

# AN INSIDE JOB: Living and working in the house at Jebel Khalid

While the diggers toil up on the Jebel in excessive heat, those of us who work in the house down in the village count our blessings. We have a ceiling fan. We don't see much of the site, nor do we have the opportunity to gaze at the magnificent view down the Euphrates as we pause in our trenches to mop our sunburnt brows, but life on the inside has its own advantages.

We work in two houses rented from the local villagers. A charming mud plastered compound of rooms around a central garden courtyard houses the kitchen where our cook creates the most wonderful meals. Our architect pores over his plans of trenches and buildings in the calm of his room, when not out on site taking measurements. Our patient illustrator works in the shade of the walnut tree while next to her our landlady rolls up her sleeves to wash yet another load of dust stiffened dig clothes. Her unwavering disapproval of rinsing ensures that stiffness remains a quality and one is wise to wash smalls oneself.

The conservator, small finds cataloguer and I (bronzes) work in the other compound, shared with the family who lives there. Our days are punctuated by the children's antics, sweet cups of Arabic tea, and language lessons through our open window while we work. Sometimes they despair of our long hours, tempting us out of our makeshift lab with offers of freshly made rose petal jam, lavish meals, requests to take photographs of them and more tea. While they spend many hours in a day toiling in the fields, herding their few sheep and preparing food, there is always time for sharing and socialising.

We start work early, *de rigueur* on a dig, and at 9 am walk down the road from one house to the other to gather in the kitchen courtyard for refreshment. Every time we make that short journey all the small children run out to hold our hands and practice their English with us. The air is heavy with the scent of coriander as we enjoy the

sun and roses in bloom. The slowly browning wheat fields stretch away to the hills beyond, and are edged on one side with pomegranate trees, startling with their flaming orange blossoms.

It rarely rains while we are there (April–June) so the diesel chug of the bore water pumps in the fields is a constant companion. Occasionally the water is diverted from the house for irrigation leaving us nothing for washing or flushing, sometimes for a couple of days. With summer approaching and temperatures already in the forties, hotel showers in Aleppo once a week acquire a sanctity of unusual but unsurprising proportion.

At lunchtime the diggers return to tell of their day so far, and the photographer, having been on site all morning, takes up residence in the room outside our lab to photograph newly cleaned and conserved artefacts we have worked on all day. The Syrian museum representative shares the space to piece pottery together as the diggers set up their tables in a courtyard outside to sort through mounds of freshly washed pot sherds. Work continues on into the late afternoon, when the director brings around a treat of ice creams or boiled sweets.

Sometimes we take a break by going into the nearest town, Membij, to purchase supplies. Membij is a tractor town, rambling and full of everything from plastic flowers and buckets to fresh produce, electrical bits, shoe menders and other handy items, like scorpion powder – necessary at this time of year.

By 6.30 in the evening we are all ready for 'gin time', a very civilised prelude to another delicious dinner. The lemons are sliced, the nibblies laid out and piles of card and string wait to be cut and threaded as labels for the next day's finds.

And then to bed on the roof under the stars – until the harvesting begins and the tractors grunt and growl and the machine shop clanks until after midnight, and I am chased inside again. Travel time to work is minimal to say the least when you sleep on the lab floor!

Over the season a large number of objects are processed in the house from being cleaned, conserved, recorded, measured, photographed, illustrated, studied and finally packed away in large crates for further study or to be sent to their new home in the museum. And next year, *ensh'allah*, it will all happen again.

*Wendy Reade*

*Looking towards Jebel Khalid across the Euphrates River.*

