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Palmyra 1991

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 3, 68-76

1992

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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This was our fourth season in the sector of downtown Palmyra, allotted to the mission by the Directorate General of Antiquities in 1988. We have continued the excavation and limited restoration of two of the major monuments in the area of regular city blocks stretching northwards from the Great Colonnade between the Tetrapylon and the Funerary Temple. These monuments are: a basilica with an adjoining colonnaded court, and a large residential unit across the street to the east.¹

The house and its decoration are safely dated, since the first season, to the second half of the 2nd century AD. It remained in use, as shown in my former reports, until the 9th century, when it was finally abandoned along with the whole area of downtown Palmyra, as the finds from Diocletian's Camp also suggest.

During the 1988 and 1990 seasons we were not able to complete the excavation of this large residence which covers well over 1000 m². So far we have cleared 24 rooms grouped around two courtyards provided with columns. Four of these rooms were excavated this year on the southeastern side of the reception court (loci 23-26). The outline of a further three rooms along the southern side of the same court has been es-

¹ The mission included, beside the writer, Dr. Maria Krogulska, Messrs Grzegorz Majcherek and Janusz Byliński, archaeologists, Mr. Marek Barański, architect, and Mr. Zbigniew Godziejewski, restorer from the National Museum in Warsaw. I wish to express our thanks to Dr. Ali Abou Assaf, Director General of Antiquities and Museums, and to Dr. Adnan Bounni, Director of Excavations, whose friendly attitude made this new venture of the mission possible. Everyday we were assisted by Messrs Khaled As'ad, Director of Antiquities in Palmyra, and his associate Ali Taha, efficient and helpful as usual. May they feel assured of our grateful feelings.

tablished, revealing a link with the still unexcavated third court of which three columns stand above ground to the south. Thus, our hope to complete the fieldwork in the house this year has not been borne out.

We have continued the study of the excavated parts by means of limited trenching and a reappraisal of evidence obtained so far. In its original form, the house consisted of two areas on the ground level without direct communication between them (Fig. 1). The domestic quarters around the courtyard loc. 13 were accessible only through a narrow door under the staircase loc. 16, while the large entrance to the reception suite around the court loc. 22 led there through loci 17 and 18, both aligned with the same street wall as the staircase. Both entrances shared a common monolithic step leading out into the street.

This feature, and the clearly distinct functions of the two areas, led us to consider both of them as belonging to the same house and having presumably some sort of connection on the level of the first floor. Indeed, the existence of a second storey is assured by the presence of stairs in loc. 16 and probably in loc. 3 as well. The room plan must have been repeated upstairs, while the roof over the porticoes served as a connecting terrace, in spite of a slight difference in height between the columns in the two wings of the domestic area and a more important one (c. 1.70 m) between these and the columns of the reception suite.

It is clear that the family wing of the house formed three distinct apartments, each including two or three rooms connected by one of the porticoes, even if not distinguished very sharply. Upper rooms should have belonged to the corresponding ground floor apartments and were presumably used as winter quarters. The guest rooms around the other courtyard were not suitable for residence, except perhaps on the upper storey.

PALMYRA 1991
 HOUSE N 1-N2
 ORIGINAL STAGE /ca. 150-200 A.D./

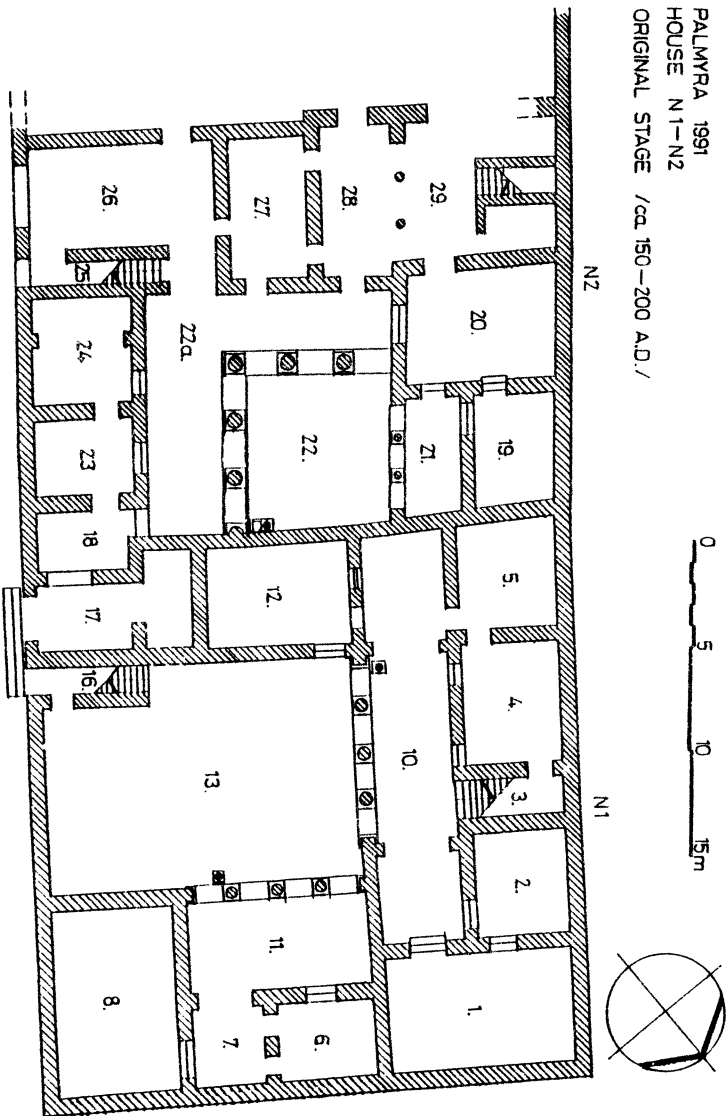


Fig. 1. The original phase of the house.

There is no trace of a water supply pipe from the outside, but there are three wells, of which at least two should be considered original. All three served as late as the house itself, collecting ground water from a remarkably high table, two at about 5 m depth and one at 8 m below floor level, while, in the living memory of local informers, the water table used to be found at 15 m or more. The fact can be of importance for the reconstruction of ancient climatic conditions, even if the debit was always slow.

The long history of the house – over six centuries of continuous use – cannot be followed progressively, as floor levels remained stable throughout: cemented floors, in some rooms still smooth and painted red, in some much worn, were made and remade without accumulation layers in between. We present the plan of the last phase, shortly before the final abandonment in the 9th century, but it should be kept in mind that some modifications of the original plan were noticeably earlier (Fig. 2). According to the evidence collected this year, the house survived in its more or less initial stage until the late 6th century, when an earthquake seriously damaged some walls, including the partition wall between the two main areas of the house and their twin entrance. As a result, both doors were blocked, the former guest entrance through loc. 17 became dependent on the other courtyard and, as both sets of stairs in the family wing were dismantled, the upper floor seems to have disappeared from use in this part of the building.

During the Islamic period the porticoes of the family wing were closed and the original apartments became three neatly separated households sharing a common courtyard. The eastern part of the courtyard, which remained open until then, was built over with two rooms, each provided with a door leading from the street. One (loc. 14) became the main entrance, the other (loc. 15) was a stable equipped with a manger. In the

PALMYRA 1991
HOUSE N1-N2
LAST STAGE / 7th-9th A.D. /

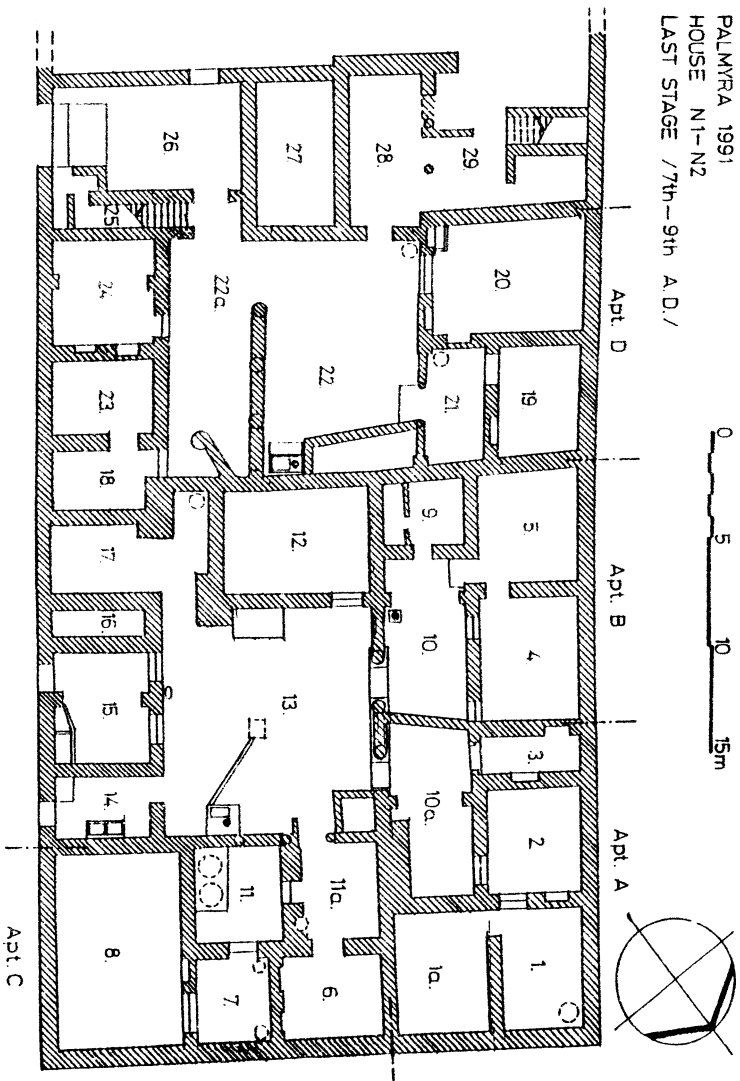


Fig. 2. The final phase of the house.

meantime, the reception suite was transformed into two more households, each complete with a yard.

A typical feature of this late phase are cupboards hollowed out in walls at different levels. There are also *tannur* ovens and storage jars set into floors. Many doors were blocked, isolating formerly interconnected rooms. In spite of these innovations, which reflect a major change in the social position and habits of the occupants, the original stucco work largely survived till the end, high on the walls of some rooms.

The stuccos found in the house were restored by Z. Godziejewski, who was able to mount from hundreds of broken fragments sixteen complete segments of different cornices, altogether about 15 m long. The Museum in Palmyra has thus acquired a rare collection of Roman architectural stucco work, giving a good idea of the interior decoration of a rich Palmyrene house. This year we have found more fragments in loc. 26, including figures of Victories and of reclining men.

The main effort this year, however, was directed at clearing the huge court (33 m by 25 m) on the northeastern side of the basilica excavated in 1989 (Fig. 3). Roughly half of this large area has been cleared by now. The court was paved and adorned with columns forming porticoes on three sides, symmetrical

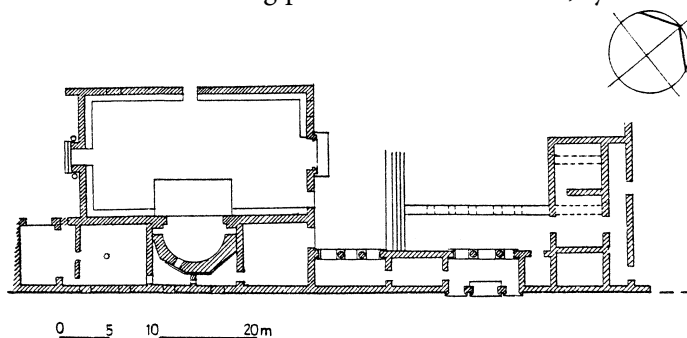


Fig. 3. The basilica and its northeastern courtyard.

to the triple gate of the basilica. Three steps ran across the court just in front of the transverse row of columns, of which only the stylobate remains in place. At the farther end of the court, there is a line of rooms which underwent some transformations at an uncertain point in time during the existence of the monument

The eastern side of the court was deeper than its opposite, because it corresponded to shops built together with the basilica along its eastern wall and opening into the street. This irregularity was absorbed by means of two exedras, each opening with two columns, separated from each other by a public lavatory accessible from both sides. One of the exedras contained at the back three passages from the street which were the original main entrance to the whole complex.

The clear and orderly layout of the court was much disturbed by later squatter habitation. The triple gate from the street was blocked, using the original but displaced lintels. The street wall itself was extensively repaired in a rather slapdash manner, most of the columns were removed and architraves reused to serve as a foundation for the mud-brick walls delimiting the rustic lodgings of late occupants. The lavatory fell into disuse and was replaced partly by a room set 50 cm higher, one wall of which stood on a lying column of black granite. In the corner exedra, a stable was installed with a manger incorporating a Corinthian capital. Behind a closed lateral entrance in the other exedra a ceramic kiln was built. This occupation is not earlier than the middle of the 6th century and seems to follow the same seismic disaster that presumably destroyed parts of the nearby house. It survived into the 9th century, just as the house in its last stage.

It will be possible to restore enough of the original porticoes to suggest the appearance of the court in antiquity, now entirely incomprehensible to an unprepared visitor. We have already

erected one column of the entrance, to match the one remaining in place, and restored three courses of a pillar in the court facade of the basilica, as much of it as could be done with extant blocks. In the future, after the clearing of the court is completed, we plan to raise at least five more columns to mark the eastern portico. By the same token, most of the late structures will disappear, but some remainders shall be preserved.

Two test trenches, one in the apse of the basilica and one immediately behind, were carried out in order to confirm and specify the dating of the transformation of the building into a church. While the dating in the 4th century, as proposed after the last season, stands firm and could be supported by more ceramic material, the date of AD 328, suggested by an inscription, remains a likely possibility. On the other hand, we are now convinced that the church was abandoned earlier than previously supposed. It happened probably after the same earthquake which destroyed parts of the court and of the house, but in this case there was no restoration, even if the building remained accessible.

We came to this conclusion after finding in the middle of the apse, slightly off-centre from the expected place of the altar, a water well complete with a basin made out of a Late Roman stone bathtub (the proportions are not suitable for a sarcophagus) adorned with four lion heads each holding a ring between the teeth. This vessel was dug into the construction fill after some slabs of the pavement had been removed, but the well itself is older, belonging to one of the original shops built along the basilica on a much lower level.

Obviously, the well and the basin could not have possibly operated while the church remained in use. Since all the church equipment, including the altar and chancel, was removed previous to the reopening of the well and since the last tumble contained only stones from the lower part of the walls, up to

the cornice running at impost level and to the lintel of one side entrance, the building should have been an open ruin between the two earthquakes we have evidence of, one in the late 6th and the other in the early 9th century.

Outside of the main area, we have investigated a huge building discovered by chance in the Valley of Tombs. Its outline on the ground was noticed from the top of the funerary tower of Atenatan just opposite. A regular rectangle 63 by 48 m, including a large courtyard and rooms in single file on all four sides, was tested in a series of trenches carried out by J. Byliński with the purpose of reconstructing the exact plan and establishing an approximate date for the monument. The walls are of mud brick on broken stone foundations, plastered inside. No floors were found. There are altogether 31 rooms, including three double-room units in the corners and one larger room of a possibly public character.

It is clear that what we have here is a typical plan of a Roman army camp intended for an ala of cavalry. The general impression of a short duration of this camp is confirmed by the finds, scarce as they are: some 3rd century pottery (mainly cooking pots, but also some sigillata fragments from the end of the century), as well as two coins, one of Salonina (wife of Gallien, 260-268), the other of Claudius Gothicus (268-270). The coins fix the date precisely enough, but it is not possible with the present evidence to decide whether the unit stationed there was part of Zenobia's army or rather a detachment of the occupying forces of Aurelianus. Further investigation would be of interest to clarify this essential point.