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and Sible L. de Blaauw



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LETTERS FROM THE FRONTIER: THE REDISCOVERY OF CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITIES BY RELIGIOUS MISSIONS AT THE BORDERS OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLD

Chiara Cecalupo and Axel Alt

Abstract

In the few last centuries, religious missions in the Middle East and Mediterranean basin have supported archaeological and ethnological expeditions. In North Africa this connection was very strong during the nineteenth century and it is possible to say that religious groups played a key role in rediscovering the rich historical past of the area from Algeria to Tunisia. This paper aims to underline the relationship between the White Fathers and Tunisian Christian archaeology by presenting an unpublished original letter found in the Historical Archive of the Congregation de Propaganda Fide *in Rome. This long letter was written in Tunisia in 1882 by the Abbot La Boüille, who wanted to inform the congregation about the new discovery of Christian antiquities in El-Kef* (Sicca Veneria). *Written in Latin, the precious text reports the discovery of architectural remains of two basilicas and provides valuable information about the Christian past of the city.*

This letter is important in terms of understanding the long life of the Christian architectural complexes of El Kef and, in addition, provides evidence of the history of Christian archaeological research in a border region at the end of the nineteenth century, at a time when studies of early Christianity started to seriously involve, for the first time, the areas outside Rome.

Introduction

In the last centuries, religious missions in the Middle East and Mediterranean basin have supported archaeological and ethnological expeditions. Since the seventeenth century, the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* had been very active in promoting Christian missions all over the world and in supporting Christian communities in countries of different religions.[1] In North Africa many different religious orders

[1] Filesi 1972.

had been working together with local governments and followed military missions from different countries in exploring and discovering new areas.[2] These connections were very strong during the nineteenth century and it is possible to state that religious groups played a key role in rediscovering the rich historical past of the area from Morocco to Libya. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the rediscovery of Christian antiquities in Europe and North Africa were strongly connected to the works of Giovanni Battista de Rossi and his school, as well as to the incredible amount of discoveries that had been simultaneously taking place in Rome.[3] The enthusiasm generated by the situation in Rome led to a broad-spectrum interest in the Christian past in the Mediterranean basin.[4] When this interest was shared by religious missionaries in lands with a rich Christian past, some of the most crucial episodes in the history of Christian archeology took place.

North-African archaeology with *Patres Albi*

In 1868, Charles-Martial-Allemand Lavigerie, Archbishop of Alger,[5] founded *Missionarii Africae*, better known as *Patres Albi*, a missionary society of apostolic life for the evangelization of Africa and Maghreb, with the idea of "riconquistare a Cristo le terre d'Africa," according to a very incisive expression of Ferretto.[6] One of the tools used by the White Fathers in this "re-conquest" was archaeology, which was instrumental for North Africa becoming of fundamental interest in research of Christian archaeology in the final decades of the nineteenth century.[7] Research on Christian archaeology in North Africa was also useful because it led to the rediscovery of the places where of some of the most important fathers of the Church of the first

[2] As in Filesi 1972, III, 153-201.

[3] Ferretto 1942, 346.

[4] Ferretto 1942, 347.

[5] For his complete biography and bibliography see Heid 2012.

[6] Ferretto 1942, 367.

[7] It is very interesting to notice that many White Fathers sent and published many anonymous articles concerning new discoveries in Christian North Africa in the Roman *Nuovo Bollettino di Archeologia Cristiana* (i.e., *NBACr* 1894, fascc. 4-5; *NBACr* 1899, fascc. 3-4).

centuries were active and shed light on ancient Christian communities very well-known from written sources. One of the most interesting documents written by Lavigerie is the *Lettre Circulaire* he wrote on Monday, the 19th of March 1877 and sent to the clergy of Algeria's dioceses, which provided guidelines for missionaries' behavior regarding archaeological findings.[8]

The introduction itself is very indicative, because Lavigerie, strong of French monetary support, calls for a general responsibility in preserving the traces of the disappearing common Christian past in Africa:

> «*Lettre Circulaire de Monseigneur l'Archevêque d'Alger au Clergé de son Diocèse: relativement aux recherches archéologiques recommandées par le Concilie Provincial d'Alger et ordonnance portant création d'une Commission Diocésaine d'Archéologie.*
>
> *Messieurs et chers coopérateurs,*
> *Parmi les Décrets du Concilie provincial d'Alger, il en est un qui regarde les études et les recherches archéologiques sur l'Afrique chrétienne.*
>
> *Nous recommandons particulièrement aux prêtres de Notre Province, disent les Vénérables Pères de ce Concilie, l'étude de l'archéologie ecclésiastique. Il existe, terre qui renalt à la vie. Chacune de ses pierres, sa poussière même portent partout leurs traces. Elles périssent cependant, ces traces sacrées ! Beaucoup d'entre-elles ont dejà disparu. Ce qui reste disparaitra bientôt. C'est à nous qu'il appartient de contribuer à prévenir un tel malheur.*
>
> *L'entreprise n'est pas, du reste, difficile, et bien que ses résultats doivent-être heureux, si nous mettons du soin, de l'ordre et de la persévérance, ils ne demanderont, en réalité, de chacun de vous que peu de travail; et quant aux dépenses, je les couvrirai volontiers, grâce au concours qu'a bien voulu me promettre M. le Ministre de l'Instruction publique.*
>
> *Voici donc, Messieurs er chers coopérateurs, ce que j'attends de votre bonne volonté.*»

The letter opens with the creation of a diocesan commission of archaeology,[9] strongly connected to the needs clearly expressed at the

[8] The following information comes directly from the printed version of this text, held in White Fathers' archive and only partially copied in this essay: General archive of the Missionaries of Africa in Rome (AGMAfr), B4, f.1, 793-802.

[9] The names of the member of this commission appear at the end of the letter: "L'ARCHEVÈQUE D'ALGER, Président; MM. GILLARD, Vicaire-Général, Vice-Président; G'STALTER, doyen du Chaptre; CAILHOL, Curé de St-Augustin; RIBOLET, Curé de

beginning of the text ("nous recommandons particulièrment aux prêtres de Notre Province, disent les Vénérables Pères de ce Concile, l'étude de l'archéologie ecclésiastique"[10] in particular). From this introduction and from the general text it appears that the role of every single missionary was considered fundamental: Lavigerie wanted each parish to keep him informed about every past and future discovery of monuments, inscriptions, medals, reliefs and ancient sculptures, not only Christian. Even the parishioners had to be informed about the letter and its content:[11] local people were required to inform missionaries and priests about every artefact or monument they were aware of. In this sense, Lavigerie highlights the importance of the collaboration of children in school or catechism, so much so that he suggests giving a reward to each child who brings, with their parents' permission, an inscription, figure, or ancient coin.

Following this, Lavigerie wrote a detailed indication of behaviors that should be followed after learning about artefacts or monuments. Each Father had to be led to the site, to make a cast of every inscription found,[12] advise the archbishop and, if necessary, share the news with the members of Diocesan Commission for Archeology. It seems clear, then, that Lavigerie's intention was to involve every social level of the local community and the missionary group, for archaeology to fill a very crucial role in the missionary life of the White Fathers.

l'Agha; BURZET, Curé de Chebli; DEMIAUTTE, Lazariste, Supérieur du Petit-Séminaire; DUCAT, de la Compagnie de Jésus; TOULOTTE, des Missions d'Afrique; GRUSSENMEYER, Curé de Mustapha-Supérieur, Secrétaire."

[10] General archive of the Missionaries of Africa in Rome (AGMAfr), B4, f.1, 793.

[11] Lavigerie attached a small questionnaire for the parishioners to the letter as well, in order to help them describe the objects they know about: General archive of the Missionaries of Africa in Rome (AGMAfr), B4, f.1, 801-802, "Note 4. Pour les guider dans ce travail, MM. les ecclésiastiques pourront suivre l'ordre du prèsent questionnaire." The need for controlling local archaeology discoveries, especially in the area of Carthage, brought Lavigerie to state that the even missionaries working with Muslims had to cooperate with them in researching antiquities.

[12] He even gave explanations on how to make the cast: General archive of the Missionaries of Africa in Rome (AGMAfr), B4, f.1, 801 "Note 3. Pour faire un estampage convenable des inscriptions antiques ou des bas-reliefs, il faut suivre les règles suivantes."

The letter from el Kef

During research undertaken in the Historical Archive of the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in Rome,[13] an unpublished letter concerning this topic was rediscovered. This archive still contains thousands of very fascinating letters and documents sent from missionaries all over the world to inform the Congregation in Rome about problems and news from the territories and missions. Some of these are truly valuable for archaeologists and historians, as they have the potential to provide important information about monuments, objects, and discoveries.

The long letter analyzed here was written in Tunisia in May 1882 by the Abbot La Boüille, who wanted to inform Lavigerie and the Congregation about the brand-new discovery of Christian antiquities in El Kef (ancient *Sicca Veneria*).[14] Written in Latin, the precious text reports the discovery of architectural remains of two cult buildings and some inscriptions providing evidence of the Early-Christian past of the city. This appears to be the most ancient document about the discovery of Christian remains in El-Kef: it joins the very short account of Cagnat, who probably visits the city during La Boüille excavations, which has been so far the first report about El-Kef Christian antiquities (Fig. 1).[15] In 1883, the site was visited and partially described in few lines by Saladin.[16] A more complex scientific account about the findings is presented to the Comité des travaux historique et scientifiques and dates only to 1884, while no other previous document can be directly related to the excavation of this town.[17]

[13] The results of this research have been partially published in Cecalupo 2019.

[14] We searched for other letters or, generally, for any kind of documental information about La Boüille, his presence in El Kef and his archaeological research in the central archive of the Missionaries of Africa in Rome, but so far nothing has been found. Further and deeper research will be held in the following time by C. Cecalupo and A. Mezzolani Andreose, which will hopefully bring to some new acquisitions from Delattre's letters and personal documents.

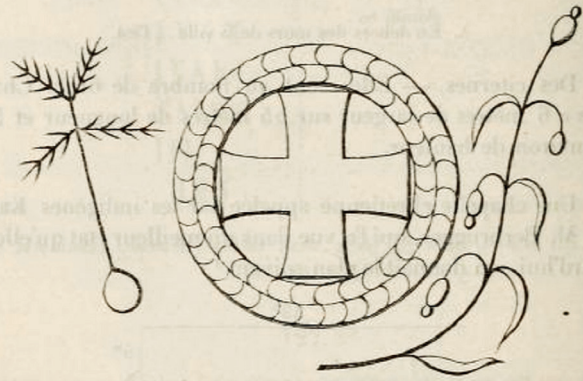
[15] Cagnat 1882, 107 (where he briefly defined the church of Kasr-el-Ghoul as a *chapelle chrétienne*) and 108 (where he published a drawing of a Christian art piece from the Christian basilica, see *infra*).

[16] Saladin 1887, 206-207, 212.

[17] *Bulletin archéologique* 1884.

B. Dans l'intérieur des murs.

5° Une basilique chrétienne. — C'est, avec la fontaine, le monument le mieux conservé du Kef. L'entrée en est obstruée par des constructions arabes en ruines. Mais la nef est encore parfaitement conservée (elle sert d'écurie actuellement). Sur le mur extérieur est représentée une croix grecque dans une couronne; à droite une branche de grenadier avec ses fruits, à gauche une branche d'olivier (?) [1].



La maison où elle se trouve porte le nom de *Dar-el-Kaus*. — On y voit des fragments d'inscriptions [2] qui sont entrés dans la construction de la basilique.

Figure 1: Printed report of Christian antiquity discovered in El-Kef, Tunisia (Cagnat 1882, 108).

The letter states as follows:[18]

"[871r] + *In Castris Siccae Veneriae (Kef) in Tunisia*
Die prima Mai in festa SS. Apost. Philippi et Jacobi

Illustrissime et Reverendissime Pater
A novem mensibus, capellam militaris pro Franciae militibus, nec non parochi, munere pro civibus Europae peregrinis, Sicca Veneriae (arabice Kef) in Tunisiam, fungor, a venerabili Archiepiscopo Cardinali Lavigerie,

[18] Historical Archive of Propaganda Fide, Scritture riferite nei Congressi, vol. 21, Barbaria (1878-1882), 871-873.

nominatus et approbatus. Deo iurante, sacram liturgiae catenam a quatuordecim saeculis fractam, annulo novo ligari, parochiam fundari, et duas basilicas quarto saeculo erectas, unam pene funditus eversam, in Francorum coemeterio, alteram intra urbis moenia, absidem integram adhuc labentem, emi et proprio sumptu solvere volui.

Nullam, hic temporis, pecuniam ad aedificia pro cultu nostro restauranda, habeo. A te ergo suppliciter, peto, Pater Venerande [871v] *ut aliquid, à SS. omnium nostrum Patre, Leone XIII, tam generoso, vel nummos, Suae paupertatis munus ordinarium, vel cultus res sacras, ut reliquias, suppellectilem, pro nobis obtinens.*

Sicca enim sedes fuit episcopalis per sex saecula, quae suos habuit Apostolos, suos doctores inter quos lactantius et Arnobius, suos pastores in pluribus Conciliis sedentes et ab Augustino seu laudatos, seu vituperatos secundum fidem, suos etiam Martyres habuit quorum tumulos nunc inquirimus.

Sua possidet etiam praeclara, in ipsius infedelis civitatis muris, Christianae professionis vestigia: labari crucem [[+ **αω in hoc si/gno sem/per vi/nces**]] *cum sententiae inscriptione, byzantinam crucem* [[+]] *in limine ipsius basilicae de qua supra, nec non Chrisma trabes ipsi latinam crucem* [[+]] *in fronte ferunt* [[**XP αω**]].

Et pro me, indigne sacerdote, à SS. Sede, Missionarii Apostolici, facultates spirituales potiusquam dignitatem postulo.

E terra longinqua et infideli, vox mea, credo, Pater, at tui cordis [872r] *aurem pervenit. Iam nox, Africanus noster Cardinalis Lavigerie pileum rubrum Romae accipiendo, verba mea confirmare poterit, nam a Sua Eminentia laudes, pro emptione accepi.*

Ipse nunc Comes Cecchini quem, com honore, Carthagine, in die collatae purpurea romanae, vidi, de his te certum faciet.

Et ideo, humillime pro voltus, tuam et praesertim SS. Patris Leonis XIII, tanti Pontificis, pro Mahumetanis ipsis ad Christum convertendus, specialiter pro animabus omnibus mihi commissis et etiam pro me indigno, benedictionem flagito.

Sue maxima libertate, Pater Venerande, excusatum me habeto et meae venerationis vota, accipere digneris.

Suae Eminentiae sum, in Christo devotissimo filius.

Carolus Maria Eduardus La Boüille
Capellanus militaris nec non parochi El Kef numera fingens. Legionis Honorificae ques Academiae Gallicae officialis Auditor in Theologia ex Instituto Catholico Tolosano

[872v] *11 Maggio 82.*"[19]

[19] As translated by the authors: "+ Fort of Sicca Veneria (Kef) in Tunisia day of the feast of the Saint Philip and Jacob. Distinguished and Reverend Father. For

The city of El-Kef, located on Tunisian North-Western border, was an ancient Punic settlement named *Sicca Veneria* and a Roman colony for veterans founded by Augustus in 27 B.C.[20] The strength of local Christianity is testified by a good number of bishops from the mid-third to the seventh century,[21] as well as by clear Christian remains. There are actually four Christian buildings known archaeologically in el-Kef.[22] Two of these had been rediscovered by Abbot, and the Military Chaplain Charles La Boüille, in May 1882 and were presented in his letter, where he erroneously dated them both to the fourth century. As it can be seen from the letter, he did not offer an extensive description but focused more on his finds as material evidence of Christianity, asking for help from Pope Leo XIII in restoring them, in continuity with the spirit of the White Fathers.

In order to better understand which buildings La Boüille referred to, it is necessary to compare the letter to the written reports by the lieutenant Émile Espérandieu and by La Boüille himself to the Comité des travaux historique et scientifiques from the 16th and the 17th of April 1884,[23] which include some interesting discussions about the birth of Christian Basilicas. These two documents offer a better description of the discoveries of 1882. The first building

nine months I have been serving as military chaplain for the French army, as well as parish priest for the pilgrim citizens of Europe, in Sicca Veneriae (Kef in Arabic) in Tunisia, appointed and approved by Cardinal Lavigerie. […] Two basilicas of the fourth century were found, one with only the foundations in the French cemetery, the other, within the city walls, with the apse intact but still falling, which I bought and arranged at my own expense. […]

Sicca in fact was episcopal seat for six centuries, and had its apostles, doctors (including Lactantius and Arnobius) and shepherds sitting in various councils, and by Augustine or praised or despised for their faith, it also had his martyrs, whose tombs we currently seek.

In this unfaithful city we have clear Christian remains: the cross of the labarum [[+ αω in hoc si/gno sem/per vi/nces]] with inscription, the Byzantine cross [[+]] inside the above-mentioned basilica, and beams with the Latin cross [[+]] on the forehead [[XP αω]].

[…] Carolus Maria Eduardus La Boüille. Military chaplain and pastor of El Kef. […] May 11, 1882."

[20] Baratte, Bejaoui *et al.* 2014, 43.

[21] Mandouze 1982, 1282.

[22] A general and very recent account can be found in Baratte, Bejaoui *et al.* 2014, 43-49.

[23] *Bulletin archéologique* 1884, 158-159, 175-176.

cited in La Boüille's letter is the church of Kasr el Ghoul (or Foul), situated, according to the same text, in the French cemetery ("*in Francorum coemeterio*"), and of which he saw only the foundations ("*unam pene funditus eversam*"), but about which he managed to provide further information in the document of 1884. The basilical plan of the church was clear[24] and it was paved in mosaics, which was taken away and brought to the local Museum du Kef.[25] In the same point of his 1884 document, La Boüille stated that it would soon be transferred to Tunis,[26] but the later account of Paul Gaukler concerning the mosaics found in Kef [27] testifies that it was never moved from the local museum,[28] where it still probabily remains.[29] Gaukler, in the same account, described two other floor mosaics discovered in the excavation of 1882,[30] stating that he received the information by Mr. Ch. Rambert. Actually, neither La Boüille nor Espérandieu said anything about these: La Boüille specified, instead, that in 1882 he found many Greek and Latin Christian inscriptions as well as some pagan ones inside the foundations.[31]

The second and most important basilica presented in La Boüille's letter is the larger church inside the city walls ("*in ipsius infedelis civitatis muris*"), the church of Dar el Kous, which was excavated between 1887 and 1896 by Saladin[32] and by the Abbot and Military Chaplain Guidicelli, was studied by Paul Gaukler in the 1930s, and totally restored between 1965 and 1970 by the Service des Monuments Historiques de Tunisie.[33]

[24] The naves had general dimensions of circa 16 × 35 m (*Bulletin archéologique* 1884, 158) and there were traces of 14 marble columns (*Bulletin archéologique* 1884, 176).

[25] *Bulletin archéologique* 1884, 176.

[26] Probabily to the museum of Saint-Louise of Carthage, which was founded by Lavigerie himself with father Delattre. For general information about the museum: *Saint-Louis de Carthage* 1893 and Freed 2012

[27] Gaukler 1910, 185-188.

[28] Gaukler 1910, 186, n. 562.

[29] It was not possible to have any sure answer from el-Kef local museum.

[30] Gaukler 1910, 186-187, nn. 563-564.

[31] This led Espérandieu to understand that the church was built upon a pagan cemetery: *Bulletin archéologique* 1884, 158. For further bibliography, see Espérandieu 1889; Saladin 1887, 202; Baratte, Bejaoui *et al.* 2014, 48.

[32] Gaukler 1913 and Baratte, Bejaoui *et al.* 2014, 44.

[33] Baratte, Bejaoui *et al.* 2014, 44.

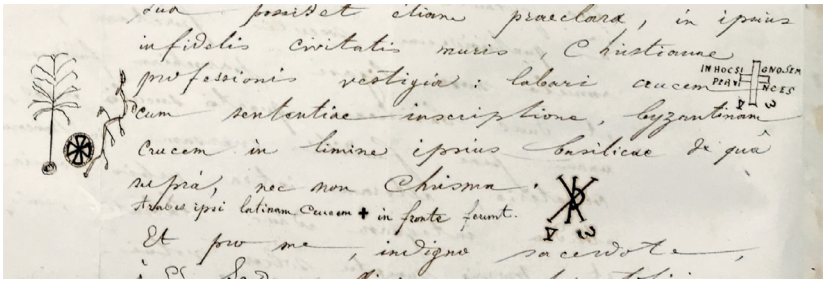


Figure 2: Part of La Boüille's letter of May 1882, informing about the rediscovery of Christian remains in El-Kef, Tunisia (Historical Archive of Propaganda Fide, Scritture riferite nei Congressi, vol. 21, Barbaria (1878-1882), 871v).

Referring to this basilica in his letter, La Boüille very briefly described a small group of inscriptions and provided small drawings of three of them (Fig. 2). These inscriptions gave material evidence of the Christian character of the building, which actually appears to have been the real concern of the Abbot: "*labari crucem* [[+ **αω in hoc si/gno sem/per vi/nces**]] *cum sententiae inscriptione, byzantinam crucem* [[+]] *in limine ipsius basilicae de qua supra, nec non Chrisma trabes ipsi latinam crucem* [[+]] *in fronte ferunt* [[**XP αω**]]."[34]

The report in the letter is very concise; however, the 1884 document written by La Boüille provided further information about at least one of those inscriptions. He reported that in this basilica, which was very well preserved, he saw the incision of a Greek cross between a palm branch and an olive branch ("une croix à branches égales entre deux branches de palmier et d'olive") in a tympanum of one of the lateral doors on the external wall of the right nave.[35] It is possible to find a visual recall of the decorations seen by La Boüille in the drawings in perspective of the church of Dar el Kous published by Gaukler following the late nineteenth century excavation.[36] This testifies to

[34] Historical Archive of Propaganda Fide, Scritture riferite nei Congressi, vol. 21, Barbaria (1878-1882), 871r. In English: "the cross of the labarum [[+ αω in hoc si/gno sem/per vi/nces]] with inscription, the Byzantine cross [[+]] inside the above-mentioned basilica, and beams with the Latin cross [[+]] on the forehead [[XP αω]]."

[35] *Bulletin archéologique* 1884, 176.

[36] Gaukler 1913, tab. V.

a continuity of findings of homogeneous decorative architectural furnishings of the basilica that date back to the first discoveries of 1882.

Conclusions

Archaeological research and excavations focused on the Christian past of the city of el Kef were conducted for decades by different scholars and institutions. Looking at the phenomenon of the archaeological discoveries made by the missionary fathers in North Africa, it is possible to understand how these fathers were the first to truly bring Christian archaeology to the frontier territories. What is clear, then, is the central role of the White Fathers in the material rediscovery of Christian antiquities in North Africa. Bringing Abbot La Boüille's letter to light in its entirety, and connecting it to the general interest on archaeological discoveries imposed by Lavigerie on his missionaires, can help provide a more in depth undersanding of the role of religious missions in the rediscovery of Christian monuments in the *Orbis Christianus antiquus* and emphasises their value in the history of Christian Archaeology at the end of the nineteenth century, when studies of early Christianity started to seriously involve, for the first time, the areas outside Rome, and when North Africa became one of the central locations of archaeological discoveries and excavations. These fathers can therefore be defined as true frontier discoverers, who paved the way for the great archaeological research of the twentieth century, and for a new understanding of Christianity in the frontier territories.

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