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LITHOSTROTOS

AND THE

BASILICA OF THE ECCE HOMO

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N. D. de Sion
 Jerusalem



NIHIL OBSTAT

SAC. GABRIEL SUEDAN

Censor Delegatus

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THE LITHOSTROTOS AND THE BASILICA OF THE ECCE HOMO.

N. D. DE SION - JERUSALEM

At the time of the Evangelists, the word "Praetorium" did not, as one might suppose, designate a certain palace, analogous for example to our lawcourts; it merely indicated the place where the Roman functionary, a procurator or legate, set up his tribunal, his "Bema"—a movable platform on which was placed the curule chair.

This place might vary, even in the same locality and same year, according to circumstances. Consequently, when we wish to locate the site of the pretorium of Pilate at the time of Our Lord's Passion, we have not to seek the customary residence of the procurator when he came to Jerusalem, but simply to determine where, on that Friday morning, he received the Sanhedrin in order to examine the testimony and pronounce judgment in the trial of Jesus.

Until lately, three places in Jerusalem, the Antonia, the Xyst and the palace of Herod the Great, were pointed out, with more or less plausible arguments, as being the probable site where Pilate judged Jesus.

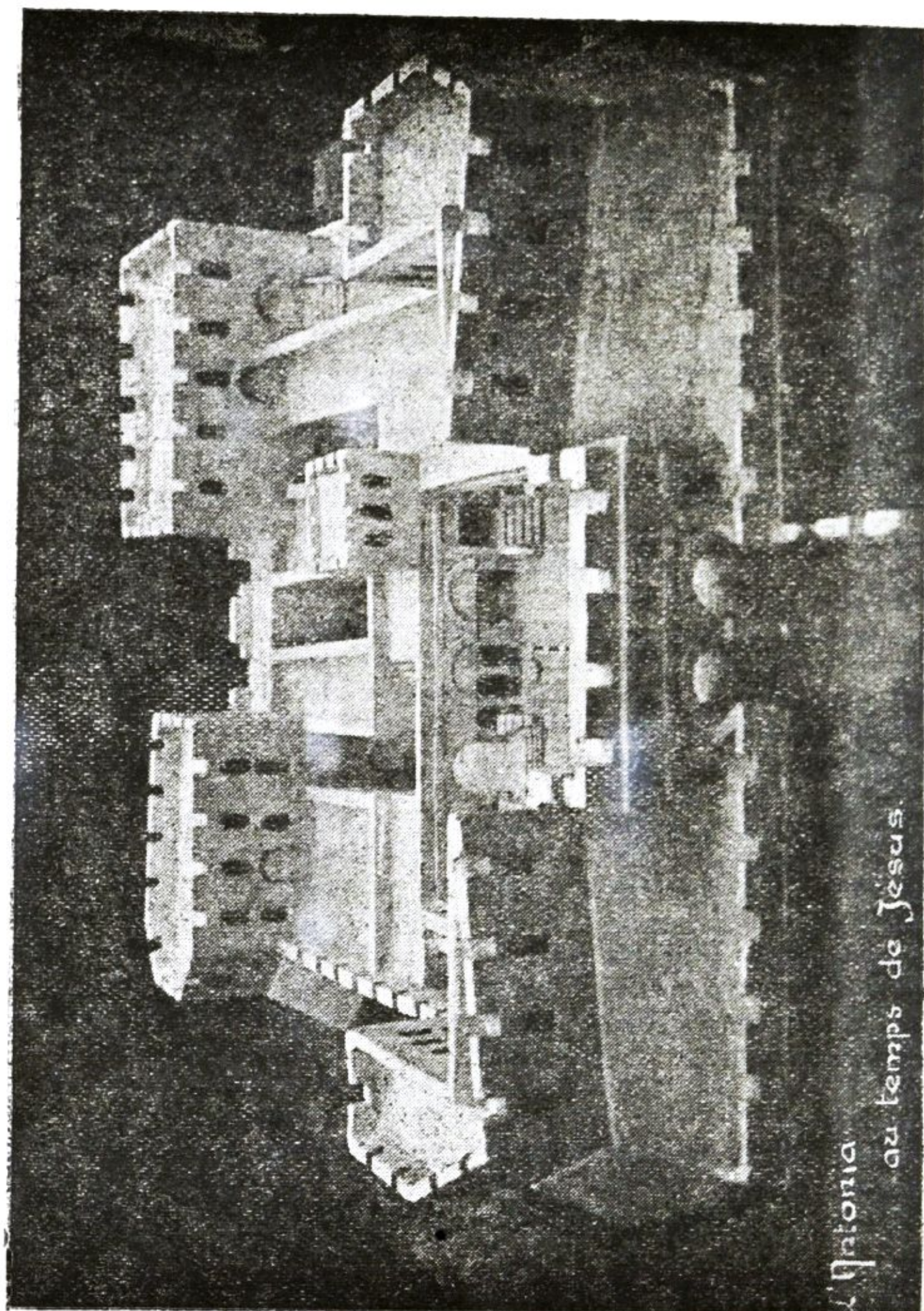
But recent archeological discoveries in the Convent of N. D. de Sion at the Ecce Homo have put an end to all controversy on the subject, and, by bringing to light the architectural structure of the Antonia, have solved this topographical problem which up to the present had been regarded as insolvable.

It is true that Philon and Josephus had affirmed in their histories that the Procurator both in Jerusalem and in Caesarea resided in Herod's palace. This was correct for Pontius Pilate (26-36) and for Gessius Florus (64-66). Such an installation guaranteed every comfort and enhanced the prestige of their authority.

The objections raised against a temporary residence of the Procurator at the Antonia during the week of the Passover in the year 30, were chiefly of a topographical nature: it did not seem possible to locate in front of the Antonia, as it was then visualized, an open space vast enough to contain such an immense crowd and where Pilate could have set up his tribunal.

The excavations recently undertaken in the convent





Clay model of the Antonia-Pretorium
according to the latest excavations

of the Sisters of N. D. de Sion present the Antonia to us under an entirely different aspect.

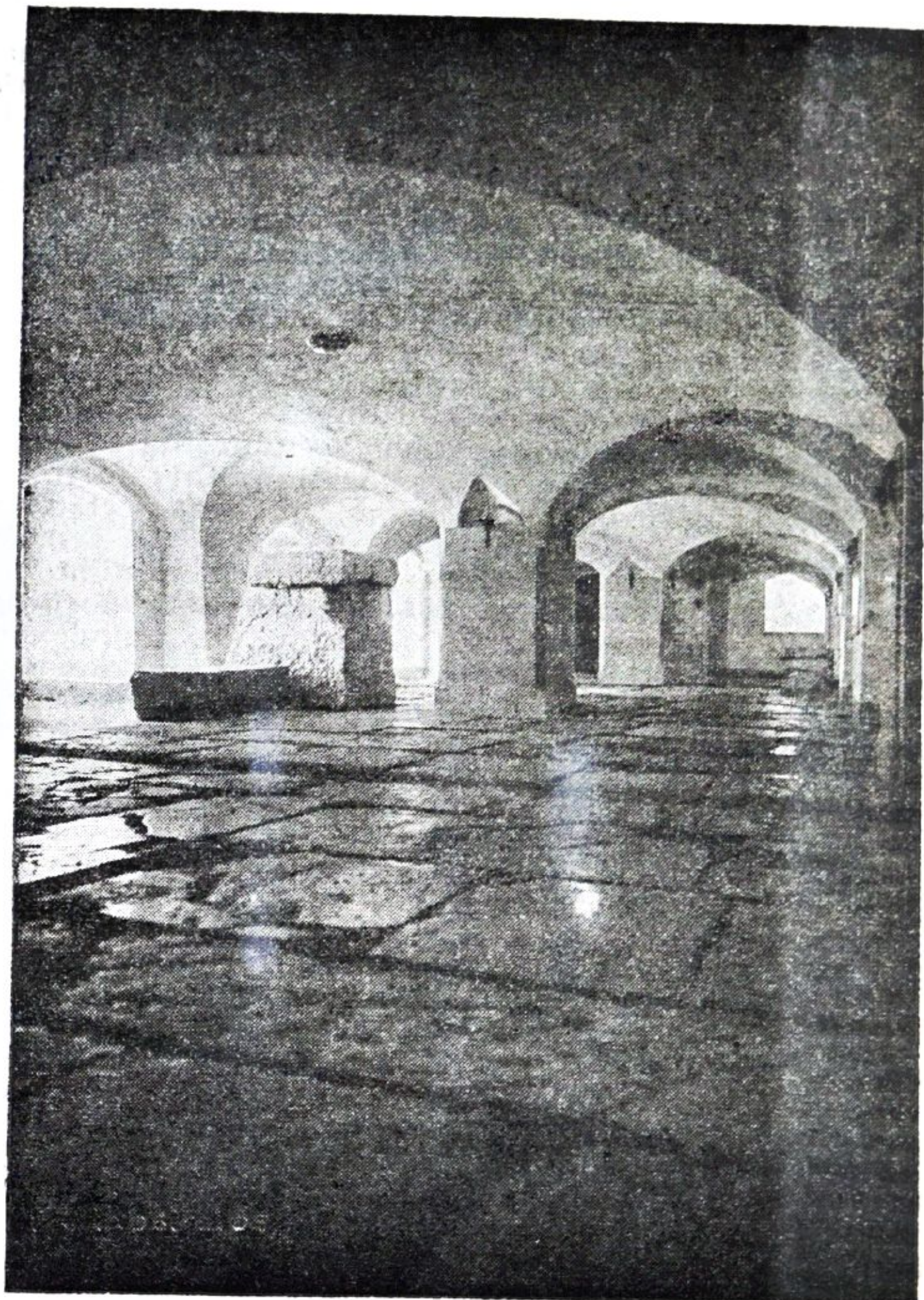
This fortress, which dominated the temple and the lower section of the city, was built on a rock foundation in the form of a quadrilateral, extending about 455 feet from east to west by 325 feet from north to south. This quadrilateral, consisting of several buildings, comprised on the south a very comfortable palace; on the north, the only side by which the fortress was accessible a rampart to defend it and a deep moat separating it from the slope of Bezetha; in the centre all the other necessary offices; store-houses, arsenals, soldiers' quarters, horse and livery stables, also dungeons. Flights of steps put the Antonia into direct communication with the Temple. Even subterranean passages have been found leading from the citadel under the esplanade, one of them terminating in front of the Eastern gate. In its restoration, this fortress, which Herod had rendered so formidable, was perfectly adapted to the supervision of the courts of the Temple and the speedy quelling of any attempted sedition.

Now, in the very centre of the Antonia, affording access to all the offices of this miniature city and covering a large double reservoir, there was an immense paved court yard the remains and limits of which have just been discovered.

This court was 146 feet wide from east to west and about 178 feet long from north to south. The flagstones, which even at the present time still cover almost its entire surface, are of hard stone, many of them being more than three feet square and from 12 to 18 inches thick. These flagstones, alternately longer than wide or almost square lie in a bed of thick cement extremely solid; though held in position without mortar, they show no sign of dislocation or repair. Along a belt passing between the entrance gates and extending alongside the palace, these stones are striated with very close grooves, doubtless to prevent horses from slipping; in some places they have been polished by constant circulation. Here and there fittings have been prepared for fixing in position barriers, supports for lights and other accessories necessary to render such a court serviceable. At regular intervals, large shallow gutters facilitated the flow of rain-water to the double reservoir below, which passed diagonally beneath the courtyard.

This court thus presents a unique whole by the nature of its flagstones, their proportions, the manner





Lithostrotos

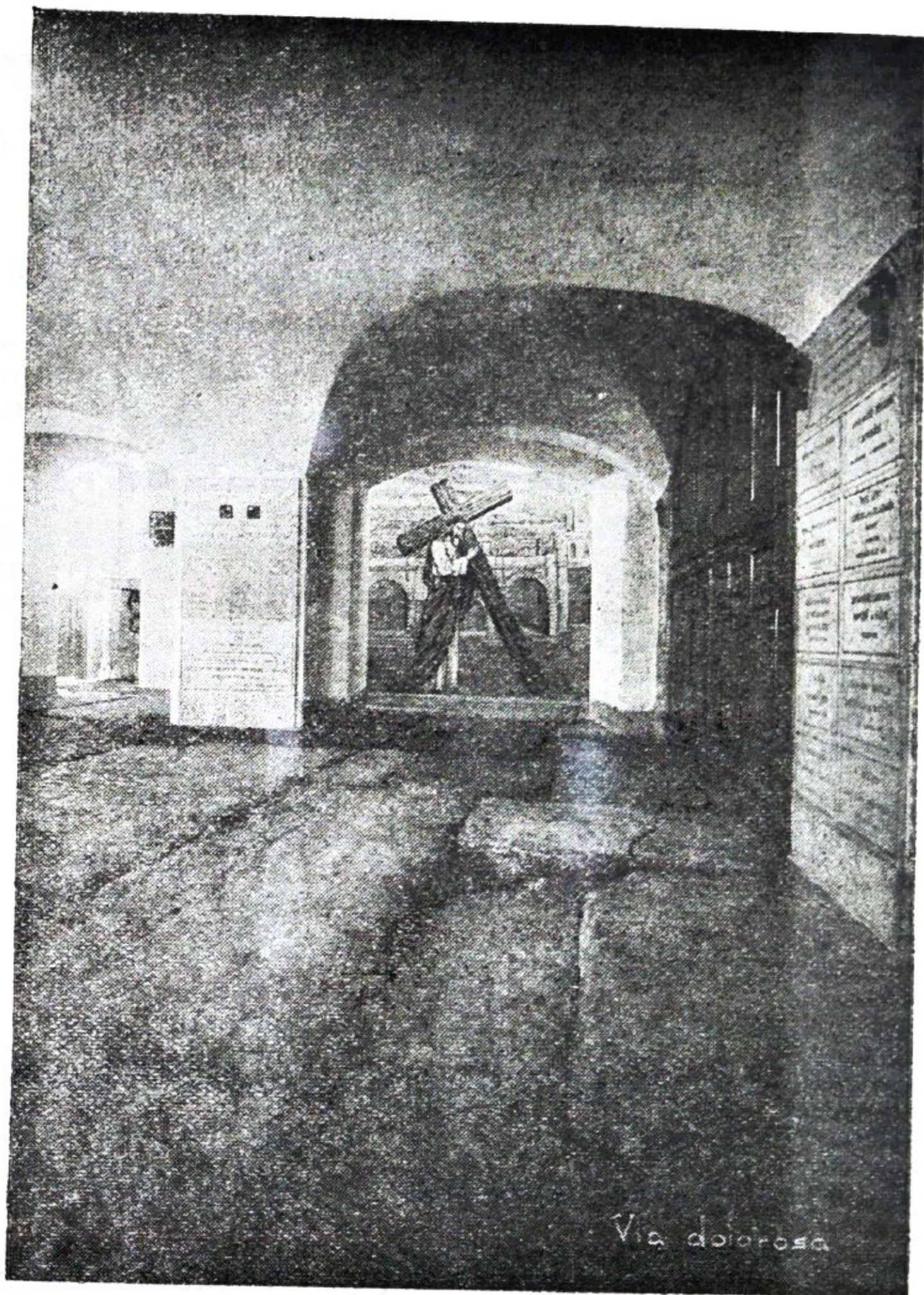


in which they have been laid, and the identity of the cement used throughout; this unique whole dates back to the time when Herod enlarged and restored the fortress. Such a detail even as the games traced out on the flagstones, though accessory in itself, yet here assumes a very suggestive character. These games, similar in every way to those found in the camps, forums, basilicas and Thermae of any Roman city, are grouped especially in the eastern part of the Lithostrotos, in front of the stairway which led directly from the court to the barracks.

As if in the place of honour, among the varieties of hopscotch, mazes, and other less familiar types, a complex design covers several flagstones with its intricacies among which frequently recur a capital "B" This game attracts attention by a rough prickly crown very conspicuous at the top of the design, whilst at the end of the curves, at the bottom of the design, the line seems to be cut by a sabre not less evident than the crown. Here we recognize, not only one variety of the many games played with knuckle bones among which Plautus mentions the Basilicus, but also evidence of the "game of the King," derived from the Saturnalia, which was very popular in the Roman Army.

It is well known that the Saturnalia, in the East called "Sacees," consisted chiefly in choosing a burlesque King, in loading him with ludicrous honours, in giving him liberty to satisfy his most scabrous caprices only to put him to death at the end of the farce.

The account given in the gospels of the derisive and bloody masquerade of which Jesus was the victim in the Pretorium seems to receive an unexpected confirmation from these simple lines traced on the flagstones of the Lithostrotos. While, by Pilate's orders, some of the soldiers were inflicting on Jesus the tortures of the scourging, the idlers of the permanent garrison, grouped near the steps at the entrance of the barracks, were beguiling the boredom of their vacant hours by playing the game of "King." What did they care about the punishment of a Jew? But this Jew was being scourged because he had said he was a King! Would not this afford a splendid opportunity of suddenly changing the monotony of make-beleive into the merriment of a living farce, rendered all the more enjoyable by the malicious pleasure of giving vent to their Roman contempt for this wretched-looking "King of the Jews"!

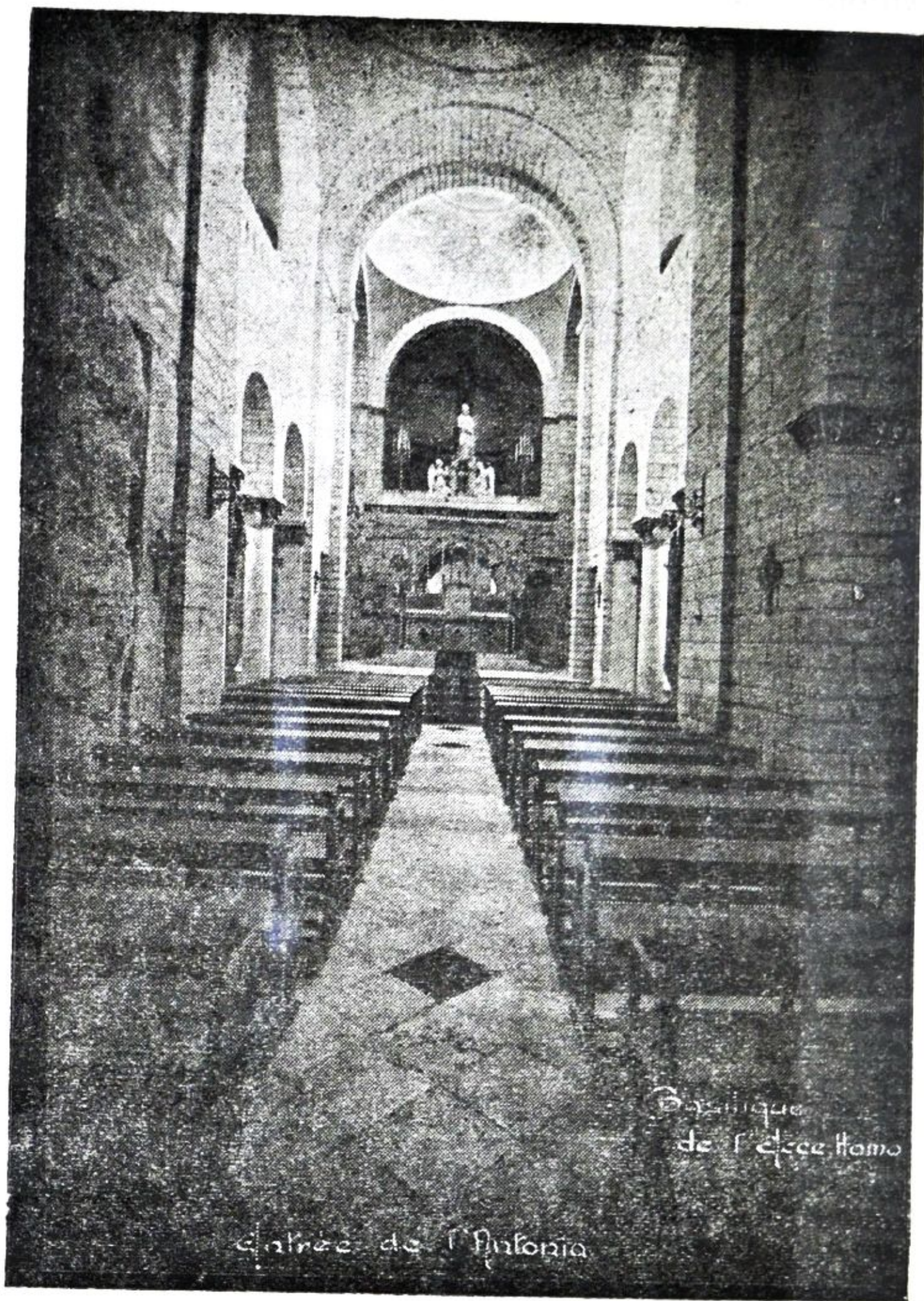


Via Dolorosa

This paved court thus furnished the archeological element which permits us henceforth to identify the "Antonia" as the place where Jesus was judged. According to St. Mark it was an interior court (XV. 16) and from thence began the sorrowful journey to Golgotha. According to St. John (XIX. 13) "Pilate sat down in the judgement seat" before the roaring mob "in a place called Lithostrotos or the Paved Court and in Hebrew Gabbatha." Now that we know all the details of the existence in the heart of the Antonia of this magnificently paved court where the throng of Jews was assembled, the description of St. John and the statement of St. Mark become remarkably expressive. It is evidently this interior court which on this occasion served as Pretorium. The Jews were grouped in the vast bays of the entrance, striving to maintain that position that they might not be defiled before celebrating the Passover. In front of them was the palace stairway. Pilate came and went from accusers to accused, bringing Jesus into the interior of his palace, then going out to speak with the Jews. In a vain attempt to arouse their pity, he presented Jesus to them crowned with thorns and clothed in the purple of derision, then finally condemned Him to crucifixion through fear of the exasperated mob, which might otherwise have denounced him to Tiberius.

The Passover of the year 30 presented itself to Pilate under such conditions that it is not at all surprising he should have left his usual residence in Herod's palace to remain for a few days in the Antonia. Already, at a preceding religious solemnity, he had repressed, not without bloodshed, the turbulence of some Galileans (Luke XIII. 1). He could not have been ignorant of the rumours which had spread in Jerusalem during the previous six months and above all during those last weeks, concerning the prophet of Nazareth. Evidently the greatest vigilance was necessary if he did not wish to incur the displeasure of Tiberius, who punished with death the slightest offense. Now there existed no better place in Jerusalem for supervising the crowd of pilgrims and, if need be, for intervening efficaciously, than the famous citadel of Antonia. There is no doubt then but that Pilate must have done in the year 30, that which later Cumanus was obliged to do (48-52). If demonstrations less inoffensive than those of Palm Sunday should occur, he would, from his palace or from one of the towers of the citadel, be in a position to





Basilique
de l'Ecce Homo

Entrée de l'Antonia

Basilica of the Ecce Homo

follow their development, and, in case of necessity, to reinforce his own troops with those quartered in the palace of Horod.

It is then in the Antonia that we must place the Pretorium of Pilate on Good Friday, and it is from there we must begin the Way of Sorrows.

When, in the year 70, Titus besieged the city of Jerusalem, the Antonia cost him strenuous efforts; his "aggeres", placed, says the Historian Josephus, on the slope of Bezetha in the middle of the Piscina of Strouthion, overwhelmed the fortress with enormous cannon-balls, which brought about its surrender. The Antonia was systematically destroyed, its ruins heaped up on the Lithostrotos, which was thus providentially preserved.

In the second century Hadrian made of Jerusalem a Roman city under the name of Aelia Capitolina: where the Antonia once stood, on the Lithostrotos, he had built the theoretical eastern gate; this gate later called the Arch of the Ecce Homo, has throughout the centuries borne testimony to the site of Our Lord's sufferings in the Pretorium on Good Friday; without it, tradition might have gone much farther astray.

It was the presence of this Arch and its name which led Rev. Father Marie Alphonse Ratisbonne in 1856 to purchase the surrounding land. This priest, of the Jewish race, converted at Rome in 1842 by a miraculous apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, had helped his elder brother, Rev. Father Theodore Ratisbonne to found a religious Congregation of men and women whose special end was the conversion of the Jews. From the day of his conversion, Father Marie Alphonse felt himself drawn towards Jerusalem, convinced that there the Blessed Virgin reserved for him some holy site, as the concrete expression of the vocation of the Daughters of Sion. This holy site was the Lithostrotos, acquired at the price of great suffering and of which he exclaimed: "There were the terrible words 'Sanguis ejus super nos et super filios nostros' were pronounced, may there be souls whose lives are devoted to love and reparation. There an expiatory Sanctuary must be raised, bearing the inscription 'May His blood be upon us and upon our children in a dew of benediction.'" This sanctuary is the Basilica of the Ecce Homo in the Convent of Notre Dame de Sion. Divine praises there replace the former cries of hate, and the "Pater dimitte illis" implores the pardon of those who crucified the Saviour.