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## Palmyra: Reexcavating the Site of the Tariff (Fieldwork in 2010 and 2011)

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# PALMYRA: REEXCAVATING THE SITE OF THE TARIFF (FIELDWORK IN 2010 AND 2011)

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**Abstract:** The exact location of the famous Tariff slab, removed from Palmyra to St Petersburg in 1901, had not been recorded. Its position was established using old photographs and fieldwork was carried out to confirm it. A wide paved road that was also revealed running at the base of the south wall of the Agora calls for a major reconsideration of ancient city topography. The remains of a small archaic shrine preserved in front of the Agora were also recognized and connected with the sanctuary of Rab'asire mentioned in the Tariff text.

**Keywords:** Palmyra, Tariff, shrine of Rab'asire, Agora

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Visiting Palmyra in 1882 Russian prince Simon Abamelek-Lazarev was shown an inscribed stone rising from the ground in a place he described as situated “between the modern cemetery and the magnificent ruins locally called Saray” (Abamelek-Lazarev 1884). The prince had the stone unearthed and took a paper imprint, but could not photograph it. Instead, he commissioned a Beirut photographer by the name of Quarelli to take the picture, which he reproduced later in a book published in Russian (Abamelek-Lazarev 1884: Pl. I). In it, the stone is already partly covered with sand [*Fig. 1*, top].

This bilingual inscription, in Aramaic and Greek, is the longest lapidary Aramaic

text ever found. Promptly published by Melchior de Vogüé (1883a, 1883b), the text was recognized instantly as a major source for economic history as well as Aramaic philology, generating an extensive literature (for instance, Šifman 1980; Teixidor 1984).

The inscription is a decree of the City Council from AD 137, setting different taxes due from merchants and travelers, previously levied according to custom and occasional regulations issued by Roman officials. In the introduction, the city stewards ordered the new law to be inscribed on stone and set up “opposite the temple of the god called Rab'asire”. This is the only mention of the shrine,

called *haykala* in Aramaic and *naos* in Greek, as well as of the god. His name might be translated as “Master of the Fettered”, although this is just philological speculation.

Twenty years after the discovery, Imperial Russian diplomacy managed to obtain Sultan Abdel Hamid’s permission to remove the inscription to Sankt Petersburg as a gift for the czar. In the summer of 1901, the dragoman of the Russian Consulate in Jerusalem, Yaaqoub al-Khoury, was dispatched to Palmyra with the mission to procure the stone [Fig. 2]. As it was deemed impossible to transport it in one piece, the stele was sawed vertically following the disposition of the text in four columns. The lower, uninscribed parts of each of the four pieces were then detached and left on the spot. Since its arrival in Sankt Petersburg in 1904, the inscription has been on display in the Hermitage Museum [Fig. 3]. The outline of the eroded upper part of the

stone is clearly the same as in the pictures taken in Palmyra.

Visiting Sankt Petersburg and the Hermitage Museum some years ago I was very kindly shown by the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities, A.B. Nikitin, a set of documents pertaining to the Tariff. They included a handwritten report by al-Khoury concerning the operation and several photographs showing different stages of the work that he directed in Palmyra. A large excavation, measuring 18 m by 17 m, had been opened around the Tariff stele, which was found set into a stone pavement and secured in position by means of a step set up in front of it. These documents remained unpublished and could not be used by the French excavators of the Agora in 1940.

In due course, al-Khoury’s trench filled with windblown sand and gravel from seasonal flooding [Fig. 5]. Nothing could be seen of it in air photographs taken first in 1930 and then 1940 in [Fig. 4]. When

#### Team

*Dates of work:* 18 September–23 October 2010; 14 April–23 May 2011

*Director:* Prof. Michał Gawlikowski (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw)

*DGAM representatives:* Dr. Khalil al-Hariri (Curator of the Palmyra Museum), Rania al-Rafidi (Palmyra Museum)

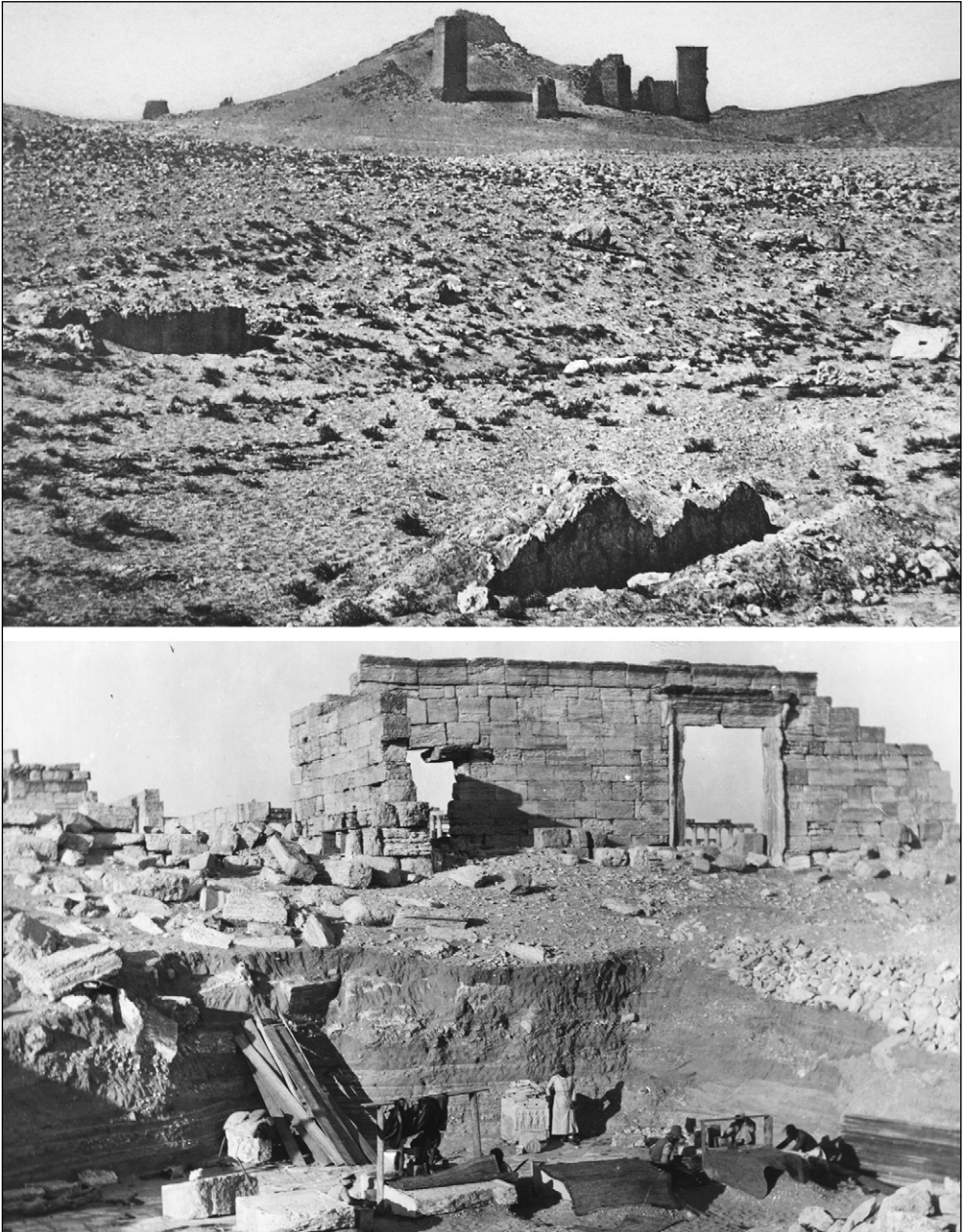
*Archaeologists:* Dr. Krzysztof Jakubiak (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw; 2010, 2011), Dr. Karol Juchiewicz (independent; 2010, 2011)

*Museum documentation:* Krystyna Gawlikowska (independent; 2010, 2011), Dr. Dobrochna Zielińska (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw; 2010), Marcin Wagner (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw; 2010)

*Restorers:* Bartosz Markowski, Aleksandra Trochimowicz (both freelance; 2010)

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*Fig. 1. The Tariff slab in the foreground, still in place, view from the east (top); the four parts of the Tariff after separation, lying in the 1901 excavation (Photo, top, F. Quarelli; after Abamelek-Lazarev 1884: Pl. I; bottom, anonymous, courtesy of the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)*



*Fig. 2. Yaaqoub al-Khoury in front of the cleared Tariff  
(Photo courtesy of the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)*



*Fig. 3. The Tariff in the Hermitage Museum today  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski and all other photos in this article except where stated otherwise)*

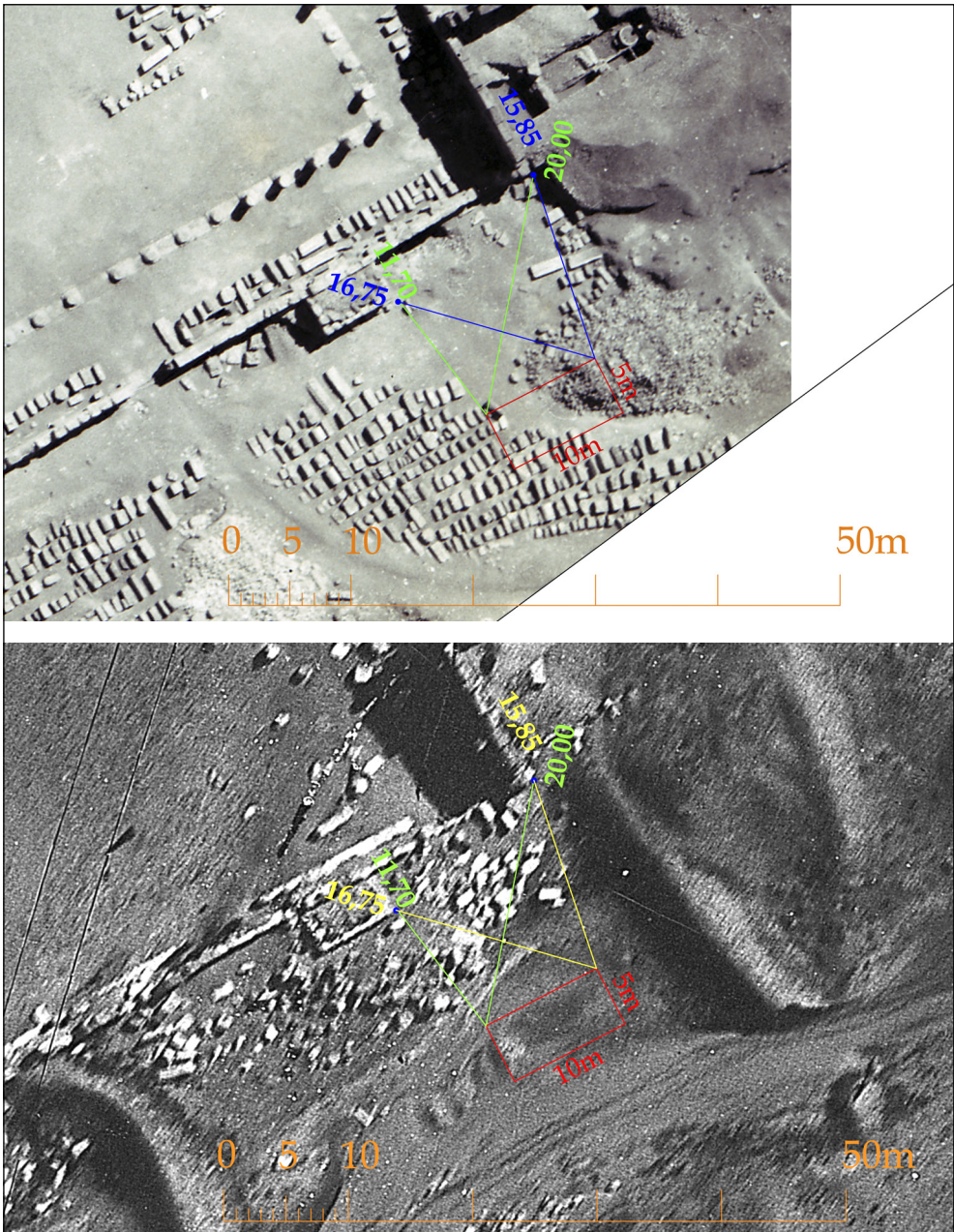


Fig. 4. Aerial view of the area in front of the Agora in 1940 (top) and in 1930, with the expected site of the Tariff marked as a rectangle in red (Mapping W. Malkowski; photo Aviation française du Levant, courtesy of the Ifpo Damas)

the Agora was cleared in 1939–1940, the excavators could only guess where the Tariff had once stood. Elderly local men who had participated in the 1901 operation reported that the site was located opposite the “Saray”. This was taken to mean the so-called Annex of the Agora, which was excavated later (Bounni, Saliby 1968) and has been lately interpreted as an unfinished basilica (Delplace, Dentzer-Feydy 2005: 118–123). Accordingly, Raymond Duru made a sounding in front of the main entrance to this monument to find only the foundations of a small rectangular building of uncertain function (Delplace, Dentzer-Feydy 2005: 148, Fig. 271). Two small fragments from the upper edge of the Tariff were found buried in the fill nearby (Starcky 1949: No. 143).

Investigating the foundations of the outer wall of the Agora, Duru also discovered a fragmentary stone frame with a relief image of a deity in armor holding two lions on a chain (now in the National Museum in Damascus, see Delplace, Dentzer-Feydy 2005: 306–308). This sculpture is commonly regarded as representing the god Rab‘asire, “Master of the Fettered” [see *Fig. 10*, bottom].

Marshalling the available information, Henri Seyrig proposed to see the Tariff stele as one of the elements incorporated into a late rampart erected in front of the Annex (see Delplace, Dentzer-Feydy 2005: 32). Taking up this suggestion, some researchers have interpreted the monumental propylaea of the building adjoining the Agora as the “Tariff Court”.

## LOCATING THE TARIFF IN THE FIELD

Old photographs from the Hermitage Museum illustrated the work carried out on the Tariff from various angles. Without being true archaeological documentation, they still showed some characteristic features of the landscape in the background, including the Agora and the Annex in the foreground, and some funerary towers in the distance [see *Fig. 1*]. It was clear immediately from these views that the stele was set up opposite the eastern angle of the Agora and the gate located there. The doorway to the Annex is seen in these pictures much farther to the right. The ground level outside the Agora was at that time much higher than it is now, because the excavations in 1940 had cleared the foot of the Agora wall. Many blocks from this

wall, once scattered on the ground or buried in sand, have since been removed and arranged in rows together with many others carried from the Agora.

The mission's topographer Wiesław Małkowski was able to calculate the exact position of the Tariff slab and mark it on an air photograph taken in 1940 right after the Agora excavation [see *Fig. 4*]. His topographical calculations proved to be very accurate. A square excavation measuring 5 m by 5 m (later enlarged to 7.50 m in length) was opened in the indicated spot and within days the stone pavement visible in the Hermitage photographs was reached. It lies about 3 m beneath the present surface, much deeper than could be expected judging by the old photographs.

## EXCAVATING THE TARIFF FINDSPOT

The pavement was made of huge, irregular slabs of hard limestone laid roughly in rows parallel to the wadi [Fig. 6]. Two slabs were missing from the southern end of the excavated square. They had adjoined the Tariff stele and were removed by al-Khoury to facilitate the sawing of the stone. The outline of the missing slabs now uncovered corresponds exactly to what can be seen in Fig. 2. The Tariff was wedged in place by means of several long stone blocks forming a step of sorts in front of it; they have disappeared.

The total length of the four stones housed in St Petersburg amounts to 5.45 m. As for height, all publications have offered measurements of the inscribed fields, further damaged at the upper edge, ignoring the fact that the lower part of the stone, bearing no text, had been cut off in Palmyra and left scattered on the adjoining pavement. The present excavation located two of these blocks. The height of the complete stele should be estimated therefore at about 2.80 m. It follows from these calculations that the upper edge of the stele was more or less flush with the plinth and thresholds of the Agora since the pavement in front of the Tariff is 2.75 m lower than the plinth.

It was not clear immediately how visitors to the Agora could negotiate the difference in levels to consult the text of the customs law. To resolve this question a second trench was opened against the southern wall of the Agora. By the same token, a search was put on for the temple of Rab'asire, keeping in mind that according to the text the shrine stood opposite the inscription. It should therefore be found somewhere in the 17 m that separated the Tariff from the

Agora, and so it was. The other edge of the stone pavement was discovered 6 m from the Agora wall, thus establishing the width of this paved surface at 11 m. Bordering the pavement was a raised step supporting other blocks in retreat. The upper surface of this step lay 2.40 m below the plinth of the Agora, that is, beneath the foundation level of the monument. An earlier phase of the Agora was identified 1.30 m lower, but it was still way above the paved surface. The area between the pavement and the Agora wall was covered with debris, mostly irregular or broken blocks of limestone of a kind seldom used in Palmyra. It is evident that the structures once standing there had been dismantled and their remains buried. This must have occurred when a rampart was erected along the line of the Agora wall in the Late Roman period, as confirmed by a coin of Aurelian found in the tumble.

### PAVED ROAD

It was not clear initially whether the pavement made of irregular flagstones in front of the Tariff was a kind of courtyard or rather a paved road. Most slabs were worn by long use, but no wheel ruts could be seen. Should it be a road, it would be the only known hard-surface public way in the city. The paving sloped gently from south to north (35 cm difference in levels within the excavation) and from west to east (15 cm difference), following the natural inclination of the wadi, the course of which was followed by the Late Roman wall. It was on average 2.50 m lower than the level of the Agora. Flagstones belonging to the same feature turned up in another trench excavated opposite the main entrance to the Agora, some 30 m





*Fig. 5. View of the Agora from outside before the excavations*



*Fig. 6. Southern edge of the pavement, showing the outline of the slabs removed in 1901 (cf. Fig. 2)*

to the west, where it abutted three steps leading up to the Agora. These steps also rose 6 m away from the wall of the Agora.

Excavations undertaken towards the end of the 2011 season by Khalil al-Hariri revealed a section of the same pavement at the base of the city wall in the sector of the Nabu temple, that is, some 200 m to the east of our excavations. This demonstrated beyond all doubt that a road had followed a deep wadi between the Agora to the north and the so-called Hellenistic town to the south, heading in the direction of the Bel temple. It was manifestly the main artery of the city before the completion of the Great Colonnade in the 3rd century AD. In consequence, the entire topography of ancient Palmyra is now in need of.

### STEPS TO THE AGORA

The steps at the edge of the paved road were recognized immediately as remains

of a monumental approach from the wadi to the Agora. In front of the Tariff site only a single step had been preserved, but three steps appeared at the same distance from the Agora wall further west. A simple calculation revealed that seven or eight steps were needed to reach the level of the Agora gates. One should think that about 3 m would have then separated the top step from the gateway [Fig. 7]. It could have served as a walkway along the Agora, above the road, and no doubt extended all the way from one corner of this main city square to the other, including the so-called Annex (an open space surrounded by walls at the same time as the Agora proper, now interpreted as an unfinished basilica, see above). Needless to say, camels would not have navigated these steps into the monumental complex. It was a civic facility, not a caravan stopover, as sometimes imagined.

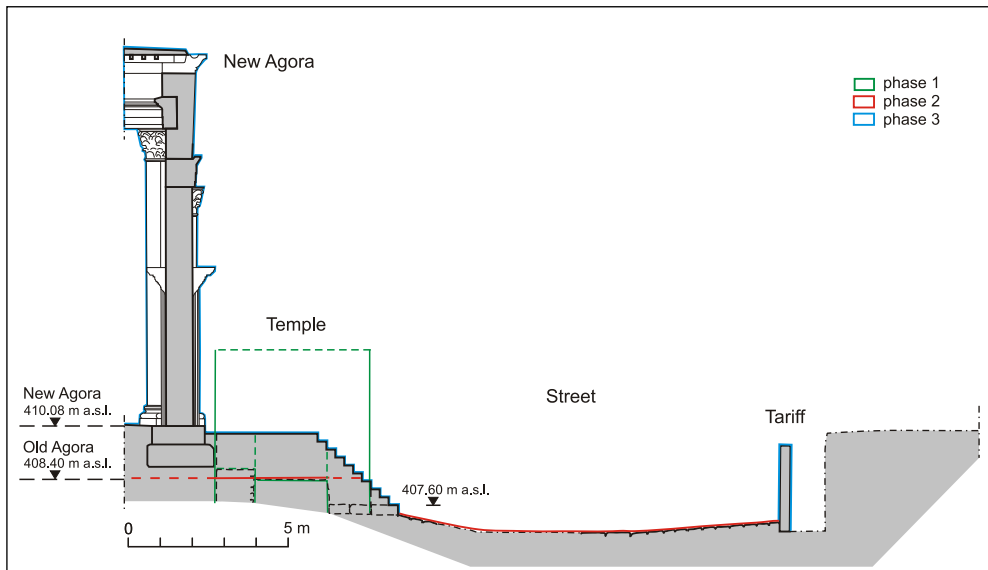


Fig. 7. Section through the wadi between the Agora and the Tariff  
(After J. Humbert, updated by S. Mašlak)

## PHASING OF THE AGORA SITE

The building history of the site can be now divided into four distinct phases, covering at least three centuries from the building of the archaic temple to the construction of the Late Roman wall.

## PHASE 1: SHRINE OF RAB'ASIRE

Roughly on the level of the lowermost step bordering the presumed paved roadway were the remains of what appears to have been a temple to Rab'asire. It was an extremely modest installation, a small chapel internally only 2.40 m by about 2.20 m [Fig. 9], standing at an angle to all the other remains in the vicinity. The entire length of the back wall is preserved, together with the northeastern corner and parts of lateral walls, whereas the front wall has been lost. The floor was simple beaten clay. The walls were built of broken stones bonded with mud mortar and excessively thick for such a small building: 1.20 m at the back and 1.00 m on the sides. The stone used for the construction, a grey

nummulithic limestone, the author has not seen before in other buildings in the city.

The crowning of a votive niche of a kind well known in early Palmyra was found in the debris inside the structure [Fig. 10, top]. It features an eagle with spread wings, apparently in the center, and a smaller sitting eagle left of it, which would have had its opposite, represented symmetrically on a separate block on the other side, as is the case of numerous parallels. Made of soft limestone, this piece of sculpture dates back to the beginning of the 1st century AD at the latest and was most probably part of the decoration of the building in the ruins of which it was found. Interestingly, there is a signature in a form of script typical of archaic Palmyra, carved on the upper surface of the stone in the end above the sitting eagle, invisible when the monument was still standing. It is the name of 'Alaisha, apparently that of the sculptor [Fig. 8].

Upon reflection, there is every reason to think that the relief stele of Rab'asire



Fig. 8. Signature of 'Alaisha on the upper surface of the eagle lintel (see Fig. 10 top)

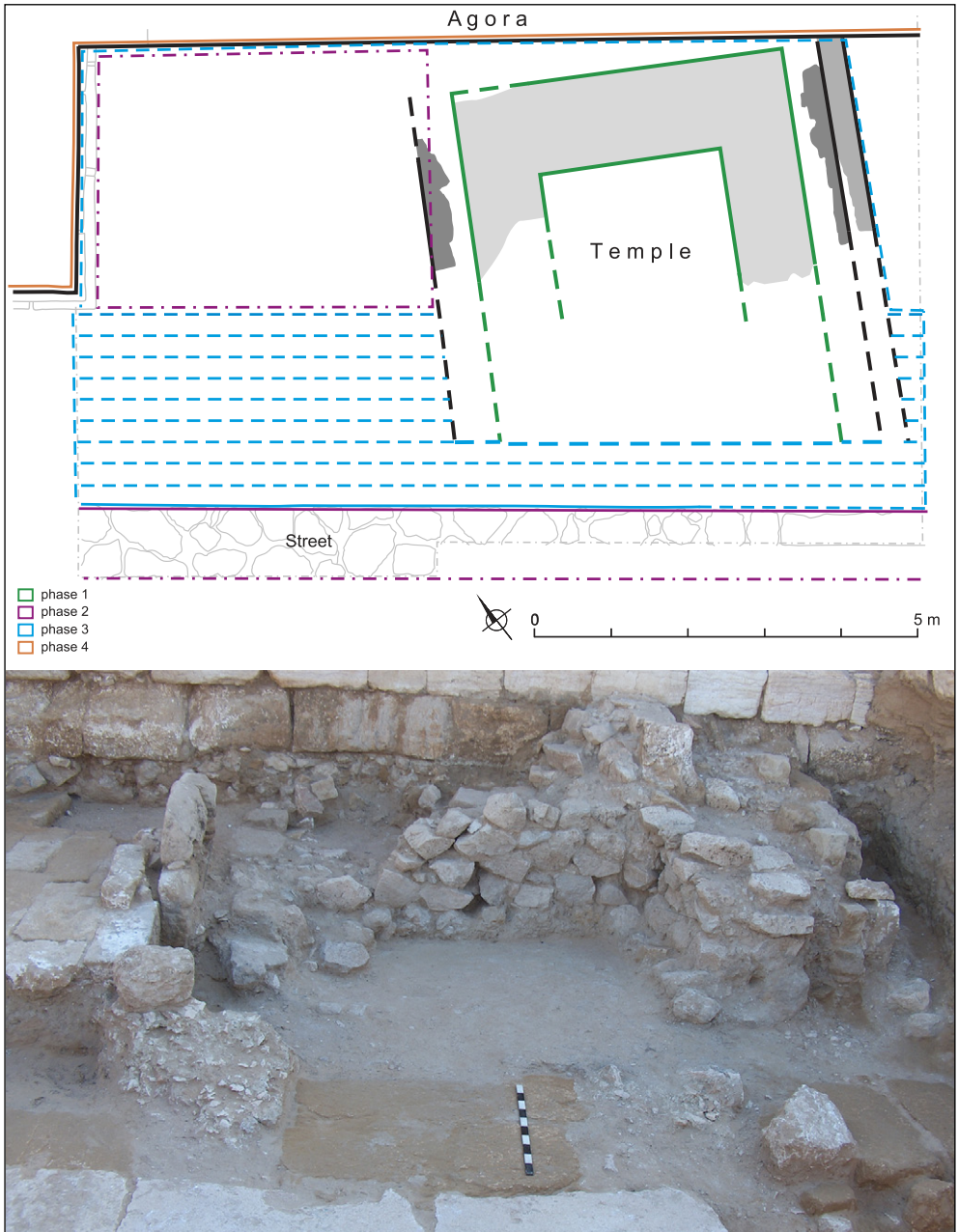


Fig. 9. Plan of the shrine and its surroundings (top) and view from the southwest of the remains of the Rabāsire shrine at the foot of the Agora (Drawing K. Juchniewicz, digitizing Ł. Rutkowski, S. Maślak)



Fig. 10. Eagle lintel found in the shrine (partly digitally constructed; top) and stele of Rab'asire, Damascus National Museum (Photo, bottom, courtesy of the Ifpo Damascus)

mentioned above [Fig. 10, bottom]. was found by the excavator Raymond Duru directly on top of the remains of the shrine, among the many building blocks covering the site. His trench intended to uncover the foundations of the Agora wall was identifiable in the section of our own excavation.

#### PHASE 2:

##### AGORA BEFORE THE AGORA

A regular pavement excavated to the west of the Rab'asire shrine belonged to a feature preceding the Agora. It was made of rectangular slabs of soft, white limestone, which was more commonly used for foundations [Fig. 11]. Stretches of this pavement were found about 1.60 m beneath the Agora level, roughly corresponding to the clay floor of the shrine, as well as some 30 m to the west, in front of Gate 9. In both places the pavement is cut by the foundations of the Agora on the northern side and by the steps to the south, leaving undisturbed a section of the paved surface about 3.50 m wide between them.

The two stretches of pavement undoubtedly belonged to the same wide paved feature. For their part the excavators of the Agora found four column bases aligned near the southeastern corner of the portico, 1.30 m beneath the surface of the existing square (Delplace, Dentzer-Feydy 2005: 34, Fig. 272). This earlier feature was apparently of the same character and destination as the later Agora, though probably smaller, even if it did extend further to the south. The southern end of the feature, where it reached the wadi, no longer exists, having been destroyed by the later steps. It did, however, respect the old shrine, the flagstones being adjusted to the lateral walls. Moreover, the walls of

the shrine were given a facing of upright limestone slabs, three of which were preserved [see Fig. 11]. The date of the pavement cannot be fixed based on the present evidence.

#### PHASE 3: AGORA

The Agora as it stands now was laid out at one go on an extensive earth embankment, 1.30 m to 1.60 m deep by the south wall. The deep foundations assured the stability of massive walls, cutting through the earlier pavement. The foundations of the south wall passed 35 cm or less from the back wall of the Rab'asire shrine [Fig. 12]. The old pavement and the wall facing of slabs on the back wall of the old shrine were removed, but yet again the builders respected the older building. The interstice between it and the foundation of the Agora was filled with stones and packed earth and the two outer corners at the back of the shrine, which must have been damaged inadvertently during the construction, were repaired.

The date of the building of the Agora is still under discussion. Christiane Delplace and Jacqueline Dentzer-Feydy recently ascribed it to the Flavian period, about AD 70, based on the oldest inscriptions found (Delplace, Dentzer-Feydy 2005: 265). For my part, I agree with Jean Starcky, who maintained that these inscriptions were copied in the 2nd century and was inclined to assign the Agora to the reign of Trajan or even Hadrian (Starcky 1949: 5). However that may be, the Rab'asire shrine was at that time still standing and well known, as is clear from its mention in the Tariff of AD 137, as a topographical reference. By now, however, it stood well below the floor level of the new structure, flush with



*Fig. 11. Pre-Agora pavement seen in the left foreground, the remains of the shrine of Rab'asire in the background, the Agora step to the right, view from the west*



*Fig. 12. Foundations of the Agora's south wall to the left; on right, back wall of the Rab'asire shrine, view from the west*



*Fig. 13. East wall of the ancient shrine with two lining walls of stone slabs, from Phase 2 (center) and Phase 3 (extreme right), view from the south*

its foundations and very close to them. It opened to the street on a corresponding level.

Remarkably, no new pavement was laid in the Agora on the higher level. Outside, access to the Agora was assured by the flight of steps and a platform it abutted. The venerable shrine remained awkwardly embedded in them, its side and back walls partly buried in the platform and the steps. The east wall of the sanctuary with its stone lining was further reinforced with a second wall [Fig. 13]. It passed under and through the Agora foundation structure, but it is not clear whether it had been added for whatever reason before the construction began or whether it was a precaution taken to protect the chapel during building operations.

It is impossible on the current archaeological evidence to reconstruct precisely how the steps and the shrine were connect-

ed and how the entrance to the shrine could be reached from the paved road.

#### PHASE 4: LATE ROMAN WALL

The south wall of the Agora was incorporated into the city fortifications built after Zenobia's fall to surround a diminished city. It was doubled then on the inside, the gates were blocked, and a massive bastion was erected at the western limit of our excavation, cutting through the pavement of Phase 2. The steps leading to the Agora from the south were no longer compatible with its new function and were dismantled. Only the lowermost remained in front of the Rab'asire shrine and two more in front of Gate 9, now walled up. It was on this occasion that the old shrine was destroyed. Its meager remains survived within the earthen embankment that was piled up against the foundations of the Agora wall.

## MUSEUM WORK

Documentation and restoration in the facilities of the Palmyra Museum were pursued parallel to the fieldwork. One task, commissioned by the Museum Direction, was to prepare a new catalogue of the glass finds, which had recently been given a new display, to give a broader perspective on this finds category. The content of the existing publication (Gawlikowska, As'ad 1994) will be augmented with finds from two underground tombs, the Barikhi tomb explored by Khaled As'ad and Ahmad Taha in 1987/1988 (As'ad, Taha 2009) and the 'Aqraban tomb excavated in 2007 by Khalil al-Hariri (2013), both tombs located in the South-West Necropolis. New drawings and digitized versions of drawings by Michał Gawlikowski from the old catalogue

were prepared by Marcin Wagner, who also photographed the entire collection digitally, assisted in this task by Dobrochna Zielińska.

The team's restorers, Aleksandra Trochimowicz and Bartosz Markowski, took on an unplanned task in 2010, reassembling an extraordinary stone basin which was found reused as a baptismal font in Basilica II. The basin had been broken by vandals a few months before the team's arrival. The relief decoration of this vessel is unique, gods being shown in a banquet scene and donors named in an accompanying inscription dated to AD 43/44. The inscription mentions the Efqa spring, so the basin could have been brought to the church from there.



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