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Palmyra Seasons 2002

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PALMYRA

SEASON 2002

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The excavation season lasted from 29 April to 14 June 2002.¹⁾ The mission took up the work in Basilica III, partly uncovered in the previous year. The main body of the basilica is now cleared entirely, but the pastophoria right and left of the apse are only partly probed and the work there will be continued. The atrium in front of the church has been cleared of later structures and its colonnades restored as far as possible. A side chapel opening from the atrium has been excavated. Other dependencies of the church await their turn.

An unexpected discovery was made in the sector by the Great Colonnade. While investigating late structures behind the shops along the octostyle portico, a mosaic floor was found. We have cleared only a small part of it, so as to get a general idea of the subjects and dating of the floor. After due recording the mosaic was covered and protected until the next season.

1) The mission was headed by the present writer with Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek as deputy. It further included Ms Marta Żuchowska, Mr. Marcin Wagner and Mr. Ladislav Stanèò, archaeologists, as well as Messrs. Wojciech Terlikowski and Michał Smoła, architects, and restorer Mr. Tomasz Myjak. A student of archaeology from Tübingen, Ms Elisabeth Katzy, also joined the team. Mrs. Krystyna Gawlikowska participated in a private capacity.

It is our pleasure to acknowledge the standing support of Dr. Abdel Razzaq Moaz, then Director General of Antiquities and Museums, and of Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of Excavations at the DGAM in Damascus. In Palmyra, Mr. Khaled Assaad, Director of Antiquities, and Mr. Ali Taha, who served as the inspector attached to the mission, have been most helpful as usual. We thank them all wholeheartedly.

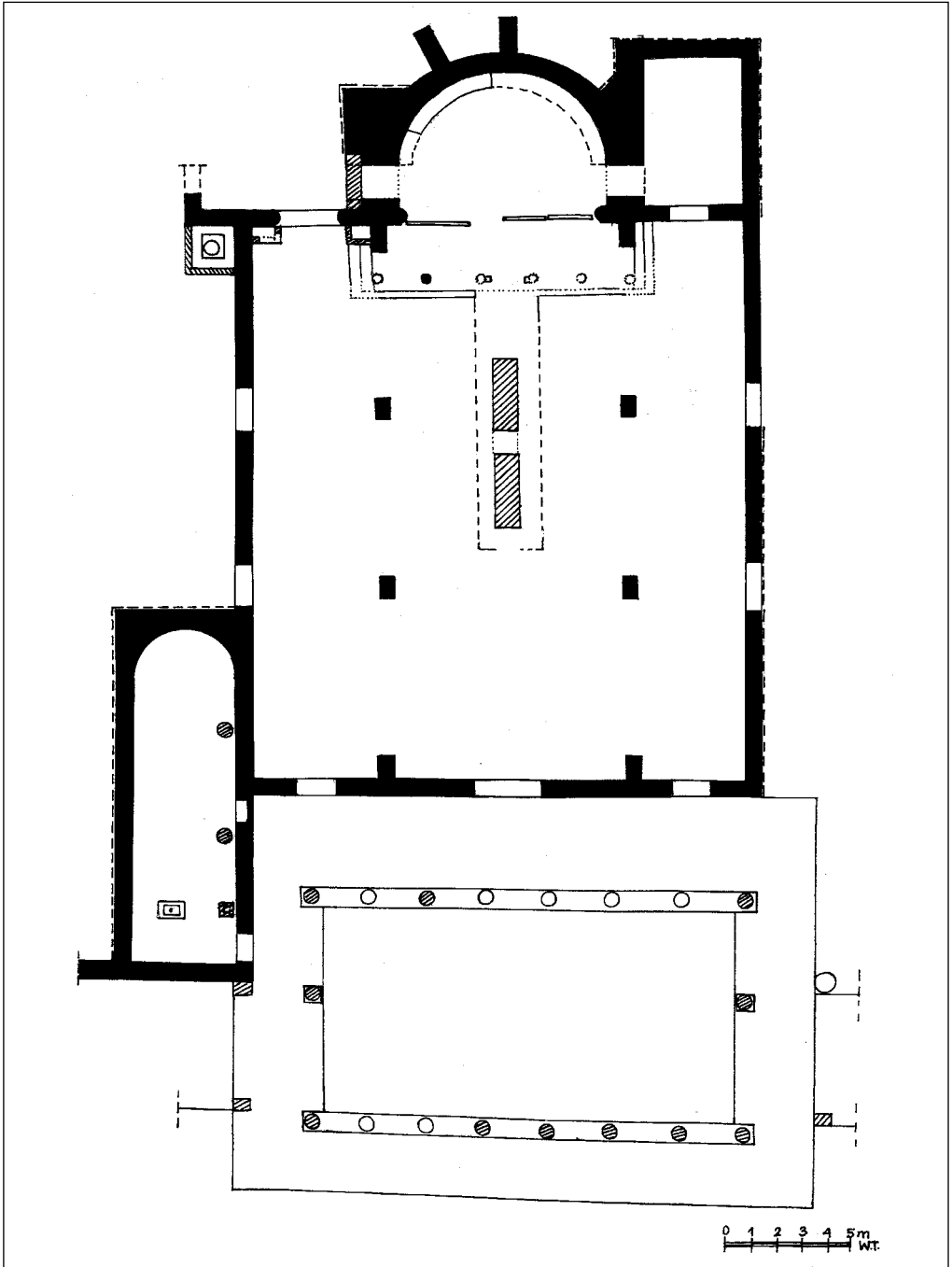


Fig. 1. Schematic situation plan of Basilica III
(Drawing W. Terlikowski)

BASILICA III

This church, about 21 m wide at front and 23 m deep without the apse and dependencies, was excavated in 2001 and some two-thirds of the main body were cleared. This year we were able to complete the excavation in the aisles and the apse (*Fig. 1*). The fill, on the average 1 m thick, contained very few sherds, but included many stones, partly much-worn hard limestone slabs fallen from the lower walls, and mostly soft limestone blocks piled up in the ruins of the church waiting to be processed into lime. Two lime kilns were in fact identified in the northern aisle. There is not much left of the vertical elements of the nave and aisles. The floor all over the place was of white plaster, but it is extremely worn and large patches of the black ashy bedding can be seen everywhere

(*Fig. 2*). The plaster floor covered the original flagging, as evinced in two test pits, one near a lateral door to the south, the other at the east end of the northern aisle.

There were two free-standing pillars on either side of the nave, preserved only in their lowermost course. Similar pillars were attached to the walls at both ends, making for three arcades 6.40 m wide on either side of the nave. This plan resembles closely that of the church at Qalb Lozeh, except for the front towers, missing here. Three capitals have been found in the rubble, corresponding to the terminal pillars at the eastern end right and left of the apse and the westernmost pillar of the southern aisle; they are taken from some Classical building and feature a row of rosettes on three sides beneath a molded cornice.



Fig. 2. Basilica III in 2002, seen from the west (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

There were three doorways in the western wall, opening into the atrium, and two more in each of the lateral walls. Both the southern wall and the façade have been preserved at a very low level, rising however toward the north, where the wall stands to a height of about 1.50 m. While the southern entrances led into the church from a burial ground between this church and the earlier excavated Basilica II, the northern doors opened into some dependencies of the main body of the building.

Two more passages opened at the eastern end of the lateral aisles. To the right, a door led into a rectangular room connected sidewise with the apse. Later use, including installation of a water pipe and well, resulted in a near complete removal of the original stone floor and all internal features, such as might have been there. To the left, there were two engaged columns flanking a passage 1.95 m wide. All parallels lead us to believe that this northern dependency of the apse served as a martyrion. It could not be excavated this season.

Two very curious features, installed in the corners of the aisle, mark the entrance to the probable martyrion. In the north-eastern corner, there was a kind of oblong rectangular basin, 1.20 by 0.65 m, set directly on the flagstones of the first pavement of the church. It was originally revetted inside and outside with white marble. The thin walls of this basin, now lost, were supported on the inside by two small pillars set against the church walls, and a third such pillar can be assumed inside the free corner. The height of this feature cannot be established, but it was probably fairly low.

On the other side of the passage, against the pillar of the first arcade, there was a squarish basin, 0.68 by 0.76 m, plastered both inside and out. Its relation to the sanctuary steps shows that it was not

a part of the original layout of the church. I cannot, for the time being, quote any parallels to these two installations in the corners of the aisle, which were probably used subsequently, one after the other. They may have contained holy water that visitors to the shrine could have taken away with them.

The sanctuary, advancing from the apse into the nave, was set slightly above the nave and paved with flagstones (*Fig. 3*). In the apse, the flagging had never been covered, unlike the body of the building. On the other hand, what is left of the *synthronon* is clearly secondary: a few blocks of white soft limestone set on the pavement against the curve of the apse. Laterally, there was a door on each side, leading to the dependencies, immediately behind the engaged columns that supported the great arch.

Originally, the sanctuary was delimited by a row of six colonnettes (dia. 35 cm) set into the front of the sanctuary (cf. *Fig. 3*). Only a stump of one of them has been preserved in place, showing that probably all of them were, like this one, of black granite. The middle pair stood on molded bases imbedded in plaster keeping them in place, but probably left apparent in front. The middle passage, 1.15 m wide, was flanked by two small pillars set against these two columns. One can imagine a light entablature and curtains hanging between the columns at this stage.

The podium of the sanctuary advancing into the nave was at one time covered with a plaster floor, the same as in the body of the church. The ashy bedding and the smooth surface have been preserved in the corners against the aisle pillars. This floor appears to have covered entirely the remains of the front portico, and met two narrow steps added in front, once faced with marble plates. Behind this, three huge



*Fig. 3. The apse of Basilica III after partial restoration
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*



*Fig. 4. Remains of late cancelli slabs on the podium and in the nave of Basilica III
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

upright slabs, two of them found still in place while the third one has fallen, formed a barrier across the span of the great arch. It seems clear that they formed a *cancellum* of sorts (Fig. 4), but one remains puzzled by the asymmetry of their layout. The chronological relation of this barrier to the portico of the sanctuary and to the later *cancellum* is not apparent.

At the edge of the first step, traces of tiny iron bolts can be observed, set at irregular intervals along the whole front of the sanctuary. Apparently, they had supported a metal *cancellum*. In the middle, however, only the second step was left, while a patch of plastered floor sloped gently down between two narrow foundations cut into it and advancing 10.70 m into the nave. We understand this structure as the support of the metal *cancellum* turning westwards, and forming a corridor about 2.50 m wide. Unfortunately, only some stones mark its course here and there up to the far end, but the trenches cut into the floor are well apparent. In the middle, a flagged walk, 80-cm wide, rose slightly above floor level and was once covered with marble.

The foundation date of the basilica remains to be established. It is already obvious, however, that the original church was restored substantially at some stage. The most conspicuous evidence for this is the plastered floor covering the original flagstones all over the nave and the aisles (but not in the apse). There are clear indications, too, that before this remake the body of the church was uncovered and abandoned for an extended period of time. This can be deduced from the deep erosion of some stones, such as door-jambs of the main entrance in their part later protected by the threshold raised to the level of the secondary floor, and especially from the

erosion of the lower drums of the engaged columns of the great arch and of the smaller arch of the alleged martyrion. Apparently, the arcades of the nave had remained standing. The outer wall of the apse, however, had to be reinforced with radial buttresses of white limestone, inserted into the original circular wall of hard nummulithic limestone in such a way so as to make the continued existence of the semi-dome above the apse doubtful.

While the finds permit us to date the final abandonment of the church in the early 9th century, the thorough rebuilding could be tentatively ascribed to the time of Justinian, who is said by Malalas to have sent to Palmyra in AD 527 a governor with the mission to restore the ruined churches and public buildings there. In particular, the radial buttresses of the apse resemble closely the structure of the round bastions added to the rampart and generally attributed to this emperor on the strength of a more often quoted statement by Procopius referring to the same event. Should this dating be confirmed by future research, the original foundation of the church should go back to the 5th century.

Before the final abandonment of the church there was a stage of profane use of the ruins. First, lime kilns were installed in the nave to process blocks of white chalky limestone which could have come possibly from the upper parts of the walls, restored at a later stage in the existence of the church. Shortly afterwards, and without clearing the heaps of stones assembled for processing, two small rooms were installed in the opposite southeastern and north-western corners of the once again ruined building, using as support what remained of the arcade pillars. From the fabric of one of these structures, a fragment of a small marble reliquary was recovered.

THE ATRIUM

The paved space in front of the church, about 21 m wide and 18 m deep, corresponds to the entire width of the Church Street leading into it from the Great Colonnade. Such arrangements are extremely rare in Syrian church architecture. Remarkably, the square was open at both ends, where the street entered it from the south and left it to the north (cf. *Fig. 1*). This suggests that the street itself was a part of the ecclesiastical complex to which our basilica belonged.

The atrium is paved with huge flagstones, which form in the middle a sunken rectangle around which all the column bases were found in place. There were eight columns along both sides parallel to the church façade and only three at the short ends, counting the corner columns twice. While the intercolumnia on the long sides

measured only 2.60 m between column axes, the short sides conformed to the width of the earlier street, and the columns were set in consequence at over 4 m away from each other. In spite of some differences in the setting of the columns, which were all reused and not necessarily coming from a single ancient monument, it should be assumed that the atrium as such is a homogenous structure, built at one time as part of the basilica.

This year we were able to raise four complete shafts (two of them with capitals) and three partially preserved ones, thus making the form of the atrium immediately clear to the visitor (*Figs. 5, 6-8*). Late enclosures between columns have been removed, as was also the wall crossing the atrium down the middle.



Fig. 5. Raising of the columns in the atrium of Basilica III
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)



*Fig. 6. The restored atrium of Basilica III, seen from the east
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*



*Fig. 7. The restored atrium of Basilica III, seen from Church Street
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

THE NORTHWEST CHAPEL

At the northern end of the atrium, where the Church Street reappears again, there was a narrow door, originally under the protection of the northern portico. It led two steps down into a rectangular room, 4.30 m wide and 13.70 m long, ending at the far end in an apse. This chapel extended all along the atrium wall and shared a part of its lateral wall with the northern aisle of the basilica (cf. *Fig. 1*).

The apse, as wide as the nave, extended on axis for 3.90 m, its curve being slightly flattened. It opened once with an arch still marked by two stumps of pilasters and was paved with flagstones. The nave was

apparently lower, but at present it has a plastered floor that is level with the pavement in the apse.

There are at present no features related to Christian cult practices left in the apse. On the other hand, the southern wall of the chapel has been singularized by two columns and an ancient altar set against it on the secondary floor. As this side corresponds to the *qibla*, it is possible that such an asymmetric arrangement might have corresponded to a late use of the chapel as a small mosque. This possibility will be checked in the future when a blocked niche in the same wall will be explored.



Fig. 8. The restored atrium of Basilica III, seen from the northeast. The south wall of the Northwest Chapel visible in the foreground (Photo M. Gawlikowski)



*Fig. 9. The uncovered part of the mosaic by the Great Colonnade
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

MOSAIC BY THE GREAT COLONNADE

A plastered area enclosed on three sides by walls had been cleared in 2001 behind the line of shops on the northern side of the Colonnade. It featured three column bases and a column shaft, as well as some partitions. These remains were evaluated as quite late, while no trace of original monuments matching the Colonnade could be seen in the sector.

This year, a test pit below the late plaster floor revealed a well preserved mosaic about 1.20 m below the present level. After clearing as much of it as could safely be done in the limited time, a stretch about 9 m long N-S and some 2 m wide E-W became visible (*Fig. 9*). On the east the mosaic is broken some 2 m away from

a wall which had formed its original limit and which contains a large threshold. In the opposite direction, late constructions interfered with our work, but another patch of the mosaic was cleared against the western wall of the room. It is clear that after removing the intrusive elements we shall have a continuous decorated surface of at least 9 m by 6 m, touching the southern and western walls of the room.

Though the mosaic has been deformed by the weight of the late N-S wall, it seems practically intact and there is no reason to expect major damage under the well preserved plaster floor. The original hall was about 8 m wide, while it could have been even twice as



*Fig. 10. Mosaic panel with two female griffins
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

long as the part already opened, if we assume a symmetry in the mosaic pattern. It could hardly have been part of a private house.

The mosaic presents elaborate borders and geometrical designs, surrounding rectangular figurative panels, of which three were cleared. One of them represents a he-goat standing in front of a tree (cf. *Fig. 9* and cover design), another features two female griffins resting one paw on a severed bull's head (*Fig. 10*), and still another two panthers flanking a *kantharos* (*Fig. 11*). While it is definitely too early to risk an interpretation, it should be pointed out that all the motifs mentioned above are encountered in Dionysian iconography.

The workmanship is careful and professional, the color palette rich, especially in the animal figures: up to 14 shades of color could be identified among the tesserae used. One panel, however, at the southern end of the mosaic, stands out as fairly crude, on a background of a different color, being evidently a reparation; it consists of two hands with outstretched fingers, uniformly red, and probably of a magical significance (cf. *Fig. 9*, at top, between two column bases).

This is the first discovery of a mosaic in Palmyra in sixty years. The last (and only) time was back in 1941, when the architect Duru excavated two houses behind the Bel temple and found several mosaics that are now on display in the Palmyra Museum.

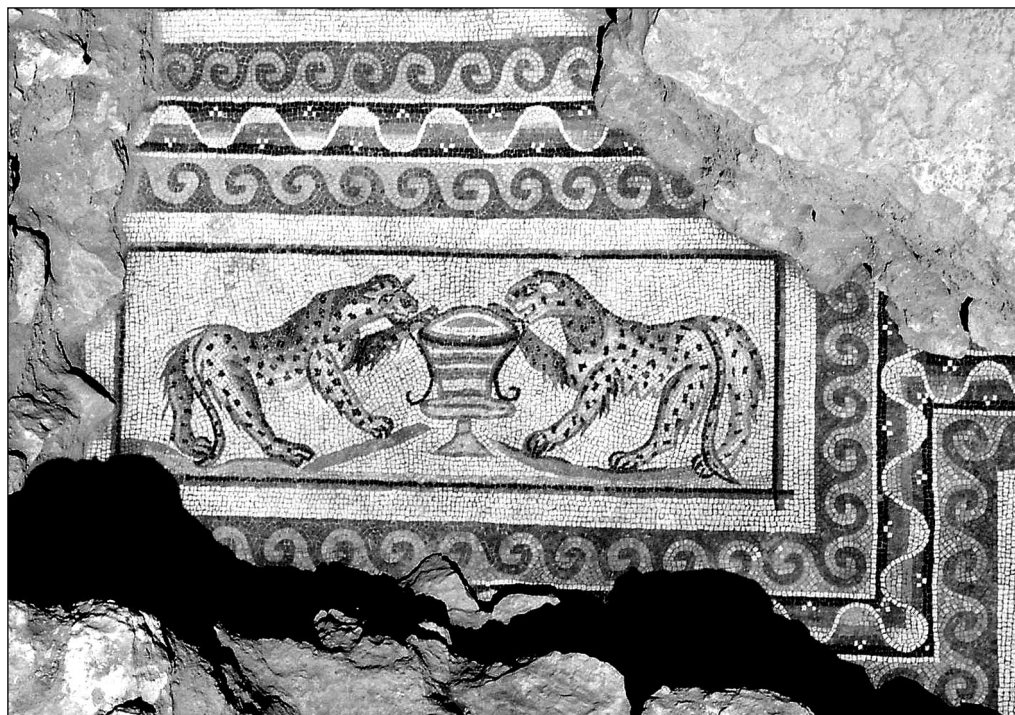


Fig. 11. Mosaic panel with panthers
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)