The Sahara buried this ancient Roman city—preserving it for centuries

It isn’t often that entire cities vanish, but the Roman outpost of Thamugadi did. Founded by the emperor Trajan around A.D, 100, the city, also known as Timgad or Tamugas, was located in the North African province of Mumidia.

Home to veterans of the Third Augustan Legion, Thamugadi flourished for hundreds of years, becoming prosperous and thus an attractive target for raiders. After a Vandal invasion in 430, repeated attacks weakened the city, which never fully recovered and was abandoned during the 700s.

The desert sands swept in and buried Thamugadi. One thousand years would pass before the city received a visit from a team of explorers led by a maverick Scotsman in the 1700s. (See also: This warrior was the best of ancient Rome's 'five good emperors')

Statesman and scholar

Best known now for his contested discovery of the source of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, Scottish nobleman James Bruce was serving as the British consul in the coastal city of Algiers (today the capital of Algeria) in 1763.

Imposingly tall and broad, Bruce was a voracious scholar with a curious mind. Before his arrival in Algiers to take up his post, he spent a few months in Italy poring over the history of the African region and its role in antiquity.

Bruce’s short temper and strong opinions soon led to clashes with his superiors in London. In 1765, he lost his appointment. Rather than return to Britain, he and a Florentine artist named Luigi

Balugani embarked on an adventure across Africa. On their journey, they kept notes and made illustrations depicting the many extraordinary people and places they encountered.

Time in the desert

In the early stages of this odyssey, they had traveled south to the Algerian desert looking for traces of ancient civilizations. Bruce and Balugani had already seen several Roman ruins as they explored more remote parts of the region.

On December 12, 1765, they reached what they identified as Thamugadi. Many believe that they were the first Europeans in centuries to visit the site, near the northern slopes of the Aure

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s mountains. “It has been a small town, but full of elegant buildings,” Bruce wrote in his diaries. He was confident that these ruins were what remained of the city founded by Trajan more than a millenium earlier.

On the first day, Bruce recorded and Balugani drew “the triumphal arch” of Trajan. They returned the next day to continue exploration and identified an amphitheater. Bruce cleared away the sand and uncovered sculptures of the Roman emperor who succeeded Hadrian in A.D. 138, Antoninus Pius, and his wife, Faustina the Elder, works he described as having “exquisite beauty.” (See also: Trajan's Column Soars Over Rome)

Bruce reburied the sculptures in the sand and continued traveling. He documented more sites throughout North Africa and Ethiopia, even claiming to find the source of the Blue Nile. Balugani died in 1770, and Bruce returned to London in 1774. When he reported his findings, they were

greeted with skepticism and disbelief. Incredulous at this reaction, Bruce retired to Scotland. In 1780, he began writing a memoir of his time in Africa, a five-volume work known as Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile. The book was published in 1790. When Bruce died four years later, much of Britain still refused to recognize his achievements.

Roman splendor

Thamugadi lay largely forgotten in the desert sands until 1875, when it was visited by Robert Lambert Playfair, Britain's consul in Algiers. In his 1877 book, Travels in the Footsteps of Bruce in Algeria and Tunis, Playfair paid homage to his consular predecessor, visiting some of the sites Bruce had recorded.

Playfair's description of Thamugadi offers more details than Bruce's. His observations revealed the city's regional importance, noting it was built at the intersection of six Roman roads. In Playfair's opinion, the architecture outshone that of the neighboring Roman city Lambaesis, Nubia's military capital. Playfair concluded that Thamugadi was a "center of commercial and agricultural activity." (See also: On this ancient map, all roads really do lead to Rome)

He also admired the magnificence of the city's Arch of Trajan. On the ground underneath its 20-foot-high portal can still be seen deep ruts from the traffic that passed into the city along the busy imperial highways.

The French took control of the site in 1881, a few years after Playfair's visit, and maintained a presence there until 1960. During this period, the site was systematically excavated. Having been buried for centuries under sand with nothing built on top of it, Thamugadi is one of only a few Roman cities excavated in its entirety.

Going with the grain

The research undertaken by Playfair and by French scholars has enabled historians to piece together the history of the city. Originally named Colonia Marciana Trajana Thamurga, in honor of Emperor Trajan's sister, Thamugadi was laid out in a grid.

In the mid-third century A.D., the city's population peaked at 15,000. They enjoyed fine public buildings, including a magnificent library and a total of 14 baths. The comfort of Thamugadi's facilities, and the presence of mosaics, has often prompted comparisons with Pompeii. (See also: Vesuvius: Asleep for Now)

The city's location was key to protecting the Roman Empire's southern borders. North Africa was a center of grain production, and Rome's Third Augustan Legion was stationed in Thamugadi to protect the grain and its transport to Rome. Several hundred men would be discharged from the legion every two years, and they settled in Thamugadi as a kind of pension for their service. Their presence also served as a deterrent to invaders.

The city was a manifestation of Roman might on the empire's southern border. Its diverse population saw those who worshipped the old gods living alongside Christians. For a while, it was a stronghold of the heretical Christian sect the Donatists.

The general crisis mounting on the borders of the Roman Empire eventually took its toll on Thamugadi. After being looted by the Vandals during the fifth century, the city began to sink into ruin. After the fall of the western Roman Empire, Thamugadi enjoyed a brief resurgence as a Christian center, and a fort was built outside the city in 539. But the city was abandoned either before or during the Arab invasions of the 700s. (See also: Rome's border walls were the beginning of its end)

From that point, the Sahara gradually covered Thamugadi, and it stayed hidden for a thousand years until James Bruce and others would rediscover its buried glory. Thamugadi was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1982.