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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 2, 119-121

1991

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THE FIRST SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS IN HATRA, IRAQ

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Following the kind invitation of Dr. Moayed Saeed Damerji, Director General of Antiquities and Heritage, an archaeological mission worked in Hatra from March 10 to April 14, 1990.¹ We found there very favorable conditions of work and rest, and most of all the efficient, friendly cooperation of our Iraqi colleagues, Sd. Manhal Jaber in Mosul and Sd. Hikmat Bashir el-Aswad in Hatra itself. It is our pleasant duty to acknowledge their very valuable help and to thank them most cordially for all they have done. We also extend these thanks to the appointed Representative of the Directorate General, Sd. Mohammad Ahmad Baud, who assisted us daily in our work.

As settled with the Directorate General during my previous visit to Iraq, the activities of the mission were to include the recording and study of the defense walls of Hatra on one hand, and on the other, soundings in the main temple court in search of traces of the original settlement. However, during the first days of our stay we found what seemed to be the line of the oldest walls of Hatra, halfway between the great temple and the walls standing on the southern side of the city. Accordingly, I requested permission to check these observations through digging. I can say now that our expectations have been fully confirmed.

Meanwhile our recording of the standing walls started at the southeastern corner of the fortifications and went along the eastern front for about 500 m up to the East Gate, recently restored. The main features of this imposing defensive system can be studied already from this sample, but we intend to proceed further with the recording.

The defenses are built in depth for about 30 m, beginning with an earthen wall and ditch, and including the main wall with towers

¹ The mission included Messrs Janusz Byliński and Tomasz Herbich (both archaeologists), Adam Dolot (architect) and the present writer.

and parallel inner wall, both in mud brick on stone foundations and both over 3 m thick. The original height of the walls can be estimated at 10 m, judging from the remains of steps leading to the top and allowing for a protective parapet along the walk. We have assured ourselves of this and some other points through several soundings on the inside of the wall. It is known from published inscriptions that both the northern and eastern gates were built by Lord Nasru, who is also certainly responsible for the whole rampart. This enterprise took place about AD 140, i.e., shortly after the same Lord Nasru had completed the temenos wall by AD 138, and before AD 152, when the wall was already in use (see inscriptions H 272 and H 336). Later additions to the rampart, consisting mainly of massive stone towers intended for housing catapults, seem to have been executed after the unsuccessful siege by Septimius Severus in AD 198/199. The wall was subsequently repaired and reinforced until it finally confronted the Sassanian troops of Ardashir in AD 240.

The question immediately arises where is the wall, which had resisted Emperor Trajan in AD 117. Hatra was at the time "neither big nor rich" as Cassius Dio says, hardly a fitting description of the magnificent city of barely twenty years later.

With this question in mind, we explored the walled area and noticed a clear straight line dividing the low ground to the south from the maze of small tells marking the densely built quarters around the Great Temple. This line runs about 230 m from the south wall and about 320 m from the temenos, meeting on the east a wadi which runs in front of the Great Temple. All tombs on the southern side are to be found beyond this line which represents, as we supposed, a trace of the defenses of the 1st century Hatra.

We opened several trenches along the line of the supposed early wall and found it immediately (Fig. 1). It was built in a straight line seven or more bricks deep, i.e., about 3 m, on rubble foundations. Our trenches made it possible to follow the wall for about 200 m of its length. The preserved height varies from one to six bricks above

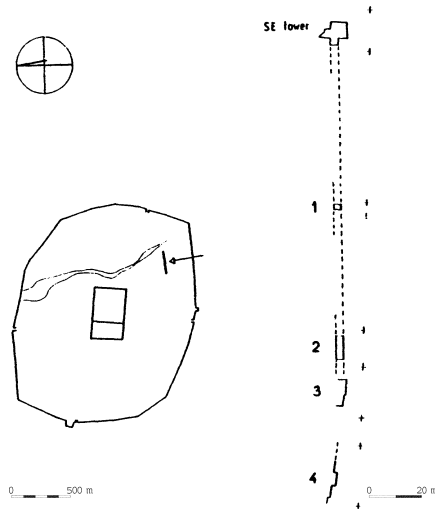


Fig. 1. The localization and course of the 1st century defense wall.

the base. The wall was dismantled in antiquity and houses were built on top of it. Later on it was subject to heavy erosion which has caused it to disappear entirely.

Close to the wadi the wall turns at a right angle to the north. The corner was reinforced by a massive tower of mud brick on a base of good ashlar masonry some 6.6 m wide on the southern side and projecting on either side for 3.5 m from the face of the wall.

While not dated exactly, this structure is in fact the oldest extant monument of Hatra, marking the limits of the archaic city in the 1st century AD. The extension of these defenses on the other sides cannot be traced with equal assurance on the ground.

We consider the results of this season as highly encouraging and hope to continue our research in Hatra in the future. We would like to spend the next season excavating the South Gate and recording the remaining parts of the cleared rampart. If accepted, this project would eventually provide us with data for a comprehensive publication of the Hatra defenses.