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Palmyra Excavations 2002-2005 (Insula E by the Great Collonade)

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PALMYRA

EXCAVATIONS 2002-2005

(INSULA E BY THE GREAT COLONNADE)

Marta Żuchowska

Insula E in the downtown district of Palmyra was the object of further excavations and measuring in 2005 in an effort to complete studies of architecture uncovered in 2002 and 2003 in the area between the portico of the Great Colonnade on the south, the façade of Basilica I on the north, 'Diogenes Street' on the east and 'Oil Press Street' on the west.¹ Despite the fact that the 23 separate loci identified in the excavations of the 2002-2003 seasons represent different phases of occupation of the area, the original designations were kept for the purposes of this preliminary report (Fig. 1). The present work concentrated on specific features in various parts of the quarter and the results made it possible to distinguish a number of occupation phases of insula E and correlate them with the observed stages in the history of the Great Colonnade.

1 The work lasted from May 14 to June 16, 2005, and was carried out by Dr. Marta Żuchowska with the assistance of Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, Mr. Szymon Maślak, archaeologists, Mr. Marcin Wagner, documentalist, and Ms Aleksandra Kubiak, student of archaeology from the Institute of Archaeology of Warsaw University, under the supervision of the Palmyra expedition director, Prof. Dr. Michał Gawlikowski.

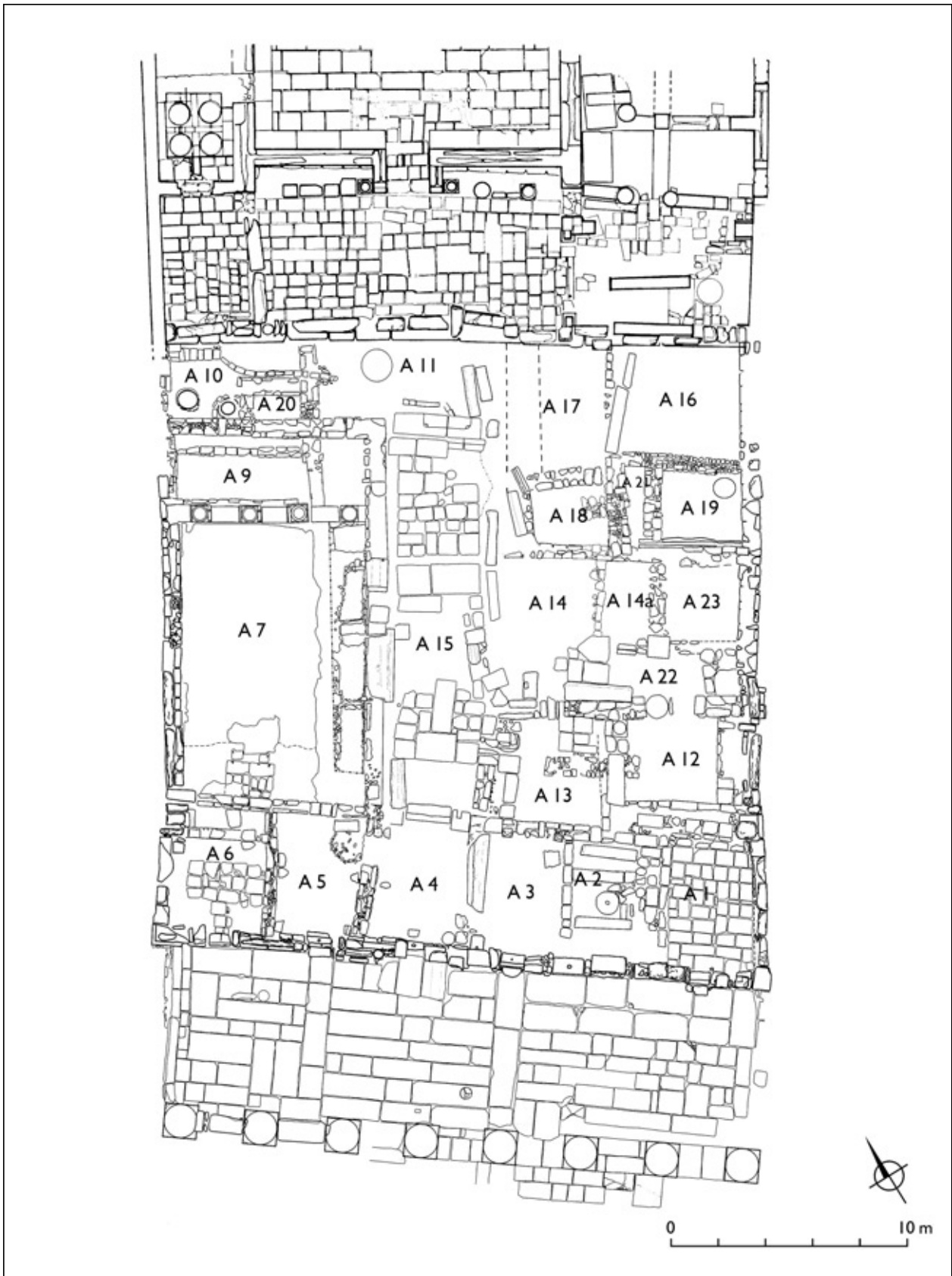


Fig.1. Plan of insula E
(Drawing G. Majcherek, M. Wagner, D. Tarara, M. Żuchowska)

THE EXPLORATION IN 2005

Explorations concerned specific features located in three different parts of the insula [Fig. 2].

In the western part, the entire west wall of the insula was uncovered. Two entrances representing late phases of use were examined in the east wall of locus A7. Finally, a test pit dug by the edge of the mosaic floor revealed the foundation of the original wall of this room.

Work in the eastern part of the insula covered loci A14, A16, A17, A18, A19 and A23. The original occupational levels were uncovered in units A14, A16, A17, A18 and A19, and dated by the pottery assem-

blage to the 2nd-3rd century. A storage vessel was found dug into the floor of room A14; it was reused as a place for depositing rubbish and ultimately destroyed by the foundation of a later wall. A *tannur* from a later age, presumably Byzantine, was discovered in the northeastern corner of locus A19. A test pit was excavated in locus A23, revealing remains of occupation from the 1st century AD in the lowest layers.

On the northern side, the entire length of the foundation of Basilica I was cleared, demonstrating how existing walls from earlier phases were reused in its construction. The doorways were blocked for the



Fig. 2. *Insula E*, view from the *Great Colonnade*
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

purpose and the holes filled in. A test pit in the late shop adjoining the corner of the Basilica revealed remains of walls that proved to be connected with the architectural phase represented by loci A14-A19. The terminal date for the structures in the

test pit came from a thick deposit of charcoal, organic remains, big but unidentifiable fragments of iron and abundant pottery. This deposit, which lay on top of the surviving wall, was dated by the pottery to the 4th-5th century.

OCCUPATIONAL PHASES

A study of the season's results led to a number of occupational phases being identified for insula E. These were correlated with the stages in the functioning of the Great Colonnade observed in test pits dug in 1997² and 2001-2002.³ Unfortunately, in the nine centuries of occupation the area had been destroyed so many times and altered significantly as far as the architecture is concerned that it proved impossible to reconstruct the spatial arrangement of the entire insula for any one given period.

PHASE I

The oldest phase corresponds to the occupation of the area in the 1st and early 2nd century AD, that is, before the construction of the Great Colonnade. Remains from this period were observed in a few test pits dug below the level of later structures. The trench in loc. A3 revealed a cistern, while in loc. A11, under the wall of the portico of the Basilica, the impression of a perpendicular wall could be seen, originally running southward and presumably removed when the whole area underwent architectural alterations. A parallel wall found in a test pit under the floor of a shop at the southeastern corner of Basilica I is thought to represent the same

epoch, although later it was incorporated into the 2nd-3rd century architecture. Complementing this data is pottery material from the period found in the lower layers of the test pit in loc. A23. These remains should be considered in relation to fragmentary structures of the same age observed in the area of the Great Colonnade⁴ and 'Oil Press Street'.⁵ The modest data on structures from this period precludes any reconstruction of the character of the architectural layout from Phase I. At the end of this phase, the wall of N-S orientation bisecting loc. A11 was destroyed and a tannur was installed where it had once run.

PHASE II

The phase corresponds to architecture of the 2nd-3rd century which was contemporary with the building of the Great Colonnade [*Fig. 3*]. At this time the colonnade between the 'Diogenes' and 'Oil Press' streets was erected, initially just four columns on the eastern side in the 2nd century (*terminus ante quem* indicated by a honorific inscription of AD 157 (Inv. III, 26) placed on the first column of the Colonnade counting from 'Diogenes' Street), followed by another four most likely in the 3rd century. The corners of

2 *Bulletin d'études orientales* (=BEtOr) (2000), 187-193.

3 *PAM XIV, Reports 2002* (2003), 291-294.

4 *PAM XIV*, op. cit., 291-294.

5 *PAM XI, Reports 1999* (2000), 259-260.

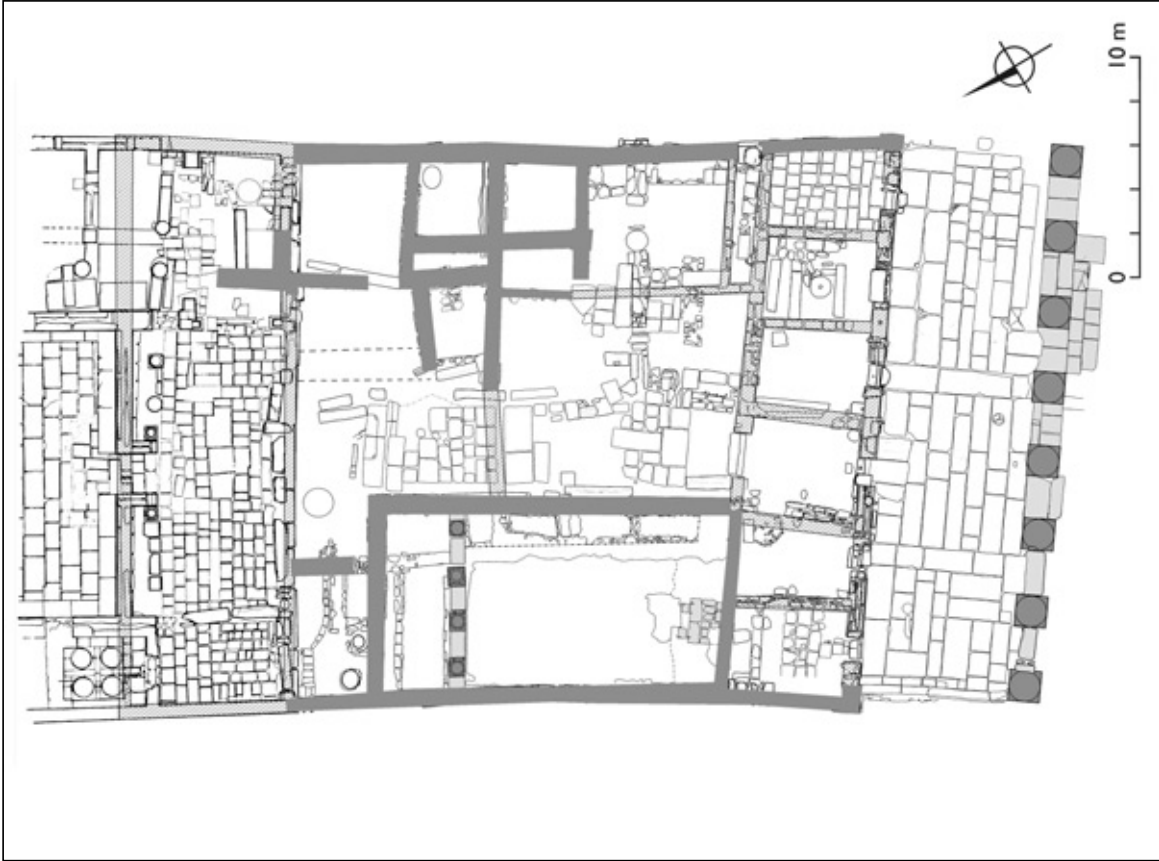


Fig. 4. Insula E. Phase III (Drawing G. Majcherek, M. Wagner, D. Tarara, M. Żuchowska)

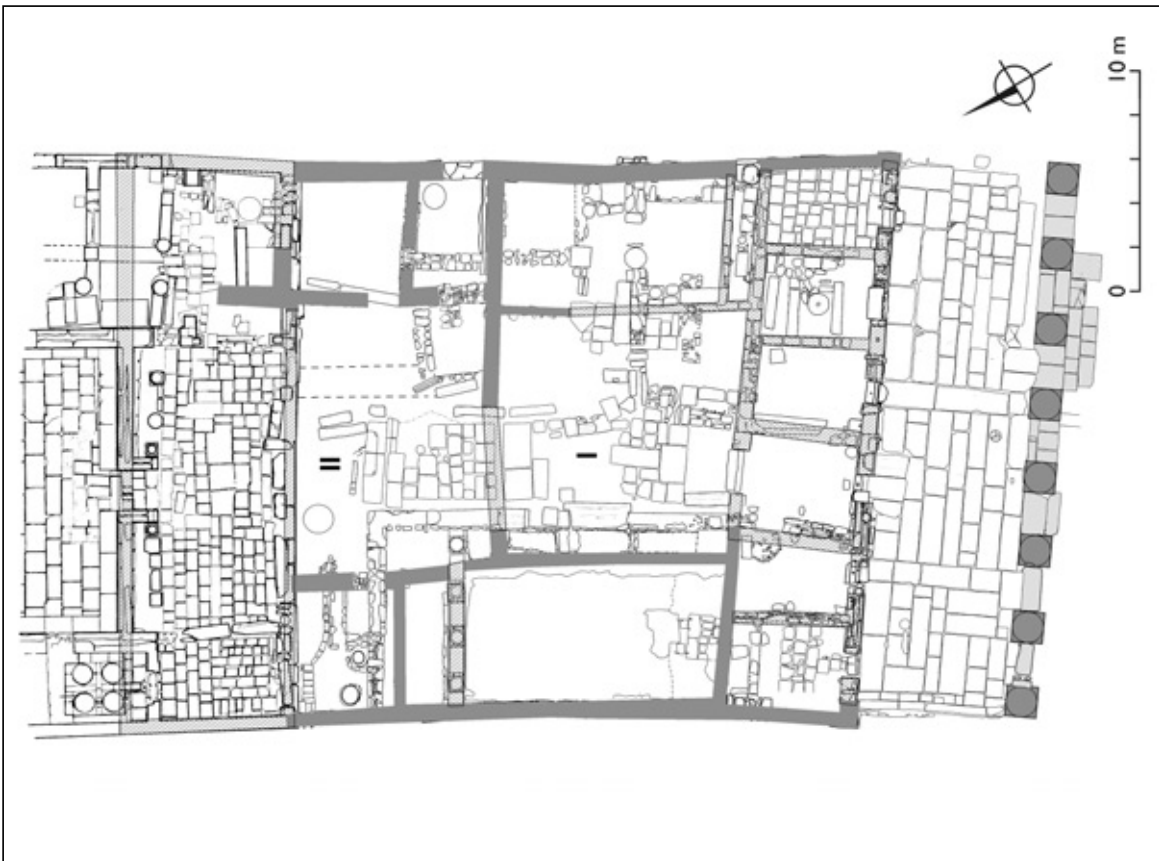


Fig. 3. Insula E. Phase II (Drawing G. Majcherek, M. Wagner, D. Tarara, M. Żuchowska)

the insula were also raised, marking its limits, and a black mortar pavement was laid in the portico. Shops lining the portico appeared as well. None of the original walls of these shops have been preserved, except perhaps the street walls of A1 and A6 and the wall separating A6 and A7, all of which appear to be more or less contemporary with the insula corners, even if the bondwork of A1 and A6 differs (presumably due to the extended time it took to build the portico itself). The position of the entrances and the inner divisions are in all likelihood from a later phase (the preserved wall of the northern portico of the Great Colonnade appears to have undergone alterations through to the last phases of occupation, while some of the partition walls in the shops and their back wall seem to have originated from a single phase). The black pavement of loc. A15 is a *terminus ante quem* here, being connected as it is with the refurbishment of this area in the second half of the 4th century. A test pit in shop A3 revealed the presence of earlier floors and a threshold directly below the one from the last phase, making it sensible to reconstruct a similar arrangement of shops as survives from the last phase. It should be noted, however, that neither the portico wall, nor the north wall of the entire complex, as well as all of the dividing inner walls are original.

The inside of the insula was occupied by what seem to be habitations. In loci A16, A17, A18, A19 in the northeastern corner, the surviving walls took advantage of earlier walls from phases I and II. A white mortar floor constituting the original occupational level was found solely in loc. A 14. In the remaining rooms marked off by these walls the original pavements

appear to have been removed or destroyed for reasons unknown. Preserved in one of the corners of loc. A16 is evidence of the turn in the plaster indicating the original floor level. Stone flagging is not to be excluded in these rooms, as the stone slabs of the pavement could have easily been taken from their original position for reuse in one of the later buildings in the vicinity.

Room A7 appears to have been used contemporaneously with loci A16-A19. Only the south wall has been preserved along with the foundations of the north and east walls. In the late 3rd century, the Bellerophon Mosaic, discovered by the mission and restored in 2003,⁶ was introduced in this room. The building also occupied the space later incorporated by the portico of Basilica I, where there were rooms of the same phase. The wall of one of these rooms, plastered and with surviving occupational level and fragments of floor, was discovered in a test pit under the floor of the shop by the southeastern corner of the Basilica. The basilica itself, erected most likely in the 2nd century, was closed off by a blind wall and the entrance to it led from the north.

A large part of the discussed house was destroyed by later structures. The pavement laid in a later phase across virtually the whole length of the insula (loc. A15) obliterated all evidence of whether the hall with the Bellerophon Mosaic was an integral part of this building or not. It cannot be excluded that room A7 with the mosaic floor was actually an entirely independent structure accessible from 'Oil Press' Street, having nothing to do with the habitation complex occupying the eastern part of the insula. A considerable difference in walking levels

6 PAM XV, *Reports 2003* (2004), 313-324.

(more than 40 cm) between the mosaic pavement and the floor in the nearest room A14 stands in favor of this suggestion. Nonetheless, the much more likely theory is that all of the architecture in the insula constitutes a single house with two courtyards, erected between the back wall of the shops lining the Great Colonnade and the public building that was turned into Basilica I in the 6th century. The current state of research permits only a hypothetical reconstruction of the house layout, excluding the rooms hidden under the later portico of the basilica and a large part of the architecture in the central part of the insula. It seems likely, however, that the house as a whole consisted of an official part with courtyard (I) adjoining the back wall of the shops in the portico of the Great Colonnade, opening onto the hall with the Bellerophon Mosaic and accessible through a vestibule from 'Diogenes' Street or through one of the shops from the portico of the Great Colonnade, and the private quarters in the northern and eastern parts, comprising living rooms arranged around the second courtyard (II). No evidence of columns standing in the courtyards in this phase have been recorded, but parallels provided by private houses from Palmyra and other urban centers suggest otherwise, as do numerous reused column shafts found in the walls of later structures in this insula. The living quarters probably had an upper floor.

PHASE III

The rebuilding and transformation of some parts identified as phase III must have been necessitated by widespread destruction of considerable parts of the insula [Fig. 4]. It seems that this event should be dated after AD 273, more generally to the turn of the 3rd century and beginning of the 4th. At

this point, part of the original mosaic floor in A7 was destroyed and the missing parts replaced in the same technique but much more poorly executed. The hall itself was extended to the east and north, the northern part consisting of an added gallery separated by a colonnade. Many of the rooms in the northeastern part appear to have been destroyed as well and the surviving upper parts of their walls reveal bondwork of worse quality; mud brick found in quantities in the fill could be proof that the upper parts of the walls were made of this material. A temporary fireplace was installed at this time in loc. A 18, its level being close to 40 cm above the original floor level. A *tannur* occupied the corner in A19. The spatial organization of this part of the insula appears to have been changed to some extent, as indicated by blocked doorways and additional walls dividing the rooms into smaller units. Many premises support the idea that the entire quarter set off by the walls of loci A16-A19 was leveled in a later phase and that the later ceramic material coming from the upper layers of the fill in loc. A19 should be connected with the building activities around the east wall of the insula.

PHASE IV

The phase dated to the second half of the 4th century corresponds to a complete reorganization of the area [Fig. 5]. Apparently belonging to this phase are parts of the surviving shop walls, especially the north wall of these shops with the exception of the parts separating loci A5 and A6 from A7, which originated in phase III. In hall A7, the Bellerophon mosaic was covered with a floor of dark gray mortar and columns were set up on the longer axis of the room. The columns of the gallery on the north side were removed and the bases thrown down into

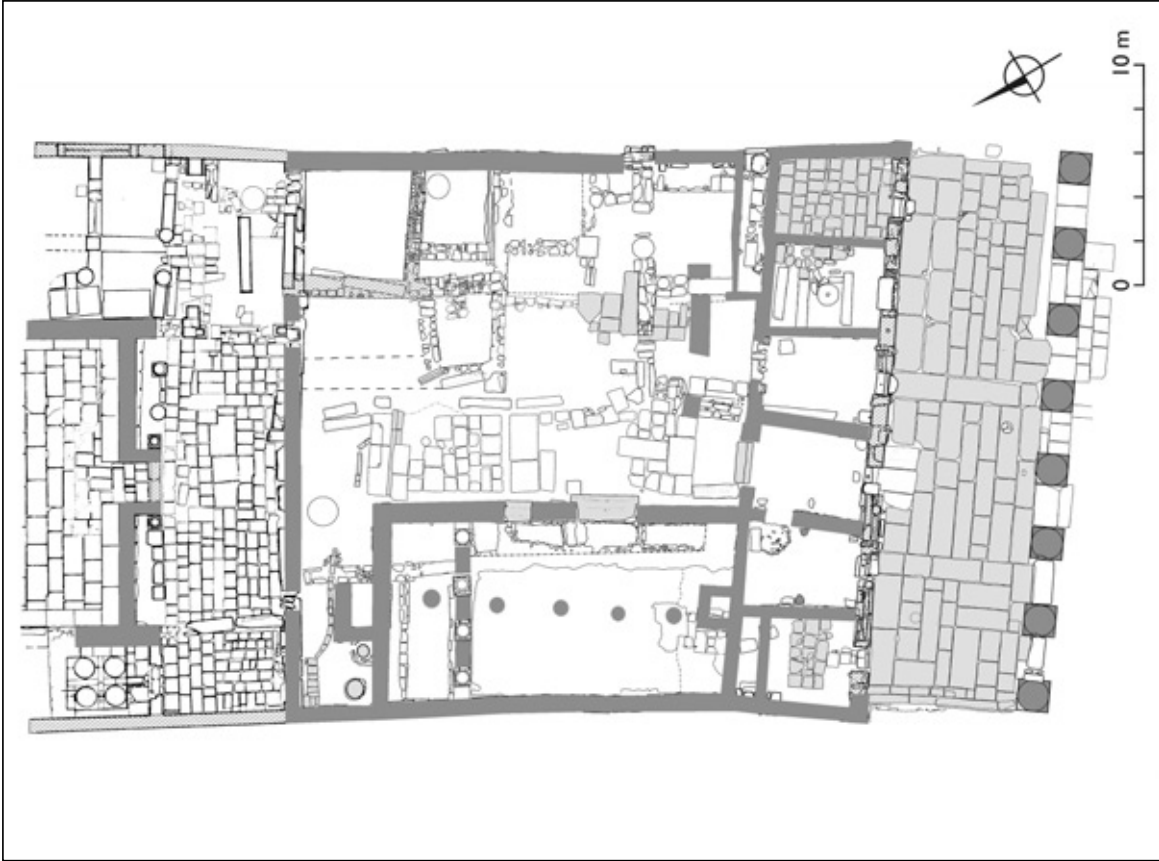


Fig. 6. *Insula E. Phase V* (Drawing G. Majcherek, M. Wagner, D. Tarana, M. Żuchowska)

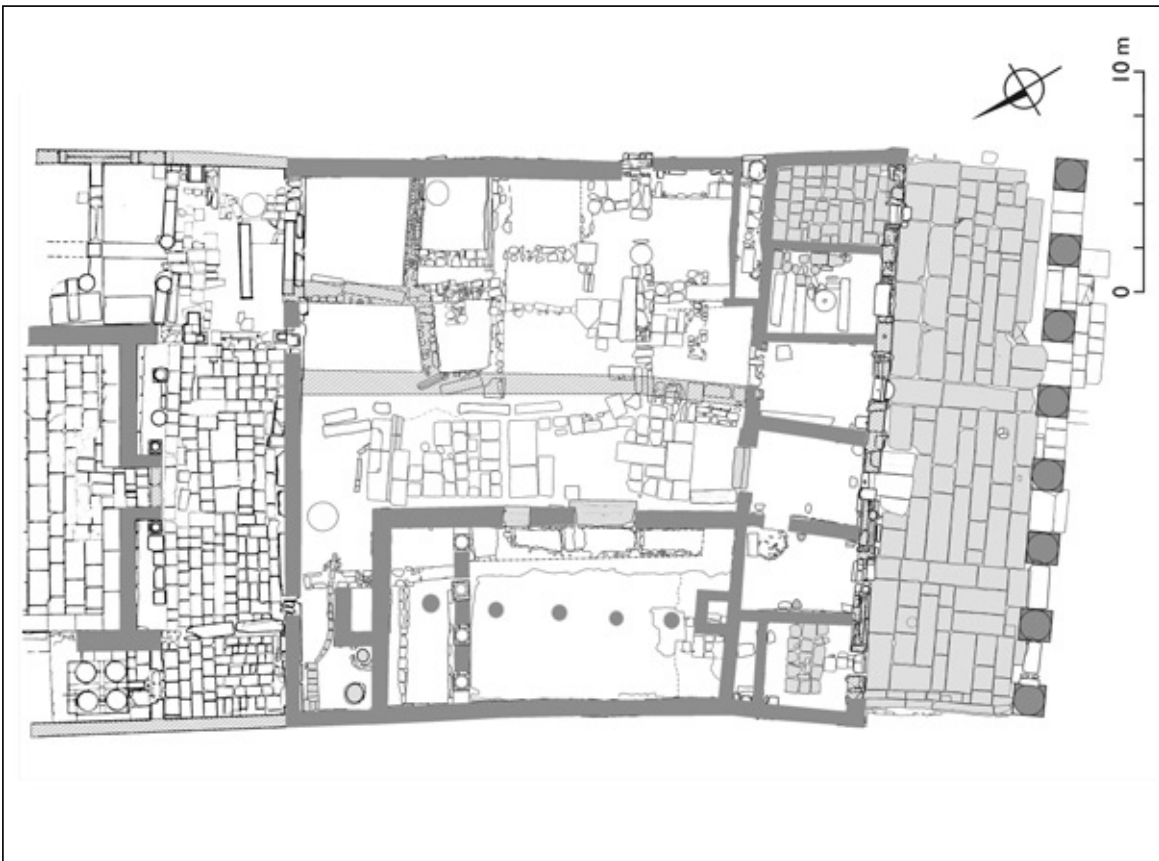


Fig. 5. *Insula E. Phase IV* (Drawing G. Majcherek, M. Wagner, D. Tarana, M. Żuchowska)

a trench under the floor of this part of the hall. A domestic room with latrine and two *tannurs* was installed north of A7 (A10, A20). A passage (A15) was formed down the middle of the insula, its floor being identical with the mortar pavement in A7. This passage had two doors on the west and opened into A7; from the south it was accessible through the portico of the Great Colonnade. On the north side there were two steps leading up to a room of unknown function (A11); the foundation trench under the wall of the Basilica portico destroyed all evidence of the character and purpose of this unit. The east wall of this passage has not been preserved, but the impression in the floor of A15 indicates that it had run more or less in line with an extension of the west wall of A3.

The arrangement of the eastern part of the insula in this phase defies reconstruction. The northeastern part appears to have been leveled down to the floor in passage A15, the northern part, now under the portico of Basilica I, was cut off with a newly erected wall reusing elements of older structures and later serving as a stylobate under the row of columns in the portico. Two doorways in this wall, one opening into loc. A10 and the other into loc. A17, led to the room or rooms adjoining the south wall of the Basilica building. A test pit under the portico of the Basilica revealed a pavement of dark gray mortar corresponding to the floor in passage A15 and the level of thresholds in the said doors to A10 and A17. The black-mortar pavement in loc. A12 could have originated from this phase as well. The original extent of the last mentioned room is unknown as the original north wall has not been preserved. It is not to be excluded, however, that a wall from a later phase (VIII) repeated the course of the original one, especially as unlike the

western section where there is no foundation whatsoever, this section stands on a fairly deeply grounded, older foundation executed of reused stone blocks.

A similar pavement was found in loc. A13 or its part. The remains discovered in a small test trench dug in this room were dated by the pottery assemblage to the 4th century AD. It is not clear, however, which room this floor belonged to as the numerous later transformations and modifications of the architecture in loc. A13 have all but obliterated any *in situ* evidence of the original walls from this period.

Locus A10 with latrine and two presumed *tannurs* fulfilled a domestic function possibly connected with the public function of the enlarged loc. A7. Surprisingly, to install the hydraulic system supplying water to the latrine the builders had to either dismantle or cut through the existing east wall of A10 and to raise significantly the floor level in A11. Later structures destroyed completely the remains of this water installation in the eastern part of the insula. Even so, the pipe supplying water to A10 seems to have run along the eastern edge of the floor in passage A15, turning then to the east to join the water system in 'Diogenes' Street. If so, it would constitute further proof that in this phase the eastern part of the insula was already in ruins and abandoned; otherwise, the pipe would have been considerably higher than any of the structures preserved in this area.

It cannot be excluded that the area of the portico was arranged anew at this time. The date for laying the pavement cannot be established precisely for lack of dating material originating from the limited test trenches dug under this floor. One theory was that this pavement was somehow connected with repairs commissioned here

in the first half of the 4th century by Flavius Diogenes and recorded in an inscription on the first column from the east standing next to the insula in question (Inv. III,27). Research in the Great Colonnade has put into doubt this dating, because the street surface from this period had not risen yet above the plinth level of the columns, while the pavement was actually superimposed on the column bases. Such a difference in levels would have required additional installations allowing easy passage from the street to the portico and no traces of such installations have been detected. Perhaps the pavement was laid some half a century later and is chronologically contemporary with phase IV of the architecture in insula E. The pavement level is only 10 cm lower than the floor in A15. It would have to be assumed, however, that the street of the Great Colonnade stopped being repaired at this time and traffic gradually moved into the porticoes. Further work may still facilitate a better dating of the origins of the pavement in the portico.

PHASE V

The only feature that is certainly attributed to this phase, which is not very clear overall, is the pavement in parts of loci A13, A14 and A 22, as well as the foundations and fragment of the south wall of a room delimiting the paved area and the east corner of this wall [*Fig. 6*]. This wall cuts across the floor of A15 and a fragment of it was later incorporated into another wall. The extent of the paved area to the north and west is indeterminable unfortunately. The function of this structure is unclear and it is not even possible to be sure that the paving filled a room or was part of an open space (courtyard perhaps). Neither can the connection with the south wall of shops

A1-A3 be determined, especially with regard to room A20 which was most likely a staircase.

PHASE VI

This phase is connected foremost with the transformation of an earlier public building found in insula E into a Christian basilica and with the piercing of a new entrance to it in the south wall [*Fig. 7*]. This is believed to have taken place in the 6th century, when a paved atrium was installed in front of the building. Shortly thereafter passage A15 started being used again, although it appears to have been narrowed down on the east compared to the state from the 4th century AD. The floor level was raised and a stone pavement introduced. The wall of the portico of the Great Colonnade was altered with huge framing elements being set up directly on the pavement to create a monumental entrance to the complex as a whole. As the level of the flagging in A15 was held a meter above the level in the entrance from the portico, additional slabs of stone were laid to navigate the difference. In this situation shop A4 must have acted as an extension of passage A15. No floor level corresponding to the pavement in A15 has been recorded in this room, but it should be assumed that there must have existed a pavement here which was robbed out later. Only a small fragment has survived of the east wall of A15 at the southern end along with a foundation that partly repeated the line set down by the foundations of the wall of A15 from phase V. The northern end of passage A15 was closed at this time with a monumental gate of which only the threshold remains. Room A10 was filled up to the level of the pavement in A15 and another gate was installed in its west wall, between the paved atrium in front of Basilica I and the north walls of A9 and

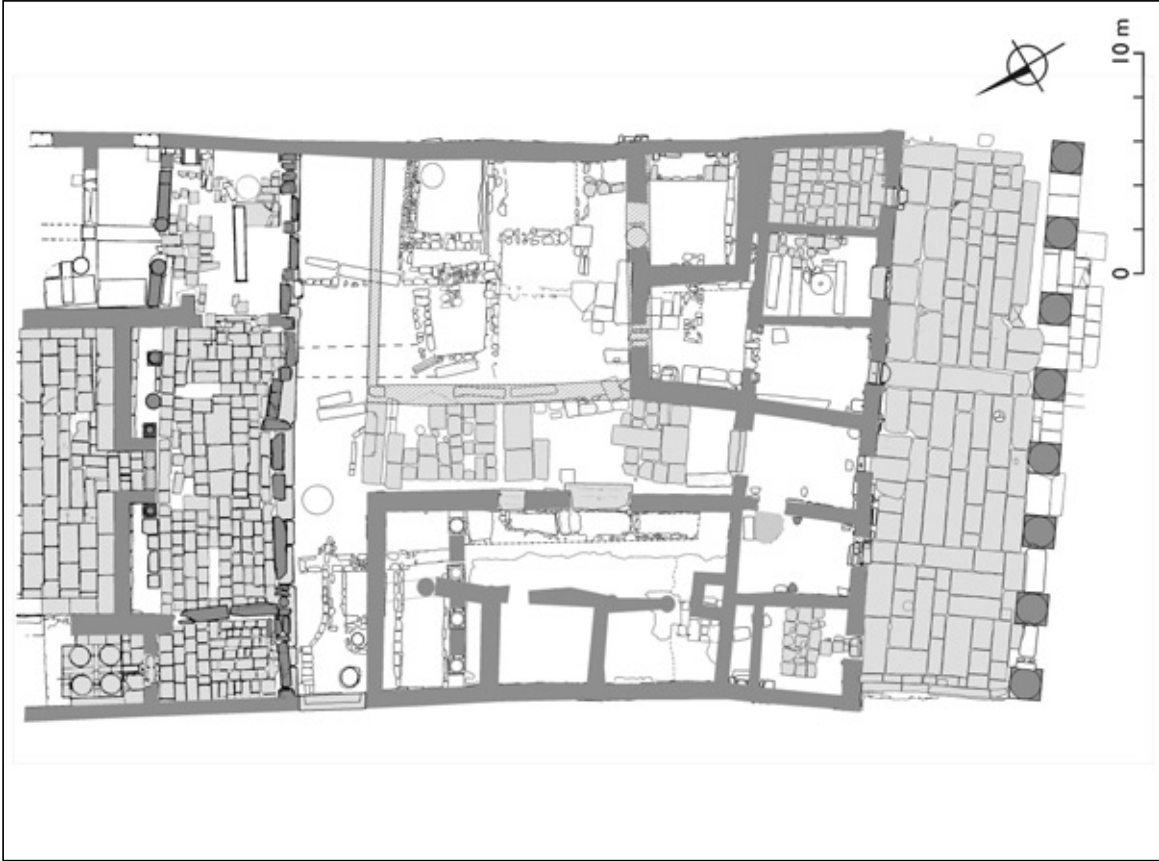


Fig. 8. Insula E. Phase VII (Drawing G. Majcherek, M. Wagner, D. Tarana, M. Żuchowska)

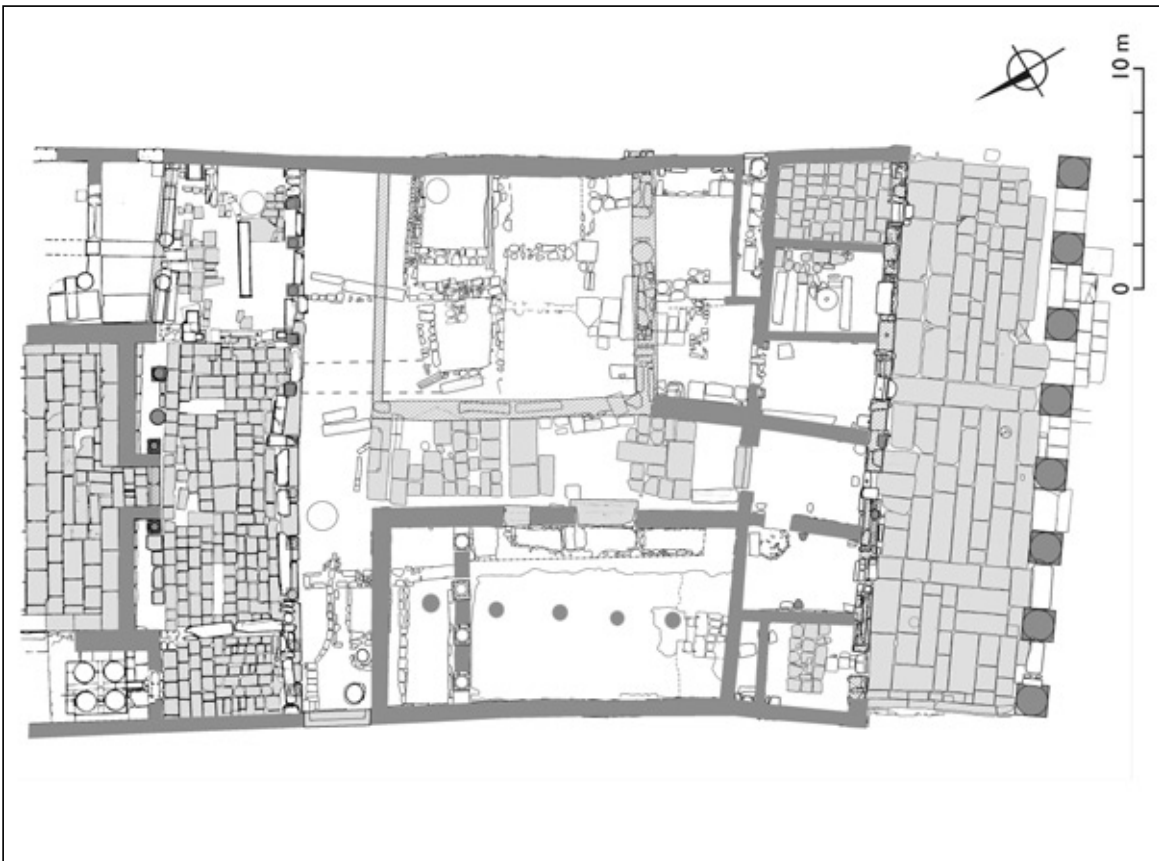


Fig. 7. Insula E. Phase VI (Drawing G. Majcherek, M. Wagner, D. Tarana, M. Żuchowska)

A15. A wall that extended northward from the east wall of A15 lined the east side of this passage. No traces of any floor from this period have survived.

It is fairly likely that that this narrow space served as a roofed portico opening onto the paved courtyard of the atrium in front of Basilica I. The east and west walls of this atrium opened onto side rooms, while the north wall was decorated with columns standing on pedestals on either side of the entrance to the church.

PHASE VII

This last but one phase corresponds to Omayyad and Abbasid times [*Fig. 8*]. The visible walls of loci A12 and A13 come from this period. Structures of unknown function were installed by the east wall in A12 and A21; they were made of reused blocks and column capitals and may have had the purpose of reinforcing the wall. The wall of the portico of the Great Colonnade was altered again, the thresholds were raised and the entrance to A3 was narrowed. Locus A20 was levelled

and a fireplace was installed in the passage between A4 and A5. Room A7 was divided into smaller units and two small cells were established in the portico of the Great Colonnade, just by the portico wall. In the narrow space between the west wall of the basilica and the wall bordering the insula on the side of 'Oil Press' Street, a domestic area with oil press was installed. With the appearance of the oil press it is clear that the church was no longer in use.

PHASE VIII

The last phase witnessed the destruction of most of the structures in the discussed area. The portico in front of the Basilica was destroyed and the area was abandoned. The most surprising destruction is represented by a robber's pit in the central part of passage A15, which annihilated not only the stone pavement, but also the lower floor of black mortar. It is completely unclear why this robber's pit was dug. In any case, it was later filled in, more likely due to natural factors rather than intentionally.