

# Syrian Archaeology in Perspective Celebrating 20 Years of Excavations at Tell Afis

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Gli operai di Afis e gli amici di Saraqeb hanno offerto con dedizione e costanza un contributo efficace di lavoro e ospitalità al gruppo di ricerca italiano a Tell Afis

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## PREFACE

In 1986 when the programme of excavations and archaeological research at Tell Afis and its area began, one of the first and most urgent aims of our field work and studies was the reconstruction of the settlement sequence of the site along with defining a coherent and reliable periodization for the Iron Age in Syria. We had, in fact, great expectations for this phase and the Aramaean period of the excavations, especially given the fact that Tell Afis had been proposed as the provenance of the Zakkur stela now in the Louvre and the ubiquitous presence of Iron Age pottery on the surface of the entire site. Initial research, therefore, concentrated on the Iron Age levels and our set aims were achieved in the first two years. Further results followed and broadened, sometimes quite unexpectedly, our knowledge of other phases. These included the discovery of the Late Chalcolithic wall and a lengthy occupation for this phase, which could not have been foreseen given the lack of any diagnostic pottery on the surface and the uncovering of a transitional Early/Middle Bronze phase, clearly stratified and rich in material finds, followed by a Late Bronze II phase characterised by a Hittite residence building. Lastly, the extensive excavation of a long Iron I sequence which, whilst easily foreseeable, was quite surprising in the clear stratification and the abundance of well-preserved materials and structures that started coming to light from 1988 onwards.

It is precisely on this phase that our work has been mainly concentrated over the last twenty years, enabling us to identify further sequences and also to confront other problems and processes involved in the lengthy development from complex societies to urban societies and the formation of states, processes for which Syria is quite rightly to be considered one of the most dynamic cores in the Near East. Intensified excavations on the acropolis have, in recent years, directed our efforts principally towards the monuments of the large sacred complex of the Aramaean phase and its transformations during the Iron Age, whilst another area of research began relating to the Hittite period of the Late Bronze phase thanks to the discovery of a palace and its archives dating to this time.

During these same years Syria witnessed a marked and wide-ranging increase in archaeological activity: research and excavations, conservation and the development of museums, important exhibitions and international conferences. Not only was our knowledge of Syrian civilisation and its immense patrimony greatly increased, but the dissemination of such information made even the most recent discoveries easily accessible to the wider public. In this context, the work carried out at Tell Afis has made a sizeable contribution providing, apart from the data obtained, inspiration for new reflections and considerations concerning the reconstruction of the long processes of social and cultural transformation in the area.

These same years saw intense activity on the part of the University of Pisa's chair of Archaeology of the ancient Near East and its collaborators. For the research carried out in Syria, a convention was agreed upon with the University of Damascus, the MEDA cooperation project begun, a programme of preliminary publications established and numerous degree and doctoral theses discussed on the material from Tell Afis.

## Preface

In November 2006 a series of studies days was organised to celebrate 20 years of activity at Afis, as well as a rich season of research for the University of Pisa. This presented an opportunity to discuss with friends and colleagues certain topics that are central to our work and common to both Syria and neighbouring areas, the emphasis lying on discussions and the exchange of ideas as well as individual contributions. Some of these latter see the light here (albeit after a lengthy delay caused by organisational and other difficulties), and reflect the questions raised and debated. The sessions followed a chronological order, as reflected in this volume, tracing the sequence at Tell Afis and with particular emphasis being laid on the transitional phases which represent a unique nucleus for our site.

The volume opens with the important contribution made by J.-Cl. Margueron which combines stratigraphic and architectonic sequences with archaeological and pottery data from Villes I, II and III at Mari, thus establishing the bases for a methodological question shared also by the crucial example of lengthy and continuous development of this great city on the Euphrates. Afis and central Syria witnessed a gradual, internal transformation at the end of the Early Bronze Age, mirroring an increase in population in the area, as shown in S. Mazzoni's contribution. For the start of the second millennium in the Balikh, Hammam et-Turkman provides another example of continuity and clearly illustrates, as noted by D. Meijer, the problems of methodology when examining the use of various materials, seals and pottery so as to define the separate phases of MBI and MBII. Kinet Höyük and the sites in Cilicia and the 'Amuq are emblematic factors in any interpretation of the passage from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age since they offer, according to M. -H. Gates, clear signs of discontinuity and great complexity. This same complexity appears in the case of Tell Afis and northern Levant, where elements of both continuity and change have been pointed out in the contribution of F. Venturi. A methodological approach for the beginning of the Iron Age in the coastal Levant is addressed by T. Pedrazzi with a special focus on the archaeological markers of the transitional process. G. Bunnens discusses the different components documented in the Iron Age sequence of Tell Ahmar which confront and melt along the upper Euphrates. Iron Age II-III is the focus of S. Soldi's contribution, who analyses pottery, especially Red Slip ware as a typical marker of Afis and inland Syria production.

The meetings were opened by Bassam Jamouss, then Director of the Directorate of the Antiquities and Museums of Syria to whom goes our gratitude for the constant and friendly support enjoyed by the mission of Tell Afis.

It is with great pleasure that we recall the expressions of esteem and recognition accorded to our research and teaching activities at Pisa on the opening day by colleagues (in the posts they then held): Lucia Tomasi Tongiorgi (Vice-Chancellor), Alfonso Maria Iacono (Head of the Faculty of Letters), Biagio Virgilio (Director of the Department of Historical Sciences of the Ancient World), Carlo Tozzi (Director of the the Department of Archaeological Sciences and of the Archaeology Doctorate), Lucia Faedo (Director of the School of Archaeological Specialisation).

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