

SYRIA: THE JEBEL KHALID

Over several recent excavation seasons the Australian Mission to Jebel Khalid in North Syria on the west bank of the Euphrates has been uncovering the remains of a Greek Temple of the Hellenistic period. Surprisingly, this is the first Greek-style Temple to be discovered in the inland Levant for the two and a half centuries of the Seleucid period (323-63 BCE) and, as such, is of special importance. On present indications, based on imported Attic pottery, coins and mould-made lamps caught in the foundation deposits, it would appear that the Temple was constructed in the later 3rd century BCE.



Jebel Khalid was founded early in the 3rd century BCE as a Macedonian military colony, guarding a river-crossing point and controlling the river traffic on the Euphrates. It was a virgin site, so the planners had no previous traditional sacred area to

restrict their choice of location for the Temple. There were two main entry points into the settlement, ringed as it was with 3.4 kilometres of protective walling and 30 defensive towers: the Main Gate on the western, landward side, and the River Gate, up via a steep ravine, on the eastern side facing the Euphrates. They chose a site where the Temple would be immediately visible from either entry point. This would mean, however, that the visitor would be confronted on one of the two sides with a blind wall. The architect chose a very Greek aesthetic resolution to the problem: he designed an “amphiprostyle” Temple with an identical portico on both east and west ends. The Temple *looked* the same from either approach, but in fact could be entered only from the eastern side. A similar solution was used for the

well known bijou temple of Athena Nike on the Athenian acropolis.

During excavations at the Temple we were greatly surprised to uncover a unique feature. The Temple was surrounded on its periphery to the north, west and south sides by a ring of altars, 23 in all, erected at regular intervals. These are of a type and number without precise parallel to my knowledge - fluted, columnar altars with a central depression and four shallow horns. They would be suitable for libations of wine, oil etc. and for burning incense or making small offerings of fruit, grains, flowers etc. They would not be suitable for major blood sacrifices. They imply outside ceremonies and suggest ritual processions around the Temple. The ceramic finds include many large bowls and amphoras for wine and oil, some imported from Rhodes and Cyprus

Fluted columnar incense altar, western portico.



KHALID TEMPLE

Graeme Clarke



View from the Temple towards the river.

as well as those of local manufacture, that may have been needed for the sacrificial rituals. Basalt grinding vessels, found in unusual numbers for a non-domestic site, may have been used in preparing sacrificial cakes of meal.

The site chosen has a sharply sloping bedrock and so the Temple was designed to stand on a platform which started at the western end at ground level and rose to a height of some 3 metres at the eastern end where a relatively narrow flight of steps led up into the building. To prepare the site for construction, the area was cleared down to bedrock and the stone debris was piled into retaining walls on three sides of the platform base.

The foundation blocks of the temple walls were laid directly on bedrock, and sumps were sunk to prevent any build-up of water seeping down underneath. Clearing the foundations to bedrock was a mammoth task occupying a full season's labour with 50 local workers. Finally, to our great delight, and despite obvious evidence of massive stone-robbing, we were able to retrieve the overall ground plan of the Temple and its precise dimensions. Episodes of stone-robbing were revealed by some of the 73 coins so far recovered from the Temple site – at the time of abandonment in the course of the 1st century BCE and in the 3rd, 4th and 11th centuries CE – as well as by fragments from plastic shoes and cigarette-packet foil of very recent times!

The Temple is “modified Doric” in order. Each of the two porticos had six columns (“hexastyle”), capped with a Doric capital. The western portico is particularly well preserved, with all six column bases still standing *in situ*, with the six capitals recovered, and enough column drums survive to reconstruct all six columns. One column had collapsed in a line so it is possible to know the height of the columns. The proportion of base diameter to column height is

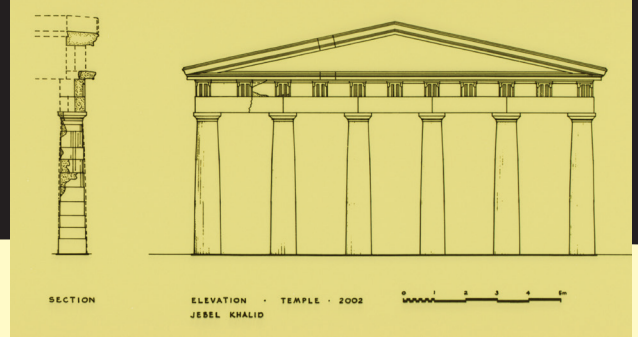


Site of Cella after clearance.



Two marble toes.

Isometric reconstruction of the Temple.



1:5.2 (as opposed to a contemporary standard of 1:7+), so that the columns would have appeared distinctly squat. The limestone columns were entirely without fluting and there is no sign of their being stuccoed: instead, they have 20 strap flutes (“facets”). Examples of the two varieties of the cornice mouldings as well as of the metopes and triglyphs survive, enabling a reconstruction of the entire façade. The porticoes were apparently lacking in other standard features by now canonical in the Doric order. There were no regulae on the architrave blocks or mutules on the geison blocks, and the whole entablature seems to be missing a course which carried the top of the architrave and the bottom of the frieze. Was all this a cost-cutting measure or was it conforming to a positive taste for the “unfinished look” (as can be found elsewhere in constructions of the Hellenistic period)? At all events the whole visual effect of this simplified Doric order must have been distinctly spare.

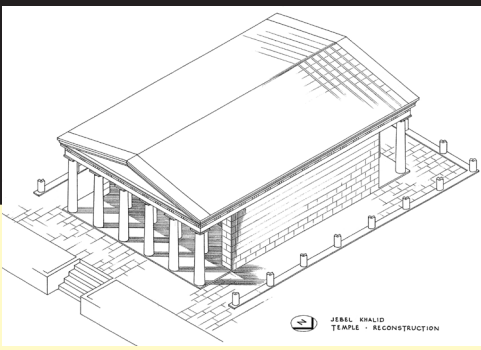
The load-bearing lines of supporting ashlar blocks found below the paving level of the platform, along with the recovery of a significant number of column

drums, with matching Doric capital, slightly smaller than those of the east and west porticoes (32 drums in all), suggest that there was a double row of columns in the eastern porch-way of the Temple. This is a thoroughly Greek architectural feature. What is beyond doubt is that the load-bearing lines within the Temple itself describe a sanctuary divided into three parts (a “tripartite adyton”). That had long been a standard feature of Mesopotamian religious architecture in this region – and was indeed to continue in the region in Roman-period temples and later in the sanctuaries of Nestorian churches. The proportions of the interior of the Temple (the “cella”) thus emerge as 13 metres by 10 metres (unusually squarish for a Greek Temple) and the Temple overall (including the two porticos) as 13 metres by 20 metres.

In the vicinity of the “adyton” were recovered two sets of marble toes from two different over-life-size statues. These are “acrolithic”; i.e. made from smaller pieces of marble designed to be dowelled together, a thoroughly Greek technique. Many other marble fragments deriving from these statues were also found scattered over the site. In addition there were found a massive fragmentary limestone toe and two limestone toes attached to a fragmentary base; carved limestone fragments that might come from the drapery of these statues were also found. A small head in marble was recovered, with deep-set eyes under heavy brows, a triangular nose and a rudimentary mouth: it has a flattened base as well as a flattened back and one side of the head, suggesting that this once stood on a small pedestal and was designed to fit into a niche. In other words

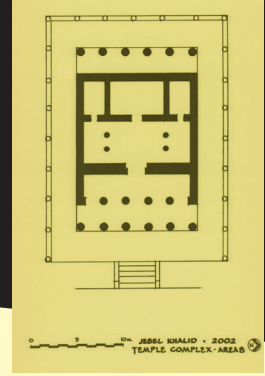


Limestone head, side view.



Reconstruction drawing of the Temple.

Reconstruction plan of the Temple.



this formed part of a herm, a local representation of a divinity or ancestor. We also found a nearly life-size limestone male head, with stylised beard and hair, braids behind the ears, and wearing a diadem and one earring. He has a thick neck in relation to the size of the head which is slightly at a tilt. These sculptural remnants provide evidence for at least six images in the Temple, two in unmistakably local style whilst others are, equally unmistakably, carved in heroic Hellenistic style and technique. A double-wick bronze lamp with triangular heat shield, in splendid condition, weighing almost 1 kilogram, was, like most of the sculptural pieces, recovered in the debris at the western end of the Temple: it would appear to date close to the

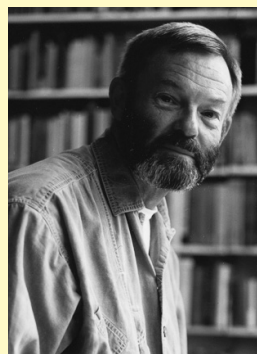
Artemis, Adonis and Atargatis at Dura Europos. The multiplicity of altars, whether for different sacrifices or for different gods, allowed for ritual procession and ceremonies surrounding the Temple within the temenos, in traditional Mesopotamian fashion. At the same time there could be nothing more Greek in appearance than a Temple with an amphiprostyle Doric facade, even though the Doric order may be in simplified form. The combination must be deliberate and is suggestive of a sensitivity to the religious traditions and needs of a mixed ethnic population (note the mixture of divine images in both local and Hellenistic styles). Going against the grain of many current (Western) colonial studies, in this colonial setting at least, it is far from being a statement of cultural (Hellenic) imperialism, rather it would appear to be a tribute to an adaptive and inventive culture, tolerant of and open to the religious and cultural traditions of others.



Double-wick bronze lamp.

Temple's abandonment.

What emerges, therefore, from our excavations so far, is basically an east-facing Temple of "quadratic" proportions, with a tripartite "adyton", raised on a platform approached by a narrow flight of steps. In other words this is a typical Mesopotamian formula for a religious building, bearing a close resemblance, in outline cella plan, to the (roughly contemporary?) temples at Ai Khanoum in northern Afghanistan (both inside and outside the walls) and to the (considerably later) temples of Zeus Megistos,



Emeritus Prof. Graeme Clarke is Honorary Secretary of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. A distinguished Classical scholar, he has been conducting fieldwork in Hellenistic Syria for a number of years.

FURTHER READING

Clarke, G. et al. **Jebel Khalid on the Euphrates. Report on Excavations 1986-1996, Vol. One.** Mediterranean Archaeology Supplement 5, Sydney 2002 — **Mediterranean Archaeology** 13 (2000) 123-149, 15 (2002) 116-12, 16 (2003) 171-189.