BAALBEK Bustan Nassif
Conservation and presentation of a medieval town quarter
World cultural heritage site Baalbek

Baalbek is known worldwide for its magnificent and well-preserved Roman sanctuaries which were added to the UNESCO World Heritage Site list in 1984. However, from a historical point of view, Baalbek has lot more to offer, such as a past of almost 10,000 years. Humans are known to have settled on a hill beneath the Jupiter sanctuary as early as 7200 BC. The site remained inhabited until the construction of the enormous temple complex in the late 1st century BC. At this stage, the settlement shifted to the area of the old town, where it has remained until today. By the end of the second century, the town received the Roman city rights and rose to its heyday in late antiquity (3rd to 6th centuries AD). During the Islamic Middle Ages, Baalbek was an important commercial and cultural centre on an interregional scale.
Baalbek in the Middle Ages

In 635, Baalbek came under the control of the Muslim conquerors. While enjoying its century-old rank as a local trading centre, much of its ancient architecture was preserved. In the 9th and 10th centuries Al-Yakubi and Ibn Hawqal still praised the quality and the impressive ornaments of the buildings. Under the Zengid and Ayyubid dynasties (12th/13th centuries) Baalbek saw itself transformed to a strategic stronghold against the crusader threat. The city’s super-regional significance remains perceptible through the attendance of religious scholars, like Sheikh Abdallah al-Yunini (d. 1221), who not only established a Hanbali school near the capital Damascus but also chose Baalbek as a super-regional site of action.

The quarters in Baalbek’s current old city date back to the 18th and 19th centuries. Only few buildings, for the most mosques and memorial buildings, have survived earlier periods marked by earthquakes and economic difficulties from the 16th to mid-18th centuries.
Bustan Nassif – a medieval dwelling quarter

The Roman sanctuaries were transformed into a fortress probably as early as the 9th and 10th centuries AD. With the crusader wars in the 11th and 12th centuries, they were modified again to take the aspect of the stronghold as it presents itself today. Immediately facing its southern gates one passes through a former neighbourhood referred to as Bustan Nassif. The sector was formerly characterised by private houses, a local mosque, a bath house, and a khan/cara-vanserai built in the Middle Ages on top of older structures from classical antiquity. Under Nur ed-Din Zengi, the quarters were fortified with a new city wall in 563/1168.

Under the Early Ottoman rule, the sector declined in the 15th century and gradually fell into oblivion until it ended up as gardening plots in the 18th and 19th centuries (Arabic Bustan).

Conservation work in Bustan Nassif

It was only in the 1970’s, during excavations conducted by the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities that the medieval quarters at Bustan Nassif were again brought to light. Although its architectural remains are preserved only as foundations, they all the same impressively reflect the wealth and status of medieval Baalbek.

Bustan Nassif is located in the visitors’ entrance area. The premises are dedicated to the explanation of Baalbek’s medieval history and that of the quarter itself.

The conservation of the area and the presentation to the public was carried out jointly by the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities and the German Archaeological Institute with generous funding from the German Federal Foreign Office.