

The significance of the *palaestra* at Hellenistic Jebel Khalid on the Euphrates in North Syria

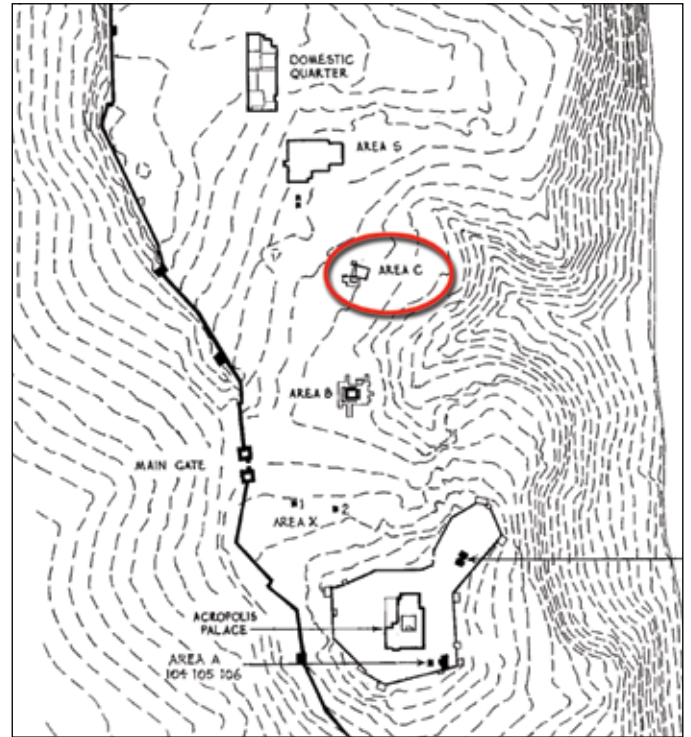
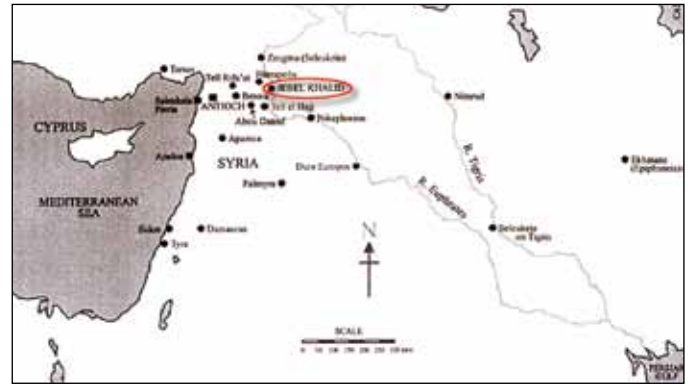
by Graeme Clarke

When the early-third century BCE planners of Jebel Khalid were making provisions in the lay-out of the new settlement for public facilities, they located a site for a *palaestra* (a type of gymnasium) in a central position ('Area C'), just to the south of the market area ('Area S') and to the north of the Temple sanctuary ('Area B') but on a direct alignment with it.

This public facility was designed to serve a number of functions.

Characteristically, *palaestrae* are peristylar buildings with a central courtyard surrounded by a colonnade, with service rooms opening off the ambulatory. The colonnade itself could provide light as well as shelter or shade and could serve for classrooms in basic education for young boys to mid-adolescence (reading, writing, mathematics, music), whilst the courtyard could be used for their physical training (wrestling, boxing, a variety of competitive games). As such, *palaestrae* came to be regarded as social clubs where the menfolk of the town might gather to watch and admire from the colonnade their sons and cheer them on at their competitive and body-building sports – military training was never far from the objectives of Greek education. When the youths scraped down the sand, dust and oil after their sporting activities, washing facilities were needed, and as such *palaestrae* came to serve also as city bathing establishments (excavation has shown that the houses in the nearby *insula* were without bathing facilities)¹. In this regard it is worth quoting Posidonios (from Hellenistic Apamea on the Orontes): "All the people of Syria, because of the great plenty which their land afforded, were free from worry about the basics of life, and so were ever meeting for a continual life of feasting, turning their gymnasia into baths in which they anointed themselves with expensive oils and perfumes" (*apud* Athenaeus *Deipnosophistae* 12.527e).

In the course of excavation of the Jebel Khalid *palaestra* a fragment of a bronze *strigil* was recovered (see opposite), used for scraping down after exercise, as well as a stone ball (*sphaira*) used in a game like bowls or skittles, and in one of the interior rooms a large circular washing-basin (*loutron*) has been uncovered, sunk into the floor (see page 12; similar to ones found near the gymnasium at Olympia) along with a plethora of large, pitched-lined,



Location map and site plan of Jebel Khalid.

water jars. Furthermore, literacy is attested at the site generally not only by graffiti on pots and plaster (over 80 examples) but also by the recovery of a number of styluses in both bone and bronze, and music-playing is attested by a fragmentary bone flute (see page 12).

Excavation has further revealed that the site was initially deeply quarried for limestone blocks and other building material (no doubt intended for the *palaestra* itself) and subsequently levelled off with a deep fill of waste stone chippings to create a floor level. This in turn entailed the



Bronze strigil fragment from the *palaestra*.

¹ See Dr Heather Jackson, Where's the Bathroom? Problems of identifying rooms in a Hellenistic housing *insula*, in L. Hopkins - A. Parker (eds.), *Archaeology of the Near East - an Australian Perspective*. Sydney, 2001, pp.90-99 and eadem, *Jebel Khalid on the Euphrates Volume. IV: The Housing Insula*, Mediterranean Archaeology Supplementary Volume (forthcoming).



Loutron sunk into floor of the palaestra.



Fragment of a bone flute from Jebel Khalid.

invest in this costly monumental construction - and to maintain it over the life of the settlement? For it was no idle undertaking, requiring a major input of labour to erect, and the institution itself entailed the selection and appointment of an overseeing official, the hiring of teachers and trainers, the establishment of the curriculum to be taught (along with a supply of teaching materials), arrangement for the provision of expensive high-grade oil for the sporting activities etc.

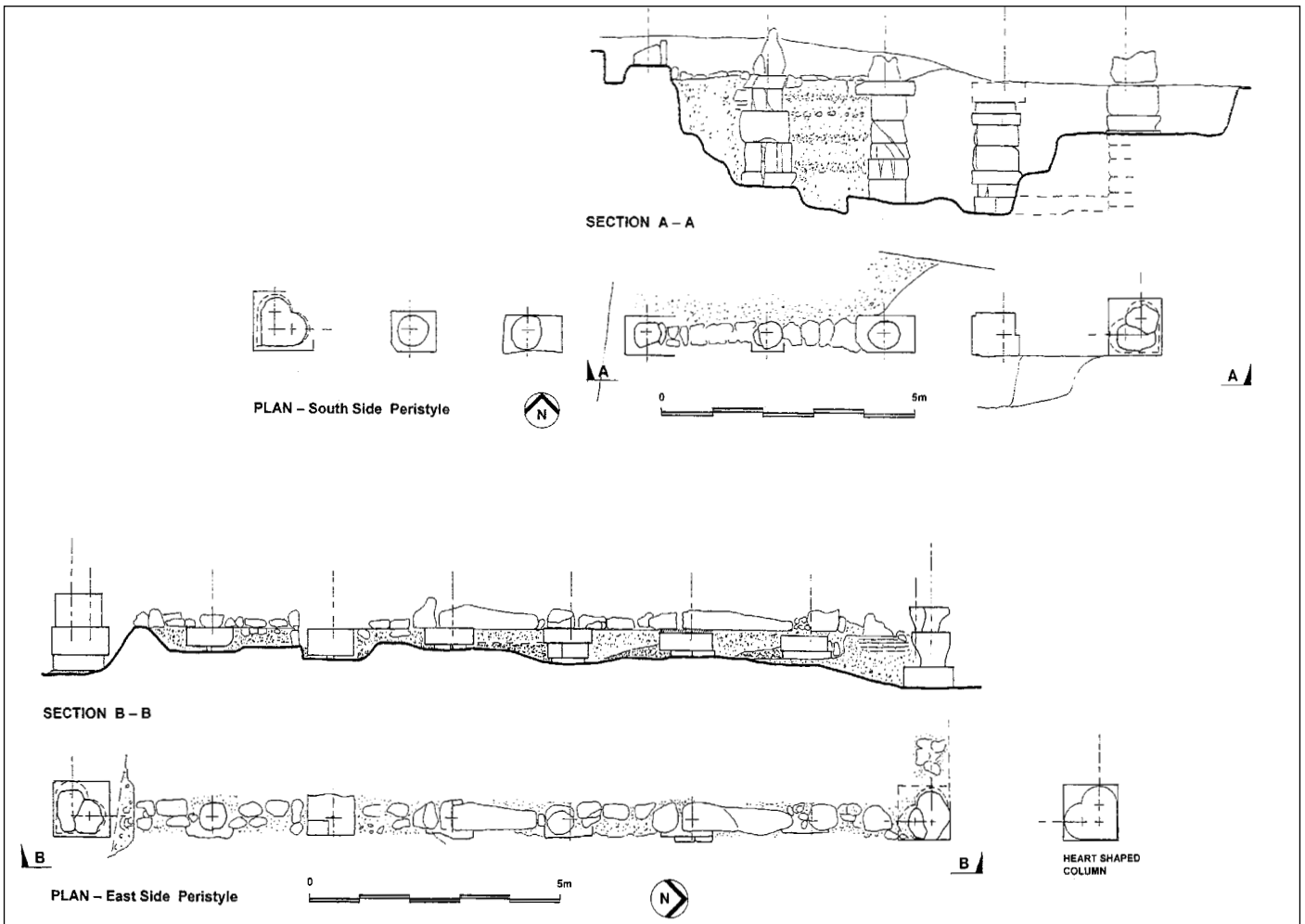
Palaestrae can rightly be regarded as being quintessentially Greek, providing a characteristic mixture of physical and educational training, with public displays of physical sporting activities, and requiring performers to train in the nude. Our reading of the institution is inevitably coloured by the propaganda of 2 Maccabees (c.4) – cf. 1 Macc. 1.14ff. - as being hopelessly alien to Semitic traditions (cf. Lucian's *Anacharsis, passim*), though the narrative in 2 Maccabees clearly concedes that many Jews did in fact freely and enthusiastically participate: even so, this is still a Greek institution, erected in Greek

construction of high piers (ranging from 2.5m to 3.0m in height), based on the quarried bedrock, for supporting the weight of the columns of the colonnade. The peristyle itself had eight columns per side (as in the *palaestra* at Delphi) with cordiform (heart-shaped) columns in the corners (see right; as in the *palaestra* at Miletus), each side being 17.5m in length. The order was Doric and the columns (some 27 column drums have so far been recovered) were left unfluted but they show traces of plaster. After its abandonment as a *palaestra* and partial demolition towards the end of the life of Jebel Khalid in the late 70s BCE, the building was reused for squatter domestic occupation, with the odd bread-oven built within the colonnade and some of the original, but now abraded, massive architrave blocks (some 2.5m in length, probably deemed too difficult to remove for recycling elsewhere) re-used to create house-walls (see plans and sections: page 13). A coin from the courtyard floor of Seleucos II (246-225 BCE) along with eight sherds of datable black-gloss pottery fragments (seven Attic and one Antiochene) and an early Rhodian amphora handle, all found sealed in the underfloor foundations (otherwise consisting largely of sterile limestone chippings), confirm that this was a third-century BCE construction – like the Temple to the south and the Palace up on the Acropolis.

What motivated the inhabitants of Jebel Khalid to



South stylobate showing corner cordiform columns.



Plans and sections of the eastern and southern stylobates (Dr.B.Rowney).

style, intended for athletic training, education and civic entertainment in Greek ways of being. Whilst *palaestrae* were constructed down on the Levantine coast (much more open to cultural changes) and elsewhere in Seleukid territory during this period, this is the only one attested so far archaeologically within inland Syria for the whole of the Hellenistic period (Damascus had to wait until the time of Herod the Great for its *palaestra*, Joseph. *B.J.* 1.21.11 [422]). This building is eloquent for at least the “Greek” aspirations of the settlers of Jebel Khalid in the course of the third century BCE, for having their sons reared in the traditions of Greek *paideia* and for providing public entertainment and social activity in Greek style (Ἑλληνικὴ ἀγωγή καὶ διαίτα - *Hellenike agoge kai diaita*).

But was it intended for “Greeks” only? As the book of Maccabees reveals, *palaestrae* could prove attractive to some of non-Greek descent also. An amphora in local fabric was recovered in the Jebel Khalid *palaestra* marked with the imprint of the owner’s personal signet-ring – and the image is decidedly not Greek; it derived, in all likelihood, from the ring of some upwardly-aspiring, socially-mobile local Syrian (see opposite)². *Palaestrae* could prove to be one way of integrating a mixed community. □



Seal impression on amphora from the palaestra.

² See Dr Heather Jackson, A local jar seal. Appendix to G. Clarke, *Jebel Khalid Stamped Amphora Handles 2000-2005*, *Mediterranean Archaeology* 18 (2005), pp.186-9, plate 22.