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# A Late Recompense: The Rediscovered Monumental Octagon at Pergamon

SEÇİL TEZER ALTAY\*

## Abstract

Today large parts of the ancient city of Pergamon lie beneath the current city of Bergama. Thriving on top of the ancient remains, the site consists of numerous historical layers ranging from the Roman period up to today. Thanks to its rich history, the city has been inscribed on the World Heritage List of UNESCO in 2014 with the title "Pergamon and its Multi-Layered Cultural Landscape." In 2013 an octagonal structure was discovered in one of these multi-layered spots where the Roman imperial expansion of the city and the 19th-century residential settlement meet. Hints in archival documents revealed that this is actually a "rediscovery," which highlights the importance of archival materials for current research projects in ancient cities like Pergamon that has a fairly long history of research. This article mainly examines the blanks and hints in the research history of the Octagon in three excavation periods. After summarizing the most recent discovery of the ancient structure, it addresses access issues as well as its state of preservation and the research methodology shaped in accordance with current conditions.

**Keywords:** Pergamon, Roman Imperial period, octagonal structure

## Öz

Bugün, Pergamon Antik Kenti büyük ölçüde günümüz Bergama yerleşimi altındadır. Antik kalıntıların üzerinde büyüyen yerleşim, Roma Dönemi'nden günümüze uzanan katmanlı bir tarihi yelpaze göstermektedir. Zengin geçmişi sayesinde kent, "Pergamon ve Çok Katmanlı Kültürel Peyzajı" başlığı ile 2014 yılında UNESCO Dünya Miras Listesi'ne girmiştir. 2013 yılında sekizgen biçimli bir yapı, antik kentin Roma İmparatorluk Dönemi'ne tarihlenilecek bölümü ile 19. yüzyıl konut yerleşim dokusunun üst üste geldiği, çok katmanlı bir alanda keşfedilmiştir. Arşiv belgelerinden elde edilen ipuçları bunun esasen bir 'yeniden keşif' olduğu gerçeğini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu durum, özellikle Pergamon gibi oldukça uzun bir araştırma geçmişine sahip bir antik kentte gerçekleştirilen güncel araştırmalar için arşiv belgelerinin süregelen önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Sekizgen Yapı'nın son keşfi, yapıya erişim, kalıntı korunmuşluk durumu ile mevcut şartlar ışığında şekillenen araştırma metodolojisi özetlendikten sonra; esas olarak antik yapının araştırma tarihçesindeki boşluklar ve yapıya dair ipuçları, üç kazı dönemi altında gözden geçirilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Pergamon, Roma İmparatorluk Dönemi, sekizgen biçimli yapı

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## Introduction and Excavation History

The ancient city of Pergamon (modern Bergama) is situated in western Turkey. Its history stretches over more than 3000 years. The city was located first on a steep hill and later expanded towards the valley of the Kaikos River (today Bakırçay) in the Roman Imperial period.<sup>1</sup> The Octagon is located on the lower part of the southern slope, immediately outside the Eumenian city walls that date to the early second century BC (fig. 1).

In 1878, the first scientific excavations in Pergamon were started by Carl Humann with the initiative of Alexander Conze on behalf of the Royal Museums of Berlin. They lasted until 1886. By 1900, the supervision of the excavation was transferred to Wilhelm Dörpfeld and the Athens Department of the German Archaeological Institute. Since 1929, the Pergamon excavation has been a project of the Istanbul Department of the aforementioned institute. During the first research period conducted by the Royal Museums, archaeological activities focused on the uppermost plateau of the ancient city, the Great Altar particularly, which was eventually transferred to Berlin.<sup>2</sup> By the next research period though, supervised by Dörpfeld, buildings on the acropolis were the focus, namely the Gymnasion, Demeter Sanctuary, etc., and the lower city started to be systematically investigated.<sup>3</sup> In Pergamon, as in many other archaeological sites, archaeological field work and publications on their outcomes were put on hold due to two devastating world wars. Yet since 1957, excavations at the city and surveys in the micro-region of Pergamon have continued until this very day.

## Discovery, Access and Methodology

A large part of the lower south slope of the ancient city hill is a residential quarter of Bergama today. It consists of approximately 1000 houses, the earliest examples dating back to the first half of the 19th century.<sup>4</sup> Many spots in this quarter display traces of ancient remains, which are difficult to assess at first glance and to which extent they are preserved. At one spot, part of an ancient structure was discovered thanks to the oral statements of residents in its immediate vicinity. These comments reveal “the hidden” behind the doors, for each of the houses incorporates a separate part of the ancient structure. A single season of field work focusing on identifying these parts unveiled that each of these remains together form a monumental structure with an octagonal shape and a symmetric plan. In short, under these circumstances it is impossible to recognize the Octagon from the modern street level, since a very large area, on top and surrounding it, is densely covered with residential buildings.

Out of the ten houses located on top of the Octagon, five provide access into separate parts of the structure and with completely different access conditions, whether walking ahead, climbing down, crawling into, etc. (fig. 2a). At one of these houses, the Bergama Museum conducted a salvage excavation in 2014 that removed a great volume of debris and revealed a large part of a 1/8-segmental unit of the symmetric structure. Although the excavated finds do not provide any contextual information for the building, the uncovered area enabled further investigations focusing on aspects such as building techniques and spatial distribution. In

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed history of Pergamon, see Radt 2002; Zimmermann 2011; Pirson and Scholl 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Conze 1884, 1. The history of excavations in this period is summarized in Kästner 2014.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of this excavation period see Radt 2014.

<sup>4</sup> This residential area, divided into three quarters, is analyzed in Ulusoy Binan 2018, 76-100. The possible influence of ancient ruins on the architectural character of this quarter is investigated in Bachmann 2012.

fact, this space remained the only accessible space of the Octagon within the framework of this research. No other residents allowed multiple access to their homes, so no further excavations could be conducted. Fortunately, there is a piece of preserved wall that was incorporated into the façade of a modern house, which likely indicates the upper structure of the Octagon (fig. 2b).

What was the Octagon built for? The study on the Octagon's possible function has not been completed yet. Many aspects play a role in this discussion, and it is certainly the topic of another article. The structure, 40 meters in diameter, allows one hypothesis regarding its function - that it could be "an inner-city mausoleum" such as the Octagon in Ephesus or the cenotaph erected for Gaius Caesar in Limyra.<sup>5</sup> Looking back on the long research history of Pergamon spanning over 140 years, how come such a prominent structure with an extraordinary shape has not gained recognition so far? After all, this was not really the case.

## Hints from Earlier Publications and Archives

A literature review combined with a search of research archives brought to light astonishing results about the research history of the Octagon. Already during the first period of the excavations, the Octagon had been discovered. However, today this can be traced only by visual materials such as maps. It was rediscovered and documented properly during the second period. Once more, such documentation remained unpublished, was partly lost, and entirely forgotten until the final rediscovery of the ancient structure in recent years.

### *First Excavation Period under the Royal Museums of Berlin (1878-1886)*

In one of the earliest publications, the guidebook of Pergamon (*Führer durch die Ruinen zu Pergamon*), published in 1887, placed the Octagon on its map (fig. 3).<sup>6</sup> However, no number is attributed to the structure on the map, thus in the book's text no information is provided regarding the Octagon.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, none of the subsequent publications of this early period mention the discovery or existence of the structure. Yet this guidebook already proves that during the first period of scientific excavations conducted by Carl Humann between 1878-1886, the Octagon must have been known<sup>8</sup> and at least briefly documented to be correctly placed on the maps. This fact is verified by the draft plans found in the archives. In 1886, Carl Humann prepared a map called "The Surroundings of Pergamon" (*Die Umgebung von Pergamon*) in 1:3000 scale, stretching over Bergama's civic borders of that time and the Octagon is precisely located (fig. 4).

<sup>5</sup> For its first interpretation within the historic context, see Pirson 2017, 105. For a rather detailed report on the research methodology and preliminary observations on the architecture, see Pirson 2020, 170-74.

<sup>6</sup> Generalverwaltung der königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1887, Plan 2. Following the first printing in 1887, there were further editions: second edition 1899, third edition 1901, fourth edition 1905, fifth edition 1911, sixth edition 1922-1923. The Octagon was excluded from the revised maps in the sixth edition.

<sup>7</sup> The only description that may cover the Octagon is in the section *Remains in the Lower City*, more precisely in the last paragraph of this section: "In the lower city there are still numerous Roman building remains, but most of them are less important or less easily accessible than the ones mentioned above"; Generalverwaltung der königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1887, 14.

<sup>8</sup> At least until 1900, the archaeological excavation team was accommodated at a house in quite close proximity to the Octagon (approx. 60 m). Under these circumstances, it seems unlikely that they were unaware of the ancient remains in their immediate surroundings.

Meanwhile, architectural researcher (*Bauforscher*) Richard Bohn conducted studies on the ancient walls on the hill, focusing mainly on the fortification systems.<sup>9</sup> However, on the southern slope, where this part of the ancient city had been overbuilt by the residential settlement, he could identify ancient remains only in bits and pieces among the modern buildings. He was not able to distinguish whether or not they were part of the fortification. Surprisingly, also a small part - the aforementioned upper structure of the Octagon - was documented within this study, apparently missing that it belongs to the already-known structure (fig. 5). Before bringing his work to print, Bohn passed away in 1898. Right after his unexpected decease, Carl Schuchhardt brought all of Bohn's work documents to Pergamon in the same year, so that Conze himself walked along the walls and remains that Bohn had depicted on his work, and became acquainted with every wall "stone by stone."<sup>10</sup>

Another key figure is cartographer Otto Berlet, who was invited to Pergamon in 1898 by Conze, particularly for preparing the map "Pergamon and Surroundings" (*Pergamon und Umgebung*) in 1:25.000 scale. Berlet mentioned that he based his works on Bohn's maps. But comparing the two versions of Berlet's map, questions arise. On the draft version of the map the Octagon is visible, whereas on the finalized version it has disappeared (fig. 6).<sup>11</sup> This mystery is solved by another archived document. On one of the worksheets of Bohn's map, the remains of the Octagon are clearly crossed out, together with another ancient structure (fig. 7). Evidently, it was Berlet who intentionally excluded these remains on the maps he prepared, which had been originally depicted on Bohn's maps. However, it should be noted that neither Bohn nor Berlet were aware that what they were depicting and later removing was part of the monumental Octagon.

### *Second Excavation Period under the Athens Department of the German Archaeological Institute (1900-1911)*

With the efforts of Alexander Conze, who left the Royal Museums and became the general secretary of the German Archaeological Institute, the fieldwork in Pergamon restarted under the supervision of Wilhelm Dörpfeld. During this period, the main focus of research did not shift away from the prominent acropolis, but rather expanded to include the lower plain where many other ancient remains were hidden between or under modern buildings. Among the excavation team members, architectural researcher Paul Schazmann was the leading figure investigating particularly the Roman buildings in the lower city.<sup>12</sup>

The first written record acknowledging the Octagon was found in Dörpfeld's excavation diary in the week of 11-17 October 1909: "This week Mr. Schazmann has examined and recorded the large octagonal Roman building that lies below the church Zoodochos Pigi" (fig. 8).<sup>13</sup> In fact, there are two letters found in the archives that Schazmann wrote to Conze during this time. In the earlier letter with no date, he lists his investigations including "the remains under

<sup>9</sup> Bohn conducted "wall studies" (*Mauerstudien*) in Pergamon between 1880 and 1886, updated for the last time on site in 1896.

<sup>10</sup> Conze et al. 1912, 30; Conze and Schuchhardt 1899, 111.

<sup>11</sup> The draft version is dated to 1898; the map was finalized in 1904 and initially published in 1913 in the first volume of "Ancient Monuments of Pergamon" (*Altertümer von Pergamon*).

<sup>12</sup> Schazmann conducted this work between 1906-1909, and its results were published in reports; see Dörpfeld 1908, 370-71; 1910, 385-88.

<sup>13</sup> Dörpfeld 1909, II-002. The Zoodochos Pigi Church used to be the metropolitan church of the Greek community of Bergama.

Makropoulos's house"; whereas in the second letter he says that he "was very absorbed by the octagonal building under Makropoulos's house, whose entire lower part is admirably preserved and will provide an interesting plan and section."<sup>14</sup> This proves that before Schazmann started his investigation in the area, he and possibly Dörpfeld were not informed of the existence of the Octagon. The original drawings of Schazmann are stored in the Pergamon Archive of the Central Office of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin. However, there is only one plate including two cross-sections of the Octagon (fig. 9), and the plan drawing is missing.

Schazmann did not forget to mention the Octagon in Dörpfeld's annual report about the work in Pergamon: "The other rotunda, which has been preserved almost intact on the first floor, is located in the northeastern part of the city, just below the Greek Agora we excavated; its massive forms are instructive for the use of octagonal construction, so popular later in Byzantium. The purpose of the superstructure, of which some granite columns have been preserved, has not yet been determined."<sup>15</sup> Dörpfeld already gave signals of an upcoming volume of the *Altertümer von Pergamon*, which would be dedicated to Roman buildings in the lower city compiled by Schazmann.<sup>16</sup> However, this was never realized.<sup>17</sup>

### *Third Excavation Period under the Istanbul Department of the German Archaeological Institute (since 1929)*

After the First World War and Turkey's War of Independence, excavations in Pergamon were resumed under the supervision of Theodor Wiegand in 1927. These focused on the arsenals on the acropolis, the Red Hall in the lower city, and the area called Musalla Mezarlığı. From 1929 onwards, the direction of excavations was transferred to the recently founded Istanbul Department of the German Archaeological Institute. During this time the excavation team included former team member Paul Schazmann, and Erich Boehringer, who will become the successive excavation director. The period under the supervision of Wiegand ended in 1938 due to the outbreak of the Second World War and until this period, there is no evidence of fieldwork on the Octagon. The next period started in 1957 under Erich Boehringer, and once again the Octagon was not included in the research program of this period. However, Boehringer undoubtedly knew about the structure, as he wrote in a text in commemoration of Schazmann in 1972:

But not only the Gymnasium in Pergamon was his task. Besides this, he researched and measured the Roman buildings of the lower city, [...] an octagonal building below the Lower Agora, not far from it the enormous basilica Kizil Avlu, which also dates back to the Hadrian era, [...]. Schazmann was able to present plans and drawings of these buildings at the Winckelmann meeting in Berlin in December 1910 and the following year in Rome at the International Exhibition of Archaeology, which astonished his colleagues. They were considered lost, but five years ago there were still some at the son Paul Emile Schazmann's in Bern, and there is hope that more will be found. They are to be published elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> These letters are stored in the central archive of the Berlin State Museums.

<sup>15</sup> Dörpfeld 1910, 387. Although it is not mentioned separately, back then granite columns must have been part of the Zoodochos Pigi Church. Today there is a primary school in the location of the church (constructed in the 1970s), and only two remaining granite columns lay in its courtyard.

<sup>16</sup> Dörpfeld 1908, 370; Deutsches Archäologisches Institut 1910, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Probably due to the outbreak of World War I, the work was reduced to publishing only the Gymnasium.

<sup>18</sup> Boehringer, 1972, 11.

Nevertheless, this knowledge is not even reflected on maps of the ancient city. Although the structure was known, it was not depicted on maps and thus faded into oblivion.

The Octagon was rediscovered again in 2013, thanks to information provided by local inhabitants. More systematic research began that revealed the Octagon, this time for good.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

The Octagon of Pergamon has a long history of being forgotten and shifted into the background of more “important” monuments of the city. Although it was already discovered during the first excavation period (1878-1886), the discovery and reassembly of scattered fragments of the Great Altar must have dominated the news from Pergamon. Knowledge of the Octagon slowly faded away, particularly following the unexpected deaths of Carl Humann in 1896 and then Richard Bohn in 1898. The aftermath of these tragic events culminated in a loss of information on the topic. The outline of the Octagon on maps disappeared and the connection between its lower and upper structure was obviously lost. Since then, team members started tracing (visible) remains of the (upper) structure but still were not able to attribute them to the Octagon.

Developments in the second period (1900-1911) in regard to investigating Roman structures in the lower city, including the Octagon, were promising. But apparently the process to prepare for publishing was interrupted by the First World War. As a result, only the Gymnasion was thoroughly studied and published in 1923 by Paul Schazmann, despite the initial plan to publish the Octagon together with other Roman structures of the lower city.

In the beginning of the third period (1929 onwards), Erich Boehringer and Paul Schazmann were members of the Pergamon excavation team directed by Theodor Wiegand. This may explain the fact that Boehringer knew of the Octagon, but he had other objectives to accomplish. Since then, the Octagon remained out of sight, and in 2013 it was rediscovered for the last time and eternalized on the latest archaeological map of Pergamon.

The Octagon, as a monumental structure located on the presumed route of the Sacred Way going up to the acropolis, must have played a significant role in the urban network of this Roman “metropolis.” Despite its history full of failed discoveries, the Octagon is just beginning a new phrase of understanding within its historic context.

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<sup>19</sup> As an evidence for its rediscovery, the Octagon has taken its permanent place on the latest released digital archaeological map of Pergamon (fig. 1), that can be visited and interactively experienced at: <https://www.dainst.blog/transpergmikro/neue-archaologische-karte/> (01.05.2021).



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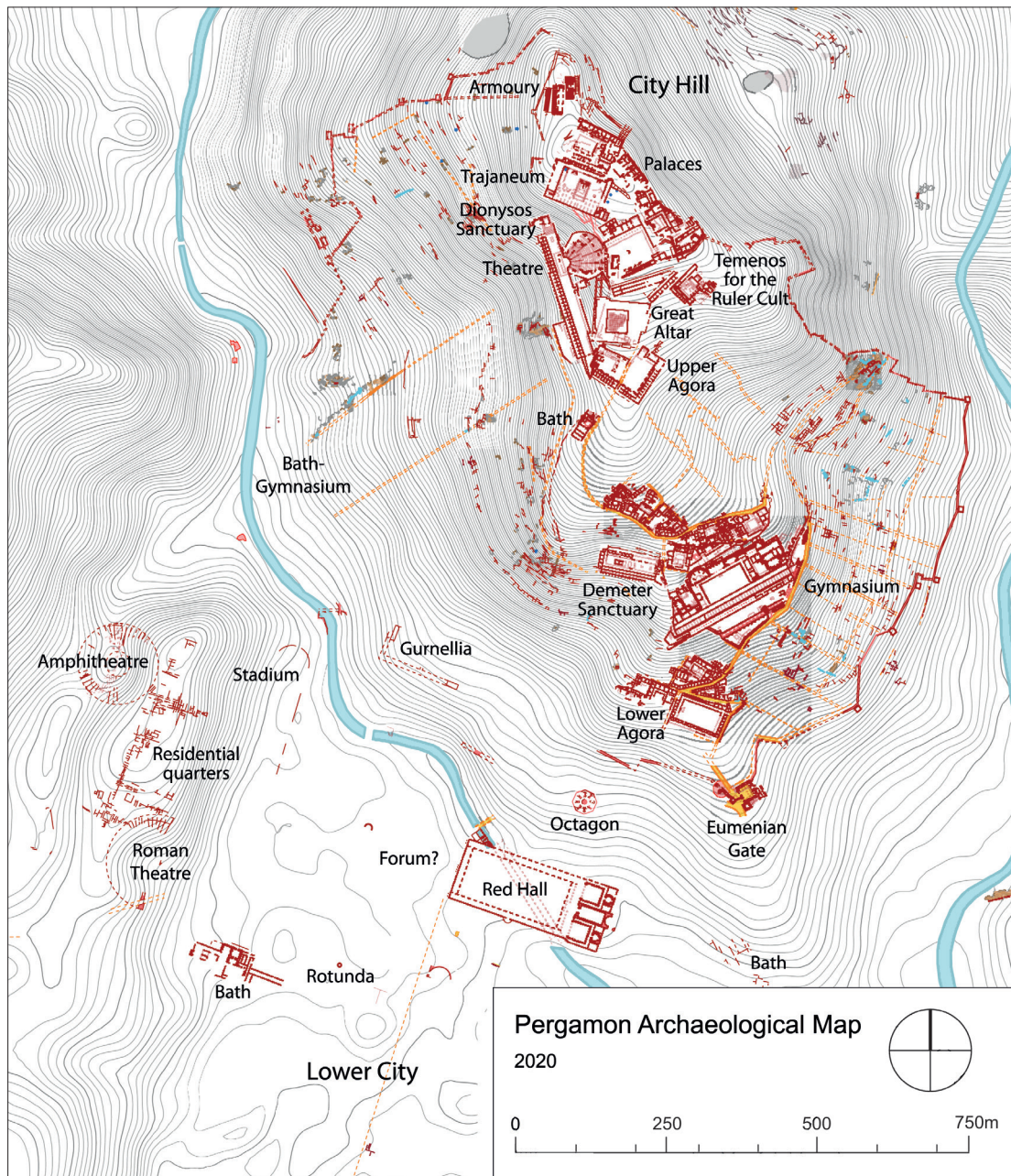


FIG. 1 Octagon on the current archaeological map of Pergamon (recreated by the author from the Digital Map of Pergamon 1.1, DAI 2020).





FIG. 2a View from the vaulted inner corridor, incorporated into the modern residential settlement (DAI-Istanbul, Pergamon Excavation, Photograph by the author, 2015).



FIG. 2b Remains of the Octagon, visible above current street level (DAI-Istanbul, Pergamon Excavation. Left: Photograph by Elisabeth Steiner, 1973. Right: Photograph by the author, 2015).





FIG. 3a First two pages of the guidebook of Pergamon: Plan 1. Ancient city hill, Plan 2. Ancient city hill with the lower city extending southwards. (Generalverwaltung der königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1887).

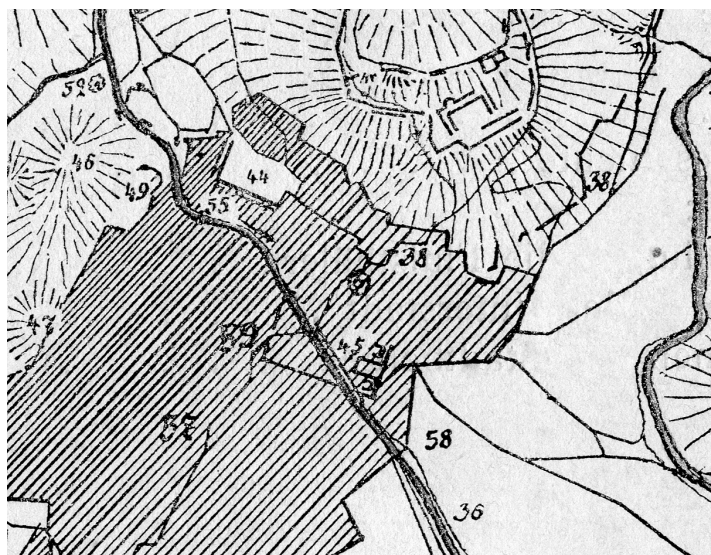


FIG. 3b Cutout of Plan 2: Octagon depicted with no numbers attributed (Generalverwaltung der königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1887).



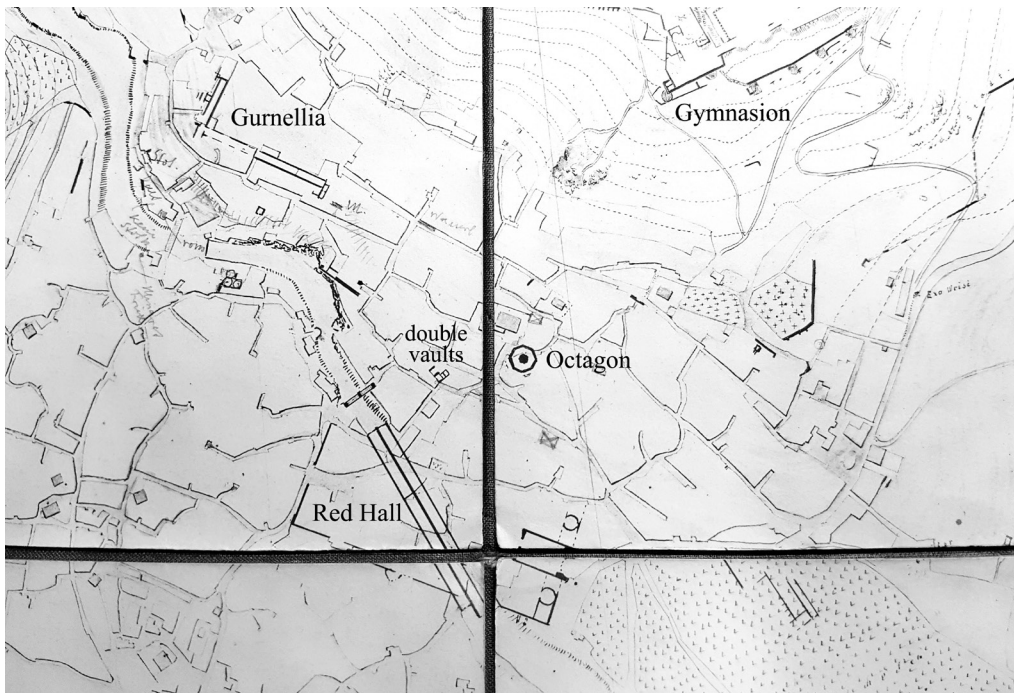


FIG. 4 Ancient structures are named on the cutout of the map "The Surroundings of Pergamon" prepared by Carl Humann in 1886 (SMB-ZA, I/ANT, P 384).

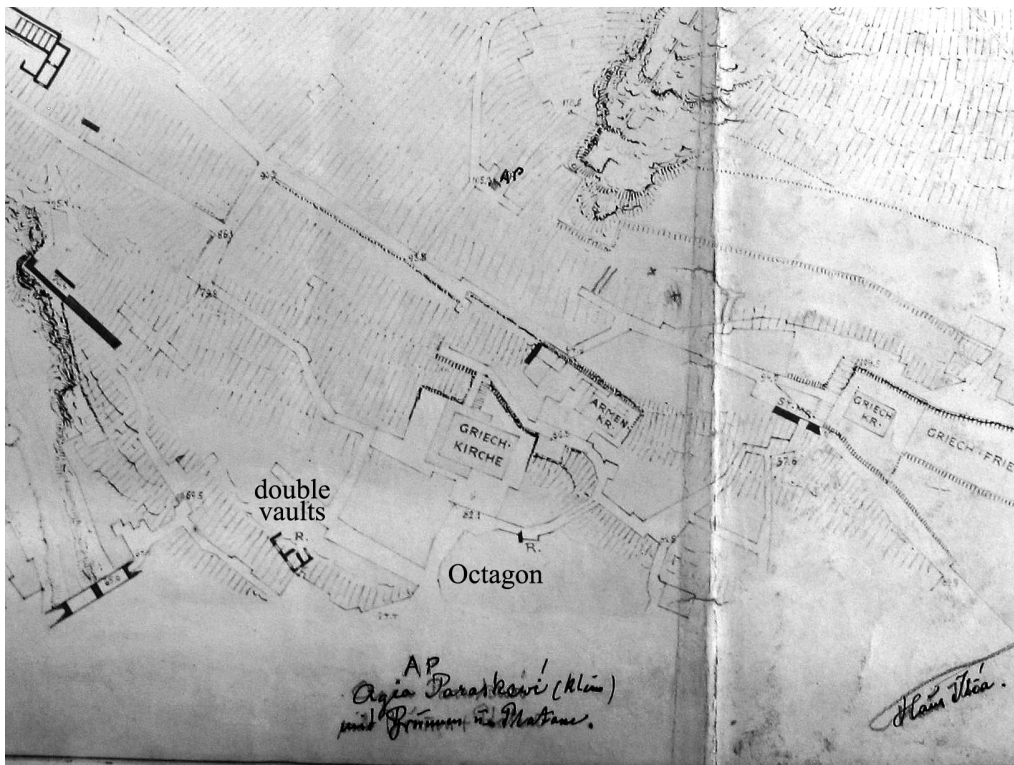


FIG. 5 Cutout of the draft map of Richard Bohn's wall studies (*Mauerstudien*) (SMB-ZA, I/ANT, P 384). Marked is the visible remains on the modern street level that indicate the superstructure.





FIG. 6 Cutouts of the draft and the printed maps prepared by Otto Berlet. The Octagon is removed from the printed version. (above: SMB-ZA, I/ANT, P 141, below: Conze et al. 1913, pl. II).



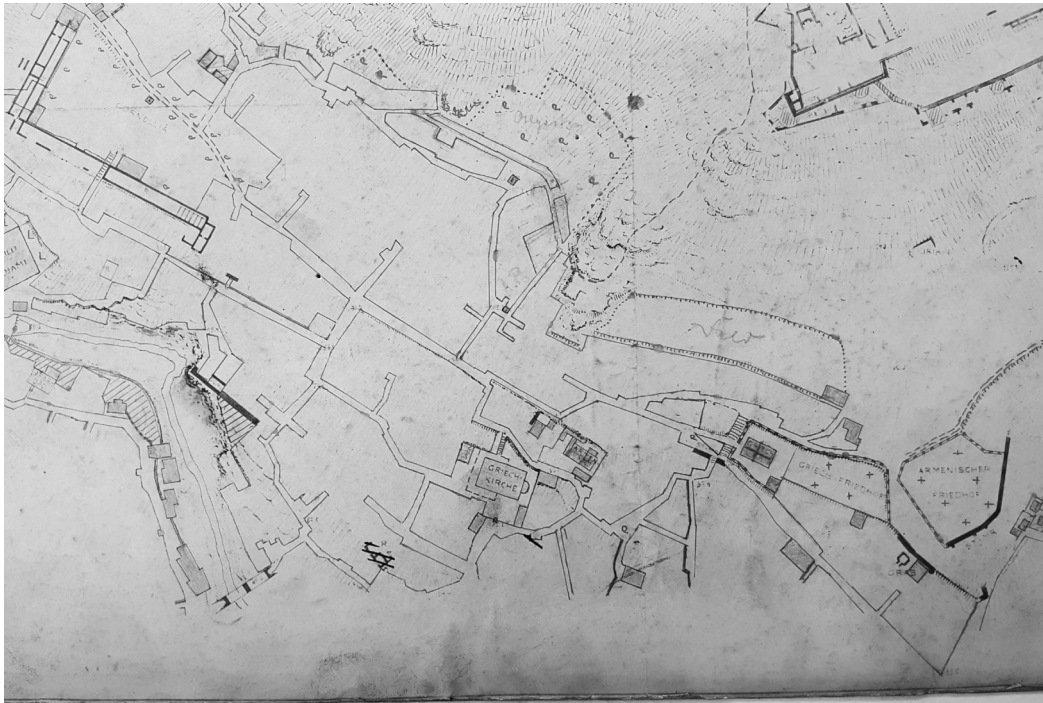


FIG. 7 Cutout of the draft map prepared by Richard Bohn (SMB-ZA, I/ANT, P 384). Remains of the upper structure of the Octagon are removed from the maps together with the double vaults.



FIG. 8 Cutout of the printed map of Otto Berlet (Conze et al. 1913, pl. III).

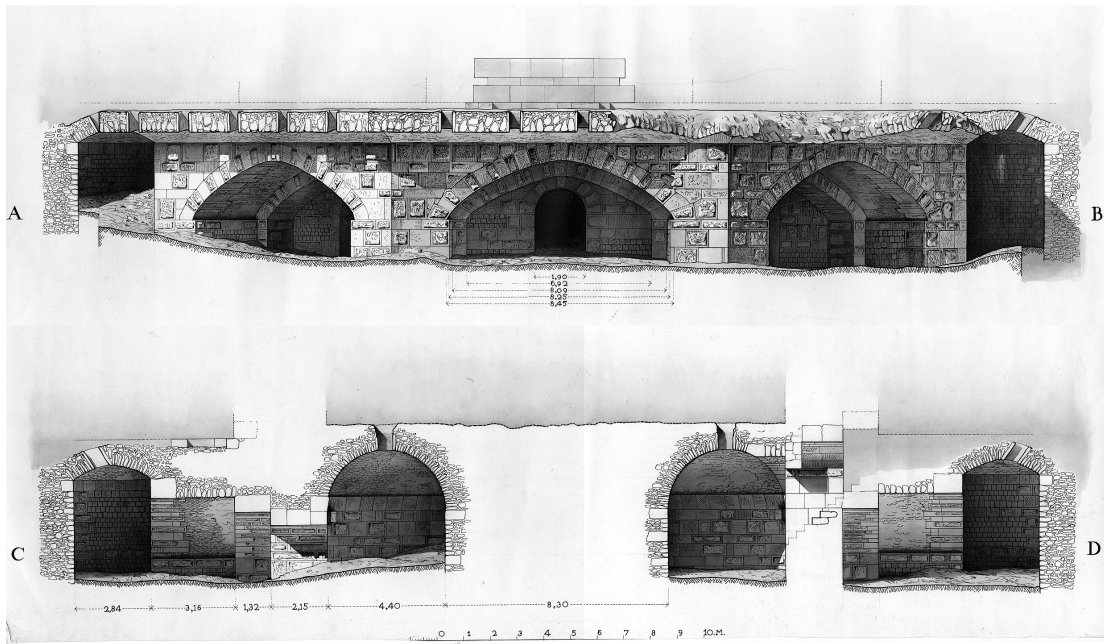


FIG. 9 Cross-sections of the Octagon, drawn by Paul Schazmann in 1909 (DAI-Berlin, Pergamon Archive).





