

The Small East Church at Ismant el-Kharab

Gillian E. Bowen

Introduction¹

The East Church complex is located upon a terrace overlooking the south-eastern wadi (Hope this volume, Figure 1). The architectural survey of this region revealed an extensive complex comprising numerous rooms, courts and corridors, much of which has been imprecisely mapped, due to the degree of preservation and the extensive alterations that had been carried out (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 205; Bowen 2002, 65; Figure 1). Knudstad and Frey (1999, 205) report that the enclosure wall surrounding the complex is 47 m wide north-south; however, its east-west length can only be traced for 60 m. The Small East Church is located within the south-eastern sector of the enclosure and is built against the eastern wall, 10 m north of the south-eastern corner (Bowen 2002, Figure 1). The Large East Church, located north-east of the small church, is set against the outer side of the enclosure wall and clearly post-dates the construction of the latter (Figure 1) (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 205; Hope and Bowen 1997, 49–51; Bowen 2002, 65–7). The access rooms to the large church (Rooms 5a and 5b) are on the west and are located within the enclosure. These rooms are separated from the north room of the small church by a narrow corridor, 1.2 m wide (Figure 1). This east-west corridor terminates in a doorway in the enclosure wall. The doorway opens onto a north-south corridor that separates the north room of the small church from the south rooms of the large church.

Minimal clearance was undertaken in the Small East Church during the 1981–82 field season (Mills 1982, 99–100). This entailed the excavation of the apse and the partial clearance of its two side chambers (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 205). In the 2000 field season it was decided to excavate the church in order to gain an understanding of its architecture, its antiquity, function, and to determine its relationship, if any, to the Large East Church.

Room 2

The Small East Church is a two-roomed, mud-brick structure: the church in the south, Room 1, and an adjoining room on its north, Room 2 (Figure 1). The overall dimensions are 10.5 m north-south x 9.5 m east-west. To the immediate north of the structure is the narrow corridor referred to above. The corridor has not been excavated. Work commenced in the expectation that both rooms would be excavated. The density of collapse in Room 2, however, made it impossible to clear the entire room in the time at our disposal. *Circa* 2 metres of wind-blown sand was removed and the floor was reached in a small section of the south-west corner. Sand-clearance revealed that it was a barrel-vaulted room, the internal measurements of which are 9.0 x 4.5 m with a height of just over 4 m. The room had been gypsum plastered throughout. The springing for the vaulting is built into the north and south walls at a point 2.8 m above the floor; it extends 23 cm from the wall. A window is set high into the west wall to the north of its centre (Plate 1). This window is 45 cm wide, 60 cm deep and is preserved to a height of 73 cm. An arched doorway, 1.25 m wide, was exposed in the north wall, 4.65 m from the west wall and 4.20 m from the east wall. This doorway had once opened off the corridor but had been blocked from the corridor side in antiquity with two courses of mud bricks (Plate 2). The doorway is set directly opposite another arched doorway which once opened off the corridor into the southern access room of the Large East Church, Room 5b (Plate 3). This doorway had also been blocked with mud bricks, covered with gypsum plaster and a niche set into it (Bowen 2002, 65). No attempt had been made to plaster over the bricking in the door in the north wall of Room 2. The blocking of the two doorways suggests that, at least in the latter stages of use, the two churches functioned independently. Three other doorways were exposed. One is in the southernmost

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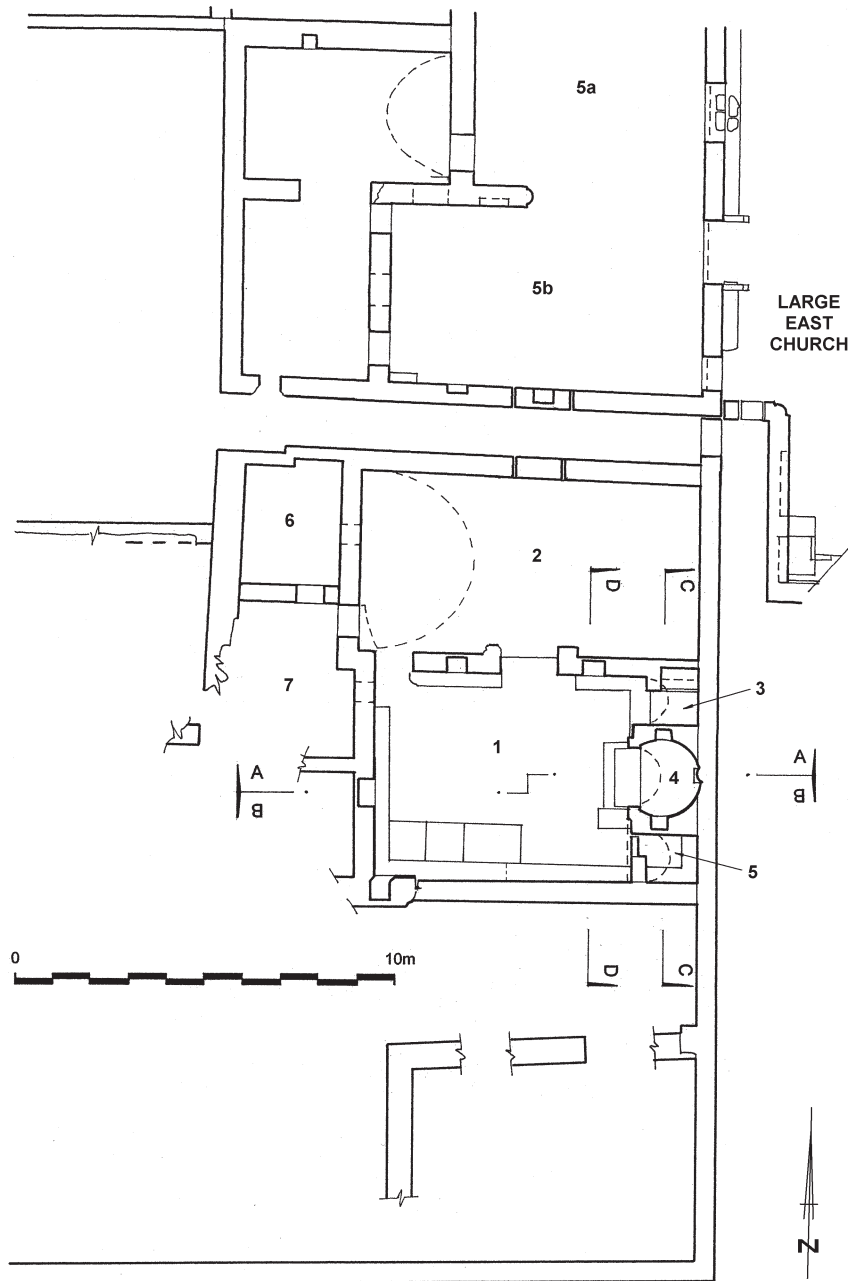


Figure 1 Plan of the Small East Church (drawing by J. Dobrowolski and B. Rowney).



Plate 1 Small East Church, Room 2, west wall showing barrel vault and the window.



Plate 2 Small East Church, Room 1 looking north into Room 2. The blocked doorway that opens into the corridor is visible in the north wall of Room 2.

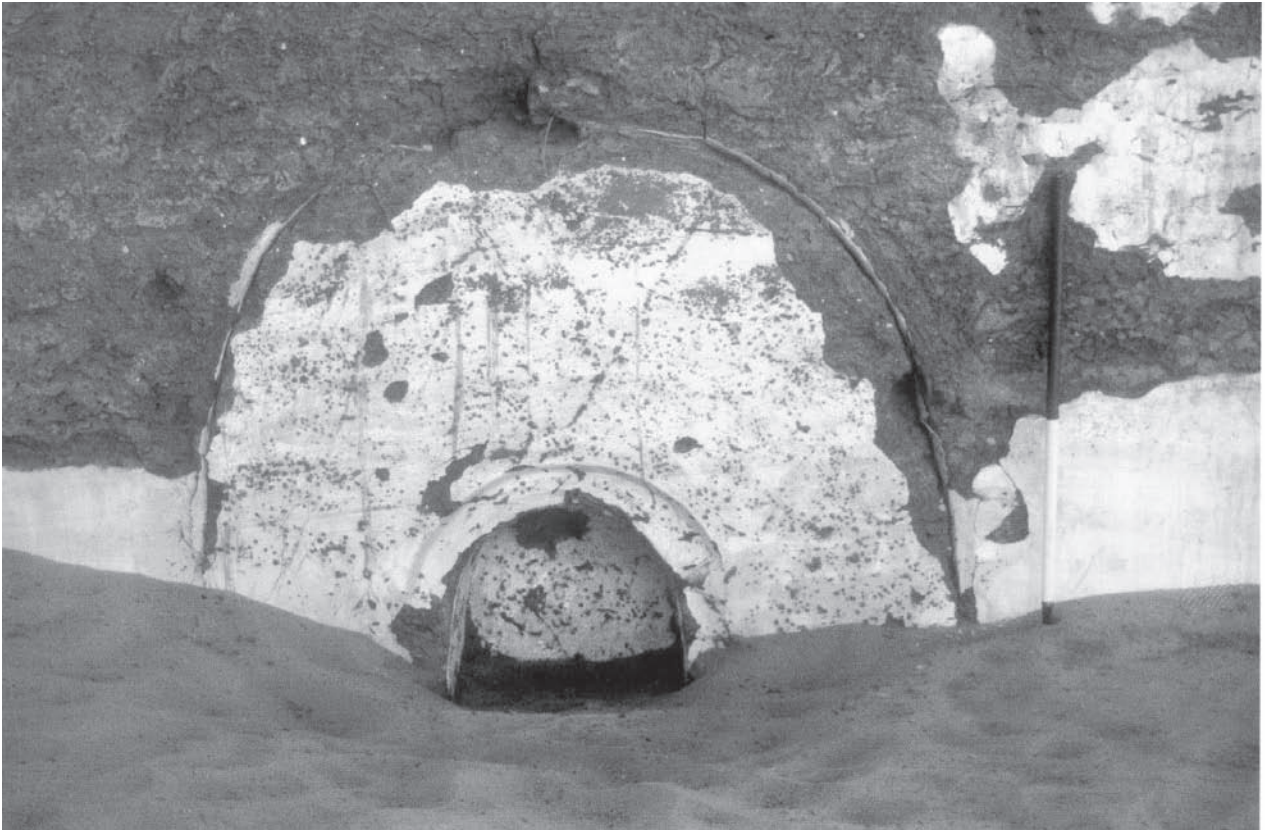


Plate 3 Large East Church, access Room 5b, showing the blocked doorway and niche in the south wall.



Plate 4 Small East Church, Room 1 looking west before final clearance of the floor.

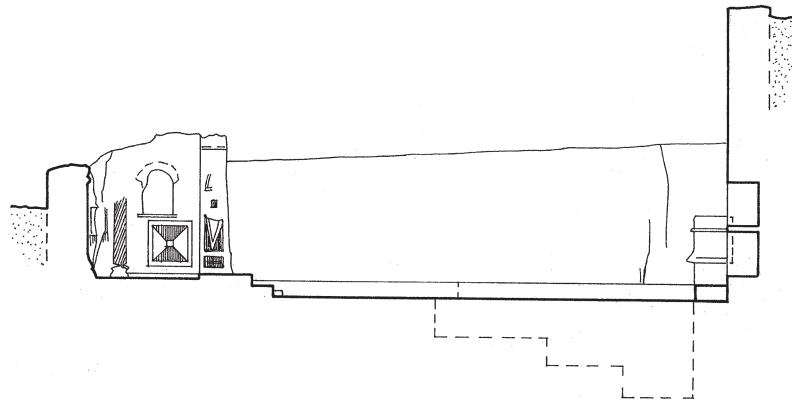


Figure 2 Small East Church, east-west section (B-B) through the centre of the church looking south; the dotted line indicates the test trench (drawing by B. Rowney). Scale: 1:100.

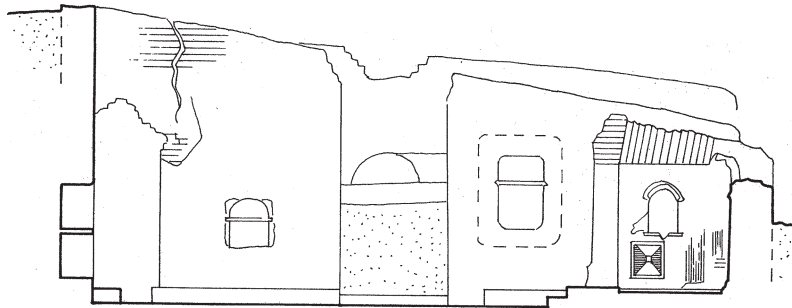


Figure 3 Small East Church, east-west section (A-A) through the centre of the church looking north through to Room 2 (drawing by B. Rowney). Scale 1:100.



Plate 5 Small East Church, Room 1 looking east into the sanctuary.

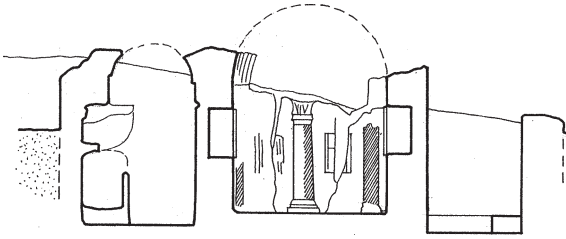


Figure 4 *Small East Church, north-south section (D-D) through the centre of the sanctuary (drawing by B. Rowney). Scale 1:100.*

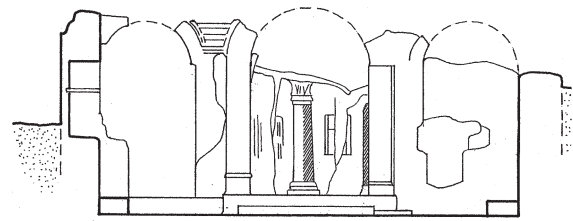


Figure 5 *Small East Church, north-south section (C-C) through the east end (drawing by B. Rowney). Scale 1:100.*

part of the west wall and communicates with a small room to the west, Room 7; this doorway provided the only access to the church in the final stage of its use. The doorway is 1.75 m high, 1.10 m wide and 63 cm deep. The removal of surface sand to the north of Room 7 revealed another small room, Room 6, which opens off the former (Figure 1). Two further doorways were constructed in the southern wall; these are described below with the discussion of Room 1.

Room 1

Room 1 was fully excavated. It is well preserved with the west wall standing 3.95 m; the east wall has been subject to erosion and at the south-eastern corner the wall is 1.45 m high. The room was filled with windblown sand to within 20 cm of the floor. The floor itself was strewn with ceramic vessels and potsherds; there were fragments of glass vessels, a cylindrical sandstone object and a single palm log lying amongst the debris (Plate 4).

The room had undergone a series of modifications in order to convert it into a church and a description of the room prior to its conversion is given first. Originally, the room appears to have been a simple rectangular, flat-roofed structure, 8.5 x 5.5 m, with gypsum-coated walls throughout and a window set high in the west wall, immediately to the south of the north wall.² A gypsum-coated bench lined the west wall (Figure 2). It continued along the south wall for a distance of 2.94 m at which point there was a gap of 2.4 m before it resumed and continued along the remainder of the south wall, turning and continuing along the east wall only for a distance of 2.85 m (Figures 1 and 2). A bench was also situated against the north wall (Figures 1 and 3), with an appropriate break to accommodate the doorway; at its eastern end, the bench abuts a wall bin that was built into the north-eastern corner of the room (see below). A wide central door was set into the north wall directly opposite the arched door that led from the north room into the corridor beyond. This door and its

counterpart in what was later to become the access room of the large church were also aligned with the gap between the benches on the south wall. A cupboard was built into each of the south, west and north walls; the latter also had a niche (below) (Figures 1, 2 and 3; Plates 4 and 5). The entire room was gypsum coated. The architecture of this early room suggests that it may have functioned as a meeting hall that had a focal point in the centre of the south wall.³ From surface observations, the other structures within the enclosure wherein the small church and the access rooms to the large church are situated do not appear to be of a domestic nature and one is tempted to suggest that the area fulfilled a civic function.

The Modification for the Church

With the modification of Room 1 to form the church, the window in the west wall was blocked and a new section was added to that same wall. A door was cut into the westernmost end of the north wall and a short section of the bench along the west wall immediately to the south of the doorway was removed for ease of access (Figure 3, Plate 2). The central doorway in the north wall was narrowed at its eastern jamb by 37 cm. The gap between the benches on the south wall was filled and an apse was constructed against the east wall creating a tripartite sanctuary: a central apse with north and south side chambers (Figure 4, Plate 5). The sanctuary was set higher than the nave and hence it was possible for the builders to leave the bench against the east wall and simply cover it with the floor of the apse and south side-chamber (Plate 5). The apse was covered with a cupola and the side chambers were vaulted. The sanctuary in its entirety was framed by three arches with pilasters on either side of the apse (Figure 5; Plate 5).

The Apse

The curve of the apse was cut into the existing wall (Figure 1). The lack of bonding between the apse and exterior

² The excavation has shown that Knudstad and Frey's (1999, Figure 13.29) plan of the internal features of both churches is inaccurate. There were no columns in the small church.

³ This observation was made by C. A. Hope.



Plate 6 Small East Church, detail of the southern section of the apse showing the painted column (centre), the south niche and the geometric square.



Plate 7 Small East Church, apse, decoration on the northern face of the south pilaster.

wall, together with insubstantial foundation for the apse, have resulted in a slumping of the latter, exposing the undecorated gypsum plaster on the exterior wall. The maximum dimensions of the apse, Room 4, are 1.87 m north-south x 1.32 m east-west; the entrance is 1.48 m wide (Plate 5); the height from the floor to the commencement of the cupola is 1.72 m. The apse is approached by a single step paved with sandstone, 1.58 m long, 26 cm deep and 12 cm high, which gives access to the apse threshold, which is raised 9 cm above the step. The threshold is 63 cm deep and extends 20 cm into the nave. A groove, flush with the exterior of the pilasters, suggests that the apse could have been screened off. The apse floor was removed in antiquity but the presence of a few sandstone blocks amongst the rubble suggests that it was flagged.

The apse in its entirety was first coated in white gypsum and elaborately decorated both inside⁴ and on the pilasters that frame it. An engaged half-column was set upon the back wall, slightly north of the centre (Figures 4 and 5; Plate 5). This column is preserved from the base of its

pedestal to the lower section of its capital; the latter comprises three-pointed leaves rising and spreading from a horizontal moulding. The shaft is 1.15 m high and the estimated height of the capital is 37 cm. From the traces of paint that remain it can be determined that the pedestal was deep yellow, the lower horizontal moulding, shaft and upper horizontal mouldings were dark red, with the leaves of the capital deep yellow on a dark-red ground. Two painted columns were placed either side of the engaged half-column (Plate 6). The column shafts are painted dark red and set upon a deep-yellow plinth; the capitals have eroded away. Between the engaged half-column and each of the painted columns are two painted frames containing representations of panelled, double-leaf doors. These panels each comprise a series of eight rectangles decorated with stylised palm fronds. Much of the colour has faded but Knudstad and Frey (1999, 207) note that most of the detail is rendered in dark red and deep yellow with some red; the frames are on a light-red or pink field and the doors on white with a dark-red filling. The panels clearly imitated cupboards. Two niches are on the western side

⁴ For a description of the decoration as revealed in 1981–2 see Knudstad and Frey 1999, 205–7.



Plate 8 Small East Church, looking down into the north apse side chamber. The wall bin is on the right; the apse wall is on the extreme left.



Plate 9 Small East Church, looking down into the south apse side chamber. The bench is exposed along the south and east walls.

of each of the painted columns (Figures 2, 3 and 4; Plate 6); the top of each is framed by a sunken arch, painted in deep yellow and outlined in dark red, as are the ledges below the niches. A narrow, vertical dark-red border completes the decoration (Plate 6). The niches are 83 cm above the floor. They are 58 cm high, 41 cm wide at the opening, and 37 cm deep. A wooden sill was presumably inserted into the base and wooden doors added. Below the niches are painted squares with an alternating deep-yellow and dark-red border. The inner square is divided into four alternating, dark-red and deep-yellow triangles (Plate 6). In the centre is a rectangle within which is a *crux ansata*, outlined in dark red on a pale-yellow base. The *cruces ansatae* are 7 cm in length and 5 cm wide at the cross bar. The circular top is painted upon the vertical shaft and is slightly raised above the cross bar. Plaster fragments from another *crux ansata* were found amongst the debris on the *bema* of the Large East Church. This early Egyptian form of the Christian cross presumably adorned the apse or its vicinity (Bowen 2002, 71). The entire apse has a narrow light-red dado; this colour is continued along the inner edge of the outer pilaster and presumably framed the cupola.

Both faces of the pilasters are decorated with geometric designs painted dark and light red, deep and pale yellow. The decoration on the north face of the south pilaster is far better preserved than its counterparts. The surviving decoration on the inner-facing pilaster faces consists of two panels: the lower contains a light-red rectangle within a pale-yellow border all within a frame of vertical and horizontal zigzag red lines; the upper panel has a dark-red ground, framed with deep yellow, with double vertical lines radiating from the base (Figure 2; Plate 7). The decoration on the west-orientated faces of the pilasters is poorly preserved; the lower panel comprises a deep yellow square into which a pale-yellow diamond with dark-red points was set. A dark-red disc was painted in the centre of the diamond.

The narrow sections of wall flanking the apse pilasters were decorated to represent stone columns to give the effect of supporting the vaults of each room. The shaft was rendered in a pale yellow with the lower moulding, outline of the shaft and vertical, wavy lines picked out in a deep red; the shaft was set upon a deep-yellow painted plinth above a dark-red base line. Two further columns painted on the north and south walls of the nave immediately outside of the side chambers fulfilled the same decorative function. Traces only remain of the painting on the south wall that has been partly obscured by the addition of a wall to the side room.

The Apse Side Chambers

In the final stage of use as a church, both apse side chambers functioned as storage rooms. Room 3, on the north, measures 1.20 x 1.18 m and contains a large shelf and a substantial wall bin set well back into the north wall leaving a space of only 80 cm between the bin and the wall that divides the room from the apse (Plates 5 and 8).

The step into the room was raised 20 cm above the floor of the nave from which it was closed off by a narrow wooden door. Room 5, the south chamber, is slightly larger than its northern counterpart, 1.20 x 1.50 m, but is devoid of features. During the alterations to the room, the bench in this corner was retained but the floor level was filled in and raised to bench height (Plate 9). A wall was constructed to block it off from the nave. Access to the room was through a small doorway placed 35 cm above the floor of the nave. The door is only 63 cm high and 45 cm wide, which indicates that the room could only have functioned as a cupboard (Plate 5). The fact that the painted column on the south wall is obscured by the insertion of the blocking suggests that the blocking may post-date the conversion of the room into a church. Both chambers, including the bin and shelf in the north room, were gypsum coated and vaulted.

The Nave

The nave occupies the remainder of the room (Figure 1). The floor was originally gypsum coated. The only features are the benches, three cupboards and a niche in the north, south and west walls (Plates 2, 4 and 5), and to the south of the step to the apse, immediately to the west of the south apse pilaster, is a narrow water-hardened platform, 40 x 62 x 5 cm (Plate 5). The cupboard in the western corner of the south wall at a point 30 cm above the bench, is 60 cm high, 51 cm wide and 35 cm deep; the wooden shelf that had once divided it into two equal parts is missing. A second cupboard is cut midway along the west wall 15 cm above the bench (Plate 4). It is 1.21 m high, 70 cm wide and 45 cm deep. The wooden shelf is still *in situ*. The niche, which had a rounded top, is in the western section of the north wall (Plate 2). It is located 53 cm above the bench and is 69 cm high, 50 cm wide and 36 cm deep. It also had a wooden shelf placed 37 cm above the base. A third cupboard is located on the eastern section of the north wall, 75 cm above the bench. The dimensions are 97 cm high, 61 cm wide and 32 cm deep (Plate 2). It had a wooden shelf placed 60 cm from the base. All cupboards were closed with wooden doors and were gypsum-coated on the inside as was the niche.

Doorways

Room 1 could only be accessed from Room 2 through two doorways: a narrow doorway in the extreme west of the north wall and a large doorway in its centre (Plate 2). The doorway in the west of the north wall of the church was cut during the modification of the south room (see above). The dimensions are 1.82 m high and 85 cm wide. The pivot emplacement is preserved in the north-western side of the opening, indicating that the door opened into the north room. The central doorway connecting the two rooms is 1.51 m wide. The dividing wall was thickened on either side to form the jambs (Figure 1). The east jamb was added after the construction of the cupboard; the plaster

that surrounds the cupboard and continued into the original doorway is observable behind the addition (Plate 2). As with the door on the west, the central door opened into Room 2.

Sub-Floor Excavations

North Apse Side Chamber

The floor of the north apse side chamber was removed in an effort to determine the relative chronology of the architecture (Plate 8). The fill comprised compacted earth with potsherds; three coins were retrieved from this context. A layer of compacted mud was laid at a depth of 1.84 m beneath the floor. This appears to have served as a foundation; a similar compacted-mud foundation was encountered in test trenches in the large church (Hope this volume). This foundation was cut through in order to erect the enclosure wall a section of which forms the east wall of the church. The bin abuts the east wall; it was set upon rubble some 12.5 cm above the compacted foundation. The front of the wall bin is gypsum plastered to the depth of the floor level of the nave; thereafter the unclad mud brick extends for a further 94 cm. This indicates that the bin was part of the original room; the fact that the bin extends into the room for the same width as the bench in the church, which abuts the bin, confirms this. The apse was the last to be constructed; its north wall abuts the east wall and extends only one course of bricks beneath the floor level, hence the slump.

The Nave

A test trench was excavated east-west along the bench on the south wall for a distance of 3.6 m commencing at the bench on the west wall, and extending one metre into the nave (Figure 2). This area was chosen because the section that had been added to the bench along the south wall suggested that it was a later addition. Excavation revealed that the bench along the entire south wall had been built directly onto the floor of the church. At a depth of 1.45 m below the floor a thick layer of mud was encountered yet again; this may have formed a foundation platform for the south wall but, as excavation was not undertaken beneath this bench, this cannot be confirmed. The fill comprised rubble, with bones and sherds; no ash was present. The ceramic assemblage was fourth-century. No earlier structure was detected.

Artefacts

The artefactual remains found in the church were few; they comprised ceramics, glass, three ostraka, coins, a

single bead and a cylindrical piece of worked sandstone with a shallow depression in the top and a groove (Plate 10). The block, which has a diameter of between 42 cm and 46 cm, and a height of 21 cm was not found *in situ* (Plate 2), and its function cannot be determined. The glass has been identified by C. Marchini (personal communication, January 2000) as originating from lamps. One of the ostraka, registration number 31/420-D-6-1/A/8/21, preserves the noun Irene (Worp forthcoming; O. Kellis 272); whether a personal name or simply 'peace' cannot be determined as the ostrakon is broken. The coins and ceramics are crucial for the date of the foundation and period of use of the church. Four of the 15 coins are third-century *tetradrachms*. Three were found in the wall bin in the north apse side chamber and the fourth was from the cupboard on the south wall.⁵ They may well have been contemporary with the earlier use of the room as *tetradrachms* were rendered obsolete with Diocletian's currency reforms of 296 and were removed from circulation soon after (West and Johnson 1967, 111; W. Metcalf personal communication, 1997).⁶ A coin retrieved from beneath the lower course of bricks on which the apse wall was built dates to the reign of Maxentius: 31/420-D6-1-A/8/29. This indicates that the modification of the room cannot pre-date his reign, which spanned the years 306–12. The ceramics evidence complements that of the coins; all vessels can all be placed within a third-fourth century context (see below).

Discussion

Although minimal excavation was undertaken in Room 2 it became clear that it was an integral part of a larger church complex. Following the blocking of the door that opened into the north corridor, the sole access to the church was through a doorway in the extreme south of its west wall that communicated with a room to the west (see above). One can only speculate upon the function of this north room, but the retention of the large central doorway suggests a ceremonial use. It may have served as a room for the catechumens who could hear, but not view the mass and where they might receive instruction; it could also have functioned as a place for the congregation to partake of the communal meal. It seems unlikely that it was a baptistery or that it was associated directly with the large church.

The structure is a good example of a *domus ecclesiae*, 'house of the church', a community house owned by the congregation and converted according to its needs (Krautheimer 1981, 27). As such, the small church predates the construction of the purpose-built Large East Church. The earliest known *domus ecclesiae* is that at Dura-Europos in Syria, which was destroyed in the conflict of 256/57

⁵ The registration numbers of the coins are 31/420-D6-1-A/8/11, 12 and 14 for those coins in the wall bin and A/8/10 for that in the cupboard.

⁶ I am most grateful to Dr Metcalf for providing me with details of his study of the *tetradrachms*.



Plate 10 Small East Church, the sandstone object found on the floor of the nave.

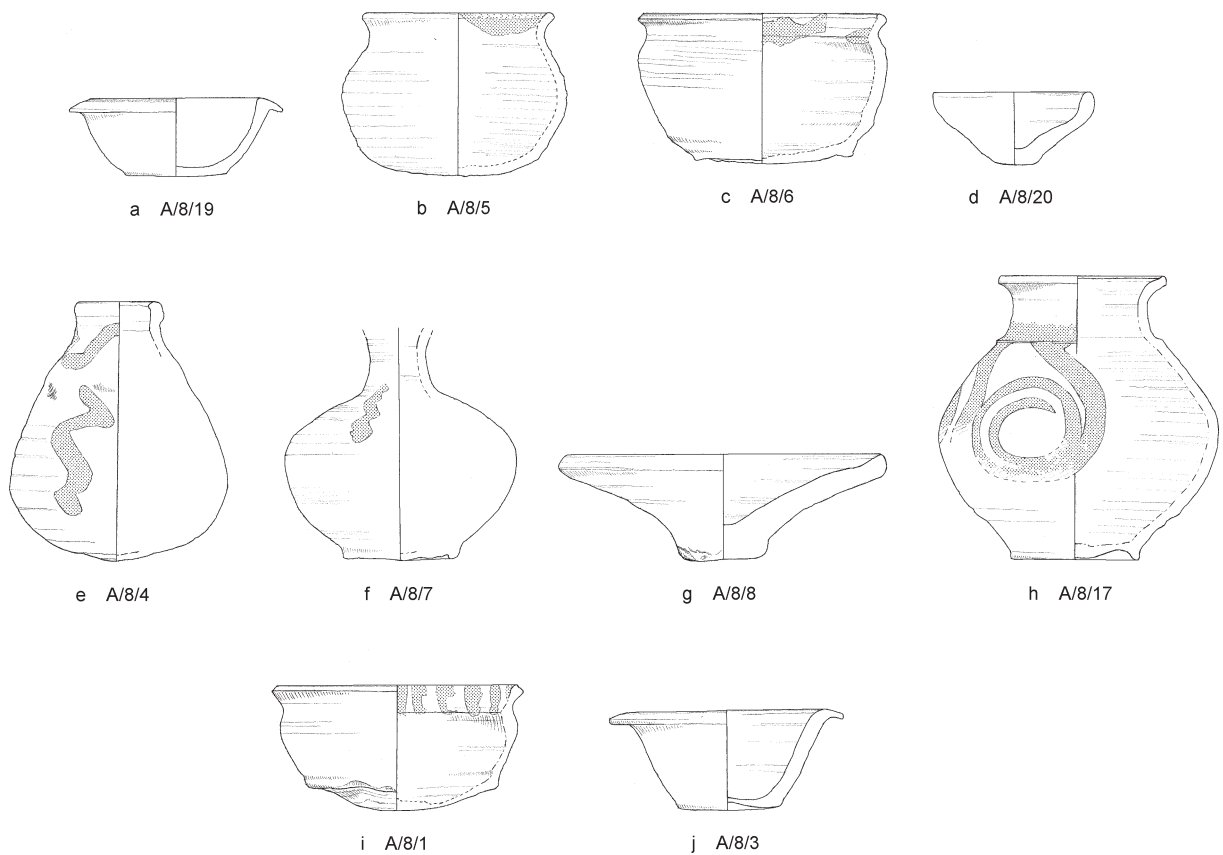


Figure 6 Ceramics from the Small East Church. Scale 1:4; object registration numbers provided.

(MacDonald 1986, 45–68). The basilica form in church architecture is said to have been introduced by Constantine I following the *Edict of Milan* in 313 (Krautheimer 1981, 43). It did not replace the *domus-ecclesiae* form, however, and structures were modified for ecclesiastical use throughout the fourth century, especially in the provinces (White 1990, 23).

The *domus ecclesiae* at Kellis has all the hallmarks of later Christian architectural conventions: that is, it is aligned on an east-west axis with the sanctuary on the east. The sanctuary is raised and the apse is closed off from the congregation. It cannot be shown whether the *domus ecclesiae* went out of service with the erection of the large basilica; indeed the two could well have functioned side by side, as did the numerous churches at Medinet Madi (Bresciaini 1987, 1–3; Grossmann 1987, 7–16). There is no evidence of post-abandonment activity within the church itself except for Coptic graffiti incised into the plaster on the apse wall. Olaf Kaper has distinguished three separate texts; however, they are mostly illegible.

The pottery vessels found at floor level in the nave may well have been associated with the functioning of the church, for cleaning of the floor revealed several impressions where pots once stood. Eight complete ceramic vessels were found on the floor in the nave (Figure 6a–h). One (Figure 6a), is an Oasis Red Ware bowl, a family of wares that has been dated to the fourth–fifth centuries (Hope 1985, 123; see Hope 1999, 236); Figures 6b, 6c and 6d have parallels in the fourth-century houses at Kellis (Hope 1986, Figure 6c 1/60; Patten 1999, 84–5). Figure 6e, however, has parallels in the well area of the Main Temple and in Tomb 13 of the cemetery known as Kellis 2, which dates to the third-early fourth centuries, if not earlier (Dunsmore 2002, 131 and Figure 1b), whilst Figures 6f, 6g and 6h also have parallels from third or early fourth-century contexts (Hope 1986, Figure 7f 3/3; Dunsmore 1999, Figure 1a); all such vessels are absent from the fourth-century houses. A vessel that was retrieved from the floor of the north apse side chamber, Figure 6i, also has parallels from the houses whilst a further Oasis Red Ware bowl was in the rubble of the south side chamber, Figure 6j.⁷ Numismatic evidence for the period of use of the church is inconclusive as seven of the 15 are either broken or too corroded to identify. The remaining coins are a *Sol Invictus*, struck by Constantine I before 318, A/8/23, one issued by Crispus, A/8/32, sometime before his death in 326, and a third that appears to be of a similar date, A/8/31.⁸ This indicates that the church functioned within the first half of the fourth century.

Onomastic evidence from dated texts attests a Christian presence at Kellis by the 280s, if not earlier (Bowen 1998, 158–61). It is not known where these early Christians met

for purposes of worship, nor can their numbers be determined. Coins retrieved from the Large East Church at Kellis indicate that it was built during the reign of Constantine I (Bowen 2002, 81–3), which suggests that the residents of Kellis quickly outgrew their *domus ecclesiae* and opted for the new basilica form. The need to build a church of such proportions in the first half of the fourth century is not only testimony to the growing number of Christian converts in the village but also the rapid pace of that conversion.

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Author's Address:

Centre for Archaeology and Ancient History
School of Historical Studies
Building 11, Clayton Campus,
Monash University,
Victoria 3800,
Australia

⁷ I am most grateful to C. A. Hope for the identification of the ceramics and providing me with information on the dates and parallels.

⁸ Both the portrait and the flan size suggest that the coin was struck before the mid-fourth century. This specimen was found together with the Crispus issue on the floor of the north apse side chamber.

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