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A NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL LOOK AT SEFĪRE

Abstract: Sefire (as-Safīrah), which is located in northwestern Syria, is well-known for the accidental discovery in the late 1920s of three basalt stelae in Aramaic script belonging to the mid-8th century B.C. As for archaeological activities, the site has never been investigated thoroughly. Nowadays the tell of Sefire has almost entirely vanished, due in particular to urban expansion and more in general to human erosion. But the ancient settlement may still be “read” with remote sensing imagery (e.g. CORONA images), revealing features indistinguishable from the ground. This allows to suggest a new hypothesis for the reconstruction of the site morphology of ancient Sefire. The shape of the ancient settlement would much resemble that of Arpad and Sam‘al, demonstrating that Sefire may have represented a city of a certain importance in the early Iron Age.

Keywords: Sefire; remote sensing imagery; CORONA images; site morphology; Near Eastern archaeology.

Sefire in northwestern Syria is well-known for a significant discovery of the late 1920s, namely the find of three basalt stelae in Aramaic script dating back to the mid-8th century B.C. They enact an agreement between BRG‘YH (Bar-ga‘yâ) of KTK – a ruler and a place whose identities still remain under debate among scholars after some 80 years² – and his vassal Mati‘-‘il, king of Arpad (modern Tell Rifa‘at,³ which is located about 30 kilometres to the north

¹ The idea of this paper came from the preparation of my PhD dissertation on “The Aleppo hinterland” at the FU Berlin, to be discussed in late 2014. I am extremely grateful to Prof. K. Kohlmeyer (Berlin) as well as to Prof. F.M. Fales (Udine, Italy) for their valuable suggestions and comments during the writing out of this paper. All mistakes are, of course, my responsibility.

² DION 1997, p. 131 fn. 87; DOSSIN 1944; HAWKINS 1980-1983; IKEDA 1993; LEMAIRE & DURAND 1984, pp. 47-51; LIVERANI 2000; LIVERANI 2008, p. 752ff.; NA‘AMAN 1977-1978; VON SODEN 1985. For a summary of the hypotheses of identification see FALES & MAZZONI 2010, pp. 343-344.

³ LIPINIŃSKI 2000, p. 208. This identification has long been proposed on philological and geographical grounds: see SCHIFFER 1911, pp. 137-138, fn. 9; KRAELING 1918, p. 65; FORRER 1920, p. 56.

of Aleppo). Although some points remain controversial, the treaty has been the object of numerous and detailed historical-philological studies,⁴ and there is at present no need for further contributions on this aspect. Conversely very little is still nowadays known about the archaeological site where the inscriptions were found. This paper aims to shed some new light on this issue.

1. Travellers: a comparison between 19th-century and contemporary landscape around Sefire

Sefire (or as-Safīrah) lies approximately 23 kilometres south-east of the Aleppo citadel and ca. 7 kilometres west of the Ġabbūl lake. The Ġabbūl plain appears nowadays arid and monotonous, an intermediate zone between the fertile north-western part of Syria and the Euphrates valley. This aspect of the landscape, however, goes back to entirely recent times, around the middle of the last century. The travellers who passed through the area before this period, in fact, reported a completely different ecological layout.⁵

In 1866 Sefire was visited by the Count Edmond de Perthuis, a French naval officer and entrepreneur. He described the village and its surroundings as follows:⁶

«grande bourgade, dont les eaux d'une petite rivière voisine, élevées par des nombreuses norias, fertilisent les beaux jardins ainsie que les terres arables d'alentour».

Eduard Sachau – the well-known German orientalist, professor of Semitic languages at the University of Vienna and later on at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (nowadays Humboldt Universität) of Berlin – visited the Near East on several occasions. In the account of his travel from Damascus to Aleppo in 1879, which was published in the book *Reise in Syrien und Mesopotamien* (1883), he described the western part of the Ġabbūl plain with a wealth of details. On November 14th, moving from Aleppo towards east/south-east, Sachau passed

⁴ See in particular BAUER 1932-1933; CANTINEAU 1931; DRIVER 1932-1933; DUPONT-SOMMER 1957; DUPONT-SOMMER 1960; DUPONT-SOMMER & STARCKY 1956; DUPONT-SOMMER & STARCKY 1958; DUSSAUD 1931; DUSSAUD 1932; FALES 1990; FITZMYER 1961; FITZMYER 1967; FITZMYER 1969; FITZMYER 1997; FRIEDRICH & LANDSBERGER 1933; GREENFIELD 1966; LANGDON 1933; LEMAIRE & DURAND 1984; LIPIŃSKI 1975, pp. 24-57; NOTH 1961; PUECH 1982; ROSENTHAL 1960; SACCHI 1961; WESSELIUS 1984; ZADOK 1984.

⁵ TEFNIN 1977-1978, pp. 197-198 and 200. TEFNIN 1983, p. 141: «La lecture des voyageurs, l'enquête auprès des villageois actuels, le repérage des toponymes (jardins, vignobles, etc...), autant que l'abondance des tells visibles entre Alep, Bâb, Deir Hâfer et la rive Sud du lac confirment jusqu'à une date récente (une cinquantaine d'années environ) la remarquable fertilité de la vaste cuvette de Djabboul».

⁶ DE PERTHUIS 1896, p. 128.

through this region and observed a landscape dotted with archaeological mounds and modern towns:⁷

«Die Ebene im Osten und Südosten von Aleppo, welche rothbraunen, fruchtbaren Boden hat, ist von vielen Dörfern besetzt und überall angebaut; sie steigt langsam aufwärts gegen Ost, wo man mehrfache Höhenzüge (wohl an den Ufern des Nahr Dhahab) gewahrt, und senkt sich etwas gegen Südost nach dem Salzsee von Djebbûl. Alle Dörfern dieser Gegend, welche zum grossen Theil neben Hügeln liegen, bestehen aus Kûbab. (...) Um 1.45 kamen wir zu einer kleinen Quelle, genannt 'Ain-Sfire, die in einer Niederung ein kleines Bächlein gegen Osten entsendet; in regenreichen Zeiten erreicht es den Salzsee von Djebbûl, sonst bleibt es auf halbem Wege stecken. Wir gelangten 2.11 nach dem grossen, von Muhammedanern bewohnten Dorf Sfire (...). Ich habe an jenem Tage, seitdem wir die Baumpflanzungen Aleppos verlassen, beständig Luftspiegelungen gesehen, Seen, Inseln, Hügel, Burgen, besonders im SO, in der Richtung des grossen Salzsees, der damals, wie man mir sagte, vollkommen ausgetrocknet war; er führt im Munde der dortigen Bevölkerung den Namen Essábakha. Die Gegend von Sfire ist fruchtbar und besonders mit Wein, aber auch mit Getreide angebaut».

Another report of the area was provided by Léon Cahun – a French Orientalist, writer and traveller – in his *Excursions sur les bords de l'Euphrate* (1884):⁸

«Les terres rouges étaient dépouillées de leurs moissons; de toutes parts, on voyait des groupes de villages; à droite, du côté du sud, une longue muraille de hauteurs [= Ġebel al-Ḥaṣṣ], teintées en bleu foncé, coupait l'horizon. (...) nous passâmes à gué la petite rivière du Nahar El Dhahab (La rivière d'or), dont les eaux fertilisent tout ce beau pays».

In sum, what emerges from all these accounts is a prosperous natural setting. The 19th-century voyagers portrayed the region as fertile, rich in water and, therefore, particularly suitable for agriculture and settlement. This picture is quite different from what may be observed nowadays. After the Second World War, in fact, as a result of deep changes in farming techniques and in particular due to the extensive use of diesel pumps to raise water from the upper aquifer system, most of the watercourses have dried up and the groundwater level has significantly dropped.⁹ Cultivation in the area is only possible thanks to a dense network of irrigation canals.

⁷ SACHAU 1883, pp. 111-112.

⁸ CAHUN 1884, pp. 134-135.

⁹ LEBEAU 1983, p. 14.

2. Previous archaeological research

As for archaeological activities, Sefire still remains an obscure area, since it has never been investigated thoroughly. As pointed out by E. Warmenbol¹⁰ – and more recently by F.M. Fales¹¹ – the excavation described by L. Brossé in the *Guide Blue de Moyen-Orient* (1932) does not seem to refer to Sefire, as indicated by the author, but most likely to Tell Beydar in the Upper Syrian Ġazīrah.

In late 1930 (end of October - begin of December), following the accidental discovery of two copies of the above-mentioned Aramaic treaty, which ultimately ended up on the antiquities market of Aleppo, a French Jesuit and professor at the University St. Joseph of Beirut, Sébastien Ronzevalle, carried out an archaeological sounding in a village near Sefire. He was misled about the findspot of the stelae by the local inhabitants, who wanted to shift the focus away from the real place of finding and claimed to have uncovered them at Suġin, about 1,3 kilometres north-east of Sefire.¹² This investigation did not lead to any significant result (fig. 1),¹³ except for some Byzantine findings.¹⁴



Fig. 1: Excavations at Suġin by S. Ronzevalle (after DENISE & NORDIGUIAN 2004, p. 120).

¹⁰ WARMENBOL 1985, pp. 165-166 and fn. 10.

¹¹ FALES & MAZZONI 2010, p. 342.

¹² DUPONT-SOMMER & STARCKY 1958, pp. 4-5; FITZMYER 1961, p. 178; NOTH 1961, pp. 118-119; WARMENBOL 1985, p. 166.

¹³ «Des excavations méthodiques sur le site, exécutées ces derniers mois, n'ont pas livré une seule lettre araméenne de plus» or any other interesting material; RONZEVALLE 1930-1931, p. 238.

¹⁴ ANON. 1931, p. 17.

Another interesting artefact whose provenance seems to be Sefire is the headless torso of a basalt statue which was found by local inhabitants around 1928 and initially dated to the Kassite period, more precisely to the 15th-14th centuries B.C.¹⁵ In reality it is surely much later and, on the basis of its cuneiform *ductus* and of its contents, may be traced back after the fall of Arpad into Assyrian hands in 740 B.C., which therefore would constitute a *terminus post quem* for the object.¹⁶ The inscription on the back of the figure is a dedication to a deity of *Nir-rú-bi^{ki}*, possibly to be identified with modern Neyrab, which is located only 16 kilometres north-west of Sefire, or with a city mentioned in the Sefire treaty, i.e. *Mrbh*, which according to E. Lipiński should correspond to Sefire itself.¹⁷

The date of 740 B.C. represents, instead, a *terminus ante quem* for the Aramaic stelae of Sefire, since Arpad is still referred to as an independent state under Mati‘-‘il (as it is also in the cuneiform treaty-document between the same king and Aššur-nirāri V of Assyria, 754-745 B.C.). Albeit scarce, these significant archaeological findings provide evidence of a site of considerable interest, particularly important during the Iron Age.

3. A view from the ground: the current state of preservation of the site

Nowadays the tell of Sefire has almost completely disappeared, so as to be visible only from a certain distance outside the city – more precisely from east and south-east – and it is hard to detect among its dense housing, moving within the town.

The state of degradation of the site is mainly due to urban expansion, which, in the course of the last centuries, has slowly but inexorably destroyed the ancient settlement. If up to approximately 30-40 years ago the village of Sefire was mainly made up of mud-brick buildings and the characteristic beehive houses predominated, nowadays more and more massive is the use of cement and other invasive construction materials, which have accelerated the erosion process of the tell.

The site was visited by E. Strommenger and K. Kohlmeyer in 1975 (fig. 2). Their unpublished survey in north-western Syria took place in the year of the last campaign in Ḥabuba Kabīra on the future Assad Lake basin of the Euphrates, with the objective of seeking another archaeological site for a new excavation. The choice eventually fell on Tell Bi‘a, ancient Tuttul.¹⁸ The low-intensity reconnaissance led by the two German archaeologists covered a wide area: from the Syro-Turkish border in the north to the Ġabbūl Lake area in the

¹⁵ DUSSAUD 1928, pp. 170-171; DOSSIN 1930, pp. 88-89; MAXWELL-HYSLOP *et al.* 1942, pp. 22-23; ARNAUD 1987, p. 144.

¹⁶ WARMENBOL 1985, p. 175; FALES & MAZZONI 2010, p. 344.

¹⁷ LIPIŃSKI 2000, p. 206

¹⁸ KOHLMeyer 1992, p. 91.

south; from the eastern slope of the Ġebel Sim‘ān in the west to the Euphrates river in the east. Descriptions of the main features of the ancient settlements are accompanied by numerous sketches and a provisional date – compiled on the field – was proposed for each site. In addition, the photographic documentation is very useful for a comparison with the present-day situation, allowing in some cases to notice erosion processes of the tells and changes in their state of preservation.¹⁹



Fig. 2: Sefire in 1975: the acropolis covered by beehive houses is clearly visible as well as what remains of the tell (image courtesy of K. Kohlmeyer).

4. A look from above

Remote sensing imagery is a resource which allows to obtain fundamental information on ancient settlement and modern landscape. The use of high spatial resolution images is particularly useful in order to identify lower towns adjacent to tells and flat sites, which are easily missed on the ground and are rarely represented in the topographic maps.²⁰

CORONA space photographs were taken by C.I.A. satellites in operation from 1959 to 1972. After being declassified in 1995 by U.S. President Bill Clinton, these images were made available for public use. It soon became evident to archaeologists that they could be very useful for their research, giving the possibility to recognize linear features which are elusive and scarcely visible on the ground (e.g. remnants of ancient roads and canals, relict field systems), and

¹⁹ I am very grateful to K. Kohlmeyer, who has given me the opportunity to consult the whole documentation of this survey.

²⁰ PHILIP *et al.* 2002, p. 113.

to locate ancient sites.²¹ Furthermore, CORONA imagery is of historical value, providing evidence of the landscape as it was before recent large scale urban expansion and agricultural works (e.g. bulldozing, deep ploughing, extensive irrigation systems, etc.) over the last four decades. In some cases it is possible to detect archaeological features which have been badly eroded, damaged, or completely destroyed after the 1960s.²²

A view from above can reveal characteristics that are indistinguishable from the ground. One of the most striking examples is provided by Sefire. Its topography and some anomalies in the modern urban planning, which are detectable in satellite images, suggest that the site measured approximately 28 hectares and consisted of an acropolis and a lower city, whose western boundary may be indicated by the main road which runs through the city: at a certain point, in fact, it seems to encounter an obstacle – possibly the ancient walls – and takes on a curved shape. In the CORONA image (fig. 3), the stub of the tell – albeit much eroded – is still visible, while in the Google Earth image (fig. 4) it is no more visible.

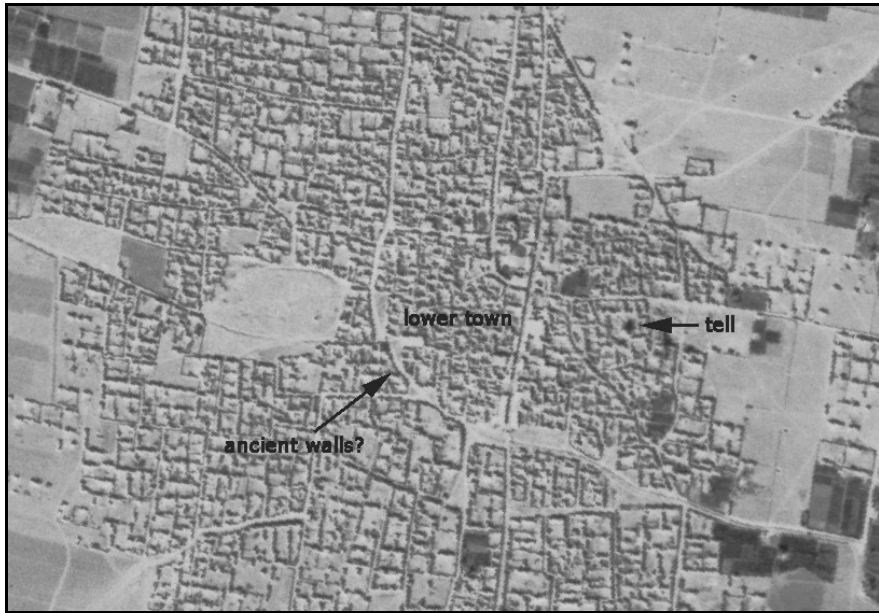


Fig. 3: CORONA image of Sefire.

²¹ On the importance of CORONA imagery for Near Eastern archaeological research see in particular KENNEDY 1998, pp. 553-561; KOUCHOUKOS 2001, pp. 80-91; PHILIP *et al.* 2002, pp. 109-118.

²² MENZE, MÜHL & SHERRATT 2007, p. 7.

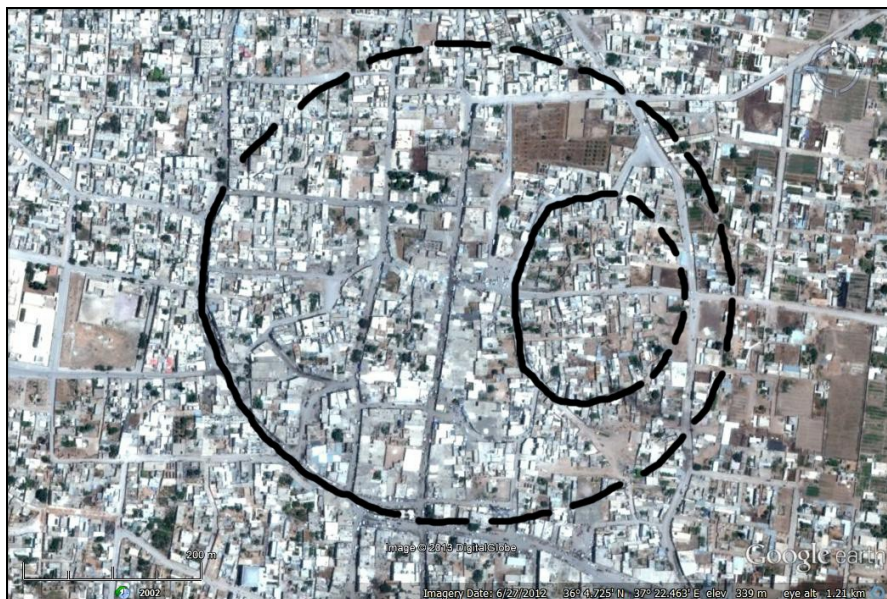


Fig. 4: Hypothetical reconstruction of the ancient Sefire, based on observations in the field, on topographic features and on anomalies in the modern urban planning (Google Earth 2012).

The oval shape of the acropolis is well defined by a different layout of buildings with respect to the rest of the modern town, i.e. smaller and denser houses. The lower city extends mainly to the west of the acropolis. Its eastern border is less clear, perhaps because – being close to the tell – the site in this area was more subject to erosion since very ancient times. The east side of the settlement was therefore protected by both the walls of the lower town and the steep slope of the tell. This pattern is very similar to that of Aleppo, whose citadel hill appears decentralized to the east, and it might suggest that in the eyes of the ancient inhabitants of Sefire the most serious threats could come from the Orient.

5. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to reconstruct the morphology of ancient Sefire by analysing remote sensing imagery. If the proposed analysis is correct, the shape of Sefire would much resemble that of Arpad (nowadays Tell Rifa'at) and Sam'al (modern Zincirli, in present-day southern Turkey not far from the Syrian border),²³ even if the acropolis, which occupied an estimated surface of

²³ CASANA 2012, pp. 598 and 607 (fig. 6A and 6C). Sefire was not sampled by me, and therefore its urban layout cannot be dated with accuracy. It could even be traced back to the Early Bronze Age.

5 hectares, appears completely decentralized eastward with respect to the rest of the settlement. In sum, Arpad and Sam'al provide the framework of settlements which were realized in a similar way as Sefire.

The significant size of Sefire may indicate that the site was not a simple border town between Arpad and KTK or a mere “neutral” area where to erect the stelae which ratified the agreement between these two kingdoms, but it may have represented an Aramaic city of some importance in its own right. The possible implications of this small but clear topographical find for the overall problem of the location of KTK, and of its specific role in international politics of the mid-8th century, may of course be best left to others, more competent in this field.

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During the later part of this period, in fact, a new form of urban centre developed: a high citadel mound, which is often a previously occupied site of small size, surrounded by a large lower town.

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