



SOKNOPAIΟΥ NESOS PROJECT

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION OF THE CENTRO DI STUDI PAPIROLOGICI
OF SALENTO UNIVERSITY (LECCE) AT SOKNOPAIΟΥ NESOS/DIME ES-SEBA
(EL-FAYYUM - EGYPT)**

SIXTEENTH ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEASON, OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2021.

PRELIMINARY REPORT

Introduction

The archaeological Mission of the Centro di Studi Papirologici of the University of Salento, Lecce, led by Mario Capasso and Paola Davoli, carried out the annual Archaeological Season at Dime es-Seba (El-Fayyum), the ancient Soknopaiou Nesos, from 1st October to 6th December 2021.

Members of the team were Ashraf Barakat (Assistant to Directors), Bruno Bazzani (Computer management and photographer), Alberto Buonfino (Papyrologist and Registrar), Clementina Caputo (Ceramologist), Francesca Cozza (Egyptologist), Silvio Di Cello (Assistant papyrologist), Cesare Iezzi (Archaeologist), Roberta Petrilli (Egyptologist). Mohammed Riad Ramadan, Nagla Rabia Hassan, Mohammed Amin Ab del Amid (Restoration department), Mustafa Faisal Hemeda, Ahmed Hassan represented the Ministry of Antiquities in the field and in the General Storehouse at Kom Aushim. Israa Mohammed Ibrahim and Ahmed Hamdi Mohammed joined the Mission team for the restoration of some objects in the SCA Magazine.

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The ST 6 building (Figs. 1-4)

The excavation of ST 6, a building in mud bricks located in the northwest corner of the *temenos*, begun in 2019. In this season two large rooms of the building, A and B, have been brought to light. The building consists of at least three rooms and a partially preserved staircase. Only the walls of the large room A, which is 12 meters long and 5 meters wide, are preserved for a maximum of 8 meters in elevation. Room A is characterized by the presence of 15 large niches arranged symmetrically along the sides and plastered with white plaster mortar. Some of these had a stone base, which has been preserved in place only in a few cases. The five niches on the east side are surmounted by windows.

The room was certainly excavated in the past; it is filled with windblown sand, collapsed bricks, mudbrick debris and many wooden elements. The ceiling, 7 meters above the floor, was originally flat and made up of wooden beams and reeds. The only evidence of the ceiling consists of three post holes for the beams, two of which symmetrical, and a collapsed portion of reeds tied with ropes and fixed with mud mortar.

There are no traces of Byzantine occupation of the room, as instead is the case of the two temples ST 20 and ST 203. In the filling, disrupted by pits dug in the past, numerous objects related to the cult were found which complement those found in 2019 (Figs. 5-12): pinecones in excellent condition; decorative elements in limestone, originally placed in the interior of the niches to constitute real chapels of worship, with columns and capitals; an Egyptian cavetto cornice and the two supporting pillars from the decoration of a niche; wooden tablets painted in bright colors, some Greek and Demotic papyri; parts of two statuettes probably depicting a priest, in black basalt, and the lower part of an Osiris, in limestone.

The furnishing of room A is represented by stone benches resting on the floor, made also in local stone and plastered with white lime, by reused column drums placed within the floor slabs on the central axis of the room (three are still *in situ*, while other five were found scattered in the filling); by two tables for offerings with two deep basins; by pillows and / or mattresses made of fabric with inflorescence of reeds, of which about 80 kg were recovered. Two finely wooden turned legs of chairs or beds and at least one table also made of wood have survived the repeated looting of the room. The objects found in 2019, such as stone and terracotta incense burners, floral elements for decorative garlands and painted wooden panels must be added to the newly found materials to have a better idea of the context. Pinecones and other plant elements were part of composite garlands, but they were also burned as votive offerings, as numerous charred remains attest. Terracotta pearls and bells were likely part of the decoration hanging on the walls.

Room A was accessed by means of a doorway located in the center of the southern wall and made with blocks of yellow limestone, of which only the foundation course and the threshold remain. The door was closed by two shutters and was 90 cm wide. It was accessed by means of two steps that went up from room B. The latter extends from east to west for 9 m and is 4 m wide. The doorway to room B, completely destroyed, was located in the northeast corner of the room and had only one leaf (Fig. 4). The hall, whose perimeter walls are heavily eroded in the eastern half, had a flat roof and had been plastered several times due to the black soot that covered the walls. It had at least two niches located at its west end, one of which was filled in before the last restoration of the plaster.

The floor was initially in compacted mud, then covered with a new one made of thin stone slabs plastered with white lime like the floor of room A. Traces of burnt are clearly visible on both floors. Benches made of stone blocks, perhaps reused, runs along the walls and are 30 cm high and 40 cm wide. The filling of the room, consisting of sand, bricks, and brick debris, was ravaged several times by robbers: pits were dug in different places and small barriers made of bricks and stones were set to support the sand during these scavenging. The floor was completely undermined at the entrance to the room and at its western end.

The materials found are very fragmentary and of uncertain origin. Some papyri in Greek have been recovered from the organic layer that still covered some parts of the floor, as well as fragments

of a gilded stucco decoration with Egyptian-style relief, on which the god Sobek with *was* scepter, and an offering woman can be recognized.

Among the finds in ST 6A and B, are 27 demotic *ostraka*; 16 papyri in Greek and Demotic; 24 pinecones; about forty terracotta bells and pearls for the decoration of festoons or garlands, of which some of the pinecones and dried dum palm fruits were part of too. Decorative architectural elements of the niches in Alexandrian and Egyptian style were recovered. Some fragments of painted wooden panels (Fig. 8), depicting divinities in classical style, were certainly part of panels already preserved in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and in the Petrie Museum in London. These were recovered by looters at the end of the 19th century.

Noteworthy is a statuette 11 cm high, in basalt, depicting Aphrodite, with her right shoulder and breast left uncovered, and with a pommel in her left hand. The figurine lacks the head and feet which were applied by means of thin iron tenons. Two small hanging holes on her shoulders suggest that she had to be hung. It is a particularly refined work, with fine details of the dress and polished surface (Fig. 13).

The building appears to be a meeting place, with stone benches, wooden chairs or beds, cushions and / or mattresses, offering tables and various types of incense burners. The niches, richly decorated with lithic elements, were different from each other and could contain cult statuettes or painted panels. The organic remains found on the floors are of leaves, flowers, and seeds (the bones are completely missing), and seem to attest to ritual activities that did not involve the use of meat but only of plant materials. In addition to the use of fire, the incrustations on floors and furniture also suggest the sprinkling of oils and other liquids.

Preparatory works for the restoration of the Templar area

In 2021 a three-year project for the refurbishment and restoration of the *temenos* area began, funded by the Antiquities Endowment Fund of the American Research Center in Egypt. The work was planned and carried out in collaboration with architects Nicholas Warner and Ahmed Abdelgawad.

The first interventions involve the clearing of the large and heavy architraves found in ST 20 and ST 203 temples during the excavations carried out from 2003 to 2019. They were temporarily removed outside the buildings and occupy the lateral areas of the sanctuaries, preventing circulation. The project intends to reorganize the templar area and give it a more orderly and usable appearance for visitors. The lintels located north and west of ST 203 have been moved during this season outside the *temenos*, in an area without buildings to the northeast of the enclosure wall. The removal of the blocks will continue in 2022. To accomplish the work, which must necessarily take place without the aid of mechanical means, a ramp has been prepared. It will allow the transportation of the heavy lintels located east of ST 20 towards an area east of the *temenos* and outside of it.

Some sectors of the *temenos* made in mud bricks have been identified as particularly eroded at the base and therefore at risk of collapse. Their consolidation will consist in the construction of new courses of mud bricks that will fill the gaps at the base of these sectors. This reconstruction requires the preparation of at least 50,000 new mud bricks (30 x 15 x 10 cm) and the excavation at the base of each sector of a trench that allows to expose the preserved wall on which the new courses must be funded. For this purpose, the production of the new bricks has begun, and a trench has already been dug at the base of walls 4.6 and 4.7 of the west side of the *temenos* (Fig. 1), from which the reconstruction works will begin in 2022. The external west face of the sector 4.6 is eroded by a depth of approx. 1 m. The trench is 5 m from north to south and 0.80 m wide (Fig. 14). During this work we had the possibility to explore the foundation of the *temenos*, which we reached 3 meters below the eroded surface of the wall. The foundation was exposed in an area of 60 x 80 cm: the wall is well built according to the English Bond scheme and has two offsets 1.45 m apart, the second of which is located at the base of the wall and is built with local stones. The foundation course is set at the elevation of 24.49 m and consists of squared blocks of yellow limestone on head, and brown limestone stones placed side by side with the blocks. The bottom elevation is much lower than that of the southeast wall of the *temenos*, reached in Saggio 10 at the elevation of 25.17 m.

Restoration of objects

The restorers of the Kom Aushim Storehouse laboratory assembled the head of the statue depicting a Ptolemaic queen with her bust. They also intervened to consolidate the stucco of some painted panels found in ST 6 during 2019 and 2021 seasons, and to clean some coins.

The directors of the Mission

Prof. Mario Capasso

Prof. Paola Davoli

Medinet el-Fayyum, 6th December 2021

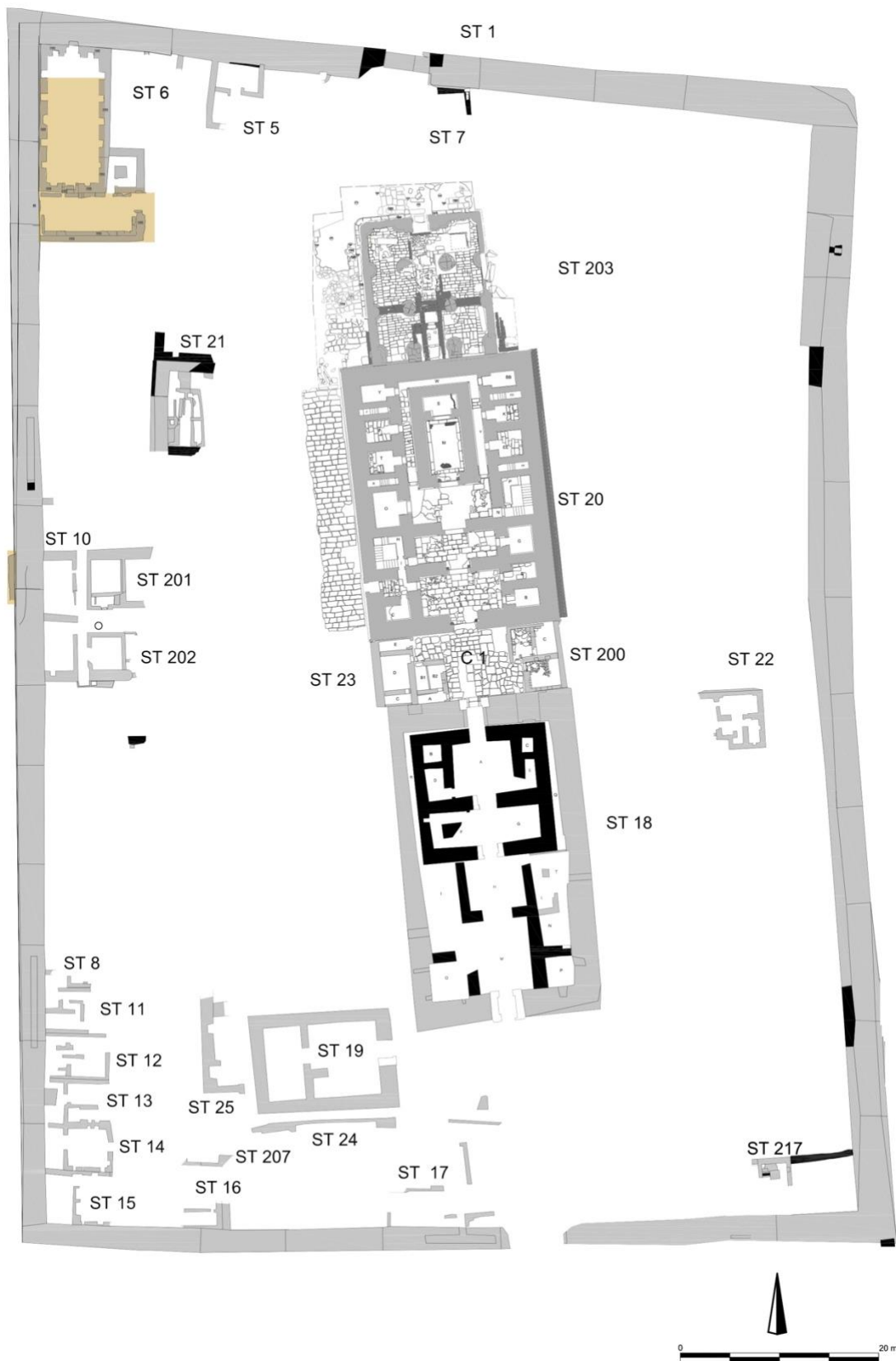


Fig. 1. Plan of the *temenos* with the areas excavated in 2021 in yellow.



Fig. 2. View of room ST 6A looking north.



Fig. 3. Room ST 6A.



Fig. 4. Room ST 6B looking west.



Fig. 5. Decoration of a niche in ST 6A in alexandrian style.



Fig. 6. Composite capitel of the decoration of a niche in ST 6A.



Fig. 7. Decoration of a niche in ST 6A in Egyptian style.



Fig. 8. Fragments of painted panel with male divinity.



Fig. 9. Pinecones.



Fig. 10. One of the terracotta bells.

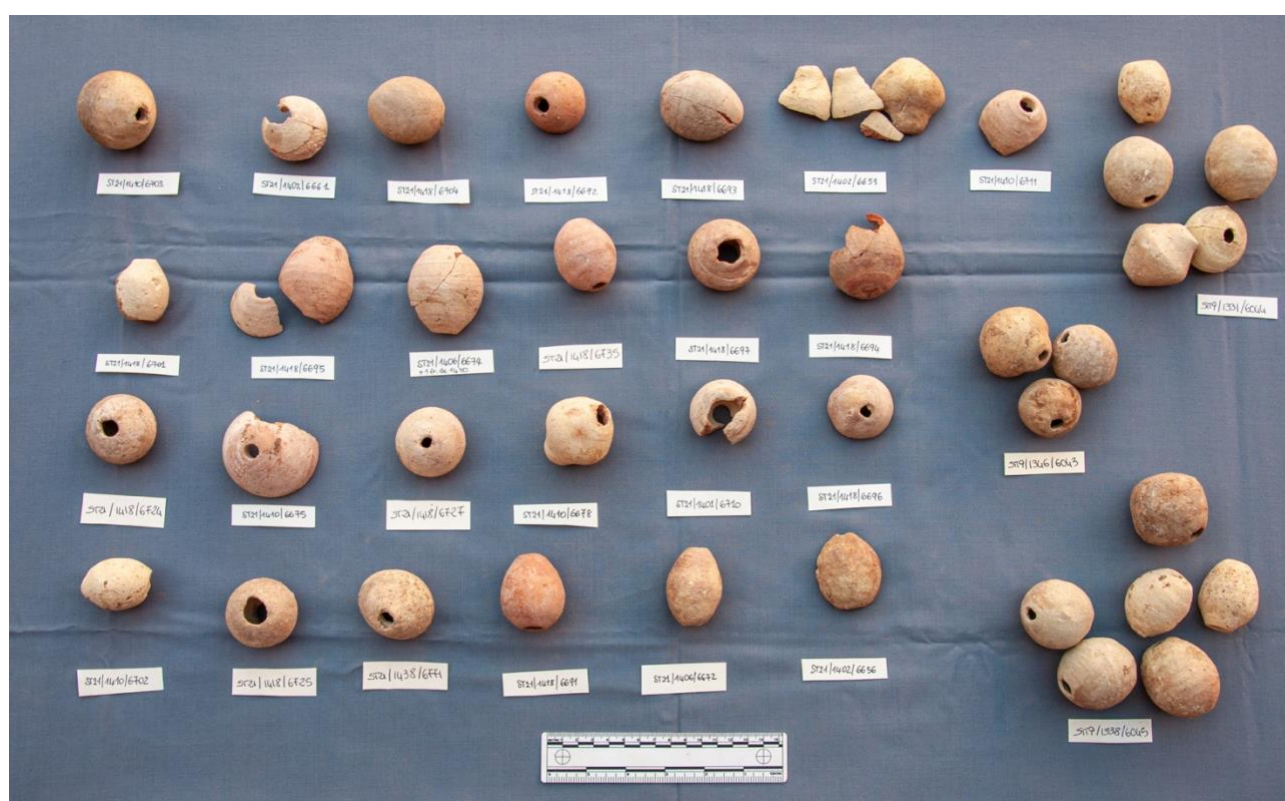


Fig. 11. Terracotta pearls.



Fig. 12. Greek papyrus.



Fig. 13. Statuette in basalt representing Afrodite.



Fig. 14. Trench west of the *temenos* sectors 4.6, 4.7.

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