

## Introduction

*“There is a goddess of Memory, Mnemosyne; but none of Forgetting. Yet there should be, as they are twin sisters, twin powers, and walk on either side of us, disputing for sovereignty over us and who we are, all the way until death.”* (Richard Holmes: A Meander through Memory and Forgetting)

I worked in northern Syria and in a region of central Syria for almost two decades. The results represent the main part of my life’s work as an archaeologist. During the years 1997–2007, extensive excavation work took place in al-Andarin with various excavation teams. In 2018, my last publication on archaeological fieldwork in Syria reported on the destruction at al-Andarin by the Islamic State<sup>1</sup>.

In 2016, I received reports about shell impacts in Qal’at Sim’an that destroyed parts of the pilgrimage centre restored by Georges Tchalenko in 1936–1942, as well as information about the catastrophic situation in numerous ruined sites in the northern Syrian Limestone Massif<sup>2</sup>. Even before 2014, the fighting in the old city of Aleppo had destroyed, through rockets and fire, the interior of the only still partially preserved Byzantine church of ancient Beroea, a space I had preserved with photos and drawings in 1979 together with the architect Heike Fastje<sup>3</sup>.

How does one deal with such experiences?

In 1905, Gertrude Bell had made a journey to Aleppo via Homs and Hama, and on this route had passed through numerous settlements of the North Syrian Limestone Massif, which many years later became my area of research. I open the chapter on Hama in her report, craving for a glimpse into the time before the shattering destruction of recent years, and the first thing I see is a photo of the old city of Hama<sup>4</sup>. I had taken the same shot in 1980, before the devastation of the old city by the Syrian Air Force in 1982 (Pl. 1a). Ten years later I drove along the newly constructed asphalt road past the ruins of a few houses of the old city up to the luxurious Sham Hotel.

One year later, when I came to the North Syrian Limestone Massif for follow-up work, the situation had changed profoundly: Numerous small asphalt roads had been built as part of the Syrian government’s tourism program. They

now led to the ancient ruined sites and thereby facilitated the plundering of churches and houses for the removal of capitals and lintels with pickup trucks.

My negative experiences from the decades of the previous millennium were displaced by the destruction of Syria in the combats after 2011. But with the news and photos gradually reaching me, these in particular added to my questions about the sense of all my archaeological work in Syria and moreover to the significance of my older photos, drawings and documentation for future restorations and research in the region.

Below I describe the general situation that I encountered in the North Syrian Limestone Massif between 1971 and 1980 and in the Inner Syrian Desert Steppe north-east of Hama between 1997 and 2007. Should archaeological works become possible again there in the future, the situation in both regions will be profoundly different from the one I experienced. Since I have rarely addressed events and experiences beyond the field of work in my scientific publications, it now seems sensible to supplement these with a report about the overall situation I encountered in those two regions.

Only after completing both these reports will I look ahead to possible future work based on the most relevant results, and that is to say, to a situation that is completely open after the destruction of the infrastructure in all areas of Syria. My considerations about the purpose of photographs, drawings and documentation made many years ago will lead to the 'Syrian Heritage Archive Project'.

In my report on the years 1971–1980, I look back below at Gertrude Bell's journey through northern Syria, the recordings of the 'Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria' shortly before and shortly after 1900<sup>5</sup>, the innovations in the French Mandate period and the developments in the decades after 1946 and before 1971. My experiences do not lead us to excavations of Near Eastern archaeology or centres of the Roman period (e.g. Kanawat, Palmyra), but to the Late Antique-Early Byzantine and Early Islamic periods.

The report on the years 1997–2007 will take us to a completely different situation: the excavations in al-Andarin of the central Syrian desert steppe. Al-Andarin, ancient Androna was the place I came to at the end of my works in the North Syrian Limestone Massif<sup>6</sup>. I had discussed possible excavation work in al-Andarin at the General Directorate in Damascus in 1980 already and finally organised an international cooperation there in 1996.