

Re-excavating the houses of Dura-Europos

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'Big digs' of the earlier part of the 20th c. produced a vast amount of evidence, much of which was never published, but the archives can hold a wealth of information. One such site is Dura-Europos on the Syrian Euphrates (fig. 1). Almost a third of the site was exposed: limited work was conducted by F. Cumont in 1922-23 before in 1928 Yale University and the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres began 10 successive seasons of work under the scientific direction of M. Rostovtzeff. The excavation of houses was largely incidental to the expedition's objectives. Amongst a range of motives for undertaking a difficult and expensive excavation was that of procuring items (especially inscriptions, parchments and papyri, and paintings) for museums in the West, in this case mainly the Yale University Art Gallery. Uninhabited since its demise at the hands of the Sasanians in the mid-3rd c.,¹ Dura obliged on all counts.

During the hunt, over a hundred houses were excavated, and it still remains one of the largest excavated groups of antique urban housing. The houses were sometimes noted in the preliminary reports as they were excavated, but the final published reports were focussed elsewhere, including eventually on pottery and other objects.² The houses were considered significant chiefly for their ability to yield paintings and objects, yet the architects (of diverse abilities) spent much time recording the structures. While contextual information for the objects found in them, as it appeared in the final reports, was relatively meagre, from the fifth season (1931) onwards detailed records were kept of where objects were found. This task fell largely to Susan Hopkins, wife of the field director, who had, with him, visited the American-led expedition at Olynthus and seen the detailed record-keeping under way there.³ The result was the detailed field object registers, still held at Yale.⁴ The registers list each object and its findspot (from which room in which structure, though not usually the location within a room), the date it was found, and other information. The registers were made before the *partage* of the collection between New Haven and Damascus. This and other documentation from the time of the excavation (photographs, plans, field diaries, correspondence between the field staff and Yale, and many of the artefacts themselves) provides a rich body of evidence on the houses. The potential of such archival datasets has been demonstrated for ancient housing at other sites,⁵ and Dura too still has much to contribute to our understanding of ancient houses and those who inhabited them. Further, the houses themselves survive, despite decades of neglect until the start of the Franco-Syrian expedition in the mid-1980s.⁶ Although the mudbrick continues to crumble, the houses can still be measured and studied.⁷

1 On the fall of Dura, see James 1985.

2 These were published in the Dura-Europos Final reports series; they included the ceramics, glass, coins, bronzes, sculptures and, more recently, the terracottas, and arms and armour.

3 Hopkins 1979, 36 and 50-53; Rostovtzeff 1934, xvii. On Olynthus, see Cahill 2002; Robinson and Graham 1938.

4 For a discussion of the object registers and the associated problems, see Baird, forthcoming a.

5 Allison 2004; Cahill 2002.

6 Under the direction of P. Leriche, and published in the series starting with Leriche 1986. One of the aims of the Franco-Syrian expedition has been to conserve and consolidate structures excavated by Yale, although the work has focused on fortifications and sanctuaries.

7 A. Allara began systematic investigations into the houses before her untimely death: see the