

THE BURNT PALACE OF MADABA

by
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In April 1985, the Jordanian Government decided to go ahead with the practical realization of a project which will enclose and cover the area along the Roman *Cardo* of Madaba including the church of the Virgin, part of the road and the crypt of the church of the Prophet Elias. The plan is to create a unique museum in the middle of the modern city, where it will be possible to re-read seven centuries of the history of Madaba.

In connection with the preparation for this project, I was given the opportunity to conduct an archaeological examination of another sector of the city along the *cardo*,¹ somewhat to the north of the church of el-Khadir which was excavated by Ute Lux in 1966² (Fig. 1). The area had been indicated to me by the reading of a long article devoted to the antiquities of Madaba by the Archimandrite Melezius Metaxakis of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem.³ By means of this new excavation, we were able to delineate even further what seems to have been the centre of the city in Roman-Byzantine times.

Metaxakis wrote in 1905 that he had obtained permission by the owner to make a trial excavation in the courtyard of the house of Yousef Ma'ay'a and that he discovered there a mosaic pavement beneath a layer of ashes and charcoal. He believed this to be the remains of a church. Our excavations produced a different conclusion. The mosaic, of which the Archimandrite had seen only the south-east corner, decorated a room of a private house which had been burned and abandoned in the Byzantine epoch and which we found still cover-

ed with a uniform layer of ash and charcoal mixed with roof tiles.

This patrician mansion which we call "the burnt palace" of Madaba, had a paved courtyard on the west side nowadays occupied by a modern house (Fig. 1,6). Two doors, of which remain the solid stone thresholds, led into a hall with a mosaic pavement to the east, and into a narrow service room to the south, mosaiced with large, white tesserae. The room, in turn, was attached to a paved area elevated some 30cm. above the level of the mosaiced hall, with two doors on the southern and northern walls, which served as a passageway from the hall to the exterior, where, probably, one would reach the *cardo* which ran along the north wall of the church of el-Khadir on a level about two meters lower.

The mosaiced hall (9.50m. long and 7.30m. wide, Fig. 2) constituted one of the central areas of the residence on the eastern side of the courtyard, where the main entrance was located. The double door, made of wood, fell inward while still burning, thus causing visible damage to the mosaic floor. In this area we recovered the two bronze door-knockers together with other metal accessories (Fig. 3).

The decorative program of the mosaic, partially destroyed three years ago during the construction of a new building on the north side, repeats ordinary motifs (Pl. LXVII, 1,2). The entrance is introduced by a pair of sandals in a crown.⁴ Trees, flowers, birds, fish and animals fill the bordering frame of the carpet which is divided into six rows of four acanthus scrolls decorated with pastoral and hunting motifs (Pl.

1. Thanks to the cooperation of Dr. Adnan Hadidi and Mr. Taysir Attiyat of the Department of Antiquities. The archaeological team of Mount Nebo collaborated. The plans were drawn by Fr. Eugenio Alliata.

2. U. Lux, "Eine altchristliche Kirche in Madaba", *ZDPV* 1967, p. 165-182, Taf.

26-40.

3. M. Metaxakis, "Madiba", in *Nea Sion* 1905, p. 452-454.

4. Like in the Hippolytus Hall under the Church of the Virgin (*LA* 1982, tav. 73) and in the mosaic of el-Qsar in Madaba.

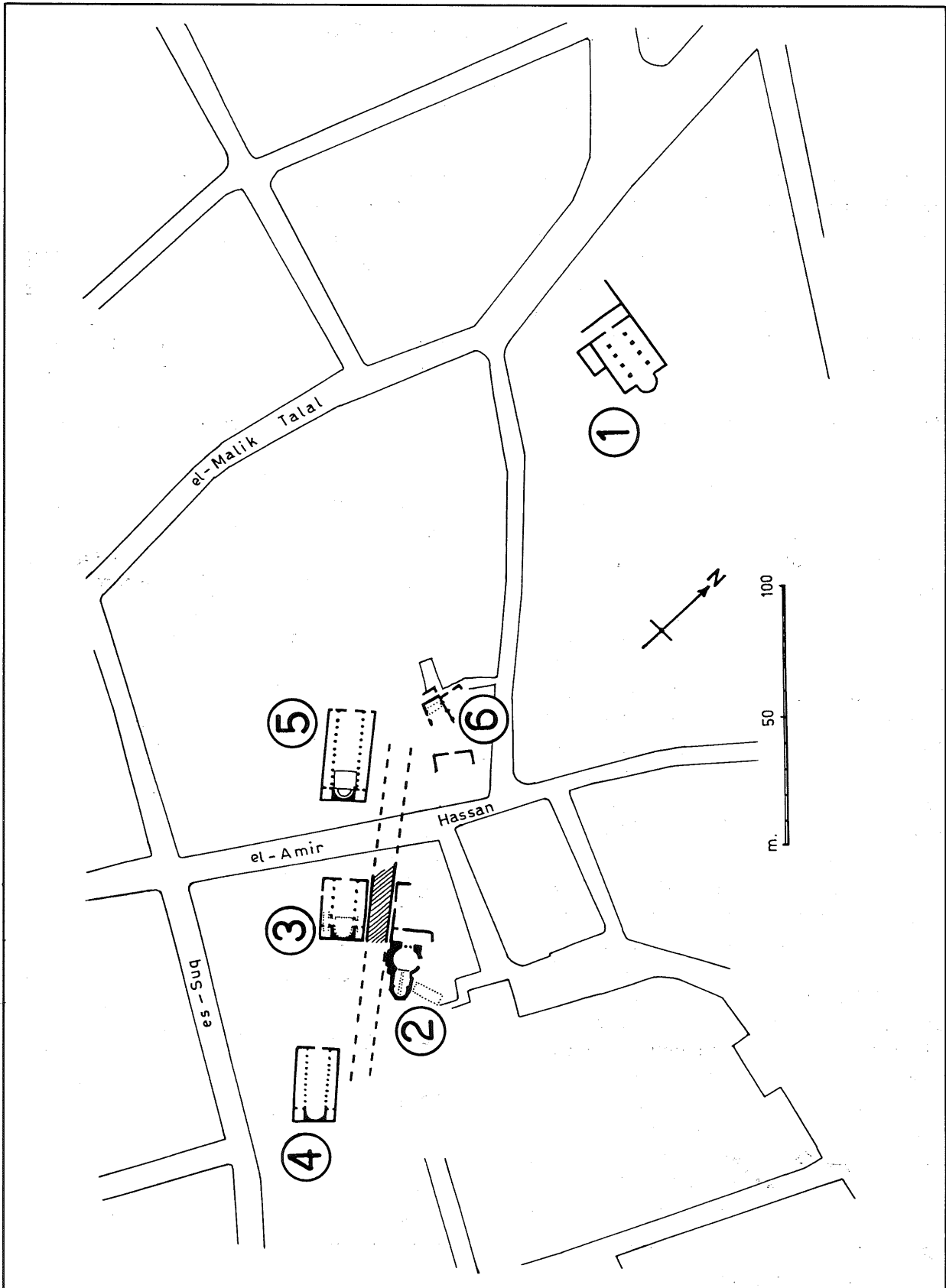


Fig. 1. Madaba. The Byzantine monuments along the Roman *cardo*. 1. The church of the Map; 2. The church of the Virgin; 3. The church of the Prophet Elias; 4. The church of the Şunna' family; 5. The church of el-Khadir; 6. The Burnt Palace. (Drawing Fr. Eugenio Alliata).

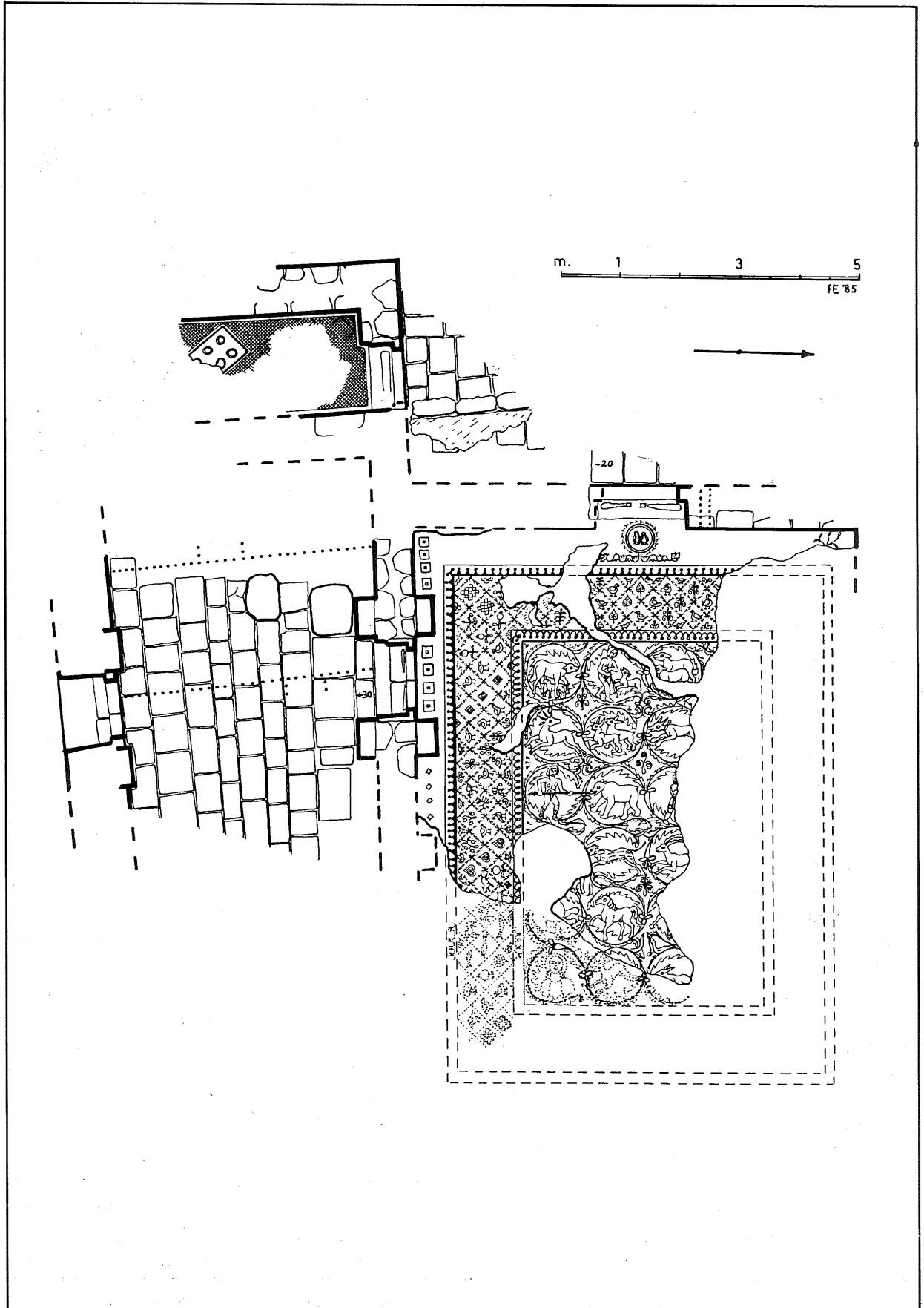


Fig. 2. The Burnt Palace (drawing Fr. Eugenio Alliata).

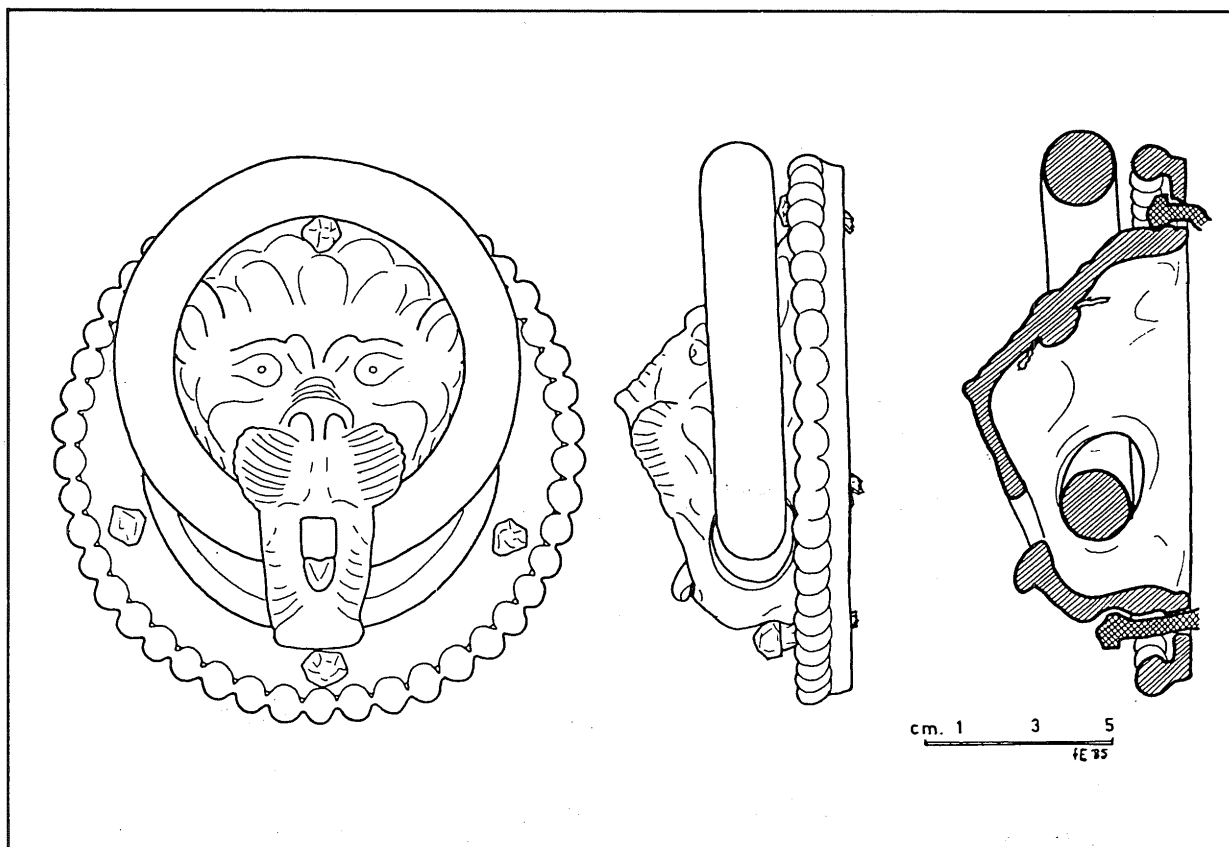


Fig. 3. The door-knocker (drawing Fr. Eugenio Alliata).

LXVII,2). In the first row, on the western side, a shepherd rests, leaning on a staff, with a dog crouched at his feet, between a ewe which is nursing a lamb (on the left) and two sheep in the scroll on the right. In the second row, a dog runs after two rabbits, preceded by a stag in flight. In the third, a hunter, wearing shoes, thrusts a spear into a bear. A long-horned stag and a female leopard occupy the two scrolls still visible in the fourth row. In the fifth, a horse with a flourishing mane, is faced off against a crouched lion. A stag in flight faces the bust of a woman in the sixth row, now destroyed but seen and photographed by Metaxakis in the south-east corner of the hall⁵. The bust may be the personification of the Earth.

As far as color is concerned, the composition is predominated by warm tones and there is an accentuated use of red tes-

serae. Technically, the design is poor, if compared with other mosaic-floors of Madaba.

The biggest surprise came from the discovery of the metal items, particularly the two bronze door-knockers (Pl. LXVIII, 1 & Fig. 3), and a tripod in bronze, which is a novelty in Jordan. The two door-knockers, both out of the same mold, with a leonine protome, measure 19 cm. in diameter. A ring is inserted in the animal's muzzle. Six nails, in iron, secured the latch to the wood of the door. The locks of the lion's mane, the ears, the muzzle and the tongue are modelled with particular care for realism.⁶

The bronze tripod is composed of three series of elements that are articulated at the centre and with slides moving on the three legs (Pl. LXVIII, 2 & Fig. 4,5). The foot of the legs is modelled into a small

5. Metaxakis, *Nea Sion* 1905, Fig. XVI.

6. Four bronze door-knockers were found during the Baqa'a-Irbid Road Survey by A. Leonard in 1984. A door-knocker was found

in Bet Shan (G.M. Fitzgerald, *Bet-Shan Excavations 1921-1923, The Arab and Byzantine Levels*, Philadelphia 1931, p.41, pl. XXV,4).

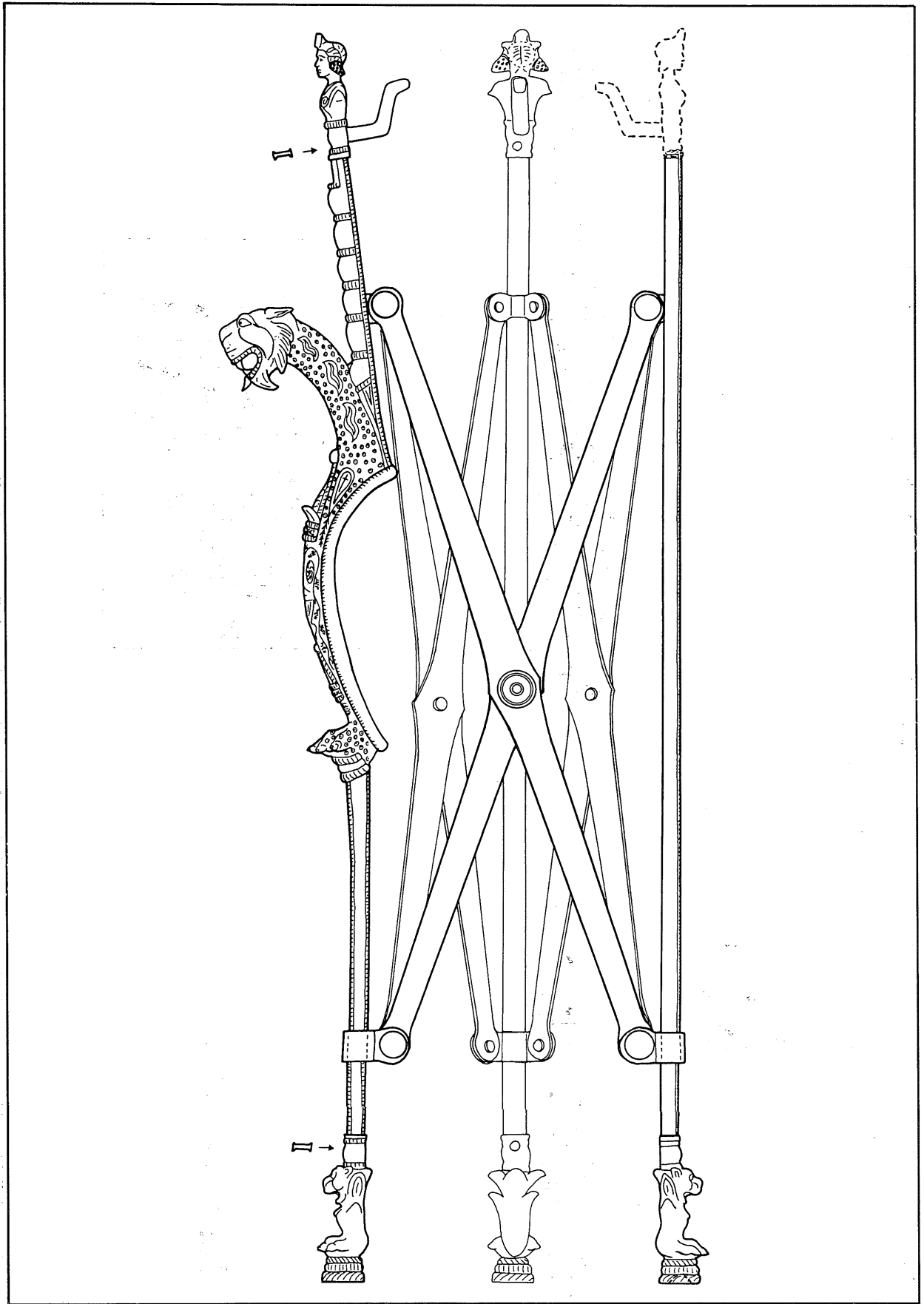


Fig. 4. The panther's bronze tripod (drawing Fr. Eugenio Alliata).

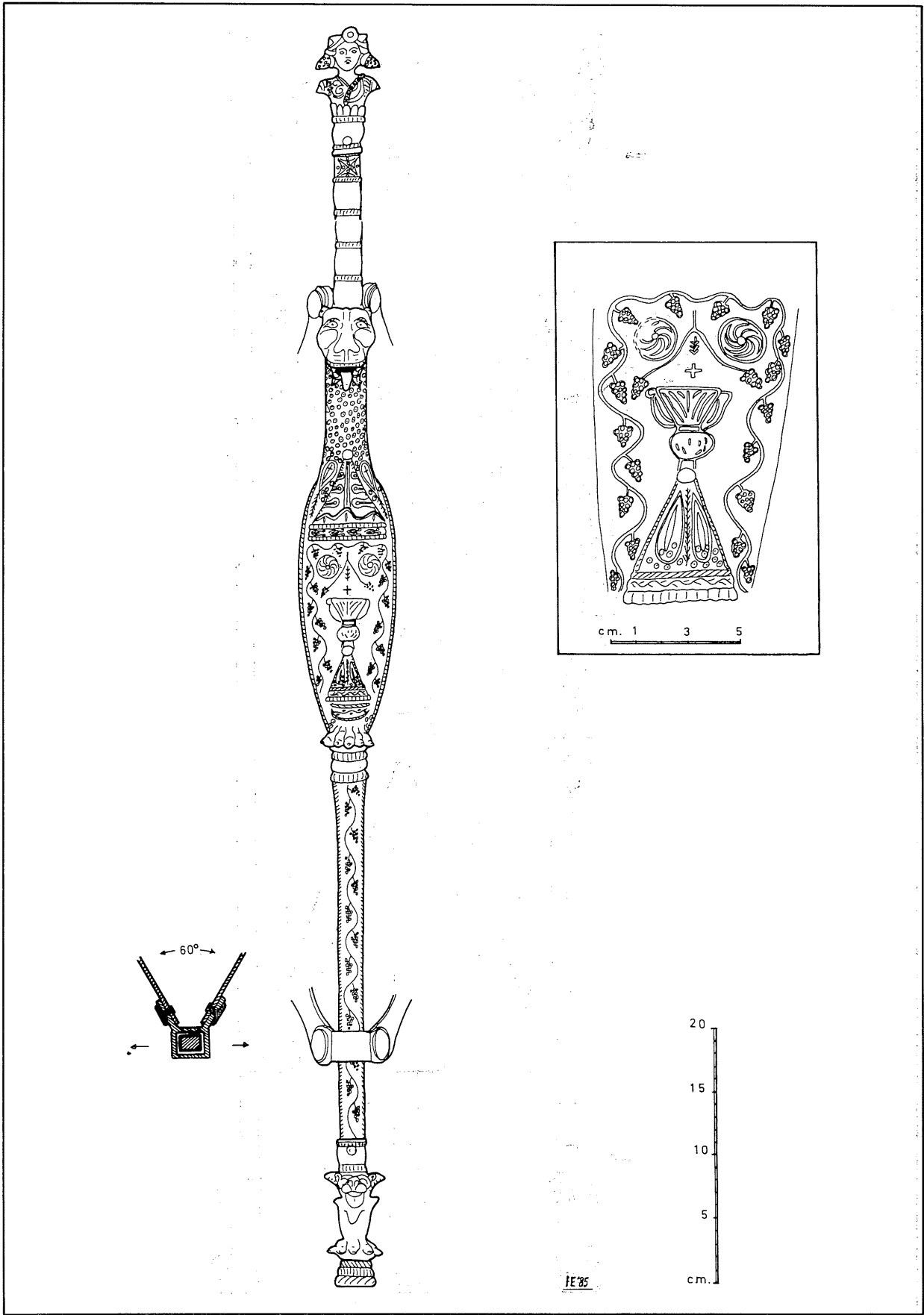


Fig. 5. Detail of the bronze tripod.

crouched lion (Pl. LXIX, 1). The legs are terminated at the top with three (one is now missing) small busts, Banchae or the young Dionysos (Pl. LXIX, 2), draped with a skin and the hair bound with a net. On the back of the busts, welded in a single block is a strong hook which served to hang a brazier or other metal utensil. The front leg reflects particular care in its decoration. The rectangular bar, above the foot, is engraved with a continuous vine of bunches of grapes. Inserted half way up is a loop handle surmounted by a panther's head on a long arching neck (Pl. LXVIII, 2), an element common to other tripods found elsewhere, like in Italy and Egypt. The long neck is decorated with dots and long tongues. Half way below the long neck, there is a kantharos between vine sprays, two spiral rosettes, a palmette and a cross. As far as I know, this tripod of the type called the "panther's tripod", judging by the main feature, is the most recent discovered yet, as it is found in a late Byzantine context.⁷ The head of the panther

testifies to the skill of the craftsman who molded it. It is a fusion of fantastic elements and naturalistic details producing a forceful expression.

The mosaic-floor, the bronze items, the tiles and the sherds found among the ashes, point to the end of the VIth century A.D. as a date for the burning of the mansion, and its last occupation.

The "burnt palace" is the first case to date of private architecture of Byzantine Madaba which has been explored, even though only partially. Thus even if it is premature to force general conclusions, the discovery can orientate future research and suggest a context for other, isolated mosaic pavements that have come to light by chance, as e.g. the mosaic of Achilles,⁸ the Bacchic procession in the archaeological museum, still *in situ*, and the Hippolytus Hall under the church of the Virgin.⁹

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7. For a discussion see D. Kent Hill, "Roman Panther Tripods" in *AJA* 1951, p. 344-347, pls. 38-39. For the tripods found in the Ballana tombs in Egypt, see Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte, Mission Archéologique de Nubie 1929-1934, *The Royal Tombs of*

Ballana and Qustul by W.B. Emery, Cairo Government Press 1938, vol. I, p. 348-353. For bronze tables and tripods; see vol. II, Plate 90.

8. *ADAJ* 1960, p. 116, Pl. VI, 2.

9. *LA* 1982, p. 386-396, tavv. 56-73.

