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Excavations at Saint John Prodromos, Jerusalem

Jean-Baptiste Humbert
École Biblique

The archaeological excavations of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française undertaken in the derelict basement of the Greek Orthodox church of Saint John-the-Baptist, *Prodromos*, took place between November 29th 2010 and April 3rd 2011.¹ The objective of the archaeological project, initiated by the French Goutal cabinet, was to explore the foundations of the ancient site prior to its restoration. UNESCO, initially approached by the Greek Patriarchate, requested the assistance of the *École Biblique* with regards to the archaeological and technical aspects of the project. The *École Biblique* nominated Jean-Baptiste Humbert as the director of excavation. By blissful coincidence, the current project builds on past work of the Dominican fathers H. Vincent and F. Abel who, as representatives of the same institution, carefully documented the site, first in 1914 and again in 1919.

Information gleaned from the historical sources²

Situated in the heart of the Christian Quarter of *intra muros* Jerusalem, the sanctuary is claimed to be Jerusalem's most ancient church. Its foundation dates back to the mid 5th century AD.³ Following the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 the structure seemingly

underwent extensive modifications and the monument may have been restored in the 7th century by John the Almoner (*Eleimon*), Patriarch of Alexandria. By the Medieval period and just prior to the arrival of the Crusaders, the Late Roman (Byzantine) building no longer functioned as a sacred site. Submerged at least 3m below the rising street levels, with its doors and windows blocked, the ancient church was obscured from public view. The upper church dates to the 11th-12th centuries. It was built according to the same trifoliate plan, over the earlier structure, which had by that time been converted into a storage area for goods and water.

Towards the end of the 11th century, an organization of Italian merchants from the city of Amalfi obtained permission to settle in Jerusalem. According to our sources, they established a hospice for foreign pilgrims on the south-west corner of the ancient forum of *Aelia Capitolina*. Featuring a guesthouse, a hospital and a church, the architectural complex would have integrated the derelict tri-apsed structure, to which we shall now refer as the "Roman Building," over which the new chapel was built retaining to the same architectural layout. For the meantime we lack any evidence which might allow us to equate the tri-apsed basement

of the medieval church with the Saint John the Baptist head-reliquary shrine of the Byzantine period, the one located “in the Western part of the city. The tradition which associates Saint John with the site cannot pre-date the Medieval period installation. The attribution of patronage to Saint John may have been a Crusader initiative. The Roman Building’s original function had been forgotten, since the structure seems to have been abandoned after that date; perhaps as a result of the destruction of the city by the Persians in 614. The Amalfite merchants and the Benedictines servants of the chapel may have been unaware of the Saint John tradition when they settled in Jerusalem between 1023 and 1070. Indeed, according to our only written sources, this specific area housed a hospice for sick pilgrims dating back to the time of Charles the Great (c. 800), and is referred to in each instance by the appellation “Saint Mary” (or “Holy Mary”) and never by that of “Saint John”. We want to advance the hypothesis that the Saint John tradition cannot pre-date the Crusader period. An 11th century Benedictine-run church dedicated to Saint John the Almoner was also located near the Holy Sepulcher. It is distinctly possible that the Saint John *Prodromos* tradition is the result of a homonymic confusion. A dedication of Saint John *Prodromos* would have been more prestigious than that of the Almoner.

When the Crusaders conquered the city of Jerusalem in 1099, a number of injured soldiers sought and found shelter and medical care in the Amalfi hospice. A few years later, c. 1118, Raymond du Puy, the founder of the Order of Hospitaliers (also known as the Order of the

Knights of Malta), extended the work of the Amalfite Benedictines by erecting, in the area south of the Holy Sepulcher, a vast hospital complex. Officially charged with the care and defense of sacred sites, the Order preserved the appellation of Saint John the Baptist which was already associated with the site. They are now commonly known as the Order of the Knights of Saint John.

The conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187 signified a new page in its history. Continuity in terms of the hospital quarter was maintained, since Shehâb ed-Din, Saladin’s nephew, himself established a hospital in the very area in 1212. During the 14th century, the area continued to offer shelter and protection to foreign pilgrims. Meanwhile the quarter had lost its former glory, and Soliman pillaged the ruins in search of building materials intended for the restoration of the city’s ramparts. The property of the church of Saint John the Baptist was finally acquired by the Greek Church towards the end of the 15th century. The Greeks most likely transformed the basement into a chapel, and while it is possible that the structure was originally intended for the performance of cultic rites, we nonetheless have no evidentiary support that the ancient tri-apsed basement was ever used for such purposes prior to the 19th century. The site is still owned and maintained by the Greek Patriarchate.

The archaeological excavations by the École Biblique

Inventory of fixtures

Below the upper church exists an ancient and well-preserved crypt. It should be noted that

while the area may have been transformed into a chapel at some point in the Medieval period, our only evidence for the performance of cult at this site springs from the 19th century archives of the Greek Patriarchate. Having been closed to the public for about four decades, this site is considered by some, as aforesaid, to be the most ancient church in Jerusalem. The floor of the 19th century crypt lies 6m below the pavement of the courtyard above. The access to the basement is made possible via a staircase situated in the South-West corner of the courtyard. The staircase is not the original antique entry. We shall see that the modern building's access caused an inversion in the original axis of the monument.

The primary architectural structure of the crypt is a quite well preserved Roman building whose original purpose and date remain unknown. The excavation project is timely, in that it occasions the opportunity to determine the date of construction and possibly the purpose for which the monument was built. The floor plan is divided into two rooms. The main space has an unusual distribution: it is an oblong rectangle of 12.50 x 8m with two perpendicular aisles of unequal length. The longer of the two is delimited by two apses, each features a 3.20m radius, one oriented to the North and the other to the South. The shorter broad-sided aisle has one apse facing the East whose radius is 2.50m. The South-facing apse is the site of a monumental doorway (2.80 x 1.75m) that was once the principal entrance of the structure but which has since been sealed in order to accommodate the installation, just beyond its exterior threshold, of a Medieval cistern. The

entire Western length of the main room is paralleled by a long narrow room measuring 20x3m, which functioned as a corridor. The Eastern apse is now home to a fairly modern altar, which serves to define the ancient space as a Christian memorial site. The monument has been restored many times over the centuries but the original, antique masonry nonetheless has preserved to the height of 9m.

During the 12th century, the Crusaders disrupted the original spatial orientation of the Roman building in order to support the new medieval upper church. They set up several massive pillars and vaulting, thereby obscuring the antas of the exedras and the spring-courses of the cul-de-fours. The modern stone tiling was removed in its entirety from the damp basement flooring in order to accelerate the drying process.

General interpretation

The Roman edifice – The principal available architecture of the site consists of the main hall with the three exedras over which lies the medieval church. While the crypt replicates the original basement layout, the medieval foundations have narrowed the width of the room. The exedra plan necessitates cul-de-four vaults as well as a cupola over the crossing of the nave in the center. Large bays perforate the exedras, the eastern apse and the west wall, which give onto the corridor. Rising street levels over the centuries have completely sealed-off the bays, transforming what must once have been a luminous space into a basement crypt. We must accept that the building's original purpose remains unknown even today. What

little evidence we do have nonetheless troubles H. Vincent's interpretation of the site. While he produced a detailed study of the monument, he did so with an *a priori* eye. In his reconstitution of the master plan, the axis of the church is East-West. Vincent allowed himself to be influenced by the site's weighty Christian history, with the result that the identification of the architectural space as a Christian sanctuary was unavoidable. The Byzantine sources functioned as evidence *a priori*, silencing even the possibility of an argument for a North-South axis. While our plan shows the main entrance to be indisputably South-oriented, Vincent's plan, by contrast, reconstructs a well organized West-oriented entrance complete with three doors which corresponds exactly to the plan of a Byzantine basilica. In the Western face of the corridor, Vincent wrongly interpreted several irregular placing of the courses of the masonry as a restoration of the façade. The breaks are only constructed steps. He neglected to direct his attention to the exceptional size of the South-oriented doorway, which has now been cleared in part and measures 2.80m in height, 1.75m in width, and 1.55m in depth. Interestingly enough, the Southern doorway's weight-bearing arch measures only 0.96m in depth. The discrepancy in terms of depth argues for a monumental and protruding door-frame on the exterior Southern face. Furthermore, the South-facing door gives out onto an area of about 20m before it is delimited by the *decumanus*. There is enough space for either another building or a courtyard (with or without a portico), which runs exactly to type in terms of the prestigious architectural structures of the period.

The West-facing wall of the narrower "corridor" room (the one which parallels the length of the principal three-apsed room) is completely sealed. The corridor's only source of direct light was a large window built into the narrow North-facing wall. Contra Vincent, the masonry of the West wall lacks any and all signs of modification, let alone the vestiges of a past perforation. Recessed courses, a common enough practise in terms of Roman masonry, may have wrongly led him to believe that the wall had at some point been restored. Vincent further neglected to note the vertical groove in the door-way between the corridor and the main hall. The groove conclusively indicates that the wooden shutter would have opened from the main hall towards the corridor, and not the reverse. In terms of spatial configuration, the main hall functioned to accommodate circulation, whereas the (so-called) corridor served as a back-room or an annex. In addition, we noted traces of disrupted courses at the base of the Western wall of the corridor, which suggests a missing staircase, a vestige of the original building. As regards the series of arches which support the vaulting of the corridor, the springer of the Southern-most arch is higher than the others by one course, which signifies an ascent. The staircase, now missing, once reached a height of 6m above street level and must necessarily have led to either a hypothetical upper storey or onto a terrace. To conclude, Vincent's proofs for a Christian-specific sanctuary layout cannot be maintained anymore. We can entertain the possibility that the shrine which housed the prestigious Saint John head-reliquary may have benefitted

from an atypical structure, one not devoted to eucharistic liturgy, but we should also consider the possibility that the original building may have been intended as a secular space which was converted, during the Byzantine period, into a Christian shrine. While the North-South axis of the church is directionally oriented towards the Holy Sepulcher, it is so by coincidence and since the placement of our monument occupies to precision the South-West corner of Hadrian's *Aelia* forum.

Providing a date for the Roman structure was a major priority of our project. It should be asserted that following the excavation however, the dating remains uncertain. The original tiles were pillaged. A succession over time of structural transformations means that the underlying ground was disturbed. The proofs are therefore absent. If, by default, we consider the archeological structures as their own context, we are forced to accept that Christian structures built during the 4th to 6th centuries are done so according to late Roman architectural style and are therefore definitely Roman. It is difficult to point to any clear signs of stylistic evolution in terms of pre- and post-324 architectural monuments, particularly in light of the fact that the Oriental Roman style did not respect Occidental conventions. Better parallels for the building plan come from the recently excavated Roman baths in Sepphoris: main hall with apses and a broad corridor. However, despite extensive surveys in the disturbed ground of main hall, not a single bath-specific find was recovered, such as expected pier tiles from a *hypocaust* or *tubuli* for the walls of the bath. It is now clear that the structure was never a bath, but may

have been a public building. Indeed, a Roman edifice from Alesia in Burgundy (France), a lay public building, provides us with our only parallel in terms of architectural ground plan. When we initiated the investigation of the Saint John church in November 2010, we might easily have attributed the building to Hadrian's re-foundation of Jerusalem as *Aelia Capitolina*. In light of the fact that we unearthed a definitive Roman level beneath the floor of the main exedra hall, however, the latter could be either Constantinian, or, as Byzantine sources suggest, built by Eudokia, or finally, and even more probable, Justinian. Each potential building agent is a Roman ruler whose building projects date to the Late Roman period.

It should be further suggested that the Roman/Constantinian, most likely secular structure, as it does not feature any known Christian sacred plan, may have been converted for re-use into a shrine or a church in the 5th century. We know that the Emperor Anastasius built a church in Jordan, c. 500, marking the site of the baptism of Saint John as it existed in the Byzantine symbolic imaginary. Considering Anastasius' interest in John the Baptist, it is conceivable that the Emperor would build a shrine for him in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Technical report for floors and underground of the crypta

a – principal survey “a” in the center of the main hall (Figs. 1a-b)

The objective of principal survey “A” (16 m²), implemented between the foundational piers of the upper medieval church, was to establish

specifics regarding the origins of the Roman exedra building as well as those of pre-existing construction levels. The survey hit bedrock at a depth of 4m below the modern pavement tiles, approximately 10m below the monastery courtyard. We should note here the absence of stratigraphic evidence for the Roman exedra building: the medieval piers, in vertical alignment with the implementation of our survey, had effectively retreaded and masked the Roman ashlars.

We have established the following stratifications:

A 1 – The Medieval flooring, replaced by the modern pavement tiles, must have been removed at an unknown point in time as no evidence of its existence remains on site. The unevenly

layered ground beneath the pavement had been leveled with crushed limestone into which had been mixed modern artefacts, signifying that the floor had been repaired as late as the beginning of the 20th century. An archival record belonging to the Greek Patriarchate from 1929 refers to the restoration of the crypt for liturgical purposes. The pavement we removed from the crypt dates back to this specific event. It is interesting to note that A.C. Dickie, who visited the site in 1898, mentions that the floor of the crypt was 10cm below the medieval pavement of the Eastern apse, which was absolutely not the case when we began this investigation.

A 2 – Two medieval pits with glazed pottery from the 14th-15th centuries. These correspond to the Mamluk period which briefly precedes



1a Undisturbed stratification in sounding A



1b Undisturbed stratification in sounding A

the purchase of the site, in the late 15th century, by the Greek Patriarchate and the subsequent reconstitution, again by the Greeks, of the structure as a cultic site.

A 3 – Roman pavement slabs were reused, by the Crusaders, as foundation blocks for the Medieval piers of the upper church. The only surviving example of Medieval pavement slabs at the site is that of the Eastern apse. The paving stones are of varying sizes and were probably pillaged from a variety of sites. Based on size alone, the slabs might have been lifted from Roman streets. While the stones themselves are Roman in origin, their re-use the pavement of the Eastern apse dates to the medieval period.

A 4 – A large Byzantine refuse pit reaches a depth of 1.80 m below modern floor level. Based on preliminary observations, the pottery found in the pit dates to the 6th-7th centuries. A refuse pit of this nature contradicts the idea of continuity in terms of a Byzantine cultic site. Assuming a Byzantine sanctuary did exist at this location, it is possible that it was destroyed by Chosroes II of Persia in 614 and was never reconstituted thereafter. Nonetheless, we must repeat, at this juncture, that our archeological labours produced no evidence whatsoever for the existence of a Christian cult at the site, and that the hypothesis of a head-reliquary shrine dedicated to Saint John is only supported by text-based historical sources.

A 5 – The Byzantine and Medieval pits disturbed what was once a heterogeneous levelling. We find the levelling in a much more stable state

in the oriental section of the excavated area: thin layers of gravel and small stones alternate with thicker layers of loose brown clay. It is our supposition that the levelling is all that remains of the history of the construction of the floor of the Roman building.

A 6 – A thick aggregate of red clay has been extensively disrupted, no doubt due to an extensive search, by Roman builders, for ashlar chalk blocks. The red clay contains many such blocks of chalk, mixed-in with numerous fragments of roofing tiles, some exhibiting Latin stamps. The ashlar blocks, still in place, are identical to those which were re-used in the constitution of the foundations of the Roman exedra building. The blocks are the dismantled products of what must once have been a structure of noteworthy architectural elegance: the edged sides of the hewn stone were dressed by stone chisel, and the dimensions of the blocks themselves are relatively constant, measuring 100 x 50 cm in size. A long corbel with a rounded end recovered here must have delimited the reach of a large door lintel. Indeed, a second round-ended corbel, a symmetrical match to the first, was recovered *in situ* in the Roman foundation of the so-called corridor-room to the West. Unit A6 consequently represents the collapse of building A7.

A 7 – An occupation level with lime mortar flooring is connected to a carefully structured masonry which foundation reaches all the way to bedrock. The summit of the masonry in question is intact: it is built like pavement, with a consistent surface. Measuring 1.03m,

it resembles a stylobate, despite being built of heterogeneous dressed stones. While we exposed 4 m worth of the masonry's length, we are as yet unable to connect it to any other nearby structure. Its foundation is made of salvaged blocks, pillaged from random buildings, and includes a few fragments of high-end architecture. The soffit of one particularly beautiful fragment of entablature is adorned with a rectangular-patterned series of 18 mutules (Fig. 2); the fragment's modenature, classical in style, is incomplete. Nevertheless, based on a preliminary assessment, we attribute the fragment to the ornamental repertoire of the late Hellenized orient. The decontextualized fragment, a solitary witness to a dismantled roman Hellenized building, it might in fact

belong to a ruined Herodian structure. Doric element as such appears to be more akin to Herodian architecture particularly in light of the earlier phase that yielded the painted plaster, sets the stage for the following section, A9: a phantom edifice.

A 8 – A massive fill rests on bedrock, 4m below the medieval foundation (A2). This undisturbed fill yielded an abundance of pottery sherds. The pottery can be dated to the Herodian period without hesitation—mid-1st century BC to mid-1st century AD. The collection has yielded a number of fragments of Jewish hand-cut chalk vessels, specific to the Jerusalemite repertoire of the 1st century AD. We also recovered hundreds fragments of painted plaster. If we consider



2 Entablature fragment from the foundation A7

these finds alongside the high-quality ashlar remains, in addition to the decorated segment of entablature, there is a high likelihood of our having excavated a refuse-area dating to Herod's Jerusalem. We have two options in terms of dating the fill: i) the clearing-away of debris of Herod's ruined city in the period preceding AD70; or ii) the period following the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus (post AD70).

a) The fill precedes the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. There are points which argue in favour of a refuse-area in a domestic urban context. The morphology of the fill itself does not correspond to the organized levelling typical of a destruction layer. Its tip-line, like the bedrock upon which it sits, tilts gently towards the east and hints to habitual deposit practises. The fill consists of a series of layers of medium thickness (about 20 cm), each reiterating the same compositional elements: gnarls of domestic ash, numerous sherds of delicate pottery, a few rare instances of amphorae, and a complete absence of dolia. To be more specific, the layers of the fill consist largely of kitchen-ware, along with animal remains, numerous small jars—always with the same neck and large folded vertical rim with comparison for example to the Masada or the Jewish Quarter reports, a number of cooking pots with carinated shoulders, a high proportion of small jugs, pilgrim flasks with asymmetrical bodies and twisted handles, and, finally, thin-walled goblets and bowls with a variety of rim styles. The glass goblets, marked just below the inner rim by one or two grooves, are characteristic of the late Hellenistic period. The fill in its entirety suggests a refuse area in proximity to

an aristocratic quarter.

At least a century later, a foundation trench would have cut the fill A8 for the purposes of installing stylobate A7.

b) Alternately, stylobate A7 and the fill A8 are contemporaneous. In this view, the foundation trench does not exist. The deposition of layers abutting the foundation at A7 is contemporaneous with its installation. The layering of the fill and the erecting of the foundation would have occurred simultaneously. Having attained the level of the stylobate, the layering would no longer been necessary and the process would have ceased. The layers under discussion are part of a levelling project of much greater scope, one logistical step among many in what was ultimately to result in the reconstruction of the entire quarter north-east of the Citadel. What appears to be a foundation trench is in fact a defective compression layer built up against the foundation blocks. The fill therefore post-dates the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and can be attributed to the founding of Aelia Capitolina, by Hadrian. The argument in favour of this hypothesis springs from the numerous fragments of painted plaster recovered from the fill. These painted remnants are dispersed with consistent regularity throughout the layers of the fill and have their origin in what was once a luxurious edifice. An older building had been destroyed. The paradoxical absence of ashlar chalk blocks in the fill could be the result of systematic pillaging at the time of the construction of stylobate A7. In conclusion, it bears repeating that the A7 stylobate and the A8 fill are probably contemporaneous.

We lean towards this second hypothesis despite the absence, in the fill, of chalk blocks and construction debris, and the contradictory abundance of high quality pottery.

A9 – A shadow architecture. The ashlar chalk blocks of the stylobate foundation lack homogeneity despite their being skilfully dressed. Some were hewn from hard white limestone and display a squared face (approximately 45 x 45 cm) bordered by a margin, cut by chisel and perpendicular to the herring-bone markings, and retaining a hammerblow surface. The other blocks are of greater size (100 x 50 x 50 cm) and were extracted from a bed of soft white chalk. These also display chiselled margins, either perpendicular or angled, and have a large central face that has been entirely levelled by angled graver markings. These larger blocks are identical to those which were recovered in the A6 collapse of building A7.

The remains of the architecture from sections A6 and A7—the large headers with chiselled margins, the rounded corbel, the sculpted entablature—were all extracted from the same characteristic soft chalk. The soundings in the corridor to the West yielded additional blocks of monumental architecture, such as drum sections and another corbel, whose composition is again soft chalk. All of them can be sourced to a single dismantled edifice, one which predates the period in question. The blocks—contemporaneous with the high-end pottery of the refuse-pit and dated to a period preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD—are objects of reuse in the systematic urban restructuration of Jerusalem. The

shadow architecture can reasonably have been a casualty of the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. It must then be attributed to the city of the Herodian dynasty and as such pre-dates the destruction of Jerusalem. The shadow architecture cannot have been in any way a part of Hadrian's forum.

B and C – Soundings in the Southern apse

The purpose of the investigation of the Southern exedra was to find some sign, in the Roman exedra building, of the floor, which has completely disappeared, and to verify therein for a level complement to the A7 stylobate, which was detected in central sounding A.

Soundings B and C

(B West, 1.21.19: 4 x 1.25m)

(C East, 1.20.10: 3 x 1.25m)

A trench (4 x 1.25m) was implemented against the Medieval foundation, to the West of the Southern apse. It abuts the launching of the arc of the exedra and encroaches slightly onto the Southern edge of the threshold of the monumental doorway. The trench was to have shown the combination of the two foundations, Medieval and Roman. Another trench (3 x 1.25) was implemented eastward, abutting the Medieval foundation, but not reaching the curved apparatus of the exedra.

B-C 1 – Below the modern paving stones, set in place in 1926, numerous glass, faience, and metal objects, all recent, are witness to an extensive levelling of the main portions of the floor of the crypta.

B 2 – The Medieval foundation of the piers of the upper church: the large Roman slabs, or sections

of re-used slabs, which sustain the foundation layer of the piers are embedded in an aggregate of stones, bound together by a dark and ashy mortar which is highly resistant. The stone aggregate, about 40 cm in thickness, extends 35 cm beyond, and is in vertical alignment with, the Medieval piers. By contrast, the Roman slabs which sustain the base of the piers extend beyond them by no more than 10-20 cm. Concerning the pavement slabs, we had initially assumed, *a priori*, that the dispersal of large slabs wedged beneath the walls of the Roman exedra building were the sole remaining vestiges of the original Roman flooring. We quickly came to see that this was not the case. The flooring of the Roman exedra building has in fact completely disappeared. In the Southern-most section of the corridor, West of the exedra building, only two small stone slabs remain. These 12 -15 cm thick slabs have decidedly retained their original placement. The layers beneath the slabs are undisturbed and the stratigraphy is intact. The small size of the tiles corresponds to the Roman edifice in terms of both proportion and style. The large slabs of the exedra building however contradict the integrity of the Roman structure: their disproportionately large and irregular size (up to 1.70m in length, and 0.50m in thickness) belies the delicate masonry of the walls. The slabs are moreover embedded below the Medieval foundation (a point we shall clarify shortly). In the Southern wing, it is clear that the Roman-style paving stones are not contemporaneous with the Roman building. The soil below the pavement has been disturbed in its entirety due to repeated pillaging for stone blocks. As a group,

the large paving stones lack homogeneity and come from different venues, with consequent variations in size, material, and cut. As such, they are in standard conformity with the slabs used to pave Roman streets. Finally, we had at first assumed that the paving stones still wedged in the walls were the only vestiges of the original Roman pavement, the rest having been pillaged. But we also know that one had to descend, and not ascend, in order to enter the Roman building. If we consider the fact that the pavement slabs are wedged under the walls at a height of 7 cm above the threshold of the monumental door to the South, we have clear evidence for a late dating: the large slabs are of Roman manufacture and were re-used, by Medieval architects, as foundation platforms for the upper church.

It is reasonable to suggest that the paving stones were extracted from derelict Roman streets at a period of time during which the Crusaders were radically reorganizing the urban fabric of Jerusalem (c. 1100). The paving-stones from Roman streets made for foundation materials that were durable, easy to set in place, and economical.

B 3 – The medieval pier intersects with a compact fill made up of crushed field stones mixed-in with red clay and large sherds of jars. One of the sherds is an ostrakon. The graffiti corresponds to the characteristic large Arabic script of the high-Medieval style. Both the sherds and the ostrakon point to a High Middle Age occupation, and may corroborate additional traces of a pre-Crusader installation, excavated in the corridor (infra: soundings in the corridor).

B 4 – Deep trenches which lean against platform B5 are in association with trenches excavated in A2 (central sounding). They can be dated to the end of the Middle Ages.

B-C 5 – A massive platform occupies the entire surface of the Southern exedra (Figs. 3-4). Its exposed Northern face is in precise alignment with the two antes of the exedra. The platform is clearly the solid foundation of the Southern wing of the Roman building. While the Northern face of the platform is more or less vertical, its frontage is devoid of regularity: it is the crudely-built wall of a terrace. Subsequent soundings confirmed that the wall functions to delimit the platform, and that the platform consists of a mass of large stones, carelessly thrown

together. The Mamluk trenches which abut the wall of the platform have partly obscured the foundation trench. The foundation trench was subsequently identified in the stratification levels below the Mamluk pits. It extends to the bedrock. It is worth noting the exceptional importance of the foundation to the structural integrity of the Roman building. The sheer weight of the construction would have exerted extreme pressure: were we to restore its architectural elevation, the building would require cul-de-fours on the three exedras and a cupola at the crossing of the two naves. We must also note that frequent earthquakes over the span of two millennia have failed to alter the unity of the load-bearing apparatus whose elevation, in some areas, is conserved to a height of close to 9 m.



3 The platform foundation of the south exedra

The platform, which extends over the entire surface area of the apses, drops down over two meters in depth below the ground course of the exedra, and in alignment with the antes. We were not able to verify that the platform also supports the Southern face of the building, although this seems likely. The platform may even extend beyond the building's exterior alignment. Only the North face of the platform is exposed, from which can be seen the irregularities of the foundation. The bulk of the platform is an accumulation of large unsquared blocks. Its summit is leveled with a bed of uncut stones or quarry splinters, covered with a dark grey ash mortar. The ash mortar is sealed, in its turn, by a fine coating of lime-plaster with

yellowish tint. The lime-plaster coating extends only as far as the base course of the apses wall. The successive layerings clearly served to accommodate the now vanished Roman floor. The fact that the characteristics of a foundation are apparent has not prevented different visitors to the site, from a variety of local institutions, to interpret the massive B / C platform as a remnant of Jerusalem's Iron Age rampart. The manner of its construction is indeed similar and can give that impression: a crude apparatus of irregular courses, as well as the sheer mass of the construction. That said, massive walls made of large stones, carelessly thrown-together, is a phenomenon that remains constant over time and space since the material of the



4 Sounding B, northern face of the platform

construction does not change. A section of what is assumed to be the late Iron Age rampart, at this particular location, moreover does not sit well in terms of potential city layouts that might logistically relate this site to the Citadel in the South-West, where Iron Age remnants have been found. We noted earlier that chalk blocks and quarry splinters of the same material punctuate the surface area of the platform; like soundings A8 and A9, these chalk elements are products of the dismantling of the Herodian level. The platform necessarily postdates this destruction event. Erratic traces of the Iron Age have been identified at the base of the platform. It has however been verified that the thin Iron Age layer underlies the platform and is not associated with it.

An alternative was proposed, namely that the platform could have been part of the massive leveling for the establishment of the southwest corner of Hadrian's Forum. While the precise layout of the forum is unknown, we assume its extension to be delimited by the main avenues of circulation still in use today, and patterned on the same plan as the old Roman streets. We now suspect that our Roman building does not sit over the angle of the forum, and that the angle of the forum is located 25 meters South of the Roman building, at the intersection of two modern streets.

While we do not doubt that the platform is the foundation of the Roman exedra building, confirmation would have been dependent on the recovery, beneath the remaining two apses, of matching platforms. This investigation however was not possible. The ground below the pavement of the North-oriented exedra has

been completely disrupted by the insertion of a Medieval cistern. The Oriental exedra is paved with heavy slabs that date back to the Middle-Ages and stabilize the load-bearing walls. A sounding in that apse is not permitted as it could result in the staggering of the medieval piers: the ground beneath displays irregular compaction.

B-C 6 – A red clay collapse resulting from the destruction of B7 corresponds to the clay collapse of A6. It contains the same chalk limestone blocks, and few sherds, with the exception of the large roof tile fragments well attested in A6.

B 7 – A low dry stone wall, running East-West, with only its lower course preserved, and which should have been the foundation of a partition wall associated with the stylobate A7. The two levels, separated by a distance of four meters, correspond in elevation.

B-C 8 – A dump with regularized layers of accumulation contains stones mixed with dark brown soil. It corresponds to the fill A8, contemporaneous with the stylobate construction A7.

B-C 9 – On the bedrock, an accumulation of quarry splinters, which are the product of the exploitation of a quarry, contains some late Iron Age sherds. The site was located outside the city walls.

D – The main door and an external Medieval cistern

The door that opens onto the Southern exedra was the Roman building's principal point of

access. The entrance's imposing dimensions themselves invite this assessment: its height measures 2.80m, with a median width of 1.75 m. The doorway broadens as it descends, measuring 1.90m in width at its threshold. The tilt of the doorway skews the structure's vertical lines, which serves to effect a perspectival emphasis onto the entrance, thereby solemnizing it. In a later period, a cistern was installed against the Southern face of the edifice, and the doorway was sealed.

The cistern was sealed-off in 1972—a measure of prevention against cholera. The safety of the location necessitated an investigation into the sector and provided an excellent opportunity to survey the exterior of the Roman building. The cistern is an empty space which should have facilitated an examination of the main door frame. Conrad Schick, who mapped out the Muristan in 1902, charts the existence of a large exterior cistern on this very spot. We assume that the cistern may have been a shared point of support for the boutiques above at the time of their construction in 1907. The exterior cistern to the South of the Roman building is most probably co-terminus with the conversion of the of the Northern apse into an underground water reserve; as hospitals are in great need of water, both cisterns may be linked to the establishment of the Muristan in the 12th century. The same mortar which binds the blockading of the principal Southern door also seals the cistern in the Northern apse.

The humidity in the Southern section of the crypt may be caused by an infiltration of water sourced to the condemned cistern, out of use since 1972. As mentioned earlier, the issue of the site's safety

and sanitation provided an added opportunity to better understand the Southern exedra's stately facade. Our objective was to access the cistern, remove the hydraulic plaster, and investigate the door-jamb and lintel. A decision was taken to break through the blockage.

A breach was made in the lower right-hand section of the blockage, large enough to accommodate one person. The work was difficult due to the great size of the blocks, the highly resilient mortar, and the 1.50m thick masonry. A surface enquiry confirms that the cistern was sealed off in 1972 with modern pavement tiles. It was not possible to access the cistern from the opening at its top. Once the inner coating of the cistern had been pierced, we were flooded with dirty water. After the evacuation of 20 m³ of water by pump, the opening of the cistern gave onto an area filled with stone blocks, rusted metal, and rotting wood. Clean-up was halted due to the hazards of collapsing debris. The work of clean-up is to be undertaken by appropriate means in the context of the restoration project. Once clean-up has taken place, we can intervene and remove the plaster from the facade of the Roman building. It is within the realm of possibility that the lintel bears an inscription.

Drying the cistern will enable the restoration project's complete de-blocking of the doorway—an undertaking we strongly encourage. As a result, we will be in a position to procure data of great significance to the interpretive task. With a large enough space set deep in the recesses of the cistern, and with the help of artificial lighting, we will be able to restore the original disposition of the Roman building.

E – Soundings in the Northern exedra

In the Northern exedra, the smooth surface of the modern pavement evinced, without apparent reason, a slope ascending Northward. The removal of the paving-slabs revealed the remains of a cistern, whose initial construction and subsequent decommissioning and filling had to be dated (Fig 5).

E 1 – The modern pavement had been levelled with an eye to the horizontal point of the vertical alignment of the protruding foundation slabs with the Medieval piers, to the East and to the West. The restoration in 1929 can have concerned no more than the fixing of the gaps in the pavement and the complete re-grouting of the joins between the slabs, as certain paving stones had remained carefully inlaid over a traditional bed of lime mortar, whereas other large slabs had been inserted into a bed of modern grey cement. Louis Vincent's otherwise detailed report of the site (1919) does not mention the pavement, probably because the crypta had not been entirely cleared at the time of his research. Yet, Vincent's precursor, the Englishman Dickie, who visited the site in 1894, remarked that the floor of the main hall lay 10 cm below that of the Eastern apse which houses the altar, a normal enough arrangement for a church. The pavement we removed, however, was definitely in horizontal alignment with the Medieval paving-stones of the Eastern apse. Should we then consider that the pavement we removed dates to 1929, and that the renovations with cement, which we noted earlier, date to an even later period? In either case, a levelling

of the entire surface area of the trefoil edifice was undertaken in the first part of the 20th century and cannot predate this time-frame. Industrial gravel, as well as modern glass and metal objects, were mixed into pockets of ash. We suggest that the dismantled pavement is that of 1929. The workers who installed the pavement could not have failed to come up against the underlying stumps of the destroyed cistern vault, which were especially protuberant towards the North. Instead of clipping them, the workers left the stumps in place and levelled the floor on a slight Northward incline. The restoration project will have to take this fact into account.

E 2 - The cistern occupies the entire surface of the Northern nave and descends 3m underground. Its installment probably necessitated the complete removal of underlying layers of archaeological sediment. The cistern is contemporaneous with the Medieval upper church. The actual point of entry, in the North-East corner, was accessed via the street, and consisted of a passage with ascending steps. The steps did not lead to the floor of the crypt; they led to the top (then intact) of the cistern vault which at that time would have been at the level of the well. The protruding vault of the cistern was later clipped-off and its body filled to restore, to the crypt, a floor that was level from North to South. The fill of the cistern yielded a quantity of imported glazed pottery from the Mamluk period. We assume that the architectural restructuring of the underground crypt corresponds to its conversion, by the Greeks in the 15th century, into a chapel.



5 General view of northern nave with the medieval cistern

F – The soundings F, G, H, J in the broad back room: the corridor (Fig 6)

We noted earlier that the back room (West-facing) might have functioned as a corridor providing access to a flight of stairs and leading to a hypothetical second storey or terrace.

The corridor's elongated surface area (20x3m) might very well be suited to this purpose. Its West-facing load-bearing wall exhibits an unusual thickness of 2m. The wall's mass does not directly offset the pressure from either the cul-de-fours or the cupola, and its thickness is therefore not useful. Some commentators offer the hypothesis that the West wall, for some unknown reason, was later doubled, and that in its original plan, the corridor would have been wider by 1m (Vincent and Abel 1922: 642–649). A quick glance at the West-wall masonries, however, speaks clearly to the rigorous architectural unity of corridor apparatus and trefoil hall. Moreover, the North-facing wall of the corridor is perforated by a now occluded yet well situated window. The window is not the product of renovations of late date; it is identical in size and shape to that of the Northern exedra. The strong North light was needed to illumine the axis of the corridor once the Southern end had been occluded by the staircase. The corridor was not a cryptoportico. In conclusion, the present implementation of the corridor should be considered original. The unusually thick West wall is in actuality a doubled wall. The doubling of the masonry stems from the exterior and can be dated to the Medieval period. The exterior wall—1m in thickness—is the foundation for the upper church. The sharp angle, south-west

of the Greek church, is the result of a radical modification to the foundations of the ancient Roman building; it exhibits homogeneous courses which are in perfect continuity with the medieval facade (restored in 1835).

Four soundings were implemented in the Southern half of the corridor : F, G, H, J. The objective of the soundings was to document the foundations of the Eastern and Western walls of the corridor. Soundings F, G, H, that were implemented against the Eastern wall, exhibit identical stratigraphic sequences reaching all the way to the bedrock, between 2.90 and 3.20m in depth. The bedrock underlying the trefoil hall reached greater depth, approximately 4 m. Nothing indicates, however, that a natural slope inclines downward to the East since bedrock exhibits traces of a quarry of late Iron Age exploitation, one which is old enough to have been in use extra muros. It would be interesting to compare it with the iron age quarry recently uncovered by Sholmit Weksler-Bdolach in Western Wall's plaza excavations. The Roman building was settled over a rock cut stage, lying below another rock cut stage to the West, namely the site of the pool of Hezekiah (or the Pool of the Patriarch's Bath) whose occupation of the site dates back to Antiquity. Its eastern dyke, which flows downstream, is in alignment with the sharp rise separating the two stages. The foundations of the wall between the corridor and the main hall are, at every point, installed on bedrock. The large chalk blocks in the foundation courses are clearly a re-use; they have, as their point of origin, the shadow architecture of A9. The chalk blocks were somewhat clumsily stacked one over the other



6 Sounding F - Umayyad/Abbasid period (close up)

with a modicum of attention to detail, and form the basis of 5 to 6 courses, the equivalent of 3m in height. We can assume that the foundation stems from a deep trench. The lower part of the foundation seems to have been a ditch which was filled with field stones and broken chalk boulders. When the workers hit bedrock, they threw down the field stones to create a levelled bed for the 5 foundation courses, which are crowned by a carefully matched set of chalk blocks, vertically aligned on the South end and protruding by 10 cm on the North end. A comprehensive investigation of the stratigraphy would consequently permit us to date the Roman building.

F1 – The purpose of sounding F was to investigate the Southern part of the corridor which abuts the modern staircase. The staircase sits on a steep slope of debris, thrown down through the opening and originating from the courtyard. The pottery from the dump represents the more recent sherds—16th and 17th centuries—collected at the site. The presence of a dump demonstrates that the basement was abandoned during this period. The massive support buttress which effaces half the modern door (the one which gives onto the courtyard) rests on the same steep slope of debris. The buttress may have been built to manage the space for the right-angled staircase. The modern access, with its two tiers of steps, was a carelessly done renovation. The base of the dump reaches a massive build-up of horizontal layers that bend towards the Eastern wall of the corridor, sealing a well built basin. The basin was discovered at the extremity of the

sounding and was cleared according to a width of only 20 cm. The basin was clipped at the level of the two paving stones from the original Roman building at F2. Based on stratigraphy, we were able to reconstitute its height at 45 cm above the Roman tiles and its depth at 90 cm below. It follows that the basin was immersed in a refuse-pit that covered the pavement: the corridor reflects a state of abandon. By chance, the basin yielded two intact lamps from its depths, which date to the late Umayyad / early Abbasid periods. By the 8th century, the Roman building had lost its noble status. We suggest that the building was destroyed by Chosroes II in 614 and was never restored. It was probably converted into a workshop.

F2 – As per sounding F, only two tiles escaped the repeated pillaging of the original pavements of the Roman building. These can give us an idea as to the original covering of the floor. The tiles are of modest size in comparison to those we believe to have been extracted from ancient Roman streets and re-used for the Medieval foundation. While they differ in length, their width and thickness are constant: 75 cm and 12-15 cm respectively. The tiles, found in situ, had never been removed and rested on a foundation raft of quarry scraps, 25 cm thick, coated with a fine grey mortar.

F3 – The stratigraphy below the two tiles in situ is impeccable. Thin layers succeed one another without transition and are cut by the foundation trench. The 1st century pottery demonstrates with clarity that the top layers of the stratification pre-date the erecting of the

Roman building. Indeed, pottery sherds and gnarls of ash so saturate the compacted soil that we hesitated to attribute these layers to a fill, and considered instead attributing them to the vestiges of an occupation layer. The hypothesis that the Roman exedra building dates to the 4th or 5th century, and is thus Byzantine, remains a possibility, particularly in light of ancient sources. Nevertheless, no Byzantine layer was detected.

We noted a discrepancy in terms of equivalent levels between the exedra hall on one hand and the corridor on the other. The A8 fill at bedrock level in the sounding of the hall yielded pottery from the Herodian period, and lies almost 2.50m below corresponding levels in the corridor. The two areas may have been separated by a wall, which could explain the disparity of the levels, but we have no evidence of one. It makes more sense to suggest that the horizon of the 1st century is in situ in the corridor and that the lower fill in the main hall at A8 is the result of its having been torn out when the A7 stylobate was erected.

G1 and H1 – Directly below the low quality pavement and its modern foundation raft, we marked out a layer of clay which deserves attention. The layer, which faced, in part, the door which gives onto the hall, reached 60 cm in depth. The composition of the material was surprising: dark grey clay saturated with water. When dry, the clay had a pale grey tint. Its compact state derives from a process of levitation; the clay was free of all admixtures. We thought at first of waterproofing measures for the central sector of the corridor. The layer

of clay however is better understood as the remnant of a process of clay decantation in a potter's workshop. The grey tint and the high quality of the material indicate that the clay was probably used locally for faience imitations.

G2 and H2 – The stratification is the same as that of sounding F. The foundation trench is clearly marked. The foundation of the Eastern wall of the corridor is here again made with large chalk blocks. In sounding G, a block of architecture can be interpreted either as the base of a capital or as the drum of an engaged column. Also to be included here is the large corbel, parallel in both symmetry and size to that extracted in sounding A.

The foundation in sounding H yielded the drum of a column, whose diameter we estimate to be 52 cm. These fragments complete the architectural set which we have attributed to the shadow architecture A9.

Sounding J, implemented against the West-facing wall of the corridor, brought to light a different type of foundation.

J1 – The ashy beaten earth underlying the modern pavement yielded two Justinian Byzantine coins (to be verified). Intriguingly enough, this level does not abut the spring-course of the wall, but abuts instead a faulty setting which marks the summit of the foundation. A bench or another installation may have disappeared. We cannot conclude on this basis that the floor level is Byzantine, since a Byzantine occupation at this site is already in context: we know the building was frequented in the 5th and 6th centuries.

J2 – The West wall rests on flat stones, thickened with a coarse and resistant mortar. The bed of flat stones covers a compact agglomerate which here constitutes the base of the foundation and measures no more than 1m in depth. The builders felt, no doubt, that the ground in this particular area was sufficiently compact and could support a heavy wall. The foundation trench is evident, and cuts the layers of thick ashy fill in which were recovered 1st century pottery sherds. We conclude that the venue of the West-facing wall of the corridor is identical to that of the one facing East, and that it is indeed part of the original plan of the Roman building.

K – Investigation, in the main hall, of the foundation of the separation wall (orientation East) between the main hall and the corridor (Fig 7)

Sounding K, implemented in face of the doorway between the main hall and the corridor, served to answer questions which had arisen as a result of sounding H. By the time of its completion, sounding K connected to sounding A in the center of the main hall. Over the course of sounding H, in the northernmost section of the corridor, we noted that the foundation of the threshold of the doorway was made with large blocks, as is the case elsewhere, but these were without a trace of either mortar or filler materials. A rod was inserted into the space up to a length of 3m without being able to indicate its directionality. In the hopes of solving the anomaly, it was decided to implement a sounding facing the door, on the main hall side.

The threshold sits on a foundation less than 1m in depth. The builders encountered an heap of fallen blocks which they judged to be reasonably solid. These blocks are arranged in a manner reminiscent of a collapse, such as that of masonry. They are cut from chalk material to the standard of the A 9 blocks and are in association with the tile fragments of the aggregate that seals the stylobate. We propose that they be considered as the collapse of the North-South wall of the construction at A 7 (Hadrian in date).

The odd empty space under the threshold might be the result of a water-based process of erosion dating back to a period when the building was abandoned without its roof. Precipitation runoff



7 The fallen disposition of the western wall of level A7 sounding K

from the courtyard onto the debris leads to this exact spot.

L – Clean-up in the dormer of the Southern vault

Medieval groined vaults crown the hall. In the Southern section, a dormer opens out at a height of 3m. It is large enough to accommodate one person. The length of the passage of the dormer window reproduces precisely the thickness of the Medieval pier in which it lies embedded, namely 1.50m. The inner small room is well constructed and once inside, it is possible

to stand up. The small room is the embrasure of the Roman window, measuring 1.56m in width, which was effectively condemned by the piers of the medieval foundations. Its summit is the arch of the window. The area was half filled with stones, thrown in from the street, at the time of the construction of the modern Muristan pavements towards the beginning of the 20th century. One square meter's worth of stones was removed from the dormer for measuring purposes. One imagines a clandestine passage, accessible from the street, at a point in time when the building was abandoned.

Notes

- 1 The excavation of the *École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem* was conducted at Saint John Prodromos, Jerusalem - property of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Jerusalem. The work was supported by the Levantis Foundation.
- 2 Cf. Vincent and Abel 1922: 642–649.
- 3 Jean Rufus possibly makes a reference to the existence, in Jerusalem, of a church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist during the 6th century

(*Plérophories*, 512). Such a church may have been founded in the mid 5th century by Juvenal or by the Empress Eudoxie, or perhaps later, between 513 and 524, during the time of Patriarch John, son of Marcian, the Bishop of Sebaste (Vincent 1922: 644). All dates noted in the paper are AD unless otherwise stated.

Bibliography

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