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The fortifications of Zenobia reinterpreted

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The city fortress of Zenobia (today Halabiya) (Fig. 13.1) was explored in the 1940s by Jean Lauffray (Lauffray 1983; 1991) and, a few decades after that, by a Syrian-French project led by University Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 between 2006 and 2010 (Fig. 13.2). Since then, events in Syria from 2011 onward prevented field research from continuing. Nevertheless, the results of this latter mission have been published, and a few new developments have been added to J. Lauffray's research (Blétry 2015). Some damage to the ancient site has been noted, but it can be considered 'light', when compared with that which occurred elsewhere at Syrian sites. This is with the exception of the destruction of several tower tombs. As far as can be ascertained, the *praetorium* (barracks), which can be considered as an extended tower on the north curtain of the fortification (three storeys of a 30 m × 30 m building), slightly suffered from rocket fire, but the rest of the city walls seem to remain as they were before the events. The purpose of these few pages is to summarise what can be known about the city wall of Zenobia-Halabiya, to place it in its local context, and to stress the significance of such an impressive and exceptional work.

The description of the fortification was done by J. Lauffray (Lauffray 1983, 85–136; 1991) and completed by Jean-Claude Bessac (Blétry 2015, 311–344). This description includes an accurate study of the materials used for the construction and of their implementation. The walls are generally 3.25 m wide. The fortification is constructed in large gypsum blocks extracted from local quarries located close to the site, two of which are just below the north and south walls. The blocks were joined by a gypsum mortar (local name '*jouss*'). It must be underlined that the city walls must have been an undeniably aesthetic feature, as this particular gypsum offered a natural look close to that of marble. The choice of this architectural feature was

possibly due to the good quality of local gypsum in Halabiya that allowed a relatively easy production of blocks of (at least) 50 to 70 cm high. This gypsum is of a much better quality than the one found in Dura Europos, for instance. Masonry between the inner and outer facing was sometimes reinforced by a basaltic packing. Two bastions, n°13 and probably n°14, the latter having totally disappeared when J. Lauffray returned to the site in 1980 (for a very succinct description of it, see Lauffray 1983, 87, n. 5, 106–107; completed by Blétry 2015, 36, fig. 21), were built over two layers of large basaltic blocks on top of which there is a packing of smaller basaltic stones and mortar. The section between bastions n°1 and n°38 on the south curtain includes some layers in small and regular basaltic stones. Between these basaltic layers, in some parts, were also layers of bricks (Fig. 13.3). The particularity of this section is probably due to an emergency construction or reconstruction, under a threat of attack. Bricks were also used for the vaults of the bastions and the *praetorium*; however it is the different dimensions of the bricks used in the south curtain and those found elsewhere in the site that led J. Lauffray to assume that the city wall, as it can be seen today, was not erected within a single campaign of construction (Lauffray 1983, 137–145).

The city walls of Zenobia-Halabiya are mentioned in the long description by Procopius of the site in his *De Aedificiis* (*On Buildings*), 2, 8. In lines 12–15, he shows how Justinian paid particular attention to the city by incorporating the western hill into the general fortification, by adding 'wings' to the former circuit-wall. The term is not clear (the word *περὰ* in Greek does not help us much). In my opinion, it should be understood as an additional wall built to join the citadel and the existing wall 'which seems to droop, as it were, from the wall' (according to the



Fig. 13.1. General view of Zenobia-Halabiya.

translation of the *De Aedificiis* by H.B. Dewing in the Loeb Classical Library, 1961, 151).¹ <Typesetter: this should be endnote marker 1, but for some reason it is showing as 5> Indeed, J. Lauffray and the Syrian-French mission after him were taken aback by the term used by Procopius. My conclusions are the same: it concerns a part of the south curtain between bastion 2 and the citadel, which is much less wide than the rest of the wall (Lauffray 1983, 16; Blétry 2015, 34–36, fig. 18). It is also where layers of basaltic blocks or bricks were inserted between the lower and upper parts of the wall that were built in regular large gypsum blocks (Fig. 13.3). In fact, exactly where this difference of width can be noted, we located the place where a former western wall began to enclose the site, when the city was smaller than in Justinian times and when, apparently, the fortification had a trapezoidal shape (Lauffray 1983, 89–90; 126; Blétry 2015, 34–36) (Fig. 13.4).

In *De Aedificiis*, 2, 8, lines 17–18, Procopius describes the work done to protect the eastern curtain wall from the floods of the Euphrates. This structure (πρόβολος), which may be understood as a breakwater instead of a wall, as it has been translated in the Loeb edition, was made in millstone (λίθου μολίου, translated in the Loeb translation as hard stone).

Indeed, until 2009, there were three breakwaters visible: one in the north-east corner of the fortification, that prolonged the north curtain towards the east into the riverbed after bastion n°26 (Lauffray 1983, 109), another starting from bastion n°15 (Lauffray 1991, 25–26), and one that started from bastion n°12 on the south-east corner of the city (Lauffray 1983, 103) (Fig. 13.5). The construction of the breakwaters seems to have been essential because the eastern curtain of the fortification had suffered to such a point that it was necessary to rebuild it (the river floods are mentioned in *De Aedificiis*, 2, 8, 18). These three breakwaters were badly damaged by works undertaken between 2009 and 2010 for the projected construction of a large dam, which, had it been realised, would have certainly led to the destruction of the site. From the general city plan, and after J. Lauffray's observations, it is clear that the eastern curtain wall was re-established several metres from the former one, especially between bastions n°13–16 (Lauffray 1983, 87, n. 5, 105–106). The structure of n°13 (and probably of n°14) was quite different from the other bastions, as indicated above. Another interpretation of the works undertaken to protect the city from the Euphrates is to consider, as Lauffray does elsewhere (Lauffray 1991, 21), that they consisted of a wharf constructed in parallel to

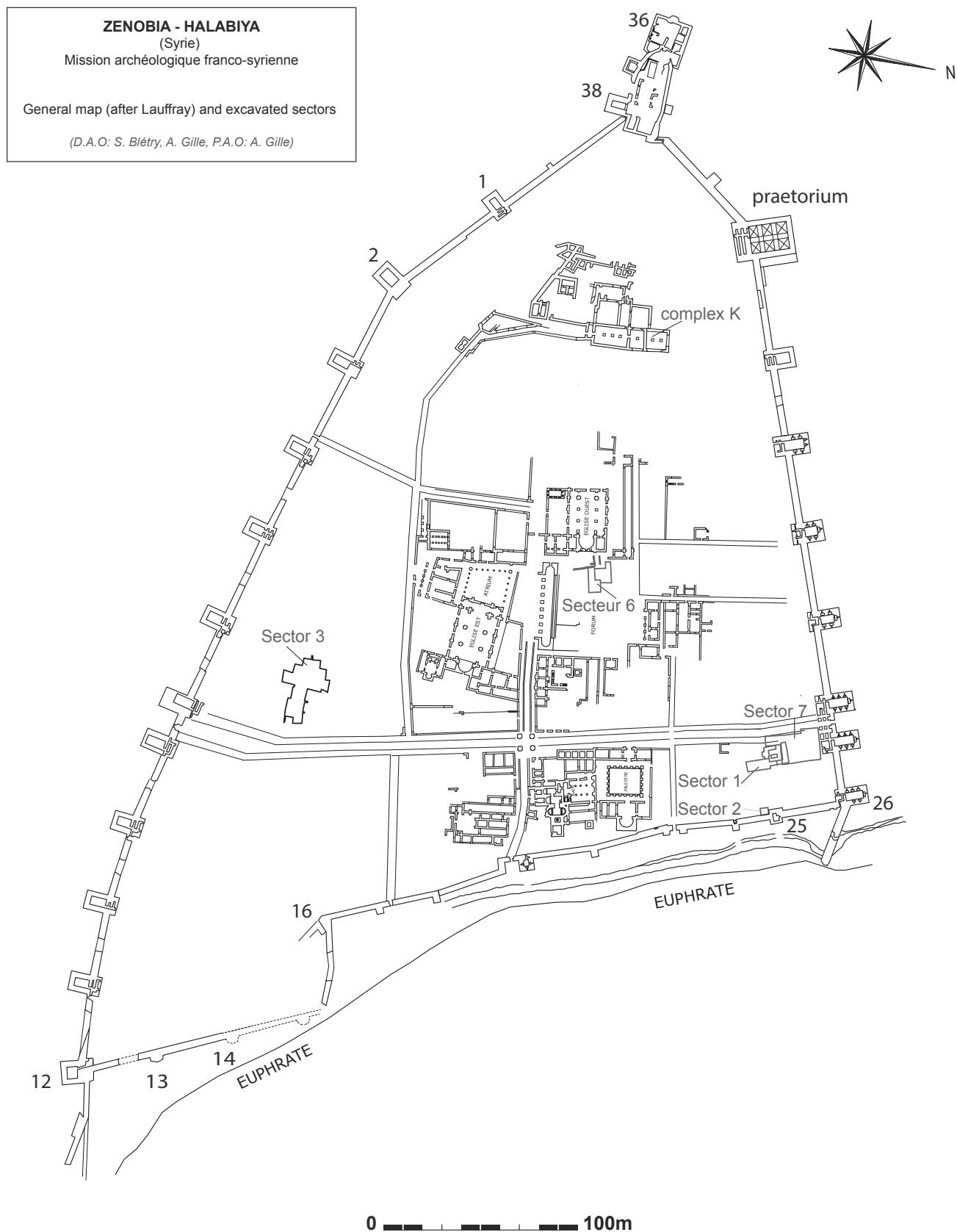


Fig. 13.2. General map and excavated sectors between 2006 and 2010.



Fig. 13.3. Section of the south curtain, between bastions 1 and 38.

the eastern curtain of the rampart: Procopius says that they had an ‘equal length’ (see *infra*).

Procopius (*De Aedificiis*, 2, 8, 19–20) notes that the north curtain, according to him, was totally rebuilt by Justinian, who erased a former one that had been ‘weakened by the passage of time’, and replaced it with an exceptionally ‘beautiful’ one in order to extend the city. As Lauffray had thought that bastion n°25 on the edge of the Euphrates was originally located at the corner of the east and north curtain walls of the rampart that originally surrounded the city (Lauffray 1983, 109–111; 1991, 23–24; Blétry 2015, 30), we searched toward the west from this bastion for the remains of the eradicated curtain. Under the very damaged remains of a dwelling from the middle of the sixth century, we found traces of a large foundation that must have belonged to the first stage of the fortification (Blétry 2015, 29–34). This reinforced the argument for the existence of a first north curtain and therefore the construction of a new one, by enlarging the east curtain between bastion n°25 towards the north and bastion n°26 (Lauffray 1983, 109,

127; 1991, 24). This corresponds with the extension of the city and the reconstruction of the north city wall that are mentioned by Procopius.

Procopius (*De Aedificiis*, 2, 8, 21–24) states that the western hill was included inside the city walls by Justinian and that another rampart was placed on top of it. According to J. Lauffray, this means that the rectangular bastion of the citadel, n°36, was added to an existing citadel (by the same time, the hill itself was provided with a glacis to prevent enemies from climbing it). If it is only from this time that the citadel was inserted inside the city walls, this implies that there was a previous wall that enclosed the city on its western side and which was no longer useful when the hill was enclosed in the city walls and the citadel placed inside the fortification system (Blétry 2017 141–142) (Fig. 13.4). The former western wall was thus scrapped. The wall climbing up the hill toward the citadel and its glacis are still visible but, on the western slopes of the town, the traces of the previous wall can hardly be seen. Our observations, after those of J. Lauffray, lead us to locate the junction between

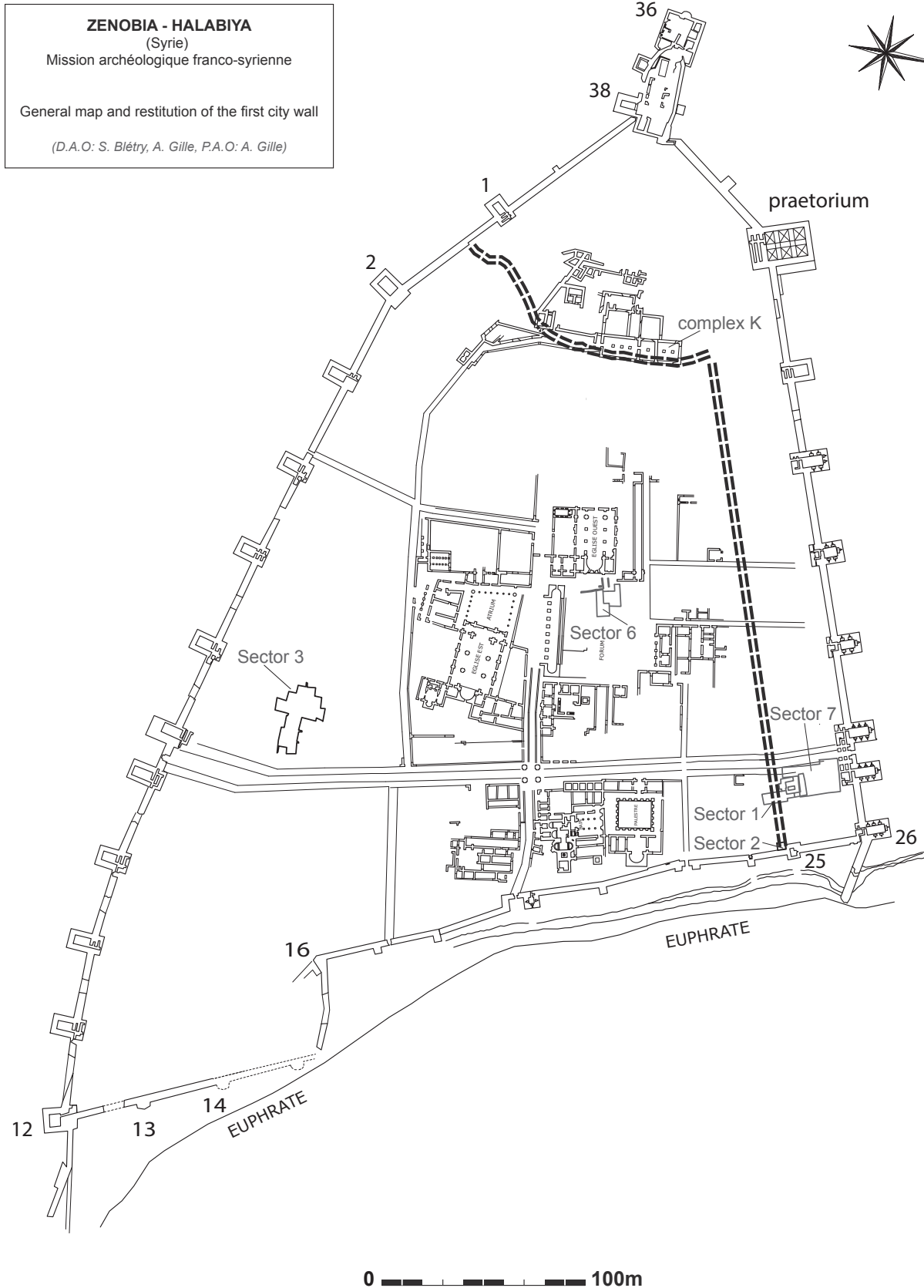


Fig. 13.4. Restitution of the first city wall.



Fig. 13.5. The southern breakwater near bastion 12.

the western curtain and the southern one on the portion of the south wall, where blocks have been torn out of the inner facing. We went as close as we could on scaffolding in 2008 and made drawings, which was impossible for J. Lauffray in his time. We also suspect that some large blocks constituting the terrace wall of complex K were re-used from the western rampart (Blétry 2015, 35–36, fig. 17–20).

As often when the text of the *De Aedificiis* is involved, the main question is the veracity of his testimony, since, on many occasions, scholars (Carrié *et al.* 2000, in general, and Croke and Crow 1983, for Dara) have proved that he attributed to Justinian many constructions that were erected before him. But Michael Whitby has also made a convincing rehabilitation of Procopius' testimony, specifically about Dara, but about elsewhere also. He stated, 'My conclusion is that, although Procopius has naturally exaggerated Justinian's achievements for the purpose of panegyric and his accounts are not so precise factual descriptions, there is a substantial basis of truth in his information which cannot be dismissed out of hand by those interested in the History

of Late Antiquity' (Whitby 1986, 737). For Zenobia, it is rather easy to show how relevant, precise, and accurate Procopius' long description is (Blétry 2008). He mentions reconstructions only on the north curtain (and not on the south one), although he could have attributed both of them, in order to give more strength to Justinian's architectural works undertaken all over the Empire. Indeed, there are architectural differences between the two curtains (J.-C. Bessac in Blétry 2015, 328–331, 333. See also Lauffray 1983, 137–140), and here again, Procopius' assertions seem to correspond with reality. For this reason, we believe that we can trust Procopius and his long description of Zenobia.

New considerations about the dating of Procopius' *De Aedificiis* (to 554, Greatrex 2013) or previous ones (for 560, Roques 2011) show no contradiction with our own estimate for the dating of the works undertaken by Justinian in Zenobia. If we take into consideration that such work needed a rather long period of peace during Justinian's reign to be carried out, we estimate that the years that immediately followed the 545 peace are good candidates.

The fact that Chosres, when leading the offensive to the West in 540, neglected to take the city (Procopius, *De Bellis* 2, 5, 7), which was ‘too unimportant according to him’, induces us to believe that, by this time, it was not properly fortified and/or not populated enough to demand a substantial ransom, as he did elsewhere. This last point is recalled in the *De Aedificiis* (2, 8, 11–12), when it is said that ‘the Emperor Justinian rebuilt Zenobia (that was ruined before) completely and filled it quite full of inhabitants, and he stationed there a commander of selected troops and a thoroughly adequate garrison, and made it a bulwark of the Roman Empire and a frontier barrier against the Persians; indeed he did not simply restore its previous form, but he actually made it much stronger than it was before’. And, further, ‘the Emperor considered the city worthy, as well he might, of his unceasing attention above all other places’ (2, 8, 15).

These last words lead us to question the choice that seems to be made by Justinian to restore to such a degree this place, which can be considered a small fortress without much importance, and particularly to provide it with such impressive and efficient city walls, especially in terms of *poliorcetics*. Was not Zenobia’s architectural improvement the occasion for Justinian to demonstrate his strength and power by erecting a sort of striking watch over the desert? When compared with similar work done in Resafa, where the aesthetics seem to have taken more importance, one may ask if the meaning and role of Zenobia were not more than what it looks like currently: a modest and unknown garrison watching a desert wilderness. A few arguments can indeed help to reconsider this point. First of all, Zenobia stands on the Euphrates. One cannot imagine that this situation was not taken as an advantage, and that at least a humble harbor was installed. We indeed made this hypothesis during the seasons we worked there, and we were about to survey the bank of the river along the eastern wall and conduct an underwater exploration. Unfortunately, the construction of the irrigation dam was quicker, and when we arrived in 2008, the remains of such potential devices were buried forever under several metres of earth embankment, which now follows the east curtain between the rampart and the riverbed. J. Lauffray noticed some blocks inside the river (Lauffray 1991, 21) near bastion n°26 that we did not see, and he mentioned others close to bastion n°15 with not enough precision to be certain that they correspond with the one we had observed in 2007 (Lauffray 1991, 21, 26). Nevertheless, it is very likely that all of them were the remains of a wharf along the Euphrates, which was destroyed with time and with the strong floods of the river, after the breakwaters were ruined.

We can also rely on other evidence, such as the presence of two churches. The main one is suspected of being a cathedral, even if we have no testimony or proof in the episcopal catalogues that Zenobia was ever an episcopal see (Lauffray 1983, 145). A *graffitto* read by J. Lauffray

on the apse of this ‘cathedral’ possibly mentions a bishop (Lauffray 1991, 231). The relative dating of the two churches by J. Lauffray (Lauffray 1991, 111) seems to be confirmed (Khoury and Riba 2013, 118). The so-called cathedral was probably erected during Anastasius’s reign and is indeed earlier than the smaller north-west church. Nevertheless, it continued to be used when the second church was built (that is, seemingly, during Justinian’s time). The ‘cathedral’ was provided with two successive *bema*. The other church had an interesting architectural feature: an *arcosolium*, undoubtedly protecting a location for a sarcophagus, was set up inside the external wall, at the eastern end of the north nave, close to the baptistry. The baptistry only consists of a small basin, dedicated to the baptism of children, which began to be frequent only from the end of the fourth to the beginning of the fifth century. The presence of a famous person (martyr? saint? bishop?) who was buried there, connected to a baptism place, is not a rare phenomenon during proto-Byzantine times. The ‘cathedral’ was, on the other end, associated with a large and monumental baptistry. This building, together with the existence of two churches, provides an argument for alleging that Zenobia may have been a station on a pilgrimage road, and that the large baptistry dedicated to the numerous pilgrims would have been used for mass baptisms (Khoury and Riba 2013, 119).

More light can be shed by the *necropoleis*, located north and south of the city, which were first studied by J. Lauffray (Lauffray 1991 207–224) and then surveyed by the Syrian-French mission, who significantly increased the number of located tombs (from 59 in Lauffray 1991 to 223, but observation could only be made of 128 monuments) and offered numerous renewed drawings of them (Blétry 2012; 2015, part IV; 2018). We developed the hypothesis that these *necropoleis* reflect the situation of late Roman and Byzantine times (at the earliest from the third or fourth centuries), even if some tombs were re-used later (with Christian signs or inscriptions). Most of these tombs are collective and monumental ones (89%), tower tombs (23%), hypogea or tombs hewn inside the cliffs (41%). For these last two types, some of them (19% of the total number of tombs) are pointed out in the landscape by an upper monument built over them. Many of them (72%) have a cruciform shape and are under three *arcosolia*, generally located on the north, west, and south of the tomb, with the entrance oriented on the eastern side. These tombs consequently show the relative prosperity of the inhabitants of Zenobia, quite far from the idea of a fortress populated only with soldiers staying in a garrison. Even then, in any case, we do not know if the soldiers stationed in Zenobia were *comitatenses* or *limitanei* (who are supposed to settle permanently in the city and become landowners or peasants). We cannot totally exclude the existence of a local aristocratic social class possessing the land, whether ecclesiastic or civilian, with some of them being possibly the descendants and heirs of *limitanei*.

These arguments renew the image and significance of Zenobia, which obviously went from a simple fortress to a real city. This new vision of the site with these economical, religious, and social implications also has a direct consequence for the significance of the city wall. It can explain the extreme attention and care that the central power of Constantinople brought in the construction of the fortification and its striking aspect.

Note

- 1 For the translation in French, we used the latest one: Roques 2011, 165–167.

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