

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Volubilis (Morocco)

No 836

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The archaeological site of Volubilis
<i>Location</i>	Wilaya de Meknès, Province of Meknès El Menzeh, Moulay Idriss Zerhoun
<i>State Party</i>	Kingdom of Morocco
<i>Date</i>	29 August 1996

Justification by State Party

The site of Volubilis conforms with several of the criteria for inscription on the World Heritage List. The archaeological remains of several civilizations are to be found there, representing all the phases of its ten centuries of occupation, from prehistory continuously through to the Islamic period. Volubilis has produced a substantial amount of artistic material, including mosaics, marble and bronze statuary, and hundreds of inscriptions *in situ*. This documentation, and that which remains to be discovered, is representative of the creative spirit of the human beings who lived there over the ages. Many of the existing monuments - columns, capitals, arcades, etc - have been restored and demonstrate tangibly the monumental and architectural importance of the city.

It is a page in Morocco's human, artistic, and architectural history. In the light of its situation, its extent, and its wealth, Volubilis can be ranked alongside sites such as Timgad or Djemila, which are already on the World Heritage List.

[Note The State Party does not make any specific proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers the property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List.]

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, Volubilis is a *site*.

History and Description

History

The name of Volubilis is known both from ancient texts and from the abundant epigraphic material from the site itself. Its origin is unknown but may be a latinized version of the Berber name for the oleander, *oualili*, which grows in profusion on the banks of the wadi Khoumane that runs round part of the site.

The Roman geographer Pomponius Mela, writing in the 1st century AD, described Volubilis as modestly sized, though he had never visited it. References by Pliny the Elder and in the 2nd century AD *Antonine Itinerary*, while describing its location, make no comments on its size.

Its easily defensible location at the foot of the Jbel Zerhoun and the good soils of the plain, suitable for agriculture and the cultivation of fruit trees (especially olives), attracted settlers to the site of Volubilis at least as early as the 3rd century BC, as shown by a Punic inscription found in the town. By the time of the Mauritanian kingdom, whose capital was here from the 3rd century BC until AD 40, Volubilis already had a defensive wall, enclosing about a dozen hectares. The town appears to have been laid out on a regular plan on the Punic-Hellenistic model.

The town developed along Roman lines during the reigns of Juba II and Ptolemy (25 BC to AD 40), when it may have been the capital. The Roman annexation of the Mauritanian kingdom in AD 40 led to the creation of two provinces, Mauretania Caesarensis in the east and Mauretania Tingitana in the west; Volubilis was given the status of a *municipium* in the latter. It rapidly expanded to its maximum extent, with the construction of many public and private buildings, the latter associated with craft and industrial installations, most notably for the production of olive oil, the main product of the region. Epigraphic evidence points to the fact that the inhabitants of Volubilis during the Roman period were ethnically mixed, with Jews, Syrians, and Spaniards living alongside the indigenous African population.

During the reign of Marcus Aurelius a town wall, with eight monumental gates, was constructed in 168-9, and the Severan emperors provided the town with a new monumental centre, including a capitol and basilica. This was made possible by Caracalla's remission of taxes, an event commemorated by the construction of a triumphal arch dedicated to him.

At the beginning of the reign of Diocletian, in 285, the Romans abruptly abandoned southern Tingitana, for reasons that remain obscure, and Volubilis entered its "dark age." This was to last until the until the accession of Idris I. The aqueduct that brought water to the town having been broken, the inhabitants of Volubilis, who were by now probably for the most part members of the Berber Baquates tribe, moved to the west of the triumphal arch, where they built a new residential area near the wadi Khoumane. This was separated from the upper part of the town by a new defensive wall, which came down to the river bank.

The area of the triumphal arch became the cemetery of this community. Four inscriptions dated to between 599 and 655 reveal that this was a Christian community with civic institutions still in place.

It is not certain what influence the raids of Oqba ben Nafi (681) or Moussa ben Nossair (710) had on Volubilis. However, documents and coins show that it had converted to Islam before the arrival of Idris. A descendant of the Caliph Ali, Idris was driven during the struggles between the Abbassids and the Shiites to seek refuge in Morocco, where he was well received by the chief of the Aouraba tribe living around Volubilis. He established himself in "Walila," from where he quickly took over the reins of power, creating a new city at Fez. His son Idris II (803-29) favoured Fez over Volubilis, but the latter was not completely abandoned, although there must have been a substantial movement of its inhabitants to the new town of Moulay Idris nearby, founded after the assassination of the founder of the Idrissid dynasty in 791. It was still occupied when El Bekri wrote about it in 1068. However, it is probably that the Almoravid raids later in the 11th century spelt the end of many centuries of continuous occupation.

Description

The ruins of Volubilis, which consist of no more than half of the original town, are located on a commanding site at the foot of the Jbel Zerhoun, defined by the two wadis, Khoumane and Ferdassa. The ancient town is well defined by the remains of its walls, stretching for 2.35km and visible over most that length. Averaging 1.6m in thickness, they had nearly forty interval towers and were entered through eight gates. Part of the eastern wall has been reconstructed to a height of 1.5m, as the boundary of the archaeological zone.

The buildings of Volubilis are for the most part constructed using the grey-blue limestone quarried nearby on the Zerhoun massif. They are notable for the large number of mosaic floors still *in situ*. Although they do not attain the artistic level of other North African mosaics, they are lively and varied in form and subject-matter.

The triumphal arch of Caracalla, which spans the *decumanus maximus* (main street), is the point of articulation between the Punic-Hellenistic town and the extension in the Roman period to the north-east. It is known to have been decorated with figures of the four seasons and trophies, and to have been crowned by the figure of the emperor in a gilded chariot drawn by six horses.

The public buildings are mostly situated in the older part of the town. The paved forum is relatively modest in size, and is surrounded by structures of various kinds, one of which has been identified as the *macellum* (market). It is flanked on the east by the basilica (law court), a large structure divided by four rows of columns into five aisles, the central (and largest) terminating in an apse at each end.

The *capitolium* abuts upon the south end of the basilica; it was built by the emperor Macrinus in 217 on the site of an earlier forum. Its *cella* (sanctuary) is

reached by means of a wide flight of steps. Adjoining the *capitolium* are the contemporary forum baths, which show evidence of having been reconstructed more than once.

There is another set of baths nearby, known as the baths of Gallienus from an inscription found during excavation. The only large private house in this part of the town, known as the House of Orpheus after one of its mosaic subjects, is noteworthy for its well preserved olive presses and mills. There are others in several of the smaller houses in this quarter.

To the west of the triumphal arch is the House of the Ephebe, named after the statue of a young man discovered there. This is an exceptional example of the Roman peristyle house (the Rhodian type of Vitruvius), with some fine mosaics. The *decumanus maximus* is lined with luxurious town-houses, some of the most important known in the Roman towns of North Africa. The so-called "Palace of Gordian" (which takes its name from the name of the emperor mentioned in an inscription found there) is a very large establishment that is believed to have been the residence of the Imperial *procurator* at one stage. The most splendid of all the private houses in Volubilis is the House of the Train of Venus, situated one block away from the *decumanus maximus*, in which eight rooms and seven corridors are decorated with floor mosaics on mythical subjects.

Close to this house there is a burial mound dating from the 3rd/2nd century BC. It lies just outside the line of the pre-Roman defensive walls, which has been traced for much of its length. Not far away, on the opposite slope of the wadi Ferdassa valley, there are the ruins of the so-called Temple of Saturn, in which were found on excavation more than six hundred funeral stelae and fragments of carved and painted objects relating to the pre-Roman period. This is thought to be the site of a pre-Roman cult that was later absorbed into the Roman cult of Saturn, in a characteristic act of syncretism.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The archaeological site of Volubilis is the property of the Kingdom of Morocco.

A *Dahir* (Royal Decree) of 19 November 1920 established a protection area around the ruins of Volubilis as part of a wider protection zone that included the town of Moulay Idriss and the area between the two. *Dahir* No 19 of 14 November 1921, confirmed in *Bulletin Officiel* No 475 of 29 November 1921, defined the protected area of Volubilis more precisely.

The area of the archaeological site is clearly defined in the legislation, and also in the nomination dossier for inscription on the World Heritage List. There is no buffer zone delineated. Whilst the nature of the surrounding terrain is such that this might appear, at least at the present time, to be superfluous, it is conceivable that a substantial increase in tourist traffic and visitor numbers following inscription on

the World Heritage List could result in the construction of undesirable buildings and other facilities in the immediate neighbourhood of the site.

Overall protection of historic monuments and sites, inscriptions, and objects of art and antiquity comes within the provisions of Decree No 2.81.25 of 22 October 1981, which implements the corresponding Law No 22.80. This establishes the legal validity of the list of protected cultural property of all kinds and the procedures for its creation. Any intervention that may result in changes to listed properties (including archaeological excavations) must secure the authorization of the Heritage Directorate (Direction du Patrimoine) of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

Management

Management of the site is the responsibility of the Heritage Directorate of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which has a programme of regular maintenance, including quarterly removal of vegetation. Funds are allocated each year for restoration and conservation work on individual structures within the site. This work is carried out by a permanent team consisting of a chief conservator, two assistant conservators, a draughtsman, two qualified stone-masons, and a team of trained workers.

On-site protection is provided twenty-four hours a day by a team of twelve wardens. These have been supplemented since the beginning of 1996 by two units of the auxiliary forces.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The first description of Volubilis was written by the Englishman John Windus in 1721, shortly before the ruins were ravaged by the 1755 earthquake (which also destroyed Lisbon).

The first excavations took place in 1887-92, directed by de la Martinière. Clearance and excavation work began again in 1915, directed by L. Chatelain at the instance of Marshal Lyautey, at that time French Résident Général in Morocco. This work continued until 1941 and was taken up again after World War II.

The triumphal arch was restored in 1930-34, the *capitolium* in 1962, the basilica in 1965-67, and the so-called Tangier Gate in 1967. A major campaign of restoration of mosaics took place in 1952-55, along with conservation work, in the House of the Columns, the House of the Ephebe, and the House of the Nereids. More recently, one of the oil factories in the southern part of the town has been restored.

Current plans are for restoration of the mosaics in the circus and of the House of the Horseman, the Palace of Gordian, and the House of the Train of Venus, and also for a radical clearance of vegetation in the western part of the town.

The report of the ICOMOS expert mission (see "Action by ICOMOS" below) made the following comments, based on the site visits:

a There are several modern buildings within the perimeter of the site (but excluded from the nominated area) that serve as administration offices, visitor facilities, and workshops.

b Little or no preservation or protection work has been carried out on some of the excavated structures. Current plans include this work, but the task is a vast one.

c Some of the reconstructions, such as those on the triumphal arch, the *capitolium*, and the oil-pressing workshop, are radical and at the limit of currently accepted practice.

d Certain excavated areas are difficult to reach, and as a result the visitor gets only an incomplete impression of the entire ancient town.

e Signage on monuments is vestigial, there are virtually no indications for the visitor on how to see the site, and there are no guidebooks or other documentation available.

However, the report goes on to affirm that the responsible authorities are conscious of all these points and that they are taken account of in the current management programme.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the archaeological site of Volubilis is very high, since the restoration and conservation work, especially in the past forty years, has been in accordance with the criteria laid down in the 1964 Venice Charter (with certain reservations: see above). The application of the principle of anastylosis has been especially rigorous.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Volubilis in December 1996. ICOMOS also consulted a distinguished British classical archaeologist on the cultural importance of the site.

Qualities

Volubilis is a largely Roman archaeological site which, because of its remoteness and the fact that it has not been occupied for nearly a millennium, has conserved a very high degree of completeness and authenticity. It is one of the richest sites of this period in North Africa, not only for its surviving remains but also for its extremely rich harvest of important epigraphic data. It is also of exceptional significance by virtue of the fact that it demonstrates urban development and romanization on the very edge of the Roman Empire. It also graphically illustrates the interface between Roman and indigenous cultures.

Comparative analysis

There is already a number of North African Roman archaeological sites on the World Heritage List - Cyrene, Leptis Magna, and Sabratha in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Djemila, Timgad, and Tipasa in

Algeria. A number of Roman towns in other parts of the Mediterranean basin are also on the List.

It is worthy of comment that ICOMOS organized three meetings in the 1980s relating to the cultural heritage of the Maghreb countries and potential nominations to the World Heritage List (Paris, February 1982; Fez, April 1985; Paris, November 1985). There was unanimity among the European and Maghrebian experts who attended these meetings that Volubilis was of sufficient cultural importance to be nominated for the List. It should be noted that, at the last of these meetings, it was proposed that Volubilis should not be nominated in isolation but in association with the town of Moulay Idriss.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

ICOMOS urges the Moroccan authorities to give high priority to the conservation and protection of all excavated areas on the site and the improvement of visitor facilities.

ICOMOS is also sympathetic to the proposal made by its experts in the 1980s for the extension of this nomination to include the town of Moulay Idriss, with which it is symbiotically linked.

Recommendation

That this nomination be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii, iii, iv, and vi*:

Volubilis is an exceptionally well preserved example of a large Roman colonial town on the fringes of the Empire.

The State Party should be invited to consider the possibility of an eventual extension of the site to include the town of Moulay Idriss.

ICOMOS, September 1997



Volubilis :
Vue aérienne du site /
Aerial view of site



Volubilis :
 Vue du Capitole du côté nord /
 View of the capitol, from the North



Volubilis :
 Arc de Triomphe de Caracalla /
 Triumphal Arch of Caracalla



Volubilis :
Plan du site /
Map of site