

The Citadel of Zalabiyeh on the Euphrates: placing the site in its historical context and a summary of the first archaeological field season (2010)

Emma Loosley
University of Manchester

The citadel of Zalabiyeh is perched on a cliff on the eastern bank of the Syrian Euphrates downstream of its twin foundation Halabiyeh. Halabiyeh (also known as Zenobia) is a much more significant foundation whose walls encircled a large town, whereas Zalabiyeh was a much smaller site that only ever appears to have supported a military garrison and the support staff necessary for the functioning of a Romano-Byzantine (and later an Umayyad) frontier fort. This diminutive size and more remote location on the eastern bank of the river could have been contributory factors to the literary confusion over the origins of the site. Zalabiyeh appears to have been first mentioned by Isidore of Charax in his first century CE/BCE work on the Roman-Parthian stations along the trade route between Antioch and India. Isidore refers to a “Royal Palace” that has in the past been associated with Zalabiyeh, but there has thus far (see below) been no evidence of pre-Byzantine occupation at the site. However this link to an imperial foundation does explain what seems to be one of the oldest names attached to the site: Basileia. Basileia has also been used in conjunction with the name Annoucas and both seem to have been applied to the cliff top now known as Zalabiyeh. If we accept this attribution then we can refer to Procopius for information on the building of the fortress:

«Beyond Circesium is an ancient fort, Annoucas by name, whose wall, which he found a ruin, the Emperor Justinian rebuilt in such magnificent style that thereafter it took second place in point of strength to no single one of those most notable cities.»

(Procopius, *Buildings* II. vi 12)

Traditionally the strategic location of this fortress has been attributed to the fact that Halabiyeh and Zalabiyeh were twin buttresses on the Romano-Byzantine frontier against the Sassanian Empire and the Euphrates acted as a monumental barrier between the two empires, but the clear continuation of the Roman *limes* east of the river and a series of Romano-Byzantine settlements over into Mesopotamia suggest that the situation was not as clearly defined as previously assumed. This area is becoming increasingly important to the growing field of Frontier Studies and Elizabeth Key Fowden's work on the cult of St. Sergius (Fowden, p. 133) suggests that often the defensive strengths of Zalabiyeh led to the fortress being bypassed altogether by Persian forces.

Procopius also describes the Iranian invasion led by Azarethes, which avoided the fortified northern route and, on the Lakhmid al-Mundhir's advice, cut across Syria-Mesopotamia further south, thereby catching the Roman forces by surprise. Belisarius was stationed in Mesopotamia, and before he was informed of their presence in Roman territory, the Iranians with their Arab (sic) allies were camped at Gaboulon, east of Chalcis. Again, in 540, Khusrau I invaded Syria, travelling from Circesium to Zenobia/Halabiya and Sura, and thence to Rusafa.

Later, Procopius describes how Khusrau I took the same route in 542, keeping the Euphrates on his right, and then immediately relates the story of Khusrau's siege of Rusafa. Procopius is not the only source for this use of the steppe routes. John of Epiphania records that in 573 the Iranian general Adarmaanes crossed through the desert from

Ambar, south of Circesium, with Iranian and nomad Arab forces. And Theophylact records that Adarmaanes made a surprise invasion through the steppe northwestward from Cirecsium as far as Antioch, taking Apamea on his way home (Fowden, 1999, p. 63).

This evidence suggests that to some extent the formidable strategic advantages offered by the high promontory above the river where Zalabiyeh was sited meant that hostile forces appear to have largely by-passed the site rather than attempt to engage the garrison in battle. This fact would seem at first sight seem to be supported by the standing archaeological evidence that suggests the natural erosion processes caused by the changing meander of the Euphrates, earth tremors and the natural weathering caused by wind and rain, rather than human intervention, have caused the decay of the citadel walls.



Figure 1: The northern extremity of the citadel wall looking south. Notice the weathering on the upper region compared with the comparatively good preservation of the more recently exposed area of wall (Joshua Bryant).

A brief survey of the standing architecture at Zalabiyeh

The walls are in fact the only standing features still extant at the site and although they can be seen from the west bank of the Euphrates it is only on the approach from the east that the full extent of the surviving architecture can be appreciated. As mentioned above, Zalabiyeh has been a victim of the changing geography of the region. The cliff on which the citadel stands has an upper stratum of basalt above a gypsum level, which means that the base of the cliff has dissolved and collapsed as the Euphrates has cut eastwards over the centuries. This has ultimately led to the complete loss of the western and northern walls of the citadel and curtailed both the eastern and southern walls. As the site has never been excavated or architecturally surveyed before, it is impossible to say with any certainty how much has been lost in this manner. The only tangible measure of deterioration is comparing photographs taken by Gertrude Bell in 1905 with those taken more recently in order to evaluate how swiftly the changes have occurred.



Figure 2: View of the southern walls of Zalabiyeh facing south within the citadel, 1905
(Image courtesy of the Gertrude Bell Archive, University of Newcastle).



Figure 3: The same view in April 2010 (Emma Loosley).

By comparing these two images it can be seen that the loss over one hundred years is only in the region of one or two metres, but unfortunately Bell did not take any similar views to the north of the site and so it is not possible to judge whether or not the rate of erosion at the north end equates to that of the south. One thing we can verify from Bell's images is that the main eastern gateway to the complex and the walls to either side of it have changed little in the intervening period. All this goes to illustrate that, from survey alone, the site appears to have suffered the majority of its depredations some centuries ago and that the majority of wear and tear has been caused by natural, rather than human, factors. However one anomaly thrown up by the surface survey was the total absence of standing architecture within the walls of the fortress. Whilst the tops of substantial basalt walls could be discerned during preliminary field walking, there were no buildings still above ground. The most likely explanation for this seems to be the fact that the location of the site at the meeting of the fertile river plain and the steppe on the higher ground means that the site is often enveloped in

dust storms and during excavations it became apparent that the sandy topsoil is always in movement and therefore the buildings had been buried in antiquity.

One element of the site that suggests that connecting Zalabiyeh with an earlier foundation is erroneous is the fact that the walls contain no evidence of *spolia*. The construction of the perimeter walls consists of a basalt rubble and concrete core faced on either side with well-dressed blocks of gypsum masonry. As figure 1 demonstrates, over time the two facing layers have eroded out from the central core and de-stabilised the wall further. Elsewhere in Syria the drums of Roman columns have been used to tie Byzantine or later walls built in this manner together. The general lack of *spolia* and in particular the absence of Roman material tying the walls suggests strongly from the outset that there was no Greco-Roman monument on the site before the construction of the current fortress.

The first season of excavation

The fact that this is a salvage mission and the security constraints placed on the team by the Syrian authorities mean that it has not been possible to undertake field-walking and test trenches outside the perimeter of the citadel walls. Therefore from the start the major objective has been to record as much of the material that remains *in situ* as possible before the construction of a dam downstream accelerates the erosion of the cliff and ultimately destroys Zalabiyeh. To this end a strategy of widespread excavation has been employed with the rationale that it is extremely unlikely that a future mission will work at the site and that this will probably be the only academic study of this monument.

The initial plan to explore the region inside the fortress gates in order to try and ascertain when the two side arches on either side of the central gate were closed was abandoned after a team of geologists working in the region drilled a large hole in the region to a depth in

excess of 5 metres, thereby rendering that area of the site unsafe. All trenches were also kept at a distance of several metres from the edge of the cliff as it is clear that the site frequently experiences landslips. The final consideration was whether to dig in the vicinity of areas that had been disturbed by looters or to include these areas of disruption within our trenches. In the end we started away from the disrupted areas, but trench 2 ultimately spread into one of these damaged regions.

In the event three trenches were opened, one to the north and two to the more southerly end of the site and the finds were remarkably similar across all three locations. The trenches all yielded evidence of barracks accommodation set in a rough grid pattern and consisting of square or slightly rectangular terraced rooms with doors opening onto straight alleys running roughly east-west across the fortress. The walls were all several courses wide and constructed, like the core of the fortress walls, with small basalt boulders. There was evidence in various locations of fine gypsum plaster on the floors and a few fragments (one painted) suggest that the walls were also plastered. In the alleys there was a street covering of rough gypsum gravel that showed evidence of being ground down into a coarse plaster and in places smoothly finished pieces of gypsum had been used as drains, thresholds or paving slabs. All building materials were therefore from the region with the exception of the wooden beams that supported the tiled roofs of these chambers, which had been presumably floated down the Euphrates from what was then the heavily wooded region of the Tur 'Abdin in contemporary Turkey.

Two of the three trenches possessed ovens (*tannour*) and trench 2 yielded three in relatively close proximity along with significant quantities of animal and chicken bones. This suggests that each of these chambers or perhaps every other chamber had the means to prepare food for the inhabitants of the dwelling, which at this stage we are assuming is barracks accommodation. Next season it is hoped that the main administrative buildings of the site will be discovered and that we may be able to understand the distinctions (if any) between barracks accommodation and areas utilized by support staff.

The mystery of why the site was abandoned was partially solved within ten days of the start of excavation. In the same context across the site there was widespread evidence of scorch marks and large pieces of carbon were discovered, often in conjunction with substantial pieces of burnt tile. A number of samples of carbon have been taken and will be sent for C14 dating in the future, but at present it can be confirmed that no objects from later than the Umayyad period have been discovered at the site giving us a strong indication that this is when the site was destroyed. What remains a mystery is the cause of the fire. Whether or not the fortress was attacked, deliberately fired as a defensive measure or simply burnt down by accident is unsure. So far the notable lack of human remains suggest that it is unlikely that the garrison perished in the fire.

With the exception of one Byzantine coin no finds have yet provided us with clear dating for the occupation of Zalabiyeh, but as mentioned above all ceramics, glass and metal objects fall squarely within the Byzantine-Umayyad period and point to a window of occupation spanning only approximately 250 years at the most. This hypothesis will be verified with the digging of test trenches next season to study definitively whether or not there was any Roman (or earlier) building at the site.

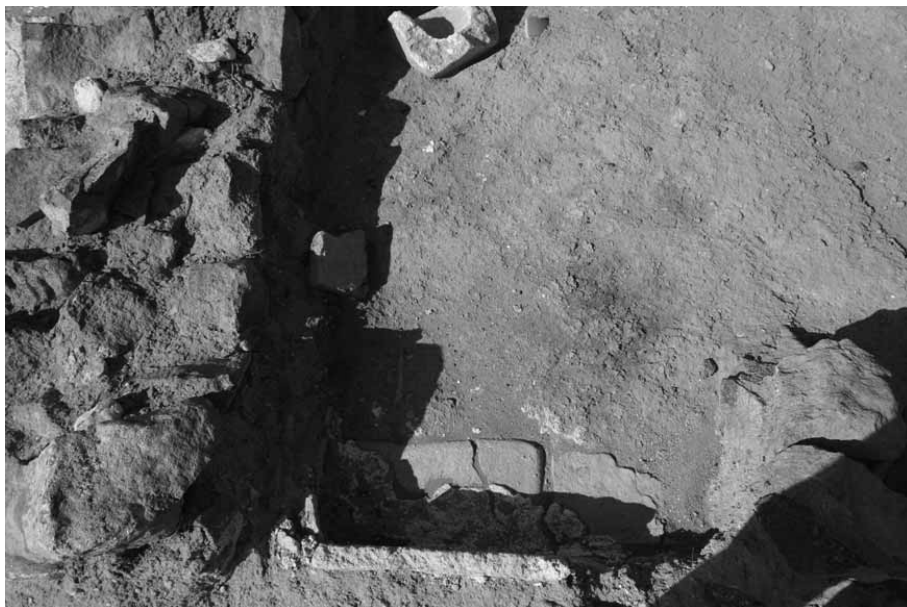


Figure 4: Detail of trench 2 showing a finely plastered threshold over a stone doorstep in the foreground and a piece of a gypsum drain at the rear. Note the large area of scorching in the centre (Emma Loosley).

Conclusion

After an excellent start the plan is to continue expanding the three trenches opened in 2010 and record the standing architecture in our second season. We will also commence analysis of the finds and begin to build up a more detailed picture of the inhabitants' interaction with other settlements. The discovery of fragments of Cypriot and North African sigillata ware in 2010 suggests that there were some residents at Zalabiyeh who were either wealthy enough to afford expensive imported wares or who originated in provinces far from the Roman frontier. There was also an unexpectedly wide variation in the types of glassware discovered and this, in conjunction with the discovery of an unusual obsidian core will also be a focus of our next season.

Finally it is hoped that it will prove possible to locate some of the administrative buildings or the garrison church, but at this stage it

is still impossible to discern how much of the fortress now lies at the bottom of the Euphrates.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) and in particular to the Director of Excavations, Dr Michel Al-Maqdissi. Obviously many thanks must go to the head of the Syrian side of the British-Syrian mission, Mr. Yaarob Abdullah and to Dr. Jolene Debert of the University of Manchester and Joshua Bryant's assistance with photography was invaluable.

Finally this work would not have taken place without the financial assistance of the British Academy and an extremely generous bursary from the Osmane Aïdi Foundation, Damascus.

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