

SOKNOPAIU NESOS PROJECT

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

THIRTEEN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEASON, OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2016.

I. Introduction

The Archaeological Mission of the Centro di Studi Papirologici of Salento University, Lecce, directed by Mario Capasso and Paola Davoli, carried out the annual archaeological season at Dime es-Seba (El-Fayyum), ancient Soknopaiou Nesos, from October 24th to December 8th, 2016.

The team consisted of Stefania Alfarano (archaeologist), Ashraf Barakat (assistant directors), Bruno Bazzani (management computer and photographer), Alberto Buonfino (papyrologist and registrar), Clementina Caputo (ceramologist), Debora Cionfoli (draughtswoman), Salima Ikram and Louise Bertini (American University in Cairo, paleozoologists), Filippo Mi (egyptologist), Roberta Petrilli (egyptologist), Mauro Cremaschi (University of Milano, geoarchaeologist), Sylvie Marchand (IFAO Cairo, ceramologist), Cesare Iezzi (archaeologist), Massimo Limoncelli (archaeologist, 3D modeling). The Ministry of Antiquities was represented by the inspectors Yasser Yussuf Abd el Sattar, Ahmed Hassan, and Mustafa Faisal Hameda. Rasha Ramadan Abd el Halim and Ibrahim Ali Ibrahim, Inspectors from Fayyum Inspectorate, participated attending a complete training.

The Mission would like to thank Prof. Dr. Khaled el-Enany, Minister of Antiquities and Heritage; the General Director of the Foreign Mission Dr. Mohammed Ismail; the Director of the Inspectorate of Antiquities of Fayyum Sayed Shura for the support received during the works. Warm thanks are due to the Provost of the University of Salento, prof. Vincenzo Zara, for the financial support granted for 2016. The Mission also expresses its gratitude to cav. Luca Trombi, who, as every year, has assured a generous and vital financial support to the Mission, and to the “Friends of Soknopaiou Nesos Project”. Thanks also to the Istituto Internazionale di Studi Borgiani of Velletri, chaired by dr. Rigel Langella.

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II. Works done in the SCA storehouse of Kom Aushim

A season for the study of the objects was carried out from October 29 to November 10, in order to document and study different categories of materials found during excavations in Dime es-Seba from 2003 to 2014, in order to publish the catalogues of the finds. Several fragments belonging to at least 20 statues have been recognized and assembled, most of them depicting

priests. There are statues in Egyptian style, perhaps of pre-Hellenistic period, depicting characters sitting on cubic seats, with missing heads. All the statues found so far are without inscriptions.

Salima Ikram and Louise Bertini have begun the study of the bones: 1726 bones from good contexts (Trench 8 and Trench 10) and other stratigraphic units were examined and identified.

Animals	Quantity
Cattle	473
Fish	521
Birds	24
Sheep and Goat	16
Hares	22
Shells	52
Equidae	3

Fig. 1: General quantification and identification of livestock types

Also bones of tortoise (*Trionyx triunguis*) and crocodile, both probably from the nearby Lake Qarun, have been identified. Overall, most of the specimens represent different species of fishes, followed by cattle, with very few remains of birds, sheep and goats (fig. 1). So far, pigs are not present. These findings suggest two main sources of food for the inhabitants of Soknopaiou Nesos: cattle and fish. The fishes were easily caught in Lake Qarun and it is curious, given its proximity, that they are not in larger amounts. The presence of cattle suggests that the population was dependent on the temple for its primary food sources, since the cattle were expensive and the environment north of the lake Qarun does not seem to be ideal for this type of farming, unless it was not radically different from the late second century BC to the fourth century A.D. Most of the remains studied come from contexts dating from the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, when the temple was active. It can therefore be assumed that the bovine animals were used as offerings in the temple and then should have been redistributed as food among the population, as evidenced by several papyrus sources (like Bulaq Papyrus 18, Papyrus Boulaq 11, the Abusir Papyri for earlier periods).

III. The archaeological excavation

III.1. The temple ST 203

From November 12th to December 7th the excavation was carried out in the area immediately north of the temple dedicated to Soknopaios already fully investigated and called ST 20 (fig. 2).

The new building, ST 203, can be considered as a contra-temple built against the northern wall of the temple ST 20 (fig. 3). ST 203 measures from north to south 14.66 m and from east to west 12.30 m. The building was not visible before the excavation except for three columns and two engaged columns built with quarters in yellow limestone (fig. 4). The temple has 4 columns per side, joined by screen-walls. Other 4 columns are at the centre of the building. The *naos* is built leaning against the back wall of ST 20. It too has been demolished, but several architectural elements are preserved: it is 3.77 m long and 2.14 m wide, bipartite and built with blocks in black basalt and in brown-purplish fossiliferous limestone (fig. 5). Only the base of the walls of the *naos* is preserved to a height of 1.30 m. The floor was probably made with tiles in black and brown stones; the side walls were made with 3 + 3 thin screen-walls alternated by a series of basalt columns with Hathoric capitals (fig. 11).

The temple is preserved to a height of up to 1.7 m and was demolished in the past following the same fate as ST 20. The demolition was more intense and systematic in the northern half of the building. The filling consists of windblown sand mixed with debris arising from the demolition of the building; several architectural elements of the *naos*, in local limestone and basalt were found inside. A lintel in local fossiliferous limestone in purplish-brown colour belonging to the door that gave access to room A, decorated with a winged sun disk flanked by two pronounced high relief cobras of excellent craftsmanship has been recovered too (fig. 6). Numerous local limestone lintels that formed the roof of the rooms had fallen inside ST 203 and have been removed.

The excavation has brought to light the three main rooms, located along the southern side of the temple. In the central room A, in which is the lower part of the *naos*, the floors are completely destroyed. The side rooms, C and D, are 5.10 x 4.40 m, and retain almost all of the floors in yellow limestone blocks.

A thick layer of organic soil on the floors reflects a late attendance of the building (4th-7th century AD), with fireplaces lit with sacral furniture and other woods.

The temple was built in the Roman period, perhaps in the second century A.D. The lack of inscriptions prevents us to establish with certainty to whom it was dedicated.

Among the finds there was an outstanding model of the temple of which the base is almost entirely preserved, as well as some of the architectural elements, such as the column shafts, some screen-walls and a jamb (fig. 7). The model does not reflect the real temple only along one side, probably altered during its construction. It is 1:12 scale.

Greek and Demotic *ostraka*, small figured papyri, Greek papyri, amulets (fig. 10), pieces of wood and stucco gilded furniture of the temple, a complete stone altar, and the bottom of a *naos* in

local limestone, whose top is located at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (JT 7/10/14/2) (fig. 8), were found in contexts altered by previous illegal excavations.

III.2. The temple ST 18

The excavation of the Ptolemaic temple ST 18 started from room P located in the southeast corner of the building. The space is 3 x 2.8 m and is preserved for a height of 7 m. The space was divided into at least three overlapping rooms or maybe two rooms and the terrace of the temple (fig. 9). The room of the second floor was accessible through a door located in its northeast corner, of which the threshold remains at 28.72 m asl altitude. Instead the door that gave access to the room of the ground floor was located in its northwest corner. The room of the ground floor has changed over time with the addition of two niches cut in the south wall and with the construction of a mudbrick storage bin in the southwest corner. These changes probably date back to the Roman period, when the compartment was used as a warehouse. 17 demotic *ostraka*, two fragments of demotic papyri, and coins were found in a stratigraphy partially excavated by ancient illegal diggers.

IV. Survey

From 20th to 24th November M. Cremaschi and S. Marchand have re-examined a number of interesting sites identified during past surveys in the area around Dime. Also the materials collected during the previous surveys have been reviewed and studied. Ceramic and flints dating back from Neolithic times until the Mamluk period bear witness of the long lasting presence of communities and people north of Lake Qarun and of their activities.

Web site: www.museopapirologico.eu

The directors of the Mission

Prof. Mario Capasso

Prof. Paola Davoli

Medinet el-Fayyum, 8th December 2016

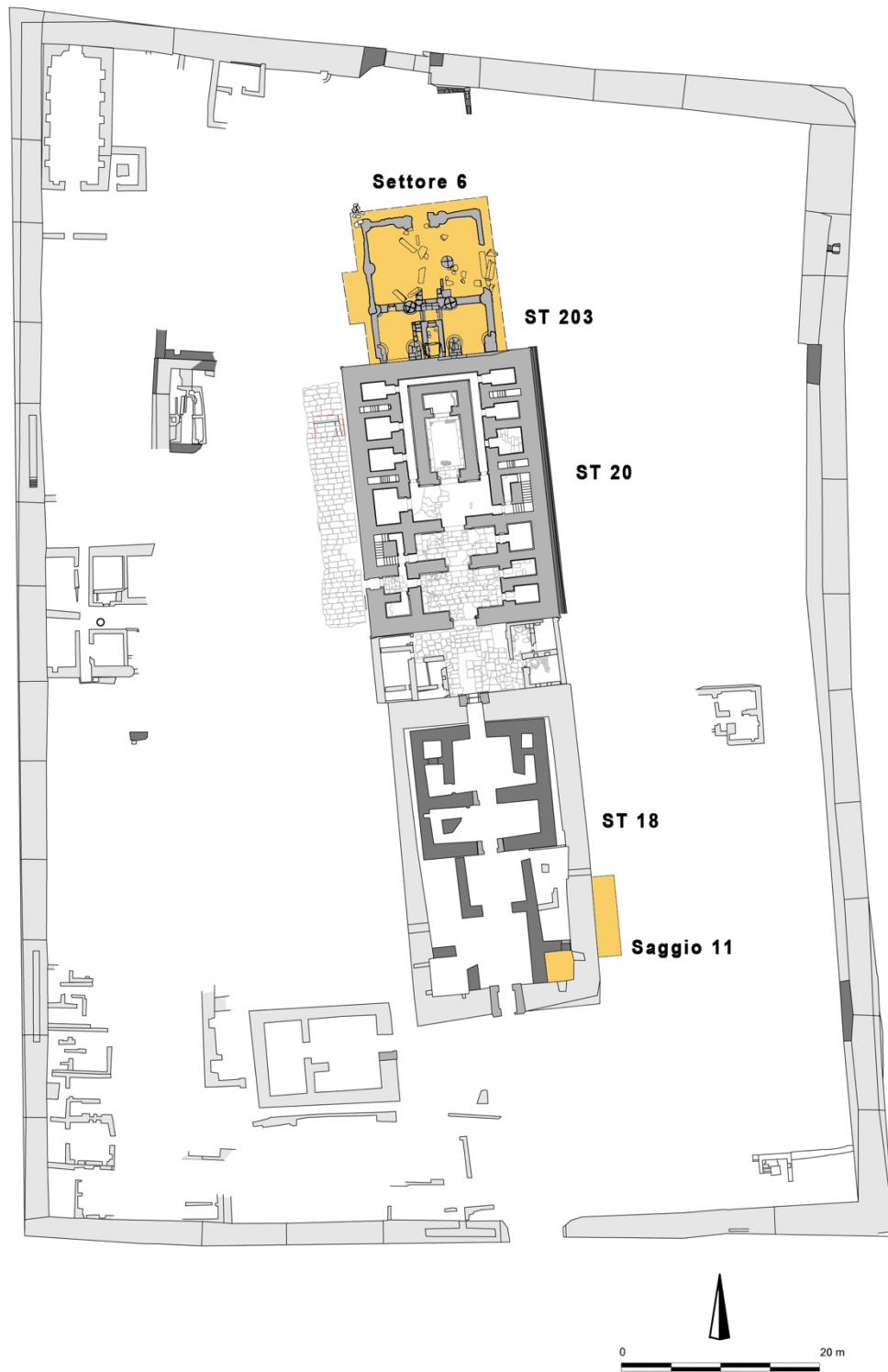


Fig. 2: general plan of the *temenos* with the two excavated areas in yellow.

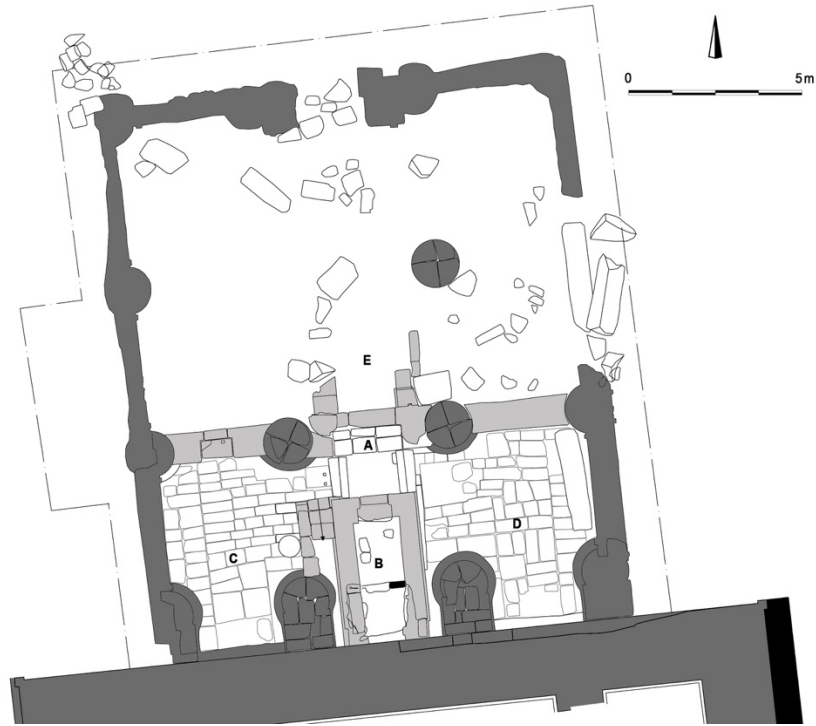


Fig. 3: general plan of temple ST 203.



Fig. 4: mosaic zenithal photograph of ST 203.



Fig. 5: *naos* in ST 203, view looking south.



Fig. 6: door lintel with winged solar disk.



Fig. 7: model in stone of the the temple ST 203.



Fig. 8: lower part of a limestone *naos*.



Fig. 9: room P in temple ST 18.



Fig. 10: amulet in *faience*.



Fig. 11: a fragment of an hathoric capitel