ARCHITECTURAL DECORATION IN MAURETANIA TINGITANA (MOROCCO)

- FIELDWORK REPORT, MAY 2013 -

SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF ROMAN STUDIES

ACCOUNT OF RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN

The research project for which the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies has provided this grant was carried out in Morocco from 3rd to 20th May 2013. Two archaeological sites were investigated on this occasion: Banasa (Sidi Ali bou Djenoun) and Volubilis (Ksar Pharaoun). The research is part of a broader project which involves the study of architectural decoration from other major sites of the Roman province of Mauretania Tingitana: Lixus (Larache); Sala (Chellah, Rabat); Thamusida (Sidi Ali ben Ahmed, Kénitra); Zilil (Dchar Jdid); and Tingi (Tangier).

As laid out in the original funding application, the methodology involved the recording of all in situ specimens of ornament through the use of pre-arranged sheets. Measurements and photographs were taken for each decoration, and the positioning in the site was indicated on the map. Photographs and plans are now being processed through Adobe Photoshop® CS5 and AutoCAD® 2011 software. The next step of the research will be the creation of a typology and catalogue, which will also include the evidence from the rest of the province. The catalogue will also detail the existence of parallels in the other provinces of the Empire, particularly in North Africa (Mauretania Caesariensis, Africa Proconsularis, and Egypt) and in southern Spain (Baetica).

At Banasa it was possible to record 155 specimens of architectural decoration, including capitals, bases and entablatures. These are rather homogeneously distributed across the site: 40 specimens come from within the forum area (temple with seven cellae, piazza with porticus, and basilica); 48 from the N and NW residential districts; 45 from the central district (temple along the decumanus, baths, and other buildings); finally, 19 are located in the S district.

We cannot exclude that, when the site was originally excavated in the 1930s and 1940s, some more decorative elements were found. However, some of these might have been lost, while some others have been moved elsewhere: for instance one marble capital is currently located in the Andalusian garden of the Kasbah des Oudayas at Rabat, while two others are in the Musée Archéologique at Rabat. The thick vegetation was also an issue that had to be overcome during the
recording process. Therefore, it is possible that a few specimens might have eluded the recording. For this reason, a second brief visit to the site (1 or 2 days) will be carried out after September 2013 to check if any other decoration can be located.

As to the architectural ornament recognized, the artistic motifs adopted at Banasa are rather heterogeneous (Fig. 1). The dating of these specimens is still to be verified, but it is likely that it covers a time frame from the early 1st century AD up to Late Antiquity. Some of the earliest ornament is represented by Tuscan capitals (Fig. 1A). In the 2nd century AD, we find decoration that tends to imitate, with different levels of accuracy, the models of Roman official art diffused all over North Africa (Fig. 1B-C). Peculiar local creations are represented by foliate or pseudo-Corinthian capitals (Fig. 1D), and by pseudo-lotus capitals (Fig. 1E), perhaps datable between the 2nd and 3rd century AD. Finally, some capitals which imitate the shape of the Constantinopolitan impost-capitals (Fig. 1F), also diffused through the Coptic art in Egypt, are the latest decoration attested at Banasa, likely datable to the 5th – 6th century AD.

Fig. 1. Architectural decoration from Banasa. A: Tuscan column capital (forum area); B: Corinthian column capital (NW district); C: Corinthian pilaster capital (central district, temple along the decumanus maximus); D: foliate or pseudo-Corinthian column capital (central district, W baths); E: pseudo-lotus column capital (NW district); F: column impost-capital (SW district)
The investigation at Volubilis was more selective. During the previous two missions undertaken at this site (June and September 2012), it was possible to record the evidence from the monumental district (basilica, forum, macellum, and capitolium with annexed porticus), from the N baths, from the arch of Caracalla, and from the gates of the city walls. This year’s research was specifically dedicated to the “Temple B”, to the porticus along the decumanus maximus, and to the so-called “palace of Gordianus”. The analysis has not taken into account the decoration coming from private buildings (i.e. the numerous domus in the NE and SW districts), for it would have been impossible to record all these pieces, given the limited time available for carrying out the fieldwork. However, the sample collected so far is entirely reliable for reconstructing the most common decorative patterns across the site.

The total number of specimens recorded is 396, 111 of which were documented during this year’s fieldwork. These latter are distributed as follows: 6 come from the “Temple B”; 16 from the porticus; and 88 belong to the “palace of Gordianus”. As for Banasa, these specimens include capitals, bases and entablatures. Luckily, Volubilis did not have the same issues of vegetation growing wild within the site; therefore, the recording was quicker and none of these specimens were overlooked. However, some of these pieces have been moved to the lapidarium and to the Musée Archéologique at Rabat, and their exact provenance is sometimes unknown.

For what regards the decorative motifs diffused at Volubilis, the town developed a very personalized and vibrant artistic taste throughout the period of Roman domination and beyond (Fig. 2). One of the most recognizable features is the continuity of Hellenistic decorative traditions, documented by the presence of prickly acanthus leaves in the majority of Corinthian capitals across the site (Fig. 2A). The production of these specimens started quite likely around the mid 1st century AD and remained unaltered until the 3rd century AD. The canonical, western Corinthian capital that represents the quintessential of Roman official art is also present here, though it is generally a simplified version with smooth leaves (Fig. 2B). Perhaps the type of decoration which shows the closest parallels with the official art of the Empire is constituted by some Ionic capitals (Fig. 2C) whose chronology, again, covers the first three centuries of Roman provincial dominion. Finally, as for Banasa, Late Antiquity is characterized by the adoption of the impost-capitals introduced from Constantinople. Here at Volubilis two different versions can be recognized: the first features a simplified, undecorated shape (Fig. 2D); the second, on the other hand, is decorated with motifs that somehow recall those of the Corinthian and Ionic capitals but which find no direct parallels elsewhere (Fig. 2E).
Presented here are select architectural decorations from Volubilis, illustrating the variety of designs and styles employed during the late Roman period. These images highlight the rich decorative traditions that flourished in this region, offerings insight into the artistic sensibilities of the time. Further examination of these finds is forthcoming, and additional details will be shared during the upcoming conference “De Africa Romaque – Merging Cultures across North Africa” at the University of Leicester in late October 2013. This gathering is generously supported by the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.

In the meantime, select ornaments from Volubilis and Banasa are being employed to underscore the similarities with Sala. Subsequent presentations will include materials from other sites explored during the fieldwork, as well as items collected during visits to the main archaeological museums of Morocco.
ACCOUNT OF EXPENDITURES

The following table details all the expenditures for the period spent in Morocco to carry out the field research (3rd to 20th May 2013):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of expenditures</th>
<th>Date of payment</th>
<th>Amount (local currency)</th>
<th>Amount (GBP)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ryanair flight Pisa-Fez (03/05/2013) and Fez-Pisa (20/05/2013)</td>
<td>11/04/2013</td>
<td>€ 163.78</td>
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<td>Car rent from 03/05/2013 to 20/05/2013 (17 days)</td>
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<td>Gite d’Hotes à l’Ombre des Oliviers at Volubilis (8 nights): including breakfast, lunch and dinner</td>
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**Total of expenditures: £1,067.96**

Grant provided by the Society for Libyan Studies: £700.00

Grant provided by the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies: £300.00

Leicester, 24th June 2013

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