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Tina Shepardson is an associate professor in the department of religious studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She earned a BA from Swarthmore College, an MTS from Boston University, and a PhD from Duke University. She studies the history of early Christianity, particularly the eastern Mediterranean world in late antiquity. Shepardson's first book, Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth Century Syria *(Catholic University of America Press, 2008), examines the role that anti-Jewish language played in early intra-Christian struggles. She is currently writing a book about the politics of controlling contested places in and around the Roman city of Antioch. She is the winner of a 2009–2010 ACLS Fellowship, a 2009–2010 AAR Research Grant, a 2008 NEH Summer Stipend, and a 2008 Franklin Research Grant from the American Philosophical Society. When not researching, writing, and teaching, Shepardson may be found hiking in the Smoky Mountains or canoeing in the Canadian arctic.*

For years I have studied the influential history and people of the fourth century Roman metropolis of Antioch (modern Antakya, Turkey), but it was only in 2006 when I began a new research project that I was able to visit Turkey in person, and it was May 2010 before Dayna Kalleres (University of California, San Diego) and I travelled across the Syrian border for the first time to see what are known as the Dead Cities on the Limestone Massif in northern Syria. This area between Antioch and Beroea (Aleppo, Syria) was dotted with small villages and ascetics' huts during the late Roman and early Byzantine period; and today a great number of their stone buildings remain in varying states of preservation, having become Roman "ghost towns" littered across the rocky Syrian hills. During the Roman era, this region was integrally connected with the religious and financial economies of Antioch, and it offers valuable examples of early Syrian church architecture and patterns of early Christian settlement — and is thus of great importance to my current research. I am grateful to the AAR for the grant that enabled me to visit this region and finish the research for another chapter of my book manuscript.

Research Project

Fourth century leaders cared deeply about where their followers travelled and visited. From constructing new buildings, to describing places controlled by their rivals as morally and physically dangerous, early Christian leaders fundamentally shaped their landscape and the events that unfolded within it. Historical narratives that overlook the manipulation of physical places in late antiquity have obscured some of the powerful forces that structured the development of early Christianity. The critical role played by these physical and rhetorical contests appears particularly clearly in the city of Antioch during the turmoil of the fourth and fifth centuries. My book project demonstrates that the strength of theological claims and political support were not the only significant factors in determining which of the competing Christianities gained authority around the empire. Far from being an inert backdrop against transpiring events, Antioch's urban and rural places were ever-shifting sites of, and tools for, the negotiation of power and authority. My research traces physical and rhetorical efforts to control Antioch's powerful places and thus shape the experiences and views of its inhabitants. This study reveals the local and locative politics involved in the development of early Christian "orthodoxy" and the Christianization of the Roman Empire, and illuminates some of the powerful mechanisms through which the physical and rhetorical manipulation of places contested by rival communities can shape religious identity and perceptions of religious orthodoxy.

My research trip to Syria was particularly relevant for the chapter of my book project that examines the ways in which temples, ascetics, and martyr shrines contributed to Christian leaders' proactive reshaping of the topography of Antioch and its surrounding countryside. The writings of Libanius and Theodoret complement each other in that both depict Christian ascetics intentionally co-opting or destroying places outside of Antioch that were associated with non-Christian gods and the rituals that honored them. The pagan scholar Libanius claims that rowdy bands of Christian ascetics destroyed the region's rural temples (*Or. 30*), and the Christian historian Theodoret describes ascetics settling on pagan holy sites and Christianizing the places and the people in their vicinity (*Historia Religiosa*). One region that Theodoret describes in some detail is the northern part of the Syrian Limestone Massif, including the region near Teleda where Theodoret claims that an ascetic named Ammianus settled on a mountain that had previously been the precinct of local gods and much honored by those who lived nearby (*Historia Religiosa* 4.2). Theodoret's description of Ammianus's Christianization of this place and its inhabitants is one example of the processes that I am tracing, and it was difficult to describe this landscape accurately before seeing it in person.

Visiting Roman Syria

It didn't take Dayna and me long to realize that we could not have found a better driver than Hammad. Whisked through the winding mountain roads in air-conditioned comfort, we watched in amazement as he expertly navigated from one remote Roman site to another, speaking with us professionally in English in between a barrage of Arabic phone conversations to provide directions for colleagues who were lost. From the popular tourist village of Roman Serjilla, to the unfamiliar rural remains of Teleda, a quick glance at the map we had brought of the Roman villages was sufficient, and he was off, driving us unerringly to our next destination. The tour itself was a dream come true for a historian of Roman Syria. We stood in the ornate early Syrian-style church building at Qalb Lozeh; we peered cautiously around the friendly Bedouin's camp to see the Roman ruins of Ruweiha; we braved various animals and a carpet of goat droppings to photograph early Christian lintels at Jerada; we walked on the Roman road that had led from Antioch to Beroea; we ambled around a well-preserved Roman village at Serjilla; and we followed in the footsteps of countless early Christian pilgrims to see the remains of the forty-foot pillar on top of which the famous fifth century ascetic and saint Symeon the Stylite had lived on top of for nearly forty years.

In addition to making possible my research on the city and territory of Roman Antioch, this opportunity to see the Roman remains of Syria has enriched my understanding of late antiquity, which has been reflected in my scholarship as well as my teaching. Before seeing these places, I had not understood that the caves of the ascetics who withdrew from Antioch to live on Mount Silpius overlooked and were visible from the city; I had not realized how present they were in their "absence." I had not fully grasped the scope of Syria's rural settlements, and their relation to the larger cities — having visited village after village tucked among the rocky hills, I will never again be able to write about Antioch without incorporating its regional context. I had not before seen so clearly the architectural distinctiveness of Syrian church buildings, or been able to experience so viscerally the layout of a Syrian Roman village, its houses, its tavern, its cemetery, and its olive oil press. As I had hoped, funding from this grant allowed me to complete my book on fourth century Antioch in a timely fashion. What I had not predicted was all the wonderful collateral learning that would happen along the way.

Of course, a visit to Roman Syria is as well a visit to contemporary Syria: a modern dam has

turned a historic desert citadel into a lakeside resort; motorcyclists drive through Roman ruins; an ancient temple gate towers over the entrance to a busy souq. Most memorable, though, is the extraordinary warmth and hospitality of the Syrian people. Sitting under the stars outside Aleppo smoking shisha, Hammad treated us to dessert as we talked long into the night about his daughter’s deliberations over whether or not to start wearing the traditional Muslim headscarf, and, ironically, about how much better things were under Bashar al-Assad than in decades past. The news out of Syria has been of great concern the past several months. I feel fortunate to have visited when I did, and have been glad to be able to share what I learned about the Syrian people and culture, ancient and modern, through my scholarship, teaching, and outreach programs.