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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT UCHI MAIUS (TEBOURSOUK, BÈJA, TUNISIA)

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Since 1995 a joint Italian Tunisian mission has been conducting archaeological investigations at the site of Uchi Maius, an ancient Roman colony about a hundred kilometres to the south-west of Tunis in a hilly area in the south of the plain of Medjerda, in the governorship of Beja (MASTINO, KHANOUSSI 1997).

This research was initiated within an Italo-Tunisian agreement stipulated between the l'Institut National du Patrimoine and the University of Sassari, under the joint direction of M. Khanoussi and A. Mastino.

Today the site of the ancient city of Uchi Maius goes by the name of Enchir ed-Douâmis (meaning in Arabic a land holding of

underground structures) and is situated in a dominant position on the right bank of the Oued Arkou, near the chain of the Djebel Gorrâ. The settlement spreads across part of the southern slope of a hill and is surrounded by a perimeter wall which encloses an area of about 6 hectares. This enclosed area should be related to the extent of the Byzantine phase at least insofar as analysis of parts of the perimeter wall has permitted a chronological attribution (GELICHI, MILANESE 1997: 51-53). No evidence is currently available regarding more ancient phases of the wall. There are some public monuments beyond the perimeter wall such as the amphitheatre, a triumphal arch and some infrastructures such as large cisterns, but it is not presently possible to determine the extent of the Roman phase of the city. Numerous installations for olive oil production and "orthostats" are attributed to the residential fabric of the city; however their specific function and chronology cannot yet be characterised without an adequate stratigraphic exploration. In this regard, in 1997, under the direction of Prof. Cinzia Vismara, three other excavation areas were opened in olive oil production areas of the site. A reduced fortification corresponding with the summit of the hill has been attributed by Pringle to the Byzantine (PRINGLE 1981: 303). Remains of the pylons of an aqueduct are observable if only at

The hill of Uchi Maius.



the level of the foundations along the north east slope of the hill.

The research is presently directed toward the recognition and topographic localisation of the visible Roman monuments in order to produce a plan of these remains (VISMARA 1997), to completely document all of the inscriptions (MASTINO, KHANOUSSI 1997) and to document the late antique and post classic phases of the site (GELICHI, MILANESE 1997). The aim of this last piece of research is to study the impact of Islam on a flourishing Roman city of Proconsular Africa utilising the instruments of archaeological research little used by researchers of these problems. The collapse of the urban system in these lands, as in the major part of post-Byzantine north Africa, has been attributed with differing points of view to the arrival of the Arabs, but probably constitutes a crisis point of a long process begun well before the seventh century and brought to a close some centuries later. From the latest phases of life of the settlement, a *marabout* was documented which is presently of undetermined date (but agreed to be of the last century) with an adjoining cemetery enclosure. The presence of the remains of walls in the zone of the *marabout*, probably referable to a basilica of the Christian period, suggested another important point of the late topography of the site.

After the first years of investigation, the research has concentrated on understanding the stratigraphic and settlement sequence in the forum and citadel areas with notable results concerning the late antique and medieval phases.

THE EXCAVATION OF UCHI MAIUS

The late antique phases

The area identified as the forum of the ancient city is located on a terrace between the contour 450 and 453 m amsl. Prior to the excavations, the remains of an honorary monument dedicated to *Septimius Severus* (CIL VIII 26255), and the remains of the stilobate of an arcade and of two discrete rooms to the north-east were visible. Also visible in all of the area were series of emergent epigraphs in the form of other bases with dedicatory inscriptions and fragments of a long frieze from the epistyle of the colonnade of the Severian forum (MASTINO 1994). The excavation of the building of the imperial period at the margin of the forum area, successively occupied by an olive press and, later, by a calcar kiln, returned some samples of masonry of the imperial period in *opus africanum*, the oldest structures of ascertained chronology yet recognised on the site.

Another zone subjected to excavation was identified at the summit of the city (455 m amsl), among the remains of the cited reduced

fortification of the Byzantine period. The fort presents, planimetrically, a quadrilateral of 25 to 30 metres on a side (a space of about 1500 m²) and oriented north-east to south-west: this structure turned out to be connected to the above mentioned perimeter of the walled city. In this area, the entire surface was cleared with the intention to expose the upper surfaces of the walls and acquire extensive information concerning the organisation of the settlement in its latest phase. Test excavations were also initiated along the exterior of the wall of the citadel (area 4000), oriented toward producing a first sample for evaluating the informative and stratigraphic potential of that part of the site.

The evidence of the occupation phases of the city in the late antique is limited at the moment to the above mentioned emergent structures of the city wall of the citadel, as well as numerous structures for the production of olive oil. Beyond the evidence visible on the surface, the stratigraphic investigations initiated in the area of the forum allowed the acquisition of the first information regarding the transformation of this public area from the fifth century. The first archaeological trace of the loss of original function of the forum is constituted by the realisation of a small cistern against the base of the equestrian monument of *Septimius Severus*.

At the moment, we haven't available direct information about the chronology of this structure but it cannot reasonably be placed before the last quarter of the fourth century; this is the period of the latest observed epigraph, relative to an imperial dedication in the area of the forum (even if reutilised, presumably, in a late antique building constructed in this public space), pertinent to the emperor *Valens* (CIL VIII 15452) and dated to the years 364-375 A.D. The cistern is, at the same time, chronologically anterior to the first traces of a building that came about by dividing the area of the forum arcade and partially using the pre-existing walls. This new construction seems to be in phase with a series of similar rooms, some of which are being excavated and others visible on the surface, and possibly with an olive oil press. In a later moment after the beginning of the sixth century, the excavated building underwent a series of reconstructions probably accompanying the abandonment of the productive activity of the olive oil press. Possibly in the same period a calcar kiln of large dimension was built by using a large cavity realised for the working of the olive oil press. On the basis of the available evidence, these structures do not seem to survive past the sixth century. They came instead to be obliterated by a natural deposit of colluvium, on which was built the structures of the medieval period.

The medieval phases

Before the start of excavations, the material evidence for the occupation of the site in post

classic times was limited to a few elements that can be summarised thusly: 1. The presence of the previously mentioned *marabout*, 2. The evident use of some of the cisterns with remaining vaults, confirmed by inscriptions in Arabic and some presumably postmedieval ceramics found in the waste of some restructural works. 3. The presence of medieval and postmedieval pottery concentrated toward the south-western part and near the walls of the Byzantine citadel. The problem of the relationship between the latest phases of the ancient settlement and the first organised structures of the medieval settlement can be articulated in the forum and in the interposed stratigraphic relationship between the curtain of the citadel and the medieval buildings within the same. In both cases, we maintain that the archaeological evidence suggests discontinuous settlement. In the case of the forum, a building of the medieval period came to be constructed above the layer of colluvium that obliterated the abandonment of the Byzantine period. In the second case, the medieval buildings are placed unevenly over the collapse of the internal curtain of the citadel. The operation of clearing the area within the perimeter of the Byzantine citadel revealed indeed the presence of a substantial and complex medieval settlement phase presumably established over the ruins of the late antique structure.

The data available for first reflections on the topography of the medieval settlement indicate that it occupied all of the space within the perimeter wall of the citadel where it was initially organised, by virtue of planning, as a centralised and highest settlement. Beyond an extensive investigation that had as its objective to understand the salient traits of the late phase of occupation within the citadel by means of recovery of the upper surfaces of the edifices (covered, as in the highest area, only by humus), the stratigraphic excavation of some of these spaces became a necessary step in order to acquire more precise chronological indications, as well as to define a possible time lag not well perceived in the appearance of the levelled buildings. Long rectangular rooms, placed perimetally along the inside of the Byzantine wall, were later defined by successive structures placed between these rooms. The first perimeter structure to be erected and define an original rectangular room longer than room 1 is the structure 1008, connected to the inner part of the partially collapsed Byzantine wall. The planimetric order of the medieval settlement with the division of an originally large space in rooms 1 and 2, constitutes a successive systemisation on the original plan of the site. Into this phase of redefinition of at least a part of the settlement, we put the following activities: the raising of the level of the threshold of room 1, a slight raising

of the pavement level, a radical intervention of restoration of its south perimetral, the creation, within the same room, of a structure delimited by an alignment of slabs and stones vertically infixed (1011) and elevated as regards the new pavement level, that was interpreted as a *dukkana* (alcove). A space present in the perimeter wall NE (1017) is referred to the collapse of a niche-cupboard that was probably lined with planks of wood and located corresponding to the cited sleeping space. Rooms 1 and 2, together with room 3 and other smaller spaces (8, 9), face toward an open courtyard. With different planimetries, other sectors of the medieval settlement also show a tendency toward definition of limited open spaces, surrounded by rooms of small and medium dimension, successively aggregated on the first installation prevalently based on an uninterrupted succession of rooms, connected the Byzantine wall. The structure 1004, common to rooms 1 and 8, suggests that, in the initial projection of the space, the presence of minor courtyards of single families within the central court was planned. Consequently, the spatial organisation could reflect the social structure of the settled community. The presence of "private" courtyards (paved with lithic slabs of medium and large dimension) that decrease the size of the central court pertinent to the first phase, seems to become accentuated, with a time lag still to understand, following the discussed construction of new rooms against the structures of the first installation.

These reflections upon the organisation of the medieval settlement constructed within the Byzantine citadel of *Uchi Maius* cannot ignore that, fundamentally, the reference model is that of a typical Islamic house with open rooms around a central space (the recognition of the problem in FENTRESS 1987: 47), a model that is then reproduced and amplified to arrive at the dimensions of a village. This phenomenon is noted in the Islamic settlements of western Sicily, as, for example, that excavated at Monte Iato (ISLER 1990: 109-11, Figs. 2-3) or those of the Iberian peninsula (for an overview, with detailed discussion of the habitation structures see BAZZANA 1992: 161-202). The initial projection of the settlement was undoubtedly conditioned by the form of the Byzantine fort, within which was organised a habitation enclosed within walls, with clear defensive intentions, following a strategy perceived in similar situations, where one observes how ancient structures were used as a base for rooms of elongated form (e.g. Henchir El-Faouar: MAHJOURBI 1978: 254; Ksar Lemsa: BELKHODJA 1967/68: 313 and tav. A).

Outside of the citadel, the excavation of area 4000 furnished a first stratigraphic confirmation of the observations from the surface (area of dispersion of medieval pottery). In fact, remains



Olive press in the forum area.

of a collapsed building were revealed, which were obliterated by layers of probable postmedieval dumping.

A preliminary chronological framing of the medieval settlement is made possible by the presence of few fragments of glazed pottery in the stratigraphic sequence from room 1, as well as from other significant contexts. A fragment of open form with polychrome glaze, found in the foundation levels of room 1 in its phase prior to division in room 1 and 2, is allocated to the typological class "a oiseaux" of the aghlabid

period. This piece, supported by another of the same production class found decontextualised in the citadel, constitutes a clue to postulate a chronology around the tenth century for the original medieval building in the area of the Byzantine fortress. A half jug appears less typologically characterisable with its deteriorated covering and brown decoration and which was found in the excavation of the fill raising the alcove in room 1; the phase in which at least room 1 came to be radically restructured. The chronological indications furnished by the piece for this important transformation of the site are oriented, in agreement with the stratigraphic sequence, toward the eleventh-twelfth centuries. Slight and problematic traces of the postmedieval period document that the site of Uchi Maius and its summit (citadel) was frequented, after the abandonment of the medieval settlement, in a manner that is yet to clarify. Some fragments of glazed wares with decoration in brown, yellow and green on a red clay come from the clearing of the *bumus* in the citadel and from the forum. As regard the citadel, the part of the site where the medieval settlement is presently the best known, small and sporadic fragments of postmedieval pottery come from the later layers of rooms 1 to 3 and suggest the hypothesis of a recovery of the ruins of the medieval buildings effected in modern times. Remains of bread ovens (*tabouna*) discovered in the open area within the settlement, when stratigraphically compatible, can be referred to the postmedieval phase.

DISCUSSION

In effect, the excavations of Uchi Maius seem to indicate, almost in emblematic form, all of the stages yet revealed (when revealed) by archaeologists in several urban settlements of north Africa after the classic period. From the end of the fourth century (certainly after 375), the area of the forum of Uchi saw the realisation of a series of structures connected with olive oil production: presses and storerooms. For their realisation, space was occupied that had until then been public space. A functional deconstruction of the forum coincides with a functional settlement reconversion, probably in a private form. The archaeological (about Christian inscriptions: ZUCCA 1997) and historical (the documents indicate the existence of bishops at least until about the middle of the seventh century) evidence suggests, also for Uchi Maius, the birth of new spaces for public use, even if the presence of a basilica under the structure of the Islamic *marabout* is at present only conjectured. These processes tend to continue into the Byzantine period, during which there is not only the documented continuity of occupation in the forum, but the settlement seems to have been involved in intense building

activity, connected with the realisation of the reduced fortification and, in all probability, the perimeter wall. The scarcity of knowledge regarding ceramic production in the late seventh and eighth centuries represents a strong hindrance to comprehension of the phase immediately before and after the Arab occupation.

Leaving open for the moment the problem of the chronology, it seems at this point indubitable that, in the forum as in the citadel, there is an unquestionable settlement *biatus*, marked in the one case by a deposit of colluvium, and in the other by a clear reconstruction above the collapse of the ancient structures. A stable and organised settlement in these two areas is documented only from the aghlabid or fatimid (X-XIth centuries). It remains to clarify the significance of the frequent and repeated signs of organised and stable settlement that many of the ancient cities of the Proconsular knew between the ninth-tenth and twelfth centuries and of which Uchi Maius seems to represent an excellent model: the recovery of urban function, the expression of a desired centralising of the settlement during the aghlabid-fatimid age, functional toward defence, the control of the tribe, fiscal organisation and complete Islamisation of the territory? A process that seems to characterise, in the fatimid, even settlement of nearby Sicily following the rescripts of the caliph al-Muizz (BRESC 1994: 65). These problems can only find solutions with the continuation and expansion of the research that must count on a larger quantitative case and a greater territorial knowledge, this later aspect being little known after the seventh century.

THE AIM OF THE PROJECT

The aim of our project in the next years is the study of the post-antique settlement and the exploitation of the medieval structures. In the past seasons many structures of these periods were excavated: as discussed above, the city wall and the Citadel of Byzantine period; installations for olive oil production in the forum and in the town of Vandal period; a little village organised into the citadel during the Islamic period (X-XIII centuries). Another monument of the medieval period is the marabout, constructed above the ruin of the Christian basilica and it is possible that in the Fatimid period it was a mosque.

Uchi Maius is one of the ancient settlement of North Africa investigated by modern techniques, but now it is necessary to launch a project of restoration and exploitation of the results of archaeological excavation. For the future, the first aim is to complete the archaeological excavation in the Byzantine and Islamic citadel and in the forum of Roman Uchi Maius. A second aim is to restore the main Islamic, Byzantine, and Roman

walls found during the research and finally to organise an exposition with didactic panels in the site and an Antiquarium with the finds excavated at Uchi Maius, that we have planned to organise in Teboursouk.

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