

DIRECTORS' REPORT ON 2003 SEASON

TEAM 2003:

Mario Capasso (director), Sergio Pernigotti (director), Paola Davoli (field director), Micaela Alfieri (student), Angela Cervi (recorder), Carlotta Franceschelli (topographer), Anna Morini (assistant), Barbara Rizzo (drawer), Silvia Vinci (assistant). The Supreme Council of Antiquities has been represented by the Inspector Nahla Mohammed Ahmed,

Archaeological Report

The Italian Joint Archaeological Mission of Bologna and Lecce Universities, directed by Sergio Pernigotti (Bologna University) and by Mario Capasso (Lecce University), carried out its first excavation season at Dime, the Graeco-Roman town of Soknopaiou Nesos, between February 18th and March 13th 2003.

The mission, with Paola Davoli as Field Director, started working on this site in 2001 with the purpose of drawing up a topographic map of the entire archaeological area using modern methods of topographical surface survey (georeferencing the site with GPS and carrying out ground surveys with Total Station) as well as by means of a series of metric photographs taken at low altitudes using a specially equipped aerostatic balloon.

From an archaeological point of view Dime is not well known and very little has been published about it, despite the fact that it is in a good state of preservation. The last and the only scientific archaeological excavation was organized by the University of Michigan in 1931-32 and was directed by A.E.R. Boak and E. Peterson. However, there have been many excavations over the years, whose sole purpose was to find objects and particularly papyri. In fact many papyri, which are now housed in numerous collections, were found at this site during these excavations starting from 1887.

Our archaeological excavation is carried on following the stratigraphic method inside the great temple enclosure, which still dominates the ruins of the ancient town and within which no scientific excavations work has ever taken place (fig. 1). Nothing was in fact known about the use and the chronological evolution of the buildings, which lie within it. The temple of Soknopaios is famous as numerous statues, architectural elements and a large number of Greek and Demotic papyri belonging to the temple archives have been brought to light there in the past. Because there were many stone buildings here, this area was also used as a quarry, a good source of building materials. What is left today is a large enclosure which measures 200 x 80 m ca. surrounded by mud-brick walls which are about 15 m in height and mostly still well-preserved. The main entrance was about halfway along the southern side, at the end of a paved road, the *dromos*, which went southwards for about 400 m dividing the settlement into two parts.



Fig. 1

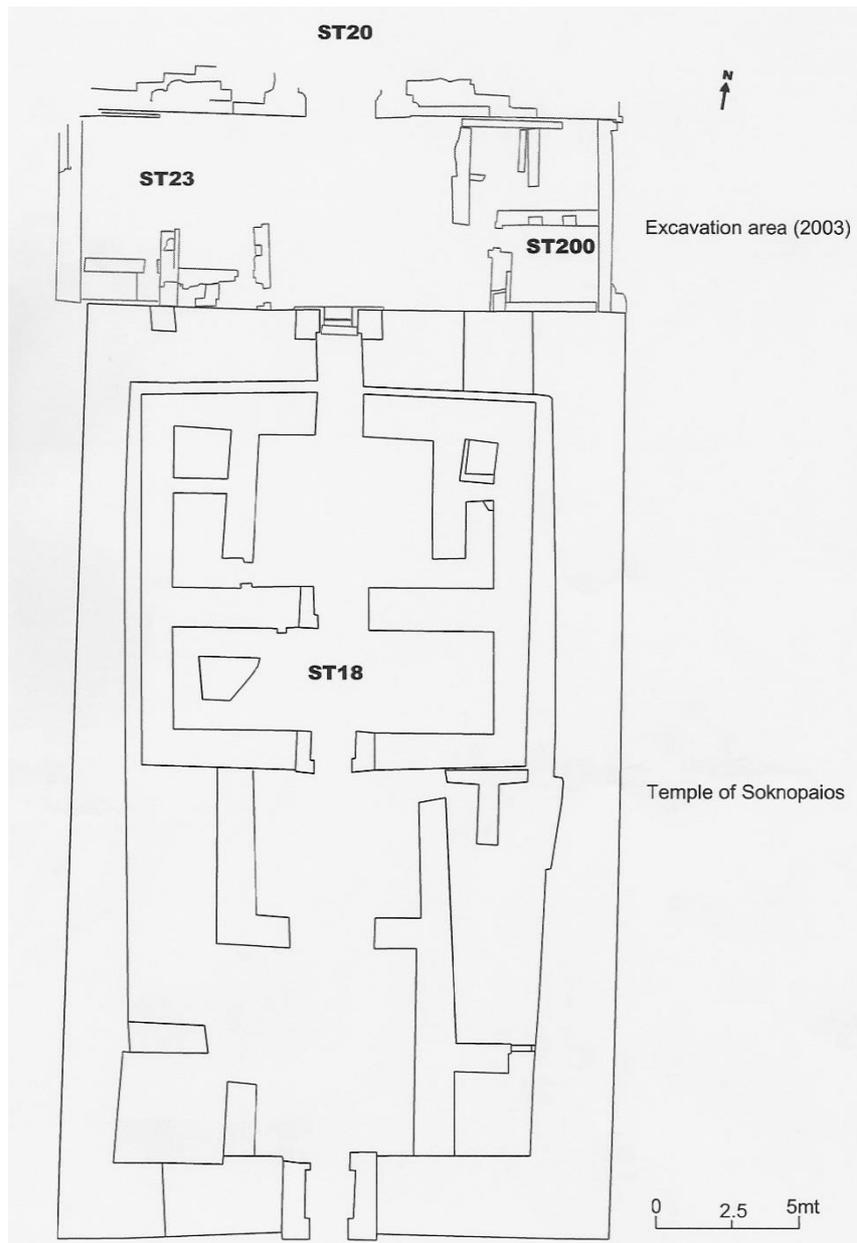


Fig. 2

Within the sacred enclosure the remains of a number of subsidiary buildings can still be seen. These were built in mud-bricks and lie along the internal perimeter of the *temenos*. In the middle of the *temenos* there is a building, which for its position and plan, can be easily identified as a temple (labelled ST 18) (Figs. 2-3). Its entrance faces south, opposite the original gateway in the *temenos* and the *dromos*. This temple is preserved for at least 5 metres in height and was built in local stones originally covered with a thick layer of plaster, which only partially remains today. The building, surrounded by a mud-brick wall, has a plan similar to other small Egyptian temple of the Graeco-Roman period, but it has a second door in the northern wall in front of the main entrance, at the rear of the *naos* (fig. 4). Beyond this door, in the middle of the enclosure, there is an area, which measures approximately 60 x 20 metres, where we found a large number of blocks and lintels made with different types of local limestone (fig. 5). This leads us to believe that there might have been one or possibly more totally unknown monumental buildings present here.

We therefore decided to begin excavating this sector, starting from the north door of the temple ST 18, in order to understand how and when it was opened and investigate the enlargement of the temple northwards. The excavated sector is 20 m in width from east to west and 7 m in length from north to south. It turned out to be a big courtyard surrounded by walls (fig. 6): to the south it was bordered by the northern walls of temple ST 18 in the middle of which there is a door; to the north it was bordered by an imposing wall built with local isodomic limestone blocks pertaining to a building labelled ST 20, which has not been excavated yet (fig. 7). To the east and to the west of the courtyard, respectively, there are two partially visible mud-brick subsidiary buildings (ST 200 & ST 23) (figs. 8-11). The area has been disturbed by undocumented excavations and was then covered with sand and mounds of mud-brick debris and stones collapsed from walls in different moments (figs. 12-13). A large 3 m high mound of rubble, the result of these clandestine operations, covered the entire eastern end of the courtyard as well as building ST 200. In this rubble we found numerous Demotic *ostraka*, fragments of Greek and Demotic papyri and some objects of daily life such as vegetable fibre sandals. Before being covered by the aforementioned rubble mound, building ST 200 had been totally emptied. It was made up of three rooms, of which two have been completely brought to light. Building ST 23, to the west of the courtyard, also suffered the same fate. Of this building only two small rooms, which originally had a barrel vault ceiling, have been brought to light in 2003. The central part of the courtyard is completely paved with slabs of local grey limestone and connects building ST 18 to building ST 20. Both these buildings are almost certainly parts of the same temple and built at different periods in time.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

At this stage we can hypothesize that building ST 18 was the original temple dedicated to the crocodile god Soknopaios and founded during the Hellenistic period. Although the inside of the temple still has to be excavated, we can recognize subsequent building phases, which gradually altered its plan. The four gateways, of which two are internal, were built with fine limestone blocks on the longitudinal axis and probably date back to the last of these restructuring phases. The fourth gateway was opened in the back wall of the *naos* and led into the courtyard, which was brought to light in 2003. On the opposite side of the courtyard and on the same axis there was another gateway in the limestone block wall pertaining to building ST 20. It is therefore likely that the courtyard, the building ST 20 and all the limestone gateways in ST 18 are contemporary and can be dated probably to the end of the Ptolemaic period or the beginning of the Roman period. At this stage in our research we are unable to date this building phase more precisely.

As far as building ST 20 is concerned, we have so far brought to light the façade of the southern external wall, which measures 20 m in length, 1.44 m in width and is preserved to a maximum height of 7 courses of blocks, which means 1.53 m. The wall was made of isodomic blocks stuck together with white and pink mortar. Its southern façade remained rough with blocks showing bosses surrounded by four chiselled bands, which are 7-8 cm wide. On the corners of the wall there is a projecting part with a rectangular cross-section (11.3 x 23 x 23 x 10 cm), which should have been used to mould the vertical *torus* cornice. Some stylized letters of the Greek alphabet are engraved on the bosses of few blocks as mason's marks. The door, which is halfway down this wall, was 2.40 m wide.

Among the debris we have found numerous architectural elements (fig. 14) in Egyptian style, such as fragments of uraeus friezes, lintels with solar disc flanked by two cobras, part of a bas-relief with a hieroglyphic inscription; but also in Classical style, like the base of an "attic" type column and a fragment of a metope frieze with rosettes.

It is therefore possible that the temple of Soknopaios was enlarged in the late Ptolemaic period or at the beginning of the Roman period when a new building was constructed at the back of the older temple, which then became a passageway. The new temple seems to have been built with the same technique and in the same style as we can see in other sites in the Fayyum, such as Karanis, Bakchias, Narmouthis and Dionysias temples, although inside and around it there were also chapels and buildings built in the Classical style.

Among the objects found during this first season it is also worth mentioning a piece of a wooden *naos* which bears a hieroglyphic inscription with the Horus name of Ptolemy III, a small scarab with the inscription *nswt bit* and a face of an anthropoid sarcophagus probably dating back to the Late Period (fig. 14).



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

Papyrological Report

The first campaign was particularly successful from a papyrological point of view. We in fact found 80 Demotic *ostraka* and a few Greek *ostraka*. Among other objects from the courtyard, we found a wooden inkwell and what is probably a piece of an *umbilicus*, which was used to roll up papyri. Both these objects are simple but not unrefined. The Demotic *ostraka* are mostly fragmentary and are datable between 1st and 2nd century A.D. They are lists of goods and various accounts.

We have also to mention a few dozen fragments of Greek and Demotic documentary papyri and, above all, 9 amulets in papyrus (fig. 16), many of which still rolled up, tied up with a papyrus fibre and sealed with mud. These were amulets worn by people.



Fig. 16.