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Palmyra: Excavations 1995

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PALMYRA

EXCAVATIONS 1995

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While continuing excavations in a sector of downtown Palmyra north of the Great Colonnade, we were able at last, at the close of the season, working from September 5 to October 12, to reach the southern limits of the large residential complex which has been under investigation since 1988 (seasons 1988, 1990 and 1993)¹. The total cleared area approximates over 2000 m². Even if the relatively modest architecture does not permit the use of the term "palace", the ruins combine to form a very spacious residence indeed. Only the northernmost courtyard, the first to be excavated, can be taken to be independent of the rest, though probably it was linked with the neighboring one at the mezzanine level, as proposed in my earlier reports. Everywhere else, the passages between the various parts of the house are well in evidence and there is no doubt as to the unity of the constitutive sectors in spite of some differences in the building technique.

The southern limit of the house was much reworked in the last period of occupation, and the remaining area between the house and the line of the Great Colonnade was apparently left empty. Indeed, the southernmost floors of the house are very close

¹ The mission, directed by the present writer, included: Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, Mr. Sławomir Kowalski, Mr. Janusz Byliński, Miss Anna Witecka, Miss Dagmara Wielgosz, and Miss Marta Żuchowska. Mrs Krystyna Gawlikowska took part in a private capacity. The architectural survey of the Arab Castle was completed by Prof. Constantinos Socratidis and his two students from the École d'architecture, Geneva. The representatives of the DGAM attached to the mission were successively Messrs Ahmad Taha and Ali Taha. I wish to thank them all for their excellent collaboration. I acknowledge gratefully the support of Dr. Sultan Moheesen, the Director General of Antiquities and Museums, and of Mr. Khaled As'ad, Director of Antiquities and Museums of Palmyra.

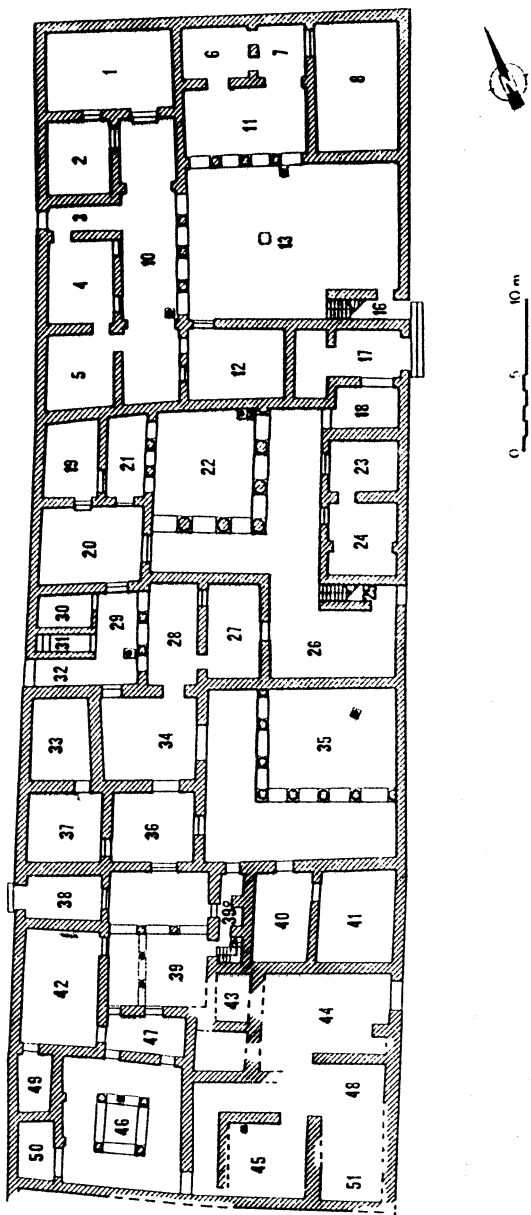


Fig. 1. House F in the middle block. Plan of the house, original stage
(c. AD 150 -200).

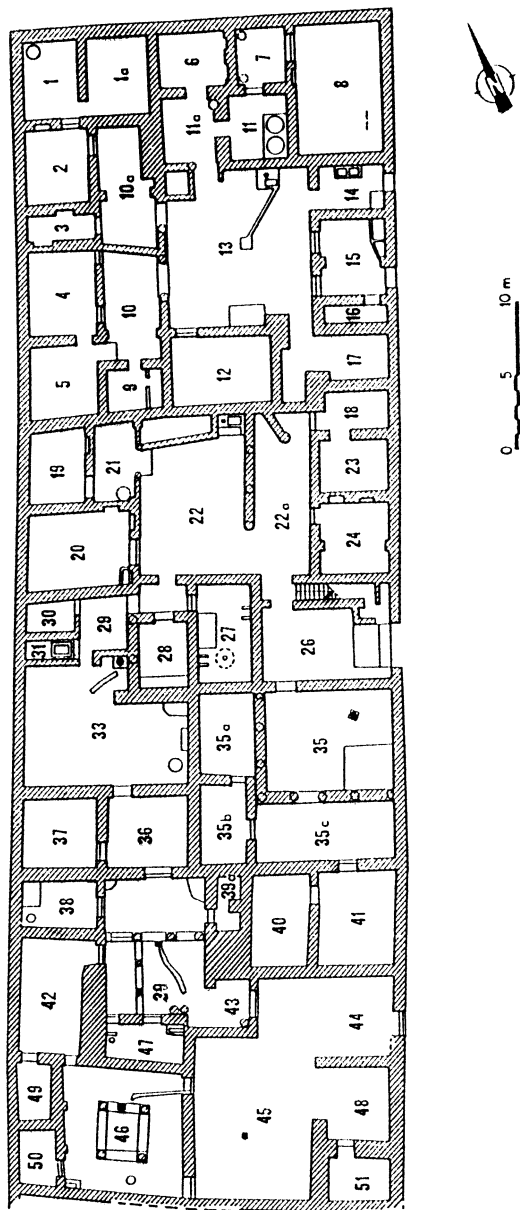


Fig. 2. House F in the middle block. Plan of the house, latest stage (7th-9th century AD).

to the present surface. As to the walls of this sector, they were mostly robbed and partly replaced with later enclosures.

In addition to the three courtyards and their dependencies excavated in the past seasons, two more courtyards have been discovered, and there is reason to believe that yet another might have been located in the poorly preserved southeastern part of the house. I had suggested in my last report that one of the living units then known, presumably the one around the more readily accessible loc. 22, represented men's quarters, while the more secluded apartments opening from loc. 35 would have been reserved for women. This hypothesis remains likely, but the findings of this year make the problem of the function more complex than expected.

THE EXCAVATIONS OF 1995

This season an additional two rooms were excavated, opening off the courtyard loc. 35 found last year (loci 40 and 41). Yet another courtyard (loc. 39), provided with a portico of two columns on the northern side, has been uncovered to the west. Behind these columns, there opened a large passage leading into room 36 (excavated in 1993), thus assuring indirect communication with the courtyard loc. 35. On its eastern side, the courtyard gave access to a well-preserved staircase (loc. 39a) which led to the terrace over the colonnade of loc. 35, while providing a passage on the ground level between the two courts. The new court also had an independent entrance from Diogenes Street (loc. 38).

More rooms depended on this fourth courtyard of the house (loci 42, 47, 49, 50), one of them (loc. 47) serving as a passage to yet another court (loc. 46). This is smaller and was provided with four columns forming a square with raised pavement in the centre. The southern wall of this courtyard is at the same time the limit of the house.

Finally, the southeastern corner of the house was altered substantially in Byzantine and Islamic times, so that it is difficult to make out its original layout. Some test trenches have been opened, and more are needed still, but there is little hope of uncovering more than the incomplete foundations. Yet another courtyard (loc. 45) was apparently situated here, but no traces of columns could be found.

The columns of the tetrastyle courtyard loc. 46 have disappeared, and of those of the courtyard loc. 39 only broken fragments remain. The walls of this part of the house are preserved rather low, leaving only such features as were close to the floor. In particular, we have found and opened two wells, one 5.00 m and the other 5.50 m deep, confirming the high water table in antiquity, as contrasted with the recent situation in this respect. Besides, here and there we find stone benches, *tannurs*, underground storage jars, cuttings in the floor of loc. 42 for an oil press, and other minor features generally related to the latest use. The few stucco fragments, parts of the original decoration, are stray pieces found dislocated from where they had fallen.

While the southern wall of the house is for the most part obviously late, though replacing the original one of which only short and incomplete sections are to be seen, the long walls of the house stop abruptly at the present limits of the excavations, either dismantled or, more probably, never extending any farther. These walls are, however, in line with the pillars marking the intersection of the corresponding streets with the Great Colonnade. We have cleared two such pillars which mark the entrance into Diogenes Street, only to find that they were left unfinished and that the adjoining transversal walls were laid only in foundation and never completed. This confirms our impression that the rest of the excavated block, between our house and the Colonnade, was never developed.

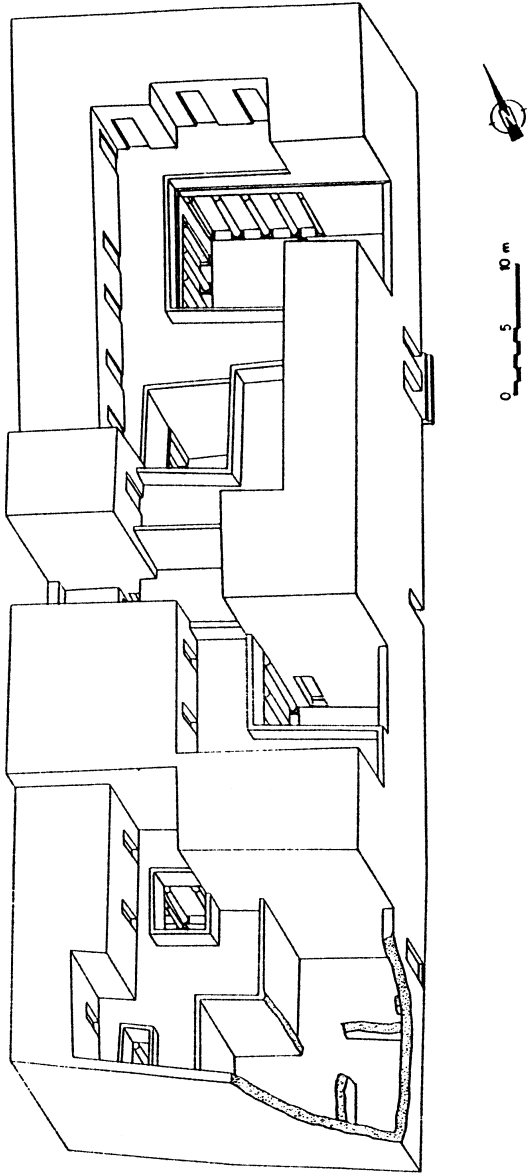


Fig. 3. House F in the middle block, original phase. Axonometric reconstruction of the house.

THE LATE USE OF THE HOUSE

The house was inhabited, apparently without major interruption, for some six centuries until its final abandonment around AD 800. During this time, while wooden ceilings remained untouched in some rooms, as shown by the circumstances in which stucco cornices have been found, the general character was changed from that of a spacious residence to an agglomeration of small, separate dwellings cut out from the whole by means of shabby partitions and blocked doors. The process of change started apparently in the 6th century and could have been induced by an earthquake or some other disaster, but resulted in the first place from the changing social conditions in Byzantine Palmyra.

The main change, as already observed before, lay in the disappearance of the storey, presumably after a major destruction. In the sector investigated this year, this resulted in the blocking of the staircase loc. 39a, which was not needed any more. The fill yielded seven coins, some Byzantine-Umayyad and some Post-Reform *filus*, securely dating the blocking of the stairs to the reign of Abd el-Malik, around AD 700.

In the courtyard loc. 39, the southwestern corner, including entrances to loci 42 and 47, was set off with two small columns and paved on a level higher than the rest of the courtyard. The resulting lounge opened to the east and was probably provided with a screen, as can be inferred from the blocks set between the columns, provided with sockets. The date of this feature could not be ascertained.

The southeastern corner of the courtyard loc. 39 was systematically dismantled at some recent occasion (a hollow in the ground was to be seen there before the excavations). No traces of a door have survived, but a paved ramp was found outside (loc. 43), belonging to the last stage in the house's use, leading up and eastwards to a rather monumental doorway. Of this, a monolithic threshold was found in place practically on the modern level,

and the matching lintel rested nearby. Apparently, the whole area beyond this limit (loci 44, 45, 48) was by then left outside the house.

THE ARAB CASTLE

In cooperation with the Palmyra Museum, we have continued and completed the survey of the Arab Castle, supervised by Mr. Janusz Byliński.² The plans, sections, and views of the monuments have been drawn by architect Constantinos Socratidis and his students from Geneva, and shall be ready for publishing during the winter.

Limited testing within the Castle was designed to help in the study of the building history and chronology. As already reported, there are at least three major phases in evidence, all rather close in time. The bulk of recovered pottery sherds is uniform and can be safely dated within the Ayyubid-Mamluk period. A late occupation, possibly in the times of the Emir Fakhr ed-Din according to tradition, is sparingly attested and could only concern the monument inherited in its final form.

Prior to an extensive program of restoration that is planned by DGAM, the castle courtyard was cleared, yielding unexpected results. Practically the whole surface was found to be covered with building foundations. The most interesting structure was a small mosque built against one of the towers of the eastern facade. It was later enlarged at a higher level, and given a second, larger *mihrab*. As the monument was in plastered mud brick, only the lowermost courses in stone are preserved. They were immediately consolidated with plaster in order to make the outline of the mosque understandable to visitors and to prevent the vestiges from disappearing.

Pottery sherds recovered from between the floors of the mosque indicate a 13th century date, not long after the building of the castle itself. The enlargement is apparently Mamluk in date.

² A detailed report hereafter, p. 147.