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Palmyra: Excavations 1996

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PALMYRA

EXCAVATIONS 1996

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Working from 31 August through 8 October 1996, the Mission continued the excavations, started in 1988, of three blocks on the northern side of the Great Colonnade.¹ The goal, hopefully to be achieved within the next five years, is to uncover and make accessible to the public a substantial sector of the downtown area, featuring monuments of the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods. We are much closer to this goal now than after the 1995 season described in my last report.

EXCAVATION AREA

The three blocks the Mission is engaged in excavating are marked E, F and G on Gabriel's plan. While the first block includes a 2nd century basilica converted into a church and the second is residential in character, the third was occupied by some kind of public building, as indicated even prior to the actual excavations by the visible remains. Indeed, the large courtyards could hardly have belonged to ordinary housing. This impression was corroborated by a caravan inscription,

¹ In absence of the present writer during the first three weeks, the mission was directed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek. The team included Miss Anna Witecka and Mr. Sławomir Kowalski, archaeologists; Mr. Tomasz Szmagier, photographer; and two students, Miss Ewa Swiniarska and Miss Marta Żuchowska. While in Palmyra, we enjoyed as usual the unfailing hospitality and helpful co-operation of the officials of the Palmyra Museum, who are also our friends of many years: Mr. Khaled As'ad, Director of Antiquities and Museums of the Palmyra region, and his associate Mr. Ali Taha, who served as inspector attached to the Mission. It is my pleasant duty to acknowledge their contribution, which was essential to the successful outcome of our fieldwork. May they be assured of our sincere appreciation of their efforts. We were happy to present some of the results to the Director General of Antiquities and Museums, Professor Sultan Muheisen, during his visit to the site.

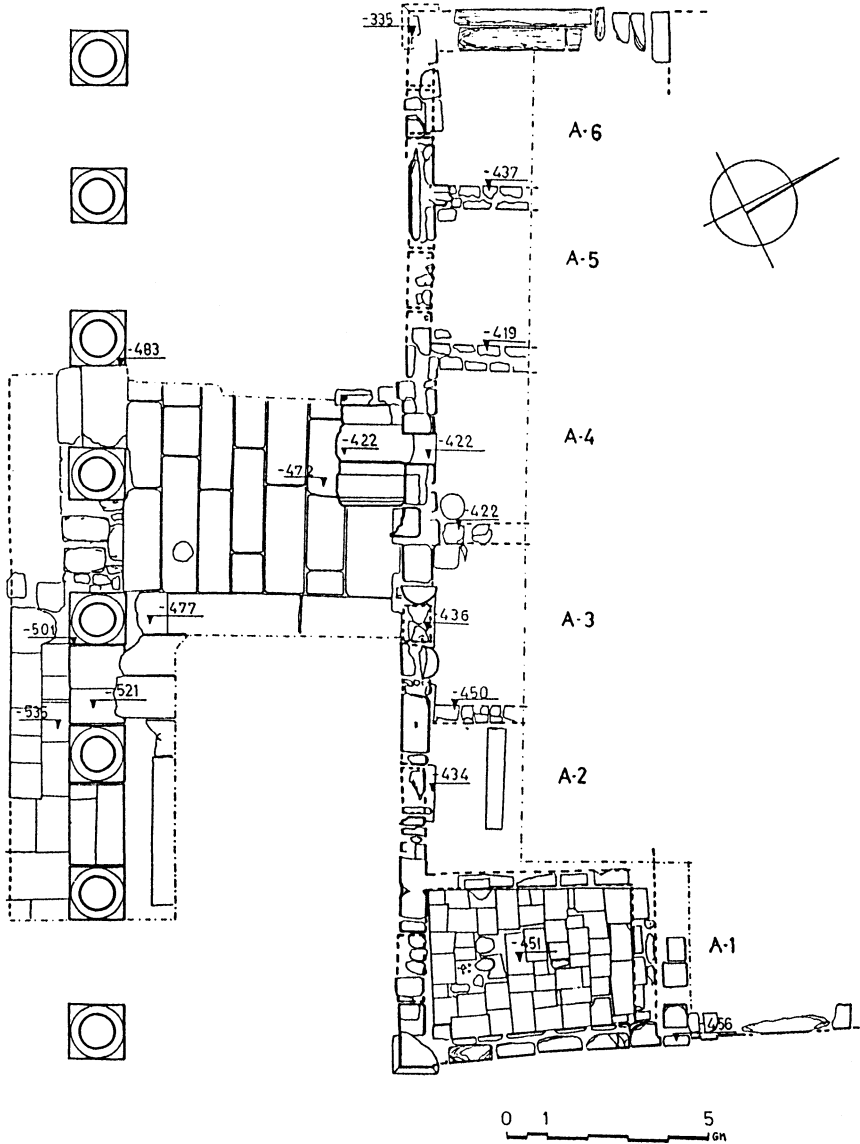


Fig. 1. Octostyle Portico in the Great Colonnade. Preliminary plan 1996.

published a long time ago by M. Rostovtzeff, which had been found lying on the ground in this area. The investigation of block G, as it is designated, is well advanced by now and has yielded unexpected results.

Another of the season's objectives was to clear the entrance to the church in block E in search of evidence for its relation to the Colonnade. This was only partly achieved because of the substantial amounts of fill needing to be removed, but some conclusions are already obvious based on available evidence.

Finally, test trenches in the southeastern corner of house F (the excavations of which are practically finished) were designed to check out some remaining details of the layout.

OCTOSTYLE PORTICO OF THE GREAT COLONNADE

The eight columns in front of the church in block E (five of which were re-erected by the Palmyra Museum some years ago) form a separate unit, differing from other porticoes in this section of the Colonnade, though set in line with other columns in the main street. They formed a building extending for 25 m between two lateral streets and including a row of six shops aligned 6.70 m behind the columns. It is clear from two well known inscriptions on the first column from the east that the portico was already standing in AD 158 (probably erected shortly before that date) and restored in AD 328. The two inscriptions are, respectively, the earliest and the latest dated text found so far in the Great Colonnade.

It is common knowledge that the Great Colonnade had no pavement, neither in the open part nor in the porticoes. It came as a surprise that in the case of this particular portico there was not only a late pavement of large flagstones in front of the shops (reaching up to about the mid-height of column bases and already apparent in an old trench made by restorers in the 1970s) but also an original pavement between the columns and out in the street, forming a sidewalk 1.40 m wide, stepping down from

the Colonnade. The roofed over part of the portico, was apparently cemented and not paved in its original stage.

It is necessary to continue the excavation of this sector next year in order to uncover the whole length of the portico and the shops behind it. Once cleared, this part of the Colonnade is likely to become an important attraction in this part of the ancient ruins. It is also to be hoped that some evidence shall be recovered pertaining to the date of the church excavated in former years further north in the same block.

PERISTYLE G2

The squarish ruin in block G excavated this year represents a colonnaded courtyard with five columns on each side (counting the corner columns twice). While the southern and eastern sides measure 10.50 m between the axes of the corner columns, the northern and western sides are shorter (only 10 m). This irregularity, which might have arisen partly from the fact that the street going from the Great Colonnade (Church Street) is not perpendicular to this avenue, was certainly not discernible to the naked eye, indeed, is not so even in the present state of remains.

Running on all four sides were covered porticoes, 3.70 m wide. Three of them, to the south, east and west, have been cleared. Nearly all the spaces between the columns were blocked at a later date in order to form several rooms around a central courtyard which was left open.

While the three cleared porticoes were thus transformed, but remained part of the same architectural unit, the north portico was cut off entirely and incorporated into the adjacent building (see below). In fact, it was discovered that the former northern wall of the courtyard had been dismantled and re-erected in line with the northern row of columns. Two gates were left in this wall to provide access to the new building to the north.

The more important of the gates opened into the courtyard and the approach from the street through the original passage was

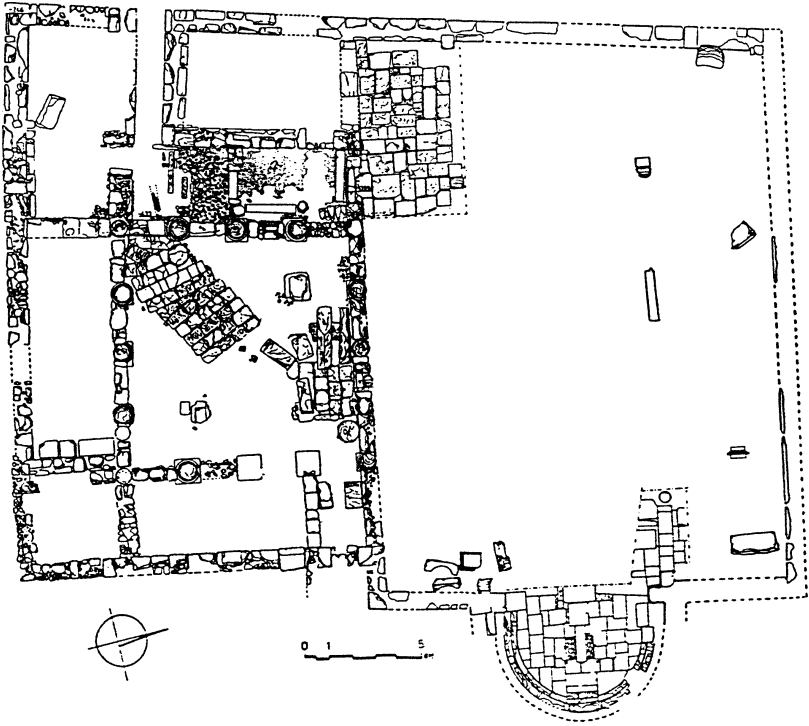


Fig. 2. Peristyle G2 and Basilica II. Preliminary plan 1996.

facilitated by a paved walk running across the court, at a level apparently higher than the original surface (which has not been reached as yet). The fill in the courtyard and its dependencies yielded practically no finds except for a few sherds and coins, which point to the 8th/9th century as the period when the area was generally abandoned, a chronology established already some years ago. At that point two lime kilns were installed in the ruins, and their presence explains the poor preservation of the remains.

It is hoped that the original floors will be found beneath the late level cleared so far and that perhaps some clues as to the first destination of the building will appear. In the late period, ending as indicated in the 8th/9th century, it was clearly a dependency of the structure extending to the north (G1).

CHRISTIAN BASILICA

Right from the start we suspected that this northern building consisted of a large space (22.20 m from east to west and 17.60 m north to south within walls), covered or otherwise, and featuring columns. A test trench in the southwestern corner revealed a stone pavement, obviously late, and two pillars set in line parallel to the wall of the excavated courtyard. As some columns that are visible on the ground form another parallel line further north, it became clear that what we have is a tripartite building, one aisle of which was created by incorporating the neighboring northern portico of courtyard G2. In other words, the building exhibits some features of a church.

Rather than proceed with the systematic excavation of the whole, which was not possible this year, it was decided to search for an apse on the east. It was found where expected and cleared from inside. Much to our disappointment, the walls of the apse had been dismantled and removed, although there is hope of reaching at least the outline of the foundations in the next season. Those who removed the stones were fortunately not interested in brick, and so a larger part of the synthronon survives. It was made of baked bricks, once finely plastered. The hemicycle consists of three concentric steps filling the width of the apse, with a protruding step in the middle leading to the bishop's throne. The apse extended 8.40 m from wall to wall and opened between stone pillars 6.20 m apart. The cancellum has not been excavated yet.

The apse is paved with flagstones, mostly of soft limestone but making use of some older carved blocks in hard stone. The places of the four legs of the altar table are clearly observed.

The stone floor overlies an older surface that was already part of the same building, but the exploration of this must wait till the next season.

TEST TRENCHES IN HOUSE F

Of a limited nature, the test trenches were designed to check some doubtful points, such as the apparent lack of the original southern house wall, the surviving foundation, close to the present surface, being manifestly late. The original wall was found some 2 m lower, dismantled to the lowermost stones laid on virgin soil. The ancient ground level outside the house was apparently some 1 m below the floors inside.

Another test trench, intended to study the foundations of walls inside the house, led to the discovery of a set of 57 tesserae, all from the same mould (RTF 552), issued in the name of a priest called Yehiba, who could have been the owner, or a prominent resident, of the house some time in the 3rd century.

CONCLUSIONS

Very few specific conclusions can be advanced at this stage. Our findings, however, bear promise of such, to be achieved when the new church and its surroundings shall be uncovered, as well as the monumental entrance to the already excavated basilica. One of the questions which we are not yet ready to answer is why so many churches had been built or arranged in older buildings so close to each other. Indeed, the newly found church is only some 50 m and one street distant from the basilica in block E, and not more than 30 m from the known ruins of another church further north in the same block. A fourth church along the same street is not far away.