological scheme of the Tyre tombolo.

edge of the Arabic plate and run NNE-SSW on a line parallel with the coastal chain of the Lebanese mountains, which rise to 3083 metres above sea level at the peak of Qornet es-Saouda, barely 30 km from the sea. Towards the south, the average height declines and the topography is less rugged with peaks no higher than 2000 m getting lower towards the south. The south Lebanese coast is rather more rugged, very open and offering no safe shelter. Contact between the mountains and the coast is not stepped so that movement along the coast is relatively easy (Sanlaville, 1977 and 1982). A series of headlands consisting mainly of Cenomanian dolomitic limestone and chalks, reach the sea and protude into shallow waters, creating natural barriers for littoral drift. These cliffs are composed of alluvium and cemented eolianite, as a result the coast is made up of a host of small independent cells which do not affect each other (Nir, 1996). To the south, in Palestine, after rounding the promontory of Mount Carmel, a wide coastal plain stretches out to link up with the Negev desert.

The tidal range is slight (20-40 cm). The sea water is fairly warm (17 degrees in January and 28 in August) and saline (an average of 38.6‰). The submarine springs are numerous and frequently copious. The swells are distinguished by a short period (5-7 seconds) and a small wave length (30-70 m) but winter storms can be dangerous on these coasts exposed to strong west and south west winds. The longshore currents run towards the north and may be fairly strong (Sanlaville, 1982).

The coastline to the north and south of the Tyre tombolo is broken up locally by outcrops of bed rock and remains of Pleistocene sandstone, known locally as *kurkar* (beach rock). The ancient island of Tyre, the origin of the tombolo formation, is part of an elongated sandstone ridge (5 km). This formation lies parallel to the coast as can be seen in the bathymetry. To the north and south of the big central island (20 m above sea level) lies a series of small outcrops which hardly rise above sea level. A wide submerged shelf appears under the water toward the west of Tyre island (Figs. 120-121).

The present tombolo formation runs from a point of beach rock 2.5 km to the north (the Chabriha littoral), and in the south, from the fan delta of the wadi El Izziyè 8 km from Tyre. On the tombolo coast there are beaches, sand barriers and extensive mantles of dunes, which link up with the continent

through silty clay and sandy sheet wash deposits, between 5, 10 and 30 m above sea level. Silty and sandy materials are brought down from the small water courses that flow until the coast.

Field work northwards from Chabriha as far as the mouth of the Litani river revealed that the outcrops of beach rock continue for several kilometers and smoothing forms such as small tombolos and sandy spits appear. Sandbars and boulders are swept northwards by the coastal drift at the mouth of the Litani river.

Between the north tombolo littoral and the continental alluvial deposits lie two separate depressions (less than 5 m above sea level); the most extensive, lying to the south in the Al-Bass area, remained swampy until 1864 at least (Fig. 1). The beach is sandy and edged by two lines of dunes, the most recent of which, close to the coast, is narrow with dunes between 5 and 7 m high. There is an interior sand barrier, between 100 and 120 m wide, broken by the mouths of the water courses draining the internal depressions. The sand barrier continues parallel to the coast; on it lie remains of Phoenician constructions (VIth century BC) (Fig. 121 PH) and the dunes contain abundant remains of pottery from the Hellenistic period (Fig. 121 HD). Behind it and bordering the depression of Al-Bass is the site of the Phoenician necropolis (Figs. 120 and 121).

The coast of the southern tombolo stretches from the fan delta of the wadi El Izziyè, 8 km south of Tyre. At the mouth of the wadi lies an extensive rim of blocks, boulders and stones with diameters of up to 50 and 60 cm embedded in gravel and very coarse sand with a lot of reddish clay. The coast to the north of the river mouth as far as the village of Er Rachidiyè has narrow beaches of coarse material. This stretch shows clearly the erosion and movement of boulders and blocks by the surf (a process of attrition, selection and wear). Northwards, the boulders and blocks gradually fall away, while the average size of the beach materials shows a marked reduction. Some 3 km north of the wadi the blocks have disappeared and the average diameter of the gravel is less than 10 cm. The beach is sandy, roughly 100 meters wide and has fresh dunes no more than one metre high (Fig. 120).

The tendency for material to accumulate becomes very clear north of the promontory of Er Rachidiyè (12 m above sea level). The beach is sandy and wide (about 250 meters) with plenty of

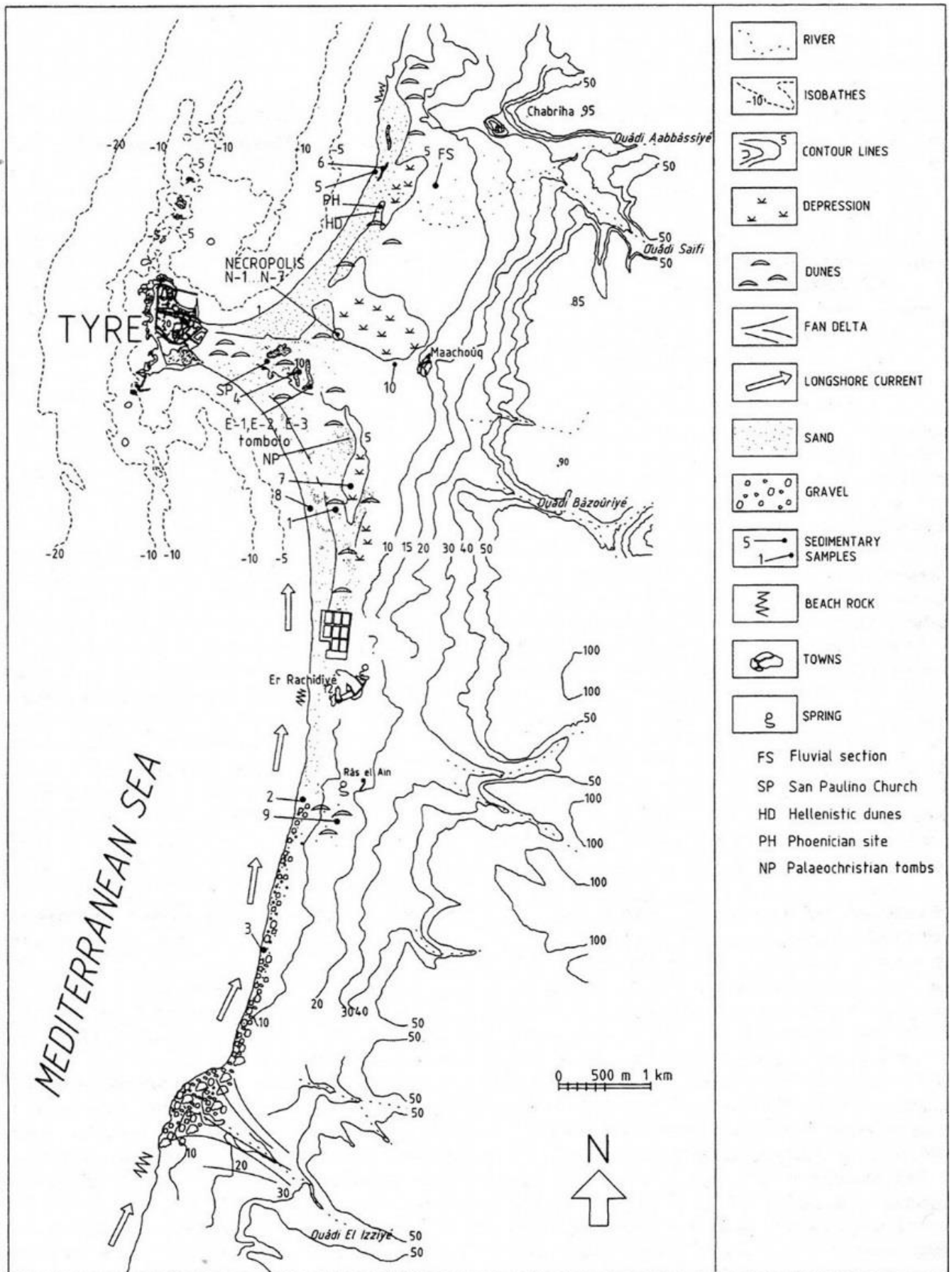


Fig. 121 - Geomorphological scheme of the tombolic littoral.

shifting dune formations separated by narrow and shallow depressions aligned NE-SW. From the village of Er Rachîdiyé northwards runs an extended ridge (170 m wide), which gradually thickens until it splits into two distinct alignments, separated by the narrow depression of Ech Chaouâkir. The inner and narrower alignment continues northeastwards for some 500 meters and has dunes as high as 9 m above sea level, it contains post roman postsherds. The zone is cultivated, which prevents us seeing how it develops. The coastal sand ridge curves inwards following the littoral of the tombolo, runs parallel with the coast and joins a huge field of dunes (rising to over 10 m above sea level) which completely overlays the root of the tombolo. This extended dunefield covering the tombolo is petrified due to its high gypsum and carbonate content. Before they were excavated or exhumed, it covered the impressive monumental remains from the Roman period (IInd century AD) of the circus, the paved road, triumphal arch and burial mounds (later). The dunes contain large quantities of potsherds of the IIIrd and IVth centuries AD. Furthermore, the archaeological excavations have left many sections in which the orientation of the dunal sets can be observed, which allows us to relate their formation to winds blowing from SW and from S. In another part of this dunefield, a palaeo-Christian necropolis has been excavated (**Fig. 121 NP**). Elsewhere, the dunes cover the palaeo-Christian church of San Paulino (**Fig. 121 SP**), destroyed by an earthquake (tidal wave?) in 551 AD.

In short, it can be observed that on the coast north of Chabriha and fan delta of the wadi El Izziyé, the coastal drift sweeps materials northwards. From the geomorphological and archaeological information we can deduce the existence of a sand barrier in the northern sector, which was already formed in the Phoenician period (VIth century BC). Dunal sands containing pottery of the Hellenistic period (IIIth century BC) have accumulated on it. Behind this, on the edge of the Al-Bass depression, lies an extensive area of necropolis. The southern sector is supplied with materials carried northward on the longshore drift from fan delta of the wadi El Izziyé and the sheetwash deposits reaching the coast. To the north of Er Rachîdiyé it stretches a broad beach and a thick ridge which splits into two with different alignments, the most recent connects with Tyre.

4. Information from the sedimentary record

The sedimentary sequence from the excavation of the Phoenician necropolis has been analysed. The section (about 2.5 m between 1.8 and 4.16 metres above sea level) was first uncovered during the archaeological excavation of 1997. In 1999, it was uncovered again in order to carry out a sedimentological study.

Elsewhere other sections were uncovered in the course of field work and a number of samples of present-day sediments were taken so as to identify and compare present and past facies and describe their texture and organic matter and carbonate content. Seven samples were taken in the excavation of the necropolis (N-1 to N-7), four samples from the beach (5, 8, 2 and 3), four from the dune (6, 4, 1 and 9) and two from the depressions (10 and 7). Information from a fluvial section (FS) and of a section at the root of the tombolo was analysed (samples E-1, E-2 and E-3) (**Fig. 121**). The data from the laboratory analyses and the drawings of the sections can be seen in the graphics of Figs. 122 to 126.

The examples from the beach, dunes and tombolo are very similar, well classified and with high percentages of medium sand (the most frequent size is 3 phi: 0.125 mm. in diameter) (**Fig. 122**) and carbonates (70 and 90%). The samples from the depressions contain little sand, a great deal of silt and clay and have a very low carbonate content. These data confirm earlier analyses by Sanlaville (1977) and Nir (1995): the mineral composition of the sand around the coast of Tyre shows that the main constituent is calcium carbonate. However, the beaches at the mouth of the Litani river are much poorer in carbonates (18-35%) (Nir, 1996).

As to the section from the necropolis, the bottom level (sample N-7), light brown sandy material (with funerary urns of the Phoenician period) is a coastal sediment (dune or beach) enriched with silt and clay of continental origin. The N-5 and N-6 samples are poorly classified sands, silts and clays, a mixture of coastal and continental sediments. In the levels of samples N-3 and N-4 (with coins of the fifth century AD) silts and continental clays are still being deposited, enriched with organic material (greyish in

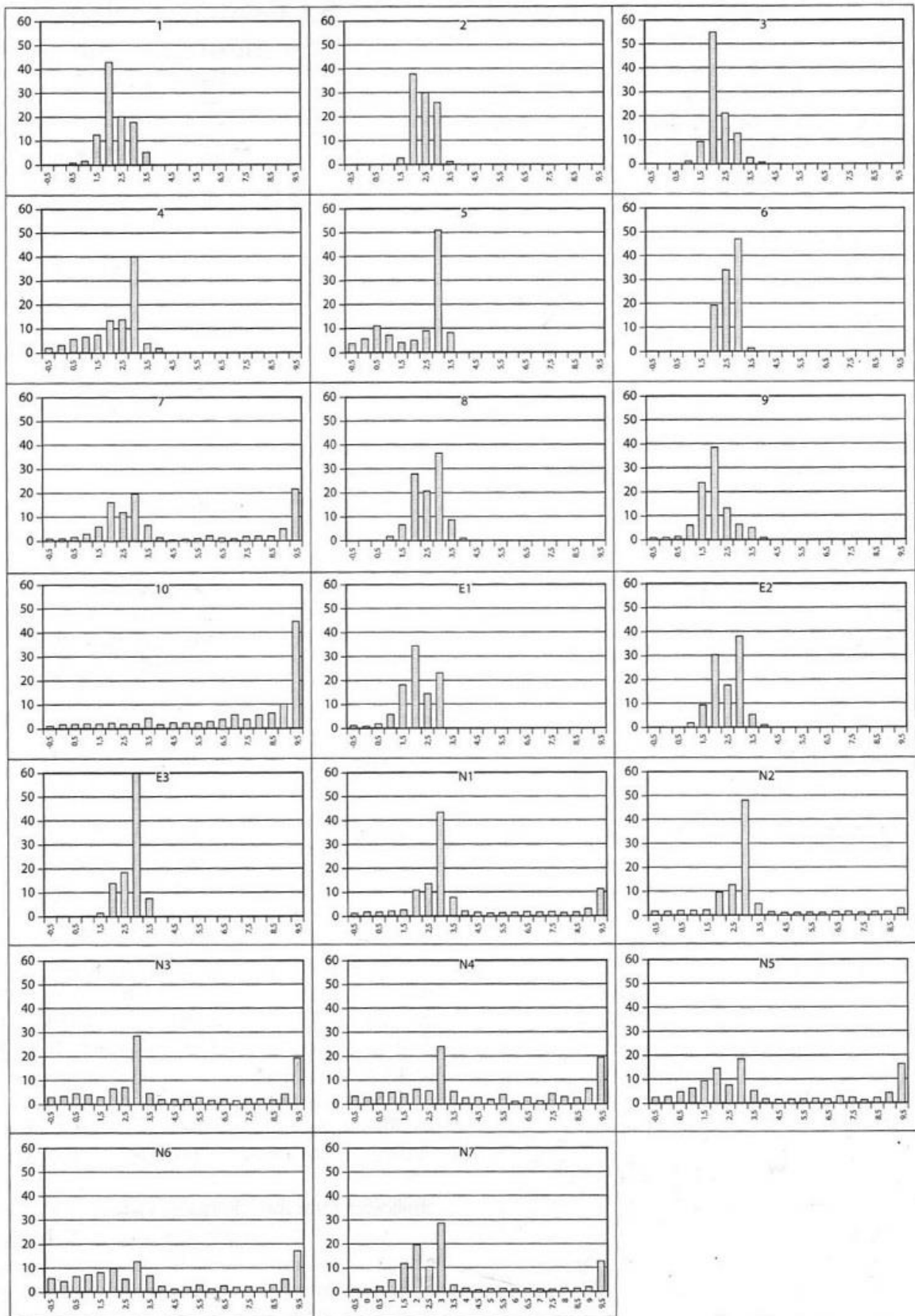


Fig. 122 - Textural distribution of sedimentary samples. Grain diameter in phi scale.

colour) and in the sandy fraction, point up the size 3 phi, typical of the littoral. In the levels corresponding to N-1 and N-2, coastal sediment increases and silts and clays decrease (Fig. 123).

The accumulated textural percentages have been shown in curves grouped according to environments. In this way, the reference data enable us to interpret the sedimentary sequence from the excavation of the necropolis (Fig. 124). The sedimentary curves of the samples from the necropolis are very similar to sample 7, sediment from the present day depression of Ech Chaouâkir. In short the analyses of the sediments confirm the geomorphological information, we have a deposit from a coastal environment on the shore of the depression of Al-Bass, emphasised by the contour line of the 5 meters and closed from marine influence by the sand barrier. This depression may have been a lagoon at some early stage. In 1861 it was a swamp, as the map in Fig. 1 shows.

Two sounds made in the 2002 field works in the Al-Bass depression (in phase of study) have shown a fill sequence of lacustrine environment (brackish bay or pound), saline between 0.6 and 1.5 m above sea level (grey clay with *cerastoderma* shells). Two samples were sent for radiometric datation to Laboratory Beta Analytic (AMS technique) and were dated between 5170+/-40 BP and 6370+/-40 BP (Conventional Radiocarbon Age). Sheet floods and fluvial deposits filled the ancient lagoon over the late centuries (see Appendix B in this volume).

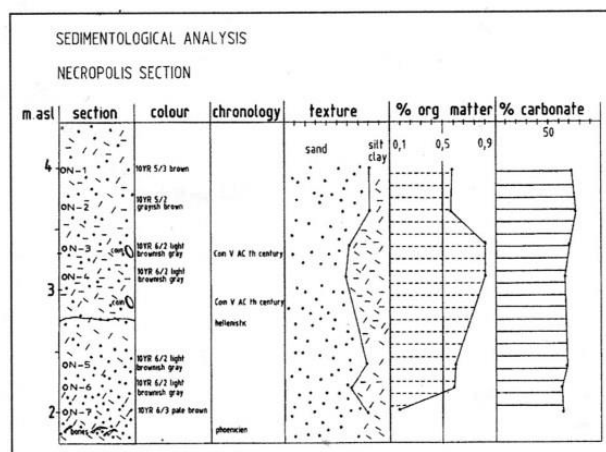


Fig. 123 - Sedimentological analysis of the necropolis section.

5. Geomorphological development of the tombolic littoral

Guilcher (1958) explained tombolos as due either to refraction of waves behind an island or by their diffraction on each side of the island with the deposition of materials at the meeting point of the two diffracted and weakened sets of waves. Tombolos can develop wherever the water behind an island is not too deep, provided sufficient sediment of the right particle size is available and provided the wave direction and wind strength favours beach development (Farquhar, 1967). The processes that determine the formation of tombolos are similar to those needed for the growth of spits, bars and similar features (Bird, 1984). Simple tombolos may be symmetrical, or not, depending upon whether the waves and currents approaching from one direction are stronger than those approaching from the other. Double tombolos are formed by waves approaching the lee side of the tied island at different angles of incidence on each flank. Double tombolos and the land they join to the coast usually form a triangular section of the shoreline. Almost the same shape is characteristic of cusped spits reaching out an angular, commonly convex, shore toward each other (Farquhar, 1967). Between double tombolos or cusped spits can develop lagoons or swamps.

The refraction of waves behind the island of Tyre and its satellite islets to the north and south is an evident process. In the eastern part of the Levant basin the longshore currents run northwards and can be relatively strong. Nevertheless, Sanlaville (1977) notes the existence of currents from two directions, one from the South that prevails from December to July and the other, in autumn, comes from the NW. The two provide a perfect explanation of the dual provenance of sediments on this littoral.

The bathymetry of the sea floor to the north and south of the tombolo, reflected in Figs. 120 and 121 and in Mansell's map reproduced in Nir (1996) shows different depths on each side, the northern area being shallower than the southern. This large accumulation of sand on the northern side, which results in shallower bathymetry might be a direct result of the greater quantity of sand coming from the north as Nir states (Nir, 1996). From the geomorphological and geoarchaeological information a different dynamic

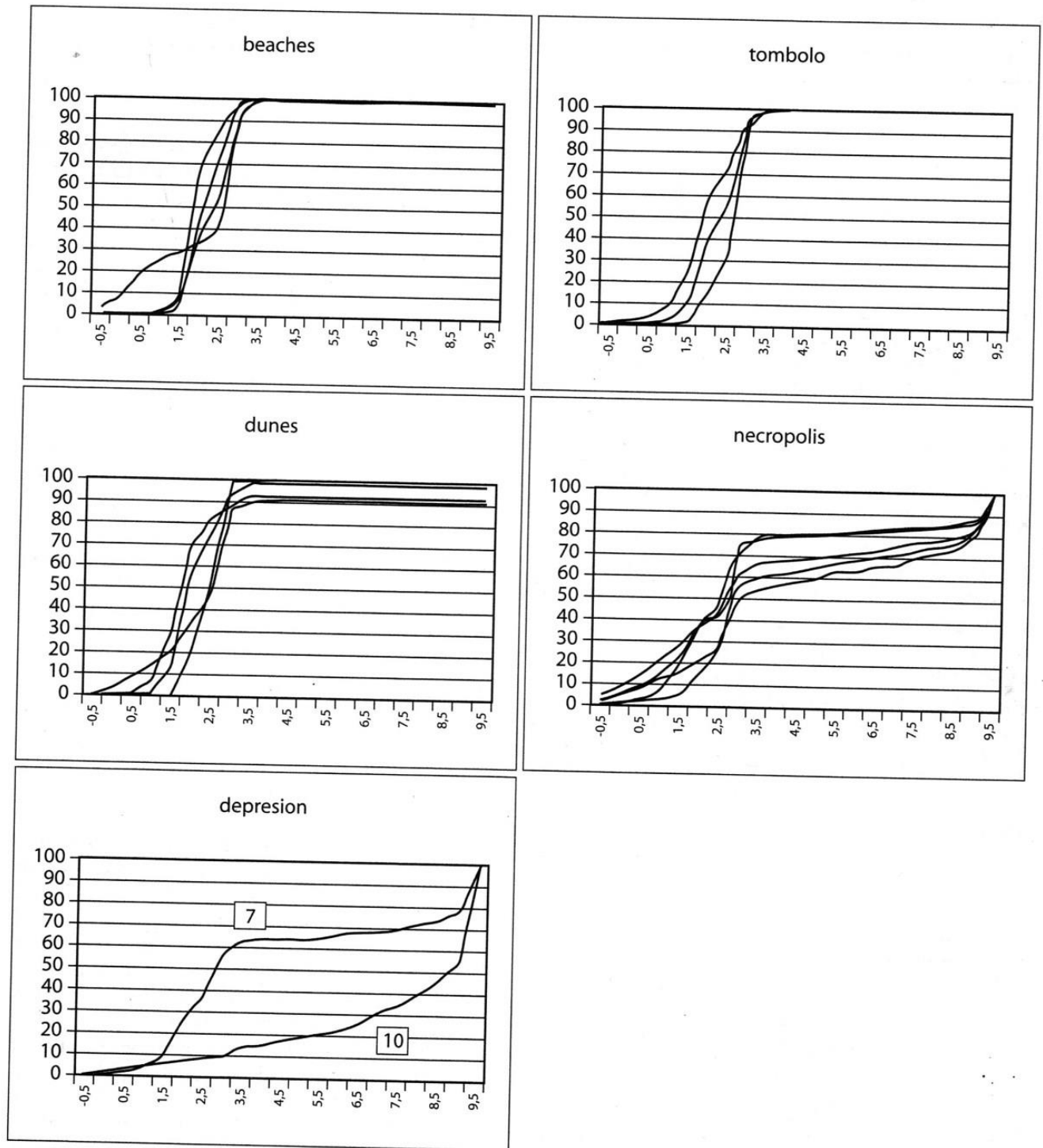


Fig. 124 - Representation of the grain-size distribution curves of the sedimentary samples. Grain diameter in phi scale.

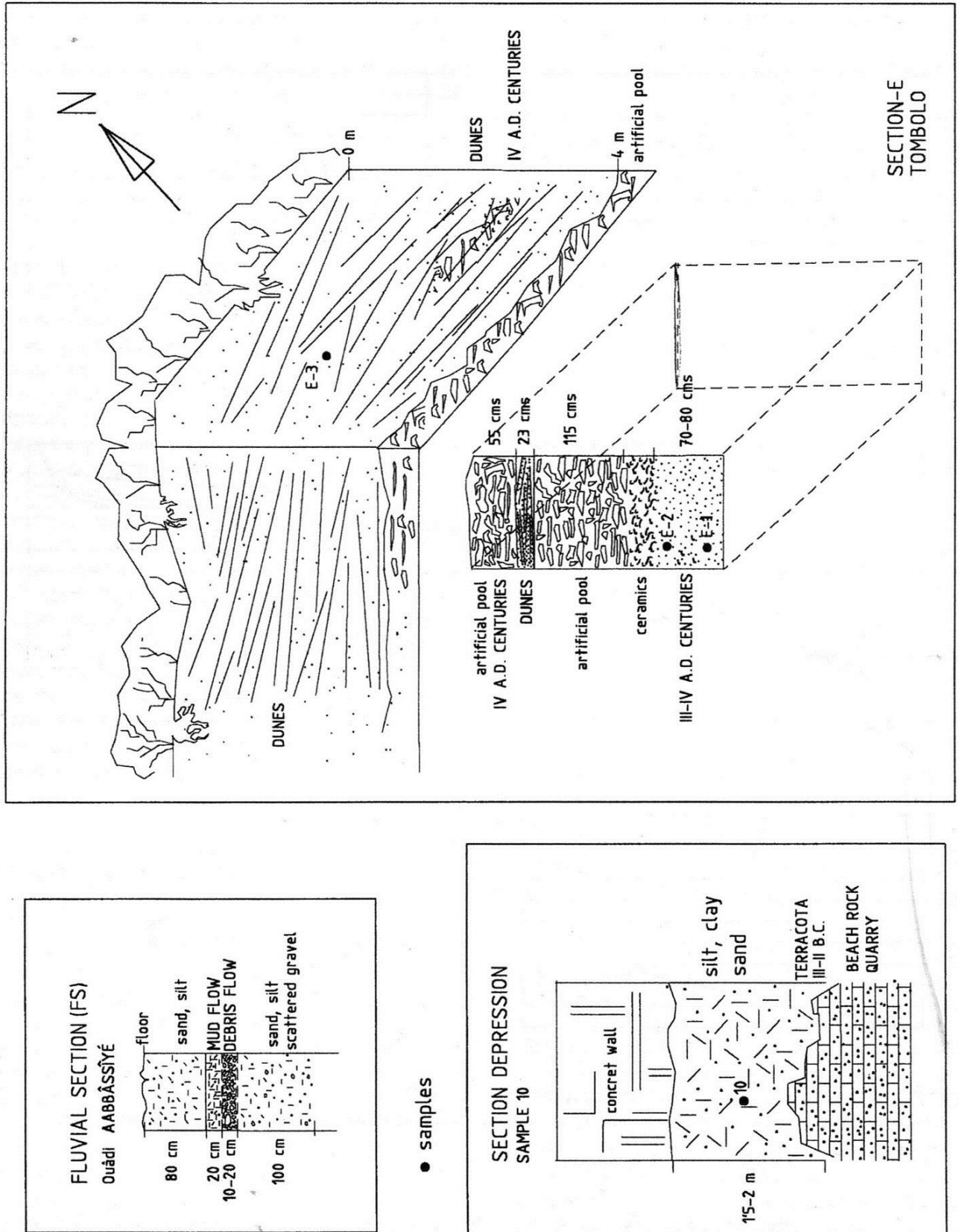


Fig. 125 - Representation of the fluvial, depression and tombolo sections.

and evolution can be deduced in the north and in the south. The tombolo is asymmetric and its formation is complex. In the north a single ridge appears, which was formed earlier than the Phoenician settlement on it. This ridge enclosed one (or several) extensive swamps or lagoons (around 6370-5170 years BP) but today they are silted up and form a depression. Behind the ridge or sand barrier, near the southern lagoon the Phoenician necropolis was sited. This ridge cannot, in its first phase, have linked up with the island of Tyre, it was a spit running out from the Chabriha salient and supplied with material (possibly beach rock) swept down by the currents from the NW whose waves were refracted in the coastal shallows behind the northern islets (**Fig. 121**).

We find a different situation in the southern sector. The inner ridge (post roman pottery) was unconnected with the island of Tyre. It ran from the promontory of Er Rachidiyé and either formed part of an ancient coastline, the northern course of which has completely disappeared, or else it joined up at some time with the northern ridge, so isolating the lagoon of the Al-Bass. The contour line of the 5 m above sea level seems to indicate that at some time in its development, the two ridges formed a cusped alignment denoting refraction of the waves behind the sandstone islets to the north and south of Tyre, but with a different angle of approach on each of its shores. The point where the two ridges joined would constitute the embryo of the tombolo pointing towards the island of Tyre (**Fig. 126 a**). In Mansell's map, published in Nir (1996), interior alignments of dunes can be seen reflecting the arrangement in diagrammatic form. From the tip of this ancient cusped ridge, the successive moles mentioned by historical sources like that of Hiram must have been built (Sanlaville, 1977), including Alexander the Great's famous mole, at a time when the tip of the cusped spit was 744 meters away from the island (Jidejian, 1969 in Nir (1996). The continuing supply of material from the erosion of the continental levels in the southern section and the fan delta of the wadi El Izziyé explain the extraordinary amount of material attached in the south to the older bars or spits in successive sequences until formation of the tombolo littoral was complete (**Fig. 126 b**). The new southern bars and the huge layer of dunes on top of the tombolo date from Roman and medieval times (**Fig. 126 c**), as can be learned from the pottery finds and archaeological sites that appear among the

dunes. The position of this field of dunes in the northern sector of the tombolic bay is explained by the predominance of southwesterly winds, as Sanlaville notes (1977), and as the orientation of the dunal sets described in previous paragraphs.

6. Conclusions: Holocene evolution of the littoral

The evolutionary sequence can be placed in the regional context of the dynamics of the coasts in the Mediterranean Levant, where an outstanding factor is the eustatism or rise in the Flandrian sea level. Sanlaville (1977) describes some holocene fossil beaches in southern Lebanon. The example closest to our study area is south of Saida, where a sandy beach with seashells and gravels appears two meters above the present sea and protected by the dunes. This beach is dated by archaeological remains to before the Iron Age. In a revision of the holocene sea levels of the Lebanese Mediterranean, Pirazzoli (1986) states that this high sea level (+2 meters) described by Sanlaville (1977) and later by Dalongeville (1983) is tectonic in origin. More recently, Pirazzoli (1999) adds that the Levantine coastline, including that of southern Lebanon, has experienced coseismic rises in the order of a meter, the first between 2900 and 2800 BP and the second between 1900 and 1700 BP. The latter would have had serious consequences on July 9 551 AD when an earthquake destroyed the palaeo-Christian church of San Paulino, at the root of the tombolo. Recently Nir (1996) related the eustatic curve of the past 2500 years, deduced from high water marks at different spots along the coastal plain of Palestine (Nir & Elder, 1987) with the phases of formation of the tombolo, stressing that in Hellenistic times the sea level was 1.2 meters lower than at present.

Morhange *et al.* (2000) have investigated two cores in Sidon that demonstrate the mobility of the coastline and the filling of the ancient harbours of this Phoenician site. The ancient port was a natural shelter and after 3500-3000 years BC silt up and were built moles structures in order to protect the artificial basin

General holocene sequences of geomorphological evolution of the littoral appear in the works of Raban (1983, 1985 and 1988) on the coasts of Palestine for

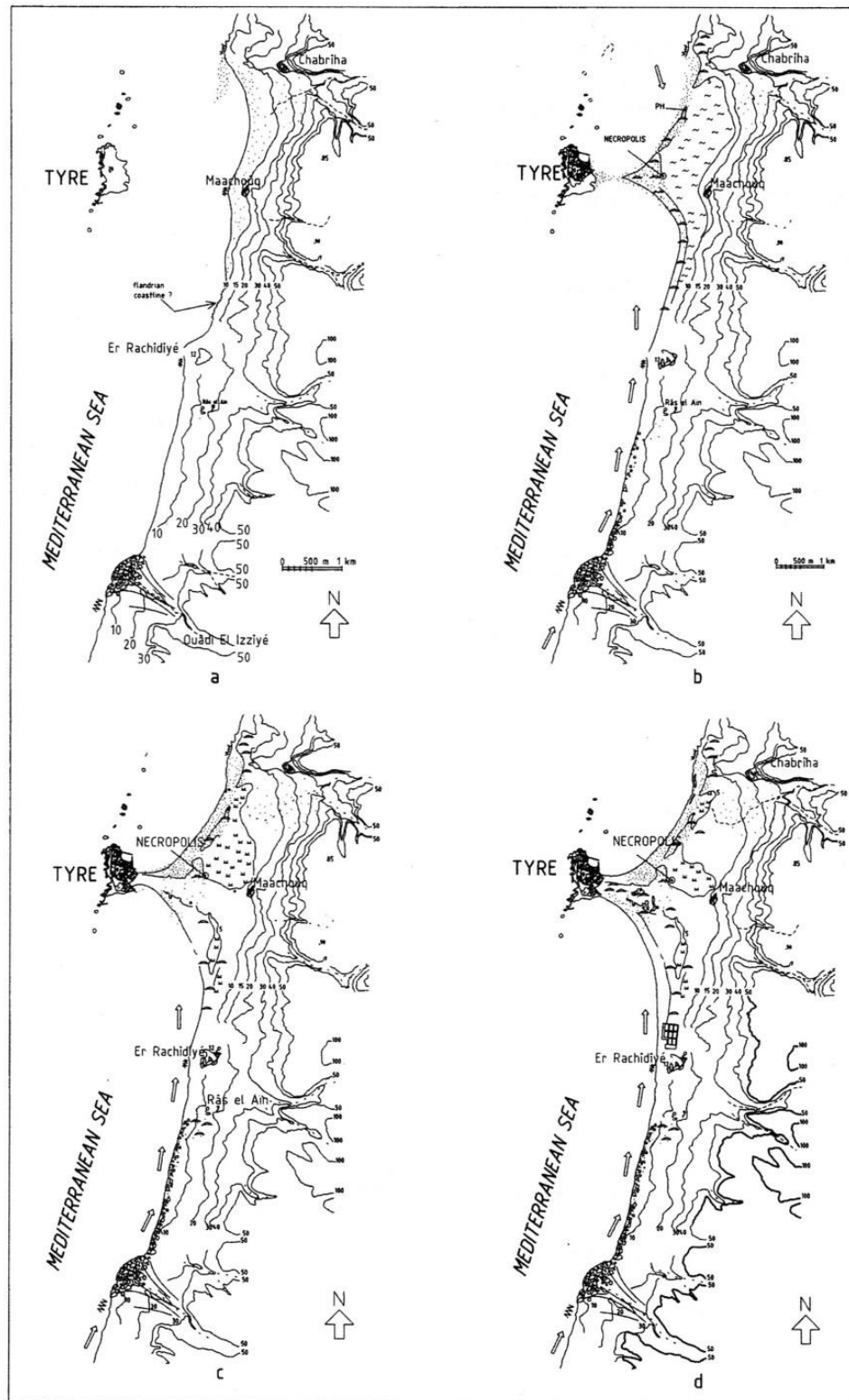


Fig. 126 - Palaeogeographical reconstructions of the littoral evolution since Flandrian. See legend in figure 121.

after the Flandrian maximum. The sequence agrees with our data, formation of sandy spits and bars on the littoral, appearance of brackish lagoons in the coastal plain and subsequent silting up and changing into swamps.

On the coasts of Syria, Sanlaville *et al.* (1997) describe a palaeoenvironmental holocene sequence, in which three phases of beach improvement are identified, controlled by climatic or anthropic factors. Of the three phases mentioned, the second, dated to the second millennium BC, and the third, in the mediaeval period, might be connected with the formation of the two series of ridges and dunes that form the tombolo. Finally, reference must be made to the palaeoenvironmental fluctuations connected with anthropisation recorded in the pollen columns from areas nearby, like the Dead Sea (Heim *et al.*, 1997), emphasising the dry conditions of the post-Roman and Byzantine periods. This aridification might be connected with the formation of the huge area of dunes covering the tombolo and all the archaeological remains of buildings of the Roman period.

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