



Richard Hodges is President of the American University of Rome.

ZEUGMA'S LAST SECRET



Zeugma – now a name to conjure with. Site of a bridge across the Euphrates, connecting the Mediterranean to Persia and, by way of the Silk Road, inland Asia. For those in the know, this Roman town possessed mosaics equal to those at ancient Antioch’s mosaic museum and in the Bardo Museum in Tunis. Unlike those mosaic museums full of French colonial trophies, Zeugma’s countless polychrome pavements have historical colour and context, courtesy of our excavations in the summer of 2000. Like any place, its history and antiquities were not retrieved by text-book methods. Instead, serendipity played a huge part in the Zeugma project. With Turkey in greater political turmoil than at any time over the past 50 years, I look back with awe at how much we achieved that summer.

My Zeugma began on a train when my cellphone rang. It was the Californian philanthropist supporting our project at Butrint, Albania – he was calling way after midnight his time. Had I seen the front page of *The New York Times* about this Roman town being submerged by the waters of a new dam in Turkey? It was fabulously rich. Could the dam be halted? Would I go there on his behalf and start a project? I stuttered about my dig just getting underway at Butrint in Albania. Leave it to the others, he commanded, so I meekly mumbled that I’d go. Clearly relieved, he signed off.

Ill at ease, with the train racing along, I opened my newspaper and abracadabra there was Zeugma – the very same article to which he’d alluded so passionately. Penned three days before in mid May, the journalist conjured up the menace



OPPOSITE A fine mosaic excavated at Zeugma. It shows an aquatic scene, which was to prove ominously prophetic in the summer of 2000, when a new dam left rising waters threatening the ancient city. Could a rescue project be mounted before a sizable chunk of the town disappeared?

LEFT The site of Zeugma seen from the air, with the new dam visible top left. Pistachio orchards speckle the hillside.

of the waters, rising a few centimetres each day, threatening untold damage to numerous spectacular mosaic floors. By October, ancient Zeugma would be underwater. The reporter captured the chaos – a treasure left to its fate; a government unable or unwilling or just too destitute to save its patrimony. Only a lone French archaeologist was defying these forces. This heroine was cast as challenging the odds for her beliefs to safeguard a place that, judging from the illustrated mosaics, ranked with the very best from the Roman Empire.

Rising waters

First, I had to square matters in Albania. Apart from the digging team; long scheduled visitors had to be attended. In the Atlantis Hotel in Corfu's harbour, I met up with a delegation from the US Parks Authority led by Brooke Shearer. I had first met Brooke the previous autumn at a conference in Florence and persuaded her to visit Butrint and Albania to offer guidance as the new Butrint National Park (only weeks old) and the concept of parks in general was attracting newsworthy attention thanks to the energetic Minister of Culture, Edi Rama. Brooke was a trooper. A pint-sized woman with a shock of black hair, she possessed an engaging, serene West Coast approach to life. She spoke in crisp sentences, shaped no doubt at college then Oxford, followed by responsible time in the Clinton court.

Undeterred by weariness from a long flight and lost luggage, she was eager to see a country that was new to her. Next day, in blissful spring weather, we took an old pleasure-cruiser, the Kamelia, to Saranda. We settled in the bow on the ribbed wooden benches ahead of the 90 minute journey. In this stasis I quizzed her gently. A college friend of the Clintons, she and her husband – the Deputy Secretary of State – were facing the final months of a wounded administration. Gossiping about salacious politics was irresistible, and somewhat surreal as we glided across the placid Corfiot waters.

Everyone loved Butrint, radiant with its carpets of flowers and first butterflies. As we were excavating on the far shore of Lake Butrint, at the site of the Roman maritime villa of Diaporit, after a fish lunch a boat was ordered up to visit the dig. Our boatman manoeuvred us through the fish traps in

the Vivari channel and then headed into Lake Butrint. Far in the distance, our team of worker ants was resisting the wind on the shore-side. Puffs of dirt exploded into the air as wheelbarrows were emptied. Landing at a makeshift dock we found our feet and hastened to the first of several trenches. Here, Will Bowden, the site director, launched into a tour omitting any reference to the exotic absurdity of digging in this improbable place. With gusto he described how the compact Hellenistic farmhouse was transformed in the Neronian period into a large maritime villa. Could this have been the home of Titus Pomponius Atticus, friend and correspondent of Cicero, opulent patron of Butrint? As his words were muffled by a gust of wind, my cellphone rang. Quite how I had a connection puzzled me. So, I answered hesitantly as though I was being spied on.

'This is the White House here. Is Brooke Shearer with you, Professor Hodges?'

Like a puppet on a long string, I of course replied in the affirmative. And the voice politely but firmly asked if I might hand my phone to Brooke, which I promptly did.

A curtain of darkness crossed her face, ending any levity, and coursed through the rest of the day. Brooke's nephew and godson had died in a tragic accident. Brooke was certain of one thing: her ambassador brother in Boston needed her support. So began the challenge of returning her from the estates of Atticus to Butrint then Saranda then Corfu. Having a diplomatic passport, nothing was strangely straightforward, but with determined purpose, she made the afternoon flight from Athens to the USA. As she left, the last time I saw her, she said with weary affection that if she could help my new venture in Turkey, I should be sure to call her.

Later that week, while I was in an anonymous hotel in Ankara, she emailed me her heartfelt thanks. If she could ever re-pay my help please let her know. As it turned out, within days this offer was to prove vital. Turkey's capital has little to commend it apart from the Anatolian Museum and while awaiting my companions to set southwards to Zeugma I felt at a loss. My principle companion was an old colleague, Dave K. We had been junior professors together for a dozen years before he set sail for Australia and I had gone to Rome. Zeugma

BELOW & RIGHT Zeugma has produced spectacular finds, including this glorious bronze statue of Mars.



had been a brief episode in his life five years before, when he gallantly answered the call to excavate here once its aquatic fate was known. The dig had been grievously punishing. Despite this, his elegant report, just published, cast him as an obvious partner in any immediate campaign. But from the beginning, in his understated mien, patently Turkey and Zeugma were not for him. Once bitten, twice shy: the Turkish Ministry of Culture would crush any philanthropic initiative, he advised at regular intervals.

Destination Zeugma

Coordinating this bid to save Zeugma was Olcay, the genial, long-suffering director-general of GAP, the government's dam coordinating body. He greeted us encouragingly on the Friday and early the next morning, with Mustafa, GAP's point person, we flew to Diyarbakir. Once over scorched mountains and emptied hills it was evident summer had arrived. Taxiing to the diminutive airport we eyed British fighter jets lined up on the far side of the air-field. Mustafa looked me straight in the eyes: they're patrolling Iraq, he said without further comment. Cars were found and we headed south-west for the three-hour drive to Birecik and our destination, the excavations at Zeugma.

On the Diyarbakir-Urfa road the heat was already up. After skirting Urfa, ancient Edessa, we dropped down off the plateau into the canyon containing the Euphrates. Our destination was unmistakable. The biblical works at Birecik included not only the storied dam with its dinky-sized operations, but a small town of prefabricated huts to house the construction teams. From here, across the rising water, the monstrous dam was nearing its conclusion in an otherwise unblemished pastoral setting. Looking more closely past the jumble of cranes and moving ants, a dusty scar lay just above the waterline on the far shore. Running up behind the scar were pistachio orchards, rising by ragged troughs and scarps to a saddle-backed summit: the acropolis of ancient Zeugma.

After lunch in the canteen, we set out for the dig that had won worldwide attention. Our driver manoeuvred us around the dam, past colossal dumper trucks and packs of sun-burnt men in yellow hard hats. Once on the south side, we pursued the battered old road past the old village of Belkis, whose shabby squat houses lay deserted and ruinous, sheltered by a clump of dusty trees. Come October and the abandoned village would be gone, submerged. Mustafa proudly informed us that the villagers had been moved to apartment blocks higher up. Later, he admitted that the community was heart-broken; many had moved to the anonymity of Nizip nearby and even to the thriving metropolis of Gaziantep, an hour's drive to the south-west.

Emerging out onto the flank of the hill, we suddenly came upon dozens of cars as well as tractors and open-bedded trailers, coated carelessly with the ubiquitous white powder of Zeugma. Television vans with satellite dishes were in among them. Then, improbably, my eye was drawn to columns: the columns of Roman houses still standing bolt upright on the shore of the Euphrates. There were people milling around everywhere, some with television cameras, as the sparkling river was spilling inexorably towards this unexpected house. It was more like a riverside market place than an excavation.

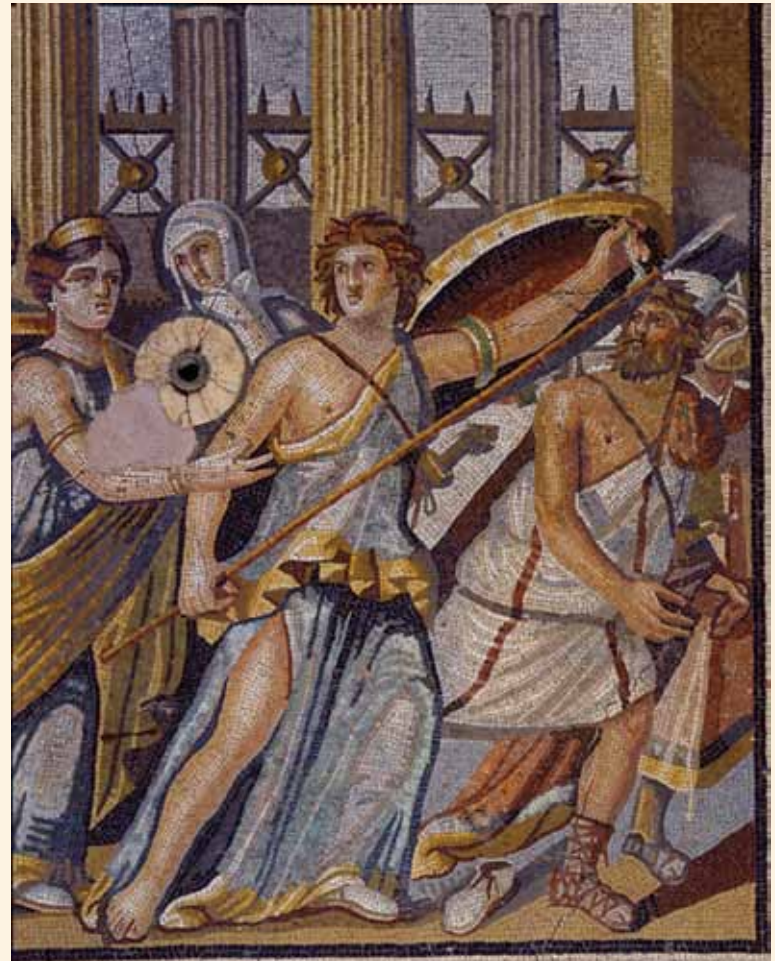


Today, Zeugma is justly famous for the sumptuous mosaics. Here we see two fine examples, a xxxx yyyy xxxx yyy xxxx yyyy xxxx and (XXXX) xxxx yyyy xxxx yyyy xxxx yyyyyy xxxx yyyy xxxx.

Media circus

This dig was theatre. Despite the afternoon heat there was a lingering sense of hysteria. The press was making this into a race against time, and then I spotted the missionary – a small, beleaguered French woman gesticulating at one camera crew next to a sweep of perfectly preserved mosaic. It was being poked then photographed. The milling people rather than the polychromatic figures in stone held my attention, but instinct told me this pavement was the work of a master. Its exact ornament belonged to the zenith of the Roman province on its eastern frontier. Voyeurs in the form of hundreds of local men watched on, their wives and children mingling with the columns or casually sitting on Roman walls, fascinated by the salvage. Most were villagers, I soon realized. This was their past being unearthed and on the verge of perpetual oblivion. No film director could have wanted more.

My little group wavered on the edge of the throng and then I led them off through the dusty orchards away from the excavation. What was already clear to us was that, good though this spotlight on one point of Zeugma was, it failed to grasp what the place was about. How far did the ruins stretch? And more to the point, what impact would the dam waters have? We already knew that the lake waters would only cover the lower 20% of the town. It was the 10% or so above this that was in real danger: a micro climate created by the dam would whip the daily waters against the new shore. As of October, a new lakeside would be created through attrition. Here, the upper part of lower Zeugma would be battered and erased. ➤





ABOVE Zeugma in May 2000. As work on the dam continues in the background, in the foreground a rather more ancient structure is rising from the hillside. A lone French archaeologist was excavating as the water edged closer.

Paradoxically those parts where the French missionary was working would survive under the placid dam waters.

We struggled along the lower scarp, weaving in and out of ragged gullies, almost certainly imprecise imprints of ancient roads bisecting the slopes. Then, we halted under the pistachios, by now sweating fiercely and aware that more than a kilometre of hillside was at risk. Beneath all of it lay ruins with mosaics like those we had seen galvanizing the media's searchlight.

Below a canopy of pistachios blowing in wisps of breeze, we sat in a circle and with a touch of irony I asked the obvious question. Why had this place been left to its fate? Why hadn't the Turkish government thrown resources to salvage the endangered escarpment? Mustafa was dismissively angry in reacting: GAP were blameless. The engineers pressed the government to involve the Ministry of Culture. They weren't interested in rescuing places. Truth be told it was appalling inaction, and here and now a challenge to our good natures. But

the Ministry had the final say as to whether we might intervene. Only they could issue the permit.

Under that tree, with the entire expanse of Zeugma and the widening if serene Euphrates before us, the scale of Mustafa's unstated challenge became clear. This was 26 May; by 4 October, the waters would have risen to cover this cherished spot. I tried to stir them to believe. We would need a team of hundreds and machines. How might this be organized if funds were to be had? Accommodation? Where? Vehicles were evidently no problem given the flocks in use at the dam. The mosaics would need to be moved somewhere. Was there a museum nearby? Only then did I learn about Gaziantep museum. Everything was taken there. It had been for years, but now its grounds were filled with lifted mosaics. It sounded apocalyptic. Zeugma was one heck of a challenge; Gaziantep sounded like a second.

Later, dinner was in a cavernous prefabricated canteen for the engineers and workmen, and afterwards I called California. I attempted to be upbeat in my verbal report to the philanthropist. He quizzed me thoughtfully. The colossal crisis and the resources required to confront it could not be disguised. Never had I witnessed such wanton mayhem at an archaeological site as I had that day. Hyperbole apart, a Pompeii of sorts was being knowingly left to destruction by an obstreperous bureaucracy. Tomorrow, I would drive back along the archaeological site, then visit Gaziantep museum, and from there, in the dead of night, cross the Anatolian plateau back to Ankara to negotiate the next steps.

Curating a catastrophe

Unprepared as I was for Zeugma, the sordid memory of Gaziantep museum has remained with me since. That Sunday, the traffic was light after we left the Euphrates, passed through Nizip and headed down the highway to Gaziantep. Newly built apartment blocks sheathed the old Kurdish town. Gaziantep in the past decade had grown ten-fold to a million people, but the Ottoman centre still had a historic bazaar and leafy boulevards of a



LEFT & BELOW Zeugma Museum today. It has come a long way since the summer of 2000. While much of the ancient city has been submerged, the glorious remains of its past discovered during excavations provide a sense of its former opulence.



dignified if stagnant era. Next to the football stadium lay the museum. It too belonged to the era when Woolley and Lawrence were digging nearby in Carchemish (alongside the Hijaz railways) on the eve of the First World War. Dishevelled and run-down, its immediate presence was shabby, but beyond the unkempt dark atrium lay galleries stuffed with treasures, many from Zeugma. We were now joined by the personnel, all alert and enthusiastic about Zeugma. One of them, an eager and energetic man had been digging there for years and was excavating an archive of tablets.

This eager companion now hastened us through the gloomy galleries where faded photographs paid homage to Nemrut Dag and, of course, Zeugma. We paused at a mosaic depicting a vibrant gypsy woman, an image that became an avatar of Zeugma's lot. My host's destination, though, was the stark concrete framework of an unfinished, new museum, alongside the old one. Gaziantep football team had been promoted into the premier Turkish league. Before long, visitors would be flocking here to see the Zeugma mosaics. The incomplete museum belonged to an aborted vision, yet assured by proximity to great archaeological sites. In a troubling hush we exited through a half-latched door, returned to the entrance and then mounted a few steps to a perimeter area to one side of the old museum.

I had already seen the scatter of bleached columns and capitals, but now my eyes focussed upon the neatly wrapped mosaics. Like carpets heaped in a Stamboul bazaar, these were piled one on top of another: dozens, if not hundreds. Perhaps 20m of piles were stacked to the right of the museum and another 50m of mosaic piles lay beside the lateral wall. Over them, by way of protection, was polythene or makeshift covers of irregular planks and cannibalized sheets of galvanized zinc. The gargantuan tragedy brought us to our senses. We had seen the lone salvaged figurative mosaic inside the museum, and the wonderment at Zeugma the day before. Here were countless more. Countless subjected to primitive lifting by archaeologists as recently as the previous week. None had been stabilized or conserved in any which way. Countless were going to disintegrate in the torpid summer heat or the winter rain. As the Museum team well knew, this was the tragedy of Zeugma.

I had an immediate sense of what to do, but I felt violated and said little to reassure our hosts. Together with the hysterical dig, the stacked mosaics amounted to a place that had been left to its fate. Little excavations were no answer. We flew back from Gaziantep and in Ankara I updated my friend in California and slept uneasily knowing on the morrow I would meet not only the worldly and helpful head of GAP, but in his company, the Director-General of Antiquities. With the latter lay the responsibility for this affair.



ABOVE The encroaching water was not the only conservation challenge at Zeugma. Temperatures could range between 40 and 50°C, with the rapid evaporation of water from newly excavated elements prompting the damaging formation of salt crystals. To tackle this problem, a thin layer of earth was left over mosaics and wall plaster by archaeologists, so that conservators could carefully clean and treat them before damage occurred.

A black Mercedes delivered Olcay, the Director-General of GAP and ourselves from the tower occupied by the engineers to an ornate Ottoman house in the heart of Ankara. Every other building overshadowed it. Its age and history made it exotic and lent its temporary proprietor national status.

The Ministry's Director-General, an archaeologist by formation, sallied forth like a frigate to meet his government colleague. They smiled charmlessly as they shook hands firmly, addressed each other, and arm in arm advanced towards a conference room.

The D-G of Antiquities listened to the opening salvo from our advocate, Olcay. Earlier that day we had conveyed our dismay at the circumstances at Zeugma and the Gaziantep Museum, and how this might be rectified in a philanthropic stroke. Our advocate now plainly showed he had understood the opportunity on offer. Above ▶

all, you felt his commitment to right the wrong dealt to Zeugma.

That's when we received a lesson in post-Ottoman contradiction.

The D-G of Antiquities began in English. He had been at Knidos, he said, with the Americans, as the government's commissar. This is where he'd learnt English. This is where, I later realized, he had learned contempt for American methods. I intervened to say I had excavated at Knidos too. He ignored me. The building, instead, merited his hyperbole and pride. This had been Kemal Ataturk's own office. I appreciated now he felt the weight of Ataturk's legacy. Turkey had lots of excavations, we were told. Turkey cared about its past. And then he switched without hesitation into Turkish and spoke directly at our GAP advocate. The tone was relentlessly firm for uninterrupted minutes until he seemed satisfied. Possibly we had been there 30 minutes, when Olcay made his pitch on our behalf. No emotion crossed the face of the Ministry's man. He listened, he digested the import of the proposal, and then with the flick of his hands as though he was swatting a fly he stood, stretched out his bulky hand and ambled away.

In the Mercedes and over tea back in GAP's capacious



ABOVE Cleaning one of the figured mosaics discovered at Zeugma.

RIGHT Not all of the mosaics could be lifted and removed to the museum. Those that remained in place received a coat of lime-wash so that a protective surface could be added before the mosaic was reburied.



offices we learnt the upshot. No permit had been applied for in November, no excavation as a result could take place. The process was in place to combat terrorist threats. That was that. Olcay called his government minister to plead for support but was rebuked. Only the Ministry of Culture might make such important decisions. For an age we tossed ideas about but to no avail. We agreed to meet a last time at 9am the next day, Tuesday 29th.

Nothing ventured...

That night after dinner the philanthropist in California called unexpectedly early. He had trusted I would call; I had not. His understandable irritation was instantly transmitted. I explained why I was late in calling, caught off-guard. His mood turned black, not to say outraged by the irrational implacability. The tone said much. I had failed to deliver a solution. So ended an unhappy call and with it, seemingly, the plan to rescue Zeugma.

That was when I recalled how a week earlier, I had been with Brooke Shearer and her kindly promise to me. So, nothing ventured, nothing gained, I called her cellphone and she answered.

'How good to hear from you! How is Turkey? Can you save Zeugma?' she asked without drawing breath.

I described my trip, interleaving it with questions about her return trip, her brother, how she was. That led, of course, to the meeting that day in the Ministry of Culture. Is there any way she might help our cause at Zeugma through her connections?

Brooke left you with the sense of kindness, of hope and above all a crusading decency. I closed the phone believing I had done my very best for Zeugma and my generous friend in California. There was no more to do but catch up on sleep.

The next morning, we arrived at the GAP offices promptly at 9am. I was calculating how to fill the day before leaving for the airport and the early evening flight to London. Being morose and deflated, the reception was little short of astonishing.

RIGHT & BELOW As mosaics were removed from the site, special laboratories to handle them were built at Gaziantep Museum. Here a mosaic is being restored following its journey to the museum.



Olcay was beaming as though he had pulled off a miracle.

'I am expecting a call from the President any instant', he said, beckoning Dave and me to sit down. Sure enough, the one-minute call came. We sat in silence. Olcay nodded, laconic, courteously polite and thanked the caller profusely. The President, he declared with evident bemusement.

'We are to expect a call about Zeugma. I think the President has intervened'.

He had. The D-G of Antiquities was commanded to permit the Zeugma project to happen at once. Exactly as I had been formulating it. Permits for 100 British archaeologists would be fast-tracked. A conservation team would be put in place too. What else was said in their terse exchange I never knew. Olcay's euphoria, like ours, was instant and infectious. Yet I could tell he was asking himself why? Why had this volte-face happened? Common sense had prevailed and an obdurate bureaucracy had been punctured by foreigners. Exultant though he was, it made no sense.

It made sense to me. Brooke Shearer had honoured her

promise. The State Department presumably called the President of Turkey and arrangements were made. I said nothing but to admit it was a lucky turn of fate. Much later that night, in London, I persuaded the Californian to begin creating a team. He did. From late June through October in roaring heat a great swathe of Zeugma was excavated against the clock of rising waters. Much of the remains amounted to the opulent riverside villas of retired veterans. Their preservation owed a lot to Zeugma's sack by Shapur I in AD 252/53, soon after the almonds had been harvested.

Zeugma's riches

A dozen years after our visit these colossal excavations were published in three magnificent volumes (and online). Context was given to the mosaics, all of which were conserved and restored to their full brilliance by Roberto Nardi and his team over nearly four years. It was painstaking work. To house this feast of Roman 3rd-century extravagance a new Gaziantep museum was opened in 2005. Here the iconic gypsy took pride of place. Gaziantep lost its spot in footballing circles, but gained national fame for its Zeugma treasures. So much happened after the President's call that only with time will the story be told. One thing is certain, though. The serendipity of excavating this faux Mediterranean city owed more than can ever be measured to Brooke Shearer.

I never met Brooke again and she died, far too young, in 2009. For all her many achievements, few frankly are greater than her intervention into Turkish politics to rescue the Euphrates bridge-town of Zeugma. □

BELOW Inside the Zeugma Museum, where visitors can get a taste of the splendours of the ancient city.



FURTHER READING

A digital version of the Zeugma site reports is freely available here: <http://zeugma.packhum.org/index>