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**UNEARTHING HOUSES IN *PORPHYREON* AND *CHHIM*.  
 STRUCTURE, SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT, AND DECORATION OF DOMESTIC SPACES  
 IN LATE ANTIQUE *PHOENICIA***

ABSTRACT

*Porphyreon* (Jiyeh/Nebi Younis) and Chhim were large rural settlements situated on the coast of modern-day Lebanon, north of the *Phoenician* city of *Sidon*. As attested by the remains of residential architecture, they were thriving during the Roman Period and late Antiquity (1<sup>st</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). This article presents the preliminary observations on the domestic architecture uncovered at both sites, their spatial and social structure, as well as their furnishing and decoration, based on the

fieldwork carried out in recent years by the joint Polish-Lebanese research team. The focus will be put on the wall painting fragments found in considerable numbers in *Porphyreon*. The iconographical and functional study of the paintings betrays to what extent the inhabitants of rural settlements in the coastal zone of the Levant were inclined to imitate the decoration of the urban houses known to them from the nearby towns, such as *Berytus*, but also from religious contexts represented by churches.

**Keywords:** domestic architecture, house furnishing, wall paintings, rural agglomeration, late Antiquity, *Porphyreon*, Chhim, *Phoenicia*

**What do we know about the residential architecture in Roman and late antique *Phoenicia*?**

Until quite recently, the only reference to the residential architecture from the Hellenistic and Roman *Phoenicia* was Strabo writing about Tyre in such words: ‘The houses here, it is said, have many storeys, even more than the houses at Rome, and on this account, when an earthquake took place, it lacked but little of utterly wiping out the town’ (Strabo, *Geographika* XVI.2.23).

Those interested in the residential architecture of the Graeco-Roman eastern Mediterranean rarely turned their attention to the central part of the Levant. A brief summary of the situation, as shown on the map, reveals that only 13 sites dated roughly to the Roman Period and late Antiquity contain structures identified as remains of residential housing (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> In most cases, these structures were only surveyed, not excavated, and their function and chronology are elusive and published poorly, if at all. The picture emerging from this summary is rather gloomy and encourages us to describe the

<sup>1</sup> Housing remains in Lebanon dated to the Graeco-Roman Period have been so far identified at Tell Arqa, Qasr Naous,

Byblos, el-Jaouze, Deir el-Qala’a, *Berytus*, Jenah, Awza’i, Khan Khalde, *Porphyreon* (Jiyeh), Chhim, Tyre, and Umm el-‘Amed.

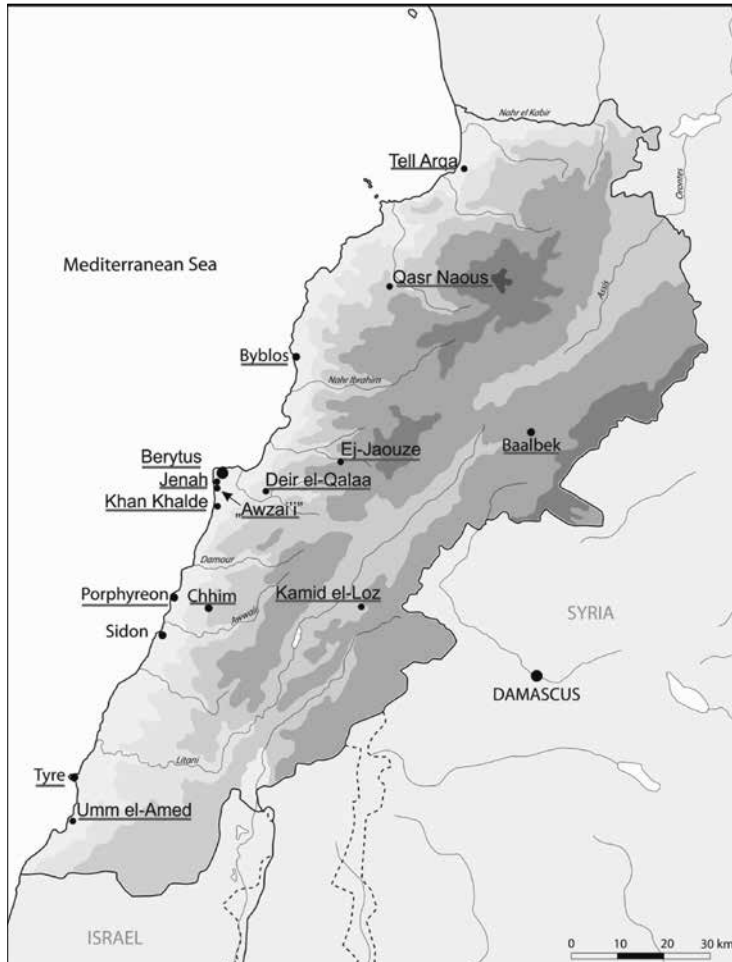


Fig. 1. Map of Lebanon showing the position of *Porphyreon* and Chhim and other sites where the remains of housing architecture from the Roman Period and late Antiquity were recorded (drawing by M. Puzkarski and M. Gwiazda; courtesy of PCMA UW).

state of research on the residential architecture in Roman *Phoenicia* as close to non-existent.

The only exception to this rule was offered in the last decades by the salvage excavation program conducted in the town centre of Beirut.<sup>2</sup> We should mention in this context a rare example of the so-called insula of the House of the Fountains, published by a team from the American University in Beirut.<sup>3</sup> These examples, however, shed light on the town architecture, whereas the aim of our brief presentation is rather to introduce new and little-known evidence that pertains to the residential architecture uncovered recently in rural areas of central *Phoenicia*.

In this context, we would like to mention the results of excavations conducted in recent years by the Polish-Lebanese team working under the auspices of the Directorate General of Antiquities and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw on two sites situated close to one another: *Porphyreon* (modern Jiyeh) and Chhim, only some 15 km to the north of modern Saida (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> Both settlements were part of the *Sidon* hinterland, occupying important positions in its northern section, closer to ancient *Berytus*. Both settlements reveal also undisturbed stratigraphy stretching, in the case of *Porphyreon*, from the Iron Age II, between the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD,

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Saghih 1996; Aubert 2001–2002; Perring *et al.* 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Perring 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to the representatives of the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA), and especially to its Director General, Mr. Sarkis Khoury, and Mrs. Myriam Ziade, the head of DGA

Saida office. Without their efforts this work could not have been done. The joint project in Chhim and *Porphyreon*, led by Tomasz Waliszewski, is supported by the Directorate General of Antiquities and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw.



Fig. 2. Plan of the archaeological site of *Porphyreon* (Jiyeh) in Lebanon (drawing by M. Puzzkarski; courtesy of PCMA UW).

and in the case of Chhim – between the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD – with the remains of residential architecture from the Roman and late antique phases being best-preserved. Chhim was a village equipped with a sanctuary, while *Porphyreon* showed a mixed rural-urban character and was much bigger.

Both sites, as we have already mentioned, are large settlements, separated by a distance of only 7 or 8 km. Evidence gathered during the consecutive seasons of archaeological fieldwork at Chhim and Jiyeh not only allows us to describe in details how the rural or rural-urban houses in this particular region of the Levant looked like but also, perhaps more importantly, shows how building traditions could be different on sites situated so close to one another in geographical terms.

### Housing at *Porphyreon* and Chhim and the impact of geographical setting

Ancient *Porphyreon* (Jiyeh/Nebi Younis) was a large agglomeration located on the Mediterranean coast only 15 km to the north of the *Phoenician* city of *Sidon*

(modern Saïda). An in-depth analysis of the subsistence economy of the site's inhabitants leads to the conclusion that it was a significant element of the local economic system – on the one hand providing for the city of *Sidon* and, on the other, mediating the exchange of goods with rural settlements, such as Chhim, scattered across the mountainous hinterland.

The area that stretches to the east of the Christian basilica comprises substantial remains of a residential quarter, discovered and excavated already in 1975 by Roger Saidah on behalf of the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities, with the latest phase of occupation dated to late Antiquity (Fig. 2). Explorations in this area, conducted by our team, concentrated on clearing previously excavated rooms and digging test trenches to determine the earlier history of the site. The area cleared during the seasons of 2008 to 2014 (c. 40 m by 35 m) encompassed some 100 rooms or other units forming a residential complex criss-crossed by narrow winding lanes (Fig. 3). The street grid followed no regular plan and was erratic on the surface level. The lanes were rather narrow (1–2 m) and paved in the parts overlying the sewage canals (Fig. 4).

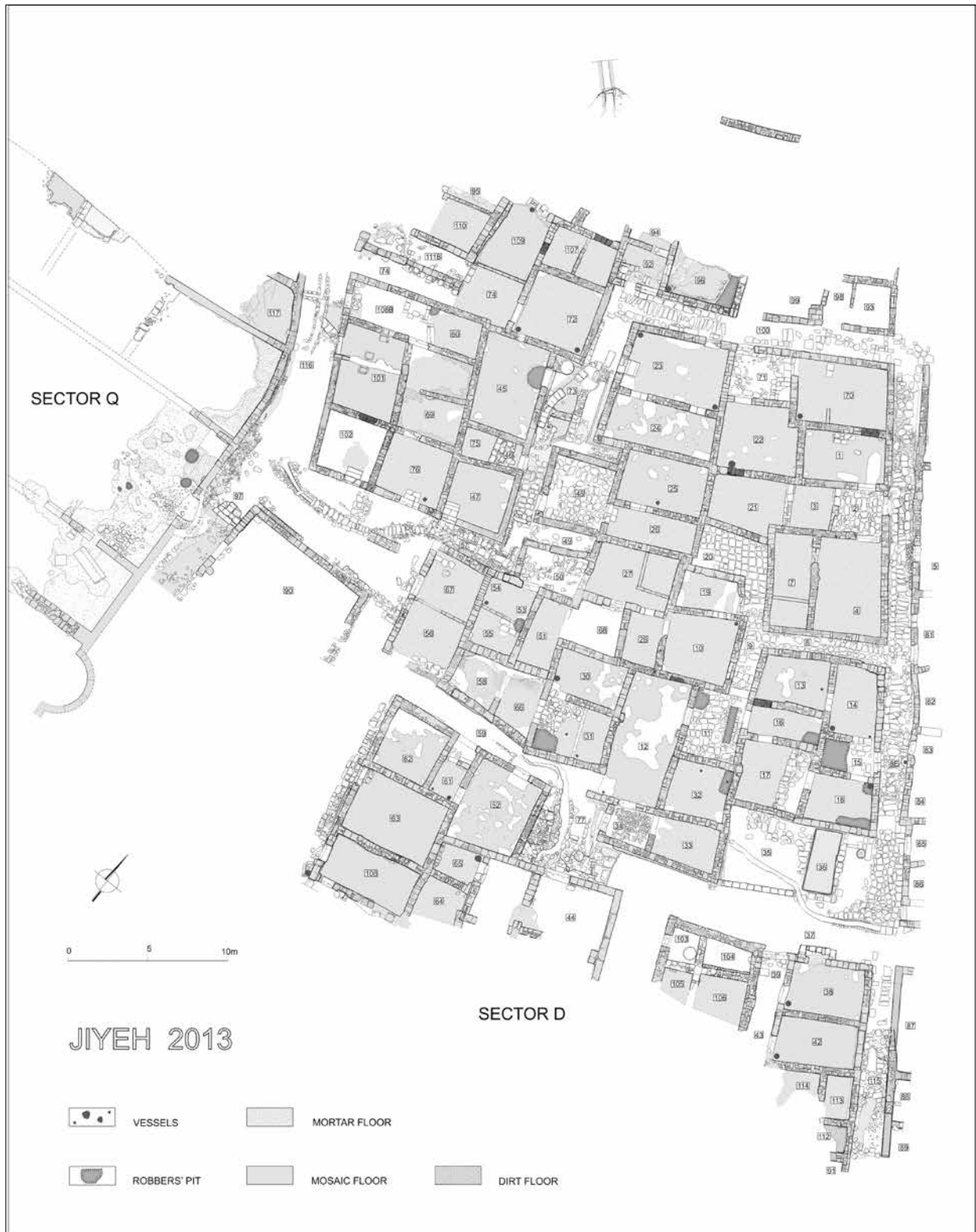


Fig. 3. Plan of the residential area in Sector D in *Porphyreon* (Jiyeh) (drawing by M. Puzkarski; courtesy of PCMA UW).



Fig. 4. Housing remains in *Porphyreon* (photo by M. Bogacki; courtesy of PCMA UW).

Ruins of the ancient village of Chhim, covering an area of *c.* 1 ha, located in the mountains to the north of *Sidon*, constitute an exceptional case of a well-preserved rural archaeological site in Lebanon (Fig. 5). The sanctuary from the Roman Period, the Christian basilica, the residential buildings, and the numerous oil presses provide an account of a settlement whose livelihood was based on agriculture and animal husbandry, yet all the while maintaining close relations with other coastal Mediterranean settlements (Fig. 6). The relatively high and stable level of prosperity of Chhim's inhabitants contrasted with technological stagnation on the site and the attachment to traditional forms in construction, both features characteristic of the mountainous regions of ancient *Phoenicia*.

In our opinion, the layout of both settlements was largely influenced by their geographical setting. The *Phoenician* coast between *Berytus* and *Sidon* is interspersed with numerous shallow bays (see Fig. 1). The coastal belt is followed to the east by a chain of hills rarely exceeding 800–900 m a.s.l. Mount Lebanon, visible in the background, was a natural barrier between *Phoenicia* and Syria, including the Beka'a Valley.

The layout of the buildings at Chhim, situated *c.* 450 m a.s.l., shows that it was carefully adapted to the natural landform. The narrow streets, no wider than 1.5 m,

ran along or crosswise to the slope, creating intersections at a straight angle. Some of them were dead ends creating cul-de-sacs accessible to the inhabitants of the nearest house. It is worth noting that throughout the entire village it is possible to observe efforts made to ensure the intimacy and privacy of the families living in houses. For example, none of the houses' doors would face the doors of the neighbouring buildings (Fig. 7).

In the case of *Porphyreon* (Jiyeh), situated in a wide alluvial bay, the inhabitants had simply much more space for construction, being limited only by the sea to the west and slopes of the hills to the east.

It is interesting to note that there was a close connection between the architecture and the local climate conditions. The walls of the houses at Chhim are thick (*c.* 0.90 m), providing better isolation during the summer from the heat and during the winter from the cold. The walls of the houses at *Porphyreon*, where more forgiving weather conditions were expected, were half as thick (*c.* 0.48 m).

The problem of rainwater evacuation was also addressed in both villages. In *Porphyreon*, the streets of the densely inhabited residential quarter, built initially between the mid-4<sup>th</sup> and mid-5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, were provided with a canal system connected with terracotta pipes that gathered rainwater from the roofs. The street



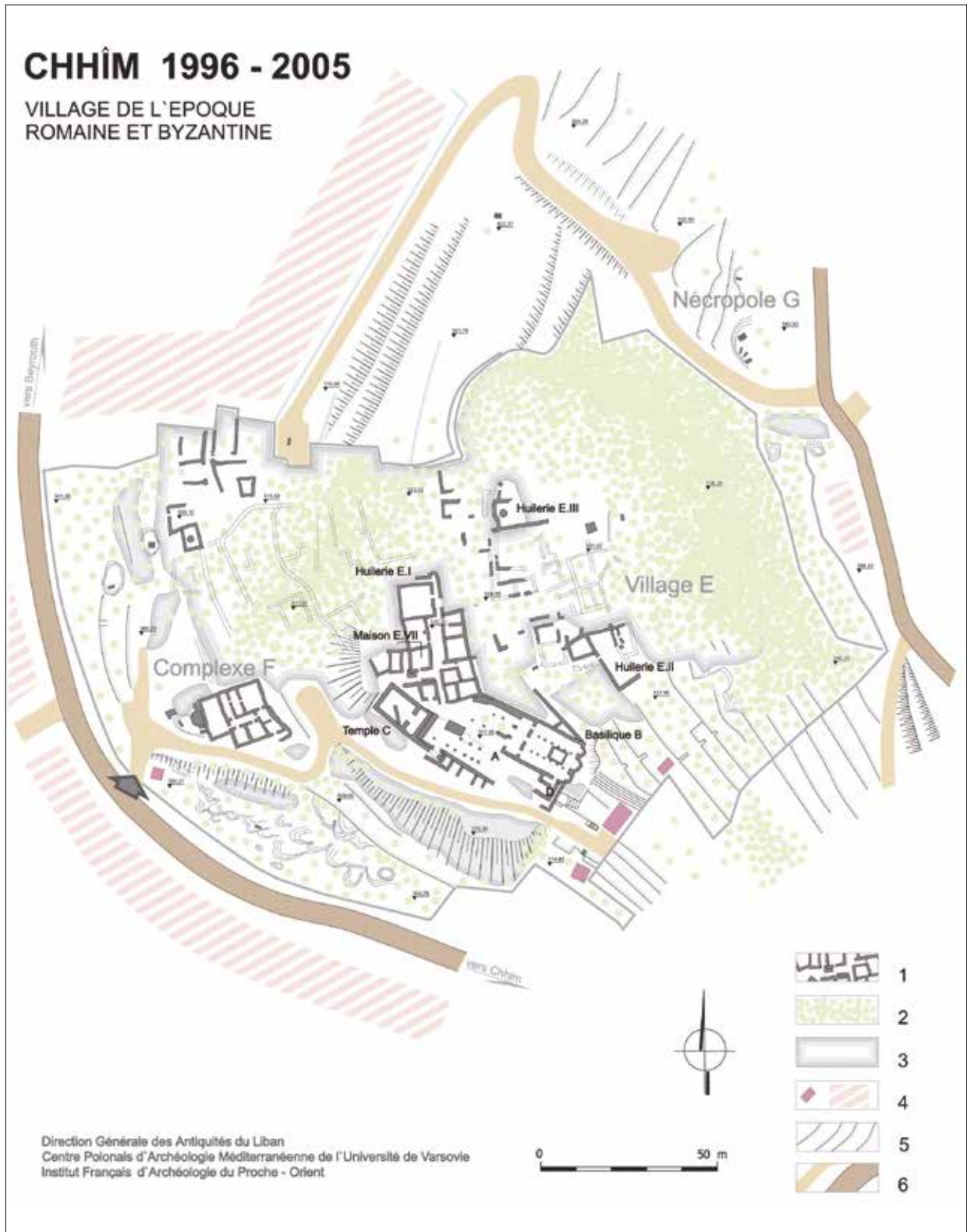


Fig. 5. Archaeological site at Chhim. Map key: 1. archaeological remains, 2. greenery, 3. artificial terraces, 4. modern installations, 5. levels, 6. modern roads and paths (drawing by M. Puszkariski; courtesy of PCMA UW).

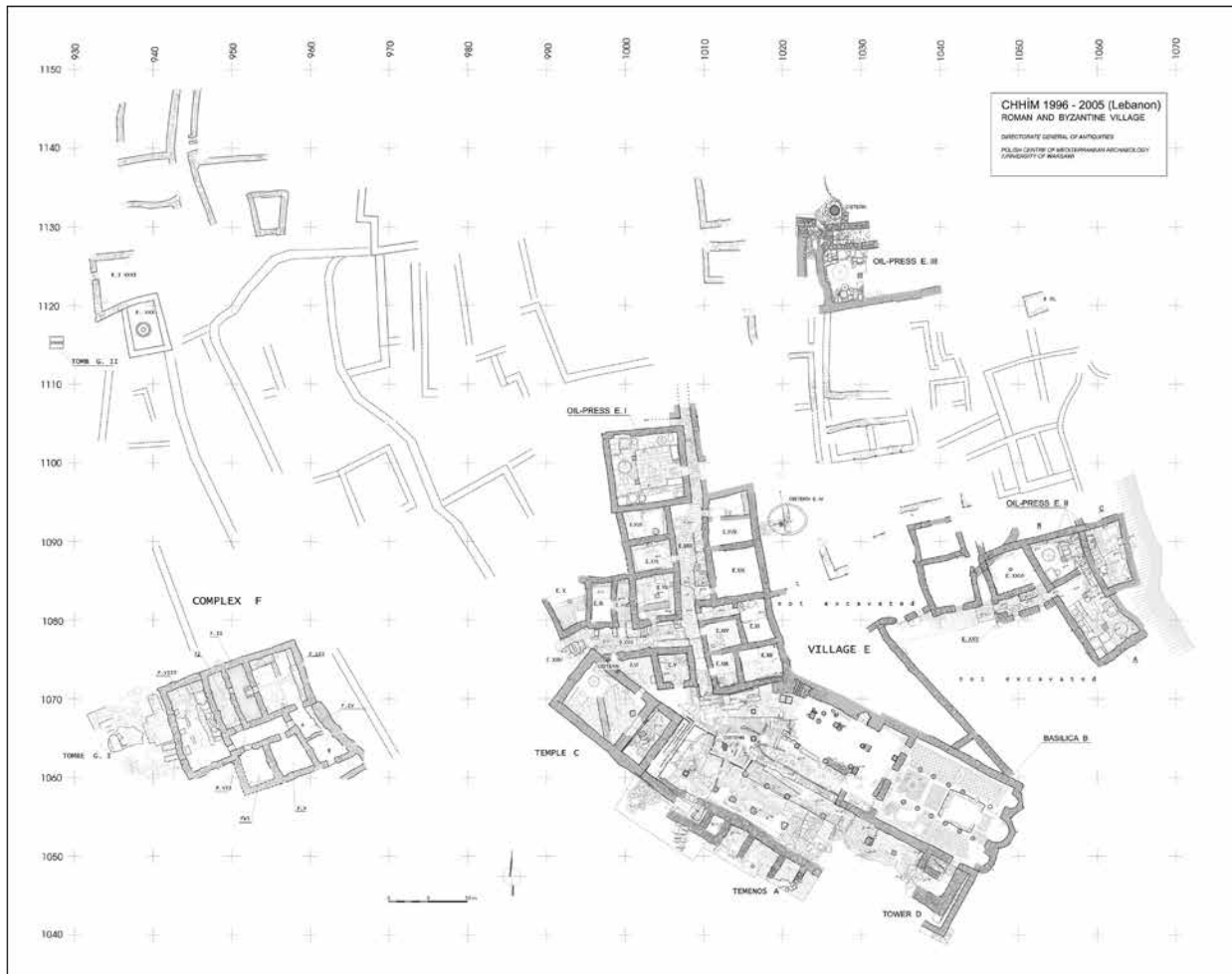


Fig. 6. Plan of the Roman and late antique village at Chhim (drawing by M. Puzkarski; courtesy of PCMA UW).

stratigraphy, as well as a ceramic analysis and numismatic finds, suggest that these structures, encompassing several streets, were constructed between the late 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Moreover, during the same period, the streets were provided with parallel lines of high stone blocks along the walls of the buildings, which resemble sidewalks in Roman towns. Clearly, their purpose was to make it possible for the inhabitants to move around without becoming completely wet during periods of excessive rain. Similar pavements, also dated to late Antiquity, have been identified in Chhim.

There is a well-pronounced difference between both settlements in terms of building material used for the construction of houses. In Chhim, hard limestone was used, quarried locally and probably not far from the village. In *Porphyreon* (Jiyeh), local sandstone (known as *ramleh*), found directly on the beach, was widely used in

all cases, including the construction of a huge Christian basilica. The walls were built with stone ashlar set using the header-and-stretcher bond, which made use of large amounts of lime mortar. Their internal and external faces were covered with various types of plaster. Limestone was used rarely in thresholds, slabs covering sewage system, or simple pavements in houses.

### Structure of the houses and their spatio-temporal development

An average housing unit at *Porphyreon*, in use during late Antiquity, had a complex history, as in the case of rooms 1-2-3-4-7-21-22-70-71.<sup>5</sup> A house comprising initially three interconnected units developed into a complex comprising at least 14 rooms and was at some

<sup>5</sup> The residential area excavated in *Porphyreon* is presented in details by Gwiazda, Waliszewski 2014.



Fig. 7. Residential quarter in Sector E in Chhim (photo by T. Waliszewski; courtesy of PCMA UW).

unspecified point in time divided into separate complexes by blocking the doorways between units 21 and 22 as well as 1 and 70. The four houses were subsequently entered through separate street entrances (Fig. 8).

It is also interesting to note that Chhim's houses lack any courtyards or backyards, even though they are so typical of the residential architecture of the Near East, as well as Greek and Roman housing. This may, however, have resulted from the limited amount of space available for the buildings rather than a specific choice to exclude these features. The roofs, which could be accessed by stone staircases incorporated into the external walls of the houses, seem to have been the only spaces used for storing tools and agricultural products, drying fruit, or doing various household chores.

The house walls in *Porphyreon* were coated on the inside with off-white plaster, seldom adorned with crosses and inscriptions painted in red, mostly quotations in Greek from the Psalms. Exterior walls were plastered and, along Street 59, additionally reinforced and protected by gravel covered with plaster, the coating being thicker along the bottom of the wall.

The uncovered residential architecture in *Porphyreon* is characterised by the presence of small vestibules with stairways allowing passage to subsequent rooms on the ground floor, as well as to higher levels. Remains of staircases (rooms 61 and 46) as well as fragments of decorated mosaics, which had obviously fallen down from the upper levels, indicate that these were multi-storeyed houses (Fig. 9). The housing at *Porphyreon*, contrary to the tradition known from Chhim, follows the tendency to imitate mosaic decoration known from the urban residential architecture, like in *Berytus*, with widely-used geometric and figural motifs (Fig. 10).<sup>6</sup> The presence of upper storeys is also attested by cornices found in the rubble inside rooms and openings for the beams supporting floors.

### House furnishing: benches and floors, mosaic pavements, and ovens

A typical house in Chhim had a simple layout. One such example (labelled E.XIX), located at the crossroads in the sector directly to the north-east of the Roman

<sup>6</sup> Saghieh 1996, 40. For a wider discussion of this issue, see Gwiazda, Waliszewski 2014, 17–18.





Fig. 8. Residential quarter in the north-eastern part of Sector D in *Porphyreon* (photo by K. Trela; courtesy of PCMA UW).



Fig. 9. Room D63 in *Porphyreon* with its mosaic pavement (photo by T. Waliszewski; courtesy of PCMA UW).





Fig. 10. Decorated fragment of a mosaic pavement from the upper storey found in Room D13 in *Porphyreon* (photo by A. Pawlikowska; courtesy of PCMA UW).

temple, has a square floor plan with an internal surface of *c.* 25 m<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 11). It was composed of a single room intended for the entire family, although in the initial phase the house comprised two large rooms. During late Antiquity, the furnishings in this building consisted of a stone bench standing along the northern wall and

a hearth in the corner to the left from the entrance. In the middle of the square room, a column drum provided support for a pillar holding up the roof. The roof itself seems to have been a construction typical for the ancient Near East. It was flat, with a wooden substructure sealed with branches and covered with beaten earth. Limestone cylinders of 0.25 m in diameter found in the backfill of the majority of the houses of the antique village testify to such a roof construction. These cylinders, known in the Arab world as *'mahdaleh'*, fitted with wooden handles, were used to level the earth and seal the roof after any major rainfall (Fig. 12).

In *Porphyreon*, the floors were either simple mortar surfaces on a pebble substrate or mosaic pavements made of white cubes in the *opus tessellatum* technique. The house ground plans, while not standard, shared features such as a main room with a mosaic floor, smaller mortar-floored rooms, and presumably also open stone-paved courtyards organised around it. The mosaics were simple, made of large white cubes with sides of *c.* 1.3 cm, laid in mortar mixed with gravel on a pebble substrate (Figs 13–16).

A clay bread oven, known in the Middle East as a *'tannur'*, was found in a few houses at Chhim. In contrast, it seems that the inhabitants of the settlement at *Porphyreon* tended to use portable ovens, as attested by numerous terracotta finds. Perhaps the dark oval



Fig. 11. House E.XIX in Chhim (photo by T. Waliszewski; courtesy of PCMA UW).





Fig. 12. *Mahdaleh* in front of the entrance to House E.VII in Chhim (photo by T. Waliszewski; courtesy of PCMA UW).



Fig. 13. Mortar floor of Room D13 in *Porphyreon* (photo by K. Trela; courtesy of PCMA UW).





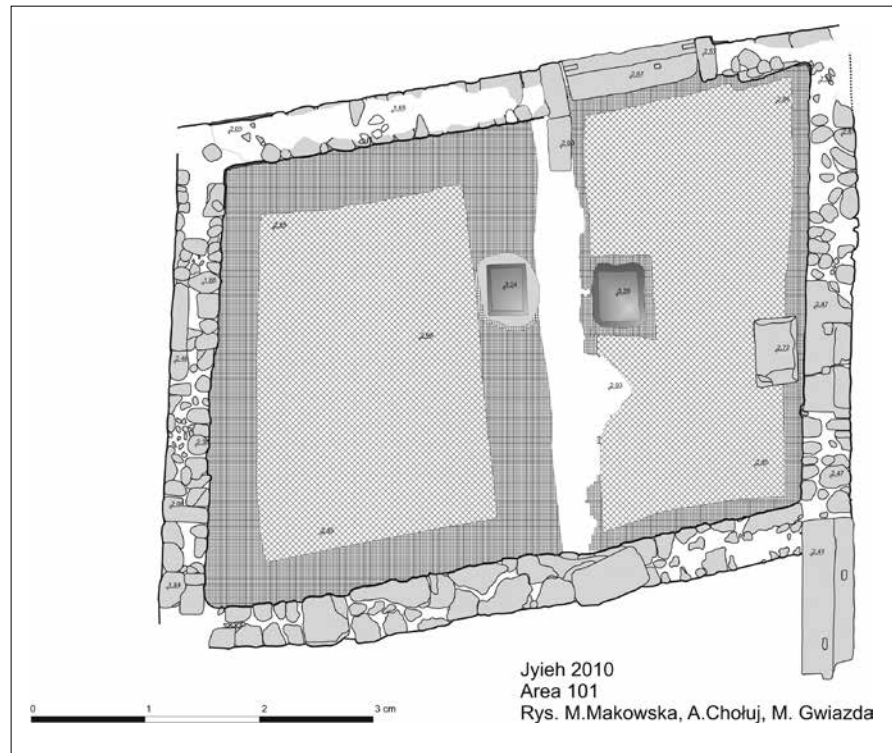
Fig. 14. Stone-paved floor of Room D48 in *Porphyreon* (photo by K. Trela; courtesy of PCMA UW).



Fig. 15. Mosaic pavement of Room D101 in *Porphyreon* (photo by M. Gwiazda; courtesy of PCMA UW).



Fig. 16. Plan of Room D101 in *Porphyreon* (drawing by M. Makowska, A. Choluł, M. Gwiazda; courtesy of PCMA UW).



discolorations seen on many mosaic floors also attest to the use of such installations.

Stone or pottery vessels sunken into the mortar or mosaic floors are another common feature at *Porphyreon*. Located usually close to the entrances or in the middle of the rooms, their function remains elusive. However, careful measurements indicate that floors in all cases were inclined towards such vessels, suggesting their use in the process of house cleaning with water, so well embedded in the Levantine tradition until today (Fig. 17).<sup>7</sup>

Houses at Chhim and Jyieh are surprisingly similar to one another in terms of the number of rooms, surface, or furnishing. This phenomenon might indicate a certain level of social equality but also prosperity, as indicated by finds of goods imported from various locations in the eastern Mediterranean as well as North Africa, Egypt, or Italy. The exception to this rule is provided by complex (F) from Chhim, located on the outskirts of the village, to the west of the Roman temple. This grand house was probably the home of a prominent local family.

### Wall painting decoration of the houses at *Porphyreon*

The interiors of the houses at *Porphyreon* were decorated with wall paintings, whose numerous fragments were brought to light in 1975 by Roger Saidah and, more recently, by the Polish-Lebanese mission. The paintings survived as patches of colourful, painted plaster fixed to the faces of individual ashlar and stones from the collapsed walls of the houses; a couple of fragments were found *in situ*.

The paintings constitute an unparalleled finding, since examples of mural decorations in late antique residential contexts are extremely rare and usually confined to few unidentifiable fragments that hardly ever make their way to publications.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, altogether *c.* 160 specimens were recovered from the houses at Jyieh. The collection of colour slides from the 1975 campaign<sup>9</sup> alongside photographs illustrating Saidah's short account of the excavations<sup>10</sup> and the illustrations in an article on

<sup>7</sup> The problem of the sunken vessels in *Porphyreon* was discussed by M. Gwiazda in Waliszewski *et al.* 2012, 439–440.

<sup>8</sup> Fragments of crosses and Greek inscriptions were found at Tall Madaba (Foran *et al.* 2004, 89, fig. 9). A fragment of a cross and colourful pieces of plaster come from a house at Tall Jawa (Johnson 2010a; 2010b, 358–360, fig. 11.1:3). Unidentifiable fragments of wall paintings were also found in houses in Pella (Walmsley 2007, 520) and Gerasa (Lichtenberger, Raja 2016,

332). In Egypt, a large representation of an enthroned Virgin decorated a courtyard of a house at Kom el-Dikka, Alexandria (Rodziewicz 1984, figs 228, 236).

<sup>9</sup> The slides were kindly handed over to the Polish-Lebanese team by Claude Doumet-Serhal, the Director of the British Museum Archaeological Expedition to Saïda.

<sup>10</sup> Saidah 1977.



Fig. 17. Sunken stone vessels in Room D101 in *Porphyreon* (photo by M. Gwiazda; courtesy of PCMA UW).



Fig. 18. Passage from a courtyard to the presumed reception room in residential Complex 8 flanked by two crosses with inscriptions. The inscription on the left reads 'Jesus Christ reigns' while the one on the right – 'In this you shall conquer' (archival slide from the excavations of R. Saidah).

inscriptions by Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais<sup>11</sup> reveal the appearance of 59 fragments that have, unfortunately, disappeared since then. Further 102 pieces were unearthed by the Polish-Lebanese mission.

Numerous colourful fragments were recovered from the debris of the houses, yet the ground floor rooms were hardly decorated. The photographic documentation from the time of Saidah's excavations shows high-standing walls

(according to the excavator, preserved up to the height of 2 m) coated with plain, off-white plaster. Altogether, only three depictions of simple crosses executed with red paint were found on the ground floor, still *in situ*.<sup>12</sup> Two of them flanked a passage from a courtyard to a large room, possibly a reception of one of the complexes (Figs 18, 19). These twin crosses were accompanied by letters '*alpha*' and '*omega*' and inscriptions, also painted in red.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Rey-Coquais 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Rey-Coquais 1982, figs 3–5; Gwiazda, Waliszewski 2014, 44, fig. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Rey-Coquais 1982, 399–400. The inscriptions read 'Jesus Christ reigns' and 'In this you shall conquer'.



Fig. 19. Simple red cross with letters 'alpha' and 'omega' and the accompanying inscription on the right side of the passage to the presumed reception room in residential Complex 8 (archival slide from the excavations of R. Saidah).

Therefore, the *c.* 160 ashlar and stones with plaster featuring colourful and, as we shall see, iconographically complex decorations must have belonged to the upper floors. Moreover, the painted decoration of the upper rooms seems to have been complemented in some cases by floor mosaics. During the most recent works by the Polish-Lebanese mission, a mosaic with the depiction of a lion was found on the upper floor of one of the houses.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Saidah noted remains of colourful *tesserae* adhering to the bedding at the level where the floor of the upper room would have been.<sup>15</sup> These findings conjure up a picture of austere ground floor rooms with occasional representations of crosses and religious inscriptions, and a *piano nobile* decorated with paintings and mosaics.<sup>16</sup>

The distribution of the iconographic motifs of the wall paintings between the different floors of the houses at Jiyeh point to an important change that occurred in the decoration of the post-Roman domestic interiors. In a Roman house, the complexity and quality of wall paintings would be graded according to the importance of the space they decorated. The major spaces where social interactions would take place, such as the atrium, the peristyles and *triclinia*, would display the most refined decorations. Besides the private rooms of the proprietors, other private spaces and rooms of lesser importance received less

elaborated treatment.<sup>17</sup> The simplicity and austerity of the decoration of the ground floor rooms at *Porphyreon*, which likely had a semi-public role of reception rooms, indicate that their role was to manifest their owners' faith, not to impress the visitors with their artistry or rich repertoire of subjects. Meanwhile, the rooms of the upper floors, perhaps accessible only to the inhabitants, housed colourful decoration featuring a variety of motifs.

Among the recovered pieces of wall paintings, the most numerous group, amounting to 57, comprises fragments of representations of crosses. We find both simple crosses flanked by 'alpha' and 'omega', executed solely with red paint (20 fragments; *cf.* Figs 18, 19), and colourful jewelled crosses, oftentimes surrounded by wreaths or medallions (37 fragments; *cf.* Figs 20, 21). Eighteen fragments of Greek religious inscriptions painted with red likely accompanied the simple red crosses. While the simple crosses appeared in the ground floor rooms, it seems that the more elaborate jewelled crosses inside decorative medallions and wreaths came only from the upper floors.

The second most numerous group are depictions of nature: 20 fragments of the representations of animals, 19 of plants, and two elements of a frieze featuring the 'inhabited scrolls' motif. The animal kingdom is represented by peacocks, partridges, wading birds, a parakeet-like

<sup>14</sup> Gwiazda, Waliszewski 2014, 44, 51–52, fig. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Saidah 1977, 40.

<sup>16</sup> A similar arrangement was observed in the Umayyad houses at Pella, where the decorated living rooms were located on the upper floor. The ground floors provided space for workshops

and stabling for animals (Walmsley 2007, 520). Also in Gerasa, the recovered fragments of painted plaster came from the upper floor (Lichtenberger, Raja 2016, 332).

<sup>17</sup> Ling 1991, 2, 175, 219–220.





Fig. 20. Fragment of a wall painting representing a jewelled cross set against green background and surrounded by a wreath (photo by J. Burdajewicz).

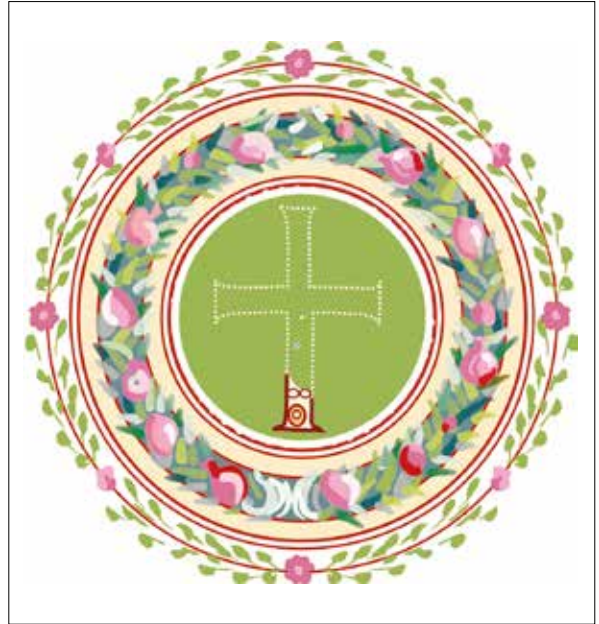


Fig. 21. Hypothetical reconstruction of the representation showed in Fig. 20 (drawing by J. Burdajewicz).

bird, a fish, hoofed animals, possibly gazelles, a lion, and a lioness (Figs 22–24). The flora consists of non-specific plants growing from strips of ground, generic red flowers, foliage with flowers and pomegranates, and a palm tree (Figs 25, 26). This repertoire of nature-derived images is further complemented by simple, monochrome red depictions of running and pacing animals and possibly of genre scenes, such as peasants at work.

Finally, four fragments of paintings show depictions of humans, clearly religious in character: an *imago clipeata* with a haloed, bearded man, two *orans* figures, and a young haloed man (Fig. 27).

Unfortunately, the wall paintings from the houses of *Porphyreon* resemble an incomplete jigsaw puzzle. Too many pieces are missing to permit even a partial reconstruction of the compositional schemes and spatial relations between the particular depictions. Only in one case was it possible to restore a fragmentary representation of two partridges adoring a jewelled cross set on a decorative base from four elements, but its broader context remains unknown.

Nevertheless, the assemblage as a whole conveys the impression of a decorative programme steeped in religious and apotropaic content. The omnipresent sign of the

cross, either its simple, monochrome version or an imitation of *crux gemmata*, was used extensively by the inhabitants of *Porphyreon* to express their faith, to manifest the triumph of Christ, and as an apotropaic symbol to ward off evil from the dwellings. The practice of placing a cross on personal items, public buildings, ‘both on house, and walls, and windows, and upon our forehead’ was encouraged by St. John Chrysostom<sup>18</sup> and is widely attested by numerous late antique monuments and objects.<sup>19</sup>

In *Porphyreon*, the representations of crosses were supplemented with painted laudatory and apotropaic inscriptions. Among the recovered fragments, we find several laudatory appellations (‘Emmanuel, God is with us’; ‘Jesus Christ reigns’; ‘Our God, glory to you’; ‘In this you shall conquer’; ‘Protection of the faithful’; the latter two are referring directly to the accompanying depictions of crosses) as well as incipits of psalms 26 and 90.<sup>20</sup> The apotropaic tenor of the first verses of Psalm 90 made it one of the most commonly inscribed passages on personal items and private buildings in the late antique East.<sup>21</sup> The verb ‘κατοικέω’ (‘to dwell’, ‘to reside’), which appears in its incipit, made it especially suitable for a domestic setting.

A similar, apotropaic and intercessory, role could have been assumed by the representations of saints and

<sup>18</sup> St. John, Homilies, 54.7.

<sup>19</sup> For example, on Christograms on lamps, see Goodson 2017; on cross graffiti as a means to Christianise a classical town,

as well as further references on the sign of the cross, see Jacobs 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Septuagint numbering is used here.

<sup>21</sup> Kraus 2005; 2009; Felle 2006, 421–422.



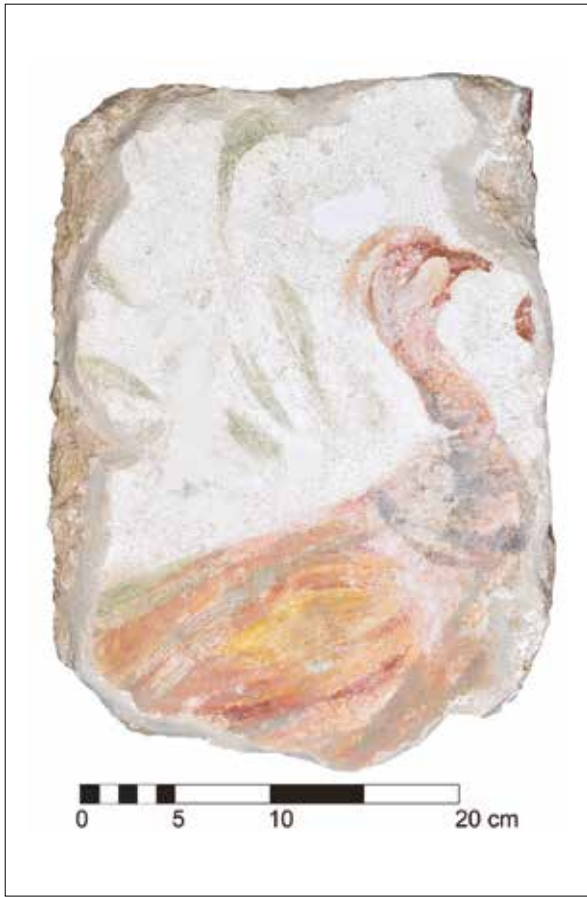


Fig. 22. Representation of a peacock (?)  
(photo by J. Burdajewicz).

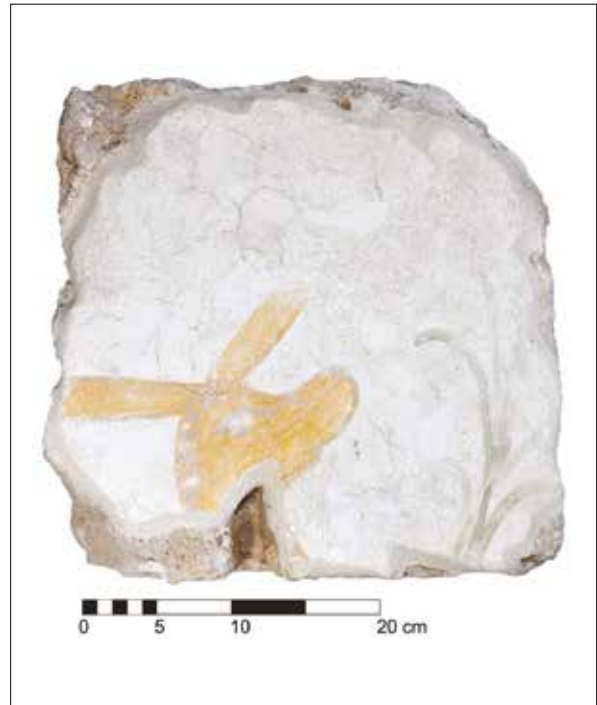


Fig. 23. Representation of a gazelle (?) (photo by J. Burdajewicz).

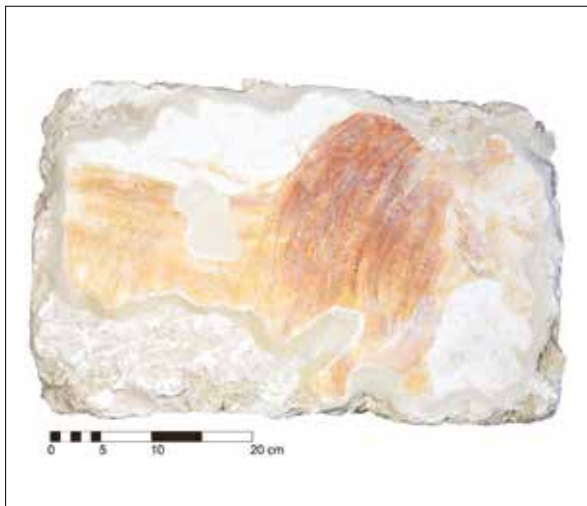


Fig. 24. Representation of a lion (photo by J. Burdajewicz).



Fig. 25. Generic plants with red flowers (?)  
(photo by J. Burdajewicz).



Fig. 26. Palm tree (archival slide from the excavations of R. Saidah).

figures of *orans* attested in *Porphyreon* on four fragments. So far, only one interpretable religious painting is known from residential contexts in the East, namely the nearly life-sized enthroned Madonna with Child accompanied by an archangel and a supplicant depicted in the courtyard of a house at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the practice of representing holy personages inside houses, either as icons or as wall paintings, may have been more common in late Antiquity than the scarcity of archaeological evidence seems to suggest. The intercessory role of such images is illustrated by Miracle no. 15 in the collection *Miracula SS. Cosmae et Damiani* from the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century, which tells a story of a woman who had saints Cosmas and Damian depicted on the walls of her house. When she fell ill, she scraped some plaster from their images, mixed it with water, drank, and was immediately healed.

Finally, even the representations of nature, at first sight neutral and disconnected from religion, coincide, in fact, with the religious character of the decorations. Various species of animals, often depicted among trees and plants, populate countless floor mosaics of late antique



Fig. 27. *Imago clipeata* with a haloed, bearded man, likely a saint (archival slide from the excavations of R. Saidah).

churches.<sup>23</sup> These representations allude to and were sanctioned by several biblical texts, which endowed them with a symbolic, religious dimension. They may refer to the diversity and abundance of Creation and the garden of Eden described in the book of Genesis (Gen. 2: 8–9), or to ‘the land of promise’ from the apocalyptic prophecies from the Book of Enoch (10: 18–19, 24: 3–4, 25: 5, 32: 3–6), the Book of Revelations (22: 1–2), and the apocalypses that followed it.<sup>24</sup> The Book of Isaiah (Is. 11: 7, 65: 25) inspired many mosaic representations of the motif of *philia*, the friendship between animals symbolising the peaceful heavenly kingdom.<sup>25</sup> Finally, certain specific types of plants and animals, such as a pomegranate or peacock, could have been depicted due to their strong symbolic charge, often predating the advent of Christianity.

Even though the fragmentary state of the representations of nature from *Porphyreon* does not allow us to piece them together, identify specific compositions, or anchor them in the overall decorative program, it seems probable that, similarly to such motifs on floor mosaics of the churches, their role was to evoke the earthly paradise and to remind of the heavenly kingdom to come. If we are correct, the depictions of nature constituted an important component of the religious content conveyed by the painted decorations of the houses.

The religious character of the wall paintings from the houses brings us to the question of the similarities and differences between the painted decoration of the dwellings and the basilica of *Porphyreon*. The excavations in the

<sup>22</sup> Rodziewicz 1984, 195–208, figs 228, 236.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see a paradise-like landscape in Basilica A at Resafa, Syria (Ulbert 1986, 100–101, pl. 39.1); in the church at Houeidjit Halaoua, Syria (Donceel-Voûte 1988, 149–150, fig. 121); or a procession of tame animals in the ambulatory of the

so-called Martyrion church at *Seleucia Pieria*, Syria (Donceel-Voûte 1988, 290–296, figs 272–278). On the representations of nature in Early Byzantine art, see Maguire 1987, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Kyrtatas 1998, 340–344.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell 1995; Talgam 2014, 219–227.



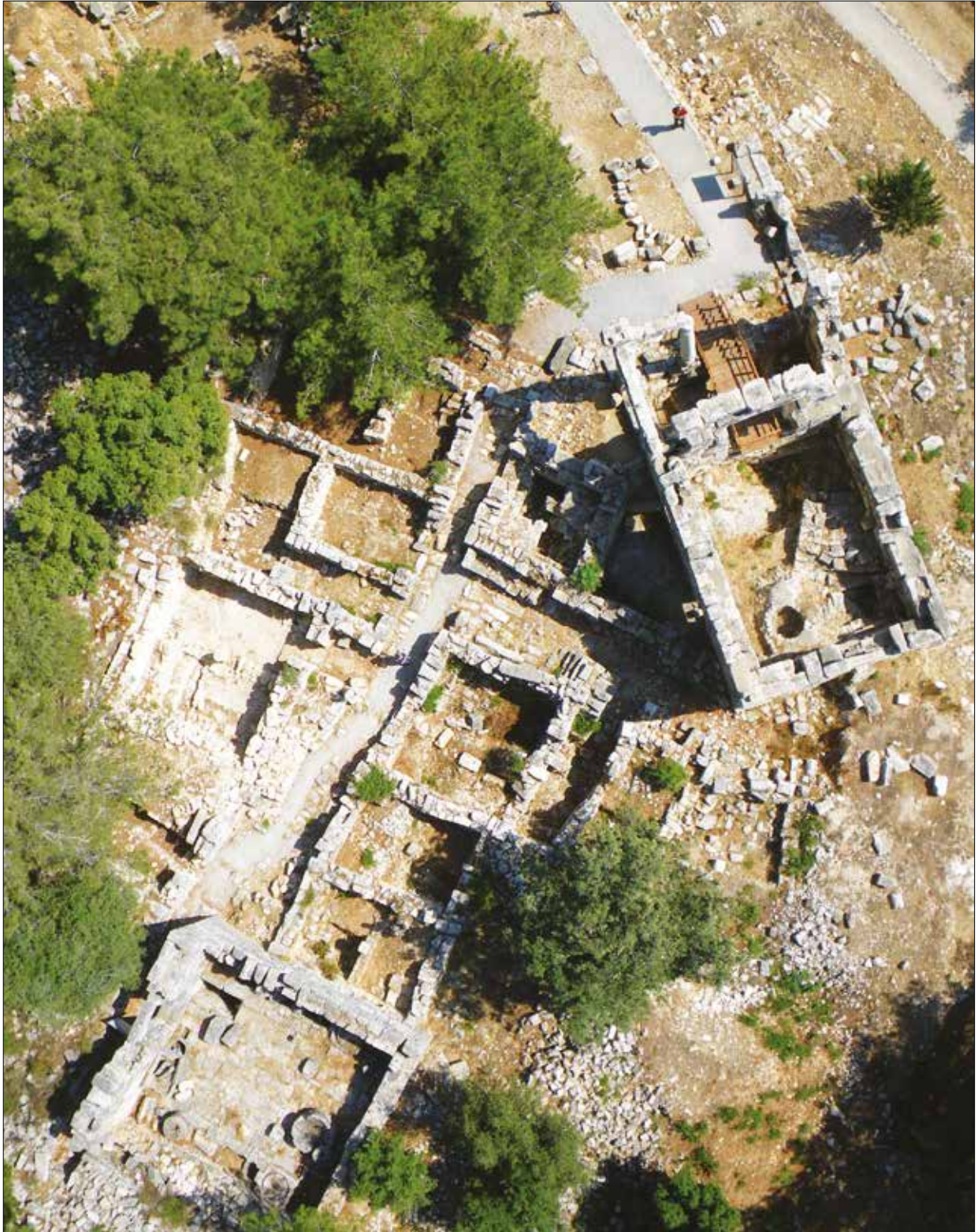


Fig. 28. Aerial view of Sector E in Chhim (photo by Ch. Krug; courtesy of PCMA UW).





Fig. 29. Aerial view of the south-western part of Sector D in *Porphyreon* (photo by K. Trela; courtesy of PCMA UW).



basilica<sup>26</sup> have yielded over 150 fragments of wall paintings, also preserved as patches of painted plaster fixed to the faces of stones and ashlar.<sup>27</sup> They display a similar iconographic repertoire as those from the residential district. Just as in the houses, the images of crosses and nature (animals, plants, and inhabited scrolls) predominate. Moreover, the floor mosaics of the basilica correspond to some extent to the representations of nature found in the houses.<sup>28</sup> Several of the largest mosaic carpets feature depictions of various birds and beasts arranged in a catalogue-like manner inside geometric grids of interlaced medallions and polygons. Such a compositional solution was adapted by the mosaicists to capture the diversity and abundance of Creation, a notion presumably represented also in the houses.<sup>29</sup>

The main discrepancy between the painted decorations of the houses and the basilica is that among the wall paintings from the latter we find only one representation of a human figure, probably an *orans*, and no depictions of genre scenes, such as those attested in the houses. Naturally, the lack or underrepresentation of certain motifs in the basilica may result from the poor condition of its architectural remains and the turbulent circumstances of its exploration in the late 1980s. We should not, therefore, build conclusions upon these two differences but rather on the similarities. The fact that the repertoire of the painted motifs in the houses is so well mirrored by the motifs from the basilica confirms the strong religious character of the former. Furthermore, the consistency of these two iconographic programs illustrates the broader phenomenon of permeation of both the sacred and secular, public and private late antique spaces with religious symbols and contents.

Finally, the presence of wall paintings and figural floor mosaics in both the church and the houses proves that the activity of artists was not confined to or reserved only for sacred spaces – a mistaken, albeit common, notion built upon the imbalance of evidence: an abundance of surviving floor and, to some extent, wall decorations from early Christian churches and the lack of corresponding

finds from residential, private contexts. The fact that our wall paintings come from a middle-sized settlement of a mixed rural and urban character offers us an insight into how some of the late antique dwellings could have looked like. We get a glance at a decent, yet provincial, level of artistry and craftsmanship and a common type and quality of decorations.

### **Towards conclusions: regional perspective on late antique Phoenician residential architecture**

So far, we have identified two parallel types of building traditions characteristic of, respectively, the coastal and mountainous residential architecture. Chhim seems to have been a typical rural settlement in the Phoenician mountains from the Roman and late Antiquity, similar to other rural settlements of the southern part of *Phoenicia*, such as Horvat Karkara or Horvat Dinila, located to the north-east of Akko-*Ptolemais*.<sup>30</sup> The example of Chhim is fascinating in that for centuries it continued to remain true to the same building tradition based on the locally-quarried hard limestone. This testifies to the longevity of the techniques employed, which, once introduced, turned out to be well adapted to the local climatic conditions and to the needs of the inhabitants (Fig. 28).

As for *Porphyreon* (Jiyeh), the simple double masonry building technique used for the walls, their random structure, and the winding narrow streets demonstrate the general simplicity of the architecture, reminiscent of some of the present-day houses seen in villages and towns in the region (Fig. 29). The most striking similarities are provided by the nearby site at Khan Khalde, ancient *Heldua* (excavated by Roger Saidah in the early 1970s), situated some 20 km to the north of *Porphyreon*, or the site at Kfar Samir (probably ancient *Porphyreon* South), uncovered during the rescue excavations just southwards from modern Haifa, both within the limits of the late antique province of *Phoenicia Paralia*.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The basilica was first excavated in 1914 by a French explorer, George Contenau. At that time, only its western half was unearthed (Contenau 1920, 295–305). The basilica was excavated anew and in its entirety in 1987 or 1988 by a group organised by the then Minister of the Public Works, Transport, and Tourism, Mr. Walid Jounblat (unpublished). During these works, the floor mosaics and fragments of wall paintings were removed from the site to the Beiteddine Museum. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the basilica was cleared and studied by the Polish-Lebanese mission (Waliszewski *et al.* 2006, 27–34).

<sup>27</sup> The paintings are yet to be published. For an article on travelling painters' workshops featuring a few paintings from the basilica of *Porphyreon*, see Burdajewicz 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, the mosaics from the basilica, transferred from the site to the Beiteddine Museum in 1988, remained unpublished for years save for a few reproductions in an album on the Beiteddine Palace by Jounblat *et al.* 1989. Only recently, Nada H elou (2019, 84–95) devoted to them a chapter in her monumental work on Early Byzantine mosaics from Lebanon.

<sup>29</sup> Maguire 1987, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Frankel 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Finkielsztejn 2005.

The cases of *Porphyreon* and Chhim show to what extent seemingly similar settlements located within the sphere of influence of the same ancient city (*Sidon*) could be different in terms of their economic model, size,

or even traditions of building construction and decoration. Their geographic location, access to land and sea transportation routes, and agricultural conditions seem to have been the decisive factors in their development.

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