

Restoration: Tunisia with a touch of Hellenism

Restoration. A word that stood out for me on my recent trip to Tunisia – a word which succinctly captures what the Greek community are aspiring to and what I in turn having been seeking for 10 years.

Tunisia is picturesque Mediterranean country. Pristine beaches to the north, the Sahara in the south, the Arab culture of the East and a touch of influence from the West (via the French colonial years). It has been a melting pot of history's great cultures: Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Berbers, Arabs and Ottomans.

What most people won't know is the long history of Greek speakers in Tunisia. Indeed, across North Africa, the presence of Greeks can be traced back to the merchants and traders who set up towns in Egypt in Antiquity through to the Byzantine occupation of the region from 535 AD – the last Byzantine territory to fall was Ceuta (Spanish enclave in Morocco) in 711 AD!! In fact, for the uninitiated, Greek cities could be found in Libya, notably Cyrenaica, Egypt under Alexander and the Ptolomies and a number of Byzantine cities developed in the 6th Century AD, as far a field as Algeria.

The only Hellenic city in Antiquity that was established in Tunisia was by the Greeks of Cyrenaica in the 5th Century BC – a port called Neapolis (Nabuel). It could have been far different had Agathocles of Syracuse (Sicily) defeated the Carthaginians during a lengthy war between 311 – 306 BC.

Greek was, arguably, one of North Africa's key languages for between 1200 – 1400 years. However, the advancing Arabs, having swept through Egypt during the 640's AD finally overpowered a gallant Byzantine resistance in Tunisia by 698. This led to the decline of the Greek language in North Africa (except in Alexandria, Egypt) and a decline in Christianity as people chose to convert to Islam or migrate to other Byzantine territories.

Restoration

I was fortunate enough to interview the head of the Greek church of Tunisia, who holds the significant and ancient title of 'His Eminence, Archbishop of Carthage and all North Africa.' I asked him what role the Church was playing in Tunisia and he told me, 'Restoration.....of the Greek traditions.'

His Eminence, Alexios Leontaritis, is a relatively young and energetic person. His title is significant as it dates back to the Byzantine era. The congregation in the capital of Tunis is about 60 people strong. I was privileged enough to attend a service on 2 occasions and was impressed by what I witnessed in the stunning church of St George, built by the Hellenic community in 1847. The passion of the small group made it feel

as though there were hundreds of people worshipping and praying. Interestingly, the Greeks in Byzantine times called themselves Romans so it's ironic that the church is located at Rue de Rome (just a few blocks from Greek Street).

In a land where 98% of the population adheres to Islam, I felt that the small Greek Community are more than maintaining a Greek presence, they have been 'resurrecting' the Hellenic spirit of yesteryear. You see, not only was there a strong Greek presence during early medieval times, the Greek community in the 19th Century numbered an impressive 8000. Many of them were sponge divers from the Dodecanese Islands as well as traders. However, over time the Greeks who had moved to Tunisia for commercial activities gradually returned to Greece.

His Eminence is responsible for all the Greek churches in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania, which numbers about 10 churches. What is interesting is that the Greek Church has jurisdiction over the Russian church in Bizerte, Tunisia, and another in Rabat, Morocco. In addition, there is a good relationship with Catholicism. In Mauritania, the Greek Church conducts services in the Catholic Church. In turn the Catholics make use of the Greek Church in Sfax (Tunisia).

In the courtyard next to the Greek Church in Tunis, is the office for the Greek community. I met with Kuria Dina who is Secretary for the Church and the Greek Community. She moved to Tunisia over 30 years ago and is married to a Tunisian. Her role is to oversee the Greek language school which has over 40 students – a mix of Greeks and Tunisians and to communicate with the Greek community. I met one of her students, Ahmed, aged 22, who was learning Greek..... so he could communicate with his Greek girlfriend!

Local Knowledge

I was keen to find out if Tunisians knew much about the Byzantine history of the country. I was pleasantly surprised by the knowledge exhibited by 2 friendly locals I met who work for Tunisia.com and who live in the picturesque seaside town of Bizerte. Bizerte was once a fortified Byzantine town. Sipping my coffee and talking to Ramzi and Sana, I fixed my eyes on the old walls of the Medina in the background. These walls, known as the Double Kasbah, contain traces of the original Byzantine fortifications. Ramzi and Sana told me how they learnt about the

Byzantine presence at school and it was they who told me about Nabuel. However, not everyone I met was aware of the Byzantine presence in Tunisia, as I usually received puzzled looks whenever I asked about Byzantine ruins. Though this can also be attributed to the fact that few people speak English (one of the charms of a visit to Tunisia).

Carthage

As a student of history, Carthage was always a favourite subject. Sitting in the classroom of Kingsgrove High School debating my teacher about the superpower status of ancient Carthage, I n-



ever thought I would actually visit. Whilst Carthage has an amazing array of archaeological sites, it was the Byzantine ruins that I had come to see. At the Antonine Baths, facing the Mediterranean, I found a number of Byzantine ruins. This includes the 6th Century Basilica, Baptistery, Christian era statues and Mosaics.

I also located the ruins of the 6th Century AD Byzantine Basilica on the road to Carthage. The Basilica is known as Damous el Karita. However, I struggled to find the excavations of a Byzantine site, Bir Ftouha, on the edge of the archaeological zone. I asked locals, a police man on horse back, a shepherd, a friendly German jogger, and anyone else who I came across. I must have spent 2 hours walking in the middle of nowhere, to no avail. However, after several kilometres and with the advent of night skies, I came across an impressive Roman forum, which apparently contained Byzantine ruins but not those I had come to photograph.

Oudna and other Byzantine sites

This is a site I won't forget in a hurry. After flagging down a taxi to take me the 25 km outside the capital, the driver had to make a stop, for the call of nature as he put it in a bottle on the highway! On the return journey, another excitable taxi driver wanted to show me his collection of pictures and tell me everything about Tunisia – in French.

Despite language barriers, I found the taxi drivers in Tunisia to be fantastic – generally honest and entertaining and my passport to Byzantine sites.

Over the years I have become accustomed to being the only foreigner stuck in the middle of nowhere looking for sites. At Oudna, I was on my own with archaeologists, workers, a security guard and dozens of sheep. Unlike Carthage, there appears to be a decided ignorance of Byzantine ruins. There are no Byzantine or Christian era tags at the site and of course all aspects of the

site were labelled as Roman – even though some of the buildings were built or upgraded during Byzantine times. After pointing this out, I was given access to maps and information in an office. Thankfully my Arabic is rusty and I could make out.....well, actually I couldn't understand a word!

At Oudna I found key ancient sites, all impressive and well preserved. The Capitol (the Forum) was upgraded during Byzantine times and turned into a fortress. Interestingly, a modern farmhouse is located inside the fortress. Oudna was used by Byzantine commanders as a base almost 1500 years ago. The best way

to identify Byzantine aspects of the site are by the large blocks of stones used on the exterior of some of the buildings – the Romans used smaller bricks.

I remember communicating with an American professor before travelling to Tunisia. He made the comment that there are numerous Byzantine sites across the country. The most notable that I could locate through my research are as follows: Ain Tounga, a fortress located in Tebersouk, ruins at the inland Musti, a fortress and church at Haidra which are located near the border with Algeria, ruins at Sbeitla located near the Sahara and an intact oil press at Thurburbo Majus. I can only speculate that there are perhaps over 50 sites in Tunisia that contain Byzantine elements.

The Future

During my teenage years I turned my back on my heritage. However, I have spent the last decade restoring my own sense of what it means to be a Hellenic and the more I travel to places in the Diaspora with Greek speakers and/or a connection to our Byzantine past, the more I am glad to have embraced and 'restored' my own sense of heritage. In Tunisia, there is a small group of dedicated people who are working on the restoration of the Greek tradition to an area that was once thriving with Greek speakers. I know that they will succeed and should I ever return I am sure the fruits of their labour will continue to be evident.