TELL AMARNA
RESTORATION AND EXCAVATION, 2000

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The site of Tell Amarna on the right bank of the Euphrates, about 8 km south of the Syrian-Turkish border, was the object of archaeological and restoration works by a Polish-Belgian-Syrian team between September 5 and 25, 2000.[1] The objective at hand was to salvage the mosaics floors uncovered in 1998 in a Byzantine basilica near Tell Amarna, investigating the building itself in the process.

1) The expedition is a joint project of the Service d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie de l'Asie Antérieure of Liège University, the Polish Center of Archaeology and the Institute of Archaeology, both of Warsaw University, and the Syrian Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées. The work was financed by the Belgian side. The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Tell Amarna expedition director, Prof. Önhan Tunca, as well as the DGAM Director of Research, Dr. Michel Maqdisi, who made our work possible. Tomasz Waliszewski field directed the activities of a team comprising conservators from the Monuments Conservation Faculty of the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw: Messrs. Krzysztof Chmielewski, Andrzej Karolczak, Marcin Chmielewski, Paweł Jędrzejczak and Sylwester Pięzdziejewski, and Mrs. Ewa Chrzanowska, archaeologist. A special note of thanks goes to Ms Rodeina Harfouche, DGAM inspector, whose friendly assistance and sympathy greatly helped to keep the project moving along.

THE PROJECT

The construction of a new dam at Tishrin near the modern village of Youssef Pasha, north of the Tabqa dam, provided an opportunity for rescue excavations to be carried out in this part of the Euphrates valley. The Syrian archaeological authorities entrusted an expedition from Liège University with the exploration of Tell Amarna.[2)]

The site of Tell Amarna lies about 8 km south of Jerablus, on the border with Turkey. It comprises the tell proper, which is some 20 m high, and ruins from the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods scattered in the neighborhood (*Fig. 1*). Over the years, a small hill some 700 m south of the tell, near the modern village of Amarna, has been yielding sufficient loose mosaic cubes for investigations to be in order. Work initiated by a Belgian expedition in 1998 led to the discovery, immediately under the topsoil, of a 5th-century Byzantine church decorated with polychrome mosaics that have mostly survived despite the damages caused by plowing (*Fig. 2*).

Fig. 1. View of Tell Amarna from the hill where the ruins of the Byzantine church are situated (Photo T. Waliszewski)

2) For a general idea of the research carried out on the site, see Ö. Tunca, Présentation sommaire de sept campagnes de fouilles (1991-1997), in: Archaeology of the Upper Syrian Euphrates – the Tishrin Dam Area, Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Barcelona, January 28th-30th, 1998, ed. G. Del Olmo Lete, J.-L. Montero Fenollós, *Aula Orientalis*, Supplementa 15 (Barcelona 1999), 129-136.

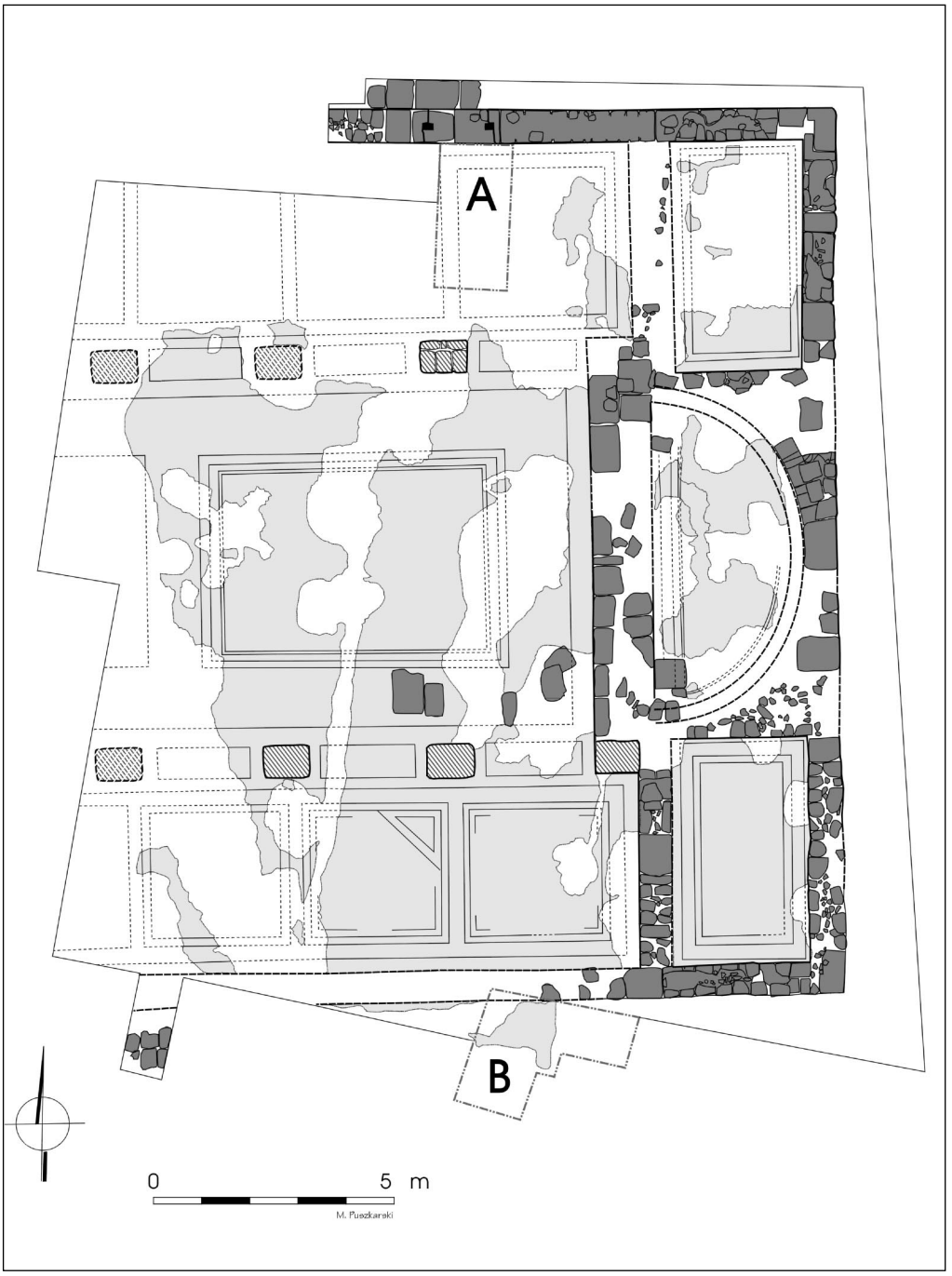

Fig. 2. Plan of the church in Tell Amarna (Drawing M. Puszkarski)

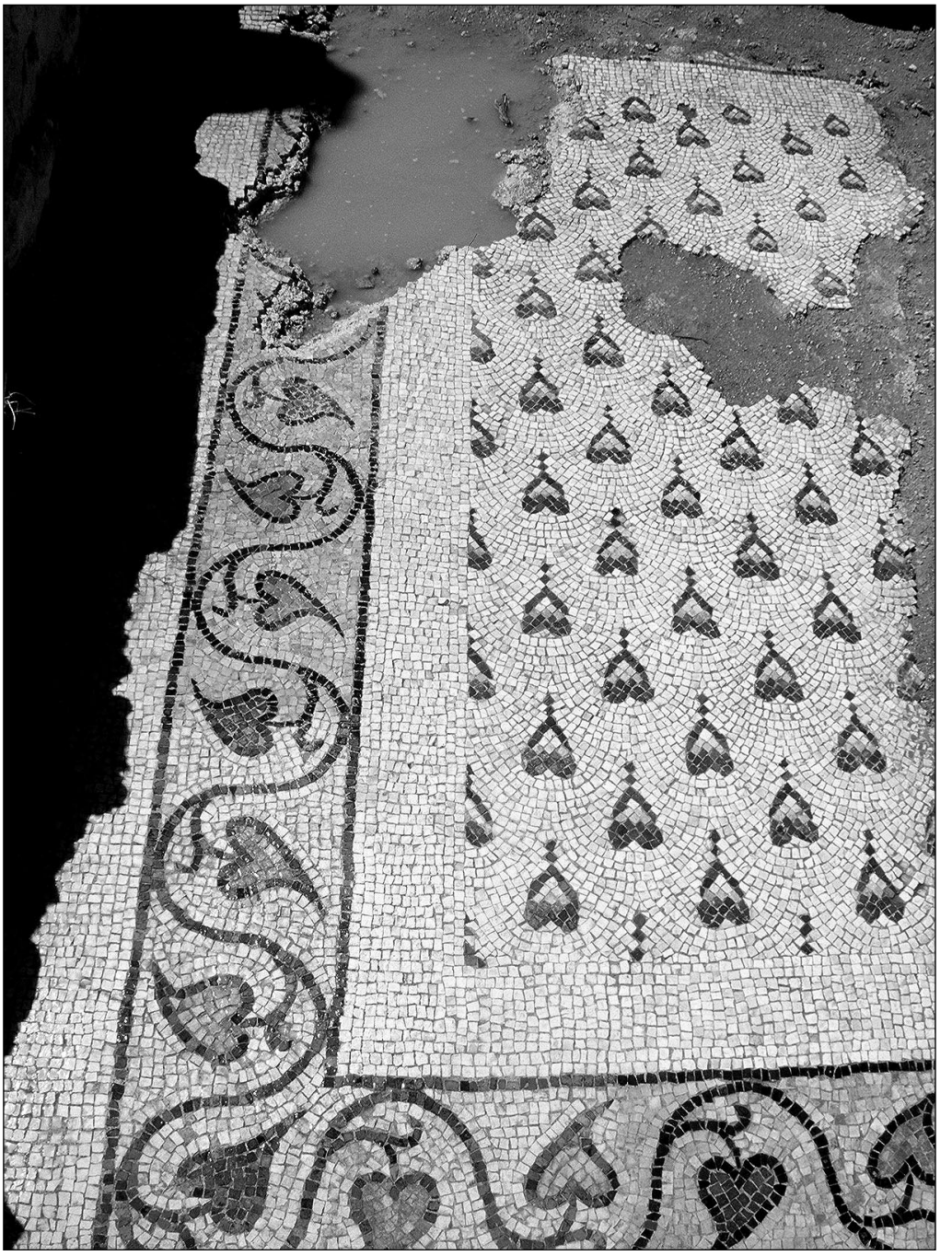

Fig. 3. Tell Amarna. Mosaic floor in the northern pastophorium (Photo T. Waliszewski)

The walls of this structure are founded on bedrock. The footing is made of dressed limestone blocks, while the walls are of flat bricks, impressions of which survive in many places in the mortar on the stones.

The church follows a basilican plan. The main entrance was situated presumably in the west end of the building, which has been lost. About two-thirds of the nave and side aisles could be investigated. Separating the aisles and nave were two rows of pillars constructed of flat bricks. The eastern end of the church was divided into three parts: the apse and two rectangular auxiliary rooms. The presbytery and auxiliary rooms are about 0.35-0.55 m above the floor in the nave.

The mosaics in the nave and aisles were made in *opus tesselatum* technique, using cubes 1 cm square (*Fig. 3*). Geometric designs formed rectangular panels that emphasized the interior division of the church. Some of the motifs used in the decoration are considered unique in the region.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

On the invitation of Project Director, Prof. Önhan Tunca of Liège University, the Polish Center of Archaeology and the Institute of Archaeology of Warsaw University took up limited archaeological research in order to revise the building plan and attempt a reconstruction of its development. The outer walls of the building were excavated: all of the east wall (with a footing of obviously reused dressed limestone blocks), a section of the south wall 7.50 m long starting from the southeastern corner of the structure, and the northern wall for a distance of 9.50 m from the northeastern corner, revealing in the latter case a fine threshold and evidence for the mounting of side doors to the temple. Side entrances were common in Syrian churches of the Byzantine period. Also cleared was the western wall of the side room lying south of the apse, revealing evidence of a threshold and of door-mounting installations that suggest the room had served as a sacristy where valuable liturgical items were kept.

The same building technology has been observed everywhere: sound foundations of reused dressed limestone blocks set directly upon bedrock and walls of flat bricks. Many of these bricks can still be seen in place in the apse (average dimensions 0.42 x 0.32 x 0.03 m). The length of the building can be estimated – despite the missing western wall – on the basis of the mosaic floor decoration in the nave; a black border framing yet another panel, now destroyed, sets the approximate length-to-width ratio of the church building. It must have been at least twice as long as the surviving part.

An extension of the trench outside the southern wall of the temple, flush with the eastern panel of the mosaic floor in the southern aisle, confirmed that the floor, recorded earlier, made of cubes 2-3 cm to the side, runs further on (for at least 1.70 m) to the east and south. It is presumably proof of a courtyard once abutting the basilica. In the layer resting directly on the floor there were many roof tiles, possibly indicating a slow dilapidation of the structure.

A probe was dug in the northern aisle, about even with the side doors of the church and the second pillar. It measured 3 by 1.50 m and provided the following stratigraphic information (*Fig. 4*):

– on the very surface a mosaic floor of the 5th century, covering the northern aisle;

– lime substructure under it, some 3-4 cm thick;
– limestone floor, hard, decorated with haphazardly introduced mosaic cubes; it corresponds to the floor found under the mosaics in other parts of the church;
– floor substructure (ca. 15 cm thick) made of small stones in a loose brown soil matrix;
– light-brown soil constituting a layer 50 cm thick on the average, accumulated over the bedrock which drops slightly to the north; it yielded several mosaic cubes of different colors and roof tiles, suggesting that another older mosaic floor must have existed inside a building that may have been dismantled and reused in the construction of the basilica.

CONSERVATION WORK

The mosaic floors surviving in the basilica cover a total area of c. 120 m^2 (*Fig. 5*). Each floor comprises four technological layers. An uneven layer of stones of differing size is laid directly upon the ground and fixed with the first layer of a lime-and-sand mortar. A second, white lime-and-sand mortar, a few centimeters thick, was poured over this first one, and it is in this layer that the different-color cubes of natural stone (c. 1 cm to the side) were set.

The floors have suffered considerable damage and extensive, irregular losses of mosaic surface, frequently making it difficult to reconstruct the original geometric composition. The overall level, however, is fairly even with only occasional insignificant depressions. In the aisles there is an overall westerly sloping tendency, presumably due to the ground subsiding in a generally downslope direction. A narrow regular strip of lost cubes several meters long must be the outcome of plowing.

Despite the losses, the surviving floors revealed good cohesiveness of the four technological layers. An exceptionally hard

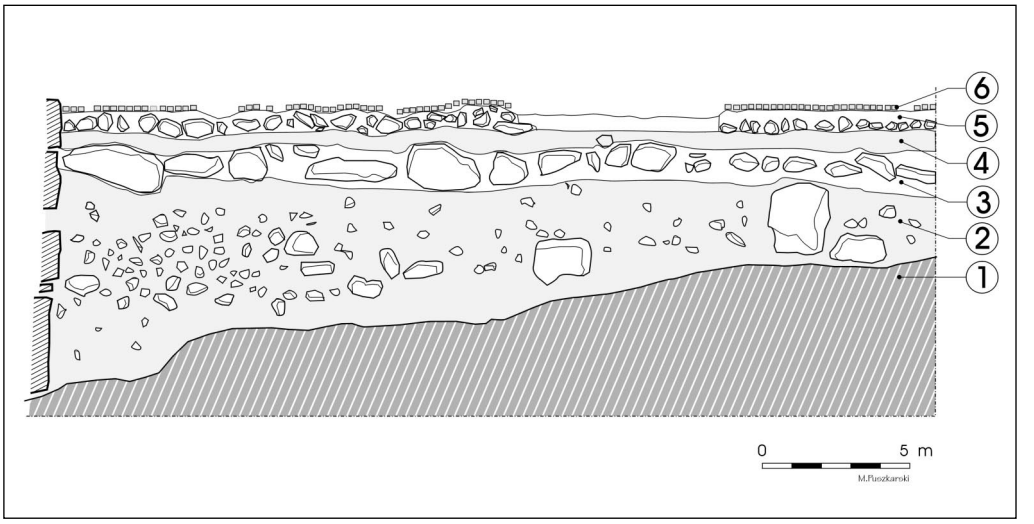

Fig. 4. Cross-section through layers excavated in the northern aisle of the church (Drawing M. Puszkarski)

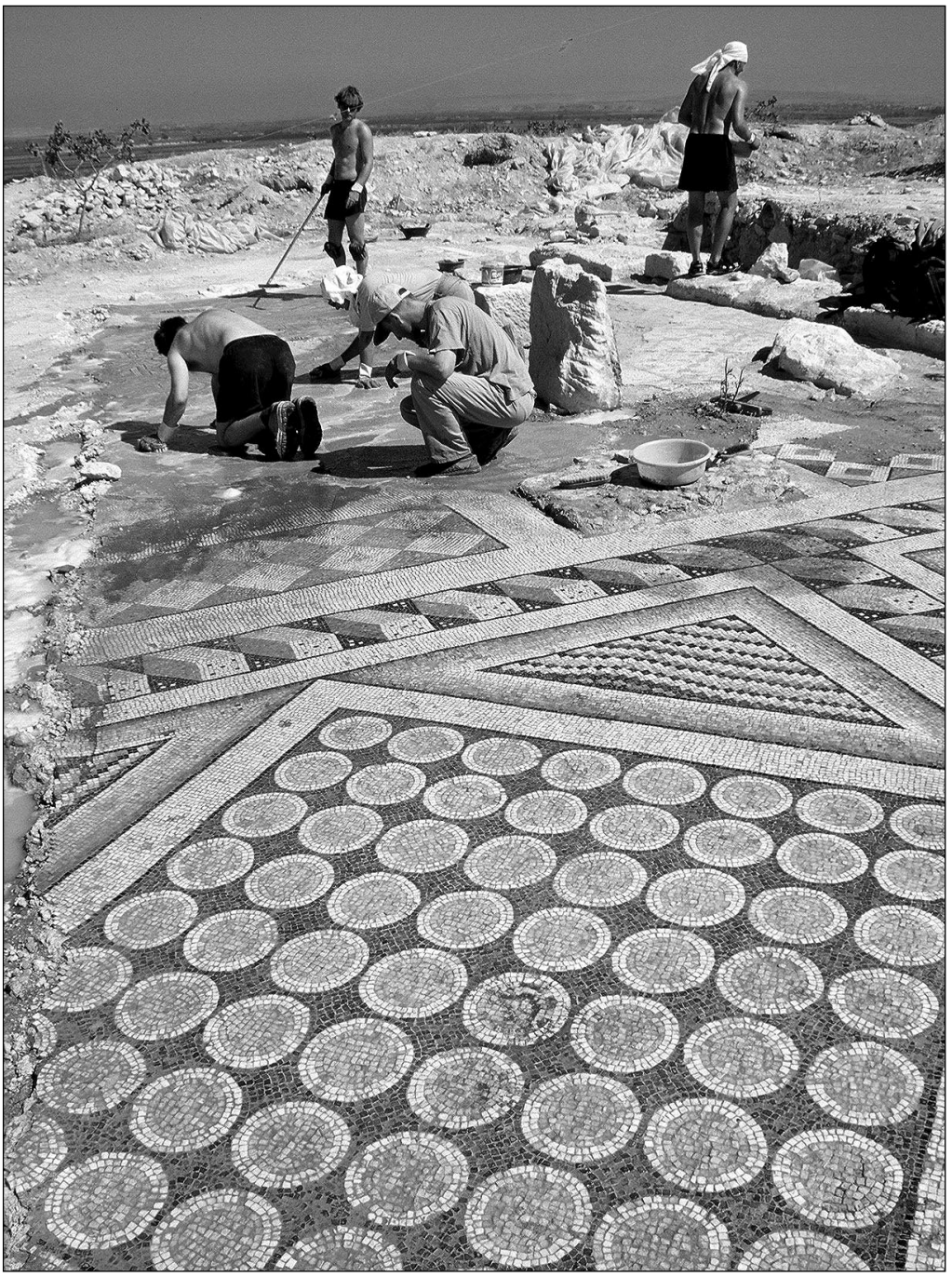

Fig. 5. Mosaic floors in the nave and southern aisle (Photo T. Waliszewski)

mortar, both the bottom and the upper one, has retained its inner cohesiveness and attachment to the substructure and to the cubes. The surface was heavily dirtied, covered in places with remnants of a secondary, white, probably limewash layer.

In view of the conditions – the mosaic floors are on private land, in a cultivated nut-tree grove, unprotected and difficult to secure – the only way evidently to protect and preserve the floors was to remove them and remount them on a new substructure for display in museum conditions.

During the 2000 season all the surviving mosaic floors were removed and stored after appropriate protective measures had been taken. The mosaics were first photographed and drawn, then divided into over forty bigger and smaller fragments, to be removed successively (*Fig. 6*). The borders of particular pieces were determined both by the arbitrary edges of the missing parts and by the original geometric decoration, this coupled with the technical possibilities.

After cleaning the surface, two layers of gauze and a thin linen fabric were glued to the mosaics with vinyl polyalcohol. Then the floors were divided into fragments removing the cubes found at the junctions. Once the fragments were cut away from their substratum, the pieces were transferred to wooden boards and turned over in order for the underside to be cleaned of mortar. This was done in order to lessen the weight of particular fragments and to increase their cohesiveness. This done, the mosaic fragments were packed in layers of foam and moved to a storeroom.

Fig. 6. Conservators roll up the mosaic floor from the nave (Photo T. Waliszewski)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF THE CONSERVATION WORK

The described preservation work on the mosaics revealed an earlier lime floor that had covered the entire church area except for the central apse and the auxiliary rooms to the sides. This even mortar floor featured white, black and gray mosaic cubes set into it at big and irregular distances.

In the central apse, fragments of an earlier mosaic floor were recorded under the floor that was contemporary with the mosaics from the aisles and nave (*Fig. 7*). The small space is divided with black stripes into regular panels containing Greek letters, costituting presumably commemorative inscriptions.

It appears justifiable in the light of the evidence cited above to state that there was an earlier phase in the development of the church, represented by the mosaic in the apse, a mosaic floor in the southern side room or sacristy (because of the exceptional iconographic similarity and the absence of any trace of the earlier floor in the probe dug under it) and the lime floor in the rest of the building.

No specific chronological determinations are forthcoming at this point. A few roof tiles and some local pottery sherds (datable only generally to the 4th-5th century) come from the layer between the mosaic floors in the apse. It is highly

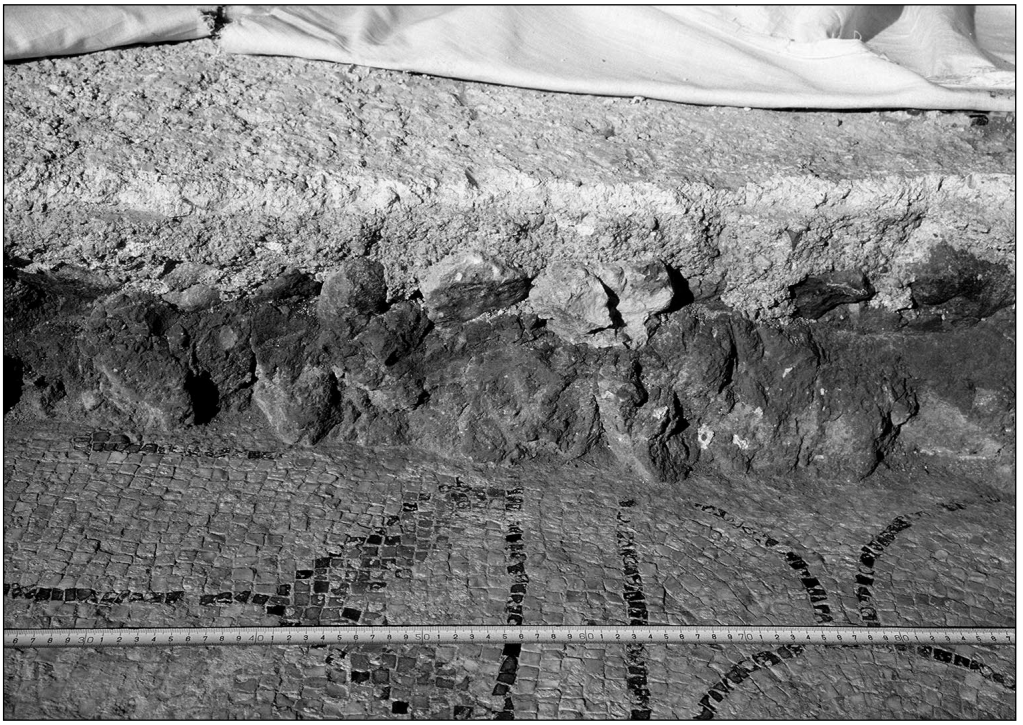

Fig. 7. Two levels of mosaic floors in the central apse of the basilica (Photo T. Waliszewski)

probable, however, that the later phase of the mosaic floor should be dated to the first half of the 5th century, while the earlier occupation of the building belongs to the turn of the 4th century.

The discovery of the church at Tell Amarna is important in the sense that it constitutes the first occasion when this type of monument has surfaced in a part of Syria that has yielded only modest evidence of the Byzantine period. The mosaic floor decoration is interesting as well, the closest counterparts coming from the 5th-century church at Dibsi Faraj, a distant 200 km away.[3] A study of the finds should bear new light on the still poorly studied development of the *Euphratensis* province in Roman and Byzantine times.

3) P. Doncel-Voute, Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban (Louvain-la-Neuve 1988), 69-87.