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## Palmyra: Season 2003 Preliminary Report

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# PALMYRA

## SEASON 2003

### PRELIMINARY REPORT

Michał Gawlikowski

*The mission worked in Palmyra for two months from April 27 to June 25.<sup>1</sup> The main task this year was to uncover the mosaic floor discovered in our sector in 2002, behind the shops of the Great Colonnade. This was done in the first two weeks of work. The pavement is nearly complete and remarkably well preserved. It measures 11.40 m by 5.60 m.*

*It was cleaned and systematically repaired by restorers as it appeared. All the cracks and some minor holes were filled with recovered tesserae and, following present trends in restoration, no attempt was made to straighten the gently rocking surface. Further work shall be needed in the future, but there is no urgency now.*

*It was decided to excavate the immediate surroundings of the pavement. Parts of two streets bordering block E (so marked on Gabriel's plan) were cleared and the task will be continued in the future. The street to the east has been called Diogenes Street after an inscription on a neighboring column; the other one is Oil Press Street, after a feature further up along it. The entire area between the two streets is now uncovered, not only the hall adorned with the mosaic pavement, but also shops behind the Colonnade and other remains dating to the first three centuries AD (Fig. 1). We have also tested the terrace in front of Basilica I.*

1) The mission, led by the present writer, included Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, who acted as Deputy Director in the first two weeks; Dr. Marta Żuchowska, Dr. Magdalena Żurek and Mr. Marcin Wagner, archaeologists; and three restorers: Dr. Krzysztof Chmielewski and Ms Joanna Lis (both working on the mosaic), and Mr. Tomasz Myjak (in charge of coin conservation). We had the assistance of a photographer, Mr. Waldemar Jerke, and an architect, Ms Daria Tarara. A student from Homs, Mr. Mozafer Mustafa Salman, joined as a volunteer and helped with the mosaic restoration. Mrs. Krystyna Gawlikowska also participated in the work.

It is our pleasant duty to acknowledge the standing support of Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of Excavations at the DGAM in Damascus. We had an inspection visit of Dr. Widad al-Khoury with whom I was able to discuss standing matters and future projects. In Palmyra, our old friends Messrs. Khaled Asa'ad and Ali Taha assisted us in every way as always. Messrs. Khalil al-Hariri and Jamil Hassan served as inspectors attached to the mission and spared no trouble to help. They are assured our heartfelt thanks.

## THE BELLEROPHON HALL

The mosaic pavement discovered last year and cleared entirely this season consists of two parts: the original 3rd century pavement, very well preserved and apparently missing only insignificant parts on the edges, and a later addition, entirely different in style, at the southern end (Figs. 2,3). The original floor is not associated at present with any walls that could be contemporary with it, but adjoins a short portico of four columns on the north. This we were able to restore, putting back in place four square pedestals

carrying Attic bases that had been found pushed down into a deep ancient trench on the northern side. They were not made originally for this location, however, as their mouldings show traces of the original destination in a portico on a higher storey somewhere. The western wall of the room should have run not very differently from the preserved one, as it divided the room from the street.

The older part of the mosaic measures at present slightly over 9 m by 5.50 m. Assuming that the yellow band around it



Fig. 1. General view of the excavations toward the portico of Basilica I  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

was 36 cm wide on each side, the entire pavement can be restored at about 9.60 m by 6.30 m. The portico on the short side, however, was longer and extended for at least 9 m, suggesting that the room included a wide band left undecorated, to the east and perhaps to the south as well. Benches may have been installed there, as in a *triclinium*. Indeed, several subjects represented on the floor strongly suggest the hall's banquetting function.

The composition of the mosaic follows a strictly symmetrical pattern. Around two central pictures included in a rich vegetal frame, there are on each side three rectangular panels, each framed with three decorated bands linked between them all around the pavement, as in a table game. Each panel represents a figurative subject on white background, while smaller panels filling the outer recesses of the general pattern reveal geometrical designs.

The middle part of the floor is made up of two scenes of the same dimensions, 154 cm by 128 cm, the northern one – higher than it is wide – facing the portico and the other one turned 90° counter-clockwise. The panels share a frame which also passes between them; it is 36 cm wide, filled with an inhabited scroll including Dionysiac masks and running animals, a very fine example of Roman art.

The standing picture figures Bellerophon riding Pegasus and killing Chimaera (Fig. 4). The ancient Greek myth enjoyed a renewal of interest in the 3rd century, but this representation is the only one known from the Near East. The winged horse is flying over the monster whose three heads (lion's, goat's and snake's) are spitting fire in his direction. The hero has

already thrown a javelin which has pierced the hind leg of Chimaera, and is aiming at it with a lance.

While all these details conform to the Greek and Roman tradition, our Bellerophon differs strongly from all other known representations in that he is wearing Persian dress. He has trousers, an embroidered tunic and an open coat with long sleeves, all three used by rich Palmyrenes as amply attested by the local sculpture, being also typical of Parthian and Sasanian royalty and aristocracy. On his head, Bellerophon wears a wide-rimmed helmet with a long flyer. From right and left two eagles approach him, bringing wreaths of victory.

The other picture figures a horseman who is shooting his bow at a tiger (Fig. 5). The animal, already wounded, stands on its hind legs, while a smaller, probably female tiger is lying on the ground under the horse's hooves. According to Mr. Gianluca Serra, a conservationist based currently in Palmyra, the felines represent the species *Panthera tigris virgata*, until recently encountered in Iran.

The dress of the hunter is the same as described above, but the movement in this case makes the coat fly out behind, showing the quiver and bow sheath attached to the saddle. There is but one eagle with a wreath in its beak, but the parallelism between the two heroes makes it clear that they are both allegorical representations of some important contemporary figures.<sup>2)</sup>

There is a short inscription fitted within the stretched bow of the hunter, but it does not give the name of this mighty hero. Instead, we get the signature of the artist,

2) An interpretation of this allegory was proposed by M. Gawlikowski at the conference "Hama and the Orontes", held in Hama in September 2003.

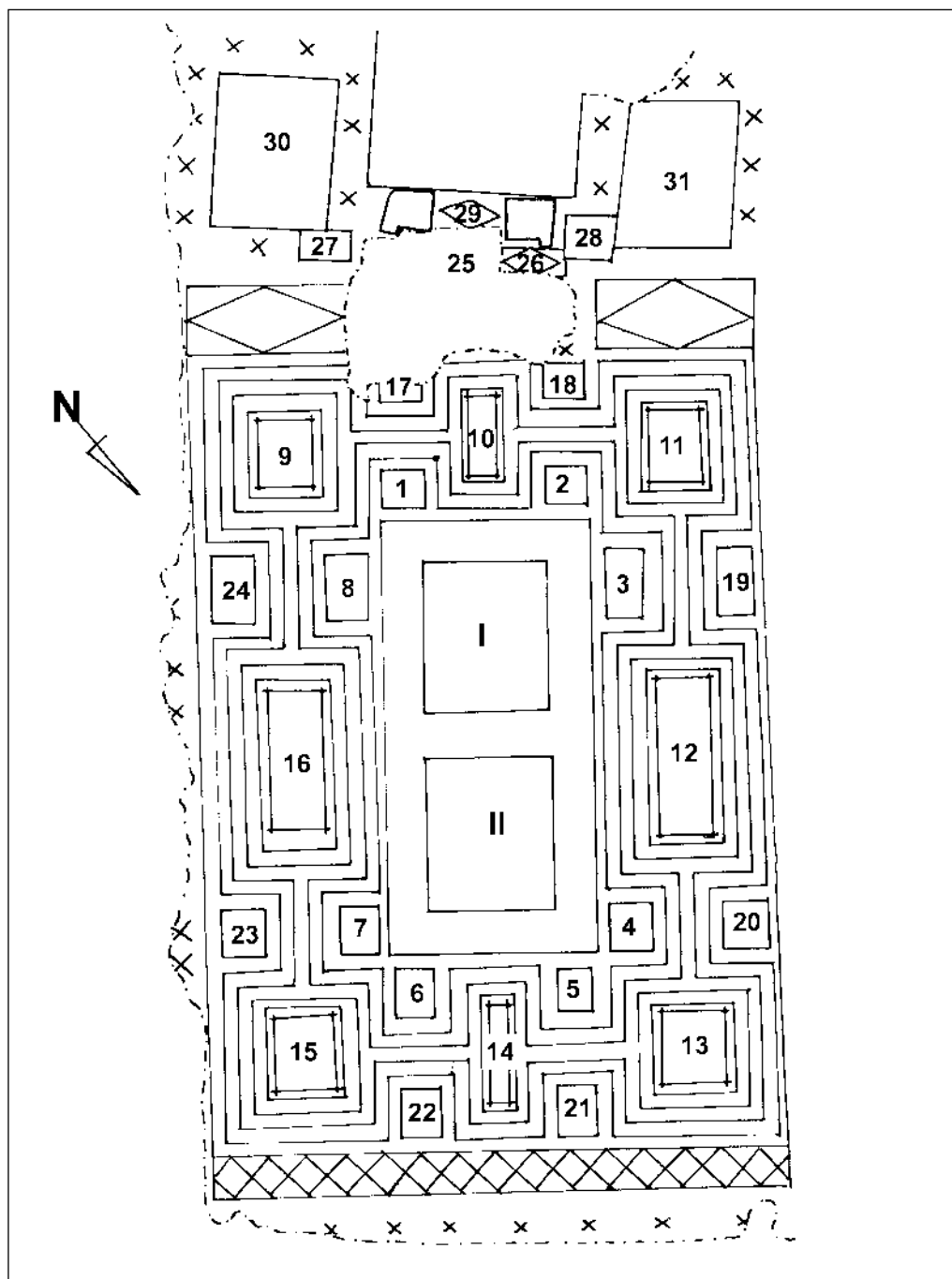


Fig. 2. The mosaic pavement  
(Drawing M. Żuchowska)

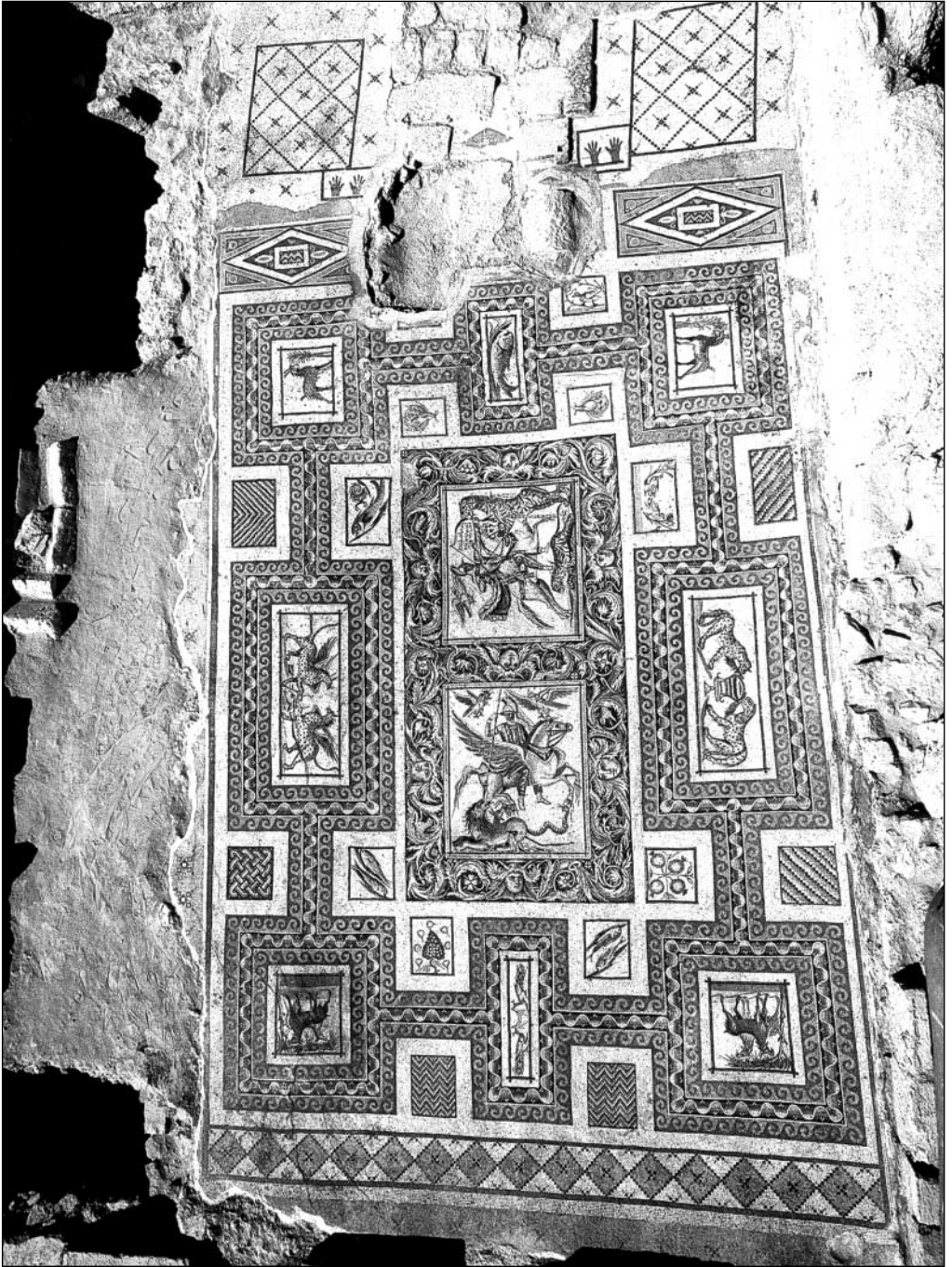


Fig. 3. *The mosaic pavement*  
(Photo W. Jerke)

an extremely rare occurrence before the Christian period. It is laid in Palmyrene cursive script, copied from a manuscript model, apparently without understanding as several letters are grossly altered. In particular, the first letter does not allow for a certain reading; I suppose the name of the mosaicist to be Theodotos or Diodotos. At any rate, he proudly announced to have made the mosaic together with his sons.

The smaller panels in the floor are distinctly made by less experienced hands. Along each of the longer sides of the central emblema, there is a picture of two animals facing each other: two panthers drinking from a kantharos and two female griffins placing a paw on a bull's head. This last subject is well known from Roman sarcophagi.

At the corners of the pavement there are other parallel subjects: two pairs of goats under a tree at the northern end, and

a lone buck in front of a tree in each of the southern corners. Smaller panels show fish, fruit, ducks, and peacocks, suggesting that the hall had been used for feasting. Indeed, fish shown on four of the panels are clearly not in their element; in ancient Palmyra fish must have been a great luxury.

The date of the mosaic can be inferred from stylistic parallels as the middle of the 3rd century. In fact, some of the decorative bands resemble closely those on the only pavements found in Palmyra before ours (in the houses east of the Bel temple, now in the local museum). Outside parallels would allow a date perhaps more readily in the 4th century, but in Palmyra such a dating is most unlikely for historical reasons.

Before the end of the season, the mosaic was buried under a thick layer of sand, and huge stone blocks were piled over it to prevent robbery.

## CULT MEETING PLACE

Not a long time after the pavement was laid, the building changed its destination. At the southern end, a very different piece of mosaic was added. Though apparently not much is missing from the original pavement, a stretch over 2 m wide was joined to it on the same level (cf. *Figs. 2,3*). On either side of a light stone foundation in the middle there is a rectangular geometrical panel and in front of each a small lozenge within a rectangle. The workmanship of these simple patterns is

rather crude. There are moreover two panels containing each a pair of open hands in red, represented without any attempt at rendering the anatomy. Such hands are, of course, encountered in Palmyra on some altars dedicated to the anonymous god. There is, then, reason to believe that some religious group had taken over the hall and adapted it to its needs. The most likely opportunity for such appropriation would be in the time immediately after the demise of Zenobia.

## COLONNADED HALL

This second stage ended with destruction. The central part of the mosaic in front of the stone foundation was destroyed,

and the whole pavement covered with stones, underlying a plaster floor laid some 50 cm higher. The new floor



Fig. 4. *Bellerophon and Chimaera*  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)





Fig. 5. *The tiger hunter*  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)



*Fig. 6. View of the trench with the pedestals from the north portico thrown in (in the foreground) and the mosaic pavement in the center (Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

extended further than the mosaic pavement: not only did it reach from wall to wall, 7.80 m east to west, but it also covered the remains of the portico, going all the way to a new northern wall built at a distance of 15.50 m from the southern one, shared with the shops along the Colonnade. A row of five columns running along the long axis of this huge hall from north to south supported the roof (Fig. 7). Only their bases have been found in place. Both long walls were built at

this late date, but apparently followed the course of the original walls of the Bellerophon Hall.

The original East-West portico was eliminated. While the columns were probably reused and served to form the more recent colonnade, before being lost in some later dismantling operation, the bases were too difficult to remove altogether from the building. Accordingly, a deep trench was dug in order to throw into it the four massive pedestals each supporting a mono-

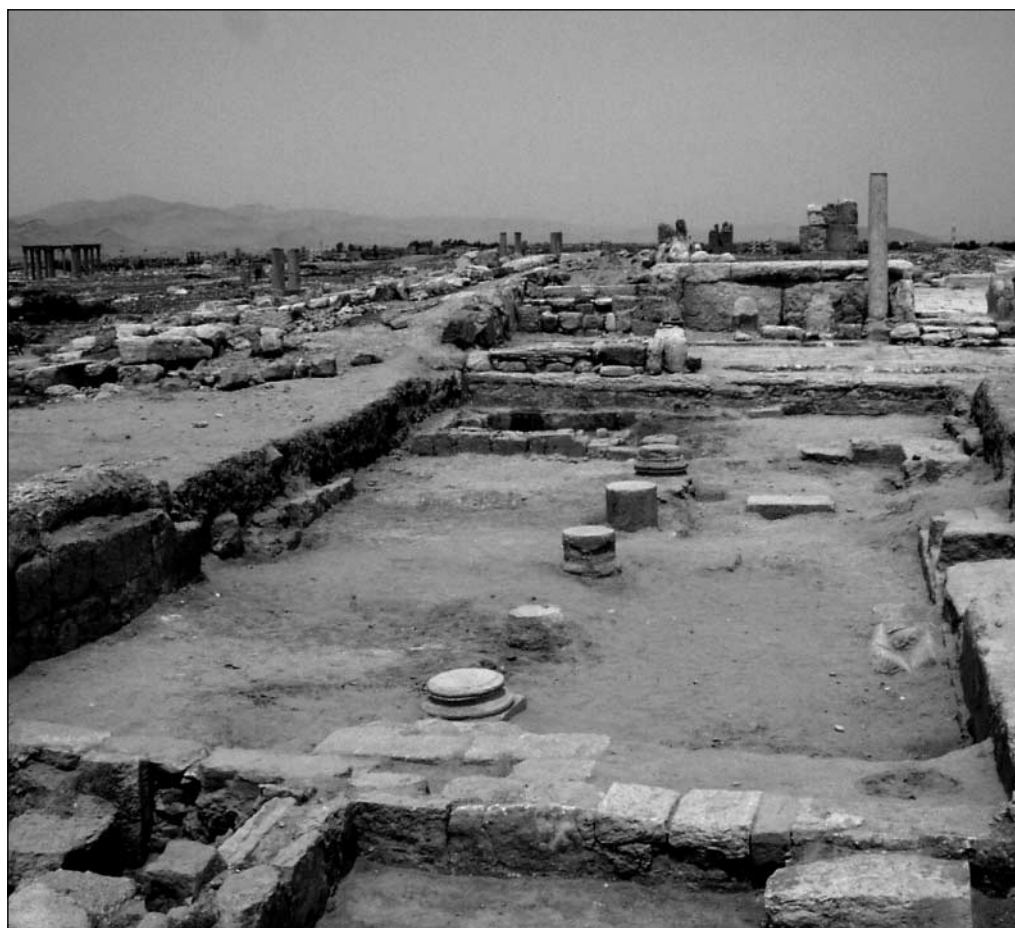


Fig. 7. View of the Colonnaded Hall from the south  
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

lithic Attic base (*Fig. 6*). Once the pit was backfilled, an even level was provided for the plaster floor covering the parts of the stylobate remaining in place. The entrance to the building was in the eastern wall, where the threshold survives.

Dating evidence – coins of Constantine and Constantius II, as well as lamps and pottery of the same period – recovered from between the two floors pointed to the mid-4th century as the date for the laying of the higher floor.

## NEIGHBORING STRUCTURES

In order to understand the archaeological context of the mosaic, we decided to excavate the whole width of the block from Diogenes Street to Oil Press Street, amounting to about 24 m. In the other direction, the distance from the back wall of the shops along the Great Colonnade, excavated earlier, and the portico in front of Basilica I, also cleared years ago, reaches 19.50 m. The surface excavated this year thus covers 470 m<sup>2</sup>, of which the Bellerophon Hall occupied 60 m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>3)</sup>

The area was excavated to a depth of 1.20 m on the average below the pavement in front of Basilica I. In places, trial pits went deeper without reaching virgin soil. The material recovered goes back to the 1st-3rd centuries, but the associated structures are very poorly preserved.

One reason why the early occupation of the area cannot be readily understood is that some parts of the buildings considered remain inaccessible under the south portico of the basilica. Indeed, they are the best preserved parts, as was seen in some limited soundings, while elsewhere there remain but a few incomplete walls and no hard floors. It seems that the building of the portico was accompanied or preceded by a systematic destruction followed by filling with earth. Some columns and other architectural members were used in the fill, resulting in a uniform level some

50 cm below the portico. It is not clear how access to it was secured.

Striking evidence for the destruction of the early buildings and the leveling of the area has been found. Among fallen stones close to one buried column there were the remains of a wooden box with bronze fittings and lock. It was thrown open, as if emptied by a robber. Inside there were still a few discarded objects, once wrapped in linen cloth: a writing stylus, a bronze seal ring, small pieces of gold including a coin (an exotic imitation of a Roman imperial coin, not yet identified), and four identical coins of Gallienus datable AD 260-268. It does not seem too farfetched to presume that this find is a witness to the sacking of Palmyra in 273.

Later on, a stone pavement was laid all along the eastern side of the Colonnaded Hall. There are wide stone thresholds at each end of it, one leading from a former shop behind the Great Colonnade, the other, raised two steps up, opening towards the portico of the basilica. It is clear that the floor corresponds to a long room serving as the vestibule to the Colonnaded Hall. Its eastern wall is not preserved, but it can be safely said that it was bordered by a partly paved open space above the 3rd century buildings. At a still later time, a stone pavement was introduced another 50 cm above this floor, apparently in the open.

3) The work was supervised by M. Żuchowska and M. Wagner.

## PROSPECTS

First and foremost, a shelter should be built over the mosaic. A preliminary idea, presented to the DGAM, assumes the use of old stones for its walls, in order not to spoil the view of the ruins around. A detailed construction design of the shelter, currently in preparation by the team's architect, Mr. Wojciech Terlikowski, follows the walls of the Colonnaded Hall, allowing space for suspended

iron passages on the east and north. Some of the ancient walls can be used as foundations for the new structure. The two adjoining streets will be cleared down to the ancient level and the entrance to the shelter would be from Oil Press Street, that is from the west. Soundings in the area, including a few within the future building, should clear up some of the remaining questions.