

THE 2011 FIELD SEASON AT DIER ABU METTA, DAKHLEH OASIS

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Excavations were conducted at Deir Abu Metta between January 5th and 13th 2011. The 2011 fieldwork was supported by Monash University, funded by Australians Studying Abroad, the Egyptology Society of Victoria and Monash University.¹ The aims for the season were: (1) to further explore and plan the buildings beneath the church, (2) to establish the eastern extent of the structures and cemetery to the north of the church, (3) to extend the excavations within the West Buildings in an attempt to understand their function and (4) to open a trench between the eastern extension of the West Buildings and the church to determine their chronological relationship. A major aim was to ascertain the date of the period of use for the site in its entirety.² To this end, six areas were selected for excavation: one within the church (Trench 15), one to the north (Trench 14), one within the tower of the West Buildings (Trench 12), two within the eastern extension of the tower (Trenches 16 and 17) and the other in the passageway between the West Buildings and the church (Trench 13). Summaries of the individual trenches are presented below.

The church (Trench 15)

Trench 15 is located in the north-east of the nave to the immediate west of the sanctuary; it covers an area 8.0m north-south by 4.60m east-west. It abuts Trench 8 to the north, which was excavated in 2010, and together they extend three-quarters of the width of the church (Figure 1).³ On the west, the trench was filled with collapse from the north wall of the church and further collapse, probably from the south wall, was encountered in the south-east quadrant. Three building phases were identified (Plate 1). The earliest comprises grey mud-brick walls, built directly onto sand. One in the north is oriented east-west and is bonded to a north-south wall in the east, which continues south in front of the apse. The faces of two other grey walls were visible in the south-east of the trench; they continue beneath the south wall of the apse. At some point in time, these walls were reduced in height and the area between them was filled with packing to provide a foundation for the second building phase. Two major walls constructed in a pinkish-grey mud brick are associated with this phase; one is oriented east-west and is bonded on the east with a north-south wall that

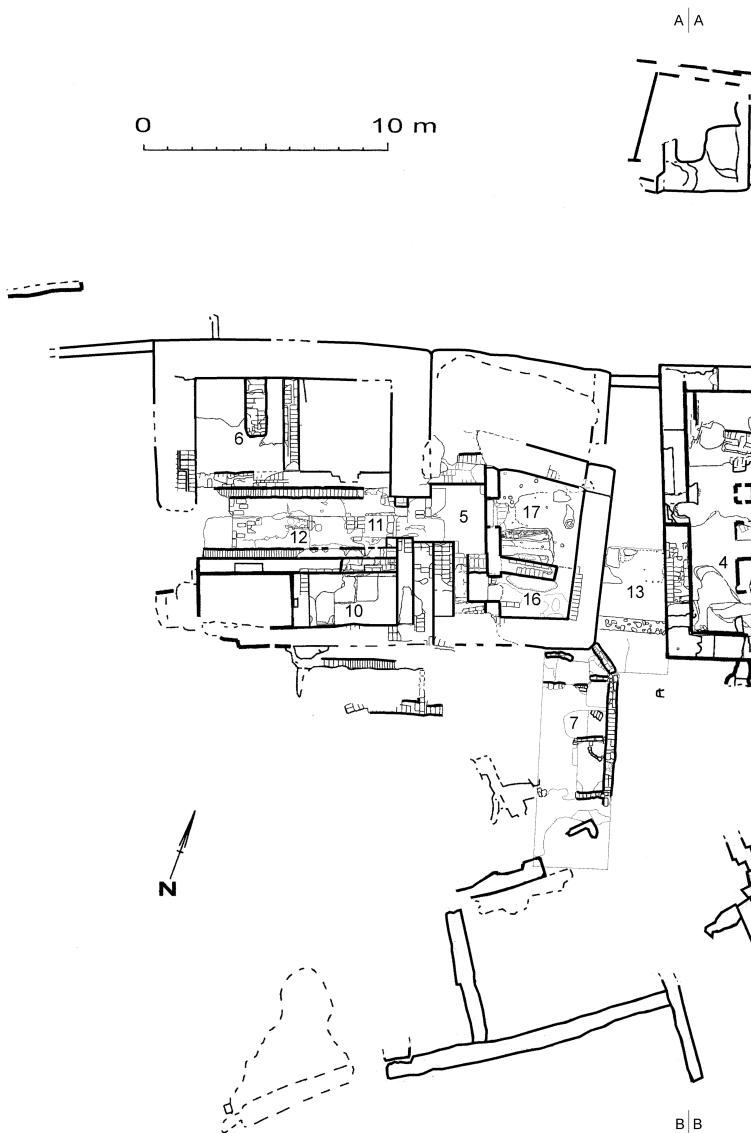


Figure 1. Plan of Deir Abu Metta. The numbers indicate the location of the various trenches.

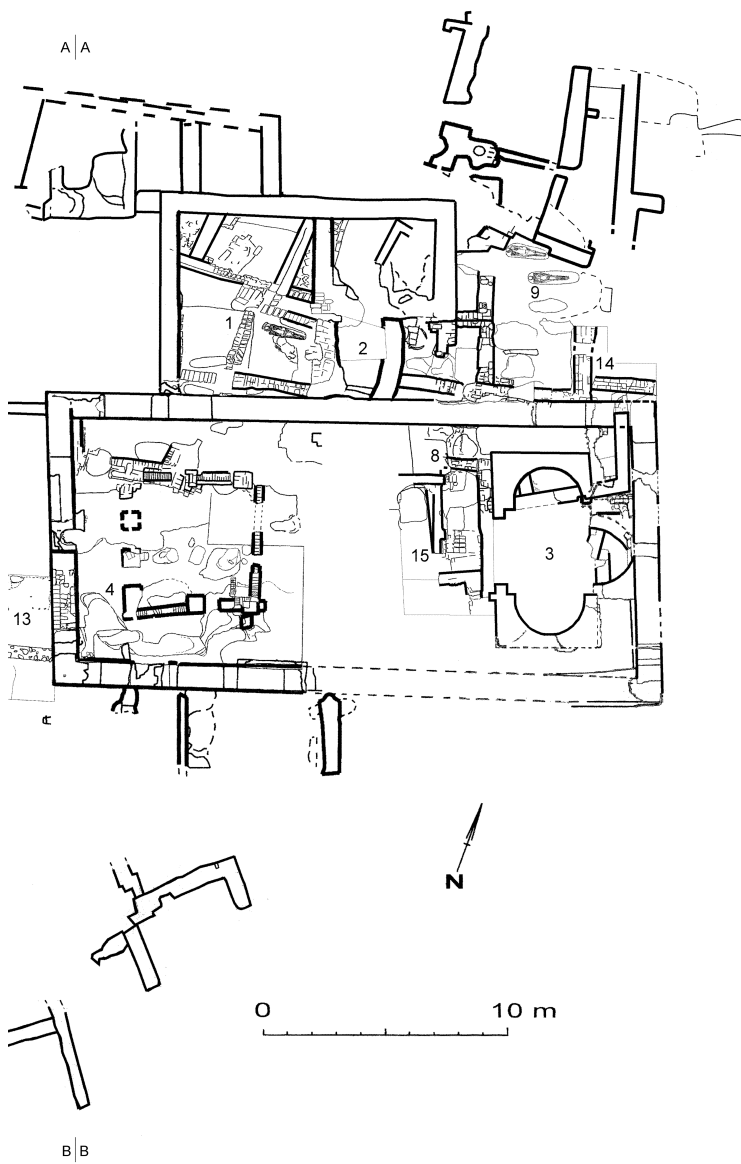




Plate 1. Deir Abu Metta: Trench 15 looking south-west, showing the walls and paved floor of the early structures over which the church was built. The doorway associated with the second building phase is in the top left of the image.



Plate 2. Deir Abu Metta: Trench 14 looking south-west, showing the north wall of the church on the left and the walls of early structures in the centre.

continues south beneath the entrance of the apse. A brick-paved floor was laid against these walls and a doorway, located in the south-west, gave access to the west. These structures were eventually reduced in height 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 were the external walls of the sanctuary.

The function of the earlier buildings could not be determined but the ceramics associated with the earliest phase date to the 4th century. The only finds were a small bowl and an ostrakon, written in Coptic, which preserves just a few letters that are barely visible.

The structures to the north of the church (Trench 14)

Trench 14, 3 x 3 metres, is an eastern extension of Trench 9 and is located on the north side of the church (Figure 1).⁴ Three building phases were encountered. The earliest phase is represented by a compact grey mud-brick, east-west wall in the south that was built directly on sand. The wall is aligned on an oblique angle and is the eastern section of a longer wall that continues to the west for almost the entire length of the church. It represents the same building phase as the low grey walls beneath the church encountered in Trench 15. The grey wall was later cut down and covered with fill as a foundation for the second phase, which is represented by two brown mud-brick walls, built at right angles, with a mud floor laid against them. These walls were subsequently reduced, filled with rubble and the north wall of the church was constructed above them (Plate 2).

Five pit graves cut on an east-west axis were located in this area; all were disturbed and although only a few human bones were found in two of them, the upper part of a body remained *in situ* in a third. The body had been placed in the grave with its head to the west in typical Christian fashion. The other two were empty. All graves were cut through the fill and into, or against, earlier walls, which indicates that they post-date the use of the north structures. Two of the graves were cut into the lower courses of the church wall and so the church had been erected by the time these individuals were interred.

Objects found in this trench include four coins, which are heavily corroded with no visible features; the coins await cleaning before an identification can be made but their metrology indicates a probable late 4th-century date. A cursory examination of the ceramics from the trench indicates a date-range from the 4th to 5th centuries. No obvious 6th century diagnostic sherds were found. Several sherds from glass vessels were also retrieved, as were fragments of textiles from the bodies.

The West Buildings (Trenches 12, 16 and 17)

The West Buildings comprises a tower, which has a suite of four rooms separated by a corridor (hereafter referred to as the tower); it is located some 10 metres west of the church and is built on the same alignment (Figure 1). An additional suite of rooms was built against the outer eastern wall of the tower but its western wall was laid on an oblique angle (the eastern extension); this extension continues to within two metres of the church on the north, widening to 3.4 metres on the south, leaving an irregular-shaped passageway between the two structures (Figure 1). Two rooms within the eastern extension were excavated in the 2009 field season (Trench 5) and two rooms within the tower were excavated in 2010 (Trenches 6 and 10); a narrow test in the entrance to the corridor (Trench 11) was also undertaken in 2010.⁵ This season's work focussed upon extending the excavation in the corridor of the tower and in two rooms within the eastern extension.

Trench 12 (Figure 1)

Trench 12 is a continuation of Trench 11; it is 2.5m wide and extends 6.0m west along the length of the corridor. Two major construction phases and several sub-phases had been identified within the tower in previous seasons. The second of these construction phases was the conversion of the structure into a four-room complex with an east-west corridor. This was carried out by reducing earlier walls and depositing a rubble fill within the interior of the tower as foundation for the internal walls dividing the rooms and east-west walls of the corridor.⁶ A mastaba was built against each wall and a thick, clay floor was laid. Mid-way along the corridor the floor was badly broken through and a hearth, with a cooking jar set into it, had been built into the floor (Plate 3), blocking access further to the west, including the doors into Rooms 1 and 3 (Trench 8). This clearly indicates late domestic use of the area. The doorway into Room 5 (Trench 10) was exposed but the north wall was too deflated to determine the location of that into Room 4. Excavation did not extend sufficiently to the west to expose the doorway into Room 1 but it was probably opposite that the Room 3 (Trench 6) that was revealed in 2010. The tower was accessed through a door in the east that opened into what appears to have been a courtyard (Trench 5);⁷ the outer west wall of the tower in the south has been cut away by local farmers and consequently it was not possible to determine whether the corridor was accessible from the exterior of the tower.

Finds from this trench include a ceramic lamp, two pots, a coin and 14 Coptic ostraka; the majority of the latter were found in association with the hearth. Numerous botanical samples, rope, glass sherds and other detritus from human activity were recovered. The coin, which was found within rubble, is a Fallen Horseman type dated to Constantius II and struck between 348 and 358; the ostraka are discussed below.



Plate 3. Deir Abu Metta: Trench 12 looking down onto the intrusive hearth and the *in situ* cooking pot.



Plate 4. Deir Abu Metta: an ostrakon from Trench 12 with the name Paule, Solomon and Abraham.

Trench 13 (Figure 1)

Trench 13 is located in the passageway between the church and the eastern extension. It is 3.0m north-south by approximately 2.75m east-west. The trench was sunk 0.5m north of Trench 7 that was excavated in the 2009 field season.⁸ Excavation to the base of the church wall again clarified that the west wall of the church and the east wall of the extension were built on clean sand, although there was a shallow lens of mud-rubble deposited above the sand for the wall of the latter. A well-preserved, mud floor, laid on sand between the walls of both structures was encountered indicating that the church and the eastern extension were built at the same time. The sherds retrieved from beneath the floor date to the 4th and 5th century, again confirming that the structures were built in the 5th century.

Trenches 16 and 17 (Figure 1)

Trenches 16 and 17 are located in the eastern extension. The southern part of Trench 16 was excavated in the 2008 season (Trench 5, Room 7), at which time two intrusive graves were found.⁹ The purpose for undertaking further work in these rooms was to determine whether both rooms had been used for burials, which proved to be the case. Two east-west oriented graves were cut into the floor of Trench 17 (Room 8) and although both had been robbed, a few skeletal remains were found in the grave on the north. A further grave was found in the north of Trench 16 (Room 7); again it had been desecrated with only a few bones remaining. This brings to three the number of burials in that room. The narrow wall that divides the two rooms is a late addition and is associated with the burials. Excavation to the base of the floor in the north-east corner of Trench 17 confirmed that the eastern extension at that point was also been built upon sand.

Four Coptic ostraka were found in Trench 16 and are discussed below. The ceramics from the two trenches date from the 5th to 6th centuries. The only other material remains recovered from this area were fragments of textile from the bodies, glass sherds and botanical specimens.

Ostraka

Eighteen ostraka were retrieved from the West Buildings. Iain Gardner, University of Sydney, has given me a preliminary translation and commentary, based upon photographs. He notes that they are written in standard Sahidic Coptic and can be dated from the latter 4th though the 5th centuries. Many preserve personal names which include Alexandros, Abraham and Solomon (Plate 4) and some refer to priests: Apa Paulos and Apa Iakob. The name Alexandros appears on two ostraka, one from the tower and the other from Trench 16 in the eastern extension; they appear to be related. Several ostraka

begin with the *staurogram*, which is commonly placed at the beginning of a letter or document. They await further study.

Summary and discussion

The excavations carried out at the site thus far suggest that all of the early structures were built on sand and as no basal clay has been found, the area may well have been covered by a dune. The church was built above pre-existing structures, two phases of which were identified. These early structures continue to the north but their full extent is yet to be determined. There is no indication that the early buildings were of an ecclesiastical nature, although further excavation is required before any definite conclusions can be drawn. The cemetery continues along the length of the church's north wall and all graves are simple pits, cut uniformly on an east-west axis, confirming the pattern for Christian interments in other sites throughout the oasis.¹⁰ The graves post-date the building of the church but it is still uncertain whether or not the church was in use when they were cut. The cemetery must have continued to be used after the church had fallen out of use for formal worship as numerous graves were cut through its floor. Several graves were also cut into the rectangular building to the north of the church and it must have been abandoned by the time it was incorporated into the cemetery.

The tops of walls from structures beyond the excavated areas north of the church were exposed and planned as far as possible (Figure 1). Several are oriented at a different angle to those of the church and the large rectangular building. Their chronological relationship and function is unknown. The outer north walls of these structures are lost beneath modern cultivation.

The outer walls of the tower are contemporary with the building of the church but it is unclear when the internal modification was carried out; the function of this structure is still to be determined but it is possibly monastic. The eastern extension is also contemporary with the church. The purpose for its oblique eastern wall is unknown. It can be stated with confidence that, like the rectangular structure in the north, the extension had been abandoned when the graves were cut into Trenches 16 and 17.

The date of occupation of the site

All ceramics recovered from the site date from the 4th to the 6th centuries, with a few belonging to the 3rd and the 7th centuries. The 3rd century ceramics derive from the buildings to the north of the church and those that date to the 7th century have only been found in the storage bins to the south of the eastern extension. On ceramic evidence, therefore, the site appears to have been abandoned in the late 6th or early 7th century. The church was built in the 5th

century, possibly in the latter half, as is suggested not only by the ceramic assemblage but because it is a triconch; that is, it has a triple-apse sanctuary. Triconch churches are peculiar to Upper Egypt and are associated with the White and Red Monasteries at Sohag. The church at the White Monastery is considered to be the earliest built to this plan. Its date of construction is determined by an *in situ* inscription, which places its foundation between 420 and 450, with 440 being the most likely date.¹¹ The church at Deir Abu Metta is the only triconch church to be found in Dakhleh and it stands to reason that the inspiration for the plan came from Middle Egypt, probably the White Monastery itself.

¹ The work was facilitated by Ahmed Salam of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Coptic and Islamic Section, Dakhleh Oasis, to whom I am most grateful. Thanks also to our inspector, Mahmoud Mohammed Messaid of the Dakhleh Inspectorate, for his assistance throughout the excavations. My gratitude also goes to the team members whose hard work made for a successful field season. The team included a recent PhD graduate from Monash University, Paul Kucera, and Latrobe University student Luke Falvey; Josh Emmitt, a student from the University of Auckland, James Milner and Nicholas Stebbins were self-funded participants. This report is edited by Bowen based upon field notes provided by Falvey, Kucera and Milner. The plan has been revised by B. Parr to incorporate the drawings by Falvey (Trench 12); Milner (Trenches 13, 14 and 17), Kucera (Trench 14) and Hope (Trench 15). Photographs are by Colin A. Hope, who also identified the ceramics.

² Preliminary reports from previous field seasons are as follows: G. E. Bowen, "The Church of Deir Abu Metta and a Christian Cemetery in Dakhleh Oasis: a Brief Report" in: *BACE* 19 (2008) 7–16; G.E. Bowen, "The Church of Deir Abu Metta, Dakhleh Oasis: a Report on the 2009 Excavation" in: *BACE* 20 (2009) 7–25; G. E. Bowen, L. Falvey, C. A. Hope, D. Jones, J. Petkov and L. Woodfield, "The 2010 Field Season at Deir Abu Metta, Dakhleh Oasis" in: *BACE* 20 (2010) 7–20.

³ Bowen et al., in: *BACE* 21 (2010) 7–12.

⁴ Bowen et al., in: *BACE* 21 (2010) 12–14.

⁵ Bowen, in: *BACE* 20 (2009) 10–11; Bowen et al., in: *BACE* 21 (2010) 14–17.

⁶ Bowen et al., in: *BACE* 21 (2010) 15–17.

⁷ Bowen, in: *BACE* 20 (2009) 10–11, 21, Figure 5.

⁸ Bowen et al., in: *BACE* 21 (2010) 18.

⁹ Bowen, in: *BACE* 20 (2009) 11, 21, figure 5, 24, plate 6.

¹⁰ Bowen, in: *BACE* 19 (2008) 11–15, figures 3 and 4; G. E. Bowen, "Some observations on Christian burial practices at Kellis" in: G. E. Bowen / C. A. Hope, *The Oasis Papers 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project* (Oxford, 2003) 167–82.

¹¹ P. Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten* (Leiden, 2002), 119–20; J. McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt 300 BC–AD 700* (New Haven and London, 2007), 275.
