

Marta Żuchowska

Palmyra: Test Trench in the Street of the Great Colonnade

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TEST TRENCH IN THE STREET OF THE GREAT COLONNADE

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In connection with work in the western sector of the ruins of ancient Palmyra, a test trench was dug in the 2001 and 2002 seasons in the street of the Great Colonnade.¹⁾ The trench, which was 3.50 m wide and 14 m long, cut through the street in one of the intercolumnia. A small section of the south portico was cleaned down to the Roman level. The chief objective was to study the stratigraphy and to verify earlier ideas about the dating of successive phases of the main street of the town. In the course of two seasons of excavations, a number of layers corresponding to the phases of street development came to light along with substantial evidence of hydraulic installations constituting part of the ancient sewage system (*Fig. 1*).

The most ancient feature found in the trench were fragments of walls in the southern part of the excavated area, made of small stones in clay bonding and surviving to a height of 0.7 m (*Fig. 2*: walls I and II). They may have constituted the corner of a bigger structure, which was leveled when the street was traced. The excavated area was too small to provide more information on the layout and nature of this building.

The tracing of the street was undoubtedly an important urban project. Not only were preexisting structures removed, but also an extensive water supply and sewage system was put into place. Under level I of the street two freshwater pipes were laid (cf. *Fig. 2*: pipes 2, 6) beside a sewer made of small stones with a carved stone trough and a large limestone-slab covering (cf. *Fig. 2*: sewer).

The first street surface (level I) was made of heterogeneous stone gravel and clay. It did not survive long as two more water pipes had to be laid soon afterwards (cf. *Fig. 2*: pipes 3, 4). The new surface of the street corresponded to a time of growth and prosperity in this part of the town. The street level was raised and the ground leveled. A tamped layer of limestone gravel was introduced (level II) presumably after the necessary pipes had been laid, although these appear to have been either removed or destroyed by later works. Some time after that, yet another street surface of limestone gravel appeared (cf. *Fig. 2*: level III). It, too, was preceded by leveling activities and the laying of another water pipe (cf. *Fig. 2*: pipe 5). Level IV (cf. *Fig. 2*) was the last phase in the use of the street in

1) The trench was dug in the western section of the Great Colonnade, near the octostyle portico excavated in previous seasons. The work was directed by Prof. Michał Gawlikowski, assisted by the present author and Ms Elizabeth Katzy, a student of archaeology from Tübingen. The pottery material was kindly identified by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek.



*Fig. 1. Test pit in the street of the Great Colonnade, view from the north
(Photo M. Żuchowska)*

this sector. Further pipe works preceded its formation with three water pipes being laid before preparing the limestone-gravel surface (cf. *Fig. 2*: pipes 1 and 7, 8).

Dating the different layers distinguished during excavations poses difficulties in view of the scarceness of the pottery material and the prevalence of local forms that frequently remained in use for long periods of time. The coins found in the trench were poorly preserved and impossible to identify.

Even so, level I can be dated with considerable likelihood to the 2nd century AD, level II to the turn of the 2nd century and level III to the 3rd century. While modern trenches have unfortunately obliterated all evidence of the original connection between the street levels and the columns of the portico, a correlation of soil levels with the plinths and bases of the columns in the portico suggests that the street surface corresponding to the primary use of the portico was in this area level III. To judge by epigraphic sources and

building technique analyses, the porticoes of the western sector of the Great Colonnade started being erected in the middle of the 2nd century (an inscription from AD 158 was found on a column in the vicinity).²⁾ The building of this part of the Great Colonnade may have gone on for an extended period of time (and was never finished in fact); hence, the two earlier street levels must have corresponded with successive phases of a long-term project for building a porticoed street that was initiated in the middle of the 2nd century AD. Level IV should likely be linked with a renovation referred to by another inscription dating from AD 328, also found nearby.³⁾

Interestingly, there is no evidence for the continued use of the street in Byzantine and Umayyad times despite public buildings from the period being known to have existed in the neighborhood. In Palmyra, as in other cities of the times, the traffic had apparently moved to the finely paved porticoes. The

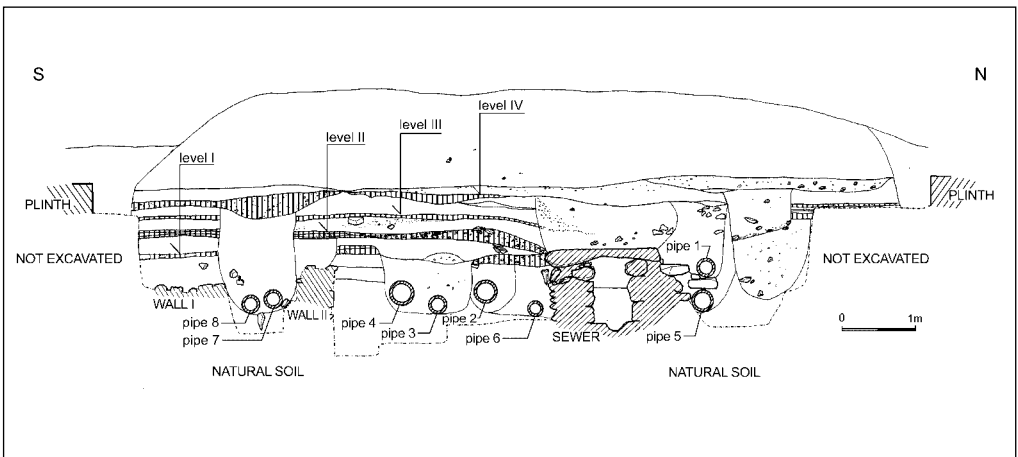


Fig. 2. Cross-section through the test pit dug in the street of the Great Colonnade, looking west (Drawing M. Żuchowska)

2) J. Cantineau, *Inventaire des Inscriptions de Palmyre*, Beyrouth 1930, III. 26.
3) *Ibid.*, III. 27.

water-pipes corresponding to this period may have been laid under the portico pavement and had branches in the transversal streets.

The stone structure described above as underlying all the street and sewage works in the Great Colonnade is of particular significance for a study of the development of urban space in Palmyra. Relative dating evidence has suggested a date in the second half of the 1st century AD for the construction of this building, proving at the same time the presence of earlier occupation in an area hitherto believed to have been empty before the erection of the Great Colonnade.

The water-supply and sewage systems of the city constitute a separate issue for

study. The present findings have demonstrated the existence of a water-supply system in this part of the city starting from the early 2nd century. Fresh water was brought probably from a source situated west of Palmyra. But even while the system was frequently extended and repaired, independent wells continued in common use. One such well was found in the southeastern part of the trench, already inside the south portico (*Fig. 3*); it remained in use until the Byzantine period. A part of the sewage system – the great sewer – was also represented in the present excavation. It presumably ran the entire length of the Great Colonnade and was used over a long period of time, being repeatedly cleaned and repaired.



*Fig. 3. Well discovered in the south portico of the Great Colonnade
(Photo M. Żuchowska)*