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Palmyra: Preliminary Report on the Forty-Fifth Season of Excavations

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PALMYRA

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FORTY-FIFTH SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS

Michał Gawlikowski

A return to the Diocletian Camp, where the Allat sanctuary is situated, was necessitated by work on the final publication of the temple and the need to check certain points raised in the meantime. The aim of the short season¹ was to complete and extend soundings started there in 2005 and 2006, but it also brought completely new discoveries. A rectangular stone foundation unearthed in the northwestern corner of the temple temenos attests to the existence of a building, probably another chapel, during the archaic phase of the Allat sanctuary.

The mission also worked in the sector of the cathedral, where the northern church, or Basilica IV, was probed in order to prepare the program of excavations for the next season of work.

In the meantime, the mission's restorers finished the treatment of a collection of Sasanian coins, four new sculptures and a lintel with the inscription of Odainat, all of which enriched the exhibition halls in the Palmyra Museum.

1 The season lasted from 16 October until 16 November 2007. Beside the present author, the mission included Krystyna Gawlikowska, art historian; Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek (Deputy Director), Dr. Marta Żuchowska, Dr. Dagmara Wielgosz, Karol Juchniewicz and Marcin Wagner, archaeologists; Wojciech Terlikowski, architect; Aleksandra Trochimowicz and Bartosz Markowski, restorers, as well as students of archaeology from the University of Warsaw: Aleksandra Kubiak and Michał Rybak. As usual, we were assisted by our longtime friends and collaborators, Dr. Michel al-Maqqdissi in Damascus and Waleed As'ad and Khalil al-Hariri in Palmyra. Rania al-Rafidi from the Palmyra Museum, who was delegated to work with the mission, did so with a dedication that was highly appreciated.

EXCAVATIONS IN THE ALLAT SANCTUARY

In the previous season the limits of the sacred precinct of the Allat temple were investigated to the extent permitted by later building activities and related destruction (Gawlikowski 2008: 532ff.). Previous observations regarding the front side of the sanctuary have been confirmed: Diocletian's

military foundation of around AD 300 erased all physical evidence of this part of the structure.

Present work concentrated on a pit containing column drums and other discarded architectural elements, uncovered in 2006 near the northwestern corner of

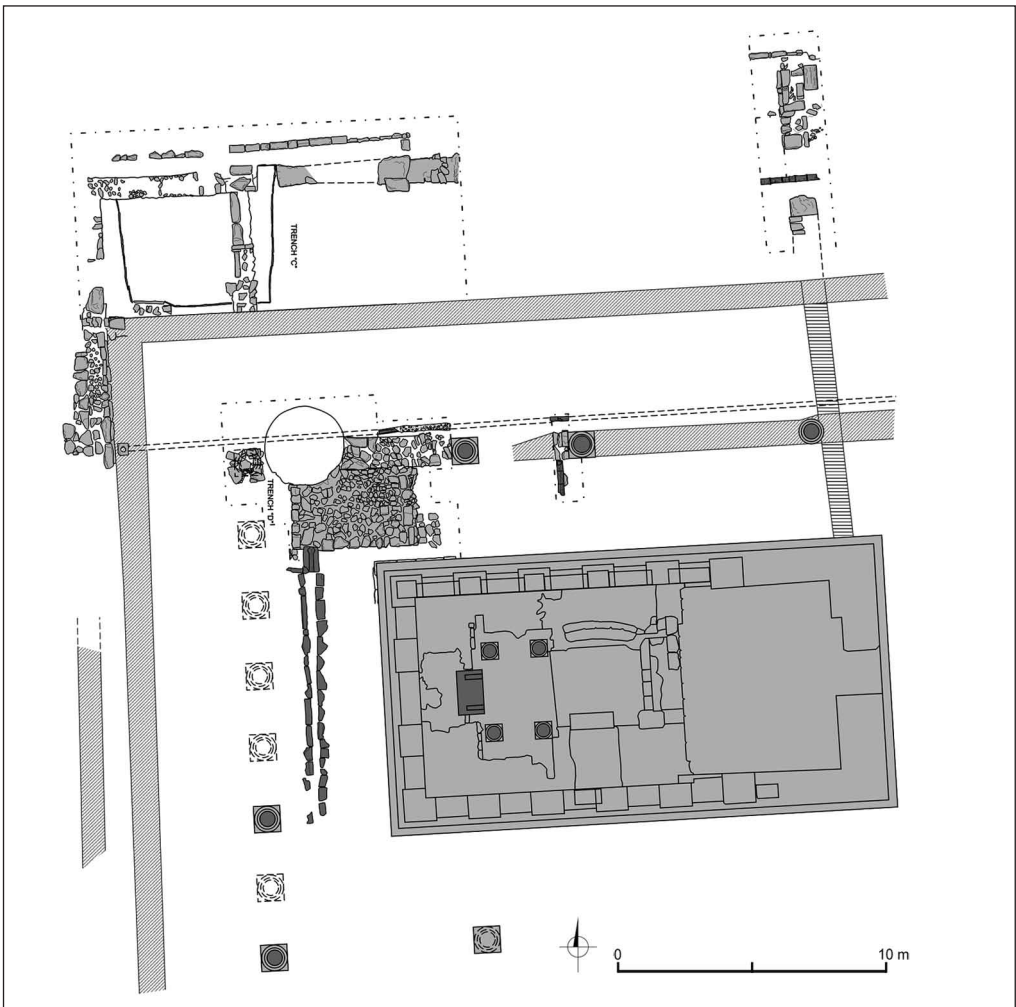


Fig. 1. Plan of the northwestern corner of the Allat sanctuary with the cistern and stone foundation of an archaic structure (Drawing M. Wagner)

the sanctuary. The structure turned out to be a cistern cut in culturally sterile soil. It measures about 3 m across near the surface, but becomes narrower further down [Fig. 1]. The bottom of the cistern was not reached despite explorations down to a depth of about 6 m.

Inside the cistern there was a column over 4.50 m high, or rather three drums of this column with a base and plinth but no capital. The column seems to have collapsed into an empty pit, first the plinth, then the base, and finally the drums one on top of another [Fig. 2]. Other architectural fragments were then thrown into the hole, apparently to fill it. Among these are a huge stone basin and other column drums, as well as, remarkably, some sculpted pieces of soft limestone dating to the early 1st century AD. The fill of the pit also contained huge quantities of potsherds, mainly of water jugs, all from the 3rd century AD.

The evidence, as can be read now, is of a building accident with the column sliding into the cistern and blocking it. As the capital of the column was not found, it can be assumed that the mishap occurred in the course of setting up the northern portico of the sanctuary. The builders must have then decided to abandon the fallen column and

fill the cavity of the cistern with whatever rubble there was at hand.

Presently, only three column bases of the northern portico remain in place. Drums lying nearby were raised on two of them last year, but no capitals to match them have been found. It seems, therefore, that the building project was abandoned after one column had been lost in the pit. The bases of the remaining columns were cut into a long foundation running parallel to the cella, containing several reused pieces, including fragments from abandoned tombs. This strongly suggests a late date, no doubt late 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century AD when the Roman camp was built around the sanctuary using many such salvaged pieces and the sanctuary itself was restored after the sacking of AD 273. The pottery found in the pit is consistent with this interpretation.

If this assumption is correct, it follows that there was no northern portico during the first three centuries of the existence of the sanctuary, while the southern and western porticoes predate the cella itself, originating from AD 55 and 114 respectively. Actually, the foundation of the northwestern corner column ending the western portico is still to be seen in place near the pit.

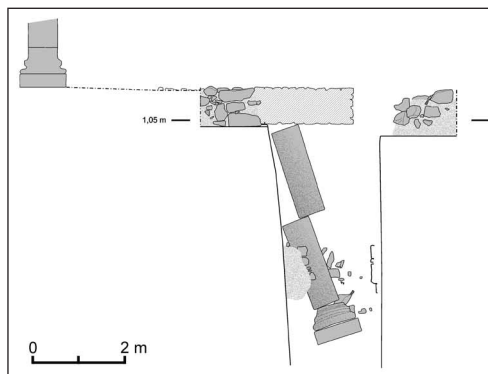


Fig. 2. The cistern in the northwestern corner with the collapsed column and other architectural elements in it (Photo M. Gawlikowski; drawing M. Wagner)

There is no way to establish a date for the introduction of the cistern, but the present author is of the opinion that it may go back to the time right before Aurelian's sacking of Palmyra. Firstly, because the cistern seem unfinished: it tapers towards the bottom and has no proper walls, a feature common in the countryside but surprising in the monumental context of a sanctuary. Secondly, although the cistern was located in line with the northern portico and indeed under it, the builders of the latter appear to have been ignorant of its existence. In effect of the building catastrophe, they were forced to interrupt the project, leaving two or three columns in place but apparently truncated and bearing no capitals or entablature. It seems, therefore, that even in its heyday the

northern portico was unfinished and looked very much as it does now, after our limited restoration effort.

The major discovery of the season was hinted at by some rough stones found in the fill of the cistern. It turned out that they came from a rectangular foundation (4.40 m E-W by 2.60 m N-S) uncovered in 1977 right beneath the surface of the temenos. It was made entirely of broken stones, averaging 0.30 m across, bonded in clay and covered by a compact clayish layer forming the walking level of the courtyard. The northwestern corner of this foundation had collapsed into the pit, but otherwise the outline is very clear [Fig. 3]. It had supported a building that was razed to the ground when the cella was built close by (the temple



Fig. 3. Foundation of an earlier sacral structure in the northwestern corner of the cella (note mouth of cistern at bottom right) (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

podium is only 0.60 m away from the foundation). On the other hand, the archaic chapel of Allat is only 1.80 m away and the back wall of the chapel and the front of the stone foundation follow the same line. This could suggest some kind of interrelation between the two structures.

It is striking that no reused stones are to be seen in this foundation. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that the building erected on it was roughly contemporary with the archaic chapel of Allat. This points to the mid 1st century BC as a possible date for this structure, but it could have also been somewhat later than the Allat chapel situated on the axis of the sanctuary.

The character of the structure which once stood on this stone foundation is a moot point. Was it another *hamana*, like the one of Allat but dedicated to a different godhead worshipped alongside the “Lady of the Temple” (*mrt byt*), as Allat is called in an inscription? Or was it perhaps a monumental altar, similar to those known mainly from Lebanon, one example of which can be seen in Palmyra, in front of the Nabu temple? It is relevant to recall here the square foundation in front of the Allat gate. It was of comparable dimensions (4.10 m to a side) and it was razed to street level when the Camp of Diocletian was being built (Gawlikowski 2008: 535 and Fig. 2). It is possible that the structure at the northwestern corner of the Allat chapel

actually stood until this time, even if it did look rather incongruous beside the 2nd century cella. After all, the old chapel did survive, encased within the cella with the utmost care.

It is of interest to note in this context the presence of building blocks and architectural moldings of a soft limestone typical of early Palmyrene architecture in the cistern pit and in some of the late walls of the temenos. An open channel running to the cistern along the western side of the temple is made entirely of such blocks. There is a distinct possibility that they came from this newly identified structure. Unfortunately, the fragments do not give enough clues for a reconstruction of the form of the building and all the more so its nature.

One of the finds from the pit was a large block of soft limestone bearing a complete Aramaic inscription [Fig. 4]. Another very similar stone with exactly the same text was discovered the previous year in a late wall nearby. The inscription reads:

*Qrbw whblt wmlkw bny zbyd' br whblt br
'gylw "ky*

*Offered by Wabballat and Malku sons of
Zebida son of Wabballat son of 'Ogeilu
A'aki.*

The two brothers are already known from five other inscriptions from the sanctuary,



Fig. 4. *Inscription of Wabballat and Malku*
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

referring to their building of the southern portico of the temenos in AD 55. There is no reason why the two stones could not come from the wall of this portico, even if they were found on the other side of the temenos, but then again the suggestion cannot be proved. While further analysis of available data and perhaps more excavation are called for, it is now established beyond all doubt that another sacral structure had existed in the sacred precinct of Allat at an early date.

A test trench in the southwestern corner of the cella proved that there had been no symmetry in the archaic layout and no twin monument had stood on the other side of the main chapel. Instead, a corner of the backside pediment of the cella was recovered from the debris right under the present ground surface [Fig. 5]. The stone is badly damaged but has preserved enough of its decoration to be of interest as an element of site display. Accordingly, it was placed on

the corresponding corner of the podium. It is obvious from the rough upper surface of the stone that it never supported a roof. It is yet another piece of evidence for the hypothesis that the cella had been left roofless because of the old chapel inside it and the altar left standing in the middle of the building.



Fig. 5. Right back corner of the pediment of the Allat cella (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

BASILICA IV

Work in the sector of the cathedral in the center of the ancient city, where three churches have already been excavated since 1988, had been interrupted after the discovery of the Odainat mosaic in 2003. With the future of the mosaic shelter still uncertain, the mission has made the decision to resume excavations in this area.

A probe was dug in the fourth, northernmost church of the episcopal complex [Fig. 6], which has been known since the beginning of the 20th century from a plan made by the German expedition to Palmyra (published in 1936 and repeatedly reproduced).

The trench that was traced across the church at mid-length of the nave revealed a stone pavement in the aisles [Fig. 7]. The stone slabs from the nave, at least in the

probe, appear to have been removed. Even so, the results point to the presence of a bema (a raised platform for lectors and singers, a feature common in northern Syria around Qalaat Sim'an). If its existence is confirmed, this would be the southernmost example of the feature in all of Syria.

The six columns of the church that are still standing were obviously taken from an older monument. One Corinthian capital remains in place, but another one which was found in the fill is from a different period [Fig. 8]. The two unearthed bases are also not assorted.

The roofing of the nave remains to be resolved considering that the columns supporting the roof over this nave, which is 13.50 m wide, are set quite far apart (approx. 8.50 m).



*Fig. 6. Northern basilica, view before the probing of this season
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*



*Fig. 7. The probe in the basilica, view from the southeast
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

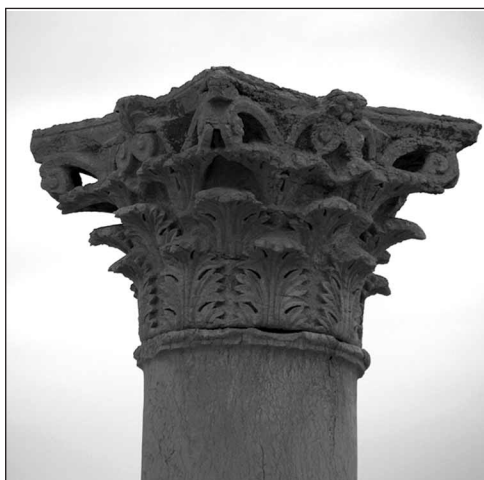


Fig. 8. *Different Corinthian capitals from Basilica IV*
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)



Fig. 9. *Four new archaic sculptures from the sanctuary of Allat in the Palmyra Museum*
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

MUSEUM WORK

Adding new exhibits to the galleries of the Palmyra Museum has recently become a tradition with the restorers of the mission. In keeping with it, a large set of Sasanian coins discovered in 2001 (Gawlikowski 2002: 266–269 and Fig. 11) was now prepared for exhibition, and four new sculptures from the Allat sanctuary were installed in the Allat gallery [Fig. 9]. Among these is one of the oldest Palmyrene sculptures and certainly the best archaic piece ever found on the site: a slab representing a panther hunted by an archer on horseback. Another slab featuring a horseman bringing a lamb for sacrifice under his arm, a decorated merlon, and a small relief of veiled women watching a procession of camels are all early pieces

from the Allat sanctuary (for these sculptures, cf. Gawlikowski 2009). They are now on show opposite the honorific statues set up two years earlier, lining the way towards the marble statue of Athena at the far end of the gallery.

The lintel of the tomb of Odainat, found crowning a narrow entrance to an old village in the Ayyubid bastion of the Bel temple and removed in 1930 to the old Dépôt des Antiquités, was also installed in the inscription room at the special request of the Director of the Palmyra Museum [Fig. 10]. The bilingual funerary text is interesting in itself, but the historical eminence of its founder makes it one of the most important inscriptions to be seen in Palmyra.



Fig. 10. *The inscription of Odainat, now in the Palmyra Museum*
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

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