

## Book Review

*My Dura Europos: The Letters of Susan M. Hopkins, 1927-1935*, edited by B.M. Goldman & N.W. Goldman (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2011); xiv + 310 pp. ISBN 9780814335888.

Susan Hopkins (1900-1969) was the wife of the archaeologist Clark Hopkins (1895-1976) who was for over thirty years a member of the Classics Faculty of the University of Michigan. In 1927 just after they were married she accompanied her husband, who was then at Yale, to Europe for summer schools in Rome and Athens, and while there Clark Hopkins was appointed assistant to the director Maurice Pillet for the second official season of excavations of the recently discovered Dura Europos, from October 1928 to March 1929. Clark Hopkins was subsequently appointed director of the Dura Europos excavations for the fifth season (1931) a position he held until 1935 (the eighth season) by which time much of the city had been uncovered and important sites such as the Christian church and the Jewish synagogue discovered, excavated and unique paintings preserved for posterity. In the winter of 1928/9 the excavation members numbered just M. Pillet, who was by profession an architect, his French secretary, Clark and Susan Hopkins and another Yale scholar, and these supervised up to one hundred and fifty locally employed labourers. The duties assigned to Susan Hopkins were primarily to oversee the camp - of tents before the Mission House was constructed in the spring of 1929 - and kitchen, but also to record and clean small finds such as pottery and coins.

During what became a two year absence from America Susan Hopkins wrote regularly to her family and friends, and these letters kept by her recipients, mainly her parents and younger sister, provided the primary source material as the title of the work plainly shows. It is through these letters that her account of travels in Europe (Chapters 4-7), initial involvement in the Dura Europos excavations (Chapters 1-3), mainly their first season there in 1928-29 (Chapters 8-14) and their return to 'civilisation', and the later visits (1931-35), when they also brought their very young daughter - born 1931 - with them (Chapters 15-16) unfolds. The volume is set out in a roughly chronological order which, through Hopkins' letters interspaced with useful editorial comment trace this leviathan of an expedition including participation in excavation work at Olynthus before an arduous overland drive through Asia Minor to Aleppo, Beirut and the valley of the Euphrates. Mary Sue Hopkins Coates donated her mothers' letters and substantial collection of photos for publication. She herself features quite prominently in the latter section of the work (pp. 196-214) because of her presence with her parents in the later excavations. She returned to Dura Europos in 1998 (Chapter 18)

to relive some of those early childhood memories (p. 186). Chapter 17 (pp. 217-234) is devoted to a more detailed discussion of the discovery and contents of the Synagogue.

However, the letters are primarily concerned neither about the excavations nor about Dura Europos but were clearly the impromptu thoughts meant for family consumption but were also an avenue for relieving tension and worries. The relationship between Hopkins and the director of the mission is especially revealing, since Pillet is exposed as a prickly and unsavoury character, highly dictatorial in manner but also rather chaotic and haphazard in his approach to just about all aspects of archaeological work. Susan Hopkins obviously disliked Pillet and found his erratic and autocratic behaviour frustrating and boorish, and while at Dura Europos, suspecting that her letters were being censored, was quite diplomatic in her views but once away from the supervision of the director she did not mince her words (pp. 162-163). Defence of her husband (pp. 95-100, 163) is also very clear and that his commitment to the project is described in heroic terms (pp. 155-156). On the other hand, her quite remarkable complaints about the boring food after a mere ten days at the site (p. 100), a seeming obsession with chocolate cake, fudge, American magazines, buying souvenirs such as carpets and prints, and an evidently pronounced homesickness also loom large in her letters. At other times, and if the plates of life at the excavation base are a true reflection, life and work at Dura Europos was not one of great hardship. Yet, while ruminating at length on her husband's career possibilities and promotion, at the same time (p. 125-132) she gives an interesting insight into the customs and habits of the local people and moreover the ubiquitous role of the French or British security forces some of whom were assigned to protecting the excavation and its European and American excavators.

Three appendices by the editors follow the main section and deal with the chronology of the Dura Europos excavations down to 1938 (A), a history of Dura Europos (B) and (C) notes about a selection of women who were active in archaeology from its inception as a discipline including Gertrude Bell, Freyer Stark and Hilda Petrie.

Sadly errors are rather too common a phenomenon here, true mostly in the historical commentary and hardly ever in the letters, but especially irritating in Appendix B (pp. 257-263) and in the Index (pp. 299-310). Both of these sections were badly in need of more acute editing and a greater knowledge of particularly Roman history. The use of BCE and CE while in vogue is a handicap if not used accurately, while famous names such as Thermopylae (p. 44/5) ought not to be misspelled when they can be checked easily enough. Anyone reading the historical comments should use these with considerable caution. Note too that the narrative is sometimes highly repetitive and is probably illustrative of the change in editorship after the death of B. Goldman. Most unfortunate is the initial quotation from Hopkins' letter (v), while highly evocative of the place and time is mistakenly entitled 'Olynthus 15 Apr 1928' when it should read 'Doura 26 Oct 1928' (cf. p. 98). On a more positive note there is much visual material interspaced in the book, some intriguing views of Dura Europos and other sites in Mesopotamia and some excellent visual material of the Synagogue (pp. 235-246).

However, the inclusion of views reproduced from contemporary postcards of Paris, Rome, Athens or Constantinople does little to enhance the subject. Finally, the excavators arrive at their site only nearly a third of the way through the volume which reduces the focus of the work somewhat.

For all its manifest shortcomings nonetheless the letters contained in this volume are both compelling and fascinating for the unusual angle this material gives about academic life in the inter-war years, the beginnings of archaeology as a scientific discipline, and just how these early major digs were organised and managed. The restricted gender roles should hardly be a cause for surprise for the period in which the odyssey of Susan Hopkins took place, that she was able to participate and have what was clearly a fulfilling role may be indicative of changing attitudes but the letters also portray a social class still very much accustomed to the 'Grand Tour' and expectations of levels of sophisticated lifestyle then enjoyed among academic circles in America and Europe.

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