

The Early Christian pilgrimage complex at Bir Ftouha, Carthage: interim report

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Introduction

Three seasons of excavation (1994, 1996, 1997) under the auspices of the Institut National du Patrimoine, Tunis, have been completed at the Christian complex at Bir Ftouha on the outskirts of ancient Carthage. Although further excavation and study is needed to clarify the plan and phasing, the findings to date warrant a brief report on this extensive and architecturally rich site.¹

The field of Bir Ftouha, named for an ancient well on an estate (formerly of Si Ali Bey), marks the NW edge of the archaeological zone of Carthage (fig. 1). It lies adjacent to the modern road between La Malga and La Marsa. The field is situated on a ledge in the terrain that descends gently from the heights of the coastal ridge. In antiquity the site lay in Carthage's northern suburbs, c.1 km beyond the Theodosian city wall.

The field has been known for its Christian structures since 1880. In the vicinity of the well Père Delattre discovered a basin, a three-apsed chapel containing sarcophagi, and an adjacent columned hall.² Some 100 m to the east P. Gauckler excavated a large mosaic floor, the pattern of which included a variety of birds in medallions and panels of a doe and stag drinking from the four rivers of paradise (see below); since the mosaic lay both inside and outside an immense apse, he concluded that it lay in the *chevet* of a basilica.³ Gauckler lifted some fragments of mosaic and sent them to the Bardo Museum and to the Louvre, where they are displayed.⁴ Gauckler and Delattre concluded that a great basilica lay between their excavations. The current project has confirmed that the basilica lay where they said, that it was as large as they suggested, and that its most extensive phase is Byzantine.

Since their trenches were backfilled the field has been used for agriculture; as a result, no structures were visible and the richness of the site has been easy to overlook. Although technically the field lies within the archaeological zone of Carthage, since 1991 it has come under great pressure from the expanding southern suburbs of La Marsa. A proposed road would cut diagonally across the field through an area known to contain ancient structures, severing the connection between Delattre's excavations on the west and Gauckler's on the east.⁵ The current

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 - 2 A. L. Delattre, "Épigraphie chrétienne de Carthage," *Missions catholiques* 1883, 321-24; id., *CRAI* 1928, 242-45, *ibid.* 1929, 23-29. See also L. Ennabli, *Carthage. Une métropole chrétienne du IV^e à la fin du VII^e siècle* (Études d'Antiquités Africaines, Paris 1997) 135-41.
 - 3 A. L. Delattre, "Inscriptions chrétiennes," *Cosmos* 1895, fasc. 542, 337-39; P. Gauckler, *Compte rendu de la marche du service en 1897* (Tunis 1898) 7; id., *Inventaire des mosaïques de la Gaule et de l'Afrique*. II. *Afrique Proconsulaire* (Paris 1910) 263-64.
 - 4 M. Yacoub, *Musée du Bardo* (Tunis 1996) p. 39, 43, nos. 203-9; F. Baratte and N. Duval, *Mosaïques romaines et paléochrétiennes du Musée du Louvre* (Paris 1978) p. 79-80 no. 39.
 - 5 Responding to this threat, in 1991 J. J. Rossiter conducted a magnetometer survey of an area of 100 x 50