

Bulla Regia I:

A new church and Christian cemetery

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Abstract

This paper reports the preliminary results from two short seasons of fieldwork that the Tunisian-British Bulla Regia Archaeological Report was able to undertake in September 2016 and 2017. In 2016, the work focused on a geophysical survey of the western cemetery and revealed a complex landscape of funerary enclosures and mausolea outside the protected boundaries of the site, likely to be of Roman date. In 2017, photogrammetric techniques were used to record and plan a late antique church and cemetery that was discovered during a rescue excavation in 2010. The church consists of three naves and a series of funerary annexes which contained burials covered by mosaic or stone epitaphs, including those marking the graves of two bishops and two priests. The church is surrounded by an extensive cemetery with a variety of different tomb types, such as mosaic caissons and simple stepped masonry tombs. The mosaics, inscriptions and finds (ceramics, glass, coins) support a fourth to sixth/ seventh century date for the church and cemetery.

Introduction

The Tunisian-British Bulla Regia Project was established as a Society for Libyan Studies Flagship Project in 2014. It aims to investigate the late antique and early medieval history of the town of Bulla Regia in northern Tunisia. The site lies in the Medjerda Valley on the route between Carthage and Hippo, in Africa Proconsularis (Fig. 1). Probably one of the residences of the Numidian kings, it dates back to at least the fourth century B.C. Bulla Regia became an “oppidum liberum” with the creation of the province Africa Nova in 46 B.C. (Pliny *HN* 5.25), and was elevated to municipium probably under Vespasian, and to colonia under Hadrian. As a wealthy town which provided Rome with many senators and equestrians, it contains all the usual monuments of a Roman town but is perhaps more renowned for its lavishly decorated 4th-5th AD houses with cool underground rooms, floored with mosaics (Thébert 1973). Christianity is attested at the site as early as 256 when one Therpaius is mentioned as bishop (*Sent. Episc.* 61), and by the late fourth century, Bulla seems to have had a substantial Christian population: just before Easter 399, its Christian inhabitants were famously rebuked by Augustine (*Serm* 301A) for attending the theatre and holding lavish theatrical spectacles too frequently, and both Donatist and Catholic bishops from the city attended the Council of

Carthage in 411. In total, eight bishops are attested in the written sources between the third and early eighth century, attesting to a long and complex Christian history that also continued after the Arab conquest of Carthage in 697/8.¹

Despite the obvious importance of Bulla Regia for the history of Christianity in northern Tunisia and the transition from late antiquity to the middle ages, this aspect of the town has received little archaeological attention. Dr. L. Carton was the first to find evidence of Christian activity while excavating the so-called ‘Church of Alexander’ in 1914, an enigmatic building of the sixth to seventh century which had a door lintel inscribed with Psalm 120 (line 8) and a variety of finds including a Byzantine cross dedicated by the priest Alexander and a reliquary (Carton 1915). He later identified a second possible church (now re-buried) and a handful of Christian graves in a bath complex in the NE of the site (Carton 1992, 175). In 1952-4, an ‘episcopal’ complex of two churches (Church 1 and Church 2) was excavated by P. Quoniam, but only published 15 years later by N. Duval (1969) in summary form, based on the excavation archive and his own observations. In 2010, a preventative excavation directed by M. Chaouali uncovered a hitherto-unknown church and Christian cemetery to the west of the large pagan cemetery on the west side of the town. Further evidence for the Christian population comes from a mosaic decorated with the four rivers of Paradise and a biblical inscription (*Gen.* 28, 17) in House 10, probably dating to the fifth century (Hanoune 1983), and a possibly Christian cemetery consisting of a series of graves cut into various houses in the north of the site at some point after the second half of the sixth century (Leone 2007, 175-6). Significantly, Bulla Regia continued to be occupied in some manner until at least the twelfth century, as is attested by medieval ceramics and coin hoards. The continued practice of Christianity under Muslim rule, already suggested by the eighth-century bishop from Bulla Regia, is lent further support by the discovery of a late infant burial in Church 1 that contained a small hoard of Umayyad coins (Duval 1968, 220, 229).

To explore these issues, a collaborative project between the Institut National du Patrimoine (INP) and University College London (UCL) was established. It combines multiple techniques – remote sensing, photogrammetry, excavation and bioarchaeological analysis – to reconstruct the urban development of Bulla Regia from late antiquity to its abandonment in the

¹ Therapius a Bulla (256), Epigonius (390-99), Dominicus (Catholic) and Felix (Donatist) in 411, Johannes de Bulla Regia (484), Quodvultdeus episcopus plebis Bullamensis or Porphyrius plebis Bellensis (525), Mellosus Bulleriensis (646), Phusalis (early 8th c). See Lancel 1990, Leone 2011:20, Table 1 for a summary. Our excavations identified the epitaphs of two further bishops as well as two priests, see below and Chaouali forthcoming.

middle ages, the development of Christianity at the site, and to understand the diet, nutrition, health, lifestyle, origins and mobility of its late antique inhabitants. In response to the challenges of conducting fieldwork in Tunisia at present, our methodology prioritises non-invasive rapid documentation techniques such as photogrammetry and geophysics, inventory of excavated finds, supplemented by targeted small-scale excavations where possible. Fieldwork was postponed several times in 2014 and 2015 because of the security situation in the region of Jendouba. A short campaign of geophysical prospection and topographic survey was conducted in 2016 and the first season of rapid documentation with limited excavation in 2017. This report presents the preliminary results of our fieldwork at the newly discovered Christian complex and cemetery. It provides an example of the possibilities that new, inexpensive technologies such as photogrammetry offer archaeologists for rapidly documenting and analysing monuments when it is impossible to conduct long fieldwork campaigns.

The church and the western cemetery

The newly-discovered church is located outside the protected site of Bulla Regia in an area which contains several visible funerary monuments, including early Roman mausolea, a recently excavated funerary enclosure with a mixture of inhumation and cremation burials, and a Muslim cemetery and marabout. This zone is known as the western cemetery: it lies north of the modern main road where it comprises a large, uncultivated field and extends up into the olive tree-covered lower slopes of the hills behind the site, below a Roman temple. A wadi diverted into a modern spring runs down its eastern flank, but the cemetery seems to have extended up to the city walls.

The earliest explorers to the site in the 1850s (C. Tissot, A. Winkler, H. Saladin, R. Cagnat) recognised the presence of a large pagan cemetery in this area and described or marked on their plans a series of Roman mausolea outside the now destroyed walls of the town, near the main roads west to Chemtou, and south to Souk El Arhas today (Fig. 2). Most of our knowledge of the western cemetery comes from Carton's excavations in 1899, 1890 and 1892 (Carton 1890a; 1890b). He excavated several mausolea and tombs (perhaps as many as 175) in a series of as yet unlocated trenches on the plain and lower slopes. The mausolea and graves of this early cemetery were marked by masonry and stone cupulae, steles or cippi, and sometimes placed in walled enclosures (*areae*). Most of the cupulae, steles and cippi had funerary inscriptions, of which he recorded 144. Whilst Carton did uncover some inhumations, most of the burials had

been cremated in situ. The use of this cemetery extends from the 1st century CE (and perhaps earlier) into at least the first quarter of the fourth century (Carton 1890, 183).

During the 1960s and 1970s, further work took place under the auspices of a French-Tunisian team. A further 10 cupola tombs covering cremation burials dated to the early 2nd century CE were excavated by M. Khanoussi near the wadi in 1968, 1974 and 1978 (Khanoussi 1983). The French-Tunisian survey planned and mapped much of the environs of Bulla Regia: they (re-)identified multiple standing mausolea in the western cemetery, many of which had previously been noted by Carton and Winckler (Antit et al. 1983, 148-151). Their survey showed that the cemetery extended as far as the Roman temple to the north and continued onto the eastern side of the wadi and was presumably bounded by the outer city walls that were destroyed during the construction of the modern road. In addition, they identified a small mound (C31) in the far west of the field, about 15 metres in diameter, with no visible architecture, but containing fragments of marble slabs, a bowl of Chemtou marble (now lost) and African sigillata (A and D) (Antit et al. 1983, 150). The remains were interpreted as a farm on the outskirts of the cemetery, rather than a mausoleum.

Rescue excavations directed by M. Chaouali in 2010 in the area of the western cemetery in response to a proposed housing development produced two discoveries: 1) a large church complex and cemetery enclosure on the mound (C31), surrounded by further tombs and at least one late antique below-ground mausoleum; 2) a Roman funerary enclosure with a mixture of inhumation and cremation burials, probably of 1st-4th century date, in the east of the cemetery. These discoveries raised important questions about the extent of the pagan cemetery and the size of the church complex and Christian cemetery.

In September 2016, we undertook a geophysical survey of 6.49 ha with a modified fluxgate magnetometer on a quadbike (Fig. 3). The results were disrupted in the zone around the church by modern ferrous debris and spoil, and as yet, we do not understand the spatial or chronological relationship between the Christian church and cemetery in the west and the Roman *mausolea* and graves excavated in the east. Nonetheless, the survey revealed a complex funerary landscape consisting of further *mausolea*, graves and funerary enclosures that extend significantly to the west and south of Carton's excavations and the standing *mausolea*. The strongest anomaly corresponds to a large quadrangular structure (20 x 54m) and open to the SE, which we interpret this as a funerary enclosure similar to Z4 to its north east, and located

on the same orientation. A second small rectangular structure of 7 x 6 m with a positive magnetic anomaly at its centre may be a cremation. To the north, a group of three significant anomalies represent stone-built mausolea similar to those that still are visible above-ground. Numerous smaller circular anomalies in the south likely correspond to graves with cremations in situ. The survey also revealed 3 linear, parallel anomalies in the direction N 330. They are separated by 57m. If one extrapolates to the north, there is no trace of a fourth line, but a fifth line is visible 106m away. Whilst these do not correspond to a multiple of the *actus* (35.5m), we identify these as either traces of cadastration that pre-date the pagan cemetery and church or later medieval or pre-modern field boundaries. The results thus reveal an extensive cemetery, which we estimate covers approximately ca. 16-22 hectares.

The Church

The church and cemetery lie 475m to the west of the Byzantine fort and is oriented ENE-WSE, the same orientation as the ‘episcopal’ complex inside the town, some 525m away (Fig. 4). The rescue excavations in 2010 uncovered a church with several funerary annexes and chapels. Many of these were used for burial and several important tomb mosaics and inscriptions were uncovered and lifted during the rescue excavations, including those of two priests and two bishops, and a double-mosaic depicting scenes from the story of Jonah and the whale. Our primary aim in the short 2017 season was to fully document and analyse the church, its decoration and the surrounding cemetery in order to understand its phasing.

The church and cemetery was recorded in its totality in high-resolution photographs and transformed into three-dimensional models using the photogrammetric software Agisoft Photoscan 1.3.4. In order to ensure that the models were accurate, we undertook a targeted topographic survey. In the post-excavation season, geo-referenced ortho-mosaics from the photogrammetry were used to produce full plans. The potential of basic photogrammetric techniques to rapidly document and monitor the condition of excavated buildings is demonstrated by the high-quality of the plans, however, it must be emphasized that the processing and digitization of the 3-d models on high-speed computers took considerable time and labour in the UK.

The church follows the typical plan of North African basilica: the *quadratum populi* (Room 5; length 14; width 12m) is divided into three naves of identical width leading onto a central apse (Fig. 5). It is constructed in *opus africanum*. The dominant stone is a local grey limestone with

many thin brown veins and the occasional quartz inclusions. However, architectural elements are in a variety of different stones, including a local dark beige limestone, a local dark green schist, a hard green slate, or a brownish red limestone with thin light veins and large grey patches. Many of the architectural elements (columns, capitals, architraves), as well as some of the material for the walls, were re-used from earlier, Roman buildings and the pagan cemetery (fragments of pagan funerary stele or altars are visible in some of the walls).

The naves are divided by two stylobates, each originally holding 6 columns. Six column bases, all Attic, have survived *in situ*, while the bottom parts of two columns erected without base are also still present. Most of the columns were in the local medium grey limestone with brown veins and quartz inclusions, though some are in white marble (most likely Proconnesian) and one in cipollino. Four identical composite capitals said to come from this area of the church probably belonged to one single building, before their reuse. The bases, however, were in four different materials, and of widely varying dimensions, supporting the interpretation that most, if not all of the bases and columns were reused.

The raised choir in front of the apse has several phases (Fig. 6). The earliest of these consisted of a central *ciborium*. This is located at the NE end of the central nave, comprising of a square foundation with dowels for the placement of columns at the four corners (Fig. 7a). The square area defined inside the ashlar foundation of the *ciborium* had a mosaic floor (of which only traces survive) where, presumably, the altar stood, and marble *opus sectile* covered a step into the apse. In a next phase, a chancel screen (the grooves for the posts are visible in the foundation) replaced the *ciborium*, whose raised foundation was encapsulated in a larger platform that also integrated 6 of the 12 nave columns. The core of the platform, where originally the mosaic floor had been, was now covered in re-used fragments of marble *opus sectile*. It is likely that at this time also the apse took its current form, either being built newly or monumentalised from the earlier phase (Fig. 7b and c).

The apse was entered from the platform by a large step in green-grey slate, flanked by two columns. It contains a *synthronos* of two steps in ashlar blocks. Part of the pavement survives, it consists of irregularly sized large coloured slabs (green and red). One of these contains a graffito of a *kantharos*. Towards the rear of the apse, a feature of large ashlar blocks might have been a throne or steps to get to the tabernacle, the base of which is still visible at the back of the apse.

The pavement of the *quadratum populi* is one of the latest additions and consists of thin slabs of varying size. No graves seem to have been cut through this new pavement which is unusual for North African churches. However, below the flagstone pavement, a modern robber pit (cleaned up as Sondage 3) revealed a fragment of a mosaic tomb-cover approximately 5 cm below the slabs, while much deeper, at a depth of 1.8m, several layers of cist tombs are visible in the section. It seems likely that there are substantial numbers of tombs below the current pavement of the church, and that in an earlier phase, burials did take place within the *quadratum populi*.

The main entrance is in the south and comprises an entrance corridor (**Room 11**), with threshold stones still *in situ*. We hypothesise, however, that the church may originally have had one or three entrances on the west side, opposite the apse, which were destroyed when the funerary chapel of the Bishop Procesius (Room 12), was constructed. This is one of the latest additions to the church (Fig. 8). It is an almost square room of 6 x 5.5m with bonded walls in *opus africanum*, built on the west side of the *quadratum populi*, off-centre. Its construction, which entailed a complete rebuilding of the church's western façade, damaged several graves with mosaic covers in the cemetery enclosure outside. In the centre of the room was a large, cracked grave slab with an epitaph marking the burial of the bishop Procesius who died at the age of 30 years and is otherwise unknown to the historical record (Chaouali forthcoming). Further tombs, including one in a lead sarcophagus filled the remainder of the room, but unlike most of the other annexes, there are no mosaic tomb covers in this room.

Southern annexes

To the south, the main entrance corridor is surrounded by a group of three or four rooms serving as ancillary chapels or funerary annexes to the church.

An entrance leads off the south nave of the church into a small ante-room (Room 7) with fragmentary mosaics, which gave onto an apsed chamber (Room 8). Room 7 is a rectangular room with internal measurements of 7.5 by 3.75 m, with fragmentary traces of funerary mosaics. Whilst most of its walls are in *opus africanum*, its northern wall incorporates an earlier thickly mortared stone wall with deep foundations of a completely different masonry type. A monumental entrance, consisting of two flanking piers with two columns in between, framed

the apse, which had a *synthronos* of one step (Fig. 9). None of the original pavement survives: the apse was given over to burials in a series of stone cist graves and sarcophagi. Most of these were excavated in 2010 and some have subsequently been vandalised. Our current interpretation sees these rooms as the earliest surviving structures of the complex, since they incorporate the earliest datable walls so far discovered. It is therefore possible that these two rooms were part of an earlier church complex, a baptistery, or a monumental funerary chapel or mausoleum, which we hope to clarify through further excavations.

The entrance corridor gave onto a small room (Room 11) of ca. 3.5 by 6 m which served as a funerary chapel. Partially excavated in 2010, a funerary mosaic of Victorianus is still in situ. Far more enigmatic is Room 10, a walled structure that abuts the main church but appears to have been damaged by tombs in the cemetery enclosure. The form and function of this space is poorly understood: it contains a piece of collapsed vault in its centre.

Northern annexes

To the north, four subsidiary funerary annexes in *opus africanum* were built, in different phases. In a first phase, perhaps contemporary with the original building of the *quadratum populi*, Rooms 2 and 3 were built. An entrance led off the church into Room 2, a roughly square chamber of ca 5 x 5m, in which several tombs were placed. At some later point, the entrance into the church was blocked and this room was used as a depot for columns. A door in its north-eastern wall opened into a second funerary chamber of ca. 6.5 x 4.5 m. The room was floored in funerary mosaics, most of which were lifted in 2010 for conservation reasons, but the underlying tombs have yet to be excavated.

Subsequently, annexes Rooms 1 and 4 were constructed, possibly but not necessarily in the same phase. They could be accessed only through Room 3. At the time of their excavation in 2010, both rooms were found to contain a large number of tombs, covered either by stone slabs or funerary mosaics, including a double marker depicting the story of Jonah in Room 1. Most of the mosaics were lifted in that season, to preserve them.

Preliminary phasing

We can currently distinguish four different construction phases of the church and annexes, which need to be further refined through excavation: 1) an apsidal structure in the south-west corner which may have served as an early funerary chapel; 2) the building of the *quadratum*

populi with central ciborium, later converted into a chancel; 3) the addition of funerary annexes with mosaic tombs to the north; 4) a rebuilding of the western façade, linked to the construction of the bishop's chapel (Room 12), and possible contemporary to the laying of the surviving flagstone floor.

In a final phase, every entrance to the funerary annexes was blocked, and a new opening was created to the outside for Room 2 at its northwest corner, as it had started to function as a depot for columns (Fig. 10). Seven complete or broken shafts were found in this room, neatly stacked for re-use. Perhaps at the same time, two makeshift entrances were cut through the walls on either side of the apse; these were made with large re-used building blocks (two of which are intact Roman funerary altars with inscriptions), to function as steps into the much lower lying church floor from the higher ground-level outside.

The church seems to have met a catastrophic end, as evidenced by the collapse of the tiled roof, the upper walls and traces of burning and ash in the *quadratum populi* (identified and removed during the 2010 excavations). At least four columns were found in the rubble as well as pieces of the architrave of the chancel, where they had fallen in situ. The date is less clear, though it must post-date the sixth and possibly the seventh century.

The cemetery

Immediately to the west of the church is a walled cemetery enclosure of 26.3 m x 24.3m containing at least 98 tombs. The enclosure abuts the outer wall of the church, but pre-dates the construction of Room 12, where Bishop Proculus is buried. The tombs are oriented WSW-ENE on the same orientation as the church (or WNW-ESE) and there is evidence of inter-cutting and superimposed burials. The majority are stepped masonry tombs which typically cover either un-mortared stone-slab burial cist or a simple undecorated sarcophagus, though they vary in quality of construction. Funerary stelae of 2-3rd century date are found re-used in the walls of some tombs, usually turned inwards. Some of the graves have markers in stone with a basic inscription, while others were covered by a mosaic marker or caisson. Two possible *mensae*, offering tables to the deceased, have also been noted (Fig. 11). The tombs contain both males and females, ranging from young children to mature adults. A mosaic panel dedicated to a second unknown bishop Armonius by the *contubernius cristianorum* was found to the south of Room 12 (Chaouali forthcoming). There were few grave goods in the tombs

excavated in 2010, but coins, glass beakers and lead-wick holders found around the graves suggest that the cemetery was in use between the fourth and sixth/ seventh centuries.

The full extent of the late antique cemetery has yet to be determined. A further 47 tombs outside the church and cemetery enclosure have been identified so far within the limits of the 2010 excavations. In places, they are superimposed to at least three levels and there is a great deal of diversity in tomb construction type, including the use of bricks and tiles. There may also have been more elaborate late antique funerary monuments, as is suggested by the discovery of a below-ground mausoleum (perhaps a converted cistern) containing 4 graves, just 13 metres to the west of the enclosure. A small hoard of bronze nummi of Justin II (r. 565-574) and jewellery was found in one of its graves, giving the burial a *terminus post quem* of the second half of the sixth century.

Mosaics

So far, over twenty-five whole or fragmentary mosaic tomb covers have been identified in the church annexes and cemetery. The majority were grave markers cut into or forming the pavement over the sarcophagus in the annexes of the church, though in the open-air cemetery a few decorated tops and sides of free-standing masonry tombs. Most are vertically oriented tripartite or bipartite panels framed by decorative borders, though there are a handful of examples of horizontally oriented panels. They are usually divided into registers, the uppermost containing a *chrismon* (usually with apocalyptic letters of alpha and omega) in a crown or wreath, while the epitaph is generally below it, at the bottom, or in the centre in case of three registers (Fig. 12). The complementary bottom panel then usually contains one or more geometric motifs, or vegetal or figural patterns (generally doves or peacocks). The *chrismon* and epitaph are sometimes made with glass tesserae, having a more lustrous effect than stone (though they weather easily). Thus far, the only example of a figural scene is a depiction of scenes from the life of Jonah on a double tomb-mosaic at the centre of Room 1, which incorporated Latin crosses, rather than the *chrismon* used on other mosaic panels. Firm dating of the mosaics awaits a full analysis of the panels and the graves, though a range from the mid-4th through the 5th century seems reasonable.

The Finds

We are still in the process of evaluating the finds from the 2010 season. The ceramic finds from stratified contexts are inevitably small, often residual, and include very few finewares or lamps.

Several sherds of painted coarseware with vegetal and geometric patterns characteristic of late 5th-7th century were found in the upper layers of the cemetery and church (see Bonifay 2004: 301-3). Coins were usually found in unstratified contexts and are primarily low-value coins of the 4th and 5th centuries, aside from the cache of nine sixth-century coins discovered in the mausoleum to the west of the cemetery enclosure. Both the enclosed cemetery and the church yielded a large amount of diagnostic glass fragments (from beakers, lamps with tubular feet, and goblets), which may offer some opportunity to refine the date. Goblets are a characteristic find of the 6th and 7th centuries in North Africa, and do not appear before the end of the fifth century (Foy 2003: 73). Similarly, many lead wick holders were discovered, which are characteristic of sixth-century church contexts such as at Bir Ftouah and Sidi Jdidi (Foy 2011).

Conclusion

To date, the project has only been able to conduct one geophysical campaign in 2016 and one season of photogrammetry, finds inventory and limited excavation in 2017. Though short, the combination of photogrammetric recording and targeted topographic survey has proved remarkably effective as a means of rapid documentation. The complex is now mapped, the majority of the standing remains of the church and cemetery complex analysed, and the human remains and finds from the 2010 project sorted and catalogued. In future seasons, we intend to conduct targeted excavations to refine the different chronological phases of the church and define its relationship with the surrounding pagan cemetery and so begin to understand how funerary practices changed at Bulla Regia with the emergence of Christianity. At the same time, anthropological and scientific analysis on the human remains will be able to contribute to our understanding of the demography, diet and mobility of the population of Bulla Regia in Late Antiquity.

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Dr. Dirk Booms (Roman architecture specialist), Dr. Gabriella Carpentiero (Building specialist, University of Siena), Mahres Brinsi (Roman archaeologist, INP). Dr. Moheddine Chaouali (Co-Director, INP), Dr. Samantha Cox (Anthropologist, UPenn), Dr. Corisande Fenwick (Co-Director, UCL), Guy Hopkinson (GIS specialist, UCL), Dr. Gaygysz Jorayev (Photogrammetry specialist, UCL), Rihab Mzoughi (University of Tunis), Manel Nasri (University of Tunis), Dr. Efthymia Nikita (Anthropologist, University of Cyprus), Dr. Aleida Ten Harkel (Archaeologist, University of Oxford), and Sonia Wertani (University of Tunis). Our work was made possible by a team of 18 workmen, managed by Mounir Abidi.

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