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Palmyra 1992

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After four seasons devoted to the excavation, and partial restoration of a large house in downtown Palmyra, as well as of a 2nd century basilica converted into a church in the same neighborhood, it would only be natural to continue this undertaking, especially as both buildings are not yet entirely cleared. However, local developments persuaded me, after a discussion with Mr. Khaled As'ad, to postpone these plans until next year, in spite of the promise they hold, other more urgent business requiring now our attention.

There are indeed serious reasons to suppose that the building of a dam at the far end of the Valley of Tombs and the eventual forming of a lake behind it will present an imminent risk to the tombs and their contents. As it is well known, the extraordinary preservation in the tower tombs of Palmyra of perishable materials such as textiles, but also wood and even papyri, as found during our recent work in the Kitot tower, is due to the extremely stable and dry conditions prevailing so far inside these monuments. These conditions may soon be drastically altered as a result of the filling of a lake nearby, to say nothing of the expected increase of the general public.

Bearing these circumstances in mind, and in close cooperation with the Palmyra Museum, we have turned our full attention to the Valley.¹

¹ The mission included this year, beside the present writer, Dr. Maria Krogulska, Mssrs Janusz Byliński and Zbigniew Godziejewski, as well as two students,

Our work there concerned two different monuments located a few meters from each other at the western end of the site: the Atenatan tower, the oldest dated in Palmyra, and a huge rectangular complex, identified last year and mentioned already in my last report.

The tower of Atenatan, built in 9 BC by Kohailu and Hairan for their father Atenatan, remained for years in a state of uncertain equilibrium, large parts of its walls on the brink of falling apart. A team from the Palmyra Museum has now consolidated the monument as high as was feasible and has helped us to clear all accessible chambers. Precise plans and sections have been prepared (Fig. 1), many loculi cleared, and steps taken to close both doors of the tower with iron grills. The contents of chambers and loculi were systematically sifted, thus recovering even minute artifacts from the fill.

Certainly the main find there was an intact burial in a loculus on the third floor, somehow overlooked by robbers. As far as I know, this is the first instance in Palmyra of an unviolated burial found in a funerary tower under controlled conditions. After opening the loculus, we found a well preserved mummy of a man. It was carefully removed and transported to the Museum, where it is already on display.

Miss Anna Witecka and Mr. Sławomir Kowalski. This 32nd excavation season covered five weeks of work, from September 17 to October 23. I would like to thank the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums for all the facilities offered and to assure of our standing concern for the site of Palmyra and its preservation. As usual, we owe a lot to our long-time friends from the Palmyra Museum. Khaled As'ad and his associate Ali Obeid Taha should feel assured of our appreciation of their efficiency and sense of purpose.

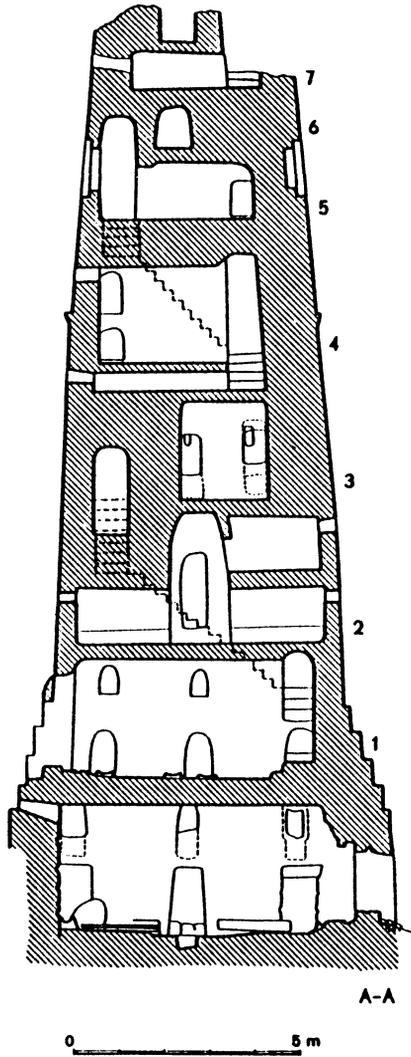


Fig. 1. Section through the tower of Atenatan.

Unlike other known mummies or fragments thereof, this body was not wrapped in cloth bands, but left entirely naked, though rolled in a woolen carpet and other textiles, all soaked in aromatic substances intended to preserve the flesh. Indeed, it has dried up without decomposition. A Late Hellenistic perfume bottle was left on the threshold of the loculus and sealed together with the burial. The only belongings of the deceased were a wooden stick and a tin bottle, but of the latter only small fragments remain.

The room containing this burial was later sealed with stones and plaster, and marked with an inscription which reads: "Kohailu and Hairan, sons of Atenatan, and their children". Because the burial appears to be the oldest in the chamber, there is a good chance that the man whose body we recovered was one of the founder brothers; the Hellenistic form of the bottle (another similar bottle was found broken on the floor) confirms an early date around the beginning of the 1st century AD.

Clearing work in the ground-level chamber, which opened to the north, revealed several plaster lamp-bowls, placed on the floor in front of the loculi. In one of them a lamp was found undisturbed; together with another lamp found nearby in similar circumstances, it provides a cross-dating for the abandonment of the chamber about AD 100. This is confirmed by a silver coin of Domitian, as well as by a funerary slab of Sheba daughter of Atenatan, which belonged to the group of early funerary sculpture. It features earrings in the form of grapes, matched by a real jewel in silver set with pearls, found in this very room.

In the same room a carnelian gem of remarkable workmanship was also found, as well as beads and pearls, common on

all levels and recovered in considerable quantities. Only after the door of the chamber had been broken, robbers and other visitors started to enter freely, sometimes leaving unwittingly proof of their passage, ranging in date from Byzantine to quite modern.

The other monument we were interested in lies just across the track from the Atenatan tower and was, strangely enough, never mentioned until last year, when we noticed and investigated it. This project, also in cooperation with the Palmyra Museum, was continued this season, given the considerable historical interest of the building.

It consists of a huge courtyard, 50 m by 35 m, surrounded by rooms on all four sides. Most of the rooms are square, 4.80 m to a side. There are 31 rooms altogether, as well as two staircases and a unique entrance from the south, that is from the road. The outer walls form a rectangle 61 x 49 m. The walls were of mud brick laid on a pedestal of rough stones and plastered inside. It seems that ceilings were supported by brick arches; a collapsed arch could be identified in the fill. The only original monumental feature in the building was the gate, 3.80 m wide and provided with a massive threshold made of two large blocks.

From the length of each of the two flights of steps, one in the southern and one in the northern row of rooms, it could be calculated that the level reached was in each case less than 5 m above ground. It seems that this level corresponded to a flat roof, rather than to a second storey; indeed, not only the limited amount of debris does not favor the latter solution, but also there is no evidence of a gallery, which would be necessary for circulation on a higher level.

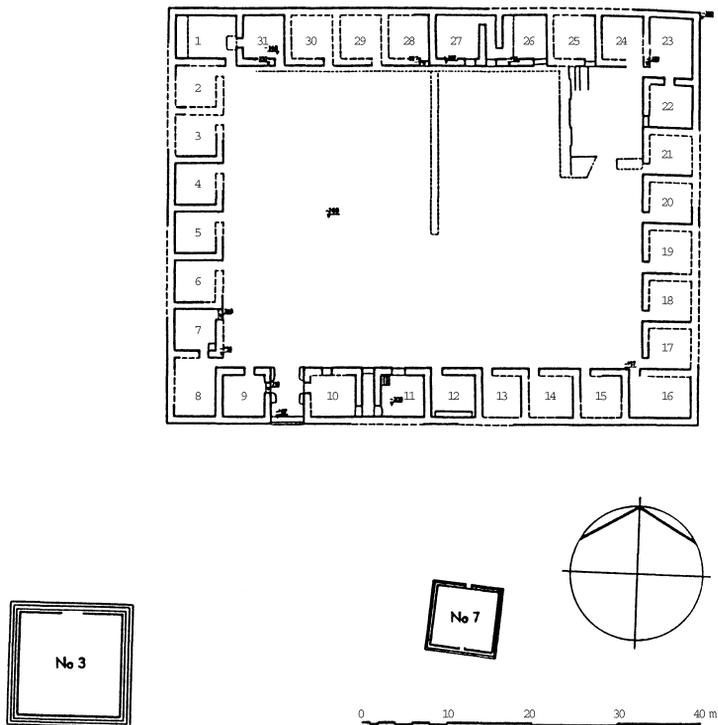


Fig. 2. Plan of the military post in the Valley of Tombs.

The first survey of the monument was started with the surmise that we had here an Islamic *khan*. Soon it became obvious that all the finds, scarce as they were last year, pointed to an earlier period, dated on numismatic evidence as the second half of 3rd century. Excavations in some of the rooms made it possible this season to make the dating more precise and to provide evidence for two stages of occupation.

The second occupational phase was marked by a slightly higher floor level in some of the rooms, as well as by the blocking of some doors. In particular, two rooms adjoining the gate were closed from the courtyard and became accessible from the entrance only; in both, cooking ovens were installed, hinting at some kind of organized distribution of food in the passageway. Coins found in relation with the secondary level point to a date about AD 260.

Another, more important addition consisted of a mud brick platform measuring 10.50 x 8.80 m and provided with buttresses, occupying the northeastern corner of the courtyard and blocking the doors of four rooms there. While preserved to a height of no more than 1 m, it clearly stood higher and represented a monumental addition to the otherwise plain, entirely utilitarian complex. By a fortunate coincidence, a coin found in connection with the platform provided a date: a denarius of Valerian dated to AD 257 corresponds closely to the remaining evidence discovered in other parts of the monument.

On the other hand, no finds whatever can be attributed to the original phase or to the period when the structure fell into disuse. This suggests a very short lifetime for the monument, during which no change in pottery style could be felt. The only definitely later remains that were recorded are related to one or more lime kilns installed in the courtyard of the then ruined building, but there is no dating evidence for this phase.

The building was not fortified. The outer walls are only 90 cm thick, little more than ordinary partitions between rooms. In spite of this, the eccentric location at the far end of the necropolis makes it unlikely that it had been intended as a caravan inn. Even if so, it was certainly used otherwise during the second

phase of occupation. The remarkable strategic location at the head of the Valley, where the main road from Homs, and from the west generally, entered the site, put the building in effective control of any movement in and out, even more so since a possible bypass to the south was then still barred by a wall. A unit of cavalry could use the place as a base for patrolling the approaches to the city in times of danger.

Keeping in mind the general situation in the east about AD 260, the existence of such a post is only natural. The Persian wars, culminating with the capture of Emperor Valerian in 260 and the following usurpation of Quietus in Emesa, provide of course the background of the rise of Odainat to power. It seems possible that the king of Palmyra could have used our building for military purposes. The latest coin found is dated to AD 268-270, that is already in the reign of Queen Zenobia. Not surprisingly, the post in the Valley did not outlive her demise.

In a different line of activity, I am pleased to announce that restorer Mr. Z. Godziejewski, who came to Palmyra for the second consecutive season, was able to complete his work on the stucco decoration found in the house which the mission has been excavating since 1988. The restored cornices have been displayed on the walls of a museum room made available after the transfer of the folklore collection to another building. Along with these late 2nd century architectural decoration, some other fragments from other locations are also displayed. It is our pleasure to offer this arrangement, hopefully to be completed later with a showcase display, to the Museum of Palmyra as a contribution to a new exhibition being prepared by its Director.