

# THE FOUNTAIN COURT OF JARASH CATHEDRAL RECONSIDERED: THE FIRST REPORT OF A NEW SWISS RESEARCH PROJECT<sup>1</sup>

by

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In recent years, archaeologists and art historians have been turning their attention more and more to the development of urban structures during times of political and cultural transformations.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that changes in the building patterns of cities can lend valuable insight to the impact of such new forces as the Christianisation of the Late Roman Empire in the fourth century or the Islamisation of the Eastern Mediterranean some centuries later.<sup>3</sup> But how was the introduction of new religions made manifest in concrete urban structures. In answer to this question, Jarash — antique Gerasa — serves as an excellent example because much of the antique city is preserved, albeit in ruins.<sup>4</sup>

From the British-American excavations undertaken in the 1920s, we know that the Christian cult center of Gerasa was situated at the very center of the city just to the south of the famous Temple of Artemis.<sup>5</sup> On the upper terrace, the archaeologists first excavated the church of St. Theodore, which is dated A.D. 494-496 from an inscription.<sup>6</sup> To the east of St. Theodore, on a

lower level, Crowfoot and his colleagues found a second basilica, this one of enormous size, which is connected to the church by a square atrium with a large, centrally placed fountain (Fig. 1). Since this so-called "fountain court" forms a structural unit with the lower basilica, it must have already been in place by the time St. Theodore was built in the late fifth century.

Lacking any archaeological evidence concerning the exact building date and dedication of the lower basilica, the discoverers thought it to be the cathedral of Gerasa because of its central location and impressive dimensions. Furthermore, this church was linked with the colonnaded cardo by a staircase leading from a prestigious portal (Fig. 2) to a niche within which are painted the names of the Virgin Mary and the archangels, thereby suggesting its function as a shrine.

Concerning the dating of this supposed cathedral complex, the American excavators considered the fountain in the atrium to be the same fountain ("pege") as the one mentioned ca. A.D. 375 by Epiphanius,

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1. We are greatly indebted to Dr. Safwan Tell, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, and his collaborators in Amman and Jarash for their always friendly support of our project. Furthermore, we owe our gratitude to Susanne Kerner, Director of the German Protestant Institute for Archaeology of the Holy Land in Amman, to Dr. Susan Matheson, Curator of Ancient Art at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven and her kind collaborators, and to the colleagues of the Archäologische Bodenforschung Basel-Stadt. Special thanks go to the Max-Geldner-Stiftung of Basel University for sponsoring our research.

2. *La topographie chrétienne*. Acts du XI Congrès internationale d'archéologie chrétienne, Sept. 1986. *Collection de l'école française de Rome* 123 (1989). See also the 14th International Con-

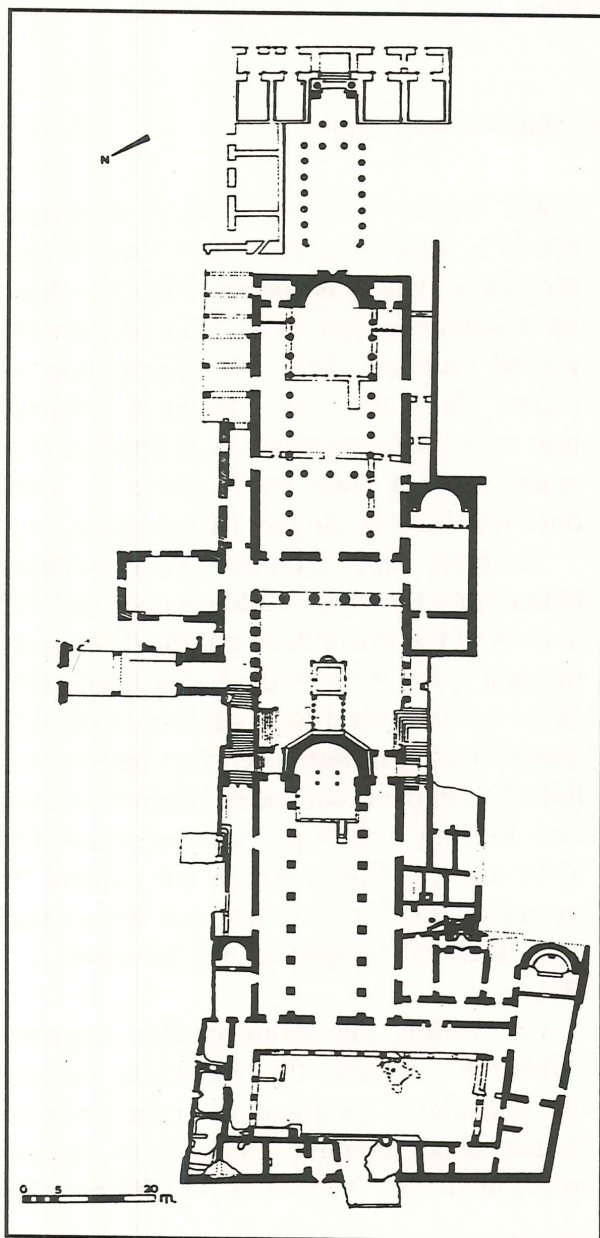
gress for Classical Archaeology 1993 in Tarragona (acts in preparation).

3. For examples of this, see R. Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals, Topography and Politics*. (Berkeley, 1983); C. Jäggi, 'Aspekte der städtebaulichen Entwicklung Aquileias in frühchristlicher Zeit', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 33 (1990), pp. 158-196.

4. For the state of research see R. Khouri, *Jerash: A Frontier City of the Roman East*. (London/New York, 1986) and F. Zayadine, 'The Jerash Project for Excavation and Restoration,' pp. 7-28 in F. Zayadine (ed.), *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981-1983*, Vol. I. (Amman, 1986).

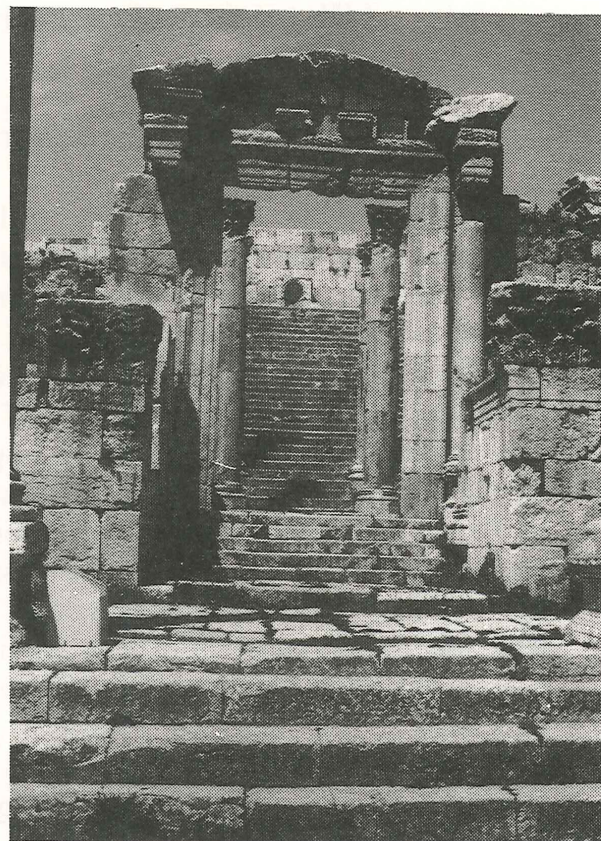
5. C. H. Kraeling (ed.), *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis*. (New Haven, 1938).

6. Kraeling, *Gerasa*, pp. 477f. Inscription No. 300.



1. Jarash, Cathedral complex, ground plan (after Kraeling, *Gerasa*).

Bishop of Salamis.<sup>7</sup> According to him, once a year during the Feast of the Miracle of Cana, wine miraculously flowed from a fountain located within a martyrium.<sup>8</sup> The fact that martyria of this period were normally located outside the walls makes that identification problematic. If, however, we accept the association of Epiphanius's foun-



2. Jarash, portal and staircase from the *Cardo* to the Cathedral (B. Brenk).

tain with that of the atrium, that would give us a very early *terminus ante quem* for the erection of the lower basilica, which would mean that already in the middle of the fourth century the old (and still venerated?) Temple of Artemis would have been flanked by a huge cult-center of the new religion. Such an unusual juxtaposition of plans may reflect either the peaceful coexistence of old and new faiths or the presence of a Christian majority in Gerasa. Adding to the complexity of the situation is the appearance of an antique structure under the cathedral. If, as Crowfoot asserts, this was a temple dedicated to Dionysos, the question then arises as to whether the Christians were allowed at this early date to demolish a center of the old religion for their own purposes — a situation known,

7. *Panarion, Haer.* 51, 30, 1-2, ed. Holl, GCS vol. 31 (1922), p. 301.

8. "Our brethren have drunk from the fountain in Gerasa which is in the martyrium...."

until now, only in Jerusalem.

The issues raised above served as the point of departure for the present research project, headed by Professor Beat Brenk from the Department of Art History at Basel University. Taking a fresh look at the Jarash Cathedral, the team of Swiss scholars have re-examined both the archaeological and documentary evidence. This required travelling to the site of the excavations in the spring of 1993, followed by a visit to the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, where archives of the British-American archaeological excavations are stored.

### The Fountain

Our first step was to carefully re-examine the fountain in the atrium, since it served both as a hinge between the two churches and as the cult focus of the entire Christian building complex (Figs. 3 and 4). Whether or not it is the miraculous fountain of Epiphanius, the Gerasa fountain holds the key to understanding the structural sequence of the entire complex. It is also a rather peculiar and outstanding monument in its own right and deserving closer inspection.

What remains today is an enormous square basin measuring 4.7 x 4.5 m with a semi-circular bowl attached to its east side. The basin itself is composed of two parts that belong to two different phases of construction. The northern, southern, and eastern sides represent one phase in that they are all constructed from blocks of local limestone measuring 72 cm in height and varying in width with rich mouldings appearing at the bottom and top edges (Fig. 5). In contrast, the western side of the basin is much more articulated, being composed of antique ceiling coffers that are cut and fitted together in a decorative fashion (Fig.

6). According to Kraeling, the three uniform sides are the remains of an *in situ* antique fountain that belonged to the supposed Temple of Dionysos.<sup>9</sup> From our findings, however, the fountain in its entirety did not originate with the cathedral complex, but was reused from another, earlier, i.e. first-second century site in Gerasa. This is evident from the seams of the basin slabs, which are widely spaced and irregular, thereby showing signs of re-assembly. In addition, the profile of the mouldings clearly corresponds to a type widely used in Gerasa in the first-second centuries.<sup>10</sup>

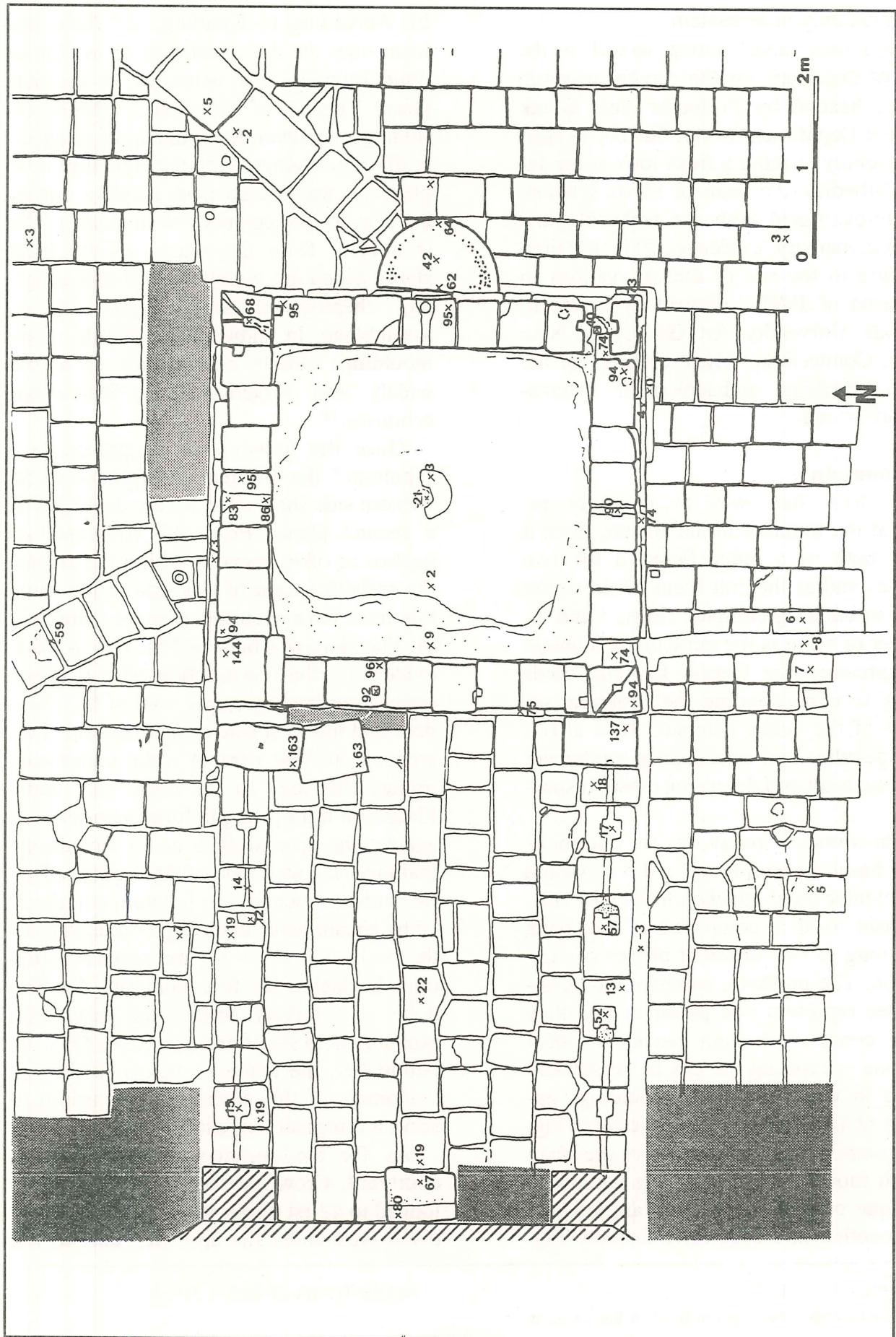
Once the fountain is recognized as a "spolium," the different construction of the western side shows that we are dealing with a second phase. From the structural sequence of other remains within the atrium, the embellishment of this side of the fountain must have occurred after the Church of St. Theodore was built in 494. This is made evident by the construction of a platform connecting the outer apse wall of St. Theodore and the west side of the fountain. Two arches with low parapet walls underneath limited this area to the north and south. Placed on top of the platform with its back against the apse wall is an *in situ* throne that faces the west side of the fountain. Further enhancement of the fountain is indicated by square holes in the top corner slabs of the basin that allow for the reconstruction of a baldachin on four columns. Smaller holes at intervals around the basin rim probably held supports for curtains (Fig. 7). Altogether, the evidence points to the development of this section of the atrium to serve a liturgical purpose.

As for the porticoes surrounding the courtyard, Crowfoot thought that they belonged to a first phase, based on mosaics he discovered under the apse that date to the

and the Temple of Zeus in Jarash.

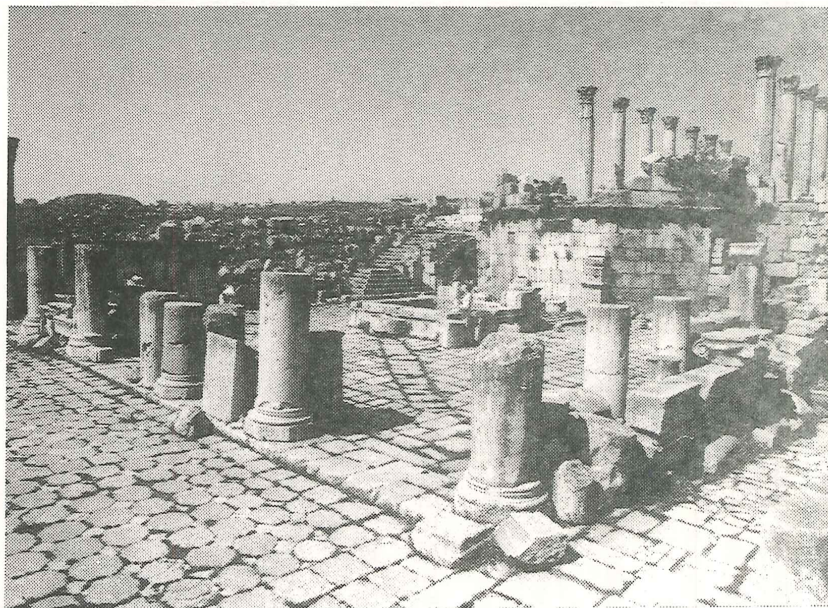
9. Kraeling, *Gerasa*, p. 63.

10. See for example the altars in front of the museum



3. Jarash Cathedral, fountain, top view (C. Jäggi and H.-R. Meier).

4. Jarash Cathedral, fountain court, view from the north-west corner of the ambulatory to the apse of St. Theodore (B. Brenk).

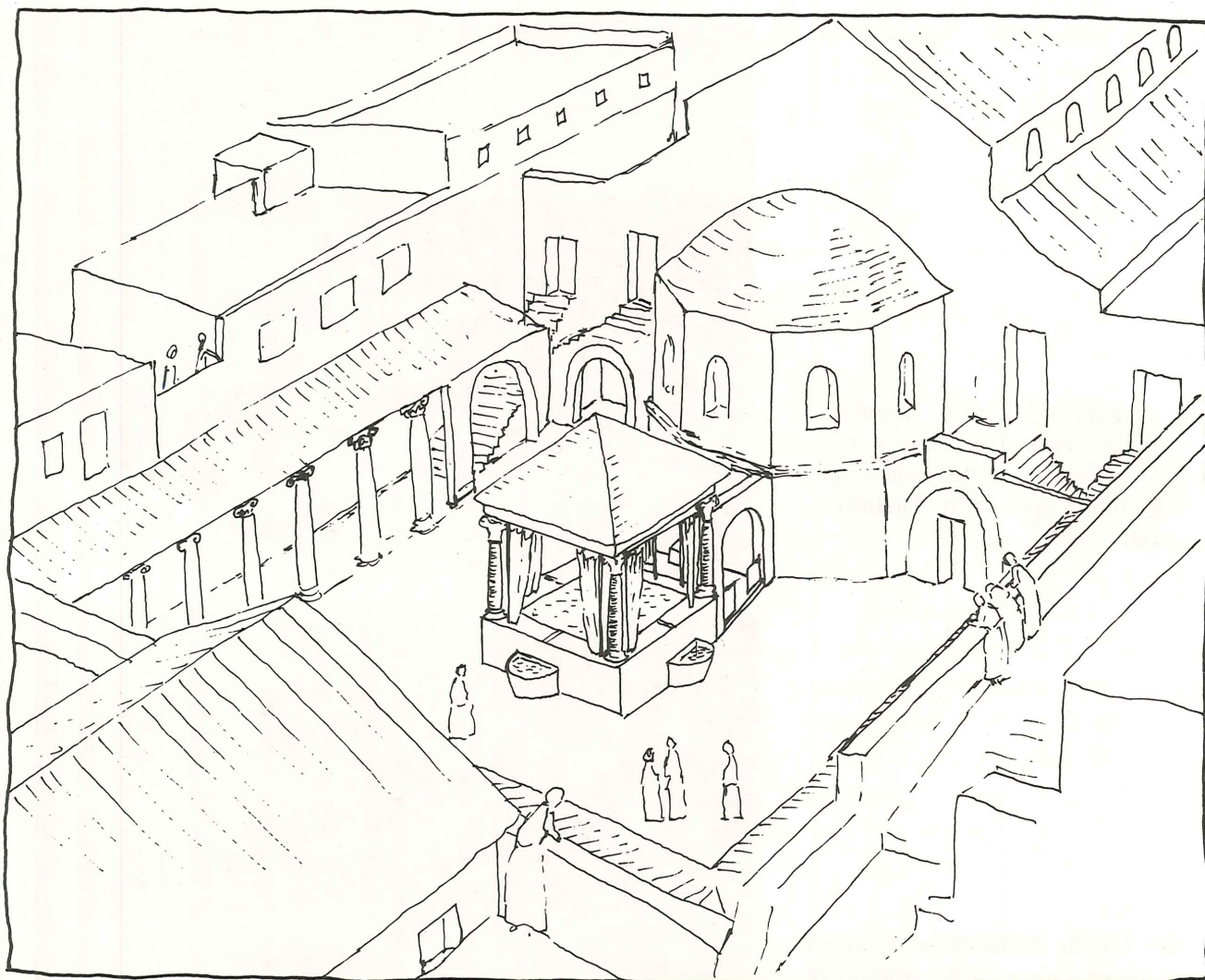


5. Jarash Cathedral, fountain court, view from south. In the background the Serapion passage (right) and the Temple of Artemis (left) (B. Brenk).



6. Jarash Cathedral, west side of the fountain (B. Brenk).





7. Jarash Cathedral, fountain court, reconstruction drawing (C. Jäggi after a draft of the British-American expedition, 1928).

second-third centuries.<sup>11</sup> That these extended throughout all four porticoes and were later covered by the pavement is, however, very hypothetical. That the pavement and fountain were constructed at the same time is suggested by diagonally placed drains, the cover slabs of which are incorporated into the pavement design. Fresh water came through the pipe running underground from the “Serapion passage” and turning southeast to end in the center of the basin. The pipe running northeast seems to have served as the exit drain leading away from the fountain in the direction of the so-called

“glass court”, where a cistern was found during the excavations of the late 1920s.<sup>12</sup>

It is difficult to understand the function of the semi-circular bowl placed in front of the east side of the fountain. It is a spolium made of local limestone stemming from an antique niche. In the sketches of the British-American team a similar bowl appears at the north side of the fountain, although none stands today. Nor is there any mention of that second bowl in the documentation of the excavations. From their placement, it appears that both bowls caught the run-off from the basin via narrow channels

11. J. W. Crowfoot, *The Church of St. Theodore at Jerash*, *PEFQS* (1929), p. 34.

12. J. W. Crowfoot, ‘Recent Work Round the Fountain Court at Jerash,’ *PEFQS* (1931), pp. 149f.

cut into the center top slabs of the northern and eastern sides. The lack of drain holes in the existing bowl indicates no connection with the plumbing.

In the foundation of the south side of the fountain is a drainpipe of terracotta that seems to have fed into an irregular system of shallow channels cut roughly into the court pavement and leading to a cistern southwest of the fountain. That was obviously a later addition.

### Conclusion

The structural sequence of the fountain court leads to the conclusion that the entire area of the atrium was in use throughout the various building phases of the Cathedral complex. The next step for this research project is to analyze the building history of the Cathedral. This will require a new survey of the entire Cathedral complex, which is being planned in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology. Included in this part of the project will be the cataloguing of all reused building material, from which we hope to determine the origin of the capitals, columns, and other such spolia, so that the results can be correlated with archaeological findings related to the decline of classical buildings such as the

temples of Artemis and Zeus. Finally, further excavations will be needed in the area underneath the Cathedral floor, where the British-American team discovered the foundations of a square structure, possibly a pagan temple. Unfortunately, those findings were never fully published in the final report and are only mentioned in a preliminary note.<sup>13</sup> Through this second phase of the project, we hope to obtain some new information not only on the formal aspects and dating of the various structures within the Cathedral complex, but also on the process of transformation of this important area in the center of Christian Gerasa.

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13. Crowfoot, 'Recent Work', p. 145, plate 2.2; and an unpublished photograph in the Yale documentation.

