The View from the Tell

Nafila resembles a small island of rectangular houses, on the fourth by the Euphrates River. From the air, Nafila appears like a village of mud brick houses inhabited by the formerly nomadic pastoralist Shafraat tribe. Separated by four kilometers of dirt road, Tell es-Sweyhat and Nafila occupy the center of a small crescent-shaped valley bounded on three sides by steep outcroppings of a limestone plateau and on the fourth by the Euphrates River. From the air, Nafila resembles a small island of rectangular houses, small fields, and courtyards amid a patchwork quilt of parched barley fields and verdant plots of cotton, sesame, sunflowers, and melons. The occasional solitary tree in the valley is cherished and well guarded by its owner. Nearly every feature in the bleached landscape surrounding Nafila reflects light at blinding intensity. The region receives little rain and is notorious for extremes of temperature.

Villagers scratch out an existence cultivating the great Mesopotamian triumvirate of barley, sheep, and goats. They supplement their incomes working as day laborers. Women pick cotton in the fields of local tribal elites, and men work as teams on the excavations, so each day is like a paid family reunion. Extended families move earth with baskets or work as shovelers — the most prestigious position. Pickmen must be skilled at identifying changes in soil color and texture, which are the initial signs of archaeological features such as mud brick architecture, pits, and ovens.

Our cooks shop in the small city of Raqqa, an hour and a half away driving on a treacherous stretch of highway. Until two years ago there was no electricity. Our lights, refrigerator, and other equipment were run by generators, which needed constant repair. In the computer age, electricity ensures that staff can work in the evenings, and refrigeration is a must, not so much for cold beer as for storing diabetic staff members’ insulin.

With the nearest medical facility an hour’s drive away, we do not tempt fate when it comes to sanitary living conditions and a dependable supply of food and water. First-timers are more prone to “Nafila Malaise,” and we anticipate sudden illness and panicked sprints to the nearest privy, a run we have glibly dubbed the Sweyhat Dash. We admit to having had a few new staffs threaten to leave during the field season, either from culture shock or illness, or some combination thereof. The relative isolation and the fact that we have only one vehicle to the nearest privy, a run we have glibly dubbed the Sweyhat Dash. We admit to having had a few new staffs threaten to leave during the field season, either from culture shock or illness, or some combination thereof. The relative isolation and the fact that we have only one vehicle means “to give something freely.”

Kevin M. D. Danti is research specialist in the University of Pennsylvania Museum’s Near East Section and field director at Tell es-Sweyhat, where he has worked since 1991.

DIGGING IN ARABIC

The language barrier always makes life in Syria interesting. While I can exist in unbroken Arabic the virtues of apricot-wood pick handles versus the cheaper poplar alternative or the merits of various brands of trowels, I still have difficulty making a hotel reservation by phone. Much of the problem stems from the dialect of Arabic we speak. Ancient-language instruction is usually an integral part of Near Eastern archaeologist’s training, but modern Arabic is not. New supervisors become masters at acting out work instructions. In dig notebooks, we often find phrases such as “Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!” followed shortly by the useful phrases “Nafa! Nafa! Nafa! Nafa!” — a sure sign that verbal communication has failed.

Most archaeologists learn the language while excavating. Once we know enough Arabic to run an excavation, the rate of absorption tends to decrease. My first verb was “to dig,” followed shortly by the useful phrases “Stop!” “Leave it (in the ground),” and “I’m not in charge here, ask my dissertation adviser!”

Dons is one of the few expeditions in Syria that employs women, who make up the majority of our workers. Women move earth with baskets or work as shovelers — by far the hardest job on the dig. They can earn more money picking cotton, but the hours are longer and the working conditions are, in their words, “dead dull!”

Most archaeologists learn the language while excavating. Once we know enough Arabic to run an excavation, the rate of absorption tends to decrease. My first verb was “to dig,” followed shortly by the useful phrases “Stop!” “Leave it (in the ground),” and “I’m not in charge here, ask my dissertation adviser!”