

Tomasz Waliszewski

Jiyeh (Porphyreon): Explorations 2003-2004

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JIYEH (PORPHYREON)

EXPLORATIONS 2003-2004

Tomasz Waliszewski

The site of Jiyeh (Jiye), situated some 20 km south of Beirut, between a shallow bay on the Mediterranean coast and the Beirut-Saida highway, was explored by a joint Polish-Lebanese mission from August 31 to October 1, 2004.¹

- ¹ The Mission was headed by Dr. Tomasz Waliszewski, assisted by Mr. Bahija Traboulsi and Mr. As'ad Seif, representing the Direction Générale des Antiquités. The team at Jiyeh was composed of Dr. Mahmoud El-Tayeb, archeologist, in charge of the excavations; Ms Karolina Cichocka, Ms Sophie Garreau, Mr. Paweł Tchorek, Mr. Jakub Prager, archaeologists; Ms Urszula Wicenciak, Mr. Krzysztof Domżański, ceramologists; Mr. Marek Puzkarski, documentalist; Ms Beata Capik, registrar; Mr. Marcin Kisielewicz, metrologist; Dr. Krzysztof Chmielewski, Mrs. Izabela Uchman-Laskowska, conservators. Archaeology, art conservation and engineering students from the Warsaw University Institute of Archaeology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw and the Warsaw Polytechnic included: Ms Marta Banaś, Ms Jolanta Górniak, Mr. Karol Juchniewicz, Mr. Marcin Klebba, Ms Maria Kozarzewska, Ms Jolanta Krajewska, Mr. Karol Ochnio, Ms Justyna Radzik, Ms Agnieszka Szulc, Mr. Krzysztof Napiórkowski, Ms Agnieszka Wielocha, Ms Małgorzata Żukowska. We would like to thank Mr. Frédéric Hussein, Director General of Antiquities, for his kind interest in our work and Messrs Bahija Traboulsi and As'ad Seif of the DGA for their effective and comprehensive assistance throughout the duration of the mission, as well as between field seasons. We are particularly grateful to Mr. Traboulsi, who prepared for us the dig house in Saida and arranged for the loan of the necessary work equipment, solving whatever problems we may have had in this regard in the course of the campaign.

DISCOVERY OF THE SITE

Travelers (H. Th. de Luynes) had taken note of the site already in the 17th century, but it was not until the mid-19th century that Ernest Renan actually put it on an archaeological map of Phoenicia.² He uncovered a Byzantine chapel with a dated mosaic inscription from the 6th century in the sands of the coastal village of Nebi Younis on the southern side of the bay (today the village has been engulfed by the main agglomeration of Jiyeh). Work carried out by George Contenau briefly in 1914 led to the discovery of a large Christian basilica amidst the ruins of buildings and a necropolis.³ Progressing devastation of the area and building development resulted in short-lived excavations carried out in 1975 by Roger Saidah of the Direction Générale des Antiquités. He cleared a considerable

section of the residential district from Byzantine times, situated in the vicinity of Contenau's basilica.⁴ Civil war, which began then in Lebanon, also took its toll on the site. In 1987/88, the local inhabitants rediscovered the basilica, which Contenau had described only summarily. To avoid destruction, the mosaics were lifted from the church and transported to the museum at the Beiteddine Palace, where they have remained until the present day.

The Polish-Lebanese archaeological project commenced in 1996 with explorations in nearby Chhim. The following year the expedition accomplished clearing of the district discovered by Saidah in 1975. However, work could not be resumed until 2003 due to difficulties in protecting the site.

SITE HISTORY

Travelers already in the 17th century proposed to identify Nebi Younis (which cherishes a local tradition connected with the prophet Jonah in the village mosque) and Jiyeh with the ancient Porphyreon. The suggestion was picked up by R. Dussaud, who referred also to other authors.⁵ Early reports contained information on urban ruins stretching all along the bay and tombs situated in the hills to the east. Porphyreon, the name of which must doubtless refer to the purple pigment commonly produced on the Phoenician coast, was said to have been a Hellenistic town, established perhaps by the Ptolemies in the 3rd century

BC. The first fact of certainty is the sea and land battle of 218 BC between the armies of Ptolemy and Antioch III for the isthmus that blocked the Seleucid armies approach to Sidon (Polybius, *Hist.*, V, 68-69). The town lay on the main road connecting all the Phoenician cities on the coast. No further mention of the site is known from Roman times, until it reappears in the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* of AD 333, where it is described as a pilgrim stop on the route to the Holy Land (*It. Burd.* 18, 21). In Late Antiquity, it seems to have been little more than a big village. Interestingly, the place name was transferred in local

2 E. Renan, *Mission de Phénicie* (Paris 1864), 509-514.

3 G. Contenau, "Mission archéologique à Sidon (1914)", *Syria* 1 (1920), 295-305.

4 R. Saidah, "Porphyreon du Liban", *Archéologia* 104 (1977), 38-43.

5 R. Dussaud, *Topographie historique de la Syrie antique et médiévale* (Paris 1927), 43 n. 4, 45.

consciousness to the locality of Sykaminon, supposed to lie near modern Haifa. Sources from the period mention a bishopric there (Ant. Plac. Itin. 3). The site must have de-

clined after that and may have even been abandoned for some centuries before the villages of Nebi Yunis and Jiyeh rose on its ruins.

SITE TOPOGRAPHY AND EXCAVATIONS IN 2003-2004

The shores of a large and shallow bay were an excellent site for settlement, considering the presence of abundant water in many wells and the excellent situation on a coastal route. Moreover, the mountains coming down practically to the shore and leaving only a narrow isthmus in the southern part of the bay imparted a strategic importance on the area.

The flat coast north of the isthmus, stretching for about 2 km, supported an

ancient town of still unknown extent. The present archaeological site [cf. *Fig. 1* on p. 424] is just 100 by 150 m and contains the Christian basilica and residential district excavated in 1975 [*Fig. 1*]. In 1998, illegal agricultural activities in the area immediately to the north of the ruins led to the planting of this area, discovering a mosaic depiction of a river deity in the process.⁶ The ancient necropolis lying on terraces another 200 m to the north became



Fig. 1. General view of the site in 1997 with the remains of late antique architecture in the foreground (Photo K. Kotlewski)

6 R. Ortali-Tarazi, T. Waliszewski, "La mosaïque du Nil découverte à Jiyé", *Bulletin d'Archeologie et d'Architecture Libanaises IV* (2000), 165-177.

the site of modern building development in 2002, prompting a geophysical survey of the endangered area, coupled with an investigation of the site of the basilica and its neighborhood.⁷ In 2004, further degradation of the Roman-Byzantine necropolis forced the Polish-Lebanese mission to undertake salvage excavations, which are reported on preliminarily in this volume by K. Domzalski U. Wicenciak, M. El-Tayeb and the present author.

The only regular excavations during the 2004 season were carried out inside the

basilica, testing in four trenches the western and southern parts of the building. The walls of the church narthex were traced [Fig. 2], identifying entrances and revealing the partly preserved south wall. Some minute traces of floor mosaics were observed in the southern aisle, presumably left when the main pavements were removed to the Beiteddine museum in 1987/88. The wall tops, preserved practically at ground level, bear clear evidence of bulldozing. Excavations in the basilica are scheduled to continue in the coming season.



*Fig. 2. Test trench in the basilica revealing the narthex wall
(Photo T. Waliszewski)*

7 See the following contribution by T. Herbich in this volume.