

## **Father Delattre's Correspondence and the History of Christian Archaeology in the Maghreb: His Correspondence with Giovanni Battista de Rossi in 1885**

La correspondance du père Delattre et l'histoire  
de l'archéologie chrétienne au Maghreb: La correspondance avec  
Giovanni Battista de Rossi en 1885

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**Abstract:** The contribution presents five unpublished letters from Father Alfred Louis Delattre's correspondence kept at the Central Archives of the Missionaries of Africa/White Fathers in Rome. This essay is part of a wider study, carried out over a longer period, on the development of Christian archaeology in the Mediterranean, always leading with special attention to archive documents. The letters of Fr. Delattre preserved in the aforementioned Archive are numerous, well known but not all have been well studied by scholars in recent years. For this text, I will focus on a group of these letters, related to the contacts made by Fr. Delattre with Giovanni Battista de Rossi, the main Christian archaeologist from Rome in the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century. These texts are useful to understand the formation of Delattre's ideas and the influences Roman excavations had on him during his work for the promotion of the discipline of Christian archaeology in the Maghreb and the musealization of early Christian finds in his museum in Tunis. In fact, the aim is not solely to present many original texts by Delattre, contributing to the knowledge of his epistolary, which is a mine of information for archaeological studies in North Africa. Additionally, it will examine his research and discoveries of Christian archaeology in a wider frame, and offer a solid documentary basis for those who will deal in the future with Christian antiquities in the Maghreb.

**Keywords:** Delattre, de Rossi, Christian Archaeology, Tunis, Letters.

### **Introduction**

This article<sup>1</sup> covers part of Father Alfred Louis Delattre's correspondence kept at the Central Archives of the Missionary of Africa/White Fathers in Rome: these letters are numerous, well known but not all have been extensively studied and published. This essay is part of a wider study project I have been carrying out for a long time in the field of the study of the development of Christian

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1. Chiara Cecalupo acknowledges support from the CONEX-Plus programme funded by Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 801538.

archaeology in the Mediterranean, always leading with a very special attention to archive documents.<sup>2</sup>

The first section provides an introduction regarding Father Delattre, his biography and his role in the archaeological discoveries in Tunisia and Algeria. This is followed by an analysis of a small group of letters (all dated 1885) exchanged by Fr. Delattre with the main Christian archaeologist of Rome of the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century, namely Giovanni Battista De Rossi, considered to be the founder of Christian Archaeology as a modern, international discipline.

This analysis will provide a useful insight into the relationship between the two archaeologists, and is also useful to understand the process of formation of Delattre's ideas (and publication procedures as well) after the influences by other European scholars had on him. In fact, the aim is not only to present some unpublished texts written and received by Delattre -contributing to the knowledge of his epistolary, which is a mine of information for archaeological studies in North Africa-, but also to deepen his commitment to the birth and promotion of the discipline of Christian archaeology in the Maghreb. Indeed, his research and discoveries of Christian archaeology in the Maghreb and the musealization of these early Christian finds in his museum in Tunis, can be inserted in a wider Mediterranean frame.

### 1. Father Alfred Louis Delattre

The bibliography concerning Father Delattre is undoubtedly vast<sup>3</sup> and his work<sup>4</sup> is the starting point for everyone who deals with Tunisian antiquities today. It is however useful here to recall some of the crucial information about his life and work.

In 1868, the Archbishop of Algiers, Charles Lavigerie, founded the White Fathers (*Missionarii Africae*), a missionary society of apostolic life for the evangelisation of Africa and the Maghreb. Lavigerie assigned a decisive role in this process – recovering living customs in the Roman Church from the Counter-Reformation to the Pontificate of Pius IX – to recover the places of the most important Church Fathers of the early centuries and the ancient Christian

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2. Chiara Cecalupo, “Documenti sulle monete antiche nordafricane nella collezione della Congregazione di Propaganda Fide,” *Mediterraneo Punico* 1 (2017): 183-95; Chiara Cecalupo, *Le storie degli oggetti. I reperti fenicio-punici nelle collezioni d'Europa*. Mediterraneo Punico Supplementi alla Rivista di Studi Fenici, 2 (Roma: CNR edizioni, 2020); Chiara Cecalupo and Axel Alt. “Letters from the frontier: rediscovery of Christian antiquities by religious missions at the borders of Christian world,” in *XVII International Congress of Christian Archaeology*, forthcoming.

3. The main biographical accounts are Joan Freed, “Louis-Alfred Delattre P.A.,” in *Personenlexikon zur Christlichen Archäologie*, eds. Stefan Heid, Martin Dennert, vol. 1 (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2012), 385-88; Joan Freed, “Le Père Alfred-Louis Delattre (1850-1932) et les Fouilles Archéologiques de Carthage,” *Histoire et missions chrétiennes* 4, 8 (2008): 67-100, with their complete bibliography. For a general account of the period see Clémentine Gutron, *L'archéologie en Tunisie (XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles): Jeux généalogiques sur l'Antiquité* (Paris: Karthala, 2010).

4. One can have an idea of the incredible number of Delattre publications from Freed, “Bibliography.”

communities well known from written sources.<sup>5</sup> The theoretical basis for this recovery was the Lettre Circulaire written by Lavigerie on 19 March 1877,<sup>6</sup> which provided the clergy of the diocese of Algeria with guidelines for the behaviour of missionaries regarding archaeological finds.

Alfred-Louis Delattre had been in Carthage as a missionary in Lavigerie's retinue since 1875, having decided to dedicate his life to the missions in Africa. He owed his archaeological training to the archbishop and his vision, which began when he arrived in Carthage in 1875. When he and other White Fathers settled in the chapel of Saint-Louis, Lavigerie encouraged them to create an archaeological museum to house the few remains of the previous collection of Abbot Francois Bourgade.<sup>7</sup>

As an archaeologist, Delattre was sent by Lavigerie to train in France in 1878 and grew up in the spirit of the late 19th century, when archaeology was just beginning to be thought of as a science. His archaeological work flowed into the museum of Saint Luis (which he created, managed, expanded, and renamed Musée Lavigerie in 1899)<sup>8</sup> and into numerous publications: both reflect Delattre's incredible excavation work in Carthage from 1875 to 1932, digging the city extensively in its Phoenician-Punic, Roman and Christian phases.

His great discoveries made Father Delattre himself (and not only his publications) the point of reference for all scholars and archaeologists, especially those who had to deal with excavation layers and Phoenician-Punic artefacts, and who saw in the rediscovered Carthage the measure for all their work. An emblematic case is that of the scholars of Malta, who from the last years of the nineteenth century, and in particular by 1930, made an enormous effort in the archaeological discovery of the island's main sites. Delattre's correspondence with Maltese scholars is relatively abundant, but to date almost entirely concentrated on Phoenician-Punic themes, which is why this topic will not be touched upon in this discussion.<sup>9</sup> The same can be said of the German scholars who turned to Delattre during their research in the Mediterranean to find comparisons for the pre-Roman phases.<sup>10</sup>

5. Stefan Heid, "Charles-Martial Allemand Lavigerie P.A.," in *Personenlexikon zur Christlichen Archäologie*, eds. Stefan Heid & Martin Dennert, vol. 1 (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2012), 797-99; Cecalupo & Alt. "Letters."

6. The complete title is Lettre Circulaire de Monseigneur l'Archevêque d'Alger au Clergé de son Diocèse: relativement aux recherches archéologiques recommandées par le Concilie Provincial d'Alger et ordonnance portant création d'une Commission Diocésaine d'Archéologie.

7. Clémentine Gutron, "L'abbé Bourgade (1806-1866), Carthage et l'Orient: De l'antiquaire au publiciste," *Anabases* 2 (2005): 177-91.

8. Alfred Louis Delattre, *Musée Lavigerie de Saint-Louis de Carthage* (Paris: Leroux, 1899); Freed, "Le Père," 70.

9. Only three of the numerous letters with Maltese scholars deal with early Christian themes. The publication of all these materials is being studied and published by the writer in ... (add reference in draft). See Joseph Mario Briffa, "Historical Introduction," in *E. Magri, The Ruins of a Megalithic Temple in Xeuchia (Shewkiyah), Gozo. First Report*, ed. Charles Cini (Malta: Heritage Malta & SDB, 2009), 8-9.

10. Two of which were Albert Mayr and Joseph Führer.

As far as Christian Carthage is concerned, it was Delattre who relied on an older and more famous colleague, Giovanni Battista de Rossi.

## 2. The relationship with de Rossi

When the young Delattre began his excavations and studies of Carthage, Giovanni Battista de Rossi was already in the latter part of his life in Rome. He was an established scholar and still very busy rediscovering the *Underground Rome* and keeping a record of all discoveries of Christian archaeology throughout the Mediterranean through the publication of his *Bulletin of Christian Archaeology*. Due to his incredible international authority, all those in other European and Mediterranean nations who were somehow concerned with Christian antiquities had close correspondence with him. De Rossi's great willingness to give help, advise and opinions on the subject to people from all over Europe can be seen in his rich private correspondence, now held in the Vatican Library.<sup>11</sup>

Among these correspondents, there was Delattre, who from 1880<sup>12</sup> until 1892, regularly updated de Rossi on his discoveries of Christian archaeology in Tunisia, with whom he engaged in long exchanges of ideas and opinions that contributed to the development of Christian archaeology in North Africa.<sup>13</sup> The acquaintance between the two is very close and this closeness has often been stressed in the literature, given their role as pioneers of Christian archaeology. As we shall see, there are many traces of these exchanges in the publications of Delattre, who throughout his life held de Rossi's scientific thoughts in high regard, to the point of almost making them a source.

### The letters

In this section, we analyse the five remaining letters from the exchange of letters between Alfred Louis Delattre in Tunis and Giovanni Battista de Rossi in Rome in 1885. These letters were chosen because, by cross-referencing the documents in the Archives of the White Fathers (Archives de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique, Rome, where the letters received by Delattre are kept) with those in the Vatican Library (where the letters received by de Rossi can be found), it was possible to reconstruct the flow of the thoughts of the two scholars and to read the complete correspondence. It is indeed not common to dispose of letters and their replies, so it seems interesting to me to be able to exploit this small treasure.

The letters are presented here in chronological order so as not to lose the logical thread of the exchange of replies. Father Delattre's letters are found, as already

11. The countless number of letters received by de Rossi available at the Vatican Library are listed in BAV, Vat. Lat. 14296, 14297, 14298.

12. I have not identified any letters from Delattre to de Rossi before 1880. There were certainly exchanges between the two from 1878 onwards, when Lavigerie sent him to France to seek funding and, during this stay, he received a letter from Rossi, inquiring about lead papal seals from Carthage and acquiring lamps from Carthage for the Vatican collections (Freed, "Le Père," 79).

13. Freed, "Le Père," 67.

mentioned, among de Rossi's personal papers, preserved in chronological order with all the other letters of the archaeologist in the Vatican Library (under the reference BAV, Vat. lat. 14273); de Rossi's replies are obviously among Delattre's papers, collected however as *Correspondance avec revues* (shortened as A.G.M.Afr, Y2.2, 5). It is clear from the internal references that some documents are missing (such as Delattre's letter to de Rossi of October 2), but the general overview of the work done in the 1885 excavations in question is clear.

1) Vatican Library, Vat. lat. 14273

f. 35r

MUSEE ARCHEOLOGIQUE SAINT-LOUIS DE CARTHAGE

Carthage (Tunisie), le 14 Janv. 1885

Bien cher Monsieur,

Je vous suis bien reconnaissant des vœux que vous désirez former pour moi au commencement de cette nouvelle année. Veuillez recevoir aussi les miens, que je prie Dieu de (...) et d'exaucer.

Son Eminence a quitté Carthage depuis plus d'une semaine et au moment de son départ, je n'avais pas encore reçu votre lettre. Dans ma suivante lettre, je lui ferai part de vos sentiments.

Je viens de faire reproduire à la peinture le bas-relief représentant la Sainte Vierge. J'ai fait compléter l'ange et le profil et ajouter l'étoile. Aussitôt que j'aurai pu photographier cette peinture, je vous en adresserai une épreuve, avec prière de me dire si cette (35v) restauration vous convient.

Je compte publier dans le courant de l'année dans les missions catholiques le résultat de nos dernières fouilles dans la basilique de Ste. Perpétue. En attendant, je vous adresse un rapport que j'ai fait dernièrement, dans l'espoir d'attirer quelques ressources qui puissent me permettre de continuer des fouilles si intéressantes au point de vue chrétien.

J'ai l'intention de déblayer entièrement l'ensemble du retournement, car je nourris l'espoir que le vœu de N.S.P. le Pape sera exaucé. En apprenant la découverte de cette basilique, quand j'eus l'an dernier l'insigne honneur d'être présenté à Sa Sainteté, Léon XIII eut la bonté de me dire: "Mais il faut la reconstruire!". Ce vœu du glorieux et Saint Pontife, je le désire bien vivement, ne sera pas stérile.

Il est bien malheureux que les bas-reliefs (36r) et l'inscription que nous trouvons dans les ruines de notre basilique soient si mutilés!

Veuillez agréer, bien cher Monsieur, avec l'expression de ma vive reconnaissance pour l'intérêt que vous voulez bien porter à mes recherches, l'assurance de mes respectueux et très dévoués sentiments.

A.L. Delattre

Fr. Miss. D'Alg.

Ch. De S.L. de C.

2) Archives de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique, Y2-2.5

Rome 26 Avril 1885

Mon très Révérend Père,

Votre lettre chargée de dessins et de photographies et de communications importantes a été accueillie avec grande joie. Mais je n'y trouve la moindre allusion à mon Bulletin de l'année courante: qui a dit vous arrivez avant le 22 courant, date de Votre très honorée. Serait-il égaré? Veuillez m'en avertir immédiatement; car je tiens à ce que vous ayez au plutôt de cahiers, on il est tant question de Vos découvertes.

Vous devinez juste, à mon avis, écartant l'interprétation MARTyr devant le mot FIDELIS. Martyr, témoin de la foi, dit mille fois plus que fidelis: cette tautologie me semblerait étrange, surtout dans une inscription, dont la paléographie annonce le V<sup>e</sup> siècle. Néanmoins je ne vois pas probables, que le nom du défunt soit caché avec les initiales MART (Martinus?). Pourquoi abrégé contre les règles les cognomen, plutôt que le INP(ace), ou ben le FID(elis)? Remarquez que l'inscription n'est pas complète: elle était continuée à droite et à gauche dans la bande en mosaïque. Je crois que le disque retrouvé est le second ou le dernier, ou l'építaphe est (...). Donc le disque on dans les disques précédent il y avait le nom du défunt et le processit, recessit, depositus (ou formule semblable) avec la date du mois (Kal. Non. Idus) MARTias, la formule fidelis in pace termine l'inscription.

Quant à la figure en mosaïque, un laquelle je n'ai pas voulu me prononcer (p. 44 note 3), examinez attentivement, si elle appartenait sans doute au pavé primitif de l'édifice chrétien. Elle pourrait appartenir à un édifice préexistant et utilisé en partie pour les secretaria de la basilique. La mosaïque avait pu être couverte, et même laisser visible: car les Chrétiens au V<sup>e</sup> siècle, habitués aux images de l'art payen, et lorsque toute idée d'idolâtrie était exclue, ma fuiraient très grande attention à ces détails. Voyez une dissertation sur la basilique de S. Andrea pris de S.<sup>ta</sup> Maria Maggiore dans le Bullettino 1871. Par rapport à la mosaïque en question, la plus important est de vérifier si la femme est réellement sans tunique. M. Allord ne le croit pas; el pense que l'artiste a donné de la transparence à la tunique; mais la tunique lui semble arasez clairement par les calliculas sur la (...). Examinez cela attentivement et veuillez m'en dire un mot. Enfin ce qui m'embarrasse surtout est le miroir. En faire un symbole des visions, c'est une idée moderne: anciens textes ou monuments antiques ne vient en aide de cette hypothèse. Le miroir, entre les mains d'une telle figure, reste un énigme, même si la nudité disparaît, et si toutes les circonstances locales exigent d'en donner une interprétation chrétienne.

Agréer, Monsieur et Rév. Père, mon sentiments très dévotés et affectueux d'estime, d'amitié et de respect.

G.B de Rossi

P.S. Mille remerciements pour les Mosaïques Chrét. de Tabarka, que j'ai citées dans mon Bulletin.

3) Vatican Library, Vat. lat. 14273

f. 342r

MUSEE ARCHEOLOGIQUE DE SAINT-LOUIS DE CARTHAGE

Carthage (Tunisie), le 6 Mai 1885

Bien cher Monsieur,

Votre lettre datée du 26 avril ne m'a été remise qu'hier au soir. Je m'empresse d'y répondre aujourd'hui afin de profiter du courrier d'Italie qui part pour Naples.

Je n'avais pas encore, en effet, reçu votre bulletin quand je vous ai écrit, il y a quinze jours. Il ne m'est parvenu qu'après. Je voulais vous en accuser réception de suite et vous remercier de votre long article sur nos découvertes, quand, à chaque jour de courrier d'Italie, des circonstances imprévues sont venues m'empêcher de réaliser mon désir.

(342v) Je le fais aujourd'hui et je suis heureux de vous exprimer toute ma reconnaissance pour l'intérêt que vous prenez à mes recherches et à mes découvertes. Merci surtout pour l'importance que vous attachez au bas-relief de la Ste. Vierge. Dans l'original la moitié inférieure du corps du personnage placé derrière la Mère de Dieu, est bien conservée. Le pied est intact et l'ensemble de ce qui reste de ce personnage indique qu'il était figuré de profil.

Quant au mot MART dans l'inscription à mosaïque dont je vous ai parlé, je crois qu'il faut y reconnaître le nom du défunt plutôt que celui du mois, parce que dans nos épitaphes de Carthage la formule FIDELIS IN PACE est toujours immédiatement après le cognomen et que je ne connais pas d'exemple où cette formule soit rejetée à la fin (343r) après le VIXITANNOS etc... ou le DEPOSITVS. Quant à l'abréviation du cognomen, je crois qu'elle n'est pas sans exemple ici. Une inscription entière de notre basilique porte: LAVR.F, une autre trouvée près de la Malga: LAVR. Ne faut-il pas lire l'une: LAVRentius Fidelis in pace, et l'autre simplement: LAVRentius?

Si j'avais le temps de parcourir ma longue liste d'épitaphes chrétiennes de Carthage, je pourrais en trouver encore d'autres exemples. Mais je dois me hâter, pour que cette lettre ne manque pas le courrier. Vous voudrez bien me dire ce que vous pensez de ces raisons et si elles vous paraissent de valeur. D'ailleurs vous avez publié vous-même dans le Spicilegium Solesmense un ... de Carthage qui porte: BA . IN PACE BIXIT ... ..



Quand je compare nos nombreuses inscriptions de Carthage avec celles que vous avez publiées d'autres fois, je suis étonné de voir dans les (343v) vôtres tant d'abréviations, telles que L . N, P . I . T, C . F etc. qui n'ont rien de commun avec les formules de nos épitaphes. Vous remarquerez ainsi combien rarement dans nos inscriptions le B remplace le V.

Je vais examiner de nouveau la mosaïque dont vous me parlez, et je vous en écrirai dans quelques temps.

Mes recherches continuent à la basilique, de nouveaux piliers avec les colonnes tombé et brisés à côté nous prouvent chaque jour davantage combien ce monument (...). Toujours beaucoup d'épitaphes brisées, ces jours-ci encore des fragments d'une de DIACONVS.

Veuillez agréer, bien cher Monsieur, l'expression de ma bien vive reconnaissance et l'assurance de sentiments de profond respect et d'affectueux dévouement sur lesquels j'ai l'honneur d'être.

Votre très humble serviteur

A.L. Delattre

Fr. Miss. D'Alg.

4) Archives de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique, Y2-2.5

Cartolina Postale

Siena

Au très Rév. Père

Le Père Delattre

Missionnaires d'Algérie

St. Louis de Carthage

Carthage (Tunisie)

Siene, 4 Sept. 1885

(fish) + Λ (fish)

ACOLYTVS

+ LOCVSCREMENT

Mon très Rév. Père,

J'ai passé les grandes chaleurs en Siène, je suis rentré à Rome. Si vous avez des nouvelles toutes (...) à me donner de vous fouilles en me les envoyant immédiatement à Rome, peut-être, arriveraient illes à temps pour les dernières nouvelles du Bulletino, qui est sous presse. Je conviens avec votre interprétation du MART. (nom propre)



et j'attends toujours avec intérêt les réponses à mes questions sur la figure féminine dressée ou non de votre mosaïque.

Si l'article de mon Bull. sur le groupe de la Vierge vous con(...),nt, vous pouvez le traduire en français et le divulguer comme bon vous semblera.

Tout à vous,

Jean B.e de Rossi

5) Archives de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique, Y2-2.5

Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana

Roma Piazza dell'Aracoeli 17

Rome 19 Nov 1885

Mon très Révérend Père,

Je vous remercie de Votre collection de marques de potier relevées à Carthage et de votre bonne lettre du 2 octobre. La mention d'un acolitus est assez rare, surtout à une époque antérieure au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle, comme il me semble qu'il faut juger de votre inscription. Le nouveau vase de terre cuite avec les deux poissons aux côtés de la crois + A est très curieux: je le mentionnerai dans mon Bulletin.

On nous annonce une nouvelle découverte de cimetières et basilique chrétiennes en Tunisie. Est-ce vrai?

Agréez, très cher Monsieur et ami mes sentiments très affectionnés et dévoués.

Jean B.e de Rossi

### 3. Historical and archaeological context of the letters

The information offered by these letters is numerous and of great value. It is therefore worth dwelling on a few aspects that seem most interesting to me for the purpose of this publication. In 1885, Delattre was working on many sites. What he brought back to de Rossi were his discoveries in the basilica of Damous el Karita<sup>14</sup> (letter 1, which Delattre refers to as the Basilica of Saint Perpetua: the Major Basilica with the Saint's relics will only be discovered by him in 1907)<sup>15</sup> and his excavations in the burial ground of Bir-el-Jebbana, near the cisterns of la Malga (letter 2).<sup>16</sup>

For both sites, he concentrates almost exclusively on the epigraphic findings, taking advantage of de Rossi who was the absolute authority on the subject. The

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14. About this complex monument see François Baratte, Fathi Béjaoui, Noël Duval, Sarah Berraho, Isabelle Gui, Hélène Jacquest, *Basiliques chrétiennes d'Afrique du Nord : inventaire et typologie. II, Inventaire des monuments de la Tunisie*, Mémoires (Bordeaux: Ausonius, 2014), 132-39, and all its complete bibliography.

15. Alfred Louis Delattre, "La Basilica Majorum. Tombeau des saintes Perpétue et Félicité," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 51, 9 (1907): 516-31.

16. For the archaeological account of both these sites see Liliane Ennabli, *Carthage. Une métropole chrétienne du IV<sup>e</sup> à la fin du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Études d'Antiquités Africaines, 1 (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1997).

only exception (letter 1) to this epigraphic monothematicity is the reference to the bas-relief of the Virgin (fig. 1) found in 1884 during excavations in the area of the basilica of Damous el Karita, in particular in the “premiere tranchée perpendiculaire au sentier de Sidi-Bou-Said,” together with many other fragments of Christian sarcophagi.<sup>17</sup>



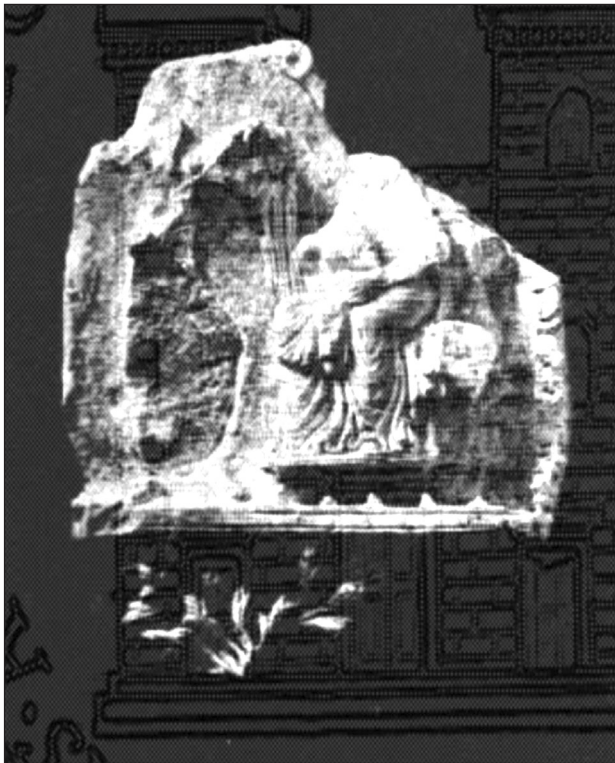
**Fig. 1:** The relief of the Virgin in his current aspect (Baratte et al., *Basiliques chrétiennes*, 136)

We find mention of the bas-relief in Delattre’s letter to de Rossi of 14 January 1885 (letter 1), in which the reverend briefly describes the phases of restoration and reproduction of the piece. The photograph of the bas-relief (fig. 2 ), given its archaeological importance, also served to disseminate the discovery and was sent by Delattre himself to his main correspondents: at the meeting of the Comité des Travaux historiques et scientifiques in Paris on 8 April 1885, M. Caron “communique une photographie d’un curieux bas relief découvert à Carthage dans une ancienne basilique chrétienne par le Père Delattre.”<sup>18</sup> However, in 1886, when Delattre published his study of the bas-relief with a new drawing, he repeated the opinions he had received by letter from Rohault de Fleury and Monsignor Robert, after receiving a photograph of it.<sup>19</sup>

17. Alfred Louis Delattre, “Archéologie Chrétienne de Carthage,” *Les Missions catholiques: bulletin hebdomadaire de l’Oeuvre de la propagation de la foi* 18 (1886): 129-32. He talks about the excavations performed “au chevet sud-est,” see Baratte et al., *Basiliques chrétiennes*, 135-36.

18. Robert de Lasteyrie, “Séance du 8 Avril 1885,” *Bulletin Archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques* (1885): 190.

19. Delattre, “Archéologie Chrétienne,” 130.



**Fig. 2:** The photograph of the relief sent by Delattre to his correspondents. (De Rossi, “Area cimiteriale.”)

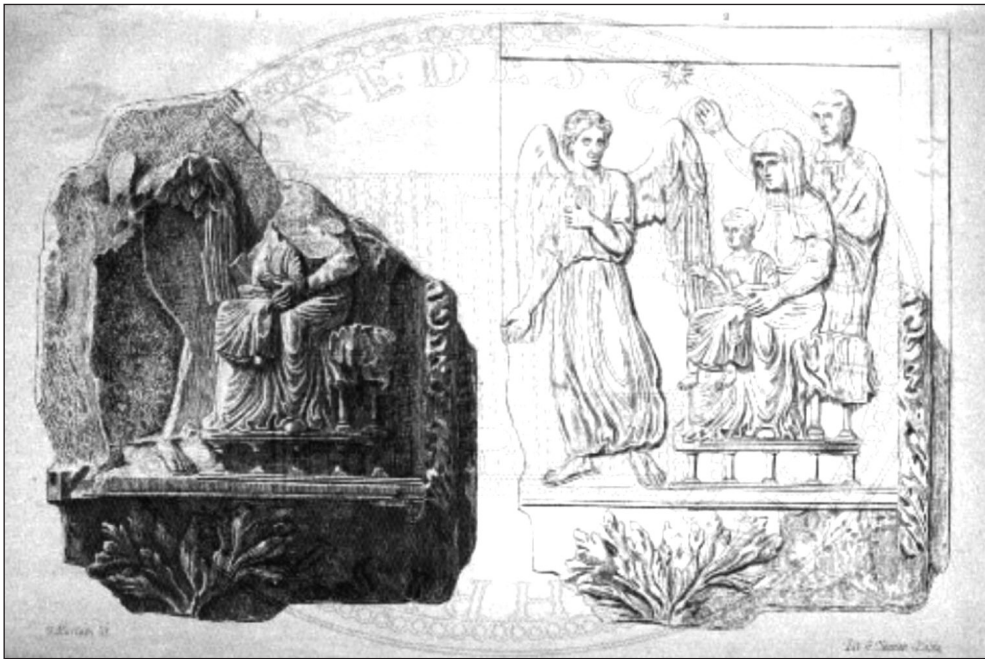
This bas-relief is studied and published by de Rossi in his six-monthly Bulletin, which confirms what we read in Delattre’s letter: “Having received from my friend Fr Delattre a photograph of such a rare group, which unfortunately has been reduced almost to a shapeless fragment, I have reproduced it, as far as possible, in heliotype” (fig. 3 ). To make it easier to understand, I have repeated (table II) the drawing, taking into account the engraving published by Delattre himself in the *Missions catholiques*; and next to it, I have sketched the attempt to make a picture of the group. I have outlined the attempt at restoration made under my direction by Mr Gregorio Mariano (table I).”<sup>20</sup> De Rossi proceeded to study the piece and reconstruct the scene, comparing it to other scenes of Virgins with Child in their arms known from early Christian art in Rome, in particular the famous painting in the Catacomb of Priscilla and the mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore.<sup>21</sup> Delattre drew heavily on de Rossi’s analysis (even publishing a full French translation,<sup>22</sup> which de Rossi authorised in his letter of 4 September, letter 4), which remains one of the main bibliographical references for the study of this find to this day.<sup>23</sup>

20. Giovanni Battista De Rossi, “Area cimiteriale con portici ed annessa basilica scoperte in Cartagine,” *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana* 4, 3 (1884-1885): 45 (Translation by the author).

21. De Rossi, “Area cimiteriale,” 49-52.

22. Delattre, “Archéologie Chrétienne,” 131-32.

23. Baratte et al., *Basiliques chrétiennes*, 136.



**Fig. 3:** The reproduction of the relief by de Rossi (De Rossi, “Area cimiteriale.”)

The exchange of ideas between de Rossi and Delattre is therefore the basis of Christian archaeological studies in Tunisia in the last years of the nineteenth century, and this is even more evident in the field of Christian epigraphy. In his excavations at Damous el Karita as well as at Bir-el-Djebbana, Delattre came across a disproportionate number of more or less clear epigraphic fragments, asking de Rossi for advice in his letters and laying the foundations, with the help of his older Roman colleague, for the study of Christian epigraphy in the Maghreb.

In the letters reported here (letters 2, 3, 4, 5), there are some very explanatory examples, both from an artistic and a linguistic point of view. In a clear connection between de Rossi’s letter and his article on Damous el Karita,<sup>24</sup> we find a reference to a “figure en mosaïque, un laquelle je n’ai pas voler me prononcer (p. 44 note 3),” already published by Lavigerie<sup>25</sup> in 1881 (fig. 4). In this case, while remaining doubtful, de Rossi does not approve of Delattre’s idea that it is a representation of the martyr Perpetua,<sup>26</sup> but rather points out to Delattre the possibility that it is

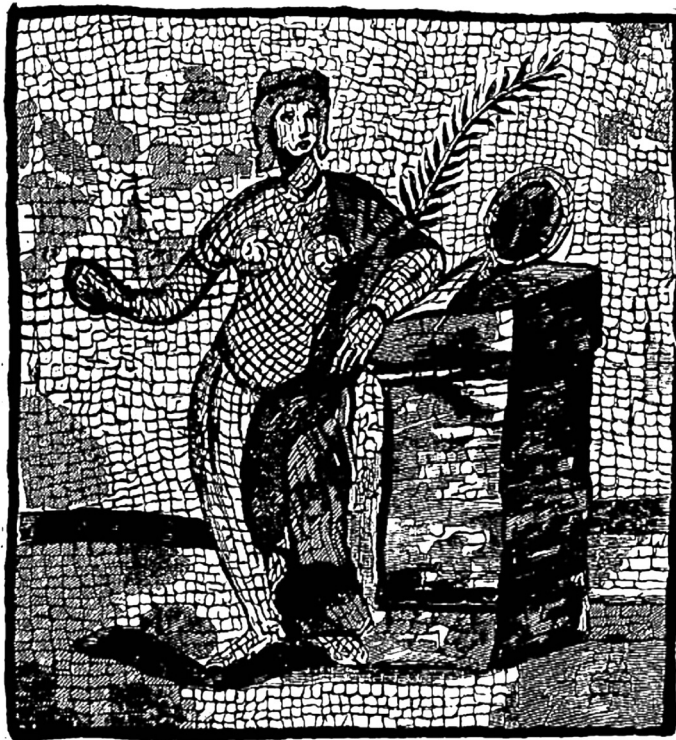
24. De Rossi, “Area cimiteriale,” 44.

25. Charles-Martial Lavigerie, “Les Cimetières Païens et Chrétiens découvert récemment à Carthage,” *Les Missions catholiques: bulletin hebdomadaire de l’Oeuvre de la propagation de la foi* 13 (1881): 163, 166.

26. The need to identify the places linked to the martyrdom of the most famous and documented martyrs of North Africa (i.e. Perpetua and Felicità with their companions) is very strong for the White Fathers, precisely to give strength to their propaganda project of materially rediscovering the great Christian past of the area. It is therefore no coincidence that an attempt is made to link all the great structures discovered in the period by Delattre to the martyrs, even in the absence of actual evidence. Even for the onomastics of certain epigraphic discoveries from the site of Bir-el-Djebbana, Delattre



an earlier covering from pagan iconography, reused in the Christian phase. This small paragraph opens the door to one of the most discussed topics by Christian archaeologists of that period, namely the relationship of monumental discontinuity/continuity between pagan and Christian society. From de Rossi's tone and words, we understand how he tries to convince Delattre of this possibility, trying to apply to the North African reality what he was seeing and excavating in Rome. The comparisons with the Roman situation are numerous, and confirm the idea that Delattre relies on de Rossi almost as a main source of comparison.



**Fig. 4:** The figured mosaics published by Lavigerie in 1881 (Lavigerie, “Les Cimetières.”)

The second case in these letters (letter 2) is “l’interprétation MARTYr devant le mot FIDELIS,” presented on a mutilated mosaic inscription found “sur le plateau supérieur voisin de la Basilique.”<sup>27</sup> De Rossi refers to this inscription both in his letter of 26 April and in his note of 4 September, allowing us to understand the logical reasoning behind the discussion between him and the Reverend, who in 1886 published the fragment using the suggestions he had received from Rome.<sup>28</sup> In fact, de

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refers to the martyr cycle of the two saints to explain the spread of certain Christian names: Alfred Louis Delattre, “Fouilles et Découvertes dans un ancien cimetière chrétien de Carthage situé près de la Malga,” *Les Missions catholiques: bulletin hebdomadaire de l’Oeuvre de la propagation de la foi* 15 (1883): 95.

27. Delattre, “Archéologie Chrétienne,” 152-53.

28. *Ibid.*, 153.

Rossi immediately seems to advise Delattre against reading MART as “martyr,” which according to him would not fit well with the subsequent attribute *fidelis*, prompting him to read it rather as the abbreviation for the month of March. In his reply of 6 May (letter 3), Delattre suggests reading it as a proper name of the deceased/dedicator, a proposal accepted by de Rossi on 4 September and then published in 1886. Indeed, it is clear from the letters that Delattre considers terminological issues very important for Christian archaeology in North Africa. What de Rossi publishes and then says in his letters is assimilated and critically reported in the publications: only by stopping at the analysis of this single case of MART. IN PACE we find theoretical reflections on the lemmas *fidelis* and *in pace* in its variants and combinations, supported by the epigraphic discoveries made many years ago<sup>29</sup> in Carthage and by de Rossi’s publications always used as sources.<sup>30</sup> In the course of this analysis (letter 3), Delattre broadens the discourse by also including the fragment found in the basilica with the inscription LAVR.F,<sup>31</sup> thus he proposes to read LAVRentius Fidelis in pace. This long reflection at the heart of Christian epigraphy, the origins of which we see in these letters, finds ample space in all Delattre’s articles.<sup>32</sup>

In the last notes (letters 4, 5), for which unfortunately I have not been able to locate Delattre’s reply, de Rossi introduces<sup>33</sup> a theme that is very dear to Christian archaeology of the period, namely epigraphic attestations of ecclesiastical offices. He comments on Delattre’s discovery of an epigraph mentioning an acolyte, with a Latin cross and two engraved fish, congratulating himself on the rare discovery and providing some information on the infrequency of this title in archaeology before the fifth century. Interestingly, a pen sketch of the same inscription (superimposed LOCUS CREMENT, cf. above) appears in the previous note (fig. 5), which was probably added after the note was written, perhaps by Delattre, who used the corners of the note as notepaper while keeping his correspondence. As well as giving us an insight into the issues surrounding the archaeological evidence for the structure of the early church,

29. A reflection on the mosaic epigraphs bearing *fidelis in pace* can also be found in Alfred Louis Delattre, “Découverte d’un cimetière chrétien dans les ruines de Carthage,” *Les Missions catholiques: bulletin hebdomadaire de l’Oeuvre de la propagation de la foi* 14 (1882): 119-20, concerning the first excavations at Bir-el-Djebbana.

30. There are some publications by de Rossi to which Delattre refers very often, such as de Giovanni Battista de Rossi, “De Christianis Titvlis Carthaginensibvs Epistola I.B. De Rossi ad I. B. Pitra Monachvm Benedictinvm,” *Spicilegii Solesmensis* IV (1858); De Rossi, “Area cimiteriale.”

31. Alfred Louis Delattre, “Inscriptions Chrétiennes trouvées de 1884 à 1886 dans les Fouilles d’une Ancienne Basilique à Carthage,” *Recueil des notices et mémoires de la Société archéologique de la province de Constantine* 24 (1886-1887): 62.

32. Delattre, “Inscriptions Chrétiennes;” Delattre, “Archéologie Chrétienne;” Delattre, “Découverte d’un cimetière;” Alfred Louis Delattre, *Description de l’Afrique du Nord*. Musées et collections archéologiques de l’Algérie et de la Tunisie. 8, 3, Musée Lavigerie de Saint-Louis de Carthage: collection des Pères blancs formée par le R. P. Delattre. Archéologie chrétienne (Paris: Leroux, 1899); Alfred Louis Delattre, *Un pèlerinage aux ruines de Carthage et au Musée Lavigerie* (Lyon: Poncet, 1906).

33. Together with the epigraph CIL VIII, 13572 (Locus Crement[is]), it is also found in Delattre, “Inscriptions Chrétiennes,” 64, whose bibliographic reference is de Rossi’s *Roma Sotterranea Cristiana*.

these theses are of great importance as no reference to this epigraph could be found in the edito: they therefore remain the sources for it.

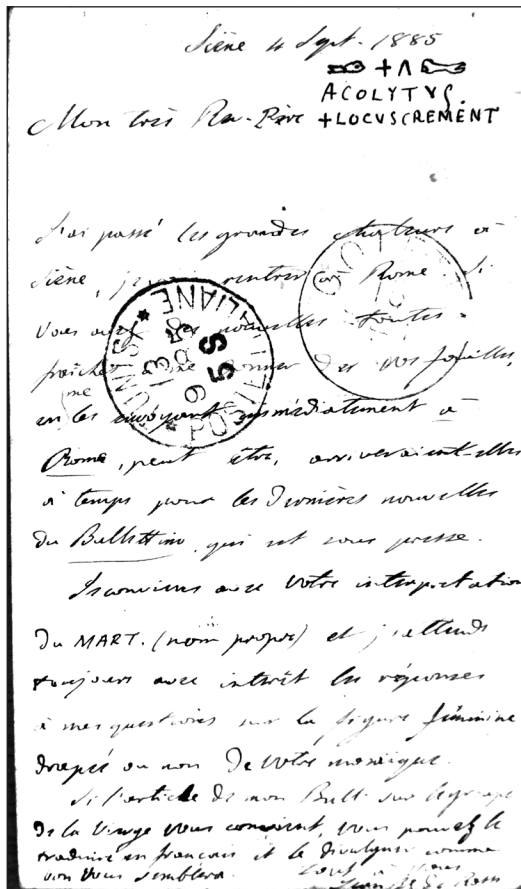


Fig. 5: Letter by de Rossi to Delattre with the sketch of the epigraphic inscriptions. (Archives de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique, Y2-2.5-Reproduced with permission of the Archives).

#### 4. From letters to publications: concluding remarks

As we have already seen in the previous paragraph, the connection between Delattre's letters and his publications is very close. Indeed, the Reverend's letters very often turn out to be the source and a draft of the texts and thoughts Delattre later published with great frequency, in particular in *Les Missions catholiques*, the bulletin of the pontifical work of Propaganda Fide. In this periodical, as in many others in the French language, Delattre constantly disseminated his findings. In this case, it is clear the letters should be read in conjunction with the publications because it is precisely in the letters that supplementary information was provided (considering also that, there are no complete reports of the White Fathers' excavations in North Africa), and where Delattre's thought unfolded and the basis for his scientific acquisitions was laid.

In particular, it should be noted that what we read in the five letters to de Rossi quoted here is almost entirely found in Delattre's publications, and it is therefore interesting to cross-reference the information in order to better understand the



reverend's way of working in the early years of his career. Delattre, a little like de Rossi, is a "field" archaeologist, and to this practicality in excavations testified to by numerous photographs he also adds later study with the support of his European correspondents. In this sense, we can say that Christian archaeology in the Maghreb was born in a truly "archaeological" way as a practical discipline, not the exclusive preserve of erudite antiquarians. There is no doubt that Delattre's commitment to sharing in writing with other scholars, and publishing everything he could, made him responsible for the preservation of an incredible amount of ancient material that would otherwise be difficult to find today. This way of 'preserving' finds in writing in fact took shape in the very first years of Delattre's career, when he began to feel the international responsibility for the discoveries of Carthage: here one can clearly discern an almost unequivocal predilection for epigraphy, seen as the main feature for the Christian identification of places. In this sense, although belonging by right to a confessional cultural current and perfectly in line with the demands of North African Christian archaeology in the field during the period of the French Protectorate,<sup>34</sup> Delattre's letters are always charged with multiple meanings for the history of archaeology.

From a methodological point of view, these letters clearly show Delattre's vocation for reproducing finds in images (in drawing/painting and photography), as well as the exchange of bibliographies and volumes between the two scholars, so much so that references to past and future articles are widespread. At the same time, there are references to the ecclesiastical authorities interested in his archaeological research, not only Archbishop Lavigerie – the real promoter of the work – but above all Pope Leo XIII. Thus, if Delattre's unavoidable link with Catholicism and the Church of Rome has often been criticised as confessionalism even by his contemporaries, it is undeniable how this helped him to give an international scope to his discoveries, which were amplified on many social levels by the Church.

From this, it is obvious to state how the question of early Christian archaeology in North Africa is never a geographically circumscribed issue, but rather becomes an important touchstone for European scholars and also an object of great interest for the Christian community, starting with the Pope.

It is certainly not possible in this article to highlight all the references and implications that these five letters and all the archaeological publications connected to them can provide for contemporary archaeologists and historians. However, what is evident is the wealth of material provided by these texts: with just five letters, it has been possible to look into a precise moment in the history of Christian archaeology in Tunis, which is rich in food for thought for the history of the discipline. In a vast area with a difficult and non-linear archaeological history, the history of the discipline and its sources, especially archival documents, are becoming increasingly

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34. Bonnie Effros, "Reviving Carthage's Martyrs: Archaeology, Memory and Catholic Devotion in the French Protectorate of Tunisia," *Archeologia Medievale* XLVI (2019): 65-73.

important and will continue to be so today and in the years to come, an invaluable mine for those who wish to engage with it.

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العنوان: مراسلات الأب ديلاتر وتاريخ الآثار المسيحية في البلاد المغاربية: مراسلاته مع جيوفاني باتيستا دي روسي عام 1885

ملخص: يعرض هذا المقال خمس رسائل غير منشورة من مراسلات الأب ألفريد لويس ديلاتر المحفوظة في الأرشيف العام لإرساليات إفريقيا/الآباء البيض في روما. ويعتبر هذا المقال جزءاً من دراسة أوسع نطاقاً حول تطور علم الآثار المسيحي في البحر الأبيض المتوسط، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على المواد الأرشيفية. وتتعلق هذه الرسائل باتصالات الأب ديلاتر مع جيوفاني باتيستا دي روسي، عالم الآثار المسيحي البارز في روما في نهاية القرن التاسع عشر. وتعتبر هذه النصوص مفيدة لفهم تأثير الحفريات الرومانية على تعزيز علم الآثار المسيحي في البلاد المغاربية واستغلال الاكتشافات المسيحية المبكرة في متحف تونس. إن الهدف هو تقديم عدد معين من النصوص الأصلية من قبل ديلاتر، والمساهمة في معرفة رسائله، باعتبارها منجماً ثرياً بالمعلومات للدراسات الأثرية في شمال أفريقيا. ذلك أنها تتيح إمكانية دراسة أبحاثه واكتشافاته في مجال علم الآثار المسيحي في سياق أوسع، وبالتالي فإنها توفر قاعدة وثائقية صلبة للراغبين مستقبلاً في التعامل مع الآثار المسيحية بهذه المنطقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ديلاتر، دي روسي، علم الآثار المسيحي، تونس، رسائل.

**Titre: La correspondance du père Delattre et l'histoire de l'archéologie chrétienne au Maghreb: La correspondance avec Giovanni Battista de Rossi en 1885**

**Résumé:** Cet article présente cinq lettres inédites de la correspondance du Père Alfred Louis Delattre conservée aux Archives générales des Missionnaires d'Afrique/Pères Blancs à Rome. Cet essai fait partie d'une étude plus large sur le développement de l'archéologie chrétienne en Méditerranée, avec un accent particulier sur les documents d'archives. Ces lettres concernent les contacts du père Delattre avec Giovanni Battista de Rossi, le principal archéologue chrétien de Rome à la fin du XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Ces textes sont utiles pour comprendre l'influence que les fouilles romaines ont eu sur la promotion de la discipline de l'archéologie chrétienne au Maghreb et la muséification des découvertes paléochrétiennes dans le musée à Tunis. L'objectif est de présenter un certain nombre de textes originaux de

Delattre, contribuant à la connaissance de son épistolaire, qui est une mine d'informations pour les études archéologiques en Afrique du Nord. Ils permettent d'examiner ses recherches et ses découvertes dans le domaine de l'archéologie chrétienne dans un contexte plus large, et fournissent ainsi une base documentaire solide pour ceux qui s'occuperont à l'avenir des antiquités chrétiennes au Maghreb.

**Mots-clés:** Delattre, de Rossi, Archéologie chrétienne, Tunis, lettres.