

Thaenae

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On the coast, 12 km S of Sfax near the lighthouse. Mentioned several times by ancient authors, the city marked the termination of the royal fossa built by Scipio to delimit Roman from Numidian territory. A civitas, then a colony under Hadrian, the town prospered as the extent of the site and the richness of some of the excavated buildings indicate.

From 1900 to 1914, the site was rifled by the soldiers of the garrison for funerary furnishings contained in the tombs; several hectares of necropoleis which extended along the principal exit routes of the town were turned topsy-turvy. Mausolea—some of them hexagonal in form—were found. In the middle of the most important of these necropoleis, some great public baths of exceptionally advanced, baroque plan were excavated in 1904 and the only mosaic, representing Orpheus, which had been laid aside, was destroyed during the Second World War.

Later on, especially between 1947 and 1955, the digging principally reached the monuments in the interior of the town, the most remarkable among them a monumental enclosure of which one side was 2.5 km comprising a gate with two semicircular towers.

In 1954-55 a bathing establishment situated in the section SE of the town was uncovered. Constructed of mediocre material and altered during the course of the centuries, the edifice presented—in spite of a very bad state of preservation—two important levels that indicate a change of function. A bath belonging to a private house must have been later converted into public baths because the plan of the edifice does not correspond with the usual type of plan for baths. Mosaics paved the floor, some fragments of which are notable for their decoration: a boxing bout, a rural villa, a ship manned by cupids. Some fragments of painted frescos were also collected there.

The Baths of the Months, excavated in 1961, are more remarkable for their extent and their state of preservation since the walls have survived to a height of several meters, allowing the reconstruction even of the roof, which was built of groin and barrel vaults. There were luxurious latrines. Frescos and a veneer of marble covered the walls. The whole was paved with geometric and figured mosaics, among them the one called The Seasons and the Months. In the course of the excavation, a coin hoard dating from the end of the 3d c. and the beginning of the 4th was found.

Two other houses, still unpublished, were uncovered at the same time. The mosaic in the triclinium of one is of a marine scene portraying cupids fishing, ships, and fish, and includes a head of Oceanus. The other house revealed a painted portrait of Dionysos with a nimbus, remarkably well-preserved, which has been taken to the Bardo Museum in Tunis. Several of these objects found in the course of the excavations are on display at the Sfax Museum.

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