ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN ROMAN BAKCHIAS: RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES

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After sixteen excavation campaigns undertaken, at first in collaboration with the University of Lecce, and currently only by the Department of Archaeology of the University of Bologna, with the scientific collaboration of the Department of Religious Studies of La Sapienza University of Rome, archaeological evidence has provided a clear-cut picture of the Kom Umm el-Atl site in north-eastern Fayyum where the ancient Bakchias lay.

Unfortunately, Bakchias and the neighboring sites of Karanis and Philadelphia suffered serious damages caused by the sebbakhin, when the sebbakh large scale exploitation (fig. 1), which started in the 1920s

Fig. 1: General view of Bakchias.
lasting well into the early 1930s, irremediably destroyed Philadelphia and badly damaged the other sites. This has to be taken into account in order to understand the progress of archaeological research that has utterly changed our approach to the long history of our kome. 

When the British expedition directed by Grenfell, Hunt, and Hogarth conducted in 1896 a brief excavation campaign intended to retrieve papyri, Kom Umm el-Atl, which they readily identified as the site of the ancient city of Bakchias, did show an overall layout completely different from the one that would have appeared to us about one hundred years later, in October 1993, when we started to work on it.

Still almost intact, it showed the characteristic layout of a rounded mound on top of which the well preserved walls of the village temple (which later turned out to be one of the temples) were still visible at the surface. The temple was promptly exposed by the British scholars who also drew a plan identifying it as the seat of the cult of Soknobraisis, a form of the god Sobek, who was worshiped throughout the Fayyum and had his major cult centre at Shedet/Krokodilopolis.

Both the papyri recovered in the excavations and a few ones that, having come to light in the course of the sebbakhin soil removal operations, had found their way onto the antiquities market whence they were retrieved in the 1930s, reported the name of a further god, Soknobraisis, another form of Sobek, providing a valuable source of information on this site and allowing to delineate a historical outline which in effect does not differ from that of other villages of the Ptolemaic and Roman period, as attested both by papyri and archaeological sites surrounding the region and linked to them. Officers were the same everywhere, as well as the same public buildings were mentioned in the papyri; limited was the range of activities attested within a predominantly agricultural economy.

Even divinities and cults relied on a uniform tradition shared throughout Egypt, with the exception of local deities and of some reported Greek divinities who were suspected to be, and most likely must have been, purely Egyptian deities assimilated to Greek gods. 

The archaeological facies of the Fayyum centres suggested that all the villages had been founded in the early Ptolemaic period and definitively abandoned between Late Antiquity and the early Arab period as a result of the progressive reduction of cultivable areas, a theory widely accepted; the only attested exception was Narmouthis/Medinet Madi, founded during the reign of Amenemhat III of the 12th Dynasty,