The hinterland of Palmyra

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Figure 1. *Location of the survey area north of Palmyra.*

Introduction

Palmyrena: City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade between Orient and Occident is a four-year (2009-2013) joint Syrian-Norwegian project on the relationship between the ancient city of Palmyra and its hinterland. It follows up earlier research by Daniel Schlumberger north-west of Palmyra in Jebel Chaar (Schlumberger 1951). The aim is to understand how one of the most important cities in the eastern Roman Empire utilised its territory for agriculture, pastoralism, water supply, transport and defence. Where earlier research concentrated on the Roman period, the scope of this project also covers the prehistoric and Islamic periods. The first two seasons of the survey were conducted in 2008 and 2009. Preliminary reports are accessible on the project homepage (http://www.org.uib.no/palmyrena).

Methodology

The hinterland of Palmyra covers a vast area, stretching in all directions from the oasis. The survey sample area lies to the north of the city, in the mountainous region of the hinterland. The study is based on extensive archaeological surface surveys in a 30 x 120km sector (Figure 1). As the area is extremely large we have chosen present features and activities in the landscape as starting points for both historical and prehistoric use. We have focused in particular on wadis, mountains, ridges and springs, in addition to wells and the presence of modern Bedouins in the area.

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Figure 2. *Arrowheads from Site 15 of the survey region.*

Neolithic sites and Bronze Age cairns

Virtually nothing is known about the Palmyra oasis in the prehistoric periods. To the east of the oasis there have been intensive surveys and excavations by Japanese teams since the late 1960s (see Nishiaki 2000), mainly focusing on the caves and their use during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) periods. In addition there have been surveys and excavations in the el-Kowm area, as well as at major sites along the Euphrates, and at the Palaeolithic site of Jerf al-Ajla to the west. This project has so far surveyed and documented 16 sites generally dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) or the very early part of the Pottery Neolithic (PN). Half of the sites are rockshelters, while others are open-air sites without any physical structures. The majority of these sites surveyed have yielded blades, cores, burins and arrowheads of various Byblos-types, diagnostic of the PPNB, as well as other types (Figure 2). These sites are generally located along the foot of Jebel Abyad, particularly next to small wadi outlets or areas where there would have been seasonal freshwater lakes. The sites seem to be related to seasonal hunting and the general expansion of PPNB sites into the steppe region (Zarins 1990). In addition, we have discovered a major hunting area in the mountains of Jebel Abyad and several kites. Kites are large stone alignments found in the desert and steppe areas across the Near East. These were first discovered by air, believed to be traps for hunting animals, but their dating and use is still controversial (see Bar-Oz *et al.* 2009 with references).



Figure 3. *Cairn 122, Jebel Abyad, one of the larger cairns surveyed.*

Until now we have recorded and documented more than 150 cairns of various types and dimensions in the southern part of the study area. The majority of these have been looted and, in general, the cairns do not contain much datable material. Many have also been reused in more recent times as corrals or other enclosures for animals. However, from a few cairns we have recovered sherds of pottery, beads of bronze and carnelian, as well as fragments of bronze. Some of the sherds may provisionally be classified as plain

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simple ware dated to EB IV. They are all located along major tracks, mountain ridges, watersheds, etc. The cairns vary a great deal in layout and dimension: some are nearly flat, while others reach up to 2.5m in height; and range in diameter from 2m to 15m (Figure 3). Although they vary in size and shape, the cairns must be seen as part of a wider context in which they shape and mark the landscape both in this region and to the south throughout the third millennium.

Historical periods

Access to water is a precondition to utilising dry steppe and mountainous regions. Springs with small aqueducts and wells dug into water-bearing layers are found at many sites. Water-catching systems with cisterns exploiting the annual precipitation permit human activities to expand into other areas. The Bedouins have reused these systems up to the present day but associated finds show that many of them originated in the Roman and Byzantine periods.

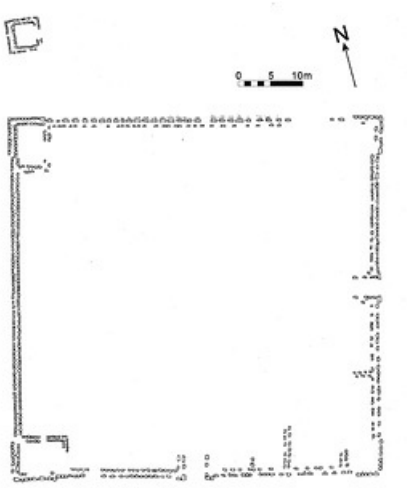


Figure 4. *Plan of fort at Shanaeh. Not that it is not as heavily structured as late Roman forts in the border area.*

There are many large and small forts in the area. Some of the forts functioned as way-stations along the route towards Antioch. Other forts, with half a day's travel or less between them, controlled the territory, its water and grazing resources. These forts are not heavily built like the late Roman forts in the border area (Figure 4) and there does not seem to have been a heavy military threat. Rather, the existence of these forts may be viewed as a reaction to a more nomadic population, not fully integrated into the centre of Palmyra — but liable to taxes. The forts may also have served to prevent smuggling or offer solutions to local conflicts between different nomadic groups and between nomads and the villages.

Villages and estates are not confined to the area investigated by Schlumberger (1951). New sites have also been added to the list in the Jebel Chaar area and, although trees have covered the mountains, the economic basis of the villages remains an open question. In some places the distance between villages is only 3-5km, indicating a more intensive exploitation of the land than simple pastoralism. The existence of small dams as well as a heavy wall across a wadi, preventing soil erosion, indicates some level of agriculture.

Throughout this project no sites have been dated to the Iron Age or the Hellenistic period. Intensive exploitation starts in the Roman era and most of the sites seem to have been occupied up to the early Islamic period (Umayyad), i.e. long after the prime of Palmyra as a caravan city. Hereafter, a Bedouin lifestyle with a low degree of central control and a low population density slowly takes over.

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