

LACONIA.

II.—EXCAVATIONS AT SPARTA, 1906.

§ 4.—THE GREAT ALTAR NEAR THE EUROTAS.

ABOUT 100 metres south-east of the new bridge over the Eurotas a line of large blocks can be seen in the right bank of the river running out into its bed. These are the remains of the city-wall,¹ which originally must have made a sharp bend to the south-west, as it reappears in the field of the Heroön. But this angle, and the land which it enclosed, have been carried away by a change in the course of the river. Close to the northern arm of the angle, and abutting on the present river-bank, lies the large structure illustrated in Figs. 1 and 2. Its eastern front has long been visible, but seems to have escaped the observation of travellers. Excavation revealed at a depth of 0·70 m. below the present surface, a great platform 23·60 m. long by 6·60 m. wide and 1·90 m. high. There are four foundation-courses, averaging 0·34 m. in height, of a softish crumbly stone, and a sill-course 0·55 m. high, projecting 0·10 m. beyond the foundations. This sill-course consists of squared and dressed blocks, which extend all round the building with a uniform breadth of 0·90 m., and vary from 1·60 m. to 2·50 m. in length. Their surface is carefully smoothed, leaving an edge on the outside, raised 0·003 m. and 0·07 to 0·08 m. wide. This careful finish, combined with the regularity of the foundation-courses, and the absence of all trace of bonding-mortar, suggests Hellenic workmanship. The dowel-holes on the surface are set at irregular intervals, and so do not suggest

¹ Cf. *supra*, pp. 284 ff.

that a continuous wall stood upon the foundation. There seem to be no cramps used. At its eastern end the channel of the mill-stream has been cut right through the building, but otherwise it has suffered little injury.

The inside is completely filled with large unhewn stones, which have been thrown in after the outer wall was built. Upon them, at a distance of 6 m. from the western end, rests a cross-wall three blocks long and two high, which extends from within 0.75 m. of the northern edge of the platform to within 1.05 m. of the southern. This cross-wall is 0.60 m. high, and it rises 0.30 m. above the sill-course. The blocks, which are 0.75 m. wide, are dressed on all sides but the western, and are of a dark stone similar to that

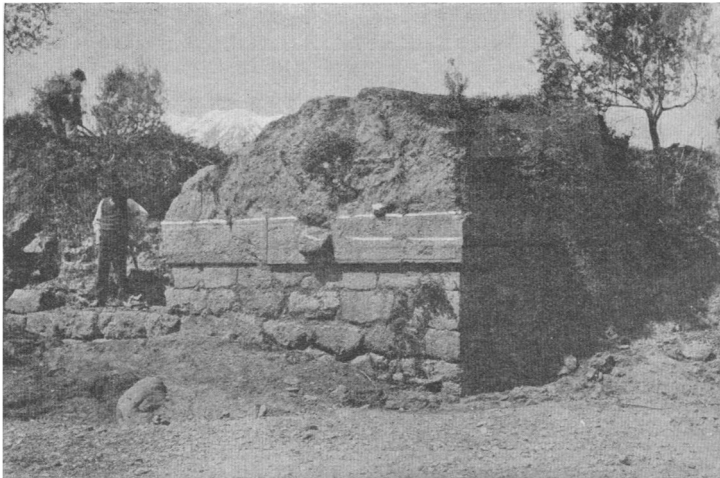


FIG. 1.—E. FRONT OF ALTAR IN BED OF EUROTAS.

used in the rest of the building. The southern side of the southern block is roughly tooled with a raised smooth edge so as to suggest that another block abutted on it. To the east of the cross-wall, at a distance of 1.50 m. from the northern edge of the building, a rougher wall 0.70 m. wide, of the same unhewn blocks as the filling, runs for 6 m. parallel with the axis of the building, and then, turning at a right angle, runs for 3.40 m. towards the southern edge. This wall has fallen to pieces, its greatest height at present being 0.60 m. above the surface of the platform. It would seem to be a later addition to the building, for it is not, like the first cross-wall, embedded in the filling, but merely stands upon it.

On the sill-course, at the north-eastern corner, stands a rough upright slab of marble 0·50 m. square and 0·10 m. thick, which is not, however, *in situ*. At the western end of the building a flight of eight steps leads up to it, the top one being a large single block of hard white stone 1·40 m. × 1·15 m. × 0·35 m., broken both above and below, and the lower seven composed of smaller slabs varying in height from 0·10 m. to 0·20 m. They are not bonded into the foundation-courses, and they rest upon a stratum of beaten earth, which is 0·45 m. above the bottom of the building, and 0·90 m. below the bottom of the sill-course. These steps, therefore, are

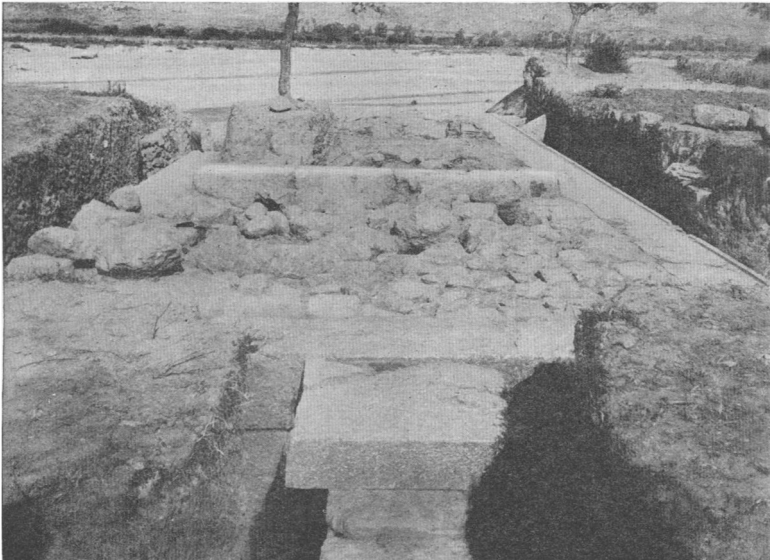


FIG. 2.—SURFACE OF ALTAR LOOKING EASTWARDS.

later than the rest of the structure, and shew in themselves two periods of construction, since the top step is clearly an addition, presumably for the purpose of repairing the stairway. 3·30 m. west of the steps, the beaten earth is covered with a layer of cement in which small stones are laid. A surface of this nature perhaps extended at one period all over this area, forming a pathway or open court for access to the building. The lower step is at present higher than the six above it, but no traces of the pebble pavement are visible around it.

Outside the building, and on a level with the sill-course, there are four

carefully dressed blocks of hard stone (*a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, on the plan in Fig. 3) of varying dimensions, whose connection with it is undetermined. *b* lies on

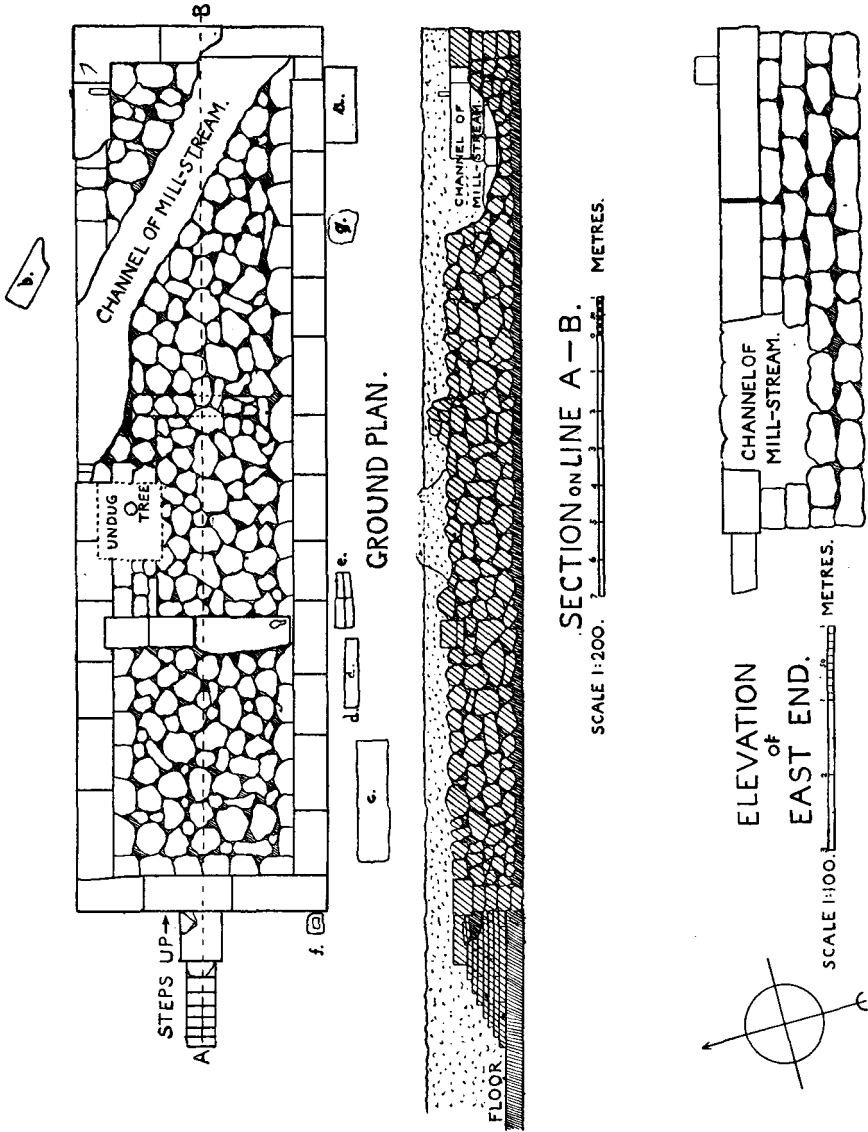


FIG. 3.—THE GREAT ALTAR NEAR THE EUROTAS.

the north side opposite a defective piece of the platform, where the mill-channel enters it, but its dimensions preclude its belonging to the sill-

course. *a*, *d*, and *c*, are on the south, where the sill-course is complete. It is difficult to restore a stone superstructure for our building, on the evidence of these blocks only, and in the absence of all signs of bonding even on the blocks themselves. It is more probable that they belonged to some smaller erection standing on the surface of the platform. The present surface is uneven, for the rough blocks of the filling are not dressed above, but project in several places above the surrounding blocks of the sill-course. They must have been covered originally,¹ and possibly the existing cross-wall is all that is left of a flooring of dressed stone slabs, which formed the original surface of the platform. On this upper surface may have stood erections of which we have the remains in *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*. These blocks with others, now removed or still in the earth, were doubtless the plunder of mediaeval masons.

Of the remaining letters on the plan (Fig. 3) *g* represents an unhewn block which may have come from the interior, and *f* a roughly-squared stone with an oblong sinking, standing without foundation outside the south-west angle. It perhaps once held a *stele*, but cannot be *in situ*, for we have seen that at the time of the making of the steps, the level of the ground outside the building at the western end was considerably lower. The stone rests upon a subsequent accumulation of earth. *e* is a Christian tile-grave. The skeleton was found extended and facing the east beneath a pent-roof of four large coarse tiles: with it was a small round unpainted cup with a broken handle. The top of the grave is just below the bottom of the surface course.

At the same height, viz. just below the sill-course, were found such remains of small objects as were discovered. These occurred almost entirely on the south side of the building, and consisted of four or five lead wreaths like those found at the Artemisium, a few shapeless fragments of bronze, and four² inscribed marble fragments. Part of a stamped³ roof-tile from the city wall was found at the western end of the building, and part of a stamped⁴ brick on the northern side in the mill-channel. So far

¹ A few traces of cement were found on the surface of the platform, and among the large stones of the filling. There was also a mass of it outside the building at the N.W. corner. This suggests the possibility of a cement flooring at some period. No mortar was found on the surface-course or among the courses of the foundations.

² See below: *Inscriptions from the Altar*, pp. 440 f.

³ See below: *The Stamped Tiles*, p. 346, note 16, No. 2214.

⁴ Inscribed [⸱⸱]ΑΚΛΑ. For a similar brick cf. *S.M.C.* pp. 28 and 70 (No. 543).

as excavation was carried out on the south side of the building, no finds were made at a greater depth than the tile-grave. This suggests three periods in the history of the building:—

1. Period of Construction. The foundation courses were presumably hidden, since they are poorly-dressed blocks of inferior material, and since the sill-course projects 0·10 m. beyond them. It was at the level of the latter that the few finds were made.

2. Period of Alteration. This is marked by the construction of the steps on a ground level 1·45 m. below the surface of the platform. The steps were clearly an addition (*vide supra*, p. 297) which had been made necessary by a change in level on the western side.

3. Mediaeval Period. A later occupation of the building, marked by the inferior rough wall on the surface, and probably by the restored top step. To this date we must attribute the Christian tile-grave.

These alterations in level can be explained by a change in the course of the river-bed. We have seen that, at the time of the construction of the city wall, the Eurotas flowed at some distance to the east of the building. We must suppose that on the occasion of some flood, or obstruction of its bed, it changed its course slightly, and washed away the earth to the west of our platform. We know from Pausanias¹ that the Eurotas was liable to flood its banks in ancient times, just as it does to-day on the occasion of any unusually severe storm. Where the banks of such a torrent are unprotected, isolated channels are always liable to temporary variations in their course. Even during the last twelve months the course of several of the smaller channels has been altered by the autumn storms.

We have further evidence for this explanation of the change of level in the condition of the steps to the west of the building. From the bottom of the sill-course to the beaten floor, the earth removed from the steps was largely mixed with sand, which must have been deposited by the river. Also the northern area of the angle of city wall, which lies directly to the north of the steps, is built in a manner quite different from that of the fragments in the field of the Heroön. Under it were found fragments of coarse red *pithoi* which suggest a Roman rather than a Greek origin. We may infer, therefore, that this piece of the wall was a

¹ Paus. iii. 13. 8.

later restoration, perhaps contemporary with the steps of our building and necessitated by the same destructive flood.

This flood would also account for the disappearance of all small objects from the northern and western sides of the building. But on the south side a few finds were made, and sand is not intermixed with the earth. Our excavations on this side, however, have been confined to the immediate vicinity of the wall, and the ground in this neighbourhood may well have been spared, if the flood, sweeping round the building,¹ entered the old bed lower down. Certainly, at the time when the Christian grave was made, the level was much the same as it had been originally, since the top of the grave reaches just up to the bottom of the sill-course.

The west side was gradually filled with river-sand and alluvial soil, and by modern times the whole building had been covered to a depth of 0·70 metre.

The great disproportion of the length and breadth of the platform rendered it at once improbable that we had to deal with a temple, even before the absence of traces of bonding shewed the impossibility of a heavy stone superstructure. It seems practically certain, from the close resemblance of the platform to the Greater Altar of Megalopolis in construction and in peculiarity of proportions, that we have here an altar on a remarkable scale. A comparison with the illustrations given in the report of the excavation (*Excav. at Megalopolis*, p. 51, Fig. 44) shews a platform with a similar projecting sill-course without cramp-marks, standing on a rough foundation filled with large undressed blocks. A course of triglyphs and metopes was found on the surface of the platform. This suggests a function for the square slab of marble found on the E. end of the Spartan platform. It may well be one of the square metope-slabs which has chanced to survive the depredations of later builders. The Megalopolitan altar measures nearly 11 m. by nearly 2 m., and is thus about half the size of the Spartan, while it is even longer in comparison to its width.

The main peculiarity of the Spartan altar, therefore, consists in its great size. Strabo,² however, relates that there was an enormous altar at

¹ The Hellenic brick-stamp found on the west side of the building may have been carried down by the flood from the original Hellenic city wall to the north.

² xii. 487 a and xiii. 588 b.

Parium with the longer sides a stade in length, and fragments have been found of an altar at Eleusis,¹ whose short sides were 7.50 m. long. There is, of course, also the well-known altar of Pergamon on a far greater scale. At Epidaurus² a platform of large slabs, quite analogous to the Spartan altar, and measuring 16 m. by 3.50 m., is probably the great altar of Asklepios.

We naturally turn to Pausanias to see if he mentions any altar that can be connected with the platform on the banks of the Eurotas. This year's discovery of the Artemisium has rendered it highly probable that the passage commencing in Book III. xvi. 1, is the portion of Pausanias' circuit of Sparta, which refers to this part of the river-bank. The temple of Aphrodite Morpho was probably situated on the hill now called Tympanon, the spur of the Acropolis nearest to the Artemisium: the gates referred to, were in all likelihood between the modern bridge and the large hill Analipsis to the north of the site. In this neighbourhood the only altar mentioned by Pausanias is that of Lycurgus, in the *temenos* of his sanctuary. It is true, however, that the reference is more casual than we should have expected for so large a structure, and that the topographical grounds are not strong enough for a definite connection of Lycurgus' altar with ours. For these reasons any identification of the two must remain tentative until further evidence is discovered.

Further evidence is also needed for the dating of the altar. The excellence of the construction seems to point to a period not later than the middle of the 2nd century, B.C.; the letter forms of three of the inscriptions to a considerably earlier period. The wall of Nabis, of which we probably have traces³ in the field of the Heroön, must have been built about 200 B.C., and the altar is likely to be earlier than the wall, since the latter seems to make a bend in order to include it. Perhaps it was adapted to coincide with the boundary-wall of the ancient *temenos* of Lycurgus.

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¹ Baumeister, *Denkmäler*, i. p. 56.

² Kavvadias, *Fouilles d'Épidaure*, Pl. I. a; *Épidaure*, Pl. IX. and X. Cf. also *B.C.H.* xiv. 1890, p. 639.

³ See above, p. 287.