

# The RAG

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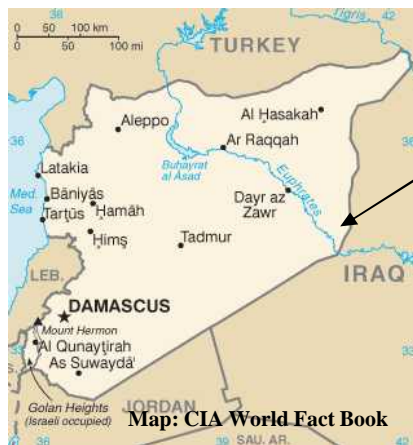
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## Iran and Weapons of Mass Destruction — Apparently A Problem for the Romans Too

In the 1930s a mass grave of 20 Roman soldiers in full battle dress was discovered in Dura Europos, an ancient fortress city in modern Syria.

In c. AD 256 when the soldiers died, Dura Europos was under siege by the Sassanian Persians, one of the line of Iranian dynasties beginning with the Achaemenid of the 6th century BC and ending with the Pahlavi overthrown in 1979 in the Islamic Revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Dura Europos (location arrowed in map below) was founded by Seleucus I Nicator in c. 300BC on the division of the Alexandrian Empire. It was the site of a major Hellenistic city.



There is no written record of the siege of the Roman garrison of Dura Europos, however, excavations which began in the 1920s (by French and Yale University archaeologists in 1920–1937, and after 1986 by French and Syrian) have disclosed that the siege involved the digging of tunnels by the Persians to undermine the city walls and the digging of counter tunnels by the Romans.

It was the discovery of the pile of remains of Roman soldiers in a part (2m high by 11m long) of one of the tunnels that led to speculation as to how the Romans died. It was inconceivable to the archaeologists that the soldiers could have been picked off one by one. The

mystery was enhanced by the discovery of the body of a lone Persian soldier nearby.

At a meeting last month of the Archaeological Institute of America addressed by Dr Simon James of the University of Leicester, Dr James proposed that the Roman deaths were caused by poisonous gas deliberately created by the Persians. The theory is that the Persians placed fire pits along their tunnels and at the strategic moment tossed sulphur crystals and bitumen into the fire thus producing a toxic mix of gases. Residues of such Greek Fire were found in the tunnels by the archaeologists.

If the theory is correct the Romans would have been rendered almost immediately unconscious and would have died of asphyxiation within minutes. The lone Persian soldier may well have been the one who ignited the toxins that killed the Roman soldiers, and he may himself have died in the process.

Today we hear of tunnels and phosphorous bombs in Gaza and the alleged construction of nuclear weapons technology by modern Iran — there is nothing new though in the human propensity for ingenuity in warfare. Ed.



Persian Soldier at Dura Europos in iron mail shirt: © Yale University

## Did the 'Stones of Venice' come from Altino?

*Francesca Radcliffe*

In September 2008 I attended the AARG (Aerial Archaeology Research Group) annual conference in Ljubljana. One of the most interesting and, for me, fascinating presentations was the one given by the team of the Department of Geography "G. Morandini" of the University of Padua: "Aerial Photography and alluvial geo-archaeology along the via Annia"(1). I must confess to a particular fondness for the *Via Annia*, its route being very close to where I was born. My interest in archaeology can be dated back to the moment when as a young girl I witnessed the emerging of some exciting finds, in a field in my grandfather's land, not far from the Roman *Via Annia*, near Altino, north east of Venice. So when I was visiting my Italian family last November, I decided to pay a visit to Altino and its Museum, to see the new developments.

Altino is situated at the edge of the Venetian lagoon, 10 km northeast of Venice (see image below).



Satellite image kindly provided by the Department of Geography of Padua University

For a time, *Altinum* - its pre-Roman origins date to the 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, was one of the most important Roman ports in north-eastern Italy, being strategically placed at the centre of a cross-road: the *Via Claudia Augusta* started in *Altinum*, heading north and the *Via Annia* linking Roman *Atria* (Adria), south-west of Venice, to *Patavium* (Padua) crossed *Altinum* and, skirting the alluvial plains of the Veneto and Friuli avoiding the coastal marshes, reached *Aquileia* and then on to Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

At the time of the Barbarian invasions, between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the local inhabitants took shelter on the islands in the nearby lagoon. Perhaps it was not only the Barbarians who drove them to abandon their town and villages, because at the time the conditions of the surrounding marshes were deteriorating, getting more and more waterlogged (2).

Tradition says that Venice was founded at about this time and that *Altinum* became the quarry from which beautiful stones were taken to build Venetian churches and palaces. Many inscribed stones have been found, and still are being discovered in Venice, witnessing their mainland origins, while, also according to tradition, the names of some of the islands in the lagoon, like Burano, Murano & Torcello, derive from places in *Altinum* like

the city gates *Boreana* and *Ammurianum* and *Torricelium*, the district where a tower stood.

During the Middle Ages, what must have been a splendid Roman town, stripped and partially submerged, gradually silted up and was almost forgotten. In the middle of the 1920s, ancient remains were being found as a result of the agricultural programme of land reclamation and drainage (3). Almost daily, along the *Via Annia* at first, many remains, mainly fragments of funerary monuments were brought up by the plough. In 1962 the Venice *Soprintendenza alle Antichita* began excavations when more substantial remains were found near the hamlet of Altino



About 40 m of a paved Roman road, thought to be one of the *decumani* (it is aligned east-west), came to light during the 1962 excavations in what we now know to be the eastern area of the city, to the east of the Archaeological Museum of Altino. On the left side of the road is a fragment of a mosaic floor; on the right, remains of a marble floor by the wooden railings which surround what is believed to be a landing stage with steps down to a canal. Photo: © F Radcliffe 2008

and in 1976 the Italian Government acquired an area believed to enclose the ancient town (4). These excavations produced a wealth of finds; among the most important are (1): a 40 m stretch of Roman road believed to be one of the town *decumani* (see photo above);

(2): foundations of buildings and mosaic floors (see photo below)

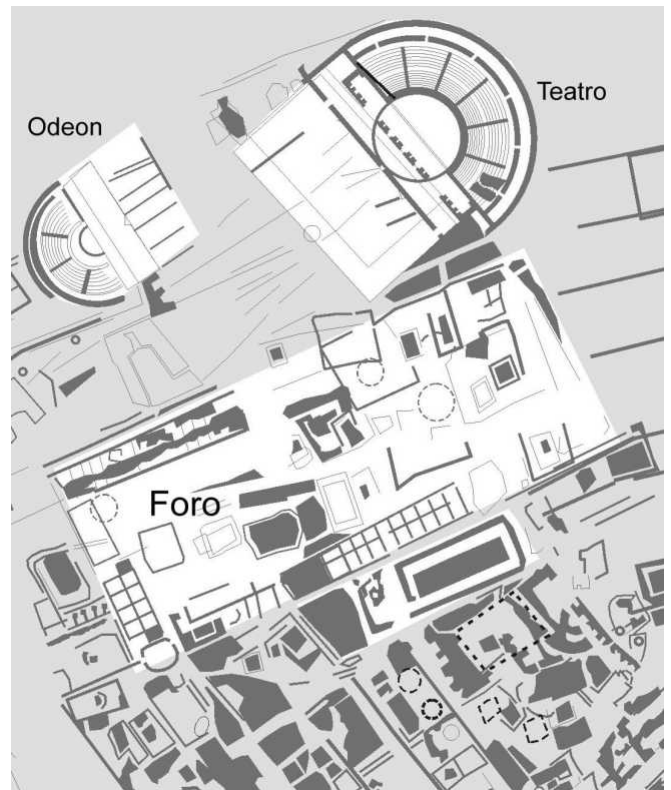


A fragment of one of the mosaic floors exposed during the 1960s excavations.

© F Radcliffe 2008.

and, (3): many funerary monuments (thousands have been recorded since, along the *Via Annia* and the *Via Claudia Augusta*), *stelae*, inscriptions, statues, coins etc. Some of these can be admired in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Altino which, as I remembered, still stands near the church. Ten years ago the building of a larger museum was started but had to be put on hold when it was found that the “new” site was above the remains of a *Paleoveneto* sanctuary, still in use after the Romans peacefully conquered the region of the *Veneti*. Ten seasons of excavations and thousands of finds later, it is hoped that work to complete the new museum will now go ahead. The authorities concerned hope that funding will be forthcoming to allow further excavations and ground surveys to explore the results of the aerial survey (5).

This survey has revealed the extent of the “lost” town of *Altinum*. The University of Padua’s team examined a wealth of images from satellites and old aerial photographs while researching their huge project. In 2007, for the area investigated around Altino and along the *Via Annia*, an area of some 2000 km<sup>2</sup>, a total of 100 hours of scheduled flights was assigned for the purpose of taking oblique aerial photographs and this allowed a more precise mapping of the archaeological and natural features. The 2007 photos, taken over the whole year, were particularly effective due to the changing conditions of the fields and crops in the different seasons. Best results have been achieved processing some digital pictures acquired by Telespazio Inc. When these photographs were analysed and interpreted with the assistance of special software programmes, infrared spectral bands and an array of up-to-date research facilities, they produced surprising results, an abundance of details which allowed the comprehensive mapping of the buried city (see drawing below).



Mapped section of the centre of *Altinum* drawn by the Department of Geography of Padua University from the interpretation of photographs and satellites images.



*Altinum* as it appears on an enhanced aerial photograph processed by the Department of Geography of Padua University showing the canal (arrowed), across the bottom, the city walls on the right and top left, the theatre. From images like this the mapping of the next figure has been made possible.

To date the mapped section of the town, enclosed by the city walls, shows a theatre, the Odeon, the Forum and clear lines of roads and buildings (see in this regard drawing above opposite).

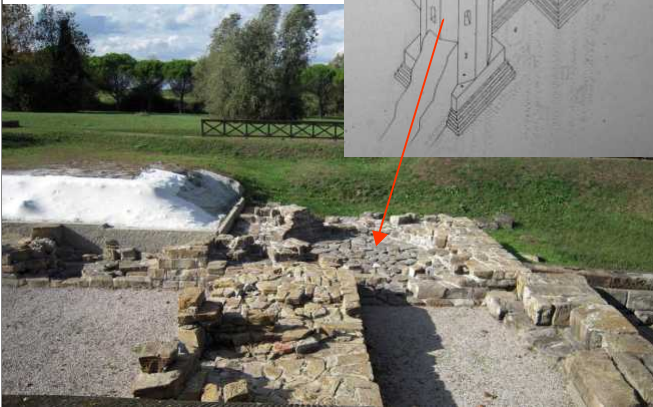
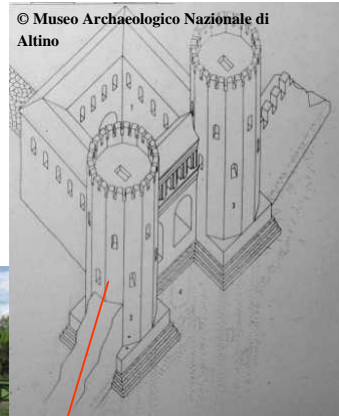
This is all predictable perhaps, but before nobody knew exactly where they were. The study is ongoing and new details of the urban area are constantly emerging (6). The line of the city walls has been clearly defined and it transpires that in some instances canals were marking the limits of the town. The outlines of an amphitheatre have been found outside the city walls. The speculation that the city was surrounded by water has been confirmed by this study, the ancient marshy landscape appeared as having been crisscrossed by rivers and waterways. A large canal has been detected inside the city, crossing the town in an east-west direction, with a landing tower by the city wall similar to the one known, and excavated, along the northern section of the city. The Roman historian and geographer Strabo (7) did mention that while some towns of the *Veneti* were partially surrounded by water, others, like islands, were totally surrounded. One of the fascinating aspects of the re-discovered *Altinum* is



The foundations of a *Porta Urbica* in the city walls, excavated on the northern area of Altino. It is thought to be a gate and a landing stage, fronting as it does a canal, the line of which can be seen following the ‘hedge’ of maritime pines, top right and across the background. © F. Radcliffe 2008

that in its watery setting, not unlike the landscape of present day Venice, the local population must have faced similar challenges in maintaining a difficult and precarious equilibrium between water and land. It is apparent that the first builders of Venice knew what they were doing and the study of the University of Padua's team is a step towards better understanding of how they achieved it.

A drawing of what the gate could have looked like. A similar gate was built in Verona. The foundation of one of the round towers can be just detected in the centre of the photo



My thanks to Paolo Mozzi, Andrea Ninfo and Francesco Ferrarese, and in particular to Alessandro Fontana, for their help in providing so readily and kindly all the information and photographs of their research.

Francesca Radcliffe, February 2009.

1. Paolo Mozzi, Alessandro Fontana, Andrea Ninfo, Francesco Ferrarese with a number of colleagues have for many years been carrying out a detailed and multi-disciplinary study of the Geomorphology of the Veneto and Friuli alluvial plain at the Department of Geography of Padua University. Their work and the results of their remarkable study has been published in the volume *Geomorfologia della provincia di Venezia*, Esedra Editrice, 2004. A hefty 500-page volume (3½ kg in weight) written in collaboration with other authors, under the aegis of the Provincia di Venezia (Ufficio difesa del Suolo e Protezione Civile) e il Consorzio Venezia Nuova. The volume is accompanied by beautifully produced and fully informative maps.

2. One of the findings of the geomorphological study conducted by the Padua University team.

3. J. Marcello, *La Via Annia alle porte di Altino*, C. Ferrari, Venezia 1956: 7.

4. Altino in the early 1950s consisted of 6 farm houses, one large estate and a small church and the number of its inhabitants was 150.

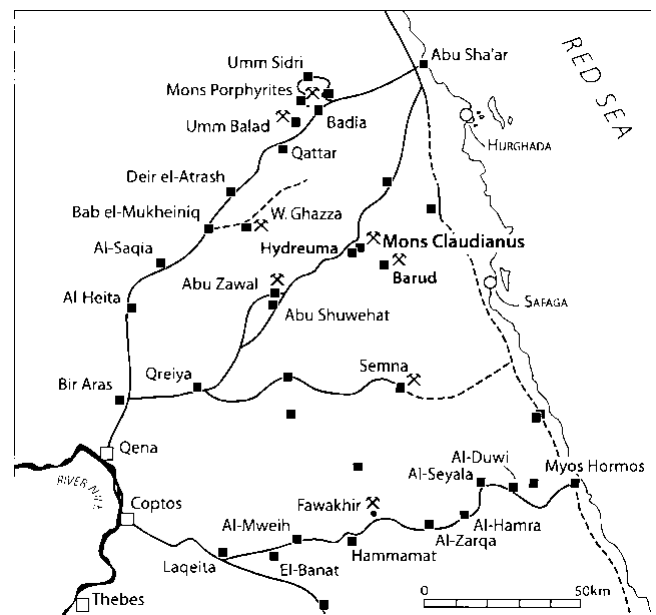
5. See note 1.

6. Alessandro Fontana, pers. com.

7. Strabo, *Geographia* V,1,5

## Everyday Writing from the Roman Frontiers: 1. Egypt

Roman histories are full of accounts of warfare and battles. Generals are named and characterized; armies are mustered and led to war; battlefields are selected and the major units distributed across it. The description that follows is often then a stock one invented by the historian; at best it will be the macro view as seen by the general. But just how common were major episodes of warfare in the centuries of the Roman Empire – especially the so-called 'High' Empire (30 BC – AD 235)? Perhaps not very common at all. Rome's great rival, the Parthian Empire (modern Iraq, Iran and parts of Central Asia and Afghanistan), was seldom an adversary in this period and major wars elsewhere equally episodic.



If there were few major wars was there nevertheless constant 'low-intensity' warfare and if so, where, and what was its character? Part of an answer can be found now in scrap paper from the rubbish heaps of the Roman army in Egypt.

Traditionally we associate the paperwork of Roman Egypt with the papyri that survive in the tens of thousand. There are, indeed, many of these dealing with military affairs. But papyrus was relatively expensive and much everyday writing was done on the scrap paper of the ancient world – pieces of broken pottery.

Pottery was produced in immense quantities and cheaply in the Roman world. A broken pot was useless – or almost. Bigger pieces could be written on and that is just what happened. A sherd of pottery was called an ostraca – a Greek word from which our word ostracism is derived (because the names of those who might be candidates for political ostracism at Athens were written on pot sherds). Tens of thousands of ostraca (the plural) were used for humbler notes in the Roman world and they can survive well because pottery is fairly indestructible.

Rome maintained a number of garrisons in the Eastern Desert

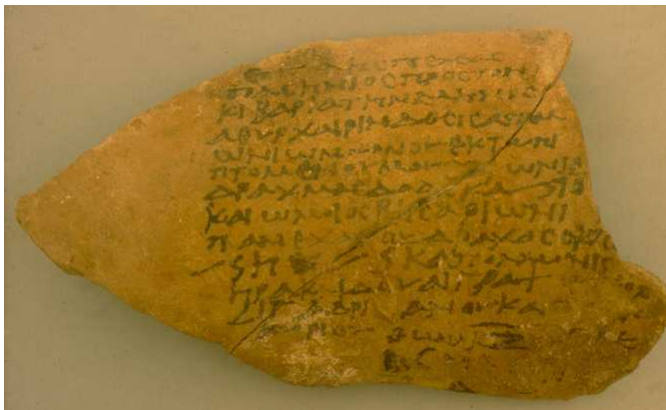
of Egypt. Especially important were those policing the roads between the Nile valley and the important quarries of the region, and those leading to the ports on the Red Sea coast. It is a bleak, inhospitable landscape in which control was maintained by guarding watering points along the roads.

The Eastern Desert is also a region inhabited by a thin population of hardy, predatory nomads, almost impossible for even the most powerful state to control much less eradicate. Despite their small numbers they were capable of being highly disruptive and demanded a disproportionately large military expenditure. Think of the stalemate or worse of successive governments on the North West Frontier of Afghanistan/ Pakistan.



**Fort and mining camp at Mons Claudianus**

Until recently we could only guess at the nature of this policing action from snippets of information from various places and times in the Roman Empire and by inference from similar situations in more recent or better-documented times. Now we can see both directly through newly-published evidence from the Eastern Desert and by reference to documents from the Chinese frontier in a similar environment. Happily, both of these sources have been summarised and compared for us recently in an article at the XIXth Congress of Roman Frontier Studies by Prof. David Graf of the University of Miami. Graf is especially suited for the job as an archaeologist and historian working in Roman Arabia (Jordan) but with a long-standing interest in links back along the Silk Route to China through his late colleague at Miami, Prof. Ed Dreyer, an expert on China.



**Pay record written on an ostracon (pottery fragment) from Mons Porphyrites**

The same congress received a paper by Prof. Val Maxfield of

the University of Exeter who has been excavating in the Eastern Desert for twenty years and provides a fascinating – if brief – survey of the range of information from these military ostraca. A few examples:

A. We know that the military would control movement in the area of the imperial quarries; now we have ostraca which are the passes issued to travellers by legionary centurions authorizing them to use particular roads. Especially interesting is that the passes survive at the place they were issued. Maxfield suggests this most likely means these are not the passes themselves but copies. That is possible but I suspect we are seeing a simple mechanism at work for the authorities to be assured the traveller did what was authorized and arrived safely – the pass would be handed in at the destination and batches would be returned to the point of issue to be checked against records there.

B. The passes can be quite detailed. They routinely list not just the number of people (men, women and children) but their names; others record their animals if any – e.g. 20 donkeys are mentioned on one. And they are addressed to a responsible officer at each of the guard posts along the way. E.g. “Valvennius Priscus, centurion, to Julius, Curator of Raima. Let pass ... [the rest is broken where the names of the travellers would be]” (*O. Claud. 49*: trans Maxfield).

C. Some ostraca refer to *skopeloi* – watch-posts – apparently watch-towers on the hills guarding the approaches to the quarries. The ostraca refer to the soldiers sent to man them as *skopelarioi*. On other ostraca from Egypt the watch-towers are associated with the terms ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ which has been interpreted to mean that at each post there was a soldier in the elevated tower who could signal down to a colleague on the road below if he saw something.

D. Several refer to bandits and low-level raiding. Most striking of these is an official report sent by a trooper of the *Cohors II Ituraeorum* to his officer, the centurion Cassius Victor who in turn sent copies to a string of local commanders. The report speaks of an attack by 60 ‘barbarians’ (= nomads?) on a garrison place called Patkoua. The attack began at 2 pm and continued till nightfall. A soldier was killed, a civilian woman and two children were seized and one of the children was killed. The next day the attack resumed.

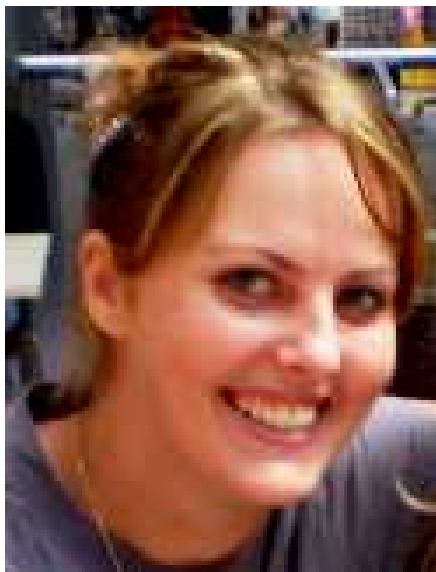


**Graffito of a cavalrman on an ostracon from Mons Claudianus**

These are simple texts but they reveal graphically details that seldom get a mention in the great histories. This is life on the frontier. In a future issue we can explore other places where humble documents shed light on everyday affairs.

## Celebrating the Golden Age: The *Ara Pacis Augustae*

*Rebecca McKimmie*



**Rebecca McKimmie: Ph D Student, Classics and Ancient History, University of Western Australia.**

Imagery played an important part in the consolidation of ideologies in the Roman Empire. Images displaying the wealth and prosperity of the empire aided the positive perception of the emperor as a provider of his people. On a recent field-trip to Rome I was able to explore the most complex and controversial visual monument commemorating the peace and prosperity of the empire: The *Ara Pacis Augustae* (the altar of Augustan Peace.) (picture below) was commissioned by the Senate in c.13 BC as a gift to Augustus to celebrate his establishment of peace on land and sea. The altar was thus a tribute to Augustus' role as a protector and provider. Scholars have generally accepted the *Ara Pacis* to be one of the most elaborate and significant monuments of the Roman Empire and the modern tourist is still awed by its beauty. Though its purpose was to celebrate Augustus' efforts to attain peace, the monument stands as an iconographical testament to the Golden Age as envisioned and created by Augustus.



Photo: R. McKimmie

The prosperity of the empire is visually illustrated in the flora and fauna adorning the altar. A biologist's dream, the friezes are abundant with a variety of species intrinsically woven together in a fantastical image of harmony. These friezes contain a wide variety of recognisable species including ivy, leafy vines and grapes, oak leaves, poppies, and roses.



Detail from the *Ara Pacis* Photo: R. McKimmie

Amongst the reliefs adorning the altar, the 'Tellus' panel is most indicative of the prosperity achieved under Augustus.

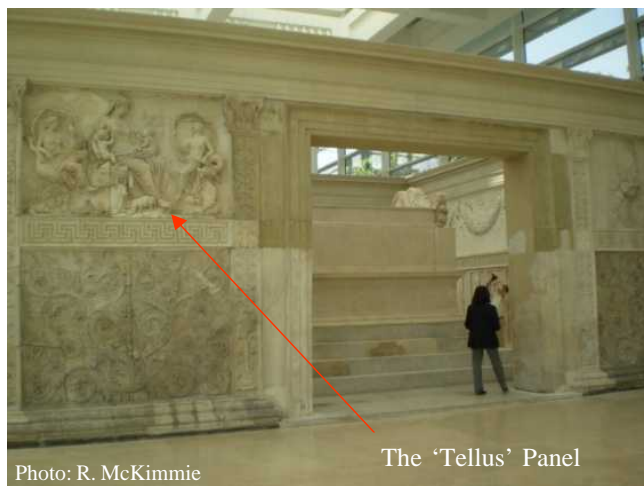


Photo: R. McKimmie

The 'Tellus' Panel

Much scholarly debate has focused on the exact identification and interpretation of the supposed 'Tellus' relief. The female figure dominating the relief has been variously identified as Tellus, Pax, Venus and Ceres. The most plausible identification of the central figure is Ceres. This theory is in line with the general premise that the emperor's role as the provider of prosperity was visually demonstrated through imagery symbolic of economic, agricultural and material idealism. The flanking figures may be nymphs, which were connected with Ceres in myth, cult and art. The primary element suggesting the figure may be Ceres is the presence of the wreath of wheat and poppies, the wheat in particular suggesting that it may be the *coronaspicea*. This garland is given as an attribute of Ceres in Tibullus and the Augustan poets.

The fruits and plants that appear in such artistic contexts are directly associated with particular deities; grapes, vines, and pine with Dionysos; oak with Kybele, Demeter and Zeus; poppies and wheat with Demeter; pomegranate with Demeter and Persephone; quince or apple—with Aphrodite; laurel with Apollo. Many of the fruits and plants appearing on the *Ara Pacis* were thus implicitly associated with fertility and abundance. The combination of plants evident on the *Ara Pacis* may be perceived as symbolic of the harmony and security experienced by man and gods alike in response to Augustus' rule.



Detail from the *Ara Pacis* Photo: R. McKimmie

The types of fruit, grapes, pomegranates and nuts are indicative of the fertility goddess and the child handing a piece of fruit to the woman is also highly significant. Behind and surrounding the figure grow wheat, poppies, and other plants and flowers, whilst sheep and a cow recline at her feet. The wheat and poppies, along with the combination of other vegetation, are a clear indication that the domain of a fertility goddess is represented. Associated with agriculture and grain, Ceres is frequently represented holding either a wheat sheaf or poppy capsules, sometimes both.



Detail from the *Ara Pacis* Photo: R. McKimmie

The vegetative friezes on the *Ara Pacis* contain a number of recognisable animal species including snakes, birds, frogs, lizards, a butterfly, a grasshopper, a scorpion and a snail. The animals are often portrayed feeding on the vegetation they sit amongst, and some are shown preying on smaller animals. The animals and floral imagery extant on the *Ara Pacis* celebrate a

love of nature and a respect for the material abundance provided by the natural world. They are symbolic of the harmony of nature, another element reinforcing the universal peace experienced by man and beast alike under the principate of Augustus. By visually displaying the interconnected harmony of the Imperial house, traditional Roman deities, flora and fauna, Augustus illustrated the utopian ideals his regime both advocated and produced. Essentially, the utopian imagery of the monument as a whole was designed to visually commemorate the benefactions and political actions that had made these ideals possible

The fruits evident on the panel reinforce the nature of the figure as a fertility goddess. The pomegranates were associated with Demeter's daughter in Greek mythology, Persephone, and were in themselves a symbol of fertility due to their many seeds. Nuts also signify fertility, and at the *Cerialia* nuts were thrown to the onlookers of the procession and therefore involved in the rituals governed by Ceres. The presence of the child offering a fruit connotes the beginning of the Golden Age, but, in terms of identifying the central figure, may denote human fertility. Notions of labour, agriculture and abundance are illustrated in the animals at the base of the panel. The presence of the animals was symbolic of the piety and physical sacrifices necessary to reap the material benefits of the Golden Age, which were demonstrated by the emperor and required of the populace.



Detail from the *Ara Pacis* Photo: R. McKimmie

The combination of the fertility goddess and the flora and fauna commemorate the achievements of Augustus in providing a peaceful and prosperous empire. The prosperity imagery on the *Ara Pacis* friezes was a visual promotion of Augustus' success in providing benefaction and material abundance for the populace. As such it still stands as a shining example of the power of the visual image and its ability to be utilised as propaganda.

#### WHERE IS THE ARA PACIS?

The *Ara Pacis* was consecrated on the Field of Mars in 9BC. It was reconstructed at huge expense in the 1930s and today the reconstructed *Ara Pacis* can be found on the east bank of the Tiber in what was the field of Mars. Today you go to via Ripetta. The location is not far from the Ponte Cavour and the *Ara Pacis* pavilion is opposite the Piazza Augusto Imperatore.

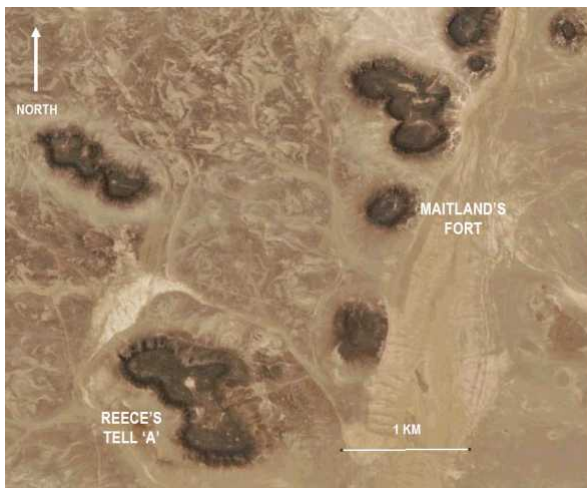
Ed.

## VISIT TO MAITLAND'S FORT

*Don Boyer*

The finish of the 2008 season of the *Jerash Hinterland Survey* provided an interlude of a few days in which to explore a number of archaeological sites in northern Jordan in the pleasant and informed company of David Kennedy, Francesca Radcliffe and Ann Boyer. One of these sites was 'Maitland's Fort', which David had flown over and photographed as part of his aerial photographic survey of Jordan. I had been fortunate to join David on one of these flights only two weeks previous to the field visit, and was very keen to visit it on the ground.

The site is located in remote north eastern Jordan some 60 km ESE of the oasis town of Azraq, site of the Roman fort Qasr al-Azraq, and 22 km north of the border with Saudi Arabia. This part of Jordan is known as the basalt desert or Harra, part of an extensive tract of desolate rock-strewn country that stretches from Syria through Jordan into Saudi Arabia. This country looks very stark and desolate from the air, but is even more forbidding at ground level. The 'unofficial' route takes one past the green irrigated farms of Azraq eastwards into the desert. After a couple of false starts we found the right track and, after almost three hours of indefatigable driving by our fearless team leader using a GPS for navigation, found ourselves in the general vicinity of Rees' Tell 'A', SW of Maitland's Fort. The area contains a number of low, flat topped basalt hills (or mesas) that have been separated from the more extensive basalt hills to the north by weathering. These hills rise only 30-50 metres above the surrounding plain but are striking, particularly from the air, because of their flat-topped nature and dark colour.

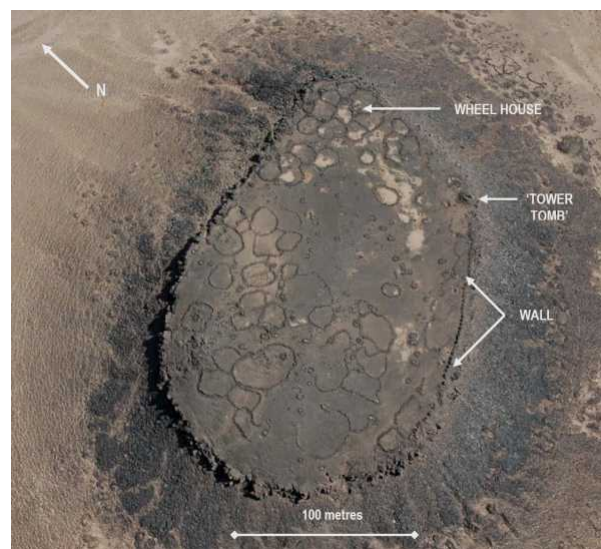


**Location of Maitland's Fort and other features, NE Jordan (Google Earth)**

The site gets its name from Flt Lt Maitland, an RAF pilot, who frequently flew the Cairo-Amman-Bagdad air route in the 1920's. In doing so he noted the features on the hills that he passed over and, after flying over and photographing the one now named after him, saw a similarity between the stone structures on the hilltop, which he interpreted to be defensive, with similar features he had noted at a Welsh Iron Age hill fort (Tre'r Ceiri). He wrote an article on his discovery<sup>1</sup>, but the reference fell into obscurity until recent times.

Our field visit brought us first to an irregularly shaped mesa that lies 2 km SW of Maitland's Fort and named for an RAF commander in Transjordan in the 1920s - Rees' Tell 'A'. This flat-topped hill boasts an impressive kite-type stone structure that had been identified from the air, and the visit permitted a brief ground check of this feature which proved to be much more prominent from the air than on the ground. The sighting of a number of rock inscriptions, perhaps Safaitic in origin (i.e. c. early Roman period), whetted our appetites for the visit to neighbouring Maitland's Fort.

Several hours were spent inspecting the multitude of stone structures and enclosures that are strewn across the hilltop of Maitland's Fort. The oval-shaped mesa is aligned NE-SW but is not large, having dimensions of 170m by 300m.



**Maitland's Fort hilltop – looking NE towards wheel house**

Many notable stone-built features are visible from the air, including a possible 'wheel house' at the NE end, the large circular burial tower site on the eastern rim, the ~100m long castellated 'wall' that extends southwards from the circular burial site, and numerous open and closed walled structures varying in diameter up to 30m. The many ~2m-5m long oval structures aligned north-south are probable burial sites.

The flattish terrain on the hilltop means that at ground level it is much more difficult to interpret the stone structures.



**View of Maitland's Fort hilltop – looking NE towards wheel house**



The ruins of a large (6m diameter) looted circular burial site (a possible 'tower tomb'?) lies on the NE edge of the hilltop. There is a suggestion that the burial may have been placed in a hollow in the basalt outcrop aligned north-south, which appears to be a natural feature.



View of large walled circular burial site – looking South

Perhaps the most enigmatic structures on the hilltop are the small stone cairns that have been constructed in a line running southwest from the large circular burial site along the edge of the hilltop. These are the structures that Maitland originally interpreted to be part of the battlements of a defensive position constructed on the rim of the hill. They consist of individual well-built cairns 1.5m high, 1m wide and 2m long separated by gaps of 1-2m. Their original purpose is unknown but a defensive purpose is unlikely given that the structures only cover a small portion of the hill perimeter. The line of cairns can be viewed from the plain below, and their location adjacent to the prominent circular walled burial site, itself highly visible from the plain below, suggests a connection with the burial site. They are believed to be Neolithic in date.



Close-up view of line of stone cairns on southern edge of hilltop – looking west



View of castellated stone cairns on hilltop looking south

The larger walled enclosures on the hilltop are similar to the walled enclosure used today by the nomadic Beduin to contain their flocks of sheep and goats at the foot of the hill, although one could question why you would need to build such structures on a hilltop. Some enclosures are constructed from upright slabs of basalt, which may have a particular cultural significance, and inscriptions (?Safaitic) were observed on several of these upright slabs (see example photograph below from Maitland's fort site). (Safaitic script is the name given to the thousands of inscriptions left by nomads in the basalt desert on the eastern edge of the Roman empire in the period first century BC to fourth century AD, and is considered to be related to the South Semitic alphabet but more difficult to read<sup>2</sup>).



While no pottery sherds were observed in the brief visit, a number of Palaeolithic flint artefacts were seen among the stone ruins (see photograph below).



The author could have happily spent days inspecting Maitland's Hill and neighbouring hills, and had to be dragged unrepentant to the waiting 4WD below for the journey home. The whole area is amazing, but you need to see it from the air to fully appreciate the stark beauty of the setting, and the detail of the stone structures. Should I ever get the opportunity to visit the area again, I have in mind a visit to a tiny mesa north east of Maitland's Hill whose surface is seemingly crammed with circular tower like burial sites.

### References

1. Flt Lt Maitland. "The 'Works of the Old Men' in Arabia", *Antiquity* 1 (1927): 196-203
2. M.C.A. Macdonald, *Kilroy in the Desert; A Database of Bedouin Graffiti*. Oxford University Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents. CSAD Newsletter No. 6 (1998) (<http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/csad/Newsletters/Newsletter6/Newsletter6b.html>)

## Did the Romans reach China?

*Emilia Oprandi*

In search of military glory Marcus Licinius Crassus in 53 BC took 50,000 men into Mesopotamia to conquer the Parthians. Crassus was a member of the Third Triumvirate, the other two being Pompey and Julius Caesar. At the ensuing battle of Carrhae (modern day Harran) the Romans were ignominiously and comprehensively defeated by the Parthians under their general, Surena. Crassus and his son, Publius, were killed along with some 20,000 of the Roman army. An estimated 10,000 were captured by the Parthians and sold into slavery. The story of the defeat of Crassus at the hands of Surena is contained in Plutarch's "*The Life of Crassus*" at 16-33.

Pliny states the captured Roman soldiers were taken to Margiana. What their fate was thereafter can only be a matter of conjecture.

One such conjecture is that some of these soldiers escaped and made their way eastward along the silk road toward China to the town then being built by the Hun, Shan-yii ("Emperor") Jzh-jzh (referred to as Chih Chih). The soldiers are conjectured to have assisted in the fortification of the town.

In 1940 Professor Homer H. Dubs postulated the theory that a group of Roman soldiers taken prisoner by the Parthians during the battle of Carrhae in 53 BC found their way to central Asia and, 18 years later, participated as mercenaries in a battle for power between Chih Chih (a pretender to the Hun throne who wished to establish an empire in Central Asia and who built himself a city on the Talass River), and the Chinese Associate Protector-General, Ch'en T'ang, who wished to prevent the growth of an empire on his territory.

The account of Ch'en T'ang's successful attack on the city was contained in only one source, a series of paintings of the battle that was sent by Ch'en T'ang to the Imperial court. Dubs saw the existence of the paintings as evidence of the influence of the Romans, likening the creation of the paintings to the Roman triumphal procession, the *triumphus*, something the victorious Ch'en T'ang would have discovered, according to Dubs, from

his summoning the leaders of this Roman force, talking with them, and leading them to speak of their native country.

A description of the paintings in the Chinese *History of the Former Han Dynasty* includes a comment that on the outside of Chih Chih's city at the commencement of the attack there were more than 100 foot soldiers lined up on either side of the gate in a fish-scale formation.

Dubs argued in several articles that were published between 1941 and 1957, that the fish-scale formation or *testudo* was a uniquely Roman formation. He reasoned that the Roman presence was explained by the fact that the Roman soldiers who were captured at Carrhae were likely to have been sold into slavery and forced to march to Margiana in central Asia, and that some of these soldiers would have survived, married barbarian women, and served in the Parthian armies.

Chih-Chih's city was about 500 miles from Margiana. Dubs argued that the Roman soldiers would have welcomed an opportunity to serve as mercenaries. He suggested that Romans had heard of Chih-Chih and his desire for troops from the traffic passing along the Silk Road.

In addition to the fish scale formation depicted in the painting of which only a single account survives (consider Dubs: "*The original paintings have, of course, disappeared*") there is a suggestion that there was also a double palisade surrounding the city. According to Dubs, the double palisade is a feature only of Roman fortification and therefore, he argued, Roman engineers must have been involved in the planning and construction of Chih-Chih's city.

Dubs conjectures that as 145 of the enemy were captured alive after the battle and that as this number tallies with the "over 100" foot soldiers drawn up outside the wall it must be a reference to the Roman mercenaries. In his earlier articles Dubs suggests that these soldiers were again subsequently sold into slavery and sent off to further reaches of the Western frontier regions of China and may even have reached as far as Chinese Turkestan. However, in a lecture published in 1957, he suggests that perhaps the soldiers went freely with the Chinese and were "accordingly placed in a specially created frontier city, to which the Chinese of course gave their name for Rome, "Lijien", thereby accounting for the most ancient Chinese name for Rome in the earliest record in the register of Chinese cities.

Although no other evidence has yet been discovered to support the theory, and despite the ideas propounded by Dubs being generally discredited by scholars, the theory has obtained some currency among some Chinese officials in places such as impoverished Liquian in China's northwest Gansu province, who are no doubt keen to exploit the tourist potential of a Roman site in China.

### See

Pliny *Natural History* vi 47

Dubs, H. H. *A Roman City in Ancient China*. China Society Sinological Series 5. London, 1957

Dubs, Homer H, *A Roman Influence upon Chinese Painting in Classical Philology*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Jan., 1943), pp. 13-19

Harris, D. *Black Horse Odyssey: Search for the Lost City of Rome in China*, 1991

## What is in (the spelling of) a name? ‘Colosseum’ or ‘Coliseum’?

*Kevin O’Toole*

In *Ars Poetica* (lines 358-359) Horace says: “et idem indignor, quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus” (and at the same time do I deem it unworthy whenever the good Homer becomes drowsy).

Horace was lamenting the lapses of perfection (and the absence sometimes of any perfection at all) in those who practise the arts. Thus, there is the aphorism: “even Homer nodded”. That is to say that even the great Homer sometimes fell below his best. Indeed, there are oddities in Homer’s work (let us assume there was a Homer) that suggest a lack of concentration, or inattention to detail on his part. For example, in Book XIII Lines 644-659 of the Iliad, King Pyllaimenes witnesses the death of his son Harpalion. This is a bit odd because in Book V lines 576-579, much earlier in the narrative, Pyllaimenes “the equal of Ares” is killed by Menelaos. And there are grammatical errors too. In Book IX at line 182, Homer uses ‘baten’ ( ) a dual form (indicating two actors) of the verb *baino* ( ) (go, walk, step forward, etc). The problem is that where he uses this form of *baino* the text at lines 165-170 suggests that he is referring to more than two actors, the grammatical equivalent of writing “John and Betty is going to town”.

It need only be mentioned here that the original works of Shakespeare are notorious for curious spelling.

Alexander Pope however allowed for intentional error, oxymoronic though that concept may be. In his *Essay on Criticism* Pope says: “*Those oft are Stratagems which Errors seem, Nor is it Homer Nods, but We that Dream.*”

It was just such a stratagem, misguided perhaps, that explains the spelling of ‘Colosseum’ as ‘Coliseum’ on the front of the previous issue of the RAG. It was not a mistake. If it is a misspelling it was a deliberate one, and in any event an excuse for this article. Thus, as editor of the RAG magazine I have been impressed by the alacrity with which readers have drawn errors to my attention. I do not think that there have been many errors but there have been some and it would be surprising if there had not been; they seem to be unavoidable. Lord Byron has been said to have discovered that “man’s greatest tragedy is that he can conceive of a perfection which he cannot attain”. The RAG conceives of and strives for perfection but perfection eludes it and I have for some time wanted to make some comment in general about any errors that have cropped up in the RAG Newsletter.

There was, as I thought there would be, more than one reader who drew my attention to the fact that “Coliseum’ is not the Oxford Dictionary spelling for the famous elliptically shaped building in Rome. ‘Coliseum’ is a common spelling for sport stadiums in the United States, and that in part explains the common use there of the same spelling for the great Roman construction commissioned by the emperor Vespasian in c. AD 70. The fact is, however, that the building was not called ‘the Colosseum’ when it was built. Its original name was ‘the Flavian Amphitheatre’ (*Amphitheatrum Flavium*). After all why would it have been called ‘the Colosseum’? It was Vespasian who commissioned it and so it took his name, or the name of his gens, or clan, ‘Flavia’. It may have been a thousand years before the Flavian Amphitheatre was called ‘the Colosseum’. In

the meantime, is it possible that at some stage it was called ‘the Coliseum’? Consider this famous epigram attributed to the venerable Bede (c. AD 672—735): *Quandiu stabit coliseus, stabit et Roma; quando cadit coliseus, cadet et Roma; quando cadet Roma, cadet et mundus.* “As long as the Colossus stands, so Rome shall stand; when the Colossus falls, so shall Rome fall; when Rome falls, so shall the world fall.” See in this regard The Catholic Encyclopaedia, s.v. *Coliseum* (sic). What does the word ‘coliseus’ refer to? In form it is masculine rather than neuter and might therefore be unlikely to refer to the *Amphitheatrum Flavium*. It has been argued that Bede was referring to what had been the colossal statue of Nero (and subsequently of a variety of other beings, mortal and immortal) near which the Colosseum had been built. By Bede’s day it seems that that statue, whoever or whatever at any given time it celebrated, had come to represent the permanency of Rome, much like the Statue of Liberty today which in fictional cinematic accounts of the fall of the United States is shown to be toppled. There can be no certainty though that Bede was not referring to the Colosseum (maybe he also suffered grammatical lapses) as that building too was symbolic, in particular in religious terms as the place where many a Christian martyr was made, or so we have been led to believe. In any event was there not symbolism in the fact that materials from the quintessentially pagan Colosseum were plundered for the construction of Christian Rome?

The detection of errors in published writing may nourish an inclination to a sense of intellectual superiority which can be misplaced. Words, and the rules that govern their use, are not a divine commission: they are the creatures of human beings and are therefore mutable and liable to caprice, all with impunity. As for deliberate mutation witness the fact that Microsoft Word offers no less than 16 versions of English spelling, 6 versions of French, and 5 versions of German. Much of what is right today would yesterday have been censured.

We should limit any pleasure we take in finding errors in written work so to leave more room for pleasure in the ideas that it can otherwise succeed in expressing. To err is human. To say something really worthwhile, spelling and grammatical errors notwithstanding, is unusual, as the rarity of works such as those of Homer and Shakespeare, mistakes and all, attests.

And by the way, if anyone has an explanation as to why the *Amphitheatrum Flavium* came to be called ‘the Colosseum’ (so spelt) perhaps they could let me know. If the word so spelt is no more than a whimsy of some obscure scribe bent on correcting the vernacular let’s go with the Americans.

In the meantime, be assured, the RAG will endeavour to minimize its errors, for to quote Horace again: “et citharoedus rideatur, chorda qui semper oberrat eadem” (and the player who habitually hits the wrong note will be ridiculed): *Ars Poetica* (lines 355-356).

# Roman Archaeology at UWA Membership of The RAG

## Notes and News

### SUMMER PROGRAMME

The first of the Summer lectures on Saturday 17 January 2009 was well attended with two lectures by David Kennedy on the subject of Roman technology. Two lectures by Dr Bill Leadbetter on the Tetrarchs drew an even bigger audience a month later.

The balance of the programme is as follows:

**Saturday 21 March 2009**

#### Roman Women

*Women in Roman Art*

Dr Glenys Wootton, UWA

*Women in Archaeology*

Fiona Crowe, UWA

(Illustrated Lectures)

#### Where

Social Sciences Lecture Theatre at University of WA

(on the south side of main Car Park at Hackett Entrance 1)

#### When

1.30 pm

(programme will normally finish around 4-4.30 pm.)

#### Cost

Free

Afternoon tea available at a charge of \$7 for Members; \$10 for non-Members

**Please RSVP for yourself and friends to Maire Gomes by telephone 9439 2828**

or email [gomescm@bigpond.com](mailto:gomescm@bigpond.com)

### UNIVERSITY EXTENSION COURSE

A UWA Extension course on "The Face of Battle" drew an audience of 30+. This was the third course on various aspects of the Roman Army. Other courses offered

through UWA Extension have included aspects of Roman Britain and Public Entertainment in the Roman World. There are no plans to offer any further Extension courses this year but if you have any 'requests' for a theme please let me know.

### NEWS

Last year The Packard Humanities Institute awarded a grant of Aus\$262,000 for the massive development of the Aerial Archaeology in Jordan project (RAG 3.3). They have now renewed their support with a grant for 2009 of Aus\$398,000.

### FIELDWORK

Members interested in following what is happening in the *Aerial Archaeology in Jordan* project may want to look at the article we have just had published in the venerable British periodical, *Antiquity* (founded in 1927). D. Kennedy and R. Bewley "Aerial Archaeology in Jordan", *Antiquity* 83 (2009): 69-81. The same issue carries one of our aerial photographs - of the Roman road, the *Via Nova Traiana*, in northern Jordan, as a Frontispiece. If you don't have access to *Antiquity* but would like to see the article send David Kennedy an e-mail message and he will send you a pdf version.

### COURSES UWA

Classics and Ancient History (CLAH) units for 2009 are now well underway. We have had a 'surge' in enrolments. Our intake for CLAH1103 Glory and Grandeur was about 70 last year. This year it is almost 100 AND we have a competing first year unit on in parallel which has enrolled 70. So our first year has about double the intake this time last year. Numbers are up with our second and third year units including almost 50 in CLAH2204 Roman Archaeology and almost 40 in CLAH2292 Roman Art and Architecture.

Members can enrol as Audit students (via UWA Extension) for any of our second semester units, including CLAH1102 Julians and Julio-Claudians and CLAH2222 Foundation of the Roman Empire. Descriptions of all CLAH units are to be found on the web site:- <http://www.classics.uwa.edu.au/>

\$25.00 Ordinary membership  
 \$35.00 Family membership 1 (2 adults; 1 copy of RAG magazine)  
 \$50.00 Family membership 2 (4 family members; 1 copy of RAG magazine)  
 \$50.00 School membership (2 copies of RAG magazine)  
 \$10.00 Student membership  
 Complete and post the form with this edition of the RAG or contact The Treasurer at the email address below.

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