

FEATURES

TILES OF MYSTERY

ANTIQUITY A PRICELESS COLLECTION OF ROMAN MOSAICS HAS BEEN RESCUED FROM THE THREAT OF LOOTING AND FLOODING. YET, DESPITE THE BEST EFFORTS OF A RECLUSIVE PHILANTHROPIST, IT REMAINS HIDDEN FROM VIEW IN THE VAULTS OF A TURKISH MUSEUM. ALASDAIR PALMER REPORTS

GATHERING DUST IN THE DARK AND DINGY STOREROOMS

of a museum in south-east Turkey are some of the most extraordinary objects from the era of antiquity ever discovered. Stacked in piles in the gloom, locked up beyond sight or touch, lie more than 750 square metres of Roman mosaic. I am told there are depictions of heroes and goddesses, of sea monsters and river gods, animals, fish and birds, intricate patterns and complex designs pulsating with colour.

Unfortunately, I can't tell you exactly what is in the hidden collection, because I am not allowed to see it. No one is. I visited the Gaziantep Museum of Antiquities two months ago with Dr Kutalmis Gorkay, an outstanding Turkish archaeologist. Dr Gorkay is in charge of excavating the site where the mosaics were discovered – but even he is forbidden from visiting the locked storerooms and seeing the treasures they contain.

The hidden hoard amounts to more than half of one of the largest and most significant collections of Roman art ever found: the mosaics from the site of the ancient city of Zeugma. The portion of the whole that is on public display is enough to take anyone's breath away. When I stood in front of the mosaics exhibited in the museum, it seemed that I had crossed the chasm of 2,000 years and come face to face with the inhabitants of the Roman empire: their expressions were so vivid that the figures appeared to be alive rather than frozen in small tiles of coloured stone.

Yet Zeugma, and all of its incomparable art, came close to being lost under a vast artificial lake. Much of the site and many of its mosaics lie at the bottom of a reservoir. The fears for the future of what remains are far from over. The hundreds of square meters of mosaic shut in the closed vaults of Gaziantep's museum are only part of the tragedy of neglect. Large portions of the site that still remain above water have not been excavated – and the many treasures that unquestionably still lie beneath the ground are prey to vicious and unscrupulous thieves.

The story of how Zeugma's glorious art came within a hair's breadth of being lost for ever, then was saved in the nick of time, before being nearly lost again, is one of luck, generosity and stupidity. It involves more than 100 archaeologists, 25 specialist 'conservators' and the munificence of David Packard, one of the world's best-educated and least self-aggrandising philanthropists. It also features some staggeringly short-sighted bureaucratic incompetence from local officials and businessmen in Gaziantep.

And it all began with a dam.

The Euphrates river snakes through ruggedly beautiful but parched country. A chronic shortage of water restricts agriculture to small plots of olive and pistachio trees. So when the Turkish government authorised the building of the Birecik dam, creating a reservoir and an adjacent hydro-electric power station, no one thought it a controversial decision. At least

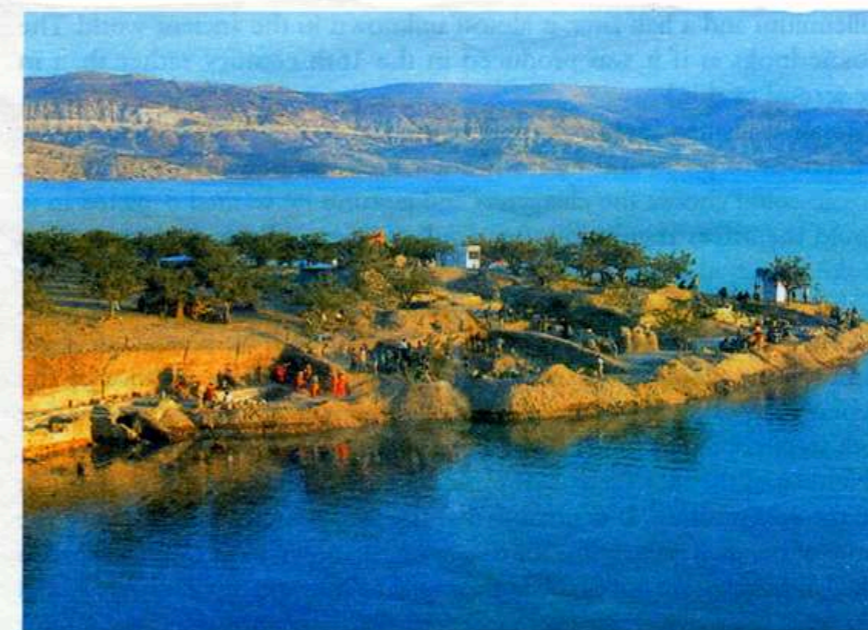
Master pieces

A fragment of a dancing maenad (above) was one of the mosaics unearthed at Zeugma. Right: workers try to beat the rising waters as the reservoir fills up

ARALDO DE LUCA FOR CENTRO DI CONSERVAZIONE ARCHEOLOGICA ROMA, AND THE PACKARD HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

one archaeological site would be flooded as a consequence, but the dominant reaction locally was: so what? Practically the entire course of the river is covered by archaeological sites. The dam had to be built somewhere. And the site that the Birecik dam would flood appeared to be a minor one.

When I first visited the site of Zeugma, I could see the locals' point. There isn't much to see above the ground except rocks and pistachio trees. In the absence of visible remains – there aren't even any solitary columns standing out against the horizon, still less whole temples – it takes guidance from an expert, such as Dr Gorkay, to appreciate the significance of what is before you. And at the time the dam was planned, no one, not even the archaeologists, had any idea that Zeugma was a site of spectacular importance.



Zeugma is occasionally mentioned in ancient sources. It was founded in about 300 BC by Seleucus, one of Alexander the Great's generals. Seleucus established two towns, one on either side of the river, but he had the foresight to build a bridge linking them: 'Zeugma' means bridge in Greek.

In about 60 BC, Zeugma came under Roman domination. A legion of 5,000 men arrived there in AD 70 after helping Titus sack Jerusalem in the course of putting down a Jewish revolt. The legio IV Scythia would be garrisoned at Zeugma for most of the next 200 years: the city was close to the frontier that separated the Roman Empire from the unpredictably violent Persians. Zeugma's legion was, however, powerless to prevent the Persian King Shapur I from devastating the city in AD 253, when his troops sacked it and enslaved its population. Zeugma never really recovered from that catastrophic shock. People drifted back, but the city itself shrank, crumbled and then disappeared.

And that was about the sum total of knowledge about the city when the dam was being designed. Predictably, it was not enough to persuade the Turkish authorities or the local people to delay its construction. By 2000, as the waters of the artificial reservoir created by the dam began

lapping on the edges of the small parts of Zeugma that had been excavated, archaeologists resigned themselves to the inevitable loss of whatever was there. Locals knew there were treasures to be found on the spot, because some of them had dug exploratory tunnels and been rewarded with slabs of mosaic. In the 1990s, the small team of archaeologists excavating Zeugma had themselves found one superb mosaic floor depicting the marriage of Dionysus and Ariadne. While they worked out how best to conserve it, looters dug their own tunnel, found the mosaic, and then cut out and stole its central figures.

The looted mosaic has never been recovered. Local inhabitants were, and to some extent still are, open about the practice of stealing mosaics from Zeugma. When carefully cleaning the earth from one mosaic border, for instance, one of the archaeologists listened with astonishment as a local workman, who had been digging with him, cheerfully explained: 'Don't bother with that mosaic – my father cut out the central part years ago.'

The workman went on to say how they used to float the mosaics they found down the Euphrates into Syria on car tyres. The trade in illicit mosaics from the site was considerable. Two exceptionally fine mosaic figures from Zeugma turned up in a museum in Houston, Texas. Given what had already been found, there was clearly a high chance that a systematic excavation of the site would turn up more mosaics. But it was a race against time – and time was winning.

IN 2000, THE *NEW YORK TIMES* PUBLISHED AN ARTICLE THAT explained how the Birecik dam would ensure the permanent loss of an archaeological site that might, if properly excavated, have turned out to be a new Pompeii. Dr David Packard read that article. Packard is a former classics professor who published an important work on the Roman historian Livy, among other topics, before he became a philanthropist. His father, the co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, left him a huge sum of money for charitable purposes, and Packard has used some of that money to set up the Packard Humanities Institute, which funds projects as diverse as the preservation of silent films and the preparation of a complete dictionary of medieval Latin from British sources.

Unlike most people who give away large sums to charity, Packard is not interested in publicising himself. The focus of his efforts is to ensure that what needs to be done gets done: he dislikes attention from the press and does not give interviews. The pollution and erosion that was slowly destroying Herculaneum has been stopped thanks to an intervention funded by his foundation; the ancient city at Butrint, in Albania, has been excavated and restored; medieval buildings in Romania have been saved from destruction – to name but three of the projects funded by the institute.

Packard wanted to ensure that Zeugma was excavated by competent archaeologists before it disappeared. After careful liaison with the Turkish Ministry of Culture, which was overjoyed by the appearance of the philanthropist, he said that he was prepared to use his foundation to fund an emergency dig. The institute came up with \$5 million to finance a four-month excavation of the areas of Zeugma that would, at the end of that period, be submerged by the rising waters of the reservoir. Packard's money financed a force of 110 archaeologists, 25 conservators and 250 local workmen to excavate the site between June and the end of September, 2000.

Within three weeks, they found their first mosaic. In the ensuing three months, they would find many more, some of them equal in quality to the highest productions of antiquity. 'We were excavating in searing heat, sometimes for more than 12 hours a day,' says Louise Schofield, the archaeologist who co-ordinated the excavation. 'But we knew we had so little time – and we kept finding such extraordinary things.' The archaeologists found so many mosaics, in fact, that only the best were lifted from the site: the rest were carefully documented and covered in lime mortar, and left to be submerged by the rising waters, in the hope that one day, when the dam is no longer in use and the waters have receded, future archaeologists will be able to retrieve them.

Among the mosaics selected for removal is a composition depicting Achilles on the island of Skyros. Achilles' mother, knowing that he would perish if he joined the Greek expedition to Troy, had hidden him in a community of women on the island. The Greeks, however, had been told that unless they had Achilles with them, they would fail to take Troy. So Odysseus tracked the hero down to Skyros. Unable to distinguish Achilles



Hero worship 'Achilles on Skyros' demonstrates an accurate use of perspective not usually seen before the Renaissance

from the women with whom he was hiding, Odysseus placed a series of presents, including a shield and spear, in front of them all. Achilles couldn't resist picking up the shield and spear, thus giving himself away: the mosaic depicts that moment.

Like every mosaic from Zeugma, indeed like almost every mosaic in the ancient world, *Achilles at Skyros* decorated a floor, probably a colonnaded courtyard with a fountain at its centre. When I first saw this mosaic in the Gaziantep museum, I was astonished. One of the many remarkable things about it is its dazzlingly accurate use of perspective. The figures are all depicted in the round, and they are located in what seems to be three-dimensional space, with a single vanishing point. Use of that kind of perspective composition, which would be perfected in the Renaissance a millennium and a half later, is almost unknown in the ancient world. The mosaic looks as if it was produced in the 16th century, rather than in the second or third.

Mosaic craftsmen are known to have used an equivalent to pattern books: collections of poses and figures from which the person paying for the mosaic could choose the characters and gestures he wanted depicted in it. Could the artists responsible for *Achilles at Skyros* have used some such book? *Achilles at Skyros* might itself have been a copy of a painting – many of the largest and most impressive mosaics in the Roman world were. Another mosaic depicting Achilles at Skyros, with an almost identical composition, was found in a different house in Zeugma – although the second version lies in the inaccessible storeroom – which may suggest that both were copied from the same work.

Neither of the *Achilles at Skyros* mosaics identifies the artist responsible for the composition. It is notable that the two mosaics that do carry the name of the man responsible for designing them – in each case, a craftsman called Zosimos – are not of the highest quality. Why exactly Zosimos should have been allowed to leave his moniker on those mosaics, while the author



Treasure hunt On site at Zeugma. 'We kept finding such extraordinary things,' says Louise Schofield, who co-ordinated the excavation

of *Achilles at Skyros*, say, was not, is a puzzling and unanswered question. The best mosaics from Zeugma are astonishing works of art by any standard: an expression can be captured by the use of a single white highlight in the pupil of an eye; the form of the human body convincingly implied by laying tiny mosaic pieces in waves that suggest its contours. One example that struck me particularly as I wandered through the part of the collection accessible to the public was the fragment of a dancing maenad. The maenads were priestesses of the wine-god Dionysus – and this one has an uncannily haunting gaze. Another striking composition is a scene involving the mythological figures of Parthenope and Metiochos: they are exquisitely modelled, the curves of their bodies creating a bewitching illusion of three-dimensional solidity.

There are many other examples of exceptional artistic ability, although not all the mosaics are at the same stratospheric level of skill. Some of them show signs of clumsy, even incompetent, restoration from Roman times: the craftsmen charged with fixing damage were often not as adept as the original creators. Still, the average level of design and execution is astonishingly high. That raises a further puzzle. At its zenith, Zeugma had a population of 50,000-60,000, about the same as a minor English provincial city, such as Hereford, today. How did it manage to sustain so many mosaic artists? Mosaics are so common in Zeugma that they cannot possibly have been the exclusive possession of the very rich. They are found not only in large villas, but also in much more modest houses.

Zeugma was certainly a wealthy city: the bridge at Zeugma was the only one over the Euphrates for 100 miles. But, as its failure to rise from the ashes of its sack by Shapur shows, its prosperity was fragile. All the same, at its zenith, between AD 150 and AD 250, it must have had both an unusually large number of well-off merchants and a large supply of skilled mosaicists. Perhaps the ready supply of craftsmen in Zeugma brought the price of mosaics down. But however many mosaicists there were in the city, they all left when Shapur sacked it.

They never returned: many of them may have been enslaved by him. At any rate, as far as archaeologists can tell, there are no mosaics in Zeugma that date from after AD 253. Many of the mosaics were damaged by Shapur's devastating raid: they are marked by burns, or were shattered by collapsing columns or roofs. It was clear that they would need careful conservation and restoration once they had been lifted from the location where they had been discovered.

With a further \$4 million, Packard's institute agreed to finance that process as well. Prof Roberto Nardi, probably the greatest mosaic conservator in the world, was hired with a team of Italian specialists. Their expertise was badly needed. When Nardi and his team arrived to inspect what had been recovered, they discovered that museum officials had left many of the mosaics in piles open to the elements in the garden of the museum at Gaziantep, the modern city near to Zeugma. Moreover, many of the mosaics lifted from Zeugma before Packard's team arrived had been relaid in concrete. Short of blowing it up, says Nardi, that is about the worst thing you can do to a mosaic. 'The high content of soluble salts and the rigidity of cement can do enormous damage.'

Nardi's team worked on conserving, restoring and cleaning the mosaics

'WE WORKED IN SEARING HEAT, SOMETIMES FOR MORE THAN 12 HOURS A DAY – WE HAD SO LITTLE TIME'

for nearly four years. The institute built a laboratory for its work behind the museum at Gaziantep. Meanwhile, Packard had come up with an even more ambitious plan: in order to exhibit the mosaics as close as possible to where they were found, he proposed constructing a museum on the Euphrates, at the site of Zeugma. The museum was not only to be big enough to exhibit all the mosaics, it was also planned to be the most modern mosaic museum in the world. Zeugma would become a major tourist destination, with perhaps 100,000 visitors a year.

But it was never built. In 2004, the Turkish government, which had been working closely with Packard's institute, suggested an exhibition of some of the mosaics from Zeugma be held in Istanbul. The idea was to publicise the discovery. Coincidentally, it later transpired that a Nato conference was to be held in Istanbul that summer. George W. Bush, Tony Blair and other Nato leaders would be there. The Turkish government would ensure that Bush, Blair and the others would open the exhibition. That would guarantee global television coverage for the mosaics, which would gain instant international celebrity.

It seemed like a sensible idea to David Packard. Unfortunately, it didn't strike the locals in Gaziantep that way, especially the businessmen involved in the city's fledgling tourist industry, and the Gaziantep museum officials. They feared that once the mosaics went to Istanbul, they would never return. Museum and local administration officials in Gaziantep, allied with local businessmen, organised a vicious campaign to prevent the temporary exhibition in Istanbul. Their initial target was the government in Ankara. But their campaign spread to take in Packard and the institute, and Nardi's team of restorers. The climax of a long campaign of vilification came when they were portrayed as 'Western imperialists working for George Bush'.

The charge was comically ridiculous, as were all the other slurs on their integrity and professionalism. But no matter. For Nardi, the last straw came when a local judge not only issued an injunction that prevented the removal of the mosaics, but also ruled that Nardi's team were damaging them. He ordered that their work should stop, had their laboratories searched and their equipment confiscated.

The police arrived and added the allegation that the Italian conservators were not just damaging the mosaics, they were stealing them. They ordered Nardi's team to accompany them to the police station for questioning. The team left Gaziantep the day after they emerged from the police station. They have not returned. Packard immediately ended all financial aid. The planned museum remains on the drawing board. And most of Zeugma's glorious mosaics remain unseen, hidden in storage because the Gaziantep Museum hasn't the space to exhibit them.

WHY MUSEUM OFFICIALS IN GAZIANTEP GOT INVOLVED IN this self-defeating campaign to sabotage what was clearly essential work on preserving the mosaics, work that could only benefit the mosaics, the museum and the people of the region, is still a mystery. They surely must have known that the charges against Packard's institute and the conservators he employed were nonsense. 'Oh, I know they were perfectly aware that they were nonsense,' insists Nardi. 'The charges were, of course, dismissed as being "without merit" the moment they came before a higher court.'

Today, Nardi is puzzled rather than vengeful. 'I have no explanation for what happened,' he sighs. 'Except that, with human beings, such things happen. We have to look to the heritage rather than the people,' he adds, wistfully. 'And we had four beautiful years of co-operation...' He thinks that even now, it is not impossible that he and his team could return. 'I don't see it as a closed situation. With a different disposition from the Turks... we could come back to finish what we started.'

Today, excavations on the site of what is left of Zeugma are in Dr Gorkay's hands. He is painfully aware of the problems of lack of finance. 'The Turkish government does what it can to help, but it just lacks the funds,' he explains. Dr Gorkay says that discovering mosaics – and he and his team have found several more – now presents him with serious problems. 'We do not want to rip them from the place where we find them,' he says. 'But if we leave them on site, they are terribly vulnerable to looters. We guard the site, but providing 24-hour surveillance is terribly difficult.'

And what of David Packard? True to reclusive form, he has not made any comment since Nardi's team left Gaziantep. But those who know him say it is not impossible that he, and the institute's money, might return. 'He is very forgiving,' I was told. 'He does not bear any kind of grudge.' ☺