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*View on the northern part of the
triumphal arch (photo: K. Jakubiak).*

منظر للجزء الشمالي من قوس النصر
(تصوير K. Jakubiak).



Via Sacra or Sacral Space in Palmyra

Krzysztof Jakubiak

Abstract / Kurzfassung / الخلاصة

Results from recent archaeological fieldwork in Palmyra raise the question as to the former existence of a sacred road (*Via Sacra*) in the city. Its proposed location is intimately connected with the city's temples and sanctuaries and their particular functions. The *Via Sacra*, if actually existed, could have played a very important role in the religious life of Palmyra.

Ergebnisse kürzlich vorgenommener Feldforschungen in Palmyra werfen die Frage nach der Existenz einer heiligen Straße (*Via Sacra*) innerhalb der Stadt auf. Ihre vermutete Lage ist engstens verbunden mit den Tempeln und Heiligtümern der Stadt und ihren besonderen Funktionen. Die *Via Sacra* könnte, falls sie tatsächlich existierte, eine wichtige Rolle im religiösen Leben von Palmyra eingenommen haben.

تطرح نتائج أبحاث ميدانية أجريت قبل وقت قصير في تدمر (بالميرا) السؤال عن وجود الشارع المقدس (*via Sacra*) في المدينة سابقًا. ويرتبط موقعه المفترض بشكل وثيق بمعابد المدينة وأماكنها المقدسة وبوظائفها الخاصة. ومن المحتمل أن يكون الشارع المقدس (*via Sacra*)، في حال أنه كان موجودًا بالفعل، قد لعب دورًا مهمًا جدًا في الحياة الدينية لتدمر.

Syria · Palmyra · *Via Sacra* · Religious Processions · Rituals
Syrien · Palmyra · *Via Sacra* · Religiöse Prozessionen · Rituale

Ever since the beginnings of research on the ancient Palmyrene, the location and function of rituals performed inside the city has been a much discussed subject among scholars.¹ One of the main problems has been concerned with the initial location of ceremonial areas inside Palmyra. Evidently, the temenos of the Bel temple and the other city sanctuaries (Allat, Baalshamin, Nabu) respectively formed holy precincts. Although most religious and ceremonial activities were restricted to the temples, there was an additional 'sacral space' necessary for extraordinary events like processions.

The precise location of some temples remains unknown and their location within the urban landscape is based on speculations only. Considering the possibly high number of such 'missing temples', we may wonder if the reconstruction of the 'city ritual map' in Palmyra is at all possible. Many scholars have studied the question in detail, and the latest analysis dealing with the topic is a remarkable book written by Ted Kaizer.² The epigraphic sources prove that at least sixteen temples and shrines had existed in the city. However, less than half of them have so far been located in the field. Among the identified sanctuaries

are those, which always have been apparent, i.e. the Bel³, Baalshamin⁴, and Nabu⁵ temples. The sanctuaries dedicated for example to Atargatis, Shamash, Herta, Nanaja, and Reseph have yet to be found.

This article does not intend to come up with a new proposition in the 'missing temples' case. I will rather try to focus on searching for sacral spaces in Palmyra, in general. Our scanty knowledge on this subject has much improved, thanks to the recent fieldwork during the last several seasons in Palmyra. One of the most spectacular and no doubt the most important sacred area was the temple of Bel with its temenos. According to epigraphic sources, not only

1 Février 1931; Milik 1972; Gawlikowski 1973; Teixidor 1977; Teixidor 1979; Gawlikowski 1990, 2605–2657; Kaizer 2002.

2 Kaizer 2002.

3 Seyrig – Amy – Will 1968; Seyrig – Amy – Will 1975.

4 Collart – Vicari 1969.

5 Bounni 1975, 46–52; Bounni – Seigne – Saliby 1992.

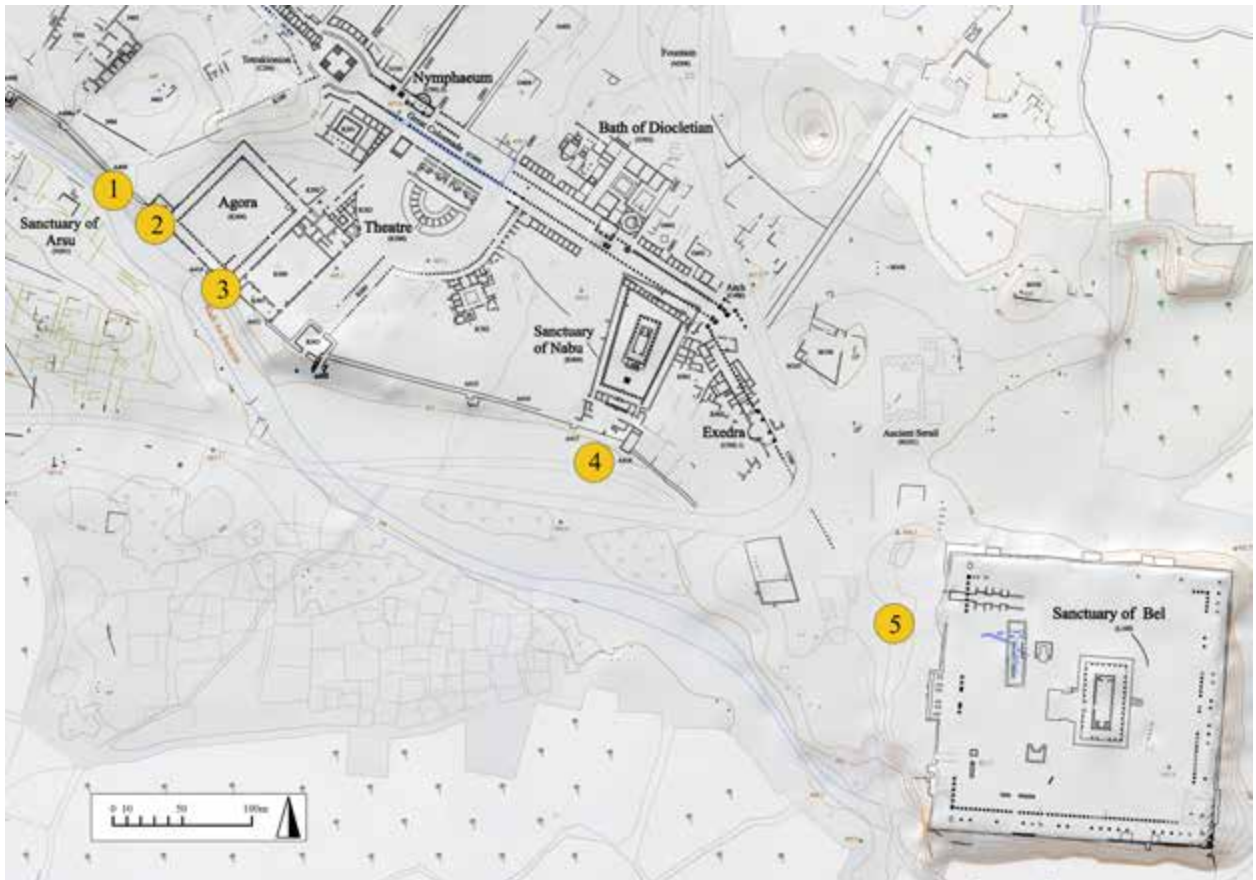


Fig. 1 Via Sacra. Recognised locations of temples (based on Schnädelbach 2010).

الشكل ١: الشارع المقدس (via Sacra)، مواقع المعابد التي تم التعرف عليها (بالاعتماد على Schnädelbach 2010).

Bel, one of the highest ranking gods of Palmyra, but also several other deities were worshiped there.⁶

The Bel temple was the main cultic building in Palmyra, and the street leading to the sanctuary (the Great Colonnade) was considered as a processional road (Fig. 1, Object No. 5; Fig. 2). The religious function of this artery was first advanced by Gawlikowski, on the basis of Greek and Aramaic inscriptions discovered along the Great Colonnade.⁷

Some of the most important ceremonies in the Bel temple might have been connected to the New Year festival (Akitu). In the case of this celebration, the traditional Babylonian ceremonies included processions leading through the main street of the city.⁸

Bel, who was worshiped in Palmyra as one of most important deities, clearly had a Babylonian origin. In fact, Bel was originally simply one of the cultic names of the god Marduk.⁹ Scholars, who comprehensively analysed the position of Bel throughout the Babylonian tradition, generally agree that the cult of the main Babylonian god Marduk had been adapted in Palmyra. Bel wasn't the only 'divine immigrant' 'installed' in Palmyra. We have evidence

confirming that some other deities like Nabu (who was closely associated with Bel) as well as Baalhammon, Herta, Reseph and Nanaja had been transferred to the Palmyrene pantheon in one way or another. The presence of these deities in Palmyra indicates that the city had been receptive to various cultic influences from both east and west. Some had certainly been assimilated, sometimes transformed and subsequently venerated in more or less altered manners. One example of such noticeably imported practices was the Akitu festival, which took place at the first day of spring.¹⁰

The question arises as to where exactly all the festival events and processions actually took place. Was there a special, sacred area delimited within the city

6 E.g. PAT 1353 (35 A.D.); PAT 1066 (204 A.D.), see also Kaizer 2002, 67–79.

7 Gawlikowski 1973, 80–86.

8 Briquel-Chatonnet 1995, 133; Dirven 1999, 165–174.

9 Drijvers 1980, 40–75; Dirven 1999, 129–130.

10 Seyrig, 1933, 277; the subject concerning the Akitu festival has recently been addressed comprehensively by T. Kaizer 2002, 203–211.



Fig. 2 The Bel sanctuary, general view from south-east (see Fig.1 No. 5) (photo: K. Jakubiak).

الشكل ٢: معبد بعل، منظر عام من الجنوب الشرقي (انظر الشكل ١ رقم 5) (تصوير K. Jakubiak).



Fig. 3 The shrine dedicated to Rab'asire (see Fig.1 No. 3), view from the east (photo: K. Jakubiak).

الشكل ٣: منظر من الشرق للمزار المخصص لـ(رب أسير) (انظر الشكل ١ رقم 3) (تصوير K. Jakubiak).

area? We were once again confronted with this important issue during the last two excavation seasons in Palmyra. Fieldwork was conducted by Michał Gawlikowski. His old hypothesis considering the Great Colonnade as a ceremonial or processional road required modification through the results of the excavations in 2010 and 2011.¹¹

While the idea of a specific ceremonial street/area in Palmyra can be maintained, I think this sacred street was situated in a completely different place than previously assumed.

The recent excavations were conducted to the south of the Agora, in the bed of Wadi Suraisir (Wadi Qubur). The various trenches opened in this area revealed some very interesting topographical findings.¹² For this study, the most important one was the discovery of a temple dedicated to the god Rab'asire (Fig. 1, Object No. 3; Fig. 3). His name appears only once in Palmyra, in the famous Tariff.¹³ The inscription, as we can learn from the text itself, had once stood in front of the Rab'asire temple (LQBL HYKL' DY RB'SYR' (10th line in the Aramaic version) and ἱεροῦ λεγομένου Ραβασεῖρη (11th line in the Greek version of that same document).¹⁴

Meanwhile, leaving those epigraphic divagations aside, we should come back to the temple of Rab'asire itself. This very modest building, closer to the size of a chapel than that of a standard temple, was located exactly in front of the Tariff, directly against the southern wall of the Agora. The most significant discovery is however not the shrine itself, but the remains of a paved street that had unexpectedly been discovered during the excavations. Its traces were

11 Mesnil du Buisson 1966, 176–177; Gawlikowski in press a; Gawlikowski in press b; Gawlikowski in press c.

12 The preliminary results after the first season of excavations were presented during the International Conference in Warsaw which took place in December 2010.

13 Texidor 1983, 235–252.

14 Cussini – Hillers 1996, 57. 61, PAT 0259.



Fig. 4 The Arsu temple. View from the south-west (see Fig. 1 No. 1) (photo: K. Jakubiak).

الشكل ٤: منظر من الجنوب الغربي لمعبد الإله «آريز» (انظر الشكل ١ رقم 1) (تصوير K. Jakubiak).

also found in several other trenches in front of the Agora and near the Nabu temple in trenches opened by Syrian archaeologists.¹⁵ Both structures belong to the archaic phase of the city's development.¹⁶ Consequently, they are older than the Great Colonnade. It seems very possible that long before the tracing of the Great Colonnade, the southern road had been the main artery of the city. The road delimited the oldest districts located south of the wadi from quarters developing on its other side.¹⁷ The paved street may have functioned as the main artery in the archaic period and most probably led directly to the sanctuary of Bel.

These findings furnish new data concerning the development of Palmyra, especially with respect to the location of the original sacred areas of the city. The paved street was the most important artery of archaic Palmyra and consequently, the most important public and sacred buildings of that period were probably aligned along this street or located in its vicinity. One of them was undoubtedly the city's agora, of which some traces were discovered by the French expedition in the 1940's in test trenches below the later Agora, just north of the paved road.¹⁸ It is highly possible that these structures are contemporary with the recently discovered chapel dedicated to Rab'asire and the paved street.

The 'old Agora' was probably only slightly above the paved street level. However, even if we can't prove

that all the mentioned structures were constructed at the same time, as part of one urban plan, it is most likely that this area was the monumental district of the city from the very beginnings.

Other buildings from the archaic period have also been discovered in this area, which additionally would support the hypothesis about the 'sacral area'. Not far from the Agora, on the southern bank of the Wadi Suraisir, a temple ascribed to the god Arsu had been located.¹⁹ (Fig. 1, Object No. 1; Fig. 4). The foundations and remains of the lowermost course of the podium are preserved. From a point of view of architecture, the Arsu temple was a classical cella. However, an archaic capital (now at the local museum) was found in the ruins suggesting that this shrine

15 Dr. Khalil al-Hariri personal communication. The measurements taken in a few points of the road's route prove that the whole construction was a homogenous structure. The leveling point of the flagstones for the location, where the Tariff had been set up was 406.63. In the trench next to the Nabu temple, the Syrian archaeologists established a street level at 406.03. The difference results from the fact only that the street slopes to the east along the wadi route.

16 Schmidt-Colinet – al-As'ad 2000, 61–93; Schmidt-Colinet – al-As'ad 2002, 157–166; Schmidt-Colinet – al-As'ad 2008, 452–478.

17 Schmidt-Colinet – al-As'ad 2002, 157–166.

18 Seyrig – Duru 2005, 23–116; Delplace – Fouret 2005, 117–150.

19 al-As'ad – Texidor 1985, 286–292.

too, must have been one of the earliest sacred structures within the city. A stone altar which led to the discovery led the temple's identification.²⁰ In line 5 and the partly reconstructed line 6 we can read that the altar had been dedicated to "Arsu, Qismaya and the daughters of El, the good gods" (L'RŠW WLQSMY' [W]LBNT'L 'LHY' ṬBY')²¹ (PAT 0992). Reading and interpreting the inscription reveals literally that not only Arsu but also other deities had been worshiped here.

Near the Arsu temple was the location of another structure, probably a chapel or a small temple. The building has not survived, although an inscribed stone block was found re-used in a later structure of this area. It was fixed in a bastion of the Diocletian wall immediately west to the Curia building. The inscription reveals that in 30 AD (50 AD is also possible but less likely) a man named Malku and his associate had erected and offered a *ḥamana* to Shadrafa and Du'nat (1 [BYRH...ŠNT 3.100+x+]40+2 ḤMN' DNH 'BDW WQRBW MLKW BR BL'QB BR M[YK'...] 2 [.....] NN PḤD BNY ZMR' LŠDRP' WLD'NT 'LHY' ṬB[Y'...])²².

The inscribed block was apparently found in a massive structure undoubtedly had been integrated to the late city wall in a secondary context. Considering its orientation, we can presume that it was associated with the urban arrangement to the north of the wadi. One side is parallel to the paved road while the lateral side is parallel to the diagonal, colonnaded street leading towards the Tetrapylon. I believe that these are remnants from the front and one of the side elevations of the Shadrafa temple (Fig. 1 object no. 2, Fig. 5). The oblique corner of this structure seems to correlate with the colonnade. This second street was never fully furnished with columns. It is another element of the original urban network, clearly earlier than the Great Colonnade and Tetrapylon. It remained in use when the Great Colonnade began to function as the main city artery. The old street survived not without reason: it led to the Arsu temple. However, in our opinion, this was not the only one. Here, between the back wall of the Curia and the corner of the oblique street, there was probably another sacred structure. The bastion mentioned above (constructed from re-used blocks of apparently the same origin) seems to belong to this sacred structure.²³ These remains are most probably the only ruins left originating from the temple (*ḥamana*) of Shadrafa and Du'nat.

The Nabu sanctuary,²⁴ being the next along the old paved road, is the second largest temple in Palmyra after the Bel sanctuary (Fig. 1 object no 4, Fig. 6). The high ranking of Nabu is not surprising as he was closely associated to Bel. The back side



Fig. 5 Possible remains of the Shadrafa shrine (see Fig. 1 No. 2), view from the east (photo: K. Jakubiak).

الشكل ٥: منظر من الشرق للبقايا المحتملة لمزار الإله «شَدْرَفا» (انظر الشكل ١ رقم ٣) (تصوير K. Jakubiak).

of the temple is opposite the Great Colonnade, and the propylaea opens towards the wadi. The recent Syrian excavations along the defensive wall in front of the Nabu temple revealed a relatively large fragment of the paved street, the same as in front of the Agora. The connection between the temple and the street remains unanswered and therefore requires further excavation. We may nevertheless assume that the temple must have been easily accessible directly from the paved road. We also believe that the original temple was much smaller than the one that has partly survived from the 2nd century and that it was similar to the other modest archaic shrines, like those devoted to Rab'asire, Arsu, and Shadrafa. Gradually, colonnades were added around the courtyard and finally, the cella. Several inscriptions mention donations of the entablature and other architectural elements offered by Palmyrene notables. One fragment cites the contribution of a certain Moqimu: 'MWD' DNH WŠRYTH WTṬLYLH DNBW 'DNH ṬB' WŠKR' 'L ḤYWH (PAT 0009 lines: 4–5).²⁵ In 1965 the inscription furnished the first evidence that this remarkable temple had belonged to Nabu.

Further to the east is the great temple of Bel. The Great Colonnade abutted at the propylaea or an empty space in front of the temple. It also seems that the paved road too, ended in front of the temenos.

20 Will 1983,76; al-As'ad – Texidor 1985, 286–292; Kaizer 2002, 116–124.

21 al-As'ad – Texidor 1985, 286–292; Cussini – Hillers 1996, 159.

22 Starky 1949, 434–48, Pl III.1; Cussini – Hillers 1996, 210, PAT 1429.

23 Gawlikowski in press b.

24 Bounni – Seigne – Saliby 1992.

25 Bounni – Saliby 1965, 121–138; Cussini – Hillers 1996, 25.



Fig. 6 The temple of Nabu (see Fig.1 No. 4), view from the south-west (photo: K. Jakubiak).

الشكل ٦: منظر من الجنوب الغربي لمعبد الإله «نابو» (انظر الشكل ١ رقم 4) (تصوير K. Jakubiak).

From the inscription PAT 1347 we learn that this extraordinary building had been consecrated on the 6th of Nisan in 32 AD.²⁶ Yet, the inscription itself was set up in October 45 AD. Moreover, the text mentions other deities, Yarhibol and Aglibol, who were venerated in the temple next to Bel. Since the inscription is very important for our further study it seems reasonable to render the entirety of its contents:

- 1 BYRḤ TŠRY ŠNT 3.100+40+10+5+2
- 2 ŠLM' DYH DY LŠMŠ BR TYBWL
- 3 BR ŠKYBL DY MN BNY KMR' DY
- 4 ḤNK HYKL' DY BL WYRḤBWL
- 5 W'GLBWL 'LHY' BQDŠWHY
- 6 YWM ŠTT' BNYSN ŠNT 3.100+40+3
- 7 DY 'QYMW LH BNWHY LYQRH

Translation:

- 1 In the month of Tishri of the year 357 (October 45 AD)
- 2 the statue of Lishamsh son of Taibbol
- 3 son of Shokaibel who is from the Komare tribe (Bene Komare), who
- 4 dedicated the temple of Bel and Yarhibol
- 5 and Aglibol the gods, BQDŠWHY²⁷
- 6 in the sixth day of the year 343 (6th April 32 AD)
- 7 which erected (set up) his sons (for him) in his honour.

At the time of its consecration, the temple was probably already given the general architectural appearance which has survived until today.²⁸ One important aspect was that one of the temple's adyta must have already been completed, rendering possible the performance of ceremonials and rituals. The temenos as well, probably already existed in its basic form (yet its precise layout remains unknown) but without the monumental stone walls which were supposedly added later. Yet, the temple precinct could also have been delimited through different means, such as constructions from mud brick or other materials. The terrain of the entire enclosure is situated on a slightly higher elevation than the rest of the contemporary city, since the Bel sanctuary had been erected on a tell containing the ruins of a former settlement. It is also possible that the temenos wall had been erected on the plan of older structures. In any event, the sacred area of the main temple must have stood out as a visible mark within the city landscape with the paved road leading to the entrance of the temple. On the remains of

26 Cantineau 1933, 170–174.

27 This word is problematic. Gawlikowski suggested to translate it with “during their feast”, but Millar is convinced that it should be translated as “with its sanctuaries” and Kaizer finally suggests “with its sacred objects?”. The entire discussion is rendered by Kaizer 2002, 69.

28 Pietrzykowski 1997, 13–72.

this structure we were able to recognise the location where the paved road reached the area of the temple enclosure. Today it is hard to assess the original size of the this sacred area but the affiliation to the paved road is evident.

Considering all the data presented above, we have to return to the conclusion I propose in this article. The existence of a so called *Via Sacra* in the form of the only paved road in Palmyra seems very likely. Questions as to its original length and where it starts remain yet to be answered. So far, we have discovered only fragments of the pavement in several trenches along the southern defensive wall erected under Aurelian or Diocletian.²⁹ The westernmost cleared section of the street is located in front of the main entrance to the Agora. We may expect that it continues further west, toward the temple of Arsu. Here the *Via Sacra* joined the oblique street leading directly to the city centre. This street was ornamented with a colonnade on one side. It is possible that it originally led further to the north, beyond the city outskirts as far as to eventually reach the temple of Baalshamin. Later, most probably after the 1st century AD, when the Great Colonnade and Tetrapylon were erected, the diagonal street formed a link between the new main artery of the city and the old paved road in Wadi Suraisir.

Subsequently, the paved street between the Bel temple and (at least) the meeting point with the oblique street west of the Agora could have served for some ceremonies and religious festivals. The road passed along temples and shrines, but unquestionably served primarily in everyday life as the main thoroughfare of the city.

Another temple built along the paved road is the shrine of Rab'asire (Fig. 3). The name of the deity is mentioned only once, and a single depiction has tentatively been attributed to it. Even so, the location of the temple, however small, along the main city artery indicates that the religious position of Rab'asire had been relatively significant.

Further east along the paved street we find the temple of Nabu. Finally, the sacred road reaches its main destination at the temple of Bel. The section of the road between both temples still remains unexplored, and its exact course therefore will have to be established. There are no hints as to how the road joined the Bel sanctuary. This road section was most probably altered by later building activity, particularly during Odainat reign, although it must be kept in mind, that its chronological setting is still lacking clear assessment.³⁰ The eastern section of the Great Colonnade ran towards the main entrance of the temenos. The older paved street, the supposed *Via*

Sacra, also ran towards the temenos. As already mentioned, the investigations by the Syrian team revealed traces of the paved street in the area to the east of the Nabu temple. It therefore cannot be excluded that the *Via Sacra* was attached to the western part of the temenos façade, or simply ended at the conjectured square in front of the temenos propylaea. Anyway, it seems that the old 'sacred road' led toward the gate in the western side of the temenos wall. We know after all, that sacrificial animals were led into the temple area through this gate. Consequently, the road may as well have served as a track for those animals. In accepting this supposition, we should look for the starting point of the *Via Sacra* much farther away than the neighbourhood of the Arsu temple, possibly even outside the city limits (Fig. 7).³¹

To conclude, the old paved street had most probably existed ever since the beginnings of Palmyra and constituted its first main thoroughfare. The street once connected the western and the eastern parts of the city while dividing it in two parts to its south and its north. The southern part most probably held the dwelling quarters as revealed by the excavations of Andreas Schmidt-Colinet.³² In the northern part monumental buildings eventually developed. The Agora building, in its present state, was preceded by an older structure belonging to the same urban structure as the Rab'asire shrine and other religious buildings and hence most probably dates back to the 1st century AD. The above analysis shows that at least four different religious structures (including the two monumental temples devoted to Nabu and Bel) were located along this artery. The diagonal street running from the Tetrapylon to the Arsu temple also was a remnant of the city's former arrangement. The street was intentionally left almost unchanged at the construction of the Tetrapylon. It was only slightly shortened and remained an important track when the new city main artery began to function. One of the reasons why the diagonal street survived virtually unaffected was the role it possibly played during the Akitu festival. Considering all the above data we can presume that it may have been the major track for processions. Moreover, the temple of Arsu may actually have marked the formal beginning of the *Via Sacra* which led the processions to and from the Bel sanctuary.

29 Juchniewicz 2011.

30 Will 1983, 69–81; Tabaczek 2001.

31 Mesnil du Buisson 1966, 176–177; Mesnil du Buisson 1969, 101–103; Kaizer 2008, 653–655.

32 Schmidt-Colinet – al-As'ad 2000, 61–93; Schmidt-Colinet – al-As'ad 2002, 157–166; Schmidt-Colinet – al-As'ad 2008, 452–478.

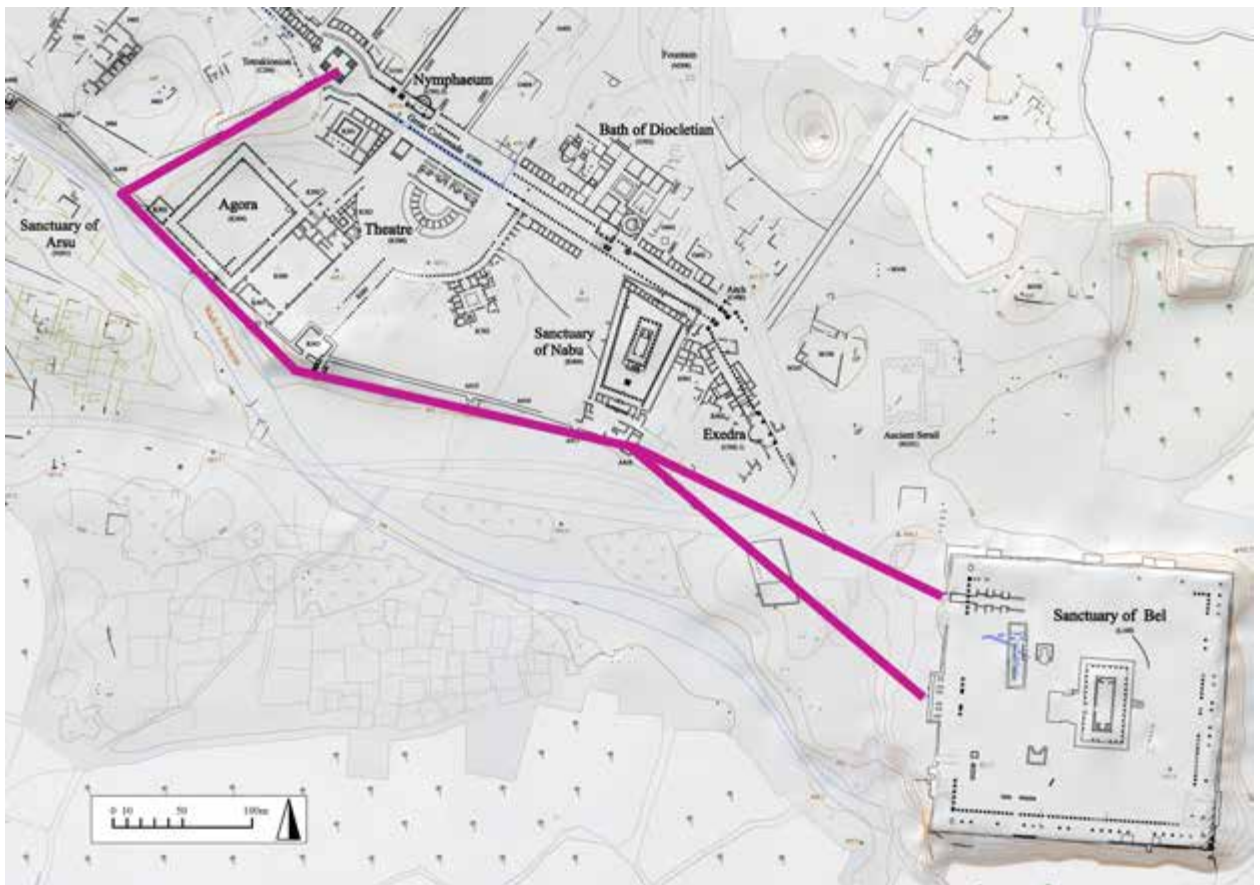


Fig. 7 Via Sacra. The assumed course of the earlier procession road, based on Schnädelbach 2010.

الشكل ٧: الشارع المقدس (via Sacra)، المسار المفترض لطريق الموكب الأسبق بالاعتماد على Schnädelbach 2010.

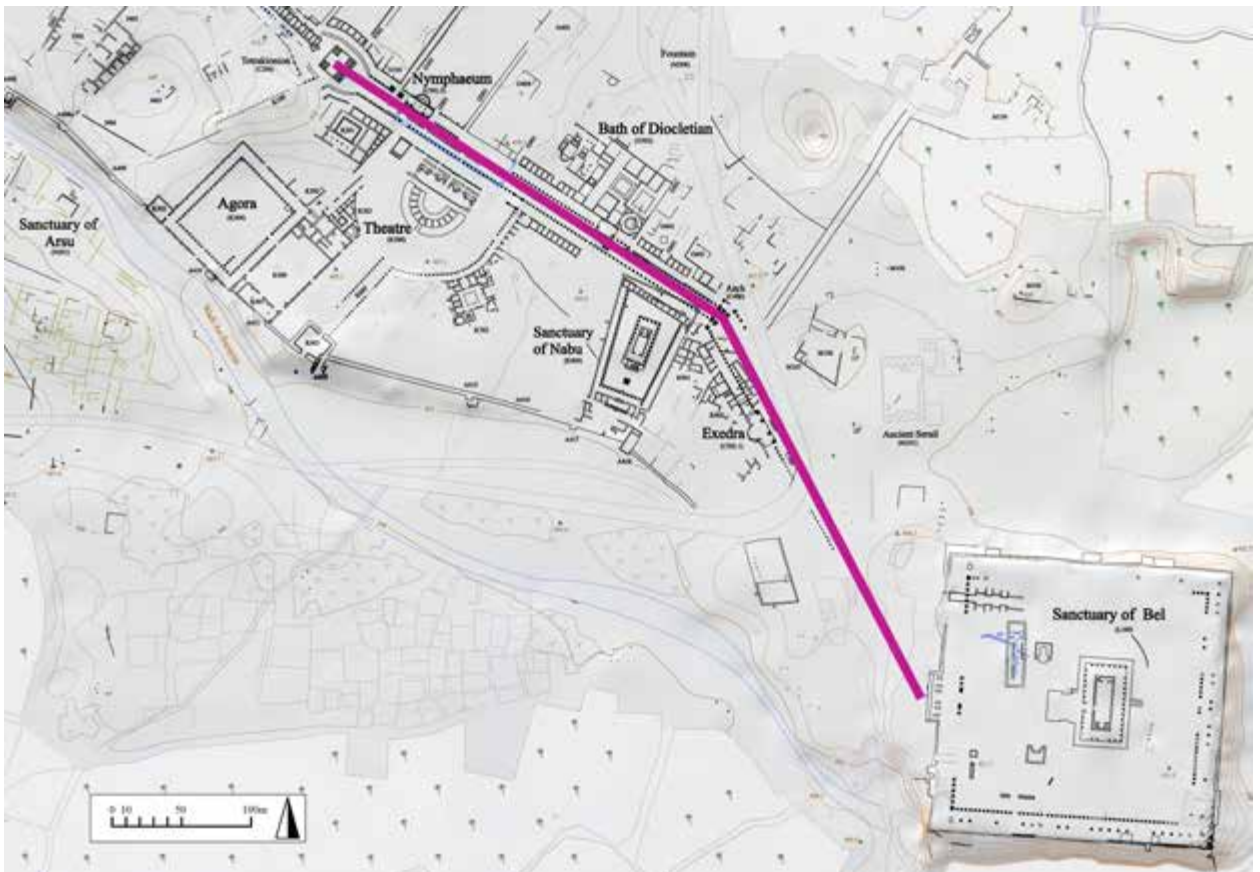


Fig. 8 Via Sacra. The procession road, later phase, proposed by M. Gawlikowski, based on Schnädelbach 2010.

الشكل ٨: الشارع المقدس (via Sacra)، الفترة اللاحقة من طريق الموكب، اقتراح من م. كَوَالِكُوسْكي اعتماداً على Schnädelbach 2010.

Once again, it is stressed that the proposed “sacred street” was the only paved road in the entire city of ancient Palmyra. The street’s function was evidently noteworthy and could have been associated with the city’s religious life. Nevertheless, the *Via Sacra* did not endure and ended up being covered by the sands. The reasons for this³³ are most probably connected to Palmyra’s dynamic development in the second and third centuries AD which involved the necessity of rearranging the city’s urban plan. The new main artery, now adorned with the Great Colonnade fundamentally changed the aspect of the city. The old function of the oblique street to the north of the Arsu temple was kept unchanged as it was connected to the new artery, where it joined the Tetrastylon. The old paved road in the meantime lost its privileged position. In addition, the dust from the desert filled Wadi Suraisir

and inexorably encroached upon the paved road. The small shrines along the primary *Via Sacra* were still operating, but the city’s centre of gravity had already altered its position. By now the Great Colonnade formed the main communication axis of the city. As far as the question is concerned whether the monumental street also served cultic purposes, no shrines have been identified along the Colonnade. However, it may have been used as a processional road leading to the Bel sanctuary. Gawlikowski would hence have been right in describing the Great Colonnade as the city’s processional road in that it had inherited the erstwhile religious function from the former street in the Wadi Suraisir (Fig. 8). From a point of view of religion therefore, we may at this point propose two phases for the *Via Sacra* or ‘procession road’ in Palmyra.

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33 Recently the changes in urban planning, religious topography and chronology were discussed in detail by Sommer 2005, 139–224.

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