

# The Syrian Middle Euphrates Archaeological Project (PAMES).

Seven years of research (2005-2011) of the Spanish and Syrian Archaeological Mission in Deir ez-Zor.

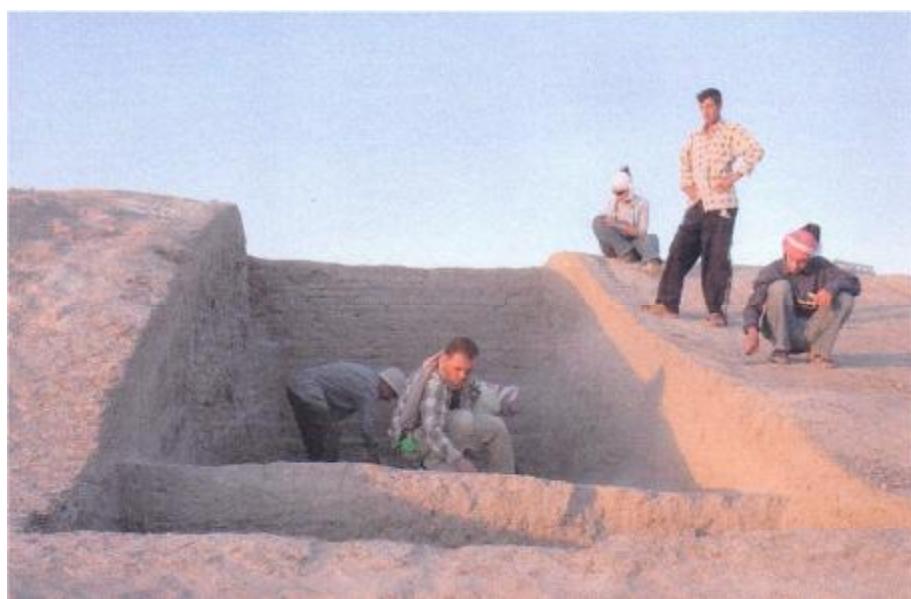
With the support of Aïdi Foundation

In September 2004, the “Syrian Middle Euphrates Archaeological Project” was founded to answer some important questions that still remain without answer regarding History of Mesopotamia, thanks to an agreement between the “Universidade da Coruña” and the “General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums” in Damascus. Later, the “Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas” and the “Universidade Nova de Lisboa” joined in. The main reason for this scientific project was to study the concept of territory and frontier in the region of the Syrian Middle Euphrates during Antiquity, in particular the pre-classical era.



The area chosen to carry out the research is an area of the valley of Euphrates, located in the province of Deir ez-Zor, in Syria. This sector is marked by an impressive geographical accident, the so-called gorge of Khanuqa, which in Arabic means the “strangler”. This is a strategic place where the river narrows due to the hardness of the basalt open ground which shaped it.

This inflection within the Euphrates basin was a superb location for controlling river traffic in ancient times. The Khanuqa gorge was a natural border, an excellent enclave for a barrier both as regards the circulation of goods and people as well as technical and cultural innovation. For this reason, from the start of his origins, Man has tried to exercise strict control over it. However, despite its strategic importance, Archaeology was never interested in this place until the arrival of the Syrian-Spanish team in 2005.



Currently, the “Syrian Middle Euphrates Archaeological Project” team are wholly focused on studying two archaeological sites of the Khanuqa gorge: “Tell Humeida” and “Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq”. The campaigns carried out have been organised around four areas of research:

- The culture of Uruk and the origins of urban civilisation.
- The Northern border of the Kingdom of Mari.
- The expansionist policy of the Middle Assyrian Empire.
- The Eastern border of the Byzantine Empire.

The culture of Uruk is one of the most fascinating stages of our past as it represents the birth of civilisation. This is the start of History. Excavations carried out by the Syrian-Spanish team in “Tell Humeida” during the 2011 campaign correspond to this Mesopotamian culture which reached its peak in the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The thorough and systematic work of all the archaeologists meant that various phases of the occupation of the Uruk period could be documented.

The most significant is represented by a level characterised by the abundant presence of charcoal, animal bones and broken and crushed pottery. In accordance with these characteristics, everything shows that this is an example of an ancient dumping ground where various types of waste were thrown during the Uruk period.



This excavation is actually of great interest as regards learning about the economy and alimentation of the people of the Uruk culture. The laboratory study of the samples collated by archaeologists in Tell Humeida will be used to reconstruct the diet (vegetal and animal) of those populations which lived next to the Euphrates towards 3500 B.C.

Equally, the study of the dumped ceramics is clearly important for learning what pottery production was like in a period whereby mass and standardised manufacturing (under the control of an archaic state) appeared for the first time. An excellent example is the so-called “bevel-rim bowls”, a type of vessel or pot which appears in a huge form in Tell Humeida. These are simple hand-made bowls whose exact function continues to be an enigma for archaeologists. The Spanish Project works on the hypothesis that they were moulds for making bread.



“Tell Qabr Abu al-‘Atiq” is another site where Spanish and Syrian archaeologists have excavated since 2008. Work carried out in the main hill has shown the historical significance of the place during the Early and Late Bronze Age.

To fully understand “Tell Qabr Abu al-‘Atiq” during the Early Bronze (2600-2500 B.C.), it must be done in the frame of the territoriality of the Kingdom of Mari. In this context, although documentation is still incomplete, we find ourselves before a model of a circular city of Mari origin. According to our hypothesis, the territorial base of the kingdom of Mari must have been established in two stages during the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium B.C.

- ✓ 1<sup>st</sup> phase (around 2900 B.C.), the foundation of the kingdom. This included the territory of the valley situated between the gorge of Baghuz and the mouth of the River Khabur in the Euphrates. In this territory, there were two large cities (Terqa, in the North and Mari, in the South) and a navigation canal which linked the capital to Khabur (naher Dawrin).
- ✓ 2<sup>nd</sup> phase (around 2600/2550 B.C.), Mari was founded again. These were the times of the so-called “Second Urban Revolution”. The city increased its territory towards the North up until the gorge of Khanuqa. At the entrance of the gorge, on its left bank, the Mari rulers built a new circular city (Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq) and dug out a new canal (naher Semiramis) at its exit. The two navigation canals of the kingdom were not constructed at the same time and there was no harmony between the start of Dawrin and the arrival of the Semiramis at River Khabur.

To summarise, the territorial base of the Kingdom of Mari in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. included the area of the valley of the Middle Euphrates, defined by two natural accidents: the gorge of Khanuqa, to the North, and that of Baghuz, to the South. This was a territory which extended for 180 km and was controlled by three circular cities: “Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq” (400 m in diameter), key for supervising the access door to territories of the north of Syria, “Terqa” (500 m in diameter), to control access to Khabur and to the road to Anatolia; and finally Mari (1900 m in diameter), the great capital which was the door to the South of Mesopotamia.

Exploration carried out to date in the main hill of “Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq” has brought to light part of a building of the Late Bronze Age, built with mud-brick, which was destroyed by a violent fire. The collapse (and the later subsidence of the building) crushed and conserved (on the ground of the different rooms) the objects and artefacts used by its inhabitants.

The laborious process of restoring and cataloguing the retrieved objects, especially the ceramic vessels, showed that we are dealing with a repertory which specialists call “Administrative Middle Assyrian pottery”, standardised production and controlled by the Assyrian state.

The researchers faced the irrefutable fact of the presence of Assyrians in the middle valley of the Euphrates where they had arrived from their country, located in the region of the Tigris, throughout the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.



The 2010 campaign brought about an even greater surprise. On the floor of one of the rooms of the burned building, and next to a carbonised beam, two small clay cuneiform tablets were found. The study carried out by the project epigraphist confirmed the historical relevance of this find. For the first time, administrative texts written in the Akkadian language appeared in the middle valley of the Euphrates, dated in the times of the Assyrian King Tukulti-Ninurta I, i.e. between 1243 and 1207 B.C. The territorial expansion process of the Middle Assyrian Empire through the valley of the Euphrates, not very well known until then, was shown, on an archaeological and textual level thanks to the research of the Syrian-Spanish team. The cuneiform texts found in “Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq” belong to archives (still to be excavated) of a fortified mansion called a *dunnu* by the Assyrians. This strategically buried fortress aimed to defend political and territorial interests of the Middle Assyrian Empire in the region.

Archaeological work of the Syrian-Spanish mission between 2005 and 2007, at the site of Tell es-Sin, to the South of Deir ez-Zor, has shown that this is an important fortified Byzantine enclave. Under its main hill, remains of the Roman, Hellenistic and Neolithic periods have been documented.

The city, a *kastron* in the Greek language of the Byzantine era, which nowadays lies under the hill of Tell es-Sin (20 km to the North East of Circesium, nowadays Buseira), must be interpreted within the historical context of the oriental *limes* in the period from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. to the arrival of Islam. This site is an exceptional place for learning about the defence system, the model of life, the social-economic organisation and the funeral beliefs, (amongst other aspects), of a Byzantine community of the middle valley of Syrian Euphrates.

Finally, the 2011 campaign in “Tell Humeida” meant that new evidence on Byzantine presence in the area could be brought to light. Syrian-Spanish archaeologists excavated a sector of a building relating to thermal baths as well as the remains of the mud-brick wall which protected this ancient Byzantine city.



There are still many doubts regarding the historical past of the region of the Middle Euphrates and archaeological research in the Khanuqa gorge has only just started. The aim is to fill the gaps which still exist in Ancient History, without doubt a passionate scientific adventure which has allowed the members of the Syrian Middle Euphrates Archaeological Project to travel through time from Uruk to Byzantium.

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