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THE CROSS MOTIF ON STONE OBJECTS FROM PTOLEMAIS IN CYRENAICA

(Pl. XII–XIV)

ABSTRACT. *The paper discusses a number of examples of the cross motif on architectural elements from Late Antique and Byzantine Ptolemais, Libya. The cross was one of the most frequent, if not exclusive decorative motifs used in Ptolemais, both in churches as well as public and private buildings. In the churches, crosses were placed in visible places, on the arcades crowning the apse or separating the nave from the aisles, on pillars and columns, and finally, on marble altar screens. In private houses, the cross motif constituted a decorative form of religious identification practiced by the inhabitants; the same function, but in more modest terms, was served by cross representations found in public buildings.*

A cross, whether Latin, Greek, Maltese or any other kind, when discovered in Late Antique ruins is commonly assumed to signify the potentiality of a Christian building having existed on the site. The article discusses a number of examples of the cross motif which the present author has had the opportunity to observe in 2006 and 2008 in Ptolemais, Libya, during excavations carried out there by an expedition of the University of Warsaw.¹ First of all, however, the ruins of this city, which is known to have flourished from the founding in 322/321 BC through the Arab occupation in AD 643 and which was one of the towns of the ancient Cyrenaican *Pentapolis*, have yielded absolutely no evidence of Christianity dated to the third and fourth centuries, while material attributed to the fifth century is not quite as certain as one would like. The town was mentioned briefly by Eusebius of Caesarea and Epiphanius of Salamis.²

Bishop Synesius, in office in Ptolemais in 411–413, was the first to leave more detailed information on his activities and the condition of the Church in the city (which served as a province capital during this period), as well as on the social relations and political events occurring in Cyrenaica at the beginning of the fifth century.³ In the present state of knowledge it is difficult, however, to link Synesius' information with concrete material evidence, especially with any of the ruins of Christian churches discerned among the ancient ruins.

Let us begin with a cross from the best known West Church, also referred to as the Fortified Church (*Chiesa Fortificata*), which was largely reconstructed by the Italians in the 1930s, but which remains unattributed for lack of written sources.⁴ It is a three-aisled building measuring 35.40 by 21.90 m and is constructed of large blocks of local limestone. The eastern end with a big apse flanked by pastophories

¹ Excavations were initiated in 2001 by the late Prof. Tomasz Mikocki; cf. T. MIKOCKI, *Ptolemais – Archaeological Tourist Guide*, Warsaw 2006, with extensive bibliography on pp. 78f., and current excavation reports presented on-line: www.archeo.uw.edu.pl/ptolemais.

² EUSEBIUS, *HE* VII, 6; EPIPHANIUS, *Panarion seu Adversus LXXX Haereses*, 73, 26; cf. C.H. KRAELING, *Ptolemais, City of the Libyan Pentapolis*, Chicago 1962, p. 22; J.B. WARD-PERKINS, R.G. GOODCHILD, *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica*, ed. J. REYNOLDS, Society for Libyan Studies monograph 4, London 2003, p. 178.

³ Cf. KRAELING, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–27; primarily: D. ROQUES, *Synésios de Cyrène et la Cyrénaïque du Bas-Empire*, Paris 1987; IDEM, *Études sur la correspondance de Synésios de Cyrène*. Collection Latomus 205, Bruxelles 1989; IDEM, *Synésios de Cyrène, Correspondance, traduite et commentée*, Paris 2000.

⁴ Primarily: G. CAPUTO, *Una basilica cristiana in Tolemaide*, in: *Atti del Terzo Convegno di Storia dell'Architettura*, 1940, pp. 159–162; KRAELING, *op. cit.*, pp. 97–100; S. STUCCHI, *Architettura Cirenaica*, Roma 1975, pp. 409–412; WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, pp. 181–191.

(of which the northeastern one has been preserved whole) is all that remains of the original structure. Two rows of seven rectangular pillars each set off the nave from the aisles; at the southern end the crowning arcade has been restored from original blocks. The aisles were covered with barrel vaults, while the central aisle probably bore a wooden roof.⁵ The Italian excavators placed the construction of this church in the fifth century, a dating accepted by Kraeling.⁶ Richard Krautheimer opted for a date in the 6th century, supported in this by Sandro Stucchi, and this date seems to be the more probable of the two.⁷

Lying in the aisle of the church near the narthex (Pl. XII.1) is a big trapezoid block of stone (c. 0.60 m high), a keystone from one of the arcades (Pl. XII.2). The front of this block bears a crudely cut Latin cross with slightly flaring ends, resting upon a narrow but tall pedestal. It is not clear where this block originated from; it is definitely not the same block (in terms of the shape and drawing of the cross) which is reproduced (Pl. XII.3) as coming from this spot in Joyce Reynold's newest publication of the posthumous legacy of John Ward-Perkins and Richard G. Goodchild.⁸ Considering that there is only one such block, it is rather improbable that it had decorated one of the arcades between the aisles. It is more likely that it was fitted into the arcade above the apse or, at best, into the arcade of one of the doorways, of which there were two in the outer walls and three from the narthex to the main nave. In none of the doorways has the top been preserved. Being a loose find, the block cannot be easily attributed to a place in the architecture of the building, but it is clear that it was part of the architectural decoration.

The said publication of Christian monuments from Cyrenaica also contains references to two other churches in the center of Ptolemais, to the east of the West Church, already located by Stucchi,⁹ but not excavated.¹⁰ The first of these is Stucchi's Central Church, referred to by Ward-Perkins and Goodchild as the West-Central Church. It is nothing but

a mound of stone blocks in front of a vaulted apse (c. 6.20 m wide) opening to the north and erected of large blocks of local limestone. According to the British scholars, this structure measured 25 by 18.50 m and had a tripartite body, the nave separated from the aisles by rows of pillars and at least six arcades, and an apse flanked by pastophories. It stood in a large rectangular courtyard.¹¹ Magnetic surveying in April 2007, conducted by Krzysztof Misiewicz from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, has confirmed the position of the lateral outer walls but has moved the façade further to the north, making the church at least 38.40 m long.¹²

A small stone block can be seen sticking out of the ground on the west side of a mound of stone in front of the apse (Pl. XII.4). It bears a very simple, linear and hastily cut, even-armed cross (Pl. XII.5). The position of this block in the church architecture cannot be determined without excavation. In the mass of blocks filling the interior of the building one finds a big pentagonal block of limestone (c. 0.40 m high) with a well-rendered Maltese cross inscribed in a double circle on its front (Pl. XII.6).¹³ There is no doubt that the block originated from the top of one of the rectangular pillars separating the nave from the aisles, because its bottom side (now visible on top) is formed of two symmetrically angled surfaces, from which the arcades once sprung. Excavations of the church, assuming they are undertaken, should bring more such fine elements of architectural decoration to light, possibly also establishing the date and patron of this church.

The other church – Stucchi's Eastern Church, referred to by Ward-Perkins and Goodchild as the Central Church – was an even smaller basilica with an apse to the east, the outline of which is barely traceable on the ground.¹⁴ Rows of five closely spaced pillars separated the aisles from the nave, leading Stucchi to conclude that the aisles had once been covered with barrel vaults.¹⁵ Stucchi was also the first to interpret a large hexagonal room (measuring 10.89 m across), to the west of the northern end of the presumed façade of the church, as a baptistery.¹⁶ Misiewicz's geophysical survey confirmed the localization of the church walls as well as the position of the baptistery, below which there was

⁵ KRAELING, *op. cit.*, p. 97, believed there was a stone vault spanning the nave as well, but this seems too broad a span. Stucchi's suggestion (*op. cit.*, p. 409) of *emporas* over the aisles appears equally improbable; cf. WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁶ CAPUTO, *op. cit.*, p. 162; KRAELING 1962; pp. 27, 99–100.

⁷ R. KRAUTHEIMER, *The Pelican History of Art: Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, London 1981, p. 288; STUCCHI, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

⁸ WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 186, fig. 139.

⁹ STUCCHI, *op. cit.*, pp. 395, 397f., 414f.; cf. also KRAELING, *op. cit.*, p. 100 (Building 6); R. GOODCHILD, *Chiese e Battisteri Bizantini della Cirenaica*, in: *XIII Corso di Cultura sull'Arte Ravennate e Bizantina*, 1966, p. 214.

¹⁰ WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, pp. 191–193, figs 143–145.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 192.

¹² Cf. E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *Some open questions concerning Late Antique, Early Christian and Byzantine Ptolemais* (in press).

¹³ WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 193, fig. 146.

¹⁴ GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 214; STUCCHI, *op. cit.*, pp. 395, 397f.; WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

¹⁵ STUCCHI, *op. cit.*, pp. 398, 543.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 398, 426.

a cistern.¹⁷ Magnetic mapping of the area revealed that the church had stood within the boundaries of a large rectangular feature (31.40×21.90 m); further exploration is necessary to determine the form, function and inner layout of the latter complex. The church pillars deserve attention in the context of the subject of this article for they assume a cruciform section (Pl. XIII.1). One such block can also be found in the rubble filling the baptistery (Pl. XIII.2). Of all the applications of the shape of a cross in architectural church decoration in Ptolemais, this would be the most monumental of the examples known today. Nothing can be said of the appearance and dating of either the church or the complex it was part of without extensive archaeological exploration, which is fortunately planned for the 2009 field season of the Polish team.

The list of stone objects decorated with the cross motif or otherwise applying a cruciform shape in church building includes one fine cross cut on the front of a block of stone found in the ruins of a large church standing on the as yet unexplored south-eastern necropolis of Ptolemais.¹⁸ The block has not been published before. Judging by the *spolia*, that is, columns and pieces of a monumental triglyph frieze observed in the walls of this structure with its rather damaged apse, it was certainly not the first building erected in the area. The *spolia* came most probably from a big and as yet unidentified pagan temple somewhere in the vicinity. The block in question (c. 0.50 m high) is rectangular in section and bears on the front a trapezoid projection narrowing toward the bottom. On it, below a horizontal band, there is a fine, flat, even-armed cross with flaring ends (Pl. XIII.3). The block may have topped one of the pillars lining the church nave on either side, but without excavations this idea cannot be verified.

Other examples of the cross motif in architectural decoration of both public and private buildings can be found as loose elements, scattered in the ruins of the ancient town and stored in the local museum. This list also includes crosses decorating imported marble columns and capitals, now of unknown provenance, but once evidently belonging to the architecture of the town's church buildings.

First to be mentioned are two already known blocks of local limestone,¹⁹ found loose in House T, which is also referred to as the House of the Triapsidal

Hall. This luxurious urban villa with a large peristyle, explored in the 1980s by British archaeologists,²⁰ still awaits a proper absolute chronology (it was in existence from the early Roman Empire through Late Antiquity) pending a study of the pottery and coins from the excavations.²¹ In Late Antiquity, the house was heavily modified, primarily by the addition of the triapsidal hall. Current research by Eleonora Gasparini on the Late Antique private houses of Ptolemais should contribute new data in this regard.²² Unfortunately, there is no information about potential owners and inhabitants of this luxurious complex at any of the stages in its existence.

The first of the loose blocks (c. 50×25 cm), all of which presumably belong to the late stage in the existence of the house, is found close to the house entrance. It bears on the front an engraved image, now fairly damaged, which appears to be a vertical section through the interior of a tripartite basilica or else a representation of the facade with three doorways between four columns with an arcade above the central one and gabled roofs on the sides (Pl. XIII.4). Suspended from the 'vaults' between the columns are three small, even-armed crosses with flaring ends.²³

The other smaller block, which is no longer where the present author had photographed it in 2006, was fairly damaged, making it difficult to recognize whether it was square or trapezoid in form. On one of the sides it bore a representation of a cross with extremely flaring arms, inscribed into a double concentric circle (Pl. XIII.5). A photograph included in the Reynold's publication shows in the same spot an entirely different stone of round shape, bearing a different, 'thinner' cross also inscribed into a circle (Pl. XIII.6).²⁴ Moreover, there is a modest linear cross inscribed in a circle cut into a threshold from the late phase of the house (Pl. XIV.1).²⁵ The cumulative evidence of this architectural decoration is that the Christians either lived in this house or used it for some purpose, but not a religious cultic one. In the opinion of this author, it would be an undue exaggeration to attribute some kind of church function to this private structure.²⁶

²⁰ J.B. WARD-PERKINS, J.H. LITTLE, D.J. MATTINGLY, *Town Houses at Ptolemais, Cyrenaica: Summary of Survey and Excavation Work in 1971, 1978–1979*, *Libyan Studies* 17, 1986, pp. 126–143.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 143, 149.

²² Paper read at the *Archeologia a Tolemaide* conference held in the Center of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Rome on 28 April 2008 (to be published in 2009).

²³ WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 197, fig. 148.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, fig. 150.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, fig. 149.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 197.

¹⁷ JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ I am greatly indebted to Mr. Wiesław Małkowski from the Polish mission who discovered this ruin during the recent season (May 2008) of excavations at Ptolemais and brought the said block with a cross to my attention.

¹⁹ WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 197, figs 148, 150.

Another stone block bearing a cross representation from a neighboring house, the so-called Small Triconchos (NE quadrant), also explored by the British, no longer exists. It was described by Stucchi as "una chiave dell'arco", leading him to identify the building as a Christian martyrium.²⁷ His suggestion is no longer acceptable today in view of an Islamic inscription found in secondary context in the pavement, which indicates that the building could not have been erected before the Arab period.²⁸

Simple cross incisions (Pl. XIV.2) can be seen in a number of places on the east wall of the *cavea* of the so-called Byzantine Theater located in the southern part of Ptolemais, not far from the famed Square of the Cisterns which came into existence in effect of a rebuilding of the Hellenistic gymnasium. The structure has not been explored and the name is purely arbitrary, possibly because of the cross images, which testify to nothing more than that Christians were somehow present in the area and the building. What was the purpose of making these signs cannot be ascertained today. In any case, the present author has encountered a similar practice of cutting signs of the cross in the ruins of many ancient buildings from Late Antiquity, especially in the territories of modern Egypt and Syria.

Marble elements of architectural decoration bearing a cross motif form a separate and innumerable group in Ptolemais. Judging by a macroscopic examination of the marble, two small capitals now found in the modern village of Tolmeita originated from the Proconessian quarries. One of them is still used by local children as a seat (Pl. XIV.3), while the other (Pl. XIV.4), already damaged at the time when the present author saw it in 2006, used to stand

next to a fragment of an inscription of Vespasian; both the capital and the inscription appear to have been lost. The crosses on these capitals are different, although typical; the size of these capitals indicates that they came from small columns decorating an altar screen. Apart from these two capitals there is a big piece of a marble column shaft stored in the Archaeological Museum in Tolmeita; it bears the shallowly engraved motif of a Latin cross with slightly flared endings (Pl. XIV.5). Analogous columns are known from the ciborium above the altar in the Central Basilica in Apollonia (Pl. XIV.6). Which church in Ptolemais had such a ciborium cannot be ascertained as yet.

In conclusion, it should be said that the cross was one of the most frequent, if not exclusive decorative motifs used in Ptolemais, both in churches as well as public and private buildings. In the churches, crosses were placed in visible places, on the arcades crowning the apse or separating the nave from the aisles, on pillars and columns, and finally, on marble altar screens. In private houses, these motifs constituted a decorative form of religious identification practiced by the inhabitants; the same function, but in more modest terms, was served by cross representations found in public buildings. The dating and typology of cross representations from Ptolemais remain an issue for discussion, to be undertaken once the archaeological exploration of Christian buildings from the city will have provided more extensive data for analysis.

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²⁷ STUCCHI, *op. cit.*, p. 420f.; WARD-PERKINS, LITTLE, MATTINGLY, *op. cit.*, pp. 144–149; WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

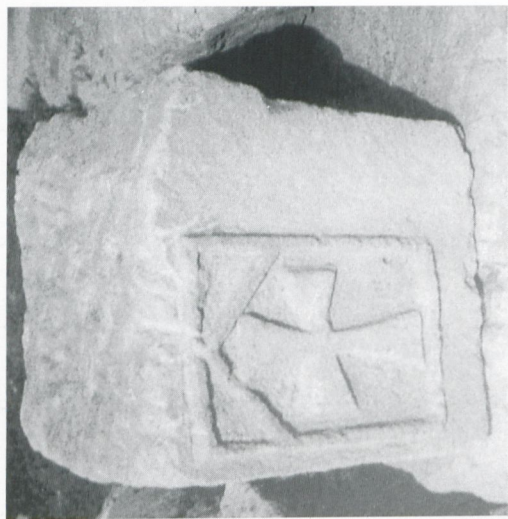
²⁸ WARD-PERKINS, LITTLE, MATTINGLY, *op. cit.*, p. 148, fig. 22.



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Ptolemais. 1. The interior of the West Church from the narthex; block with cross seen in the nave (photo by the author). – 2. Keystone with cross from the West Church (photo by the author). – 3. Fragment of arcade with cross from the West Church (WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica*, fig. 139). – 4. Ruins of the West-Central Church with a cross motif engraved on a block of stone seen in the foreground (photo by the author). – 5. Stone block with an engraved image of cross found by the West-Central Church (photo by the author). – 6. Block with cross from the top of a pillar in the West-Central Church (photo by the author).



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Ptolemais. 1. Pillars of cruciform section lining the nave of the Central Church (photo by the author). – 2. Block of cruciform section in the baptistery next to the Central Church (photo by the author). – 3. Block with a cross motif from a pillar of the Southeastern Church on the necropolis (photo by the author). – 4. Block with a re-presentation of a church facade (?) with three crosses, found in the House of the Triapsidal Hall (photo by the author). – 5. Block with a cross motif, seen in 2006 in the House of the Triapsidal Hall (photo by the author). – 6. Block with a cross motif, said to be found in the House of the Triapsidal Hall (WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica*, fig. 150).



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Ptolemais. 1. Cross engraved on a threshold in the House of the Triapsidal Hall. – 2. Engraved cross on the east wall of the *cavea* of the so-called Byzantine Theater in Ptolemais. – 3. Damaged marble capitals bearing a cross motif, seen in 2006 near one of the modern houses in the village of Tolmeita. – 4. Marble capital bearing a cross motif in front of the houses in Tolmeita. – 5. Fragment of a column shaft with cross motif found in the collection of the Archaeological Museum in Tolmeita. – 6. Columns with crosses in the Central Basilica in Apollonia. All photos by the author.