

ARCHAEOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT

Conservation of the cultural patrimony of Sebaste and the training of the local population

ATS pro Terra Sancta

Introduction

ATS pro Terra Sancta has been active in the town of Sebaste for several years, working on projects aimed at the preservation and development of the town's exceptional archaeological and cultural patrimony. The activities conducted, supported initially by the *Cooperazione Italiana* and currently by the *Fondazione Cariplo*, complement the conservation of the historic town centre with a continuous training programme for the local community and take the opportunity to develop the town's historical and cultural riches for the benefit of the population of the village, with particular attention given to women and young people. The conservation work next to the main mosque, which dates from the medieval period, has already saved various cruciform buildings inside the historic centre from collapse and neglect. These buildings were in a serious state of degradation and suffered from structural instability.

The town takes its name from Sebastia, the city founded in 25 B.C. by Herod the Great on the site of ancient Samaria, capital of the northern Israelite kingdom. Archaeological excavation has brought to light spectacular remains, still visible today from the acropolis, including a Hellenistic tower and the remains of a Roman temple dedicated to the Emperor Augustus, the forum, the basilica, the theatre, the stadium, the walls and the colonnaded street.

Development outside the walls of the old town first began during the Islamic period and continued later during the Byzantine period. The town's historic centre is built on the remains of the Roman necropolis and on the layers built up from the medieval to the Ottoman period. This part of the town became famous during the first Christian period when a legend developed that the body of John the Baptist, decapitated in the Fortress of Machaerous in Jordan and recovered by his disciples, was buried here together with the bodies of the prophets Elisha and Obadiah. A church was built on the site of John the Baptist's tomb during the Byzantine period and it is represented, flanked by two towers, in the 8th century floor mosaic in the Church of Saint Stephen of Um Rasas in Jordan. In the 9th century, however, the church is recorded as being destroyed, possibly as the result of an earthquake. In the 12th century the Crusaders rebuilt the cathedral from its foundations on a monumental scale. In July 1187 Sebaste surrendered to the armies of Saladin. The cathedral was transformed into a mosque and dedicated to the prophet Yahia, the Muslim name for John the Baptist.

For centuries the tomb of John the Baptist was visited by pilgrims and travellers while the old town was slowly deserted and the population moved to the area around the mosque. From the middle of the last century several buildings made of cement invaded the centre, while the historic

houses were slowly deserted. When we arrived, the centre of the town, especially the lower levels, was abandoned and full of dirt and rubble.

The conservation activities

Today's Pro Terra Sancta staff started dealing with the degradation of the village in 2002. A series of visits, together with the scientific support of father Michele Piccirillo and the *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum* had highlighted the value of the buildings and the urgent need for preservation work. Thanks to a series of projects supported by *Cooperazione Italiana*, the first redevelopment work began. From a small nucleus of buildings, the conservation work gradually expanded to redevelop a substantial part of the historic centre, supporting the town's economy and providing jobs on the construction site for artisans and the local labour force.

A particularly interesting moment occurred when, following the removal of rubble and detritus from the area, the remains of an imposing fortification were found. The fortification contains a tower with a spiral staircase and also a chapel which probably dates back to the time of the crusades, that is to say the beginning of the 12th century. In the summer of 2009 the remnants of two exquisitely-made floor mosaics were also uncovered, probably remains from the Byzantine monastery adjacent to the church.

Materials incompatible with the survival of ancient original structures have been used for centuries, in particular cement which was used by inhabitants during the last century to build and plaster various rooms and stairs on top of the rubble. These materials have been carefully removed, improving the stability of the buildings. Once they were made safe, the buildings were restructured in a way that respected their historical value and used to host the social activities promoted and delivered by the local council and the Palestinian association *Mosaic Centre* including a youth centre, guest rooms and a tourist information centre.

2010: The project supported by the *Fondazione Cariplo*

Since January 2010, the work of Pro Terra Sancta in the village has been supported by the *Fondazione Cariplo*. Work began with the resumption of development of the historic centre, providing work for the local labour force. The aim of this work is to expand the redeveloped area and increase the capacity of the guest rooms. A section of the historic centre has been cleaned and redeveloped, revealing under the dirt a courtyard, a room with three beds, a bathroom and a little open space from which one can enjoy a view over the hills.

With the aim of preserving the greatest possible number of structures of historic interest, unsafe buildings have been strengthened through the intrusion of mortar. Surfaces have been cleaned and certain parts have been rebuilt for safety reasons. The process of securing and adapting historic buildings is based on the principal of reversibility and uses materials compatible both with those used in the original buildings and the environment in which the buildings are found. Every effort is made to modify neither the original appearance nor the subsequent stages of the

buildings' development. Work has been done on the damaged areas, clearly highlighting those affected.

The project also provides training for the local population, in particular women and young people. During this first stage of the project, research was conducted into the local produce made by the women of the village with the aim of improving their organoleptic qualities and confection. An initiative is underway which aims to recover a section of the historic centre to be dedicated to the opening of a shop selling traditional produce.

Contacts with the local authorities aimed at the recognition of a local tourist guides course, which the project will organise in the next few months, are at an advanced stage. This course would involve five boys or girls from the village. The course aims to train tourist guides capable of showing visitors the cultural riches of Sebaste, the town's archaeological site and the ruins both in the town and in the entire Nablus province.

On the 8th of March the Custodian of Pro Terra Sancta, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, visited the project and the construction site.