Howard Crosby Butler Archive
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Introduction

The Howard Crosby Butler archive is a collection of materials relevant to the expeditions taken by Butler (pictured below) and others to Syria and the surrounding area in the late 19th and early 20th century. The group surveyed hundreds of sites in the area and later published their findings. There remain today many unpublished materials; including images, filedbooks, sketches and more housed at Princeton University.
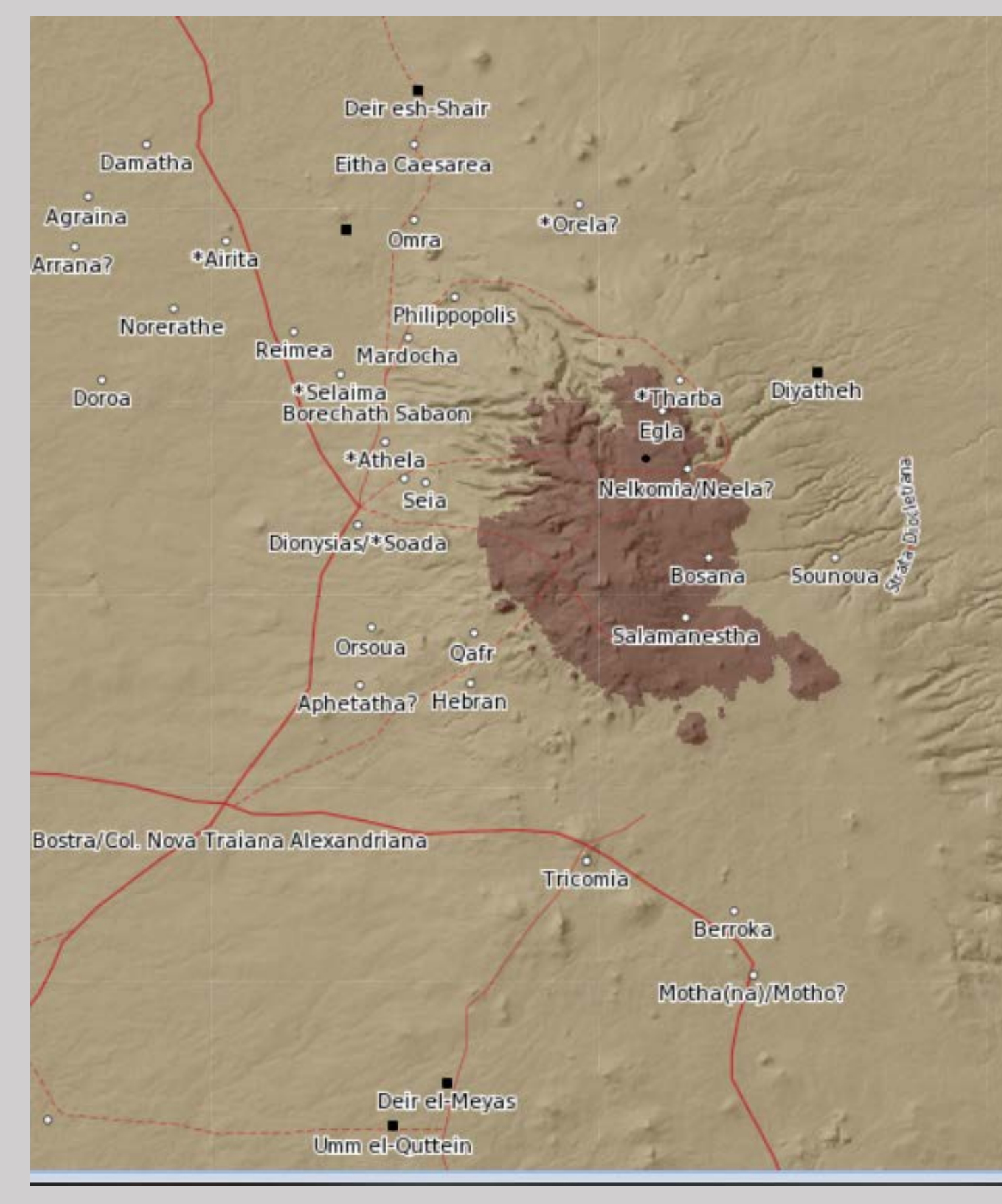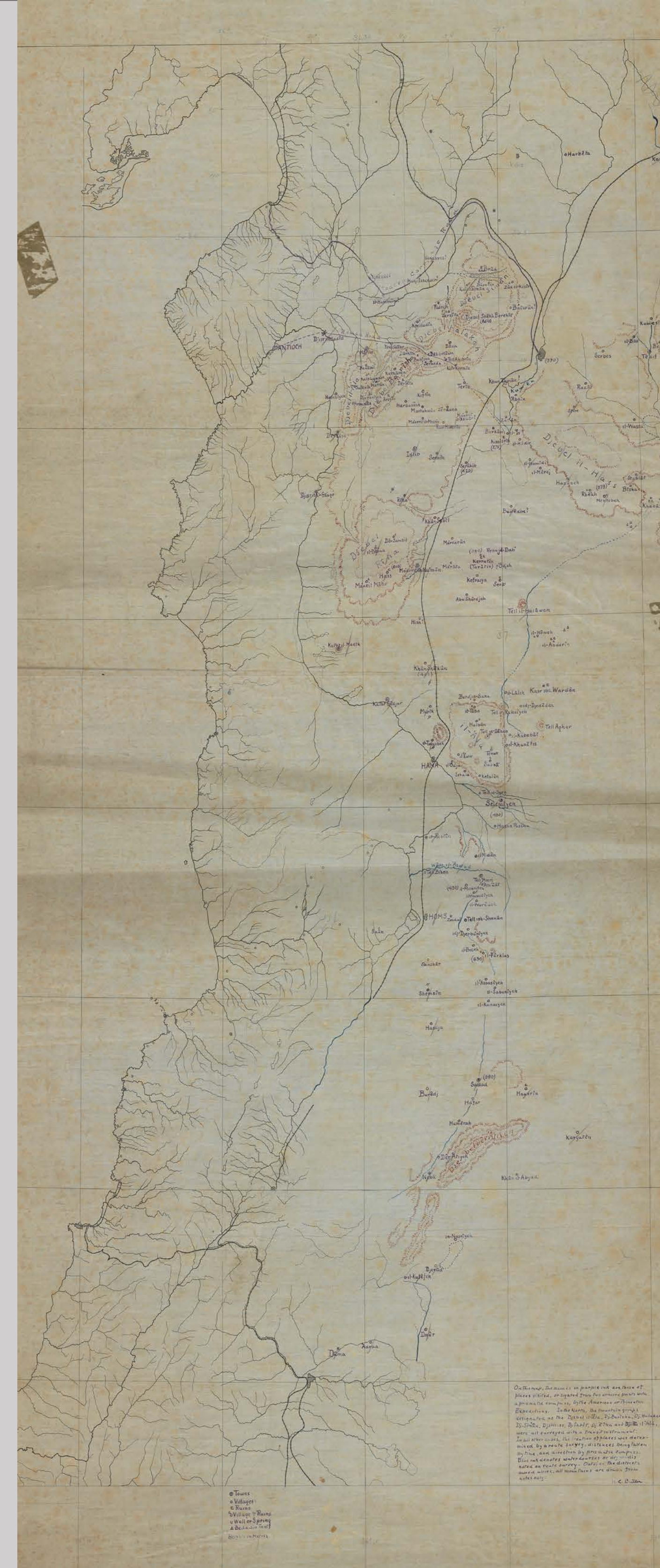
Butler's photographs and other written works are essential to current scholarship because they preserve these sites in forms no longer available to historians due to the destruction of these sites as a result of the Syria Civil War. Many of the sites in which Butler surveyed remain without in depth scholarship today and his unpublished work may allow historians a clearer picture of this area. The ultimate goal for work with the archive is to create a story map that will show the route the expeditions took and for each site they visited to have information for the viewer to see, including coordinates, images and general information on the architecture there.

Accomplishments

- Verified approximately 200 sites that Butler visited
- Met with specialists (Tom Elliot, ISAW) to craft a plan to identify all sites
- Have identified preliminary vision for the organization of the final project
- Transcribed 3 fieldbooks and several dozen itinerary cards
- Transcription work included all materials found on Qalʻat Simʻan
- Gained specific skills relating to: working with electronic geographic sources and databases, skills in precision, how to work with archival and archeological material

Map

The publications that came out of the expeditions contain the names of the sites and descriptions of them, but little else that would allow one to know where the site is today. Our job was to try and verify these sites' existence and find out where they are, preferably with exact coordinates. Ultimately we want to have enough information that we can make the sites easily searchable on the final digitized product. We would also record all other names the sites went by, often there would be many that were different than Butlers. To do this, we used academic sites such as Pleiades, The Barrington Atlas, and the Tabula Imperri Byzantani and an online mapping service (pictured bottom right) to verify the sites. We would also se simpler techniques, such as using maps like google and cross reference named sites on google with Butler's hand drawn maps in the archive (pictured to the right). We were able to verify over 200 sites during the MUSE project.

Transcription

Fieldbooks & Transcription:
In the archive there are 11 digitally published field books written by Butler. In addition to Butler's field books, there are two diaries from Frederick A. Norris, and notebooks from Enno Littmann. We systematically transcribed three of Butler's field books from his time in Northern Syria as well as his writings on Dêr Simʿân and Qal'at Si'man .

Pairing Butler's early 20th century notes with modern technology, we were able to give utterance once again to his words and findings. Although much of the transcription process consisted of deciphering handwriting and architectural vocabulary and typing out the transcribed passages in a word processor, we also utilized a digital transcription system, "Transkribus" to train a Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) model which enables our team, and future scholars to perform word/phrase searches through the collection and to automatically transcribe portions of or an entire collection of handwritten materials produced by the same person.
In nearly every entry of his field books, Butler provides a site name, date, and structure type (i.e. church, tomb, house). Butler's exceptional record keeping abilities enabled our team, working nearly 120 years later, to pinpoint and tag the sites his expedition visited via two programs, "Recogito", and "Pleaides" in turn, to produce an interactive and virtual map. Creating a concordance of site names to match ancient and modern geographic names with the specific places that Butler's mentions in his field books between 1899-1915, will allow scholars to locate modern Syrian sites using their ancient or variant names.

Acknowledgements