

Lepcis Magna Excavations

**Preliminary Report
1996**

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**REPORT ON
TRAVEL, SURVEYING,
ARCHAEOLOGY AND POTTERY**

We had a very successful season in Libya receiving a good reception and full support for the excavations at Lepcis from Mr. Ali Khdouri, President of the Department of Antiquities and Mr Eshtewee Mustafa Mohammed the Controller of Lepcis. The Libyans are pleased with the presence of the Society for Libyan Studies at Lepcis.

Travel:

We travelled with AirTunis, London-Tunis-Djerba (03/09/95); Djerba-Tunis-London (01/10/1995). Land transport from Djerba to Lepcis and back was courtesy of the Red Crescent, Misurata Branch.

Team Members from the U.K.:

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| 1. Philip Michael Kenrick | University of Oxford |
| 2. Sophie Anne Hay | University of Reading |
| 3. Sally-Ann Ashton | King's College London |
| 4. Nigel Robin Fradgley | RCHME |
| 5. Keith Nicholas Wilkinson | Cotswold Archaeological Trust |
| 6. Isabella Ylva Toini Welsby Sjöström | Freelance |
| 7. Kimberly Beaufiles | University College London |
| 8. Philip Graham Frickers | University College London |
| 9. Ayse Çalik | King's College London |
| 10. Adrian William Miles | Museum of London |
| 11. George Lanlands Wilson | RCHME |
| 12. Michael Bryan Halliwell | University College London |
| 13. Hafed Walda | King's College London |
| 14. Ian Donald Blair | Museum of London |
| 15. Franca Louise Cole | University College London |
| 16. Stuart James Alexander Laidlaw | University College London |
| 17. Elizabeth Jane Sidell | Museum of London |

Participants from Libya:

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| 18 Saleh Hasi | University of Garyunis |
| 20 Ahmed Bu Zayan | University of Garyunis |
| 21 Habib Lamin | University of Garyunis |
| 22 Jaber Seleni | Lepcis Magna Controlership |
| 23 Halima Ramadan | Lepcis Magna Controlership |

Permit:

The permit from the Libyan Department of Antiquities has been renewed for the survey and excavation of the site of Lepcis Magna for two more years from November 16, 1995.

Surveying:

The control network which was intended to serve the current excavation was rechecked using an EDM and proved to be stable.

An experimental 3D recording procedure was employed on a single area at the site, which in practice proved to be more complicated to implement than anticipated, but we nevertheless produced good results which are at present waiting to be compiled into a preliminary report.

The excavation:

Our plan was to achieve the following during the 1995 season:

1. Widen the area of excavations in order to find out the size of the house.
2. To set up the recording system, laboratory for site conservation, finds area at the new museum, environmental sample processing area, and obtain more storage space for finds and equipment.
3. Implementing an ongoing training programme for Libyan participants, which both benefited us and furthered good relations between ourselves and the local archaeologists.

After cleaning last year's trench the new area of excavation was marked. A JCB type mechanical excavator was used to clear the sand dune prior to excavating new areas in order to save time and effort.

The top layers of the new area are of the same nature as in the previous year and confirmed that the whole of the upper stratigraphy of the excavation area had been robbed of stones, presumably during the period 1911-1935.

The next levels represent the time when the area was abandoned in antiquity and debris/dumping material were tipped into the ruins, along with a certain amount of colluvial material.

In the meantime we continued excavating within last year's trench where we encountered occupation deposits and reached the floor level of the building first revealed in the geophysical survey of 1994 which proved to be a Domus with Peristyle.

The occupation deposits were buried by collapsed dividing walls in many locations indicating that the former had accumulated when those walls were still standing - and therefore when the building was still in use - rather than as later squatting activity. The collapse in general seems to have occurred mainly to the latest period walls which appear to have been constructed to divide the peristyle into smaller units. These late walls are of inferior quality when compared to the original peristyle construction, which may be one reason why they were prone to collapse. As there does not seem to have been wall tumble over the whole site it is extremely unlikely

that a single event (such as an earthquake - which has been previously postulated) was the cause, and localised instability due to poor construction and non-maintenance seems a more likely candidate. The occupation deposits sealed between the wall collapse and the stone flagged floor of the peristyle are of varied properties, but generally seem to have been extremely rich in artefacts and animal bone. By far the largest component of these sediments is ash suggesting that most are derived from hearths, and indeed the peristyle flag stones show burn marks in a number of locations. Of the artefacts found perhaps the most exiting were a number of carnelian beads with etched designs of human figures, while many coins were also recovered. These coins, in common with most others recovered from the 1995 season have been three dimensionally recorded which will allow detailed plotting during post-excavation and therefore will ease chronological interpretation of the stratigraphy. The occupation deposits were also a prime focus for taking environmental bulk samples. These were processed in the projects flotation machine, and while the resultant flots await study, sorting the residues has lead to the discovery of a diverse collection of faunal remains including rodents (not previously recovered Lepcis Magna) The nature of the occupation deposits was somewhat different in the eastern room (provisionally interpreted as the original kitchen). Here they were a great deal more complex, varying greatly over a scale of even half a metre, and consisting not only ashy horizons, but pits and linear troughs. These results suggest that this room has seen a more intensive, and perhaps varied use than other areas of the building. During one phase paving slabs seem to have been laid curving around an entrance to in 8 metre deep cistern, while during another storage racks designed to hold amphori were constructed. As this area was the most complex it was .selected for a trial run of the 3D recording system. This was carried out by taking about 80 EDM readings on the surface of each context, which data was then downloaded into the projects CAD program MICROSTATION 5 for later rendering. The "kitchen" was also sampled extensively for flotation, while the quantity of bone recovered was the highest of any single area. Therefore as this area has been recorded in such detail there is good reason to suppose that a full picture of the past activities can. be reconstructed.

Further to the east one of the original dividing walls within the peristyle formed with the exterior wall of the structure a small room of about 2 x 1.5 m. This proved on excavation to have been intimately connected with a system of piped water, and it has been suggested that it was the lavatory. This is in fact the best present interpretation of a feature which has a design and structural dimensions much the same as those of known lavatories in the Hadrianic baths and if correct it would be the first domestic lavatory found at Lepcis Magna. The Urban Domus was restricted in design and size, probably due to its location on the corner of the insula. The Peristyle of the house is of a three sided colonnade and located on the fauces axis in order to extend the long view from the entryway. It seems that the location of the rooms is to achieve the best possible condition of light and temperature in relation to the time of the day and season.

In the latest phase of the house, probably in the fifth century, the northern side of the peristyle was converted into two room s, one of which was a latrine.

The main feature of this house is the water supply which consists of one deep well (13 m.), a large cistern in the peristyle area and another even larger cistern in the kitchen. The cisterns were of the traditional type of the area with a shaft and at its

bottom an entrance for two large rooms. Both cisterns were investigated to some extent and planned using a compass and tapes. The deposits found consisted of water lain silts which have been sampled for diatron analysis in order to examine past water quality and salinity.

The kitchen area proved to be the richest in finds, e.g. coins, glass, Gem stones, a considerable amount of storage amphorae, bronze artefacts (e.g. statuettes, door fittings, and a yard stick), miniature mosaic fragments and a small sculpture of a miniature lion lying under a tree?

A few environmental samples were collected. The samples have been processed and the results will be important as no environmental work has as yet been undertaken at this site.

Ceramics and spot dating of the stratigraphy:

All of the significant feature sherds recorded in 1994 and 1995 were reviewed by Dr. Philip Kenrick in order where possible to establish identifications and dates. In addition, brief notes were made on the pottery from each context after washing in order to provide spot dates. The outcome of this for the interpretation of the excavation was as follows.

The latest levels of definite occupation within the excavated area appear to belong to the fifth century A.D. on the basis of the African and Tripolitanian Red Slip Wares present and the corresponding lamps. The half dozen or so sherds of later date (sixth or seventh century) were so few in number as not to be relevant to the occupation of the building in question. The upper levels contained large quantities of decorative marble veneer, much of it affected by burning, including a number of pieces of white (Pentelic?) marble tegulae.

Despite the recognition of a succession of alterations in detail to the last major phase of the building, it was not possible to differentiate the finds from the corresponding levels chronologically. Given the apparent clarity, however, of the stratigraphy, it is possible that the evidence from the site may eventually lead to some refinement in the chronology of fifth-century fine wares from that established at Sabratha and Benghazi. Indeed this will be a primary objective of the next field season.

Towards the end of the season, some definitely earlier strata were excavated in one room on the southern side of the building: these yielded abundant (but small) fragments of first-century fine wares. Sherds of casseroles in African 'Black Top' ware which seem more likely to belong to the second century, were also present, but the absence of definite second or third-century sherds, even as residual items in fifth-century layers, was surprising and perhaps suggest that the excavation area was not in use at that time.

The significance of this earlier material will doubtless become clearer during the next season of excavation

Potential interest of the pottery

As the excavation, is at a relatively early stage with regard to the depth and chronology, it is premature to make any but the most tentative comment on the significance of the pottery. It does appear, however, from the very marked predominance of Tripolitanian Red Slip Ware over the Tunisian varieties in the fifth-century levels that the former ware was produced much nearer to hand. The known typology of this ware is likely to be extended by the Lepcis finds, particularly in regard to closed vessels. The coarse wares include a number of types which do not at first sight seem to be paralleled at Sabratha or Benghazi (the nearest major collections of published material) and it should in due course be possible to give a reasonable account of these.

Conclusions:

We were delighted with the progress of the excavation this season in uncovering a peristyle houses there is little known domestic architecture at Lepcis due to the previous emphasis on the excavation of monumental buildings. Indeed while much is known of the theatre, fora, and temples very little known of everyday life in the town. Our excavations are succeeding in changing this state of affairs by examining domestic features and finds.

The overall picture of the life in the city in the area near the theatre, is that public and private buildings were mixed together.

According to dates derived from the cleaned coins, this area was last occupied in the late fourth and early fifth centuries AD, reinforcing suggestions that thereafter the city shrank eastwards towards the old centre of the city in the late Roman period. The potential for the future years work on the site is of course exciting, and we have plans to complete excavating under the 5th - 6th century structures next season.

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Autumn 1996 :

The main intention of the 1996 season was to expand the excavation area of 1994 and 1995 so that encompassed the whole of the 4th / 5th century house. The layers which covered the 1996 trench extension were found to consist of the same erosional debris and reworked sediments found in previous seasons. All these deposits consisted of 4th century and later artefacts. It seems that the whole area west of the theatre suffered from selective stone robbing since at least the 1930's as large quantities of stone from the southern walls uncovered from the 1996 excavation were found to be missing. Robber trenches were located in association with much of the southern wall and included in one of them a coin of 1962. It seems that all the robbed stones were of sandstone and of sizes that could be comfortably carried by animals. Some larger sandstone blocks and a great deal of limestone were found adjacent to the southern wall and probably represent discarded material, too heavy to carry.

Once we reached the archaeological layers the sheer volume of finds became apparent. These rich areas were encountered over much of the extended area, but particularly over the street to the North, over the flagstone floor in the NE room and to the SE of the building. Unfortunately the large quantities of artefactual material could not all be studied this year, but the majority of the contexts have nevertheless been spot dated. These spot dates are discussed in further detail in Appendix 1, but it appears that the later stone building dates to the middle 4th century and all material contained within them is of 4th and 5th century date. Beneath the stone building a mud brick predecessor was found, contained within the same stone outer walls. The mud brick internal walls follow the course of the stone walls in the majority of cases, and are found directly below them. However, in certain cases - notably the north-eastern room - mud brick walls are found in totally different locations, and even in different alignments. Ceramic dating of deposits associated with the mud brick walls indicate that this structure was in use during the 1st century, but had been abandoned by the beginning of the second century. There is thus a hiatus on the site of over 250 years.

The excavation this year confirmed that the northern facade of the house lay on one of the streets emanating from the theatre piazza. Its western boundary may also lie of a north south street, although this was not found in the present campaign. The eastern limits of the house were marked by a thick dividing wall with a great deal of plaster on both faces. This feature presumably separated the investigated building from a similar structure. The southern limit of the house was found in the extension trench in the form of a thick limestone / sandstone wall. To the south of this further north - south walls were encountered suggesting the presence of a further building..

Water storage

As stated in last years interim report three water storage features were found; two cisterns (one 5.5m deep and the other 8m deep) and a well (13m deep). All three of these features were investigated further during 1996.

a. The western cistern

This was completely emptied of sediment (very few artefacts were found), and planned in detail. The plans were augmented by several profile drawings. Diatom samples were taken from both the cistern chambers and will be studied during 1997 to determine the properties of water in the cistern during its use (salinity, pollution, origin etc). The cistern extends a total of 6m in a north-east to south-west direction.

b. The eastern cistern

This cistern of 8m depth was completely excavated, although once more few artefacts were found. The cistern was also planned in detail, profiles drawn and diatom samples were taken. A further study was made of paint and mud marks on the cistern wall, and it was found that a complex stratigraphy of marking exists. These probably formed during cleaning of the cistern, although a hypothesis of "mud fighting" has also been suggested. Tide marks within the cistern suggest that periodically water was of very poor quality - a hypothesis we hope we can confirm by the study of diatoms.

c. The well

In 1995 it was determined to be too dangerous to enter the well. This year we took out climbing equipment and two of us made a study of the feature. We found that the well had been bored through a previous cistern, suggesting that the well itself is a very late feature. The cistern was approximately 5m below ground surface. Sediments at the bottom of the well were of great interest. The initial fills were obviously post abandonment erosion deposits, but below them at a depth of 12.5m below ground surface we encountered a waterlogged deposit. Large samples were taken from this material, which is we believe the first waterlogged archaeological context found from North Africa. The samples produced large quantities of waterlogged wood and vast amounts of seeds, olive stones etc. The samples are currently being studied in Britain.

All drawings of the water storage features have been digitised and a CAD model is currently being developed in order to determine how much water could be retained in each.

Plans for 1997:

We envisage the 1997 season to be largely a study of the collected material, with limited further fieldwork.