

Turkish provincial governor drops by dig site for official visit



JENNIFER GREEN
IN TEL TAYINAT



Farmers banking field fires, cattlemen prodding herds down the middle of the highway, even the razor wire marking the Syrian border: these are part of daily life on the road to Tel Tayinat.

The jackbooted soldiers bracing machine guns across their chests on Thursday were a surprise.

The men took up strategic positions around the rutted dirt entrance to the University of Toronto archeological dig, as a nine-car entourage announced the arrival of provincial governor Mehmet Celalettin Lekasiz.

The governor was dropping by for a visit that may have been unexpected, but was by no means unofficial.

The cars, including Lekasiz' shining black sedan, roared up the road to the dig, carrying a military man in camouflage gear and a beret, press officers with notebooks and cameras, and the usual phalanx of factotums who emerged from the hot cars only to pace up and down the site, cellphones to their ears.

Lekasiz, himself, however, was completely attentive as project director Tim Harrison showed him the remains of an ancient temple unearthed several years ago, and explained its importance, even to people as far away as Canada. Why, look, he said, they even sent a reporter!

The governor's cluster (which had picked up a curious young boy) next walked down to another level of the dig, where the workers are excavating deeper, going from the Iron Age to the Bronze Age levels of occupation.

Earlier in the day, Lekasiz

Citizen reporter Jennifer Green is in Tel Tayinat on the Amuq Plain in Turkey, where Ottawa's Stephen Batiuk is part of a group of 30 archeologists uncovering and sifting through 3,000-year-old artifacts. The team is hoping to piece together the mystery of how this once-powerful kingdom, possibly tied to the Biblical Philistines, rose and inexplicably collapsed. Follow Green's blog at ottawacitizen.com/unearthing

had visited Tel Tayinat's sister site, Atchana, just a few hundred metres away.

After a landowner harassed archeology students working nearby on Wednesday, some wondered if the provincial governor was making his own statement by coming out to the site.

Turkey has some of the richest archeological resources in the world, many as yet undiscovered. The Amuq Plain, where Harrison is digging, has something like 300 ancient sites.

But this is a mixed blessing, as that daily roadside pageant shows. The Amuq Valley has always been a fertile area, as the daily truckloads of melons heading out of it testify.

Until recent years, it also supported large fields of cotton; in fact the Tel Tayinat dig is directly behind a decrepit cotton mill, one of the few still in operation here.

It is a particular irony that textiles are a central focus of

the archeologist's work here.

For some time, there have been laws forbidding farming on land designated to be of historical interest. Harrison recalls seeing some people get fines for growing water-melons.

But now, some are seeing that this designation might not be such a bad thing, especially if the owner can convince the Turkish government to expropriate the property and compensate them.

In a land like Turkey, however, no government could ever afford the billions or trillions it would take to purchase everything of some archeological value.

The question is then: how much is the land worth? That's a delicate negotiation — not to say haggle — that can take some time.

Meanwhile, Harrison tries to get all he can do into an eight-week summer season.

Why does Canada care? The answer is that there is no longer a part of the world we can ignore.

Harrison has begun a group, Friends of Tayinat, to raise money and support for an archeological park on the site "showcasing the region's unique cultural heritage, and help foster greater awareness of its role as an historic crossroads, or bridge, between the cultures and peoples of Turkey, the Middle East, and the West."

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