

# Baalbek, Archives of an Eternity

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# Tinol



Cover

**Louis-François Cassas (1756-1827)**

**Vue de Baalbek avec les temples de Bacchus et Jupiter [View of Baalbek with the Temples of Bacchus and Jupiter], Undated, Circa 1784-1787**

Watercolor, quill pen, and black ink on paper, 87×119.5 cm

Philippe Jabre collection

The developmental history of Baalbek can stand in for the developmental history of human urban civilization. Founded 10,000 years ago – eight millenia before the appearance of its monumental Roman buildings – Baalbek’s uniqueness is not only embedded in the enigmatic grandiosity of its sacred Roman architecture; beyond the sheer scale and purpose of its classical ruins, Baalbek’s sense of epic is inscribed in its unbroken and enduring history, which spans the entire breadth and course of urban developmental history, from the time of the earliest settlements to the present day. Baalbek ranks amongst one of the few cities with an uninterrupted lifespan across all eras and periods of man’s urban history.

The turns of fate – the dramas of place, time, scale, and purpose – have made Baalbek both a paradigm and a paradox. The weight and burden of history is felt perhaps nowhere more strongly, more magnificently, more monumentally than in Baalbek. There is the place – enduring across the full span of the history of man from when he settled. There is the aura – an intimate and intrinsic connection to the forces of nature and to the supernatural. There is the image – forever imprinted with the monumentality of its material presence.

Its composite material and symbolic history and capital have both shaped and been shaped by its inheritors – to whom it actually belongs – and bewildered its many visitors, traveling from afar to behold its ancientness and bask in its grandiosity. Its ineffability and its magic – the aspirations and memories embedded within its stones – have driven imperial and national ambitions, which claim its potency in telling their version of the story. At play here are three different overlapping strands: that of ownership and inheritance; that of observation and storytelling; and that of power and ambition.

From obscure beginnings, the site emerges as if by chance, but always in intimate connection to its natural assets, setting the stage for a destiny so epic, that its multiple meanings, functions, and histories cannot be readily reconciled or reductively synthesized – but held together as a constellation. The productive tensions that emerge are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the face of the immensity of its Roman sacred architecture – one the largest of its kind – layered over the remains of the original human settlements. This imposes a tension between absence and presence; between a human space and a mythological sacred abode of the gods hovering above all of the Beqaa. Its lofty presence inspires and awes in its magnificent scale and ambition, transcendent of man, but built by his own hand. This presence simultaneously threatens to suppress, at once, all that came before it; and perhaps casts too wide a shadow, inevitably oppressing – or at least pre-empting – all that comes after it.

*Baalbek, Archives of an Eternity* traces an epic stage of human drama through the story of Baalbek and its many different lenses, dialogues, and perspectives – traversing ancient and modern; mythological and empirical; symbolic and material; world history and personal testimony; to its emblematic rise as the national brand of the modern nation of Lebanon.

**Vali Mahlouji**  
Curator

## 10,000 years

### From the time of the earliest settlements to the present

The ancient *tell* of Baalbek first appears as a small settlement around 10,000 years ago in the northern half and the eastern edge of the plain of the Beqaa. It is perched on an idyllic summit, in a cool spot overlooking the Beqaa plain near its highest point at an altitude of 1,142 meters, amongst numerous springs and abundant water sources – the springs of Ras al-Ain and Ain al-Juj. From its privileged spot, Baalbek commands the waters that flow down the slopes to the two great rivers of the Beqaa – the Litani river, flowing south, and the Assi river, flowing north.

Excavations in Baalbek have revealed a layered and continuous settlement history located at its summit, directly underneath the Great Court of the Roman sanctuary of Jupiter. For much of its early history, Baalbek remains a relatively small and inconspicuous settlement, unmentioned in ancient sources and historical accounts. There is evidence that Baalbek, from early times, is associated with cultic and sacred rituals linked to its resourceful natural settings and its proximity to abundant waters, though conclusive archaeological evidence for organized sacred functions can be dated back to the Seleucid times in the 1st century BCE, when it is called Heliopolis. Its meteoric rise to ritual and political prominence happens with the arrival of the Romans; and by the end of the 2nd century, Baalbek-Heliopolis is granted the status of a Roman colony. Major logistical difficulties have to be surmounted for the monumentalization of the site by the Romans, who insist on embarking on their largest sacred architectural landmark as an imperial marker of Rome's arrival in the East. In order to do so, the settlement is cleared, and the city is pushed further afield beyond its original summit, which is absorbed into the expanded sanctuary. A massive engineering plan is undertaken to consolidate the loose

ground between the natural solid rock base formations, in order to create a foundation that would uphold the unprecedented monumental building project from ever sinking.

Baalbek-Heliopolis becomes one of the most prominent sacred sites, attracting the largest numbers of religious pilgrims to its temple dedicated to the god Jupiter Heliopolitanus, which rises to the status of an oracle guiding Roman emperors in their quests. Various Roman constructions are erected at Ras al-Ain, Bustan al-Khan, Sheikh Abdallah hill, and further afield. These include various other temples, avenues, markets, baths, nymphaea, banqueting halls, theaters, and necropoli.

The advent of Christianity marks a turning point in the history of the city, and the purposeful iconoclastic destruction of the Temple of Jupiter and its altar by the end of the 4th century. For centuries, the new religion struggles to impose itself on the people of Baalbek, who passionately retain a sacred connection to their ancient pre-Christian social and ritual practices. The city is conquered by Arabs in the 7th century, and its name Baalbek (which is believed to have been its ancient Aramaic appellation before Heliopolis) reappears in the 7th century. For much of its Arab and medieval period, the Baalbek summit – with its Roman structures – acts as a fortified citadel, known as the *Qalaa*, further altering its architecture and purpose. The city is mentioned in various sources, which comment on its natural, verdant beauty. By the Ottoman period, the site of the *Qalaa* is reorganized to include small dwellings, which are cleared out by the excavations carried out by the Germans in the first years of the 20th century.





Baalbek village  
© Marilyn Stafford

## A European-Organized Spectacle

In the pursuit of European historical origins extending beyond “the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome” (Edgar Allan Poe) to Asia and the Near East, European travelers sought, from the 17th century, to walk in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, the medieval crusaders, and – ultimately – to retrace those of the Biblical prophets, in a rediscovery of ancient and biblical lands.

Peaking in the 19th century, we see a confluence – in this exploration of pre-classical roots beyond Europe – of the European drive to classify, classicize, and order history, with a romantic yearning for the rediscovery of a glorious past. The Eastern romance produces a vast corpus of artworks – especially paintings – which collectively constitute an important visual document of the lands, the sites, and sometimes the people. The artists revel in the melancholic beauty of distant sites and landscapes with varying degrees of faithfulness and fictionalization.

This fascination with the “Orient” and the expectation of sensational new discoveries and connections is tinted, however, with an outsider’s gaze. It is fundamentally construed as an encounter with Europe’s own past – a narrative that claims and absorbs desired assets and facets of the “Orient” and the Other into its own canon, reacquainting the European with

his or her own ancient and sacred history, as the rightful keeper and inheritor of civilization.

For the most part, canonization into the history of classicism and western (universal) antiquity ignores and bypasses local exigencies / realities (life, peoples, histories). In textual and visual depictions, locals become subordinated to the European civilizing mission, only marginally mentioned and deployed, enhancing a little color and exotic texture. The impulse to discover, protect, recreate, depict, exhibit, consume, and ultimately claim that which was civilized – the universal heritage of man – is constructed as a mission and a right in the face of decay and neglect on the part of the indifferent local, and the corrupting effect of the “non-enlightened.” Lamentation of the noble past, by design and by default, embeds itself within discourses of purity versus pollution, and dichotomies of Other / East / barbarianism versus self / West / civilization.

In this context, the construction of a visual and textual European Baalbek with all its sacred symbolic capital and material potentials becomes a particularly rewarding case. Baalbek, one of largest sacred monuments of the Roman period, is exalted, romanticized, and represented as an emblematic reminder of cultural achievements transcendent of man, but built by his own hand.



**Louis-François Cassas** (1756-1827)  
**Reconstitution des trois temples de Baalbek**  
[Reconstruction of the three temples of Baalbek], Undated, Circa 1784-1787  
Watercolor and ink on paper, 71 × 138 cm  
Philippe Jabre collection

## Archaeologies of Origins and Imperial Aspirations

The 19th century is characterized by an obsession with the ordering of history. Historicism transcends romanticism and auratic symbolism to include empirical and scientific organization of knowledge. The paradoxical pairing of romanticism and empiricism is institutionalized through the disciplines of archaeology and linguistics, which are *de rigueur*, and utilized in the orderings and decipherings of history. Both disciplines focus on a scientific discovery of pure origins. By extension, a European claim to custodianship of civilization and its origins is scientifically consolidated and rationalized.

Calls for the demarcation and management of archaeological sites and the saving those “sites of decay” has a reciprocal relationship with hegemonic political and imperialist aspirations of domination over the Near East. The Near East becomes the locus for imperialist rivalries of domination, grounded in Napoleon’s expansionist ambitions and successful invasion of Egypt (1798–1801) and the battle of Navarino (1827) in support of Greek liberation from Ottoman rule – both key markers of Europe’s growing power *vis-à-vis* the diminishment of Ottoman might.

The scale and purpose of the unprecedented German intervention in Baalbek under Kaiser Wilhelm II exemplifies a total project – intended to trace origins beyond Europe; to romanticize the aura of historical linkage to the most ancient roots of European civilization; to link the person of the Kaiser with the greatness of the emperors of Rome, as manifested in the grandeur of Baalbek; and to boost German political and economic influence within Ottoman territories. Specifically, it is time for German archaeology to catch up with its British and French counterparts, and to collect its share of material cultural wealth to match the nascent museums of the world at home. As latecomers, the Germans are afforded little access to the cultural assets of Italy and Greece, already in the collections of the Louvre and the British Museum. The Near East becomes a German project.

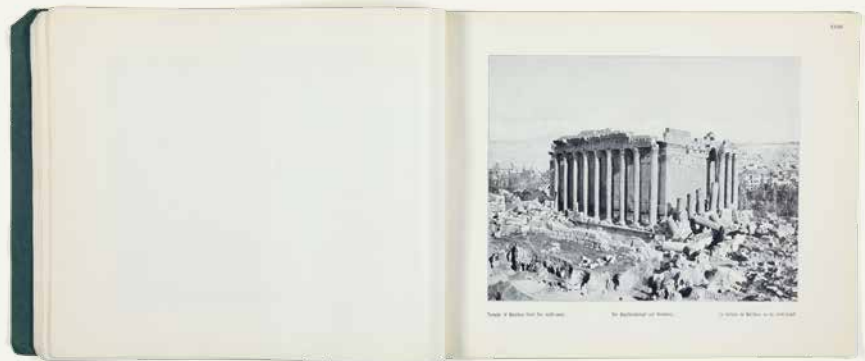
Baalbek, having captured the imagination, is to be rebuilt or returned to its purer, idealized past. The German – and following, them the French-led – excavations cleanse and remove the post-Roman layers of settlements and return the Great Court back to the Roman period.

**Dr. Otto Puchstei and Theodor von Lupke, ed. Georg Reimer (Berlin)**

**Baalbek, trente vues des fouilles allemandes** [Baalbek, thirty views of the German excavations], 1905

Photographic reproduction, 22×53.5 cm (open)

The Fouad Debbas Collection / Sursock Museum



## Photogeneity

Photography, as the new industry of visual commodities, takes advantage of the growing public demand and the dream for a connection to a monumental past. Photography and archaeology become paired as the two decisive tools of modernity in linking the modern to an idealized past. As archaeologists prepare and stage the ground, photographers visually frame and record them for circulation. And as with archaeology, it is the stones themselves that are the pure embodiments of culture. Photographers purify the sites in their own framing in order to dissociate them from contemporary signifiers. In these, any sign of the

local and the contemporary is to be eliminated and avoided. The two operate in parallel to exalt an idealized version of classicism –sanitized, immortalized. Audiences – viewers and consumers – follow suit, demanding an association with the ideals of culture and a piece of the unadulterated, clinical, stereotypical image of antiquity.

Baalbek becomes a photogenic summit, high up on the itinerary and agenda of artists and photographers, in the visual creation and dissemination of cultural value.



### Studio Bonfils

Porte du Temple de Jupiter [Doorway of the Temple of Jupiter], Circa 1885-1895  
Albumen print from glass negative, 27 × 21 cm  
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Sursock Museum



# From Image to National Monument

## The rise of Lebanese Baalbek

The myth of an ideal past becomes the bedrock and launchpad of the new nation. The long trajectory of Baalbek's European-articulated symbology, the archaeological mission of returning to pure, ideal origins, and its popularization through photography and tourism, make Baalbek the perfect choice to be instrumentalized in lieu of the construction of a national Lebanese narrative. As nationalism becomes the dominant ideology of the modern state, monumentalization of an idealized past plays a decisive role in the construction of national history and the modern nation.

Monuments act as reminders of the past. Modernity has employed monuments – of antiquity in particular – to stand as an anchor and scaffolding for the idea and identity of the new nation. Their linkage to (universal) history and their grandiose scale and material vestiges are appropriated for an “imagined community” of the nation to claim and carry forth into the future. This is prescribed in the etymology of the word monument – from the Greek *mnemosynon* and the Latin *moneo*, *monere* (to remind, advise, or warn). A national pedagogy is permeated through

Baalbek, where it is singled out to play an exceptionally prominent role as the material signifier of continuity between the classical world (civilization) and the new nation state. Officiated as an emblem of national identity, Lebanese Baalbek rises as the most powerful endorsement that the modern nation state is a contemporary seat of civilization and power, the successor and inheritor of the timeless glory of authentic ancient greatness and originality. The idea is extended to the notion of a unified, timeless, national body.

At first, it is unclear whether the Beqaa and Baalbek will become part of Syria or modern Lebanon. However, the fertile geography of the Beqaa plays a decisive role in convincing the French Mandate that modern Lebanon would benefit from its acquisition. In 1920, French colonial influence ensures that the Beqaa is incorporated into the republic of Grand Liban and the Lebanization of Baalbek is officiated.

With Lebanization, Baalbek goes from an unreconcilable (prehistoric, historic, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Ottoman) past to become the most reproduced emblematic brand of the new nation.



**Drawing by Joseph de la Nézière /  
Printed by Helio-Vaugirard**  
Baalbek – 2 piastres, 1930-1931  
Stamp, heliogravure, 2,4×4 cm  
Abdo Ayoub collection

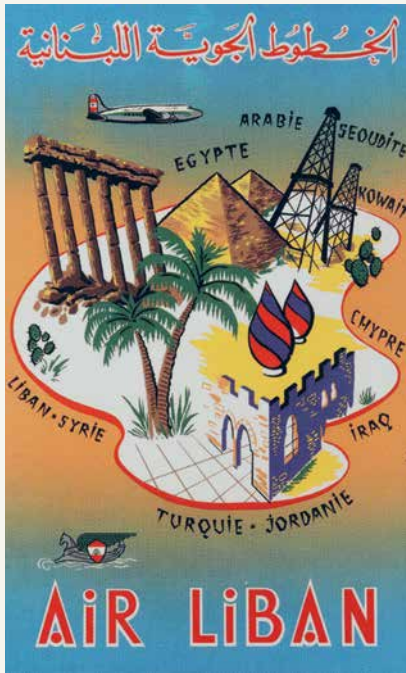


**Drawing by Joseph de la Nézière /  
Printed by Helio-Vaugirard**  
Baalbek – 3 piastres, 1930  
Stamp, heliogravure, 2,4×4 cm  
Abdo Ayoub collection

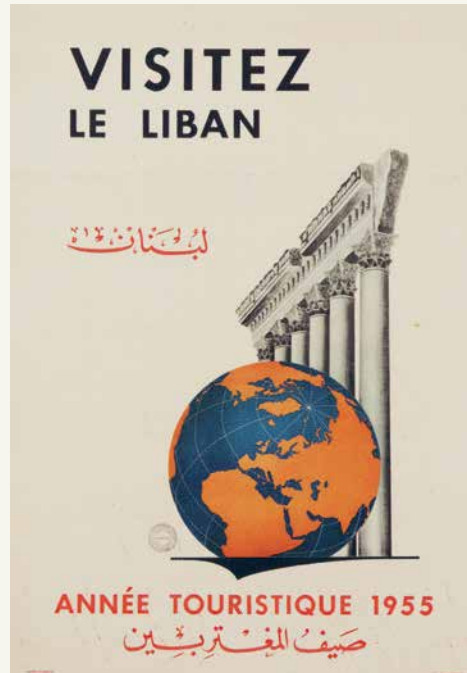


**Drawing by Paul Koroleff**  
Baalbek – 25 piastres, 1952  
Stamp, heliogravure, 2,4×4 cm  
Abdo Ayoub collection

## Popular Imagination



Brigitte for Air Liban  
Inscription in Arabic at the top: Air Liban, 1955  
Lithograph, 103.5×65 cm  
Banque Audi (Suisse)-Geneva collection



Agence officielle du tourisme libanais  
Visitez le Liban – Année touristique 1955, 1955  
Offset print by Imp. Catholique, Beirut, 102×72 cm  
Banque Audi (Suisse)-Geneva collection

As an actor in the popular imaginary, the ruins of Baalbek have had the most prolific career over the last half a century. They have featured in every possible form – as stage set; as backdrop; as screen; as idea; and no less, as the very source of passion and creative inspiration. The sheer epic stage, the enigmatic sense of wonder and awe, the exuberating convergence of mythical and real, are evoked by the aura and the material vestiges of the ruins. Baalbek's

paradigmatic syncretism as a site enables it to assimilate and transcend different narratives – national, local and “world” histories – and renders it supreme for the activation of the artistic, poetic, and popular imaginaries.

But whose Baalbek and which Baalbek is it anyway? How does an ancient ruin – equipped for celebration and exploitation – relate to Baalbek, the enduring city of the citizens?

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**Herbert von Karajan, 1968**  
Courtesy of the Baalbek International Festival

## Baalbek International Festival Lebanon's *mission civilisatrice*



In 1956, Baalbek becomes the site for launching one of Lebanon's most ambitious national cultural institutions – the Baalbek International Festival – at the initiative of the republic's President Camille Chamoun (1954-1958). The festival becomes the first of its kind in the Near East – inspiring others to follow suit – and remains one of the longest running modern performance festivals in the world.

From inception, the festival is institutionalized in the Lebanization of Baalbek, and is committed to the activation and exploitation of the Roman ruins as an omnipresent “backdrop” – always shining bright at the “core” of the

contemporary state; a convenient green screen onto which could be projected protean meanings and national / cultural mythologies of a new Westward-looking calling, set apart and *imagined* as an enlightened guiding mission. The festival takes to the stage to construct a new nation's self-image in the face of the world; and to declare a new nation's *imagined* claim and pledge, in the President's words, to its “true vocation” – its own (timeless and universal) *mission civilisatrice*.

Coming together in full circle, the European-historicized paradigms of origins, authenticity, civilization, and cultural value coalesce at the

festival and are appropriated into its own missions and rhetoric, including those of Occident and Orient, where Lebanon is posited as the natural link between East and West. These stand in sharp contrast to prevalent contemporaneous political and intellectual attitudes and discourses which were on the rise in the Arab world, especially those of Arab nationalism. In spite of its focus on local talent and local folklore, internationally, the festival adopts and pursues a distinctively Eurocentric vision of culture – high and low – in contrast to radical articulations and experimentations that emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. Performance festivals from Belgrade to Shiraz via Dakar and Algiers gravitate instead, in various measures, towards defining a post-colonial moment and proposing new and more subversive cultural mappings, promoting internationalist solidarities distinctly against – and breaking away from – European cultural hegemonies. Of those, only Belgrade survives the political shifts of the late 20th century.

Significantly, the Baalbek International Festival re-emerges after the injuries of the civil war, against many political and logistical odds, in a defiant act of resilience and hope, and in alignment with a national desire and determination to reconstitute and rehabilitate. As a top down, state-initiated project, with a dual mission to enhance culture and promote tourism, the festival tenaciously out-performs many others as a beacon of continuity, endurance, and permanence.

In its second phase, postwar, and in the face of contemporary realities and demographic shifts, the festival's self-confident gaze towards the West and the notion of high culture has had to be recalibrated. The festival is, today, readjusting itself determinedly to connect to local conditions and enhance its link to local reality.

## Modern City

Does it suffice to reduce the energy and confidence of Baalbek to its ruins?

Today's visitor is lured to the site in many ways, that are by destiny and by deliberate design, detached from the city and its people, marginalizing them both. The wide shadow cast by monumentalization inevitably suppresses what was before it and eclipses what comes after it.

However, in spite of the memorialization of its grandest manifestation, Baalbek was never stagnant in one era. These ruins themselves occupy the original heart of the 10,000-year-old living city. They themselves continued to live beyond Rome. The massive blocks used to construct them (with the exception of several elements) are carved out of blocks of local Baalbek limestone (unusual for Roman sacred architecture, normally made of imported marble). Remains of these massive blocks lie in quarries in and around Baalbek, ready for

use, as though the construction itself is still a living project.

The aura and meaning of its imposing ruins cannot be reduced to the folly of a moment in history. They are intrinsically tied to the long and colored story of its people and their practices. The enduring and uninterrupted layered story of its people, unlike abandoned Palmyra and Jerash, lends Baalbek its historical uniqueness.

Recent urban development has created more separation than integration. Demographic shifts across the last century have altered the human landscape of the city and the Beqaa. Political, economic, and ideological tensions have strained the Baalbek story. The obvious and deep-seated passion and pride of Baalbek's citizens is overlain with intense experiences of desire and loss, for which the monuments may very well stand in.



Sayidda Khawla shrine and temple view  
Hekmat Awada collection



## Citizens

The people of Baalbek speak candidly and directly of their city and their lives. The exhibition presents seven interviews and seven perspectives.



Hussein Al Hussein



Siham and George Awad



Oumayma and Hammad Yaghi



Hala Othman



Cyrine Othman



Talal Haidar



Youssef Haidar

Film stills from interviews, 2019  
Filming and editing: Malek Hosni

**Vali Mahlouji** is a London-based curator, founder of Archaeology of the Final Decade, independent advisor to the British Museum, and director of Kaveh Golestan Estate.

Mahlouji's recent work includes exhibitions at Foam Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo; Whitechapel Gallery; Photo London; Prince Claus Fund; Singapore International Festival of Arts; Art Dubai Modern; Bergen Triennial; Open Eye Gallery; Dhaka Art Summit 2018; SAVVY Contemporary; and Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow.

Mahlouji has been published by various institutions, including Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Guggenheim Museum; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; Photo London, Encyclopædia Iranica, Columbia University; Asia Society Museum New York; Sharjah Biennial; and City University New York.

Recent talks and lectures by Mahlouji have taken place at Stanford University; Yale University; Goldsmiths University; SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin; Para Site, Hong Kong; Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Russia; Kultuforum, Berlin; Lahore Literary Festival; Irish Museum of Modern Art; Bergen Assembly; Asia Society, New York; Whitechapel Gallery; and the British Film Institute.



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