Essouk-Tadmekka: An Early Islamic Trans-Saharan Market Town by Sam Nixon. Journal of African Archaeology Monograph Series, volume 12. Brill 2017. Hb. €125.00/\$144.00, ISBN-13: 9789004346147. E-book: €125.00/\$144.00, ISBN-13: 978-90-04-34899-8.

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Since the early 2000s, due to political instability and insecurity, the archaeological research was a little slowed down in the North of Mali and more widely in the South of Sahara. The implementation of large-scale programs on the Saharan Islamic sites, like Tegdaoust and Koumbi Saleh in Mauritania during the 1960s, seems today unthinkable and impracticable. The research studies led by Timothy Insoll then Shoichiro Takezawa and Mamadou Cissé at Gao, as well as Sam Nixon's work on the site of Essouk-Tadmekka whose monograph is presented here, are among the last works led within this geographical area and achieved in the 1990's and 2000s (Insoll 2000; Takezawa and Cissé 2012).

The 24 chapters, articulated around 5 large parts and around 14 appendices, present the results of an excavation campaign managed by Sam Nixon, within the framework of his doctoral research, between December 2014 and March 2015. It represents the first archaeological exploration of one of the most important crossroads of the trans-Saharan trade in western Africa at the beginning of Islamic time. The readers who wish for a summary of the results of these excavations can read the published article some year earlier in the online journal *Afriques*, which is one synthesis (Nixon, 2013). Beyond the very detailed presentation of the chronostratigraphy of the various sectors excavated, the interest of the work remains essentially the valuation of the finds by registering it in a global research focused on the question of an early trans-Saharan trade. About ten specialists, who did not participate in the field campaign, were associated as contributors of this work.

The first part, divided into three chapters, acts as general introduction. It is made in both an erudit and scholarly way and allows the reader to follow the progress of the work. The general issue of the research is also detailed, it is question of giving a perspective towards the premature trans-Saharan connections between North and Western Africa by being interested more particularly in a commercial road controlled by Ibadi connecting Wargla, Tadmekka and Gao, contemporary of the western axis Sijilmâsa-Tegdaoust, under the Fatimid influence, more known and better documented by the historical sources and archaeology.

The site of Tadmekka, “the Mecca-like” of al-Bakri (p.12), covering a surface of about fifty hectares in the dry region of Adrar des Iforas in the north-eastern Mali, fascinate and attracts historians and archaeologists since the beginning of the 20th century. Among the main protagonists of this early research, we can quote De Gironcourt who published in 1920 the first detailed mapping of the site (whose absence in this work seems to us regrettable), then Raymond Mauny who conducted in 1948 a campaign of aerial photographs (not published but transmitted to Sam Nixon by Paulo de Moraes Farias), which enabled him to notice the exten-

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sion of remains of stone buildings, well preserved and partially covered by the aeolian sand. So, in his notebooks reports, Mauny described ruins extending on 1 km from North to South on both sides of a wadi as well as on an island situated in its center.

Both chapters of the second part linger over the results of a survey made on the central zone of the site and its surroundings. It was question of recording the nature of the visible structures, of making a systematic collection of the on-surface material to establish comparisons with that discovered in stratigraphical context, but also to determine areas of siting of units to excavate. The first information is that the city does not arrange a surrounding wall, the cliffs which surround it playing therefore the role of natural protection (p. 32). The observable buildings are mainly of rectangular plan, including a set of rooms ordered around a central courtyard, a classic model in the Islamic world which we also find in the Berber tradition (p. 105). Next to this domestic architecture, religious remains were spotted during prospection, namely two mosques on the east shore of the wadi, viewable on aerial photographs, as well as a *musalla* in the North of the ruins of the city (Chapter 4). The cemetery survey surrounding the central area has enabled Moraes Farias to prove the existence of Arabic inscriptions on gravestones dated from the 11th century (Moraes Farias 2003). New inscriptions discovered on the surrounding cliffs where Arabic writing is associated with the Berber alphabet (*tifinagh*), lead the authors to a writing *tifinagh* by Berber pastoral communities frequenting the valley, and the Arabic writings by sedentary populations were involved in the commercial life of Tadmekka (Chapter 5).

The third part presents the archaeological results of operations conducted by Sam Nixon between January and March 2005, the first real systematic excavations, after a one-day test-pit not documented and made by Mauny during the 1950s and, more recently, some illegal investigations practised by a local Tuareg group searching for an archaeological proof of their ancestral property on Essouk (Nixon, *ibid*). During this brief and unique field campaign, three sectors were excavated for a total surface of 56 m²: Ek-A, located on the east bank of the wadi, in border of a likely wide commercial complex (Chapter 7) ; Ek-B, south of the previous and near cliffs, on an area including on surface a representative spreading of trans-Saharan trade (Chapter 8) ; Ek-C, located on the island and whose the choice of siting can seem totally arbitrary (Chapter 9).

While these three chapters are interested in the archaeological and stratigraphical description of these sectors, by emphasizing the archaeological facts, the following chapter lingers over the chronology (Chapter 10), based on AMS dating on ceramics containing organic materials and carbonized botanical samples, whereas the last chapter of this part is dedicated to architecture (Chapter 11), combining datas stemming from the excavation and surface observations. In spite of a generalization of the dry stone in the construction, earth was also used as material of construction under the shape of mud bricks and *pisé*. The use of this last constructive technique in the unit Ek-A, for the preparation of what was interpreted as a staircase, seems to us however doubtful, especially if the stone was plentiful in the region.

Moreover, the lack of an accurate description for concerned structures showing marks of coffering and packing down of the sediment, or still the not definition of this term by Nixon in the case of Tadmekka, consolidate this idea (Aurenche *et al.* 2011). This passage on the architecture is also sorely lacking metric data and we can miss topographic records, in spite of a general plan of the site established through the aerial photographs of Mauny, maybe a con-

sequence of the lack of time and priorities. Finally, although numerous plans were realized reporting various phases of reorganization of the urban housing, the absence of systematic legends reduces clearly their immediate legibility.

The fourth part concerns the huge and exemplary work about finds (macroscopic and microscopic observations, chemical analysis, comparative studies), which represents the heart of this monograph, including ten chapters on approximately 136 pages (against 64 pages for the archaeological part) to whom it is necessary to add hundred pages of complementary appendices to the various studies: pottery (Nixon and MacDonald, Chapter 12), glass vessels (Nixon, Lankton and Dussubieux, Chapter 13), beads (Lankton, Nixon, Robertshaw and Dussubieux, Chapter 14), gold processing remains (Nixon and Rehren, Chapter 15), crucible-steel making and other metalworking remains (Rehren and Nixon, Chapter 16), coins and other metal artefacts (Nixon, Chapter 17), miscellaneous material culture (Nixon, Chapter 18), eggshell (Sidell, Chapter 19), faunal remains (MacDonald, Chapter 20) and plant remains (Fuller, Murray and Nixon, Chapter 21). We cannot here get into detail of every chapter, which would be a fastidious task. But let us indicate, beyond the “classic” furniture of the Saharan Islamic sites (pottery, glass, beads), the most significant discovery on this site: moulds and crucibles for the coinage of a very high-purity gold at Tadmekka (Nixon *et al.* 2011).

Finally, the fifth and last part is dedicated to the synthesis and the discussion of the data, beginning first with an overview of the combined archaeological sequence of three sectors of search and articulated around four big chronological phases suggesting a more or less permanent activity of the site between the 8th and the 15th century AD (Chapter 22). In a second time, this chronostratigraphical sequence is replaced in a historical, political and social dimension on the scale of Western Africa and the Islamic world (Chapter 23). Well marked by the imprint of the Ibadi sect in the first stages of its sedentary occupation, the 12th century seems to be considered as a turning point in the history of the site, corresponding to the rise of Almoravids in the South of Sahara and Sahel, of which “their reported actions included destruction of the trading centre of Audaghust, as well as the widespread persecution of Ibadi Muslims” (p. 264). Archeologically, this period is relected on the site of Tadmekka by an abandonment of some sectors and reconstructions operated in Ek-A unit. Chapter 24 concluding this monograph boosts the debate concerning the emergence and the development of medieval trans-Saharan trade, where Tadmekka leads a major role, as center of diffusion of Islam in Western Africa and a main hub for technological transfers regarding the work of gold. The field operations well realized by Sam Nixon offer a first overview of the archaeological potential of this site, of whom we should not however draw hasty conclusions in the views of the tiny part diagnosed until now.

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