

THE BUILDINGS UNDER THE "CATHEDRAL" OF GERASA THE SECOND INTERIM REPORT ON THE JARASH CATHEDRAL PROJECT*

by

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Our program of new investigations of the Cathedral of Gerasa began in 1993 with an examination of the so-called Fountain Court.¹ The investigation showed that the question of antecedent structures was of critical importance. Was the foundation part of an earlier, pre-Christian, structure or was it designed for the so-called Cathedral and composed out of *spolia*? What did this earlier building look like, when was it erected and when and how was it destroyed? These are all questions of critical importance.

Crowfoot describes mosaics in the western portico of the atrium, found during excavation beneath the apse of the Church of St. Theodore.² In his preliminary report he dated these mosaics to the second to third century AD, but in his final report he published them as the remains of the original pavement in the walks of the atrium of the first Cathedral.³ However, the stone paving of the inner court rests directly on bedrock. Before the construction of the Cathedral a temple must have stood on the site. To judge from the later miracle of the wine, this supposed temple may have been dedicated to Dionysos, in his Arabian incarnation, Dusares.

Although Crowfoot insisted that this was no more than an hypothesis, Kraeling, in

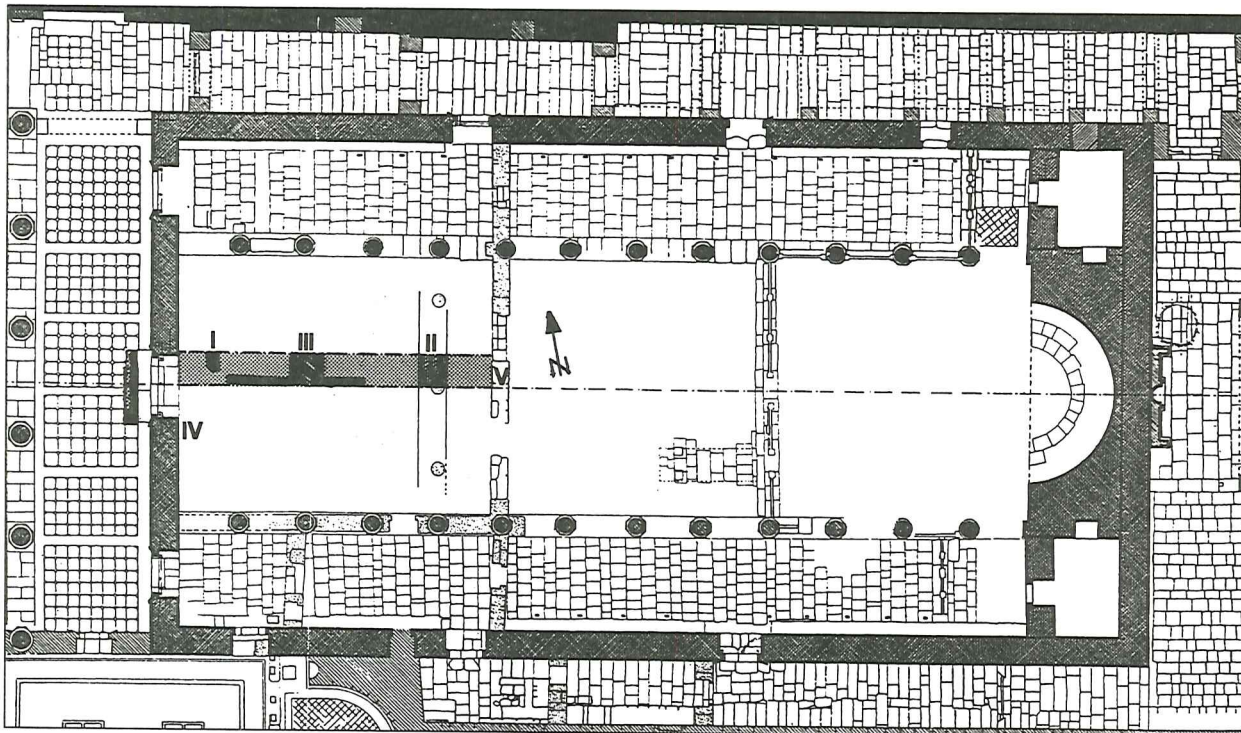
the final publication of the Anglo-American excavations, constructed a building sequence for this temple, based exclusively on inscriptions which had been found on the site.⁴ He made no mention of any material remains of this structure, although Crowfoot in 1929 had excavated a trench in the western part of the nave of the Cathedral, close to the central axis. This excavation is recorded in a photograph published in a preliminary report, but it is not mentioned in the final publication.⁵

An unpublished photograph, which we found during our inspection of the original documentation on the excavations, in the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, showed that in the late 1920s a profiled base moulding which lay beneath the stone pavement of the atrium was temporarily uncovered in front of the central portal of the Cathedral. This feature is otherwise unrecorded and it is not referred to in any published report.

Since Crowfoot's excavation had revealed a situation more complex than the wall referred to in the published reports, we decided that, besides continuing work on the catalogue of the *spolia* incorporated into the Cathedral, we would re-examine the features beneath the pavement of the atrium

* In collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. We would like to thank Dr Safwan Tell, then Director-General of the Department, for his generous support. We would also like to thank the Inspector at Jarash, Ibrahim al-Zu'bi, our departmental collaborator, Zakaria Qudah, and our workmen Mahmud I, Ibrahim and Mahmud II. For the English translation we are most indebted to Prof. John Mitchell, Norwich. The numbers used in the text are those of the structures and layers in the plan and sections of the nave-trench.

1. B. Brenk, C. Jäggi and H.R. Meier, 'The Fountain Court at Jerash Cathedral Reconsidered: The First Report of a New Swiss Research Project', *ADAJ* 38: 1994.
2. J.W. Crowfoot, 'The Church of St. Theodore at Jerash', *PEQ*, 1929.
3. J.W. Crowfoot, P. 211 in C.H. Kraeling, *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis*, (New Haven 1938).
4. Kraeling: 37 and following.
5. J.W. Crowfoot, 'Recent Work round the Fountain Court at Jerash', *PEQ*, 1931: Pl. 2, Fig. 2.



1. Jarash Cathedral, Location of the excavations and diagram of the results.

during our second campaign of fourth March to fourth April 1994.⁶ The removal of few slabs of the pavement of the atrium made it possible to analyze and document the base moulding in its immediate archaeological context. The 1.20 m wide sounding was designed to take the best possible advantage of preserved undisturbed stratigraphy, and so make it possible to study the sequence of levels and phases, without having further to damage archaeologically relevant areas with new trenches or open-area excavation. Because the American trenches of 1928 did not have vertical sides, were in depth, and did not respect archaeological stratigraphy, at many points we were able to find quite extensive undisturbed levels. To the west of the “wall of the temple” (3) and immediately to the east of the entrance to the church all strati-

graphy has been destroyed by deep trenches dug in 1928 along the courses of the walls.

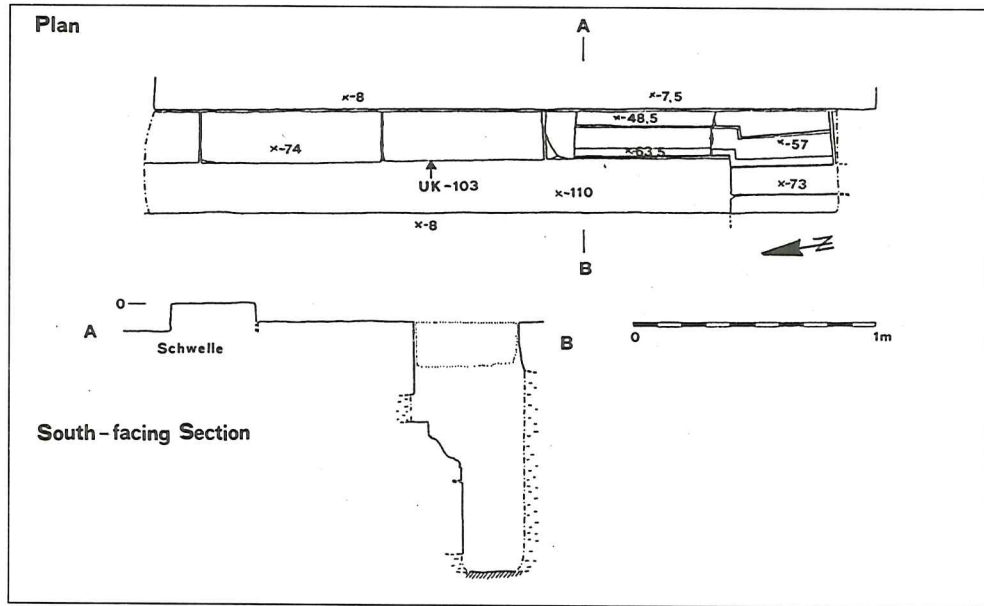
The results of the present excavation justified our cautious manner of operation. Hopefully this will ensure that future open-area excavations can be precisely targeted and thus avoid causing unnecessary damage.

The Situation in the Eastern Walk of the Atrium (Fig. 2)

To the west of the threshold of the central portal of the Cathedral there is a noticeable irregularity in the pavement of the atrium. Instead of the octagonal slabs with which the rest of the eastern walk is paved, here three large slabs abut the threshold, forming a kind of ante-threshold. Seemingly puzzled by this irregularity, the Americans removed these three flag stones and

6. We are again most grateful to the Max Geldner Foundation of the University of Basel for providing financial support for our project. The Archäologische Bodenforschung Basel-Stadt and Reto Marti provided us with material support. In

‘Ammān we were again able to use the German Protestant Institute for Archaeology as our operational base, and for this we are most grateful to its director, Susanne Kerner.



2. Jarash Cathedral. Plan and section of the trench in the eastern walk of the atrium.

found underneath the remains of the above mentioned earlier structure. In order to evaluate this feature, we lifted the slabs once again and removed the modern fill beneath them. The uppermost course of stone of the structure we were looking for was found circa 40 cm below the present level of the pavement in the southern half of the trench. The complete removal of the fill revealed a row of blocks, 65-75 cm long and about 30 cm high, which formed the base



3. Jarash, Cathedral. moulding under the eastern walk of the atrium.

course of a wall (Fig. 3). This was not built directly onto the natural rock, but was separated from this by a loamy layer of earth a few centimeters thick. This row of blocks, the western edge of which projects a good 20 cm in front of the edge of the three large stone plaques of the ante-threshold, survived *in situ* for the whole length of the trench. At the southern extremity of the excavation these blocks turned at right angles and continued to the south beyond the extremity of the trench. A second course of blocks, in this case finely profiled, lay on top of the base course. Only one block from this course remained in place, broken in two halves in the southern half of the trench. But the continuing line of this wall, running southwards, could be seen in the section of the trench. Where the base course turned at right angles, the upper profile broke into a shallow rectangular projection, which indicated the presence of a pilaster. A conspicuous feature of this profiled block is its seemingly imperfect execution. It is imprecisely cut and is slightly off-axis. This contrasts strangely with the otherwise extremely exact cutting of the moulding.

Of course a definitive analysis of so lim-

ited an excavation would be premature. However, our findings prompted certain observations which will be useful to keep in mind when undertaking further excavations in this area. The excellent state of preservation of the moulding suggests that it was either protected by a roof or that it was only exposed to the element for a short period of time. The rectangular, pilaster-shaped, projection in the westward-running base course, rather than carrying a wall, may have served as the point of departure for the springing of an arch. The actual wall must have continued to the south. Moreover, the base moulding gives the approximate level of the corresponding exterior surface, which must have lain more or less level with the upper edge of the base course at point of about 73 cm below the threshold of the central nave. For the time being, the eastward extent of the excavated structure remains unknown. In order to find this out it would be necessary to lift the ante threshold and the two flanking slabs of the atrium walk. In all probability the west wall of the church was constructed not directly over this earlier structure but immediately to the east and adjacent to it.⁷ It is possible that the remains of this earlier building were found during the digging of the trench for the foundations for the west wall of the church and that it was intentionally avoided because the builders were unsure of its load-bearing capacity. As long as the extent of this building and its stratigraphic relationship with the corresponding walls of the church remains unknown, it will be impossible to say if anything of this earlier structure was visible when the church had been erected. The almost perfect state of preservation of the base moulding might

suggest that the wall may have been taken down if indeed it ever was completed, and covered with earth long before the building of the church. There is no hard evidence for dating the structure since it cannot be directly related to any of the features in the long trench to the east of the threshold. However, the stone employed suggests a date in the first century AD at the latest, since after that time this kind of limestone was hardly ever employed in Gerasa.

The Excavation in the Western Section of the Nave (Fig. 4)

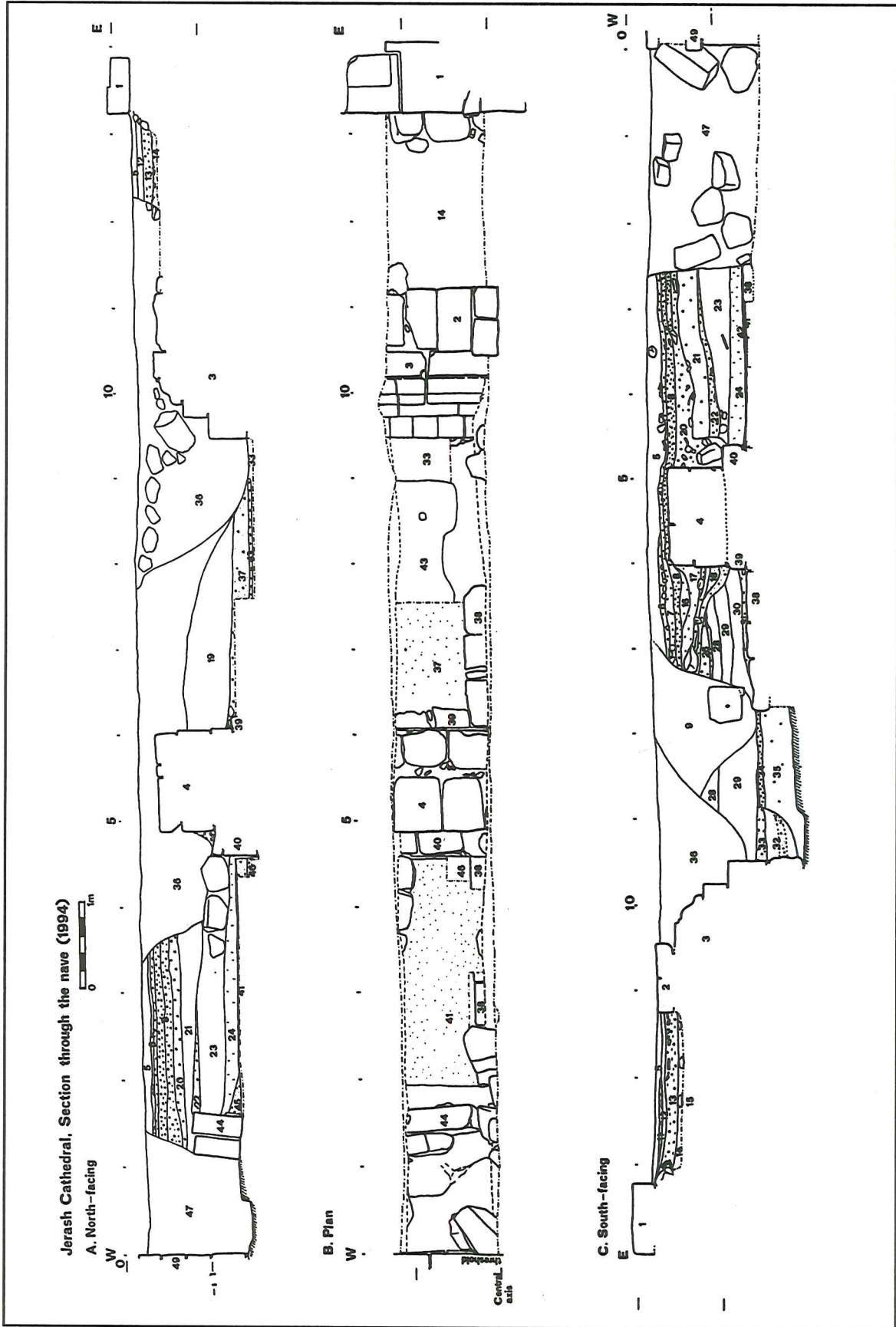
The decision to excavate in the western section of the nave of the Cathedral was taken on the strength of a photograph published in 1931 in a preliminary report, which shows in the foreground a wall of dressed stones running across the nave and further to the east a massive wall foundation with an upper moulding and in the background a later wall still visible above ground between the fifth pair of columns.⁸ One would expect the American exploratory trench of 1928 to have run out from the west wall of the church. However, between the wall with the fine base moulding referred to above, and the secondary dividing wall (1) (Fig. 4) seen in the photograph, the joint American and British team did not go very deep, and as a result an intact area of stratigraphy is still preserved at this point. Because there was no time to investigate this, we left it undisturbed and intend to examine it in the context of a future open-area excavation in this area.

The chronological sequence of the structures discovered so far is as follows: A wall running west-east (38), the northern edge of which could be seen at the southern extrem-

7. This is confirmed by the fact that the ante-threshold does not rest directly on this structure, but is separated from it by an intervening layer 10 cm thick. This contained fragments of 1st-2nd-century pottery. We would like to thank Ina

Kehrberg (Jerash), Anne-Michèle Rasson-Seigne (Amman) and Yvonne Gerber (Basel) for analysing the pottery and Jacques Seigne for discussing the excavations with us.

8. See n. 5.



4. Jerash Cathedral. Plan and section of the excavation in the nave.

ity of the trench, formed part of the earliest structure found in the excavated area. The width of this structure is not yet known. To the east the wall runs to a point of 7.73 m of east of the threshold at the entrance to the church, at which point it breaks of, while to the west it was breached and destroyed in the 1920s. Another wall (44) (Fig. 5) which ran parallel to this one was also partially destroyed at this time, when the foundations of the west wall of the church were uncovered in rather a cavalier fashion. It is unclear if this formed part of the same structure as wall 38, since, despite the fact that both lie at the same level, their composition is very different. Only one block, ca. 0.24 m wide, remains *in situ* in wall 44. It is to be noted that this is set upright on one of its narrow sides, rather than horizontally. Although this block lies a little out of the vertical, it is still *in situ*. This is

clear from the configuration of the original wall-plaster which still adheres to its eastern face (Fig.6). The vertical surface of this plaster curves out at the bottom of the block to run into the horizontal mortar-surface of the floor, which is still preserved further to the east. This white two-layered covering of plaster consists of a 2 cm thick friable *arriccio* over which there is a thinner skin of fine plaster, 2-5 mm thick, with a smooth surface. The adjacent block to the west, which was also set upright, appears to have been slightly disturbed, since it is no longer mortared to the first block nor does it show signs of a continuation to the north where the stratigraphy is still intact. Here, too, it is unclear how wide the wall was originally. To the west the underlying bedrock has a markedly straight edge, which suggests that the rock may have been cut back when wall



5. General view looking eastward of the trench in the nave. In the middle the tow remaining stones of the wall 44, in the background wall 4, in between the mortar floor 41.



6. On the left of the eastern-face of the wall 4 with the original wall-plaster, in the foreground the affiliated mortar floor 44. In the background the foundations of the Cathedral-west-wall with their section.

44 was constructed. The smooth mortar surface, which was mentioned above, belongs to wall 44. But this was probably not the earliest floor surface in this area. About 15-18 cm lower down there was another surface (43/46) (see Fig. 4) similar in composition to the natural rock which, to judge from the few passages which are preserved, would seem to have been a floor of limestone slabs. This would have constituted the original floor surface which went with wall 38. Later the floor level was raised. This may have occurred when wall 44 was constructed (or at least when it was plastered). The thin mortar layer on the surface of this new floor conceals the stones of wall 38. It is not clear whether this west-east wall was reduced to its present height at this time. It is also possible that this is only the projecting foundation of the wall which was never intended to be visible above floor-level, and that the wall above was set back. If this is the case, the lower surface, which was identified above as a floor of limestone slabs, would have to be reassessed. Only an extension of the excavation to the south will provide a solution to this problem.

A thick wall beneath the north-south wall 4 (Fig.7) also must have formed part of the earliest building on the site of the later Ca-



7. View from west on the late antique wall 4.

thedral. The principal evidence for this was found on the east side of this structure. The mortar surface 37 which belongs to building phase I overlaps both the projecting foundation 39 and the lowest course of the set-back wall. Furthermore, the construction-trench for this wall, both sides of which are clearly visible at this point, falls from 4 to a level of -1.12 m,⁹ and this corresponds precisely with the upper surface of the first course of stone blocks. On the opposite, western, side of this wall, the corresponding horizontal building-break runs between the projecting edge of the foundation (40) and the first course of stone blocks above.¹⁰ The presence of a thin layer of soil in the narrow space between the foundation and the course of blocks above shows that there was a horizontal break in construction at this point. Here it is clear that the cross-wall 40 is later than the structure 38 which runs parallel to the nave of the later Cathedral. The fact that 40 also cuts through the floor surface 41 shows that the construction of this wall 40 is the latest change which can be associated with phase I. It is not yet possible to tell whether parts of the earlier wall were demolished and the floor surface was raised to the west when wall 40 was constructed.

The destruction of building I by fire is evident in levels 31, 34 and 42, which are full of ashes and charcoal. The substantial construction trench dug for wall 3 cuts through the upper surface of the ash-filled level 34, and consequently must belong to the phase of construction in the excavated area (Phase II). The lowest foundation, which consists of unworked stones lies directly on bedrock, which at this point is at a level of 1.97 m. This foundation supports a course of dressed stones set upright, and over these lies a course of horizontally set

9. The temporary bench-mark was located at the south end of the threshold of the central portal in the west wall of the "Cathedral".

10. The surviving blocks of wall 40 must always have formed part of its foundations, since their surfaces are barely worked.

blocks, the front edges of which are set a good 25 cm behind the front of this lower course. The second course is crowned with an extremely coarse and weathered moulding, the orientation of which clearly shows that this must have formed part of the west wall of a building. After this wall was constructed, or even earlier, wall 44 was for the most part levelled and the level of the terrain was raised a good half meter (levels 22-24, 28-30). The dump with which the land was built up contained large numbers of fragments of brick, mortar and plaster which must have come from the demolished building. There is no surviving evidence to suggest that this surface carried a substantial floor. But this would not be surprising if the floor was of stone slabs, since the stone pavement of the Cathedral has also disappeared without trace. Finally, it is not clear whether the wall 39/40 was levelled on this occasion. The fact that the later wall 4 was built directly over this one could speak for the continued existence of this north-south division after the erection of building II.

Subsequently, at a later date, when the level in the western part of building II measured 0.55 m high, cross wall 4 was erected, for the most part with reused blocks (Phase III). The tips deposited at this time (levels 16-18, 20) reached a level of 0.4 m, that is more or less the level of the pavement of the church.

The next major building phase was the construction of the church (Phase IV). Because the stratigraphy is lost in the area close to the west wall, the precise level of the surface cannot be determined. However, it probably was about 0.4 m high. The pavement of stone slabs which is still preserved further to the east in the area where the ambo once stood, must have lain directly on top of the levelled walls 3 and 4. Supposing that the pavement slabs were about 10 cm thick, the floor-level inside the

church must have been at about 0.30 m.

At a later date these pavement slabs were removed, possibly first in the western part of the church and only later in the eastern part. At the same time as the floor slabs were removed from the western part, the dividing cross wall 1 was constructed over a foundation of rough, unworked field stones, shortening the church by a good 13 m (Phase V). The removal of the paving slabs revealed the massive foundation wall 3, which was used subsequently to support the column of a porch (see plinth 2). A proper floor surface was found here. However a nest-like concentration of large white limestone tesserae was found at the northern edge of the excavated area at a level of 0.45 m. These probably belonged to an earlier building phase. Levels 6-8 and 11-13, which could be traced in all parts of the excavated area, certainly should be associated with the phase in which the pavement was removed and the church was shortened.

Interpretation and Chronology

Bearing in mind the uncertainties which are bound to result from the excavation of an area as restricted as this sounding, several concluding observations can be made concerning the interpretation and the dating of the excavated features. At the very least these may serve as working hypotheses for future investigations. The relationship between the base moulding to the west of the wall of the church and the features lying to the east of it is not yet resolved. To judge from the levels of the various surviving features, it would appear that the earliest excavated structure on the site of the later "Cathedral" of Gerasa was a building which stood on the east side of the later church wall. This structure seems to have been constructed in various stages. The smoothly finished mortar surface (41) to the east of wall 44 indicates that this was probably a private house rather than a monumental

public building. The pottery found in level 35 and in the mortar surfaces 37 and 41 suggests that this building dates from the first or second century AD.

The layers of ash, which contained somewhat later types of pottery, show that this building must have been burnt down at some later stage in the Roman imperial period. To the east the burnt building was replaced by a new structure which, to judge from its massive base with upper moulding, may have been a temple. This was already suggested by the archaeologists who excavated here in the 1920s. They saw sections of the long side walls of this structure “..at two or three points further east about 0.25 m inside the colonnades of the cathedral”.¹¹ Accordingly the “temple” must have been about 10 m wide, and Crowfoot put its length at about 25 m: “..and it may be worth noting that the twenty-four columns used in the cathedral might have been taken from a temple of these dimensions with nine columns on the long sides, four at the end and a prostyle portico in antis at one end”.¹² However, as Crowfoot realized, this hypothesis raises one particular difficulty: the foundation wall with its upper moulding, to judge from the type of stone used and from the fact that it bore traces of a plaster covering, would seem to date from the first century AD, while the columns and capitals of the cathedral date from the second half of the second century. “If therefore the columns were used on the base we must assume that the temple was rebuilt in the second century, which indeed is likely enough”.¹³ This is because the approach from the *cardo* with its ceremonial steps and pedimented portal, which still survives in outline, was laid out in the second half of the second century. The dumps were deposited

after the completion of the temple, or at least after the completion of its foundations, contained pottery of first and second century date. Consequently it must be assumed that the temple was built *in toto* in the second century.

It has already been said that, when the earliest structure 44 was demolished in connection with the construction of building II, the north-south wall 39/40 may have continued to stand. It is uncertain whether the base moulding found to the west of the threshold at the entrance to the church belongs to this phase of construction. Although the moulding and the material employed suggest an earlier date, the fact that the floor level lies at about 0.75 m suggests that this belongs to phase II. However, as considerable variation can be found in the floor levels within a building, this must remain as a hypothesis.

To judge from the material and the constructional techniques employed and from the nature of the associated pottery, a new wall was built over the course of the earlier north-south wall 39/40 in the third or early fourth century. This phase of construction is clearly represented stratigraphically in the corresponding wall trench. The lack of associated stratigraphy makes it impossible to tell whether the temple underwent alterations or was demolished at the time this new construction took place.

The “temple” and the late antique north-south wall 4 were levelled to the contemporary ground level at the latest when the construction of the “Cathedral” got under way. It is noticeable that no deposits or dumps were found here which could be associated with the demolition of earlier structures and with the leveling of the ground for new construction. It seems that when the church was

11. Crowfoot, *PEQ*, 1931: 145.

12. *Ibid.* On the other hand, see Kraeling, 1938: 37: “To judge by the older elements incorporated in the Fountain Court of Christian days and in the

Great Staircase to the Cathedral, the order of the temple was ionic.”

13. See Brenk *et al.* *ADAJ* 38: 146.

built the earlier structures on the site were completely demolished (although their foundations were left) and that the stone was reused in the new building. The fact that the colonnades of the church run immediately outside the course of the walls of the earlier temple, so that they almost seem to encase the earlier structure, suggests that these walls were still visible when the church was built. The stone pavement of the cathedral must have been laid very soon after the demolition of the antecedent structures, since no layers containing datable artifacts were found between the two phases.

The extensive building campaigns of the fifth and sixth centuries to the west of the "Cathedral" could not be traced in the stratigraphy examined inside the building. At the same time as the church, dedicated to St. Theodore was erected, many other satellite structures were constructed adjacent to it and around the atrium.¹⁴ The layers which cover the levelled walls of the earlier structures date from a time when the stone pavement of the nave had already been removed and the church had been reduced in length by about two-fifths. Crowfoot assigned these changes to the eighth century.¹⁵ However, the pottery found in the contexts associated with these alterations suggests that they probably took place in the second half of the sixth century, or in the seventh century at the latest.

Conclusion

Our second excavation in this area has shown that the antecedent structures on the site of the "Cathedral" of Gerasa were far more extensive than had hitherto been supposed. The earliest building on the site was a relatively simple structure of a private nature. It is possible that this formed part of the "andron" which is referred to in the Serapion inscription of 67/68 AD.¹⁶ To

judge from the associated pottery, this building dates from the first century AD. Possibly in the same era, but more likely in the following century, following a fire, a temple was erected to the east of the great north-south wall 39/40, which may have remained standing. To the west of this wall a further building may have been erected. This was articulated with pilasters which carried the springing of arcades running out to the west. One or two centuries later the old wall 39/40 was reconstructed. When the "Cathedral" was erected, the earlier structures on the site were taken down to ground level and the terrain was cleared and levelled to provide a secure foundation base for the new building. The church retained its original form until the second half of the sixth or the seventh century. At this time it was reduced in size and its stone pavement was removed - at least in the area where the church had been curtailed. This area was now transformed into a small open court in front of the building.

This is the point which our current investigations have reached. Crowfoot's cautionary admonition of 1931 should be reiterated: "Until the whole area has been examined it will be wise to maintain an open mind."¹⁷ However, we hope that the observations made in this report will prove useful to future excavations on this site.

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14. See Brenk *et al.* ADAJ 38: 146.

15. Crowfoot, *PEQ*, 1931: 145.

16. Kraeling, 1938: 37, 43.

17. Crowfoot, *PEQ*, 1931: 154.