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New Excavations at Soknopaiou Nesos: the 2003 Season

PAOLA DAVOLI

The Italian Joint Archaeological Mission of Bologna and Lecce Universities, directed by Sergio Pernigotti and by Mario Capasso, started working at Soknopaiou Nesos/Dimê in 2001 with myself as Field Director. Our first aim was to survey the site with the purpose of drawing up a detailed topographic map of the archaeological area.

From an archaeological point of view Dimê is not well known and very little has been published about it, despite the fact that it is in a good state of preservation. Unfortunately there are no guards of the Supreme Council of Antiquities present on the site and the increasing popularity of desert tourism is seriously damaging the surface. The tourists in fact pass through the town with 4-wheel drive cars and do not care about mud-brick buildings. Moreover they pick up objects and excavate looking for antiquities. As we have seen, the area is still particularly rich of every kind of materials even on the surface: *ostraka*, small statues, coins and daily use objects.

For all these reasons we think that the preservation of the site is at risk. Therefore we have decided to begin a project of documentation and study of the archaeological remains, about which very little is known. In fact the previous archaeological researches were not extensive and not well documented. The one and only archaeological excavation carried out with a stratigraphical method took place in 1932 by the Archaeological Mission of the Michigan University directed by E.E. Peterson.¹ We owe the knowledge of the stratigraphy of part of the site to this Mission only.

There have however been many excavations over the years, whose sole purpose was to find objects and papyri.² Here I can briefly mention the search for papyri and *cartonnage* of B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt in 1900–1901; the excavations of F. Zucker in 1909 and 1910; those of Ahmed Bey Kamal in 1916, carried out inside the *temenos* on behalf of an antiquities dealer from Asyut.

The project of the Joint Archaeological Mission of Bologna and Lecce Universities involved 3 teams: the first one was composed by surveying researches from DISTART of Bologna University Engineering Faculty; the second one by archae-

¹ A.E.R. Boak, *Soknopaiou Nesos. The University of Michigan Excavation at Dimê in 1931–32*, Ann Arbor 1935.

² For the history of excavations cf. P. Davoli, *L'archeologia urbana nel Fayyum di età ellenistica e romana*, Napoli 1998, pp. 39–54.

ologists from the Department of Archaeology of Bologna University and the third one by Papyrologists of the Centro di Studi Papirologici of Lecce University.³

The first task was to collect all the information on site: this was then georeferenced with GPS, photographed by means of a series of metric photographs taken at low altitudes using a specially equipped aerostatic balloon.⁴ The ground survey has almost been completed and we are able to produce the first scientific topographic plan of Dimê, with contour levels and all the buildings that are visible on the surface (Pl. 1).⁵ These have been surveyed with a Total Station as well as recorded and photographed.

The second step of the project, still in progress, is to analyse with topographic methodologies the archaeological site and the area surrounding it by means of satellite images together with the photographs taken with the balloon and with the plan.

The topographic survey, which took place in 2001 and 2002, has enabled us to learn a great deal about the archaeological area, which measures 640 m from north to south and 320 m from east to west. It is divided into two parts by a paved *dromos* 6 metres wide, that would have been 400 metres long but now measures 320 m. In fact it finished about 75 m south of the gateway of the *temenos*. Here what we have is a large, deep hole and a small heap of sand and rubble, in which parts of sandstone columns are scattered. What might have been here is a colonnade building such as a propylon or a kiosk, now completely dismantled.

The central area of the town is lower than the peripheral ones, where the buildings are still completely covered (for this reason on the borders of the plan few buildings are visible). The presence of exposed buildings and of a number of round holes of various dimensions scattered in the lowest area suggests that *sebbakhin* and plunderers may have been here. The *sebbakhin* probably concentrated their efforts in the south-western part of the site. We found a similar situation inside the great *temenos* of the Soknopaios' temple. We are aware of some of these activities from reports published by Grenfell and Hunt and Boak:⁶ in 1890 and 1894 excavations were carried out by two antiquities dealers (Farag from Giza and a Copt); in 1900

³ The members of the mission listed by Departments were: G. Bitelli, L. Vittuari; P. Campagnoli, P. Davoli, S. De Maria, E. Giorgi, G. Lepore, S. Pernigotti, M. Sasselli, C. Tassinari; M. Casasso.

⁴ G. Bitelli and L. Vittuari of DISTART – Bologna University – carried out the GPS surveys and aerial photographs. S. De Maria and his staff of Bologna University carried out the ground survey with Total Station in 2001 and 2002 seasons.

⁵ The only complete plan of the site in existence dates back to Lepsius (1843): K.R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*, I, Berlin 1849, B1. 52.

⁶ B.P. Grenfell – A.S. Hunt, *Excavations in the Fayûm*, in *Egypt Exploration Fund. Archaeological Report 1900–1901*, London 1901, pp. 4–5; B.P. Grenfell – A.S. Hunt – E.J. Goodspeed, *The Tebtunis Papyri. II*, London 1907, p. 348; Boak, Soknopaiou Nesos cit., pp. vi–viii.

Ptolemaic papyri deriving from the activities of *sebbakhin* that worked there using *decauville* and boats were sold on the market. Moreover we have to point out that the stone masonry has been almost completely dismantled, particularly the parts built in squared blocks. We cannot tell exactly when this happened, but we are certain that it was before Belzoni's trip⁷ in 1819. Nevertheless the spoliation of the site was not as extensive as it has been in many other places in the Fayyum. No massive activities of the *sebbakhin* have taken place in Dimê at least since 1908, as we can see if we compare the photographs taken by Zucker⁸ in 1908–09 and those taken by the Michigan University Expedition⁹ in 1932 with the present situation.

Moreover, if we compare the town plan drawn by Lepsius in 1843 with the new one, we can easily observe that Lepsius's plan is generally correct and that the state of preservation of the site and buildings is almost the same. This consideration allows us to say that Dimê was far less exploited by the *sebbakhin* than all the other *kiman* in the Fayyum.¹⁰ Therefore I think that the shape of the *kom* is mainly due to the original stratigraphy, which is lower in the middle,¹¹ and that there might have been even considerable differences of level between the streets of the town.

The *dromos*, for example, seems to have been used from the time it was built until the town was abandoned. On the other hand, the living quarters excavated by the Michigan University on both sides of the *dromos* show that the street levels consistently rose over the centuries. The *dromos* itself was built on a stone platform which, as we can see along its western side, seems to be deeper southward. Along the *dromos* the slope rises from 21 m above sea level in the south to 24 m in the north.

In general, it is possible to assume that in the town there was a longitudinal slope increasing northward, probably due to the original soil. The temple was built

⁷ G.B. Belzoni, *Viaggi in Egitto ed in Nubia* (ed. italiana a cura di A. Siliotti), Firenze 1988, p. 330, Tav. 15 (I ed., *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs and Excavations in Egypt and Nubia; and of a Journey to the Coast of the Red Sea, in Search of the Ancient Berenice; and another to the Oasis of Juppiter Ammon*, London 1820).

⁸ Some of these photographs are going to be published by G. Poethke, *Ulrich Wilcken (1862–1944) und Wilhelm Schubart (1873–1960)*, in M. Capasso (ed.), *Erme. Figure e percorsi della disciplina papirologica*, forthcoming.

⁹ These photographs are now kept in Kelsey Museum, The Michigan University, Ann Arbor. Thanks to the kindness of T. Wilfong and R. Meador-Woodruff I have had the possibility to examine most of them.

¹⁰ It is hard to imagine a large scale exploitation of *sebbakh* before 1843 in a place such as Dimê so far in the desert.

¹¹ This happens also in other Graeco-Roman places in the Fayyum: cf. Davoli, *L'archeologia urbana* cit., passim.

in the highest part of the town. Two other slopes were created, over the centuries, on both sides of the *dromos*: the rising of the street levels was much more evident the further you move away from the *dromos*, which continued to be used.

From a topographical point of view we can say that the majority of the buildings and the streets visible are oriented following the *dromos* only south of the *temenos*. On the other hand, to the west, east and north of the *temenos* they are not so regularly laid out. In some cases they seem to follow the orientation of parts of a wall which encloses the town.

Between the houses we identified at least three big areas enclosed by walls built with rough local stone. Two of them are placed against the north wall of the town; the third one is in the middle of the town, east of the *dromos*. Their purpose is still not clear but they might have had something to do with animals.¹² We were also able to locate the two mounds of rubble from the Michigan excavations.

Between the buildings west of the *dromos* one is surely a small temple in mud-brick, facing the *dromos*. Other chapels and temples are located inside the *temenos*. As is known, the idea that the temple area has been completely plundered and dismantled is widely held. In 1932 Boak stated: "The space inside the *temenos* wall had been plundered almost completely and contained no important remains".¹³

Even in recent publications¹⁴ we read about poor ruins of two temples, one to the north of the other. In fact, 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, irregular enclosure which measures 122.30 × 84.37 m. It is surrounded by mud-brick walls which are about 3 m thick and 12 m in height and mostly still well-preserved. The main entrance was about halfway along the southern flank, at the end of the *dromos*, but another one probably opened in the middle of the northern wall.

Within the sacred enclosure we were able to number at least 20 buildings, in some cases only partially visible, and in different states of preservation. Some were subsidiary buildings (mainly houses) in mud-brick lined up along the internal perimeter of the west, south-west and north-west walls of the *temenos*. Other buildings are to be interpreted as small chapels in mud-brick and stone. Some of them were decorated with small columns in classical style. An imposing mud-brick building is still in good condition in the north-west corner. The best preserved part is a rectan-

¹² D. Hobson, *Agricultural Land and Economic Life in Soknopaiou Nesos*, BASP 21 (1984), pp. 107–108; J. Schwartz, *De quelques villages du nome Arsinoïte à l'époque romaine*, CRIPEL 10 (1988), pp. 145–148.

¹³ Boak, *Soknopaiou Nesos* cit., p. vi.

¹⁴ D. Arnold, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, New York 1999, p. 254. He dates the two temples to the reign of Nero.

gular room of unusual dimension. It is 12.35 m long and 4.70 m wide and has 5 large niches surmounted by windows on both sides, as in many Karanis houses of the Roman Period.¹⁵ This room is flanked by a staircase.

In the middle of the area there are 3 buildings, which can be easily identified as temples (labelled ST 18, ST 19 and ST 20), for their position and plan. ST 19 is a small mud-brick sanctuary apparently of 14.30 × 9.96 metres, facing east. Few limestone blocks of the door survive.

The main temple ST 18 (32.53 × 18.90 m) 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 stone, which is freely available in the neighbourhood. The walls were originally covered with a heavy layer of plaster moulded to resemble isodomic blocks, which only partially remains today in central rooms. The building is surrounded by a mud-brick wall and its general plan is that of a 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*. Beyond this door, in the middle of the enclosure, there is an area, which measures approximately 60 × 20 metres where we found a large number of blocks and lintels of different types of local stone. This leads us to believe that there might have been one or possibly more totally unknown monumental buildings present here. These ruins have been noted and identified as a second temple by travellers and scholars that previously worked at Dimê. North of these ruins we can recognize a colonnade building: two rows of columns are visible with at least three columns each (the southernmost one is a half-column); here there is also a fragmentary *naos* still in the sand.

In 2003 we decided to carry out a more in-depth archaeological investigation¹⁶ inside the great temple enclosure, where no scientific excavation work has ever taken place. Nothing is 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 and *ostraka* belonging to the temple archives have been brought to light there.

We therefore decided to begin excavating a sector north of the temple ST 18 (square G 28), starting with the northern door of the building, in order to understand how and when it was opened and investigate the enlargement of the temple northwards (Pl. 2). The sector we are excavating is 20 m in width from east to west and 7

¹⁵ Cf. for examples houses C119, C62, C50 (level C, about I–II century AD), in E.M. Husselman, *Karanis. Topography and Architecture*, Ann Arbor 1979, Plans 37, 40, Pls. 19a, 59.

¹⁶ The season lasted from February 18th to March 13th 2003. The members of the staff were: M. Alfieri, M. Capasso, A. Cervi, P. Davoli, C. Franceschelli, A. Morini, S. Pernigotti, B. Rizzo, S. Vinci. The Inspector of SCA was Nahla Mohammed Ahmed of Medinet el-Fayyum Inspectorate.

m in length from north to south. It turned out to be a big courtyard surrounded by walls: 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 sandstone blocks pertaining to a building labelled ST 20, which has not been excavated yet (Pl. 3). To the east and to the west respectively it was bordered by mud-brick walls that were used also as perimetral walls of two subsidiary buildings (ST 200 & ST 23). These have been partially brought to light. The whole area has been tampered with on more than one occasion by undocumented excavation works and was furthermore covered with sand and mounds of mud-brick and stone collapsed from walls in different moments.

A large 3 metres 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. Room A is characterised by the presence of 4 niches, one in front of the other, in the north and south walls. Under the mud-brick floor there is a vaulted cellar that we plan to open next year.

Building ST 23 also suffered the same fate. Of this building only two small rooms, which had originally had a barrel vault ceiling, have been brought to light. Under this building there are underground cellars, which probably belonged to previous buildings, which we shall finish investigating during the next excavation campaign.

The central part of the courtyard (7.80 × 7 m) is completely paved with slabs of local stone¹⁷ and connects building ST 18 to ST 20. Both these buildings are almost certainly parts of the same temple and were built at different periods in time.

At this stage we can hypothesise that building ST 18 was the original temple dedicated to the crocodile god Soknopaios and founded during the Hellenistic Period. Although the inside of temple ST 18 still has to be excavated, we can recognise subsequent building phases, which gradually altered its plan.¹⁸ The four gateways, of which two are internal, were built with fine sandstone blocks on the longitudinal axis and probably date back to the last of these restructuring phases. The fourth

¹⁷ The surface of the floor is at an average of 25.60 metres above sea level.

¹⁸ Works in the temple are testified by a Demotic papyrus of 153/142 BC (Ptolemy VI or VIII): E. Bresciani, *L'archivio demotico del tempio di Soknopaiou Nesos nel Griffith Institute di Oxford*, Milano 1975, p. 81.

gateway was opened¹⁹ 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 sandstone block wall pertaining to building ST 20. It is therefore likely that the courtyard, the building ST 20 and all the sandstone gateways in ST 18 are contemporary and can be dated back to 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 equals 1.53 m. The wall was built with isodomic blocks stuck together with white and pinkish mortar. Its southern façade remained rough with blocks showing bosses surrounded by four chiselled bands, which are 7–8 cm wide. At the far south-eastern end of the wall there is also a projecting part with a rectangular cross-section, which should have been used to mould the corner *torus* cornice. Some stylised letters of the Greek alphabet are engraved on the bosses of some blocks as mason's marks. The door, which is halfway down this wall, was 2.40 m wide.

We have found numerous Egyptian style architectural elements in this area such as fragments of uraeus friezes, lintels with a solar disc flanked by two cobras, part of a bas-relief with a hieroglyphic inscription. We have also found elements in the Classical style, such as a fragment of a metope frieze with rosettes probably of the reign of Augustus²⁰ and a base of a small column in imperial attic style. These finds should make us think. In fact on the basis of the written documents many scholars believe that Soknopaiou Nesos was a settlement "unaffected by the Roman occupation"²¹ and that here "there is no evidence for romanization".²²

It is therefore possible that the temple of Soknopaios was enlarged in 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 Egyptian style as we can see in other sites in the Fayyum,

¹⁹ A similar door was opened in the naos of the Ptolemaic temple of Hathor at Phile during the reign of Ptolemy VIII: Arnold, *Temples* cit., Fig. 141 p. 192 e p. 204.

²⁰ A similar cornice was found in Theadelphia. It is now kept in the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria (inv. 19910). Cf. P. Pensabene, *Elementi architettonici di Alessandria e di altri siti egiziani*, Roma 1993, nr 924 p. 510, Tav. 97.

²¹ D.H. Samuel, *Greeks and Romans at Soknopaiou Nesos*, in *Proceedings of the XVI Int. Congr. of Papyrology. New York 24–31 July 1980*, Chico 1981, p. 390.

²² K. Lembke, *Private Representation in Roman Times: the Statues from Dimeh/Fayyum*, in N. Bonacasa et alii (eds.), *L'Egitto in Italia dall'antichità al Medioevo. Atti del III Congresso Internazionale Italo-Egiziano Roma – Pompei 13–19 novembre 1995*, Roma 1998, p. 292.

such as Karanis, Bakchias, Narmouthis and Dionysias,²³ although inside and around it there were also chapels and buildings in the Classical style. The *temenos* walls may also have been erected at the time of the enlargement of the temple, possibly during the reign of Augustus, as the stela CGC 9202 seems to suggest.²⁴

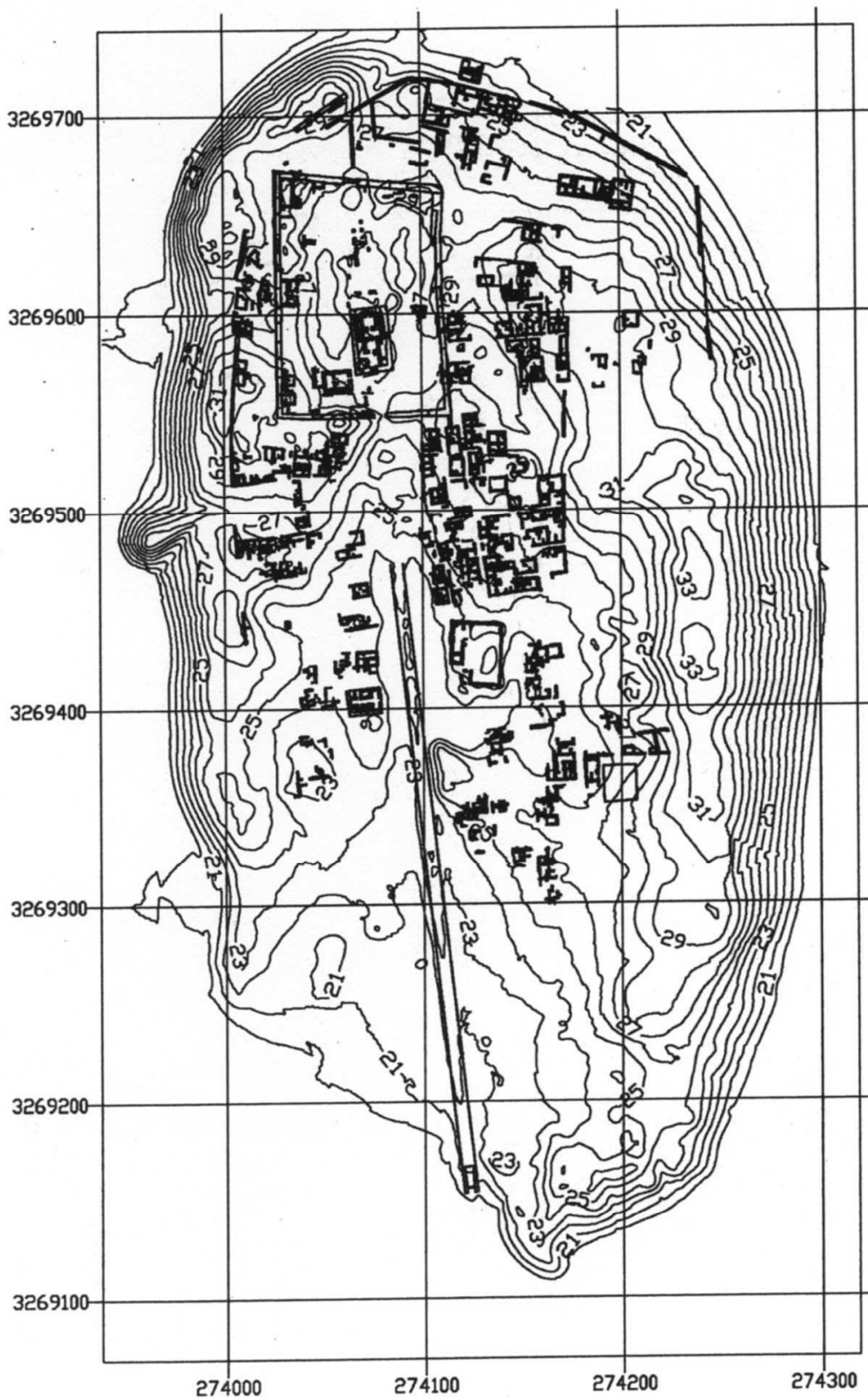
Among the objects we found during this first season of excavation it is also worth mentioning a piece of a wooden *naos* which bears a hieroglyphic inscription with the Horus name of Ptolemy III. This is an impressive object for the high quality of its realization and was, in my opinion, a gift of the king for the temple. It was found in the passageway of the rear door of ST 18 and was probably preserved and used for all the Roman Period. Then we have a small scarab with the inscription *nsw.t b1.t* (probably of the VII cent. BC), a face of an anthropoid sarcophagus probably dating back to the Late Period, a disk of a pottery lamp with the face of Medusa in relief (beginning of I cent. AD), parts of male and female statues.

The first campaign was particularly lucky also from a papyrological point of view. We in fact found 80 Demotic *ostraka* and a few Greek *ostraka*. Amongst the latter it is worth mentioning an *ostrakon* that seems to be a spelling book, where the first letters of the alphabet were carefully traced probably by a teacher. This *ostrakon* was found in the courtyard that was brought to light in this season, where, amongst other objects, we found a wooden inkwell and what is probably the fragment of an *umbilicus* which was used to roll up papyri. Both these objects are simple but not unrefined and they lead us to believe that, during the Roman Period, there might have been a school in the vicinity of the temple. The Demotic *ostraka* are mostly fragmentary and are datable between I and II century A.D. They are lists of goods and various accounts.

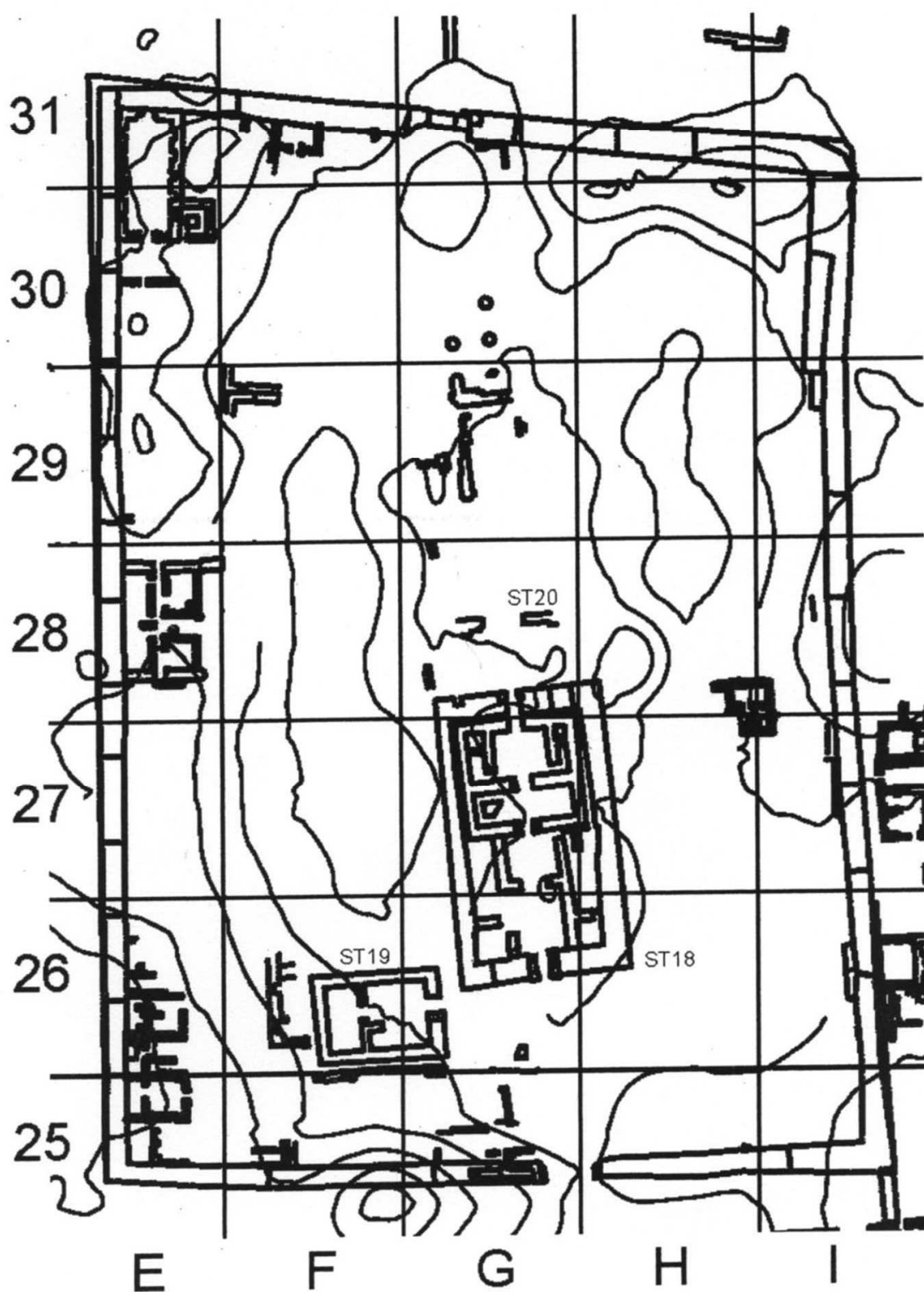
We have also to mention a few dozen fragments of Greek and Demotic documentary papyri and, above all, 9 figured magic papyri, many of which still rolled up, tied up with a papyrus fibre and sealed with mud. These were amulets worn by people. The image of the sun often recurs amongst the magic drawings.

²³ Arnold, *Temples* cit., pp. 157–160, 253–257; Davoli, *L'archeologia urbana* cit., pp. 73–102, 117–131, 223–245, 301–317; Ead., *Lo scavo 2001. Relazione preliminare*, in S. Pernigotti – M. Capasso – P. Davoli (eds.), *Bakchias IX. Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna di Scavo del 2001*, Imola 2002, pp. 7–69; E. Bresciani, *L'attività archeologica dell'Università di Pisa in Egitto nel Fayum: Medinet Madi 1995–1996*, EVO 19 (1996), pp. 5–12. On the characteristics of architecture in Graeco-Roman Period cf. J.-Cl. Golvin – J. Larronde, *Etude des procédés de construction dans l'Égypte ancienne I. L'édification des murs de grès en grand appareil à l'époque romaine*, ASAE 68 (1982), pp. 166–190; J.-Cl. Golvin – R. Vergnieux, *Etude des procédés de construction dans l'Égypte ancienne IV. Le ravalement des parois, la taille des volumes et des moulures*, in *Hommages à F. Daumas*, Montpellier 1986, pp. 299–321.

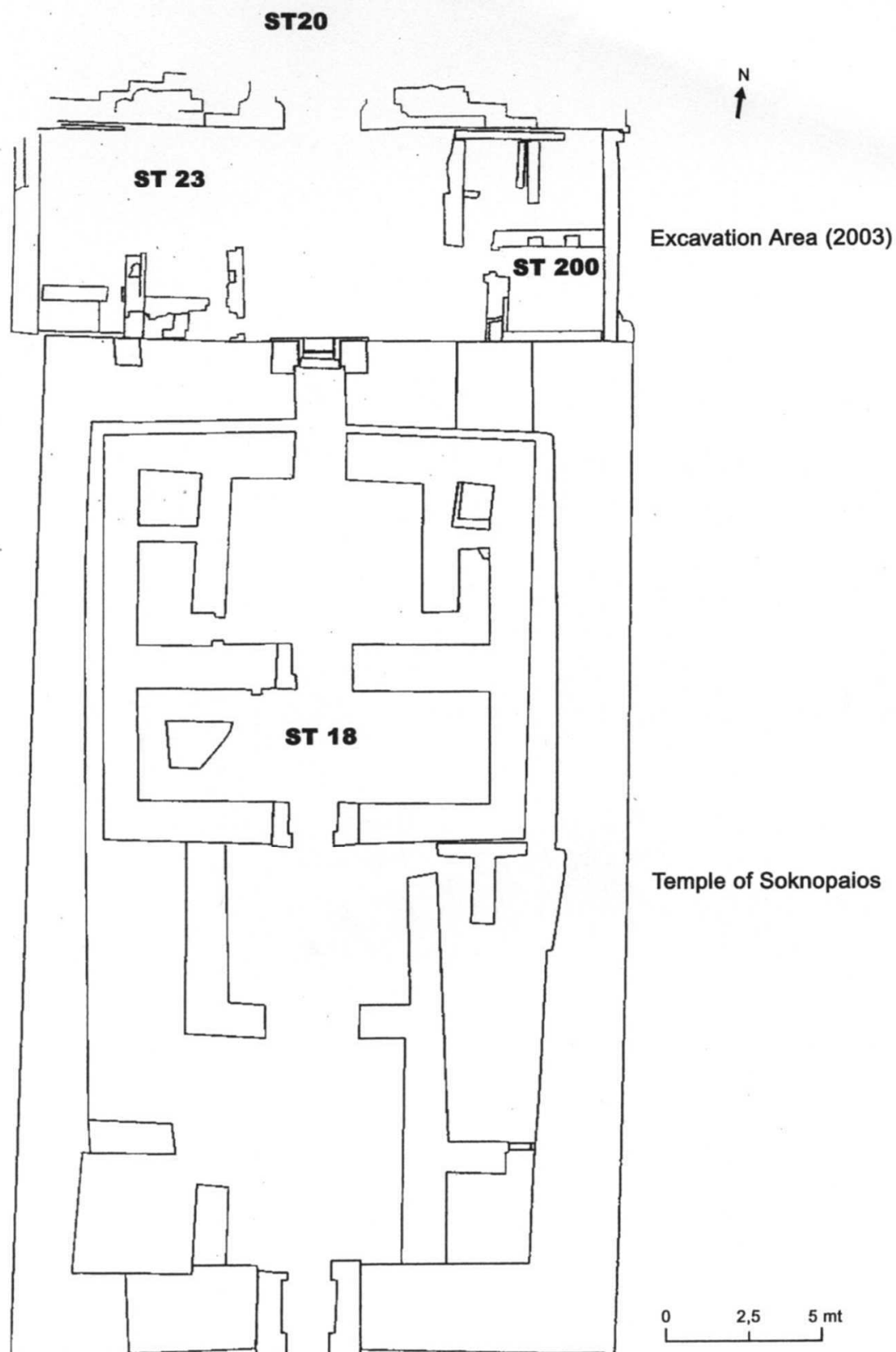
²⁴ E. Bernand, *Recueil des inscriptions Grecques du Fayoum*, I, Leiden 1975, nr 73, pp. 142–144. The inscription was found by Brugsch between the ruins of the temple.



Pl. 1: Preliminary topographic plan of Dimê (survey 2001, 2002).
Coordinates UTM-WGS 84.



Pl. 2: Topographic plan of the *temenos* before excavation (squares of 20 m).



Pl. 3: Plan of the excavation area 2003 and of the temple of Soknopaios (C. Franceschelli).