

The 2010 field season at Deir Abu Metta, Dakhleh Oasis.

Gillian Bowen

**with contributions by Luke Falvey, Colin A. Hope, Daniel Jones,
Johanna Petkov and Louise Woodfield.**

The 2010 season of excavation at Deir Abu Metta was conducted between December 24th 2009 and January 6th 2010. The excavations were directed by the writer and I would like to express my gratitude to the Supreme Council of Antiquities for granting the permit to undertake the work, to Ahmed Salam, Chief Inspector of the Coptic and Islamic Section of the Wadi el-Gedid, and to Madame Sahar Habib of the Dakhleh Inspectorate for their assistance throughout the excavations.¹

The site comprises a church set within what appears to be a small settlement, a tower-like structure located on a mound to west of the church with an addition against its east wall (the West Buildings), and a Christian cemetery. This year's season continued our earlier work within the various structures with the express purpose of exposing and planning what could be salvaged of the internal architecture of the church; expanding the excavation of the structures to the north of the church; exploring select rooms within the tower and investigating some of its outlying structures. It was hoped that we would be able to establish the date of the period of use for the site as a whole and the function of the West Buildings. To this end, four areas were selected for excavation: one within the church, one in the structures to its

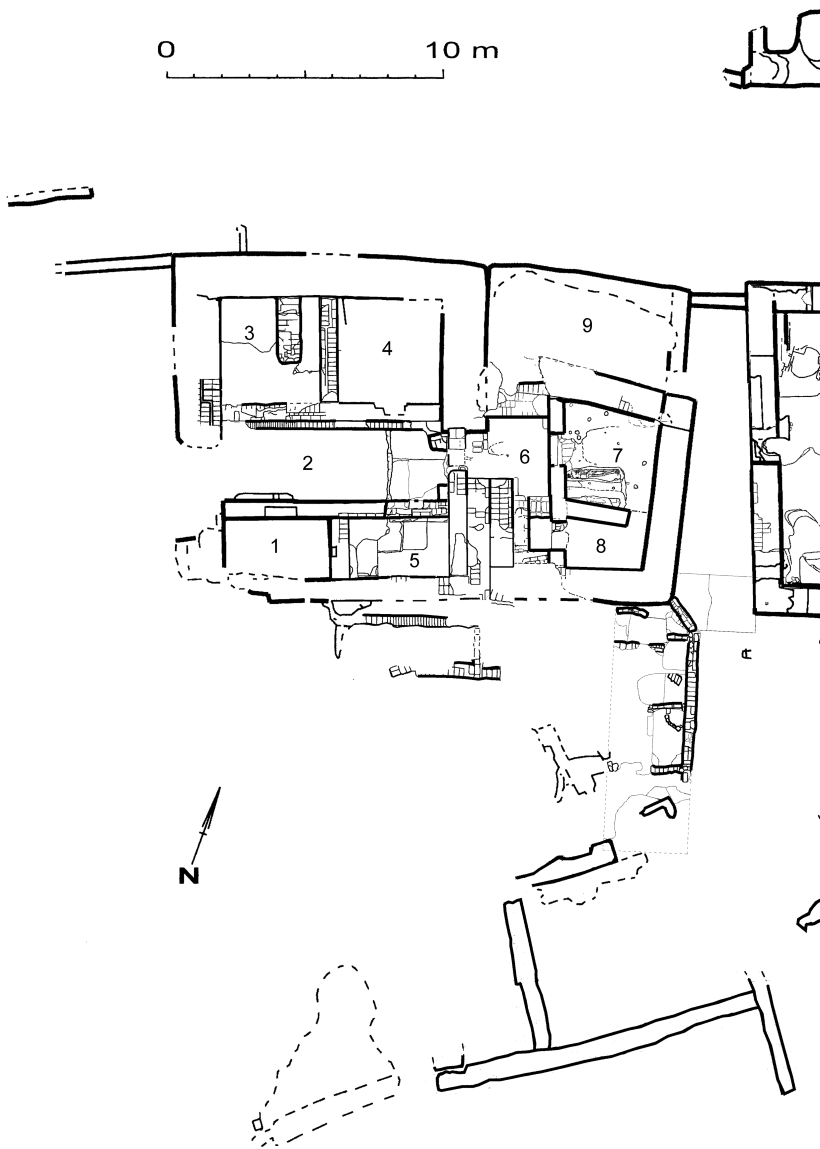


Figure 1: Plan of Deir Abu Metta

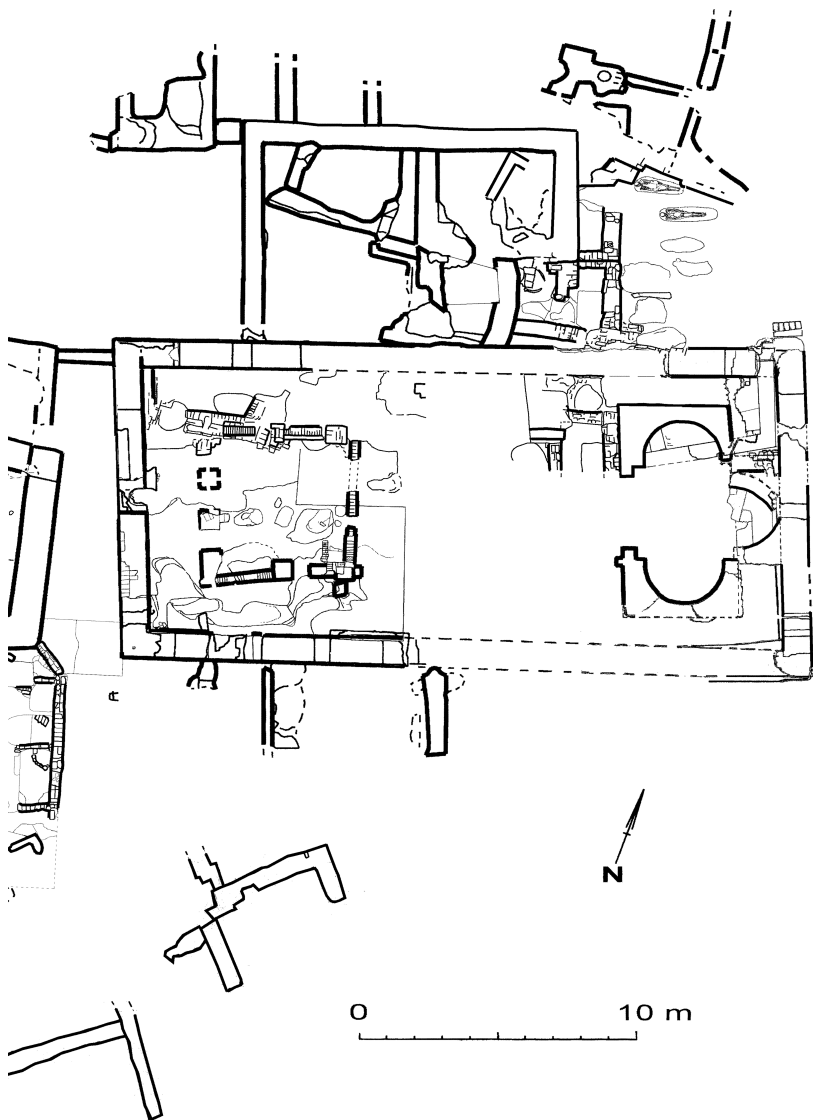


Figure 1: Plan of Deir Abu Metta

north, three rooms within the tower, and small structures south-east of the West Buildings. Summaries of the individual trenches are presented below; see Figure 1.

I. The interior of the church

The interior of the church is badly deflated and the internal architecture in the south-east quadrant of the nave is irretrievably lost. In the south- and north-west quadrants, the foundations of the colonnades and of other internal architecture are the only elements that survive. The former was excavated in 2009 and the latter was either uncovered by James Knudstad, during his survey of the site in 1980, or was already exposed as a result of deflation.² The north-east quadrant is covered in up to two metres of collapse (Plate 1) and it was anticipated that its removal would reveal further architectural elements. In the previous season several grave pits were found in the south-west quadrant and it was uncertain whether or not these post-dated the abandonment of the church as a place of worship.³ The discovery of any further graves within the church might help to clarify the situation.

The north-east quadrant (Excavators Gillian Bowen and Louise Woodfield)

The collapse in the north-east butts the north wall of the church and the outer west wall of the north apse; it extended around 12 metres east-west and some five metres to the south. The collapse was less dense at the west and so clearance began there. A deflated part of the foundation for the east-west colonnade, a mud-brick pier, and the lowest course of a section of

north-south wall were uncovered. The north-south wall is one brick, or 33cm, wide and is laid in header fashion. It is a continuation of the wall in the south-west quadrant that was exposed in 1980.⁴ The narrow wall, which extends from foundation piers in the east-west colonnades, formed the eastern boundary of an enclosed area roughly 5 square metres, bounded on the other three sides by the north, south and return aisles. This wall would have interrupted access to the east nave and its purpose is unknown at present and no parallels have been located; it could be a late addition. Small sections of the compact mud-floor surface were exposed but it was obvious that little remained of the architecture in this area of the church. We were able, however, to redraw the plans of the north-west quadrant and correct those drawn in 1980.

We then turned our attention to the east of the quadrant and removed a three metre area of collapse, which was contained by the north wall of the church and the west wall of the north apse. We anticipated that a section of the *haikal* wall, designed to shield the sanctuary from the nave, might have survived. We also wanted to determine whether the corridor behind the north apse, leading to the north *pastophorium*, was closed off from the north aisle of the church. This quadrant proved to be more disturbed than that in the west; the floor in its entirety had been cut through and no architectural elements from the church itself remained. Close examination of the inner north wall of the church and the outer north wall of the north apse for grooves or other markings that might indicate that a door had once been located at the entrance to the corridor proved to be negative and we are confident that no such door existed.

The remains of structures representing two earlier building phases were found beneath the level of the floor; they are presumably contemporary with those found below the floors of the north *pastophorium* and the triple apse in 2009.⁵ The earliest phase of building activity comprises grey mud-brick structures built on grey clay which in turn is laid above clean sand. Three walls from this phase, two oriented north-south, abutting one which is laid east-west, survive. The walls are 50–55cm wide and are preserved to a height of five or six courses. Their full extent is currently unknown. Another grey wall comprising two courses of lime-rich bricks is incorporated into the north wall of the church. The second building phase is represented by two flimsy, brown mud-brick walls, built at right-angles to each other. One is laid directly above the western north-south grey wall, and the other, which begins in the centre of the trench, 3.80m west of the outer wall of the apse, continues in a westerly direction. The walls are 35cm and 30cm wide respectively and are each preserved to three courses, 30–33 cm, in height. All of the early walls were cut back for the building of the church.

In the last few days of the season, attention turned to the north-west quadrant of the nave in an attempt to establish the number of graves present. Fragments of human remains, hair and textiles were found in a pit but this was the only positively-identified grave in that quadrant. This particular grave post-dates the building of the church as it is built against the foundation wall of the north colonnade. As a further five metres of collapse remain in the north aisle, the potential for finding more graves in the church awaits its removal.

Ceramics recovered from the church date from the 4th to the 6th centuries. Because of the disturbed nature of the trench, it is not possible to date the earlier structures. Three ostraka, all from disturbed contexts, were found: two are written in Greek and the other in demotic. Several human bones were found in the collapse.

The structures to the north of the church

Clearance of the surface debris to the north of the church exposed the tops of numerous walls, which can be traced to a dirt track that delineates the ancient site from the modern cultivation, some 20–25 metres from the church itself; the settlement probably continued beneath the modern fields which circle the site. The structures closest to the church are built on the same alignment as the latter but those further north are set at an oblique angle, which indicates at least two construction phases. Previous excavation in the area to the immediate north of the church exposed a number of pit graves indicating that following the abandonment of the buildings in this locality, the area was converted into a Christian cemetery.⁶

Trench 9 (Excavators Colin A. Hope and Johanna Petkov)

The area designated Trench 9 is an extension of Trench 2, which was excavated in the 2007/8 season.⁷ It is situated directly to the east of a two-roomed, brown mud-brick structure, built on the same alignment as the church and which is 12m east-west by 8m north-south. The purpose for extending the excavation outside of this building was to determine the extent of the structures immediately to the north the church wall and how

the building phases relate; to investigate the nature and function of any other structures that might be exposed; and to ascertain whether there were further graves, indicating that the entire area was converted into a cemetery.

Trench 9 covers an area approximately 5m north-south by 7m east-west and is bordered on the west by the east wall of the aforementioned structure, on the north by a grey mud-brick wall, and in the south by the north wall of the church; there are no visible structures on the east. With the exception of a wall that runs parallel to the church, all structures in Trench 9 are confined to the western half. Two building phases were identified. The earlier is represented by a series of grey mud-brick walls built to the east of the two-roomed structure, and butting it, creating two narrow rooms each 2.5m north-south by 1.0m east-west; the grey walls are between 60–70cm wide and are built directly onto sand. Another grey wall runs in an east-west direction, parallel to the north wall of the church but on an oblique angle; it is a continuation of that exposed during the excavation of Trench 2 and can be traced for a distance of four metres. It is built on a sand foundation, is about 60cm wide and is preserved to at least seven courses. This wall appears to represent a sub-phase of activity in this area and other grey walls can be seen abutting it on the south and continuing beneath the north wall of the church.

A second building phase was observed. This comprised brown mud-brick walls but the area is so badly deflated that little of this phase remains. Two walls that survived were built at right angles above the grey walls. These walls 30-35cm wide and are reminiscent of the brown mud-brick building phase in the church; it is safe to conclude that they are contemporary. The

only identified section of floor that survives in the western half of the trench is in the doorway between Trenches 9 and 2; it is presumably associated with the second building phase.

Although the eastern half of the trench was devoid of structures in the central area, a compact grey floor was encountered and the area could once have been a large room or a courtyard. Seven grave pits, all oriented west-east, had been cut through the rubble and into the underlying compact grey floor. Five were disturbed but each contained fragments of human bone; two graves were intact. The adult occupants were laid on their backs with their heads to the west. The body in the south was buried with the hands across the pelvis and that in the north had its hands to the sides. Both bodies had been wrapped. The graves themselves are badly deflated and as a result the bodies were encountered close to the surface making the original depth of the cuts impossible to determine. The fact that the graves were cut through debris indicates a later period of use than the early grey phase, although whether they predate the abandonment of the church is unclear. Two other graves were found in Trench 9 bringing the total to nine: one was cut into the church wall and the other was cut into one of the grey walls. Yet another is located beneath a small vault, which could have been part of the superstructure of the grave but the wall is badly deflated and the function of that vault cannot be determined with certainty. Of the seven graves in the east of the trench, four are 1.3m or less in length suggesting that they were burials of children.

A number of small finds were retrieved; these include a jar docket written in Greek, a small mud seal with an impression of a *crux ansata*, four small

glass and faience beads and four bronze coins; all are from disturbed contexts. One of the coins was struck under Constans as Caesar (330–337 CE) and the others are too corroded to be identified.

Ceramics from within the stratified floor deposit in the doorway connecting Trenches 2 and 9, representing occupational phase 2, date to the 4th and 5th centuries. There are no sealed deposits associated with the first phase and so no assessment of the date of the grey mud-brick walls can be determined. Sherds retrieved from the fill of the two intact burials date to the 4th century but this does not clarify the date of interment as the ceramics must have been swept into the fill from the contaminated debris.

3. The West Buildings

A series of buildings are located to the west and south-west of the church (Plate 1). The major structures are the tower and the building to its east. In the 2009 season, excavation focused upon the east building (Trench 5: Rooms 6 – 8) and we decided this season to explore specific areas within the tower in order to determine its architectural sequence and relationship to the east building, and the possible function of the structure. The tower is built on a mound about 10m west of the church; it occupies the highest point on the site. The area to the west of the building has been cut into demolishing the southern half of the west wall and any structures that might have been located beyond it. The area to the south is poorly defined with a series of east-west walls, which abut one another, making it difficult to determine the southern extent of this building. The full length of the north wall is preserved, 11.5m, and the east wall can be traced along its external face for 6m at which point it was modified to form the north jamb of

doorway; it presumably continued in the south but is not identifiable from the surface. The north, east, and west walls are constructed of brown mud brick and have an average width of 1.70m; the internal dimensions of the building are 8.0m east-west and at least 10m north-south. The building is subdivided into four rooms each leading off an east-west corridor. The rooms to the north (Rooms 3 and 4) are larger than those to the south (Rooms 1 and 5). The corridor opens in the east onto Room 6, which was excavated in the 2009 season.⁸ As the west end of the corridor has been cut through, it is not possible to ascertain whether there was a western, external, door to the building. This season's work was undertaken in two of the four rooms, Rooms 3 and 5, and some minor clearance in the entrance to the corridor, Room 2. The purpose for choosing these rooms is that excavation within Room 3 should reveal the foundation of the outer walls of the structure, whilst that in Room 5 had the potential to clarify the southern extent of the building; work in Room 2 should show the relationship between the tower and the addition to the east.

Room 3 (Excavator Luke Falvey)

Work commenced in Room 3, which is 3.9m north-south by 3.7m east-west. It soon became apparent that the subdivision of the building represented a secondary phase in its use. Excavation into the natural sand on which the building was constructed revealed the following sequence. The north wall was built first. At its base is a mud-brick footing of six courses of stretchers; the lowest three courses project 20cm into the room and the upper three are stepped back by 10cm. The west wall is bonded to the north wall but its foundation course is laid two courses higher than that of the north wall; it

does not have an equivalent footing. A north-south wall was then built against the north wall at a point 2.0m east of the west wall; it extends 2.45m into the room, is 82cm wide, and is constructed in the same brown brick as the outer walls. The section of the wall immediately abutting the north wall is set 55cm lower than the remainder of the wall, which is laid on a bed of sand. An earth floor was then laid above the sand. The tower was then modified and other interior walls inserted. For this phase rubble fill, one metre deep, was deposited, presumably throughout the structure, and the south and east walls were built upon it. The south wall, which forms the north wall of the corridor, was the first to be built, followed by the east wall, which butts the former. The entrance to the room is located in the west of the south wall and the door opened inwards against the west wall; it is 87cm wide. The south wall is 95cm wide and the east is 60cm; they are built with brown mud bricks but of a lesser density than those used for the original walls. The secondary walls are preserved to a height of 35cm only and no floor was preserved. The low wall could have been cut down for the building of this phase but the deflation is such that it is impossible to tell; it could equally have been incorporated into the room but this would have resulted in an unusable space.

Room 5 (Excavator Luke Falvey)

Room 5 (Plate 1), is a rectangular room 2.25m north-south and 3.8m east-west. Excavation to the sand foundations in the east end of this room confirmed that the south wall is not part of the original structure. The building sequence within this room is as follows. Two east-west walls of the same compact grey brick were laid on the sand foundation, one in the

north and the other running parallel, 2.0m to the south; remnants of a mud floor associated with this building phase survive. The construction pattern for the northern wall comprises four alternating courses of rowlocks and stretchers. The south wall is a single course of stretchers. A wall of the same brown bricks as those used in Room 3, 85cm wide, was then built directly above the grey wall in the south and a north-south brown mud-brick wall of the same texture was then built against the south wall, 30cm east of the west wall of the room; the north-south wall was laid on sand with its foundation commencing two courses, or 20cm, above that of the south wall. It is 70cm wide and projects 1.34m into the room. Another earth floor is associated with this phase. At some stage the north-south wall was cut down, as perhaps was the north grey wall, and the area was filled with rubble to a depth of around 50cm; the east wall was built onto this rubble fill and butts the south wall. The east wall extends north into the corridor where it forms the south jamb of the entrance to the complex at yet a later phase. The north wall of the corridor was then constructed and was laid directly on top of the low grey wall; it is stepped back 20cm from the south face of the grey wall. It was not possible to reach the base of the west wall from inside the room because of its proximity to the low north-south wall but as it butts the north wall, it is safe to conclude that this was the last to be built. The upper floor associated with the latest building phase did not survive. The north, east and west walls of this room are, on average, 60cm wide and it can be assumed that the low grey wall in the north is at least 80cm in width. The south wall, at 85cm wide, is more substantial. It is built up against another wall, which is of a comparable width. The south wall continues east for 60cm at which point it is bonded to a north-south wall,

against which the east wall of Room 5 was built. As with Room 3, no remnants of floor associated with the modification of the room remained.

Trench 11, Room 2 (Excavator Luke Falvey)

Trench 11 is located at the eastern end of the corridor, Room 2; it spans the width of the corridor, 3.0m, and extends 2.2m west from the inner doorway. The purpose for opening this trench was to relate the corridor to the architectural features to its immediate east, which was excavated in 2009. The doorway is 1.16m wide and the jambs are formed by the extension of the east wall of Room 5, and the outer wall of the building on the north.⁹

Excavation within this trench continued to a depth equivalent to the base of the south wall of the corridor, which is the upper north wall of Room 5 and the penultimate wall to be built. A high-quality, light-grey floor is associated with this horizon; it extends across the entire trench. Time constraints prevented further work through the floor but laid bricks were visible beneath it against the north wall of the corridor and the western baulk. A 30cm wide mud-brick footing was laid header fashion, against the north, south and south-east walls. A shallow rubble fill, averaging 16cm deep, was then deposited and another grey compacted earth floor was laid against the top bricks of the footings. The accumulated deposit of sand and rubble within the eastern part of the entranceway linking it with Room 6 was not removed, but it is obvious that this floor extends throughout and continues in Room 6. Wendy Dolling, who excavated Trench 5 in 2009, noted that there is no evidence for the relaying of this floor. She further noted that the door sill into the corridor is slightly raised from the floor level

but the plaster is contiguous with that of the floor in Room 6. On the northern side of the doorway in Room 6, there are several laid bricks underlying the plastered surface; these bricks may represent an earlier wall or they may have been incidentally incorporated into the sill surface.

The ceramics retrieved from the three trenches show a similar pattern. Those from the lowest sealed deposits of the structure representing the earliest occupational level date to the 4th and 5th centuries, whilst those from the fill above the low floors contain sherds which span the 4th to the 6th centuries. In total six ostraka were found: one from Room 5 and the remainder from the corridor; all are written in Coptic and are awaiting study. The only other objects from this building are two jar sealings; they throw no light on its function.

4. The structures to the south of the West Building addition

Trench 7 (Excavator Daniel Jones)

Trench 7 is located against the south wall of Room 8 in the eastern addition to the tower; it extends 3m east-west and 9m north-south. The area was chosen for excavation in order to clarify the nature of several partially-exposed features, and to determine their chronology, function, and relationship to the church and the West Buildings. Trench 7 was extended to include an east-west cut through the passageway between the outer east wall of Room 8 and the outer west wall of the church. The aim of this cut was to establish how the two structures related to one another over time. This relationship remains unclear and further work is required.

The structures within Trench 7 comprise a series of basins, which post-date the construction of the West Building addition. The earliest building activity in the area is a 40cm wide mud-brick wall, located 1.72m south of the West Building addition and running parallel to it. Its function and relation to the surrounding architectural features is unknown at present. At some point, the wall was cut at its eastern end to insert at least four basins, which were modified over a period of time. With the last phase of use, a rubble fill was laid to raise the internal surface of the basins making it approximately 50cm higher than the external surface between the West Buildings and the church. At the same time a shallow north-south rectangular basin with a step leading to it from the newly created floor was installed in the south. When its primary function fell out of use, a hearth was built into the accumulated rubble in the north corner. A new basin was built just to the north of the first basin; it was lined with a layer of mud and clay and may have been used for storage. The primary function of this area fell out of use and the bins were filled with successive deposits of building material which is probably a combination of dumping and collapse.

Ceramics retrieved from this area date between the 4th and 6th centuries, although those from the lowest fill, beneath a section of floor against the wall of the West Building addition, and from the sand on which the structures were built, date no later than the 4th century and a few diagnostic sherds belong to vessels of the 3rd century.

5. The path between the West Building and the church (Excavator Dan Jones)

The passageway between the West Building and the church is 2.0m wide on the north widening to 3.0m in the south; the odd shape is the result of the oblique angle of the east wall of the West Building addition. At some point the passageway was blocked in the north. A test trench the width of the passageway extending 1.3m north of the outer corner of the church wall and continuing 60cm to the south of the church was excavated. The trench was divided east-west; 60cm of material was removed from against the wall of the West Building addition but only 30 cm was removed from against the church wall and consequently the base of that wall was not reached. The test did not yield any information on the phasing of the two structures. All ceramics from these contexts date from the 4th to 6th centuries.

Discussion

This season's excavations at Deir Abu Metta indicate several phases of use. The site itself may well have been built upon a dune, as a sand deposit was found at the base of all trenches. The tentative building sequence for the church and the north structures is as follows. The earliest building activity is represented by grey structures in the north, which continue beneath the north wall of the church. These walls were built onto the sand or upon a compact deposit of grey clay directly above the sand. The main two-roomed building to the north of the church belongs to this phase. There was a shallow deposit of rubble above the grey walls onto which structures with narrow walls of friable brown mud brick were built, although those beneath the church had no intervening rubble deposit. The third phase was the building of the church and for this, the brown and grey brick phases were partly demolished and the resulting rubble was used as a fill for the church

floor. The oblique walls constructed to the north of the church appear to represent the fourth building phase. Deflation at the north of the church is such that it is difficult to determine whether the graves represent the final stage of use in that location, or whether the cemetery was commenced in the east contemporaneously with the oblique phase, that is, while the church was still in use. The burials were cut into the grey phase and there is evidence of a rubble/collapse phase before the graves were cut. The graves within the church itself, clearly postdate its abandonment for formal worship.

The first occupational phase of the West Buildings appears to predate the church. This phase is represented by the north and west walls of the tower, which were built onto the sand. These may well be the only walls to survive from this phase, although it has yet to be determined whether low walls encountered in Room 6 belong to this phase. The second phase is represented by cladding on the interior walls of Rooms 3 and 5, the insertion of internal walls and the corridor. There may also have been structural changes at this point. The West Building addition was then erected to the east of the tower with its east wall at an oblique angle to its south wall. The storage bins to the south of the West Building addition, and perhaps the modifications in the south-west of that building, followed. The burials seem to represent the final stage of use in this part of the site. Intrusive graves were not only cut into the church and the structures to its north, but two burials were also cut into the floor of Room 7.¹⁰ The temporal relationship of the various phases and sub-phases remain unclear as there were doubtless several modifications made to the structures beyond the church itself and insufficient excavation has yet been undertaken.¹¹

The ceramic assemblage from the church itself dates to the 5th and 6th centuries but sherds from the earlier structures in the outer buildings, which predate the foundation of the church, includes significant quantities of 4th century diagnostic examples and attest occupation on the site at this time. Some sherds dating to the third century were found in the storage area and an ostrakon written in demotic was retrieved from beneath the church. This does raise the possibility that there was some activity on the site before the fourth century. Minimal numbers of sherds dating to the 7th century were recovered from the upper deposits in the storage area to the south of the West Buildings. At this stage in the excavation of the site, it can be suggested with a degree of confidence that the church and perhaps many of the associated structures were abandoned by the end of the 6th century.

In the 2011 season, work at Deir Abu Metta will focus upon West Buildings, the area to the north of the church, and other outer buildings in an effort to clarify their extent and function. Several walls, some of which are visible on the south and north of the site, were added to the plan this season (Figure 1). Those on the south are located beyond the mound and they could well represent a wall around the periphery of the site. The sand accumulation on the south is greater than that on the north and it is likely that there are further structures within this region.

¹ The excavation was supported by Monash University and funded by Australians Studying Abroad, Monash University and the Egyptology Society of Victoria. Participants included Gillian Bowen, Colin Hope, Johanna Petkov and Louise Woodfield (Monash University), Luke Falvey (Latrobe University), and Daniel Jones (a freelance archaeologist). The plans were compiled by Bruce Parr from

those drawn by Falvey, Hope and Jones. The ceramics were identified and dated by Hope, who was also responsible for the photography. This report is edited by Bowen based upon notes provided by Falvey, Jones, Petkov and Woodfield; the discussion is also by Bowen.

² G. E. Bowen, "The Church of Deir Abu Metta, Dakhleh Oasis: a Report on the 2009 Excavation" in: *BACE* 20 (2009) 9–10; A.J. Mills, "The Dakhleh Oasis Project: Report on the Third Season of Survey September – December 1980" in: *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* XI/4 (1981) 185. Knudstad did not make any notes on his activities within the church and it is uncertain whether or not he undertook any excavation.

³ Bowen, in *BACE* 20 (2009) 9–10.

⁴ Mills in: *JSSEA* XI/4 (1981) 185.

⁵ Bowen in: *BACE* 20 (2009) 8–9.

⁶ Mills in: *JSSEA* XI/4 (1981) 185; G.E. Bowen, "The Church of Deir Abu Metta and a Christian Cemetery in Dakhleh Oasis: a Brief Report" in: *BACE* 19 (2008) 8.

⁷ Bowen, in: *BACE* 29 (2008) 8.

⁸ Bowen, in: *BACE* 20 (2009) 10–11.

⁹ Features (9) and (19) in Trench 5, Room 6. See Bowen in: *BACE* 20 (2009) Figure 5.

¹⁰ Bowen, in: *BACE* 20 (2009) 11.

¹¹ I am grateful to Colin A. Hope for his advice in determining the building sequences.



Plate 1: Deir Abu Metta showing the West Buildings in the foreground and the church, looking east.