

# Satellite and Archaeological Reconnaissance in the Țūr 'Abdīn, Turkey





# Satellite and Archaeological Reconnaissance in the Ṭūr 'Abdīn, Turkey

Final Report of the Finnish-Swedish Archaeological  
project in Mesopotamia (FSAPM), 2014-2016

Kenneth Silver, Minna Silver,  
and Raffaella Pappalardo

With contributions by Markus Törmä



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Front cover: Çattepe, Tilli or Tell Fafan. A general aerial view of the mound. Photo and copyright: Haluk Sağlamtimur. Published with permission.

Back cover: Ömerli, Keferde. The tower in the east end of the settlement with an intact entrance in the western wall. Photo: Minna Silver and copyright FSAPM.

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

The draft of this book was written under unique circumstances in the Old City of Mardin in North Mesopotamia, the city where we had moved in 2014 for academic and research purposes. From the outset, the aim was to study the Tūr 'Abdīn and the eastern *limes* of the Roman Empire. However, quite soon after the project had been successfully launched, it became obvious that we had discovered something rather different from what we originally imagined or perhaps ever could have anticipated.

In September 2014, we found ourselves for the first time in the central highland of the historical mountain called Mt. Izala, better known in research literature as the Tūr 'Abdīn, following an invitation by the mayor and staff of the Municipality of Ömerli. Accompanied by heavily armed guards, we familiarized ourselves with the ancient, fortified site of Keferde located ca. 12 km south-east of the sleepy town of Ömerli. Personally, I was from before to some extent familiar from research with the Christian past of the famous Tūr 'Abdīn and the monasteries. Namely, I happened to be working on a large paper dealing with the rise of early Christianity and the Church east of the Jordan River, which extended its roots also into Northern Mesopotamia, a work that I had earlier inherited from my dear father-in-law who passed in 2015.

Nevertheless, we were in no way prepared for the almost surreal experience that was in store for us out there in the middle of nowhere in the mountain of the ancient Tūr 'Abdīn. Suddenly, right in front of us was an amazing ancient city from Late Antiquity, with city walls, towers, and apparent streets covered by grass, which once displayed an advanced municipal infrastructure. After all, according to the newly published authoritative map of the region, the geographic location in question was supposed to have been empty.

The archaeological reconnaissance work and mapping project in the Tūr 'Abdīn was luckily finished in the third season by the end of the summer of 2016, just before the project was interrupted by the unrest and military coup in Turkey. It took us quite some time to recover from the aftermath of the coup and the subsequent relocation of the project outside Turkey for security reasons. The preliminary results of the fieldwork were presented to the scientific community in September 2017 in Ottawa, Canada, at the 26th International CIPA Symposium. That this present, final volume, eventually could be published is largely due to the possibilities that accompanied the appointment to the curatorship of antiquities at the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, Sweden, for the principal author.

More importantly, the big picture, if you will, is that now the time has perhaps arrived to re-evaluate the understanding of the military organization of Northern Mesopotamia in the Late Antique period. Nevertheless, the full effects of this will probably only be felt in the near future, when many more sites in the region have been archaeologically surveyed, mapped or excavated and above all properly dated based on rigid archaeological work, though some clear indications of this is already seen in this publication.

\* \* \*

On an institutional level, we are pleased to acknowledge the scientific partners of the project. In 2015-2016, the project was able to benefit from the kind cooperation of the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (SRII), under the leadership of the then Director Johan Mårtelius, who helped us sort out many practical issues. The University of Stockholm, the Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies under the leadership of Professor Arja Karivieri extended its support in various forms to initiate the Finnish-Swedish archaeological project, which we greatly appreciate. An

extension of the project was also planned in cooperation with the Institute for Digital Archaeology, Oxford, UK, in 2015-2016, but unfortunately that did not get the funding required. However, in September 2016 we were able to attend the World Heritage Strategy Forum that was arranged by the Institute at Harvard University, US.

We would also like to thank the staff of the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University, UK, which provided the project with high-resolution images of the Beşikkaya Fafe tower tomb in the Tūr 'Abdīn and general information connected to Gertrude Bell's travel in the region in the early 1900s.

The Stanfords Cartographic Team (London, UK) also deserves our sincere thanks for their kind cooperation and upon request, promptly providing the Tactical Pilotage Maps and Operational Navigation Charts.

We are also grateful for the Turkish co-operation with the then Museum Director Nihat Erdoğan at Mardin Museum for all the photographs, maps, and information regarding the research area, the then Director of Ömerli Municipality, Süleyman Tekin for the signed cooperation agreements, and to the then Professor Ahmet Denker at Bilgi University, for planned cooperation in digital archaeology, and to Professor Haluk Sağlamtimur at Ege University.

On a personal level, I am much in debt to Professor Emeritus Jyrki Knuutila from Helsinki University, Finland, and to Professor Isto Huvila from Uppsala University, Sweden, for their willingness to support my work in Stockholm.

Regarding this publication, I am very grateful to the National Museums of World Culture, Sweden, and the Chief of Staff, Dr. Karl Magnusson, for the encouragement to publish this volume on the endangered cultural heritage in south-eastern Turkey and providing an institutional umbrella for doing that. My sincere thanks also go to the Librarian at the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, Mrs. Helena Rundkranz, who did not spare any effort in finding missing books and literature for me.

As always is the case with a scientific and archaeological project, the financial partners made the acquiring of the research material such as the satellite images and maps, as well as the fieldwork and post-fieldwork in 2014–2022 possible. Therefore, it is our great pleasure to express our heartfelt thanks and gratitude to the Birgit och Gad Rausing's Stiftelse för Humanistisk Forskning in Lund, Sweden, and Ella och Georg Ehrnrooths Stiftelse, Finland, and Thure Galléns Stiftelse, Finland. In addition to this, we also had the pleasure of working in close cooperation with a private sponsor whose help was invaluable in advancing the work and the presentation in Canada in 2017.

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archaeological connections as well as possible trade and cultural connections that once dominated the Romano-Persian *limes*.

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### **The structure of the book**

The main body of the work entitled *Final Report of the Finnish-Swedish Archaeological Project in Mesopotamia (FSAPM)* is divided into seven large sections that are set out in 12 chapters. The first part covers the introduction, previous scholarship, methodology and goals, as well as the remote sensing and geospatial data (Chapters 1-2). In the second part (Chapter 3), the contents of the archaeological reconnaissance work at the chosen sites are presented under the subject headings of Keferde, Beşikkaya Fafe, and Çimenlik, Mersê, all in the Ömerli municipality in the Mardin Province. A more detailed discussion and analysis of the archaeological reconnaissance work at the three sites follows in the third part of the book, which covers Chapters 4-7. In the fourth section, the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire is put into a larger geographical and historical context (Chapters 8-9). In the fifth part, the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire is viewed from the point of view of satellite prospecting, in the search for new clues of the military installations which are summarized in Chapter 10. The concluding thoughts in Chapter 11 represent the sixth section. At the end of the book, there are five supporting appendices.

Before we move on, it may be legitimate to ask here if the understanding of the eastern frontier in Mesopotamia in a better and deeper way is a prospect fully unattainable. We do not believe that. The motivation for this answer is quite unusual and comes from my third occupation. In the science of warfare, starting from the famous Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu, it was recognized that the terrain and the physical conditions were always the key elements in a military strategy, forming the basis for laying out plans or waging any war successfully. And, of course, the Roman-Byzantine period was no exception from this well-known conventional rule.

Sun Tzu (*Art of Warfare* 11, 'The Nine Situations', 52) said: '*We cannot enter into alliance with neighboring princes until we are acquainted with their designs. We are not fit to lead an army on the march unless we are familiar with the face of the country—its mountains and forests, its pitfalls and precipices, its marshes and swamps. We shall be unable to turn natural advantages to account unless we make use of local guides*'.

Thus, the actual structural and methodological approach in this book – out of many different approaches available to the ancient world – as seen in Chapters 4 to 11 – focuses primarily on the geography and environmental context of the military installations and their architecture, and secondly on the road network, and thirdly, on other considerations. However, the emphasis is

not on the climatological and subsistence point of view of the environmental aspect, but rather a military one, in relation to the environment once chosen for defense purposes, as outlined above. Finally, here we find another great military truth: defensive forces preparing to counter enemy offensives always identifies the terrain where the enemy's advance is stopped and makes necessary preparations there in his own advantage.

The reason for the above approach is that the contextual analysis of the environment and the geography is a topic which has almost completely been neglected in Mesopotamian Archaeology, although this crucial aspect enables us in the first place to understand why the military sites from the Late Antique period are where they are. In general, it also facilitates the understanding of Roman military strategy and its subsequent development, as well as its obvious shortcomings.

Lastly, it seems quite possible that we have been too focused on the fragmentary literary sources of the time, and sorting out the bits and pieces that we already know. But at the same time, we have been rather slow in grasping the military strategy of the Romans and the decisions behind it, which eventually affected the outcome of the campaigns. Thus, I understand if some of the ideas expressed in this work are 'thought provoking'. Nonetheless, if the discussion put down in writing has indeed provoked some new thoughts and ideas, that is most warmly welcomed.

Any failure to reproduce the exact views presented to me by other scholars or partners of co-operation remains entirely mine. As the principal author, I also am at fault for any actual errors or other academic shortcomings. Nevertheless, my sincere hope is that this volume would inspire further scientific debate.

Kenneth Silver