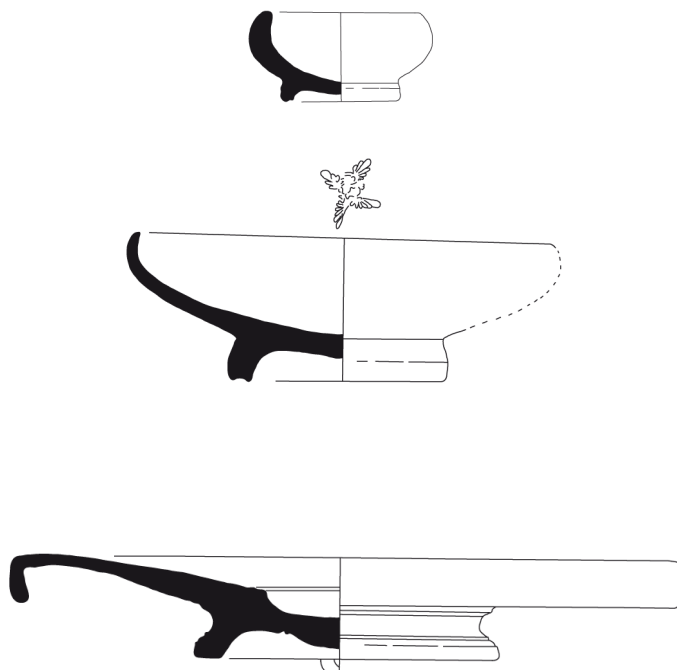


# CARTHAGE STUDIES 7

**ERIC GUBEL:** Glenn E. Markoe (NYCity 1951 – Kenwood 2012); **ROALD DOCTER:** In memoriam Naïdé Ferchiou (1945-2013); **HANS GEORG NIEMEYER †:** Arbeitsgebiet: Phönizische Archäologie. Über die Lage eines Sondergebietes der mittelmeeischen Archäologie in den deutschsprachigen Wissenschaften; **HANS GEORG NIEMEYER †:** Die Phönizier und die deutsche Altertumswissenschaft; **BABETTE BECHTOLD:** Distribution Patterns of Western Greek and Sardinian Amphorae in the Carthaginian Sphere of Influence (6th-3rd century BCE); **IMED BEN JERBANIA:** Céramique attique de la nécropole de la *Qasbah* de Sousse, l'antique Hadrumète; **ROALD DOCTER:** Pottery of the Islamic Period from the Bir Messaouda Site (Carthage); **ROALD DOCTER:** An Italian Relic of WW II at the Bir Messaouda Site (Carthage)



Gent 2013

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# **CARTHAGE STUDIES 7**

**edited by Roald F. Docter**

**Gent 2013**

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# An Italian Relic of WW II at the Bir Messaouda Site (Carthage)

*Roald Docter*

Excavations by the University of Amsterdam in 2000 and 2001 at the Bir Messaouda site in the centre of present-day Carthage yielded archaeological strata and remains ranging from the Early Punic period through the 20th century CE.<sup>1</sup> From the most recent era comes a brass button that once belonged to a military uniform of the Italian navy (Regia Marina Militare).<sup>2</sup> The cross in the centre of the eagle refers to the House of Savoy, the anchor to the navy.



**Fig. 1.** Button of Italian naval uniform (BM00/10105; photo author, edited by W. van de Put).

BM00/10105 (context BM00/5000 = Modern), copper alloy button of uniform (**Fig. 1**).

Dimensions: diam. 2.5, th. c. 0.5. Condition: complete; well-preserved.

Date: 1921-1943.

<sup>1</sup> On these excavations of the Universiteit van Amsterdam, generously supported by the UTOPA Foundation, the Netherlands, see Docter 2004. The excavations, closely coordinated with colleagues from Cambridge University, have been transcribing the Arabic toponym 'Bir Messaouda'. The Tuniso-Belgian project of the INP (Tunis) and Ghent University at the same site, however, preferred the transcription 'Bir Massouda'.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tarlao 1975. I. Bogaerts of the Royal Army Museum at Brussels kindly identified this artefact; she and the museum staff are to be thanked for their interest and expertise.



Although the reverse of the present button has no imprint, identical buttons have the factory's mark (\*CORINALDI & RIZZI S.A. MILANO\*). This firm, founded in 1920, operated under this name between 1921 and 1938, changing thereafter to "BO.MI.SA. Minuterie Sa".<sup>3</sup> It is unclear whether these buttons were produced after 1938. Similar buttons regularly appear on the specialized militaria market in Italy and on the internet, often as unprovenanced metal detector finds.

The discovery of this button in Carthage links to more recent Tunisian history.<sup>4</sup> Italian and German (Axis) troops fought against the Allied forces of American, British and French during the so-called Tunisia Campaign (November 17th 1942 - May 13th 1943). In particular the San Marco Marine Regiment joined the Italian 1st Army in the defence of the Mareth Line between Gabès and Medenine (from March 1943). After the final allied offensive between April 22nd and May 3rd 1943 in North-West Tunisia, Allied forces reached Tunis and Carthage on May 7th 1943. Of the Axis troops, some 3,700 Italians were killed, 89,442 were taken prisoner, and many more escaped to Italy.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of Italian naval personnel in Carthage, either in active service or as prisoner of war, may account for this uniform button at the Bir Messaouda site. The fact that a surface layer of trench 3 (**Fig. 2**) yielded a WW II shellcase (BM00/10106; context BM00/3000), might even suggest that actual fighting took place at the site. Alternatively, the button might belong to an Italian pre- or post-war immigrant with a naval background, a member of the large Italian population in Tunisia. Finally, it might even have fallen off an Italian military uniform that found its way to the Tunisian second-hand clothing market.

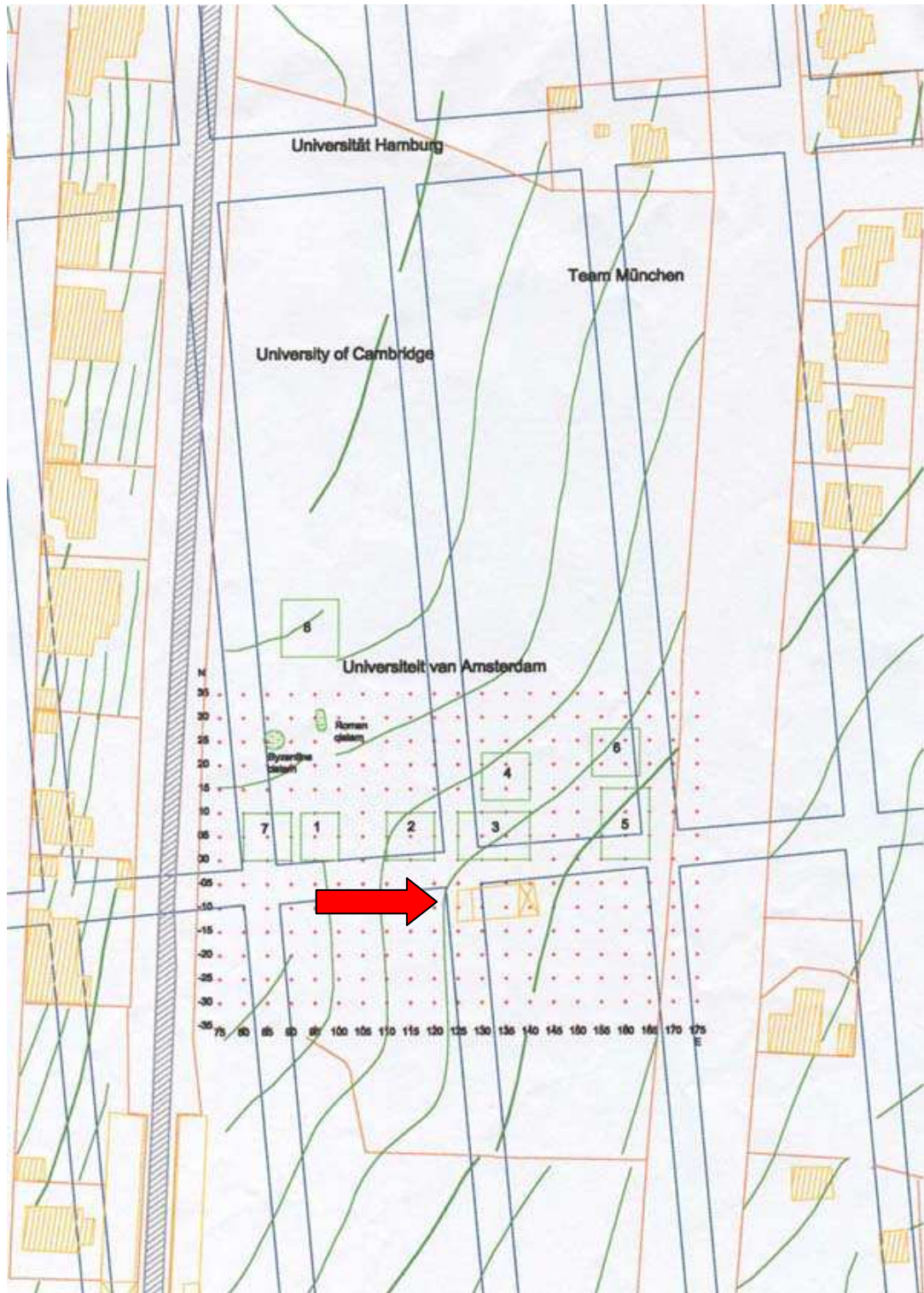
The find spot of the button leaves all of these possibilities open. Found in modern surface layers within trench 5 (**Fig. 2**), it lay only a few meters distant from the main road through Carthage (Route de La Goulette à Sidi-Bou Saïd, the present-day Avenue du Président Habib Bourguiba), a likely path for a passing soldier to lose a button. On the other hand, trench 5 lies at the entrance to the Adel Khader property, where the family house (*gourbis*) remained in use until at least 1962 (**Figs. 2-4**). So, it could just as well have belonged to one of the family, who once lost a button off their second-hand Italian marine jacket transformed into a

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<sup>3</sup> See the Archivio nazionale cinema d'impresa, Sistema Archivistico Nazionale: <http://www.impresan.beniculturali.it/web/impresan/enterprise/dettaglio-soggetto-produttore?id=52426> (retrieved 11.8.2013).

<sup>4</sup> Italians made up the majority of foreign nationals in Tunisia and Italy had designs for the nearby territory, if not before establishment of the French protectorate in 1881, certainly after Italy took Libya in 1912 and Ethiopia in 1936. Mussolini's plan for expanding his African Empire involved Tunisia, and he arranged the release of Habib Bourguiba, who had been imprisoned in France since 1940, and his transfer to Rome in the futile hope of winning support for Italian claims on Tunisia.

<sup>5</sup> Audouin-Dubreuil 1945, 200; Playfair *et alii* 1966, 460; Atkinson 2004, 537. Rare colour footage taken May 9th 1943 shows German and Italian prisoners of war, among them Italian sailors: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcEgKYrYRUA> (ARC Identifier 23655 / Local Identifier 111-ADC-9890 - Department of Defence. Department of the Army. Office of the Chief Signal Officer. (09/18/1947 - 02/28/1964) – 1943).



**Fig. 2.** Plan of the Bir Messaouda site with indication of the individual trenches; excavations of the University of Amsterdam 2000/2001 (drawing A. Mezzolani). The position of the Adel Khader family's house is visible in yellow at the arrow.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The house remarkably follows the alignment of the Decumanus 1-South, probably because its northern wall used remains of the insula wall as its foundations. The Roman street grid may have been partially visible and may have remained in use, a fact as suggested by **Fig. 4**, where the Decumanus 1-South, Cardo IX, X and XI are clearly visible as darker areas. The two insulae (lighter in **Fig. 4**) were used for agriculture.



**Fig. 3.** Aerial photograph of Carthage, c. 1950, taken from the southeast. The Bir Messaouda site lies at the centre. The Adel Khader family *gourbis* is just visible behind the trees bordering the actual Avenue Habib Bourguiba (arrow; photo courtesy A. Ennabli).



**Fig. 4.** Aerial photograph of Carthage, c. 1950, taken from the east, with the Bir Messaouda site lies at the lower left, and with the Adel Khader family *gourbis* in the south part of the field (arrow; from Cintas 1976, pl. XLII,1).



farmer's coat. Other traces of their family life at Bir Messaouda, found in all surface layers, show that European, colonial material culture played an important part in their lives (**Fig. 5**).



**Fig. 5.** Pottery and glass fragments from context BM00-4000, trench 4 (cf. **Fig. 2**), first half of 20th century CE (photo author).

Archaeology of more recent historical periods in Carthage has always been the poor cousin to antiquity, with only pottery of the Islamic period receiving any attention (e.g. Vitelli 1981; see also the previous article in this volume). Elsewhere in other former colonial contexts, the field of Historical Archaeology has seen enormous advances, following on the seminal work of James Deetz (1977, revised 1996). The related field of Conflict Archaeology has also seen increased interest, particularly in the case of the First World War (e.g. Saunders 2002; 2007). Within the larger Arab world, one might note in this connection the recent initiation of the Great Arab Revolt Project in southern Jordan.<sup>7</sup> In Tunisia, concerns related to the military heritage have led to the creation of the 'Commission Nationale d'Histoire Militaire', which also represents the interests of the Institut National du Patrimoine (cf. Actes Tunis 2011). Still, limited attention has been paid to this branch of archaeology in Tunisia and North Africa. With the publication of this minor relic of a major historical event, we hope to raise interest in this field of study. Moreover, this Italian naval uniform button from Tunisia's recent past opens a new chapter in the archaeology of the Bir Messaouda site.

<sup>7</sup> Saunders, Faulkner 2010 (see also: <http://www.jordan1914-18archaeology.org/>).

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