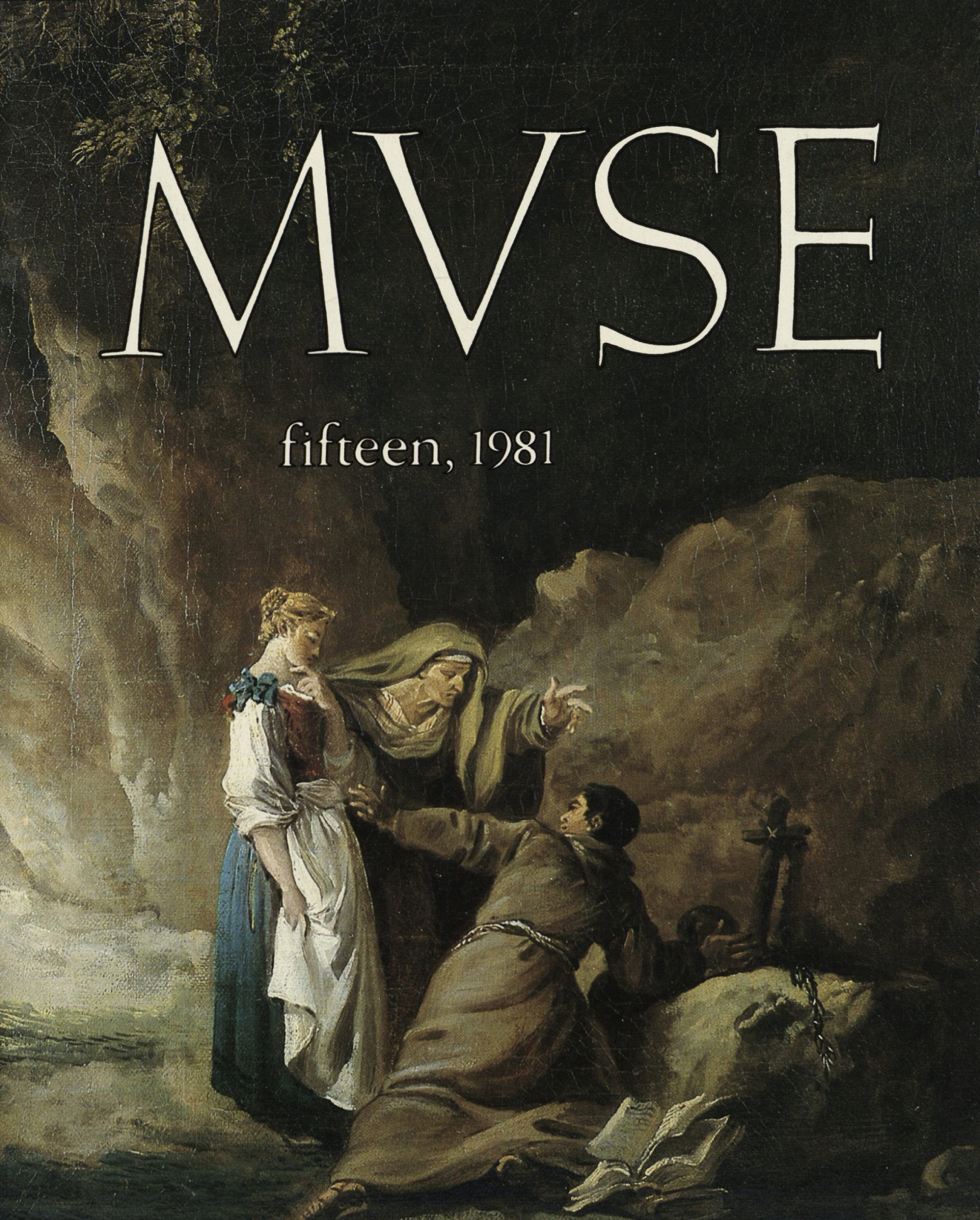


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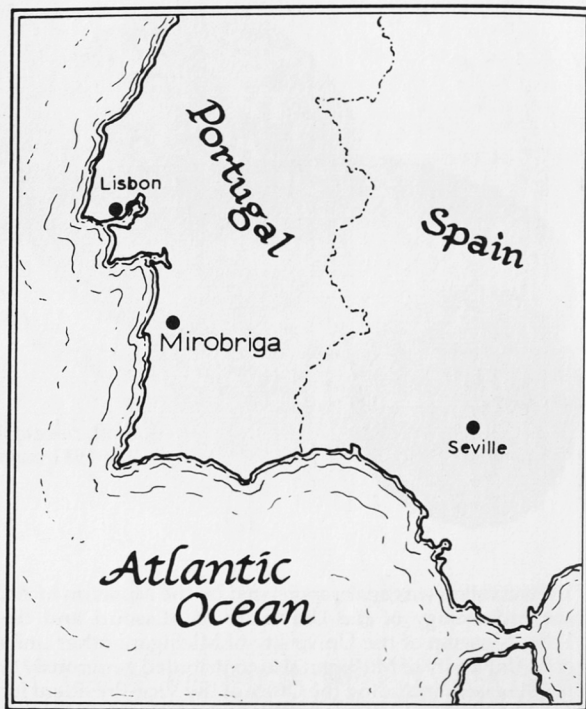
Investigations at Mirobriga, Portugal in 1981

At the invitation of the Portuguese government, the Department of Art History and Archaeology of the University of Missouri initiated the first Portuguese-American archaeological project at the site of ancient Mirobriga in southern Portugal.¹

The site of ancient Mirobriga lies about 140 kilometers southeast of Lisbon (ancient Olisipo) amid gently rolling hills near the modern town of Santiago do Cacém (Fig. 1). In antiquity it was situated on the westernmost major road of the Roman empire leading from Lacobriga (modern Lagos) in the south to Bracara Augusta (Braga), capital of the Province of Gallaecia. It was also the starting point for a major inland road that passed through Eborá (Evora) on its way to Emerita Augusta, the capital of the Roman Province of Lusitania. Mentioned by several ancient writers, Mirobriga must have been an important center both in Roman times and in the Pre-Roman, Iron Age, period.² Today, its ruins extend over two square kilometers and contain traces of buildings, paved streets, a large hippodrome, a bath complex, and an acropolis with a forum and at least one temple.

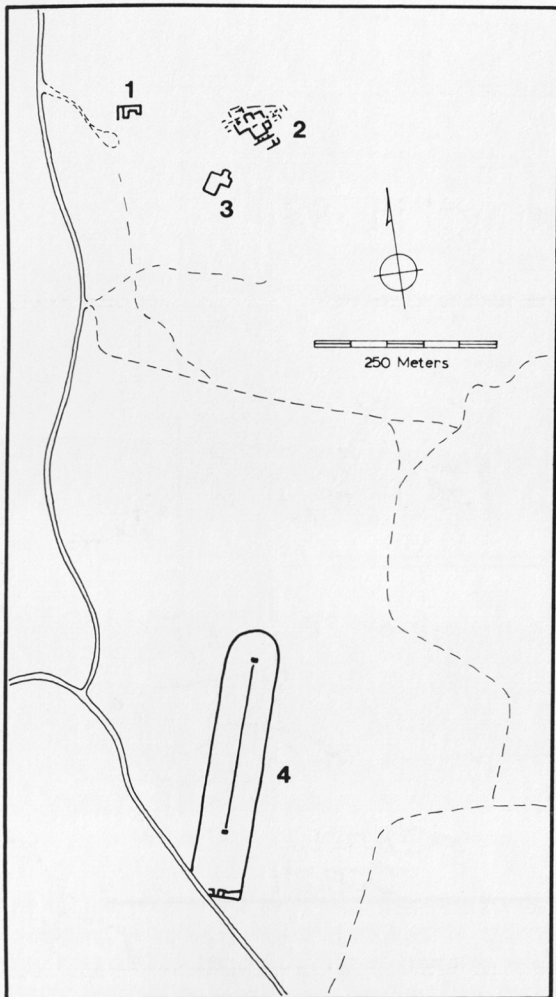
The site long has been known and was investigated as far back as the early nineteenth century. Major clearing of some areas was undertaken in the forties of this century, and in 1959 Professor Fernando de Almeida began to excavate the site. His book and articles constitute the most important studies of Mirobriga.³ In addition, he made his excavated material available to specialists and students who have produced significant articles on the pottery, coins, and lamps from the site.⁴

Professor de Almeida's investigations led him to interpret the site as a huge pilgrimage center built around an enormous sanctuary of Aesculapius and Venus located at the top of the



1. The southwestern Iberian peninsula, showing the location of Mirobriga.

hill.⁵ The entire temple area was seen by him as having been constructed essentially at one time, during the third or fourth century A.D. The hippodrome and the baths, which were destroyed in barbarian raids of the fifth century, are assigned to the same building program.⁶ De Almeida's interpretation of the site was based on construction technique and an inscription referring to a festival known as the Quinquatrus, which he believed was the major celebration of Aesculapius at Mirobriga. De Almeida partially restored the temple on the top of the hill (his



2. Sketch plan of the areas at Mirobriga: 1. St. Brás Chapel, now the excavation field house; 2. Temple area and Forum; 3. Bath complex; 4. Hippodrome.

healing saint. Professor Caeiro will carry on investigations in this area. The Missouri teams will concentrate on area 2, the forum and temple complex at the top of the hill; area 3, the extensive bath complex to the south, and area 4, the hippodrome. The preliminary 1981 season concentrated on area 2 under Professor Soren, and area 4 directed by Professor Leonard. The bath complex (area 3) will be investigated in the forthcoming season.

In 1981 work in area 2 produced a plan of the forum area (Fig. 3), and a section through the restored so-called Temple of Aesculapius (Fig. 4). The work cast doubt on many of the previous theories concerning Mirobriga.⁸

As can be seen from the plan (Fig. 3), the principal temple and forum area look very much like the standard provincial Roman capitolium and forum area with many roads leading to it, numerous dedications appearing within it and various shrines and public buildings around it. The whole assembly is more appropriate to a large fortified town (the *oppidum* of Pliny) than to a sanctuary, and critical study of the Aesculapius inscription indicates that it does not necessarily support the identification of the temple as dedicated to that god.⁹

The actual remains of the temple are evidence of a substantial structure with walls some ninety centimeters thick. It apparently had a basement, since an opening 1.88 meters wide exists and continues down over two meters below the level of the present reconstructed column bases. The construction technique for

temple of Aesculapius), the bath and the hippodrome, even borrowing columns and other architectural members originally found in the bath to decorate his reconstruction of the temple (Fig. 5).

The death of Professor de Almeida in 1979 halted excavation at Mirobriga, but his work will now be carried on by the new Portuguese-American Mirobriga Project. Figure 2 is a sketch plan of the site, indicating the primary areas of investigation by the Project. Area 1 is situated at the modern entrance to the site and includes a Roman street, houses and a standing, but abandoned, medieval chapel of St. Brás, a local

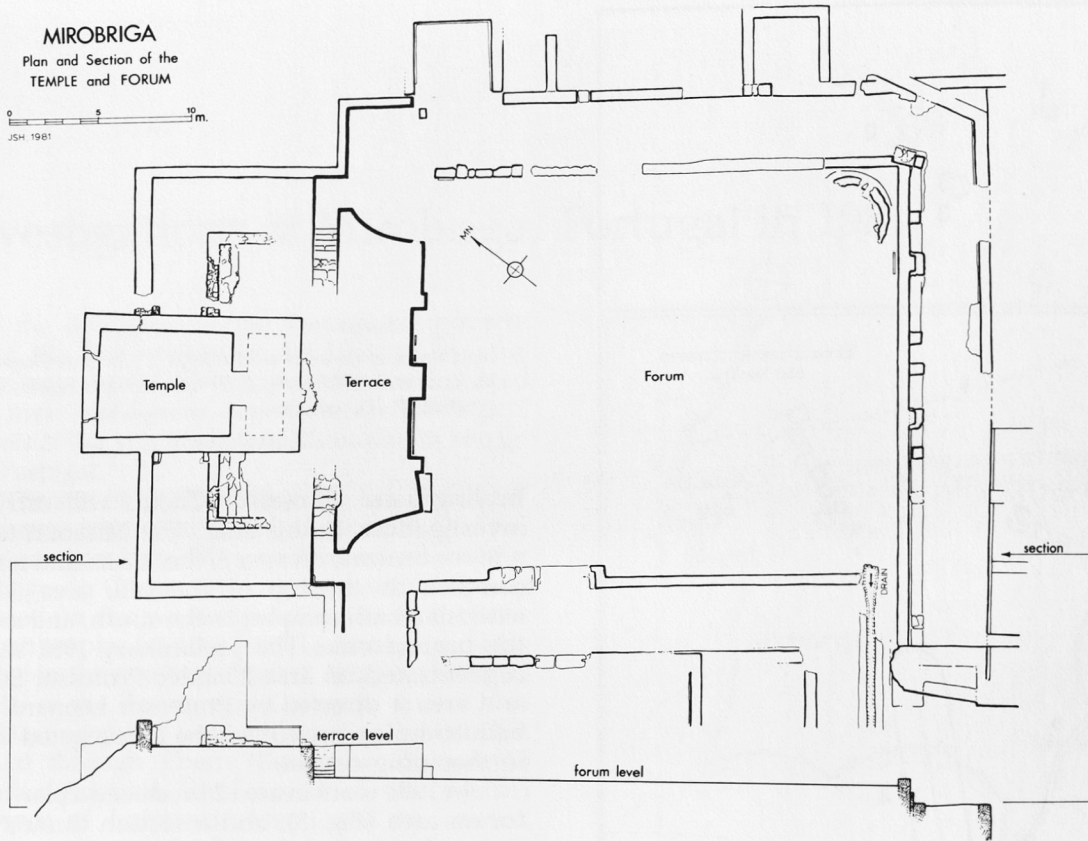
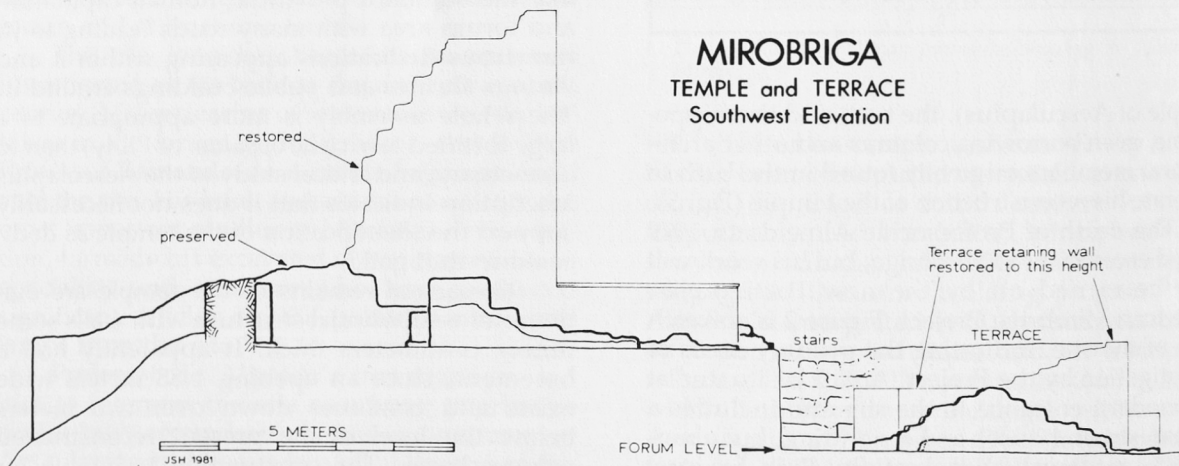
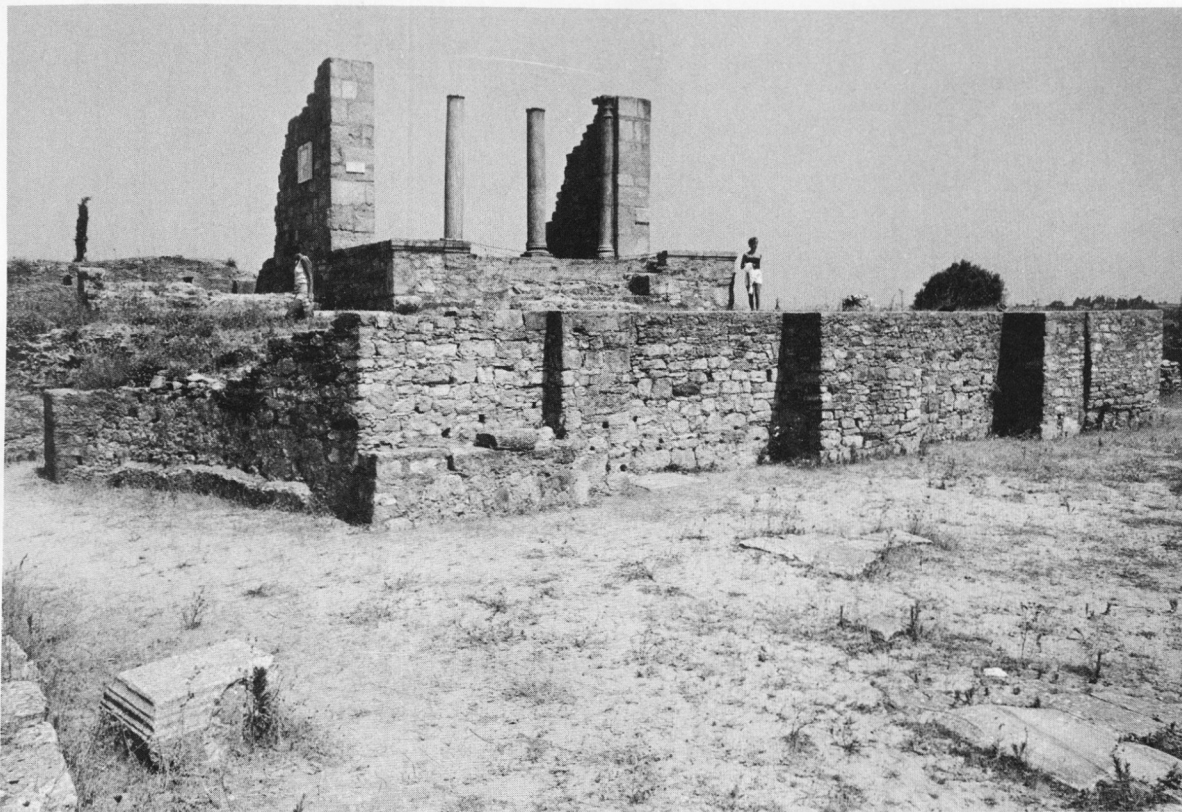


Figure 3.

Figure 4.





5. View of the restored Temple and terrace as it appears today.

the temple was to set pale red limestone blocks averaging seventeen centimeters high by thirty-five long and twenty-six deep in courses, with ample interstices filled with mortar. This technique is found all over the site.

The temple rested upon an elaborate, rather asymmetrical terrace approached by flanking staircases and decorated with scalloped rectangular and curvilinear niches reminiscent of a Roman theater *pulpitum* or stage front (Figs. 3 and 5). De Almeida had recorded the existence of stairs attached to the exterior of the southwest cella wall that led to a raised L-shaped *ala* (wing). Investigations proved that a similar step and L arrangement existed on the northeast side of the temple. These *alae* might have been colonnaded. The *pulpitum* and *scenae frons* arrangement of a Roman theater would seem to have inspired this extraordinary construction

that gives the appearance of having emerged from a second style architectural landscape painting.¹⁰

The forum area is paved with limestone slabs set in hard mortar. A small test under this paving in the southern corner of the forum provided evidence for an earlier Phase 3 in the form of the remains of a drain dismantled in antiquity. Scraps of Arretine and South Gallic pottery datable not later than the Flavian Period (A.D. 69-96) and not earlier than the Tiberian Period (A.D. 14-37) came from beneath the paving slabs and were found in association with the drain. Confirmation of at least two stages in the forum can be seen at the south end where a lower level peristyle ran southwest to northeast against the south foundation wall of the forum. Here at least two stages of construction can be differentiated, the first with stairs and projecting

columns or pilasters of which only the ashlar bases survive and the second at a higher level that eliminated the need to step up into the forum proper.

Below the forum to the south and bonded into the southeast wall of the lower peristyle is a huge building, previously unrecorded, measuring 13.5 meters in width and 42 meters in length. Some of its walls are preserved to a height of over 10 meters (Fig. 6).

This structure contained at least two and possibly three stories. A narrow staircase ran down between the forum and lower street and between this building and a smaller extension of the building along the same alignment to the southwest. At least six extremely massive walls ran through the building along its width. The limited campaign of 1981 did not afford time to clear or plan the structure but it was possible to discover a tumble of corner blocks at its apparent southeast limit and to observe the facade which appears to have been carefully made from ashlar blocks, some of which at least have been rusticated. (Rustication was common in the Claudian period in Rome and is found in the Neronian period on Cyprus, so that it would not be inappropriate to find it used here at about the same period.) Behind the facade, the most massive walls appear to be of a construction technique similar to that of the temple, but more clearing and cleaning will be needed to confirm this. One tumbled ashlar from the building contained a fine relief sculpture of a bull, while an iron tethering ring is still clearly affixed to the wall of one of the rooms. Could this have been a market building? Also preserved here were several iron strips which have a ring on one end (Fig. 7). These are hardware for hanging doors, and cuttings for the placement of these strips can still

be seen in the stone thresholds of the large building.

A few other small soundings were undertaken in the temple and forum area. One of these in a "shop" recovered the remains of a fallen fresco decorated with simple bands of red and black on a white background. The fresco was also "decorated" with graffiti and several fragments contained complete words or nearly complete phrases. These are now being studied.

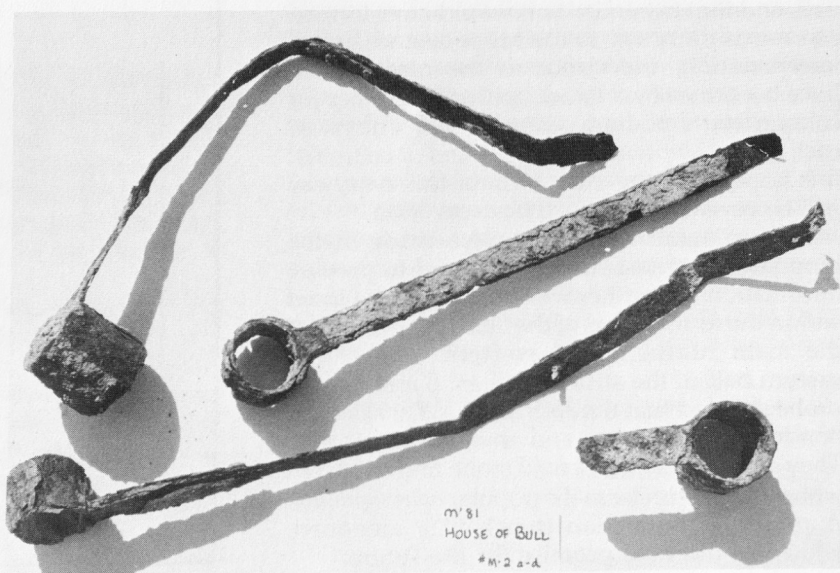
THE SECOND AREA TO BE INVESTIGATED in 1981 was the hippodrome, which lies slightly over a kilometer south of the temple area. Here also a new plan was made and small tests were dug.

The hippodrome is a large structure measuring approximately 369 x 75 meters. Although first identified in the forties of this century, Professor de Almeida excavated and reconstructed portions of it and published the first coherent plan. The dimensions as given by de Almeida are basically correct; however, the axis of the structure does not lie so neatly along a north-south line but approximately 20° east of north. This may not seem a major discrepancy, but combined with the fact that more walls are now visible than appeared on de Almeida's plan, it was decided that a new plan must be made (Fig. 8). From this it is clear that the hippodrome of Mirobriga shares most of the features exhibited by those in other parts of the Roman world. It is an elongated structure entered from the south, with a rounded wall at its northern end. The race-course is divided longitudinally by the *spina*, and there is evidence for a turning point (*meta*) at each end. At about the mid-point of the *spina* the foundations are interrupted for about seven meters. Until excavations are undertaken, it cannot be ascertained whether this is part of



6. Above: the large building to the south of the forum. Investigating this massive structure will be one of the focal points of the 1982 season.

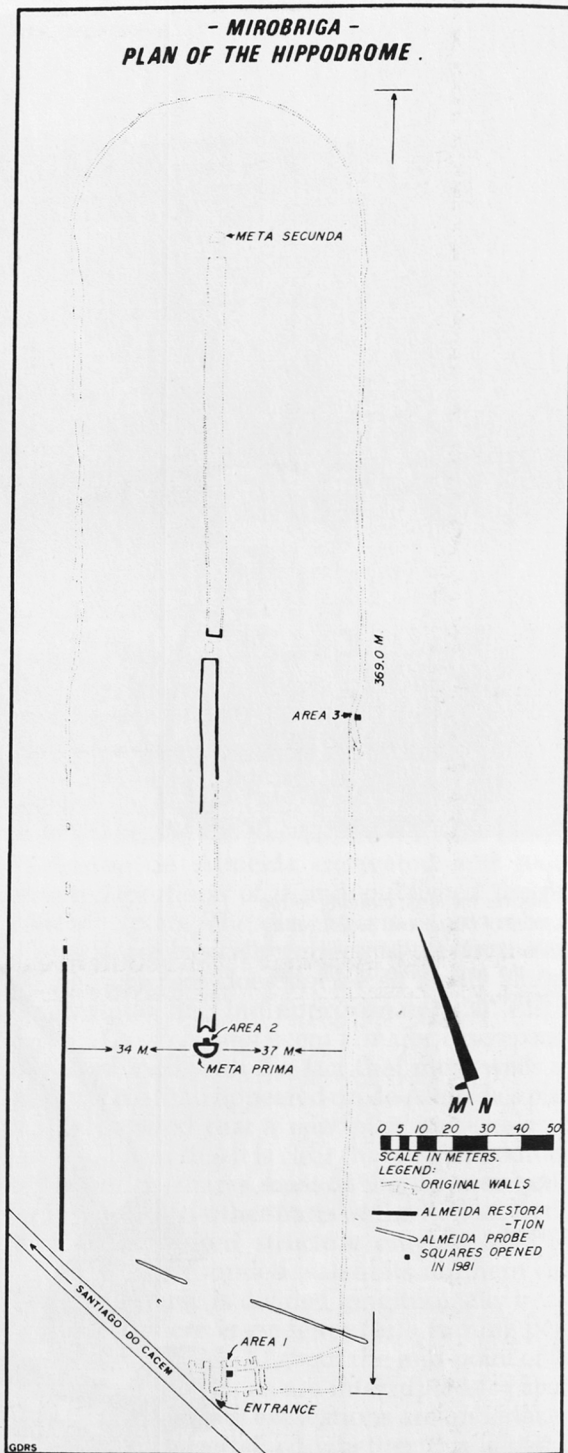
7. Right: iron fittings for a door once used in the large building seen above.



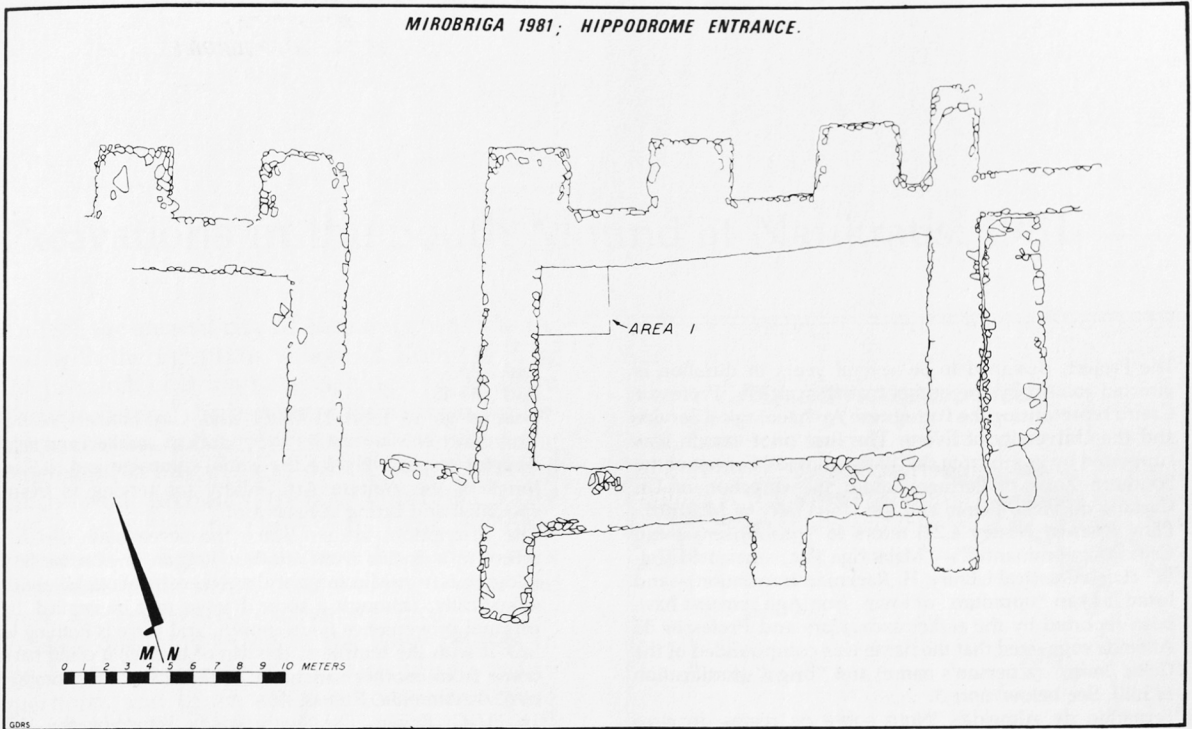
the original structure or placed here in modern times to emulate the position taken by the obelisk in the Circus Maximus in Rome.

Rubble and concrete constructions located at the south end of the hippodrome and now partially under a modern road were identified by de Almeida as starting gates (*carceres*). A preliminary study of these remains suggest that they may not in fact be starting gates. In the first place, it seems that the remains are of a structure which, although partly destroyed by the road construction, can be divided into a western and an eastern half, separated by a central entryway which is aligned approximately with the main axis of the hippodrome. Of these two sections, the one to the east (to the right as one enters the hippodrome) is complete in plan (Fig. 7) but the one to the west is fragmentary. It may be that it would have been a mirror image of the eastern half, and that the entire unit would have formed an on-axis entryway to the hippodrome. In this interpretation, the visitor to the races would have been met by a facade with a deep pier (or column on a podium) framing the entryway, each flanked by two shallower piers or columns. It is hoped that the exact form of this entryway will be revealed with further excavation.

Three small soundings were made in the hippodrome to test stratigraphy and to provide information for further work. Area 1 was placed within the foundations of the "entryway" against the main northern and western wall of the eastern half of the structure (Figs. 8 and 9). The probe showed that the N-S and E-W walls were bonded to each other and thus contemporary. They are constructed of field stone and mortared with concrete similar to the popular *opus signinum*. A probable foundation trench was identified, which should hold promise for the future.



MIROBRIGA 1981; HIPPODROME ENTRANCE.



8. Opposite: plan of the Hippodrome. 9. Above: plan of Area 1 at the south end of the Hippodrome.

The second sounding, at the southern end of the *spina* (Area 2, Fig. 8) was placed against a reconstructed semi-circular base. It was found that this modern construction rests on a lower wall constructed of unhewn field stones, without coursing and mortared with mud. The exact nature of this wall will also be the subject of future study.

The third probe (Area 3, Fig. 8) was opened along the eastern side of the building. Here a foundation trench for the east wall of the building was found and a large bronze Roman coin recovered from the soil into which the foundation trench was dug. Although not yet cleaned, the coin appears to be of first century date, providing a *terminus post quem* for the digging of the foundation trench and the building of the wall.

In short, the first preliminary season of the Mirobriga Project has cast doubt on the attribution of the site as a sanctuary to Aesculapius, has argued for a city with major constructional phases perhaps beginning in the first century, and has begun to approach an understanding of some of the most important buildings, with future seasons on the acropolis, in the bath, the hippodrome and elsewhere. We are confident Mirobriga will become one of the most important archaeological sites in the far west of Europe.

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¹The Project, designed to be several years in duration is directed jointly by the authors of this article, Professor Caeiro representing the Portuguese Archaeological Service and the University of Evora. The first pilot season was supported by grants from the Archaeological Service of the Southern Zone of Portugal under the direction of Dr. Caetano de Mello Beirão and the University of Missouri.

²Pliny (*Natural History* 4.22) refers to "mirobricensis qui Celtici cognominantur"—"Malabriga [sic] surnamed Celtic" (Loeb Classical Library, H. Rackman translation)—and listed it as an "oppidum" or town. Iron Age remains have been reported by the earlier excavators and Professor de Almeida suggested that the name was compounded of the Celtic "miro" (a person's name) and "briga" (fortification or hill). See below, note 3.

³Fernando de Almeida, "Noto sobre os restos do circo romano de Miróbriga dos Celticos," *Rivista de Guimares* 73 (1963); de Almeida, "Tres lucernas do Museu de Santiago do Cacém," *O Arqueólogo Português* I (1951) 125-131; de Almeida, *Ruínas de Miróbriga dos Celticos* (Edição da junta distrital de Setubal, 1964)

⁴Maria Adelaide de Figueiredo Garcia Pereira, "Subsidio para o estudo da terra sigillata de Miróbriga," *Actas do II Congresso Nacional de Arqueologia* (Coimbra 1971) 433-444; Luisa Ferrer Dias, "Terra Sigillata de Miróbriga," *Setubal Arqueologica* II-III (1976-1977) 361-422; Jeannette Smit Nolan, "Alguns fragmentos de 'paredes fines' de Miróbriga," *ibid.*, 432-454; Maria Elisabeth Figueiredo Neves Cabral, "Lucernas romanas de Miróbriga," *ibid.*, 455-468, Maria Luisa Abreu Nunes, "Moedas romanas de Miróbriga," *Actas das II Jornadas Arqueológicas* II (1972) 185-193. For additional reading on Mirobriga, see Jose Leite de Vasconcelos, "Excursão arqueológica à Extremadura Trastagana," *O Archeólogo Português* (1914) 314-318; João Cruz e Silva, "Apontamentos e considerações sobre as pesquisas arqueológicas realizadas desde 1922 no nos conchelos de S. Tiago de Cacem, Sines e Odemire," *Arquivo de Beja* II (1945) 291-299 and continued in volume III (1946) 336-351; Scarlat Lambrino, "Catalogue des inscriptions latines du Musée Leite de Vasconcelos," *O Archeólogo Português* Series III, Vol. I (1967) 147-148. Mirobriga is mentioned in Jorge Alarcão, "On the Westernmost Road of the Roman Empire," *Archaeology* 20:3 (1967) 174-177 and in Paul MacKendrick, *The Iberian Stones Speak* (New York 1969) 191-196.

⁵De Almeida, *Ruínas*, 71.

⁶*Ibid.*, 26.

⁷*Ibid.*, 45-48.

⁸Thanks go to John Huffstot and Guy Sanders of the University of Missouri for their work as architect and field director respectively for the initial campaign and to Sian Jones of the Walters Art Gallery for serving as fresco specialist and acting conservator.

⁹The inscription, known since the seventeenth century, refers to a doctor from another Roman town some fifty kilometers from Mirobriga and nowhere mentions Mirobriga specifically, although a second town may be implied. Its original provenience is unknown, and there is nothing to link it with the temple at the top of the hill; it could have come from another sanctuary in the city or even another city! de Almeida, *Ruínas*, 46.

¹⁰In H. G. Beyen, *Die Pompejanische Wanddekoration Vom Zweiten bis zum Vierten Stil*, Volume I plates (Haag 1938) are numerous examples of shrines with projecting colonnaded *alae* of L shape. Particularly striking and reminiscent of the Mirobriga temple, *alae* and Baroque terrace arrangement is a wall painting from the Pompeian house of Sulpicius Rufus which shows in *tabula* form a temple sitting atop a terrace with a pronounced rectangular niched entry (pl. 36). The temple has a colonnade across its front with a second story of columns rising above that and crowned by the pediment. The structure is clearly flanked by and linked to two projecting L shaped *alae* each with broken pediment. While this may not be an exact copy of the arrangement at Mirobriga or even be intended to be a temple, it is close enough and shows that this kind of architectural caprice could emerge from wall painting and become built. In plates 40, 43, 100b, 109, 110, etc., Beyen shows the Roman emphasis on a central structure with laterally projecting wings as quite typical in painting of the first century A.D. For an Augustan temple with *alae* (but not of L shape) see Jorge Alarcão and Robert Etienne, *Fouilles de Conimbriga I, L'Architecture* (Paris 1977) 33.

¹¹De Almeida, *Ruínas* 40-43.

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WILLIAM BIERS, Professor of Classical Archaeology in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Missouri-Columbia, has excavated extensively in Turkey, Israel, Greece and now Portugal, and is a frequent contributor to *Muse* (see volumes 5, 6, 7 and 13). His book, *The Archaeology of Greece*, published by Cornell University Press, is a standard text for university students in archaeology.

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