

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE BALIKH VALLEY, SYRIA

Tony Wilkinson

My interest in the development of landscape and settlement in northern Syria is intended to build upon earlier field results from the region described in the 1992–1993 *Annual Report*. In order to get an extensive view of the terrain, fieldwork has been focused upon two areas within the western part of the Syrian Jazira (fig. 1): The upper part of Lake Tabqa, specifically the area of Tell es-Sweyhat (see report by Thomas Holland in the *Annual Report* for 1992–1993); and the Balikh valley. During 1993 fieldwork was confined to the Balikh valley, specifically focused on the Neolithic, Halaf, and Middle Assyrian site of Sabi Abyad. Excavations at this site, directed by Peter M. M. G. Akkermans of the National Museum, Netherlands, continue to provide abundant information concerning prehistoric communities in northern Syria, and with the discovery of numerous Middle Assyrian tablets within a fortified building complex, the site is now also shedding light upon living conditions close to the western limits of the Middle Assyrian empire. The Chicago field season was again funded by the National Geographic Society and the Oriental Institute, and we are grateful to Peter Akkermans for continued logistical support as well as to the Directorate General of the Department of Antiquities, Syria,

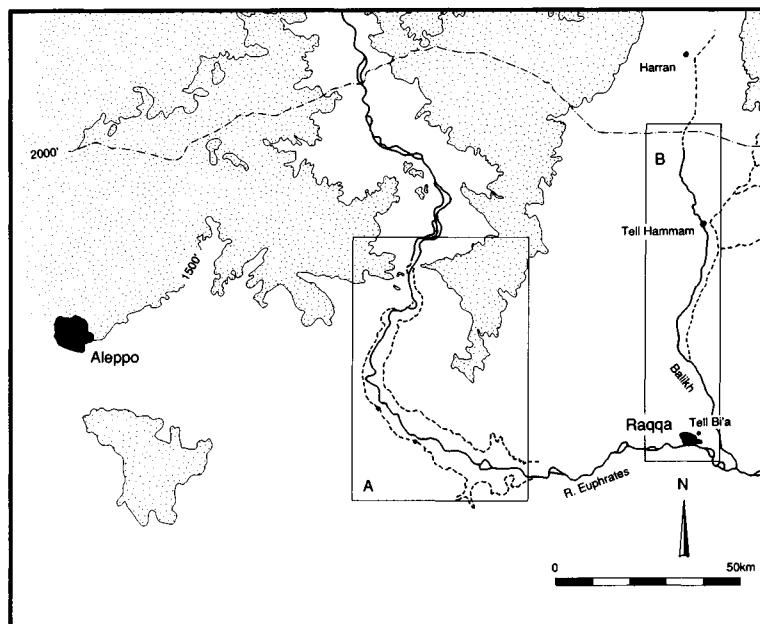


Figure 1. Location of Lake Tabqa (area A) and the Balikh valley (area B) in northern Syria

for help and encouragement during fieldwork.

During August and September 1993 the writer, with the assistance of Fokke Gerritsen, a graduate student at the Oriental Institute, and members of the Sabi Abyad team, extended recording of the archaeological landscape to the south of the major prehistoric complex of Tell Sawwan/Mounbatah. As a result the coverage now includes the boundary of rain-fed cultivation and extends to the south well into the zone of irrigated agriculture.

A noteworthy discovery of the 1993 field season was a major canal extending from near Tell Sahlan in the north to Tell Hammam et-Turkman in the south (fig. 2). This thirteen to eighteen meter wide depression formed a dark crop mark on aerial photographs and on the ground was evident as a straight, shallow valley running along the western bank of the present Balikh River. A missing stretch about three kilometers in length has probably been eroded away by the river, which appears to have adopted the canal as its bed for part of its course. The weathered, eroded, and discontinuous course of the canal and its spoil banks combined with the presence of Hellenistic occupation on spoil banks near Tell Hammam et-Turkman suggest that the canal is of considerable antiquity and is probably pre-Hellenistic in date. The canal is of more than local interest because its route by Tell Hammam (possibly the Old Babylonian site of Zalpu) suggests that it may be a canal that caused disputes over water allocation during the Old Babylonian period. Thus texts from Mari indicate that by diverting the flow of the Balikh the inhabitants of Zalpu may have caused the inhabitants of Tuttul (Tell Bi'a on the Euphrates; fig. 1) to complain to the authorities at Mari. This identification of the canal must, however, remain tentative until it is excavated and dated more accurately, which we hope to accomplish in the field season of summer 1994.

A major advantage of studying the entire landscape rather than individual sites or artifacts is that it then becomes possible to view the context within which ancient communities developed and lived. More specifically, the physical environ-

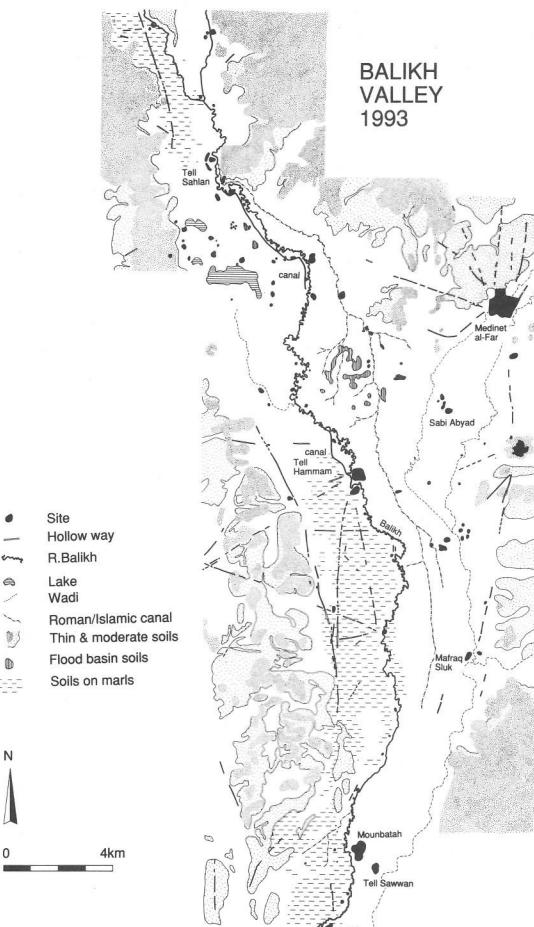


Figure 2. The archaeological landscape of the Balikh valley in Syria showing archaeological sites, ancient routes ("hollow ways"), and features associated with ancient irrigation

ment of a site can be recorded and it may even be possible to determine how conditions have changed through time. For example, in the Balikh, a shallow valley between Sabi Abyad and Tell Hammam et-Turkman may represent a former course of the river that perhaps originally continued to the south to flow between the prehistoric sites of Tell es-Sawwan and Mounbateh. This may therefore be the remains of the channel that existed before the above-mentioned canal effectively diverted the Balikh River to the western side of the valley. This would explain the present course of the river which in places anonymously cuts through the western bank river terrace and may also explain why a number of prehistoric sites occur along the eastern fringes of the valley far removed from obvious water sources. Again, however, this notion must be tested by further fieldwork.

The landscape survey continued to document ancient "hollow way" routes which remain as straight soil marks and shallow valleys (see my report in last year's *Annual Report*). Although most are difficult to date, a long feature located about two and a half kilometers to the west of Tell Hammam et-Turkman (fig. 2) has only Iron Age sites along its route. Surface collection of pottery from a number of these sites, including the (approximately) ten hectare site of Khirbet Ajlan (Site 38, shown in the extreme south of fig. 2), provided good examples of Late Assyrian types, thus suggesting that the route may have formed part of a Late Assyrian road network probably linking the Harran plain and Sultantepe areas with Raqqa to the south on the Euphrates River. Although present data does not allow us to follow this road to the north, it is hoped that fieldwork and aerial photographic mapping in the summer of 1994 will at least enable it and its associated sites to be traced further to the south, thus improving our knowledge of a little known part of the Assyrian empire.
