

I. Introduction: The History of Research on Meninx and our Objectives

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Why Meninx?

Meninx, situated on the southeast shore of Djerba (Fig. 1), was the capital of the island during the Roman Empire and eponymous with the island's name in Antiquity⁷. The outstanding importance of this seaport derived especially from the fact that, as reported by Pliny the Elder in the later 1st cent. A.D., it was one of the main production centres of purple dye in the Mediterranean⁸. Meninx was one of the largest cities in Roman North Africa⁹. However, there is a striking contrast between the former importance of the city and its present appearance.

The site of Meninx, which is today called El Kantra («bridge») with reference to the nearby causeway which links Djerba to the mainland, offers a rather poor view. What can be seen is a slightly hilly landscape covered by sandy soil, the surface of which is full of ceramic fragments and crushed murex shells. These unspectacular

but innumerable remains indicate the enormous size of the ancient city, which extended from the modern shore for about 500 m inland to the northwest and from the beginning of the modern causeway in the southwest for about 1.5 km to the northeast (Figs. 2, 3). Here and there, the badly preserved ruins of a few isolated buildings become visible, while the location of the Forum is indicated by numerous monumental architectural blocks that lie scattered around and testify to the wealth of the city in Roman Imperial times.

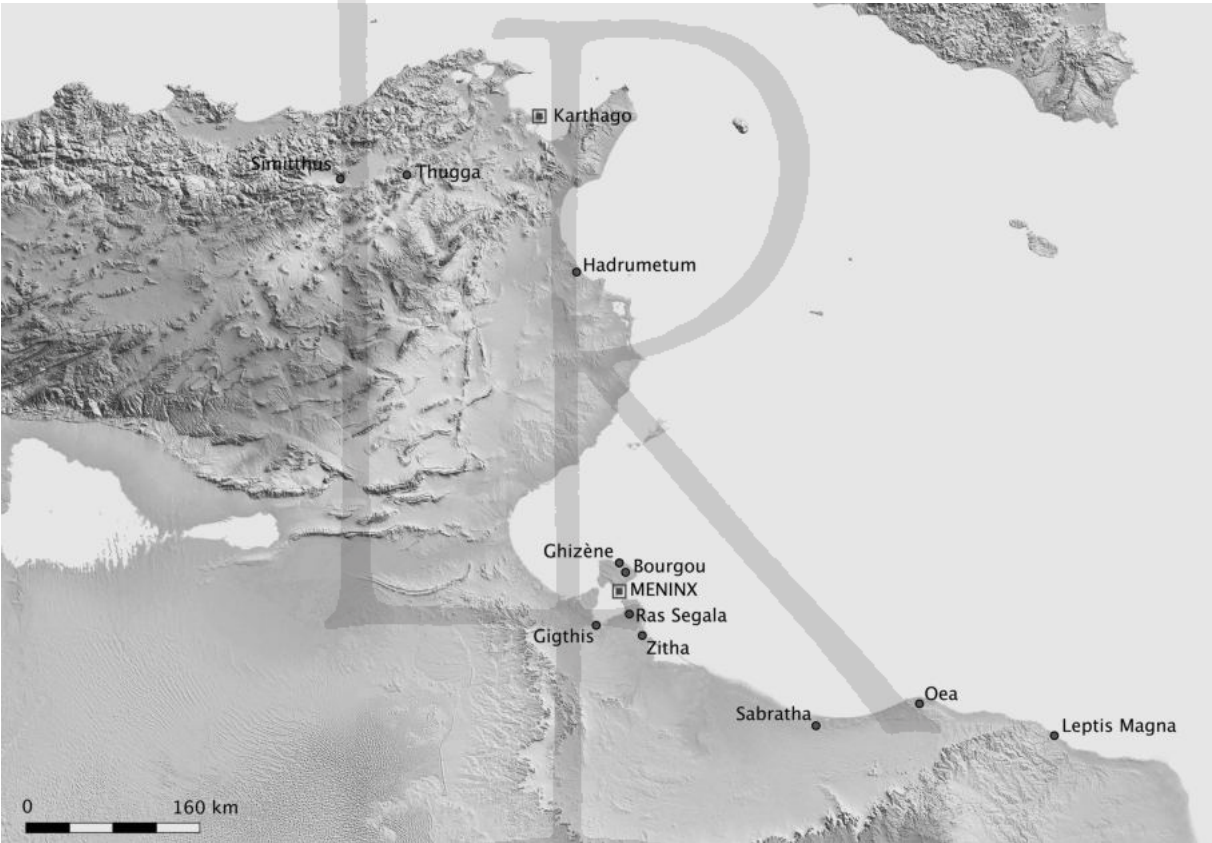
Why did we choose this rather unappealing place for conducting an archaeological project? There were two reasons. One of them was the great discrepancy between the outstanding importance of the city in Antiquity and its very marginal role in modern scholarship. The second reason, which is prior to the first one, was the fact that this site had not attracted much interest in the colonial

⁷ For the ancient sources see below.

⁸ Plin. nat. 9, 127; see below.

⁹ See Hobson 2020, esp. 297–313. Hobson created a settlement hierarchy for the Roman cities in North Africa, based on the three criteria municipalisation, monumentality, and size, and categorised more than 1000 sites into eight classes. Meninx is attributed

to «Class 1», which contains «settlements [which] possessed a built-up area of at least 100 ha with many public monuments» (p. 297). According to this classification, the metropolises Carthage and Lepcis Magna belong to «Class 1a», Hadrumetum, Iol Caesar-ea, Lepti Minus, and Thaenae to «Class 1b», followed by Meninx, Cyrene and Ptolemais in «Class 1c» (p. 313).



1 Meninx in its North African context

period from the later 19th cent. onwards when other ancient cities in North Africa, such as Volubilis, Thugga, and Leptis Magna, were rapidly unearthed on a large scale but at the price of proper documentation. Since the ruins of Meninx had only sporadically been affected – and destroyed – by earlier excavations, they remain largely untouched under the present surface of the terrain.

Systematic archaeological research at Meninx started only in the mid-1990s, with a survey project that was conducted on Djerba under the direction of Ali Drine and Elizabeth Fentress from 1996 to 2000. The results

for the Punic and Roman periods were published in a comprehensive monograph in 2009, which is today indispensable for anyone studying the history of Meninx¹⁰.

We will now present an overview first of the ancient sources on Meninx and then of the history of research, referring further for both of these subjects to Elizabeth Fentress and her colleagues’ substantial monograph where all relevant information is easily accessible. After delineating the present state of research, we will briefly say what our questions and intentions were when we started our project in 2015 and finally explain our periodisation.

10 Fentress et al. 2009.

Tunisia - El Kantara

Situation as of September 03, 2015 - WorldView-2 satellite image - 1:14000

Product No. 01
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2 Bou Ghrara Gulf, air photograph



3 Meninx, air photograph

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The Ancient Sources

The literary and epigraphic texts relating to Djerba have been comprehensively compiled and thoroughly discussed by Annarita Agus and Raimondo Zucca in 2002, and then again by Ali Drine and Elizabeth Fentress in their above-mentioned monograph in 2009¹¹. Thus, we will restrict ourselves to a brief outline of what little information can be extracted from the texts.

The toponym »Meninx« is probably of Libyan origin and was later adapted, presumably under the influence of Greek culture, to the Greek term μῆνιγξ, »membrane«¹². The earliest mentions of it are probably Eratosthenes of Cyrene in the 3rd cent. B.C. (according to Pliny¹³) and then Polybius in the 2nd cent. B.C.¹⁴. Both sources report that Meninx is the current name of the famous island of the Lotophagoi, the »Lotus-eaters« described in Homer's *Odyssey*, and this identification is attested by several other authors too¹⁵.

According to some geographical texts, the island is surrounded by shallow water with high tides¹⁶. This is true both for the island in general and in particular for the Gulf of Bou Ghrara, where the city of Meninx was located. Pseudo-Skylax reports that the inhabitants obtained much oil from oleasters, and that, besides the lotus, the island was the home of many types of fruit, wheat, and barley, and had fertile soils¹⁷.

Historical sources for the Hellenistic period are very sparse. Polybius describes an unsuccessful attack led by two Roman consuls »on the island of the Lotus-eaters, called Meninx« in 253 B.C., in the course of which the Roman ships, ignorant of the shallow waters and the tides, ran aground and barely escaped by throwing overboard their heavy cargo¹⁸. Livy, citing Polybius, also briefly mentions that the island of Meninx was devastat-

ed during another Roman attack in 217 B.C., at the beginning of the 2nd Punic War¹⁹.

Since the island was called by the same name as the city of Meninx, it is not always clear which of the two is being referred to in the texts. The majority of the Hellenistic sources, however, clearly refer to the island, whereas the city itself is explicitly mentioned from the 1st cent. A.D. onwards.

Strabo refers to the city by saying that one of the towns on the island of Meninx is homonymous with the island²⁰. As Pliny the Elder reports, the island has two towns (*oppida*): Meninx on the side of the African continent, and Phoar (/Thoar) on the other²¹. Accordingly, the location of Meninx fully complies with its position on the southeast shore of the island, just opposite the mainland. In the Roman imperial era, Meninx was agreed to be the capital of the island²². In the *Stadiasmus Maris Magni*, Meninx is named as the »metropolis« (μητρόπολις) among the many towns on the island, and is said to have a port and water²³.

Furthermore, according to Pliny, Meninx was one of the most famous production centres of purple dye in the Mediterranean: »[Purple] from Tyre is most excellent in Asia, from Meninx and the Gaetulian shore in Africa, and from Laconia in Europe«²⁴. This statement, which posits an analogy between Meninx and Tyre, clearly refers to the city of Meninx since this is the only site on the island where enormous quantities of crushed murex shells testify to the large-scale production of purple dye.

The epigraphic evidence from Meninx is to date very limited, since there are only a few of very fragmented inscriptions²⁵. The most instructive testimony known so far is a dedication to L. Minucius Natalis, the proconsul

11 Agus – Zucca 2002; Fentress et al. 2009, 37–43 with table 3, 1 (with English translations).

12 Agus – Zucca 2002, 1919. It has been assumed that the reference to the medical term μῆνιγξ might have been intended to compare the form of the island to that of the brain, see T. Ghalia in: Fentress et al. 2009, 159.

13 Pliny (Plin. nat. 5, 41) attributes to Eratosthenes the statement that Meninx was the island of the Lotus-eaters (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1933 no. 4; Fentress et al. 2009, 38 no. 2).

14 Pol. 34, 3–4 (= Strab. 1, 2, 17) (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1933 no. 5a; Fentress et al. 2009, 38 no. 4) and Pol. 1, 39 (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1933 no. 5b; Fentress et al. 2009, 38 no. 5).

15 For the relevant sources see Agus – Zucca 2002, 1919 f. (for the name Meninx). 1921 (for the identification with the island of the Lotus-eaters); Fentress et al. 2009, 37 with n. 3 (further literature).

16 Ps-Skylax, *Periplus* 110 (Agus – Zucca 1931 f. no. 2; Fentress et al. 2009, 38 no. 3); Agathem. 5, 22 (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1936 no. 9; Fentress et al. 2009, 40 no. 12).

17 Ps-Skylax, *Periplus* 110 (see above). For a comparison with the archaeobotanical evidence see below chapter IX. 3.

18 Pol. 1, 39 (see above).

19 Liv. 22, 31, 2 (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1936 no. 10; Fentress et al. 2009, 39 no. 7).

20 Strab. 17, 3, 17 (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1935 no. 7d; Fentress et al. 2009, 40 no. 11).

21 Plin. nat. 5, 41 (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1936 no. 12a; Fentress et al. 2009, 40 no. 13).

22 For the relevant sources see Agus – Zucca 2002, 1926 f.

23 *Stadiasmus Maris Magni* 103 (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1939 no. 15; Fentress et al. 2009, 40 no. 16).

24 Plin. nat. 9, 127: Tyri praecipuus hic Asiae, Meninge Africae et Gaetulo litore oceani, in Laconica Europae (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1937 no. 12b; Fentress et al. 2009, 40 no. 14).

25 The inscriptions have been compiled and discussed in Agus – Zucca 2002, 1948–1953 nos. 1–10 (Meninx). 1953 f. no. 11 (Girba).

of *Africa Proconsularis* in 120–121 A.D. by the »Meninxitani«, the citizens of Meninx²⁶.

In the second quarter of the 3rd cent. A.D., the island began slowly to change its name to »Girba«²⁷, which later was transformed into »Djerba«. This process is testified, for example, by Pseudo-Aurelius Victor, who spoke of »the island of Meninx which is now called Girba«²⁸.

It is a controversial question whether or not the main town of the island was renamed in the same way as well. On the one hand, there is an explicit statement by Ptolemy in the 2nd cent. A.D. that Meninx and Girba are two separate towns (πόλεις)²⁹. On the other hand, there are several reasons to think that the city of Meninx changed its name to Girba³⁰. The main argument is that Meninx was still flourishing when it disappeared from the sources in the 3rd cent. A.D., and continued to exist well into the 7th cent. A.D.³¹. For instance, it is otherwise difficult to make sense of why, among the four

towns depicted in the *Tabula Peutingeriana* (Girba, Tispasa, Haribus, and Uchium), Meninx is missing³². Strong arguments for identifying Girba with Meninx are provided by the fact that the textual references to the production of purple dye, as well as to the bishops of the island, fit well with the archaeological evidence from late antique Meninx. The purple dye industry is associated in the texts with Girba from the 3rd cent. A.D. onwards³³, which signifies the continuing importance of Meninx as a production centre of purple. Moreover, all the bishops who are mentioned in the texts from the 4th to the 6th cent. A.D. are said to refer to Girba (*episcopus Girbitanus*)³⁴, and the huge, three-aisled Christian basilica just to the west of Meninx³⁵ not only testifies to the importance of this city in Late Antiquity, but also represents the best candidate for a bishop's church on the island³⁶. Thus, Meninx and Girba were very probably the same city.

A short History of Research

In the above-mentioned monograph on Djerba published in 2009, Ali Drine presents a very thorough and detailed compilation of the modern sources on Meninx³⁷. Consequently, we will give only a summary here, referring to this book for the details.

The exploration of the site began early in the 19th cent. with the Jerbian chronicler Mohammed Abou Ras, who wrote some sentences on the site that focussed on the ruins of the huge basilica to the west of the city, which was called »Girba« at his time³⁸. He was followed by two French travellers – R. Pellissier in 1853 and V.

Guérin in 1862 – who briefly mention the site in the accounts of their journeys through this part of the Ottoman empire³⁹. These as well as some later travellers describe the site as covered by debris, and make reference only to the ruins of some few buildings, architectural pieces scattered across the site, and some statues.

Immediately after the installation of the French protectorate in Tunisia in 1881, excavations were started at some places by French military officers, first by Commandant Massenet in 1881 and then by Lieutenant Gilbert in 1881 and 1882⁴⁰. These and some later excava-

26 CIL VIII, 22785, = AE 1998, 1519 (see Akkari-Weriemmi 2002, 1682 f. fig. 2; Agus – Zucca 2002, 1948–1950 no. 2; Fentress et al. 2009, 41 no. 19). This inscription is placed on a marble slab, now in the Musée Bardo in Tunis. It was detected by P. Gauckler in 1895 as having being reused in a mosque in Sedouikech, a little town next to Meninx from where it likely originates.

27 For the sources testifying to this process of name change, see Agus – Zucca 2002, 1921 f.; Desanges 2003, 303; Fentress et al. 2009, 37. 174–176.

28 Ps.-Aur. Vict. 31: ... in insula Meninge quae nunc Girba dicitur (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1943 no. 26; Fentress et al. 2009, 41 no. 32).

29 Ptolem. 4, 3, 12 (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1939 no. 16; Fentress et al. 2009, 41 no. 20). On this basis, some scholars have proposed locating Girba to the north of the island, in the area of the modern capital Houmt Souk (see, for example, Agus – Zucca 2002, 1921 with n. 45). This identification, however, is highly improbable since any traces whatsoever haven't been found which might indicate the existence of a Roman settlement; see Fentress et al. 2009, 175.

30 The question has been discussed thoroughly and with convincing results by A. Drine and E. Fentress in: Fentress et al. 2009, 174–176.

31 See below.

32 *Tabula Peutingeriana*, Segm. VII 1 (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1946 no. 40; Fentress et al. 2009, 41 no. 27; 84 fig. 6, 12).

33 The *Notitia dignitatum* (Occ. 11, 64–73), for example, list even a Procurator of the purple dye of Girba (Procurator baphii Girbitani provinciae Tripolitanae) (Agus – Zucca 2002, 1931. 1943 no. 27; Fentress et al. 2009, 42 no. 39).

34 For a thorough discussion of the sources see Agus – Zucca 2002, 1927–1930.

35 For this building see below.

36 Cf. Fentress et al. 2009, 43. 175 f. with the important information given by Muhammad Abu Ras in the early 19th cent. that the ruins of this basilica were known as Girba (see below).

37 A. Drine in: Fentress et al. 2009, 43–54.

38 A. Drine in: Fentress et al. 2009, 43.

39 A. Drine in: Fentress et al. 2009, 43 f.

40 A. Drine in: Fentress et al. 2009, 50 f.

tions had the primary goal of detecting precious finds, especially sculpture. The only building that was widely uncovered and attracted some attention during the following decades is the above-mentioned Christian basilica west of Meninx, which was excavated in 1887 by G. Reynier, in 1900 and 1901 by E. Sadoux, and in 1906 by P. Gauckler. This lattermost project produced at least a plan of the building which was published in 1913, even though the excavations were never fully published with it⁴¹. After a long break between the two World Wars, P.-M. Duval carried out excavations in the presumed forum in 1942, which later turned out to be the basilica bordering the square⁴². During the decades between the late 19th cent. and Duval's campaign, 14 sculpted pillars of captured Orientals and Victories were uncovered in the Forum area; these figures, made of coloured limestone, were brought to the Louvre in Paris (1) and the Musée du Bardo in Tunis (13) and became the only sculptures from Meninx which gained some fame in scholarship⁴³. Apart from those sporadic activities, several more travellers visited Meninx until the end of the French protectorate in 1956 and wrote down briefly what they saw at the site⁴⁴.

The informational content of these documents is modest. The vast majority of the statements are limited to simply mentioning, instead of describing, the few ruins that were visible above ground, and the only building which attracted greater interest was the Christian basilica to the west of the city. Some of the mentioned buildings are no longer visible, such as a borj/castle situated below the modern police station near the causeway, a mosque in its vicinity, and a (Byzantine?) surrounding wall which received mention in several documents but has completely disappeared since then.

From among the buildings mentioned, less than a dozen can still be identified (Fig. 4)⁴⁵. These include the following, from the west to the northeast: the huge, above-mentioned Christian basilica which is in a deplorable condition because of intensive looting in recent

years (›Basilique de Bou Merdès‹, ›Basilica B‹, ›Western basilica‹)⁴⁶; the amphitheatre⁴⁷; some remains of port structures at the beginning of the causeway⁴⁸; the ruins of a great cistern complex inland⁴⁹; the forum, including the civic basilica⁵⁰; the impressive ruins of the ›North baths‹⁵¹; the poor remains of an aqueduct nearby⁵²; the well-preserved ›Seven cisterns‹ at the shoreline⁵³; the theatre, whose outlines are only visible in concentric mounds covering the *cavea*⁵⁴; and, finally, a second Christian basilica to the North which offers very few remains (›Basilica A‹, ›Eastern basilica‹)⁵⁵. Apart from these buildings, there are some rock-cut tombs outside the city to the west, which have been studied by Jenina Akkari-Weriemmi in the early 1990s⁵⁶.

As has already been pointed out, systematic archaeological research at Meninx began only with the Tunisian-American survey project conducted on Djerba between 1996 and 2000⁵⁷. Although the focus of this project was directed at the whole island and not just at Meninx itself, exploration of the city was conducted through several investigations (Fig. 4).

In 1997, the large area of the city was investigated by an intensive field survey. Starting from the survey results, several trenches were then excavated in different areas of the city between 1997 and 2000.

In two trenches, at some distance to the southwest of the forum, substantial domestic buildings were uncovered. One of them included two cisterns which probably indicate a murex-dye workshop (Trench ›Meninx I‹)⁵⁸. The other is a house with small narrow rooms arranged around a small inner courtyard (›Meninx II‹)⁵⁹. These two trenches reached bedrock without any stratigraphy earlier than the Flavian period when both of these buildings were constructed. They were both in use over several centuries until they were abandoned and spoliated in the late 6th or 7th cent. A.D. Another trench was excavated at the forum basilica to investigate the history of this building (›Meninx V‹)⁶⁰. Without reaching bedrock, this excavation revealed traces of various building activ-

41 Gauckler 1913, 9 f. pl. 32; A. Drine in: Fentress et al. 2009, 47, 51 with fig. 3, 4.

42 Duval 1942, 221–224; cf. A. Drine in: Fentress et al. 2009, 51.

43 Baratte 1995; Fentress et al. 2009, 50, 143 f. with figs. 10, 12, 13, 15.

44 See A. Drine in: Fentress et al. 2009, 44–52.

45 Cf. Fentress et al. 2009, 50 with fig. 3, 5.

46 Fentress et al. 2009, 47 fig. 3, 4; 160–163 figs. 10, 35, 36.

47 Fentress et al. 2009, 149 f. with fig. 10, 23.

48 Fentress et al. 2009, 157 with figs. 10, 32–34. For the harbour structures of Meninx see below chapter IV and chapter VI.

49 Fentress et al. 2009, 184 with fig. 11, 11.

50 Fentress et al. 2009, 135–149 figs. 10, 5–22.

51 Fentress et al. 2009, 150 f. with figs. 10, 24–26; 184–186 figs. 11, 12, 13.

52 Fentress et al. 2009, 177–181 figs. 11, 1–6 (aqueducts 1–3).

53 Fentress et al. 2009, 183 f. with fig. 11, 10 (›cistern complex C1‹). For this building see below chapter VII. 2.

54 Fentress et al. 2009, 150 with fig. 10, 24.

55 Fentress et al. 2009, 47 with fig. 3, 3.

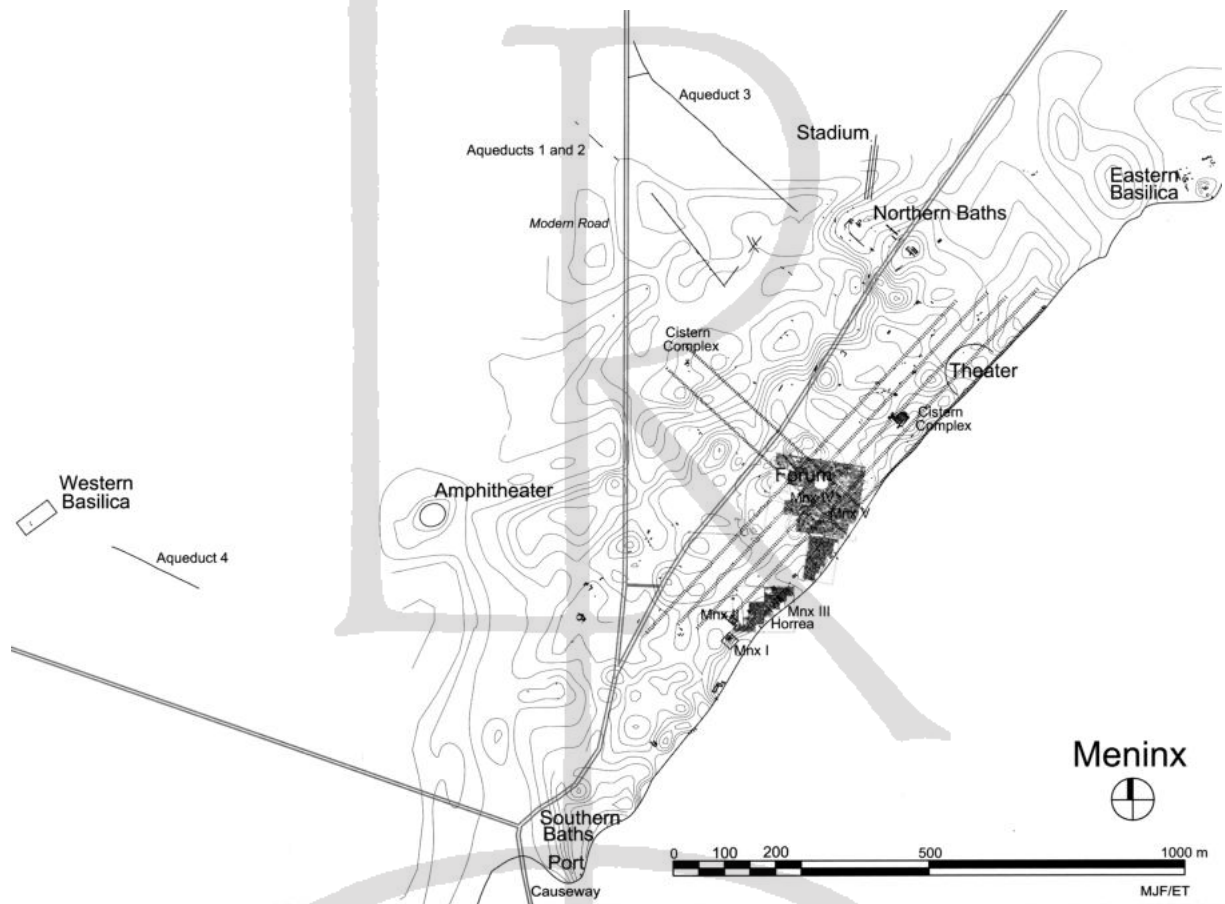
56 Akkari-Weriemmi 1992/1993; Fentress et al. 2009, 163.

57 Fentress et al. 2009.

58 Fentress et al. 2009, 75, 163–166 fig. 10, 37; 170 f. 173 f. 213–217 figs. 15, 1–5.

59 Fentress et al. 2009, 163–166 figs. 10, 37–43, 217–222 figs. 15, 6–14.

60 Fentress et al. 2009, 229–232 fig. 15, 27. This excavation followed a small test sondage opened by Sadok Ben Omrane in 1998 (›Meninx IV‹), the results of which were not made available; see Fentress et al. 2009, 229 fig. 15, 26. For the basilica see below chapter V. 7.



4 Meninx, plan of the city created in 2000

ities from the late 2nd cent. B.C. onwards until the basilica was built in the first half of the 2nd cent. A.D.

In 2000, a larger area around the Forum was explored through a fluxgate gradiometer survey (Fig. 4). The magnetometry data revealed the structure of the civic Basilica, some walls of other buildings surrounding the Forum, and, further to the southwest, a large *macel-*

lum, and parts of another huge building which is situated ca. 100 m to the southwest of the forum near the coast. It was excavated between 2000 and 2004 under the direction of Ali Drine (Meninx III) and turned out to be a *horrea* complex which was used for storage until it fell out of use in late antiquity, apart from some rooms which afterwards were used for burial⁶¹.

Our Research Objectives

Our project aimed to gain new insights into the urban history of Meninx, in order to understand more clearly the extent to which the cultural geography and the specific economic role of the city are reflected in its structure and development over the nearly 1000 years of its existence.

This intention required us first to understand the internal organisation of the city. In order to obtain a coherent picture, we decided first to explore the central areas with a large-scale geophysical prospection. We started our prospection in the Forum area where, ac-

61 Drine 2007; Fentress et al. 2009, 153–155 figs. 10, 28–30; 222–229 figs. 15, 15–25.