A Cache of Roman Mosaics

Among the ruins of Volubilis images of Orpheus and Bacchus speak eloquently of the past

By Nicholas Fox Weber

When restoration by the French began in 1915, the city had been in ruins since the 18th century. Destruction had begun even before Volubilis was taken by the Spanish in 1711 and the Berbers had built it into a town on the site of one of the most important Roman cities of the time. The remains of Volubilis, which was founded by Roman legions in the 1st century BC and was the capital of the kingdom of Mauretania Tingitana, are a mix of Roman ruins, Berber and Moorish buildings, and Islamic architecture. The city was occupied by the Spaniards until 1912, when it was taken by the French. The French then restored it and made it a provincial capital. The city was destroyed again in 1914 and 1915 during World War I, and it was not until the 1950s that it was finally restored to its former glory. Today, Volubilis is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a popular tourist destination. It is a place of stark contrasts, with the ruins of the Roman city standing side by side with the modern city of Moulay Idriss. The city is a reminder of the resilience of human civilization, and it is a testament to the ingenuity of the people who built it. The city is also a reminder of the power of art and architecture, and it is a place of inspiration for all who visit it.

A surviving gateway overlooks the Roman city of Volubilis near Meknes in Morocco.

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In Morocco, a Roman City's Eloquent Mosaics

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In fact a hammam — a steam bath in which people lie on hot stones on the floor, and are washed from buckets. If you are lucky, by the time you see the faded mosaics on the wall of this one you will have discovered that the tradition of these hammams is still alive in modern Morocco. Like the mosaics, the hammam at Volubilis is the ancestor of more recent glories.

You walk through the main public spaces of the city and past (its monumental buildings. They surround the Forum, where public meetings were held and political speeches given. The aisles that once lined this space are now elsewhere in Morocco, but one can envision the Forum in use. Remains of the basilica — the courthouse — are nearby. So are the ruins of the Capitol, a rectangular court marked by Corinthian columns, with a temple inside it. The temple, with its delicate pillars, was dedicated to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, the chief divinities of the state. The local officials would appeal to them here, at the sacrificial altar at the base of the temple steps, before declaring war or going into battle, or after returning from victory, when they would offer gold or other booty at the altar.

Next comes the triumphal arch, which in one direction faces the remains of the broad Decumanus Maximus Avenue, the main byway of Volubilis, and, on the other side, opens to olive groves and rolling fields. Having survived the Lisbon earthquake with relatively little damage, the arch was the remainder of the original Roman city that inspired its excavation in 1915. Erected in 217 in honor of the Emperor Caracalla and his mother, Julia Domna, it is missing its top section but remains an impressive monument of large blocks of local stone. Simple and mathematically precise in its overall form, the arch has a wide opening capped with a perfect semicircle. Medallions, statues and the remains of columns cover its walls.

A few minutes' walk from the triumphal arch, on the other side of town, stand the remains of the governor's palace, built in the third century with numerous courtyards and 74 rooms. And there are more fine mosaics in the ruins of other large neighboring houses. On the floor of the Knight's House, is a vivid mosaic of a horse strolling with its head down, life in ancient Volubilis are remarkably like those of modern Morocco. Guidebooks describe it in excellent condition, and remains a fine example of the eloquence of mosaics.

Nearby is the House of the Athlete, with geometric designs on the mosaic floor of a third-century house in Volubilis.

Another floor mosaic that is one of the glories of Volubilis. Guidebooks describe it in different ways. One calls it a depiction of "a sportsman who has won a cup for vaulting over a grey horse." Another characterizes it as "an image of an "acrobat... who rides backwards on a horse." In any event, it depicts a horse strolling with its head down, mounted by a Judgment Figure seated backwards and looking toward us. The rider's face resembles, to an astounding degree, heads drawn by Picasso. Surrounded by a jubilant framework of intertwined lines and curves, he conveys a spirit of sheer triumph.

The pleasures and skills that give lustre to life in ancient Volubilis are remarkably like the pursuits of our own era.

Visitor's guide to Volubilis

The Approach

There is no place to stay at Volubilis, but there is a cafe where lunch and snacks are served at low cost. There are also some vendors stands selling fossils, locally made pottery for serving couscous, and other bits of handicraft.

The nearby town of Moulay Idriss, an ancient village and pilgrimage site, has a lively marketplace where a pot of mint tea and a thin bread grilled over an open charcoal fire cost about $2. (These might be especially welcome if you have visited Volubilis when it is windy and cold, as it was when we went in April.)

Most visitors will have come by taxi or bus from Mekeke (half an hour) or Fez (hour and a half). A taxi from Fez costs about $25. Tour organizations run trips from hotels in Mekeke and Fez for about $30.

A Fez landmark

In Fez the hotel of choice is the Palais Jardin, (06) 635096; Situated at the edge of the medina, the hotel is a luxurious 16th-century palace of much architectural and aesthetic distinction to which a wing was added in the 1930's. Most of the rooms have a view of the city. A double room is $30 to $40.

The hotel has both a Moroccan and a French restaurant, although we found the couscous and other local dishes, including salads, to be better at the Restaurant Al Firdaus, a two-minute walk away.

It is just inside the walls, where patrons sit in a courtyard that resembles an extravagant cost and watch belly dancers and other performers during dinner. Dinner will cost about $20.

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