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Gerasa: fountain court of the cathedral

Jäggi, Carola ; Meier, Hans-Rudolf ; Brenk, Beat

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Gerasa, Fountain Court of the Cathedral.

B. Brenk, C. Jäggi, and H. Meier, University of Basel, report:

In recent years, archaeologists and art historians have been turning their attention to the development of urban structures during times of political and cultural transformations. Research has shown that changes in the building patterns of cities lend valuable insight into the impact of such new forces as the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century or, later, the Islamization of the eastern Mediterranean. But how was the introduction of new religions made manifest in urban structures? Gerasa serves as an excellent example because much of the ancient city is preserved.

From the British-American excavations undertaken in the 1920s, we know that the Christian cult center of Gerasa was situated to the south of the Temple of Artemis. On the upper terrace, archaeologists first excavated the church of St. Theodore, dated to 494–496 by an inscription. To the east, on a lower level, Crowfoot and his colleagues found a second basilica of enormous size, which is connected to the church by a square atrium with a large, centrally placed fountain. Since this so-called “fountain court” forms a structural unit with the lower basilica, it must have already been in place by the time the church of St. Theodore was built.

The discoverers thought it was a cathedral, and the fountain in the atrium to be that mentioned by Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis ca. 375. If this association is accepted, it provides a terminus ante quem for the erection of the lower basilica, suggesting that in the middle of the fourth century the 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. There is also a structure under the cathedral. If this was a temple dedicated to Dionysos, as Crowfoot asserts, the question then arises whether the Christians were allowed at this early date to demolish a center of the old religions for their own purposes—a situation known, until now, only in Jerusalem.

These issues serve as the point of departure for our research. Our first step was to reexamine the fountain as it served both as a hinge between the two churches and as the cult focus for the entire Christian building complex. Our research indicates that the fountain did not originate from the cathedral complex, but was relocated from an earlier first- or second-century site in Gerasa. Evidence also suggests the development of the atrium to serve a litur-

gical purpose. 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. Reused building materials will be catalogued to determine their origin and relationship to the decline of Classical-period buildings nearby. Further excavations will be conducted underneath the cathedral floors to explore a square structure, possibly a pagan temple, which is as yet unpublished.

Gerasa, Hippodrome. I. Kehrberg and A. Osrasz, University of Warsaw, report:

The excavation of chamber W2 of the hippodrome in 1993 revealed a compact layer of misfired pottery dating to the second half of the sixth century A.D. Hundreds of unfired pottery and lamp fragments were also found mixed with the misfired sherds. The fragments vary in size and represent several types of pottery, the most important of which are the so-called “Jerash Bowls.” Various forms of rims and bases, as well as plain and decorated body-sherds (white- and red-painted, and with stamped decoration), are present. The lamp fragments are of the sixth-century Jerash lamp type with zoomorphic handles. All unfired fragments are of the same tempered clay and are in date and typological range identical with the misfired pottery.

It is now irrefutable that Jerash Bowls were made in Gerasa. The hippodrome has so far emerged as the only center of ceramic production of the sixth century that has provided ample evidence for all possible kinds of discarded waste products—malformed and misfired fragments and, most significant of all, the unfired Jerash Bowls. The other interesting aspect of the unfired lot is that typical mid-to-late sixth-century pottery and lamps were made of the same ware, at one potter’s workshop. Based on this and other evidence, we suggest that the various pottery types and lamps were planned for one firing.

During the course of excavation in chamber W2 in 1992, human skeletal remains of at least eight individuals were found under and between tumbled stones of the vault of the chamber. Additional skeletal remains have been found, bringing the number of individuals to perhaps more than 40. The position of the remains and the number of bodies in the chamber attest to mass burial rather than a number of individuals being instantly killed by a collapse of the vault. The corpses appear to have been dumped in the chamber (on top of the ceramic dump) with no regard to any burial custom. One