

Roman and Early Christian burial-complex at Leptiminus: first notice

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Following the rescue excavation of part of the Roman cemetery and a Roman mausoleum (Site 200) on Dhahret Slama, on the SE edge of the ancient town of Leptiminus on the east coast of Tunisia,¹ the continued pressure of modern building led to the discovery of a remarkably well preserved underground burial-complex, as well a considerable extension of the above-ground cemetery which we had previously sampled.² The underground burial-complex includes a number of tunnels and chambers, undoubtedly part of a much larger area of catacombs. These underground structures are cut into the sandstone and limestone ridge known as the *Formation Rejiche* which runs along the coast.³ This geological formation was suitable for the cutting of Punic-type chambers, of which a number have been located on this side of Leptiminus,⁴ and for catacombs, of which other examples have been identified in the same region, at Sousse, Sullectum, and probably Thapsus.⁵

The existence of underground structures became clear following enquiries made of local residents, who spoke of substructures and vaults beneath their houses. Residents noted that after heavy rains water vanished rapidly into the ground; we now realize that it disappears into the underground voids of built or carved structures.

The underground complex of rooms and tunnels

Following some such indications, we opened a first trench directly in front of a modern house and were fortunate to discover a large opening (c.1.8 x 2 m) cut into the limestone bedrock. It descended for 4 m (at the bottom of the shaft were found 2 Punic coins) and opened into a tunnel running N-S. At the N end where it runs beneath the modern house the tunnel is full of earth. Tombs sealed with terracotta bricks or tiles are visible cut into the walls of the tunnel. (Clearly at a certain distance this north tunnel connects with a large vaulted underground room which runs E-W and is described in the next paragraph.) Against the foot of its E wall there is a Roman tomb oriented N-S and covered by pitched sandstone slabs. The S part of the tunnel could not be investigated because it was blocked by superimposed cist tombs built of sandstone slabs that reached to the ceiling. The ceiling was made of natural rock and a large fragment of

1 For location of the site, see L. M. Stirling, D. J. Mattingly and N. Ben Lazreg, *Leptiminus (Lamta). Report no. 2. The East Baths, cemeteries kilns, Venus mosaic, site museum, and other studies* (JRA Suppl. 41, 2001) fig. 3.1 on p. 216, site no. 200. For a brief summary of the earlier rescue excavation of this cemetery and a Roman mausoleum, see N. Ben Lazreg, "Un cimetière romain sur Jebel Lamar (Site 200) près de Dhahret Slama: fouille de sauvetage," *ibid.* 409-11 with photograph of part of the mausoleum, and L. M. Stirling, D. J. Welle and D. J. Mattingly, "General context of the cemetery (Site 200) and the grave containing the terracotta mask," *ibid.* 412-14, with a schematic plan (fig. 6.22) of the mausoleum, *cupulae* and stepped tombs found in the earlier excavation.

2 Our earlier work in the cemetery of Site 200 had also exposed and emptied most of the fill of a deep shaft. we can now interpret this shaft, though perhaps a Punic tomb in origin, as a light well for later subterranean structures.

3 *Leptiminus. Report no. 2* (supra n.1) 259, n.3.

4 *Ibid.* 259 n.4.

5 For the catacombs of Sousse, see M. Leynaud, *Les catacombes africaines, Sousse-Hadrumète* (3e éd., Alger 1937). For Sullectum, *ibid.* 451-55 and survey work conducted in 1987 by P. Senay briefly published in the *Cahiers de l'Université de Trois-Rivières*, Québec 1990. At Thapsus, construction work for a road behind the Club Méditerranée to the south of the ancient town has revealed the presence of subterranean galleries provided with shafts and which could be catacombs, but their condition has not permitted their exploration. In addition, other information has pointed to a subterranean gallery, the nature of which is still unclear, beneath the textile factory at Ksar Helal a short distance to the northwest of Leptiminus.