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## Palmyra

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## PALMYRA

### Michał Gawlikowski

From their beginning in 1959 and down to 1987 our excavations in Palmyra concerned mainly Diocletian's Camp, especially its two major monuments, the *principia* ("Temple des Enseignes") and the sanctuary of Allat. After clearing yet another building inside perimeter, the *horreum* or granary of the Camp (1981-1986), and investigating the Watergate in the northeastern corner of the Camp (1987), the excavations program in this area can be considered as closed.

The season 1988 marked a new start. We have taken up another sector of the ancient town, situated to the north of the Great Colonnade, between the Tetracylon and the Funerary Temple. The new excavation permit was issued very soon after the request was made, upon the recommendation of Dr. Adnan Bounni, Director of Excavations in the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of the SAR and the Director General, Dr. Ali Abu Assaf, expressed his support to this new project right after taking office. I wish to reiterate our appreciation for this generous policy which was and is so essential for our activities. I am also pleased to credit Mr. Khaled As'ad, Director of Antiquities of Palmyra, and his associates Msrss Ahmad and Ali Tana with their part in the success of our undertaking.

The site of the Diocletian's Camp, even if no longer excavated, has not been abandoned. We endeavor to consolidate every year particularly threatened parts of its monuments. In 1988, we put in good repair the main part of the chapel of the *principia*. The apse, much eroded and excavated incompletely for fear of collapse, has been entirely cleared and restored. Newly cut limestone blocks were used to fill gaps in the walls, and the north pilaster of the arch, entirely missing, was rebuilt.

Work was started meanwhile in the new sector. It includes three long blocks, each 25 m wide and stretching for some 135 m from the Great Colonnade to the northeast. The middle block has eight columns opening on the Great Colonnade, one of which bears the oldest dated and the most recent inscriptions in the whole street, from AD 158 and 328 respectively.<sup>1</sup> The texts concern probably the building and certainly the restoration of the portico of eight columns.

The importance of the monument behind them was easy to guess, even without considering its walls, still standing 5 m high above the bases in the Colonnade, concealed under a small tell at the far end of the intermediary courtyard about 26 m deep. Surface remains indicated a rectangular enclosure measuring about 27 m through 30 m, and an inner building about 15 m wide and 23 m deep, provided with an apse looking east. It was quite clear from the start that the monument was used in the Byzantine period as a church, but it was also obvious that it had been erected in the Antonine period, apparently as a civil basilica used for some political or commercial activities. In 1988 we have sounded the facade of the building, as well as the outline of the apse, found to be polygonal in plan and provided with three openings. We were mostly engaged, however, in digging up a house at the far end of the block east of the basilica.

This house is 25.50 m wide east to west and 27 m north to south. Standing at a distance of 108 m from the Great Colonnade, it is surrounded on three sides by public lanes, while its southern wall touched a column belonging to the neighboring courtyard of another house. The mansion covers nearly 700 square meters, of which 400 square meters had been excavated during 1988 season.

The excavated part of the house includes two wings, northern and western, each having in front a portico of three columns, 4 m

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<sup>1</sup> J. Cantineau, *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre*, vol. III, 26-27.

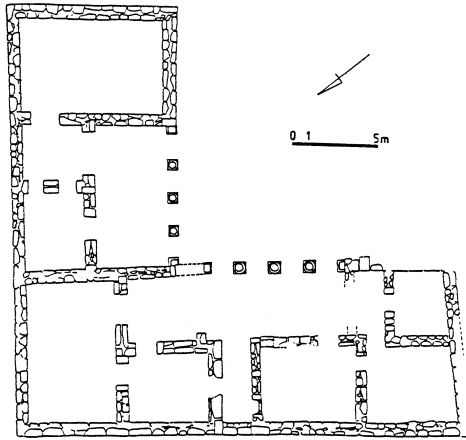


Fig. 1. Plan of the house.  
Drawing M. Barański.

deep. (Fig. 1) The entrance was apparently oriented east, and rooms on this side, as in the southern wing, were not provided with porticoes, but opened directly on a square courtyard 9 m wide.

The western wing was originally planned as a coherent, if not strictly symmetrical unit: two large rooms in the corners were linked by the colonnade of four spans, 2.05 m each; behind the columns two smaller rooms flanked a narrow compartment, probably used as a staircase. The northern portico was separated from this one by a wall aligned with the western row of columns, forming a kind of *iwan* at the northern end of the portico. While nearly identical with the western portico, the northern one opened on two rooms only, linked between them by two passages separated by a pillar.

A sounding in one of the rooms of the west wing allowed us to see that the foundations of the house are laid on bedrock, about 2 m below the floor. The contents of the trench suggest a date shortly after AD 150 for the building of the house; the style of the decoration strongly supports such an estimation. On the other hand, existing floors in red-painted mortar are typical of the Islamic settle-

ment as we know it in the Diocletian's Camp. This impression is confirmed beyond doubt by a Kufic grafitto on one of the floors, but even more convincingly by the uniform fill in all the excavated rooms, dated everywhere to the 8th century.

At the beginning of the Umayyad period, the house was divided into several family units by means of closing the porticoes with low walls set between columns. Later on, some of the larger rooms were split into two, probably in connection with the decay of the original ceilings. Other rooms have remained intact, as can be seen from extensive finds of stucco fragments fallen from ceilings onto destruction levels otherwise dated firmly in the 8th century. It appears therefore that the architectural decoration of the house had at least partly survived through six centuries of continuous use. This is an astonishing conclusion, but it is securely founded on stratigraphical evidence.

The character of the occupation changed completely during these centuries, in spite of the continuity of the settlement. A wealthy urban residence of the Roman period had come to lodge several modest families, one of which installed an oil press and a cooking oven in the northern portico of the house.

The stucco pieces found can be compared to those of the House of Achilles and of the porticoes of the sanctuaries of Nebo and Baalshamin, while they are clearly older than the lot recovered from the construction site of the Meridian Hotel. Strictly Classical motifs, such as ovolo, kymation, dentils and scrolls, are being used in the decoration of these friezes with the exclusion of figurative subjects. We hope to find more in the remaining parts of the house.

We were not able to continue the task in 1989, as the dump of removed earth could not be evacuated from the site in time. The digging has been postponed until the next year. Instead, the basilica behind the eight columns was entirely cleared inside. (Fig. 2)

The rectangular hall was found to measure 21.57 m by 12.77 m. It is paved with huge, rectangular slabs laid neatly in rows. The walls

are erected in the characteristic Palmyrene way of which the earliest instance seems to be the facade of the theatre, and the latest the principia of Diocletian: big slabs laid in pairs back to back form courses of about 1 m in height, alternating with lower courses of bonders. This masonry stands now up to 3 m above the pavement, and much less for the most part, but the fallen blocks allow a graph-

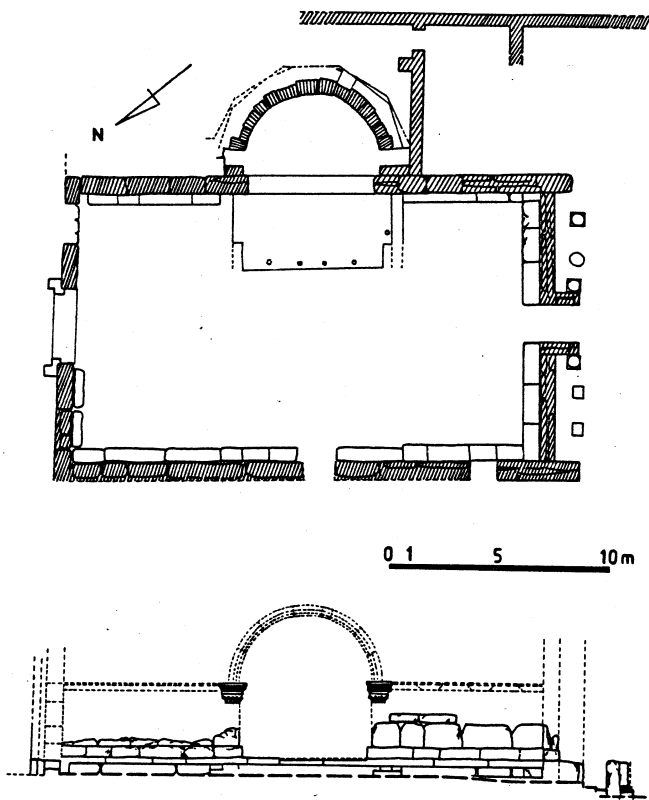


Fig. 2. Plan and facade of the basilica.  
Drawing M. Barański.

ical restoration up to the level of 4.10 m, where a cornice projected at regular intervals of 1.15 m for stretches of equal length. Blocks providing evidence for this feature were found only at locations corresponding to the long walls of the hall. The arch of the apse sprang from their level, thus marking the mid-height of the building when complete. The upper half of walls is however not represented in the mass of stone debris and consisted probably of mud brick.

The hall was approached from the south through a door 1.75 m wide, set in the middle of one of the short walls. There was certainly a flight of steps rising from the courtyard in front, but these are covered by a later pavement. On the opposite, northern side of the building there opened three passages separated by pillars 3.80 m in height, fallen on the present surface. The central passage was 3.50 m wide, the lateral ones measure 1.90 m each. They led into another courtyard behind, also paved as our soundings have shown.

On both long sides the hall was separated from neighboring streets by rows of rooms. A door led into a room at the southwestern corner of the hall. The rooms on this side, or perhaps a single corridor, unexcavated as yet, measure 3.20 m between the walls. On the opposite, eastern side, the rooms surrounded the apse opening in the middle of the wall. The distance between the main building and the street wall on this side, which consists of high slabs running without any opening all the way along the basilica, is 7.25 m in length, thus allowing enough space for the apse. This is pentagonal in outline and 5.80 m wide between two pillars crowned with square capitals from which the arch sprang.

All the voussoirs were found, either on surface or in the fill; they are decorated on both faces with a laurel frieze and on the underside with another laurel scroll and rosettes in coffers. The style of this decoration, however worn, fits well into the second half of the 2nd century, when the whole area north of the Colonnade was built over apparently in one bold operation. As a matter of fact, the enclosure of the northern courtyard was founded on

bedrock at the same depth, some 2 m under the ancient surface, as the foundations of the house described above.

While the building belongs incontestably to the class of Roman basilicas, its precise original purpose remains uncertain. The monument suffered serious damage before being taken over and transformed into a church. While the walls of the hall survived at least to the restorable level of 4.10 m above the pavement and the arch stood intact, nothing but the foundations of the original apse had remained. Upon them a new apse was built, roughly on the same plan but in a distinctly shoddy fabric. To the right, a sacristy was installed in a neighboring room, entered through a low door just off centre of the apse; right and left from it, similar openings were blocked already at the time of construction, so as to form two deep niches. The original pavement in the apse is missing along the curving wall, where the synthronon should have been.

In front of the apse a platform 8.50 m wide intruded some 5 m into the hall. It is 0.45 m high and was approached by a step from the front, now missing. In another damaged place, on the left hand side of the platform, it can be seen that its stones are set on the pavement, which stops short under the outside blocks of the structure. This means that the platform goes back to the original stage of the building. It suited well, however, the purpose of the Christian founders, as the advanced part of the choir. A chancel was set around the platform, 7.30 m wide between the side posts; only the sockets remain.

The aisle, stretching in front of it, was provided with benches along the four walls. They are made of reused architraves, cornices, and other stones, plastered to the pavement and to the walls. On the west side, the bench blocked the original door in the southwestern corner, while in the middle, facing the apse, a new door was opened. Side passages from the north were blocked and in the front of the south entrance restored, an irregular pavement being laid on an area vaguely delimited by a line of reused architraves, probably above



the original steps leading to the 2nd century basilica. A slapdash portico including two truncated columns to the right and two pedestals to the left, ran along the facade.

The time of the founding of the church is unknown. Adopting a ruined and neglected building suggests a relatively recent date, but such an estimate may be misleading. The impoverished Palmyra in the 5th or 6th century was certainly a community not comparable in any way to Northern Syria of that age. At any rate, the church was abandoned and its essential elements removed some time before the final collapse, which occurred in the 8th or 9th century according to the pottery finds, pretty scarce as they are in the fill. More information may be reasonably expected from sounding the original level, wherever it differs from the late one.

The mission was also engaged, in collaboration with the Palmyra Museum, in the Valley of Tombs. The funerary towers there provide perhaps the most notable feature of the site. Their survival is often taken for granted, but in fact they are seriously threatened by modern development. For this reason a comprehensive survey of the towers has been ongoing for some time now. During the two seasons under report we have cleaned the tower of Kitot (no. 44, built AD 40) on four levels, and recorded all six. In the process, some very interesting finds were secured, including many textile fragments of various fabrics and patterns, leather shoes, lattice work, and occasionally wooden objects and pottery. Noteworthy are tiny fragments of papyrus, the first ever found in Palmyra. All this is being treated and studied.

Finally, also in collaboration with the Palmyra Museum which is restoring parts of the Arab Castle in Palmyra, we have conducted limited soundings in the castle. Two successive stages of construction have been determined, and the limited ceramic evidence indicates the 13th century as the period of its founding. It is planned to proceed next year with a comprehensive architectural recording of the castle.