

**SOKNOPAIU NESOS PROJECT**

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

**ELEVENTH ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEASON, OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2014.**

## **Introduction**

The Archaeological Mission of the Centro di Studi Papirologici of Salento University, Lecce, directed by Mario Capasso and Paola Davoli, carried out the Eleventh Excavation Season at Dime es-Seba (El-Fayyum), the ancient Soknopaiou Nesos, from October 26<sup>th</sup> to December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014.

The team consisted of Stefania Alfarano (assistant excavation), Ashraf Barakat (assistant to director), Bruno Bazzani (computer management), Alberto Buonfino (registrar), Clementina Caputo (ceramicist), Ehab Younes Ali (Fayoum University), Massimo Limoncelli (3D specialist, Catholic University of Milan), Magali de Haro Sanchez (papyrologist, University of Liège), Ilaria de Nigris (archaeologist), Simone Occhi (surveyor), Roberta Petrilli (Egyptologist), Federico Scacchetti (archaeologist), Sandro Vannini (Photographer), Mariacristina Macchia and Filippo Mi (University of Salento), Yasser Yusef Abd el Sattar (training inspector). The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by the inspectors Mohammed Riad Ramadan and Mustafa Faisal Hemed.

The Mission would like to thank Prof. Dr. Mamdouh Mohamed Gad Eldamaty, Minister of Antiquities and Heritage, the General Director of the Foreign Missions Hany Ahmed Abo El Azm, the General Manager of the Fayyum Inspectorate Ahmed Abdel-Aal Mohamed for their support in the course of work. Warm thanks to the Provost of the University of Salento, prof. Vincenzo Zara, for the financial support for 2014. We are also grateful to the Cav. Luca Trombi, who, as every year, has secured a generous and crucial financial support, and to the supporters of the "Cultural Association Soknopaiou Nesos Project". In particular, we would like to thank the International Centro di Studi Borgiani of Velletri, chaired by Dr. Rigel Langella, for the scholarship provision for young people participating in the Mission.

Thanks also to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the financial support in 2014 and Mrs Cecile Safwat of the archaeological section of the Italian Cultural Institute in Cairo, who was responsible for relations with the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

## **Excavation 2014**

The main body of work took place in the great temple enclosure. The excavation continued on the west side of the temple dedicated to the god Soknopaios (ST 20) (Fig. 1) in Trench 8 already opened in 2012. In addition, a new area has been investigated in the southeast corner of the *temenos* (Trench 10) on a mound already present in the plan outlined by K.R. Lepsius in 1843.

Trench 8 is long from north to south 8.65 meters and wide from east to west 3.10 m. It has been opened in the pavement in limestone slabs perfectly preserved on the west side of the temple

ST 20 (Fig. 2). This floor (US 810), brought to light in 2012, is not the original floor but a remaking built during a restoration phase of the exterior wall of ST 20. It abuts a coating of grey limestone slabs (US 806) put in place along the bottom of the outer wall eroded from the winds.

The stratigraphy found in Trench 8 is sealed and is therefore of great interest to determine the history of the temple ST 20. In the area where temple ST 20 was built there were earlier structures built in local stones and mud-bricks, which were partially demolished to make room for the new temple. Inside Trench 8 are three walls in rough stones founded directly on the *gebel* (Fig. 3). The spaces between the walls were filled with sand and debris to level the area for the building yard. It is not clear which kind of buildings are they, but in the space between them there was a dump made of domestic waste alternating with layers of sand. Ceramics and *ostraka* found in these layers are dated to the late first century BC.

The original floor outside the sanctuary ST 20 was made up of rough stones, on which a chapel with columns was. Both are badly preserved because of their dismantling that occurred in the restoration phase of the building, during which the revetment and the floor above mentioned (810 US 806) were made. The base of a column and the imprint of a second one are all what remains of the chapel (Fig. 4). A test trench has allowed us to ensure the absence of other columns to the south and to conclude that a chapel 4.25 meters large was set against the western side of ST 20 and was perhaps in classic style.

The materials found in the layers between the two floors (50 cm thick) suggest that the dismantling of the chapel and the subsequent construction of the new floor 810 have occurred during the second century AD.

Trench 10 is located in the southeast corner of the *temenos* and measures 10.5 east-west and 10 m north-south (Fig. 5). The excavated mound was composed of sediments accumulated during the long history of the site. On the surface there were materials resulting from clandestine excavations carried out between the end of 1800 and the beginning of 1900 that have damaged the structures present in the area. Only part of a mud brick house was found (ST 217). It is likely that it was a house for priests built with light grey mud bricks, of which part of a staircase with a central pillar and an adjoining cellar remain (Fig. 6). The house developed to the west and probably is still preserved below a high hill made by clandestine excavations. The house was built in the Roman period at a distance of 3 m from the south side of the *temenos* and 6.5 m from the east one. A wall made of reused stones and mud-bricks was built to the east of the staircase to enclose a space like-courtyard. This wall is largely collapsed toward north and seals the underlying stratigraphy that

consists of layers pre-existing the construction of the house. The house was built on a layer of domestic waste levelled on purpose that covered an earlier structure of mud brick and rubble resulting from its destruction. In turn, this building was built directly on a previously demolished mud-brick building. So far three are the building phases of construction recognised in the area. The chronology of the various phases will be assessed through the study of ceramic and other materials found in the stratigraphy, including Demotic *ostraka*.

The area was still inhabited during the Byzantine era by animals enclosed in the courtyard of the Roman house. An *ostrakon* with a staurogram attests to the presence of Christians in the *temenos*.

### **Finds**

Overall 181 *ostraka*, of which one Greek, some figurative and all the other Demotic were recovered (Fig. 7). A dozen of fragments of Demotic papyri and one Greek were also found.

Rings, earrings, coins and a small figure of goddess Renenutet in bronze were also discovered.

### **Photography**

The site and some special monuments have been documented with digital photographs in order to create a three-dimensional model of the site and of some buildings.

The Directors of the Mission

Mario Capasso e Paola Davoli

Medinet el-Fayyum, december 1<sup>st</sup> 2014

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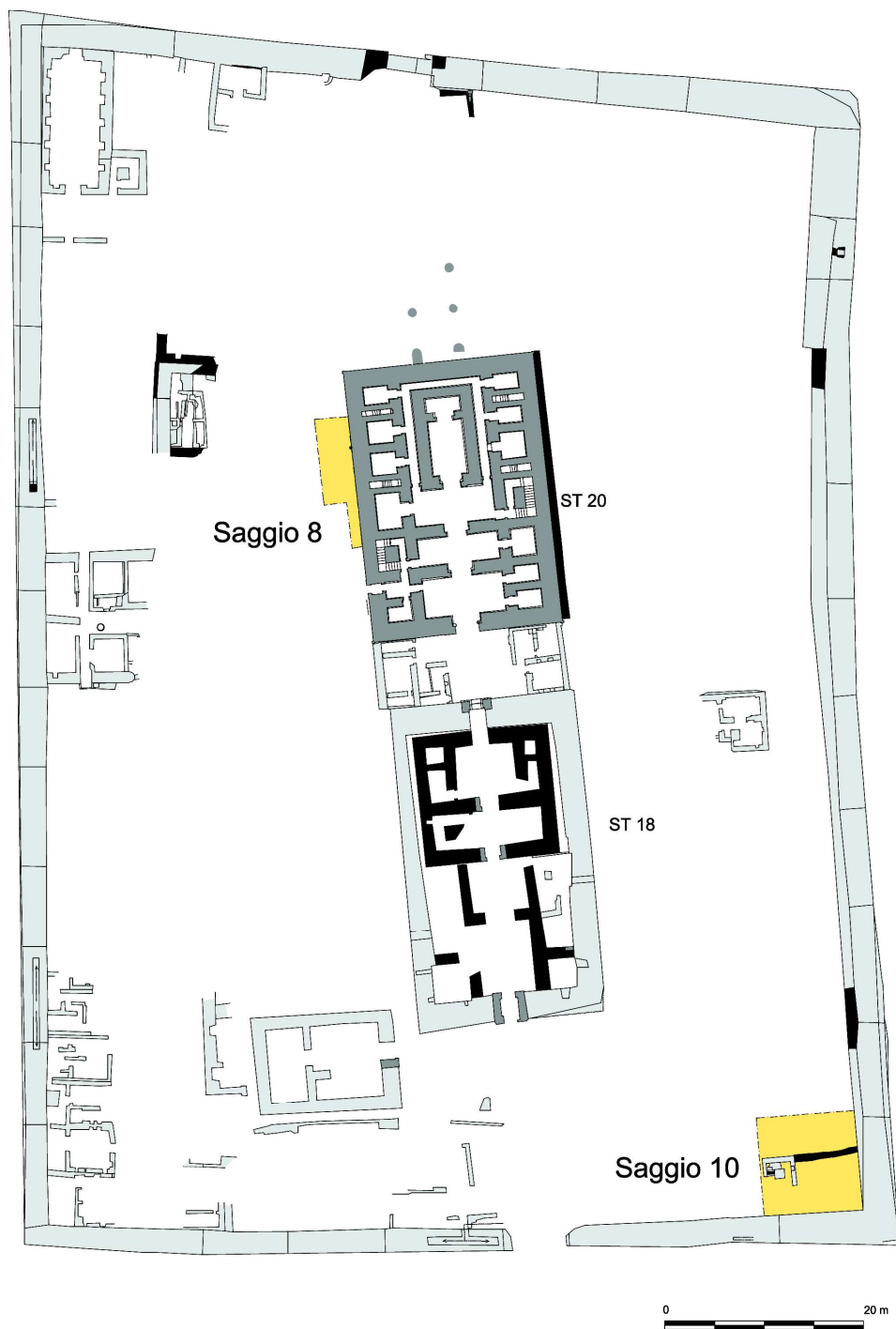


Fig. 1. 2014 excavation areas in the *temenos*.



Fig. 2. The second century AD floor (US 810) on the west side of temple ST 20.



Fig. 3. Hellenistic period buildings in Trench 8.



Fig. 4. Trench 8. The base of the column of the chapel west of ST 20.



Fig. 5. Trench 10, overview.



Fig. 6. The house of priests in Trench 10.



Fig. 7. Some of the Demotic *ostraka*.