

## The Macellum in the Economy of Gerasa

Since 1984, the excavation, study and restoration work performed in the Roman city of Gerasa in the Provincia Arabia by various research groups, archaeological missions and the Jordanian Department of Antiquities have brought to light vestiges and remains with which we can begin to fill in some details of the history of the city, and to take a different viewpoint of other work on which merely provisional conclusions had been based.

The unceasing activity and preoccupation of the Department of Antiquities, and the increase in the number of teams of archaeologists and researchers, have led to further changes in our view of the city of several years ago.

Accepted theories have been replaced by new ones, some ideas have given ground to others, but, above all, the history of the city of Jarash, first Roman, then Byzantine, and Umayyad up to the present day, still contributes valuable data with which to construct the historical framework of the region on a solid basis.

The Spanish Archaeological Mission, under the direction of the author since 1984, has been in charge of a central area of the old city, in which the excavations of the University of Jordan under Dr. Barghouti, continued years later with the Spanish participation in the Gerasa Project and published by Olavarri, gave an overview of what that central area offered. This was all a continuation of the work performed in the '30s by American teams, who discovered the first Gerasa groups, and with them the *cardo maximus*, on which our work area is located.

All these precedents gave a general, imprecise and often vague or erroneous idea of the function of these remains and particularly of their identification. Evidently, the small research base to date did not support more precise assessment.

Since 1984, and intensely since 1986, the work of the Spanish Archaeological Mission has expanded considerably, thanks to which the field work and the consolidation, restoration and laboratory work as well as the study of structures and materials have proceeded at a rapid pace. The presence of teams of archaeologists and restorers on site eight months a year, in larger numbers, has led to a decisive change in our knowledge of the physiognomy of

that sector of Gerasa.

The research work performed has been described briefly in Martín-Bueno 1987 - 1989, which describe the progress made and the interpretation of structural and material remains. The building we excavated was identified as a *macellum* or Roman food market, with genuinely classical type and layout, and very pure proportions, which place it among the best examples in the Roman Empire.

This building played an important commercial role, both because of its basic function, and because of its role as a focus of trade attraction in a very central area of the city of Gerasa.

Ancient sources say little about the commercial function of Gerasa and of the Decapolis to which it belonged. Although they do mention the city and its neighbours, their purpose is not mentioned, so we do not know if this association was political, or commercial, and the information at hand does not allow us to define the nature of this relation and the links involved.

Gerasa is, nevertheless, one of the largest cities of this group, or at least the one which was most developed, as evidenced by its size. Its origins are unclear, since the remains found in some high areas inside the sector belong to very old settlements, and we cannot be sure that there was continuity between these and the classical Gerasa which is the object of our research, but there was clearly a tradition of occupation in a territory with certain facilities for the presence of human groups. Of interest in this context is the work by Braemer in recent years, which defines the ancient levels of occupation around the beginning of the first millennium B.C.

The morphological characteristics of the *macellum* building itself show it to be a monumental construction, with its facade onto the *cardo maximus* of the city being located on the main axis of urban development. However, the special urban layout of Gerasa, the fact that it is located in a valley and fed by a stream means that the grid scheme has to be based on more than one axis, and each side of the river can be considered as clearly defining the functions of the quarters or neighbourhoods there.

Within this initial distribution, the monumental area of

Gerasa, particularly the religious centre, is located on the western side, where the *macellum* is located. The main gates of the city at each end of the *cardo maximus* open onto this area and revalue this decisive function.

We consider the location of the *macellum* to be particularly well chosen, for two reasons. First, it is a relatively central point of the city, apart from the religious centres but not too far from the two principal sanctuaries, as if to take advantage of their evident attractive force to the benefit of the *macellum*. Second, its proximity to the Southern Gate, the city's main gate which connected it to the Philadelphia road and the Mediterranean coast, and the large oval plaza that welcomed visitors, although its actual function is unknown (it was certainly not the *forum*, as was once proposed). This certainly channeled people directly towards the *macellum*.

The *macellum* is of moderate dimensions, considering the size of oriental buildings in general, of which Gerasa has several more than eloquent examples. The facade is 50 metres long, and the building is 55 metres deep, almost square were it not for the portico on the east wall which makes it longer in that direction. It is surrounded by shops, *tabernae* which justify its commercial function, and the interior is divided into more open spaces in which this function is clearly seen (FIG. 1).

Entry is by a large, triple, monumental door, with windows over the side doors (FIG. 2). This entrance, which stands out in the facade because of an increase in the height of the portico columns, leads into an octagonal patio, with a covered pillar-lined corridor, and an open central space, presided in the centre by a kiosk which contains a fountain and a pedestal for sculpture, with an inscription (FIG. 3).

Around this octagonal patio there are four exedrae in the corners, thereby creating four spacious, semicircular covered areas which are separated by pillars from the octagonal centre. Between these spaces there are straight sections which frame the three access areas, the main door and the two side doors, with *tabernae* on each side, and a rectangular room of the same dimensions, with two side doors leading outside and which, presumably, gave access to the second floor of the building from the outside.

This space could be related to a sacred space, a *sacellum*, although no evidence has been found to definitively support this relation, apart from some as yet unidentified sculptural remains, since the successive re-occupations of the building have prevented its being conserved intact. Taking into account the location, it might have had that purpose, since we should perhaps associate with it the remains of at least one *ara* found among the debris levels of the *macellum*, which was later moved from its original site.

In the centre of the internal exedrae was a *mensa* with a single block of stone as the table, resting on supports or legs on the front of which are carvings of animals, felines and goats (FIG. 4). These *mensae*, of which there were at least five, were located in the four exedrae at each side of the main entrance. They were perhaps used as stalls for

money-changers and for commercial transactions, and not just as sales stalls. *Mensae* commonly have this function in most known *macella*.

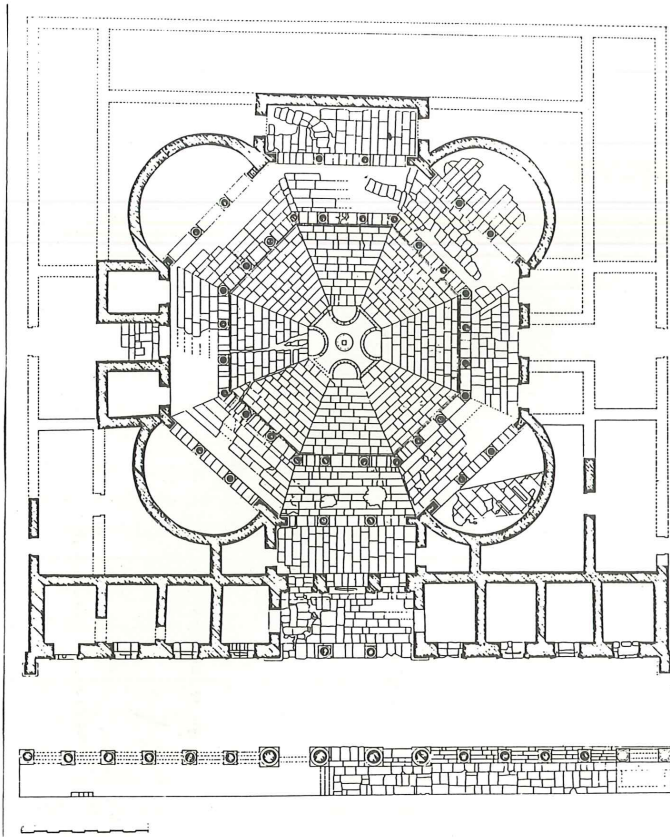
The number of stalls, *tabernae*, including those already excavated and those estimated to be located along the back wall of the building, which has not yet been fully excavated, is about forty-six. To these we must add the exedrae with their tables, and the spaces in the internal patio and corridor, which would be used for temporary stalls, as would appear to be borne out by the presence of shoulders on the columns to attach awnings, and perhaps partitions. With regard to the distribution of these stalls inside and outside the building, one must recall that the *macellum* is a free-standing block, all four sides of which can be used for stalls. Although the *macellum* is a closed, unified space, its three or four doors open it to the outside, and allow the free flow of traffic through the building. To about thirty or thirty-five fixed stalls, external *tabernae*, were added a similar, though less regular, number of internal stalls.

Such a large number of stalls leads us to question the specific type of products sold here. Was it a *macellum* in the strict sense of the word, i.e. a meat and fish market, as noted by the Latin authors? Or was it a market in a broader sense? To answer these questions, in the general study of the building and its surroundings which we are performing, we will have to consider all the details and information available. Inscriptions, ranging from large to small down to graffiti on the building materials, though open to many interpretations, do point towards a market in a wider sense than the traditional *macellum*, particularly if we consider its location in such a special geographical area as this Oriental province.

Undoubtedly, the *macellum* of Gerasa had a decisive influence on the area where it was located. In a city of this size, this building must have been surrounded by a shopping area in which citizens and visitors could do their business and also buy the goods typically found in ancient markets. We cannot conceive this building as being isolated from its surroundings, either physically or functionally. It was located in a sector where activities such as daily shopping for immediate consumption were performed.

The presence of the *macellum* close to the southern *tetrapylon* of Gerasa, which was modified to accommodate shops, appears to point to the existence of a shopping sector. We cannot rule out the possibility that the oval plaza was also related to commerce. Its surroundings, as yet unexcavated, could contain shops, which would reveal a large commercial area ranging from the Oriental type market, linked to the *agora*, to the Roman *macellum* as a symbol of quality specialized trade.

Its proximity to the main gate of the city, to one of the two main temples (the oldest, without doubt), and to the theatre, gave it considerable force as a commercial and economic sector. We must not forget that the temple and the theatre drew large numbers of local people and visitors, who would have to pass through the area and do some

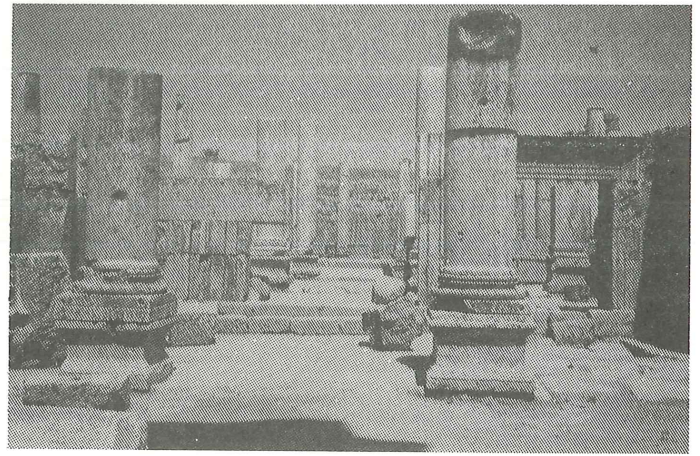


1. General plan of the *macellum*.

shopping on the way. The place itself must be related to this purpose, which can still be seen today in the Oriental *souq*, with the same accumulation of commercial functions.

The *macellum* and the commercial area of the *tetrapylon* could have seen a modification in the flow of traffic of potential customers as the axes of urban development in *Gerasa* shifted to the north and, perhaps, to the other side of the river. The existence of a bridge between the two different sectors of the city gave easy access to the *macellum* from the other side. The shift which some authors attribute to the construction of the temple to Artemis, followed by the north theatre, does not appear to us to be sufficient reason for changing an entire shopping tradition, since the city was still open and oriented in the same direction, southwards, and because the *macellum* was still reasonably close to this new centre of religious and possibly political attraction.

The explanation for the development of the east of *Gerasa* and its layout is less clear. There is evidence that some of the city's monuments were located there, such as the large baths, whose ruins now house part of the modern *souq* of Jarash. We must not forget the possibility that the *forum* was located in that area, since the west side of *Gerasa* is not large enough to hold such a building, which



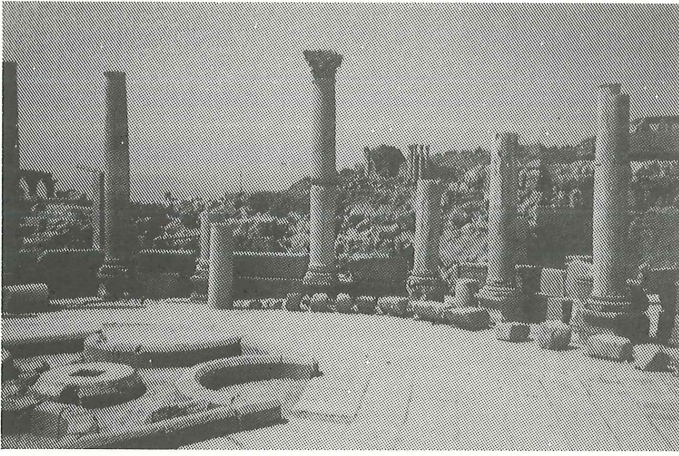
2. Main entrance of the *macellum*. (Photo. M. M.-B.).

must have been very large, nor does the stretch of the land support the possibility, for the moment.

*Gerasa* must have developed from the southwestern side to the northwest, crossing the river to the east to occupy the two banks, and forming a town based on two axes tending to be parallel. Our ignorance of the eastern sector, due to the development there of the modern city, and the fact that the most spectacular monuments are in the west, leaves our picture of the city decidedly incomplete. The presence on this bank of the two main temples of the Roman era, the two theatres, the *macellum*, and the oval plaza, with the *cardo maximus* connecting the two main gates confirms this idea. The persistence of this character as the city grew, with the construction of Hadrian's arch, and the later construction of the main Christian churches in the Byzantine period, appears to confirm this possibility. However, we are unable to provide reasons for this development, due to our lack of knowledge of the other bank, and of the dating of the different sectors and monuments.

The external configuration of the wall of *Gerasa*, with its modifications, which surrounds the city and encloses a very large area, can be deceptive with regard to the date and phases of construction. It was undoubtedly a symbol of prestige rather than just a defensive barrier, at least in the beginning, but we cannot define the stages in which it was built, since there are no reliable excavations in the surroundings and the only work performed to clean and approximately rebuild the walls and towers provided no data on this point. We have no archaeological information with which to talk about the construction and dating, and its extensions, reuse and modification during the Byzantine and Umayyad periods, which appear clear from the external configuration and the building techniques involved.

Seigne's proposal that it was a late construction cannot explain all the gaps in our knowledge, and arguments based purely on construction and urban development are not

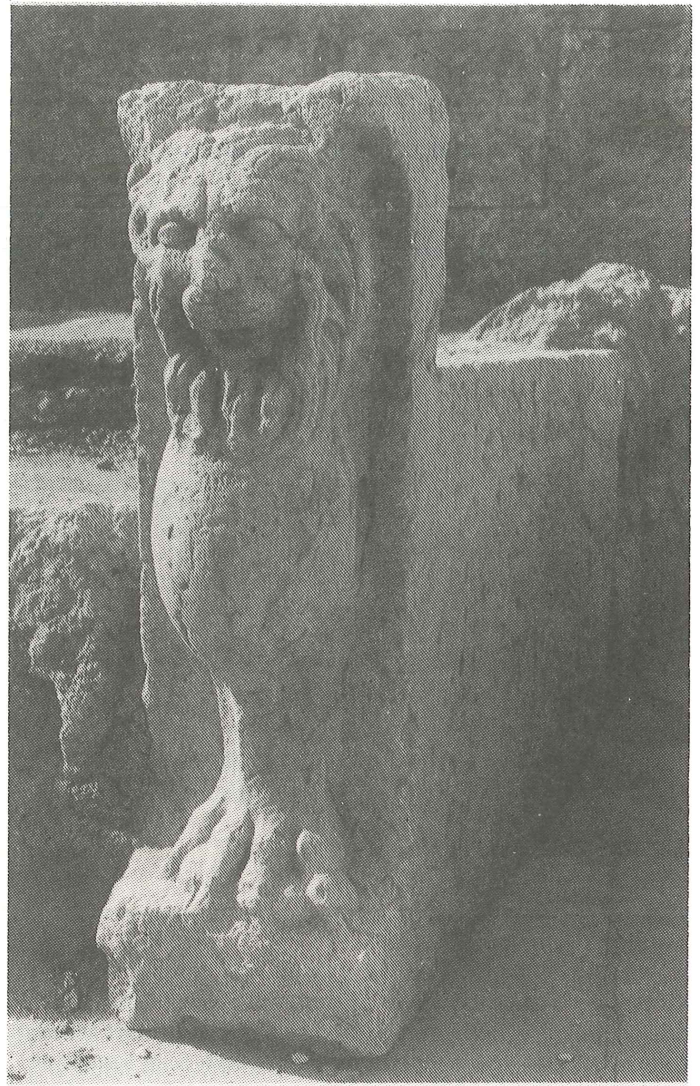


3. General view of the court. (Photo M. M.-B.).

sufficiently backed up by reliable excavation data.

It seems reasonable to assume that the city reached maturity over a long period, in the light of the results from the monumental centres, but there is not enough archaeological evidence to support the idea that all Gerasa was modern. Clearly, in the second and even third centuries A.D., there was a high level of construction activity, but it is also true that the city is mentioned in ancient sources, that its location made it viable long before that, and that such a large urban development is a slow process. Findings in some sectors of the city include remains from the first century A.D. or older, but it is no less true that the difficulty in excavating below the foundation levels of these monuments greatly reduces the possibility of gaining a full understanding of the situation in the first century A.D. and earlier. Therefore, what is required is systematic excavation below the monumental areas in order to gain solid information about Gerasa's early urban development. Such buildings as the *macellum*, the temples and the centre of the city deserve more than mere recording as splendid monuments for public exhibition. Historical investigation should take precedence.

The city expanded north- and eastwards, following an economic development based on the caravan routes and on the strategic location of the city in this trade network. Gerasa quickly set itself apart from its neighbours and competitors, due not only to the dynamism of its inhabitants, but also to the natural resources of the area, which was fertile, with nearby quarries for building materials, and sufficient irrigation for crops. These factors enhanced its economy and inscriptions describe considerable natural expansion from the first century A.D. onwards, heightened by the construction of the *via trajana* which improved communications in the region. The visit of Hadrian, and the continuity during his dynasty and the Severan dynasty which followed led to a constant increase in urban activity and economic development and, apart from the monu-



4. Support of the *mensae* for the money-changers. (Photo. M. M.-B.).

ments on the western side of the river, there must have been considerable activity on the other side, which is as yet little known.

With regard to population distribution, the most affluent residential areas were those around the monumental centres, passing to poorer areas the further one goes from these centres. If, as some researchers think, there was a point in the second century A.D. in which there was a polarization of population pressures around the two temples, we must try to imagine how the residential areas would be divided. It is possible to draw some conclusions about the neighbouring areas, but much more difficult to speak of the areas around the baths on the other side of the river where, in our opinion, most of the middle and lower income citizens lived. Further excavations are required there, over a large area if possible, to confirm or deny these hypotheses.

As a provisional conclusion, we can say that in general, and in the absence of detailed information, the *macellum* of Gerasa fits into a picture of the upper levels of the city's economy. It is a singular building, built in the first quarter of the second century A.D. according to inscriptions and archaeological data, on an area occupied previously by buildings which remain to be defined by excavation. This building appears to have been a gift to the city by, or built in honour of, the Governor, Tiberius Julianus Alexander, who is reported to be in Rome in A.D. 126 after serving as governor of the province, and was built after considerable social upheavals in the city, as reported by inscriptions. The market was part of an upper class economy, at least because of the etymological significance of this type of building, and we do not know if it was put to other uses. The building was, therefore, linked to the privileged classes, but because of its location and proximity, it was accessible to all those who could pay for its wares.

The building suffered the same vicissitudes as its neighbours, and among natural and human catastrophes it lost the distinction afforded it by its fountains, *marmora*, sculptures and inscriptions. It continued to be a market place, as shown by its reoccupation to this end for centuries, although after obligatory interruptions it slowly degraded, losing its rich appearance as well as its characteristics. With the passage of time the rooms were roughly modified to house other activities such as stables, skin and wool dyeing, pottery and glass making, forges, and the building fell slowly into decrepitude, although retaining the vestiges of its former splendour and elegant proportions. It lost its essence, but maintained for Gerasa its commercial

functions, first as an excellent specialized market, and later as a small *souq* or place for bartering and selling such goods as livestock, pottery or wool.

### Bibliography

- Barghouti, A. 1982. Urbanization of Palestine and Jordan. Pp. 209-229 in A. Hadidi (ed), *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan, I*. Amman.
- Bowersock, G.W. 1983. *Roman Arabia*. London.
- Browning, I. 1982. *Jerash*. London.
- Gatier, P.L. 1986. *Inscriptions de la Jordanie, t.2*. Paris.
- Khoury, R. 1986. *Jerash*. Amman.
- Kraeling, C.H. 1938. *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis*. New Haven.
- Martín-Bueno, M. 1984. Gerasa Misión Arquelógica Española en Jordania. *Arqueología* 83.
- , 1986. Gerasa (Jordania): Nuevas perspectivas. In *Estudios Homenaje a A. Beltrán Martínez*. Zaragoza.
- , 1989. Notes préliminaires sur le macellum de Gerasa. Pp. 177-199 in *Jerash Archaeological Project 1984-1988, II*. Paris.
- Olavarri, E. 1988. *Excavaciones en el ágora de Gerasa en 1983*. Madrid.
- Rouillard, P. and Paillet, J.L. 1987. *Baelo III, le macellum*. Madrid.
- de Ruyt, C. 1983. *Macellum, Marché alimentaires des romains*. Louvain-la-Neuve.
- Spijkerman, A. 1987. *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*. Jerusalem.