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Re-collecting Sherds: Rescue Activities of Archaeological Materials from Tell Afis, Syria

CANDIDA FELLI

Università degli Studi di Firenze
candida.felli@unifi.it

Abstract. In September 2021 a small group of archaeologists, members of the University of Florence excavations at Tell Afis, made return to Syria and took part into an expedition concerning not the site itself, out of reach due to the political crisis in the country since 2011, but materials from the site kept in the expedition house written at Saraqib. This article is an account of that return and of the following ones in 2022 written with the aim to keep attention on Syria, its important past and its critical present.

Keywords: Tell Afis, Syria, rescue, sherds.

1. SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Tell Afis is located in Northwestern Syria in the governorate of Idlib. It is placed in a fertile plain next to an important crossroad of routes running east-west and north-south, in antiquity as much as now (Fig. 1).

Excavations at the site, started already in the '70s by Paolo Matthiae of the University of Rome La Sapienza, were resumed on a larger scale in 1986 by Stefania Mazzoni, at that time of the University of Pisa and, from 2006, of the University of Florence, and Serena Maria Cecchini, of the University of Bologna.

The site has a long history of occupation as the results of excavations in different areas have shown from the Late Chalcolithic period at the bottom through the Bronze Ages reaching out the Iron Age on the top (Fig. 2).¹

Among the most relevant discoveries is certainly an official building dated to the Hittite period brought to light in one of the enlargements of the stepped trench on the western slope of the tell, in area E4b, with important finds including high quality bronze objects and cuneiform tab-

¹ The site's bibliography is available at <https://unifi.academia.edu/TellAfisArchaeologicalMission>.

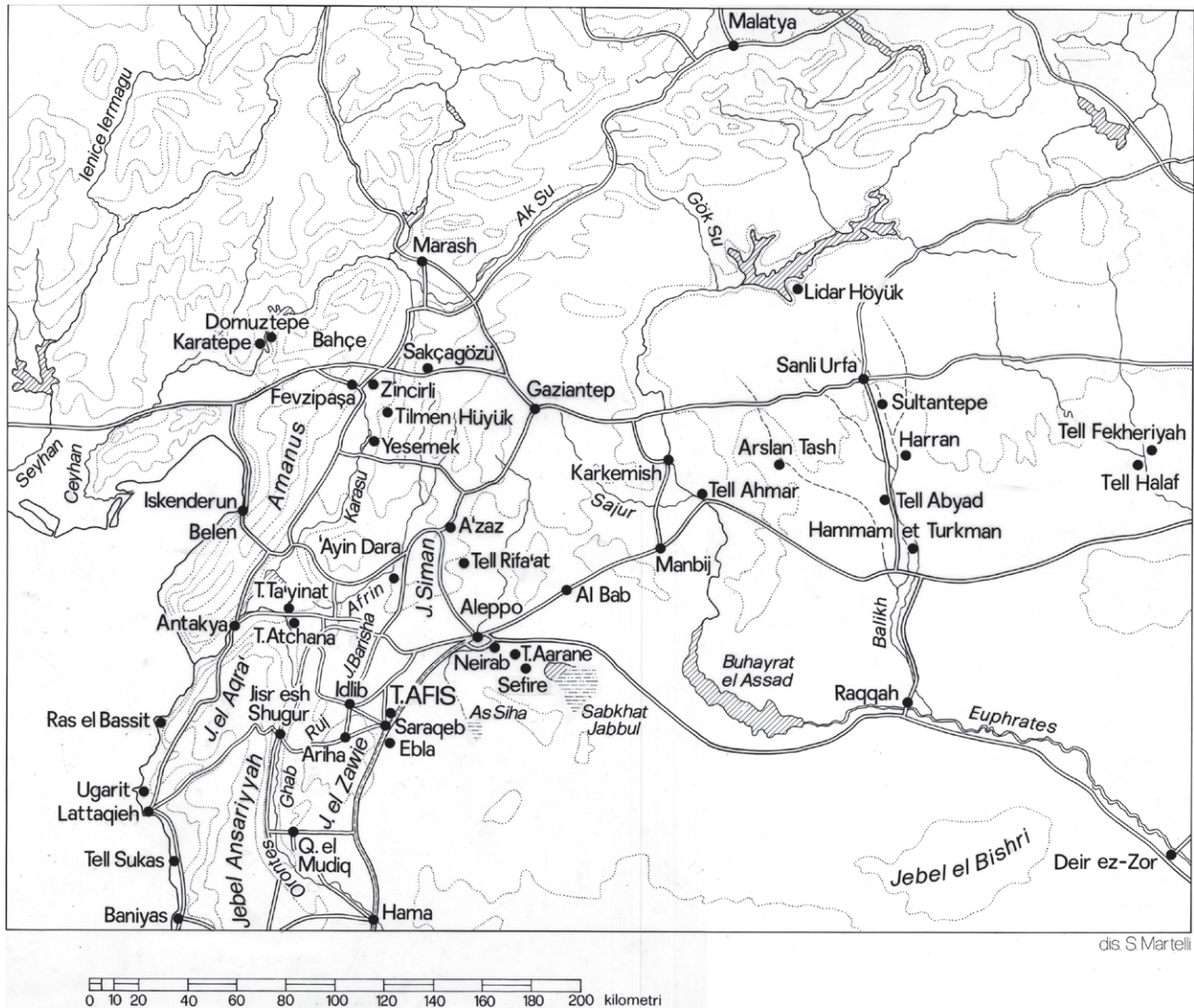


Fig. 1. Map of Northwestern Syria with location of Tell Afis and indications of modern roads (copyright Sergio Martelli 2007).

lets (Venturi 2020). Monumental buildings next to a large, sunken, ceremonial courtyard on the Acropolis were part of a cultic area, presumably dedicated to a Storm god, dating to 11th-7th century BC, the time in which Afis then became Hazrek, the capital city of the important Aramaean kingdom of Hamath and Lu'ash. The special function of the buildings and of the whole area is confirmed by the specialized archaeological associated materials (Fig. 3.a, b).

2. CURRENT SITUATION

Works at the site have been part of a long-standing project carried out until 2010, just before the political upheaval occurred in 2011 which caused the closing down of all the expeditions active in Syria at that time due to the general disruption.²

² For the last report see Mazzoni 2012.



Fig. 2. Tell Afis, view from the west (copyright Afis expedition).



Fig. 4. Tell Afis, view of the Sheikh Hassan cenotaph on the Acropolis from west (2003) (copyright Afis expedition).



Fig. 3. Tell Afis: a. ivory recumbent calf, AI temple annex (2,1x6,6x3,3 cm); b. cultic vessel, A III temple (27x13 cm), Iron Age (copyright Afis expedition).

Tell Afis is part of the governorate of Idlib and has since then remained within the limits of the opposi-

tion-held territory. During this period the site has been affected by some looting and its most relevant feature on the top, the cenotaph of Sheikh Hassan, object of restoration by our mission in 2000, has been destroyed, most probably rather early, already by 2012 (Fig. 4).

As it is possible to see by comparing satellite images of the site through time since the outbreak of the conflict, apart from many new building activities detectable in several areas of the mound profiting from lack of safeguarding, defense works for military purpose have been erected on crucial locations on the mound itself including a quite recent long trench running east-west (Fig. 5.a, b).

A different fate experienced Saraqib, a town located just few kilometers to the southeast of Tell Afis where the expedition was based since 2000. Initially, two houses had been rented in the town of Saraqib for the purpose of accommodation from a close friend of both Ebla and Afis expeditions, dr Fais Abeidin:³ one where women lodges and all common rooms were placed and one, nearby, to accomodate all male members of the team, both provided with large courtyards ideal for post-excavation activities (Fig. 6.a). In 2003, the latter house was left for a new, two-storey building, with spacious storerooms, located in the basement, where all archaeological materials which were not sent to the Idlib museum could find place along with some excavation equipment.

³ To him our greatest gratitude for all help and support always granted to our mission in Syria.

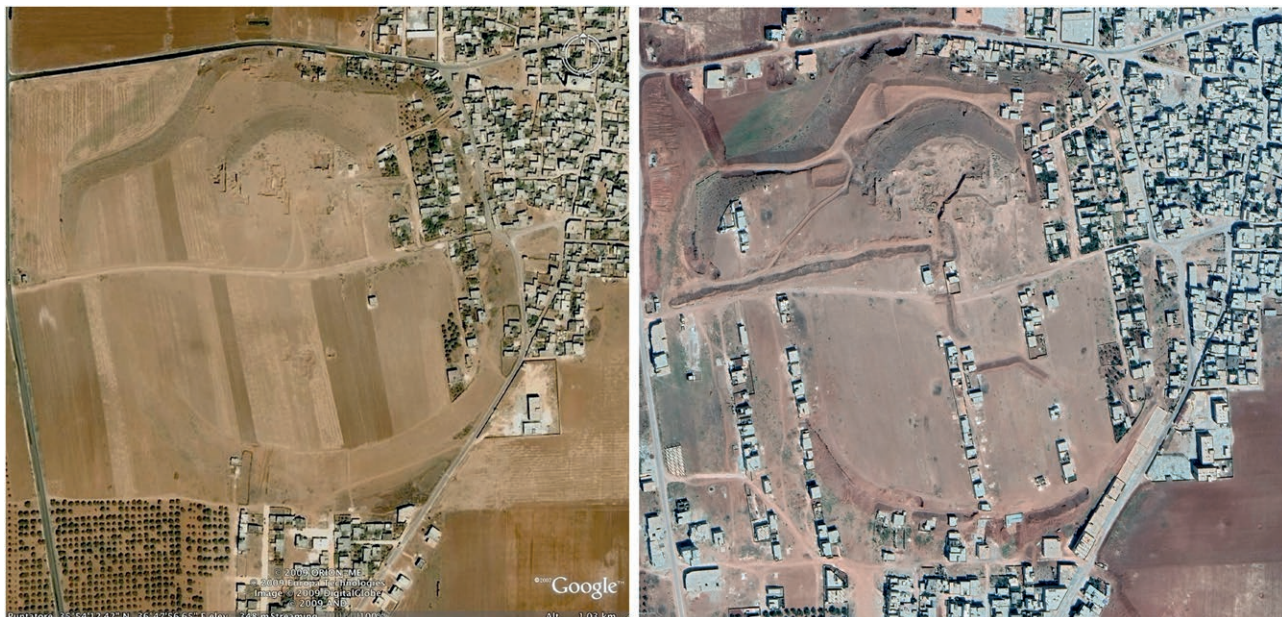


Fig. 5. Tell Afis, 2009 and 2021 satellite images (copyright Google Earth Pro).



Fig. 6. Saraqib, expedition house courtyard a. in 2003; b. in 2021 (copyright Afis expedition).

As usual in all archaeological projects in Western Asia, most of the sherds retrieved in the excavations, after having been processed, catalogued, drawn and/or photographed, were kept in the storerooms of the expedition house together with different sorts of soil, botanical and osteological samples and all other finds which were not handed in to the museum. Such collections, fundamental for the expedition's post-excavation work, were also valuable resources not only for each mission specialists but also for all scholars who asked permission to see the materials.

In 2020, Saraqib was taken back by government forces. Within a city largely destroyed, our houses were still standing but devastated (Fig. 6.b): all extant materials from within the buildings, including storerooms, were found thrown out in the courtyards, scattered around and utterly broken, as was still possible to ascertain by Stefania Mazzoni and Serena Cecchini in a visit in December 2021.

However, some materials had escaped from destruction and had been brought by DGAM officials during late Spring 2021 to the museum of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, a town located to the south of Saraqib on the highway leading to Damascus – the closest possible location, being the Idlib museum still off limits.

The city of Ma'arrat itself had been bombed and abandoned, but the museum, although badly damaged, was still standing. The building was originally a khan dating to the 16th century, turned in 1987 into a museum of Late Antique mosaics from the region. In 2021 the Afis materials had been placed by the DGAM in its eastern wing, in the space left free from the sandbags put against the wall to protect the leaning mosaic panels. However, the location was clearly unfit for long storage, as already assessed by Marina Pucci in an early visit in March 2021. That was the reason for planning an expedition in September, to arrange things to enable the move of the materials in a safer place, more to the south, in the Hama Archaeological Museum, where the director of the DGAM of Idlib, Ghazi Alulu, under whose responsibility fall the archaeological materials from Tell Afis, holds temporarily his office.⁴

3. 2021: WORK IN MA'ARRAT AL-NU'MAN

The archaeological materials in Ma'arrat were partly in the original plastic boxes used for storage, partly in the typical black containers made of car tires (arabic *zanabil*), usually used in excavations to carry pottery from the dig, some simply in plastic bags (Fig. 7.a).⁵ Many sherds were also scattered on the ground, around and beneath the containers. Finally, there were three arrays of red plastic boxes of a type we never used in our storeroom and fetched by the DGAM to collect sparse materials, filled in till the top and beyond with sherds, some in the original cloth or plastic bags, some loosely placed there.

Among these materials were included also finds from the sites surveyed by the Afis expedition in the Jazr region surrounding the site, especially Tell Nuwaz, Tell Zertine and Tell Sheikh Mansur (Mazzoni 2005).

It was immediately clear that, apart from few exceptions, most of the containers did not hold any longer their original content, clearly indicated on the tags attached to each box in the Saraqib storerooms, but mixed materials.

Therefore, our first task was to recognize and put apart the few, individual complete pieces or reassign together batches of materials, thanks to the presence of inventory numbers inked on them.

To make up for the chaotic state of the materials, they were sorted out by categories (pottery, bones, lithics, small finds) and put back into plastic boxes provided of tags. While keeping all boxes in good conditions, new ones have been bought in Aleppo to facilitate the transfer to their new location.

In addition to material finds, hard copies of the expedition archive, of which the originals are all in the University of Florence premises, had also been displaced here: all these materials were also sorted out and checked to be moved along with the objects.

On the whole 140 boxes were prepared to be moved to their final destination in Hama (Fig. 7.b).

⁴ The operation was planned by Stefania Mazzoni in accordance with the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria (DGAM), in the persons of the General Director Nazir Awad and the Deputy General Director and Director of Excavations Dr Houmam Saad, and generously funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by the Fondazione Orme, to which goes our deepest gratitude. The team included, beside Stefania Mazzoni and the present writer, Safwan Bannan, member of the staff of the Aleppo Museum, who has helped us in all possible ways with great proficiency and kindness; Giuseppe Minunno, senior member of Tell Afis expedition, lecturer at the School of Specialization in Archaeology at the University of Florence, and Margherita Carletti, PhD candidate at Freie Universität Berlin.

⁵ It was planned to stay in Aleppo and commute each day for a week to the town of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man to work on the materials which were housed there. That not solely for the practical reason that Aleppo was the only possible place where to find an accommodation at that time but also because of the presence of the team of the University of Florence, headed by Marina Pucci, working at the museum there. I wish also to thank warmly Marina Pucci whose help was fundamental in the organization and accomplishment of this task.



Fig. 7. Ma'arrat al-Nu'man Museum, Tell Afis materials before (a) and after our intervention (b) (copyright Afis expedition).

4. 2022: WORK IN HAMA

In 2022 two further campaigns were conducted in June and September to accomplish a more thorough check on the surviving materials from Afis excavations in the archaeological museum at Hama (Fig. 8.a).⁶

The activities included assessment and reattribution of a large proportion of items, restoration of some fragmentary pieces, arrangement for temporary storage in the basement of the museum. Preliminary inspections were also carried out to plan the preparation for an exhibition of a choice of materials from Tell Afis in a room at the first floor of the museum: such space could be furnished with informative panels on the long history of the site, from the Late Chalcolithic to its apogee, when the site became the capital of the kingdom of Hamath and Lu'ash (1st millennium BC). All the above-mentioned activities could be carried out thanks to the close collaboration with the Museum Director Hazem Jarhas and the Museum officials Yasmine Kasser and Ziad Alkhit.

Around 1700 pottery sherds could be identified and arranged in plastic bags according to excavation areas within separate boxes by years, totaling 50 new boxes.⁷ Sherds with no inventory numbers have been checked through looking for joins with numbered sherds and put aside in boxes for further future controls. All these materials have been arranged in an area separate from the already processed ones. The most remarkable pieces both in terms of preservation conditions and of scientific relevance were put aside to be included in the temporary exhibit in the museum. To that end, some fragmentary pieces were handed over to the Hama Museum conservator Hend Al Khannas to be restored (Fig. 8.b).⁸

The inspections carried out to check the compliance with safety standards of the building and the availability of space for an exhibition could ascertain that the museum, open in 1999 in the actual location to house finds from the Danish excavations of the tell of Hama and neighbouring sites, did not suffer from significant damages

⁶ The first campaign team included: Stefania Mazzoni, Serena Cecchini, Giuseppe Minunno and Federico Mandorino, MA student at the University of Florence. The second campaign group consisted of the present writer, Stefania Mazzoni, Sebastiano Soldi (assistant curator of the National Archaeological Museum of Florence and lecturer at the School of Specialization in Archaeology at the University of Florence, senior member of the Afis expedition), Giuseppe Minunno, Emily Bolognesi (student of the School of Specialization in Archaeology at the University of Florence) and Laura Siciliano (MA student of Archeology at the University of Florence). In the Hama museum storerooms were also located materials from Ebla expedition house: Matthiae *et al.* 2022: 3, 4, note 6.

⁷ Unfortunately, it is still impossible to calculate the total number of preserved sherds.

⁸ The Object Conservation Laboratory of Hama was refurbished and equipped in the context of the project "Documentation, Conservation and Preservation of the Hellenistic Collection of the Archaeological Museum of Hama in Syria" carried out by the Technological Educational Institute of Athens in collaboration with the DGAM – Ministry of Culture of Syria and the Centre for Museum Studies of the National Kapodistrian University of Athens, from 2006 up to 2008: Panagiaris *et al.* 2014.



Fig. 8. Hama museum: a. work on the pottery from Tell Afis (copyright Afis expedition); b. pottery restoration (copyright Y. Kasser).

caused by the war and is in good conditions, although in need of some renovations. In particular, the large room at the second floor which could be chosen as site for the Afis exhibition has only broken windows glasses and collapses of false ceilings. The frequent lack of electricity in the museum as well as in the whole city makes any work with electrical devices difficult but that could be temporarily bypassed by using solar storage batteries.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, activities on the site have by force become exclusively activities for the site, readdressing energies towards projects of digitization of the dig archive, study and publication of the excavation results.⁹ Dissemination of knowledge about the site has been accomplished also in teaching activities at the University of Florence, where sampled materials from Afis, brought to Italy over the years for analyses and circumstantial studies according to past Syrian export regulations, have become an important dataset in students' training in the dedicated lab. In addition, participation into both specialists' conferences and public venues,¹⁰ organization of focused workshops, as the one taking place in Florence in 2018 on pottery repertoires from the Yamkhad kingdom (Felli 2021: 125, 126, note 2), have played an important role in keeping scholarly attention on the site and its region through this long period of forced halt of fieldwork activities.

At least two more campaigns are needed to fulfill our planned task in Syria. Any future plan for the site appears inevitably subject to the evolution of the political situation in its region. The recent earthquake in February 2023 has caused a worsening of current living conditions in the whole area having the only positive effect of a temporary lift of sanctions by the United States. What effect would have in the long run is unpredictable, but certainly the path to recovery appears steep and difficult. Archaeology is clearly not the first entry in the agenda now, but it is a crucial field towards which continue to address attention and efforts both at a local and international level not only to protect the country's heritage but also to create new hope for a better future.

⁹ Venturi 2020; Felli 2019, 2021; Di Michele 2022; Giannessi 2022.

¹⁰ Preliminary accounts of individual campaigns have been presented orally in a number of venues, including the conference *Egitto e Vicino Oriente Antichi: Tra Passato e Futuro* held at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' (July 2022).

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