

*CARTHAGE IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY AN EXPANDING POPULATION?*

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette communication est une synthèse préliminaire des recherches sur les habitations pauvres dans les secteurs des fouilles américaines et canadiennes. Par le recours aux textes anciens, je tracerai un tableau de l'occupation "pauvre" dans la Carthage byzantine et je tenterai de voir si l'on peut constater des signes de prospérité ou de décadence.

ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary summary of evidence of poor housing in the American and Canadian sectors of the city. I use some historical references to build up a picture of low-level occupation in Byzantine Carthage, and seek to suggest whether this is a sign of prosperity or decline.

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Plan  
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texte

It seems appropriate that it should be in Canada that I would first air thoughts on excavations at Carthage in September of 1981 and 1982 in the Canadian sector of the International Campaign. The excavation was financed with funds from Oxford University, with logistical help and much support from the second Canadian team led by Prof. Colin Wells and the late Prof. Edith Wightman. The aim of the excavation was to link together a group of four earlier trenches, and to examine the extent of intensive Byzantine occupation in this north-west corner of the ancient city.

The buildings which were uncovered consisted of a row of ten shops fronting *Decumanus* VI north between *Cardines* IV & V east, and two ranges of rooms to their rear. The plan of the area remained substantially the same from the fifth century to the Arab Conquest, but nonetheless there were changes in the quality of the occupation. Room 10 on the north edge of the excavation was originally quite a fine room, perhaps part of a house. It had a plaster egg and dart cornice in alternating sections of red, yellow and green. The walls of the room were well-built in fine *opus africanum*. The north wall of the room had a large central door 60 cm wide and about two meters high. The doorway may have been flanked by windows, which were otherwise absent.

Figure

However, at the end of the sixth or in the early seventh century, the room was refloored with a beaten earth floor in which were found 100 1 *nummus* coins. At this stage the width of the doorway was halved and the earlier threshold was removed to form part of the eastern door frame. The upper part of the north wall was rebuilt in mudbrick, and the two presumed windows were removed. The room was now a dark cell, but worse was to follow. Later, in the seventh century, a large pottery kiln took over the south-west corner of the room. The kiln was producing Plain Ware jugs and bowls. In order to create a platform from which to fill the kiln earth was piled up to the north and the threshold of the door was raised by just under one meter. Presumably part of the original roof had collapsed or the fumes and the heat would have been intolerable. Moreover the doorway was now only about one meter high so that the lintel must have been removed or at least raised. Right outside the furnace arch was the skeleton of a dog which it would be nice to think had suffocated in this atmosphere. In truth, it was carefully buried with a bowl at its head and one at its tail. It is hard to think of a sound reason why the dog should be deliberately buried in this location, and the only suggestion I can make is that it was to keep the demons of the kiln in their place.

Though this is but a single room it illustrates many characteristic features of Byzantine housing at Carthage. What had once been a well-decorated room with a wide north door and perhaps windows to catch the morning light, became a closed cell with an earth floor and industrial workings. Such unhealthy industrial establishments are documented in Early Byzantine texts. Zachariah of Mitylene (*Chronicle* VIII, 5) records the suffocation of a man in prison over a kitchen at Gangra. Both St. John Chrysostom (*83rd Homily*

on *St. Mathew*, 4) and some Palestinian texts associate sooty walls with poverty.

Elsewhere on the site of the second Canadian team there was also considerable Byzantine occupation in the seventh century A.D. In trench 2CC1-2 excavated by Prof. Wells, two *insulae* further to the west on the south frontage of *Decumanus* VI north rich houses of the late fourth century were subdivided into many smaller rooms and apartments<sup>1</sup>. The later walls are of poor construction, including rough herringbone masonry foundations, and mudbrick structures, though some of the latter are faced with wall plaster. In 2CC8 excavated by Prof. Wightman, one *insula* to the east, on the north side of *Decumanus* VI north, over the line of *Cardo* VI east herringbone walls were used to rebuild shop walls.

Similar walls are used to subdivide a building on the south side of *Decumanus* VI north at the north end of the *Cardo* VIII-IX *insula*. What appears to be a house with an apsidal *triclinium* and a black and white geometric mosaic was repaired with 2-3 m high windowless walls in herringbone masonry. The apsidal room seems to have been unaffected by these developments, but a central court may have been built over. The new constructions do not enhance the setting as they are of poor style and allow little light into the rooms. One wall in this property has a characteristic vertical repair. A similar repair to a wall on the Michigan site has been dated to the seventh century. To the south-west of this property are the half-excavated remains of an oven. To the mid-east of the *insula*, a property has a new wall built with charcoal-flecked mortar and a new drain to the west running over the east side of its peristyle. Between the peristyle and the street are several small walls in typical small squared stones with thick mortar. The mortar does not fall into the gaps between the stones of the course below.

To the south of *Decumanus* VI north between *Cardines* IV and VII east lies the Odeon excavated by Gauckler in the first year of this century<sup>2</sup>. The Odeon is assumed to have been robbed in Vandal times. Huge tips of burnt wood, ash, brick and plaster are said to have filled the auditorium. Two cisterns or vaults behind the stage were filled with statues, architectural fragments and inscriptions. Gauckler and later archaeologists believed that these occupational tips were the remains of small houses. The filling of the vaults with architectural fragments and other debris matches the pattern observed in recent excavations<sup>3</sup> where many cisterns were filled with Vandalic debris after the

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Byzantine Conquest. The Byzantines were probably deliberately clearing the debris from these sites in order to give them over to houses. The Odeon may therefore be another dense residential area.

The area under discussion lies in the north-west corner of the walled city, bounded to the south by *Decumanus V* north and to the east by *Cardo IX* east. We have presented archaeological evidence of dense Byzantine occupation all the way along *Decumanus VI* from *Cardo II* to *Cardo IX*. The district was comparatively prosperous into the fourth century, but by Byzantine times it had become a densely populated area of small subdivided apartments. So far no Byzantine public buildings have been identified within the district, but several large ecclesiastical sites lay around the perimeter. The two principal assumptions to be questioned are the totality of the subdivision and its date. As concerns the extent of subdivision we are caught between the poorly-dated widespread clearance of early excavations in the Park of the Villas, and the limited painstaking modern excavation of the Canadian sector. For the Canadian sector we can say that there were no substantial Byzantine buildings within the excavated area, but we cannot tell what existed between the trenches. For the Park of the Villas we have total clearance within the area, but lack of records makes it difficult to tell how many structures were removed during excavation. With regard to dating we may be sure of the stratigraphic information from the Canadian site, but we may be sceptical of the masonry types I have used to date the Park of the Villas. Several well-dated examples of the types of wall - herringbone, charcoal mortar, and thick mortar slurry with small square stones - are necessary before passing a final verdict. In the case of charcoal mortar one thinks immediately of the Theodosian city wall, suggesting a date rather earlier than Byzantine times. On the question of masonry I would particularly welcome advice from colleagues.

Despite reservations it seems reasonable to put forward the idea of a large increase in poor-quality occupation in the north-west of the city during Byzantine times, and in particular during the seventh century A.D. There are various reasons why people might have moved into the city. The political history of Byzantine Carthage shows two main periods of prosperity. The first period would be immediately after the Byzantine Conquest in 533, when initial optimism about the future would be associated with Justinian's rebuilding programme and the revival of legal privileges. This "hollow triumph" was followed by the long

and costly struggle with the Berbers which continued for the rest of the sixth century. However, in the first half of the seventh century, Carthage gained more political and theological influence. The emperor Heraclius took control of the Empire with the African fleet, and later when besieged in Constantinople by the Persians and Avars in 616 thought of moving back there<sup>5</sup>. Even monophysite refugees from the Persian and Arab invasions in the East may have preferred orthodox Carthage to the more heretical views of the Constantinople aristocracy. Carthage had housed refugees after the Vandal sack of Rome when Victor of Vita (*Historia Persecutionis Africae* I,24-26) tells us that some disused churches were employed. The leading theologian of the age Maximus the Confessor was living in Carthage in the mid seventh century and other eastern intellectuals such as Moschus and Sophronius visited the city<sup>6</sup>. This second period of relative political importance was ended by the Arab invasions. Many of the people moving into Carthage may have been from the Tunisian countryside, coming in because of the pillaging of their farms by brigands, or simply because of crop failure. Eastern sources record many instances of country people going to the city because of famine. Joshua the Stylite (*Chronicle* 43) tells us that Demosthenes, governor of Edessa, was faced with an influx of country people after a famine in 500-501. He responded by blocking the colonnades of the winter baths and laying down straw matting. The blocking of porticoes is a typical type of subdivision and matting has long been thought one source of carbonate layers of "occupation".

Having turned to "occupational debris" we can elucidate more about this Byzantine population by considering the layers and their associated objects. We can now bring in evidence from other sites at Carthage - the Michigan Ecclesiastical Complex, the Georgia Circus, and the recently published British Ave. Bourguiba site<sup>7</sup>.

The occupational levels in which these finds have been discovered consist of essentially two kinds of layer, with which you are all no doubt familiar. One type is a highly carbonate ashy layer deposit in thin lenses, sometimes including earth and mudbrick. These lenses alternate with patches of mortar surfacing, often a light skim formed in dessication, or a more substantial "real" mortar patch. The second type of layer is a dessicated floor of earth or mudbrick. The earth is damped down and as it dries hardens. Soluble carbons and minerals are leached out, leaving much lime at the surface. The lime then dries to cement and crystallisation takes place due to the hot Mediterranean

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climate. This second type of layer is probably formed by re-working lower levels. It thus contains pot from earlier deposits, collapsed structures, or "ghosts" of tips deeper down in the trench. The first type of layer, the ash and mortar tips, are a different story. The ash was, at least in the first instance, brought into the rooms, and then was intermittently consolidated with the mortar patches. Here we have behaviour totally alien to our culture, perhaps the ash was regarded as some kind of protection for the floor. What is clear is that for the occupants of these buildings it was quite permissible to drop broken objects on the floor and to leave them there. The Michigan site has produced about a dozen dessicated floors on which broken pots had been left in pieces lying on the surface where they were trampled underfoot. These pots provide evidence that the occupants of the rooms must have been conscious of what lay on their floors.

Overall the most striking feature of Byzantine occupation on many sites is the poor quality of the finds. The most mundane belt buckle or brooch, common enough on poorer Romano-British sites is a rare occurrence in Byzantine Carthage. The full range of domestic metalwork in use around the year 600 can quickly be gauged by glancing at the catalogue of the Sardis excavations\*, though much of this material was found under exceptional conditions. Among the six different areas I have worked at Carthage the most prolific in terms of metalwork may prove to be the circus, though study of the finds has not commenced in earnest. The greater quantity of metal at the circus is most probably due to the presence of a major city refuse dump. The Byzantine "occupational debris" on which we rely in the centre of the city are not generally primary refuse, and their overall contents are dictated by redeposition. We must try and separate out any finds that are more likely to be contemporary with the occupation itself.

The most common domestic items found in Byzantine "occupational debris" are probably those of bone. They include *styli* of varying shapes, and no doubt function, bone hairpins, fitments for handles or boxes, and dice. The proliferation of dice and so-called "gaming pieces" - cut discs of stone, bone, or pot - is remarkable. The items were no doubt cheap and easy to obtain, but bear out Christian writers such as Augustine and Salvian who thought Carthage a den of sin. A major bone-working industry has been identified at the circus. The industry may have been based in the vaults of the seating. Off-cuts seem to have come from Byzantine occupation within the vaults not just

from the city rubbish dump to the south. Metal slag is commonly found in "occupational debris" but not in sufficient quantities or in association with enough briquetage to be considered as evidence of metal working on site. We have of course already mentioned the pottery kiln of the Oxford trench on the Canadian site.

Rings have frequently been found, most commonly their glass insets, but sometimes bands of bronze or bone. Very few have intaglios or engraved designs. Ring insets and bone pins were the most common finds in the Oxford trench. Thus we can conclude that small objects of daily clothing could represent an element of contemporary loss in Byzantine occupation. Perhaps the lack of brooches could be explained by fashion - they were not often worn.

The coins from the Michigan site<sup>7</sup> have already stirred up a good deal of controversy. There are infact two problems which must be treated separately. The first concerns the enormous quantity of fifth-sixth century 1 *nummus* pieces, which seem to be found, at least in some levels of most sites in the city. Opinion now seems to be coming to agreement that this phenomenon is a reflection of the late Vandal monetary system, which was kept up by Justinian before Carthage came into line with the rest of the Byzantine Empire in the later sixth century. The large number of *nummi*, the great variety, and wide distribution of Vandalic African Red Slip Ware certainly form good archaeological reasons for supposing a flourishing Vandal economy. Justinian tried not to disturb this and there remains the possibility that *nummi* continued to circulate till at least the end of the sixth century, even though their production ceased at the end of Justinian's reign. A hoard found on the Michigan site in 1978 (CMich VII) contained 102 *nummi* with 2 *pentanumnia* of Maurice. The *nummus* coins are unlikely to have been kept unless they still had some value. It is not surprising that the Carthage mint was allowed to have its own way through the sixth century. Byzantine mints, apart from Constantinople and Nicomedia normally had a local distribution, and at times their own denominations, as for example at Thessalonika<sup>10</sup>. We must ask what kind of economy the *nummi* represent? If the finds of 1 *nummus* are more of a pattern of use than loss, as Richard Reece<sup>11</sup> would suggest, their overwhelming preponderance might indicate low prices and a large market which could absorb so many coins of such a small unit.

The second and more difficult problem is the state of the economy in the seventh century. Reece thinks that after the Byzantine Conquest the *nummus* rapidly lost its standing in the local economy under pressure from the standard larger Byzantine denominations. This led to a sudden shift in the economy and thousands of 1 *nummus* pieces were discarded. He then hints that the economy never recovered in the seventh century<sup>12</sup>:

The coin using economy of N. Africa may have been broken or radically altered by the reconquest so that after the year 600 it was a thing of the past.

The Michigan site is exceptional in providing about 100 seventh century coins from contemporary occupational contexts. However it may be exceptional more in terms of archaeological deposition than in terms of its representation of the seventh century economy. In fact the seventh century coins from the site form a standard pattern of loss. If our minds were not clouded by the glut of *nummi* in the sixth century, the slow trickle of seventh century coins, and the slowly rising denomination lost would seem normal for an archaeological site. The rise in denomination lost, from 1 *nummus* under Justinian I to 1 *follis* under Justinian II, was counteracted by the drop of metal in the coins. The result was that copper metal retained the same relative value throughout the Byzantine occupation. These calculations were made by Metcalf and Hitchner (*CMich* V, pp. 187-189) on the basis of coins from the Michigan site 1975-1977. They were very aware of the limitations of their figures but I think they do imply that the economy at Carthage was not in economic crisis.

It is not easy to explain the absence of seventh century coins from other sites. There may for example be a different pattern of circulation or loss at the edge of the city on the British Ave. Bourguiba, the Canadian, and the circus sites. Both the Ave. Bourguiba and the circus had a cemeterial character in the seventh century and were probably visited intermittently. The levels at the circus do however include a number of intensive occupation layers within the seating vaults. Neither this occupation nor that at the Canadian site produce many seventh century coins.

I have not considered pottery in this review of finds. Pottery studies so far published<sup>13</sup> seem to indicate that imports of *amphorae* levelled out or fell off in the seventh century, but the implications of this are hard to assess.



It is quite possible that a drop in imports could be occasioned by a stronger home market, or could be made up in other areas of the economy. The Byzantine Conquest was two-edged, opening new long distance markets to the east, but introducing eastern imports.

The consideration of the finds from the Byzantine occupational levels gives us some informations about the people who produced them, and some about the deposition of the "occupation" itself. There is a large amount of redeposited material in the layers, but along with it a small amount of more contemporary finds. On the Michigan site a great many of the 1 *nummus* pieces are redeposited in later levels, but along with them a consistant scattering of seventh century coins. Much of the pottery may be redeposited but there are seventh century sherds and we have taken special note of pottery crushed on the top of earth surfaces. We have suggested that a number of everyday objects which are found in some quantity on different sites - rings, pins, and gaming pieces - may be contemporary, but we have noted the absence of much metalwork. There are signs of industrial working in pottery and bone. The picture this gives of our inhabitants is of poor people with simple tastes and very little "furniture".

This brings us to what might be termed an ethnographic perspective to the occupational deposits. These people were living in real squalor, but as hygiene was unknown at that time they thought nothing of it. This is the impression of the smoke filled windowless kiln room of the Oxford trench on the Canadian site. Chrysostom's description of a poor house mentioned earlier runs as follows:

It has no ivory couch or silver vessels, everywhere there is only wood and clay... the vile state of a house is not in furniture, or in an unmade bed, nor in walls covered with smoke, but in the wickedness of those that live there (83rd Homily on St. Mathew, 4).

Open fireplaces seem to be commonplace in this Byzantine occupation. Examples on the Michigan site (M<sup>2</sup>Π/E 084), British Ave Bourguiba site (Building 2, Surface 99) and in the Oxford trench on the Canadian site (9A040) were located in the corner of the room: out of the way of passers by, and where a convenient chimney breast can be constructed with a beam across the corner<sup>14</sup>. Others (Michigan M'K 052, Canadian 9D 003/4) lie in the centre of the room. The fireplaces have no surrounding structure, but can be distinguished from the ashy occupation patches by their "differentiated

burning" - the centre of the hearth shows most burning with decreasing amounts of heat and discolouration as one moves out from the centre.

The structure of the housing in which these people lived was often in poor state of repair. Much of the occupation on the Michigan site took place after the collapse of the original roof of the building, and one assumes that part of the roof over the kiln room on the Canadian site had collapsed. The location of fireplaces within the rooms may well be caused by holes in the roof. It is an architectural rule of Early Christian subdivision throughout the Empire that new walls in old buildings were never plastered, and never respected earlier decor, whether it be wall painting or floor mosaic. At the east end of the Michigan site flanking *Cardo X* east the walls had been so robbed in Vandal times that the Byzantine occupants had to build new walls and floors of mudbrick. One wall was formed with upright road flags framing a mudbrick slurry core. The rooms were subdivided with wooden partitions. Presumably the rooms had wooden roofs as well. The inhabitants of many of the buildings we have discussed did not repair the buildings to anything like their original architectural standards. On the other hand they were capable of building high masonry walls at the Park of the Villas, or erecting new structures of wood and mudbrick as at the Michigan site. In many ways subdivision at Carthage and elsewhere suggests that we are not dealing with technical incompetence, but with an alternative style of architecture. An architecture not geared to producing major public monuments, but to creating the maximum number of rooms out of the smallest area as quickly as possible. We think again of the Governor of Edessa subdividing the winter baths for refugees from famine, or of John of Ephesus, *History of the Refugees*, where he records how the empress Theodora set up wooden partitions in the Great Palace at Constantinople.

Putting together the various sections of this paper we can see that the inhabitants of the sites had few material possessions, lived in unsanitary conditions, and in half-built structures. But before passing judgement on Byzantine Carthage we must add that many sites, in particular those in the north-west of the city, show very dense occupation. I have postulated an influx of refugees, and country people, and Carthage must, at least in certain districts, have been very heavily populated in the seventh century. On examining some of the economic evidence we have concluded that more evidence is required to demonstrate a financial crisis in the seventh century. The population

included several very distinguished citizens of the Byzantine Empire. As many Byzantinists have pointed out Byzantium never lost interest in the West, and there is no reason to believe that Carthage was ever seen as an "appendage" to the Empire. With reference to Byzantine occupational levels we have to be wary of judging too much by modern prejudices. No doubt rich Carthaginians such as Maximus the Confessor did not live in the buildings we have considered, but the implications of the "unsavoury" life-style of the inhabitants of the poor structures would have been lost on the people themselves. Early Christian cities were full of ruins, filth, and demons. Carthage was no exception. We still do not have enough economic data to know if the Byzantine occupants of these buildings were really poverty-stricken, or enjoying the benefits of a well-populated, politically active city, whose economy had merely assumed more of a local market-place character.

#### NOTES

1. See preliminary report - C. Wells and E. Wightman, "Canadian excavations at Carthage 1976 and 1978: the Theodosian Wall, northern sector", *J. Field Archaeology* VII, 1980, 43-63.
2. Gauckler, *Bull. Arch. du Comité*, 1900, 177-180.
3. J. Humphrey, *Excavations at Carthage 1977, conducted by the University of Michigan* VI, 1980, henceforth volumes referred to as *CMich* I-VIII.
4. These are to the north, the great basilica of the Damos el Karita, to the south, the Circular Monument (P. Senay, *Cahiers des études anciennes* VI, 1976, IX, 1978) and to the east, the Monastery of Bigua (W. Ben Osman & L. Ennabli, "Note sur la topographie chrétienne de Carthage: les mosaïques du monastère de Bigua", *Revue des études augustiniennes* XXVIII, 1982, 3-18.
5. Nicephorus, *Historia Syntomos*, n°12, l. 9-10.
6. For a summary of the Byzantine history of Carthage, see A. Cameron, "Byzantine Africa: the literary evidence", *C. Mich* VII, 29-62.

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- 7.H. Hurst and S. Roskams, *Excavations at Carthage. The British Mission I,1*, University of Sheffield, 1984, henceforth *C. Brit. I*.
- 8.J. Waldebaum, *Metalwork from Sardis: the finds through 1974*, Harvard, 1983.
- 9.T. Buttrey and R. Hitchner, *CMich* IV, 1978, 99-163; W. Metcalf and R. Hitchner, *CMich* V, 1980, 185-270; W. Metcalf, *CMich* VII, 1982, 63-168.
- 10.D. Metcalf, "the Aegean Coastlands under Threat; some Coin Hoards from the Reign of Heraclius", *Ann. Brit School at Athens* VII, 1962, 14-23.
- 11.R. Reece, "Coins", in *CBrit* I, 171-81.
- 12.*Ibid*, 175.
13. See, in particular, articles by Fulford in *Reading Mediaeval Studies* VI, 1980, 68-80, and *Opus* II, 1, 1983, 5-12. Also D. Peacock and M. Fulford, *C. Brit* I, 2, 1984. For the Michigan site, see J. Riley in *CMich* VI, 1980, 85-124.
- 14.F. El Khoury, *Domestic Architecture in the Lebanon*, AARP, London, 1975.

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FIGURE

Une habitation pauvre de la Carthage byzantine de l'équipe canadienne II (reconstitution).

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