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Palmyra: Excavations 1997

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PALMYRA

EXCAVATIONS 1997

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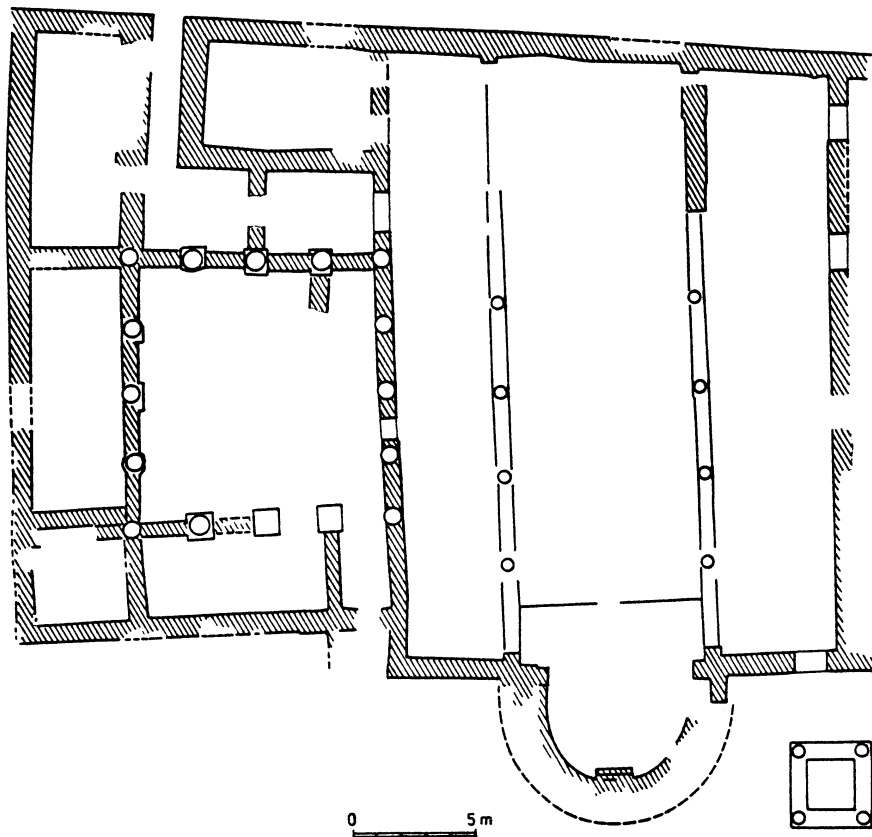
Working from September 3 to October 3, the Mission continued the exploration, begun in 1988, of three urban blocks to the north of the Great Colonnade.¹ The objective, hopefully to be achieved some five years from now, is to uncover and make accessible to the public a substantial sector of the downtown area, featuring monuments of the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods. After the discovery in 1988 of a church arranged inside an earlier building, we are currently dealing with another church, identified during the previous season some 50 m to the east.² It was also incorporated into an ancient public building of some importance.

EXCAVATION AREA

The town block, which the Mission is engaged in excavating, is marked as G on A. Gabriel's plan. A square peristyle courtyard (G1) that was cleared last year underwent some additional research in the form of trial pits and extra clearing

¹ The expedition, led by the present writer and assisted by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, included Dr. Maria Krogulska, Mr. Sławomir Kowalski, Ms Anna Witecka, and Ms Dagmara Wielgosz, archaeologists and established members of the Mission, and also graduate students Ms Marzena Łuszczewska, and Ms Marta Żuchowska. Mrs. Krystyna Gawlikowska also participated in our work. For two weeks, Mr. Janusz Byliński continued work on his publication of the Ayyubid Castle soon to be completed. Mr Abd el-Nasser Nimr, a student of archaeology in Damascus, volunteered to help with the documentation. While in Palmyra, we enjoyed as always the unfailing hospitality and helpful cooperation of the officials of the Palmyra Museum, who are also our friends of many years: Mr. Khaled As'ad, Director of Antiquities and Museums of the Palmyra region, and his associate Mr. Ali Taha, who served as inspector attached to the Mission.

² *PAM VIII*, 1996 (1997), pp. 191-197.



*Fig. 1. Church II and the adjoining courtyard (G1 and G2).
Plan G. Majcherek and S.P. Kowalski.*

work. The season's main objective was to complete the excavation of Church II (G2) identified in 1996 to the north of the said peristyle. Only the apse and a part of the pavement in the southern aisle were cleared then, as described in the last report. This purpose was achieved, but it is now obvious that further dependencies of the church lie to the north and east of the main body of the building and will have to wait until the next season to be cleared.

Only some limited test trenches were opened around Church I, discovered in 1988 in block E, but we have continued with the study of the octostyle portico of the Great Colonnade in front of this building. The Byzantine level of the portico was exposed and two shops of the Early Islamic period were cleared, while a test trench in the main street helped in clearing up the stratigraphy in this sector.

Finally, test trenches at the far end of block G were opened with the purpose of establishing a dating for a late structure known as the Wavy Wall. On this occasion, a late water channel was found and followed on the surface all the way from Diocletian's Camp to the neighborhood of the Zenobia Hotel.

CHURCH II

The building, identified as a church at the close of the last season, is very poorly preserved, though the pavements are nearly intact. It is a quadrilateral structure measuring 17.30 m from north to south and 23 m from east to west, apse excluded. It is divided into a central nave and two aisles, all three within the frame of earlier walls. While there were no openings in the western wall, which was inherited from the Roman period, three doors opened in the northern wall, also partly of earlier construction. The eastern end of both aisles is made of walls of reused stones, maybe in line with some earlier partitions. The southern wall of the church was built on top of a blockage between the



*Fig. 2. Church II, general view from the east.
Photo M. Gawlikowski.*

columns of the neighboring portico. One aisle was formed by incorporating the neighboring portico of courtyard G1, while the nave and the other aisle occupied the place of some earlier buildings of unknown character and plan.

The earlier structures partly determined the plan of the church, which is irregular as a result. Not only the opposite walls are not exactly parallel to each other, but also the aisles are not symmetrical. While the southern aisle, converted from one side of portico G1, is 3.80 m wide, just as the portico on the three other sides of the courtyard, the northern aisle has a width of 4.80 m, determined no doubt by some pre-existing feature. The nave is 7.40 m wide, as measured between the pilasters marking the colonnades.

The aisles were divided from the nave by two lines of columns. There were four reused columns on each side, starting from the east. All columns have between 50 and 60 cm in diameter. The

first column to the left of the apse, still standing to a height of 1.50 m above the level of the pavement in which the lower shaft was buried, is of the common local white limestone. The capital, which is in the same kind of stone, and has a lower diameter of 50 cm and height equal to 55 cm, was found nearby. The corresponding column to the right has disappeared. Three other columns on each side were of black-and-white granite. Only one (the third from the choir on the left) still preserves its original height, though broken in two parts, one of which is still in place. It originally stood 3.10 m high above the pavement. Even with the capital on top, one cannot suppose anything but arcades between them. With the span being a regular 2.90 m between columns, the intrados of the archivolt should have been some 5.10 m above the floor.

The pilasters at the east end of the aisles have no bases either; they were crowned with capitals, of which one fails to show any trace of the decoration, while the left one still has some recognizable volutes and leaves. It is 60 cm high and 60 cm wide at bottom, both in front and on the right side, while to the left there is a flat surface departing at right angle 20 cm from the front, just as on the pilaster shaft. The length of the stone amounts to 1.20 m and corresponds exactly to the distance from the pilaster front to the inner face of the apse wall.

At the western end of the church, two pairs of pillars supported the last tier of the colonnades separating the aisles. It was larger than the others, about 4.50 m, but not necessarily higher.

At first glance, it would seem that there are stylobates to the right and left of the nave, 65 cm and 60 cm wide respectively and made of blocks clearly distinct from the pavement on either side. However, the mode of erecting the columns was actually quite different.

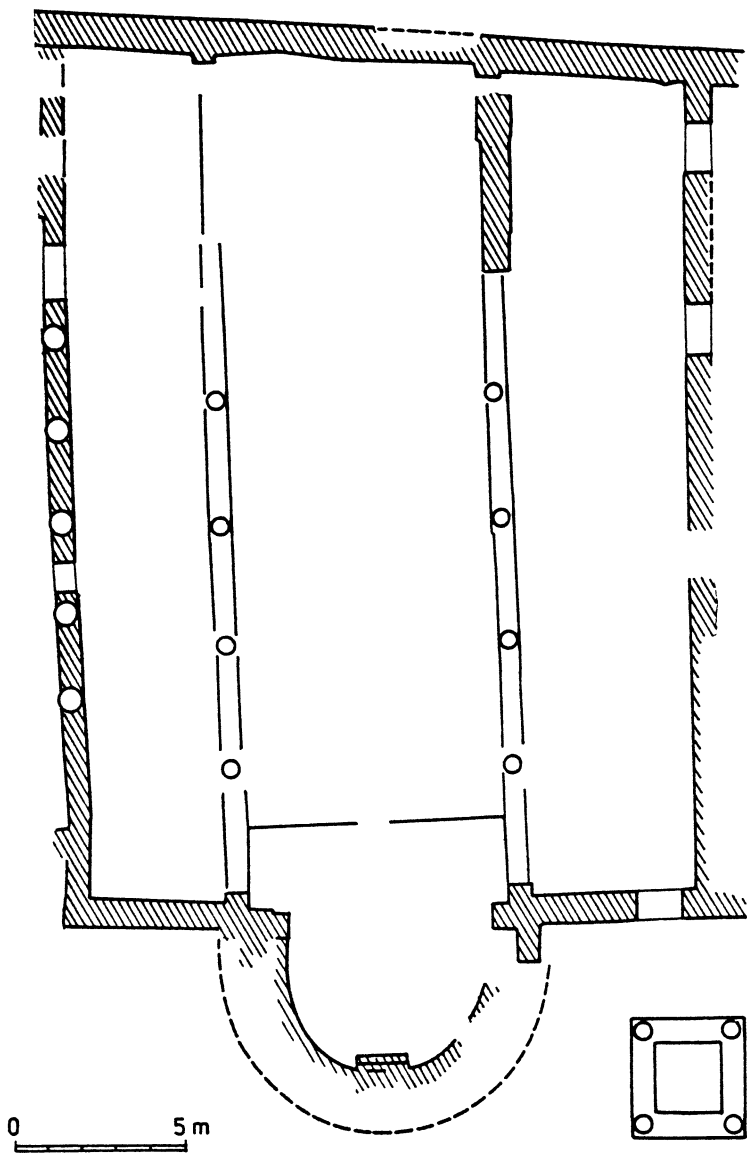


Fig. 3. Church II. Plan G. Majcherek and S.P. Kowalski.

The granite columns were set without any base on a flat slab some 60 cm under the floor level and held in place with stones and mortar, covered with two stones that were hollowed out to accommodate the circular shape of each column and laid as part of the pavement. The slabs laid between them form two lines in the pavement and divide the aisles from the nave, but have no structural function whatever.

The western end of the aisles, marked by square pillars 55 cm wide, made use of two earlier E-W walls bonded with the western wall, but preserved only in foundations under the church pavement, except for a stretch in the northern aisle, where they are still apparent a few centimeters above the pavement. In the southern aisle, the pillar in white hard limestone is still preserved in place, 1.95 m high and standing some 2.20 m above the pavement level. Two mortises on top, as for a statue, indicate that it was reused.

A robbers' trench along the western wall has cut through the church pavement and the underlying levels, all of which can be seen in section. This trench is dated by two wheel-turned lamps and some sherds to the 8th or 9th century; it also contained some tiles which could indicate that it was dug when the building was already in ruin. In the northwestern corner of the church, under the missing pavement stones, there is a stone box covered with three slabs, containing a double burial. The skeletons were laid one upon the other, looking north, their feet towards the east. No objects were deposited with the dead, who were apparently buried in the church which was already in ruins, but still considered a holy place.

The flooring of the nave in the rear part, up to a line 4.35 m from the western wall, corresponding roughly to the first tier of the arcades, is made of plaster. Further east, flagstones were used, many reused: a sculptured ceiling block, a volute door console, and other huge blocks, especially eight full rows of ashlar blocks 65 cm wide (and presumably square in section), which together

could constitute some 60 m of continuous masonry in an important monument, apparently of 1st century AD date. In the temple of Bel, for the sake of comparison, similar blocks were used, though measuring 0.80 m in height and thickness. The pavement of the aisles is generally of lesser quality and much worn.

Flagstones in front of the apse, mostly larger and better preserved than elsewhere, are cut by the chancel groove which is 10 cm wide, parallel to the apse opening, but with a passage left in the middle, 1.55 m wide, in which two mortises, 0.90 m apart, held in place a moving barrier of some kind. Laterally, there is only one mortise on each side, 0.45 m from the corresponding pilaster. More mortises can be seen in the slabs in front of the chancel, including two in a pair of fine slabs reused to the right in front of the chancel. It was perhaps the greatest surprise of the season when, on the very last day of excavations, thanks to light falling at a particularly favorable angle, an engraved Kufic inscription was noticed on one of these slabs. Only two lines out of four could be read; they contain the *bismala*.

The pavement of the apse includes a square slab 0.96 m to the side, set on axis, and, also, a reused cornice 0.45 m wide and 1.57 m long, set higher than the pavement. Right and left of it, there are four holes left by the legs of an altar table installed over the cornice, but slightly more to the east. They mark a rectangle 0.95 m wide in the E-W direction and 1.35 m long from north to south, no doubt corresponding approximately to the dimensions of the altar itself.

The surrounding wall of the apse has entirely disappeared, but the baked brick *synthronon* was disregarded by the robbers. Laid on a semi-circular stone foundation which is level with the pavement, the brick structure is preserved up to some 0.50 m in height. It fills a recess 0.38 m wide at the right end, behind the lateral pilaster of the arch, while at the left end the

bricks have vanished. The bricks are flat, 4 cm thick and laid in a thick ashy plaster to form steps.

In the middle, a stone step 1.45 m wide and 0.26 m deep is raised barely 0.10 m above the pavement. In front of it, there is a negative imprint of a flat stone laid in mortar in front of the surviving step. This stone extended 0.44 m forwards and ended 0.30 m away from the mortises of the altar table. Above it, there are three steps c. 0.20 m high and 0.25 m deep, made each of three bricks, leading up to the bishop's seat. On each side, there is a step five bricks high. The round foundation of the steps rests on orthogonal chalky slabs beneath the pavement of the apse which is laid against the *synthronon*. The arch of the apse is 6.30 m wide and rests on two pillars, each different. The apse itself is 5.20 m deep behind the arch.

Several test trenches were opened beneath the pavement level of the church in places where the flagstones are missing. Repeatedly, a plastered floor was found immediately below the pavement, and another floor about 0.15 m deeper. They both belong to structures earlier than the church. While it would be very difficult to restore the plan of these buildings, it is clear from the pottery found in the fill that both the floors and the corresponding monuments should be dated in the late 3rd or in the 4th century. The Early Roman level, wherever found, begins about 1.20 m below the floor of the church. In two out of three trenches that reached this level, the remains of bread ovens were found, pointing to a rather modest settlement in the area. The buildings associated with the plastered floors could have been erected only after the time of Zenobia. Further research is necessary in order to understand the topography of the site in the Roman period.

By way of contrast, the chronology of the church is quite clear. While the fill in the nave and aisles, as well as in the robbers' trench, is heavily in favor of the church being abandoned in the

course of the 8th-9th century – as it was only to be expected from our finds elsewhere in the neighborhood – the date of its founding was suggested in the beginning by a single 8th century coin found under a column serving as a step in front of the threshold of the southwestern entrance. On the last day of the excavations, the Kufic inscription mentioned above was noticed on one of the flagstones. The use of this stone, taken no doubt from a ruined Islamic building by an illiterate person who could not appreciate the abomination rising from God's name being trampled underfoot (though the pavement was no doubt covered with carpets when still in use), shows that in Palmyra under Moslem rule the two religious communities existed side by side, but foremost it proves beyond all doubt that the pavement, and the whole church with it, comes from a period when the Arabic script (in its early variety) was already established in the oasis. In other words, we have here a church of the Umayyad period, to my knowledge the first church of this date ever found in Syria. This church was not destroyed violently, but dismantled stone by stone after being abandoned by the congregation.

EARLY ROMAN REMAINS

There is not much to show for the architecture of Classical Palmyra in the sector under investigation. While the columns of courtyard G1 are undoubtedly of late 2nd century date, there is no certainty that they are found in their original location. In fact, the corresponding walls could be pretty late, possibly post-Zenobian. If this impression is confirmed, a public building erected so late would be compelling proof of the urban vitality of Palmyra in the 4th-5th centuries.

If so, the Early Roman remains in the sector would be limited to a *tannur* found under the courtyard and another under the northwestern corner of the church, as well as to some disconnected fragments of walls, all more than 1 m below the level of the church.



*Fig. 4. Fragmentary votive niche with eagles. 1st century AD.
Photo M. Gawlikowski.*

On the other hand, there are errant remnants of some important 1st century building in the area, possibly a temple. The heavy ashlar stones reused in the pavement of the nave were probably not brought from afar. Besides, it should be noted that block G is twice as wide as other blocks to the right and left of it. This is the reason why there are as many as three churches opening from the same street: a larger building oriented to the east would not fit into the width of a standard block. As the street pattern dates from the 2nd century, it is quite clear that some monuments in existence at that time required this aberration from the norm.

One particular find provides a hint. In the drain channel going around the northwestern corner of the church, two fragments of a cult niche were found. The spread-winged eagle

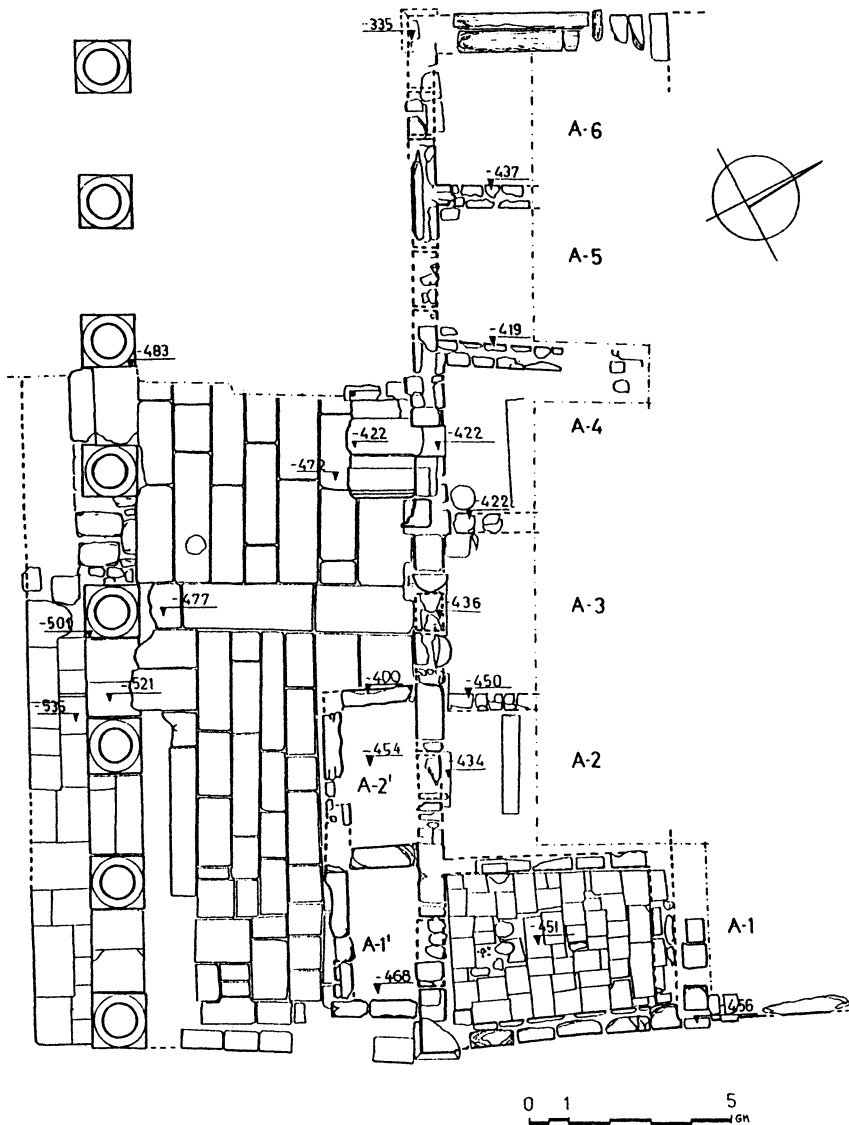


Fig. 5. Octostyle portico in the Great Colonnade.
Plan G. Majcherek and S.P. Kowalski

with two smaller ones on the lintel, and another in the field below, as well as the elaborate decoration of the frame, agree in every detail with the pattern best known from the finds in the Baalshamin sanctuary, but not peculiar to this cult. The monument comes from the 1st century AD.

OCTOSTYLE PORTICO OF THE GREAT COLONNADE

The portico in front of the church in block E, unlike other parts of the Great Colonnade, had a beautiful pavement between the columns, extending into the street with a sidewalk of 1.40 m width. The roof of this portico was restored in AD 328 by the city's administrator of the name of Flavius Diogenes. We can also attribute to this official the laying of another, higher pavement in the portico, a pavement that is well preserved and covers the whole width from the back wall to the colonnade, circling partly the column bases. At the same time, one of the shops was converted into a passage leading to the courtyard behind it through a monumental gate that opened in the back wall of the portico.

Later, the flagstones of the 4th century pavement were covered by two earthen layers forming successive walking levels. The upper one is associated with two small rooms built in the portico in front of two of the shops. The collected pottery and several coins date these structures to the 8th/9th century AD, but we were not able to differentiate between the two observed levels. They obviously correspond to the *suq* discovered by Khaled As'ad near the Tetrapyle, which the Polish mission helped to investigate.³

DEPENDENCIES OF CHURCH I

The courtyard behind the shops of the Colonnade is not yet excavated, because one of the possible access routes to the site passes above it. Practicality did not interfere with work at the opposite, northern end of the courtyard, in front of Church I

³ As'ad and Stepniowski, *DaM* 4, 1989, pp. 205-223.

(discovered in 1988). The stylobate of a portico was cleared there, extending for the entire width of the block; it is probably also due to Flavius Diogenes. Its relation to the basilica antedating the church has been clarified. When the church was installed in the ruin of this building in the 6th century (that is later than previously thought),⁴ the columns of the portico were no longer standing. A pavement was laid then between the stylobate and the wall of the church, and some architrave blocks were set down around it as a kind of enclosure.

When the church was abandoned, one of its dependencies to the west was converted to hold an oil press. Once the door from the nave was walled up, the floor of the press was installed, at a very high level with respect to the church floor and right under the present surface. This working floor is square and contains four circular grooves linked in pairs and provided with outlets running towards the north, where a step at a lower level could have supported vessels to collect the oil. The installation is not yet completely cleared, because a part of it is still covered by the stone rubble of a toppled adjacent church wall.

WAVY WALL

A shabby enclosure laid without foundations nearly on the present surface surrounds the northern part of the ancient city from a point close the Tetrapyle up to Diocletian's Camp.⁵ It seems certain that it belonged to the last phase of settled life on the ancient city site, that is to the 8th century. It probably replaced the walls destroyed by Marwan II in AD 750.

We have searched for confirmation of this supposition, testing the wall at the point of its intersection with block G. While no precise evidence was found, an open water channel was

⁴ See *PAM V*, 1994 (1995), p. 141.

⁵ See D.P. Crouch, *Studia palmyreńskie* 6/7, 1975, p. 11.

identified behind the Wavy Wall, running parallel to it on the inside. The channel cuts across the ruins, which must have looked much as they do now, and can be followed on the ground for most of its course.

It has been established that the channel starts at the Camp, where a short stretch of it was found in 1987, probably linked to the Abu Fawares aqueduct. At the other end, it can be seen behind the Zenobia Hotel, where some old garden enclosures are still apparent.

CONCLUSIONS

The key result of the season is the clearing of Church II. It is now certain that the Christian population of Palmyra in the Early Islamic period was concentrated in the area under investigation, which corresponds to the heart of the ancient city. It is striking proof of the vitality of this community that a new church was built in the Umayyad period. What we know of usually is the continued use of earlier churches and this case is to my knowledge unique in Syria.

The neighborhood was abandoned in the early 9th century, as is clear from our previous finds, confirmed again this year. As the last known bishop of Palmyra is attested in AD 818, it seems that the definite end of occupation on the ancient site coincided with the disappearance of the Christian community which until then had lived side by side with the Moslems within the limits of Late Roman Palmyra.