

The Basilica of Tabarka (Tunisia): a monument caught in urban inflation

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Abstract

The Basilica of Saint Maximus of Tabarka has had many vocations throughout the time, which have been impacted by to the continuous urban changes of the city. Originally built as an ancient cistern with Rome, this monument was transformed, during the French colonization, into a Christian Basilica, which gave it an urban function in the city. The monument was restored in the 1980s. The interior spaces as well as the exterior environment were used to host cultural activities. However, the Basilica was deeply affected by the excessive change in spatiality due to this restoration and, probably, by the use of inappropriate materials. After a few years, serious conservation problems arose for this listed monument, in this case, its establishment in an urban fabric in continuous inflation, and the conflicts concerning its protection.

Today, three interrelated problems affect the Basilica. First, its poor state of conservation, since the monument presents serious humidity issues and is affected by a total disfigurement of its interior space and its immediate environment.

Second, and despite the Tunisian solid regulations that govern the protection of listed monuments and their respective surroundings, the urban inflation to the immediate environment of said heritage presents a lethal damage to this one. Finally, the Basilica of Saint Maximus and its exterior annex suffer from a lousy use that worsens the awful state of conservation already diagnosed. This paper presents and analyses the general problems affecting the Basilica in its urban context and retraces the attempts to preserve this monument.

Notwithstanding the effective restoration operation carried out under the control

of the National Heritage Institute and the care of some institutions to save the monument, this latter remains in continuous threat because of the absence of radical solutions for the functional gap, the lack of a collective awareness of the importance of this cultural heritage, and the urban inflation that stifles this monument.

Being the architect responsible for this area, I had the opportunity to supervise the restoration of the Basilica. As a result of the findings, it is revealed that the operation requires a follow-up based on a conservation strategy that questions both urban tools and the participatory approach.

Key Words: Tabarka, cultural heritage, Conservation laws, strategies of conservation

Introduction

This article focuses on the city of Tabarka, a coastal city in the northwest of Tunisia, which contains some archaeological and historical treasures.

After demonstrating that all archaeological remains and monuments are not equally threatened, our analysis will target those most affected by urban inflation. We will attempt to investigate to what extent the Tunisian law can protect these remains and monuments, and we will also try to investigate whether there are other strategies to address potential gaps in cultural heritage conservation. In order to better understand how the heritage is in a serious threat in this city, we will first present this commune and give an idea of the spread and state of conservation of its built heritage.

Second, we will attempt to get a general idea of the laws governing the protection of built heritage in Tunisia. Finally, we will deal with the Basilica as a concrete case of a monument in the urban fabric, a legacy that was restored under the control of heritage architects.

Furthermore, we will question the sufficiency of its possible conservation in the presence of all threats in order to justify the implemented strategies, beyond the state-controlled intervention.

Our foci are the following:

First, we will try to analyse the heritage situation in this commune; then we will highlight its state of conservation according to its position in the city.

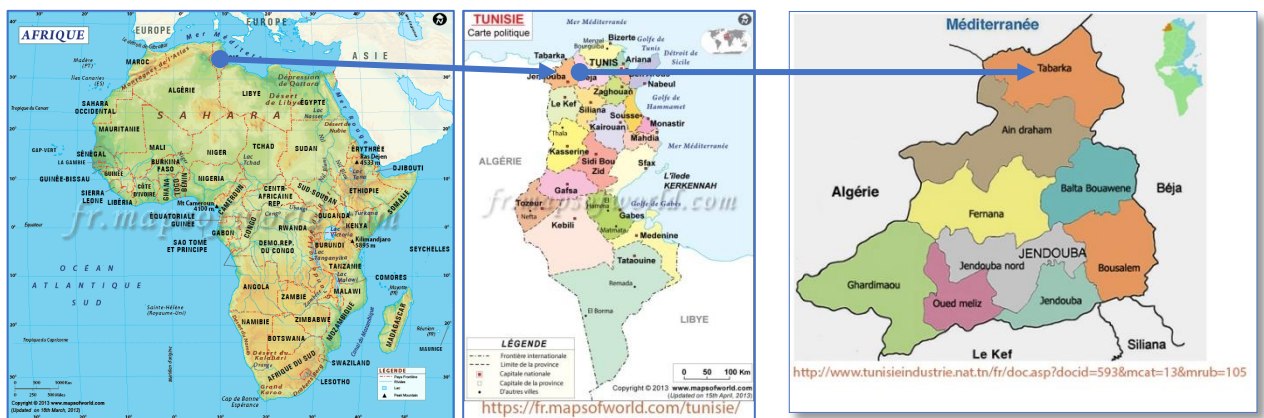
Second, we will explore the concrete solutions to preserve this heritage, with the aim to evaluate their effectiveness. Finally, we will discuss possible strategies to supplement and correct the potential inefficiency of existing laws for the conservation of this heritage.

We will use historical documents, which are reliable scientific sources usually updated according to the archaeological discoveries. These documents can be easily compared to cartographic documents.

We will naturally use the cartographic records at different times. We will investigate and analyse the urban planning schemes of Tabarka to get an idea of their suitability to protect the threatened cultural heritage.

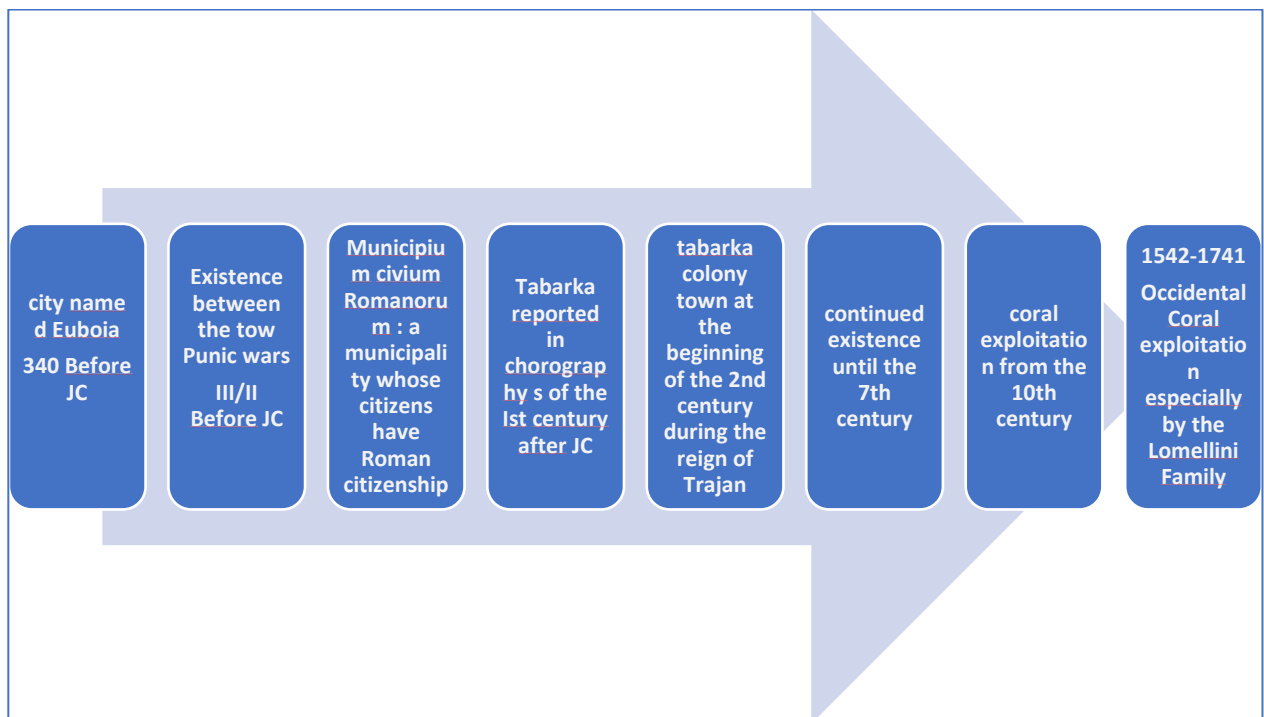
The city of Tabarka: general introduction

Tabarka is a coastal town in the governorate of Jendouba in the northwest of Tunisia. It is well known for its sea, its jazz festival, its coral production (which shaped its history), and certainly its attractive landscapes that vary between sea and hills. It is an attractive touristic city but not only for its landscapes and natural resources, but also for its rich history impacted by many civilizations.



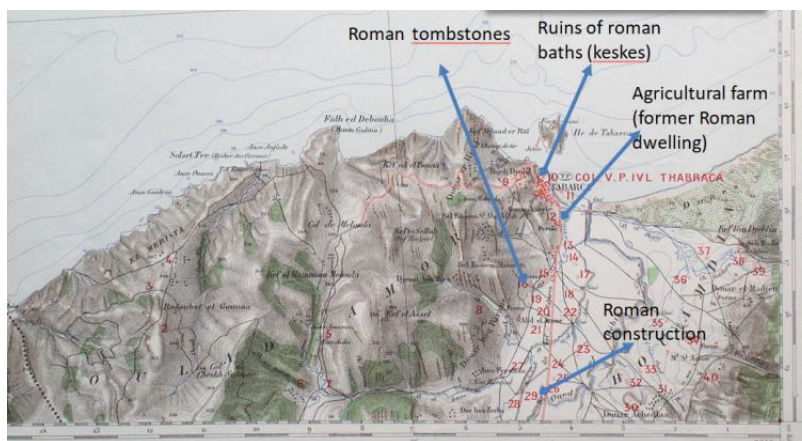
1 Situation of the city of Tabarka

The city of Tabarka was probably cited for the first time around 340 B.C.; C. as a city called Euboia situated between Hippo (ancient Bizerte, a town in the north of Tunisia) and Thapsa (probably near Ras Skikda in the north of Algeria). Its existence was also attested until the two Punic wars, between the third and the second century BC. Under Augustus it was civic and citizens had the Roman citizenship. The city was reported in the chorography of the first century, and «The presence of the city in these two authors¹ suggests that it was already included in their common source, a description of the coasts written at the time of Octavian, that is between 44 and 27 BC»(Longuerstay 1988, p222). Later, this city was at the beginning of the second century a Roman colony under Trajan. Still, it knew a significant prosperity under the Aghlabids, the Fatimids, and between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries with the Genoese and thanks to the exploitation of coral in its land. This continuous and prosperous existence of this coastal city will characterize the city.



2D.LARIBI, 2021, different historical periods of the city of Tabarka, National School of Architecture, Tunisia

Built heritage in Tabarka: First inventory



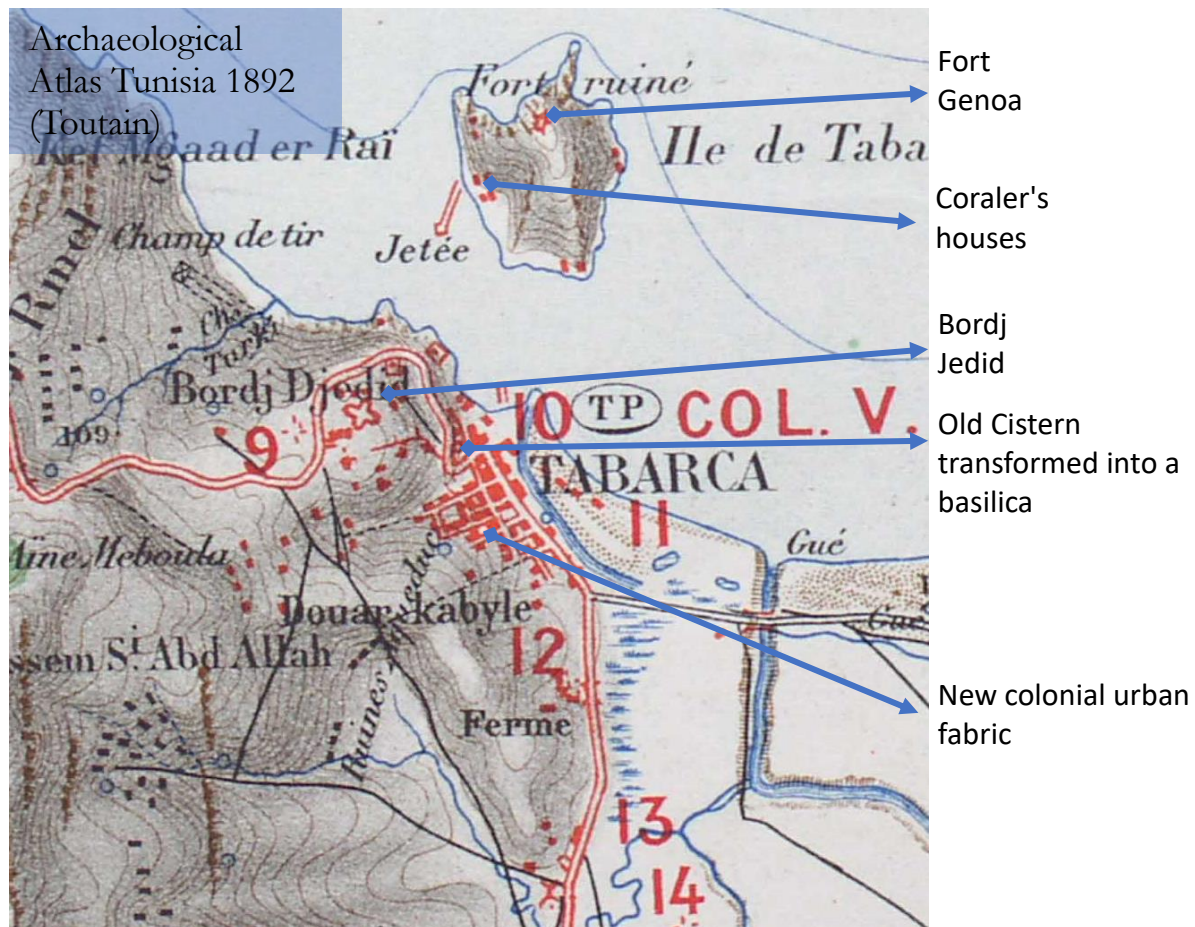
3E.BABELON, B.CAGNAT, S.BEINACH, 1892, extract from the archaeological Atlas, sheet number 7, Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts, Paris

In fact, and referring to the Tunisian Archaeological Atlas of Tunisia, prepared by E.BABELON, B.CAGNAT since 1892 (record number 7), many remains have already been recorded, although only four remains were annotated and identified.

It is the first document that highlights the presence of the remains in this

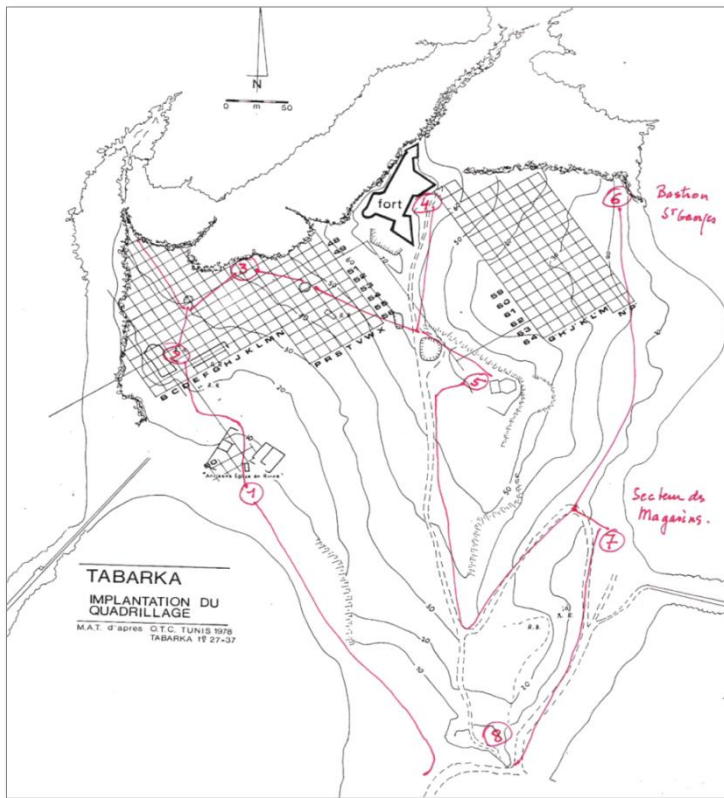
¹ Mèla end Plinie

commune and it describes the variation of the historical period of the entire heritage. Thus, one can observe, in the same sheet, remains of the ancient Civilization as well as vestiges of medieval times and finally traces of colonial times marked by the diversion of the river towards the sea for reasons of urbanization.



4E.BABELON, B.CAGNAT, S.BEINACH, 1892, extract from the archaeological Atlas, sheet number 7, Zoom on the part of the island and the new town, Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts, Paris

If one zooms in and focuses on the part that represents the island and the shore immediately opposite to it, one notices that the greatest concentration of vestiges is in this part. One can observe the Fort of Genoa, built in the sixteenth century, which is the most important witness of the Genoese presence in Tabarka. Moreover, one can see the houses of the coral reefers and the enclosure of the “The African company” (late 18th century). These remains are still visible in the island of Tabarka. We will focus on this area later in this article.



⁵Gourdin.Ph, 2008, *Topographic plan of the island of Tabarka. with grid layout*, Ecole Française de Rome, Rome

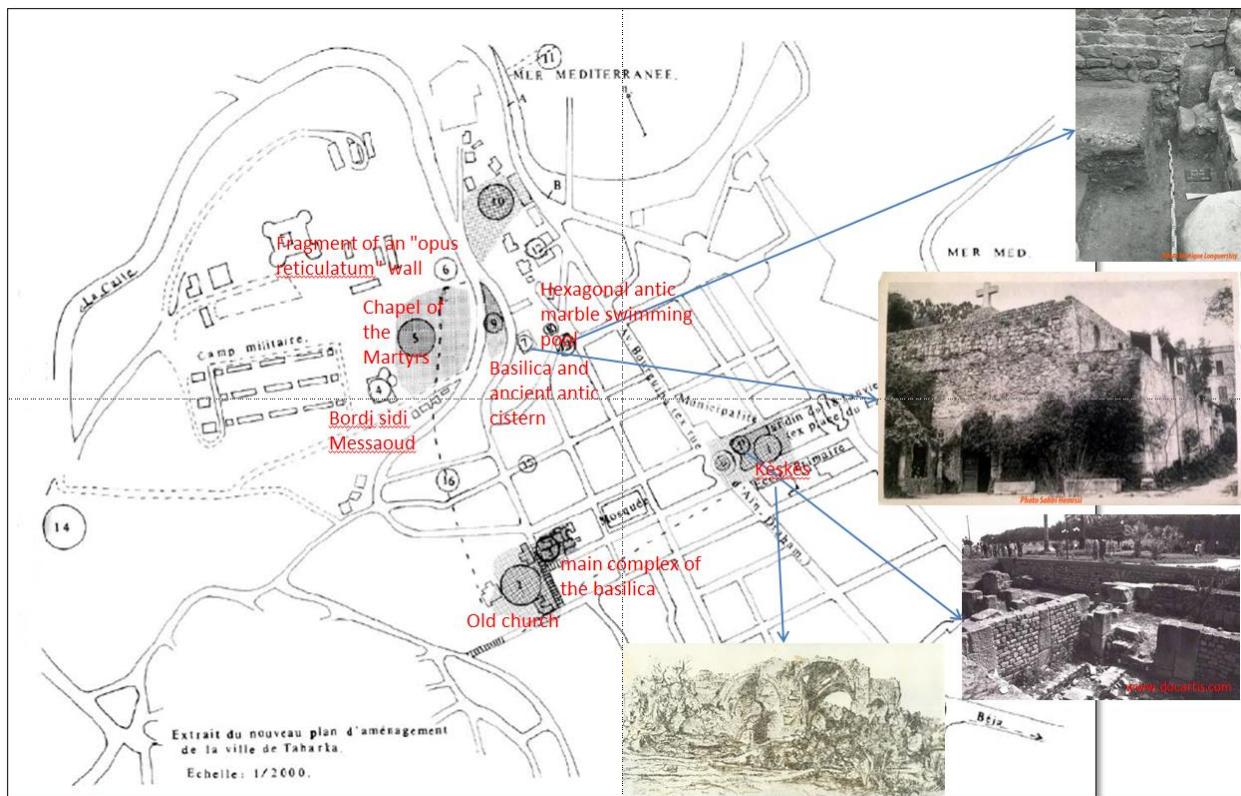
The part to the south of this zoomed map is the part that is taken up later by different archaeologists. We can see, besides the new urban fabric built during the French colonization, a set of remains and monuments, including the fort "Djedid" and our subject of study: the Christian Basilica. This latter is an old cistern transformed by the French into a church "Saint Maxime". Thus, to summarize the situation, there are two major foci of built heritage in Tbaraka:

First, the island of Tabarka, whose map is shown below by Philippe Gourdin to locate the remains. The most important is, of course, the Genoese fort and the remains on the east coast. In his book on the history of Tabarka, Philippe Gourdin proposed an archaeological and natural route in the peninsula, which connects the remains in the

following order:

1. The enclosure of the 'African company'² (late 18th century) with the portal of the enclosure that opens onto the beach, the shops that include the museum, a first survey showing the structures of the African enterprise and the Genoese Epoque and a second survey showing the foundations of the rampart of the Genoese era.
2. The area of the church with the leveling of the round tower, the church and its cemetery. A survey showing several houses of the Genoese era (including the hospital), a street and a system of rainwater recovery canals and sewage disposal.
3. House P (sector of the cliff). Set of buildings built around a closed courtyard in the center of which is a cistern.
4. The Genoese fort built in the sixteenth century, which is the most important witness of this period, which overlooks the hill and which one can see from all sides of the city.
5. The hexagonal tower and the second castle of the island.
6. The Saint-Georges bastion.
7. The location of the island's shops in the Genoese era.
8. The southeast bastion.

² The African company is the latest and successful in a series of commercial exploitation of North Africa by France, which is based on the on-site installation of a set of trading equipment operated by French citizens.



6M.LONGUERSTAY, 1988, Illustration of the new excavations in Tabarka (addition of some legends by the author), national Institute of Heritage, Tunis

Second, the “downtown” contains a set of identified remains. We have a map made by the archaeologist Monique Longuerstay and which represents important vestiges not identified before in other documents.

So far, this part, loaded with relics and history, has always been neglected by historians. The first work of fairly complete excavations and investigations were crowned by the document presented above and carried out by the archaeologist.

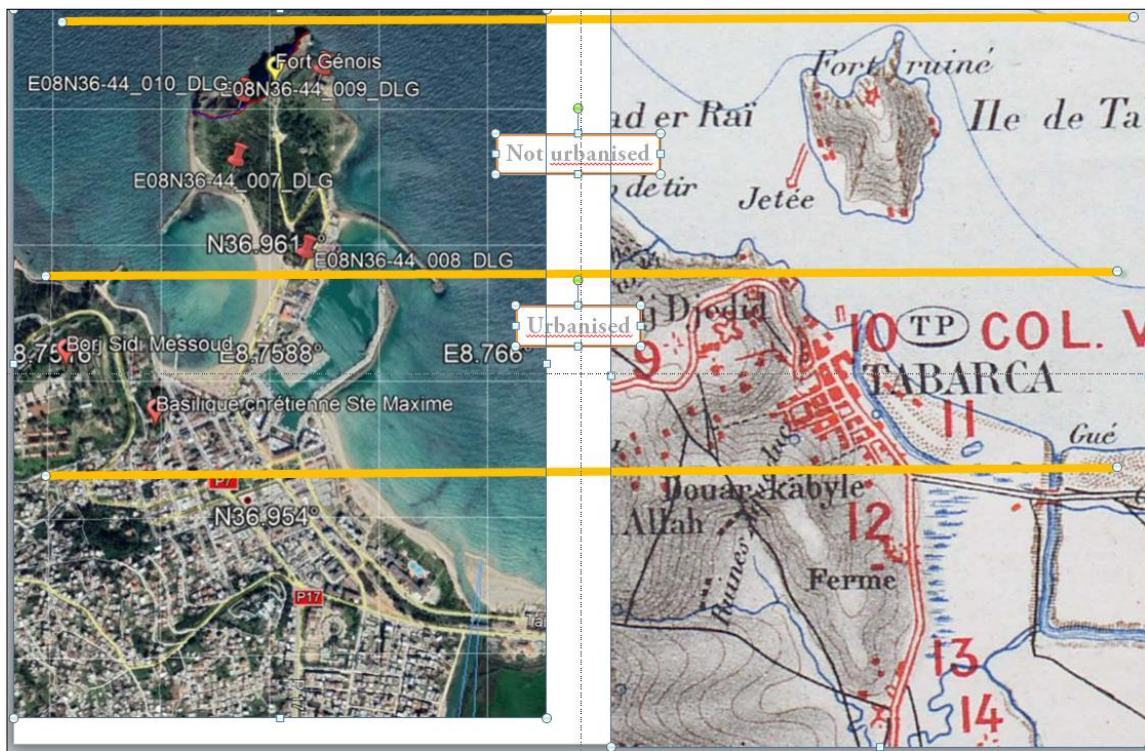
In a clear interweaving with the checkered urbanism traced by the settlers, the researcher was able to identify numerous vestiges:

- The 'Kèskès', the remains of the baths of the ancient city, before its destruction, was only the subject of a brief description of J. Toutain. Only a part of the monument was cleared during the rescue excavation which was carried out during the landscaping of the garden by the municipality.
- Former church, also known as Urban Basilica with a small enclosure with graves, representing a Christian cemetery.
- Large complex reflecting a large urban Basilica complex.
- Bordj sidi Messaoud, which is an ancient Roman spa. The Bordj was mentioned in the ancient Atlas of 1892 as the Genoese fort.
- The wall fragment in “Opus reticulatum.”
- Basilica mentioned as ancient mosque by J. Toutain and Captain Rebora and transformed into a Christian church with settlers called the Basilica of Saint Maximus. One can deduce the importance of

vestiges built nearby, such as the Decumanus, which defines the most substantial axis of the ancient city.

- Hexagonal marble swimming pool indicated by captain Rébora. It would have been removed and hidden for protection by the priest Cassagne, in colonial times. It is no longer in place today, and its location is unknown.
- Remains of private and public buildings, cisterns, mosaic pavements with geometric patterns.
- Probable location of the old harbor, remains of jetties. Docks and ruins of shops, the quay of embarkation and disembarkation, some remains still exist, it is difficult to determine the destination.
- Location of the stratigraphic excavation: remains of various structures bordering a “Decumanus”.
- Remains of the foundations of the towers and parts of the enclosure of the Byzantine period.

Despite the historical and archaeological importance of the two parts, the simple comparison between an old map with a new Google Earth map leads us to conclude that the island has not been urbanized. Its built heritage is not marred by new constructions or urban outlines. On the other hand, in the second part, which is the new city, we can easily deduce the impact of urbanization produced over the years on the state of conservation, or even the existence of the antique heritage.

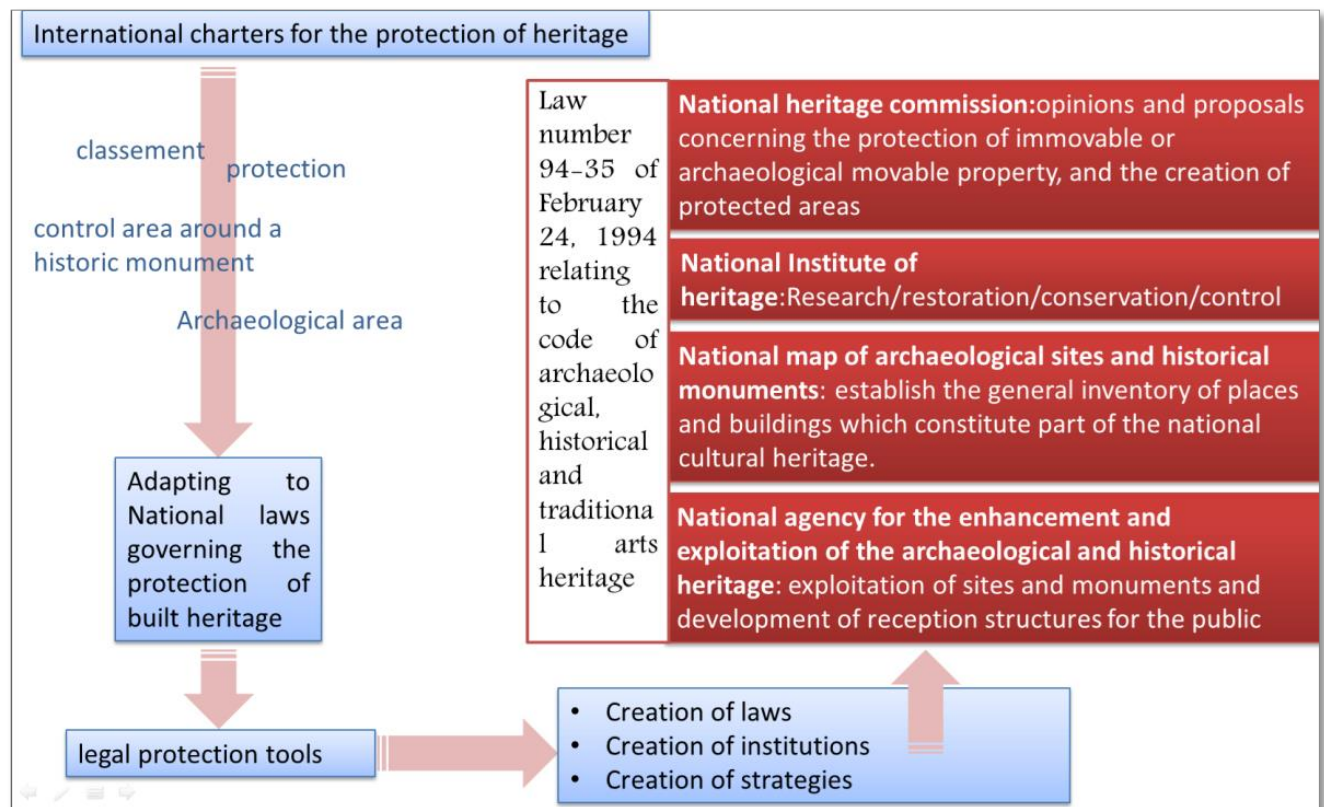


7D.LARIBI, 2021, *Comparison between the actual Google earth card and the ancient Atlas card*, National School of architecture, Tunis, Tunisia

Indeed, the national and the local authorities have always considered the island as the «historical» part of the city, despite the importance of the remains in the «urbanized» city. Thus, we do not have the same treatment for both parts of the city. As the legal tool is the main instrument to act on the built heritage, control it and protect it, it is necessary to read and analyze the laws protecting the heritage in Tunisia, to better understand the situation and the mode of protection for this city. We will tackle this thoroughly in the following chapter.

Regulations for Protecting Heritage in Tunisia: Effectiveness and Limitations

In Tunisia, we have a regulatory base protecting the heritage. However, there is a dichotomy that affected the protection of the legacy of the city (Tabarka). The purpose of this part is to examine more closely the said law, to analyze it, in order to be able to identify the extent of its effectiveness for the protection of built heritage.



8D.LARIBI, 2021, *Summary of references and prerogatives of Tunisian heritage law*, At: National School of Architecture, Tunis, Tunisia

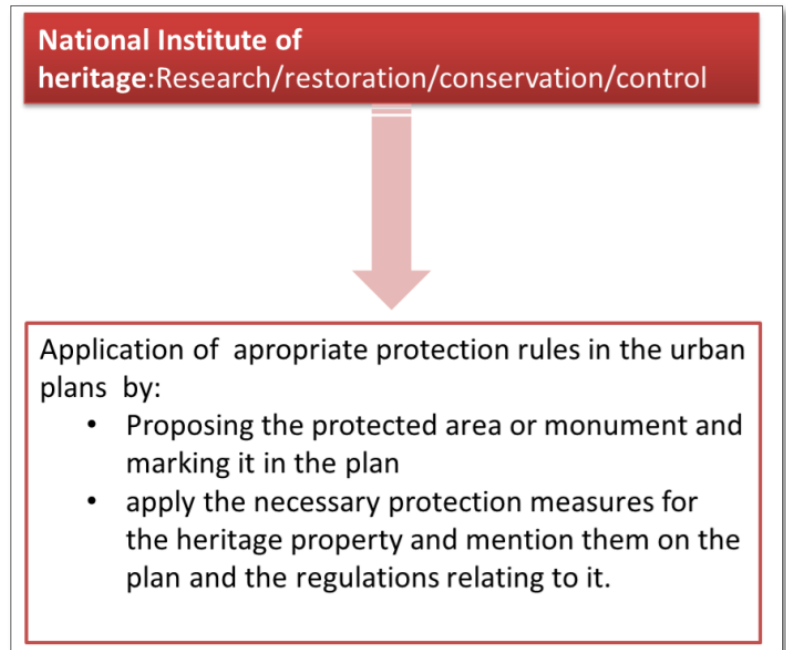
The law protecting heritage in Tunisia is embodied in the “Archaeological, Historical and Traditional Arts Heritage Code”, a document known as “Law 94-35.” It is based on international conventions for the protection of heritage, the charters that Tunisia was the first Arab and African country to co-sign with other countries.

The Tunisian code is aligned, in several points, with the main ideas that are presented in these charters, such as the exact definition of historical monuments, archaeological sites or historic sites and the definition of zones of control. Moreover, there is an identification of concepts such as the right of review, or the implementation of certain tools and rules for an intervention on built heritage. These main concepts, in addition to the Tunisian reality of heritage and the various contextual problems, are the essential bases for creating legal protection tools and for adapting suitable methods of heritage protection to national laws. In

this perspective, and beyond the creation of laws as well as the tools for the legal protection of heritage, Tunisia has relied on three essential and dependent points to apply. On one hand, the government creates laws for the protection of heritage, but the heritage protection approach is also based on the creation of strategies to be applied for the effective conservation of the heritage. In this case, the inventory division of the Tunisian national map is a precise example.

The two legal and strategic tools are created by institutions guaranteeing the proper application of the conservation and development policy, namely:

- The National Heritage Commission: To provide advice and proposals on the protection of archaeological immovable or movable property and the creation of protected areas.
- The National Heritage Institute: Responsible for research, restoration, conservation, and monitoring the application of the various decisions, in particular those applied to town planning
- The National Map of Archaeological Sites and Historical Monuments: Establish a general inventory of sites and buildings being part of the national cultural heritage.



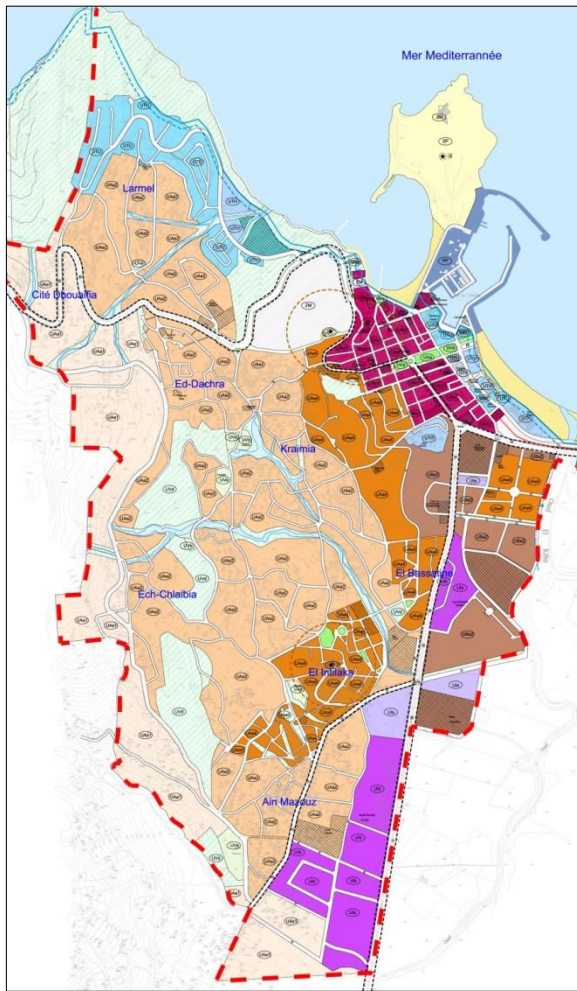
9D.LARIBI, 2021, The prerogatives of the National Institute of Heritage, National School of architecture, Tunis, Tunisia

- The National Agency for the Development and Exploitation of Archaeological and Historical Heritage: the paid exploitation of sites and monuments for the general public and the development of reception facilities for users of the site.

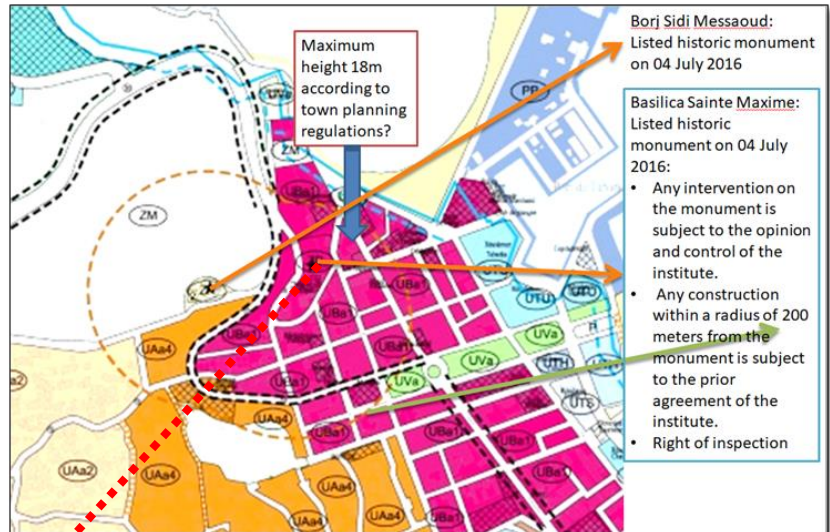
Thus, for the case of the National Heritage Institute; and particularly with regard to build heritage, the institute is responsible for the application and the control of the rules for the protection of heritage in the various urban plans. Standardizes legends are set up. For example, the yellow colour shows the archaeological zones where construction and use are prohibited.

As we can see in the following document, which represents Tabarka Area Urban Development Plan, the entire island is yellow, meaning an archaeological area where no construction or intervention is permitted. Only this area and a small part of the other lands are classified as archaeological areas. The purple color corresponds to an UBa1 zone, which is buildable with a maximum height of 18m according to the town planning rules.

One can also see circles with an interrupted line in this area that corresponds to a control zone all around two the listed monuments that are “Bordj Sidi Messeoud” and the Basilica Saint Maximus. Any construction in this historical area is subject to the prior notice of the National Heritage Institute. It must be beyond the radius of 200 meters from the center, which is the monument itself. Any construction which presents a visual obstacle in front of the said monument is supposed to be forbidden.



But the philosophy of the area is not only to support the straight look, but also to warn against any risk of uncontrolled work in the grounds around the monument which can hide important historical structures.



Text of Claude Grenié

j'ai connu cette baraque avec des derviches sans doute comme sur la
 photo. j'ai le souvenir, vers l'été 1944, d'être en l'attente GACA, puis faire
 une faulx pour monter à l'église qui venait même à confondre, afin de lui
 montrer le baptême du baptême. j'ai eu plus d'un souvenir de baptême vu ce
 confus pour celui du monde du Christ.
 puis à l'église GACA et à l'église qui le baptême et le prêtre, lui, par la photo (celle au-dessus)
 entre puis à l'église GACA et à l'église qui le baptême et le prêtre, lui, par la photo (celle au-dessus) 1944

For this specific part of the city, we present a valuable document by Claude Grenié, an archaeologist born in Tabarka. Through this document, he takes some notes on this crucial part and plans an excavation right in the part adjoining the Basilica, which was excavated after a few years by the archaeologist Monique Longuerstay³.



Photo Sahbi Hemissi



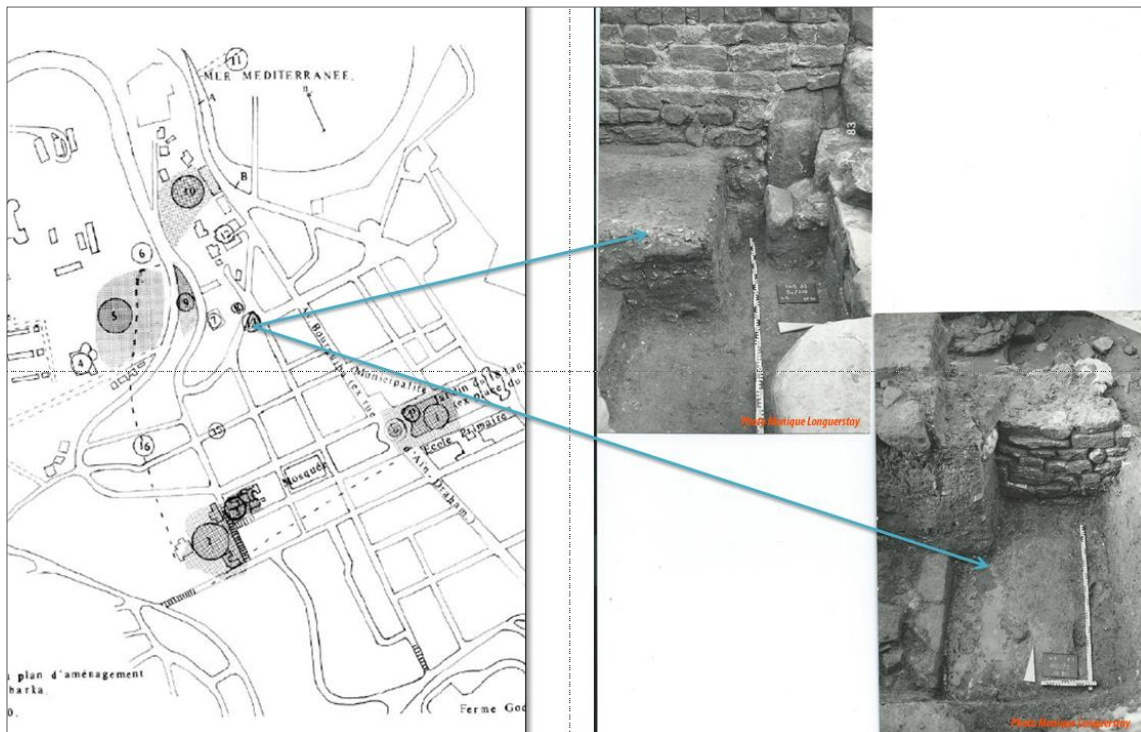
Photo Sahbi Hemissi



Photo Sahbi Hemissi

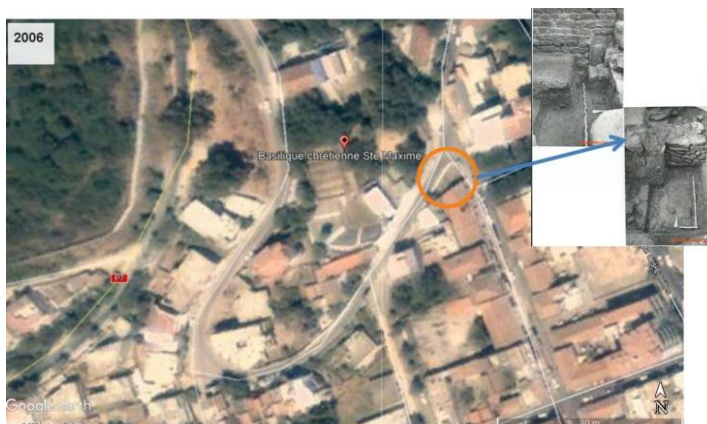
Just nearby, Longuerstay deduced the presence of vestiges, testifying to the urban Decumanus, as well as the archaeological significance of the whole territory.

13 Unknown source, Towards 1900, Old postcards from the Basilica, Sahbi Hemissi, Tunis, Tunisia



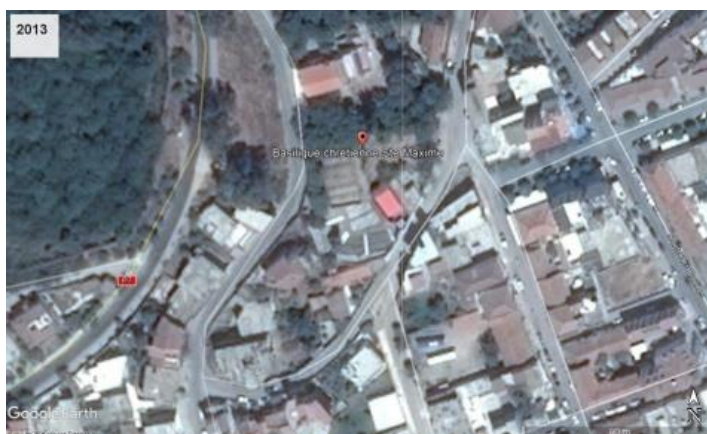
14M. LONGUERSTAY, 1988, Excavations carried out by the archeologist, national Institute of Heritage, Tunis

³ But it should be noted, in addition to the archaeological importance of the region, that the Basilica of Saint Maximus, which was an ancient cistern, also has exceptional architectural qualities and remains perceived as an architectural landmark.



But referring to the urban development plan, and particularly in the perimeter of the Basilica, we notice a significant contradiction between the status of a «classified historical monument» and the vocation of the area within the 200m area. In this area, a construction with the height of 18m totally hides the Basilica. But we also notice that nothing prevents building on the remains of the Decumanus.

As it can be seen, this part has witnessed, over the years (from 2006 to 2021), large and tall buildings. One can identify the importance of urbanisation all around the Basilica and near the remains uncovered by analysis of the shadow of the buildings can give an idea of their respective heights (confirmed by the photographs taken on the spot). The Basilica is clearly obscured and the construction clearly hides the monument.



15Google Earth, 2006, 2013 and 2021, Evolution of the urban fabric around the basilica, ©Google Earth Pro

The Basilica between Protection and Vulnerability

In 2020/2021, I represented the Institute in a joint operation between the Institute, the municipality and some associations, for the restoration of the basilica Saint Maximus. This operation, which I monitored as a specialist in heritage architecture, succeeded in remedying important pathologies threatening the very existence of the Basilica. This latter which problems of humidity, aging, water infiltration, and of bad use and bad restorations. As the Basilica was a municipal property, the National Heritage Institute accompanied the operation rather as the validator of solutions than the technical provider.

From this perspective, and in the absence of an architectural approach of reconversion of the abovementioned monument, my role consisted in upgrading the studies carried out by the architect, directing the pathological records, choosing the appropriate materials for the intervention, controlling and correcting the execution of the various batches, as well as removing and demolishing some additions that have harmed the monument.

My work, also, dealt with the validation of some choices of carpentry work, and the architect made a lot of efforts to ensure a suitable lighting of the place by reducing the slats of old shutters to be replaced. A considerable effort was also made by the architect and the contractor to ensure the installation of electrical cable trays that not only caused no harm to the interior atmosphere, but also, added an exceptional artistic lighting as well as provided a double reserve of wiring for a potential functional use, such as an exhibition.



16D.Laribi, 2021, Saint Maximus basilica : the state pre and post- restoration of the interior, National School of architecture, Tunis, Tunisia

As for my part, as a heritage architect, a major problem arose and persisted despite the success of the one-off operation. In our case, “restoring” could only affect the monument’s interior, the roofs and some exterior walls. In my opinion, the external landscape remains completely disordered, particularly with the presence of authorized constructions all around the monument, which contribute to the visual cacophony, something uncontrollable but supported by the current regulation of the area and which probably caused us to lose such interesting remains.



17D.Laribi, 2021, immediate state of the environment at the basilica, National School of architecture, Tunis, Tunisia

In regard to the surrounding environment of the monument, a poor occupation of the square in front of the Basilica considerably reduces the importance of the valorizing effort due to bleachers, a scene painted in bitumen for reasons of infiltration of water, and changing rooms for cultural activities. In my opinion, this was not well thought, arbitrary, and carried out long before the official classification of the monument by the care of the municipality.

So, our reflection focused on the effectiveness of this critical but timely intervention. After completing the restoration of this architectural gem, today we wonder if the urgent intervention to remedy the problems of this monument has served well to valorize it, or was it just a first rescue operation that must be followed imperatively by other actions.

On the other hand, we ask ourselves the question in our specific case, whether, in the end, the problem was the ineffectiveness of the regulation itself or the inability to apply the right one.

The restoration of the Basilica of Saint Maximus opened the door to a debate as painful as necessary, and was for me the opportunity to conduct this reflection which was intended to be analytical, but also to construct for better perspectives.



18 D.Laribi, 2021, the stage and the bleachers, National School of architecture, Tunis, Tunisia

Conclusion

Through this paper, we attempted to explore the situation of the built heritage in Tabarka and its relationship with the urban fabric. Hence, we clearly noted the significant difference in the state of conservation, as well as the damage caused by the urban fabric between the two parts which testify to the heritage importance of the city. Moreover, although the island is a subject to a patrimonial vocation to protect it against any urban or other intervention, the urbanized part of the island opposite the shore with the evolution of the urban fabric, had very bad consequences on the preservation of this heritage, especially and specially, on the Basilica.

This part has, indeed, benefited from existing laws of protection of built heritage. However, the controversy between the basic principles of said protection, which must be strictly respected, and between the reality of the land use plan, which applies only part of these principles, makes its application random and ineffective.

After the restoration, the Basilica of Tabarka has been partially preserved mainly in its interior, still the immediate outdoor environment is not protected and there is an important contrast between the restored part and its courtyard as the buildings all around the Basilica hide it completely.

It should be remembered that despite its status as a listed historical monument, the Basilica was before its restoration in a state of degradation for years. Even though the institute, associations and municipality, managed to save the interior and the roofs, we were totally aware that the vocation of the urban area around the Basilica is in a total contradiction with the vital protection that the listed monument was given.

We, therefore, believe that any law protecting the built heritage must be followed by a local conservation strategy. In this regard, and being aware of the need to complement a restoration action by another party, I started thinking about a plan that would complement what we started.

And in cooperation with the Municipality of Tabarka, the work focused on two key points:

- First, the project to restore the Basilica has raised the inhabitants' awareness of the importance of their heritage threatened by the urban development. In this sense, the National Heritage Institute has ensured the establishing of agreements with local authorities to remedy the lack of conservation and the valorisation of the monument and its surroundings. Thus, it worth creating a cultural function in the monument that will contribute to the development of the Basilica. Currently, we are moving towards a museum project of the history of the city of Tabarka, which is a conversion operation that will take into consideration the external environment adjoining the Basilica as well as the interior. Furthermore, the same convention aims to better present and preserve the existing vestiges around the Basilica.
- The same action encouraged the establishment of a specific road map for the development and rehabilitation of the perimeter of the Basilica of Saint Maxime, which was impossible before the restoration, and supported today by the participation of various local associations, including ATTS and the Green Country. Indeed, the existing buildings have damaged both the remains and the urban landscape, but today reflection is launched, and solutions can remedy the situation. This will be extremely sad if not completed. In my position of a heritage architect, I always find myself in this strategy of working at multiple scales and speeds, and I am fully aware that there is still much to do for this part.

Glossary⁴

- **Conservation:** (ICOMOS terminology)
 1. Conservation means all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance. (*Australia Burra Charter*).
 2. All efforts designed to understand cultural heritage, know its history and meaning, ensure its material safeguard and, as required, its presentation, restoration and enhancement. (Cultural heritage is understood to include monuments, groups of buildings and sites of cultural value as defined in article one of the World Heritage Convention). (*Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention, held at Nara, Japan, from 1-6 November 1994*)
 3. Concerned with the transmission of cultural heritage, with its significant values intact and accessible to the greatest degree possible. (*Recording, Documentation and Information Management for Historic Places - Guiding Principles; Getty Conservation Institute, 2008*).
- **Cultural heritage:** a cultural heritage is, in its broadest sense, both a product and a process, which provides societies with a wealth of resources that are inherited from the past, created in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. Most importantly, it includes not only tangible, but also natural and intangible heritage
- **groups of buildings:** groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;
- **Historic monument:**
 1. The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event. This applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time. (*Venice Charter Art.1*).
 2. Refers to monuments with local, regional, or international political, cultural, or artistic significance. (*In Getty Research - Art & Architecture Thesaurus Online*)
- **monuments:** architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;
- **Reconversion: Verb; to reconvert** To cause to undergo conversion to a former state. (*Webster's II Dictionary, 1988*).
- **Restoration:** means returning the existing fabric of a place to a known earlier state by removing accretions or by reassembling existing components without the introduction of new material. (*Australia Burra Charter*)
- **sites:** works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.

⁴ Definitions of UNESCO and ICOMOS

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