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# New Work on the South Slope of the Byrsa Hill, Carthage (Tunisia): a Roman House Revisited

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CHRISTINE ZITRIDES\* AND ALICIA WALKER\*\*

[with preliminary ceramic analysis by Angela KALINOWSKI\*\*\*]

## NEW WORK ON THE SOUTH SLOPE OF THE BYRSA HILL, CARTHAGE (TUNISIA)

### A ROMAN HOUSE REVISITED

Excavations conducted on the south slope of the Byrsa Hill during the fall of 1998 and the summers of 1999 and 2000 revealed new evidence for the study of Roman, late antique and medieval Carthage<sup>1</sup>. A house, located on the southwestern corner of the first southern *Decumanus* and the *Cardo Maximus*, close to the summit of the Byrsa Hill, constitutes the primary feature of the site. Preliminary dating of ceramic and numismatic evidence indicates occupation of the structure from the Roman through the Byzantine eras. In addition, the presence of an Islamic cemetery within the confines of the house points to some medieval activity on the Byrsa Hill. Although the site was partially excavated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the current project has allowed for the recovery of new material that will permit a more precise dating and phasing of the structure.

Père Delattre of the Order of the White Fathers of Algiers directed the earliest documented excavations at the site beginning

in 1892. He recorded the major features of the monument in a plan that was published in the 1893 *Bulletin Archéologique*<sup>2</sup>. In this article, he referred to the building as a “*maison byzantine*”, a somewhat hasty identification that Auguste Audollent later noted as “*un peu vite*”<sup>3</sup>. The primary features of the structure as documented by Delattre included a centrally located apsidal hall running approximately north-south, with two suites of rooms situated to the west and northeast of the hall. To the immediate east of the hall, Delattre uncovered a courtyard. From the debris he salvaged a wide range of marbles, dozens of fragments of mosaics, and some small finds. Delattre published a bronze key (now on display in the Christian room of the Carthage Museum), a bronze belt buckle with a Byzantine monogram (preserved in the Museum’s storerooms), and a monumental inscription (current location unknown).

A few years later, Henri Bourbon, a protégé of Delattre, further exposed the floor surface

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Carthage Museum, as well as the museum staff, without whose ample assistance our work would not have been possible.

<sup>2</sup> P. DELATTRE, «Fouilles archéologiques dans le flanc sud-ouest de la colline de Saint-Louis en 1892», *Bulletin Archéologique*, 1893, p. 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> A. AUDOLLENT, *Carthage romain*, Paris, 1901, p. 277-278 (BEFAR, 84); *InvMos II*, 595, p. 199.

of the apsidal hall. He revealed a mosaic approximately 3,25 m by 3,5 m, which depicted a variety of animal and flower motifs, enclosed by lozenge-shaped frames. Additional decorative motifs included satyrs, masks, and lamps<sup>4</sup>. According to Paul Gauckler's *Inventaire des mosaïques de Gaule et de l'Afrique*, Bourbon left the floors *in situ*<sup>5</sup>.

Although Delattre mentioned that the Byzantine construction rested atop re-used earlier Roman walls, he did not document adequately the multiple phases of the structure. It is clear that Delattre stopped his excavations at the surface of the latest floor levels, leaving the stratigraphic remains intact. What Delattre uncovered was in fact mostly accumulated debris and antique dumping. What Delattre left in place provides evidence for the solid dating and phasing of this important domestic structure, located in the center of late Roman Carthage.

Current excavations at the site were initiated in the fall of 1998. After three weeks of cleaning, work began in the area immediately to the east of the apsidal hall (fig. 1). Investigation of this section was intended to verify Delattre's identification of a courtyard and to establish the area's phasing. A flagstone floor, which was already exposed after preliminary cleaning, supported Delattre's interpretation of the area as a courtyard. Fill from over the flagstones offered no evidence of a roofing system. With the use of a Total Station, a square measuring 13 m north-south and 6 m east-west was laid out in the western half of the courtyard<sup>6</sup>. We removed approximately twenty-five flagstones in order to date this floor. Fill from beneath the flagstones included Byzantine ceramics and lamps, as well as Vandal coins. Preliminary ceramic analysis dates this fill to the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century.

Beneath the flagstone fill were uncovered the fragmentary, but still partially intact remains of a mosaic floor that displayed a blue and white geometric pattern (fig. 2). A



Fig. 1 – Overview of Trench 10 000 from the North (Byrsa Hill House Excavations, 1998).

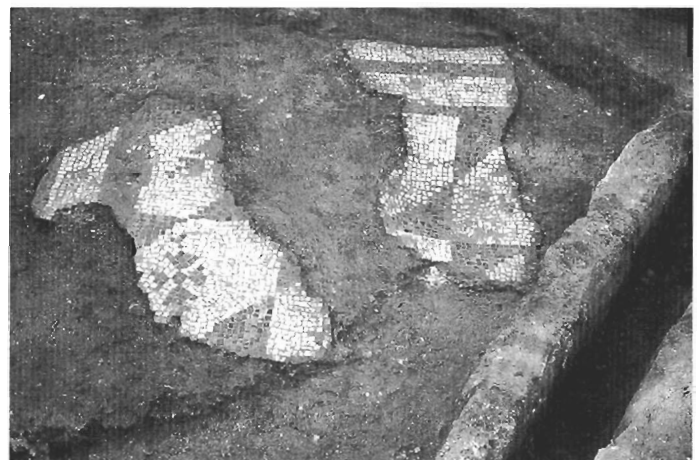


Fig. 2 – Detail of blue and white geometric mosaic pavement (Trench 10 000, Byrsa Hill House Excavations, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> *BSNAF*, 1906, p. 286-7; *Revue Tunisienne*, 14, 1907, p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> *InvMos II*, 597, p. 200.

<sup>6</sup> The remaining area of the courtyard, located outside the current bounds of the Carthage National Museum, rests inaccessible, as it apparently was even in Delattre's day.

preserved inner border line of this mosaic shows the composition to be aligned with the walls of the room. Mosaics of comparable style and design can be dated to as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century. A strikingly similar decorative pattern is apparent, for example, in a 4<sup>th</sup> century (*ca.* 320-60 A.D.) mosaic from Piazza Armerina in Sicily<sup>7</sup>. Ceramic collected from fill beneath the blue and white mosaic, however, dates the bedding to the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century, placing the courtyard mosaic in approximately the same period as the flagstone floor that covered it. Cleaning of the mosaic and surrounding mortar bed surfaces revealed numerous Vandal coins that were lodged in plaster repairs to the blue and white mosaic. Although only a small portion of the floor was preserved, areas where the tesserae had been dislodged still retained the mortar bedding. In order to preserve the remaining mosaic, we continued excavation to lower levels only in areas where *tesserae* had been lost but the mortar bedding was still intact.

In addition, the fill from beneath the bedding of the blue and white mosaic consisted of nearly 80% fragments of Roman fresco painting, which was mixed with a yellow, sandy soil. This same fill of wall painting debris in sand was found throughout the courtyard area occupied by the mosaic. From this, we conclude that the fragments of wall painting, either salvaged from an earlier phase of the same structure or brought in

from a nearby site, were used to raise the floor level on which the mosaic was laid. Some fragments of wall painting displayed very elaborate decoration, including complex geometric and vegetal designs, as well as some floral motifs.

Beneath the flagstone floor we also uncovered a marble water collection basin as well as a series of three drains, two of which ran into a re-used cistern in the center of the courtyard. These channels cut through the blue and white mosaic floor, making certain the association of the drainage system with a phase later than the mosaic and suggesting a date coterminous with the flagstone floor.

Excavations continued in the summer 1999 season and focused on the room to the northwest of the apsidal hall. The aims of this campaign were to investigate the remains of the Islamic cemetery said by Delattre to have been left partially intact and to uncover any floor surfaces still extant within the walls of this room<sup>8</sup>. A single trench measuring 4 by 7 m was established, using the walls of the northwest room as the perimeter.

Regrettably, the burials that Delattre claimed to have left *in situ* had since been disturbed. Furthermore, none of the tombstones that Delattre reported to have left in place were found. From the current state of the area within the walls of the northwest room, it can be concluded that any remnant of the Islamic cemetery had been displaced

<sup>7</sup> See the mosaic at Piazza Armerina in Room 18: CARANDINI, *Filosofiana*, II, pl. V, I fig. 39, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> The Islamic cemetery represented the latest documented phase of installations encountered in the area. Within the boundary of the northwest room, Delattre uncovered approximately twenty simple inhumation burials that were marked with marble, kadel and tufa gravestones. The associated bodies, he states, were laid just above the mosaic floor of an earlier phase of the structure. The gravestones were oriented approximately north-east/south-west in alignment with the walls of the house, and were arranged so as to make maximum use of the space within the confines of the room. Seven of these stone markers are preserved in the Museum's collection today. Based on the style of the grave markers, Delattre believed the installation to be an Islamic incursion of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Because the burials were late in date, he left them in place, along with an unspecified number of poorer quality stone grave markers (*op. cit. supra* n. 2,

p. 3-4). In her archeological study of Islamic Carthage, Giovanna Vitelli cited the Islamic cemetery, but she only summarized Delattre's earlier findings (G. VITELLI, *Islamic Carthage*, Carthage, 1981, p. 16, 18-20, pl. V [CEDAC Carthage]). She studied three of the grave markers in the collection of the Carthage National Museum, but she did not have access to the entire corpus. Based on the style of the tombstones, she dates them to as late as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The tombstones lack any inscription and therefore do not offer any explicit evidence for the nature of an Islamic settlement in the vicinity of the Byrsa Hill. According to Vitelli, however, the fine workmanship of the grave markers argues for "a (possibly short-lived) settlement of the Islamic period that was sufficiently well-off to command artistic resources" (p. 20). Vitelli states that first-hand inspection, let alone excavation, of the site was prohibited by the accumulation of debris.

between the time of Delattre's excavations and our own. To our knowledge, the only formal excavations conducted in the area during this interim period were those of Bourbon, which were limited to the apsidal mosaic. At present, we must therefore conclude that no further documentation of the Islamic cemetery will be obtainable.

We were able to locate and reunite the grave markers that were removed in the course of Delattre's earlier excavations and that are currently in the storerooms of the Carthage National Museum. Each grave marker consists of a long, pitched stele which rests vertically within a grooved base. Although the pieces are aniconic and anepigraphic, they are articulated with bands of ridges on all four sides. The grave markers range in size significantly, with the largest measuring approximately 1,75 m in length and the smallest 0,26 m in length. The base of one of the smaller markers was carved from a reused ancient architectural fragment. In keeping with the aniconic and anepigraphic character of the markers, the spoliated frieze was concealed on the underside of the base. Comparable grave markers have been found throughout Tunisia<sup>9</sup>, but the Byrsa Hill pieces are unusual because of their strict exclusion of inscriptions or other adornment and their almost total uniformity of carving.

The absence of burials in the northwest area of the house allowed for unexpected progress in the uncovering of a mosaic floor surface in this room (fig. 3). The mosaic displays a geometric pattern (outlined orthogonal pattern of adjacent irregular octagons forming squares, *Décor* 165d) in a wide range of vibrant colors : purple, orange, white, blue, green, grey, yellow, and black. It includes guilloche and triangular borders as well as pelta shields, pinwheels, and stepped pyramid motifs. The mosaic is clearly oriented



Fig. 3 – Overview of geometric mosaic pavement from the west (Trench 1000, Byrsa Hill House Excavations, 1999).

to the walls of the room. On the south side, the edge of the mosaic runs flush along the base of the wall<sup>10</sup>.

Stylistic and iconographic similarities suggest a date for the mosaic in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. Comparanda may be found in Carthage from the Odeon<sup>11</sup> and a late 2<sup>nd</sup> century mosaic from Sousse<sup>12</sup>. Further excavations beneath the mortar foundation of the mosaic in the north and central areas of the floor yielded ceramic remains that offer a preliminary date for the sub-floor fill to the first to 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. We currently propose a date for the mosaic in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.

High concentrations of Vandal coins within the plaster fill in the central and northern

lost. The southwest corner of the room was also disturbed, in this case by a pit approximately 0,50 m deep, 0,60 m long, and 0,53 m wide. Other areas of subsidence and loss had been filled with plaster, particularly along the north wall and in the center of the mosaic.

<sup>11</sup> *Décor* 165c, still *in situ*.

<sup>12</sup> FOUCHER, *InvSousse*, pl. LVIIc.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see S.M. ZBISS, *Inscriptions du Gorjani : Contribution à l'Histoire des Almohades et des Hafsides*, Tunis, INAA, 1962 (Corpus des inscriptions arabes de Tunisie, I, 2).

<sup>10</sup> The mosaic was broken in several areas. The most conspicuous disturbance was in the north-west corner where the mosaic and underbedding have been completely



areas of the mosaic suggest that these repairs date to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Similar mortar patches in the blue and white mosaic of courtyard area have likewise been dated, preliminarily, to the Vandal era. This evidence argues for restorations throughout the structure during the Vandal period.

The summer 2000 season focused on the area of the apsidal hall (fig. 4). Excavations were intended to verify Bourbon's description of a mosaic in this area as well as to clarify the relationship of this mosaic to the walls of the hall. A single trench measuring approximately 3 by 7 m was established, using the walls of the apsidal hall as the perimeter on the north, east, and west.

Gauckler claimed that Bourbon had uncovered a Byzantine mosaic that lay over the earlier Roman mosaic. The remains of this mosaic were recovered at the north end and on the east side of the apsidal hall at a depth of approximately 15 cm. This mosaic displays a repetitive geometric pattern of crosses set in intersecting roundels: orthogonal pattern of quasi tangent and poised concave squares, forming double axes (Décor 155d; fig. 5). The



Fig. 4 – Overview of apsidal hall from south before excavation (Trench 2000, Byrsa Hill House Excavations, 1999).

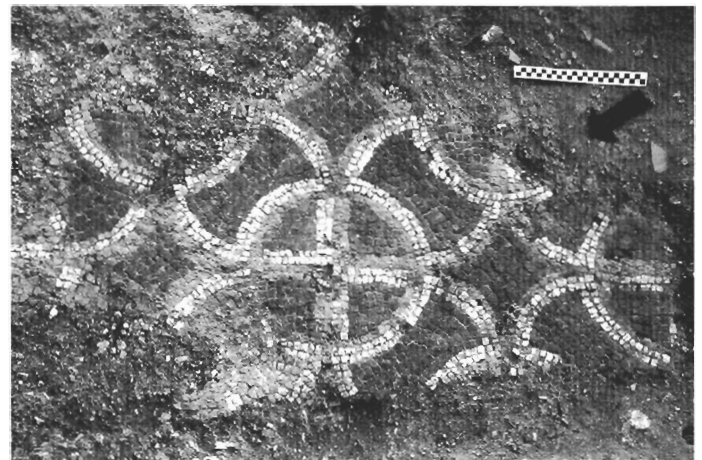


Fig. 5 – Detail of Upper Geometric Mosaic (Trench 2000, Byrsa Hill House excavations, 2000).

color palette includes white, grey-green, and blue-black stone tesserae, which were laid somewhat irregularly in a very weak mortar bedding. Extensive loss of tesserae was recorded in the northernmost area of the apsidal hall floor.

Excavations were continued on the west side of the apsidal hall where no remnants of the Byzantine mosaic were encountered. At a depth of approximately 0,50 m, we uncovered a finely worked mosaic depicting a fox eating a locust, a Dionysiac cymbal, and millet stalks (fig. 6). Most significantly, the design of this earlier mosaic does not appear to conform to the walls of the extant apsidal hall, thereby suggesting that an earlier phase of the building followed a different plan. Because of the poor condition and time-consuming excavation of the later Byzantine mosaic, work in this area

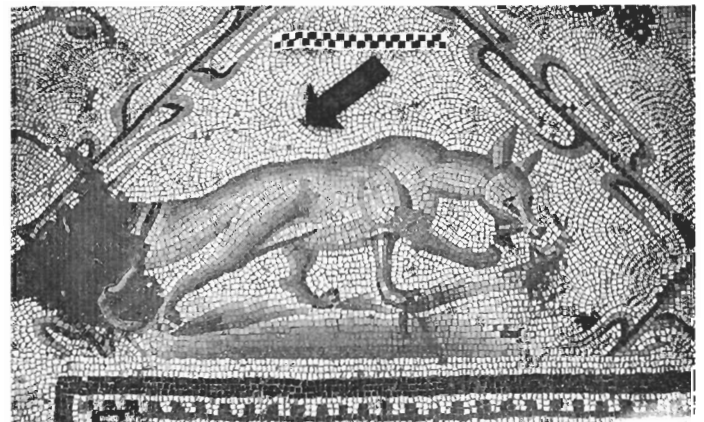


Fig. 6 – Detail of Animal and Musical Instrument pavement (Trench 2000, Byrsa Hill House excavations, 2000).

was discontinued and will be resumed in the fall of 2000.

The 1998, 1999, and 2000 seasons contributed significantly to the realization of our initial aims. We have a preliminary date of the 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. for the fill beneath the intact mosaic in the northwest room and a 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. date for this mosaic based on stylistic comparisons. We can identify one 5<sup>th</sup> century or later phase of repairs in both the northwest room and the courtyard and we have a preliminary date of the 6<sup>th</sup> century for fill beneath the flagstone and mosaic floors to the east of the apsidal hall. Investigations of the remains of an Islamic cemetery in the northwest area of the house were unsuccessful, but we were able to

reunite and fully document a group of medieval Islamic tombstones previously removed from the northwest room by Delattre. Finally, we have mapped approximately 30% of the structure in relation to the Carthage zero point atop the Byrsa Hill. These data will allow for the eventual integration of a more accurate representation of the house into the master plan of Carthage.

Excavations to date have revealed a much more complex phasing for the structure than Delattre's earlier investigations had shown. Further study of this building will help to draw preliminary conclusions as to the nature of domestic activities on the Byrsa Hill from at least the early Roman to the Byzantine and early medieval eras.

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