

## PALMYRA

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This was the third consecutive season spent in the downtown area of ancient Palmyra, to the north of the Great Colonnade and halfway between the Tetrapylon and the Funerary Temple. We continued work in two neighboring blocks, one of them residential and the other public in character, the latter being occupied by a secular basilica converted into a church. Besides, we have started comprehensive investigations in the Arab Castle high on the hill northwest of the ruins.<sup>1</sup>

We decided to continue this year the excavations of the house partly cleared in 1988 (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> The entrance opened to the east into the street giving access on its other side further north to the Byzantine churches, while the street on the western side of the house passed close to the Great Colonnade, along the basilica excavated last year. In 1988 we were able to clear about 400 m<sup>2</sup> of the surface of the house, i.e., the northern and western wings opening into the centre courtyard. Upon clearing the other dependencies of this courtyard, it was found that originally it had been linked to the adjoining peristyle court the columns of which still stand further

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<sup>1</sup> The mission included, beside the present writer, Dr. Maria Krogulska, Messrs Grzegorz Majcherek and Janusz Byliński, all archaeologists, and two architects, Messrs Marek Barański and Jan Kempa. We have met, while in Palmyra, with the most efficient and generous help of our friends of many years, whose collaboration has proved as precious as always. It is for me a pleasure to acknowledge their part in the success of our mission. Mr. Khaled As'ad, Director of Antiquities in Palmyra, was with us as often as he could afford and let us feel his support at all times; his associates Ahmad and Ali Taha assisted us daily in the field, sharing our labors and smoothing our way throughout. Needless to say, there is no forgetting the friendly support of Dr. Ali Abu Assaf, Director General of Antiquities, and of Dr. Adnan Bounni, Director of Excavations, who have made our project possible.

<sup>2</sup> See *PAMI*, 1990, p. 37-40.

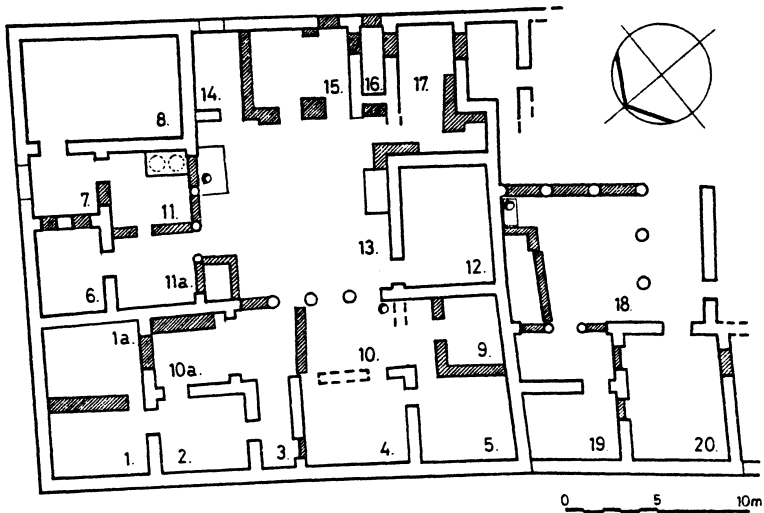


Fig. 1. Plan of the house after the 1990 season. Younger walls are shaded.

to the south; once this was cleared too, we found that several passages led into yet another colonnaded courtyard. One should count the total surface of the house well over 1200 m<sup>2</sup>, of which nearly 900 m<sup>2</sup> have been excavated already.

It was established, as a result of the former season that this house was built in the later half of the 2nd century AD, and was used without interruption, but not unchanged, down to the 8th or even early 9th century, when it was finally deserted. The stucco decoration dating back to the foundation of the house collapsed only then, covering with its debris an accumulation layer including pottery, glass and coins, all confirming a late date for the abandonment.

We can add now more evidence to the same effect. The original house, no doubt the residence of a very affluent family, underwent over time a series of partitions, apparently between relatives, as the

resulting units continued to share a common courtyard and an entrance from the street. One of the latest occupants signed his name on a floor in Kufic script as (probably) Hassan. This determination of the continuity of urban life in this part of Palmyra appears to be the most important result of our research so far.

The northern courtyard (loc. 13) measured originally c. 10 by 14 m. It opened to the north and to the west into separate porticoes of three columns each, giving access to several rooms (loci 1-11). The details of this arrangement were described in my first report. This time we excavated the court itself and its dependencies on the eastern and southern sides. Two columns on the northern side were found fallen and one of them was re-erected. To the south, there was a single room 5 by 6 m (loc. 12), accessible from the courtyard and from the adjoining western porch (loc. 10) until the latter passage was blocked. More Islamic evidence were found in the fill close to the floor of this room, while much higher there were elements of two stucco cornices once adorning the walls at two different levels.

The original courtyard had no other dependencies and extended east right to the street wall. The entrance was through a narrow corridor (loc. 16), in line with room 12 just described. Immediately to the right and left of the street door, there were two passages: one narrow in the corner of the courtyard, probably meant to serve a future eastern wing, the other, 1.40 m wide, leading south into the main part of the house through room 17.

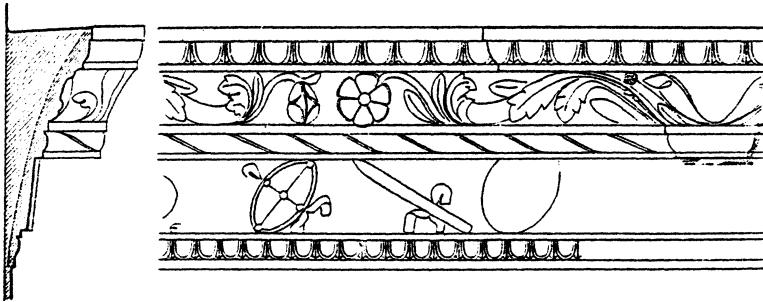
The eastern wing was not added until the Islamic period. It consists of two rooms set higher than the original floors, but even with two platforms marking this later level in the courtyard. Room 15 had two doors from inside and a door opening into the street, while the original entrance was blocked at its inner end and transformed into a shop. The new entrance was abandoned in its turn and still another opened in the adjoining room 14. A shallow basin appearing on the present surface marks this last access to the house, above

a typically Ummayyad red-painted plaster floor. The former vestibule, room 15, was then transformed into a stable, as suggested by a manger near the blocked street door.

In the middle of the courtyard (loc. 13), a sewage collector was found, cut into the rock and corbel-vaulted, now filled with clay. It was joined by an open drain coming from the northeastern corner of the courtyard, where there was a well 4.50 m deep, set into a platform which had blocked one of the intercolumnia of the northern portico. This well, as the one of the same depth within the western portico, collected underground water at a surprisingly high water table level.

The courtyard neighboring to the south (loc. 22) commanded a reception suite. It was entirely paved, though not at one time, and four of its columns were still standing on its eastern side, bearing the architraves. The restoration team of the Palmyra Museum, now ably headed by Mr. Ali Saleh Taha, has reinforced them, replaced the capital on the fourth standing column, and erected the one surviving column on the southern side. The peristyle is irregular, due to the oblique course of the wall dividing this court from the dependencies of the one described above. It is not clear why this aberration arose, leading the architect to leave unfinished the northernmost column engaged in this wall which was built around it. Close by, there is another well, 8 m deep, going certainly back to the 2nd century; it is provided with a monolithic basin above the pavement.

There are two reception rooms on the western side of this courtyard. The huge room 20, measuring 8.00 by 5.50 m, opened under the colonnade and was provided with niches and symmetrical doors right and left, leading to the neighboring rooms. The stucco fragments found there are clearly the most elaborate of the whole house and include many interesting motifs such as olive trees, vine scrolls, human heads (destroyed by iconoclasts) and parts of armor (Fig. 2). The room was used into Islamic times, as the rest of the



*Fig. 2. Stucco fragment from Room 20.*

house, and coin finds tend to place the blocking of the side doors in the beginning of the 7th century. The parallel room 19 is smaller, but it was preceded by a porch of two columns, later walled in front and equipped with a tannur. The eastern wing of this part of the house still awaits excavation.

We also conducted this year a limited program of stratigraphic investigation behind the apse of the basilica excavated in 1989. The results are interesting: it appears that the apse was not part of the original 2nd century building, as was thought earlier because of the style of the decoration of its arch, but that it was built especially for the church, while borrowing the voussoirs and the impostes of the arch from another monument. Pottery evidence points to the 4th century as the date of the church and this is confirmed by a coin of Constantius II as Caesar (324-337), found on the floor upon which the apse was erected. For this purpose, the shops lining the street alongside the original basilica were dismantled, their doors blocked, and the whole sector transformed first into two, then into one big room accessible from the porch in front of the church. The dependency of the church was destroyed and filled up in the late 6th or early 7th century, but the aisle itself survived until the 8th century, as described in my 1989 report.

It is very tempting to link the transformation of an earlier hall of probably commercial use into a church with the inscription<sup>3</sup> relating the restoration in 328 of the portico in front of the building by a city official called Flavius Diogenes. If this association is correct, this text would mark the installation (impossible before 324) of the first church in Palmyra, which would have been the see of Bishop Marinus mentioned as one of the Fathers present at the Council of Nicaea.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Cantineau, *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre*, vol. III, 27.