WALILA: FROM THE AWRABA TO THE MERINIDS

UCL-INSAP Volubilis Project 2021

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with the assistance of

Introduction

The INSAP-UCL Project at Walīla directed by Drs Elizabeth Fentress, Corisande Fenwick (UCL) and Hassan Limane (INSAP) was established in 2018 to understand how an early Islamic town worked and how its population lived as well as to train young Moroccan and British researchers in cutting-edge archaeological techniques. Walīla, Roman Volubilis, offers an ideal place to explore these questions. A UNESCO site more widely celebrated for its Roman heritage thanks to decades of work by Roman archaeologists, it played a significant and often overlooked role in the early medieval period as a Berber centre, the probable locale of an Umayyad or Abbasid garrison, and the first capital of Idrīs I and the first surafā dynasty in Morocco. As such, it provides an exceptional opportunity to investigate how a town was transformed from a Berber agglomeration to the base of a new Arab-Islamic state and how local groups engaged with new immigrants from the East.

Long before the Muslim armies reached Morocco, the city was reduced to the western third of the Roman town, protected by a new rampart running north-south. This reduced city remained at eighteen hectares a large and important agricultural settlement in the seventh and eighth centuries occupied by the Berber Awrāba tribe. At some point after the Arab conquest of Morocco, a new walled quarter – the so-called ‘Arab quarter’ – seems to have been established outside the gateway near the wadi, perhaps to house a garrison. Walīla subsequently became the headquarters of the Idrīsid state and the earlier INSAP-UCL excavations, of 2000-2005 identified the probable location of Idris’ administrative complex outside the walls to the southeast. The court was removed to Fās under Idris II, but the town continued to be an important Idrīsid centre until the tenth century, when Al-Warrāq says that it was abandoned. The town disappears from the historical sources thereafter, but there is increasing archaeological evidence of a sizeable fourteenth-century occupation in the Merinid period, perhaps related to the new importance of Idris I and II for legitimising the right of this dynasty to rule.

The project takes a holistic approach to Islamic Walīla by combining the excavation of different zones in the medieval town with scientific analysis of the largely unstudied medieval finds in the site archive. It combines multiple techniques – excavation, GIS, archaeobotany,

Figure 1: Medieval Volubilis, showing the excavation areas (CF).

zooarchaeology and bioarchaeological analysis – to reconstruct the urban development of a North African town in the Islamic period and to understand the diet, nutrition, health, lifestyle, origins and mobility of its medieval inhabitants. Equally, it seeks to train Moroccan and British students collectively in the latest archaeological techniques and to foster and encourage a new generation of Islamic archaeologists in the two countries.

The first two seasons of work in 2018 and 2019 were funded generously by the Barakat Trust. The third season of work, delayed by 18 months due to the outbreak of Covid-19, and again generously supported by the Barakat Trust took place between October 5th and November 13th 2021. The Barakat Trust supported the participation of 11 Moroccan colleagues from INSAP (Prof. Hassan Limane, Co-Director, Dr Mustapha Atki (Ceramic specialist), Mohamed Alilou (Draughtsman), Omar Bouka (GIS and Topographer), Dr Tarik Moujoud (Conservator), Dr Fatima Zohra El Harrif (numismatics), 5 doctoral students Asmae El Kacimi (Supervisor), Asmae El Qably (Supervisor), Basma Mejrihi (Small finds), Hanae Jerjou (Archaeology), Hajar el Khaouda (Archaeology) and the employment of 26 workmen and 2 cooks on the project; the costs of the UCL team (5 staff members, 2 doctoral students, 2 Masters students) was supported by grants from the Society of Antiquaries and the UCL Student Fieldwork Fund.

The Results

Area A (fig. 1)

Figure 2: Area A, with phases and excavation areas (Hallvard Indgjer, Elizabeth Fentress, Asmae El Kacimi
Located more or less at the centre of the medieval town, the area was selected for its massive double wall, which enclosed an area of around 400 m. sq. The enclosure is one of four adjacent properties of similar size and construction technique, arranged on either side of a road running north-south across the town. Excavations commenced in the northwest quadrant in 2018, where a series of relatively small buildings was quickly visible. Of these, building A-B was entirely excavated, as was building D, to its north, and building C, a 14th century to the south of the site. In 2019 a new area was opened in the northeast quadrant, and work continued in the courtyard areas to the north and south of building A-B.


The area to the south revealed a phase that had not yet been seen on the site: structures earlier than the 8th century. We are not yet entirely sure that these are all contemporary, but their dates seem to lie in the 7th century. These comprise a series of walls, one of which, running approximately e-w, may be a boundary. They delimit an open area with, in the centre, a series of pottery kilns (fig. 3). Three of these were excavated this year. They are of a very simple type, shaped like a figure eight, with a firing chamber at the smaller end, and without a raised floor and are cut down into the yellow earth of the Roman destruction levels. Their fills contain massive quantities of ash, and the collapse of their roofs, in burned clay.

![Figure 3: Kilns in area K, from the east (Asmae El Kacimi)](image)

One of these kilns was partially covered by the wall of house A-B, which makes their stratigraphic relationship clear. Others, above and to the north of house A-B, were also probably cut by it: these have yet to be excavated. (fig. 4).
Rooms F-I G-T-S (Basma Mejrihi)

Up the slope to the east another structure appears to belong to this phase. This is a courtyard house, entered through an elegantly paved vestibule with a bent entrance, G. The courtyard, H, has a rough beaten-earth floor, with traces of plaster that may have come from the walls. In one corner, a semi-circular structure may be a manger. Two rooms, S and T, have not yet been excavated. This is the only domestic structure that appears to be contemporary with the use of the kilns. Outside this house are a number of very large, deep silos, one of which finally revealed Roman ground level at almost 3 metres below the surface from which it was cut.

Area D-E (Alice Poletto)

The construction of House A-B, described in previous interim reports, brings this phase to an end, at least as far as the kilns are concerned. It cut into the slope into which the eastern kilns are built, to create a level building site. This cut probably continued to the north, where a subsidiary door led to a courtyard, area D, with a very large silo. Other silos cut the kilns, and may belong to the same phase.

To the west of this, in area E, was found a very curious feature (figs. 5 and 6). This is a massive pit, roughly square and measuring 5 x 3.8m., cut 2.5 m down into the yellow earth of the Roman destruction. Its excavation is not yet complete, but it appears to have a level floor, with raised structures on the north and south sides. On the west side a roughly-built wall steps down towards the middle, and may have combined a terracing function with that of a stair, giving access to the space. On the south side the raised platform had a flat surface, and a large pit in one corner, while the platform on the north side had a shallow hearth, filled with dense ash and flecks of burned clay. On its east side was a small, deep pit lined with white clay, apparently designed to hold water. This was later replaced with a second, similar pit, and the level of the hearth raised. 278 fragments of pellet moulds were found in this area, with 28 fragments in the ash covering the hearth.
There appear to have been a succession of these hearths building up until they were no longer accessible from the ground. Other finds include a probable mould for creating the moulds, of fired clay shaped like a flat bread pan, and numerous bone tools, including anvils and scrapers, as well as a handle with two iron nails for fixing the paddle or spatula that it was attached to (fig 8, analysis Marie Middleton). It seems plausible to interpret the whole of the structure as a workshop, cut deeply into the ground for unknown reasons. The numerous moulds suggest that metal pellets for striking coins were the principal products of this workshop, although a few fragments of wasters and a crucible might indicate that glass was worked there as well. The bronze or silver for the coins would have been melted in the moulds over a fire: preserve traces of over-firing at their bases. The
7 coins were probably struck elsewhere, as we have neither found pellets nor any trace of hammer scale. Preliminary analysis of mould fragment, however, shows the presence of metal prills within the moulds (analysis Raluca Lazarescu).

The abandonment of the workshop is signalled by a deep series of fills, of which one of the highest contains massive stones clearly deriving from a nearby building. This may have been house A-B, one of whose orthostats lies on the ground as it fell, next to the subterranean workshop, although a building to the north is also possible.

Throughout these dumps were found ash and bone material deriving from multiple firings. Once filled, the structure was covered by an oven and a last firing surface nearby.

Room D, described in previous reports, was then constructed to the east of the area of the workshop, now a courtyard. Its pebble floor, with a drain, was apparently intended for some sort of process involving water: its removal next year should reveal any structures that belong to the area of the underground workshop. Two silver dirhams of Idris I appear to date the construction of room D and the abandonment of the workshop.

The area was then abandoned, and covered by layers of hillwash. By the 14th century, only the crests of the walls at the east end of building A-B were visible. It is at this point that the large walls of the enclosure were constructed, as well as building C, described in previous reports. The construction of these walls entailed the cutting of numerous wide, shallow pits, presumably to collect the earth for superstructures in pisé de terre.
Area E

Our second focus is the so-called ‘Arab quarter’, located just outside one of the Roman gates (Fig. 9) and the second-century Roman enceinte. Here, earlier, unpublished excavations had revealed a complicated sequence of houses, while the partial publication of a series of silver coin hoard of Umayyad date had led scholars to interpret this zone as an extra-mural settlement of Arab soldiers. Our aim is to clarify the occupation history, and, in particular, evidence for Arab settlement in the first half of the eighth century and the presence of a possible garrison and local coin mint. In 2018 and 2019, we focused on cleaning up the French excavations and establishing a working chronology for this vast zone through limited trenches in areas where intact stratigraphy was preserved. In 2021, we expanded excavations across this quarter to build up a detailed understanding of the settlement in this zone. Five phases of activity have been identified to date. In Phase 1 (the early Roman period), this extra-mural zone was used as a Roman cemetery and many epitaphs have been collected here in past years: indeed, the site was used as an exercise for student archaeologists and as a mine for epigraphy.

Building 2, Room 1  (Paige Steen)

The 2021 excavations in this room provided a full sequence from the early Roman period to the medieval period. The earliest level reached was a pebble surface which was not entirely excavated. Finds seem to indicate a date around the turn of the millennium. A furnace or hearth was cut into this road; iron and copper slag suggest that it was used for metallurgical activity. It was covered by

Figure 9: Site E, with buildings marked (Hallvard Indgjerd)
a cobbled surface cut by a posthole which dated to the second half of the first century CE (fig. 10). These surfaces were presumably associated with the extra-mural cemetery, and perhaps with a road leading east from the main gate. This was covered by another cobbled surface and preparation (≈15-20 cm) and large quantities of pottery and animal bones, metallic slag and vitrified production waste, as well as fragments of Roman bricks and ceramic building material. Cut into its south side was an elongated pit with a loose dark brown-black silty fill. The ceramic assemblage suggests a post-Roman date (fig. 10).

In the medieval period, a building with opus africanum walls was constructed; its earliest surface (fig. 11) is associated with pre-Idrisid coin of ‘Rashīd’ minted at ‘Wallīl’ (fig. 12). Subsequently, the floor was covered by a destruction layer with significant amounts of charcoal and bones. A series of occupational yellow-brown pise surfaces were then laid down. Two small, round holes, perhaps post holes, were cut into this layer in the central part of the room along with a small depression with an ashy grey fill, possibly the location of a brazier, was found midway (Fig. 11). A silo, was cut into the SE corner and contained significant amounts of charcoal, burnt bone, and metallurgical debris. Later contexts of 8th-9th century housing were excavated in the 2019 and 2018 seasons.
Building 1, rooms 6, 7 and 8 (Raluca Lazarescu, Marie Middleton, Tim Penn)

Along with Building 5, Building 1 is one of the most heavily damaged in the area, due to excavation in the 1950’s. The earliest incarnation of this building was probably defined by a wall now visible in the middle of room 6, and, to the south, by the wall of four orthostats in the middle of room 7. (fig. 13) There was almost certainly a courtyard to the south. Just south of the orthostat wall was found a well, or perhaps a cesspit, lined with river pebbles. At some point this structure was replaced by that comprising rooms 6 and 8. Its door was probably found in the middle of the south wall, opening onto room 7. This allows access to the north via a very narrow passage between the building and the Roman rampart: clearly the access to the inside of the building was very protected. Possibly at the same time the orthostat wall was replaced by a continuous wall running east-west, which appears to enlarge the size of the room at the expense of the courtyard, and covered the cess pit. To the south of this room was found a courtyard, bounded on the east by the Roman wall and tower, on the west by room E, excavated in 2019, and on the south by a wall running between room 3 and the tower. The precise dates for these phases have not yet been established.
This room lies to the south of room 2, excavated in 2019 (fig. 15). The earliest floor is of smooth beaten earth with some slicks of plaster. Towards the east wall is, a built hearth or, perhaps, a bread oven with a carefully constructed exterior and baked clay floor (fig. 16). Entrance to the room may initially have come through a narrow passageway, like that leading to Building 1, with a bent entrance at the southwest corner. This is suggested by the pebble surface that covers that corner, and the short stub wall running e-w. Although it shares a wall with Building 6, room 1 to the north, it does not appear to communicate with it, and may have had further rooms or a courtyard to the east- To the south lies the Roman road.

Subsequently the floor was covered with a deep deposit of ash, and there are few clear floors: the room as a dwelling may have been abandoned, and used as a dump for the metallurgical activities taking place to the west. The construction of a well in its northwest corner seems to mark the moment in which this room and that to the north of it, went out of use definitively, at least as a covered structure. It is not impossible that the space that they had occupied because an open courtyard, giving access to the well.
building 5, room 2 (Asmae Elqably, Raluca Lazarescu)

This building (fig. 17) has been under excavation since 2019: it was, again, heavily damaged by the French excavations, which also left a large amount of spoliated architectural elements in their backfill, which had made excavation very difficult. The season thus began with the removal of these, including several large column fragments. We continue to aim to understand this structure, at c. 17 x 4 metres is significantly larger than any other visible in the extra-mural settlement. To the north, it gives onto a large courtyard with a well, while on the south it was bounded by what was probably a Roman road, whose use continued into the medieval period. A small sondage into this surface revealed a series of cobbled surfaces without much material. Through them was cut a trench along the southern wall of the building. Although the wall is actually missing at this point, a row of spolia seems to have reinforced its foundations, and it seems probable that this was a foundation trench. Within the trench a fragmentary glass weight with Kufic lettering seems to date to the Umayyad period (fig. 18).

Figure 17: Building 5 (Hallvard Indgjerd)

Figure 18: Glass weight (Hallvard Indgjerd)
Although most of the south wall of the structure has been robbed, two orthostats remain at the centre of the south side. We removed the collapse contexts that covered the area to the south of them, and a roughly semi-circular shape emerged, paved in beaten earth with very small pebbles. That this was actually a mihrab remains uncertain: we hope that it will be demonstrated one way or another in the next season. What is certain is that there was a large amount of collapse before the beginning of the next phase, and that in the next phase the building served for artisan activities, principally metallurgical. A small door in the north wall, later blocked led onto a room delimited on its east side by a wall in pisé de terre, and to the west by another small wall of which only a stone foundation remains. Directly in front of the door are found a series of successive small hearths that were used for metallurgy (fig. 19). These hearths were cut into the wall collapse from the previous phase, and were fired to a very great heat, as the burned earth beneath them shows. The heat was increased by means of bellows, for the nozzles of which two possible slots were identified in the excavation (A on fig. 20). Although the exact structure of these hearths cannot always be identified, as each was replaced by the next, there is no doubt that they were used for metallurgy, as hammerscale and slag were everywhere in the debris around them. The shop was small, and its owner was perhaps only one of a series of artisans that now occupied the great courtyard to the north. To the east of the metallurgical complex another room is under excavation. Showing a succession of beaten-earth floors, some of which are plastered, and several pits. The use of the room has not yet been identified.

Training and outreach at Volubilis

Training is a key aim of the project and our 5 Moroccan doctoral students were supported in developing their excavation and recording techniques, inventory and report-writing by the three
directors and project staff. UCL students were trained alongside their Moroccan colleagues and particularly benefitted from learning ceramic analysis from Dr. Atki. Though Covid restrictions restricted the amount of outreach we were able to do, we were able to run a visit for 22 high school students from the Lycée of Meknes introducing them to archaeological techniques. We also hosted a visiting undergraduate student from the University of Meknes for a week training her in basic excavation and finds processing.

We have also revamped and updated our website (www.sitedevolubilis.org) which we will continue to update and develop in the coming year.

Conclusion and plan for next season

The third season of excavations has produced remarkable results, revealing a bustling medieval city of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries with a variety of housing types and an artisanal quarter, as well as a significant 14th century Merinid re-occupation of the site. The new information from Area E seems to confirm our hypothesis that we have two different communities living at the site in the seventh to ninth centuries, consisting of a Berber population living in the medieval town producing local ceramics and a new (Arab?) incoming community moving in and settling outside the walls in courtyard houses, a model seen elsewhere in the Islamic world. These communities lived in different types of houses and used and consumed different types of goods (particularly ceramics) and foods; and there seems to be a significant difference in wealth and buying power between those living in the new quarter and those in the old town.

Our excavations to date have produced an enormous amount of material – coins, ceramics, glass, small finds, animal bones and archaeobotanical samples – which require detailed analysis. Given the scale and richness of the materials, we therefore plan, funding permitting, to hold a study season in May-June 2022 to advance the study of this unique early Islamic assemblage from North Africa, before completing a final season of excavation in October 2022. Detailed analysis of the ceramics including the products of the newly discovered kilns will allow us to refine the dating and sequence. Archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological analysis will continue to be conducted to answer key questions about the introduction of new crops (durum, millet, cotton), the spread of Muslim dietary proscriptions, as well as subsistence, lifestyle and the urban economy at Walila and North Africa. Anthropological analysis on a newly excavated 14th-century cemetery at the site by our Moroccan co-director, Hassan Limane, will take place under the auspices of the project extending our knowledge of the demographics and living standards of Walila’s population. Glass, metal, and ceramic samples have already been exported to the UK and are currently undergoing laboratory analysis (LA-ICP-MS, archaeometry, SEM-EDS) to understand technology, recipes and manufacturing processes. Similarly, human and animal bone samples are undergoing isotopic and aDNA analysis to answer key questions about diet, mobility and health in the middle ages. In November 2022, we plan to complete excavation in the two zones to understand better the plan and layout of the eighth-ninth century city, its housing and chronology, and to open a new area in the vicinity of the late wall.

We will continue to work closely with our Moroccan colleagues to ensure knowledge exchange, capacity-building and technical training, a key goal of the project. Covid-permitting, we plan to train a further 10 Moroccan postgraduate students from INSAP alongside 6 British students (funded by UCL) in finds processing, illustration and photography as well as zooarchaeology and archaeobotany.