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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE DISCOVERY IN THE TARHUNA AREA

MOHAMED SHABAN EL-BALAZI* · ATILIO MASTINO**

AFTER receiving the news of an attack on one of the archaeological sites in the Tarhuna area, a technical team of the Superintendency of Leptis Magna Antiquities was appointed to visit and check the site.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION (FIG. 1)

The site is located in the area of Ain Wif (The-nadassa) about 35 km west of Tarhuna city, and it can be reached via Tarhuna Sidi El Seid road, through a paved road branched from the main road known as the Faschia road.¹ The site itself

is situated on top of a hill known as Henscir Banis.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

Considering the recovered archaeological evidence, the site has been interpreted as a fortified farm, including the remains of a Gasr. The site also comprises the remains of a Roman oil-press, in addition to a Roman dam, approximately 15 long and 70 cm thick, which was constructed in the bed of the nearby valley. Furthermore, a mosaic pavement depict-



FIG. 1. Tarhuna and Henscir Banis location (map ESRI).

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¹ Coordinates of the site: Lat. 32° 15' 19.08" (N) Long. 13° 25' 0.084" (E) o, nella proiezione UTM (WGS84), fuso 33S, E: 350855.551, N: 3569834.310.



FIGS. 2-3. Views of the Gasr.

ing some images of the then everyday life has been discovered.

Due to its important geographical location on the caravan route and its proximity to the village of Ain Wif (Thenadassa), which was a

focal center for ancient trade caravans, the site experienced several phases of settling.

Its chronology most likely goes back to the 2nd, 3rd century AD, when region was in its highest of prosperity and expansion.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION
OF THE PALACE (TOWER-GASR)

Henscir (Banis) is one of the fortified towers that were built on top of a high hill (FIGS. 2-4) overlooking a plain area interspersed with some waterways and valley tributaries. This defensive tower is surrounded by a protective trench. The stone quarry is very close to the north of this tower (palace). At a distance of 100 meters, on the southern side, there are the remains of an olive press and the ruins of a villa whose floor mosaics suffered damage as it will be described later.

The tower was damaged by a heavy demolition machine, causing a distortion of the construction's features and partially wrecking its structural elements and several columns and capitals decorated with floral and animal motifs (FIGS. 5-9).

One of the tower rooms has a rectangular plan (7.20 m length, 2.50 m width 3 m height); the walls were built of well fined stones and use the tin, mud and a Roman mortar consisting of gypsum, lime and earth. The roof is



FIG. 4. Views of the Gasr.



FIG. 5. Architectural elements.



FIGS. 6-7. Architectural elements.



FIGS. 8-9. Architectural elements.

arched and at the room entry there is an arch built of small stones. On both sides (right and left) there are niches with different sizes large 1.50×1.50 m and 1×1.50 and 1 m deep, while the small one on the opposite side is of 50×50 cm and 20 cm deep. Some of them were violated. Perhaps this room was used as a storage place. Also there are some of small pottery tubes of uncertain function (they were maybe used for ventilation or for another purpose), but they are similar to the steam tubes transmission in

the sweating rooms inside the Roman baths. This room was looted, as some parts of the walls were removed, perhaps searching for treasures. Many elements of the tower (Gasr) were found scattered, such as capitals, columns, and decorations with floral and geometric motifs and fishes resembling sardine flocks, and this is not familiar in such areas.

About 100 m to the southwest of the tower down the hill, a mosaic floor was found, which perhaps belonged to a rural Roman villa.



FIG. 10. The mosaics room.

THE DISCOVERY OF A ROMAN MOSAIC FLOOR
WITH A LOCAL CHARACTER (FIGS. 10-19)

On the edge of the valley, south of the Henscir Banis Palace (Tower-Gasr), about 100 meters away, the hands of the abusers uncovered a part of a mosaic floor marked by a splendid and important local character. The discovered mosaic is a part of a wider mosaic floor that may be related to the main hall of a Roman villa which is still buried. The uncovered part of the room measures 5,20 m × 5,20 m (FIG. 10). The mosaic was made of large tesserae, bearing brown, yellow and black colors, representing geometric, animal, vegetal and human figures; moreover, three Latin words made of large tesserae were found, reading as follows: DIAMIA, ACILES, SARIA (FIGG. 11-13).

There are human figures depicting a scene of warriors with all their equipment, a circular shield, a short Roman sword, an arrow, and a woman carrying a child in her arms, in addition to a beautiful scene, probably representing Cupid, who was commonly portrayed in mosaic and fresco works; besides, there are animal figures, which show the daily life, and

the common hunting scenes of wild animals, given the presence of a horse, a horseman, and a hunting dog in front of its prey, the deer. The floor is also decorated with geometric designs inside squares. There are also geometric shapes for a door, columns, and a castle. Perhaps this work represents the Tower located at the top of the hill indicating its defensive character and probably identifying it as a watchtower.

The other image depicts a black man with local features entering a gabled entrance. The man appears naked, wearing what looks like a hat. The background is white and decorated with 3 flowers. The basket is filled with grapes and its dimensions are 50 cm × 40 cm. The man in the image is 35 cm tall. The overlapping forms of decoration consist of braids and geometrical designs aimed to obtain a 3D shape, made of large tesserae (FIG. 14).

This decorated pavement is followed by another floor pavement decorated with a large cup with two spiral handles filled with grape juice with a semi-triangular base, the whole scene is framed by braids and the panel is surrounded by two large grape leaves with spiral climbing branches, as well as a winged figure of a Victoria with African. All the characters



FIGS. 11-12. The mosaic pavement.



FIGS. 13-14. The mosaic pavement.



FIG. 15. The mosaic pavement.

are wearing loose clothes, each one of a different color.

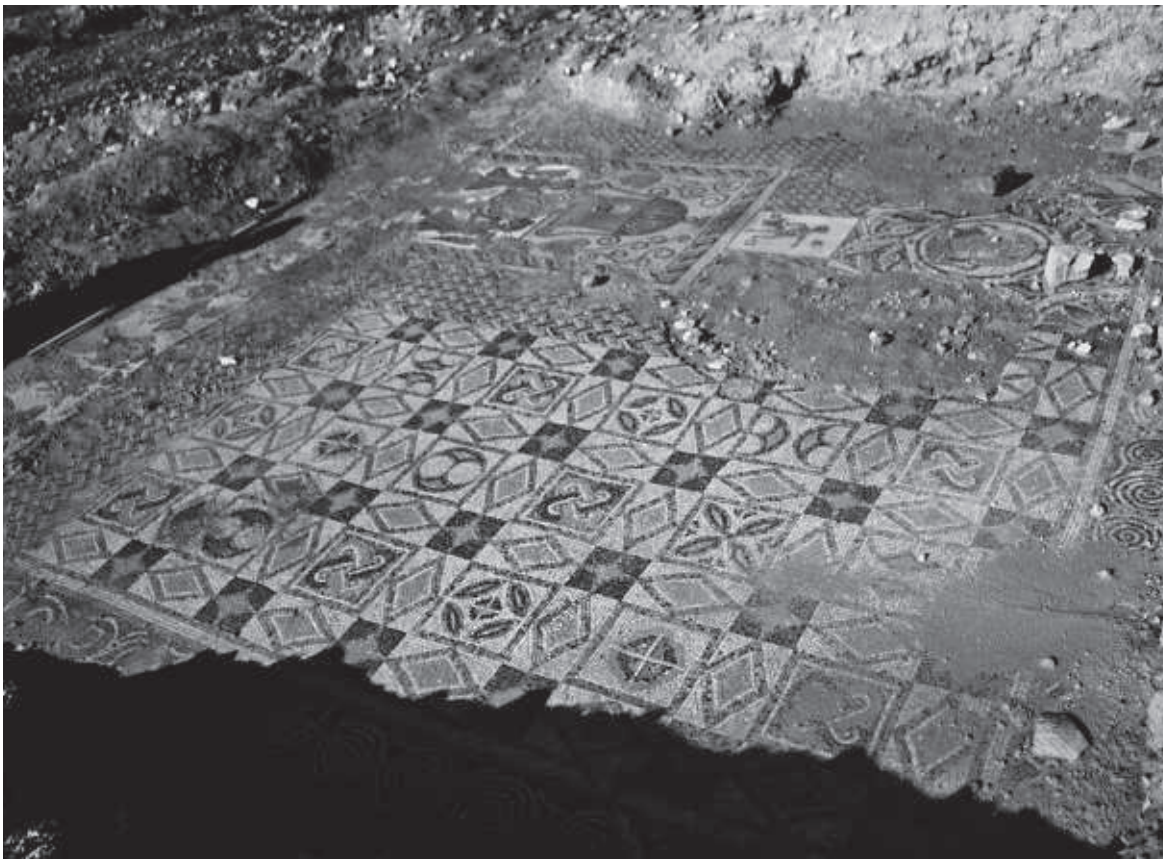
The two women (FIG. 15) have black hair with braids and wear circular earrings and hold a laurel wreath, symbol of victory. Two palm fronds hang down. The painting takes the shape of a facade, and is framed by the laurel wreath with something unclear in the middle. This image has been damaged and removed in the middle.

The rest of the floor is decorated with complex overlapping motifs, where each shape differs from the other taking the form of blooming flowers or tridimensional braids. This pavement requires a throughout archaeological investigation in order to be properly documented; it would be advisable to collect and restore its tesserae or even to remove it and transfer it into a safe place to extensively study it, since such kind of pavements are rare in these contexts and highlight the richness of this area belonging to the Emporia region of Tripolitania.

MOHAMED SHABAN EL-BALAZI



FIG. 16. The mosaic pavement.



FIGS. 17-18. The mosaic pavement.



FIG. 19. The mosaic pavement.

NOTA EPIGRAFICA

Quel che rimane della villa romana di Henscir Banis, col suo grande mosaico mitologico (almeno 5,20 m × 5,20), va localizzato a 35 km a occidente di Tarhuna, in località Ain Wif, Thenadassa, come ora documentato dai colleghi della Superintendency of Leptis Magna Antiquities (sulla strada Tarhuna-Sidi El Seid, ben collocata sui percorsi carovanieri principali dell'area a Sud di Oea-Tripoli (FIG. 1).

Il monumento è stato presentato nelle pagine precedenti in questa sede da Mohamed Shaban El-Balazi.

Il mosaico presenta una serie di scene mitologiche in parte danneggiate che sono accompagnate da tre sole didascalie epigrafiche già note in letteratura (per quanto erroneamente riferite ad un'area sconosciuta della provincia di Creta e Cirenaica, probabilmente a causa dell'incerta situazione militare della Libia negli ultimi anni).

Il passaggio di grossi mezzi agricoli o militari ha danneggiato il pavimento musivo in più punti.

Manfred Clauss aveva segnalato la foto in EDCS 01271, EDCS-ID: EDCS-80200105, con la seguente trascrizione:

Diamia. L'editore aveva inserito il documento musivo tra i *tituli possessionis*, forse con riferimento al nome della proprietaria della villa.

Le altre due didascalie erano state unificate sotto il numero EDCS-01272, EDCS-ID: EDCS-80200106,

² Vd. C. CALLEN KING, *Achilles on the Field of Sexual Politics*, in *Subversive Subjects: Reading Marguerite Yourcenar*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004, p. 252; P. J.

sempre erroneamente dalla provincia Creta et Cyrenaica e da località incerta. Ancora una volta veniva presentata una fotografia.

Soria A(c)hil(l)es

Il testo andrebbe collocato da un lato tra i *tituli possessionis* (*Soria*) e dall'altro tra i *tituli sacri* (*A(c)hil(l)es*).

Preferiamo proporre la seguente edizione che, nell'ordine, sembra presentare alcuni personaggi mitologici. Il primo nome non è certo:

1. *Soria* vel *Sobia* (FIGG. 20-21)
2. *Aciles* per *Ac(h)il(l)es* (FIG. 20)
3. *Diamia* forse per *D(e)i(d)amia* (?) (FIG. 22)

La scena sembra quella – notissima ai pittori greci come sappiamo da Plinio xxxv, 134 a proposito del pittore Ateneione e Pausania I, 22, 5 per Polignoto – ambientata nell'isola di Sciuro, isola collocata ad Est rispetto all'Eubea, alla corte del re dei Dolopi Licomede: Achille, che in realtà dovrebbe avere i capelli color biondo fuoco (oppure rossi), si presenta agli Achei travestito da donna, con sullo sfondo le mura di Sciuro, ma nascondendosi tra le altre figlie del re in vesti femminili; fino a quel momento aveva voluto evitare di partecipare alla guerra di Troia, dove la madre Teti (sposa di Peleo) prevedeva che egli sarebbe morto, a seguito di una affidabile profezia.²

Da destra verso sinistra: Odisseo squilla la tromba scuotendo i soldati; Achille, *virginis habitum occultatum*, travestito da Pirra ("la rossa") figlia di una Amazzone o Issa o Cercisera, balza impetuosamente afferrando le armi rivelandosi tra lo sgoimento delle fanciulle: impugna una lancia con punta ferrata presa tra i doni offerti dai greci (la versione tradizionale lo vede impugnare una spada). Tra gli oggetti rappresentati non manca una corta spada romana. La scena è ben nota nella pittura pompeiana, nei mosaici ad es. di Caesarea, Tipasa e Sparta, su numerosi sarcofagi, tra i quali emergono quello Stroganoff e quello capitolino (anche sulla Thensa e sul rilievo capitolini).

Deidamia gli offre il figlio Neottolemo-Pirro che forse lo seguirà a Troia. Una compagna ha il fuso per filare la lana in mano, *Soria* o *Sobia* (se la lettura è esatta) non *Saria* o *Sabia* (per *Sabia* vd. ad es. *CIL* VIII 15275, Thubursicum Bure; *CIL* II 3216 g Iniesta, Hispania citeriore; *CIL* V 1359 = *AE* 2007, 264, Aquileia; R. SYLVESTRE, *Les graffiti sur céramique d'Aventicum* (Avenches), Avenches 2017, 178, Aventicum, ecc.), potrebbe essere una delle altre figlie di Licomede, compagna di *Deidamia*.

Seguono altri soldati, magari gli Achei (Diomede?) che avevano accompagnato Ulisse; due vittorie

HESLIN, *The Transvestite Achilles: Gender and Genre in Statius' Achilleid*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 37.



FIG. 20. EDCS-01271.



FIG. 21. N. 1: Sobia e Aciles.

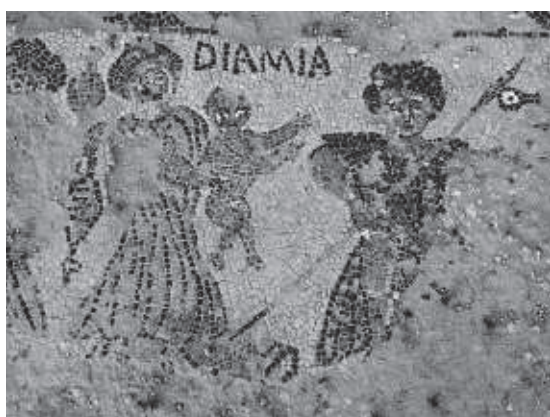


FIG. 22. N. 3: Diamia.



FIG. 23. Deidamia da Hispania Epigraphica.

alate (una africana) portano una ghirlanda forse inscritta (FIG. 15).

Il confronto immediato è con il mosaico *Corpus de Inscriptiones Latinas de Andalusia*, 3,1 250 = J. GOMEZ PALLARÈS, *Edición y comentario de las inscripciones sobre mosaico de Hispania. Inscripciones no cristianas*, Roma 1997, 1 = EDCS-10200083 di Ilurgo (Santisteban del Puerto) in Hispania Citerior: *Pyrra / filius / T(h)etidis / [C]irce Deidamia / Moedia (M[e]d[e]a?) ist[a]e enim omnes virgines qu[a]e sunt mulieres filiae sunt solis nam [Lis]ides filius Priami*. (FIG. 23)

Escluderei che *DIAMIA* (che abbiamo interpretato *D(e)i(d)amia*) sia da intendersi *DIANA* o *DIAMA*, come pure a Praeneste, dove è ben documentato nelle ciste funerarie di III secolo a.C. anche il nome *Aciles*: in *CIL* XIV 4105 = I,2² 563 = *ILLRP* 1198, *EDR* 122404 = EDCS-17100097 (ultimi decenni IV secolo

a.C.): *Iuno / Iovos / Mercuris / Hercles / Apol(l)o / Leiber / Victoria / Menerva / Mars / Diama / Fortuna* (su tabula bronzea).

Aciles sta per *Ac(h)il(l)es (A(c)hil(l)es* in *Clauss-Slaby*): Vd. alcune iscrizioni repubblicane, *CIL* I, 2² 3598 b1, EDCS-26700392, Volcei (*Aciles K XXIV IX urn(arum) / IX urn(arum) LXXIIS / K XXII*); *CIL* XIV 4106 = I,2² 563, *EDR*122405 (*Micos, Aciles, Victoria, Fercles, Diesptr, Iuno, Mircurios, Iacor, Aiaz., Iventus*); *CIL* XIV 4109 = I,2² 567 = *EE* IX p. 503, *EDR*122410, Praeneste: *Tondrus, Sociolucus, Creisita, [H]elena, Aciles, Simos, Oreste[s]*.

Data: III secolo d.C.

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