

PALMYRA

EXCAVATIONS, 1998

Michał Gawlikowski

Between September 7 and October 6, the Mission worked on the long range project (begun in 1988) to uncover and prepare for public display a sector of the downtown area, featuring monuments of the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods.¹ Last season the excavation of a church with three aisles and an apse was completed', judging by a Kufic inscription reused in the pavement (now in the Museum), the structure was erected in the 8th and abandoned early in the 9th century. The objective of the present season was to excavate the dependencies of this church and the neighborhood east and north of it.

¹ The expedition was headed by the present writer, assisted by two long time members, Dr. Maria Krogulska and Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek. The staff included also Mrs. Ewa Paradowska, restorer; Dr. Karol Piasecki, anthropologist; Mr. Adam Dolot, architect; and Mr. Tomasz Szmagier, photographer. Mrs. Krystyna Gawlikowska and Mr. Piotr Paradowski also participated in our work. While in Palmyra we enjoyed, as usual, the unfailing hospitality and assistance 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 rest assured of our sincere appreciation of their efficiency and support.

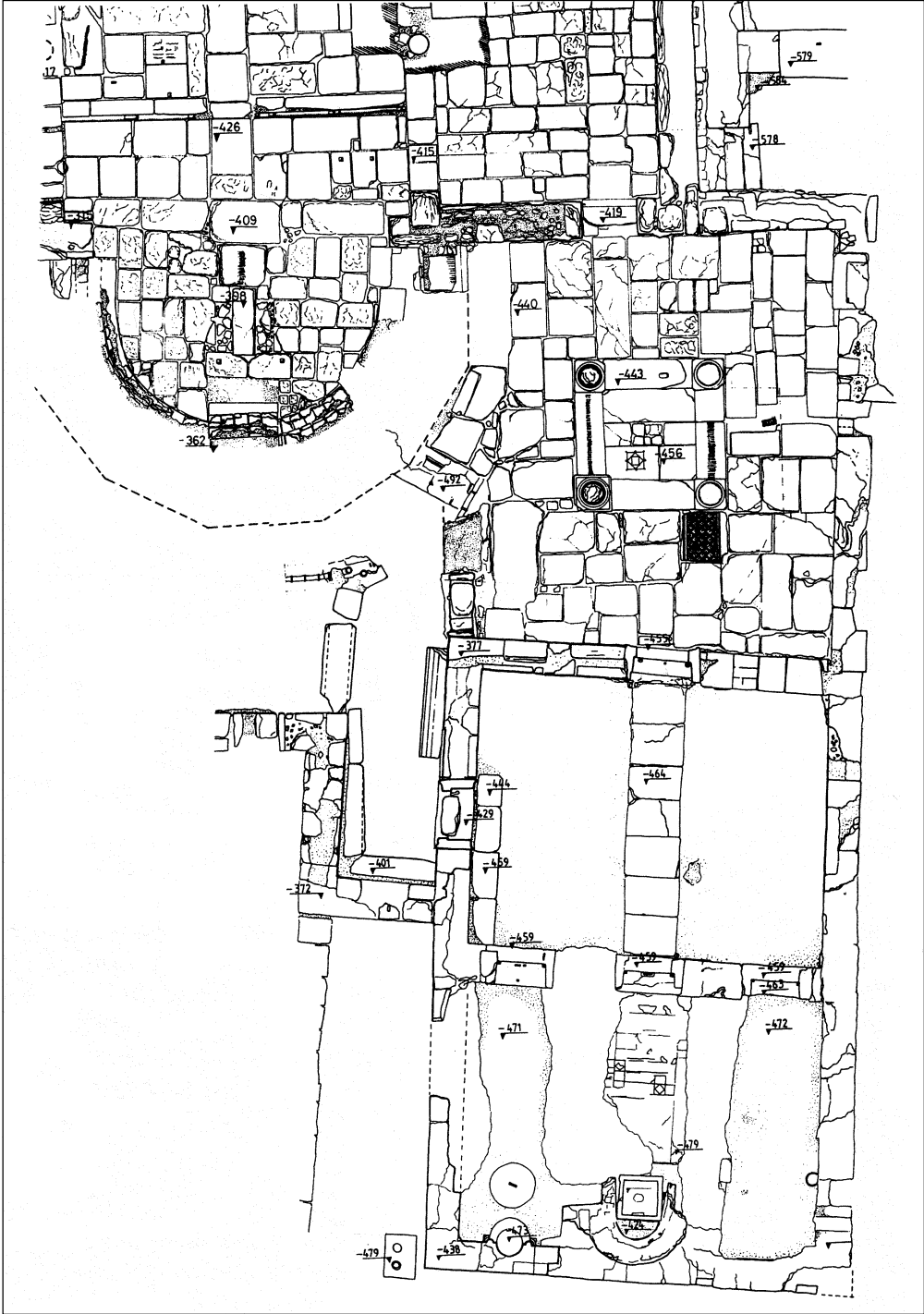


Fig. 1. Plan of the Baptistry adjoining Church II
(Drawing A. Dolot)

EXCAVATION AREA

City block G currently under exploration includes a square peristyle courtyard (G.1) excavated in 1996, and Church II (G.2) cleared last year to the north of this peristyle. It was already clear by then that further dependencies of the church lay to the north and east of the main body of the building.

There were three doorways in the northern wall of the church opening into an area where no traces of ancient buildings could be seen. This area was delimited on the other side by the ruins of yet another church, and on the west by a continuous wall running from the

Church Street coming up from the Great Colonnade. The area appears to have been used as a late cemetery (G.3), in connection with Church II. Already last year we had discovered a double burial in the northwestern corner of the church, obviously made in the ruins.

To the east, a door at the end of the northern aisle opened into a paved courtyard (G.4.1) with four columns in the middle forming the supports for a light well [Figs 1-2].

It was thought after the last season that this feature, occupying the place

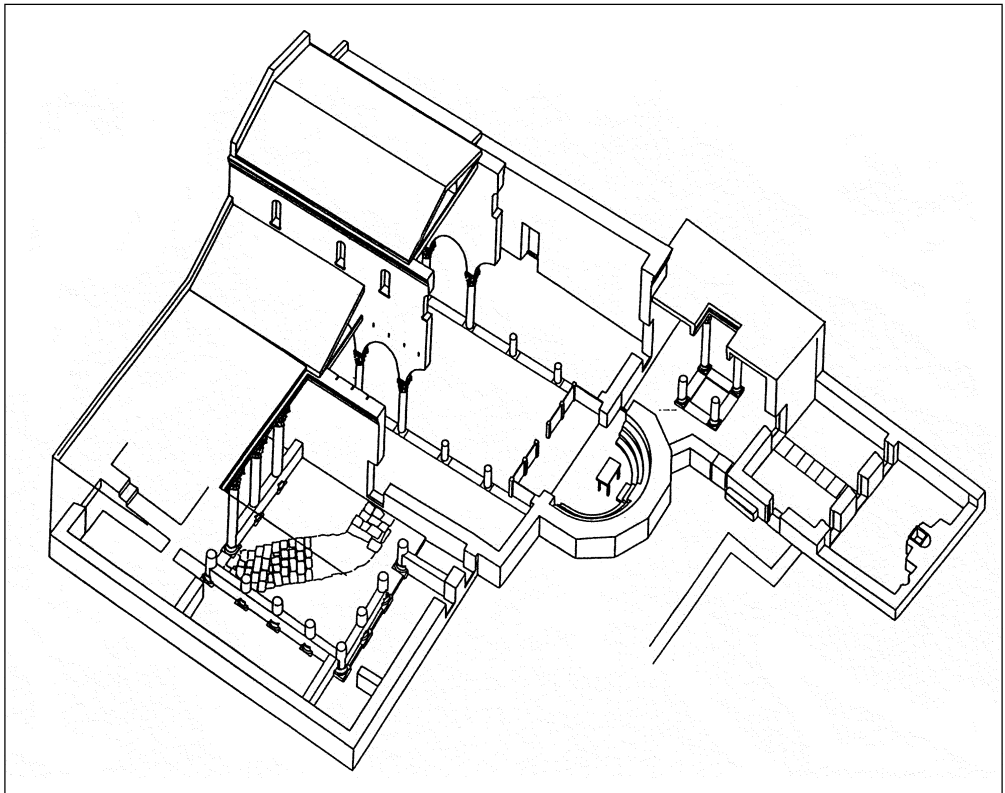


Fig. 2. Axonometric reconstruction of the Baptistry
(Drawing A. Dolot)

usually allotted to a sacristy, must have been inherited from some earlier, although already Late Antique building. We know now that it was not so. The colonnaded court led to a complex of rooms which was built together with the church and which displays features that allow it to be described as a Baptistery (G.4). This monument was excavated completely [Fig. 3].

Unfortunately, the Baptistery, in similarity to the church and at the same time, was systematically dismantled for the building stone. Consequently, the surviving walls are rather low, but the floors are practically complete and the plan is clear. We were able to identify in the fill some characteristic vertical members and to replace them, so as to make the monument more intelligible to visitors.

CEMETERY

An area 33 m wide between Churches II and III was entirely empty of ancient remains. Three doors in the north wall of Church II opened into it, practically level with the present surface. We opened an entirely sterile, wind-blown soil up to

1.50 m deep on the average. It was decided to remove the upper part of the fill further to the north using mechanical means under archaeological control. The ground is thus prepared for the next season.



Fig. 3. *The Baptistery seen from the east*
(Photo T. Szmagier)

In the trench, about 22 m long and 4 m wide, some discontinued foundations in broken stones were found about 1.50 m below the church level. They apparently belong to the Roman period, but their investigation is reserved for the future. Between them, four pit burials were found each containing a single skeleton, interred simply in the ground with no belongings. All were oriented East-West, the heads to the west. Two of the dead were male, one was a young girl, and one a pregnant mother. Only the girl had a pair of copper earrings and a necklace of glass beads.

The excavation resulted in the complete clearing of the northern foundations of Church II [Fig. 4].

The foundations are made of broken stone, reaching the same depth as the

burials in the wind-blown soil, except where they found support on earlier structures. No chronologically sensitive finds were associated with the foundation trench. Beside earlier foundations and walls, we also found several huge construction blocks from some monumental building, seemingly transported for reuse, but abandoned on the way. They were lying too low to have been a product of the destruction of the church. Rather, they had been brought together with other stones eventually reused by the church builders.

At both ends the church foundations made use of earlier structures, from the Roman period and built some 1.50 m lower than the church pavement. To the west, a cross wall associated with the continuous street wall marked a wide entrance

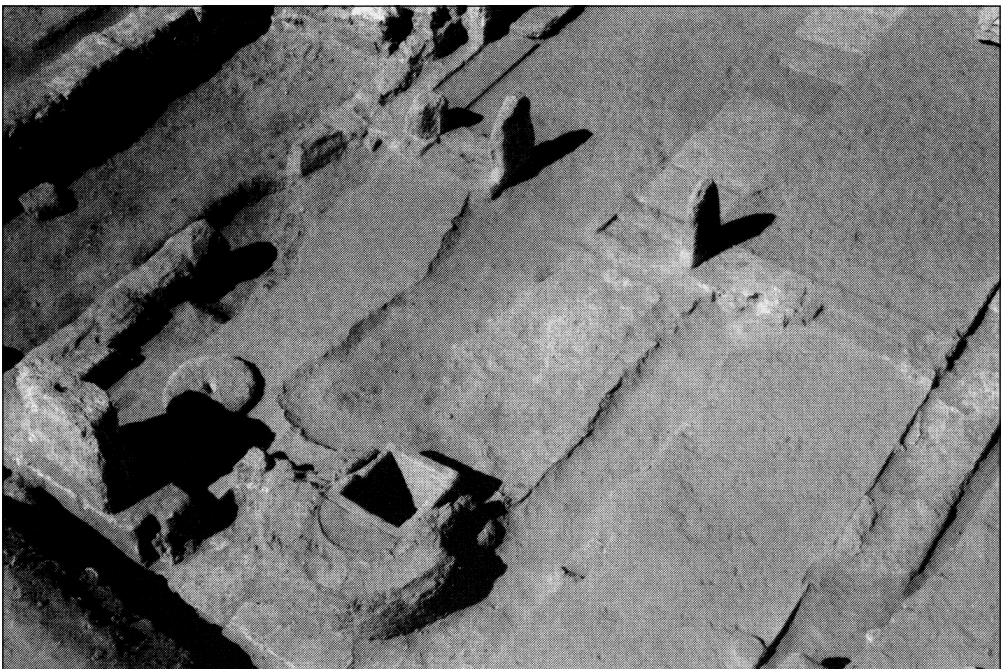


Fig. 4. *Baptismal font at the far end of the Baptistry*
(Photo T. Szmagier)

into the enclosed area which featured a line of rooms along the western wall. At least one of these rooms was used on a level corresponding to the church floors, but others were apparently demolished by then, leaving only the foundations of partition walls. No trace of the front wall of the rooms was found, but the back wall on the street side remained standing above ground until the end of occupation in this sector.

At the other, northeastern corner of the church we can see the remains of a more important monument. Its monolithic threshold lies 1.50 m below the church level [Fig. 5]; it is part of a wall uncovered on 8 m of its length and 90 cm wide, running at a slight angle to the church wall above. Two courses of the western corner survive, and there is a perpendicular cross wall running north,

containing a flat stone which probably supported another threshold. It is clear that whatever survives of this building under the church flagstones is residual, left over from the dismantling which occurred some time before the church was built.

Better prospects for identifying early monuments lie outside the church area, but for the time being not much can be said about them. It looks as if there was an extended phase of abandonment between the buildings of the 2nd/3rd century, and the founding of the church. It would be interesting for the urban history of Palmyra to understand better the sequence of occupation in this area. It is already well established that the late church remained in use as long as the housing of the ancient city, that is until the first half of the 9th century.



Fig. 5. Monumental entrance to a building beneath the northeastern corner of Church II
(Photo T. Szmagier)

BAPTISTERY

A more spectacular discovery was that of a church dependency to the northeast of the structure. A four-column courtyard uncovered for the most part already last year (G.4.1) was considered at first as being older than the church, because it seemed more likely part of a house. Now it was established that the wall foundations were strictly contemporary with those of the church and could not be dissociated from it. The court is 9.40 m wide along the northern wall and 7.80 m along the eastern one. While contiguous to the apse and accessible through a door at the head of the southern aisle, it is much wider than the aisle, protruding some 3 m beyond the body of the church proper. The columns have a diameter of about 50 cm, very similar to that of the aisle columns, making it probable that they had stood just as high, albeit carrying flat beams instead of arcades. Together with the rooms described below, the outside of the building formed a nearly regular body 24 m long, that is, about as long as the main body of the church, although only 9 m wide [Fig. 2].

The courtyard gave access through a door on the east into a room 6 m long (G.4.2). In the middle, a row of flagstones led to another door on the opposite side; to the right and left of these slabs lay a plastered floor and two other doors in line with the central one. While all three passages were of the same width, 95 cm each, the middle one was obviously more important. These doors preserved only the thresholds in place, but a few fragments of door frames could be identified in the fill and were set upright.

To the right, when one enters, there is another door, elevated and later

blocked. It led into a narrow space between the building itself and an enclosure wall further south, where several architrave blocks had been reused as benches set up against the walls. This waiting room (G.4.4) opened into a small and irregular court, G.4.5, behind the apse of the church. There was another entry into this space from court G.4.1, later closed. Pipes, which had once supplied a fountain, were found here.

The three aligned doors in the eastern wall of G.4.2 led into three narrow, parallel rooms of the same width, about 2 m each. While the partition walls have all but disappeared, the floors largely survive. The middle room was only 3.70 m long. It was paved with marble slabs, and had a step lined with marble at the far end, in front of a stone vessel [Fig. 4]. This was a reused fountain pool, 1 m square, with remains of a relief on a side now hidden in a circular walling of baked brick running around the vessel on three sides. The brick formed the foundation of a niche, 92 cm wide and 40 cm deep, behind the basin. The stone crowning of this feature was found lying on the surface nearby.

The room to the right had no marble revetment, and was longer (5.80 m). At the far end, a bowl was set in the floor, which was made of baked brick. The niche above was smaller (55 cm wide) and was preserved in one piece, though the half-columns in front were broken. It has been reinstalled in place. A similar niche adorned the room to the left, where however no trace of a basin was found.

It seems safe to interpret these installations as baptismal fonts. Of course, baptismal basins used in Syria usually had

one set of steps leading down and another one, on the opposite side, going up, the design being adapted to the rite of immersion commonly observed in the Church of Late Antiquity. The installation we have found, apparently used in a different way, finds parallels in Northern

Syria, for example at Dehes and Qirqbize. I have no ready explanation why there are three parallel rooms.

It should be remembered that our church is later than any identified in Syria so far. Obviously, all this requires the consultation of an expert in Syriac liturgy.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PROGRAM

Warsaw University anthropologist Dr. Karol Piasecki studied the mummy discovered in 1992 in the tower tomb of Atenatan; he took samples for possible fungi and made sure there is no immediate danger to the mummy's condition.

He also examined the skeletons from the cemetery: two from the last season and

four he cleaned himself, determining age, physical type, and pathological conditions. It is to be hoped that he shall be able to continue with the study of bones from Palmyrene tombs. Our excavations alone have yielded large series from the towers of Atenatan and of Kitot, as well as from the underground tomb of Alaine.

CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Mrs. Ewa Paradowska joined the mission in her capacity of restorer on the occasion of another assignment in Syria. Her primary task was to prepare plaster molds of some Palmyrene sculpture to be exhibited in Warsaw on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of our expedition next year. With the generous help of the

Palmyra Museum, she was able to prepare eight molds, which have been transported to Poland.

She has also restored some monuments in the Museum, including some stucco work and the shield of the statue of Athena, reassembled from several loose fragments.

CONCLUSIONS

The key finding of the season is the monumental baptistery abutting Church II. The unusual layout of this building requires further study, but even now it can be said that the Christian community in Palmyra exhibited considerable vitality in the Umayyad and Abbassid periods.

The church was abandoned, as previously determined, in the early 9th century. The systematic dismantling of the walls suggests resettlement: While the ancient city survived in the downtown area until this late period, from then on the population must have moved to the

Bel precinct where the settlement remained until modern times.

While some less important parts of the church complex still remain to be excavated, the next season should be devoted mainly to the study of the extensive area between Churches II and III. It measures 33 m from north to south and about the same distance from east to west. It was apparently used as the church graveyard, but its main interest lies in older remains, at first sight very different from the formerly excavated housing across the street.