

A Unique New Palestine Art-Form

The excavation of Ghassul was always close to the heart of Father Fernández, both as former Rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and as director of its Jerusalem branch. Hence the authorities of both these houses have graciously permitted to appear in these pages an account of the first striking discovery in the eighth excavation campaign¹.

This was a wall-fresco roughly three metres square. It was executed in red paint on a gray plaster surface which was not flat, but in part curved and in part «pocked» with crater-like protuberances. These were apparently intended to hold ball-shaped precious stones or other objects incorporated into the decorative effect. The painting itself contains a number of star-points or rays reminiscent of the famous Ghassul eight-pointed star². But in the newly discovered fresco they intertwine with other bands and festoons in a more fantastic design. No definitively human or other representation appears.

Frescoes employing plastic art, after the fashion of the Renaissance, are rare in all epochs of the history of art, but quite unheard of in the Middle East or at least the Palestine of that remote epoch («chalcolithic», generally dated about 3500 B. C.)³. Hence it will be of interest to all archeologists and historians of religion to learn in detail how the find was discovered and extracted.

On New Year's Day, 1960, the first traces of painted plaster appeared, not in E3, find-site of our fresco, but 200 metres westward in A2. The excavation had already been in progress since December 4, with some sixty workers and a staff of ten. It was the eighth

¹ The official preliminary report is to appear in *Analecta Biblica* (1960).

² A. MALLON, *Teleilat Ghassul I* (Rome 1934) 135.

³ R. NORTH, «*Ghassulian*» in *Palestine Chronological Nomenclature*, *Biblica* 40 (1959) = *Analecta Biblica* 10, 407-421.

campaign⁴. Work at this site had been resumed after an interruption of twenty-two years, chiefly in order to settle whether there was more than one ceramic-chronology period represented. But it was also desired to learn whether by oversight or in simple fact Ghassul showed no evidence of features so characteristically «ghassulian» at other sites, such as house-shaped ossuaries, underground cave-dwellings, and apsidal houses. Conversely, the brilliant fresco-art known from several Ghassul examples had never been paralleled elsewhere; and it was to this mother-site that students had to look for further clarification of these unique phenomena.

The A2 painting was in Tulayl 3, at the point of our chantier nearest to where the Star-fresco had been discovered in 1932. It was in the same building where the Procession-fresco was found in 1931. The wall (our number BW 7) was standing vertically to a height of over a metre, and the line of plaster was seen to be almost two metres long. The exposed corner was immediately seen to consist of a dozen superposed layers of plaster, each painted a single monochrome (red or black) wash, insofar as the flaking could reveal.

Work was interrupted to seek the advice of the chief archeologists and museum-curators who happened to be in Jerusalem and Amman at the time. Their almost unanimous judgment was that the fresco should be detached and preserved in *panels*, after cautious and experimental use of fortifying-materials from both sides.

Our first step was to apply a backing of plaster of Paris in 30 × 25 cm plaques 6 cm *behind* the unpainted side of the plaster. Then the earth was detached from the front as far as feasible, and a spray of acetone-celluloid was applied to a portion of the painted surface as soon as it was disengaged. This move was presently seen to be ill-advised, since it made the plaster curl up and flake. Moreover, it rendered futile further efforts to detach the earth clinging to the plaster which had been sprayed.

When one plaque was cleared, the results were disappointing. Nothing but a succession of monochrome surfaces was discernible. Where the plaster had flaked off or been worn off, there appeared a fantastic play of multicolored lines, like *moiré* (watered silk) or like the ledger-binding which was in style half a century ago. Our artist, Panayot Hanania of the Bethlehem Duhaysha Boys School faculty, spent weary hours trying to recapture the color-effect, but it was almost impossible. This was in any case a mere *tour-de-force*, since the mingling colors did not represent any intentional design but the

⁴ The title «achte Grabung» given to the report of the 1938 campaign by R. KOEPEL in *Biblica* 19 (1938) 260, was corrected in his *Teleitāt Ghassul II* (Rome 1940) vi.

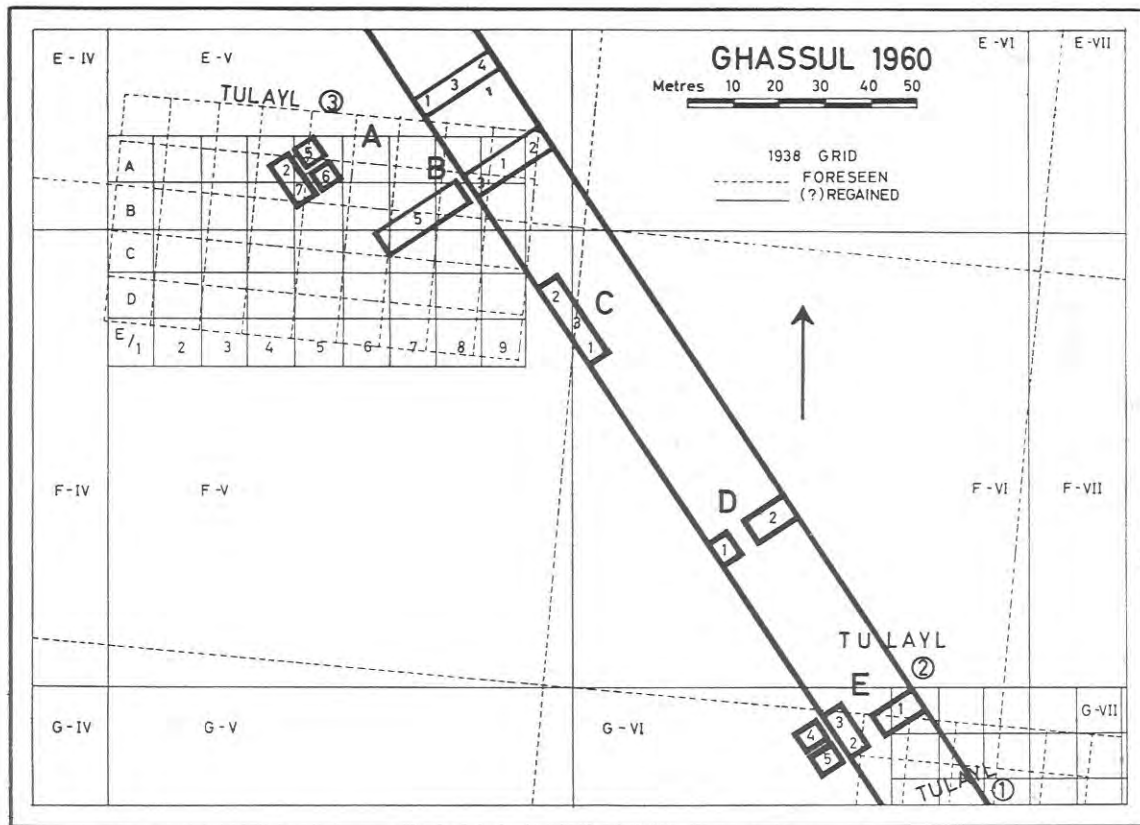
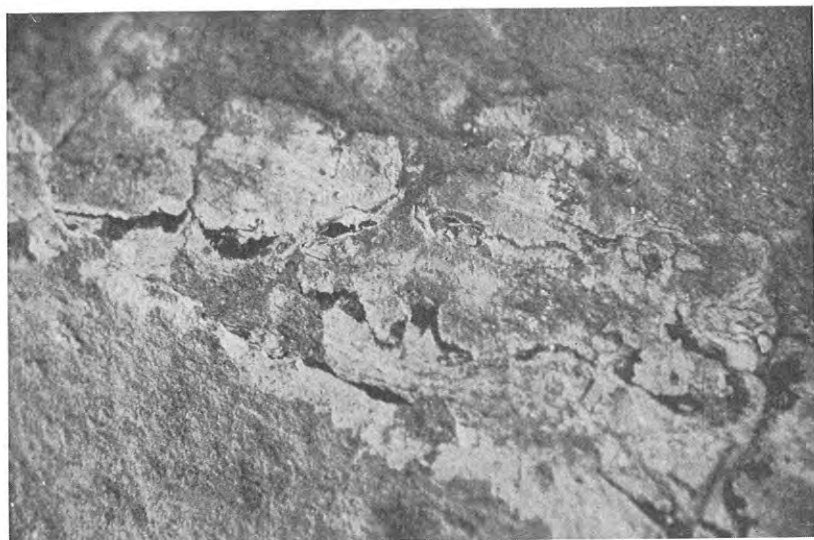
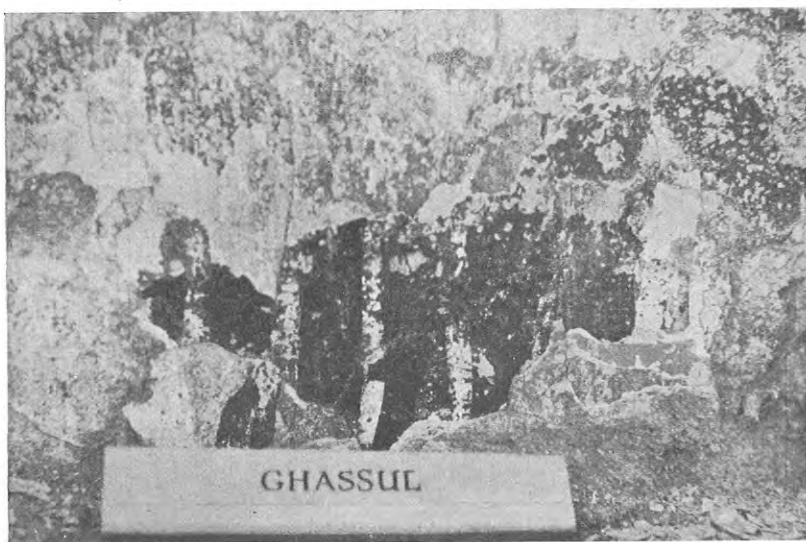


Figure 1

PLATE I



A 2 plaster as first discovered. Illusion of design, caused by flaking of several successive layers of monochrome wash.



A 2 plaster: first traces of genuine design, on a subsurface layer, as discovered by Père Senès.

LÁMINA XII

merely fortuitous exposure of washes from various levels. A portion of this play is visible in Plate I.

We resolved to leave this wall standing just as it was, with its strong covering of over 6 cm of original hard earth from both sides. Only the one plaque was to be left exposed for the study and counsel of visiting archeologists, and for the effects of wind and rain. It is well known that some archeological features such as mud-brick walls are often completely unnoticed until after atmospheric disturbances, which cause reactions in the mud-wall different from those of its surroundings. We had nothing to lose —if there was really nothing here but a succession of monochrome washes!

Further cautious nibbling in the square A2 brought to light several other walls of painted plaster. One of these (BW 8) was a north-westward continuation of Brick Wall 7, the painted one, but dislodged from its axis toward the southwest by the force of its fall. Farther northwest, in the line of BW 8 but after an interruption or doorway, was BW 9, whose plaster was apparently not painted. At right angles to BW 9 came BW 10, also plastered without painting. Despite the shock of the fall which had dis-axed BW 7-8, the corner seemed to be preserved intact at least in part. Opposite BW 8, BW 11 was found to be fallen flat on its painted plaster face.

The plaster line of BW 10 had been in fact noticed first of all, in a recent look-around by Père Henri Senès, S. J., of Marseille, the venerable surveyor of the 1938 campaign; and it was thanks to his observation that any trenches had been laid out in this region at all. And when all these painted plaster surfaces were reserved to await the decision regarding BW 7, it was he whose ingenuity and persistence discovered the fanciful and splendidly Ghassulian «tiger» painting shown in Plate II, which otherwise does not concern us here.

On January 7, in the trench E 1 between Tulayl 1 and 2, appeared another line of painted plaster. It turned out to be Brick Wall 13, fallen slopingly on its painted face. Careful and repeated examination made it appear that the wall had been successively replastered and painted in monochrome washes (black or red) as in A 2. The flaking of the plaster left exposed various lines which only an unleashed imagination could erect into representative designs. When the veterans of 1929-38 assured us that the famed Ghassul frescoes of those years *also* included several painted levels beneath/behind the one on which the design appeared, we were beginning to wonder whether all the Ghassul paintings were just the effect of flaking of successive monochrome surfaces.

But that very afternoon of January 7 in E 3 (Tulayl 2), a chance blow of the workman's pick turned up the decisive piece. Père Maurice Tallon, S. J., director of the Oriental Letters Institute of the

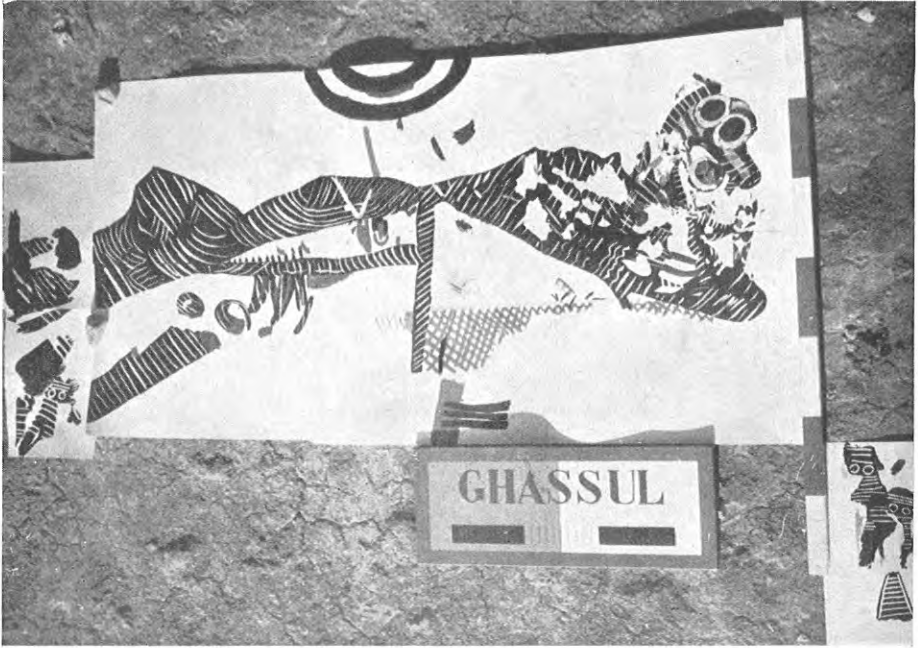
Jesuit University of Beirut, who was with us for one month as supervisor of this square, immediately recognized distinct painted lines on a single surface. Each observer was at once convinced of the intention of representative design. It was coarse gray plaster and only one dull red color. But it made bands and similar ornamental motives which could not possibly be ascribed to the chance mode of destruction of its elements. This plaster was traced along an area some 2×2 metres, quite horizontal (flat on its face). Southeast of it was a big hearth, which broke the line of the painted surface. But it was observed again some 40 cm farther southeast, over a surface of more than a square metre.

This discovery called for renewed counsel and decision. The small-plaque policy had been advocated by all available experts. It had been tentatively put into practice on January 4 in A 2 by Brother Antonio Vives, S. J., the oldest veteran Ghassul excavator (since 1929!), who had also been largely responsible for the safe removal of the Star-fresco and others. He had cool-wittedly observed the effects and defects of the small-plaque policy as we were practising it, and had proposed or readily embraced remedial adaptations. However, at this point he launched a vigorous defense of the «monolith» method of removal — all in one sole bloc, with a wooden frame above and below bound together by clamps. Eloquenty and plausibly he showed the greater likelihood of success by this method — as proved in practice in 1932! — and our obligation and keen desire to preserve this art-monument for connoisseurs.

Nevertheless, the consensus of opinion of the collaborators was that in sawing out small plaques from the earth we would stand more chance of getting a faithful accurate copy of the maximum content, which was felt to be our chief scientific obligation. The saw-line between plaques would be negligibly thin, and even if some plaques cracked they could be reassembled without any necessary loss of the pictured content. Moreover we could not help feeling that the massive efforts required to remove the painting en bloc would perforce proceed wholly in the dark: not until the whole daring experiment was completed would we have any way of checking whether part of the painting was being destroyed by the undercutting.

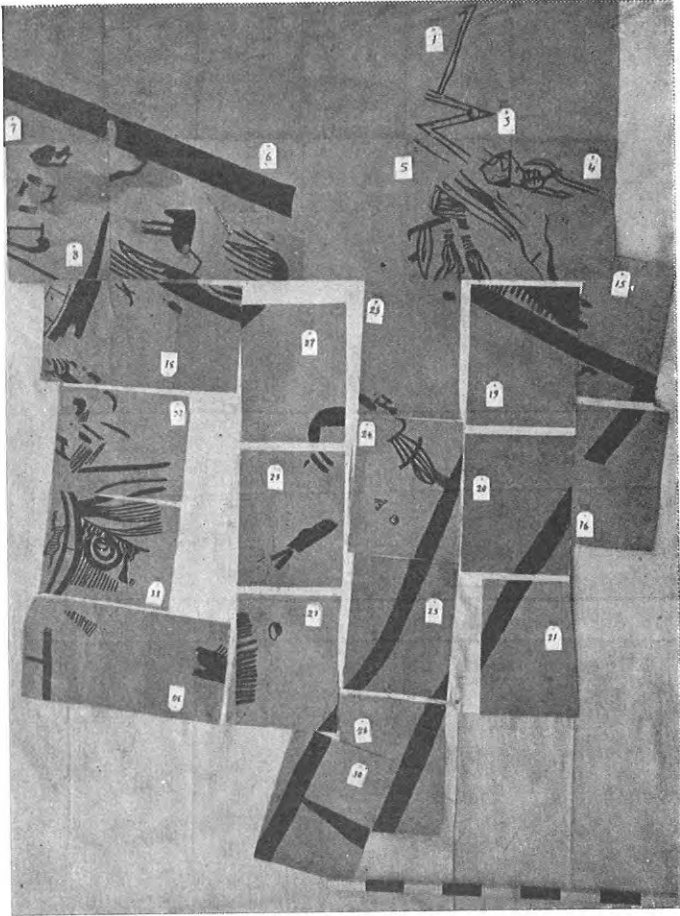
It was finally approved, also by Bro. Vives, to make an initial experiment with the small-plaque method, which would only jeopardize a small portion of the painted surface and leave us free to adopt the bloc method for the rest. The adequacy of the experiment turned out to be in a sense vitiated by our «beginners' luck». The very first plaque to come out was not only almost perfectly intact, but was largely covered over with a rich and varied design. Also, it was *not horizontal*, but curved or «vaulted» and with a «crater-button» in one corner. It was in fact so divergent from the horizontal line we were

PLATE II



A 2 tiger painting as copied by artist Panayot Hanania.

PLATE III



E 3 geometric painting as reconstructed and drawn after extraction.

FIGURE 2

| Plaque | Removal | | Size cms. | Percent containing design | Quality of design (percent) | Percent design preserved | Percent unpainted preserved |
|--------|------------|------|--------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | Date | Mode | | | | | |
| 0 | Jan. 7 | A | 15 × 20 | 90 | 80 | 100 | — |
| 1 | Jan. 8 | B | 35 × 30 | 70 (C) | 100 | 95 | 90 |
| 2 | » | B | 25 × 30 | 0 | — | — | 30 |
| 3 | » | B | 25 × 30 | 20 (C) | 100 | 90 | 30 |
| 4 | Jan. 9 | B | 35 × 30 | 70 | 60 | 95 | 80 |
| 5 | » | B | 35 × 30 | 70 | 80 | 95 | 80 |
| 6 | » | B | 36 × 30 | 40 | 40 | 90 | 80 |
| 7 | » | B | 25 × 45 | 60 | 40 | 95 | 80 |
| 8 | » | B | 42 × 23 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 |
| 9-14 | Jan. 11-12 | C | 35 × 25 | 0 (C, C) | — | — | 80 |
| 15 | Jan. 13 | D | 23 × 34 | 25 | 30 | 80 | 80 |
| 16 | » | D | 23 × 34 | 10 | 10 | 80 | 80 |
| 17 | » | D | 23 × 34 | 0 | — | — | 50 |
| 18 | » | D | 23 × 34 | 0 (C) | — | — | 80 |
| 19 | » | D | 23 × 34 | 30 | 30 | 80 | 80 |
| 20 | » | D | 23 × 34 | 10 | 20 | 85 | 80 |
| 21 | » | D | 23 × 34 | 20 | 20 | 80 | 80 |
| 22 | » | B | 23 × 34 | 0 | — | — | 95 |
| 23 | » | B | 23 × 34 | 10 | 25 | 90 | 90 |
| 24 | » | E | 23 × 30 | 50+30 (C) | 80 | 95 | 95 |
| 25 | Jan. 14 | E | 23 × 34 | 30 (C) | 30 | 95 | 90 |
| 26 | » | E | 23 × 34 | 15 | 30 | 85 | 80 |
| 27 | » | E | 23 × 34 | 25 | 20 | 95 | 90 |
| 28 | » | E | 23 × 34 | 20 (C) | 25 | 95 | 90 |
| 29 | » | E | 23 × 34 | 5+20 (C) | 30 | 95 | 90 |
| 30 | » | E | 23 × 50 | 70 | 40 | 95 | 90 |
| 31 | » | E | 23 × 50 | 60 | 50 | 95 | 90 |
| 32 | » | E | 23 × 50 | 70+10 | 40 | 95 | 90 |
| 33 | » | E | 23 × 50 | 95 | 90 | 95 | — |
| 34 | » | E | 25 × 54 | 30 | 30 | 95 | 90 |
| B1-6 | Jan. 11-12 | C | 35 × 25 | 0 | — | — | 90 |
| B7 | Jan. 12 | C | 35 × 25 | 50+40 (C) | 30 | 90 | — |
| B8-10 | Jan. 12 | D | 35 × 25 | 0 | — | — | 90 |

Modes of Removal: A workman's pick; B sawing, with boards above and below; C plaster casing; D plaster and box; E sawing, with board below and box inverted above.

(C) in the column «Percent of Design» means «crater-button». In the same column, the number after + indicates the subsurface level.

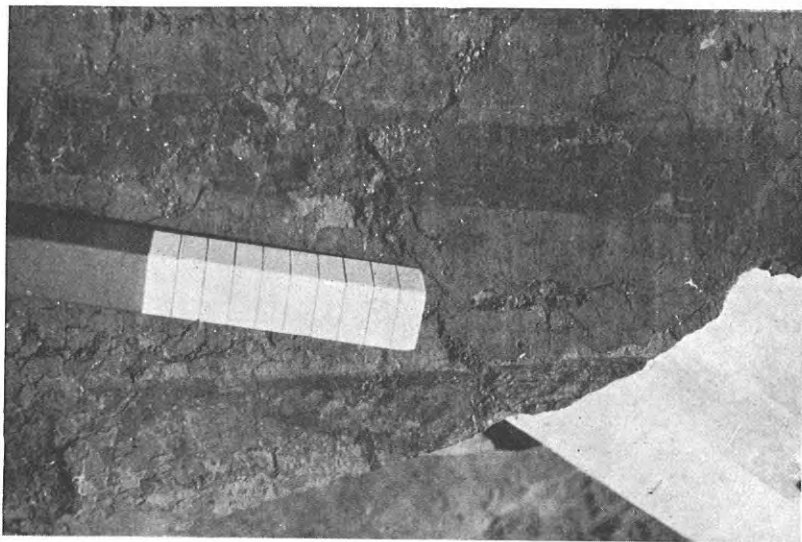
ideally following, that we felt the bloc-removal system could have been disastrous.

And the next two plaques, to our dismay cracking up in removal, turned out to contain an almost blank gray plaster surface, except for one of the «crater-buttons» with its design which could be immediately fitted to its proper juncture with Plaque 1. The total result being thus, if only the design-content be taken into account, practically 100 % perfect, it was natural to prolong the «experiment» for another day — at the end of which we had five more plaques, broken at some corners, but with a considerable design-surface of no notable lacunae. (See Figure 2.)

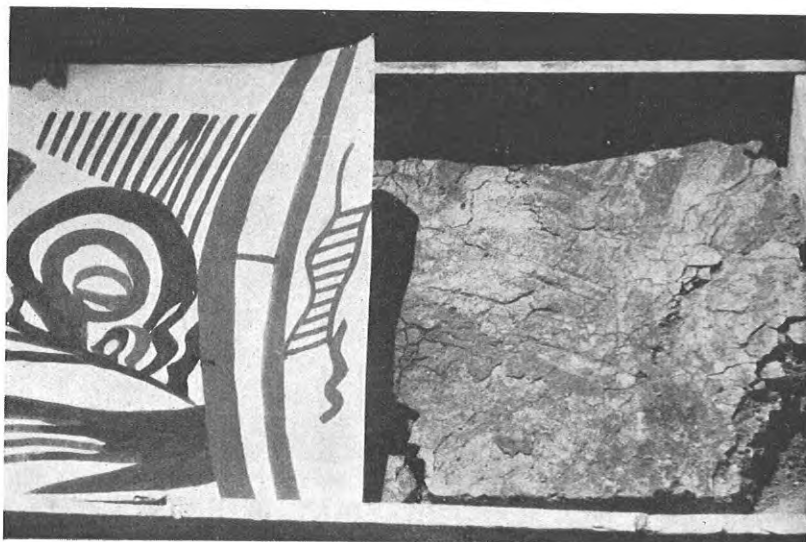
Unfortunately, however, these plaques did not present a very aesthetic or professional appearance, some being sawed askew or with more earth adhering than others. This also made it difficult to get the plaques next to one another in an even-enough line to copy them accurately. It was hard to maneuver them without breaking the heavy earth which clung to them. To remedy these disadvantages, it was proposed by M. Cornely Voronine (expert Russian-Lebanese surveyor graciously lent for a month by the Dunand Byblos chantier), to make a plaster casing around each plaque before removing it. This work was carefully undertaken by Bro. Vives, and with relative success. As luck would have it, most of the plaques thus decorously removed turned out to contain only a blank gray surface, with at most a «crater-button». More disquietingly, when some of the painted squares appeared, it transpired that despite all efforts, the «casing-technique» required the destruction of at least a 2-cm. band along each side, or a total of almost three hundred square centimetres per plaque. Unwilling to face this loss, I took the responsibility for requiring the removal of the last plaques by simply sawing, without plaster casings. But in the meantime there finally arrived some sturdy wood boxes which we had ordered long before in Jerusalem. By sawing the plaques to the exact size of these boxes, and inserting them before turning over, we secured an almost complete salvaging, together with optimum transport and long-term preservation conditions.

The statistical table of Fig. 2 gives some idea of the relative efficiency of the methods employed: A, chance blow of pick; B, sawing, with board-support above and below; C, plaster-casing; D, plaster casing supplemented with wood box; E, board below and inverted box above. Since the plaster-casing used up almost 2 cm along each edge, it was considered to obliterate 20 % of the surface (264 out of 1080 square cms in a 36 × 30 plaque). Père Tallon, to whom we are indebted for most of these observations, stresses that such «statistics» leave out, or present in a false light, many variable factors. Notably, some portions of the plaster (plaques 9-14) had been more

PLATE IV



E 3 Plaque B7, showing bands on separate layers of surfacing.



E 3 Plaque A33 with copy.

PLATE V



E 3 «Star»-festoon of Plaques A 1-3, incorporating «crater-buttons»
on a curved surface.

trodden upon than others, and hence came out more deteriorated. Also, in some cases a stone lodged in the path of the saw caused jerks or eventually resulted in cracking the plaque. To this I must add that the percentages are a mere approximative estimate of my own. At best they give some approach to factors which we felt to be of great importance while we were working with them.

Père Tallon undertook to keep the plan recording the order and direction in which the single plaques were removed. This was a very hard task, embroiled by numerous confusing factors. First of all it was decided to note as fulcrum or pivot the outermost edge, which would be the identical direction for the orientation of all the plaques. This was conventionally called «north» because it was roughly parallel with the Amman highway to the north of us. Actually the arrow points some 45° west of the true north, but to adopt a complex direction would have multiplied the difficulty and the chances of error.

As each plaque was turned over (since the design was face-down), the portion to the right of the north was called east, as is natural. But since it had been on the opposite side when face-down, it must be remembered that this «east» was lying actually on the west or rather southwest: that is, toward the brick wall (16) from which apparently the rest of the painted wall had toppled over. To visualize the painting as it once appeared inside a real room, we must put this «east» at the bottom and «north» running up along the right.

It was no very great task for our artist to draw exactly, on a scale of one to one, the single plaques; or even to combine the first eight together into a somewhat convincing panel. This was already done on January 10. But to go on and combine all the remaining plaques into one canvas was sorely burdensome. The boxes (or plaster casings) were bulky and heavy. Though they could be maneuvered without breaking the surface, they could not permit adjacent lines to be joined. Moreover in some but not all cases, the break of several centimetres for the plaster casing had to be allowed. We will all remember the hard day we spent on this enervating work, Sunday January 17. (Plate III: «north» runs along top edge).

All this would be tolerable if the design itself had rendered us the slightest assistance. But it was a pure phantasmagoria. Even if—as is likely enough under the grueling circumstances of the removal-work—error had crept in, in numbering or orienting one or other of the plaques, this could have been detected in a normal «jig-saw puzzle» reassembling. But the reader's glance will readily convince him that a reversal of the direction of any plaque after the 8th would make precious little difference for the aesthetic unity of the whole. Our artist in fact reversed Plaque 31, under the conviction that the adjacent design required it; and we bowed to his competence to the

extent of photographing his reconstruction before requiring that he re-do that plaque in the direction indicated by Père Tallon's notebook.

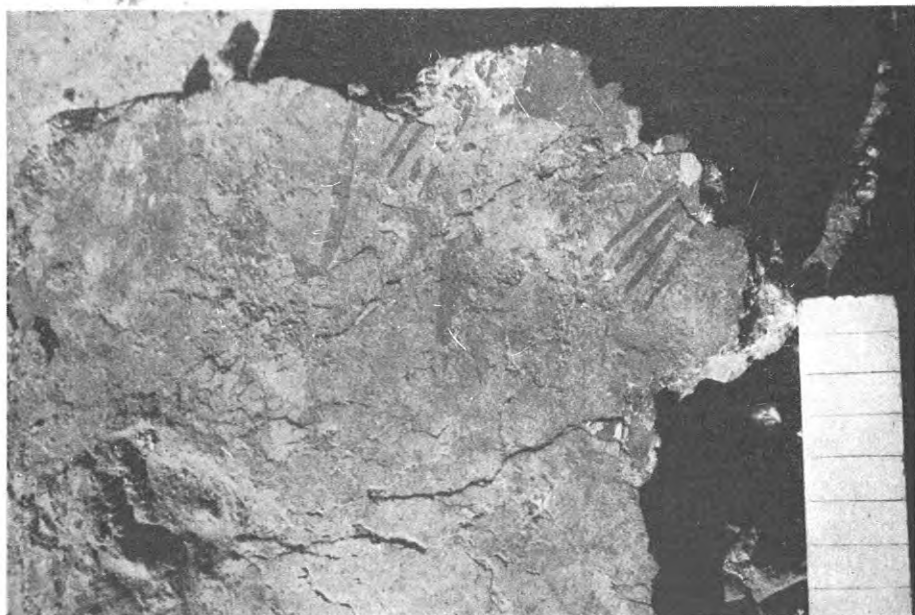
From the statistical table it will be seen that the plaques 21-34 (like 1-8) were removed without plaster-casings, i.e. without destroying a 2 cm border all around. This does not appear from our reconstruction, because an effort was made to fit these plaques into some recognizable connection with the fairly-unified portion 1-8. But Plate III puts at the disposal of every critic the separate plaques, which he may endeavor to assemble in a design more plausible and more conformed to the actual facts of the extraction. Between 33 and 34 there is a large blank space left unaccounted for. Apparently Plaque 34 should have occupied this space, but the artist and all his advisers felt that the design of 34 fitted better with 30. In any case it is certain that the plaques 31-34 are to be inserted with their *short* edge running north-south.

One chief factor which made it almost fruitless to seek unified design was the presence of an *earlier* painting, of almost identical color and style, on an earlier plaster-surface of the same plaques. We first noticed this subsurface layer on January 12 in Plaque B7, and at once photographed the phenomenon (Plate IV). We were jubilant to verify the same situation in the case of Plaque 25, whose horizontal rays distressingly jar with the broad vertical bands of the adjacent plaques. But alas, further study showed that some of the broad bands were also on the lower layer⁵. All in all, we did not find it feasible to try to have each of the two surfaces drawn as a separate unity. This would have required destroying the upper surface, which on the whole seemed more promising. Fragments from the lower surface were merely encircled with a jagged black line, on the smaller-scale (1:4) design.

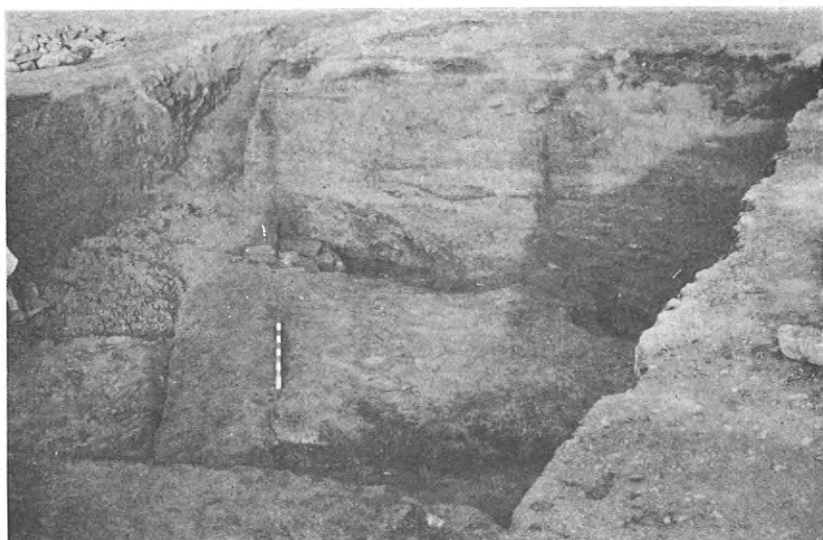
The full-size tableau was photographed together with tags indicating the respective plaques (all numbers to be preceded by A except B7). B7 in the corner is the only plaque of the southern «half» to

⁵ Further observations on the two layers: Plaque A 15: At southwest (left of north), all is on the surface layer except for a sort of star-point going off amorphously subsurface. Nearer the north there were three finger-like impressions impaired in transit, but preserved in a photo which however showed the relative positions of 15 and 16 reversed. A 24: The band going north-south at edge is subsurface and rayed. The block meeting it at right angles from north is rippled. A 25: The two bands are clearly on the surface layer. A 29: The rayed band (subsurface) has yellowish-red rays flanking the red rays and goes straight along the plaque-edge, not joining up with the band of 28 (though this is also subsurface). A 31: Everything is surface except the bright red «cladder» at southeast (right). A 32: All the heavy lines are at the surface. The thin alternatingly-yellowish lines tending toward north edge are at subsurface. A 34: Only the bright red striations at southeast are subsurface.

PLATE VI



E 3 «Hands» of Plaque A7 as originally appearing in dull red on dull gray surface pocked with craters.



E 3 room containing Brick Wall 16 (left of stick) as excavated by Père Maurice Tallon S. J. of Beirut. The part of the wall containing the fresco was fallen on its face to the right of the stick and discovered in a horizontal position.

PLATE VII



Père Senès (left) and Frère Vives (center), lifelong collaborators of Jubilarian Father Fernández, working at the extraction and copying of the E 3 fresco.

contain any painting. Also in the corner is the fragment turned over by the pick, near A 1. The black-and-white reproduction is adequate, since there was really only one red color, and it was as dull as its dull gray background (Plate V). Naturally in many cases each viewer got a different impression of what lines or curves were actually to be seen, especially where the plaster was creased. But the artist listened patiently to the observations and proposals of a numerous corps of keenly-interested critics; so that his end-product must be considered to represent an objective and judicious, albeit by no means infallible, appraisal.

It must be admitted frankly that the brilliant presage of plastic art held out by Plaque I was not fully borne out. The surface of the first three plaques was clearly curved; or one might almost say, on a small scale, vaulted. We discussed at that time and excluded the possibility that this might have been due to what the wall hit in falling. But it must be called at least a curious coincidence that no trace of similar curvature appeared in all the subsequent plaques. Many other button-craters appeared, however, some incorporated into the design: but without any further clue as to the decorative intent. The likeliest supposition, that they were intended to hold a ball-shaped semiprecious stone, was not corroborated by the emergence of any such stone in the immediate environs. Despite all this, the state of the question remains essentially what it was as soon as Plaque I had been examined: we have here to do with elements of plastic art which are unique in Ghassulian if not in the whole of ancient Palestinian culture.

What does the painting represent? The only somewhat recognizable elements are the two detached hands in Plaque 7. It is entirely coincidental that the first eight plaques to be extracted contained some slightly coherent design. The broad bands, which seem so bold and fit the tradition of Ghassulian vase-painting, turn out to be disappointingly truncated — at points generally not at the partition-lines of the separate plaques. Some of them have bold right-angles leading to nowhere. Many ripply lines, also notably in the Ghassulian pottery-painting tradition, seem intended to form ethereal bodies, possibly even of humans — but the illusion is as difficult to capture as moonbeam-ripples on a lake. One blob could be called an octopus or head with flying tresses. The Ghassul Star-fresco seems redivivus in Plaque 1, but the star-points then dissolve into festoons. On the whole we must simply present our tableau to the world's specialists in the history of art, and await their foreseeably widely-divergent rapprochements.

Can any religious significance be seen in the discovery? Palestine archeology has suffered from the endemic disease of too-readily ascribing a religious function to discoveries which seemed to serve no

other useful purpose. The fact that nothing in this painting conforms to the art of other known cult-forms would not be conclusive. But it must be noted that in many different parts of the vast area of Ghassul have been found paintings, mostly of higher technical quality than this one. On the other hand, the building in which apparently the painted wall stood is a strongly built and imposing one, though not more so than many or most of the other buildings revealed by former excavations. In the sense that both art and worship relate to the higher forms of cultivation of the human spirit, it might be considered natural to see in this unusual achievement of primitive man a striving toward the expression of some conviction regarding the cosmos.

A final difficult decision remained to make. Should we dig into the 5-metre block left standing between E2-3 and E1 in order to remove the portion of fresco still contained there? In a sense this seemed to be our obvious obligation — and we had both time and funds adequate to the need. But we decided against. Since we possessed already some 2 × 3 metres of the surface, the remainder surely could not be much. And even if it were, more so in fact, science would be grateful to us for leaving its extraction to others who might at some future date be in possession of more advanced techniques. If the Pontifical Institute once headed by our jubilarian Father Fernández ever decides upon a ninth excavation at Ghassul, it will possess as point of departure a precise objet d'art waiting patiently at a well-determined point.

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