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# Preliminary Results of the Excavation Work Carried Out at Thibilis (Announa, Guelma).

# Excavation Campaign from July 25 to August 12, 2023

## النتائج الاولية لأعمال التنقيب الاثري المنفذة بالموقع الاثري ثيبيليس (عنونة، قالمة)

## حفرية من 25 جويلية الى 12 أوت 2023.

| *Dr. Nacer Benmessaoud* * | *PhD. Benkacir Boubaker* |
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| | **ORCID iD Link https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4880-6439** |
| University of Algiers 2- Abou EL Kacem Saâdallah, Algeria. Institute of Archaeology, | University of Algiers 2- Abou EL Kacem Saâdallah/ Institute of Archaeology, Algeria The Laboratory of Civilizational Construction of the Central Maghreb (Algeria). |
| nacer.benmessaoud@univ-alger2.dz | **benkacir.boubaker@univ-alger2.dz** |

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**Abstract:** The 2023 excavation campaign at Thibilis (Announa, Guelma), conducted from July 25 to August 12, aimed to verify the construction date of the Capitoline Temple, traditionally attributed to the late 4th-early 5th century CE by Stéphane Gsell and Jolly. Three test pits were opened in front of the temple, later connected into a single unit reaching depths exceeding three meters. The stratigraphy revealed three layers: topsoil, a colonial-era abandonment layer, and a substantial ancient destruction layer containing nearly 5,000 pottery sherds (predominantly Roman), 83 Roman coins in varying states of preservation, two Latin inscriptions (including a funerary stela bearing the name ANTISTIA), an ivory gaming die, and a bronze signet ring with raised symbols. The ancient occupation level was not reached. These preliminary results challenge the existing chronology and necessitate expanded excavation in future campaigns to understand the site's occupational phases and urban development.

**Keywords:** Thibilis, Announa, Capitoline Temple, archaeological excavation, Roman Algeria

**الملخص:** هدفت حملة التنقيب لعام 2023 في مدينة ثيبيلس (عنونة، قالمة)، والتي أجريت في الفترة من 25 جويلية إلى 12 أوت 2023، إلى التحقق من تاريخ بناء معبد الكابيتول، المنسوب تقليديًا إلى أواخر القرن الرابع وأوائل القرن الخامس الميلادي وفقًا لما ذكره ستيفان غزالStéphane Gsell وجولي Jolly ، تم فتح ثلاثة خنادق اختبارية أمام المعبد، وتم فيما بعد ربطها لتشكل وحدة واحدة وصل عمقها إلى أكثر من ثلاثة أمتار، كشف التحليل الطبقي عن ثلاث طبقات: التربة السطحية، طبقة تعود لفترة الهجران إبان الحقبة الاستعمارية، وطبقة دمار قديمة سميكة احتوت على ما يقرب من 5000 قطعة فخارية (تعود غالبيتها للفترة الرومانية)، و83 قطعة نقدية رومانية بحالات حفظ متفاوتة، ونقشتان لاتينيتان) من بينهما شاهد قبر يحمل اسم(ANTISTIA ، وحجر نرد عاجي، وخاتم برونزي يحمل رموزًا بارزة، لم يتم الوصول إلى مستوى الاستيطان القديم، بناء على هذه النتائج الأولية يستلزم منا توسيع نطاق التنقيب في الحملات المستقبلية لفهم مراحل الاستيطان في الموقع وتطوره العمراني. **الكلمات المفتاحية :**ثيبيلس، عنونة، معبد الكابيتول، الحفرية الآثرية، الجزائر الرومانية.

* ***Nacer Benmessaoud :*** nacer.benmessaoud@univ-alger2.dz

# I. Introduction:

It is with great pleasure and honor that we initiated our archaeological research at the site of the ancient city of Thibilis (present day Sellaoua Announa) in the wilaya of Guelma.

The present research project aims to conduct archaeological excavations at the site within the framework of scientific research and university training (PRFU), particularly with the objective of contributing to the training of future specialists in the field of archaeology.

These investigations form part of a broader research program entitled “Civilizational Centers in Algeria during the Roman Period: Archaeological and Historical Studies of the City and its Territory, Urbanism and Architecture, Arts and Craft Production in Roman Algeria.”

This project was approved by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research on 1 January 2023 (Project No. I04N01UN160220230008). It is hosted within Laboratory No. 31 (LECMMA) at the Institute of Archaeology, with the research team registered under No. C1581002. Within this framework, the present report introduces the archaeological excavation project conducted at Thibilis.

**Fig.1. Overview of the Thibilis site.**



**Source: by Autours.**

## 1. Situation and Geographical Location

### 1 – Location of the Archaeological Site of Thibilis

The ruins of the ancient city of Thibilis are located 23 km southwest of the modern city of Guelma (ancient Calama) and approximately 18 km in a straight[1] line from the administrative center of the region.

The locality mentioned above corresponds to the present site of Sellaoua Announa. The city is attested in several ancient written sources and inscriptions, including CIL VIII, N 5525 and 18908, where the name of the settlement appears as "Thibilim."

The city is also mentioned by Augustine of Hippo, who refers to it in Letter no. 1121. It is likewise recorded as "Thibili" in the Tabula Peutingeriana. The Ravenna Cosmographer also cites the settlement as "Thibili," without the letters H and S.

Furthermore, the city is indicated in an inscription relating to the road linking Gadiaufala to Tipasa, which measured approximately thirty Roman miles. According to Stéphane Gsell, although this road did indeed exist, it did not pass through Thibilis.

## 2. Brief Historical Overview and History of Research at Thibilis

The second section of this report presents several aspects of the historical development of the ancient city of Thibilis. According to ancient sources, Thibilis was one of the oldest cities of Roman Africa. Its foundation dates to the pre-Roman period, that is, the Numidian period. The city subsequently experienced the Roman period, and finally the Byzantine period.

The earliest modern references to the ruins of Announa date back to the eighteenth century. In 1725, the physician Jean André Peysonnel discovered the site by chance during a journey devoted to the study of the natural history of the region. During this visit, he identified several monuments, including arched structures such as the southern and eastern gates, as well as a central arch, which Stéphane Gsell later interpreted as a triumphal arch. He also noted the presence of a double arcade forming the entrance to the ancient forum of the city and copied a Latin inscription previously discovered on the site.[2]

Another reference was made by Thomas Shaw, who mentioned Announa in his work Travels or Observations Relating to Several Parts of Barbary and the Levant.[3] He reported the presence of a church building on the southwestern side of the site and copied an epitaph discovered there.

In 1836, Baron Bande and Berbrugger, as well as Grenville Temple, while visiting Announa, brought to light the Latin inscriptions discovered at the site, These inscriptions were published in Quelques inscriptions de la province de Constantine (1838), Other inscriptions were collected by Doctor Guyon and published in a collection by Grabaw in the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Volume VIII.[4]

## 3 – The Archaeological Site of Thibilis

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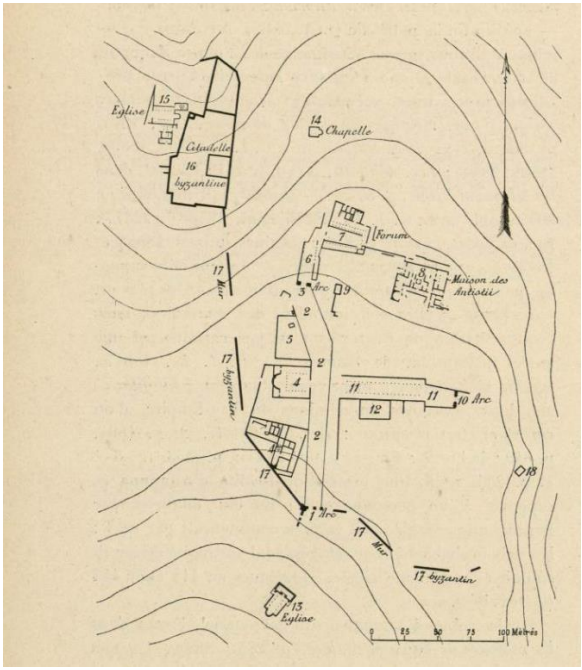
[1] Gsell (st) et Jolly, Khamissa, Mdaourouch, Announa, T.III, Alger-Paris,1918, p. 7.
[2] CIL, VIII,5539.
[3] Shaw, voyage dans plusieurs provinces de la barbarie et du levant, traduction française, T.I,1743. P 153.
[4] CIL, VIII.n°.5526, 5598, 5624.

The archaeological site of Thibilis presents a combination of both regular and irregular structural layouts on a plateau that is almost flat at its center. Field observations indicate that the irregular pattern is concentrated in the northern sector, which corresponds to the earliest settlement area and includes structures dating to the pre-Roman (Numidian) period.[5]

By contrast, the principal urban axes display a relatively regular layout, particularly the Decumanus Maximus and the Cardo Maximus, which intersect at the center of the city.

This urban organization remains clearly visible despite the site's topography, which is characterized by a gentle slope from both the northern and southern sectors toward the central area of the settlement.[6]

**Fig.2. Site Plan of Thibilis.**




**Source: Gsell (Stp),A.A.A,Feuille:18,n°107.**

## II – Introduction to the Excavation

The excavation campaign at Thibilis, scheduled from 25 July to 12 August 2023, was conducted under favorable conditions. The site accommodated six trainees and two supervisors. The limited number of participants was a deliberate choice, aimed at enabling closer observation and a better understanding of the challenges posed by the various structures and edifices that comprise the ancient city of Thibilis, thereby supporting well-informed decision-making during the excavation.

[5] Gsell (st), A.A.A, f.18, n°;107.
[6] Gsell (st), Announa, P 7.

This restriction on participant numbers was not due to a lack of interest in participation, but rather a conscious decision to limit the team to ten members to ensure effective supervision and optimal management of excavation operations, the research team, and archaeological equipment.

Limiting the team size did not reduce the work accomplished; on the contrary, it improved efficiency, as the results obtained over the areas explored during this campaign were highly satisfactory and encouraging.

To ensure the smooth progress of the campaign, the first step was training the trainees in techniques for analyzing the distribution of built spaces, as well as methods for dividing the site into squares and sectors for referential identification. Trainees were also instructed in archaeological recording techniques, including the principles, methods, and precautions essential for conducting systematic excavation.

1. **Initial Problematic Issues**:

All the previously mentioned elements raise several Problematic, both in terms of spatial organization, such as the geographical distribution and land use, and in terms of the construction of the edifices, including the identification of chronological occupation phases and the development of buildings within the urban framework of the city. Understanding these patterns requires a careful study of the components of each structure and their interrelationships.

Additionally, we adopted a topographical approach to the city, addressing specific scientific challenges such as stratigraphic analysis, in situ photographic documentation, and recognition of modern restoration interventions, as well as knowledge of architectural elements.

All these factors have a direct impact on the research, particularly regarding the dating of the structures, their construction techniques, spatial distribution, and their relationships with historical events. They also allow for comparative analysis with other buildings and cities of antiquity, ultimately aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the historical and civilizational development of the region.

## III. Excavation: The Temple of the Capitoline Triad (Triada Capitolina):

Among the operations and interventions carried out at Thibilis, the first task was to verify the hypothesis proposed by Stéphane Gsell and Jolly regarding the construction date of the Capitoline temple (late 4th to early 5th century CE). Our preliminary assumption is that the monument may have been built much earlier, an idea that required verification.

To investigate, we undertook a reconnaissance trench to obtain new data and discoveries to understand the precise condition of the structure. We also photographed the area identified as the podium by Jolly before starting the excavation planned for this campaign.

Preliminary plans of the temple were extremely helpful in our work, providing reference for the general layout. The trench was delimited by three walls: one to the east, one to the west, and one along the north façade of the temple.

A secondary objective was to develop an action plan for the next excavation scheduled for July 2024, since this campaign served primarily as an introductory and familiarization campaign with the site. Based on the trench observations, the excavated layer consisted of ancient fill, which raises additional questions regarding the formation of this layer and the reasons for its presence in this location.

The 2023 campaign served as a twofold contact mission: first, engagement with local authorities, including officials from the Directorate of Culture of the Guelma Wilaya, to ensure that all necessary resources were available for the successful execution of the project; second, a site assessment to document the current condition of the archaeological remains of Thibilis.

In summary, the primary research questions concern:

Why and how the Capitoline temple was constructed at this location.

The precise chronology of its construction.

The reasons for using these specific construction techniques, especially given the standard architectural norms of Capitoline temples.

Why were the foundations not previously excavated to determine stratigraphy and potentially date the monument.

Additional questions arise from the east and west walls of the cella, which align with the temple space without apparent intersections, and from discrepancies in the general plan proposed by Gsell and Jolly, where certain partition walls are absent from Gsell’s published plan. These issues will be addressed in detail in subsequent studies.

## V. The Sondage :

During this campaign, three test pits (sondages) were opened in Sector 01, at a location known as the front of the Capitoline Temple, in the area situated between the eastern and western staircases of the temple's facade. These three small sondages were positioned as follows: one to the east, running alongside the western wall of the eastern staircase; the second, the western sondage, running alongside the eastern wall of the western staircase; and finally, the third sondage, located on the northern side, running alongside the southern facade of the southern wall of the cella.

The objective of these test pits was to determine the foundation layers in order to understand the construction method. Furthermore, it was hoped that they would help date these interventions, which we believe to be modifications or reworkings of an earlier building, possibly even a private house.

The dimensions of these sondages were 80 cm in width, with lengths varying as follows:

East side: 3.50 m.

West side: 3.60 m.

North side: 6.40 m.

After several days of excavation, we found it necessary to revise our working method. Consequently, we opted to connect these sondages to form a single, larger excavation unit, given that the depth was considerable, exceeding three meters. This new configuration revealed several significant data points. This situation necessitates the opening of the entire surface area of this sector, a task programmed for the next excavation campaign in July 2024. A broader excavation method is indispensable for the purpose of reaching the occupation level and determining the chronology of the occupational phases of this site, particularly following the discovery of a new wall to the south of this sector.

## VI. The Discoveries:

observed in the sondage, These layers are number three:

An upper topsoil layer, with a depth ranging from 15 to 25 cm in different areas.

The second layer is an abandonment layer, resulting from the suspension of excavations during the colonial period.

The third layer is the destruction layer from the ancient period. This layer is very substantial and loosely compacted, consisting of rough, unworked construction stone blocks (rubble). It was within this layer that numerous finds were discovered, at depths exceeding three meters. It should be noted that the ancient occupation level has not yet been reached.

### 1 - Ceramics.

The largest yield from this excavation is characterized by the high number of pottery sherds found in this sondage, amounting to nearly 5,000 sherds. These are composed mainly of pottery sherds from the Roman period, along with a few sherds dating back to the pre-Roman period. These sherds are currently being studied at the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Algiers 2.

**Fig.3. Ceramics discovered during the 2023 excavation at Thibilis**.



**Source: Authors**

## 2- Coins.

The discovery of coins during this excavation is promising, with nearly 83 coins counted, all from the Roman period. They were found at depths of up to 2 meters within the destruction layer, in the northwest corner of the sondage, These 84 coins are distributed as follows:

9 coins are legible and well preserved.

19 coins are legible on one side. State of preservation is poor.

38 coins are barely legible on both sides, with effacement.

18 coins are broken (in half or quarter fragments) and barely legible.

It is evident from the current state of the site that no conclusions can yet be drawn regarding the dating of this layer, due to the circumstances of the discovery of these coins, the majority of which were found at different levels.

**Fig.4. The 83 coins discovered during the 2023 Thibilis excavation campaign**



**Source: Authors**

## 3 - Latin Inscription

**Text No. 1.**

A fragment of an epigraphic text was discovered at a depth of one meter on the north side of the sondage, bearing five letters distributed over two lines, the text of which is as follows:

Line No. 1: Q.V. The height of the letters is 4.5 cm, width 3.8 cm, with a depth of 3 to 4 mm.
Line No. 2: I.I.C. The height of the letters is 4.2 cm, with an unknown width due to breakage. The depth of the letters is between 2 and 3 mm.

**Text No. 2.**

A second epigraphic text was discovered, inscribed on the main facade of a funerary stela. This stela was unearthed during the excavation at approximately 1.30 m depth, in the middle of the sondage on the north side, this stela is made of light blue limestone, with the following dimensions:

Total height: 76 cm.

Width: 39 cm.

Thickness: 18 cm.

**Fig.4. A funerary inscription stele discovered at Thibilis in 2023**



**Source: Authors**

The facade field is divided into two parts: the upper part, rounded into a semicircle at the top, which is thought to be reserved for symbols and the funerary formula, over a height of 44 cm; the lower part bears the funerary text of the deceased, which has not been executed. The second part, the text field, is rectangular, with a length of 29.02 cm and a height of over 28 cm, possibly more given that the stela is broken at the lower end. The data contained on the stela are so considerable that we cannot provide further information on this text here, and we will limit ourselves to citing the content of the text pending further information that will complete the final study.

The text of the stela is composed of four lines:

Line No. 1: Indicating a feminine name (ANTISTIA).

Line No. 2: Bearing five letters (Q.F.C. RY).

Line No. 3: Bearing another name (S A R I O).

Line No. 4: Indicating the age and place of burial (V.A.X.). "Possibly a second X, or more."

Proposed reading:
ANTISTIA Q(uinti) F(ilia) C(ai)
RYSARIA V(ixit) A(nnis) X (ans) perhaps more.

**4 – Die**:

Alongside these findings, another equally significant element was uncovered: a gaming die. It was unearthed at a depth of 1.80 m in the northwest area of the sondage. It is made of white ivory, of small format and nearly cubic shape, measuring 9 mm in length, 8.5 mm in width, and 8 mm in height.

**Fig.5. The ivory die was discovered at Thibilis during the 2023 excavation campaign.**



**Source: Authors**

It is in a very good state of preservation, with the details of the circles indicating the numbers clearly visible. Its weight is 1.29 grams.

## 5 - The Signet Ring:

During the excavation, we were exceptionally fortunate to discover a bronze signet ring bearing raised symbols. This ring weighs 3.10 grams and has a diameter of 1.8 cm, with a band thickness of 1 mm. The seal itself is rectangular, measuring 0.9 cm in width and 1.25 cm in length.

**Fig.6. The bronze signet ring discovered at Thibilis during the 2023 excavation campaign**



**Source: Authors**

The field bearing the symbols has a thickness of 2 mm and is divided longitudinally into three parts, forming three sub-fields, the symbols of which are currently under study.

It is known that in the 4th millennium BC in Mesopotamia, the first seals appeared, always made of clay. They were also used in ancient Egypt on papyri or on tombs. From the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC onwards, seals of all kinds were produced in the Aegean Islands and mainland Greece. In Minoan civilization, they were fashioned from ivory, soft stone, and later hard stone, displaying characteristic forms.

**Fig.7. Symbols engraved on the upper face of the ring**



**Source: Authors**

During the Late Bronze Age, we witnessed the development of lentoid seals and signet rings, elements that persist in subsequent centuries. The Hellenistic period is characterized by seals that became a form of luxury art, a tradition that would last until the 19th century. Parallel to this mode of authentication, the Romans initially favored witnesses for validation, then adopted the subscriptio (literally "subscription") accompanied by a sign (seing), often a monogram, or a seal (an impression made by a stamp or an annulus signatorius, a signet ring).

## VII – Conclusion:

In conclusion, the excavation and research campaign in this area has proven to be highly fruitful and indeed promising. It has been observed that the initial research questions raised remain pertinent. Regarding the discoveries, given the current state of the data, it would be unwise to hazard any hasty conclusions, as the excavation has only just begun. It is recommended to continue the excavation of the temple and to open additional sondages on the southern side to understand the occupation of this area.

## VIII. Bibliography:

## Books:

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