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Marek Baranski

Preserving the Christian Basilica of El-Ashmunein.

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Marek BARANSKI

PRESERVING THE CHRISTIAN BASILICA OF EL-ASHMUNEIN

Ashmunein, in ancient times called Khoumu - Hermopolis Magna, was an important centre of administration and religious life in Egypt. After the fall of the town its numerous buildings were ruined and dismantled in order to acquire ashlars for building and lime-production [1]. Vast sebakh digging in the XIX th century completed town destruction. This process was stopped in the beginning of the XX th century when the first archaeological expeditions came to Ashmunein. Excavations of Chaban and Roeder allowed to recognize the main monuments and urban disposition. In the forties and fifties expeditions of the Service des Antiquités and the Alexandria University continued excavation in Ashmunein. They resulted in the discovery of an early Christian basilica and other monuments in the town centre. In the 80ties British Museum expedition excavated in the Thoth Temple temenos [2].

Ancient remains of Ashmunein are situated close to arable fields and canals. It causes that monuments built of limestone suck from the damp soil water containing salts. In winter moisty air increases stone humidity as well. These unfavourable conditions cause salt crystalization in evaporation zones what results in stone deterioration [3]. This process has recently increased due to the fact that ground water table had changed after the High Dam building in Aswan. Considerable expansion of grasses and bushes causes that fortunately preserved remnants of ancient mudbrick buildings are being devastated too.

The basilica in Ashmunein, one of the most interesting monuments in the town, was identified during the 1942 excavation conducted by Mr. Kamal [4]. Previous suggestions

1. V. Meinecke-Berg, *Spolien in der Mittelalterlichen Architektur von Kairo in Agypten. Dauer und Wandel*, 1985, p. 137. S. Snape D. Bailey, *The Great Portico at Hermopolis Magna; Present State and Past Prospects*, 1988, p. 48 *sq.*

2. G. Roeder, *Hermopolis 1929-1939*, 1959; A.J. Spencer, *Excavations at El Ashmunein I. The Topography of the Site*, 1980; A.J. Spencer P. Spencer, *Excavations at El Ashmunein II. The Temple Area* 1989.

3. M. Baranski, « Ruins of Ashmunein. Problem of conservation », *Reports from Ashmunein*, 1989, p. 5-10.

4. M. Kamal, « Excavations in the so-called Agora of El Ashmunein », *ASAE* XLVI, 1947, p. 289-295.

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concerning the ancient relics at this site connected them with the Agora [5]. Excavation exposed the whole monument and adjacent area in the fifties publication « Hermopolis Magna, Ashmunein. The Ptolemaic Sanctuary and the Basilica » by Wace, Skeat and Megaw described remains and presented scientific point of view on the monument [6].

The church in Ashmunein is a big basilica with side galleries. Its length is of 55 metres, span of the nave is of 14.7 m and depth of aisles is of 5.6 m. The columnaded transept has exaedras on both sides. This feature makes that the basilica is one of the most important examples of early Christian architecture development [7]. At the east end there is a great apse of width equal to the nave span. The western part of the church was ended by the esonarthex, which was later on completed by the narthex. On its north and south sides there were unsymmetrically situated staircases which led to the side galleries. It is supposed that the ceiling of the church was wooden. Presumably the basilica was 22 m high. There were two entrances leading into the basilica. The main entrance from the spacious atrium was situated on the western end of the church. The other one was the side entrance situated on the north and leading from the Antinoe street through the four column portico—the Tetrastyle. The baptistery tank was situated in the north-east corner of the church complex. The basilica was built in the centre of the town, what caused destruction of earlier buildings present on this area.

Unfortunately there is lack of historical sources concerning building of the basilica. Megaw took into account both architectonic analyses and historical premises, what lead to the conclusion that the church was probably built in the middle of the Vth century A.D. [8] Both the basilica's unusual design and its size are the cause that there are not many similar analogies. The most similar one, the one with a columnaded transept, is the Great Church in Abu Mina near Alexandria. But, transept ended with exaedras makes the basilica similar to the churches of « cella trichora » type which is common in Upper Egypt, where the Deir el-Abiad and Deir el-Ahmar churches seem to be the closest analogies to the Ashmunein's. We have to mention that in the light of the most recent research, the Great Church at Abu Mina of a columnaded transept was built later, *i.e.* in the VIth century [9]. Other studies indicated that the dating of the Coptic decoration must be also revised [10]. In the light of these assumptions it seems doubtful that the basilica should be considered as built in the middle of the Vth century. Probably it was built later, in the end of the Vth century or at the beginning of the VIth. We do hope that research which has been recently begun will corroborate this thesis.

5. E. Baraize, « L'Agora d'Hermopolis », *ASAE* XL, 1940, p. 741-745.

6. A.J.B. Wace, A.H.S. Megaw, T.C. Skeat, *Hermopolis Magna, El Ashmunein. The Ptolemaic Sanctuary and the Basilica,* 1959.

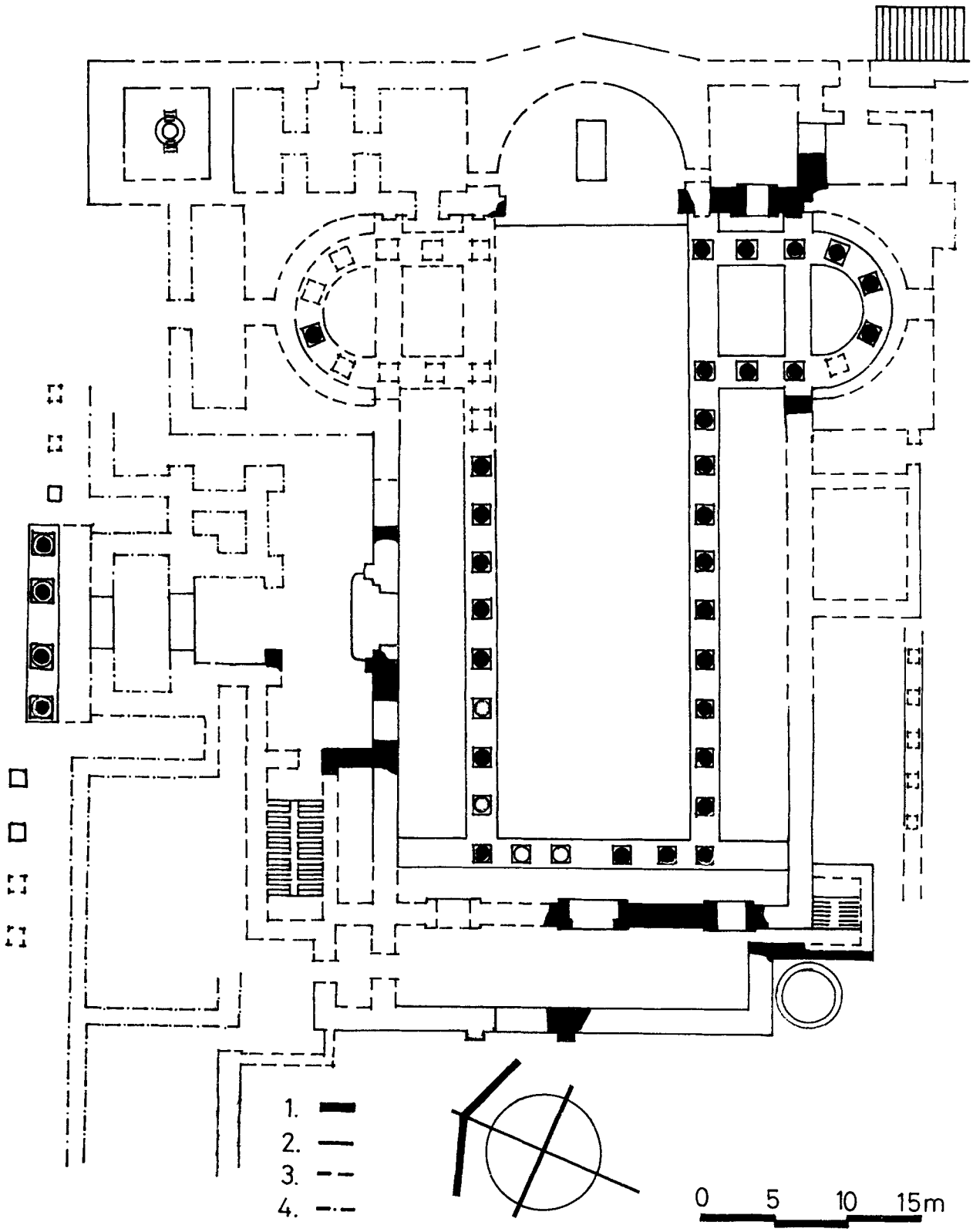
7. R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 1986, p. 113 *sq.*; P. Grosmann, « Esempi d'architettura paleocristiana in Egitto dal V al VII secolo », *Corso di Cultura sull'arte Ravennate e Bizantina* 28, 1981, p. 152-155.

8. A.J.B. Wace *et al.*, *o.c.*, p. 74-82.

9. P. Grosmann, H. Jaritz, « Abu Mina, Neunter forläufiger Bericht. Kampanien 1977-1978-1979 », *MDAIK* 36, 1980, p. 212.

10. H.G. Severin, « Problemi di scultura tardoantica in Egitto », *Corso di Cultura sull'arte Ravennate e Bizantina* 28, 1981, p. 315-336.

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1. *The Basilica in Ashmunein. Plan.*

1. *Remaining walls.*
2. *Outline of existing foundations.*
3. *Outline of non-existing foundations.*
4. *Probable outline of walls (not excavated yet).*

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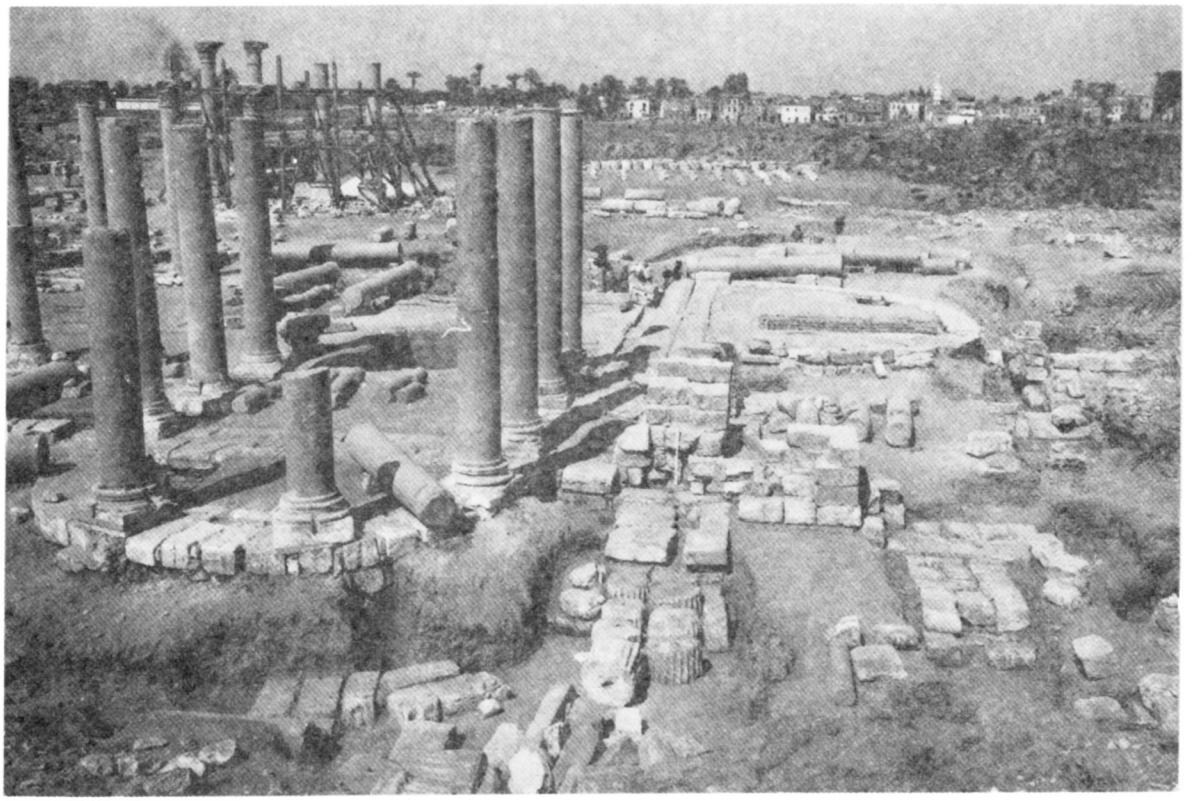
The excavation carried on in the forties exposed many fallen columns, part of the basilica's decoration mainly capitals and some remains of the walls and foundations. It had been stated, that after the basilica's destruction, what probably happened about the Xth century, its walls and foundations were demolished to obtain ashlars and limestone to burn it for a lime. Another discovery was that the foundations of the basilica were constructed with elements from dismantled Hellenistic buildings, on which traces of the original polychromy were preserved. The uniqueness of this find and its high artistic quality created the situation in which on the ground only some remnants of the great basilica remained while beneath its pavement among its foundations plenty of well preserved Hellenistic fragments could be found. It has to be mentioned that their quality is comparable with the best Hellenistic remains known from Alexandria. Archaeologists were so curious that to obtain these fragments most of basilica's foundations were took apart. Fortunately, this process was quickly stopped. Such decision was necessary because demolition of the basilica was done without architectonic inventory, necessary measurements and photographs.

In the forties team of the Egyptian Service des Antiquités completed some protective and reconstruction works. The fallen north portico was re-erected [11]. In the main nave 20 granite columns were put on their bases, but before this operation bases were protected with steel bands and all missings were backfilled with concrete. Wherever it was possible, their shape were reconstructed. The same operation was completed for the bases of 8 originally standing columns. In the main apse a fragment of the stone pavement was reconstructed and the outline of apse's northern part was marked [12]. In the esonarthex, a fragment of the wall with the door-jamb shape was reconstructed in order to mark the size of the main doorway. The voussoirs of the doorway arch were set on the ground nearby. Numerous decorated elements of the basilica as well as blocks with hieroglyphic inscriptions discovered during dismantling of foundations were transfered to the nearby lapidarium.

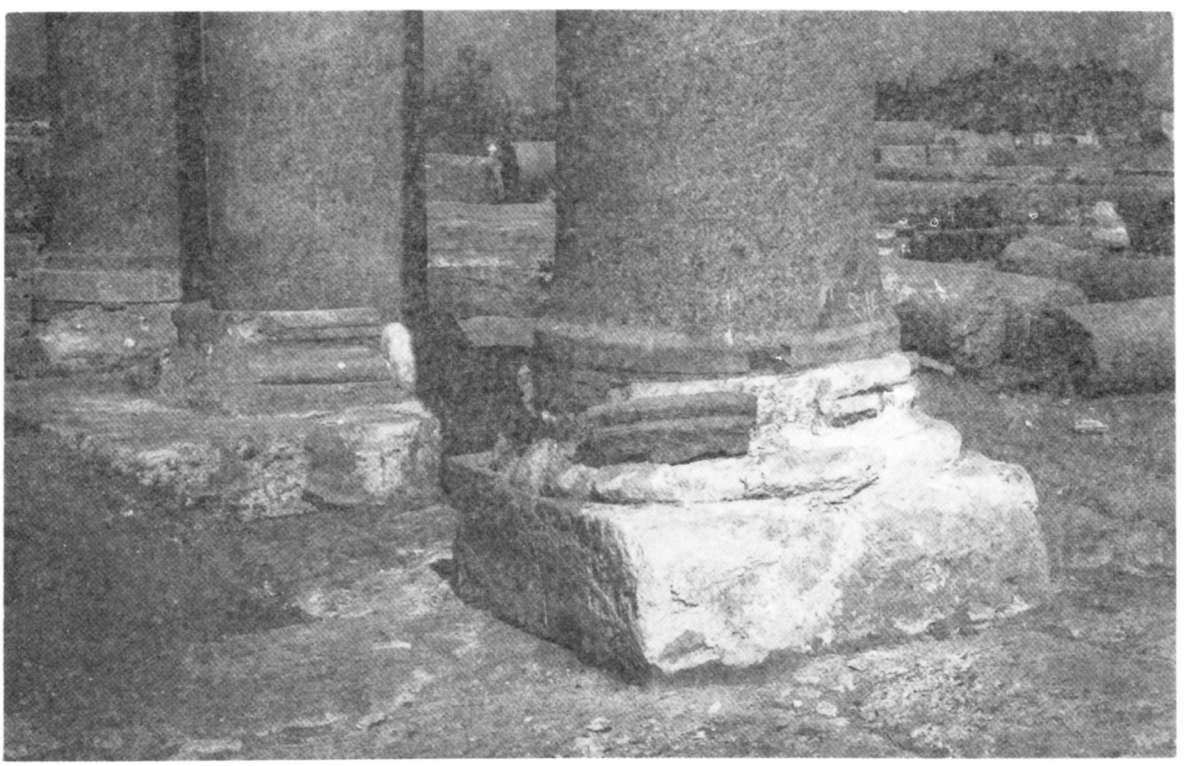
In the year 1950 Megaw elaborated for the Alexandria University a report concerning a method of further exploration of the basilica [13]. He suggested that a team of architects, archaeologists and conservators should work simultaneously on the site, prepare documentation and temporary protection of extractied Hellenistic remains from the foundations. Megaw proposed also, that the already exposed elements in the foundation should be immediately protected. However, these proposals were not brought to completion. The work was stopped and the monument was left unprotected. During the years the archaeological pits and trenches gradually deteriorated and stone elements absorbed salts. In the seventies the columns of the northern portico began to fall. This increased the new interest to the monument. The columns were temporarily supported by wooden structure. In the eighties Egyptian Antiquities Organization proposed to the State Ateliers for Conservation of Cultural Property (PKZ) cooperation and mutual preservation

11. E. Baraize, *o.c.*, pl. XC, XCI.
12. A.J.B. Wace *et al.*, *o.c.*, p. 25.
13. *Ibid.*, p. v-x.

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2. *The Basilica. State of preservation in year 1989.*



3. *Destroyed column bases in the transept.*

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works in Ashmunein. PKZ was well known in Egypt thanks to the works of the Polish-Egyptian Archaeological and Preservation Missions at Deir el-Bahari and in Cairo. According to the Cultural Agreement a new Polish-Egyptian mission has been established. The Basilica was chosen as the first monument for mission activity.

In the Autumn 1987 the Mission began its works. The task of rescuing the portico, which was on the verge of tumbling was considered as a most important one [14]. Wooden structure propping the columns was immediately strengthened and all cavities in the Tetrastyle foundation were backfilled with compressed fine sand. After this intervention mission specialists prepared a technical design for Tetrastyle restoration. At the same time the basilica remnants were being investigated in order to recognize its present state and to define measures needed for basilica protection. We have mentioned that the previous research in the basilica resulted only in a description of the building. There was no archaeological documentation and none of the basilica's elements were catalogued. Unsurveyed plan of the church in scale 1 : 100 could not serve as a basis for any restoration works.

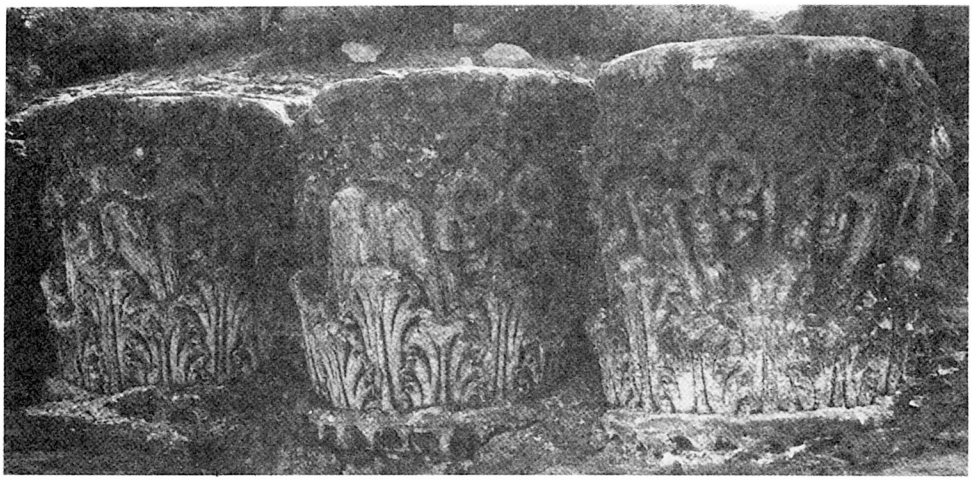
After the first season Polish specialists made plans for the preservation of the basilica. The main requirement was that the use of the means and materials not available in local condition should be minimized. Another important factor which influenced the scope of the planned works was the time of project completion. The basilica was fully documented in scale 1 : 50. All architectonic details were measured and catalogued. Architectonic inventory was verified with the archaeological data in order to know bonding of foundation walls and to establish their outline in destroyed parts. The basilica was built in the centre of the town, therefore its archaeological context would be interesting to us. We have to mention that previous clearance of the site destroyed deposits accumulated after destruction of the basilica. On the big area layers of earlier periods were destroyed as well. In the course of the present works the layers of the basilica building period as well as of Hellenistic occupation were recognized. Except the huge stone Hellenistic foundation underneath the basilica's apse, some mudbrick walls of earlier buildings were found when basilica foundations had been investigated. These mudbrick structures cover all area under the basilica. Some of them were excavated in the forties below the atrium of the basilica. At present nothing survived in this area. Fortunately some photographs taken during the excavations show these mudbrick structures [15]. We do hope it would be possible to reconstruct their plan photogrammetrically and to incorporate these buildings to the plan of this area. During the inspection of basilica foundations many minor objects were found, which are interesting from the scientific point of view. There are for instance terracotta figurines, faience amulets and a partly preserved nude male statue of marble. The statue is a Roman copy of a Greek original. It is worth of mention that it is the second statue found in the basilica foundation [16].

14. M. Baranski T. Kowalski, « Protection of the Basilica Tetrastyle at Ashmunein », in : *Reports from Ashmunein*, 1989, p. 20-28.

15. I am greatful to dr A.J. Spencer and Mr. D. Bailey who put at my disposal documents from the Wace — Megaw's archive being in the British Museum collection.

16. A.J.B. Wace *et al.*, *o.c.*, p. 9 *sq.*, pl. 18.

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4. *Hellenistic capitals found in the basilica foundations.*



5. *The salt efflorescence on the Hellenistic capitals.*

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We hope that present excavations will provide us with the new data to define more precisely the time of the basilica building. It has to be mentioned that all archaeological trenches after exploration are backfilled with sand or gravel in order to improve humid condition of the foundation. The superior aim of the present work is protection and maintenance of the basilica. Programme of the preservation work stresses that neither the works nor the conservation technologies should disturb or make access to future archaeological excavations difficult.

As it was mentioned, the ruins of the basilica and other monuments at Ashmunein are exposed to destructive action of salts crystallization. One must realize that this phenomenon has been occurring for ages. Such deterioration could be observed in granite column-shafts which had been projecting from the soil. There are also newly exposed elements of which the rate of destruction is similar. Such acceleration of damage is caused by unfavourable conditions. Therefore the most important is to stop ground water suction by the limestone remains. Our programme proposes that foundation should remain in the conditions of humid equilibrium. Therefore the exposed elements of the basilica namely column bases and walls should be insulated against ground water [17]. Different protective measures will be applied according to the present state of objects. Inspection of column bases which were restored in the forties confirms that such interventions are indispensable. Lack of damp-proof course caused destruction of almost all bases. Stone shows progressing erosion. Existing mortar mouldings are completely disjointed or deeply eroded. In many bases steel bands are completely rotten. Actually almost all bases are shapeless now. Protection of bases with their desalination and conservation without lifting the columns up seems to be a difficult and expensive task and in many cases useless. Therefore we decided to leave and conserve only the best preserved ones. Other bases ought to be replaced by the new replicas. The preserved parts of walls will be treated in a similar way. The maintenance of the architectonic elements, both those from the basilica and the Hellenistic ones is a separate problem. At present, specialists both in Egypt and Poland test methods of big limestone blocks desalination in the Egyptian conditions. We do hope that after conservation these elements will be applied in the restored basilica. To prevent destruction of exposed limestone elements the most deteriorated ones were covered temporarily with sand. Tests for elaboration of protection of mudbrick remains are also one of mission tasks.

The basilica restoration programme foresees better exhibition of its plan and the most valuable elements of its decoration. The first task needs reconstruction of foundation walls wherever they have been destroyed. Exhibition of the characteristic elements of the decoration will not be an easy task. When comparing decoration of other Coptic churches in Sohag, Bawit, etc. and Ashmunein one can see how it would be difficult to display the destroyed basilica's remains in the logical exposition. The foundation of the Hellenistic building found beneath the basilica's apse, as well as decorated blocks

17. R. Jurkiewicz, « Preliminary Studies on Conservation Programme for Basilica in Ashmunein » *Reports from Ashmunein*, 1989, p. 11-19.

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in the basilica's foundation should be protected and exhibited *in situ*. This is our opinion. In our consideration it would be the best way for proper demonstration of the monument and its history.

The great number of Hellenistic blocks which were taken out from the foundations form another problem. At present, elements of Doric and Corinthian buildings are stored in the lapidarium nearby the basilica. After the thorough selection, the best preserved ones should be exhibited in the groups representative for particular architectonic orders. The present storage area is not the best place for their exhibition. The fact that they are situated close to the original monuments, *i.e.* the basilica, the Komasterion, the Bastion can mislead the visitors suggesting that they are remnants of the buildings which stood on this area. Megaw, in his report proposed that the Corinthian column should be erected on the remnants of the Hellenistic foundation in order to mark on site building activity of this period [18]. But, until now it has not been stated to what building this foundation belonged. Moreover, the effect of setting the fluted column close to the basilica's plain granite shafts can make a disharmony in the visitors eyes. In our consideration the best place for such an exhibition would be the area nearby the museum's storehouse in Ashmunein, where the reconstructed statues of Baboons, which originally stood in front the Amenophis III temple and after its demolition were used as a rubble core of the foundation, are already standing.

During the excavation many of reused inscribed blocks were found and extracted from the foundation. Among others there are some Amarna blocks. Most of these fragments were spread over the site. Also our archaeological activity brought some blocks which previously belonged to the Nectanebo's II [19] and Ptolemies' temples. It seems that these blocks of unknown origin but of course of historical and artistic value should be upkept and exhibited. They would constitute an additional element illustrating historical changes in this archaeological site.

At present, while preparing a technical design of the basilica is restoration we assume that reconstruction works should be reduced to the strict minimum. For instance, it is not our intention to re-erect the rest of the fallen columns. In our project we want to preserve not only the monument but also the natural beauty of the site [20].

18. A.J.B. Wace *et al.*, *o.c.*, p. x.

19. Z. Szafranski, A. Makramallah, « A New Inscription of Nektanebo II from Ashmunein », *GM* 112, 1989, p. 65 *sq.*

20. *Reports from Ashmunein*, vol. II (in print).

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