

Sbeitla archaeological site

The **archaeological site of Sbeitla** , a remnant of the ancient *Sufetula* , is an archaeological site in central-western Tunisia , located in Sbeitla in the governorate of Kasserine . It has ten of the listed monuments of Kasserine Governorate .

The site suffered serious damage, following the earthquake of 365 and due to voluntary destruction in 647 , after the violent battle between Muslims and Byzantines who refused to abandon this strategic site ¹ .

Summary

Story
Buildings
<div>Public buildings</div> <div><div>Capitol</div><div>Forum</div><div>Large public thermal baths</div><div>Forts</div><div>Theater</div><div>Amphitheater</div><div>Aqueduct Bridge</div></div>
<div>Political buildings</div> <div><div>Arch of Antoninus Pius</div><div>Arch of Diocletian</div></div>
<div>religious buildings</div> <div><div>Bellator Basilica</div><div>Chapel of Jucundus</div><div>Basilica of Vitalis</div><div>Basilica of Saints Sylvain and Fortunatus</div><div>Servus Church</div><div>anonymous temple</div></div>
<div>Other landmarks</div>
References
Bibliography
See as well

History

Sbeitla archaeological site



Plan of the archaeological site of Sbeitla.

Location

Country	<div><div></div><div>Tunisia</div></div>
Contact information	<div><div>35° 14' 26" north, 9° 07' 11" east</div></div>

Geolocation on the map: [Tunisia](#)

Sbeitla archaeological site

The archaeological evidence of the site all date back to the 1ST CENTURY , but traces of an earlier human settlement exist in the immediate surroundings.

The city was founded by the Romans , under the Flavian dynasty , probably in the second half of the 1ST century 2 . The Roman armies have just pacified the region then in the grip of the attacks of the Moors presented as the true barbarians of Africa 3 , and lands are allocated to the veterans who can thus protect the borders from foreign incursions. This is how the towns of *Sufetula* and *Cillium* (current Kasserine) were born, 35 kilometers apart. Located halfway between the north and the south of the province of Africa , in Byzacène , the city of *Sufetula* is experiencing significant economic and urban development. The monuments, which can still be visited, testify to this: the houses, the forum , the temples, the thermal baths , etc. The city then serves as a crossroads and commercial and agricultural center. Its economy is essentially based on agriculture , and in particular on the cultivation of olive trees for the production of oil .

The city becomes a colony , after having been a municipality 4 , with an administrative organization modeled on the classical Roman system. From the 2ND century

, the city had a curator , a sort of financial controller sent by Rome. It is moreover *Sufetula* who provides the first example of a city curator (a certain Aelius Rusticus) under the reign of Septimius Severus .

In the first quarter of the 4TH century , Sufetula converted to Christianity like the rest of the Roman Empire , after Emperor Constantine instituted Christianity as the state religion. It does not escape the quarrels linked to the schismatic currents experienced by the Church (notably Donatism). But these disappear with the arrival of the Vandals in the 5TH century . The Christians of the city are then persecuted, in particular in 484 , with the case of a bishop named Praesidius. The presence of several centers of production of olive oil and ceramics near *Sufetula* , whose activity is certainly dated from the end of the 5TH century and the beginning of the 6TH century , suggests that the economy and the arts, however, continue to develop.

The Byzantines , on the reconquest of Africa under the reign of Justinian , settled in *Sufetula* with a garrison and fortified many monuments, as evidenced by the houses at the entrance to the site. Patrice Grégoire indeed chose the city as his place of residence and set up his staff there . With the approach of the Arab armies from Tripolitania , Gregory proclaimed his independence from the Byzantine Empire in 646 5 .

Knowledge of the attacks of the Muslim army is essentially based on Arab oral tradition. In 647 , *Sufetula* was taken 6 and its inhabitants fled the city in large numbers, perhaps taking refuge in the amphitheater of ancient Thysdrus, present-day El Jem . The city is destroyed but not completely abandoned as evidenced by recent excavations.



The excavation of the site began at the end of the 19TH century , ⁱⁿ particular with the excavations of Lieutenant Marius Boyé which began on May 30 , 1883 ⁷ , followed by a second series from 22 to June 29 , 1884 ⁸ . Then, the site underwent major excavation and restoration work between 1906 and 1921 ⁹ , followed by others until 1963 ¹⁰ .

Despite these many works, only a third of the site has been restored and many monuments remain pending, such as the anonymous temple, the arch of Septimius Severus and the amphitheater. It is marked by the loss of the monuments listed in 1967 by the archaeologist Noël Duval , including the mausoleum, the basilica of Saints Sylvain and Fortunat, the hill of ashes and the tombs from the Christian period ¹⁰ .

Buildings

The current site covers about twenty hectares but the ancient city probably occupied about fifty hectares. It is installed on a plateau near springs which are still exploited, some of which supply the city of Sfax , and stone quarries still in operation .

From the start, *Sufetula* is divided into rectangular islets separated by paved streets under which runs a system of pipes for drinking water and sewers for the collection of waste water .

The site has not yet been fully excavated but the monuments are numerous and date from the Roman period (forum, baths, theatre, etc.) or the Byzantine period (churches). It is not possible to attribute with certainty monuments to the Vandal period, for lack of texts attesting to it, or to the first Islamic period.

Public buildings

Capitol

The capitol, the central element of any Roman city, is made up of three separate temples, dedicated to the capitoline triad Jupiter , Juno and Minerva ¹¹ , constituting the religious center of the city. They form a homogeneous and spectacular ensemble of classical form in Roman times, built on podiums separated at the base by corridors. Each temple is preceded by a portico of four columns, supporting a pediment , and surrounded by a false colonnade. The capitol is accessed by stairs on the side temples, the platform in front of the central temple can thus serve as a tribune.



Partial view of the archaeological site of Sbeitla.



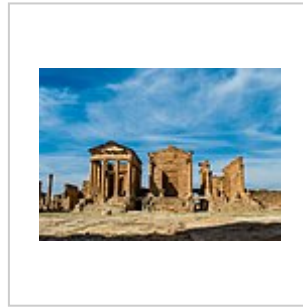
Capitoline Triad : Jupiter, Juno and Minerva.



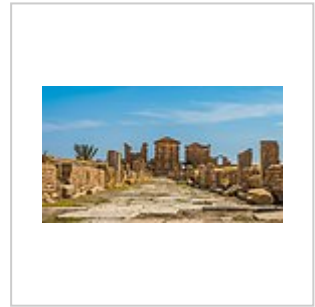
Distant view of the capitol.



Temple of Juno through the Arch of Antoninus Pius.



Capitol temples.



View of the capitol from the rear.

Forum

The Roman forum, rectangular in shape bounded by a wall of about 70 by 67 meters, is a central square of about 34 by 37 meters, paved with limestone slabs and surrounded on three sides by colonnades supporting the roofing of the porticoes. The columns, thirteen in number to the south-east and fifteen to the sides, were originally surmounted by Corinthian - type capitals, for a total height of around 5.50 metres.



Sbeitla Forum.

The gallery, which borders the square on both sides, is six meters wide and ends at the level of the temples with niches.

From this gallery, there is access to a series of small rooms four to five meters wide.

Large public thermal baths

It is a building with a fairly large surface whose plan is characterized by its irregularity because it has no main axis. The monument is double with a set of rooms corresponding to the summer baths and another more modest one for the winter baths; both are separated by an intermediate space corresponding to the entrance halls and the palaestra. The visitor enters the building through an entrance door framed by two columns and opening onto a vestibule where, on the opposite wall, is the base of a statue bearing an honorary inscription in the name of Carpentius. .



Palaestra of the great thermal baths.

On the right, he accesses a first room most likely used as a cloakroom; this is followed by a second room from which one enters an open-air palaestra of about 27 by 17 meters, surrounded by a portico on all four sides and paved with mosaics with geometric patterns.

The palaestra overlooks the summer baths formed by the large frigidarium divided into two large rooms, each with a swimming pool at its end; one of the two rooms overlooks two others, probably tepidaria, of which a double floor with brick pillars supports the concrete floor as well as terracotta hot air ducts in the partitions of the walls.

These last rooms overlook the caldarium, classically cross-shaped, with a square space in the center, two rectangular niches on the sides and a semicircular exedra in the center. The winter thermal complex is accessible for its part by the cloakroom which overlooks a frigidarium with two

square rooms and a single swimming pool at the end; the latter has niches on the three sides probably intended for statues, a set of rooms forming the tepidarium parallel to the frigidarium, then the cruciform caldarium with a rectangular space in the center and three pools, two of which are rectangular on the sides and one semi- circular in the axis.

Forts

The forts are enclosures without doors which were accessed by ladders. They served as a refuge for the inhabitants. The interior is divided into rooms and has a well to ensure the supply of water; three remain today, two of which were excavated after 1945 and restored ¹.

Theater

Located on the edge of the wadi, in the center-east of the city, the bleachers of the theater were restored in the 2010s and the raised columns stand out against the hollow.

Amphitheater

The amphitheater is a structure dedicated to the underprivileged population ¹², located to the northwest of the site. It has not yet been completely excavated and all its secrets have not yet been revealed ¹³.

Aqueduct Bridge

The aqueduct bridge, located on the Sbeitla wadi, is about fifty meters long. It is anchored in the rock and rests on three central piles. It was consolidated and fairly extensively overhauled during work undertaken from 1907 to 1911 ¹³.

Political buildings

Arch of Antoninus Pius

The central door of the triumphal arch has two right legs pierced by side windows. The whole is decorated with four columns, each resting on a pedestal. Below the side bays are two niches probably intended for sculptures. The arch is surmounted by an architrave with three bands above which an upper floor bears a dedication of 139 to Antoninus Pius and his two adopted sons ¹⁴. The arch allows access to the forum by four steps.

Arch of Diocletian

Located to the southeast of the city and restored between 1910



Plan des grands thermes de Sbeitla

Map of the great thermal baths.



View of the theatre.



Aqueduct bridge.



Arch of Antoninus Pius.

and 1911 [≈], the arch of Diocletian represents, with the three temples, the most admired monument of Sbeitla. It is part of a



Arch of Diocletian.

rectangle of 12.15 meters by 6.85, thus forming a monumental door with an opening of more than five meters, framed by two thick uprights, each comprising a niche; they are preceded by a pedestal supporting two pilasters placed on two Corinthian columns.

The arch has a massive appearance with a rustic decoration surmounted by an inscription placed on the external face; we learn there that it was dedicated to the emperors of the first ^{century} tetrarchy set up by Diocletian at the end of the 3RD to face the barbarian invasions.

Religious buildings

Bellator Basilica

The so-called Basilica of Bellator, built on public land in the courtyard of an earlier pagan building, served as the Catholic Cathedral of Sufetula. The basilica has undergone several architectural alterations; it is accessed by two side doors, 35 meters long and 15 meters wide. The building has three naves separated by two rows of eight pairs of columns. At both ends of the central nave, the basilica has two apses, one of which was previously an entrance door. For reasons of liturgical use, the altar initially located in the middle of the central nave, was offset from the side of one of the apses while the apse opposite housed graves. Along the side walls of the columns, of which only the bases are preserved, served to cover the aisles of the cross vaults. Along with its annexes and the Chapel of Jucundus, the Basilica of Bellator is part of an episcopal group serving as a religious center for the Christian community.



Basilica of Bellator and its dependencies.

Chapel of Jucundus

The chapel of Jucundus was originally the baptistry of a rectangular basilica, with doors on three sides and an apsidole on the fourth. The baptismal font has a rather particular shape, with two staircases extending it and giving it an ovoid plan. After the construction of another installation, the baptistry, which had become useless, was transformed into a chapel, most probably in honor of Bishop Jucundus, head of the Catholic clergy in the ^{5th} CENTURY, whose remains are buried in the chapel.



Baptistry of the Church of Vitalis.

Basilica of Vitalis

The so-called Basilica of Vitalis, built as a result of the need for a larger space for the Catholic community, forms with the Basilica of Bellator a "double church" of which other examples exist in Africa and Western Europe. Measuring about fifty meters long by 25 meters wide and accessible by four side doors, this building has five naves with eleven bays separated by double columns

recognizable by their bases.

The central nave has two apses at both ends, one of which, accessible by a small circular staircase, housed an altar in the centre; the second apse, accessible by a wide staircase serving as a presbyterium , accommodated a bench for the priests. This apse overlooks two side rooms which led to the baptistery behind the apse.

The baptistery, whose architecture and shape of the tank are similar to those of the chapel of Jucundus, is richly decorated with a cross at the bottom and on the sides, fleurons on the vertical walls, a laurel wreath on the rim and an inscription recalling that the vat had been offered following a wish by Vitalis and Cardela.

Basilica of Saints Sylvain and Fortunatus

The Basilica of Saints Silvanus and Fortunatus , located 600 meters southwest of the temples, is 25 meters long by twenty meters wide. The walls are composed at the base of freestone, several of which have epitaphs , borrowed from the necropolis within which the basilica is built. The building is accessible by stairs leading to an interior composed of five naves, separated by columns and pillars, with six bays, the fourth of which is deeper and framed by four groups of four marble bases . The floor is paved with two levels of mosaics with funerary inscriptions. On the floor of the central nave, an ex-voto dedicated to the martyrs Sylvain and Fortunatus gives this church a role of "martyrium" and place of pilgrimage. The semi-circular apse has a collective bench for the priests called a *synthronos* . To the left of the apse, a rectangular room housing several burials with epitaphs dates back to the reign of Justinian.



Church of Servus.



Church of the Martyrs.

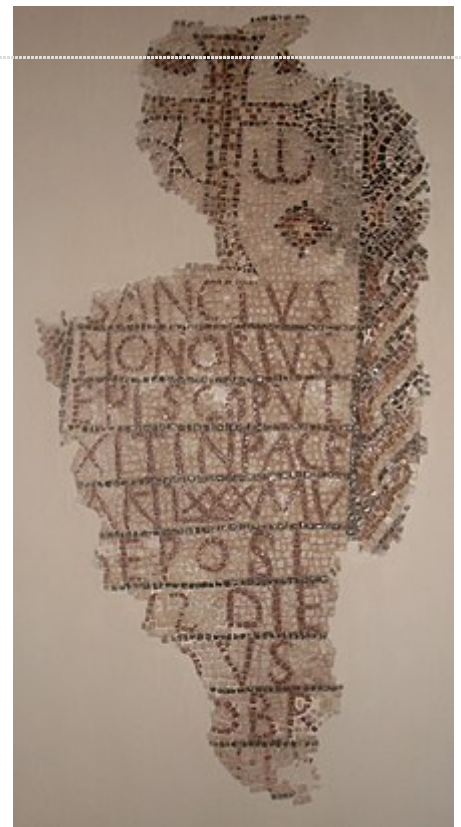
Servus Church

The church of the priest Servus, built in the courtyard of an old pagan temple of which only the bases of a wall and a square cella of 8.80 meters on each side have been preserved, is very degraded. Built

transversely, it has five naves with, at the bottom, an apse recognized only by its foundations in which four sarcophagi are visible, one of which is that of the priest Servus recognizable by his epitaph. The baptistery of the church was installed in the middle of the cella of the temple.

The church, dedicated according to inscriptions found under the altar to Saints Gervais and Protais as well as Tryphon , is accessible by three doors at the level of the facade, of which only one side door has been restored.

The interior has three naves with six bays which were separated by double colonnades of which some bases or sections of columns have been preserved. The initially semi-circular and then rectangular apse is preceded by a corridor intended to accommodate the choir



Mosaic of Bishop Honorius.

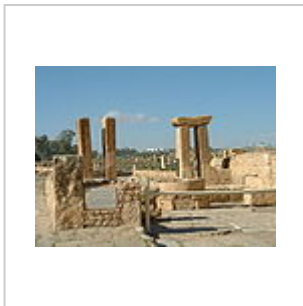
and the altar . The chapel of Bishop Honorius, located about three kilometers outside the site, could be part of an ancient village or a farm. It has three naves with four bays separated by double colonnades. The importance of this chapel lies in its mosaics, two of which are on display at the Bardo National Museum : one adorned the tomb of Bishop Honorius, the other which was found under the site of the altar is a gemmed cross surrounded by foliage.

Anonymous Temple

A small prostyle ¹⁵ tetrastyle temple is located to the north of the site, opposite the building of the seasons. Given the destruction of its facade, we do not know to which deity it was dedicated.

Other monuments

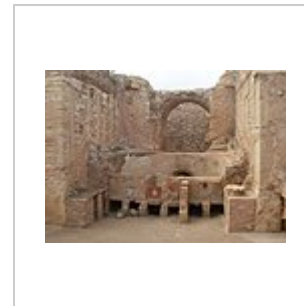
- building of the seasons
- Arch of Septimius Severus
- Fountains
- Oil mills



Oil presses.



Public cistern.



Thermal baths.

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See also

- [Roman Africa](#)
- [List of listed monuments in the governorate of Kasserine](#)

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