Research on the Roman and early Byzantine frontier in North Syria

Michaela Konrad

From 1991 to 1996 the Damascus department of the DAI conducted a project on Roman fortifications in N Syria between Ġabal Bišrī and the Euphrates (fig. 1).\(^1\) For long A. Poidebard’s and R. Mouterde’s publications of the aerial surveys dealing with Roman fortifications in the steppe-desert of Syria have needed confirmation by modern fieldwork.\(^2\) This was further necessitated by the fact that ancient historians treating questions of late Roman military organization generally presume a Diocletian date for these installations even though there was no certainty about their date or indeed their precise number and size.\(^3\) This project chose the exterior line of fortifications on the fringe of the desert, the northern continuation of the strata Dioecletiana that follows the 150 mm isohyet, an area where farming is possible only through intensive irrigation.\(^4\) Even today nomadism or semi-nomadism is the most appropriate and common lifestyle (fig. 2 colour, following p.240). To judge from sources of the 5th-9th c., it would appear that the climate in antiquity did not differ markedly from the present day’s,\(^5\) but the landscape between Sura and Resafa has changed greatly as a result of new irrigation systems inserted to allow cotton to be planted after the wheat harvest in May.

From an earlier survey in the hinterland of Resafa and sherdng at Sura and Quṣair as-Saila, we are well informed about ancient remains in the area.\(^6\) From them and from the recent

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1 The project was directed by T. Ulbert: see id. 1989. For the final publication see Konrad (forthcoming).