

Agora Excavations - 1999 Preliminary Report

Excavations were carried out in the Athenian Agora from June 7 to July 30, 1999; in all, 53 people participated, including volunteers, supervisors, and permanent staff. This report has been prepared for the volunteers and represents a very preliminary account of the results.

Most of the work this season was concentrated in the upper levels in the northern half of Section BZ, under the supervision of Laura Gawlinski, Mark Alonge, and Anne McCabe. The Byzantine levels first uncovered last season were more fully explored this year, with good results. Long stretches of relatively well-preserved street walls were found on both sides of the narrow (2.60 m.) north-south street which runs through the section, and the plans of the houses behind began to emerge. Parts of three houses were uncovered - the two eastern ones joining with rooms excavated in 1991/1992 - along with an alleyway running east-west at the north end of the section (Fig. 1). Two Roman carved gemstones - one depicting Athena, the other Fortuna (Fig. 2) - were recovered from the upper levels of the alley. The house walls are of rubble set in earth, incorporating a considerable number of large squared blocks clearly borrowed from some earlier structures. One reused piece was the upper part of a marble herm, inscribed with a invocation to Good Fortune. The number of built pithoi or subterranean storage bins in these houses is striking. Several more were added to the number found last season, and multiple examples are now known for many rooms. These can be seen as a regular feature of these houses and they represent impressive storage capacity, far more than usually encountered in a Classical or Hellenistic private house of similar size. Also characteristic is the density of construction: the houses are closely crowded together, even sharing party walls. After two centuries of abandonment, our area became thickly inhabited, the neighborhood growing up in a relatively short time. Welcome evidence for the chronology of the buildings was encountered in the form of a small hoard of 21 copper coins in good condition (Fig. 3). They show the bust of Christ on one side and the four-line inscription 'Jesus Christ king of kings' on the reverse. They are part of a class (A)

of 'anonymous folles' minted between 970 and 1059 AD, anonymous because they represent a relatively short period when neither the emperor nor his name appears on the coins. This hoard confirms what we have learned from the wells of the adjacent houses to the east, that a major phase of construction and habitation in the area should be dated to the 11th century AD. It becomes a question whether the crowded houses, provisions for storage, and the burying of a hoard are all related, and what they may have to tell us about the economic or political situation in Athens at the beginning of the millennium.

In the lower area, Section BE, excavations were continued under the supervision of David Scahill. In the Classical shop building another *pyre* was discovered and excavated, the seventh from the building thus far, the largest concentration of these enigmatic deposits known from the Agora. The usual assemblage of wine cup (kantharos), lamps, miniature cooking pots (chytras), and small saucers and plates was recovered, twelve pieces in all, dating to the early 3rd century BC. Not attested in the literary record, these pyres presumably reflect some nocturnal ritual involving food; as they are generally found only in private houses, commercial buildings, or funerary contexts, such deposits should be regarded as evidence for private cult.

Also uncovered was the upper part of a *well* (J 2: 14 - Fig. 4). The unlined shaft, ca. 1.05 m. in diameter, was excavated to a depth of 4.00 m., at which point digging was abandoned until collapsing side walls could be shored up. Probes indicate that the well is at least another 2 meters deep. The shaft of the well was filled with debris and a great deal of fragmentary pottery which seems to date to the 2nd and possibly 3rd quarter of the 5th century BC. A wide range of black-glazed shapes was recovered: skyphoi, 'Pheidias mugs', salt cellars, lekythoi, oinochoai, lamps, lekanides, and one-handlers, as well as amphoras and cooking pots. Only a few examples of figured wares were present, and they do not represent the high point of Greek vasepainting: one black-figured stemmed cup with a sketchily drawn frieze of standing and seated figures, and three red-figured lekythoi (Fig. 5) showing, 1). Athena attacking to the right with a spear, 2). a draped woman approaching an altar, and 3). a seated woman looking into a mirror. All this pottery represents a dumped fill, and the period of use was not reached. It remains to be seen, therefore, how this well might relate to the commercial building

behind which it lies. Burnishing stones found both in the well and in the lowest floors of the building suggest a possible association.

Final clearing of *Mycenaean tomb K 2: 5* was completed, with more scattered bones found on the floor in the north half and more miniscule beads of the faience necklace recovered from the watersieve. The question of access and a possible dromos at the northwest remained unresolved due to the position of the 5th century well. More work was also done in *Tomb J-K 2: 2*. Here, in the final moments of the season, several Geometric pieces (9th BC?) were found, at floor level. At the moment it is not clear whether these represent a deliberate reuse of the grave, or offerings left after an unintentional intrusion. Well K 1: 5, dug in 1997, also dates to the 9th century and lies only some 15 meters to the north, suggesting that the area was used for more than just burials in the Iron Age.

At this stage, it remains only to thank all of you for a productive and positive effort throughout the summer (Figs. 6, 7), and to wish you well for the fall. It has been a great pleasure working with you.


J. Camp
July 1999


11th Century A.D.

Plan of Remains

SECTIONS BZ & BE

AGORA EXCAVATIONS ATHENS

PITHOS : 

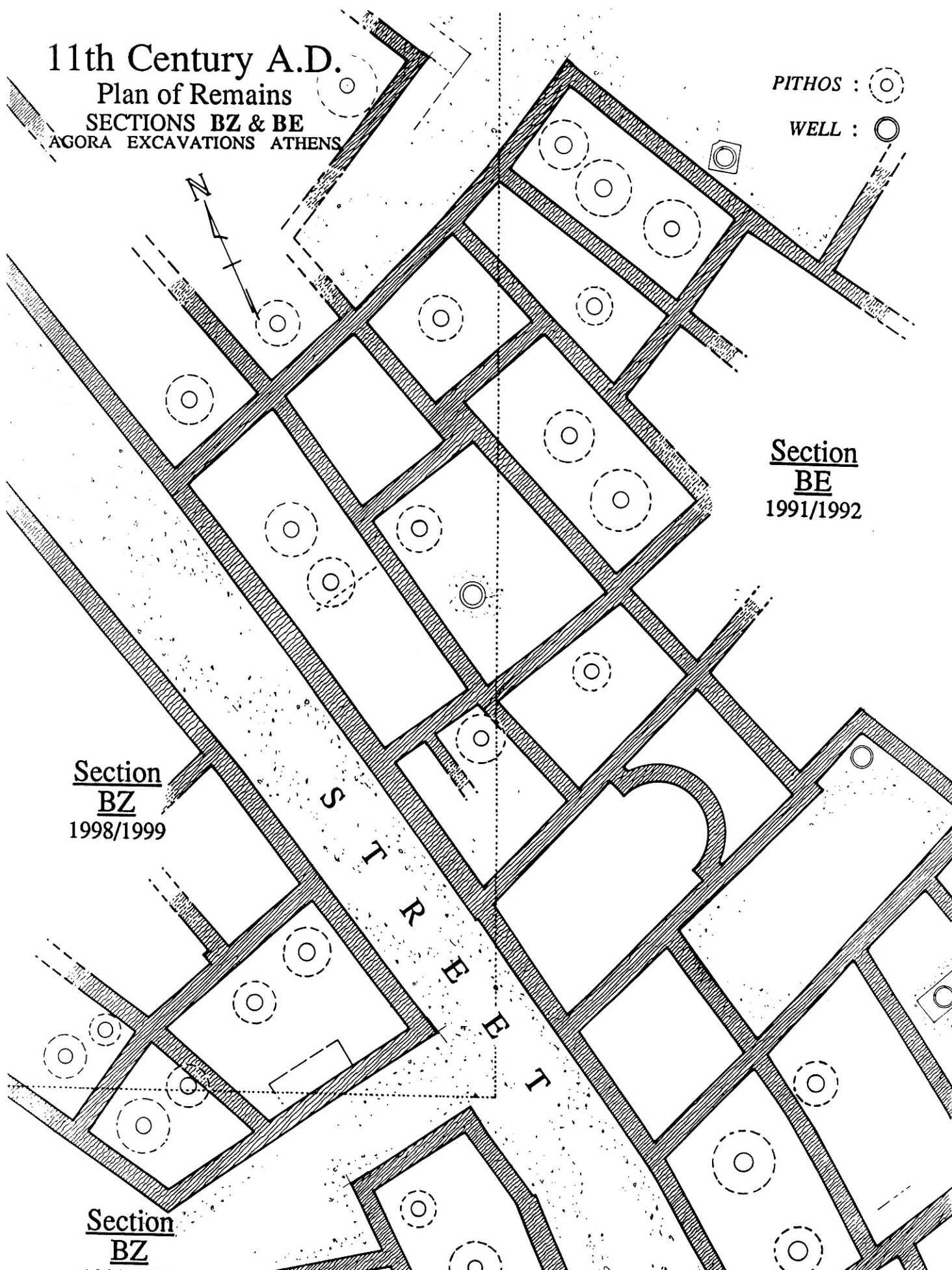
WELL : 

Section
BE
1991/1992

Section
BZ
1998/1999

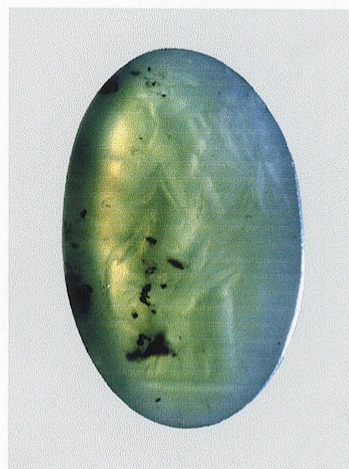
Section
BZ

S
T
R
E
E
T





J229



J230

Fig. 2 Roman Gemstones. *Fortuna at left, Athena at right*



Fig. 3 Coin Hoard. Twenty-one Copper 'anonymous folles'
970 - 1059 A.D.

BZ-924 to 944



Fig. 4 Excavating Well J2:14



Fig. 5 Red-figured lekythoi from Well J2 : 14



Fig. 6



Fig. 7