

THE ROMAN AND BYZANTINE ARMY  
IN THE EAST

A FORTRESS IN MESOPOTAMIA:  
Hatra

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The ramparts of Hatra have been surveyed for the first time by W. Andrae and other members of the German Assur Expedition, at the beginning of this century<sup>1</sup>. They mapped them from horseback using only the compass, following the military routine of those days, and the plan so provided is still not replaced.

The military history of Hatra is known from scraps of information in ancient authors, mainly from two passages of Cassius Dio, who relates an unsuccessful siege by Trajan in 117 A.D. and two equally abortive attempts by Septimius Severus in 198/199. The city is known to have fallen only in 240 A.D. to the Sassanians, who apparently deported the entire population forthwith, as it was their habit. In its last years, Hatra harboured a Roman cohort (*IX Maurorum Gordiana*), commanded by Q. Petronius Quintianus, *tribunus militum* of the *I Parthica*, who has left two votive inscriptions, one to *genius cohortis*, the other to *religio loci*, meaning presumably the god Shamas<sup>2</sup>. It does not follow that there was a Roman occupation; king Sanaʿrūq remained in power at least in 238 A.D., and graffiti in the Eastern Gate are all Aramaic. The Roman unit was rather helping an ally<sup>3</sup>.

Excavations of the walls were undertaken by Wathīq al-Salihi in 1970, starting from the Northern Gate<sup>4</sup>. They have proceeded up to the Eastern Gate and well beyond, clearing enough of the fortifications to give an adequate idea of the whole system. Important inscriptions were also discovered in both

<sup>1</sup> Andrae 1912: 24–59.

<sup>2</sup> Oates 1955: 39–43; Vattoni 1981: 109–10; Aggoula 1991: 183.

<sup>3</sup> Maricq 1957: 288–96 (= Maricq 1965: 17–25).

<sup>4</sup> M. Damerji, *Sumer* 37, 1981, 13; *id.*, *Sumer* 42, 1986, 157, 276; *id.*, *Sumer* 43, 1987, 349; W. al-Salihi, *Sumer* 43, 1987, 158–89.

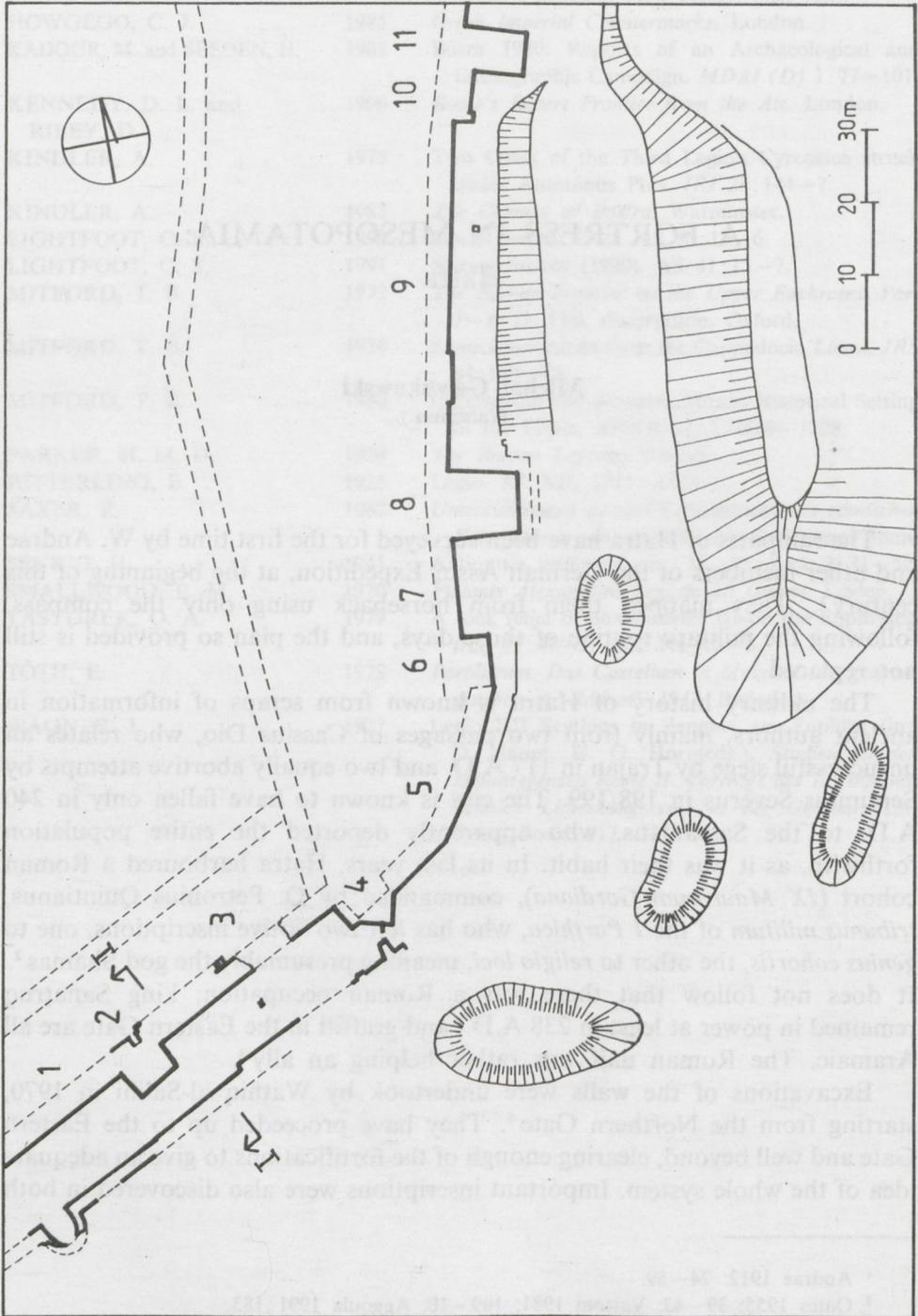


Fig. 1. Part of the main wall at the SE corner of the fortifications. (Drawn by A. Dolot)

gates<sup>5</sup>; they were discussed mainly for their interest for the legal history, but they provide also information useful for the chronology of the rampart.

In the spring of 1990, I was allowed by Dr. Moayed Sa'id Damerji, Director General of Antiquities and Heritage, to record the cleared portion of the walls. Our team managed to do so on a stretch of about 500 m, between the SE corner and the Eastern Gate (fig. 1).

There are three parallel lines of defence to be seen. First, the attackers met a ditch with a corresponding earthen wall on the outside; its inner side had a stone facing, rising as a free wall (*proteichisma*) at least 2 m above the ground behind, and so protecting the defenders engaged in activities in front of the main line of fortification 10 m in retreat.

The main wall consists of a mudbrick curtain 8 bricks (3.15 m) deep. At intervals of about 30 m there are rectangular mudbrick towers, on a stone socle common with the curtains. Inside, the towers had apparently no intermediate floors between the ground and the top walk, which was reached by steps set along the wall close to each tower at 8.5 m, and some 10 m counting with the battlements. The walk was probably paved with baked bricks, some of which were found in the rubble, and the crenellations covered with blue-glazed tiles, found in fragments at the foot of the wall and in the filling of one tower. On top of each tower there was a platform or a small room intended for archers or light catapults.

Finally, there was an inner wall, about 11 m behind the main line and approximately of the same height. It appears to be later, however, and had no towers. Together, the defence system was about 30 m deep. It is evident that the farther outer wall, surrounding the city at a distance of 300 to 500 m, is a siege work, most probably due to Sassanian troops investing the place in 239 A.D.

At one time the original main wall has suffered locally heavy damage and was repaired. Some mudbrick curtains were doubled with ashlar masonry (fig. 3). More important, solid square bastions of stone have been set against the original wall. They were level with the curtains and intended obviously as catapult batteries (fig. 4).

Between the main line and the antemural there were more shooting devices: heavy stone blocks were set there into the ground maintaining massive wooden axles parallel to the wall; at other places, beams were fixed on the face of the wall, in a metallic collar apparently having been matched on the inner face of the antemural. I am still unable to explain the installations of which these are the only surviving parts.

Both excavated gates (East and North) formed integral parts of the original defences. Both were already in place in 152 A.D., when a law was proclaimed concerning theft inside of the ditch and of the "outer wall" (*šura baraya*). While inscriptions relating directly to the construction of these two gates

<sup>5</sup> Inscriptions H 336 (numbering as in Vattoni 1981; Aggoula 1991) and Ibr. I (Ibrahim 1986: 195). Cf. Segal 1986: 73.

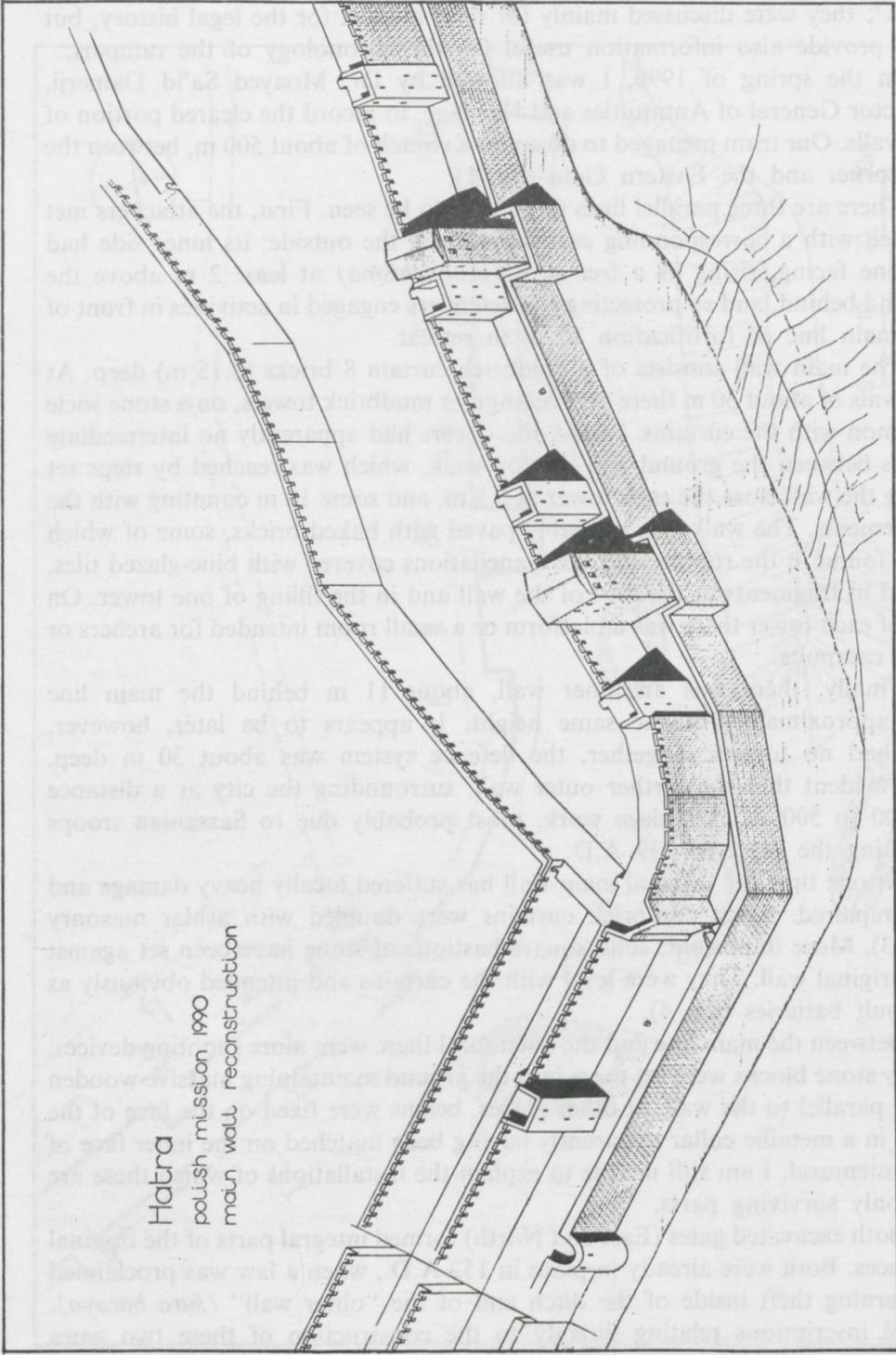


Fig. 2. Restored bird's eye view of the SE corner of the fortifications, showing the *proteichisma*, the main wall with added bastions, and the second wall.  
 (Drawn by A. Dolot)

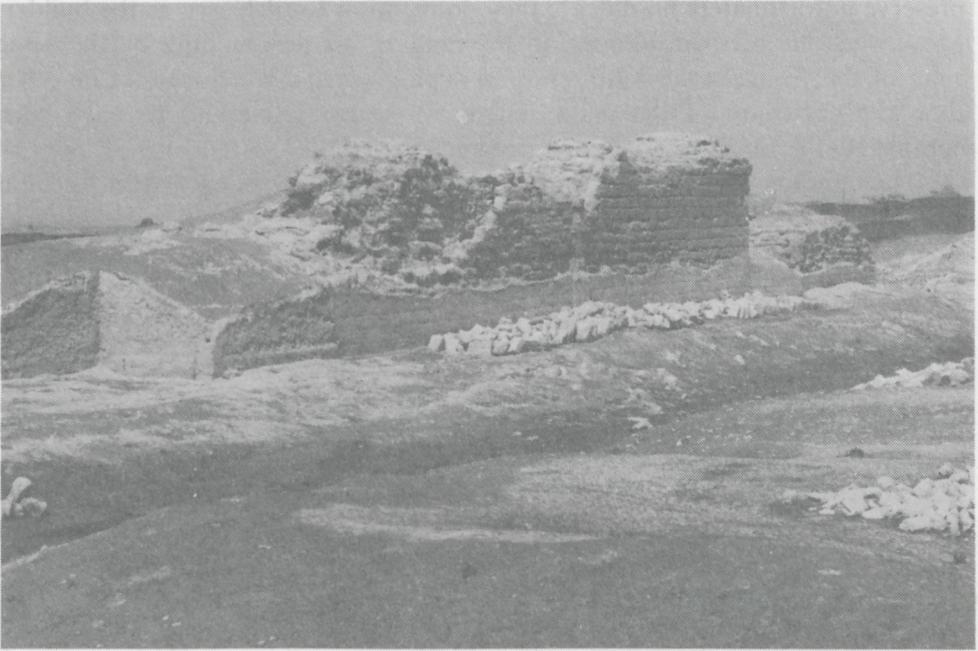


Fig. 3. Part of the main wall from outside. From left to right: an original mudbrick tower, added stone facing, an ashlar funerary monument incorporated into the original mudbrick wall. (Photo by M. Gawlikowski)



Fig. 4. Two stone bastions built against the original mudbrick wall. (Photo by M. Gawlikowski)

preserve unfortunately no dates<sup>6</sup>, they do mention Lord Naşru as the builder. Moreover, one of them alludes, in my reading, to the building by the same ruler of the “inner stone wall” (*şura di kepa gawaya*), which cannot be other than the enclosure of the main sanctuary, known otherwise to have been completed by Lord Naşru in or before 138 A.D.

The building of the brick “outer” wall can be dated, then, between 138 and 152 A.D. and attributed to Lord Naşru. The repairs can be understood as following a siege, and so placed after the repeated unsuccessful attempt of Septimius Severus in 198/199 A.D. The second line behind the main wall is most probably contemporary with these repairs; indeed, this inner wall has reinforced the defence after a period during which houses were allowed to agglutinate on the main wall on its town side.

Even so, the traumatic experience of the Severan siege has apparently convinced the rulers of the city that the old wall would not stand another trial. Accordingly, more vulnerable places were protected with stone curtains adhering to the original mudbrick wall and huge solid bastions added along the line to accomodate catapults, such as the one actually found at the foot of the battery covering the North Gate<sup>7</sup>.

This gate has been reinforced by means of a second doorway, provided by Sanaşruq b. ‘Abdsamya<sup>8</sup>, the future Sanaşruq II, still under the reign of his father who had confronted the Roman troops of Severus and remained king in 200/201 A.D. according to a recently discovered inscription<sup>9</sup>. Sanaşruq is probably responsible for the other additions as well, all completed in the first years of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The dating of the brick rampart in the time of Lord Naşru, around 140 A.D., prompts immediately the question of fortifications which Emperor Trajan encountered when he tried to take the city in 117 A.D. Hatra does not appear to have left a particularly strong impression on the Romans then, judging from the disparaging remark preserved by Cassius Dio (LXVIII, 31, 1–2; “neither big or prosperous”). Still, it inspired a sound respect eighty years later, on the occasion of the next Roman siege; treasures kept in its temples are said by the same author to have been coveted by Septimius Severus (Dio LXXV, 12, 2). While it is clear that the historian used in each case a different source, perhaps without noticing their discrepancy, the problem of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Hatra is quite independent of his text.

The oldest firmly dated monument in Hatra is a shrine built in 98 A.D.<sup>10</sup>, and no part of the main temple complex can be attributed with any probability to earlier times. While the chronology of the temenos is still far from complete, it is established that the construction of the great liwans has started under

<sup>6</sup> Inscriptions H 335 and Ibr. IX (Ibrahim 1986:200). Cf. Gawlikowski, in print.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Baatz 1978:1–17.

<sup>8</sup> Inscriptions H 333–4, 341.

<sup>9</sup> Venco Ricciardi 1988:31f.

<sup>10</sup> Inscription H 214 from the Temple VIII.



Fig. 5 The line of the old rampart seen from south. In the background, bastions of the main wall.  
(Photo by M. Gawlikowski)

Lord Worod in the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and was completed by Lord Naşru, who also erected the stone enclosure of the temenos by 138 A.D. Lord Naşryahb, father and predecessor of Naşru, is mentioned in the extant inscriptions only in connexion with his son and no foundations of his own are on record, suggesting a rather short reign. The ruler of Hatra who opposed Trajan in 117 should have been therefore Lord Worod. The city had obviously to be walled at that time, but the standing walls were built, as we have seen, only about 140 A.D. Where is, then, the rampart of Worod's time?

With this question in mind, we have started a survey of the walled area and noticed immediately an embankment running in a straight line between the low ground to the South and the maze of small tells marking the abandoned houses of the city (fig. 5). It is distant some 320 m from the temenos and about 230 m from the standing city wall (fig. 6). The former is of stone, the latter originally of mudbrick, but both erected by Lord Naşru during the second quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

We have assumed to have found there the defences of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, earlier, that is, than any monument in town we are able to date. This impression was confirmed by the fact that all tombs to be seen in the neighbourhood happen to stand outside the embankment, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> century development included most of them within later fortifications.

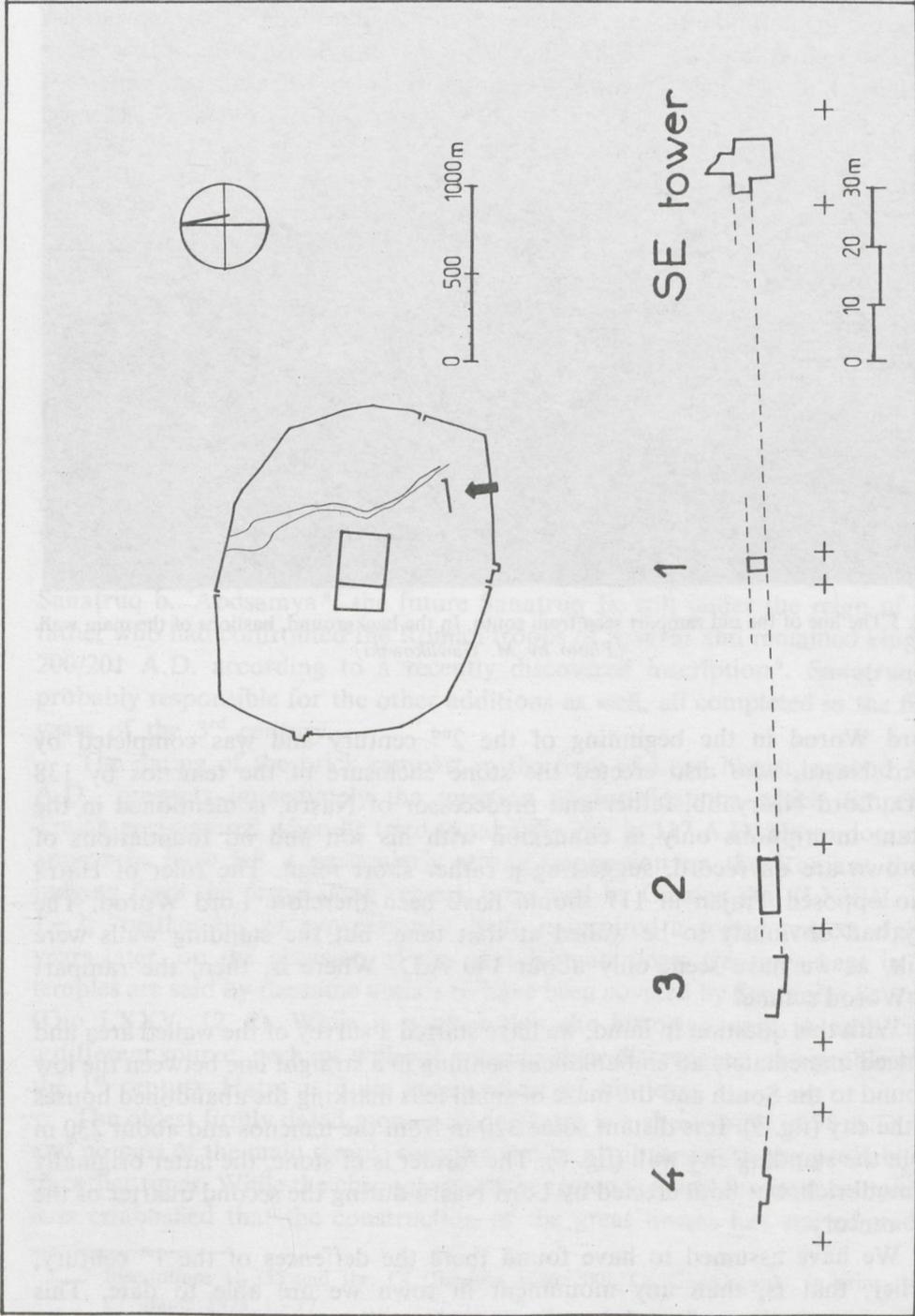


Fig. 6. Sketch map of Hatra, with arrow showing the recently discovered rampart between the temenos and the main wall. Below, soundings along the rampart. (Drawn by A. Dolot)



Fig. 7 The corner tower of the discovered old rampart. (Photo by M. Gawlikowski)

Given these circumstances, I have requested the permission to check these observations through digging. This was granted immediately by Dr. Damerji and work has started without delay along the line of the presumed early wall.

Several soundings were opened along the line of the presumed early wall. It was found to be built in mudbrick on a rubble foundation, about 3 m thick. In spite of very heavy erosion, there are at places up to six courses of brick, particularly where protected by foundations of later houses.

To the East, the wall meeting a wadi, running northward to the front of the great temple enclosure. The corner is marked by a solid bastion advancing for 3.5 m, built in brick on an ashlar-faced socle (fig. 7). Finds of stone catapult balls not only confirm the military nature of the monument, obvious anyway, but also suggest its active use.

The course of this wall on other sides of the early city could not be followed on the ground. Neither is the time of the construction established, in absence of dating finds. A new chapter of the urban history of Hatra is just beginning to emerge.

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