

# Michał Gawlikowski

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## Palmyra: Season 1999

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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 10, 249-260

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1999

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# PALMYRA

## SEASON 1999

Michał Gawlikowski

*As a part of the long range program of digging and presentation of downtown Palmyra, the mission continued this year its excavations in a block marked G on Gabriel's plan, situated on the eastern side of the street coming up from the Great Colonnade, the so-called Church Street (Fig. 1). After having cleared in this area a residential unit and two churches, one of them a three-aisle basilica with adjoining baptistery (seasons 1997 and 1998), we have set out to investigate yet another basilica situated 33 m to the north. While the walls of the first church were systematically dismantled, apparently in the 9th century, the other church seems to be better preserved and offers hope for a partial restoration. Preliminary to this considerable task, we have worked this season in the sector between the two churches (area G 3). At the same time, a sector of the Great Colonnade opposite Block E was investigated again. Generally speaking, this season can be considered as preparatory. The five weeks in Palmyra were entirely turned to the coming season and the goals we plan to achieve next year.<sup>1)</sup>*

<sup>1)</sup> The mission, headed by the present writer, included Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, Ms Marta Żuchowska and Ms Dagmara Wielgosz, archaeologists. For a short time, we had the assistance of Dr. Karol Piasecki, anthropologist, and Mr Wojciech Terlikowski, civil engineer acting as topographer. A student of archaeology, Ms Iwona Żukowska also joined the mission. Mrs. Krystyna Gawlikowska participated in a private capacity.

It is our pleasant duty to acknowledge the standing support and friendly help of the Syrian officials concerned: Prof. Dr. Sultan Moheesen, Director General of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus, Mr. Khaled Assaad, Director of Antiquities of Palmyra, and Mr. Ali Taha, who served as the inspector attached to the mission. They have spared no effort to come forward and assist us in every way, as they have done indeed for many years. May they feel assured of our heartfelt thanks.

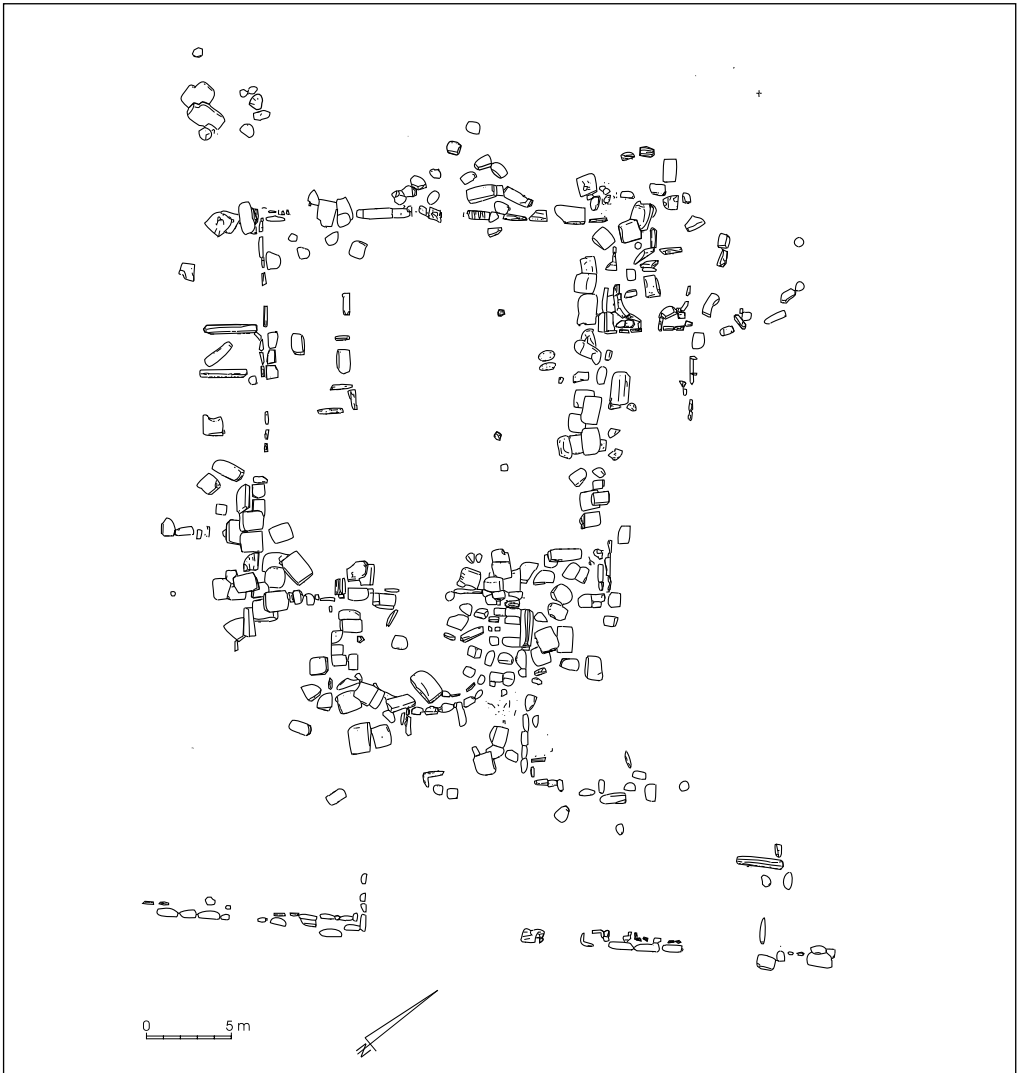


*Fig. 1. Excavations in 1999 with House F and Basilica I in the background  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

## BASILICA III

The architectural remains of the church about to be excavated in the near future are marked on all the plans of the site (*Fig. 2*); this is the smaller of the two buildings usually called "Byzantine basilicas". It is about 21 m wide at front and 23 m deep,

if the apse and dependencies are excluded. On the northern side of this squarish monument, there seems to be an absidal martyrion, aligned with the front of the nave. The facade of the building is about 9 m behind the line of the street into which the



*Fig. 2. Basilica III. Sketch of surface remains  
(Drawing W. Terlikowski)*

church opens, but while this was observable in the past, until this year there was no explanation for this particularity.

After a careful inventory of the standing walls and fallen stones apparent on the surface, it was decided to tackle the empty expanse in front of the church. It soon appeared that this area, including the whole width of the street, is paved with huge, well fitted flagstones. In the middle, the paved area is slightly lower, forming a sunk rectangle around which some column bases were found in place. It is already clear that what we have here is a typical atrium (*Fig. 3*), a feature extremely rare in Syrian church architecture.

It is now clear that the paved area is some 18 m wide east to west and at least 23 m long along the church facade. Clearing it shall be an easy job, as the flagstones are covered with only up to 1 m of sterile soil, including some architectural elements of the atrium colonnades. The appearance of

the ruins will undergo a considerable change once this is done.

The narrow Church Street going north from the Great Colonnade between the house in Block F and the excavated church in Block G was never paved as far as the perpendicular lane marking the NE corner of House F. The street opens there into the atrium with a large slab laid between the corner of the house and the structure opposite it. The courtyard of Basilica III was thus directly accessible from the downtown area. Future excavations will show whether the courtyard could be freely crossed towards the section of the same street continuing at the farther end.

The fragment of the pavement cleared this year features five column bases of Attic type, 50 cm in diameter on top. In addition, one Corinthian capital and some broken architrave beams were found loose in the fill. All these elements are clearly reused. However, three bases are partly hidden by



*Fig. 3. The paved atrium in front of Basilica III, seen along Church Street (right)*  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

the flagstones and apparently remain in their original position. Two of them are aligned with the western side of the Church Street, and one with its eastern side. On the other hand, the two remaining bases closer to the church are set on the pavement; no doubt, they were originally aligned with the east side of the Church Street.

It draws from these observations that the narrow street coming up from the Great Colonnade was considerably enlarged in

this sector, for as much as the combined width of the lateral porticoes resting on two lines of columns, which mark the width of the street proper between them.

We have no means of knowing yet how wide these porticoes were or what antique monuments stood behind them. In the Byzantine period, with the laying of the pavement, the western portico was used as the front side of the atrium, while its eastern counterpart had been dismantled and

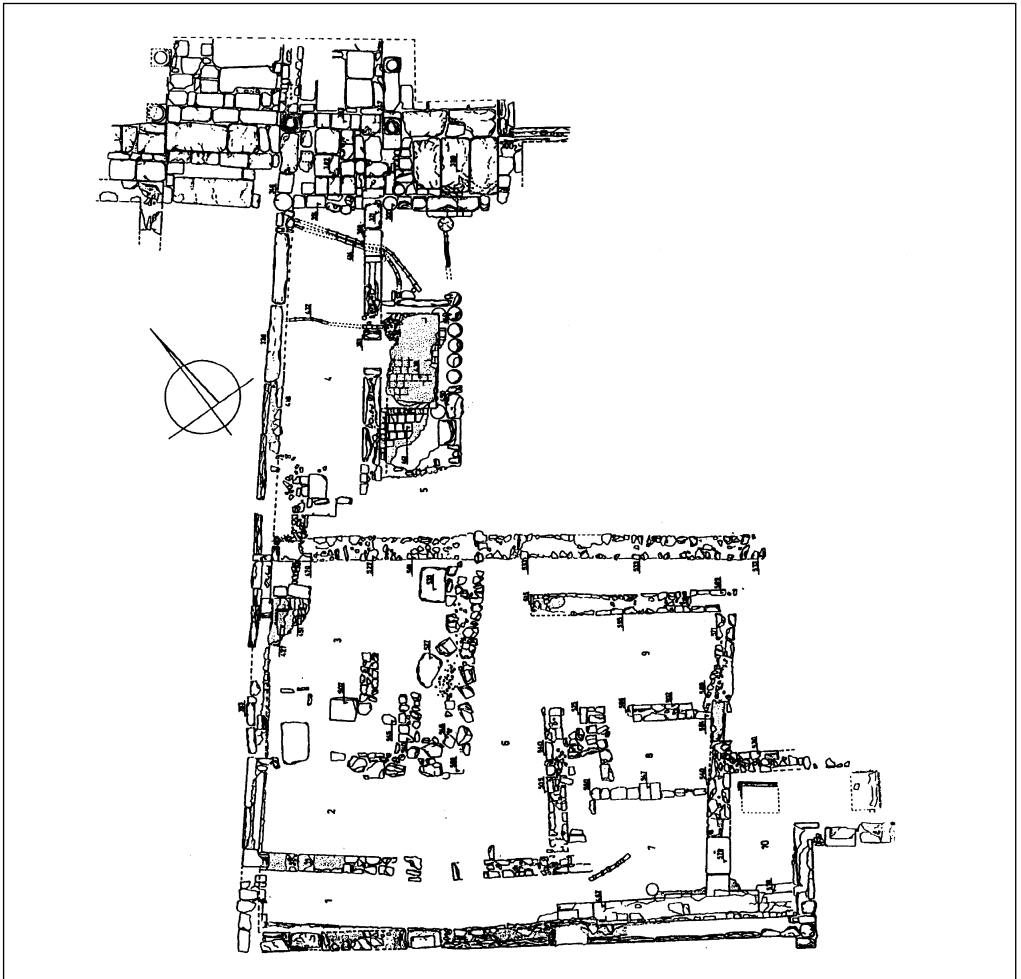


Fig. 4. Plan of the area between the two churches (sector G 3)  
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

its columns replaced to form the inner colonnade of the atrium. However, the first eastern column of the original colonnaded street was left in place, resulting in an asymmetry: the intercolumnia on the short side measure 5.50 m and 4.30 m, while on the long sides they have only 2.60 m.

We were also able to establish that, at a later date, the western portico was closed with walls between the columns, made of huge blocks taken from some ancient buildings. The columns themselves fell still later, at a level about 30 cm above the bases, that is practically on the modern surface. All this should be clarified by further digging.

## CEMETERY

The area (*Fig. 4*) between the two churches is 33 m wide north-south, but clearly divided into two halves by an east-west wall whose foundation could be followed all through the excavated sector, that is, for some 23 m. The southern half is clearly delimited on the north by the above-mentioned foundation, on the south by the lateral foundation of Basilica

II, and on the west by the Church Street. It is filled with ruins preserved to levels between 0.80 m and 1.80 m below the pavement of the adjoining church (*Fig. 5*).

It is clear that at the time when the church was in use the whole place was an empty field, all remains having been deeply buried even before the church was



*Fig. 5. General view of area G 3 to the south with Basilica II in the background (Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

built. Indeed, the ceramic content of the fill does not exceed the early 4th century. After the building of the church several tombs were sunk into the ground, sometimes hitting on the ruined foundations. Three burials were found this year in addition to the four explored in the last season.

All are evidently Christian, the skeletons lying with their heads to the west, their hands joined in front. Two of the tombs take the form of stone boxes covered with flat slabs, and one is simply a hollow in the ground. No objects whatsoever were associated with these burials.

## EASTERN BUILDING

A building abandoned and dismantled in the late 3rd-early 4th century was found in the eastern part of the cemetery area (G 3.6-10), partly hidden under the foundations of Basilica II and its Baptistery. The walls are preserved in places up to 80 cm above the thresholds, but some of them are discontinued and the overall plan is difficult to establish. The remains of the building can be seen for about 12.50 m in the north-south direction, but they continue under the northern aisle of the church.

The best preserved room G 3.10 is partly covered by the northwestern corner of the Baptistery; it was 5 m wide north-south and over 7 m deep. Entered from the west through an imposing two-winged door 1.50 m wide in a wall 90 cm thick and preserved as one course only, it gave access through an even wider door to another room to the south, entirely covered by the church. Both passages have monolithic thresholds indicating the monumental size of the building. In the corner between them there is a small fragment of a cement floor still in place.

After the abandonment of the building, the room had been used as a pottery workshop. The floors of two rectangular kilns built in mud-brick about 1.50 m below the church level have been identified. Pottery associated with them, including several complete vessels and some misfired

fragments, point to the 4th century as the date of this late use. At the same time the northern wall of the room was rebuilt over the first course of the original structure, showing that the mud-brick walls had already disappeared. A funerary slab with the likeness of a woman was used in this latest enclosure.

Room G 3.10 was accessible from the west through Room G 3.7. This is poorly preserved, due not only to the general dismantling but also to late tombs excavated in the fill. The southern wall, partly covered by the church foundation, preserves one ashlar course of stones, except for a block of the second course at the corner turning south beneath the church. There is a passage 1.30 m wide between this corner and a wall of broken stone going further west, delimiting an L-shaped courtyard G 3.6/9. Between this open space and Rooms G 3.7 and G 3.8 there was probably a flight of steps leading up southwards, that is, apparently above the mentioned passage and the corner beneath the church. The foundation dividing rooms 7 and 8 includes in the middle a pedestal, 88 by 70 cm, made of two flat stones, possibly intended under a column. This part of the building is too poorly preserved, however, to allow for sound conclusions.

The fill throughout is of a late 3rd/4th century date, including some African Red Slip, a Kapitän II amphora, a lamp of type



K, etc. Only in the close vicinity of a well in the courtyard (G 3.9) are there some Early Islamic intrusions. The foundation date has not been established as yet.

It seems that the monument was built in the same time as the line of rooms along Church Street (G 3.1-4), traced in the late 2nd century. Clearly they functioned

together and could hardly differ in dating. On the other hand, while all the walls are orthogonal within each of these compounds, they are not so to each other. Each of them apparently follows the orientation of a street running on its side of block G, but this will be confirmed only when the street east of this block is excavated.

## WESTERN ROOMS

The street leading up from the Great Colonnade, which we have called Church Street because of three churches opening onto its eastern side, now presents on this side a continuous wall preserved 1-2 m higher than the structures described above, mostly up to the level on which the mud-brick walls had been raised. Two years ago we had found in this wall the entrance to the colonnaded courtyard, later incorporated into Basilica II (G 1.1). This season another, very similar entrance was discovered (G 3.1), giving access to the whole area.

The passage is 6.40 m long and 1.90 m wide. While its northern wall was leveled to the floor, the southern one preserved two courses reused by the foundations of Basilica II. No trace of a closing are to be seen at either end. Later, the passage was used to pass a drain outside into the street and around the corner of the church.

The neighboring room G 3.2 was 3.50 m wide and as deep as the entrance. It preserves only the foundations of its side walls which had been linked to the continuous western wall of the street. Next, room G 3.3 of double width (8.60 m) fared no better: its northern wall is preserved only where linked to the street wall, then at the floor level and even deeper, going in a straight line all the way to the limits of the excavation 23 m further east. In this way, a narrow passage was formed between

this and the wall of room 9, leading east beyond the excavated sector. There are two short fragments of foundations that could represent the original front wall of room G 3.3: One is in line with the front of the two rooms described above, and the other in marked retreat 4 m from the street wall, but the course of both is blurred by an accumulation of apparently loose blocks heaped in the area. They can be explained by the situation found further north.

Found there is a long irregular room (G 3.4) running along the street, with a doorway to the east. It is nearly 10 m long but much narrower than other rooms in the same line: only 3.20 to 3.60 m. Both long walls are original and thus date probably to the second half of the 2nd century. The northern wall is, however, a remake, built at the same time that the atrium pavement outside was laid. This room is crossed by three water pipes joining on one side the mains under the street and on the other the later structures marked G 3.5.

These four rooms G 3.1-4 are the visible, if poorly preserved part of a longer series, extending also under Basilica II, and they were built together with the tracing of the street. At the same time, they apparently functioned as one unit together with loci 6-10. Indeed, they necessarily opened into the L-shaped courtyard G 3.6/9, and the passage G 3.1 led directly into rooms G 3.7 and 10.

## WATER TANKS

Last year three fragmentary floors one upon another, all of them made of baked bricks and waterproof mortar were found in the northwestern corner of locus G 3.3 (Figs. 6 and 7). The uppermost floor reaches a level about 70 cm above the room floor. This has become clear only now that part of the area to the north with the structure marked as G 3.5 has been excavated.



Fig. 6. The water tanks (G 3.5) close to the atrium of Basilica III  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

A floor of baked bricks (32 by 32 cm) and ash mortar was found there, at practically the same level as in G 3.3, together with the outlines of a brick enclosure doubling on all sides the stone walls, contemporary and earlier, and blocking the original door to G 3.4. They were laid on a substructure comprising vertical column drums packed closely together and some other huge blocks, suggesting that a heavy load was expected to fill the basins installed above. The one whose entire surface is preserved measured 4 x 2 m; the other one is barely half this length. The pipes laid in G 3.4 and in an open space north of the basins provided for the inflow of the water and its outflow toward the conduits running under the surface of the Church Street.

Seen in this light, the irregular heaps of stones found under the floor level of G 3.3 should be understood as the superstructure of similar basins founded on the ruins of this room in two parallel rows. The floor of one of them was fragmentarily preserved, as mentioned above. We would have thus at least six tanks measuring about 4 x 2 m, allowing for the storage of well over 100 m<sup>3</sup> of water.

The basins were installed on deep foundations dug into the ruins of ancient structures. The operation was clearly connected with the building of both churches. Indeed, the storage level is very close to that of the pavement of Basilicas II and III, the tanks being at the same time neatly separated from the churches, in order not to endanger their walls. They disappeared no doubt together with the churches, the stones being taken away in the 9th century or later.

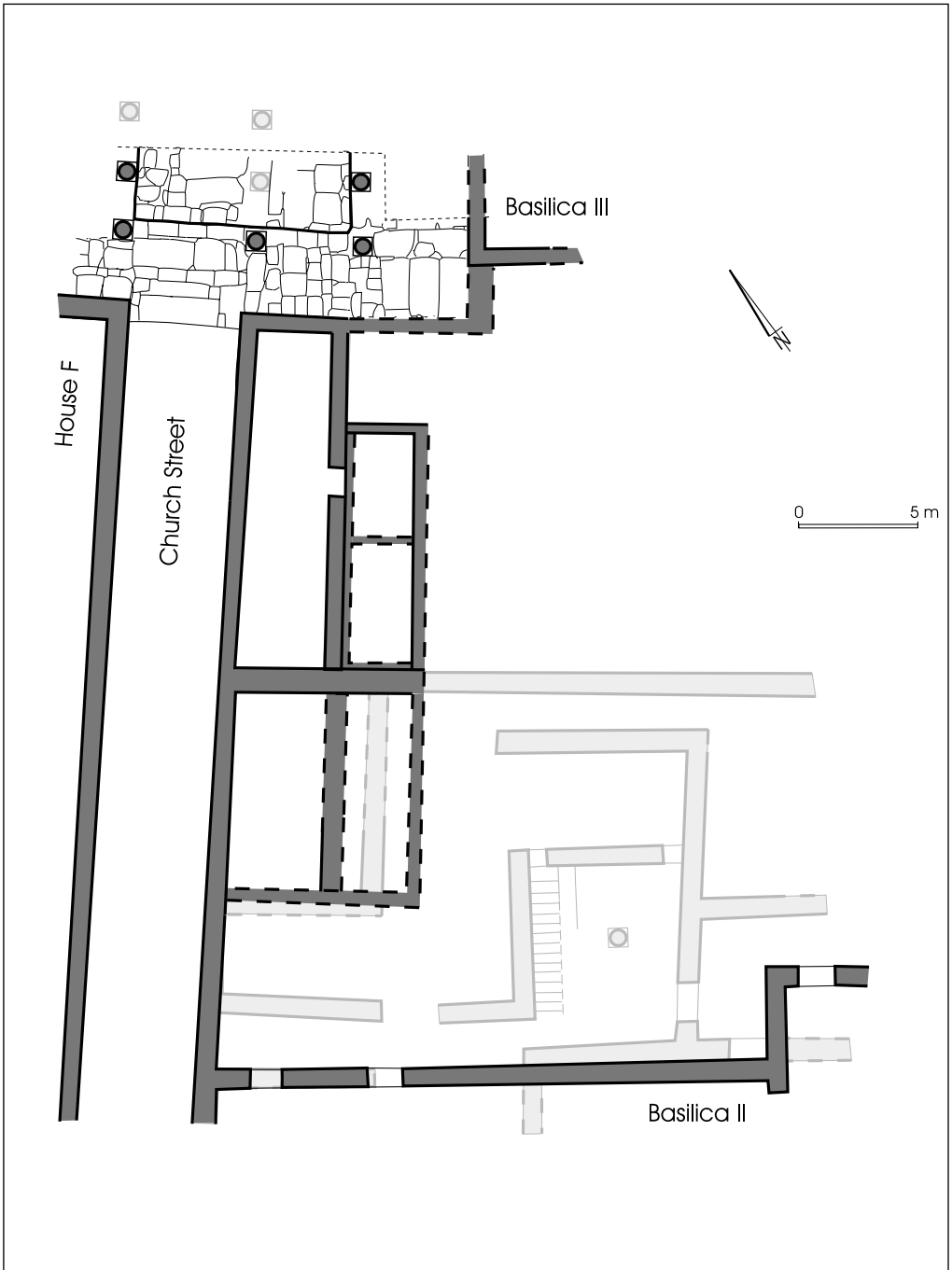
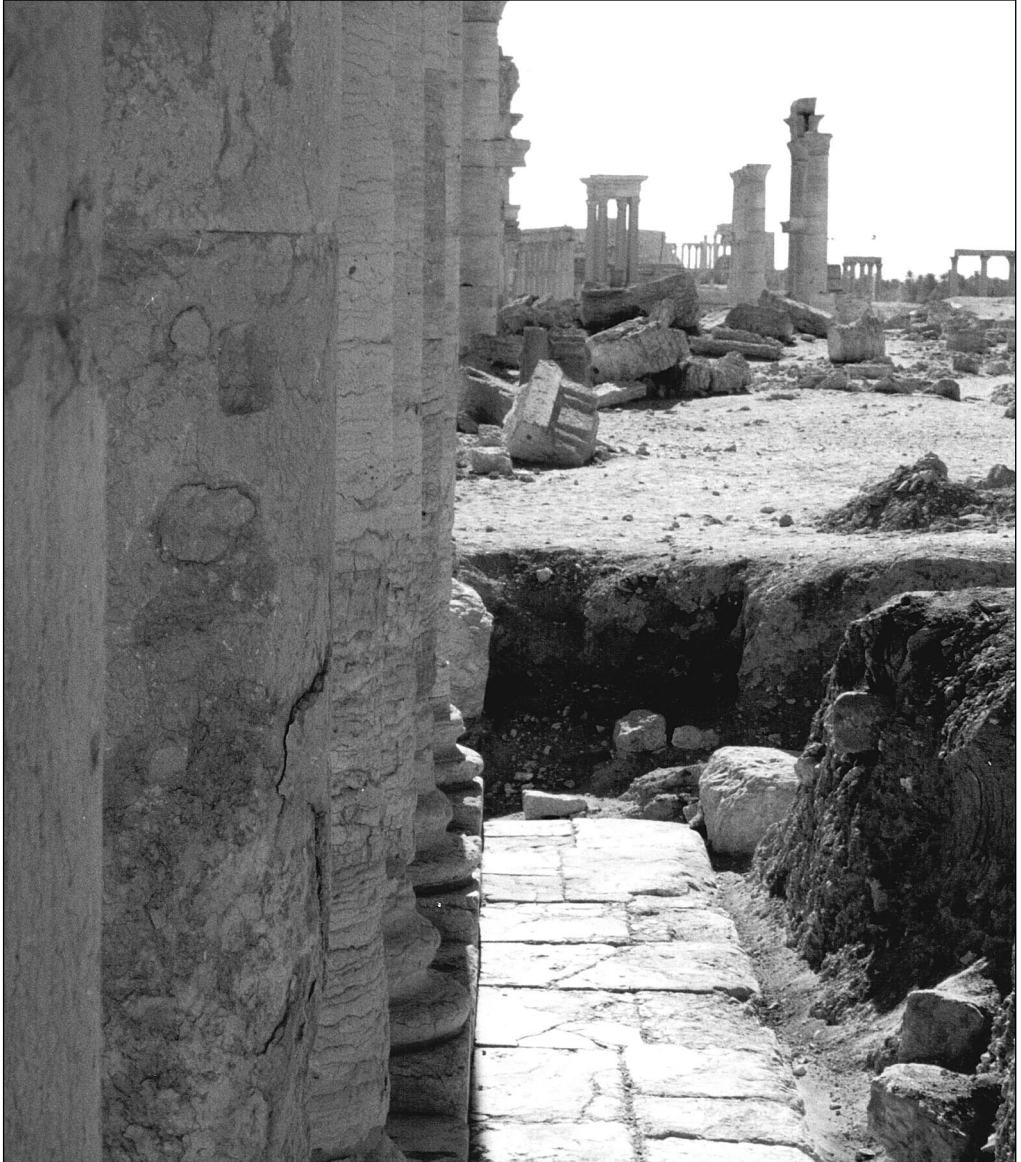


Fig. 7. Plan of the area between the two churches (water tanks and atrium)  
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

## THE OCTOSTYLE PORTICO OF THE GREAT COLONNADE

In the course of this season the clearing of the late stone pavement has been continued, between the eight standing columns and the

line of shops, both facing Block E and Basilica I behind them (*Fig. 8*). Two shops were excavated (A 5 and A 6), reaching the



*Fig. 8. The paved walk in front of the octostyle portico  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

ancient levels. Beyond, there ran a cross street (Oil-Press Street) of which two corner pillars were found, the border of the portico pavement joining one of them (*Fig. 9*).

The most interesting, however, was the discovery of a perpendicular wall below the street level. It was cut by the foundation of the corner pillar and is therefore older than the Colonnade. The

associated pottery belongs to the 1st century AD.

While unassuming for the moment, this find can gain in importance once more remains of this early date are located under the main street. Valuable information pertaining to the urbanism of Palmyra in its early stages may then be expected.



*Fig. 9. The base of a corner pillar of Oil-Press Street, cutting across an early foundation of the Great Colonnade (Photo M. Gawlikowski)*