

Zeugma's Military History in Light of the Rescue Excavations

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The rescue excavations at Zeugma in 2000 provided an unusual opportunity to examine a city in the Roman Near East with late 20th-century archaeological techniques. The site at Zeugma is remarkable for the excellent state of preservation. Its position at the base of Belkis Tepe meant that most of the city was covered with colluvium, rather than being exposed for stone-robbing. In its potential for archaeological research, its frontier situation on a river crossing, and its use as a Roman legionary base, Zeugma thus offers opportunities similar to few classical sites in the ancient Near East. The majority of the areas excavated in 2000 contained domestic housing, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn about Zeugma's military history. Nonetheless, a large quantity of military equipment has been recovered.

CONTEXT

The opportunity offered in 2000 was particularly important since most urban sites nearby have not been well explored. There were five major classical cities within about 80 km of Zeugma, three in Turkey, Germanicia (modern Kahramanmaraş), Samosata (Samsat), Edessa (Sanliurfa), and two in Syria, Hierapolis (Membij) and Cyrrhus (Nabi Uri). Of these cities, Samosata and Cyrrhus both had Roman legionary bases, but at Cyrrhus, almost no work has been done. At Samosata, the city and legionary base were submerged beneath the waters of the Atatürk Dam by 1991; although general surveys had taken place before the inundation, excavation was limited.¹

Further afield, useful comparisons can be made with the Syrian sites of Dura-Europos and Apamea. Dura-Europos was, like Zeugma, a small city founded as a Hellenistic military colony in the third century B.C. It sat on a rocky bluff overlooking the Euphrates but, unlike Zeugma, was not located at a good crossing point on the river. The city was captured by the Romans from the Parthians in A.D. 165 and later sacked by the Sasanians, probably in A.D. 256.² In its final phase at least, there was a large military zone about 10 ha in size in the northeast corner, separated from the rest of the city by a mud-brick wall.³ Some of the private houses were commandeered for military accommodation. The site was abandoned after this disaster. The state of preservation there, especially of organic materials, was very good. Although excavations took place in the 1920s and 1930s, much of the site has still not been completely published, and we are often still dependent on preliminary reports.⁴ However, the final report on the military equip-

ment has recently been published. This was a large assemblage, including about 75 edged weapons and perhaps as many as 50 shields, and provides the best parallels for the Zeugma materials.⁵ From the mid-1980s, there have been some renewed excavations.⁶

At Apamea in north Syria, also an open-field site, long-running Belgian excavations provide useful comparisons.⁷ Like Zeugma and Dura-Europos, Apamea was founded by Seleucus I, though its role as the major western Seleucid army base means that its character may have been different. Under the Romans, it also served as an assembly area for military expeditions, a function it had in common with Zeugma. And as at Dura-Europos and Zeugma, the Sasanian invasion of the 250s had a great impact on the city. A Roman military cemetery was dismantled and the tombstones built into new urban defenses in anticipation of a Sasanian offensive.⁸ There is currently no evidence of a legionary camp, though the number of tombstones suggests a permanent base, nor has any military equipment been recovered from the site.

The Zeugma excavations also come at a period of much greater scholarly understanding of urbanism and far greater clarity in our knowledge of the ancient Near East.⁹ There have also been new textual discoveries, in the form of papyri from the middle Euphrates, showing the role of the army in civil administration in the third century.¹⁰ The topic of soldier and civilian has also been explored extensively, with recent work focusing on Syria.¹¹

ZEUGMA

The city usually known as Zeugma was actually Seleucia-on-the-Euphrates, lying on the southwest bank of the river and paired with Apamea on the northeast bank. It was a critical crossing point on the Euphrates. Further north the crossing was more awkward because of the hills; further south, more difficult because the river widened considerably and suffered more from flooding. Military activity here included city defenses, permanent garrisons, and troops passing through.

When the site first gained a military function is unknown. Gawlikowski has recently suggested that Zeugma was the site of Thapsacus, the Euphrates crossing used by Cyrus in 401 B.C. and Alexander in 333 B.C. Although his arguments are not conclusive, the lack of mention of Thapsacus after the Seleucid foundation of Zeugma is powerful.¹² In the 2000 excavations, no pre-Hellenistic material was found, probably because of the short period available

for excavation, with many trenches not able to reach bed-rock before they were flooded.

The significance of the site was not just that it lay on a good river crossing, but also because it lay on the main road connecting the two main centers of Seleucid power, Antioch in Syria and Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in Mesopotamia, and so linked Asia to Europe.¹³ Strabo mentioned a Seleucid fortress at the site, though whether this was on Belkis Tepe (where there is a walled circuit) or on Karatepe, where there was a later fortress, is uncertain.¹⁴ The city itself would probably also have had a walled circuit. The defenses of Apamea across the river are well known, a circuit of typical polygonal Hellenistic masonry with protruding towers. The absence of what was probably a similar wall at Zeugma is quite surprising. There do appear to have been traces of a large defensive wall running down from Belkis Tepe towards the opening of the Bahçe Dere into the Euphrates. However, there are no Hellenistic blocks recorded, nor is it possible to reconstruct the path of the wall circuit, problems probably arising from robbing and colluviation.¹⁵

The fortress and city walls would have been maintained by whatever rulers the city had down to the imposition of the first Roman garrisons. In 64 B.C., as part of Pompey's dismantling of the Seleucid Empire, he gave Zeugma to King Antiochus I of Commagene (ca. 69–36 B.C.).¹⁶ When Zeugma was transferred from the kingdom of Commagene to the Roman province of Syria is uncertain. It is possible that this happened in 55 B.C. when M. Tullius Cicero boasted that he made Antiochus "take his hands off that small town located in the territory of Zeugma on the Euphrates."¹⁷ It has also been suggested that this transfer took place in 31 B.C., because Zeugma issued coins under Trajan with an era of Actium, though this suggestion is based on a single coin now shown to have been misread.¹⁸ The complex (though not atypical) politics of the Hellenistic and Roman city and kingdom are worth stressing to avoid over-interpreting the (necessarily) simple phasing of the material culture.

The Imposition of a Roman Garrison

The lack of clarity as to Zeugma's status is also relevant to the question of the Roman garrison.¹⁹ After the death of King Antiochus III in A.D. 17, Commagene was taken over as a Roman province by Tiberius (A.D. 17–38) and was ruled directly. During this period there were meetings between the governor of Syria, Vitellius (and presumably a military escort), and the Parthian king Tiridates III in A.D. 35, and between Vitellius and the Parthian king Artabanus II in A.D. 37/38. Both of these meetings probably occurred at Zeugma.²⁰

Wagner's suggestion that Zeugma was the base of *legio X Fretensis* from A.D. 18 onwards is often followed, though the evidence for this is circumstantial at best.²¹ It is based on Tacitus' statement that in A.D. 18 *legio X Fretensis* had its winter camp at Cyrrhus and Josephus' statement that when

legio X Fretensis was moved from Syria to Judaea in A.D. 66, it was based "on the Euphrates."²² There is still no evidence for *legio X Fretensis* at Zeugma, though now up to ten different legions have been recorded in inscriptions and the more than 150 stamped tiles from the site.²³ Although there is very little Early Imperial military equipment, this is because any troops based here (temporarily or permanently) would have been outside the city most of the time.

In A.D. 38, the emperor Gaius restored the kingdom of Commagene to a member of the royal house, Antiochus IV (A.D. 38–72). Antiochus was briefly removed from power at the end of Gaius' principate, but restored under Claudius. There was another visit to Zeugma by a governor of Syria, Longinus, in A.D. 49. Subsequently, Titus, accompanied by Legions V and XV, met envoys of the Persian king Vologaeses I there in A.D. 70. Romans often carried out such actions in allied kingdoms, and this shows nothing about the city's status. Survey work by Drs. Hartmann and Speidel found two superimposed temporary camps, each of 11 ha, with mud-brick walls. These lay to the east of Belkis Tepe, and thus outside the city. Hartmann and Speidel have cautiously suggested that these temporary camps were built because there was no permanent legionary base at the city during the mid-first century A.D.²⁴

Then, in 72, the Romans occupied Commagene and incorporated it into the province of Syria.²⁵ At some point in the late first century, probably in 72, *legio IIII Scythica* (transferred from Europe in the mid-50s) arrived to garrison Zeugma. There is, however, no definitive first-century evidence for its presence. Although an inscription referring to the construction of a "screw" at Arulis in A.D. 73 is sometimes restored as showing the involvement of *legio IIII Scythica*, this can only be a possibility.²⁶ It is sometimes said that *legio IIII Scythica* replaced *legio X Fretensis* at Zeugma when the latter was sent to Judaea in A.D. 66. However, as we have seen, there is no evidence for this.²⁷

Although the arrival date of *legio IIII Scythica* at Zeugma is uncertain, the large number of legionary stamped tiles and tombstones of its soldiers show that at some point it was based there. The precise location of the Roman legionary fortress is also uncertain, but it would have been a large site, approximately 18–20 ha. Recent work by Hartmann and Speidel has identified what is clearly a Roman military base with stone walls to the west of Belkis Tepe, the so-called At Meydani. Although it has produced military equipment from the late first and early second century to the third century A.D., as well as military inscriptions and stamped tiles, it is only 1 ha in size and thus cannot be the legionary fortress. It seems more likely to be a transit camp related to transfers of troops to or from areas further east.²⁸ This role of Zeugma as a staging post also helps to explain why so many units are attested by tombstones in the city's necropoleis. However, the finds of many tile stamps from different units suggests that many of these men were here for some time.

Legio IIII Scythica would have been about 5,000 men at full strength. The impact of this force on city life at Zeugma would have been considerable, even though many of them would have been detached throughout the province, or further even afield. There were various ways that soldiers interacted with cities, and some of these are vividly expressed by Tacitus in a description of troops garrisoned elsewhere in Syria in A.D. 58:

The army actually contained old soldiers who had never been on guard or watch, who found ramparts and ditches strange novelties, and who owned neither helmets nor breastplates — flashy money-makers who had soldiered in towns.²⁹

How realistic this picture might be is unclear, and Tacitus suggests that many of these men would not have taken their equipment with them when acting as traders. But if the legion was at full strength, every day the camp would have needed about 16,000 lb grain and at least 1,000 lb forage.³⁰ These needs were hardly different from needs of the local population (and added perhaps 10 percent to local food demand), but the army also had some requirements that may be noticeable archaeologically. The use of salty, fish-based sauces (*garum* or *allec*), imported in specialized containers from Spain, is an example of this.³¹ However, during Zeugma's Flavian/Trajanic phase (Ceramic Group C), imported amphorae, both from long distances and from central Syria, are very rare.³² Likewise, there are very few finds of Early Imperial military equipment (though there were few excavated contexts from this period): the head of a lance or bolt (ML23) and an arrowhead (ML32). Apart from a few pieces of miscellaneous metalwork, the only other significant find was an Aucissa brooch (ML76) from a late-Augustan to Flavian context.³³ These finds may represent troops, but this should be considered only as a possibility, because there are numerous other uses for this sort of equipment (for example, hunting, equipment for retired veterans, or personal security), and so the very small quantity at Zeugma need not suggest military activity.³⁴ Other evidence for the presence of troops in the city comes in the form of a reused Latin building inscription recording the presence of *legio IIII Scythica* (IN4). This was dedicated to an emperor, possibly Nerva or Trajan. This is the first inscription (as opposed to stamped roof tiles or funerary markers) that locates the unit at the city. There is also a fragmentary Greek inscription for a prefect (IN6).³⁵ None of this is surprising since the finds came from houses, rather than military or public areas.

After the campaigns of Lucius Verus against the Parthians (A.D. 162–166), the Roman border was relocated further east. By the early third century, *legio IIII Scythica* was partially or mostly based further east along the Euphrates, with at least one large detachment at Dura-Europos. However, detachments may have been outposted from Zeugma earlier, since Dura-Europos received a Roman garrison after its capture in 165.³⁶

The Sasanian sack

After his victory at the battle of Barbalissus, south of Carrhae in A.D. 252/253, the Sasanian-Persian king Shapur I entered Syria. He claimed to have “burned, ruined and pillaged” a number of Roman cities, among them Zeugma.³⁷ There is archaeological evidence for the Sasanian destruction by fire from Trenches 2, 7, 9, 13, and 18, across about 400 m of the site. It was these deposits that produced the largest quantity of military equipment. In part, the significance of these deposits at Zeugma lies in the absence of comparable deposits from the Near East outside Dura-Europos from this period. The military equipment found here comes from domestic (i.e., nonmilitary) contexts and so does not directly inform on the presence or character of a legionary fortress near the city, or on general matters of the Roman army in the East. On the other hand, it offers a telling snapshot of city life at Zeugma in A.D. 253 in that it raises questions about the dynamics of how soldiers and cities interacted on the Roman/Sasanian frontier.

The military equipment is described in detail by Ian Scott in this volume. In brief, the defensive equipment comprised one helmet (ML1) and fragments of two others (ML2–3), two shield bosses (ML4–5), three fragments of scale armor (ML6–8), and eight fragments of what may be iron-strip limb defenses (ML9–16). The offensive equipment included seven spearheads (ML17–22, 24) and five *pilum* heads (ML25–29), as well as one bolt head (ML30) and three arrowheads (ML31, 34–35). There were also three swords and daggers (ML36–37, 39). The mattock (ML40) can be probably be considered military in function due to its association with the scale armor and spearheads found in the same room. There are three significant concentrations of military equipment in the houses at Zeugma:³⁸

- From the House of the Helmets in Trench 2: three helmets, two spears, and a sword, all in Room 2240, in addition to a finger ring (ML77) from the same trench, possibly associated with *legio IIII Scythica* because of its Capricorn emblem
- From the House of the Fountain in Trench 11: scale armor, two spears, and a mattock, all from Room 11176
- From the Mud-brick House in Trench 18, a shield, *pilum*, sword, and armor, all from Room 18119, and armor and a sword from Room 18146

The scale armor is not surprising; it is well represented at Dura-Europos, and fragments were also found in trial trenches in 1993.³⁹ But the dearth of mail armor, found in quantities at Dura-Europos, is interesting.⁴⁰ The parade helmet suggests continuing cavalry games into the mid-third century (such helmets were not suitable for combat). Fragments of what was probably a parade helmet were also recovered from Dura-Europos.⁴¹ The Early Imperial *gladius* (ML38) came from a destruction context (18108) and although of a type that went out of use in the late first century A.D., it is likely to represent the sort of equipment

that could occasionally be found in service in the mid-third century. This is similar to the finds of semicylindrical shields at Dura-Europos, of a pattern not in general use for over a century.⁴² *Pilum* and spearheads were only recovered in small quantities at Dura-Europos but in larger numbers, relatively, at Zeugma. This does suggest caution may be necessary in identifying some of these items as *pila* (as well as spearheads); they could be ballista bolts or drill bits, but could also indicate a use of *pila* slightly later than generally accepted.⁴³

Many of the expeditionary troops that passed through Zeugma and Apamea were from the West, and it is likely that some of the city's garrison in its last days was also composed of western troops. The presence of western units at Zeugma in the mid-third century is shown by a tombstone for a soldier of *cohors milliaria Maurorum*.⁴⁴ However, the finds do not show any eastern or western regional characteristics. What is also surprising about the assemblage of military equipment is the small quantity of personal fittings, i.e., the small number of brooches, belt buckles, strap ends, and scabbard elements. These were manufactured in a wide range of materials (e.g., iron, bronze, wood, and bone), and it seems odd that so few were found at Zeugma (apparently only two scabbard plates, BR24–25, and a scabbard-slide, BR32).

Apart from the parade helmet, the rest of the equipment could have been used either by infantry or cavalry units and could belong to either legionary or auxiliary units. But the total volume of equipment is small, and it could signify no more than a dozen individuals. But during the Sasanian campaign, for example, there would have been hundreds, if not thousands, of troops in the city. Thus it is hard to be confident that this material is representative of a military defense of the city in the 250s. Despite the closed destruction context, it is not possible to tell how long before the sack these objects may have been in these houses. They could have been left behind by troops evacuating the city, discarded as rubbish, and therefore not to be mistaken for functioning assemblages of personal equipment. With some reservations then, it seems that the military equipment recovered from the Zeugma houses may not have been in active use at the time of the Sasanian attack, and may have been abandoned some time before the sack of A.D. 252/253. If it had been discarded as defective, then the Tower 19 deposits at Dura-Europos come to mind as a parallel.⁴⁵ What is clearer is that these deposits do not represent production areas or the debris of combat. Still, the domestic context of these finds gives rise to questions about troops within the city in the 250s A.D.

Post-Sasanian Military History

The military history of Zeugma after the Sasanian sack is unclear. Although the precise location of the Roman border moved several times after the 250s, the city was always within the Roman Empire. *Legio III Scythica* was

redeployed at some point, and the next unit identified at Zeugma is the *Equites Scutarii Aureliaci*, perhaps based in the city for some of the late third to late fourth century.⁴⁶ This cavalry regiment may have been the source for two fourth-century belt buckles of types usually used by troops (ML47–48), but there is a lack of contexts at Zeugma securely dated between the mid-third century and the second half of the fifth century. In the sixth century, Procopius records the construction of new walls by Justinian, but no trace of these has been found.⁴⁷

The seventh-century Arab conquest of northern Mesopotamia was rapid. For some cities, the transition from Roman power was violent, in other cases it was peaceful. A number of contexts from the seventh century show evidence for destruction that may be relevant here. A single arrowhead (ML33) was recovered from a sixth-to-seventh century context and may be relevant here.

The Byzantine reconquest in the 10th century (reoccupying Samosata in A.D. 958, Tarsus in A.D. 965, and Antioch in A.D. 969) again changed the politics of the region. Zeugma essentially disappears from history, probably because it was no longer used as the crossing point of the Euphrates. The 2000 excavations produced no archaeological evidence for the periods after the ninth century. By the 11th century, the main crossing point had moved to Bira (Birecik), where there was a well-defended ferry crossing. Bira was incorporated into the County of Edessa in 1098, and a castle subsequently built to protect the crossing. But a last glimpse of Zeugma might be gained from Albert of Aachen's account of Baldwin of Boulogne on his way east to Edessa in February 1098. Baldwin was following the main road, presumably via Bira, but then detoured to avoid a Turkish ambush and crossed the Euphrates elsewhere; Zeugma may have been his crossing point.⁴⁸

CONCLUSIONS

The 2000 excavations have therefore helped to elucidate the historical evidence in a number of ways. The unambiguous archaeological evidence for the Sasanian sack of A.D. 252/253 complements the evidence for Apamea and Dura-Europos nicely. But as a source for the general state of the Roman army in the mid-third century, it is less useful. At Dura-Europos, finds include the remains of combat in a collapsed mine, as well as a tower used to store military equipment. The Zeugma material is not so impressive, but it does seem to document the stationing of troops in domestic houses in part of the city, presumably during the final days or weeks before the Sasanian attack. The evidence for this mid-third-century period should be very different from the evidence for military activity in earlier or later phases. At these times, units would normally be based outside the city in separate camps, and thus any finds of military equipment are likely not to be directly related to military activity. In this respect, the small number of finds from

either the Early or Late Imperial contexts is not a surprise. Finds of weapons and armor outside fortified sites should perhaps be considered as a regular part of domestic assemblages, not as evidence of military activity.

NOTES

1. Frézouls 1977, 164–97; Kennedy 1998, 17–8.
2. James 1985, 111–24; MacDonald 1986, 45–68.
3. Rostovtzeff 1952, 69–70.
4. Hopkins 1979; Millar 1993, 445–52, 467–71.
5. James 2004.
6. Leriche and Gelin 1997.
7. Balty and Balty 1977, 103–34; Balty 1988, 91–104.
8. Balty and Van Rengen 1993.
9. Millar 1993; Butcher 1994; Sartre 1995.
10. Teixidor 1990, 144–66; Feissel and Gascoü 1989, 535–61.
11. Pollard 2000; MacMullen 1963; Isaac 1992.
12. Gawlikowski 1996, 123–33.
13. Comfort et al., 2000, 99–126.
14. Strabo 16.2.3 (749); Abadie-Reynal 1997, 349–51.
15. Kennedy 1998, 33–5.
16. Strabo 16.2.3 (749); Appian, *Mithr.* 114.
17. Cicero, *Q Fr* 2.12.2; Syme 1995, 101.
18. Wagner 1976, 64; followed by Millar 1993, 29; misattribution shown by Butcher 1994, 449. See further discussion of the date for the transfer in Crowther, volume 1.
19. Dabrowa 1986, 93–108; Keppie 1986, 411–29.
20. Tac. *Ann.* 6.37; Josephus, *AJ* 18.101.
21. Wagner 1976, 286.
22. Tac. *Ann.* 2.57; Josephus, *BJ* 7.1.3.
23. Hartmann and Speidel, this volume; Keppie 1986, 415.
24. Hartmann and Speidel, 2003, 103–4.
25. French 1991, 11–9.
26. *ILS* 8903; French 1994, 29–46; French's doubts are rejected by Speidel 1998, 169 n. 23.
27. Speidel 1998.
28. Hartmann and Speidel 2003, 105–12.
29. Tac. *Ann.* 13.35 (tr. M. Grant). See also the supposed speech of Mucianus at Antioch in A.D. 69: Tac. *Hist.* 2.76–77.
30. Roth 1999.
31. Cotton et al. 1996, 223–38.
32. See Kenrick, volume 2; Reynolds, volume 2.
33. Cf. James 2004, 55–56.
34. Bishop 2002, 7–12; Brunt 1975.
35. For IN4 and IN6, see Crowther, volume 1.
36. Elton 2005, 289–304. See also the military equipment from Zeugma discussed in Kennedy et al. (1998), which includes a face mask for a cavalry helmet possibly from Zeugma.
37. Maricq 1958, 295–360.
38. For the complete assemblages, see Tobin, volume 1.
39. Hartmann and Speidel, this volume.
40. Kennedy 1998, 137; Hartmann and Speidel, this volume.
41. James 2004, no. 377. For the location of the Roman frontier in Mesopotamia, see Kennedy 1987.
42. James 2004, 22, 168–9.
43. Bishop and Coulston 1993, 123; cf. Scott, this volume.
44. Hartmann and Speidel 2003, 115–8.
45. Du Mesnil du Buisson 1936, 199.
46. Speidel 1977, 271–3.
47. Procopius, *Buildings* 2.9.18–20.
48. Albert of Aachen, *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades: Historiens Occidentaux*, vol. 4, 352 (Paris, 1879).

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