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Palmyra: Season 2001

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PALMYRA

SEASON 2001

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The excavation season lasted from April 28 to May 31, 2001.¹⁾ As 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 a street, called Church Street, coming up from the Great Colonnade. Having cleared in this area a residential unit and two churches, one of them a three-aisle basilica with adjoining baptistery (in 1997 and 1998), we set out in 1999 to investigate yet another basilica situated 33 m to the north. A surface plan was traced and a trial pit dug in front of the church established the existence of an atrium, paved and surrounded by colonnades.

Other obligations in Syria prevented our return to Palmyra in 2000. This year, we have cleared the atrium in its entirety and exposed about two-thirds of the church interior – altogether an area of 1,000 sq. m. Stone or cemented floors have been revealed everywhere at an average depth of one meter. Also, a sector of the Great Colonnade opposite Block E was investigated again, concurrently with the work in the basilica.

1) The mission, led by the present writer, included Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek (as Deputy Director), Ms Marta Żuchowska and Mrs. Magdalena Żurek, 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 from Tübingen, Ms Elisabeth Katzy, also joined the mission. Mrs. Krystyna Gawlikowska participated in a private capacity. It is our pleasant duty to acknowledge the standing support of Dr. Abdel Razzaq Moaz and Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, respectively Director General of Antiquities and Museums and Director of Excavations in Damascus. In Palmyra, Mr. Khaled Assaad, Director of Antiquities, and Mr. Ali Taha, who served as the inspector attached to the mission, have spared no trouble to come forward and assist us in every way. Our heartfelt thanks to them.

BASILICA III

This church is marked on all the plans of the site as the smaller of the two buildings usually referred to as “Byzantine basilicas”. Even before excavations started, it could be said that the building is about 21 m wide at the front and 23 m deep, if the apse and dependencies are excluded. Stones apparent on the surface did not permit, however, an understanding of how the aisles were separated from the nave.

We have removed the fill from most of the interior (*Figs. 1, 2*). It rose an average of 0.60 m above the floor, even less in places. Very few sherds were found except for roof tiles. Two of these, surprisingly, bear Kufic inscriptions, carefully traced in black ink. The floor all over the place was of white plaster, but it is extremely worn and large patches of the black ashy

underlayer can be seen everywhere. The plaster floor covers the original flagstones, which are to be seen only in a small test pit for the time being.

The eastern side of the church, with the apse and cancellum, as well as a stretch along the northern wall, was left unexcavated (cf. *Fig. 1*). On the surface, these parts reveal many fallen stones, quite huge and often well preserved. As some of these blocks can probably be replaced in their original locations, or at any rate should be removed, it was judged wiser to hold back from the operation until the full-time presence of an architect could be assured next year.

On each side of the nave there were two free-standing pillars, 0.75 m thick and 1.10 m long; a single course has been



Fig. 1. Basilica III in May 2001, view to the east. In the background, stones of the yet unexcavated apse (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

preserved, made of two blocks joined together. Similar pillars were attached to the western wall, and no doubt on each side of the apse. The three-aisled roof could thus be supported on three arches, spanning the length of the church.

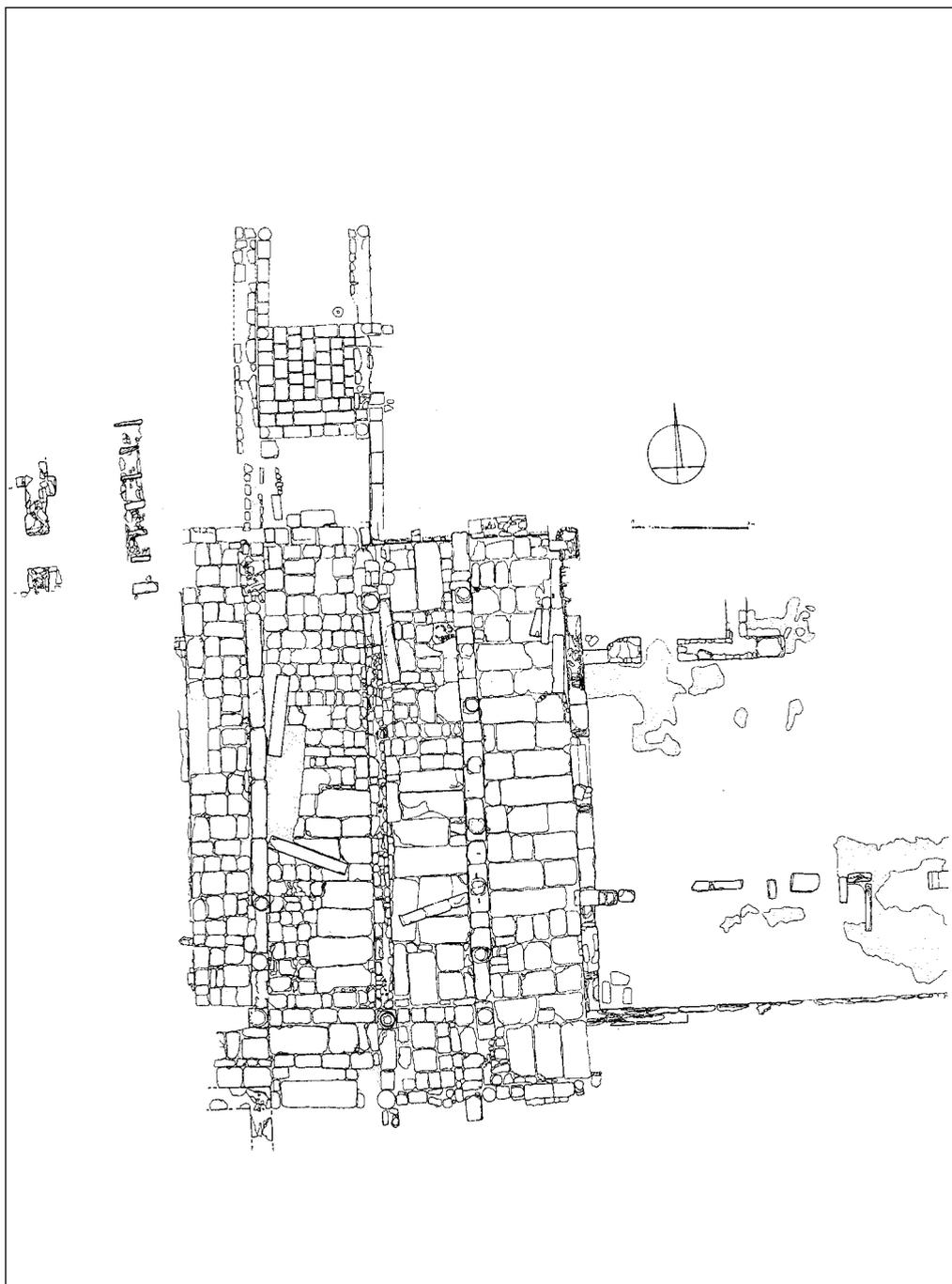
There were three doorways in the western wall, opening into the atrium, and two more in the southern wall, leading to the open ground between this church and the one previously excavated. Both walls are preserved at a very low level, rising however toward the north, where the unexcavated wall seems to stand to some 1.50 m in height. In the last phase of the church, only the main entrance seems to have remained open at a level corresponding to the plaster floor inside, while the other doors were blocked.

After the final collapse and dismantling of the church, there followed a period of

industrial use marked by the remains of a lime kiln set against one of the pillars of the left aisle and by a sizable deposit of soft limestone stones in the middle of the church, which had apparently been brought there to be processed in the kiln. Later, some walls were built directly on the plaster floor and between the pillars, without even clearing the rubbish. As a result, at least one room was installed in the northwestern corner of the former church. The interpretation of this feature will have to wait until a time when the excavations are completed. In the opposite, southwestern corner, a well was dug (or an older, pre-church well reopened). This area certainly remained roofless at this late date. The chronology of destruction and abandonment remains vague, but the church likely went out of use some time in the 8th-9th century.



Fig. 2. *Basilica III, the nave and pillars of the aisles with later walls added, view to the southeast (Photo M. Gawlikowski)*



*Fig. 3. Plan of the atrium and its surroundings
(Drawing W. Terlikowski)*

THE ATRIUM

An extensive area in front of the church, as wide as the church itself and some 18 m deep, including the whole width of the Church Street and porticoes on either side of it, is paved with huge, well fitted flagstones. In the middle, the paved area is slightly lower, forming a sunken rectangle around which many column bases were found in place. It is clear that we have here a typical atrium, a feature extremely rare in Syrian church architecture (*Figs. 3-5*).

The narrow Church Street, running north from the Great Colonnade between the house in Block F and the excavated church in Block G, remained unpaved as far as a perpendicular lane marking the

northeastern corner of House F. There, the street opens into the atrium with a large slab laid between the corner of the house and the structure opposite. Apparently, there was an arch introducing into the courtyard, but only the lower part of one pillar, adjoining the corner of House F, has been preserved. Both supports of a similar, symmetrically positioned arch are still in place at the northern end of the atrium.

The western portico of the atrium is clearly inherited from some earlier monument. It consisted of eight columns aligned with the street wall coming up from the Great Colonnade (cf. *Fig. 3*). The bases are preserved in place, spaced 2.60 m



Fig. 4. Paved atrium in front of Basilica III, view to the south. Two late parallel walls in the foreground (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

between the axes. Some of them still support stumps of columns, while three complete shafts lie on the ground. They are 3.40 m high and 52 cm in diameter. At the southern end, the first column was set opposite the corner of House F; a side lane passed between it and the house. At the other end, the row of columns meets a pilaster set against the corner of a building or courtyard, which was in line with the street, set much lower and obviously earlier. The portico was 3.15 m deep and its back wall was blind; the only threshold to be seen seems to be contemporary with the church. Also contemporary with the basilica is the pavement of the portico, laid against the bases and partly covering them. We do not know whether the original portico was paved.

The parallel eastern portico, closer to the church, was built together with it. The bases of the columns are set on the atrium pavement (cf. Fig. 5) and have a smaller diameter of only 45 cm. They follow the course of a wall, which had been built in line with the back wall of rooms situated along the eastern side of the street further to the south.

Between the two lines of columns, one older than the church and the other contemporary, there were two other columns, one at either end of the atrium, forming together with them a rectangle around the central sunken floor. These two columns conformed in diameter with the larger western row and were likewise planted lower than the pavement. There was perhaps another portico symmetrical

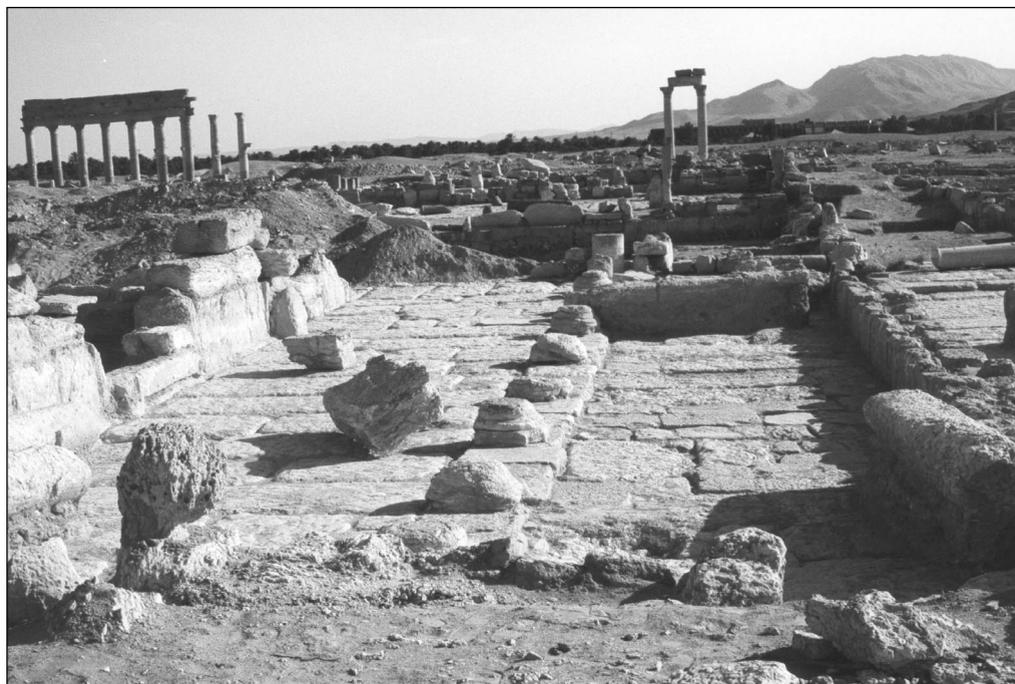


Fig. 5. Atrium seen from the north, the front of Basilica III visible on the left (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

to the one preserved on the western side. Its columns could have been reused in front of the basilica, perhaps on a foundation that had supported the back wall of an earlier portico, which would thus be 4.30 m deep.

We have also established that at a later date the western portico was closed off by walls between the columns, built of irregular rubble, but also of large stones taken from other buildings (*Fig. 6*). The columns fell even later; apparent on ground surface even before excavation, they were found to lie some 50-60 cm above the pavement. Another wall, much better built, sits on the pavement between the two intermediate columns (on the north and south), that is, in line with the street. In this way, Church Street, which

had been enlarged in ancient times on one or perhaps even on both sides by porticoes, was reduced at a late date to the same width of about 5 m all along its course (*Fig. 7* especially). The basilica remained in use and retained a portico in front of the new enclosing wall.

It is thus clear that the atrium, though belonging to the church, was originally open at both ends and could be crossed simply by following Church Street. The most likely explanation of this peculiarity would be to admit that the street itself ran on church grounds, and was a constituent part, together with Basilica II and perhaps even House F, of the cathedral complex in Palmyra. Later, the street reverted to the public domain and the church was separated from the street by a curtain wall.



Fig. 6. Atrium viewed from the north, along Church Street. The western portico seen to the right (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

STREET IN FRONT OF THE MARTYRIUM

Beyond the terminal northern arch of the atrium the pavement stops and the street reappears between two continuous walls inherited from an earlier period. The walking level of the street was about 50 cm lower than the atrium pavement, a much-worn stone being used as an intermediary step (cf. *Fig. 7*). We have excavated a stretch of this street running north for about 10 m.

The ancient wall to the right received a portal consisting of two jambs and a lintel, which bore a Greek inscription, unfortunately entirely illegible. The weathered surface of joints indicates that this doorway was transplanted from

elsewhere to give access to a small apsed building adjoining the basilica on the north. While this monument remains to be excavated, one may safely admit it being a chapel, very likely a martyrium of some saint or saints buried there.

In front of the doorway a square surface (4.75 by 4.85 m) was finely paved on the same level as the street, that is, lower than the atrium (*Fig. 8*). Further north, there is on either side a single row of flagstones along the wall. The angles of the paved square are marked by four columns, while two more are set further on along the street. All six are founded below the pavement and do not have any bases. They

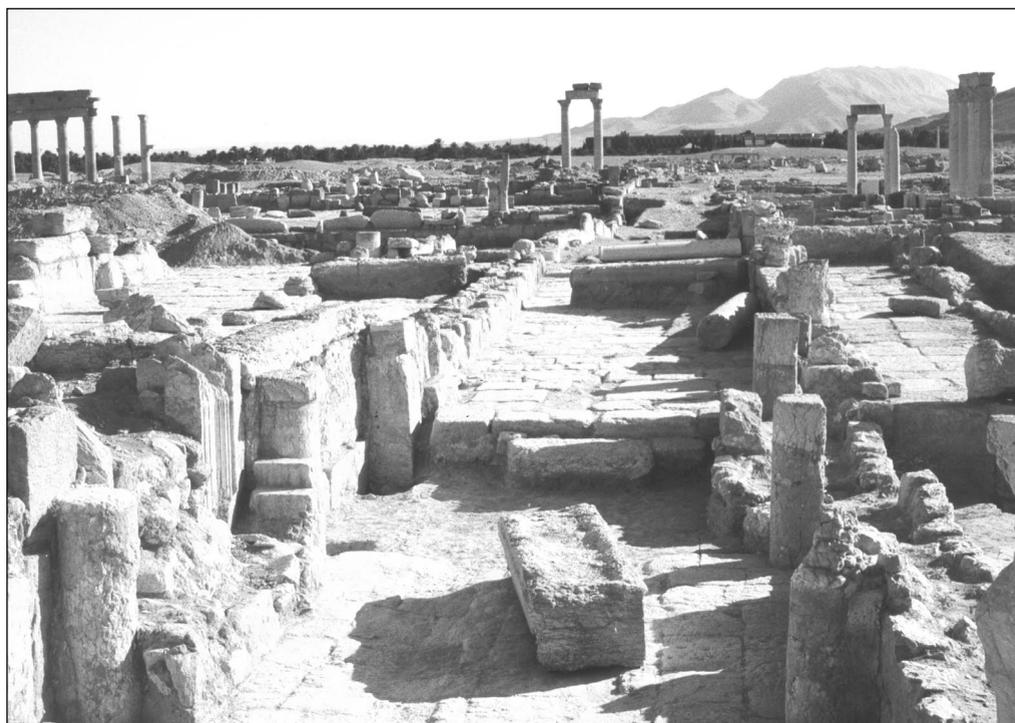


Fig. 7. Atrium, view from the north. Entrance to the martyrium in the left foreground
Photo M. Gawlikowski)



Fig. 8. Blocked entrance to the martyrium and the four columns in front of it, view from the east (Photo M. Gawlikowski)



Fig. 9. Close-up of the entrance to the martyrium, with steps leading to the top of one of the columns (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

are fixed with plaster to the walls behind them and do not seem to have ever been higher than the present 1.40 m above the pavement. No capitals or elements of entablature are in view.

On first impression we assumed there was once a canopy in front of the entrance.

However, the column to the right of the doorway could be mounted by means of three steps to reach a flat stone on top (*Fig. 9*). Could this feature belong to an early mosque, installed in the former martyrium? Only excavation can provide an answer to this intriguing question.

SILVER HOARD

On May 26, 2001, a hoard of silver dirhams was found on the pavement, beside one of the columns in front of the martyrium (*Fig. 10*). At the time that it had been hidden, the pavement was obviously covered with an accumulation

layer. The coins were tightly packed in a linen bag which was deposited in a corner formed by the column and the wall opposite the doorway.

The coins formed a compact cluster and few pieces could have been separated from

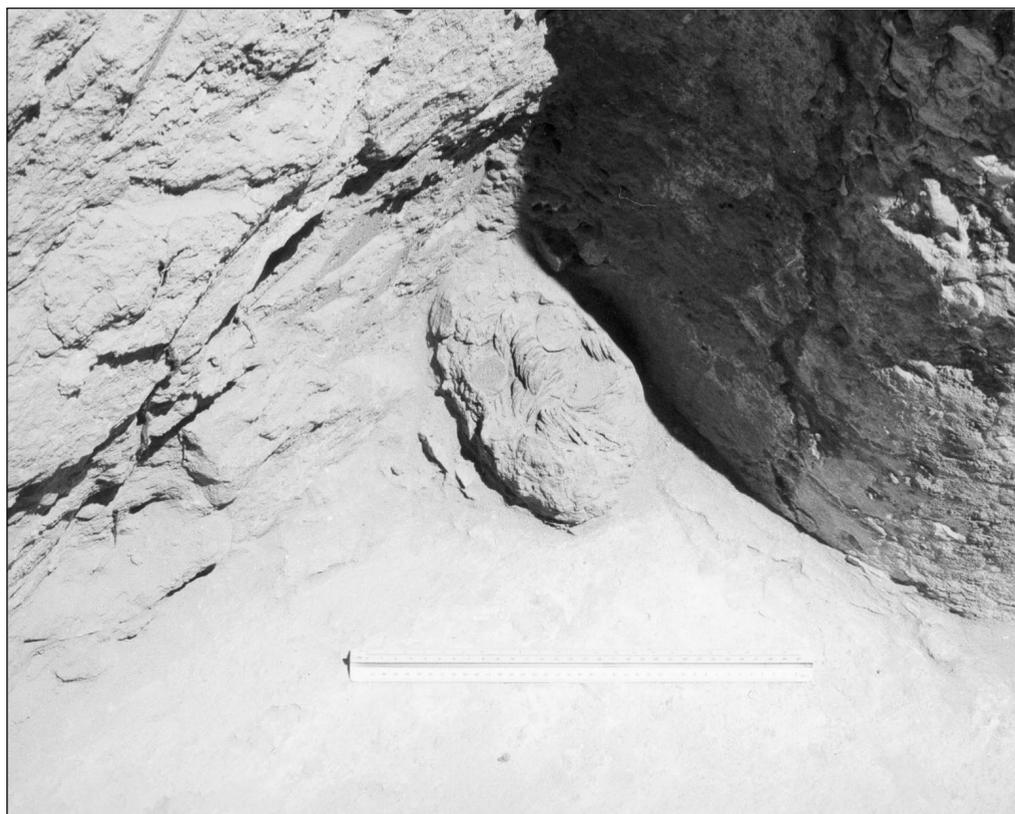


Fig. 10. Hoard of silver coins as found opposite the martyrium (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

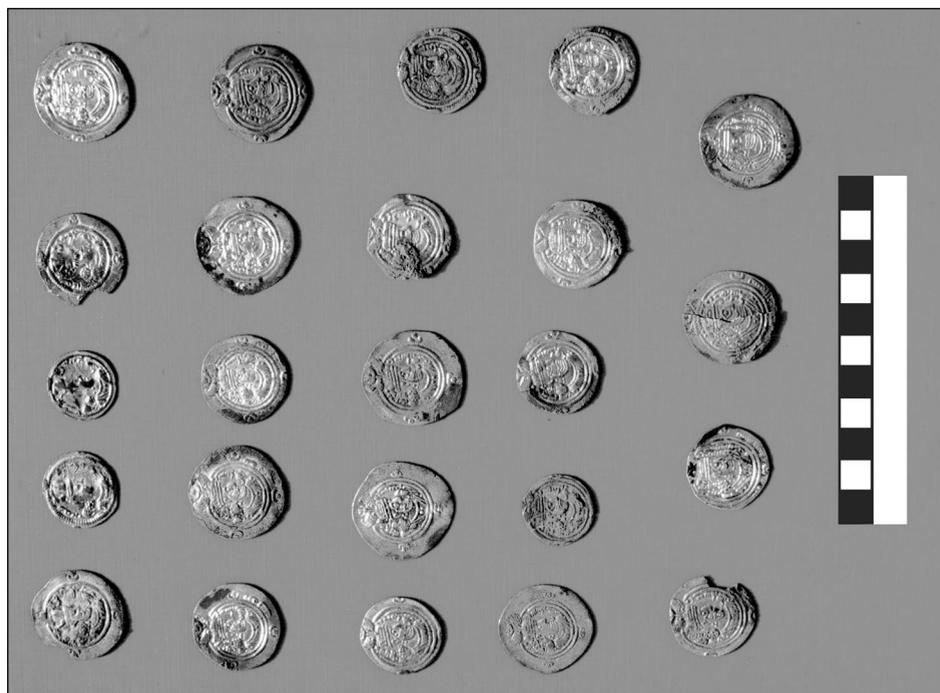
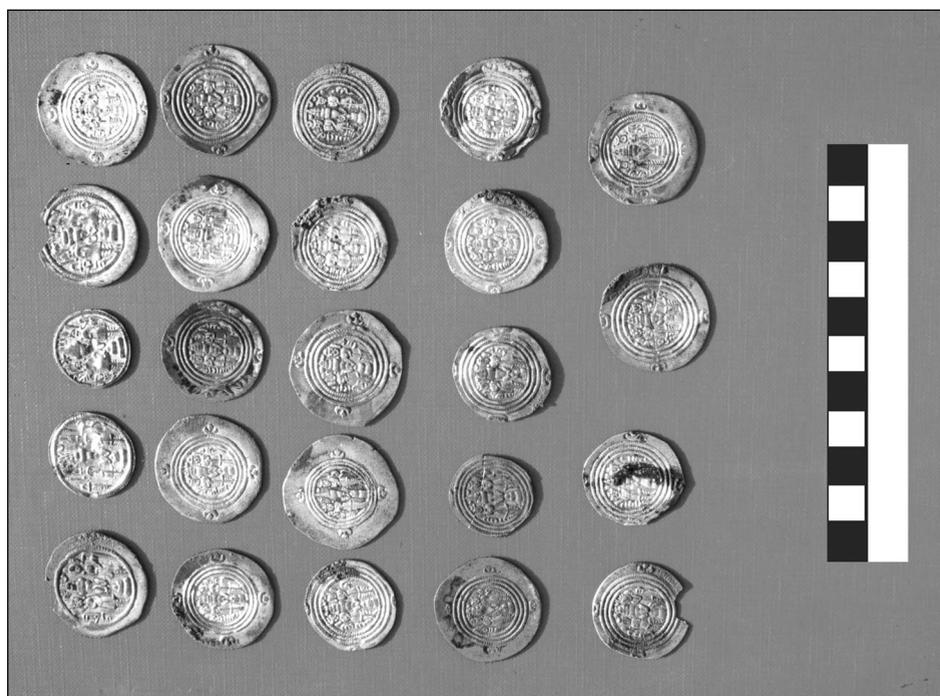


Fig. 11. Silver dirhams, sample of 24 coins from a hoard found in Palmyra: a) averses; b) obverses
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

PALMYRA

SYRIA

1	Khusro I	mint GD (Jay-Isfahan)	year ARBA (4th=AD 534)
2	Khusro I	mint uncertain	year TSHA (9th=AD 539)
3	Khusro I	mint RD (Rayy)	year 47 (AD 577)
4	Hormuzd IV	mint RAM (Ram Auhmazd)	year TMNA (8th=AD 585)
5	Khusro II	mint NIH/WYH	year 23 (AD 612)
6	Khusro II	mint MR (Merv)	year 25 (AD 614)
7	Khusro II	mint NIH/WYH	year 25 (AD 614)
8	Khusro II	mint NIH/WYH	year 25 (AD 614)*
9	Khusro II	mint uncertain	year 28 (AD 617)
10	Khusro II	mint AY (Airan)	year 31 (AD 620)
11	Khusro II	mint GN/BN (Gundeshapur?)	year 33 (AD 622)
12	Khusro II	mint PR (Forat)	year 35 (AD 624)
13	Khusro II	mint NIH/WYH	year 35 (AD 624)
14	Khusro II	mint DA (Darabgird)	year 35 (AD 624)
15	Khusro II	mint NIH/WYH	year 35 (AD 624)
16	Khusro II	mint PR	year 35 (AD 624)*
17	Khusro II	mint PR	year 35 (AD 624)
18	Khusro II	mint NIH/WYH	year 36 (AD 625)
19	Khusro II	mint AIR	year 37 (AD 626)
20	Khusro II	mint DA	year uncertain
21	Khusro II	mint AY	year uncertain
22	Copy of Khusro II, ZYAT i-ABUSUFYAN	mint KWAT (Kubad-xurrah)	year 53 H. (AD 673)
23	Copy of Khusro II, APDULA AMIR i-RUISHNIKAN, bismala	mint ART	year 51 (= H. 63, AD 682)
24	Copy of Khusro II, APDULA AMIR i-RUISHNIKAN, bismala	mint DA	year 60 (= H. 72, AD 691)

Table 1. List of 24 silver dirhams from a hoard found in Palmyra; *) indicates ink graffito on margin (cf. Fig. 11 a,b: in rows starting from top left, each row from left to right)

it. As things stand now, we can be sure there are no less than 757 complete coins in the hoard, not counting broken fragments (of which many can be reassembled). Once the whole lot is cleaned in a laboratory, we will likely find that the total is higher.

On the next day, another lot of 18 coins of the same kind was found some 2 m from the first hoard, in the middle of the street. Altogether, we can be sure of having at least 775 complete coins, maybe more.

Immediately after the discovery I was able to clean and study a sample of 24 coins from the bigger hoard (*Fig. 11a,b*).

While representing only a random choice, this lot may be taken as an approximation of what the hoard contains. The following identification has been established: Khusro I – 3 pieces; Hormuzd IV – 1 piece; Khusro II – 17 pieces; Ziyad b. Abi Sufyan – 1 piece; Abdullah b. Zubayr – 2 pieces (cf. *Table 1*). Apparently, the hoard was collected in the years of the Sasanian occupation of Syria (614-628). The three Arab Sasanian specimens, added much later, give an approximate date for the burying of the hoard (after AD 689). As far as I could see, the hoard contains no reformed dirhams of Abdel Malik b. Marwan.

OCTOSTYLE PORTICO OF THE GREAT COLONNADE

A cross-section through the Great Colonnade was effected by Marta Żuchowska, between the eight columns facing Block E with Basilica I and the single standing column of the opposite row. The objective was to search for data that would help to revise the street chronology. Some 3 m below the present level, beneath several layers marking stages of street use from Roman through Islamic times, five different water pipes were found running

along the avenue. Still lower, a stone main, known already from other places along the Colonnade, was reached.

Behind the line of shops on the northern side of the Colonnade, a plastered area enclosed by walls (reached on two sides only) features two column bases and a well. These remains are apparently quite late, but only when a larger surface has been excavated will their proper evaluation become viable.