Ras el Bassit and the Late Antique Archaeological Landscape of Coastal North Syria

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The Late Antique archaeology of North Syria is best known for the excavation of its provincial capitals, Antiokheia (Syria Prima) and Apamea (Syria Secunda), and for the abandoned villages of the Limestone Massif Hills, the so-called “Dead Cities”. The remains of these villages, often spectacular and spread in an open landscape well-suited for extensive prospection, have caught much of the attention of Late Antique archaeologists since the Marquis de Vogüé and have allowed a detailed demographic and economic portrait of an entire region (Tchalenko, 1953–1958; Tate, 1992; Decker 2001; etc.).

Much less attention has been paid to the coastal region, in part due to its landscape. From Lattakia to the mouth of the river Orontes, the coast is formed by mountains running parallel to the sea and raising to more than 1000 m, 1728 m at Mount Kasios. This relief accounts for some of the most abundant rainfalls of the Levantine coast, which maintain one of its thickest extant forests. This mountainous and forested landscape obviously did not allow the kind of extensive explorations that were carried out inland, either in the pasturelands of the Limestone Massif Hills or further East in the open steppe. Since 1938, a militarised border running through the Western Antiochene region has been acting as a further obstacle to extensive surveys and regional studies.

Another reason lies in research agendas. Inland, the outstanding body of material evidence from the Limestone Massif Hills has attracted and concentrated much research effort at the expense of other areas. This concentration was further fed by the notion, taken for granted, that the plains had little or no archaeological potential, and by an implicit notion that conclusions drawn from the Limestone Massif Hills could be expanded to all of North Syria. While the latter assumption should at least be taken with caution, if only because the Limestone Massif Hills were marginal lands settled in a context of sustained economic and demographic growth, recent surveys have proved the former to be wrong and demonstrated the need to understand the Limestone Massif Hills in a wider regional context (Casana, 2004; 2007). On the coast, following Leonard Woolley’s work at al Mina in the 1930s, archaeological research has been dominated by the still ongoing debate on the relations between Greeks and the Levant in the Iron Age (e.g., Niemeyer, 2004). A number of sites were excavated following al Mina, but their Roman and later occupations being outside the research agendas, these “late” levels were often hastily removed as
overburden with little or no published record (e.g., Levels “A” to “D” at Tell Sukas [Riis, 1970]).

The knowledge of the Late Antique archaeological landscape of coastal North Syria thus remains sparse. Finds excavated by Woolley at al Mina and Sabouniyeh were subjected to a sorting that makes their interpretation difficult and limits their potential (Pamir & Nishiyama, 2002; Vorderstrasse, 2004; 2005). The survey and excavation of Seleukeia Pieria by the Princeton team in the 1930s turned into the excavation of a tetraconch church before it was interrupted by World War II; the topography and the decline of the most important port of Antiokheia thus remains to be fully documented. The early Christian remains of the “Holy Valley” of the Lower Orontes are an exception for having been visited and described a number of times (Mécérian, 1964; Lafontaine-Dosogne, 1967; Djobadze, 1986; Sinclair, 1990), but their later reuse and modifications related to Georgian, Armenian and Frankish presence in the valley often make their interpretation and dating difficult and they demand a systematic survey and study. Further South, two cisterns among ploughed structures yielded pottery assemblages at Ibn Hani (Touma, 1984) and a local team is excavating Late Roman baths nearby. However, despite numerous chance finds, the urbanization of Lattakia seems to have discouraged any extensive exploration of the ancient port-city of Laodikeia ad Mare since the main lines of its Hellenistic city-plan were drawn by Jean Sauvaget (1934).

Recent and ongoing surveys in the Orontes Delta and elsewhere have produced important results and more are expected (e.g., Pamir, 2005; Pamir & Brands, 2005). Still, until recently, the only excavated and published sites of this period in coastal North Syria, outside Seleukeia, were the sixth-century monasteries of Saint Baarlam on Mount Kasios and, up the Valley of the Orontes, of Saint Simeon the Younger on the Mons Admirabilis (Djobadze, 1986). Thus the interest of Ras el Bassit.

Bassit has long been known to be a Late Roman settlement, if only by the huge quantities of pottery that litter the site (Schaeffer, 1935: 173–176; Woolley, 1938). It is best known today from Paul Courbin’s excavations from 1971 to 1984 (Courbin, 1978; 1986). Courbin’s work focused essentially on the Bronze Age and Iron Age occupations, but it also revealed a final period of prosperity and thriving activity during Late Antiquity. After the settlement was apparently abandoned in the 7th century, its relative isolation protected the site from the systematic robbing of building materials, while rocky outcrops, collapsed masonries and a dense cover of thick bush and forest protected most of it from ploughing. An archaeological and natural reserve created in the 1970s was extended to the whole cape in 2001. Thus Bassit offers excellent potential for the archaeological investigation of Late Antiquity on the North Syrian coast.