Volubilis is a North African, Roman ruin located in Morocco, just a short distance (about 36 miles, or 58 km) outside of the historic city of Fez, and not far from the city of Meknes (about 18 miles, or 29 km), and only a couple of miles (3 km) from Moulay Idriss Zerhoun an important Islamic site in Morocco. While it is not impressive in size as are Pompeii or Herculanium, it makes for a wonderful place to visit while traveling in Morocco, as it is one of the largest ancient ruins in Africa. The countryside is spectacularly beautiful and it can be seen from all sides of the ruined site. The city sits at an altitude of 1300 feet (400 meters) on a triangular-shaped, rich plain bordered on both sides by two small rivers (Oued Fertassa and Oued Khomane). Arabs call Volubilis: "Oualili", "Oualila", and "Ksar Pharoun" (Pharaoh's Palace); names that have been attested to by Latin epigraphs, Arab written sources, and even excavated coins from the Idrissid period and before.
Its Place in History

Volubilis grew and prospered from the third century B.C., to B.C. 40, under the successive rule of independent Moorish kings (Bocchus the Elder, Bogud I, Bogud II. From this period several monuments have been uncovered and identified; namely, temples in the Mauretanean-punic tradition and a mysterious tumulus. After the assassination of King Ptolemy in B.C. 40 by Caligula and the crushing of a revolt by Ademon in ancient Mauretania, Emperor Claudius annexed the region, dividing it into two parts: one to the West with Tingi (Tangier) as its capital, the other to the East with Caesara (in Algeria) as capital. Volubilis was then elevated to the rank of a municipality.

From B.C. 40 to A.D. 285, Volubilis expanded spectacularly. During the first century came the major urban structures, such as the spacious roads (Decumani and Cardines), and the public monuments (temples, thermal baths). The next century saw further developments in the urban tissue; most importantly, the wall surrounding the city was founded by Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 168-169), together with the eight major gates linking the city to the outside world. The monument-filled center (the Forum, the Basilica, the Capitol, the Triumphal Arch) came about during the Severius dynasty, between A.D. 193 and 235. Also dating back to this period are the stately homes with perisyles and pools, the great mosaics (“Orpheus Mosaics”, the “Works of Hercules”, “Diana's Bath”, “Neriedes” are some of the well-preserved, much visited in-situ mosaics), numerous bakeries, and about one hundred oil presses attesting to the thriving economy of this roman outpost.
Toward the end of the third century A.D., an era of decline nearly officially began with the order of Emperor Diocletian to the Roman administration and the army to vacate Volubilis and the southern region in favor of the northern coastal posts of Mogador, Sale, and Loukos. From then on, what remained of the population shifted to the west of Caracala’s Arch, proceeded to raise a protective wall toward the sixth century and even continued to erect public structures. Some Latin inscriptions (found in the city's necropolis) from the period A.D. 599-655 indicate some “Christian-ization” of the population.
Arab sources, and in particular, some found pre-Idrisside coins, point to an Islamic presence in Volubilis at the beginning of the eight century. However, a centralized Islamic authority in Volubilis had to wait for the arrival of Idriss I, founder with his son of the first Arabo-Islamic dynasty in Morocco. Idriss had fled from Baghdad of the Abbasids and settled in Zedrhou, after the Ouraba Berber tribes (led by Ishak) welcomed and made him their Islamic leader. For a brief time, Volubilis (or “Oualili” served as capital of the new Islamic kingdom.

After the assassination of Idriss, his son, Idriss II, abandoned the city in favor of Fez, which he founded and made the first Arabo-Musli, capital of the first ruling dynasty of Morocco. Meantime, Volubilis continued as an urban center, receiving in the year A.D. 818 settlers from Andulusia (the Rabedis). According to early Arab historian, Al Bakri, Volubilis was still a sizable agglomeration as late as A.D. 1086. Thereafter, most probably due the successive raids of the Almoravids (the next ruling dynasty) the city's resistance came to an end. After this date, Arab historians referred to Volubilis only as an abandoned city in ruin.

After 1915, date at which European archeological digs began at Volubilis at the initiative of the French Protectorate, the World came to discover the long history, the unique architecture, and the rich and variegated artistic legacy of a city that harbored successive and successful communities for centuries.

No Roman town of any particular size could be without the important military and serenomical structure of a triumphal arch. In Volubilis it is placed at the end of the main street Decumanus Maximus. And after the triumphal arch there is nothing to be found of ancient ruins, only fields and grass. Its size is not the most impressive, but it is in good shape, and is striking as one steps out into the fields to look back upon it.
Volubilis was a Roman settlement constructed on what was probably a Carthaginian city, dating from 3rd century B.C. Volubilis was a central administrative city for this part of Roman Africa, responsible for the grain producing in this fertile region, and exports to Rome. Volubilis was also administering contacts with the Berber tribes which the Romans never managed to suppress, but who only came as far as to cooperate with the Romans for mutual benefits. Unlike so many other Roman cities, Volubilis was not abandoned after the Romans lost their foothold in this part of Africa in the 3rd century. Even the Latin language survived for centuries, and was not replaced before the Arabs conquered North Africa in the late 7th century.

People continued to live in Volubilis for more than 1,000 years more. Volubilis was first abandoned in the 18th century -- when it was demolished in order to provide for building materials for the construction of the palaces of Moulay Ismail in nearby Meknes. If that demolishing had not arrived, Volubilis could have become one of the best preserved
Roman sites anywhere. The main area of Volubilis (the only area that really attracts
visitors), is no more than 2500 x 1900 feet (800 x 600 meters) measured between the
walls. Much of the best of the excavations have been moved to the Archaeological
Museum (close to the royal palace in Rabat), but Volubilis offers ruins of quite good
quality, and about 30 high quality mosaics that still lay in their original emplacements.

The Forum of Volubilis is typical to the Roman town. But with a population of about
20,000 it still achieved an impressive size. The columns still standing are more than high
enough to dwarf most people.
The Basilica of Volubilis is very impressive, and even though there is not much remaining beyond walls and columns, there will be no difficulty to imagine what it looked like when it was in its glory. The walls rise up more than 30 feet (10 meters) and are in such good shape, that one can easily feel as if time has been turned back 2,000 years.

Volubilis is definitely an ancient Roman city where one should take care to keeping a keen eye focused on the ground. There are many mosaics there and an impressive quantity of them are in excellent condition. (All are fenced in so as to save them from the wear and tear of visitors – for the mosaics are spectacularly decorated ancient floors.)
There are mainly three houses to visit: the “House of the Euphebus” right next to the triumphal arch; the “House of Orpheus” to the south near the olive oil presses (see figure 10); and the “House of Dionysus” near the Decumanus Maximus.

Volubilis (a Roman excavation site, the largest in Morocco) is a mere 1.5 miles (4 km) from Moulay Idriss, Morocco's first Islamic city. Artifacts found at Volubilis are now in the Archeology Museum in Rabat.

Special note: In 1997, this ruin’s historical legacy won the city (most deservedly) the classification of a "World Heritage Site."
Figure 15 – Mosaic that once embellished an entire room.

Figure 16 – The Triumphal Arch ... as one departs from this dead city.
Historical Notes:

The original Hellenistic “Province of Africa” was formed after the defeat of Carthage in 146 B.C. and corresponded roughly to what is northeast Tunisia today (circa 2003). After the Battle of Thapsus in 46 B.C., Julius Caesar added a further area, Africa Nova (New Africa) to the original province by then called Africa Vetus (Old Africa). Under Augustus, further gains were reorganized into a new province, Africa Proconsularis, which extended from Numidia in the West to Cyrenaica in the East. The coastal area of Numidia and Mauretania appears to have been incorporated into Africa Proconsularis soon thereafter, forming a large senatorial province. Mauretania came under Roman control in 40 B.C. but was not fully subdued until several years later. In 42 B.C. Mauretania was split into two imperial provinces: Mauretania Caesariensis and Mauretania Tingitana. Numidia was established as a separate imperial province under Severus. In Diocletian’s reorganization, Africa was divided into seven new provinces in the diocese of Africa, while Mauritania Tingitana became part of the diocese of Hispanae. Under the Mauretanian King Juba II in the 1st century B.C. and the 1st century ad, Volubilis became a flourishing center of late Hellenistic culture. Annexed to Rome about A.D. 44, it was made a municipium (a community that exercised partial rights of Roman citizenship), and it became the chief inland city of the Roman province of Mauretania Tingitana.

Figure 17 – The Triumphant Arch and the breathtaking “Jebel Zerhoun Plain”.

My visit to Volubilis provided me with a panorama of intense visual memories, of great beauty, and enduring permanence – enough, to last a 1000 lifetimes. - ed.