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General Account of Recent Discoveries at Tocra

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Short seasons of excavation between 1985 and 1992 were conducted under the supervision of the writer in an open and almost featureless area near the center of the walled city of Tocra. The excavations were part of the Garyunis (Benghazi) University training program, arranged by the Department of Archaeology for undergraduate students.

The excavation uncovered the remains of seven buildings and produced a vast quantity of stratified material. Four periods of occupation, Hellenistic, Roman (early and late), Byzantine and Islamic, were encountered within the excavated area.¹

Periods 3–4 (Figs 1–2, 10)

The uppermost levels of all buildings excavated are to be dated mainly in the Byzantine period, but show some structural additions and minor modifications probably undertaken during the Islamic period. The floor level of each building produced a large quantity of material which is confidently referred to the 6th and 7th centuries AD. The vast majority of the dateable finds consisted of coarse pottery: including flat-based jugs, some of which were nearly complete, a very distinctive type of cooking ware with a row of finger indentations on the top of the lug, pieces of broken amphorae, mostly necks, bases and handles; one of these handles is stamped with a bust of a Byzantine emperor in a style exactly similar to that of busts on the obverse of Byzantine coins. The legend, however, is not legible (Fig. 13a). Among the finds were also a large quantity of Byzantine lamps, of which more than thirty are either complete or **nearly** complete, and many Byzantine coins, of which a high proportion belongs to the reign of **Heraclius** (AD 610–641).²

This datable evidence we further confirmed from the **fill** of two underground vaulted cisterns belonging to buildings I and IV which were evidently made to receive waste and **superfluous** water (Figs 3–4).

Five buildings among those excavated proved to be modest dwellings; I, II, III, IV, VI. In building V, which was only partly excavated, there is evidence to suggest that the two excavated rooms situated at the western end of the building were used for industrial activities or as shops. These two western rooms are distinct from each other. The further one originally had a northern entrance which was **later** blocked and compensated by another entrance facing an alley on the western side; it is internally divided into two compartments by a partition wall. The second room had an entrance facing north and is divided by partition walls into three compartments (Fig. 5). Large column drums, c. 70 cm in diameter, were used in the construction of the partition walls. This room contains four box-like structures made of re-used materials which include many architectural elements. During the course of excavations, however, nothing was found to indicate what were the products manufactured or sold here.

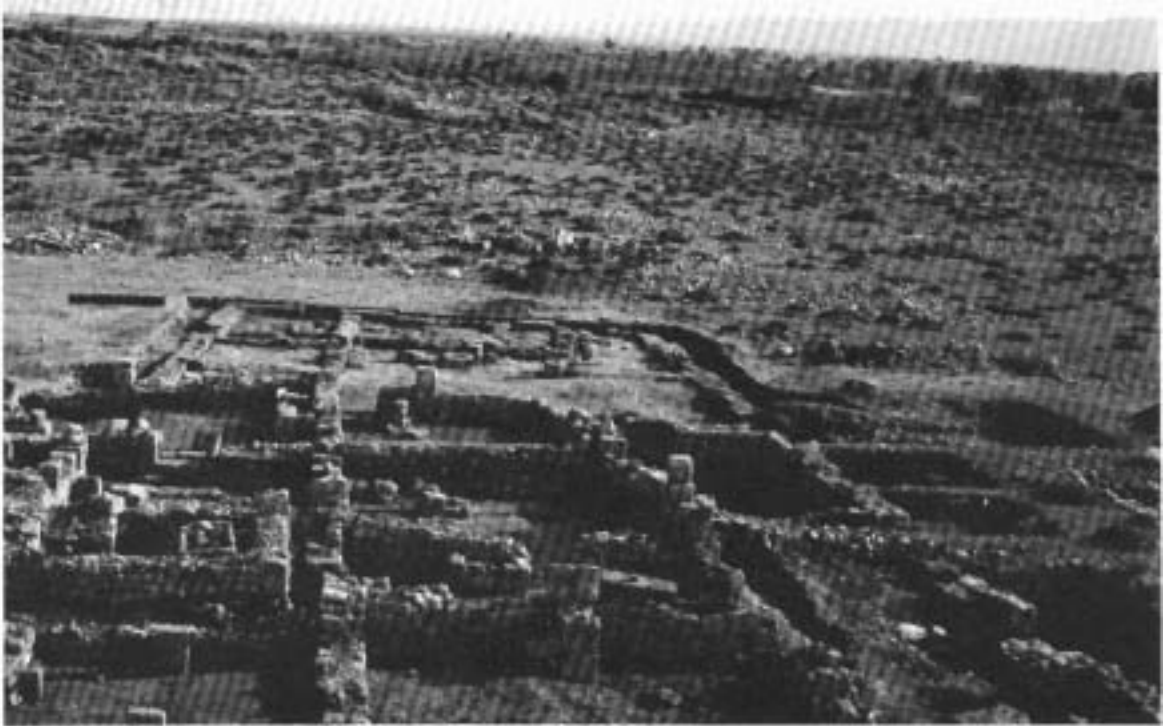


Figure 1. General view of Buildings I and IV.



Figure 2. General view of Buildings I, III and V.

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Figure 3. Building I, showing cisterns.

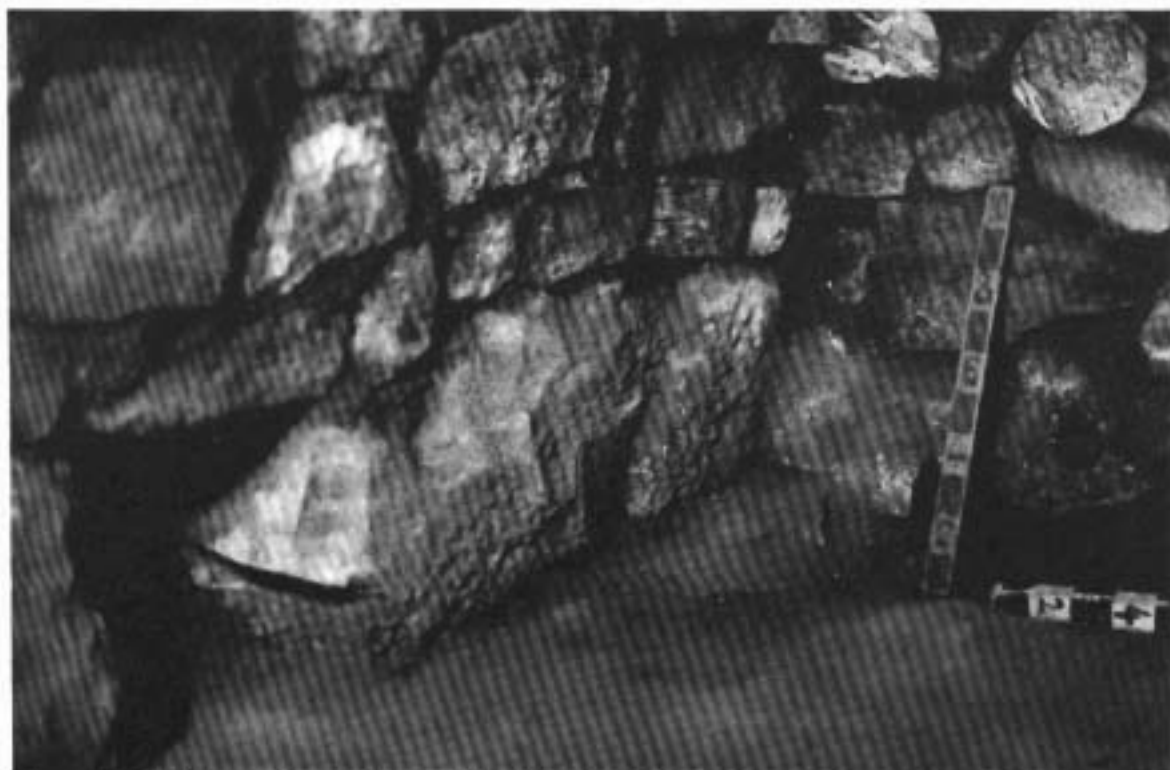


Figure 4. Detail of an underground cistern in Building I.

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In building VII, the discovery of a group of eight vats, inserted into room 3, show that some sort of light industrial activities were carried on there. Each vat was about 3 m deep and lined internally with *opus signinum*. Such structures were undoubtedly used for storing liquids such as oil and wine.

At a later stage in the history of these buildings, some structural additions and minor modifications were made. These are most obvious in buildings I and IV. In building I, a small room-like structure was built up within room 2. It was set upon a thick layer of compacted debris which covers the older room. It is of particular interest to note that the second builder made no attempt to re-use the remains of the up-standing old walls as foundations, with the result that the old and the new walls are c. 50 cm apart. This may indicate hasty construction or that the second builder intentionally ignored the presence of the older walls. In either case what is certainly a later addition is most likely to be related to an Islamic presence. In building III a curved and rather crudely-built wall was added to room 3. It was laid directly on to the earth floor extending from the northern to the eastern walls of the existing room, creating a small irregularly shaped room. To make use of the room thus created, another entrance was added in the eastern wall of the older room. A larger and also crudely-built curved wall was added on the western end-wall of the same building for unknown purposes. The entrance between room 4 and room 5 of the same building was blocked. There are, however, also strong indications of reoccupation of the excavated area by the Muslims following their overwhelming defeat of the last Byzantine garrison at Tocra.

Apart from pottery and lamps which are used alike by Byzantines and Muslims, our excavation resulted in the discovery of two early Islamic coins of a type which has not been found elsewhere in Cyrenaica as far as we know. The two pieces bear on the obverse the

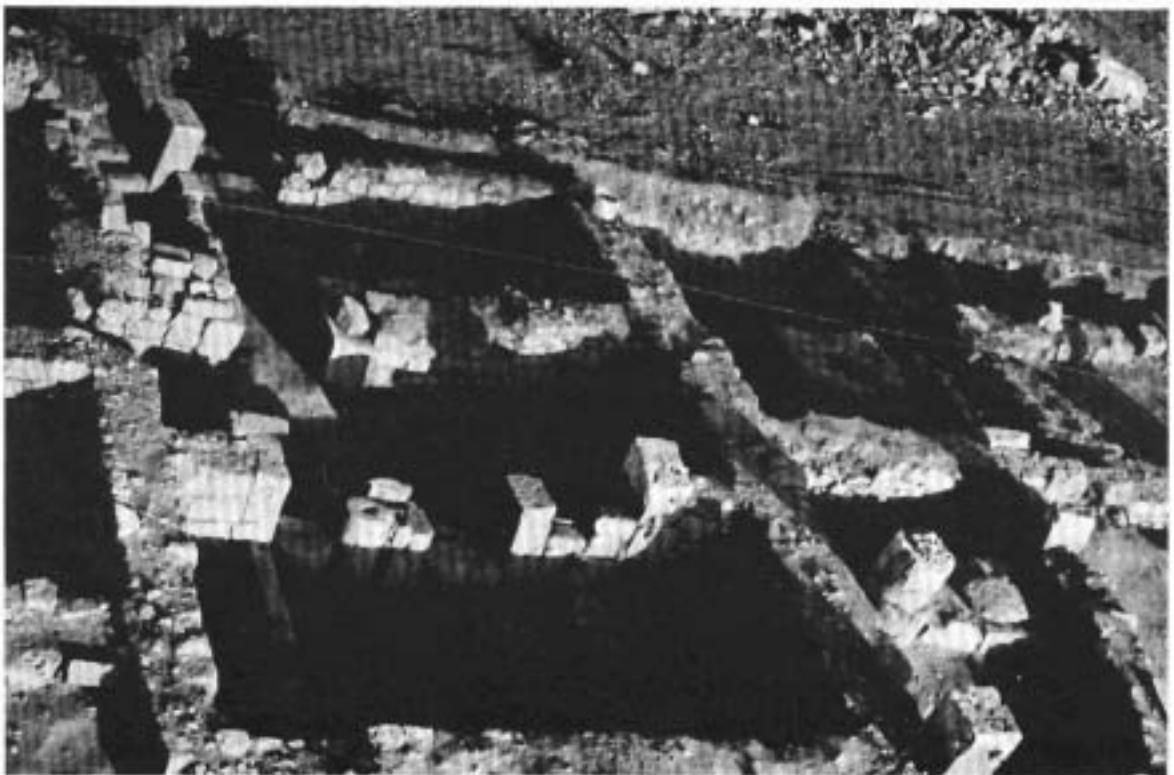


Figure 5. Building V, the second western room.

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following monotheistic statement: There is no God but one God; and on the reverse: Mohamed is the messenger of God (Fig. 13b).

It is worth mentioning that one of the two coins was overstruck on a Byzantine coin. The two Islamic coins were found near the northern wall of the room inserted in building I.⁴

As excavated, the buildings provided examples of the poorer type of construction associated with the final phases of the city's urban life. Such structures have been encountered by many excavators on other sites in Cyrenaica, but have not so far received proper study. Poor as they are, they have their own character and can provide us with much useful information. They constitute a link in a chain of Cyrenaican architectural development and will undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of the later history of ancient Cyrenaica; thus they deserve some attention. Building IV provides a good model for the material and construction-methods used for such buildings. This topic will be comprehensively investigated in a separate article.

Period 2 (Fig. 11)

Prior to discussion of the evidence for earlier occupation on the site, it will be useful to offer the following general remarks:

- (1) Neither a clear general impression of the earlier character of the quarter nor complete building plans could be confidently restored at present.
- (2) Most of the overlying buildings were constructed around the courtyard of building I which was originally an early Roman building.
- (3) It is evident that these buildings were haphazardly grouped around the early Roman building, with no respect paid to the main outlines of the city's *insulae*.
- (4) Another **complicating** factor is that the density of the overlying buildings prevented a complete examination of earlier structures.

Nevertheless it was possible to reveal substantial evidence of earlier occupation. The best evidence was obtained from building I where it was possible to isolate two periods of earlier occupation.

Building I lay almost in the middle of the excavated area of the site. Originally it was certainly a Roman building dating most probably to the late first century AD. Evidence for its construction came from a sounding made **below** the western end of its courtyard. The full extent of ~~the~~ building was not discovered for the reasons given above and due to the fact that most of its rooms surrounding the courtyard were incorporated into the late establishments set around it. It was only possible to determine part of its southern limit.

The principal remains of the Roman building consisted of a rectangular courtyard measuring c. 9.30 × 6.30 m. Approximately in its centre there was a large rectangular underground cistern with an elongated well-like head, substantially intact, measuring 2.90 m wide, 3.10 m long, and with a total depth of 5 m. The well-head and all its capstones, which were made of sandstone slabs, have survived. The cistern had a quarter-round moulding at the junctions of the walls and the floors, which were lined with water-proof mortar. The courtyard, including capstones, had a concrete floor of pinkish water-proof mortar c. 5–7 cm thick. A shallow mortared channel, c. 25 cm wide, which carried rainwater from the roof of the north range of rooms into the cistern was preserved in the north corner of the courtyard. No evidence for similar channels was observed in the other corner, but another and very practical system for collecting water was installed there; circular bowls, c. 70 cm in diameter, lined with water-proof mortar, were inserted near the other corner of the courtyard. Each was roughly 7–10 cm deep. It is evident that they were used **as** filter-beds for rain water which collected in the courtyard before **entering** the cistern. It is worth mentioning that the courtyard was later subdivided by a partition wall into two rooms. The **dividing-wall** was laid directly on to the concrete floor extending over

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a large portion of two filter beds which were thus put out of use. An oven was inserted in each room. One oven was very simple, consisting of a circular wall, lined internally with baked clay, c. 2–3 cm thick, while the other, which was set in the westernmost room, was much more elaborate, although it too is circular in shape; the outside face of its external wall was covered with re-used sherds from amphora-necks, sealed with white mortar. The discovery of many (over 20) small broken cups made of distinctively thin glass, the existence of a basin made of re-used architectural elements of the Roman building, and a patch of pavement roughly circular in shape, made for the most part from the remains of circular querns, all contribute to the impression that late activity here was not purely domestic.

Returning to the remains of the Roman building, most of the lateral range of rooms facing into the courtyard are still traceable. To the south, the courtyard was bounded by two rooms. These were later incorporated into building VI by the blocking of their entrances. The east wing of the courtyard contained one room which had a thick solid concrete floor; it was later incorporated into building IV. To the west, the concrete floors of rooms 1 and 3, which later became part of buildings IV and II respectively, belong to the original Roman building. To the north, the courtyard was bounded by two rooms. One of these two rooms – room 1 – had a concrete floor. Apart from the doorway into the courtyard, this room had three more entrances. One of them, located in the eastern wall, led, by way of raised steps, to a larger room, or, more probably, a yard, containing three box-like structures of different sizes, made of re-used materials. The other two entrances are to be found in the northern wall, one of them opening into an enclosed chamber with neatly-built walls constructed of similar-sized small blocks, some of which still carry traces of plain wall-plaster. It also contained remains of a stone bench set in the northern part of the room. The other entrance led into a large open area, only partially excavated. This partial excavation resulted in the discovery of a well and two small rectangular basins one of which was constructed of small stones and lined with water-proof mortar, while the other was made from a large sandstone block.

The well seemed to be of an earlier period (Hellenistic). Its head was built up to the level of the two basins with rough materials including re-used drain blocks. Evidently this well replaced another of the same period which had been demolished as we shall see later. A small sounding was made in this open area, in which a portion of the leg of a white marble statue was recovered.

Many architectural elements which had belonged to the Roman building were found re-used or were recovered from the debris. These elements included a fine door-jamb, fragments of door lintels, fragments of dentil blocks, fragments of modillions, pieces of cornice, some small voussoirs, a small portion of a triglyph block and two column-bases, one made of sandstone and the other of heavy limestone. Other stone objects included two large mortars fashioned from column drums. Other elements of the decoration and furnishing recovered include the marble leg mentioned above, a fragment of drapery with rigidly designed folds, made of fine white marble (this last piece found re-used in the construction of the west wall of the courtyard), a pale blue/grey marble colonette with a square base and spiral flutes, a small slab of coloured-marble wall veneer re-used as part of the pavement in the doorway connecting the two rooms created in the courtyard, small pieces of polychrome wall plaster and numerous blue and white tesserae. None of the decorative elements, however, was found *in situ*.

It should be pointed out that no traces whatsoever of mud-brick were found either in this building or in the investigated area as a whole. It can, therefore, be assumed that such building material was not utilised and that the walls were entirely built in stone.

In spite of the fragmentary condition of the building, the surviving internal decorative and furnishing elements and its dominating position almost in the heart of the city, suggest

that it was of some significance. It was, most likely, a courtyard house and, if so, it must have been built for a prominent citizen.

Period 1 (Fig. 12)

The Roman building was constructed above the remains of earlier Hellenistic structures, of which only some have been uncovered. A full recovery would require the removal of many essential features of the Roman building. Nevertheless the structures revealed are of great significance. Several deep soundings made below the floor level of the southern part of the Roman building resulted in the discovery of a large kiln resting directly on the natural bed-rock and a small built-up tank, in addition to stretches of contemporary walls.

The kiln (Fig. 6) was rectangular in plan, 2.60 m long and 2.20 m wide. Its walls, which survived to a maximum height of 60 cm, were made internally of mud brick (sun-baked mud and clay), c. 25 cm thick. It was reinforced externally by a surrounding packing of two rows of rubble stones bound together with mud mortar. This section of the wall was c. 60 cm wide. The same method of construction was visible in the east wall; and it is probable that the other walls were built entirely in this way too. The stoke hole (80 × 100 cm) lay at the north end of the kiln (Fig. 7). Traces of a flue c. 20 cm wide and lined with mud mortar, through which oxygen passed into the firing chamber, were preserved near the northern end of the west wall. Also found nearby was a cover of coned shape, made of sandstone, which might have been used to close the channel when necessary. The lower part of a supporting-post probably for a floor was preserved near the south-east corner of the kiln. This was roughly rectangular in shape, measuring c. 60 × 80 cm. The interior of the kiln was filled with numerous fragments of baked mud and a thick deposit of blue-grey ash, which was found spread in the firing chamber and stoke hole.



Figure 6. Building I, Hellenistic kiln.

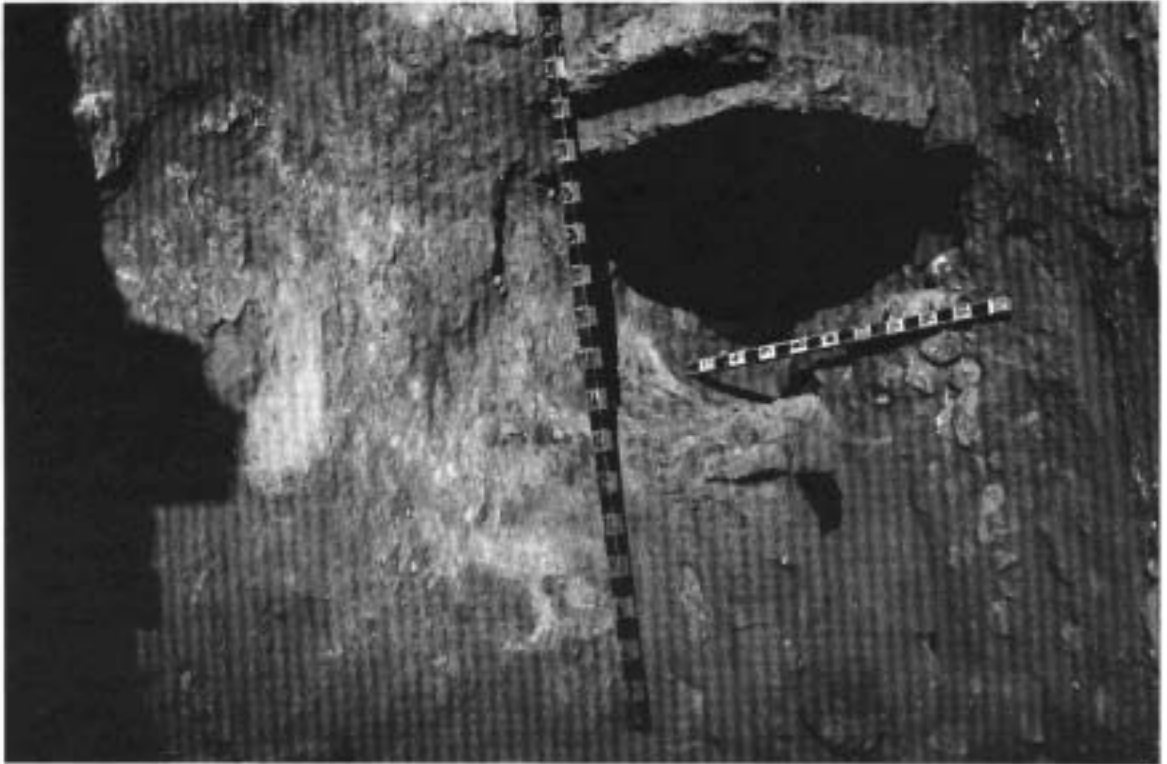


Figure 7. Building I, stoke-hole of the Hellenistic kiln.

Coarse pottery, recovered from the fill of the kiln and the area near it, ranges in date from the Hellenistic to the Augustan periods (Fig. 8). Remains of coarse pottery wasters were identified. The fill of the kiln produced a large number of loomweights some of which were unfired.⁵

The built-up tank was rectangular in shape, 0.75 × 1.75 m and 1 m deep. It was lined with a thin layer of waterproof mortar. The upper part of the east wall had been destroyed, but otherwise the structure was well-preserved. A jug and two complete lamps of Hellenistic date were found in the fill.

It is important to note here that a circular well and two rock-cut tanks had been excavated prior to 1985, just to the south and south-west of the kiln. It is clear that this well was contemporary with the kiln and fell out of use after the construction of the Roman building; and it was apparently replaced by the other well which was mentioned earlier.

In fact, the two rock-cut tanks, the well and the built-up tank seem to be related in use to the kiln. The main requirements needed for pottery manufacture are water and tanks for preparing the clay, in addition to the kiln. It seems conceivable that the southern part of the Roman building was constructed upon a Hellenistic industrial complex, which was used for manufacturing coarse pottery and other clay objects including, obviously, loomweights.

Limited exploration below the floor level of room 5 in building IV revealed the remains of another kiln (Fig. 9). This kiln was circular; its walls were built up in a beehive shape and attained a maximum height of 1.10 m. They were lined internally with fossil-gritted baked clay 3–4 cm thick; air passed into the kiln through a tuyere made in its south wall. The tuyère entered the firing chamber through the neck of a re-used amphora. Considerable quantities of slag were found among the debris filling the kiln and the surrounding

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Figure 8. Pottery and loomweights found in the Hellenistic kiln in Building I.

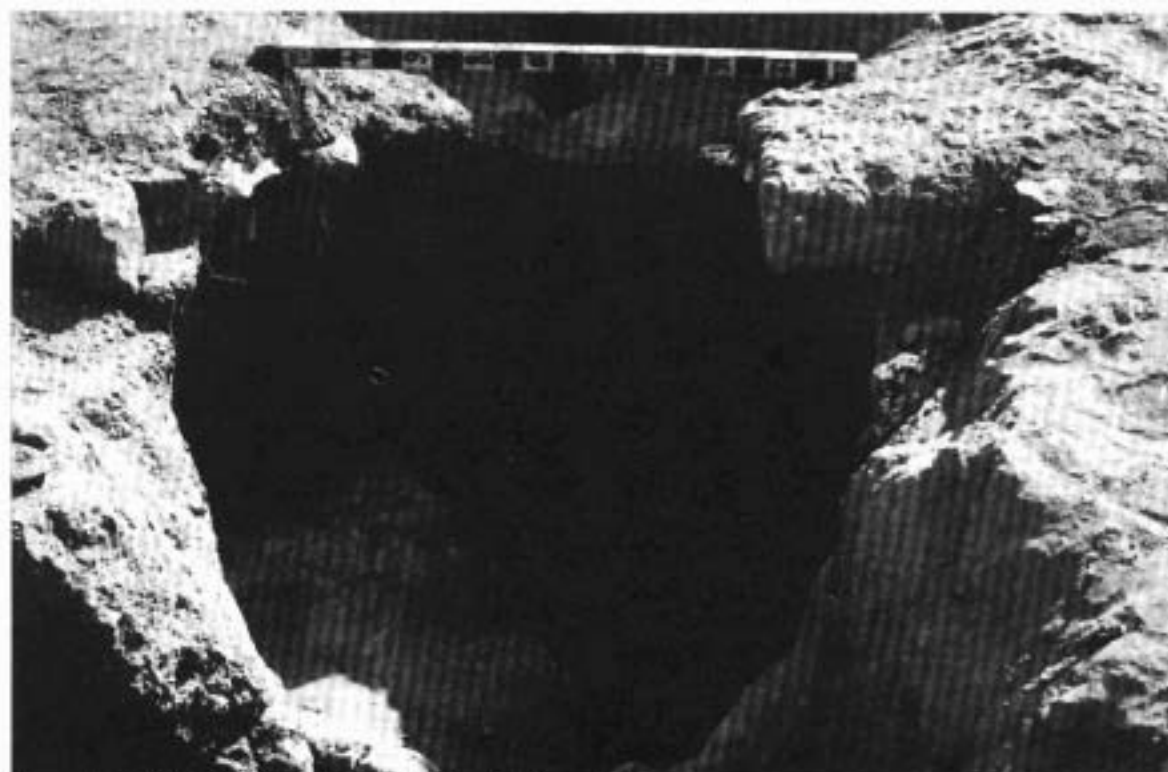


Figure 9. Building IV, kiln below the floor level of Room 5.

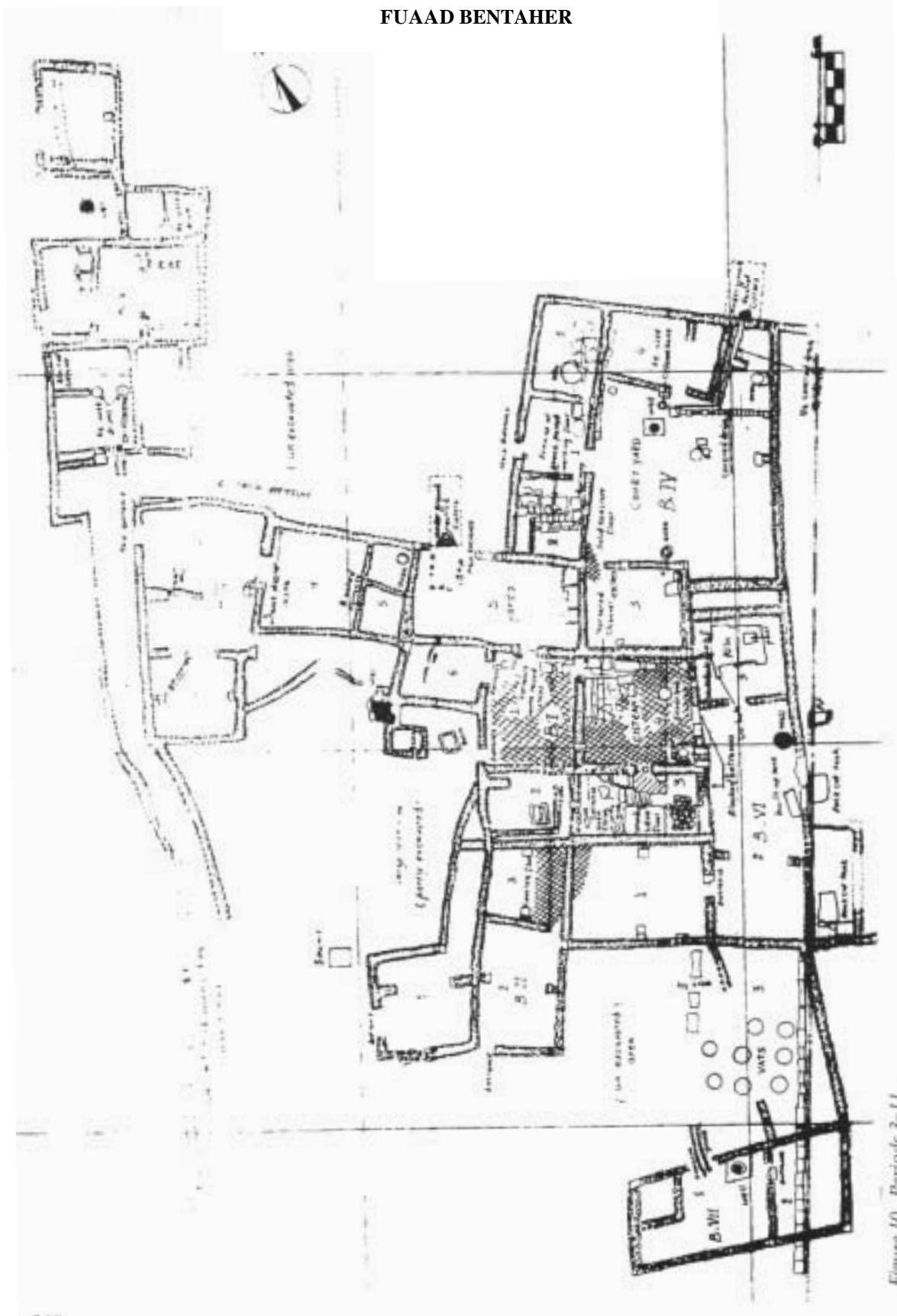


Figure 10. Periods 3-11.

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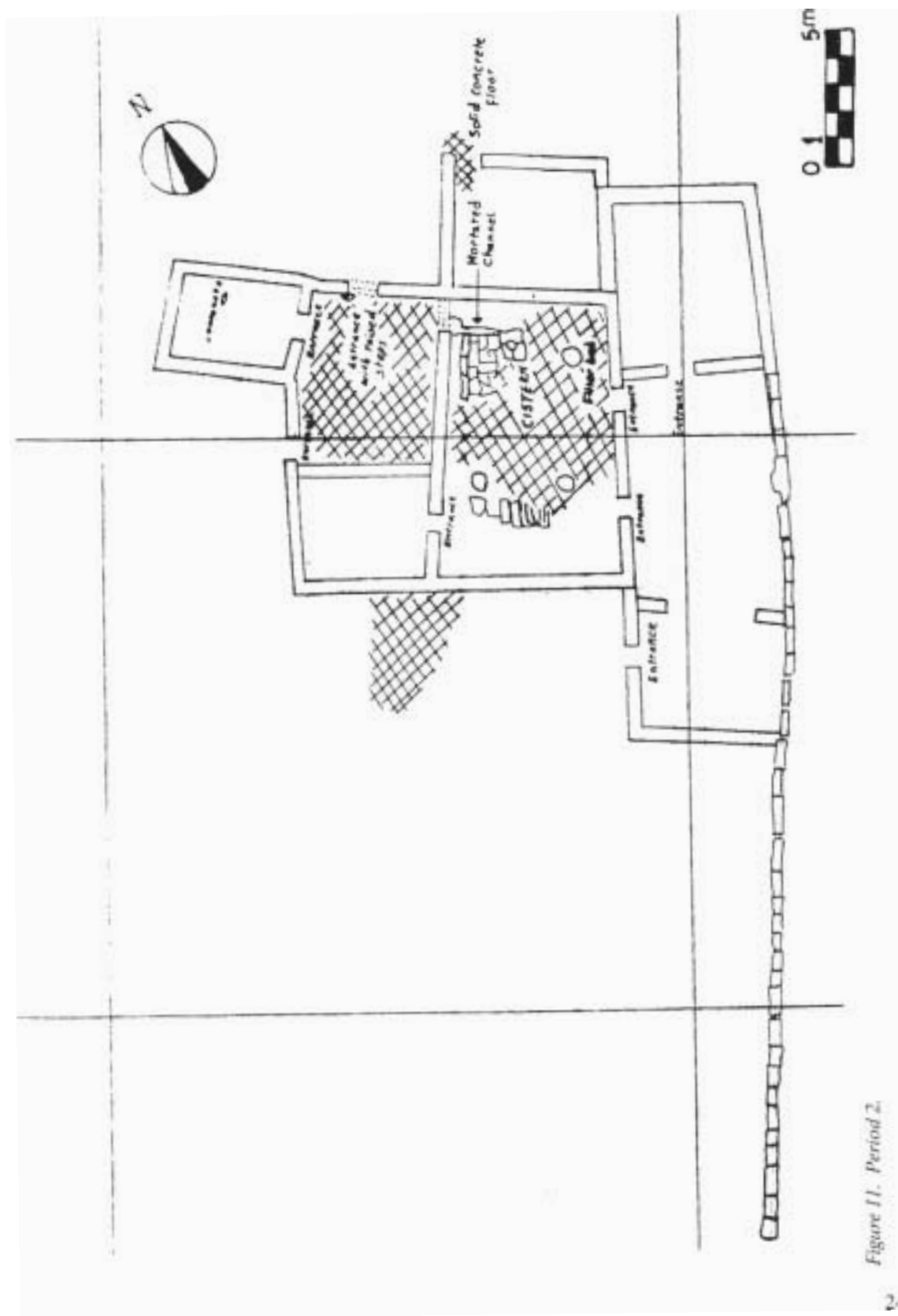


Figure 11. Period 2.

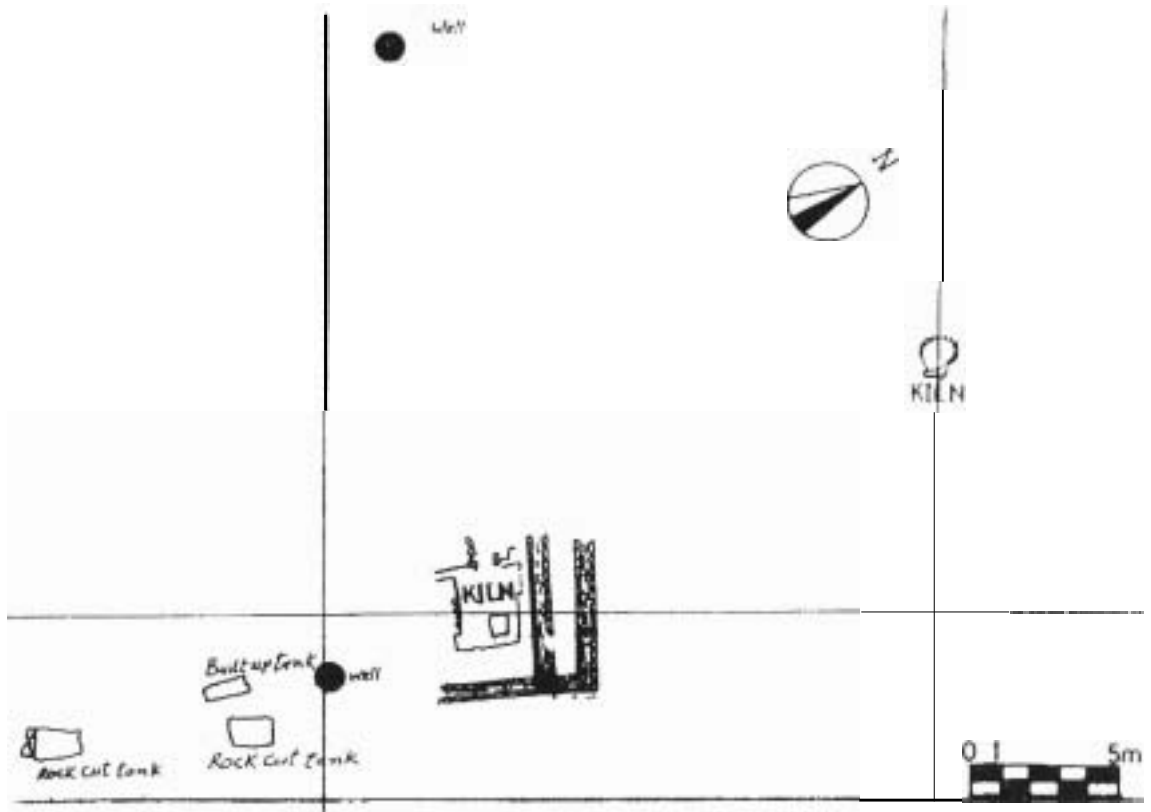
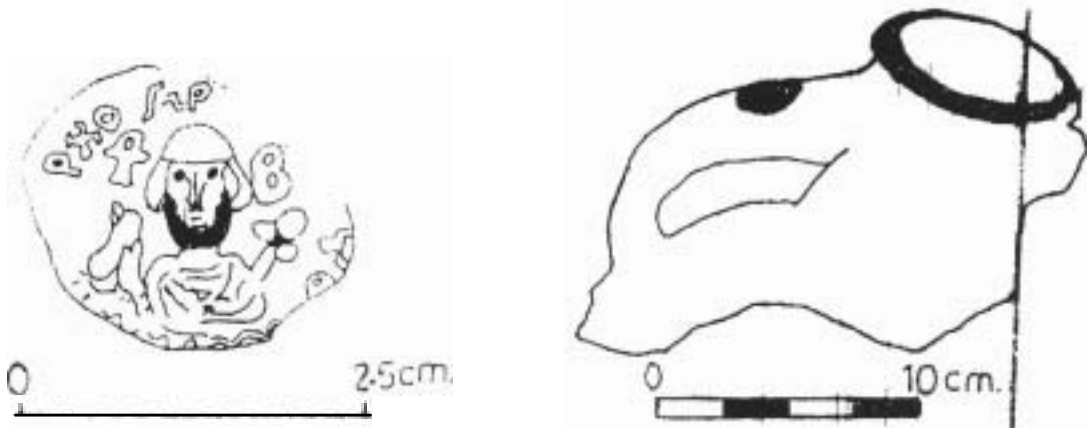


Figure 12. Period 4.



a. Stamped handle.



Ohv. There is no God but one God.



Rev. Mohamed is the messenger of God.

h. Early Islamic coin struck over a Byzantine piece

Figure 13.

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area. Two rather fine **redslip** bowls, one of which was complete, were recovered from the kiln. Both of them were found upside down. **One** bowl was plain and the other was decorated with a strip near the **rim**. It is of special **interest** to note that only half of the strip was fired black.

Another small sounding was made nearby to the east. Again this produced a considerable quantity of slag and coarse pottery associated with the Hellenistic period, along with a rejected plate showing traces of metallic black-glazing. There is here some indication that manufacture of black glaze could have been practised locally, but for verification of this point, further evidence is needed.

In conclusion the following points seem worth emphasizing:

- (1) Many deep soundings down to the natural bedrock were conducted in different locations of the excavated area.
- (2) The legible coins collected from the excavated area range in date from the Hellenistic to the Islamic periods. None of the coins identified is of pre-Hellenistic date.
- (3) Apart from a few insignificant sherds, almost all pottery recovered can be dated from the late 5th century BC onwards into the Islamic period.

On the basis of the above mentioned points it seems that the nucleus of the city is still further to the north of the excavated site.

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Finally many thanks are also due to Professor Laronde of Paris and to my colleagues at the Department of Archaeology in Benghazi for their moral support and encouragement.

Notes

1. The results of these excavations **have** been presented to the **department** of Antiquities at **Benghazi** in a series of **preliminary** reports. Finds recovered **from the site** will be presented in **separate reports** by several authors.

2. The dates assigned to coarse pottery recovered from the site were based on the **study** made by J. A. Riley, *Supplements to Libya Antiqua V, Vol. II*, which is the major **reference** work for such **pottery** on all Cyrenaican sites.

3. **Ptolemaic**, Roman and Byzantine coins found in earlier excavations conducted at Tocra just to the south of our activities have **been** studied by the present writer and submitted to **Garyounis Scientific Journal** in a series of **three** articles. The first two, on Ptolemaic and Roman coins, have already been published. Fuaad Bentaher, *Ancient Coins from Tocra*, in Vol. I (1988) 103-12 and Vol. II (1989) 181-94. The third report on **Byzantine** coins is still in **press** and will appear in the same journal.

4. **Continuity** of urban life at Tocra and other sites in **Cyrenaica** after the Muslim Conquest in AD 642 has been observed by many scholars. For Tocra, see G. D. B. Jones, **Beginnings and Endings of Cyrenaican Cities**, in *Cyrenaica in Antiquity* (1985) 39. For Apollonia, see W. M. Widrig and R. G. Goodchild, The West Church at Apollonia, in *PBSR* 28 (1960) 89. For **Cyrene**, see R. G. Goodchild, *Kyrene und Apollonia* (Zürich, 1971) 147-8. For Ptolemais see C. H. Kraeling, *Ptolemais, City of the Libyan Pentapolis* (Chicago 1963) 13. For Bercnicc, see I. A. Lloyd, *Excavations at Sidi Khrebish Benghazi, Herenice, Supplements to Libya Antiqua V Vol. I* 190-1.

5. Coarse pottery recovered from the kiln and the area nearby will be studied by H. M. **Amin**.