The block of limestone with a carved image of three crosses within an arcade of the “triphorium” type (Fig. 1), found in the previous century in Ptolemais, is neither a superb sculpture nor a part of a particularly interesting building among architectural complexes unearthed within the area of this famous antique city in Cyrenaica. This cuboidal block still lies in the ruins of a Roman dwelling house in Ptolemais, in the so-called House of the Triapsidal Hall, or House T (Fig. 2). Meanwhile, the large and luxurious House T with a central peristyle covers

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a considerable area east of one of the *cardines* and north of one of the most important *decumani* of the Late Antique city, i.e. *Via Monumentalis*.

Only five years ago, in House T, there were two limestone blocks ornamented with cross signs. They were documented by British archaeologists in the 1970s. Besides, on the stone threshold at the entrance to the house, on the side of the street, there is also a graffito with a cross inscribed in a circle, albeit much cruder. As it was placed on a permanent element of the house, only this graffito can be considered to belong to this building beyond doubt. As far as the two other loose blocks are concerned, today no one knows any more when and where exactly they were found and in what archaeological context they were at the moment of the discovery, let alone how their ornamentation can be dated. The smaller, almost cubic block – with a relief in the form of a Maltese cross inscribed in a circle – was still visible in the ruins of the house in 2006, but in 2008 it was not there any longer.

It is not possible to determine exactly the chronology of House T, where several phases of usage were distinguished: from the Early and Late Empire to the Byzantine

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Period. All that is known is that this luxury urban residence from the 1st c. AD was destroyed by an earthquake in 365, famous throughout Cyrenaica, after which it was rebuilt and underwent a large-scale reorganisation. Therefore, it seems that it was when Ptolemais became the capital of the province, after Cyrene had been completely demolished, that the new flourishing centre of the new capital developed in the north-eastern district of the city. Then were built the abovementioned Via Monumentalis, its intersection with a tetrastyle and all adjacent buildings, including Paulos’s House, the so-called Byzantine Thermae and, farther to the east, the so-called Governor’s Palace, and to the northeast, the rebuilt House T as well.

As for the bigger stone block, it was first recorded by Susan Alix already in 1969, and then, in the 1990s, its presence in House T was confirmed by other British researchers visiting Ptolemais. The block made of local, quite weathered limestone has dimensions of ca. 80×40×40 cm and lies in the south-western part of the house, next to the abovementioned threshold ornamented with a cross. On one of its bigger sides (now directed to the east), there is a concave, carved, flat and wide graffito with a representation of a kind of “triphorium” with four columns connected by an arch in the middle and with triangular tops on the sides (Fig. 3). From the top of the central arch hangs a Greek cross, and under the lateral triangular roofs, there are similar crosses. The shafts of the columns are rendered in a flat manner and devoid of any ornamentation, but their bases and capitals are clearly visible, although all of this is not enough to assign these columns to any order of architecture. Out of the three Greek crosses, the left one is almost invisible because the stone is considerably damaged there. The middle cross is damaged as well, but to a lesser extent, while the best preserved cross is the right one, whose arms seem to widen slightly at the ends. In any case, the drawing of the entire “triphorium” is simple and clumsy and seems to be a preliminary work done with a chisel (without using a drill bit). According to Joyce Reynolds, it would represent an “incised façade” that could indicate “even an ecclesiastical function for the house.” However, if this image was to be understood so literally, it could also represent a section of the interior of a basilica, across its nave and aisles. One thing is certain, namely, it is a Christian ornament, and the place of discovery of this item, like in the case of the other two reliefs with crosses, indicates only that in the 5th c., after the earthquake, House T was inhabited by Christians, who may not have practised any cult activity there, as there is no appropriate room (a church or a chapel) in this building, let alone any liturgical equipment.

As for the interpretation of the relief architectonic representation on the limestone block, it is difficult to compare it with other images of buildings made with the

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5 J.B. Ward-Perkins, J.H. Little, D.J. Mattingly, Town Houses..., 143, 149 – the impossibility of determining the chronology of House T results from the fact that so far no one has examined the pottery and the coins found there.

7 E. Gasparini, Edilizia domestica e autorappresentazione a Tolemaide nel periodo tardoantico, (in:) E. Jastrzębowska, M. Niewójt (eds.), Archeologia a Tolemaide..., 159.


2 E. Gasparini, Edilizia domestica..., 159–164.
same technique of stone carving as it has no analogies among the stone reliefs I know. By contrast, there are numerous mosaic representations, both of church façades (frequently) and of church interiors (rarely) from North Africa, Syria and Arabia, which I collected and analysed already two years ago. One of them is a monumental “triphorium,” as it were, unconnected with any church representation, which surrounds the foundation inscription in the Chapel of the Priest John in Khirbet el-Mukhayyat on Mount Nebo (in Jordan) from the mid-6th c. (Fig. 4). Particularly noteworthy is also the mosaic representation of another “triphorium” from the same century, from the Eastern Basilica in Qasr el-Libya in Cyrenaica, quite near Ptolemais (Fig. 5). In the intercolumnar spaces, there hang simple cloths fringed on the bottom, although John Ward-Perkins identified these curtains as doors, and under them he saw steps leading to these doors behind the columns. From the point of view of architectonic construction, it is difficult to imagine any columns standing in the middle of the stairs in the façade of the building. However, first of all, the representation of a “triphorium” from Qasr el-Libya is located under a dedicatory inscription and in the middle of an extremely interesting mosaic consisting of 50 square figural panels characterised by extremely wide-ranging subjects and extensive symbolism. The whole ornamentation refers to the diversity and abundance

of nature, to the achievements of the Roman civilisation, and even to everyday life. All these motifs reflect the heritage of the Antiquity and the "triphorium" itself is derived mostly from a similar architectural setting, topped with a so-called Syrian arch and surrounding imperial images, which were quite popular in this form in the Late Antiquity.15

Certainly, the modest relief from Ptolemais could by no means equal rich mosaic representations in church interiors or imperial images on luxury objects. At present, I believe that the stonemason, the author of the graffito from House T, did not follow monumental and magnificent imperial representations. Perhaps he did not even know them but saw a model for his representation among small figurines commonly used at that time in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Basin. In fact, early Byzantine metal (bronze and copper) weights dated to the 5th–6th c. are ornamented with very similar images of a "triphorium," decorated with a cross under the central arch as well.16

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16 I would like to thank Dr. Piotr Jaworski, of the Unit of Classical Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, for drawing my attention to these items.
These weights with Greek inscriptions were probably well-known and commonly used in Ptolemais. On the weight published by Christopher Entwistle, one of many similar items, weighing three ounces and made of a copper alloy, there is an almost identical “triphorium” with four columns connected with an arch in the middle and with triangular roofs on the sides (Fig. 6). Under the central arch, there is a Latin cross with arms widened at the ends, and in the lateral intercolumnar spaces, there are two Greek capital gamma letters signifying the number 3, the weight of a three ounce weight. Over the “triphorium” and under the central arch, there is the following inscription: ΘΕΟΥ ΧΑΡΙC meaning “divine grace.”

In my opinion, what can help understand how this ornament of a weight became an ornament of the stone block is the location of the block in house T (Fig. 2:B). Namely, it is situated immediately next to a masonry workshop (Fig. 2:B), which was active during the last phase of the existence of this house in its south-western part. Therefore, it seems highly likely to me that the relief with an image of a “triphorium” was a result of preliminary work of a stonemason or his occupational exercises under the tutelage of a master, so it would be a training or trial work or a sketch in masonry and not an ornamental item or one for sale. The creator of the relief modelled it on an ornament of a weight, the nearest and most convenient object, which was certainly in everyday use in the workshop, so he copied the image from the copper weight in stone, only scaling the original pattern up.

Despite such a modest reason and purpose of the creation of the relief in question, hardly connected with rich church ornamentation including similar compositions in the same period, the graffito from Ptolemais draws indirectly on the monumental decoration of church interiors, and everything, by the way, derives from models typical of

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17 Ch. Entwistle, Byzantine Weights, (in:) A.E. Laiou (ed.), The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century, Washington 2002, 613, fig. 7. Similar items are on permanent exhibition of Byzantine art in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.


the representative art of the Empire, where old images of rulers were replaced by crosses in the 6th c. Only the original model for the representation most probably got to House T in Ptolemais quite prosaically by means of the decoration of small metal weights.

Translated by Grzegorz Zabiński

Prof. dr hab. Elżbieta Jastrzębowska
Institute of Archaeology
University of Warsaw
ej.jastrzebowska@uw.edu.pl

THE CASE OF A RELIEF FROM PTOLEMAIS

ELŻBIETA JASTRZĘBSKA

RELIEF FROM PTOLEMAIS – FACADE OF A CHURCH, RELIGIOUS SYMBOL OR EXERCISE IN MASONRY?

If the relief is to be interpreted as a religious symbol, the best analogies are mosaic representations, both of church facades (numerous) and interior decorations (rarely occurring) from North Africa, Syria and Arabia.1 Although the small relief from Ptolemais could not compare with the rich mosaic representations of this type, I think that the mason, the author of the graffito from House T, did not use monumental images of this kind as a model. He found a model for his representation in the common small plastic art, which was in use in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea.

The relief block, with a relief image of a large triacontasymbol, consists of a stone block measuring 80 x 40 x 40 cm, which was found in the ruins of a Roman house, known as the House of the Three Apsides (House T) in Ptolemais.2 The luxurious House T, with a peristyle in the east and Via Monumentalis on the north, was evidently a city residence of the 1st century BC. It had several phases of use, from early, through the late Empire, to the Byzantine period, and it was destroyed by an earthquake in 365 AD. Therefore, it seems that this limestone block, which is an essential part of the relief, comes from the last phase of use of the house.

The relief block is decorated on one of its larger sides (which faces east) with a shallow incised relief of a relief image, which has been interpreted as a triacontasymbol, consisting of four columns, connected by a central arch, with triangular crowns.

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The relief block is decorated on one of its larger sides (which faces east) with a shallow incised relief of a relief image, which has been interpreted as a triacontasymbol, consisting of four columns, connected by a central arch, with triangular crowns. The central column bears a Greek cross, while the two side columns each bear a Greek letter gamma, each representing the number 3, or the weight of the object. Above the triacontasymbol and below the central arch, the inscription ΘΕΟΥ ΧΑΡΙΤΩ is visible, meaning “the grace of God.”

1 Por. E. JASTRZĘBSKA, Graffiti with „Triporium”... (przyp. 1 na s. 23).
Blok kamienny w Domu T (Ryc. 2:A) znajduje się w bezpośrednim sąsiedztwie warsztatu kamieniarskiego (Ryc. 2:B), który działał w ostatniej fazie istnienia tego domu. Zatem wydaje mi się bardzo prawdopodobne, że relief na omawianym bloku nie stanowił obiektu przeznaczonego do celu dekoracyjnego, lecz był wynikiem pracy wstępnej kamieniarza lub jego ćwiczeń zawodowych. Autorowi reliefu za wzór posłużyła dekoracja odważnika, przedmiotu będącego z pewnością w codziennym użyciu w warsztacie. Mimo tak skromnego wzorca i powodu wykonania omawianego reliefu, mającego niewiele wspólnego z bogatą dekoracją kościołową, w której w tym samym czasie pojawiają się podobne kompozycje, graffito z Ptolemais nawiązuje pośrednio do tego rodzaju dekoracji.