

The Church of Dayr Abu Matta and its Associated Structures: an overview of four seasons of excavation

Gillian E. Bowen

At the Sixth International Dakhleh Oasis Project Conference, I presented an overview of the excavations carried out at Dayr Abu Matta in the 2007/8 and 2009 field seasons.¹ Since that time, two further seasons of excavation have been undertaken at the site and I take this opportunity to include the results of that work as well as providing an introduction to the site. This report is arranged by structure rather than excavation seasons.²

Dayr Abu Matta is located in western Dakhleh, on a low mound just off the Mut/Qasr road 2.5 kilometres north-west of Rashda. Structures at the site include a triconch church, large buildings resembling a tower to its west and a series of buildings to its north; walls are also visible to the south of the church and the west buildings but there is no evidence of any structures on the east (Figure 1). The extent of the settlement cannot be determined as the site is surrounded by cultivation, which is gradually encroaching upon the ancient buildings. Dayr Abu Matta may have been a small isolated settlement or was perhaps associated with a large Ptolemaic/Roman settlement that lies about two kilometres to the east and which is now almost lost to agriculture.³

Previous Study of the Site

Herbert Winlock visited the site in 1908 and whilst there he drew up a plan and took two photographs of the church, one of which he reproduced in his book *Ed Dakhleh Oasis: journey of a camel trip made in 1908*, published in 1936, together with the plan and a brief description of

the visible remains (Plates 1 and 2). It is apparent from his description that the church was merely a shell and that, with the exception of the sanctuary, none of the internal architecture remained or was at least visible. In Winlock's day, the north and east exterior walls were preserved, in part, to a height of at least six metres but a fourteen-metre section of the south wall had collapsed.

In 1979–80 the site was surveyed by members of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, who undertook some minor clearance and carried out a test excavation (Mills 1981, 185). As the base of the church in the west had only a light covering of rubble, James Knudstad cleared part of this area in order to define any surviving elements of the internal architecture and draw the plan. He also undertook some clearance within the sanctuary. In the same season, Colin Hope conducted a test excavation against the exterior wall of the church in the north-west (Trench 1). This revealed several activity phases attested by a series of walls and four intrusive pit graves cut on an east-west axis; one grave was intact and the body interred within it was laid supine on the grave floor, with the head to the west in what is typical of Christian burial practices. Another grave had been disturbed but the upper body was *in situ* and followed the same orientation as the former; the remaining graves had been desecrated. This discovery indicated that there was a cemetery associated with the church. Coins retrieved by Hope date to the 4th century and provided an approximate date for activity in the region. No test was undertaken in the west buildings, but in his publication Mills (1981, 185) suggested that it

¹ DOP site reference 32/405-A7-1.

² The work was funded through Monash University by donations from Australians Studying Abroad, the Museum of Old and New Art (Hobart, Tasmania) and the Egyptology Society of Victoria, for which I am most appreciative. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Colin Hope for his invaluable advice and assistance with the excavations, and for agreeing to undertake the photography. Preliminary reports on the excavations have appeared annually in the *Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology (BACE)*.

³ This site was cursorily surveyed in 2010 by members of the Monash University team at the request of the Dakhleh Inspectorate of the Supreme Council of Antiquities. The surface ceramic assemblage identified activity at the site in Ptolemaic, Roman and Late Roman Periods. Both stone and substantial mud-brick structures were identified.

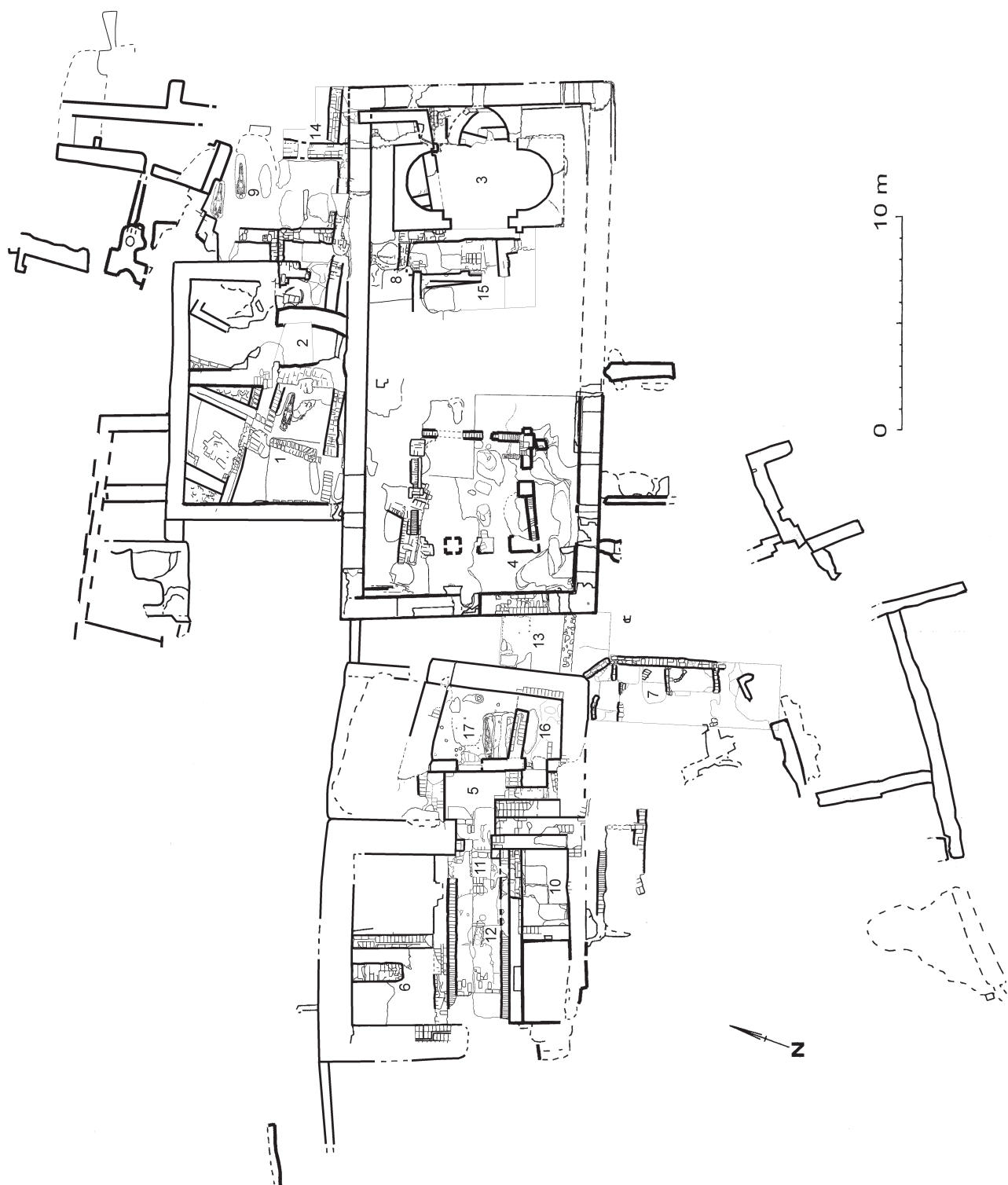


Figure 1 Plan of Dayr Abu Matta showing the main excavation areas; original drawing of the church by J. E. Knudstad and the north and west buildings by W. Dolling and A. Stevens, supplemented by L. Falvey, C. A. Hope, D. Jones, P. Kucera and J. Milner and compiled by B. Parr.



*Plate 1 The church in 1908 showing the east and north walls looking south-west;
photo by H. Winlock (1908) © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*



*Plate 2 The church in 1908 showing the window in the east wall looking north-west;
photo by H. Winlock (1908) © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*



Plate 3 The extant remains of the church in 2008 taken from the same location as Winlock's photographs in 1908 looking south-west; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 4 The extant remains of the church in 2008 showing the remaining window looking north; © C. A. Hope.

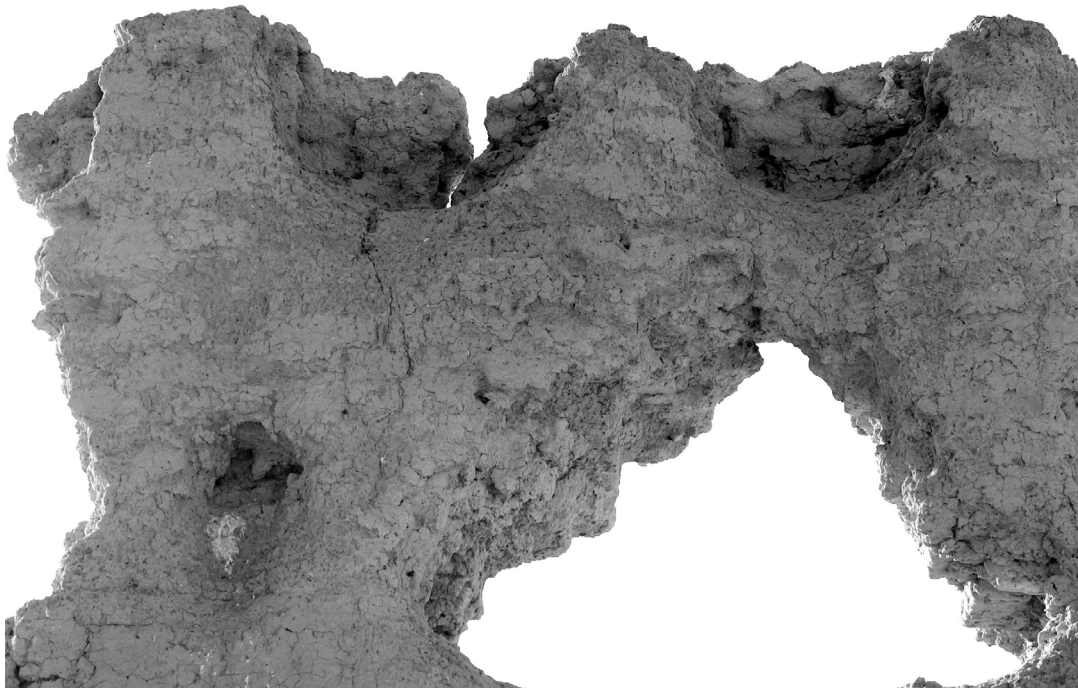


Plate 5 Beam emplacements above the window in the inner south wall of the church; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 6 Trench 6, the sanctuary showing the low walls beneath the east and north apses looking north;
© C. A. Hope.

could have perhaps housed a small monastic community; this was based upon the tower-like appearance of the structure, which is a phenomenon of monastic architecture. Peter Grossmann (1991, 706) in his entry on the site in the *Coptic Encyclopedia*, identified the building as the keep of a monastic establishment. According to Colin Walters (1974, 86) such towers are first attested in literary evidence in the mid-fifth century but no contemporary archaeological evidence for such was known at the time he wrote. Grossmann has suggested that the church dates to the late 6th century, and Judith McKenzie (2007, 415, note 97) concurs.

The Current Project: Introduction

The pace at which Christianity spread throughout Egypt is not well understood and there are virtually no surviving early churches in the Nile valley; but in Dakhleh Oasis, five well-dated fourth-century churches have been excavated, and presumably there are others that have not yet been identified.⁴ This prompted the excavation at Dayr Abu Matta, which is the only known triconch church in Dakhleh. Its study will expand the growing corpus of early churches in Dakhleh Oasis and redress the paucity of information from the Nile valley. The overall aims of the research project are to study the development of both church architecture and the burial customs of the Dakhleh Christians, a study which has the potential to inform us about the nature of Christianity as it was practised in the oasis at a time when the religion was still somewhat fluid, before the development of what might later be termed orthodoxy. To this end, it is necessary to establish the date of the foundation of the church and its period of use. Study of the west buildings is crucial for they are clearly associated with the church. Our aim in relation to these structures is to determine their function and whether they are contemporary with the building of the basilica or whether they represent a pre-existing complex. A study of the cemetery should provide further information on whether Christians of Dakhleh adopted a uniform burial practice, as appears to be the case at Kellis, or whether

there was some variation amongst the population, especially over a period of time. Four short excavation seasons have now been carried out and the following report details the current state of our knowledge.⁵ Excavations have focussed upon three areas: the church, the west buildings and the structures to the immediate north of the church; these are discussed separately.

1. The Church (Figure 1)

Several sections of wall have collapsed since Winlock visited the site just over 100 years ago; however, the exterior walls of the church are sufficiently well preserved to give a basic architectural description (Plates 3 and 4). The church is a three-aisled basilica with a triple apse. Its axial orientation is slightly to the north of east with the sanctuary located in the east. The internal dimensions are 24 metres by 10.35 metres and the mud-brick walls, which are 1.04 metres thick, were constructed in sections. Beam sockets can be seen in the central section of the south wall, 5 metres above the floor and several others were visible in Winlock's (1936, 24) day, leaving him to suggest that the roofs over the side aisles were flat (Plate 5). The light-source came from windows and Winlock (1936, 24) mentioned surviving examples, one of which is shown in his photograph and is situated in the east wall behind the north apse (Plates 1 and 2); today the only extant window is located in the south wall 3 metres above the floor (Plates 4 and 5). It may well be that the basilica had a clerestory roof but there is no evidence for such. The door of the church is located in the west but as the central section of the wall is badly deflated it is impossible to determine its exact location or its width. A possible entrance, 0.9 metres wide, is located in the western end of the north wall.

The sanctuary occupies an area 6 metres north-south by 5.70 metres east-west and comprises three semi-circular apses, with a central space of 3.5 square metres (Plate 6). It is flanked on the north and south by two narrow L-shaped rooms, neither of which gives access to the sanctuary and therefore the only point of entry was

⁴ The fourth-century churches are as follows: three at Ismant al-Kharab, ancient Kellis (Bowen 2002; 2003), one at 'Ain el-Gedida (Aravecchia, this volume and forthcoming) and the fifth at 'Ayn es-Sebil, which was excavated in 2010 by inspectors from the Dakhleh Oasis Inspectorate under the direction of Kamel Bayumi (unpublished). A Christian inscription was found at Mut al-Kharab, ancient Mothis, in 1980 (Mills 1981, 185) and since excavations began there under the direction of Colin Hope in 2000, other architectural elements from a church have been identified; these await further study but it is appropriate to list them here. They include sections of columns all of which are cut from heavy fossil-rich stone, as is the inscription found in 1980; one column base is inscribed XPHTIANE, which Klaas Worp, in a personal communication to Colin Hope, suggests may be a spelling error for XPICTIANE, the vocative for 'Christian'. A fragment from a sandstone stela, identified as such by Olaf Kapfer, includes a small cross, and other sandstone blocks with floral elements typical of church decoration have been retrieved. A bishop is recorded in the Kellis texts of the fourth century (Bagnall 1997, 81) and there is every reason to suppose that Mothis, as the capital of the oasis, was an episcopal see. The date of the architectural fragments is not known but the ceramics assemblage from Mut al-Kharab attests continuing activity at the site throughout the first and second millennia of the common era. Another church has been identified beneath the old mosque at al-Qasr (personal communication, F. Leemhuis), and it stands to reason that Amhida, ancient Trimithis, also had a church in the 4th century (Bagnall and Cribiore, this volume).

⁵ The field seasons are as follows: 27 December 2007 to 5 January 2008, 5 to 15 January 2009, 24 December 2009 to 6 January 2010 and 5 to 13 January 2011.



Plate 7 Trench 3, Space 1 showing the early walls in the centre and the east wall of the church on the right looking north; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 8 Trenches 8 and 10 showing the early structures beneath the nave with the paved floor in the centre looking south; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 9 Trench 4, the west nave showing the south-west corner of the church, the remaining internal architecture, cuts for the graves, the late north-south wall in the foreground, the entranceway to the church and the wall of the west building at the top looking west; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 10 The north-east corner of the church showing the tops of the north structures in the foreground and the north-east corner of the west buildings in the upper right looking south-west; © C. A. Hope.

from the nave through what would have been an arched entrance spanning 2.7 metres. The entrance was flanked by half-columns, built against the outer north and south walls of the apse. The entrances of the north, south and east apses also cover a 2.7-metre span and would have been fitted with a cupola and an arched entrance. Fragments of white plaster found among the debris both in the sanctuary and against the outer north wall of the north apse indicate that the sanctuary and probably the church in its entirety were white plastered. The use of white plaster for churches in Dakhleh may have been standard and would serve to reflect the light; it survives today on the walls of the east churches at Kellis (Bowen 2002, 71; 2003, 159), the church at 'Ain el-Gedida (Aravecchia, this volume and forthcoming) and that at 'Ain es-Sebil (personal observation). One might assume that the sanctuary was decorated, if it follows the decorative scheme of the east churches at Kellis (Bowen 2002, 71; 2003, 159–61).

1.1 Excavation within the Church

The excavations within the church, conducted from 2009–2011, were confined to the sanctuary, a section of the northern L-shaped room, the north-eastern part of the nave and the west nave. The area immediately in front of the sanctuary was covered by dense collapse from the north wall, which had fallen since Winlock's visit and it was chosen for excavation to explore whether a *haikel* screen had once been located here. We also chose to work in the western nave, where some architectural elements in the south had been uncovered by Knudstad, as it was obvious that more survived in the north-west. We extended the northern part of the trench to the east beneath the collapse from the north wall to investigate the possibility of further remains of the colonnade.

1.1.1 The Sanctuary and the North-East Nave (Trenches 3, 8 and 15) (Figure 1)

Work in of the sanctuary focussed upon the north and east apses and the eastern part of the north L-shaped room (Space 1). The floor of the sanctuary does not survive but from the number of sandstone pavers retrieved from the collapse, it appears that it was originally flagged. There is no indication of the floor's original height above that of the nave but it was no doubt elevated. The south and east apses are poorly preserved and the remaining wall of the latter stands a mere 1.6 metres above its foundation. The wall of the north apse is better preserved, surviving in part to a height in excess of 2.5 metres from its foundation. The remains of grey mud-brick walls from earlier structures were encountered beneath the north and east apses and in Space 1. These include a north-south wall that commences beyond the church in the north and continues through Space 1, turns at an oblique angle and continues beneath the entrance of the north apse, which was built over it. This wall is butted on its north face by a north-south wall, which continues beneath the north

wall of the apse. The early wall beneath the entrance to the east apse is broken and dislodged; it appears to abut the east-west wall in Space 1 on the north and continues beyond the south wall of the east apse (Plates 6 and 7).

In the 2010 and 2011 seasons we excavated the area immediately to the west of the north apse and although no internal architecture from the church survives, we again encountered walls from earlier structures. Three building phases were identified. The earliest comprises grey mud-brick walls built directly onto sand. One, located in the north of the trench, is oriented east-west and is bonded on the east with a north-south wall that continues south beneath the entrance to the apse, which was probably built onto it (Plate 8); the faces of two other grey walls were encountered in the south-east of the trench. All of these walls, and those beneath the sanctuary, are contemporary. At some point, the area between the grey walls was filled with packing and a second building phase was begun. Two major walls, one oriented north-south in the centre of the trench and the other east-west in the south, are associated with this second phase; they are constructed using a pinkish-grey mud brick. A paved floor was laid against these walls and a doorway located in the south-west gave access to the west. These structures were eventually cut back and filled to provide a foundation for the internal architecture of the church. The north wall of the church was built onto this rubble fill, as was the external wall of the sanctuary. An east-west wall of brown mud brick was built above the north-south wall and as it is located two metres south of the north wall and the outer west wall of the north apse, it might be a remnant of the foundation course for the north colonnade. No evidence for a *haikel* screen survives.

1.1.2 The West Section of the Church (Trench 4) (Figure 1)

Trench 4, excavated in the 2009 season, covered an area 10 metres north-south by 6 metres east on the north and 9.4 metres east along the south wall. The boundary of the trench to the east followed the line of collapse from the north wall (see above). The excavation was extended in the 2010 season, following some clearance of the collapse in the north-west. The entire area is badly cut through and little remains of the mud floor. The foundations of four piers of the colonnade which separated the return aisle from the nave survive as do four other piers separating the side aisles: two on the north and two on the south; none of these is preserved more than two courses (Plate 9). Of particular note is the close proximity of the two central plinths in the north-south colonnade, probably located in front of the door, which are set 0.75 m apart. An oddly-aligned brown mud-brick wall, oriented east-west, located in the north-west seems to be from an earlier structure and a single course of bricks running north-south between the third piers from the west is a later addition; its purpose is not known.

In the west, several pit graves had been cut through



*Plate 11 Trench 1 showing a late wall in the centre-east of the rectangular structure looking north-east;
© C. A. Hope.*



Plate 12 Trench 2, showing the small room with the outline of the circular feature in the upper right and the doorway in the lower right, the north wall of the church in the lower left and the remains of a stratified floor surface at the top looking north-west; © C. A. Hope.

the mud floor into the sand on which the church is built (Plate 9). Only one undisturbed burial was found but numerous disarticulated human bones were encountered in these pits and amongst the debris throughout the church. The body is that of an infant buried in a shallow grave. The infant had been buried in a hooded linen garment, edged with a tapestry band (Livingstone in Bowen 2009, 14–15, Plate 8). The skeletal remains of two adults were found in graves parallel to the south wall of the church; both had apparently been wrapped in red cloth, much of which lay within the same vicinity as the bodies. Tosha Dupras, who is studying the physical remains, reports that the injuries on one of these bodies indicate that the woman met with an extremely violent death. Because of the disturbance in this part of the church it is not possible to determine the number of graves but they presumably represent a final phase of activity after the church was abandoned.

1.1.3 Building Sequence for the Church

The building sequence for the church as determined from our excavation within the sanctuary and from a test beneath the west wall in the south corner is as follows. The east wall of the church was built first; the foundation is laid on sand and is considerably deeper than the north, south and west walls. It is 0.5 metres deeper than the low north-south wall in Space 1 against which it was built (Plate 7). The remaining walls of the church were also built directly onto sand, with the exception of a section of the west wall, which was set on a shallow deposit of rubble above the sand. The early walls in the east were cut down and a packing of clean sand was deposited between them to create a sound foundation for the church. The sand was topped with a narrow layer of rubble fill and the walls of the sanctuary were then built as a block above this fill. The curve of the east apse abuts the east wall, rather than being constructed as an integral part of that wall.

1.1.4 Artefacts and Dating Evidence

Objects retrieved from the church are minimal. Most notable are an iron hoe and a terracotta lamp found in the sand beneath the wall of the north apse and two glass *unguentaria* from beneath the floor in Space 1. Three coins derive from disturbed contexts in the west; one is Ptolemaic and is an obvious stray, one was struck under Constantius II between 341–348 and the third in the reign of Valens sometime after 364. Three ostraka, two written in Coptic and one in Greek, were also recovered in this part of the church; they await study. The only sealed deposits within the church are beneath the floor in Space 1 and beneath the paved area in Trench 15. Ceramics

from both of these areas have been dated by Colin Hope to the 4th century and presumably relate to the early structures.⁶ Ceramics from the test below the west wall of the church date to the 4th and 5th centuries. There are no other objects from sealed contexts within the church that might allow us to refine the date of its foundation.

2. Excavation within the Northern Structures

(Trenches 1, 2, 9 and 14) (Figure 1)

An area 20 metres east-west by between 4 and 6 metres north-south has been excavated to the immediate north of the church commencing four metres east of the north-west corner and working progressively east. This work has spanned four excavation seasons: 1979, 2007/8, 2010 and 2011. Only the tops of walls were visible in this area and they can be traced continuing in a northerly direction down the mound at which point they disappear beneath an unsealed road used by the local farmers. There is an irrigation ditch and cultivation immediately north of the road. In the 2007/8 field season, the tops of walls were brushed in order to draw a plan, which has been added to in subsequent seasons (Plate 10).

2.1 Trenches 1 and 2 (Figure 1 and Plates 11 and 12)

The area is dominated by the remains of a rectangular building 11.25 x 7.75 metres, three quarters of which has been excavated (Trenches 1 and 2).⁷ Two major building phases were identified within this structure. The earlier phase is represented by a series of walls built on an oblique angle; all walls of this phase are laid directly onto sand. The rectangular structure was then built and underwent a series of modifications (Plate 11). The only entrance-way to be identified is located in the south-eastern corner of the building; it opens into a narrow irregularly-shaped room with a maximum width of 1.3 metres. This room is bordered on the west by a curving north-south wall which belongs to the first building phase. At some point a circular feature, probably a storage bin, was set into the floor of the narrow room blocking access to the north (Plate 12); only its brick base remains. All north-south walls were later cut back in the south to build the north wall of the church, which post-dates the construction of the rectangular building. Following the abandonment of the structure, the area was used as a cemetery and pit graves were cut through the laid mud brick floor. Four graves were found in Trench 1 (see above). Pit graves were also found in Trench 2 but all had been robbed. Because of the damage to the floor it was impossible to determine the exact number of graves in this part of the structure; two, however, were cut into the north wall of the church, confirming their relative chronology.

⁶ Colin Hope is responsible for the study of all ceramics recovered from Dayr Abu Matta.

⁷ The north-eastern quadrant is unexcavated.



Plate 13 Trenches 9 and 14, showing the north wall of the church on the left and the low wall over which it was built with a grave pit in the lower left and against the church wall looking south-west; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 14 Trench 9, showing one of the Christian burials with the edge of a second grave in the upper left looking north; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 15 The west building showing the tower and the west walls of the eastern extension prior to excavation looking north-west; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 16 Trench 6, showing the north and west walls of the tower and the low internal wall on the right looking north; © C. A. Hope.

2.2 Trenches 9 and 14 (Figure 1)

Further structures were built against the rectangular building on the same alignment, in both the north and the east. Whether they are contemporary with the rectangular building is uncertain but they are constructed in the same brown mud brick. Those in the north have not been excavated but an area 5 metres north-south by 7.2 metres east-west was opened in 2010 (Trench 9); it is contained on the south and west by the church wall and the outer east wall of the rectangular structure. In the 2011 season, the trench was extended east to take in the north-eastern corner of the church (Trench 14). Several grey mud-brick walls were found within this area and they represent the same early phases as those beneath the church. Most notable is the east-west wall in the south of the trench, built on a slightly oblique angle and which was first encountered in Trench 1 (Plate 13). This wall served, in part, as a footing for the north wall of the church and disappears below the church wall 2.5 metres west of the north-east corner. Two other oblique east-west walls and two north-south walls are also associated with this phase. The grey walls were cut down and the area filled with a rubble packing for the brown mud-brick walls. Two narrow rooms built against the outer east wall of the rectangular building are the only identifiable structures. There are no buildings relating to this phase east of these rooms but again the space had been used as a cemetery. Twelve pit graves were found in Trench 9 and a further five in Trench 14; of these, two of the burials were intact and several others contained the *in situ* remains of bodies (Plate 14). In three instances, mud bricks were placed alongside the head as if to offer some protection. Once again the graves had been cut through flooring and into, or against, the lower walls, as well as into the face of the church wall or just beneath it.

2.3 Artefacts and Dating Evidence

Objects from this area were more plentiful than those from the church although without exception these were retrieved from disturbed contexts. In all six identifiable coins were found. They include two issues of Constans, one as Caesar (330–37) and one struck between 348 and 350, one struck by Constantine I between 324–30, one dating to Valens sometime after 364 and two from the reign of Theodosius I (379–83). Substantial fragments of glass lamps or goblets, plates and bottles have been studied by Marie-Dominique Nenna who dates them from the late 4th and throughout the 5th centuries. A Greek ostrakon, recording transactions of oil, includes at least ten names; amongst them is Abraam; Klaas Worp notes that it is written in a 4th–5th-century hand. Roger Bagnall has informed me that the name Abraam only appears within a Christian context from the late 4th century. There are just two areas excavated within the northern structures which have yielded sealed contexts: the floor in doorway connecting Trenches 2 and 9 and a sequence of mud floors in Trench 2. Ceramics retrieved from these floors date to

both the 4th and the 5th centuries. Other sherds found within this area date to the 6th century.

3. Excavation in the West Buildings (Figure 1)

The west buildings, located on the highest part of the mound, comprise a structure with a suite of four rooms separated by a corridor, located some 10 metres west of the church and built on the same alignment, henceforth referred to as the tower, and another with walls on a different alignment built between the east wall of the tower and the church, leaving a narrow passageway, two metres wide in the north, opening to three metres in the south. This is referred to as the eastern extension. Three rooms within the tower were excavated in the 2010 and 2011 seasons (Trenches 6, 10, 11 and 12) and three more within the eastern extension in seasons 2008/9 and 2011 (Trenches 5, 16 and 17). In 2010, some flimsy structures to the south-east of the complex were explored and a test was sunk in the passageway (Trench 7); the test in the passageway was extended to the north in the 2011 season (Trench 13).

3.1 The Tower

(Trenches 6, 10, 11 and 12) (Figure 1)

The exterior walls on the northern part of the structure are 1.6 metres wide, well defined and easily accessible but those in the southern part could not be distinguished because of a series of modifications that had been undertaken with walls built against walls. We chose to excavate the north-west and the south-east rooms (Trenches 6 and 10) to expose the foundations of the structure in the north and to try to locate the outer walls in the south, and the corridor (Trenches 11 and 12) to determine the relationship between the tower and the eastern extension (Plate 15).

It soon became obvious that the division of the structure into a suite of rooms was a modification to a pre-existing structure; the temporal relationship between the phases, however, has not been determined. The foundations of the north and west walls were exposed in Trench 6 as were the north, south and east walls of Trench 10; all were built on sand. The former were walls of the original structure but the latter represented a stage in the modification of the building and the south wall of the tower was not found. This suggests that the original building was rectangular in shape: 8 metres east-west and in excess of 10 metres north-south. Low interior walls, north-south oriented and associated with an earlier phase in the building's history, were encountered in both Trenches 6 and 10. That in Trench 6 is 0.8 metres wide and extends 2.5 metres into the room; although it is built on sand its foundation was laid 0.55 metres above that of the external north wall of the tower which it abutted (Plate 16). The remnants of a floor associated with this occupational phase, also laid on a sand foundation, survive. In Trench 10, three early walls, again built on sand, were found: the south wall of the room, which was



Plate 17 Trench 10, showing the low walls on the sand foundation, the rubble fill and the late walls looking north-west; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 18 Trenches 11 and 12, showing the south-east corner of the corridor with the mud floor, the mastaba and the wall and doorway into the south-east room looking south-east; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 19 Trench 12, the corridor with the hearth and cooking pot looking south-west; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 20 Trench 5, the eastern extension showing the lower and upper walls and the blocked doorway in the south visible in the upper left, looking south-east; © C. A. Hope.



*Plate 21 Trench 5, the west section of the eastern extension with the tower on the right, looking north-west;
© C. A. Hope.*



*Plate 22 Trench 17 (formerly part of Trench 5), eastern extension showing two intrusive graves cut into the room
with the dividing wall on the left, looking west; © C. A. Hope.*

built atop a single course of grey mud brick; a north-south wall in the west, 0.8 metres wide, butting the south wall and extending 1.4 metres north; and an east-west wall, over which the east wall of the room was built (Plate 17). A floor surface associated with these walls was also laid directly onto sand but set one metre higher than the first phase in Trench 6 and the two do not appear to be contemporary; it is tentatively suggested, therefore, that the walls in Trench 10 represent a second building phase. At some point the internal walls in both trenches were cut down, a compact rubble fill at least one metre deep deposited and the structure was modified to create the suite of rooms separated by the east-west corridor. During this period of modification, the corridor walls were the first to be laid; in Trench 10, the south wall of the corridor was built directly above the low east-west wall and the east wall of this room was inserted against another east wall, which could be the south wall of the tower. The internal walls separating the east and west rooms were the last to be built. The rooms to the north are 3.6 metres square; those to the south are 3.5 metres east-west by 2 metres north-south. Three rooms open onto the corridor but the entrance to the south-west room has not been identified. The two rooms to the north of the corridor do not communicate directly with one another.

The corridor (Trenches 11 and 12), which extends the full length of the building, is 2.5 metres wide, with a 0.3 metre-wide mastaba on either side. The corridor relates to the final stage of modification and the floor associated with that phase is made of a dense layer of clay laid above a rubble fill (Plate 18). The south-western side of the mound has been cut into by farmers and the architecture here is irretrievably lost and therefore we cannot determine whether there was an external entrance-way into the complex from the west. The corridor, and presumably the complex, must have been in use for some time as remnants of an upper floor, which was laid against the mastaba, were encountered. The floor in the western end of the corridor was broken through and a hearth, into which a cooking pot has been set, was built (Plate 19). This domestic activity must post-date the formal use of the building. The tower has suffered badly from deflation and the internal walls, which represent its final stage of formal use, are preserved to a maximum height of only four courses above the thick clay floor.

3.2 The Eastern Extension

(Trenches 5, 16 and 17) (Figure 1)

There seem to be two structures built between the tower and the church. That in the north is identified only by a massive north wall and a seemingly narrow east wall. The entire area is covered in brick collapse and has not been investigated. In the south, the east and the parts of the north and south exterior walls of the structure are clearly definable with the north and east walls built on a different alignment to that on the south; these exterior walls are 1.16 metres wide. The structure was presumably

built against the eastern wall of the tower but the complexity of the modifications in the western part of the building renders it impossible to establish the building sequence without further excavation.

The initial focus was the area to the immediate east of the tower, Trench 5, which was excavated in the 2009 season. This is a roughly L-shaped area 5.4 metres north-south by 3.6 metres, narrowing to 1.4 metres east-west. Two construction phases were identified. A test was cut in the southern part of the trench, where an intrusive pit indicated the presence of earlier structures; this revealed two early north-south brown mud brick walls, 0.7 metres apart and the top of either an east-west wall, or a brick platform, which abutted the other walls in the north (Plate 20). A mud floor associated with these walls was laid directly onto a sand foundation, as were the low walls. The walls were cut down and a rubble fill deposited for the next construction phase. The south wall of Trench 5 was laid above these walls and the east wall was laid atop the lower east wall. No sub-floor excavation was undertaken in the north of Trench 5 and so we were not able to determine whether there are earlier structures in this area. The second building phase is contemporary with the final phase within the tower, with which it communicates via an entrance-way 1.16 metres wide. The same compact, dense clay floor of the corridor is continued through the doorway and into Trench 5. The area to the immediate east of the entrance to the tower is brick paved and may once have served as a courtyard. Two doorways located in the eastern wall gave access to the rooms beyond: Trenches 16 and 17. Both doorways had been blocked: the northern one with bricks and mortar, and that to the south was blocked by rubble that appears to have been deliberately laid. As with the tower, the walls associated with the last building in the eastern extension are badly deflated and are preserved to a similar height (Plate 21).

The eastern part of this structure (Trenches 16 and 17) originally comprised a single space. The exterior walls were built directly onto sand; the common wall dividing this area from the north was built above an earlier wall (see above). A floor associated with the earlier phase continues west beneath the western wall. No other early walls were located in Trenches 16 and 17. Five east-west oriented graves were cut through the rubble and into the low floor; three in the north and two in the south. The oblique east-west dividing wall and the blocked doorways in the west are associated with this phase of use. One grave was undisturbed and contained the body of an adult female (Plate 22). Four had been desecrated and a few human remains were scattered throughout the area.

3.3 The Area to the South-East of the West Building

(Trenches 7 and 13) (Figure 1)

Trench 7 was opened in 2010 to clarify the nature of the partially-exposed structures in the area and determine their phasing. The structures proved to be a series of basins,



Plate 23 Trench 7, showing the basins looking south; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 24 Trench 13, the passageway between the church and the west buildings showing the foundation of the west wall of the church, looking north-east; © C. A. Hope.



Plate 25 A Coptic ostrakon retrieved from Trench 12; © C. A. Hope.

which had been modified over a period of time. The west buildings and the church were already in place when construction began in this area (Plate 23). The trench was extended to the north-east to the entrance of the passageway between the church and the west buildings to determine their temporal relationship. This test was extended to the north in 2011 (Trench 13) at which time we were able to demonstrate that the church and the eastern extension of the west buildings were built on the same horizon and are contemporary. This was shown by a well-preserved, mud-plastered floor laid above the sand extending against and up the walls of both structures (Plate 24). A narrow east-west wall at the north end of the passageway might be a late insertion and this area awaits further study.

3.4 Artefacts and Dating Evidence

In total 21 Coptic ostraka were found in the tower. The majority were retrieved from the corridor some in association with the hearth. A further seven were found in the eastern extension. They all await study but Iain Gardner notes that those found in 2011 are written in Sahidic dialect and can be dated from the latter part of the 4th century and through the 5th (Plate 25). Several preserve names which include Solomon, Abraham, Alexandros, Apa Iakob and Apa Paulos. The ceramic assemblage from the early phase within the west buildings dates to the 4th and 5th centuries; that from the modification phases dates from the 5th to 6th centuries. The basins south of the eastern extension are of the same period although a few sherds belonging to 7th-century vessels were recovered.

Discussion

After four seasons of excavations at Dayr Abu Matta we have identified several phases of use. All major structures excavated are built on sand or a narrow lens of fill laid above the sand and no basal clay has been found. This could indicate that the site was built over the remains of a dune. A tentative building sequence for the church and north structures follows. The earliest activity is represented by oblique grey-brick structures both in the north and beneath the church in the east. These walls were reduced in height and a deposit of rubble was laid between and above them as a foundation for the second phase which was constructed in a brown and pink mud brick. The structure with the columned doorway to the west of the sanctuary belongs to this phase as does the rectangular building in the north. Next was the construction of the church and for this the earlier structures were demolished and the resulting rubble used as fill for the floor. The south walls of the rectangular structure were cut back to insert the north wall of the church but as yet the temporal relationship between the church and the buildings to the north and north-east of the rectangular structure eludes us. The final stage of activity is the use of both the north structures and the church as a cemetery. It is assumed that the cemetery in the north was begun whilst the church was operational, although this cannot be verified. The chronology of the burials within the church is problematic because of the extensive damage to the floor but it seems unlikely that the church was built above a pre-existing cemetery. The graves may have been cut following the abandonment of the church for formal worship.

As with the church and north structures, the occupational phases of the west buildings offered here are tentative and could change following further excavation. The earliest occupational phase seems to pre-date the church and is represented by the north and west walls of the tower and some of the low walls encountered in Trench 5, although more work needs to be carried out here. The outer walls of the eastern extension were the next to be constructed; these are on the same horizon as the foundation of the church. Modification of the tower into a suite of rooms and the reduction of the low walls in the eastern extension and the construction of a north-south wall dividing the space followed. The basins in the south may be contemporary. The blocked doors, graves and the division of the east room were the final phase and may be contemporary with the intrusive hearth in the corridor of the tower.

The ceramics from beneath the foundation of the west wall of the church date to the 4th and 5th centuries, which indicate that the church was constructed some time during the 5th century. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the early structures were ecclesiastical. The ceramic assemblage associated with the church dates to the 5th and 6th centuries but that from the earlier structures beneath the church and in the outer buildings, both on the north and the west include large quantities of 4th century diagnostic examples which attest occupation at the site at that time. A few 3rd-century sherds were found in the area of the storage bins and a demotic ostrakon was retrieved from beneath the church, which may attest a slightly earlier date for the occupation at the site but this is very slender evidence and cannot be relied upon. A minimal number of sherds dating to the 7th century were found in the upper deposits of the storage bins and in 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 structures associated with it had been largely abandoned by the 7th century.

The triconch church is peculiar to Upper Egypt with the earliest known being that at the White Monastery near Sohag, built between 420–50 (Grossmann 2002, 119–20; McKenzie 2007, 275).⁸ Grossmann (2002, 120) maintains that this became the standard plan for triconch churches throughout Upper Egypt, including that at Dayr Abu Matta. Other triconches dated to the fifth century include the churches at the Red Monastery and at Dendera. There is some variation to the plan at Dayr Abu Matta: the north and south L-shaped rooms that flank the sanctuary do not give access to the apses as they do at the other churches. A further deviation in the Dayr Abu Matta plan is the lack of a narthex although the same is true of the triconch church of Dayr Anba Bakhum, near Akhmim, which is the same size as Dayr Abu Matta and which also

dates to the 5th century.⁹ The triconch churches share the same orientation, east-north-east, with the exception of that at Dendera, which is determined by the pre-existing building. The similarity in the plan of the church with that of the monastery churches in the valley indicates close contact between the Dakhleh Christians and their co-religionists in Middle Egypt, and perhaps their allegiance to the central authority.

The function of the west buildings has not been determined and although they were in use contemporaneously with the church there is no evidence that they were part of a monastic complex. The tower is of a comparable size to the keep at the monastery of Epiphanius (Walters 1974, 86) but Winlock, who had identified that keep, made no mention of the tower at Dayr Abu Matta in his publication of the church. Lack of evidence for its function is due partly to the poor state of preservation within the tower, and partly to the limited excavation undertaken at the site. The tops of several walls are visible to the south of the church and the west buildings (Figure 1) and none has been explored. Some on the south are located beyond the mound and could represent a wall around the periphery of the site.

Burial practices adopted by the Christians at Dayr Abu Matta reflect those at other sites in Dakhleh, including Kellis (Bowen 2003, 167–82) and the small 5th century cemetery north-east of al-Muzawwqa (Bowen 2008, 11–15), which suggests that practices remained unchanged over at least a 200-year period. The graves are simple pits cut, without exception, on an east-west axis; the interred was wrapped, placed in a supine position on the floor of the grave, head to the west, some have mud bricks placed alongside the head as if to afford protection and the fill from the pit thrown directly onto the body. No grave goods were found with any of the bodies. The graves are relatively shallow and there is no evidence for superstructures but this might be due to erosion as the north of the site is exposed to the winds which sweep across the escarpment.

The triconch church at Dayr Abu Matta marks an important stage in the evolution of church architecture at Dakhleh and the site in general has the potential to fill a gap in our knowledge of the oasis in the 5th and 6th centuries.

Author's Affiliation and Email Address:

Centre for Archaeology and Ancient History
Monash University, Clayton Campus,
Australia

gillian.bowen@monash.edu.au

⁸ McKenzie (2007, 275) notes that the date of construction can be determined from an *in situ* inscription, together with written sources; the probable date is *circa* 440.

⁹ It should be noted that the triconch at Dayr Anba Bakhum is significantly larger than that at Dayr Abu Matta.

REFERENCES

- Aravecchia, N., forthcoming, 'Ain el-Gedida Results from the 2006 Field Season, in O. E. Kaper and F. Leemhuis, eds, *The Oasis Papers 4 and 5: Proceedings of the Fourth and Fifth International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project*, Oxford.
- Aravecchia, N., this volume, The Church Complex of 'Ain el-Gedida, Dakhleh Oasis, 391–408.
- Bagnall, R. S., 1997, *The Kellis Agricultural Account Book*, Oxford.
- Bagnall, R. S. and R. Cribiore, this volume, Christianity on Thoth's Hill, 409–15.
- Bowen, G. E., 2002, The Churches of Kellis, in C. A. Hope and G. E. Bowen, eds, *Dakhleh Oasis Project: Preliminary Reports on the 1994–1995 to 1998–1999 Field Seasons*, Oxford, 65–85.
- Bowen, G. E., 2003, The Small Church at Ismant el-Kharab, in G. E. Bowen and C. A. Hope, eds, *The Oasis Papers 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project*, Oxford, 153–65.
- Bowen, G. E., 2008, The Church of Deir Abu Metta and a Christian Cemetery in Dakhleh Oasis: a brief report, *Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology* 19, 7–16.
- Bowen, G. E., 2009, The Church of Deir Abu Metta, Dakhleh Oasis: a report on the 2009 excavation, *Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology* 20, 7–25.
- Grossmann, P., 1991, Dayr Abu-Matta, in A. S. Atiya, ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, volume 3, New York, 552.
- Grossmann, P., 2002, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten*, Leiden.
- Hope, C. A., 2002, Excavation in the settlement of Ismant el-Kharab in 1995–1999, in C. A. Hope and G. E. Bowen, eds, *Dakhleh Oasis Project: Preliminary Reports on the 1994–1995 to 1998–1999 Field Seasons*, Oxford, 167–208.
- McKenzie, J., 2007, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt 300 BC–AD 700*, New Haven.
- Mills, A. J., 1981, The Dakhleh Oasis Project: Report on the Third Season of Survey September–December, 1980, *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 11, 185.
- Walters, C. C., 1974, *Monastic Archaeology in Egypt*, Warminster.
- Winlock, H. E., 1936, *Ed Dakhleh Oasis: Journal of a Camel Trip made in 1908*, New York.