

Early Medieval Volubilis: The Archaeology of a Berber Town

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Abstract: This article presents new evidence on the medieval history of the Moroccan city Walīla, the UNESCO site of Volubilis from excavations in four areas of the medieval town conducted by a Moroccan-British team (INSAP and UCL) between 2000-2005 and 2018-2019. The Roman city continued to thrive after the departure of the Roman administration in 285, before being abandoned after an earthquake in the early fifth century. This first abandonment was short-lived and by the late sixth century, the site was partially re-occupied by Berber groups. The scattered housing units of the Berber town were very different to the earlier Roman town, but this was still a substantial settlement. In the late seventh or early eighth century, a new extra-mural quarter was established over a city midden. The housing and finds assemblages were very different from those of the Berber settlement, and there were large numbers of Islamic coins. This quarter which we interpret as an extra-mural settlement of Arabs was destroyed mid-century. The coming of Idrīs I in the late eighth century was marked by the construction of a hammam and headquarters outside the city walls and a major expansion of the city. The excavations provide tantalising evidence on the houses and lifeways of different communities, new and old, as the city developed from a Berber town to a bustling Idrisid city. This city came to an end in the mid-ninth century, and the site was re-occupied briefly once more in the Merinid period (fourteenth century) by a series of large walled compounds. Walīla therefore provides a corrective to simple urban histories of foundation, occupation and abandonment, and instead provides an example of what might be described as an intermittent urbanism which peaks in the early Roman period (Ist-IVth c.), the early medieval period (VIth-IXth c.) and the Merinid period (XIVth c.).

Keywords: Volubilis, Walīla, Abbasid, Berber, Awraba, Merinid, Urbanism.

The town of Walīla, Roman Volubilis, played a significant and often overlooked role in the early medieval period as a Berber centre, the probable locale of an Umayyad or Abbasid garrison, and the capital of Idrīs I, the founder of the first *shurafā* dynasty in Morocco. It is the only site in Morocco – and the Maghreb more generally – where excavations have uncovered substantial evidence of eighth-century urbanism.¹ Widescale excavations by classical archaeologists since the 1890s have produced medieval material from across the site, the largest corpus of medieval finds in the Maghreb, much of which remains unstudied and unpublished. As such, it provides an exceptional opportunity to investigate the nature of a Berber town and its transformation into, for a short time, the base of a new Arab-Islamic state.

1. For an overview of early Islamic North Africa, Corisande Fenwick, “From Africa to Ifrīqiya: Settlement and Society in Early Medieval North Africa (650-800),” *al-Masāq* 25, 1 (2013): 9-33 and Corisande Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa: A New Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

A joint excavation by INSAP-UCL between 2000 and 2005 concentrated on the western part of the Roman city, and an area immediately west of the walls. Its final publication in French appeared in 2018.² A new series of campaigns by the same two institutions, directed by the authors, is now underway, again explicitly aimed at the medieval city, examining both a site within the walls, and another just outside the main northwest gate.³ The new project takes a holistic approach to Islamic Walīla by combining the excavation of different zones in the medieval town with scientific analysis of the largely unstudied medieval finds in the site archive. It combines multiple techniques – excavation, GIS, palaeobotany, zooarchaeology and bioarchaeological analysis – to reconstruct the urban development of a North African town in the Islamic period and to understand the diet, nutrition, health, lifestyle, origins and mobility of its medieval inhabitants. Equally, it seeks to train Moroccan and British students collectively in the latest archaeological techniques and to foster and encourage a new generation of Islamic archaeologists in the two countries. To this end two new areas have been opened, while material from previous excavations has been subject to new analyses and contextualization. We will report on both here in order to delineate what we know of the medieval town and its inhabitants so far, summarizing the information from the earlier campaign while giving the preliminary results of the new excavations.

The basic outlines of the town's classical and medieval history are clear from previous excavations and the written sources. Volubilis was founded at some point in the third century BC, probably by members of the Mauretanian elite, and became the provincial capital after the occupation of Mauretania Tingitana by the Roman emperor Claudius (r. 41-54). Over the next two hundred years of Roman occupation Volubilis acquired all the standard public architecture of a Roman town: a forum, baths, a basilica, and a triumphal arch.⁴ However, there is little doubt that the wealthy urban elite remained Mauretanian, with a few immigrant additions. Thus, when the Roman administration departed in 285, this was not the end of the town: indeed, several fine mosaics appear to date to the fourth century AD, and show the persistence of an educated and prosperous élite.⁵ African Red Slip, Roman coins and imported metal work are found across the excavated area, although in decreasing quantities, until the end of the first quarter of the fifth century AD.⁶

2. Elizabeth Fentress and Hassan Limane, (eds.), *Volubilis après Rome, les fouilles UCL/INSAP, 2000-2005*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

3. The new INSAP-UCL project has so far conducted two seasons in 2018 and 2019 with the generous support of the Barakat Trust, the Gerald Avery Wainwright Fund and the UCL Institute of Archaeology Fieldwork Fund.

4. René Rebiffat, "Le développement urbain de Volubilis au second siècle de notre ère," *Bulletin Archéologique des Travaux Historiques* 1-2 (1966): 231-40.

5. Most obvious of these is the circus scene in the House of Venus: see Susan Walker "La maison de Vénus: une résidence de l'Antiquité tardive?," in Fentress and Limane, (eds.), *Volubilis après Rome*, 38-50.

6. Aomar Akerraz, "Note sur l'enceinte tardive de Volubilis," *Bulletin Archéologique du Comité*, 19B (1985): 429-36.

There is evidence, however, for a massive destruction of much of the town around the first quarter of the fifth century. Our excavations showed collapsed building material as much as two metres deep covering the Roman levels (fig. 1), while an amphora smashed *in situ* by the collapse of the building in which it was stored appears to date to that period. It seems likely that Volubilis was hit by one of the many earthquakes of the early fifth century⁷ and that the ruined site was then deserted. Indeed, there is almost no datable pottery for the subsequent century and only a single coin that can be placed with any confidence within the fifth century.⁸



Fig. 1: A sondage between the earliest Islamic layers and the latest Roman ones shows the collapse of pisé walling over 1.80m deep, (© Elizabeth Fentress).

At some time in the sixth century, the site of the city, or rather its western slope, proved attractive once more for settlement due to its evident natural

7. Elizabeth Fentress, "Un tremblement de terre?," in Fentress and Limane, (eds.), *Volubilis après Rome Volubilis après Rome*, 78-81. For fifth century earthquakes Elizabeth Fentress and Andrew Wilson, "Terra septem diebus mugitum dedit: North African Earthquakes Revisited." In *Cités et religions de l'Antiquité tardive (IIIe-VIIe siècle)*, Colloque international en hommage à Claude Lepelley, Nanterre, 7-8 septembre 2016, X Dupuis, V. Fauvinet-Ranson, C.J. Goddard, H. Inglebert, (eds.), (Paris: Hermann éditions), 133-53.

8. A recent attempt to show that the town was continuously occupied remains unconvincing: see Noë Villaverde Vega, *Tingitana en la antigüedad tardía (siglos III-VIII)*, (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 2001), 157-74. There are 29 coins for the fourth century, and one each in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries (p. 171). This hardly echoes a vibrant urban economy. See the review by Emanuele Papi, "Mauretania Tingitana in epoca tardo-antica: Great Expectations?," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 15 (2002): 703-7.

advantages. Positioned between the plain of the Gharb prime wheat-growing country, and the foothills of the Zerhoun mountains, today covered with olives, it is relatively rich in water, with a permanent stream, the Oued Khoumane, running at its base. The site was protected by the massive fortifications of the earlier Roman settlement, though the new settlement seems to have been limited to the western half of the former Roman town. A small group of tombstones written in Latin in the late sixth and seventh centuries reveals the existence of a Christian community that still dated its foundation by the year of the Roman province.⁹ One inscription of the year 655 AD even names a *vicepraepositorus*, probably referring to the leader of a Berber kingdom who was drawing on Roman symbols and patterns of rule. Aomar Akerraz has convincingly demonstrated that this community lived in the western third of the city, protected by a new north-south fortifying wall which connected with two segments of the earlier Roman walls.¹⁰ To the east of the new rampart, much of the Roman city was given over to burials: the sixth-seventh century Christian cemetery was found around the Arch of Caracalla and in the ruins of earlier Roman houses. The Roman town was thus reoccupied after a long abandonment, its name reverting to what was probably the original Berber form, ‘Walīla.’

At eighteen hectares this reduced city remained a large and important agricultural settlement in the seventh and eighth centuries, probably occupied by the Berber Awrāba tribe. At some point after the Arab conquest of Morocco, a new walled quarter – the so-called ‘Arab quarter’ – seems to have been established outside the gateway near the wadi, perhaps to house a garrison.¹¹ It was excavated after a fashion, but never published, in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Coins inscribed in Arabic were minted at the site and in neighbouring towns in the late eighth century, some inscribed with the city’s new name ‘Walīla.’ These coins reveal a series of otherwise unknown individuals (e.g. al-Rashid b. Kadīm and Muḥammad b. Khalifa) variously interpreted as ‘Abbāsid generals¹² or leaders of an independent Berber city-state similar to those established at Nakūr or Tlemcen in this period.¹³ In this period, too, the old Roman town continued to be used for industrial and burial purposes. Immediately outside

9. Raymond Thouvenot, “Les origines chrétiennes en Maurétanie Tingitane,” *Revue des Études Anciennes*, 71 (1969): 354-78.

10. Aomar Akerraz, “Recherches sur les niveaux islamiques de Volubilis,” in *Genèse de la ville islamique en al-Andalus et au Maghreb occidentale*, Patrice Cressier and Mercedes García Arenal, ed. (Madrid: Casa de Velasquez, 1998), 295-304.

11. Daniel Eustache, “Monnaies musulmanes trouvées à Volubilis,” *Hespéris* 43 (1956): 133-95.

12. Daniel Eustache, “Monnaies musulmanes trouvées dans la Maison du Compas, Volubilis,” *Bulletin d’Archéologie Marocaine* 6 (1966): 349-64; Akerraz, “Recherches.”

13. Fatima Zohr El-Harrif “Monnaies islamiques trouvées à Volubilis: liberté locale et pouvoir abbaside,” *Actes de 1^{res} journées nationales d’Archéologie et du patrimoine, Rabat, 1-4 juillet 1998*, vol. 3 (Rabat 2001), 142-59.

the sixth-century wall, a series of rooms and pottery kilns were built in the shell of a Roman house (the ‘maison au compas’) in the eighth century.¹⁴ A later cemetery with skeletons laid out in accordance with Muslim funerary rites lay to the east; further Muslim graves have been found in the eastern and southern quarters of the old town.¹⁵

It is at this point that the site became pivotal in the history of Morocco, for it was here that Idrīs I (745-791) established himself during his brief reign.¹⁶ Later sources relate that he arrived in 788 fleeing persecution in Baghdad, married an Awrābā woman and was proclaimed imam (for the Awrābā had already converted to Islam).¹⁷ Walīla briefly became the headquarters of the Idrīsid state, but soon afterwards Fès was founded; his son Idrīs II (r. 791-828) moved the court there. The town disappears from the historical sources thereafter, but our excavations have revealed evidence of a significant fourteenth-century occupation in the Merinid period, perhaps related to the new importance of the Idrīsid heritage for legitimising the Merinid right to rule.¹⁸

The Archaeology of the Berber Town

Our knowledge of the reduced town is still extremely partial, based on our own excavations and those of Aomar Akerraz in the 1980s,¹⁹ as well as on a topographic survey of the standing walls carried out in 2000, (fig. 2). Our information on the settlement within the walls comes from two extensive excavations: Area D, excavated in the first campaign, and Area A, currently under excavation.

14. Excavations of the Maison du Compas, where Christian burials were found, produced a variety of ‘Abbāsid bronze coins minted between 772 and 789; see Eustache, “Monnaies musulmanes trouvées à Volubilis.”

15. Aomar Akerraz, “Recherches” Analysis of these skeletons was undertaken in 2019 by Efthymia Nikita with the assistance of Imane Qouti.

16. Bernard Rosenberger, “Les premières villes islamiques du Maroc: géographie et fonctions,” in *Genèse de la ville islamique en al-Andalus et au Maghreb occidentale*, Patrice Cressier and Mercedes García-Arenal (eds.), (Madrid: Casa de Velasquez, 1998), 229-56; García-Arenal, Mercedes and Manzano, Eduardo. “Légitimité et villes idrissides,” in *Genèse de la ville islamique en al-Andalus et au Maghreb occidental*, ed. Patrice Cressier and Mercedes García-Arenal (Madrid: Casa de Velasquez, 1998), 257-84.

17. Summarised in Ahmed Siraj, *L'image de la Tingitane. L'historiographie arabe médiévale et l'antiquité, nord-africaine*, Collection de l’École Française de Rome 209 (Paris: École Française de Rome, 1995), 513-7.

18. Herman Beck, *L'image d'Idrīs II, ses descendants de Fās et la politique Sharifiennes des sultans mérinides* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

19. Akerraz, “Recherches,” cf. Eliane Lenoir. “Volubilis des Baquates aux Rabedis: une histoire sans paroles?” *Bulletin d'Archéologie Marocaine* 15 (1984): 299-309.

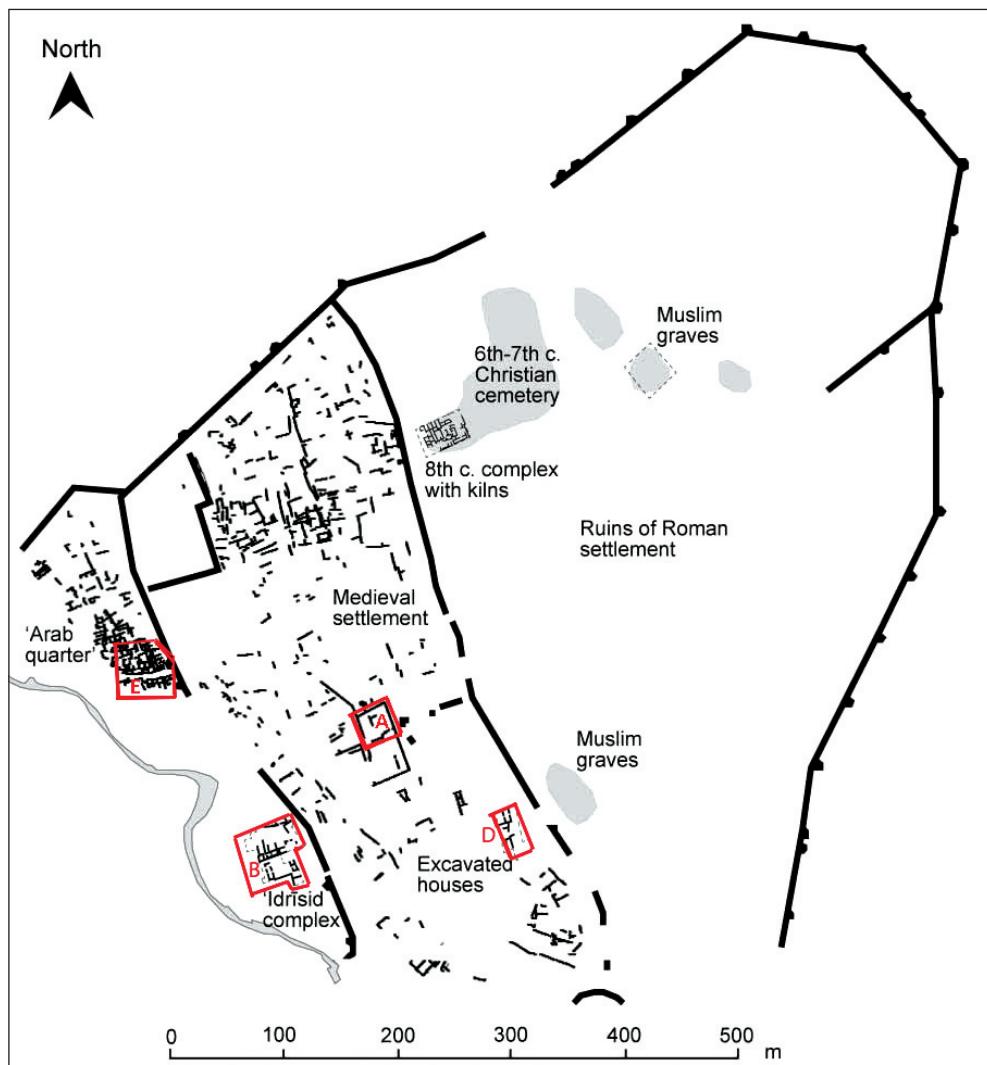


Fig. 2: Plan showing the western quarter of Volubilis and the four excavation areas (A, B, D, E) mentioned in the text.

Area D²⁰

The first of these, Area D, was excavated in 2000-2005 and lay on the southern edge of the town, just north of what recent excavations have revealed to be a medieval cemetery.²¹ Here we found houses dating between the early eighth and the ninth centuries. The irregular rubble of the collapsed Roman town was cleared and terraced in order to provide building plots. The large, rectangular houses excavated showed a notable lack of boundaries between them, (fig. 3).

20. The excavation was supervised by Ali Ait Kaci.

21. These excavations were directed by Aomar Akerraz.

They were in general well-built, large, rectangular structures, using *pisé de terre* over stone foundations. There was generally one principal room measuring around 20 m², with, perhaps, an annex for storage or stabling. In one case, a house closely resembled Bourdieu's '*maison élémentaire*,' (fig. 4). It consisted of a single space, with a large posthole two thirds of the way down its length. Behind this the floor was lower, and it is clear that the posthole supported a loft, for storage, sleeping or both. A hearth and a small silo were found in the main room, which, like all the others, was floored with beaten earth. The absence of delimitation between the buildings suggests that they were occupied by related families, perhaps a kinship group. The habitat is, at least here, rather rural in feeling, with multiple grain silos and the seeds of olives, grapes and figs, although glass making or some sort of metallurgy on the site is suggested by a pit with massive traces of burning.²² The earlier excavations thus allowed a glimpse of what could best be described as Berber, or Amazigh, urbanism, albeit in a peripheral area of the town.

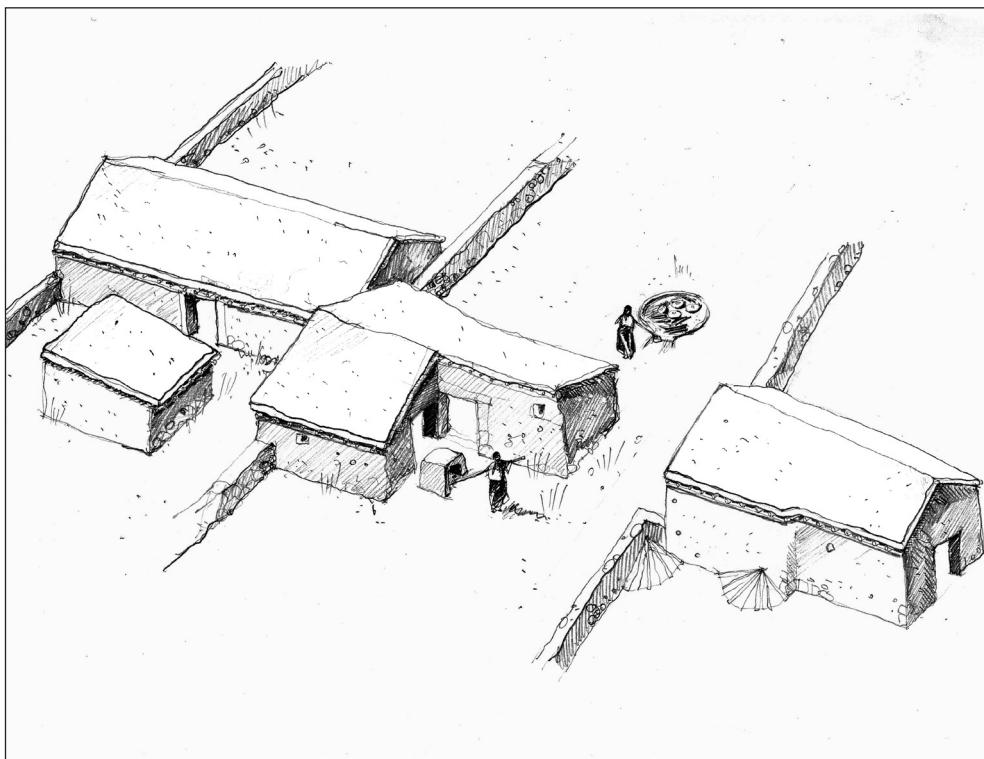


Fig. 3: Reconstruction of houses on of Area D, (© Fernanda Palmieri).

22. Ali Ait Kaci, "L'habitat à l'intérieur des murs: le site D," in Fentress and Limane (eds.), *Volubilis après Rome*: 167-208, 176-7.



Fig. 4: One of the houses on Area D, showing two rooms: a posthole in the rear room supported a loft. On the left are visible a hearth and a silo, (© Elizabeth Fentress).

Area A²³

In the new excavations we have opened a large trench (c. 400 m²) in the centre of town, Area A (fig. 5), with the aim of establishing if the archaeological sequence discovered at site D – in effect, a rather peripheral sector of the Medieval city – was an anomaly, or characteristic of the town as a whole. In Area A were found large, square enclosures with rather massive walls. In the centre of one of these enclosures the walls of a large rectangular house were visible. Its excavation revealed two rooms (fig. 6), which again compare closely with Bourdieu's *maison élémentaire*. A large, multi-purpose room, B, was probably used by the family while a smaller room, A, was covered by a loft supported by a post and a subsidiary wall. However, unlike the Kabylie examples, the smaller room may have served for storage rather than for stabling, as it contains a series of small pits for jars. The loft was also used for storage; it burned particularly severely and collapsed leaving charred remains of planking with several large, smashed, jars above them.

23. The excavation was supervised by Giuseppe Castellano (2018) and Asmae El Kacimi (2019). The team included Leila Araar, Maria Gajewska, Uzma Haque, Basmae Mejrihi, Fatima Zohra Cadi, and Nora Lemcharrea.

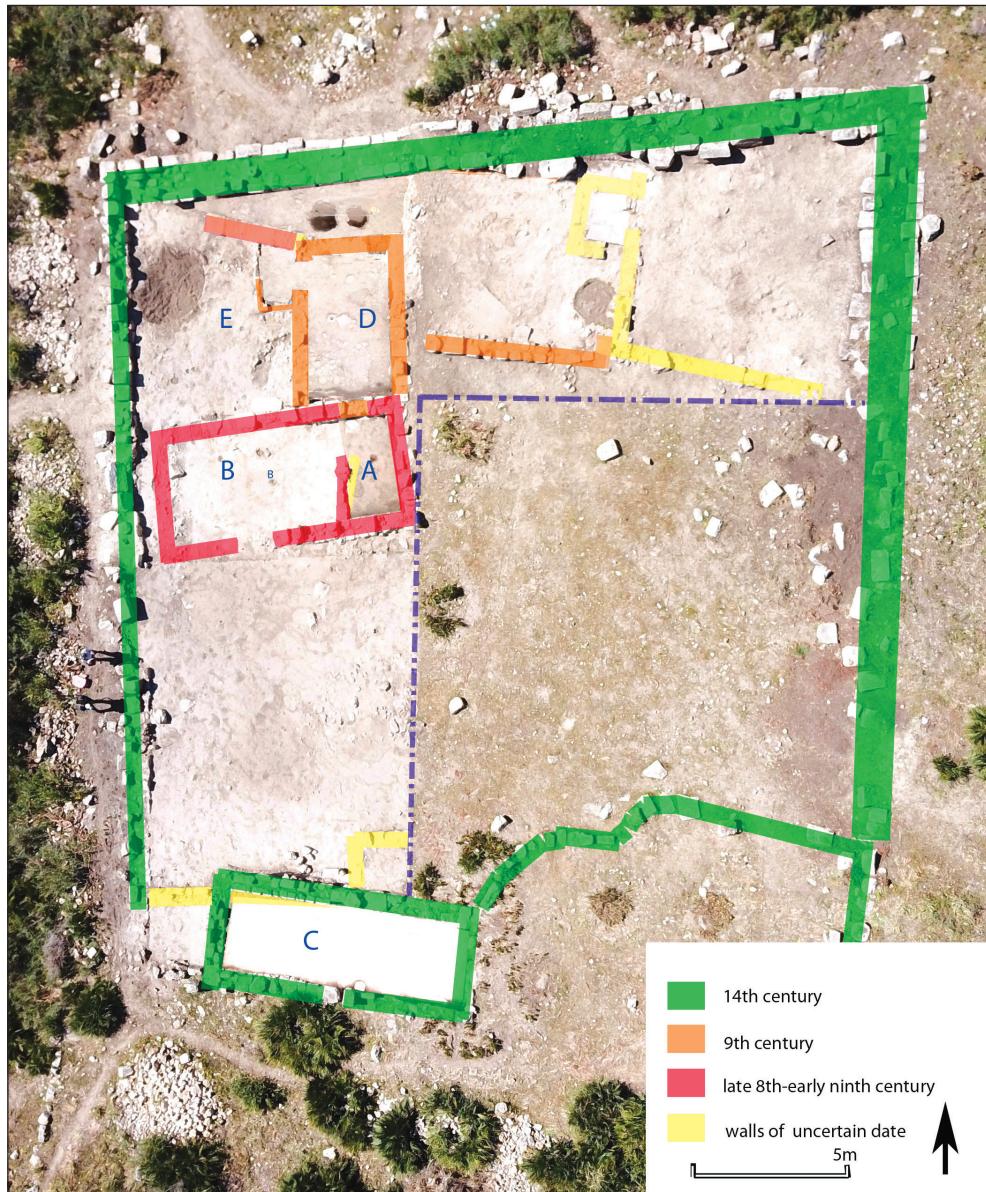


Fig. 5: Area A, (© Corisande Fenwick).

In the larger room, B, the floor was very smooth, with plaster traces towards the east which petered out on the western side. It was marked by a substantial hearth against the north wall and near the door to room A, and by two shallow postholes cut .80m from the north wall, 1.75m apart. Between these two postholes and slightly closer to the wall was a group of stones, embedded in the floor but showing no particular pattern. Given the position of these three features directly in front of the wide door on the south side of the room, and thus in the position that would have received the greatest amount of

sunlight, we interpret them, tentatively, as being supports for an upright loom. The postholes themselves were, at c. 20 cm., too shallow to have provided much support, so we hypothesize a timber element which would have propped them up, wedged by a stone feature found between them, and possible other links to the north wall of the room. The walls, constructed in large blocks with a superstructure of pisé de terre, were robbed towards the west end, and in some cases had fallen outwards.



Fig. 6: Building A-B, from the northwest, (© Elizabeth Fentress).

Although the pottery from the building generally comprises rather standard coarsewares, largely storage jars, the find of not one but two incense burners from the deposit of the collapse of the loft is intriguing (fig. 7), suggesting a rather more complex occupation than was initially assumed. Preliminary analysis of the charred plant remains has identified small amounts of grain and fruit seeds and stones, particularly grape and olive.²⁴ In the various destruction layers and in the space to the north, we also find numerous broken clay moulds that may have served for coining, which are identical to those found at the mining site of Imidar south of the Atlas mountains and the Saharan entrepot of Tadmekka (Mali), (fig. 8).²⁵

24. The archaeobotanical analysis is being conducted by Ruth Pelling.

25. El Moussaoui El Ajlaoui, "Mine d'argent d'Imidar et la question de Todgha (VIIIe-Xe siècle): vers une hypothèse," *Hespéris Tamuda* XXXII, 1 (1994): 11-34; Sam Nixon et al., "New Light on the Early Islamic West African Gold Trade: Coin Moulds from Tadmekka, Mali," *Antiquity* 85 (2011): 1353-68.



Fig. 7: Incense burner from the collapse of the loft in room A, (© Elizabeth Fentress).

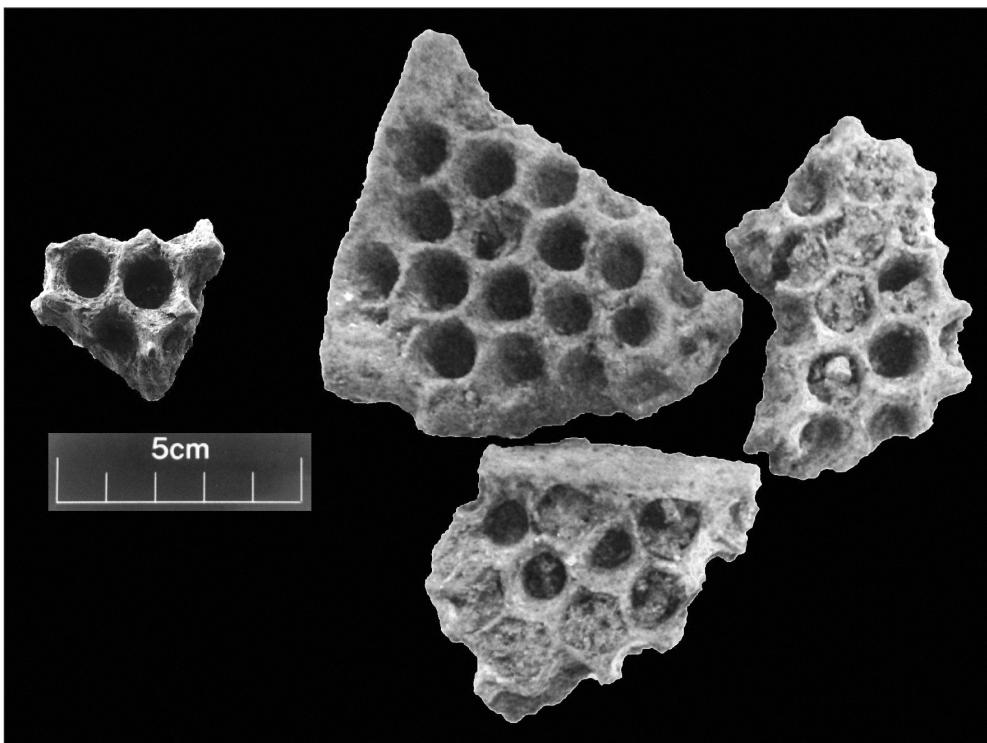


Fig. 8: Probable coin mould from the destruction of house A-B.

After its destruction by fire, House A-B was not rebuilt, as the prone position of one of the large stones from its north wall shows. To the north of it lay a space previously occupied by a very large silo, cut into a hard surface. After the fire the silo was filled in by very large blocks of building stone, as well as by smaller stones and earth, including, towards the top, burned material from the fire. The site thus roughly levelled, walls were constructed around the space, which now formed room D. These are built in techniques so dissimilar as to make it uncertain

they are contemporary, although the east and west walls both about the north wall of room A. The east wall was constructed of large, spoliated blocks cut into the hillside to the east. The west wall, on the other hand, was made of very roughly-coursed rubble masonry, without large elements of spolia. Of the north wall we only have the robber trench of what was presumably an orthostat, and a foundation in yellow clay *pisé de terre*. We may assume that, as is the case with the east wall, this was covered by a line of large blocks that were removed during the construction of the later enclosure.

The southern half of the room was paved with densely-packed cobbles, which sloped slightly towards the west, where a substantial drain opened in the west wall, (fig. 9). The space was evidently used for some activity relating to water, probably washing. This suggests that it was not the main room of the building. Lines of stones with a very similar orientation are found on the uphill slope to the east of it, and may well represent the new domestic structure, although this will only become clear after next year's excavation. Pottery seems to date room D and its fills to the early ninth century. The sequence of these houses is thus very similar to those observed in Area D, in which larger buildings are associated with annexes in which a variety of subsidiary activities took place, in this case grain storage and perhaps washing facilities. The date of the occupation that results from the analysis of the ceramics,²⁶ also resembles that of Area D, running from the late eighth to the ninth century. It is, of course, not impossible that subsequent campaigns will reveal an earlier medieval occupation of the site, but for the moment there is no evidence for it inside the walled enceinte.

This is surprising, particularly in view of the well-known late-sixth and seventh century funerary inscriptions from the site, which relate to an occupation so far not identified within the walls.²⁷ The houses in both areas are similar, and, it should be noted, closely resemble those of the eighth-ninth centuries at Tolmo di Minateda, where irregularly placed rectangular buildings cover the remains of the old cathedral complex.²⁸

The large enclosure, on the other hand, has turned out – quite surprisingly – to be Merinid in date, a chronology provided by the ceramics: this will be discussed below. Future campaigns should clarify the whole history of this space, at least as far as the Roman destruction layer, though we hope to carry out at least one sondage to reach a Roman floor surface.

26. The study of the pottery is carried out, like those of the previous campaigns, by Victoria Amorós Ruiz and Mustafa Atki.

27. Aomar Akerraz, "Les rapports entre la Tingitane et la Césarienne à l'époque post-romaine," in Mustapha Khanoussi, Paola Ruggeri and Cinzia Vismara, eds. *L'Africa romana: Atti del XIIº Convegno di studio Olbia, 12-15 dicembre 1996*, (Sassari: Università di Sassari, 1998): 1435-40 with references and previous bibliography.

28. Sonia Gutiérrez Lloret, "Histoire et archéologie de la transition en al-Andalus: les indices matériels de l'islamisation à Tudmīr," in *Islamisation et Arabisation de l'Occident Musulman Médiéval*, Dominique Valérian, (ed.), (Paris: Bibliothèque Historique des Pays d'Islam 2, 2011), 195-249.



Fig. 9: Room D, from the east, showing the cobbled paving and drain, (© Elizabeth Fentress).

Extramural Settlement.

Area B²⁹

In 2000-2005, Area B, between the city walls and the oued Khomane, was excavated. This consisted of three large interlocking courtyards with, at the centre, a well-preserved hammam, (fig. 10). Each courtyard had a different function: from south to north a domestic space, a reception space, with rooms carefully floored with plaster and a raised platform at one end (fig. 11), and a storage/workshop space, with very large grain silos in the centre. We interpret this complex as the headquarters of Idrīs b. ‘Abd Allāh during his brief career in the Maghreb after the disastrous defeat of the Alids by the Abbasids at the battle of Fakhkh in 786. The Awrāba tribe welcomed him to the city in 788 and followed him in the conquest of northern Morocco. The city served as his mint as well as his base, as we will see below. Although he was assassinated in 791, his son, Idrīs b. Idrīs, continued to live there until his majority, when he removed to Fès. Both, however, were buried outside the walls of the town. The identification of the complex as his headquarters is based on the coincidence of the radiocarbon (AMS) dates with the Idrisid occupation of the site, on the very different nature of the settlement and its material culture when compared to the contemporary occupation within the walls, and on numerous Idrisid coins, including two of

29. The site was supervised by Helen Dawson and Guy Hunt.

Idrīs I. The complex seems to have been abandoned with the departure of Idrīs b. Idrīs, although it was then reoccupied at the end of the ninth century by large, rectangular houses, which continued to cluster near the hammam, (fig. 12).³⁰ This occupation, tentatively identified with the Rabadi, fugitives from a revolt in the suburbs of Cordoba, lasted for perhaps a century and is described by al-Bakrī.³¹ It should be noted that no settlement of the same date has yet been identified within the city walls.

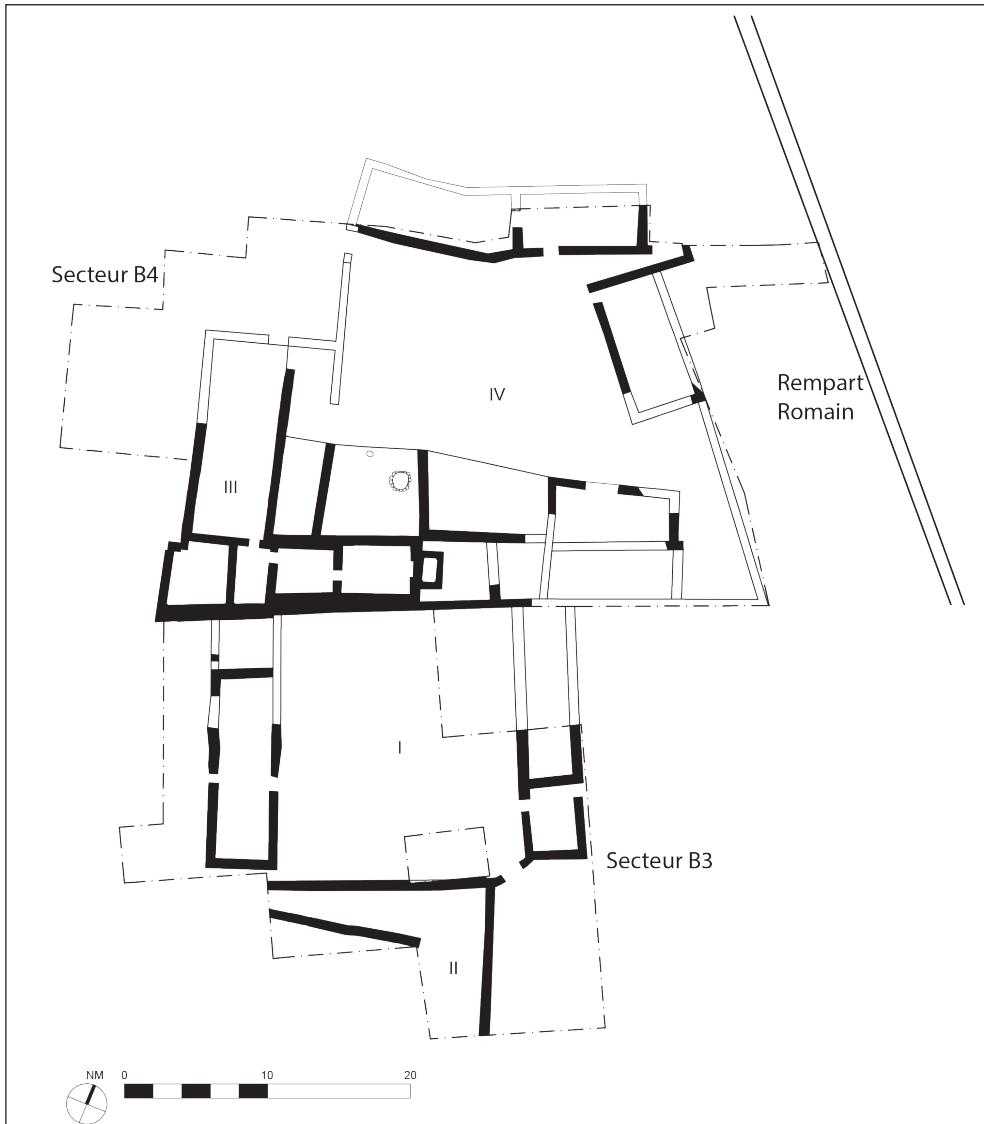


Fig. 10: Plan of the structures on site B, (© Fernanda Palmieri).

30. Fentress, "Walīla au Moyen Age," 102-3.

31. Al-Bakrī, *Description de l'Afrique septentrionale*, ed. and trans. M. de Slane (2nd edn) (Algiers: Adolphe Jourdan, 1913), 243.

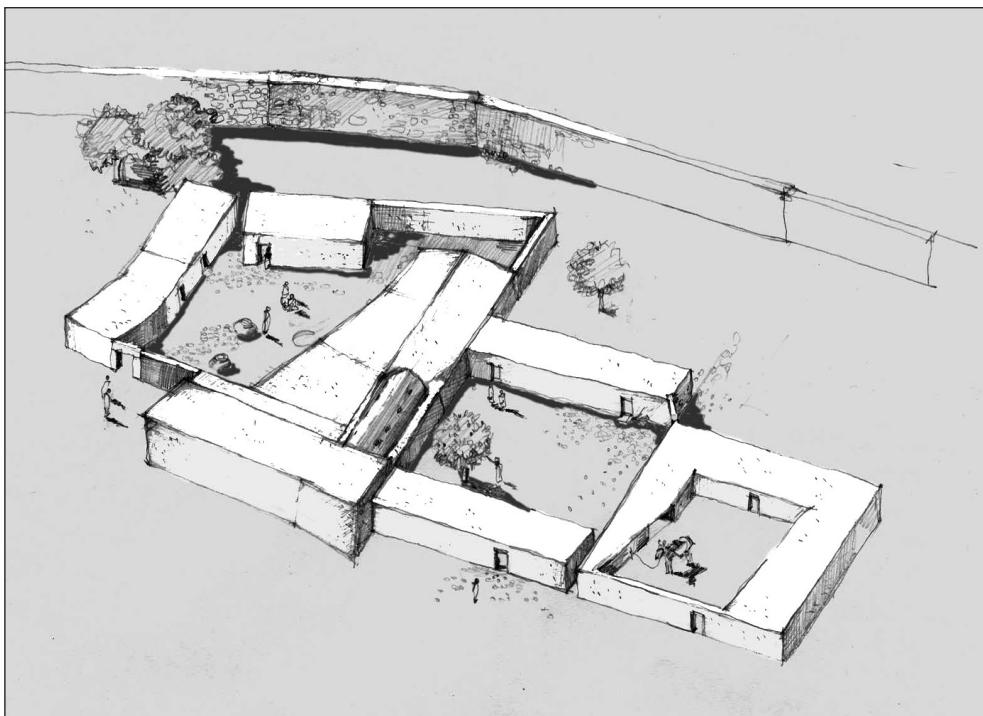


Fig. 11: Reconstruction of the structures on site B, (© Fernanda Palmieri).

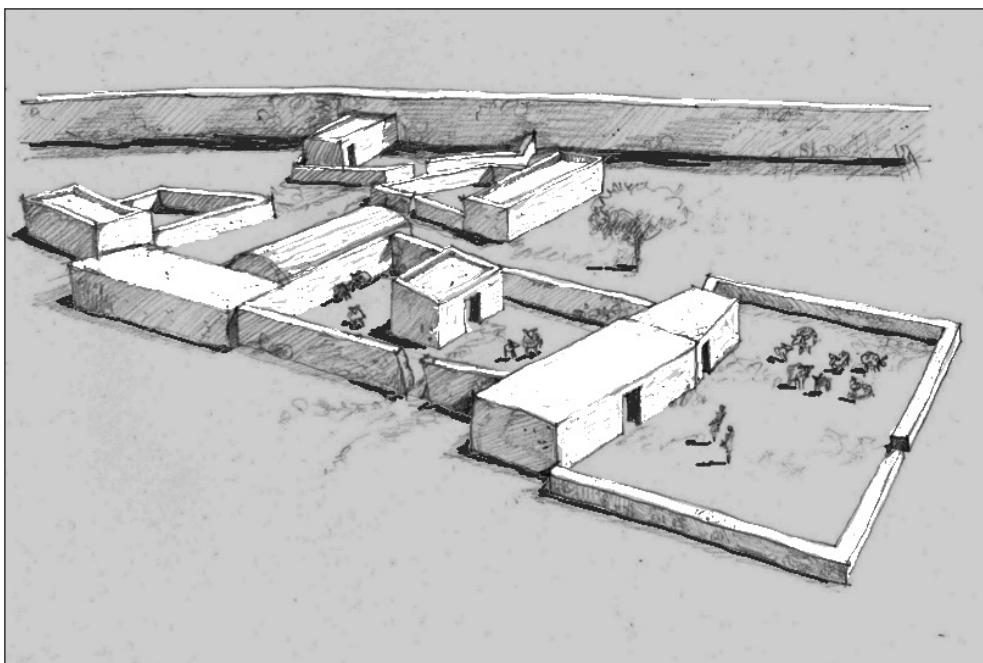


Fig. 12: Reconstruction of the late ninth-century settlement, (© Fernanda Palmieri).

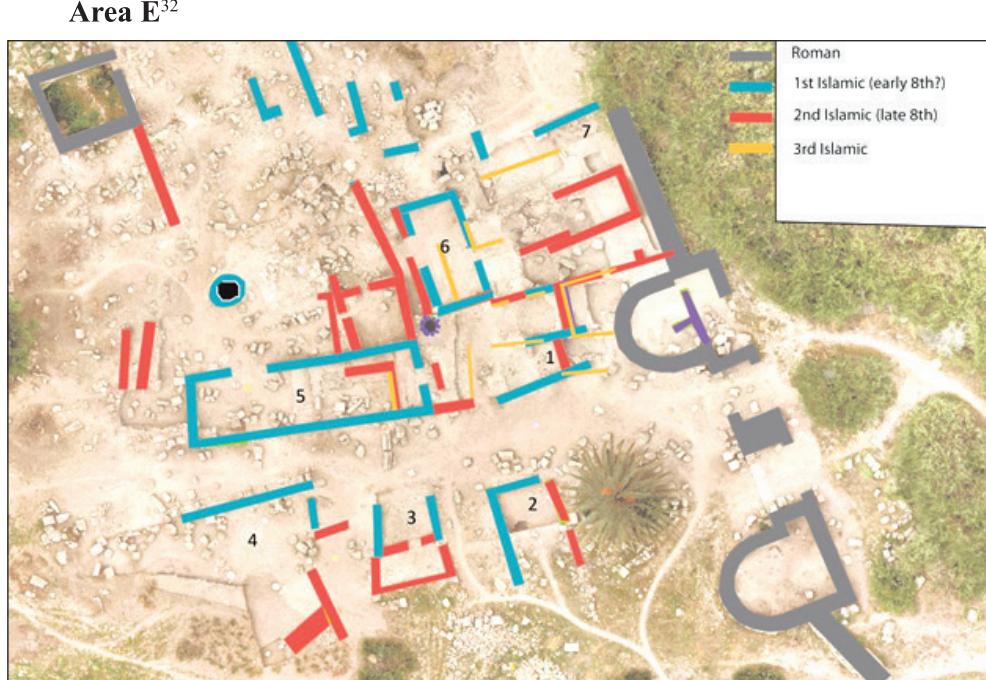


Fig. 13: Drone photograph of Site E, (© Corisande Fenwick).

In 2018 we began the excavation of the zone immediately outside the Roman enceinte and located just outside the West Gate (fig. 13) and on the flat ground in front of the Oued Khoumane. This is the area conventionally known as the ‘Quartier Arabe.’ Here, again, we sought for greater clarity as to the occupation history, and, in particular, for evidence for settlement in the first half of the eighth century – a period entirely obscure in North African excavations.³³ Earlier, unpublished French excavations in the 1950s had revealed a multitude of second- and third-century altars and funerary *cupolae* re-used in the walls of dense medieval housing, and an irrigation canal. The report describes a building with 12 columns and five doors that may have been a mosque. Large amounts of Islamic coins were found including over 500 bronze coins, a gold dinar and two substantial coin hoards: the first contained 236 silver dirhams minted in the Middle East, Ifrīqiya and Al-Andalus dating between 698 and 743, and the second (still unpublished) apparently contained silver dirhams minted by the Umayyads in Spain.³⁴ Our aim is to clarify the occupation history, and, in particular, evidence for Arab settlement in the first half of the eighth century and

32. The excavation was supervised by Dirk Booms, with the participation of Zineb Askaoui, Anna Békési, Chaimae Imrani, Meriam Hansali, Guy Hunt, Joyce Ho, Raluca Lazerescu, Marie Middleton, Abdellah Sgouri.

33. See Fenwick “From Africa to Ifrīqiya.”; Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*.

34. Daniel Eustache, “Monnaies musulmanes trouvées à Volubilis.”; Georges Séraphin Colin, “Monnaies de la période idrisite trouvées à Volubilis,” *Hespéris* XXII (1936): 113–25.

the presence of a possible garrison and mint. In 2018, we focused on cleaning up the French excavations and establishing a working chronology for this vast zone through limited sondages and sections. In 2019, we expanded excavations across this quarter to build up a detailed understanding of the settlement.

During the life of the Roman town, this area lay outside the massive Antonine walls and the two-bay West Gate with its dedicatory inscription of 168/9. It was occupied by a substantial Roman cemetery with built mausolea and *cupolae* tombs of the second and third century: the bases and substructures of some of these are still visible. This too was where five of the altars commemorating treaties between the Baquates and the Roman governors between 169/76 and 280 were found in a medieval canal;³⁵ these must have been set up outside the town walls, perhaps lining the road towards the oued.

At some point in the sixth or seventh century, presumably contemporary with the re-occupation of Volubilis after the earthquake and the Christian cemetery, the area immediately outside the western gate was used by the Berber settlement as a midden: large amounts of animal bones, imported Tunisian lamps and Spanish and Eastern amphorae of seventh-century forms suggest that Volubilis was far better integrated into Mediterranean trading networks than previously thought.

In the next phase, probably in the late seventh or early eighth century, a settlement was established outside the *enceinte* on top of the midden. Several scattered large houses have been identified so far, built in a roughly *opus africanum* technique re-employing architraves, columns, tombstones and other stones. One of these buildings is on a larger scale than the others: it consists of a large room at least 15m long, facing the main street. Behind it is a large courtyard and well. Inside the houses, very little intact stratigraphy survives, but a series of partially preserved plaster floors and substantial stone pavements are visible in the sections.

The buildings of this phase are characterised by fine plaster floors, large numbers of copper *fulūs*, new forms of ceramics and a much wider variety of crop types than in Area A, which supports our interpretation of this new urban zone with its different housing types as a settlement of Arabs outside the town walls. A substantial destruction layer dating to the mid-eighth century closed this phase. This layer contained a glass paste ring setting inscribed *bismillah* (in the name of God), (fig. 14). It is very similar to a silver seal-ring discovered in 1933 (perhaps in a grave) to the west of the ‘maison au chien,’ that is inscribed ‘Allah is enough for me. He is the best guarantee.’³⁶ These seal-rings are characteristic

35. See Edmond Frézouls, “Inscriptions nouvelles de Volubilis,” *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome* 65 (1953): 139–72; “Inscriptions nouvelles de Volubilis, 2,” *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome* 66 (1954) and “Les Baquates et la province romaine de Tingitane,” *Bulletin d’Archéologie Marocaine*, 2 (1957): 65–115.

36. Abdallah Fili. “La bague-sceau,” *Maroc médiévale* (Paris: Louvre éditions, 2014), 116–7.

of early eighth cemeteries in al-Andalus, but these are the earliest discovered in Morocco to date.³⁷

Various interpretations of this site have been offered since the 1950s ranging from an Arab suburb³⁸ to the settlement of an Abbasid garrison.³⁹ Our current hypothesis is that this is an Umayyad-period extra-mural settlement, similar to those identified elsewhere in the Middle East, North Africa and Spain.⁴⁰ It may have originated as a military settlement, relating, perhaps, to tax-collection.



Fig. 14: Glass-paste ring setting reading “bismillah” found in the destruction layer of the first Islamic phase, (© Ruth Pelling).

In the next phase, dated securely to the late eighth-ninth century (the Idrisid phase), the quarter expanded significantly: new multi-room dwellings were built in a drystone masonry, while existing houses seem to be subdivided or extended. New blocks of housing were inserted between the two Roman gates, creating two narrow streets in place of a wider one. Evidence of artisanal activities dating to the late ninth century has been found including a furnace for iron smelting and a

37. María Paz de Miguel-Ibáñez, “La maqbara de Pamplona (s. VIII): Aportes de la osteoarqueología al conocimiento de la islamización en la marca superior” (Doctoral dissertation, Universidad de Alicante, 2016): 64–69.

38. Edmond Frézouls, “Inscriptions nouvelles.”

39. Maurice Euzennat, “L’archéologie marocaine 1955–1957,” *BAM* 2 (1957): 199–229.

40. Donald Whitcomb, “The Misr of Ayla: Settlement at al-‘Aqaba in the Early Islamic Period,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East vol. II. Land Use and Settlement Patterns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 155–70.

tank for fulling or processing agricultural goods, (fig. 15). This phase also ended abruptly and thick burning and collapse layers rich in coins and locally produced ceramics (cookwares, jars, tablewares) were found across the site. The coins include several silver dirhams and many bronze *fulūs* minted under Muhammad b. Idrīs (828-836).⁴¹ These not only attest to the wealth and prosperity of the inhabitants in the extra-mural quarter, but demonstrate that this area continued to be occupied in the Idrisid period perhaps as part of a significant expansion of the town.⁴² However, the mid-ninth century date of the burn layer in the extra-mural zone, the Maison au Compas and the abandonment in Areas A and D, suggest that we may be seeing a site-wide abandonment this period. Ibn Khurraqādāhbih (d. 912) provides an explanation for this abandonment which fits very well with the archaeological and numismatic evidence: “Muhammad [b. Idrīs] resided at Walīla, the last town in the province of Tanger, and he died there. His descendants moved to Fès and are still there.”⁴³

A final phase of occupation comes after a substantial period of abandonment and repeated flooding events. This consists of ephemeral housing scattered across the entire area, mostly destroyed by the French excavations in the 1950s. It may relate to the Merinid activity seen elsewhere on the site or be later still.



Fig. 15: Vat for processing agricultural goods, (© Corisande Fenwick).

41. The coins are being studied by Fatima Zohra El Harrif.

42. Ongoing excavations by Aomar Akerraz have identified Idrisid occupation to the north of the walls: Akerraz pers.com.

43. Ibn Khurraqādāhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik* (ed.) M.J.de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1889), 265-6.

Merinid Occupation

The walled Berber town was re-occupied in the fourteenth century, some five hundred years later. Excavations in Area D revealed a large, thin building consisting of two rooms, placed end to end, and opening onto the south through centrally placed doors (fig. 16) constructed at the southern end of the site. The rooms had slightly raised platforms at either end, and a paved area in the middle, following the standard plan of the Arab *dār*.⁴⁴ Its pottery dates the building to the fourteenth century, with many resemblances to the Merinid period at Fès.⁴⁵

That this was not an isolated construction is demonstrated by the excavations at site A. Here we had set out to investigate a single, large enclosure measuring c. 20 x 20 metres. This is an enigmatic structure, probably entered from the south, without, for the moment, any associated habitation. It is, however, one of at least four such enclosures identified in the original survey, and in one of these, just to the south, we find a long building consisting of a single, narrow room with a plastered and flagged floor. This was excavated as room C, and its relationship to the next courtyard to the south was demonstrated by the position of its door, on the south side, (fig. 17). It had traces of a hearth, or brazier, but all that remained of its material culture was one large dish, left on the floor when the building was abandoned. Again, we are dealing with a classic *dār* plan, in this case probably with a very large courtyard defined by massive walls, like that excavated to the north of it. The context of what appears to have been a brief but widespread Merinid occupation of the site remains to be established. Three other such enclosures are clearly visible near the excavated one, and the house on Area D shows that the occupation extended throughout the town. However, it was clearly brief, as each house has only a single floor, and little associated pottery. Could we be looking at some form of planned settlement, possibly associated with the discovery of the body of Idrīs I at the site in the fourteenth century?⁴⁶ Or does it represent the settlement of newly-arrived groups in the region?

44. On the differences between Arab and Berber houses in the Maghreb Elizabeth Fentress, “Reconsidering Islamic Houses in the Maghreb,” in Sonia Gutiérrez Lloret and Ignazio Grau Mira, ed. *De la estructura doméstica al espacio social. Lecturas arqueológicas del uso social del espacio*. (Alicante: Universidad de Alicante, 2013), 237-44.

45. Victoria Amorós Ruiz and Abdallah Fili, “La céramique,” in *Volubilis après Rome*, Elizabeth Fentress and Hassan Limane eds., 288-92.

46. On this event see Bennison and Limane, “Walilā-Volubilis,” 70.



Fig. 17: The Merinid-period building on site D, (© Elizabeth Fentress).

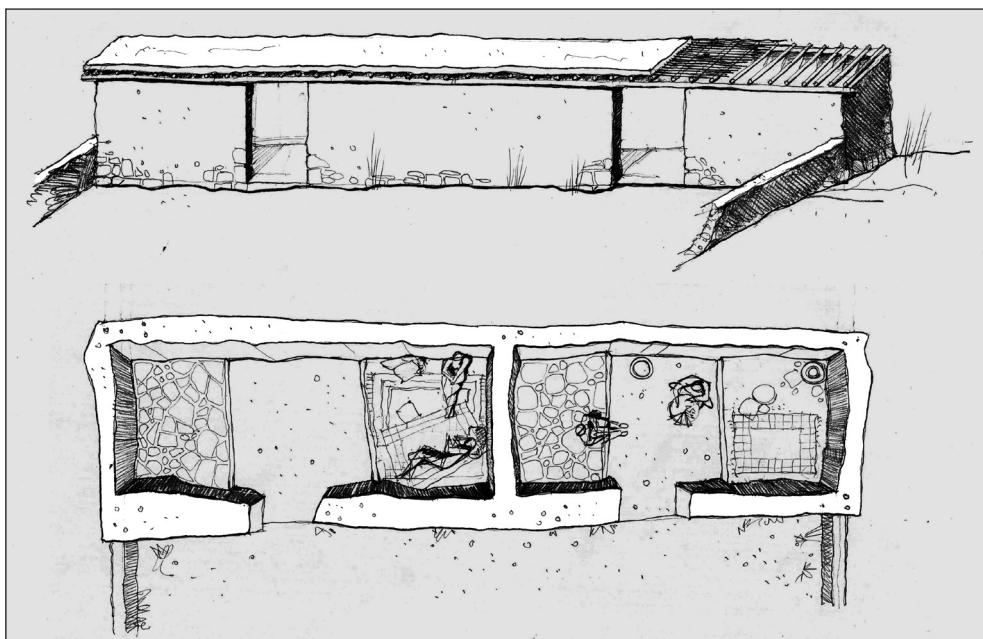


Fig. 18: The Merinid-period building C on site A, (© Elizabeth Fentress).

Conclusions

Scholarship on the early medieval city in North Africa frequently has fallen into two camps: research by late antique scholars on the ‘ends’ of classical cities and research by Islamic scholars on the ‘origins’ of Islamic cities.⁴⁷ Volubilis complicates the picture considerably and offers some new interpretative insights into urbanism in the late antique and Islamic West. Here, the city continued to thrive after the Roman administration left in 285, but it was eventually abandoned as early as the fifth century, a cautionary tale for archaeologists who seek to tie abandonment of classical cities to political events. This first abandonment was short-lived and by the late sixth century, the site was partially re-occupied by Berber groups. The scattered housing units of the Berber town were very different to the mosaic-floored insulae of the classical town, but this was still a substantial settlement with a (perhaps Christian) elite who had access to imported luxury goods, used Roman titles and still dated their year by the Roman provincial calendar. Urban settlements of this size were rare outside the Byzantine strongholds of Tingis (Tangier) and Sebta (Ceuta) in the sixth- and seventh-century western Maghreb, but are paralleled at Pomaria (mod. Tlemcen), Altava and mod. Tahert (Tingartia) in Algeria. In Morocco too, excavations at al-Basra have revealed several phases of occupation before the walled town founded by the Idrīsids in c. 800.⁴⁸ As early as the fifth or sixth century, there was a large settlement consisting of stone and mudbrick buildings with tiled roofs and flagstone pavements. This settlement seems to have been abandoned, and then followed by a phase of ephemeral occupation, perhaps dating to the late seventh century, before the city was refounded. Walīla therefore provides a tantalising glimpse into a nascent, but as yet poorly understood, Berber urbanism of the sixth and seventh century.

This Berber town continued to thrive in the early eighth century during the Arab conquest and partial rule of the *Maghreb al-Asqa* (whatever this may have meant in practice). What emerges from our preliminary work in the ‘quartier arabe’ is a phenomenon paralleled at other sites in the Maghreb and elsewhere in the Middle East: a reluctance on the part of the newly-arrived settlers to settle within the confines of the existing settlements.⁴⁹ The styles of housing and building are radically different inside and outside the walls, as are the finds distributions, palaeobotanical and numismatic records. Coins, in particular, are

47. Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*, 53-80; Corisande Fenwick, ‘Early Medieval Urbanism in Ifrīqiya and the Emergence of the Islamic City,’ in *Entre civitas y madīna. El mundo de las ciudades en la península ibérica y en el norte de África (ss. IV-IX)* S. Panzram and L. Callegarin (eds.), (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2018), 283-304. See more generally for scholarship on the early Islamic city, Patrice Cressier “Ville médiévale au Maghreb. Recherches archéologiques,” in *Histoire et Archéologie de l’Occident musulman (VIIe-XVe siècles)*, Al-Andalus, Maghreb, Sicile, P. Senac (ed.), (Toulouse: Maison de la Recherche, 2013), 117-40.

48. Nancy L. Benco ‘1990 Archaeological Investigations at al-Basra, Morocco,’ *Bulletin d’Archéologie Marocaine* 19 (2002): 293-340.

49. Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*, 31-52.

extremely abundant in the settlements outside the walls, and nearly absent within them. Such extra-mural settlements are found at Tlemcen in Algeria, where the Arab settlement was found just outside the Roman city walls, and the two were linked by the mosque.⁵⁰ The well-known site of Henchir el-Faouar (anc. Belalis Maior) in Tunisia, whilst unwalled, seems to show a similar phenomenon on a smaller scale: a small fort and a series of courtyard houses were built on the periphery of the Byzantine town over a cemetery church.⁵¹ More recently, excavations have shown a similar pattern at Zama Regia in Tunisia, where a courtyard house of the ninth century has been found outside the Roman walls.⁵² In the Near East, the same situation is found at ‘Aqaba and Amman in Jordan and seems to derive from the late antique practice of housing Arabian auxiliary troops in extra-mural settlements (*ḥādir*) outside large towns in Greater Syria.⁵³ This pattern continues: we can also note the double-medina of Fès: here, the earliest walled settlement, Madinat Fās, was constructed by Idrīs I and probably occupied by Berber groups, while a second walled settlement, al-‘Aliya, built by Idrīs II, was built on the opposite bank of the river.⁵⁴ If we are right in identifying the extra-mural quarter at Walīla as a new Arab settlement, perhaps even a military zone occupied by elements of the army of the Umayyad caliphate, it is tempting to associate its violent destruction with the Berber revolts of the 740s. On the other hand, the minting of coins at Walīla under its own name and by otherwise unknown individuals with Arab names suggests that the picture is not so clear cut.⁵⁵ Precise dating of this phase must await the detailed analysis of the ceramics, coins and a targeted radiocarbon dating programme.

Under Idrīsid rule, in the late eighth and ninth century, the town seems to have grown rapidly and traces of Islamic occupation discovered outside

50. Said Dahmani “Note sur un exemple de permanence de l’habitat et de l’urbanisme,” *Bulletin du Comité des Travaux Historiques* N.S. 19B (1985): 439–47.

51. Ammar Mahjoubi. *Recherches d’histoire et d’archéologie à Henchir el-Faouar, Tunisie: la cité de Belalitani Maiores* (Tunis: Publications de l’Université de Tunis, 1978). See Corisande Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*: 48–50.

52. Chokri Touhiri, “La transition urbaine de Byzance à l’Islam en Ifrīqiya vue depuis l’archéologie. Quelques notes préliminaires,” in *Les Dynamiques de l’Islamisation en méditerranée centrale et en Sicile: nouvelles propositions et découvertes récentes*. Collection de l’École Française de Rome 487 Annalise Nef et Fabiola Ardizzone, (eds.), (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2014), 131–40.

53. For ‘Aqaba and the new extra-mural settlement of Ayla, Donald Whitcomb, “Amsar in Syria? Syrian cities after the conquest,” *ARAM* 6 (1994): 13–33; for ‘Ammān, Alastair Northedge, *Studies on Roman and Islamic Amman, I: History, Site and Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 60. For the hadir hypothesis in late antiquity, Donald Whitcomb, “Archaeological Evidence of Sedentarization: Bilad al-Sham in the Early Islamic Period,” in Stefan R. Hauser (Hg.), *Die Sichtbarkeit von Nomaden und saisonaler Besiedlung in der Archäologie. Multidisziplinäre Annäherungen an ein methodisches Problem*. Halle 2006 (Orientwissenschaftliche Hefte 21; Mitteilungen des SFB, Differenz und Integration, 9) 27–43.

54. Évariste Lévi-Provençal, *La fondation de Fès* (Paris: Larose, 1939); García-Arenal and Manzano Moreno, “Légitimité et villes idrissides.”

55. Fatima Zohra El-Harrif, “Monnaies islamiques” and ‘Les monnaies,’ in Fentress and Limane (eds.), *Volubilis après Rome*, 308–38.

the enceinte to the northwest as well as in the extra-mural zone, shows that its extent far exceeded that of the late Roman city. The town's brief moment as the residence of Idrīs I and II seems to be reflected in the large courtyard complex and simple hammam constructed outside the walls. The metal-working and other industrial activities we find in the extra-mural settlement and the potters' quarter in the Maison au Compas would have been related to the new needs of this larger and bustling city, which functioned as the base for Idrīs' conquest of northern Morocco. Walīla's prosperity proved short-lived. The town certainly remained in occupation through the reigns of his son and grandson, Mohammad b. Idrīs (who may have based himself at the town), but seems to have been destroyed or abandoned suddenly thereafter, leaving the site entirely deserted. After an interval of several decades it was briefly reoccupied by a settlement over the ruins of the old Idrīsid headquarters, which we identify as that of the refugees from Cordoba. The site was then abandoned for half a millennium, when a new and substantial, if short-lived, Merinid settlement appears to have occupied much of the site within the walls.

Walīla thus provides a cautionary tale to the archaeologist and historian. Its complex history cannot be reduced to a simple sequential narrative of foundation, occupation and abandonment: instead, it provides an example of what might be described as an intermittent urbanism which peaks with the substantial early Roman town of the first-fourth century, the medieval town of the late sixth-early ninth centuries and the very short-lived Merinid settlement of the fourteenth century. Walīla will certainly provide further revelations in the years to come.

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العنوان: وليلي خلال العصر الوسيط الأعلى: أركيولوجية مدينة أمازيغية

ملخص: يسعى هذا المقال، استنادا إلى الحفريات المنجزة ما بين 2000-2005 و 2018-2019 في أربعة مناطق على يد فريق مغربي بريطاني (المعهد الوطني لعلوم الآثار والترااث وجامعة لندن كوليج)، إلى تقديم معطيات جديدة حول التاريخ الوسيط لموقع وليلي المصنف من قبل اليونسكو تراثا عالميا. لقد واصلت المدينة ازدهارها بعد مغادرة الرومان سنة 285م قبل أن تصبح مهجورة منذ حدوث زلزال بداية القرن الخامس الميلادي وإلى غاية نهاية القرن السادس الميلادي، حيث تم تعميرها من قبل جمومعات أمازيغية استقرت في تجمع سكني كبير ذو منازل مشتتة ومورفلوجية جد متميزة عن نظيرتها الرومانية. وظهر خلال نهاية القرن السابع أو بداية الثامن حي جديد خارج الأسوار، دمر خلال منتصف القرن، استوطنه الأعراب واختلف كلية عن شكل المدينة الأمازيغية، وضم بين طياته عددا هائلا من القطع النقدية الإسلامية. ومع جيء المولى إدريس الأول إبان نهاية القرن الثامن توسيع المدينة خارج الأسوار بشكل كبير، وأنشئ بها حمام وحي جديده. وتقديم لنا الحفريات دلائل على هندسة العمارة السكنية، وأنماط عيش مختلف الجماعات البشرية التي استوطنتها. وخلال أواسط القرن الحادي عشر هجرت المدينة، قبل أن يتم تعميرها من جديد في العصر المريني (القرن الرابع عشر). وهكذا نقدم لنا وليلي نموذجا مرجعا تاريخيا لتأسيس الحواضر في مدحها وجزرها، ومثالا للتمدن المتقطع الذي بلغ أوجه في الحقبة الرومانية (القرون 1-4) والعصر الوسيط الأعلى (القرون 6-9) والعصر المريني (القرن 14).

الكلمات المفتاحية: وليلي، وليلة، العباسيون، ببر (أمازيغ)، أورابة، المرينيون، تحطيط المدن.

Titre: Volubilis du haut Moyen Âge: L'archéologie d'une ville berbère

Resumé: Cet article présente des nouvelles données sur l'histoire médiévale de Walīla, la Volubilis romaine, site du patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO, sur la base de données de fouilles provenant de quatre zones de la ville médiévale menées par une équipe maroco-britannique (INSAP et UCL) entre 2000-2005 et 2018-2019. La ville romaine a continué de prospérer après le départ de l'administration romaine en 285, avant d'être abandonnée après un tremblement de terre au début du V^{ème} siècle. Ce premier abandon a été de courte durée et à la fin du VI^{ème} siècle, le site a été partiellement réoccupé par des groupes berbères. Les maisons dispersées de la ville berbère étaient très différentes de la ville romaine, mais il s'agissait d'une agglomération importante. À la fin du VII^{ème} ou au début du VIII^{ème} siècle, un nouveau quartier extra-mural a été établi sur un dépôt du VII^e siècle. Les maisons et les assemblages étaient très différents par rapport à la ville Berbère et il y avait un grand nombre de pièces de monnaies islamiques. Ce quartier que nous interprétons comme une colonie extra-murale d'Arabes a été détruit au milieu du siècle. L'arrivée d'Idrīs I à la fin du VIII^{ème} siècle a été marquée par la construction d'un hammam et d'un quartier général à l'extérieur des murs de la ville et une expansion majeure de la ville. Les fouilles fournissent des preuves sur l'architecture domestique, les modes de vie des différentes communautés, nouvelles et anciennes, alors que la ville s'est développée d'une ville berbère à une ville prospère sous des Idrissides. Cette ville a été de nouveau abandonnée vers le milieu du XI^{ème} siècle, à la ville réoccupée à l'époque mérinide (XIV^{ème} siècle) par une série de grands enclos. Walīla fournit donc un correctif aux histoires urbaines de fondation, d'occupation et d'abandon, et fournit plutôt un exemple de ce qui pourrait être décrit comme un urbanisme intermittent qui culmine dans la période romaine (I^{er}-IV^{ème} s.), le haut moyen-âge (VI^{ème}-IX^{ème} s.) et la période mérinide (XIV^{ème} s.).

Mots-clés: Volubilis, Walīla, Abbasside, Berbère, Awraba, Mérinide, urbanisme.