

Chiltern U3a Archaeology – Tunisia (Part 2)
Thuburbo Majus, El Jem*, Sufetula and the Mosque*

By Guru Guruswamy
18 Mar 2022

[Via Zoom] Good morning everyone ...

[D00] I am very pleased to have this opportunity to present the second part of my talk about Tunisia. As I had mentioned earlier, we did this trip nearly 15 years ago, in 2007.

In the first part that I presented in January I covered Carthage*, Dougga* and the Bardo Museum. Today I will cover four other sections - **Thuburbo Majus, El Djem (Amphitheatre* and the mosaics in a museum called 'House of Africa'), Sufetula and Roman columns in the Great Mosque in Kairouan**. All the four sites are in the northern part of Tunisia. El Djem and Kairouan are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

[D01a] Their locations are shown on this map, with modern Tunisian names. They are in the northern part of the country.

D Thuburbo Majus

Thuburbo Majus is about 60 Km south west of Carthage on a main road connecting Carthage to the Sahara.

It was a Berber-Carthagenian settlement prior to becoming a colony for the Roman veterans at the time of Augustus in 27 BC. Most of the town was built around AD 150 to 200. There were about 10,000 inhabitants and the wealthiest tried to compete with each other by their donations to public buildings and mosaics.

[D01b] They were active producers of grain, olives and fruit. You can see the Olive groves from the road as you approach the site.

[D01c] This is the satellite view of the site. You can see some structures which are still standing.

[D01d] This is the site plan from the Rough Guide to Tunisia. We will have a look at some parts of the site.

From the bottom left – Sancturay of Baal, Sancturay of Caelastis, Byzantine Church, Paelasatra of Petroni, House of Neptune and Temple of Peace at the far right near the top.

[D02] Entrance to the site

[D03] Some general views as we enter the site. Slightly hilly. Some prominent structures as a back drop to this rather large house. There are remains of several walls and some mosaic.

[D04] This house had an interesting name - **House of Trussed Animals**.

[D05] A better view of the mosaics in this house.

[D06] This is the **Temple of Baal**. Baal is the top deity for Phoenicians. It is a small square temple with yellow-veined grey pillars at the top.

[D07] There is only a gateway left of the next temple - **Temple of Caelestis** – Roman version of Punic Goddess Tanit, the wife of Baal Hammon.

[D08] This is the other side of the gateway. The temple was adapted as a church in later years.

[D09] This is the **Byzantine church**. The central green area is surrounded by Mosaic flooring.

[D10, D11] A fair amount of mosaic is still in reasonable order as we walk around.

[D12] Detail of the mosaic.

[D13] Behind the remains of some buildings, you can see a series of pillars with a beam across. They are part of a wide portico of a gymnasium called the **Palaestra of the Petroni**. It was paid for by the family of Petronius Felix. It was completed in AD 225. In the gym, men took part in boxing, wrestling and running.

[D14] Some details of the portico. The Corinthian Columns have an unusual yellow-veined grey marble.

[D15] A closer look at the beautiful capital.

[D16] Interesting detailed designs on the beams as well.

[D17] The view of the portico from inside. The beams are just plain on this side.

[D18] We move on to the **House of Neptune**. It is very spacious. There are some remains of the mosaic flooring in the rooms.

[D19] Yet more mosaics

[D20] Swastika pattern of mosaic in another room

[D21] This is the **Temple of Peace**. Quite aptly named as even the backdrop looks peaceful.

[D22] Side view of the Temple. There are some remains of capitals and pillars neatly stacked up.

[D23] Some detail near the base. The top row looks like a series of elephants.

[D24] Pegasus – a symbol of Roman Legion III Augusta

[D25] This is **Temple Church**. These are the remains of a Roman temple that was converted into a church.

[D26] Some stone troughs for water

[D27] We walked past some interesting parts two of which I am unable to identify in spite of great efforts on my part. If any of you know, please let me know.

[D28] This one with the interesting pillars in a little area, and [D29] this one with mosaic and alcoves. It was probably a small temple.

We will now leave this site of Thuburbo Majus which was abandoned after the Arab invasion in 7th century and was rediscovered only in 1875.

E El Jem (also spelt as El Djem)

[E01] We move on to El Jem. At the time of Romans, it was known as Thysdrus. The only Roman Amphitheatre in Africa is at El Jem. it is an UNESCO World Heritage Site and I believe it is a real Gem. It occupies an area of about 400 acres.

[E02] It was built around 238 AD using red sandstone blocks.

It was a very turbulent unsettled period in Roman history as there were six emperors in just one year. It was commissioned by one of the unfortunate six, Gordian I. He was a native of

this place and his rule lasted just 20 days. He was murdered by another native discontented with the higher taxes on his Olive Oil production.

It is similar to the Coliseum in Rome which I covered in one of my earlier talks on Rome. In size, it is the largest outside Italy and ranks third ... after the Coliseum in Rome and Capua.

It was the site of the last heroic battle between Kahina, Jewish prophetess and leader of Berber resistance against the Arab invasion in the seventh century. Later on, in 1695, Mohammed Bey blew up most of one side to evict the followers of Ali Bey. It was further damaged by British soldiers when they attacked German soldiers sheltering there during the second World War.

[E03] This drawing with a cut away view shows what it must have been like in its prime. There are no foundations and it is free-standing.

[E04] This display at the site shows different methods of construction of amphitheatres adopted by the Romans depending on the terrain.

1. Dig quite deep, with the arena in a pit.
2. Dig a bit, and use the earth to build up the galleries all round.
3. Dig a bit more, and build up.
4. Dig on one side if there is a natural slope on some parts of it.
5. Build entirely on the ground surface ... as in this case. It is 41m high.

We will take a walk round the outside of the building first ... **[E05 – E08]**

[E09a] There are three levels of arcade in the façade with Corinthian or composite style columns.

[E09b] This section shows clearly the three levels of galleries ... and a fair bit of the columns in reasonable order to appreciate their style and quality. [Zoom]

[E10] We can enter the arena via the Main Entrance.

[E11] It could accommodate about 35,000 spectators. The infrastructure for tiered seating is still intact.

[E12] Some seating has been reconstructed for events to entertain tourists in this section.

[E13,E14] The grey area running through the centre of the arena is of a grilled metal surface allowing light and air to the basement. Animals and gladiators would have come up lifts through this section.

[E15, E16] The arena is shaped like an ellipse148m by 122m. It is one of the largest in the world. You can imagine the amount of blood shed here by animals and humans accompanied by the roar of the crowd.

[E17] These sort of vents in the arena provided some additional light to the underground area.

[E18] There are lots of chambers underground to accommodate the Gladiators, animals and theatrical scenery with a complex system of lifts. There is a central hallway.

[E19, E20] There are 16 cells for animals and gladiators.

[E21 – E28] As we leave the site, we can get a taste of the route that the spectators would have taken in different parts of the amphitheatre. We can appreciate Roman engineering.

[E29a] We move on to the site of **House of Africa**. It was discovered in 1990s when there was an attempt at an unauthorised construction.

It is considered to be one of the most aristocratic residences in Tunisia with an area of 3,000 sq. m.

[E29b, E29c, E30] Part of it has been converted into a museum and it contains a fine collection of mosaics. The Rough Guide states that the mosaics are ‘fresh and vigorous’. You can judge for yourself.

I will show quite a few of them beginning with [E32] a peacock just past this arch.

[E33] This peacock seems it is ready to leap off the wall.

[E34] Another peacock design but just parts of the feathers.

[E35] Drunken Silenus in the centre [Zoom] -- Vine jars in four corners. Jar is a symbol of Dionysususually depicted with a grapevine growing from it.

[E36] Birth of Venus

[E37] It is part of a larger mosaic showing more sea creatures with beautiful patterns surrounding each one.

[E38] You can see a three- dimensional effect on the pattern in the border of this.

[E39] A rather sweet one with a child riding a lion... and Silenus behind him on a camel.

[E40] A leopard attacking a slave in an amphitheatre.

[E41] Three dimensional effect on the Swastika border. The swastikas sign is considered holy in India. Please note that the Nazi Swastika is a lateral inversion of this.

[E42a] Another Swastika design with a 3D effect.

[E42b] Big reef knots on the border. Two circles in the middle – one in which a lion has tamed/numbed a cow and another in which a lion is attacking a sheep.

[E43] A row of fish. The five rings remind me of the Olympic Games.

[E44] A sea horse with a couple of dolphins.

[E45] Animals, birds and fruits – perhaps originally in a dining area. [Zoom] You can see three of the eight heads still.

[E46] A variety of headgear on the seven heads.[Zoom]

[E47] Some of the characters with musical instruments. One of them has what looks like a book.

[E48] The last mosaic in the museum I want to show you is supposed to be a masterpiece ... rather unique in Africa, and it has no equivalent in Rome. It features a central female character representing Rome, and six other characters surrounding her – three of them in full length and three of them in bust form representing Rome's six colonies.

Central character – Rome – is shown seated on a throne. She has a helmet with a celestial sphere on one hand and a spear on the other.

Going clockwise from the 9'o Clock position:

Africa – wearing traditional elephant hide.

Spain – holding on an olive branch although increasingly Africa was becoming a prime source.

Asia – wearing a turreted hair style.

Unknown - ?? Just wondering if it could be Britain.

Egypt - holding a sistrum, musical instrument of the Goddess Isis

Sicily – represented as huntress Diana with a headgear in which the three legs are bent behind the head representing the three tips of the island.

We move on to the next site -

F Sufetula [SBEITLA]

[F01] There are some modern names for many places. In this case, it is Sbeitla.

It thrived under the reign of Septimus Severus from 193 AD to 211 AD. Historically it is a very significant city as it was here that the Moslem armies conquered the Byzantines in 647 AD.

The lay out of the city is typically Roman - a rectangular grid plan with long avenues. The central section called the Capitoleum has a set of three beautiful Roman temples .

Just north of it, there are a number of churches built in later periods with some very interesting Baptismal tanks for total immersion. At the far right, there are the main baths and a theatre by the river. The river looks rather muddy and brown in this satellite picture.

I have included quite a few pictures of the long straight roads to give you a feel for the size of the site and for it must have been like in its hey day.

[F02] This sketch shows places of interest. We will be looking at this Diocletian Arch, an olive oil press, the Forum area with Capitoleum consisting of three temples, some baptismal tanks in the churches, the baths and the theatre.

[F03] We entered the site near this Diocletian Arch. Diocletian, in the third century AD, had a system of government headed by four persons. During this period, Christians were persecuted. So, when the Christians were in power, they obliterated Diocletian's name. The top part of one of the four columns on this side is missing.

[F04] From the other side of the arch, you can see the broken column better.

[F05] You get a view of the huge site unfolding through this arch.

[F06] Looking back at the arch in the distance through which we entered.

[F07] Nice green, fertile areas.

[F08] Approaching the built-up area. Quite wide roads.

[F09] We begin to get a view of the oil press, remains of a church and the Capitoleum.

[F10] This is the schematic representation of a typical olive oil press in this area. Force will be applied downwards at the far right to squeeze the oil out. The round parts and some vertical pillars were made of stone and they are still there. You can also look out for the grooves on the vertical pillars.

[F11] I doubt if the various parts are in their original layout. Some parts look as if they have been offset. You can see the groove.

[F12] Our guide was explaining the process of making olive oil.

[F13] View of another oil mill showing the grooves in which oil would run into tanks.

[F14] There were at least five churches. This was the entrance to the Byzantine Church. It is thought to be the smallest and most recent ...end of 6th century /beginning of 7th Century AD. It was dedicated to the Christian Saints Gervais, Protas and Tryphon.

[F15] From inside, they would have a good view of the three Roman temples in the Capitoleum.

[F16] We continue along another long road.

[F17] There is some old terracotta pipework that you can still see,

[F18] One such pipe probably supplied water to a large cistern. The steps would enable access for maintenance.

[F19] We continue our walk along another long road parallel to the Capitoleum.

[F20] A tree lined avenue.

[F21. F22] Wide roads with remains of buildings on either side.

[F23] This piece caught my eye for the quality of artwork on it.

[F24] Remains of shops near the Gate of Antonius leading to the temples in the Capitoleum.

[F25] This gate is like a triumphal arch dedicated to the emperor Antonius Pius and two of his adopted sons in 139 AD.

[F26] This is the Forum with the Capitoleum and its three temples. They are dedicated, from left to right, to Minerva, Jupiter and Juno. The priests could go from one to the other via interconnecting bridges that you can see.

There are steps to the two temples at the ends.

Each temple would have had a statue. The temples had doors as I gather that there is some evidence of a closing mechanism.

The large square in front of them is about 70m by 60m.

[F27] It was surrounded on three sides by pillared colonnade. You can see some parts of the pillars.

[F28] First on the left is the Temple of Minerva... Athena for the Greeks, goddess of wisdom and arts. [Zoom} ... the steps, the columns, capitals and the pediment.

[F29] The middle one is the Temple of Jupiter... Zeus for the Greeks, father and the king of Gods. [Zoom]. Not much of the roof structure is left.

[F30] On the far right, is a Temple of Juno... wife of Jupiter, goddess of marriage, Hera for the Greeks. Here again, there are steps. Not much of the super structure is left.

[F31] Space to the right of the temple – pillared area. Mirrors the area on the right.

[F32 -35] These are some details of the structures. Some parts are in a fair condition.

[F36] Some artwork below the beam [Zoom].

[F37] This is the rear view of the Capitoleum

[F38] Remains of another church near the Capitoleum.

[F39, F40, F41] There are major roads branching out from the Capitoleum in different directions.

[F42] One of the churches - Church of Bellater.

[F43] There were several interesting Baptismal Tanks in different churches. I would like to show you four of them. This one is in the Church of Vitalis.

[F44] This is another view of it, and you can see the artwork at the bottom of the tank. One would step into it for total immersion. I have seen a couple of baptismal tanks in the UK designed for total immersion. There is one round the corner near us in Chesham Broadway Baptist Church by the Main Bus stop. Normally it is kept covered, and I had sight of it on an Open Day a few years ago. I have also seen one in St Helen's Church in the City on another Open Day in the City.

[F45] Another rather big baptismal tank with beautiful mosaic.

[F46] This baptismal tank was in the **Church of Bellator**. It was converted into a chapel for bishop Jocundas, by putting his relic in the middle. You can see the space for at the top of the column.

[F47] This baptismal tank has the mosaic of a beautiful flower vase.

[F48] We go past the remains of another church on the right with the remains of four columns.

[F51] Distant view of **Church of Servus**.

[F52] This Church of Servus is very prominent on the site because its four pillars are made of large blocks instead of round columns. It was built on top of some Pagan monuments.

[F53] We are moving to the Baths area. The name Carpentius is engraved on this. It was probably the base of a statue for Carpentius who was a major donor for the renovation of the baths at the end of the 4th Century.

[F55] This is the plan of the Baths. It covered an area of about 100m by 50m.

Colonnaded area 1 as gym/exercise area. Area 2 is the Frigidarium/Cold area – in quite a few small sections. Area 3 is the Caldarium/Hot Baths. Area marked 4 with some steps is the entrance/reception area.

[F56] An overall view of the Baths area.

[F57, 58] Views of the Palaestra [Exercise Area]. Remains of some columns all round. Some geometric mosaic patterns. They were washing them down when we were there. Swastika patterns on part of it.

[F59] This is a fairly large Frigidarium with a seating area.

[F60] This is the Caldarium with underfloor heating.

We leave the baths to see the final spot in Sufetula ... the theatre.

[F61] On the way, we see some remains of probably fortified houses.

[F62] Site of a Theatre. Not too far from the Capitoleum and remains of a church you can see in the background.

[F63] The Theatre was originally made up of about ten tiers of seating. Probably destroyed by an earthquake.

[F64] This is the stage. The orchestra would have been at the bottom of the terraces.

With this of view of the stage, we draw the curtain on Sufetula.

And my presentation on Tunisia has almost come to an end. Just want to finish with a few slides of the numerous Roman columns that have ended up in a big and the oldest mosque in North Africa – the Great Mosque of Sidi Oqba in Kairouan.

G The columns of Mosque at Kairouan

[G01] Kairouan is an UNESCO World Heritage Site.

It is Islam's fourth holiest city – after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem.

[G02] The mosque was built in 670 AD by Arab General Oqba Ibn Nafi. It was rebuilt in 836 AD when Kairouan was the capital of a big province.

I just want to show you some of the Roman columns reused from other sites in its construction.

[G03] This is the minaret and part of courtyard.

[G04] A variety of columns here. [Zoom] On the right, you can see a variety of capitals.

[G05] A fluted column on the far left. On the far right, the second column is slightly offset from the capital. There is assortment of pillars on the right.

[G06] A variety of capitals.

[G07] A very elaborate entrance to the prayer hall.

[G08] Prayer Hall.

[G09] Central nave .. the left hand side and **[G10]** the right hand side. The Mihrab is at the far end... and when you pray, you will be facing Mecca.

In the prayer hall, there are 414 columns of marble, granite or porphyry (among more than 500 columns in the whole mosque), taken from ancient sites in the country. A legend says that one could not count them without going blind. Needless to say ... I left Tunisia without counting.

[G11] I hope I have given you some insight into some real gems in Tunisia through my two presentations.

To sum up, we covered Carthage, Dougga and the Bardo Museum in my previous presentation. Today we covered **Thuburbo Majus, El Djem (Amphitheatre* and the mosaics in a museum called 'House of Africa'), Sufetula and Roman columns in the Great Mosque at Kairouan.**

It is a pity that the terrorist incidents in Tunisia have put a brake on UK tourists. Hope one day you will have an opportunity to visit it.

Links to the full text and the slides will be on Chiltern U3a website, Archaeology section. You can perhaps digest them more leisurely at your pace.

Time permitting, I will be happy to answer any questions or hear your comments.

Thank you.
