ACCOUNT OF RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN

This report provides a brief account of the fieldwork undertaken in Morocco from 16 to 26 September 2014. Most of the travel and accommodation costs were covered thanks to the grant provided by the Society for Libyan Studies in October 2014.

The project built upon the fieldwork carried out in Morocco from 2011 to 2013, as part of a PhD research programme at the University of Leicester. It is directly linked with the previous project financed by the Society for Libyan Studies and the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies (3 to 20 May 2013). Starting with data collection in situ and through the creation of a detailed catalogue of architectural decoration for the most significant sites of Tingitana, the aim of the current project is to enlarge the research framework to a broader North African level, and beyond. The results will contribute to further develop the study within the next years – hopefully leading to post-doctoral research on the architecture and architectural decoration across the Maghreb, based on the analysis of published data and archive material.

This year’s research focused on select architectural ornament from Sala (Chellah, Rabat), Banasa (Sidi Ali bou Djenoun), Lixus (Tchemmich, Larache), and Volubilis (Ksar Pharaoun). It involved the recording of new evidence and a more in-depth analysis of some materials already documented during the previous fieldwork seasons, in order to examine three key-themes: (1) the role of imported marble architectural decoration in Tingitana; (2) the adoption of decorative traditions that resumed pre-Roman (Punic and Hellenistic) legacies; (3) the creation of peculiar motifs attested only at local and provincial level.
Fieldwork at Sala and Banasa (2 days) was carried out to re-analyse in more detail some specimens of decoration for which we can recognize a closer adherence to the Roman official models. In particular, it was necessary to take more detailed measurements and photographs suitable for their publication. These architectural elements come from the capitolium at Sala and from the “maison à la mosaïque de Venus” at Banasa, respectively.

With regard to the evidence from Sala, the marble Corinthian capitals of Asiatic style found in the storehouse and inside one of the tabernae under the capitolium (Fig. 1a) represent a significant set of evidence for evaluating the presence of marble decoration in Tingitana. Apart from a few other elements from Lixus and Tingi, Sala appears to be a rather exceptional context for the quantity and heterogeneity of white and coloured marbles. It is also important to remark that the closest parallels for this type of Asiatic Corinthian capitals can be identified at Leptis Magna (temple of Rome and Augustus, and Hadrianic baths), all datable to within Hadrian’s reign (Pensabene 2001, 68-9, fig. 17; Bianchi 2009, 49-51, fig. 2a-f).

The Corinthian capitals with smooth leaves from the porticus of the capitolium (Fig. 1b), all made of local calcarenite, clearly attest to the intention of the carvers to reproduce a simplified version of the Romano-Carthaginian motifs diffused across North Africa. In this case, the model is represented by the Late Flavian architectural decoration from Rome, which was first adopted at Carthage, and then in the other main African centres during the second century AD (Pensabene 1986, 364-7). The dating of the capitolium to c. AD 120, as confirmed by epigraphic evidence (IAM Suppl., nos. 859-61), allows us to understand that certain decorative features – such as the presence of smooth leaves and the simplification of the abacus – were already introduced in the early second century. Therefore, they cannot always be regarded as a later “impoverishment” of the canonical Corinthian capitals (c. third to fourth century AD), as initially believed.

The western-style, Late Flavian capitals with acanthus mollis were also the model used by the stonemasons at Banasa for carving the Corinthian capitals placed at the entrance of the “maison à la mosaïque de Venus” (Fig. 1c). In this instance, the carving was of higher quality and no simplifications were introduced. For this reason, we can infer that the carvers were more deeply influenced by Roman art, and this was reflected in their know-how. It is worth remarking, however, that local variations can be identified as well: the thick astragal at the bottom of the capitals, decorated with an Ionic kymation, is a feature that cannot be found in the official forms at Rome or elsewhere across the Empire. When looking at the evidence from the rest of the province, we realize that such combination of official and local art is a recurring pattern.
Fig. 1. Corinthian capitals. A: Sala, Asiatic Corinthian capital (*tabernae under the capitolium*); B: Sala, Corinthian capital with smooth leaves (*porticus of the capitolium*); C: Banasa, Corinthian capital with acanthus mollis (“maison à la mosaïque de Venus”)

The research at Lixus (1 day) did not involve a direct study of architectural decoration, since all the specimens preserved at the site had already been recorded during two previous seasons in 2011 and 2012. However, it was necessary to undertake a general survey of the so-called “quartier des temples” on the top of the Tchemmich hill (Fig. 2), which has been the centre of academic debate in these last years. On the one hand, the preliminary results of the French-Moroccan “Mission Temples” would confirm the interpretation of the district as a series of sacred buildings dated to the Roman period (Brouquier-Reddé et al. 2006). In contrast, following a recent re-analysis by the Universitat de València, it was suggested that the complex should rather be interpreted as a palace of Juba II (Aranegui Gascó and Mar 2009; 2010). This latest hypothesis has been criticized on the basis of two main arguments: (1) the various inconsistencies noticeable in the plan drawn by the authors; (2) the chronological issues caused by the presence of Dragendorff 29 Hispanic *sigillata* inside a cistern obliterated when the complex was built, which would rather hint towards a dating not earlier than the Flavian period (Mugnai 2013, 168; Papi 2013, 804-7).

While we should not discard *a priori* the possibility that the complex might have been a palace indeed, the new survey of these structures has confirmed the problems mentioned above. Many details of the plan do not correspond to what the evidence shows: some of the doorways and staircases indicated in the drawing are non-existent; the space in front of the so-called “Temple F” cannot be interpreted as an open courtyard, given the presence of cocciopesto in various spots; “Temple F” itself is placed on a podium, and is not found at the same level of the surrounding *porticus*; etc. To sum up, this preliminary survey has shown that a new, detailed study of the district needs to be carried out in the future using a thorough methodology of investigation. The
information obtained from the analysis of the architectural decoration preserved at the site and in the museums at Tangier and Tétouan – Attic bases without plinth, single torus bases, Tuscan capitals, Ionic capitals of Punic-Hellenistic tradition, and Egyptian gorge cornices – should thus be combined with the data obtainable through the study of building techniques, masonry typology, architectural stratigraphy, and rectification of aerial photographs.

Finally, the research at Volubilis (5 days) aimed to achieve three goals. Firstly, it was required to carry out a general survey of the buildings already investigated in the previous years to take new measurements and photographs of their architectural decoration. In particular, the work was focused on the specimens belonging to the judicial basilica, the capitolium and annexed piazza, the arch of Caracalla, and the porticus along the decumanus maximus, which were repositioned on the top of columns and pilasters during various restoration works from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Afterwards, a part of the research was dedicated to a preliminary study of the documents kept in the local archive. Thanks to the initiative of the site curator, Mr Mustapha Atki, these materials are currently being digitized and will become fully available for research purposes shortly. In the meantime, it was possible to examine a first set of documents – mainly notebooks and excavation journals, containing notes, plans and sketches of archaeological works at Volubilis from the 1930s to the 1980s (labelled “fouilles et rapport Volubilis”). Given that no synthetic publication detailing
these results was ever published, and considering the lack of stratigraphic methodologies at the time of the first excavations during the French protectorate, it is undeniable that these documents represent a source of additional information. It goes without saying that more in-depth research will be needed to assess their full potential. However, the materials digitized so far can already provide interesting data for the analysis of select buildings: the typewritten notes and reports left by Raymond Thouvenot on his works in the palace of Gordianus are a case in point, just to cite one example. It is evident that any future study of urbanism, architecture, and architectural decoration at *Volubilis* – possibly as part of interdisciplinary, post-doctoral projects – should necessarily take into account this type of evidence.

The third goal of the research was to analyse the later specimens of ornament attested at the site, among which are some capitals labelled as “pseudo-impost”, found in a room of the palace of Gordianus, in the “thermes du nord”, and in the south-west district of the town. Some isolated specimens are also kept in the storehouse and *lapidarium*. Previous studies on these capitals have advanced either a dating to the pre-Roman (Mauretanian) period (Jodin 1987, 96-7), or to the Byzantine era, c. mid-fifth to early sixth century AD (Pensabene 2011, 254-7), although neither chronologies are accepted for the current study. A pre-Roman dating can be discarded judging by the features of the decorative motifs, which represent a later modification of canonical forms – such as those of the orthodox Corinthian capitals of the second century AD. On the other hand, the almost total absence of archaeological evidence at *Volubilis* datable to the fifth or sixth centuries AD would suggest that such a late chronology should be revised.

Thanks to the analysis carried out across the whole site, it is now evident that a smooth (undecorated) version of these capitals was employed in many buildings datable from the late second to the third century AD (e.g. the judicial basilica and various *domus* of the north-east district). Moreover, it seems that this shape was progressively modified through the use of more elaborated motifs, probably at some point towards the late third century, or even in the fourth century AD. Starting with simple decorations featuring a row of biconvex leaves (*Fig. 3a*), the final step of this production was likely represented by pseudo-impost capitals provided with a mixture of Corinthian-Ionic motifs, where the traditional acanthus is replaced by palm leaves (*Fig. 3b*). It is also worth observing that parallels (or prototypes?) for these motifs can be identified in some capitals from *Caesarea* in Algeria (Pensabene 1982, 66, pls. 66-7, nos. 191-2), and elsewhere in Spain (Domingo Magaña 2011, 120-1, nos. 11-3). Although more research needs to be undertaken, it is possible that a group of Corinthianizing capitals kept in the storehouse at *Volubilis* and in the
museum at Rabat can be dated to the same period as well (Fig. 3c). While the overall shape of the Corinthian capital is maintained, the decoration of their leaves and the upper portion of the kalathos are modified through the use of geometric motifs, whose origins are yet to be discovered.

**Fig. 3. Volubilis, Late Roman/Late Antique capitals. A: pseudo-impost capital with biconvex leaves (lapidarium); B: pseudo-impost capital with Corinthian-Ionic motifs (south-west district); C: Corinthianizing capital (lapidarium)**

**PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS**

Some of the materials from Sala and Banasa have been examined in the paper “Architectural decoration at Sala (Chellah) and in Mauretania Tingitana: Punic-Hellenistic legacies, Roman official art, and local motifs”, included in the volume of conference proceedings “De Africa Romaque – Merging Cultures across North Africa” (to be published in 2015 thanks to the financial contribution of the Society for Libyan Studies). The photographs and measurements recorded in September were specifically needed to improve the quality of the data presented in this article.

A second paper, entitled “At the edge of the Roman world: the Corinthian and composite capitals from Sala, Banasa, and Volubilis (Mauretania Tingitana)”, is currently in preparation and will be published by the end of 2015 as part of the proceedings of the conference “Decor – Linguaggio Architettonico Romano” (Università di Roma “La Sapienza”). In particular, the re-analysis of various materials at Volubilis is fundamental for the topic presented in the text.

Finally, as soon as the study on the pseudo-impost and Corinthianizing capitals from Volubilis is concluded, the results will be used for a paper to be submitted to the editor of Libyan Studies by the end of 2015. The paper will discuss the importance of these elements in the light of a broader North African context, also taking into account the analysis of their measurements to reconstruct the length-units employed by the carvers (Roman foot, Punic cubit, and Egyptian royal cubit).
REFERENCES


Niccolò Mugnai