

Suburban land-use and ceramic production around Leptiminus (Tunisia): interim report

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The Leptiminus Archaeological Project has been investigating the ancient town of Leptiminus and its immediate surroundings in the Sahel region of Tunisia since 1990. The project's purpose is to examine in diachronic perspective the society and economy of Leptiminus (modern Lamta), with particular emphasis on the Roman period, during which the town reached its greatest extent. This was an important harbor town, not least because of its involvement in the production and distribution of olive oil, fish sauce, amphoras, and African Red Slip ware. As a result of its suitability for modern study — c.85% of the town remains under cultivation despite the rapid pace of development in the coastal region of central Tunisia — it is all the more significant. Although smaller than the major ports of Carthage or Lepcis Magna, Leptiminus allows examination of the material evidence of one second-rank harbor, of which many existed along the North African coast. Moreover, since few sites in the Sahel region have been the subject of detailed scientific investigation, this project serves as an important case study within Byzacium, a geographically and culturally distinct entity. Further, Leptiminus is well placed to provide a better understanding of exchange between the Mediterranean and the hinterland, and to evaluate the development of the latter in relation to the coastal region over time. Whereas textual and documentary sources facilitate the examination of life in the major harbors, little documentation exists for the more minor centers: thus our main source is archaeology.

During the first 4 years of the project, interdisciplinary fieldwork resulted in the systematic study of artifacts on the surface of the Roman town proper, the excavation of several cemeteries, a major bath and two domestic contexts, the creation of a ceramic typology for the site, geomorphological and palynological analyses and, finally, the installation of displays in a museum which stands on the site of the bath.¹ In 1995, the project entered new phases in its two major activities of field survey and excavation, and the initial results of our investigations in 1995-96 will be the focus of this interim report.

Field survey: the "Rural Survey" (DLS, NBL)

Recently, archaeological field surveys in Tunisia have multiplied. In the last 20 years, nine projects have investigated portions of the country, and much other research has been conducted in the context of the *Carte Nationale des Monuments Historiques et Sites Archéologiques*, a government-sponsored program to inventory all historical places in Tunisia. A series of publications has set the stage for comparative study of the multiple and not uniformly productive landscapes which characterized Tunisia in antiquity (Ben Baaziz 1992; Ben Lazreg *et al.* 1995; Dietz *et al.* 1995; Greene forthcoming; Hitchner 1988, 1990; Mattingly 1992). The methodology adopted by the survey at Leptiminus has been designed with a view toward contributing to the study of both urban and rural landscapes throughout Tunisia.

The permit for research at Leptiminus covers the town and its immediate hinterland, a small area of c.10 km². While these boundaries are smaller than those normally investigated by a multi-period field survey, they have enabled us to look closely at each of the regions sel-

1 Prior to the start of the project, no major or long-term research had been conducted at the site, although a number of archaeologists had worked for short periods. A summary of previous research and earlier reports of the current project appeared in N. Ben Lazreg and D. J. Mattingly (edd.), *Leptiminus (Lamta): A Roman port city in Tunisia. Report no. 1* (JRA Suppl. 4, 1992), henceforth *Leptiminus I*. Two further volumes concentrating on the results of excavation (*Leptiminus report no. 2*) and field survey (*Leptiminus report no. 3*) are scheduled to appear in 1998 and 1999, respectively.