

# Houses of hoards

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William Aylward, editor  
 EXCAVATIONS AT ZEUGMA  
 Conducted by Oxford Archaeology  
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On the north bank of the upper Euphrates river stands the ancient city of Samosata, capital of the ancient kingdom of Commagene. This is the site of the royal palace of King Antiochus I of Commagene (70–38 BC), whose magnificent tomb-complex on the peak of nearby Mt Nemrud is one of the most evocative archaeological sites in modern Turkey. Partially excavated between 1978 and 1988, Antiochus' palace at Samosata is (or was) one of the best preserved royal buildings anywhere in the Greco-Roman east, with splendid floor mosaics, vivid frescos and royal sculptures.

But don't start planning your summer holiday around a visit to Samosata. Today the site lies deep beneath the waters of the mighty Atatürk dam, part of a huge network of twenty-two hydroelectric dams

on the Turkish stretches of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (twelve of which are now complete). In 1989, Samosata disappeared under the rising reservoir, along with more than a hundred Kurdish villages.

If only the flooding of Samosata could be reduced to a simple morality tale, of a philistine and materialistic Turkish state wantonly destroying its own cultural heritage. In fact, things are not so simple. The flooding of Samosata was hardly unexpected. The dam was more than a decade in the making, and there was ample opportunity for archaeologists to excavate and map the surviving remains, had there been the collective will to do so. The only work done at Samosata in the 1980s was undertaken by a tiny team of under-resourced Turkish archaeologists. No one else was all that bothered.

Throughout the 1990s, work proceeded on the Birecik dam, further downstream on the Euphrates. This time the most important ancient site under threat was a town called Zeugma. Zeugma lies on the northern fringe of the Syrian desert, where the Euphrates cuts through the Taurus mountain range out into the plains of Mesopotamia. The name Zeugma means "bridge", and the ancient river-crossing at Zeugma made the town one of the key strategic points on Rome's eastern frontier. From the mid-first to the mid-third centuries AD, Zeugma was garrisoned by Rome's fourth Scythian legion, before its final sack by the Sasanian Persians in 252/3. Most of the town was never reoccupied, leaving its ruins as a rare and pristine example of a Roman frontier-town in its prime.

By the late 1990s, Zeugma seemed doomed to suffer the same fate as Samosata. Only small rescue excavations had been conducted, most notably by the Australian archaeologist David Kennedy, who had campaigned tirelessly (if unsuccessfully) to bring the threatened sites on the Euphrates to the world's attention. At last, on May 7, 2000, only months before the flooding of the Birecik reservoir, Zeugma landed on the front page of the *New York Times*, under the headline "Dam in Turkey may soon flood a '2nd Pompeii'". Some spectacular mosaics – including one showing a particularly photogenic tousle-haired girl, with melting dark eyes and a worried-looking expression – suddenly made Zeugma big news.

In the early summer of 2000, a spectacular rescue project belatedly began at Zeugma, lavishly funded by David W. Packard's admirable Packard Humanities Institute. By mid-June, several hundred British, Italian, French and Turkish archaeologists were already at work at Zeugma, under the overall management of Oxford Archaeology, an independent company specializing in rescue excavations. The dig was carried out at breakneck speed, as the waters of the reservoir steadily crept up over the lower part of the site, a few metres below where the excavators were working.

Excavating the entire city was clearly out of the question. Oxford Archaeology chose to focus on a narrow, jagged strip running across the entire breadth of the site, high enough above the reservoir to give the excavators about three months before the rising waters would make further work impossible. In total, nineteen large trenches were sunk along this strip, thirteen of them by Oxford Archaeology, four by the University of Nantes, and two by the local Gaziantep museum. By September, the excavators were already back-filling the trenches with soil and gravel to give some final protection from the reservoir waters.

The present volumes – 984 pages of text and 261 pages of plates, all freely available online at [zeugma.packhum.org](http://zeugma.packhum.org) – are the final report on the thirteen trenches excavated by Oxford Archaeology in the blazing summer of 2000. It is hard to praise this extraordinary collaborative publication too highly. Any old looter can dig up a mosaic. But to have recorded, classified and conserved hundreds of fragments of ancient textiles, 5,553 pieces of animal bone, and rich samples of charred plant remains and charcoal – and all this under the most unfavourable conditions imaginable – is something else altogether.

The randomness of rescue excavations does have certain advantages. Most ancient city excavations tend to privilege monumental structures and public areas: temples, theatres, marketplaces and baths. Quite by chance, all but one of the areas chosen for excavation in 2000 were occupied by fine private houses of the Roman imperial period. Private housing has, up until now, been a near-total blank spot in the archaeology of the eastern Roman Empire. Thanks to the meticulous recording of the Zeugma houses, *Excavations at Zeugma* will now be the starting point for any study of housing in the Roman Near East.

Nothing gets archaeologists more excited than a closed depositional context – that is to say, clear evidence that a particular building or site was destroyed by fire, earthquake or war and not subsequently reoccupied. (This, of course, is what is so useful about sites like Pompeii and Herculaneum, where everything has to date before the Vesuvian eruption of AD 79.) Zeugma offers us one of the most beautifully clear destruction contexts in the entire eastern Roman Empire. Most of the houses excavated at Zeugma seem to have met with a violent end at exactly the same time. This destruction can be precisely dated, thanks to coins found lying just below the burnt debris, the latest of which were struck in 252 or 253.

As it happens, we know from an independent source (an inscription from Naqsh-e Rostam in western Iran) that a Sasanian Persian king, Shapur I, sacked Zeugma and other Roman cities along the Euphrates in precisely 252/3. Zeugma thus gives us our first clear picture of a Roman cityscape in the immediate aftermath of a Sasanian visit, and it is far from pretty. Perhaps most telling of all – and in stark contrast to Pompeii – is the fact that few of the local inhabitants seem ever to have returned to the ruined city to reclaim their possessions. In the so-called Villa of Poseidon, the excavators found a near life-size bronze statue of Mars in a kitchen storeroom, where it had apparently been hidden away in anticipation of the Sasanian attack.

For the modern archaeologist, if not for the unfortunate owner of the Villa of Poseidon, the sudden and violent end of Roman Zeugma is something of a blessing. We can, for instance, be quite certain that all the town's famous floor mosaics predate 252/3. As William Aylward remarks in his excellent introductory chapter, this has major knock-on effects for our dating of mosaics and wall paintings throughout the Roman Near East – in particular, a whole group of mosaics from Syrian Antioch turns out to be around a century older than previously thought.

Some of the most tantalizing finds come from a structure called the "House of the Helmets", a rich dwelling arranged

around a columned courtyard. This house was devastated by fire during the Sasanian sack of the city. On top of one of the house's mosaic floors, the excavators found a large jar still standing where its owners had left it, packed with the carbonized remains of walnuts and pomegranates. In the open courtyard were fragments of three iron helmets (one almost perfectly preserved), a sword and a spear. It is very surprising to find armour and weapons piled up in the courtyard of a private house: quite probably, members of the town's Roman garrison were billeted here during the days leading up to the final Sasanian attack.

Among the countless riches of *Excavations at Zeugma*, we might pause on one particularly delightful puzzle. One of the houses destroyed in the sack of AD 252/3 was a modest little place, dubbed by the excavators the "House of the Hoards". This house contained a curious selection of odd bits and bobs of bronze metalwork: jug handles, vessels, rings and, significantly, a steelyard balance for weighing small objects. No fewer than three different hoards of bronze and silver coins turned up in the house, the largest of them an extraordinary miscellany of 462 bronze coins. The coins in this hoard range from the mid-second century BC to the third century AD, and were struck at a bewildering variety of mints ranging from Lugdunum (modern Lyons) to Judaea. In his essay on the coin-finds at Zeugma, Kevin Butcher suggests that we are dealing with "a junk box of foreign change, assembled perhaps by someone who had dealings with foreign visitors . . . . The coins may have been regarded as scrap, or the hoarder may have hoped (however vainly) that the coins could be sold to travelers". It looks very much as though the House of the Hoards might be the abandoned workshop of a scrap-metal dealer – the only such workshop known to us from the entire Greco-Roman world.

Magnificent as they are, these three stately volumes raise awkward questions about the priorities (and funding) of archaeological research in Turkey and the Near East. Were it not for the Birecik dam, and the international outcry of May 2000, the private housing of Zeugma would quite probably never have been excavated at all, and certainly not in so meticulous a fashion. Local Turkish museums and universities simply do not have the resources (or, for the most part, the technical expertise) to dig and record sites with this kind of scholarly rigour. The two trenches excavated by the Gaziantep museum in the summer of 2000, along with the rumoured 140,000 clay seals discovered in one of the houses, remain unpublished. It is possible that there is a Turkish counterpart to *Excavations at Zeugma* in the offing, but don't hold your breath.

So it is all the more alarming to find that the work of European and American archaeological teams in Turkey has been aggressively curtailed in recent years. Longstanding projects like the German dig at Aizanoi and the French excavation at Xanthos have been abruptly shut down on spurious pretexts, and no new permits are being granted to foreign excavators. Today, with a major construction boom pushing Turkish GDP growth up to 9 per cent in 2010 and 2011, sites like Zeugma are in more danger than ever before. And, I fear, David W. Packard will not always be there to ride to the rescue.