

Desert mystery

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Archaeologist Robert Mason spoke at the Semitic Museum about the discovery of mysterious rock formations near the Syrian monastery Deir Mar Musa (above), and the need for further exploration. Photos by Jon Chase/Harvard Staff Photographer

There's a mystery in the Syrian desert shielded by the conflict tearing apart the Middle Eastern nation.

In 2009, archaeologist Robert Mason of the Royal Ontario Museum was at work at an ancient monastery when, walking nearby, he came across a series of rock formations: lines of stone, stone circles, and what appeared to be tombs.

Mason, who talked about the finds and about archaeology at the monastery on Wednesday at Harvard's Semitic Museum, said that much more detailed examinations are needed to understand the structures, but that he isn't sure when he will be able to return to Syria, if ever.

Analysis of fragments of stone tools found in the area suggests the rock formations are much older than the monastery, perhaps dating to the Neolithic Period or early Bronze Age, 6,000 to 10,000 years ago. Mason also saw corral-like stone formations called “desert kites,” which would have been used to trap gazelles and other animals. The region is dry today (“very scenic, if you like rocks,” Mason said), but was probably greener millennia ago.

It was clear, Mason said, that the purpose of the stone formations was entirely different from that of the stone-walled desert kites. The kites were arranged to take advantage of the landscape and direct the animals to a single place, while the more linear stone formations were made to stand out from the landscape. In addition, he said, there was no sign of habitats.

“What it looked like was a landscape for the dead and not for the living,” Mason said. “It’s something that needs more work and I don’t know if that’s ever going to happen.”

In a talk in 2010, Mason said he felt like he’d stumbled onto England’s Salisbury Plain, where Stonehenge is located, leading to the formations being dubbed “Syria’s Stonehenge.”

Mason also talked about the monastery, Deir Mar Musa. Early work on the building likely began in the late 4th or early 5th century. It was occupied until the 1800s, though damaged repeatedly by earthquakes. Following refurbishment in the 1980s and 1990s, it became active again.

Mason thinks the monastery was originally a Roman watchtower that was partially destroyed by an earthquake and then rebuilt. The compound was enlarged, with new structures added until it reached the size of the modern complex, clinging to a dry cliff face in the desert about 50 miles north of Damascus.

Mason was searching Roman watchtowers when he came across the stone lines, circles, and possible tombs.

The monastery is the home to many frescoes — some badly damaged — depicting Christian scenes, female saints, and Judgment Day. Mason also explored a series of small caves that he believes were excavated and lived in by the monks, who returned to the monastery for church services.

Mason said that if he's able to return, he'd like to excavate the area under the church's main altar, where he thinks there might be an entrance to underground tombs. He's already received the permission of the monastery's superior, who was recently ejected from the country.

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