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EXCAVATION AND CONSERVATION OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN BASILICA, SANCTUARY OF ZEUS, ANCIENT NEMEA

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The excavation and conservation project on the Early Christian Basilica, located in the archaeological site of Ancient Nemea (Sanctuary of Zeus), consists of the excavation of fills to reveal the walls and various floor levels and the conservation of the foundations, where the ancient mortar has disintegrated from exposure to the elements, to stabilize and preserve the original masonry remains. Considered one of the earliest Christian structures founded in the Peloponnese, the Basilica was constructed during the 5th century CE. Situated near the center of the pagan sanctuary, the Basilica not only was built on top of an earlier structure of antiquity, in this case the *Xenon* (a housing structure for participants in the Nemean games), but also was constructed largely of materials (*spolia*) pillaged from the 4th century BCE Temple of Zeus (Figure 1). The re-excavation and conservation of the Basilica will permit us to publish the results of multiple excavation campaigns, and especially to highlight to visitors not just the Panhellenic sanctuary, one of the four major crown sanctuaries of the Greek world, but also its diachronic cult use into the Christian period.

The first phase of the multi-year project was undertaken 4 July to 1 August 2022 and during October 2022. The west end of the 5thc. CE building was cleaned, including most of the narthex and the rooms added later to the building on its north and south sides (rooms 1 and 3). Along the west and south façades of the structure we cleaned down to the base of the foundations.

We cleared and fully documented areas that had been excavated in the 1920s by Blegen and Hill, in the 1960s by Williams, and in 1980 by Miller. We revealed the building's foundation walls, floor surfaces, and other architectural features (column/pilaster bases), including previously unrecorded interior walls belonging to the 4thc. BCE *Xenon* building on which the east wall of the narthex was founded. The ashlar temple blocks were set on a leveling course of clay and mortar, a course of small stones, and other clay level over the 4thc. masonry. The east-west central wall of the *Xenon* (so-called Telestas wall) is preserved here to a significant height as well, passing just under the threshold to the nave.

All of the foundations were digitally recorded, and the Xenon foundations were planned and drawn for the first time. Interestingly, just as the basilica walls were built of blocks “quarried” from the 4thc. temple, the interior walls of the Xenon were built using fragmentary blocks from the 6thc. temple, the foundations of which remain under the later temple. So, the 5thc. CE basilica was not simply built over the ruins of the Xenon but specifically founded on visible and well-preserved walls belonging to the 4thc. BCE building.

In rooms 1 and 3 to the south of the narthex and south aisle of the nave respectively, we removed a deep backfill full of rubbish from the excavations of the earlier 20thc. to uncover and record the covered terracotta drain that ran along the south wall of the Xenon to the Bath and the 4thc. BCE road surface which transected the site, in this case parallel to the Xenon. No floor surface was found. In addition to the architecture, we recovered small finds overlooked in the previous excavations, such as coins and painted architectural terra cottas, some from the same source as others recovered in the 1980 excavation. We also took the opportunity to focus our museum study in support of the on-site work in order to better understand the previous excavations in the basilica and its stratigraphy. The majority of these contexts were excavated by Miller, with a few from Williams, but none had been fully studied nor published. The activities on site and in the museum included the participation of the Nemea Center’s field school students especially in the updating of storage containers and the registration of finds.

The basilica trenches were partially backfilled again at the end of the season, except where wall conservation was necessary and pending. In October, the conservation team from Lithou Syndyrisi, who had completed the study, came to Nemea. The conservation consisted of cleaning and replacing the ancient mortar in the sub-foundations, especially on the west and south facades (Figure 2), with a modern formula that will strengthen the stones and their carrying capacity. Work was completed on the interior and exterior of the NW corner, the W narthex wall, the S façade and the interior walls of Rooms 1 and 3. Once the mortar had set and dried, we backfilled the remaining open trenches in the narthex to protect the unexcavated portions and remaining tile floors of the basilica. Wherever possible, the tops of the 4thc. BCE walls were left visible along with the road surface and drain in Room 1. Those walls were stabilized also with sandbags. The remainder of the building will be reinvestigated, cleaned, and the masonry conserved in the coming seasons.

As part of this project, we removed the Early Christian burial long on display outside Room 3. The bones had suffered from exposure, the cement display case was harming the ancient architecture, and it is not appropriate to exhibit human remains in this manner. Signage will be set up here for the basilica, its

relationship to the pagan sanctuary, and the locations/characteristics of related cemeteries, including this burial.



Figure 1. Architectural Features of the Early Christian Basilica



Figure 2. Basilica, S façade, post conservation