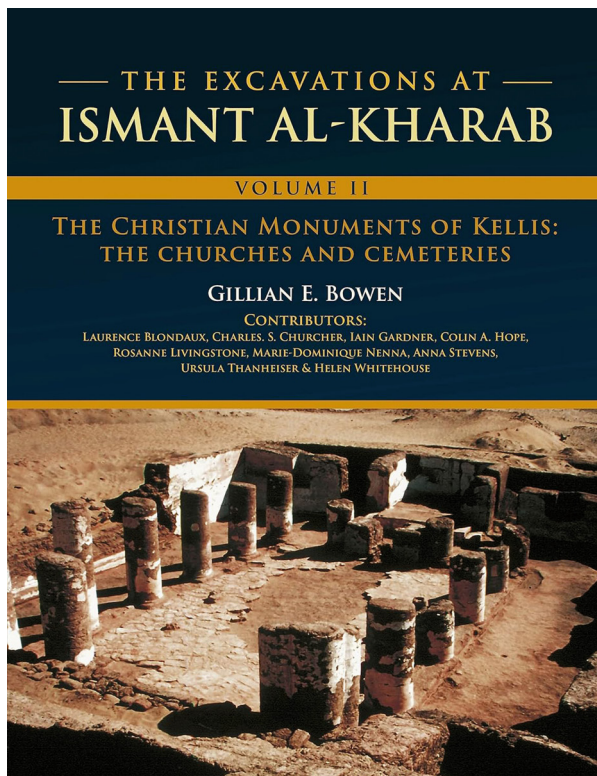


Reviews



Gillian E. Bowen, 2024 *The Excavations at Ismant al-Kharab Volume II, The Christian Monuments of Kellis: The Churches and Cemeteries, Dakhleh Oasis Project: Monograph 23*, Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, Hardback ISBN: 978-1-78925-963-6; Digital ISBN: 978-1-78925-964-3, pp. 468, + xxix, multiple figures, tables and b&w photographs, colour plates 40, A\$205.

Reviewed by Susan Balderstone

This volume brings together the results of more than thirty years of investigations at the Dakhleh Oasis in Upper Egypt, begun by Colin Hope at Ismant al-Kharab (ancient Kellis). Contributors to the publication include Laurence Blondaux, Charles S. Churcher, Andrew Connor, Iain Gardner, Colin A Hope, Rosanne Livingstone, Marie-Dominique Neen, Anna Stevens, Ursula Thanheiser, and Helen Whitehouse. The work comprises part of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, founded by Anthony J. Mills, which has involved current and former staff and students of Monash University since 1978. Information about the project can be found on the Monash web site <https://www.monash.edu/arts/philosophical-historical-international-studies/dakhleh-oasis-project>. The location of the oasis, about 350 kilometres west of Luxor as the crow flies, is shown on a map on the web site, together with other nearby sites.

As described by Mills in his Preface to the publication, Kellis was a settlement covering the period between the fading of the earlier Pharaonic and Roman religions and the arrival of Islam. It was a Christian community that included Manichaeans, as revealed by the finding of numerous texts including in Greek, Coptic and Syriac. The excavation of the three churches and cemeteries, containing numerous graves dating from the early fourth century, has added much information to our knowledge of this period. Mills notes that, considering the remote location of Dakhleh oasis, it is significant to find such early, well-developed churches with plans implying sophisticated liturgical arrangements. Other sites within the oasis, including churches and cemeteries that can be dated to the early fourth century, indicate that Christianity there was well-established. Several of these, sites including Kellis, were gradually abandoned during the 390s, for reasons that are not clear. On the other hand, others continued to flourish. There were also early Christian settlements at the Kharga Oasis, located between Dakhleh and the Nile, including the well-known Bagawat Necropolis, which was investigated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/kharga-oasis>). Others have been found at Shams el-Din and el-Deir in the Kharga Oasis, and at Berenike and Pelusium.

Following the Introduction, which includes a brief description of the Dakhleh pottery fabrics, the publication is arranged in four main parts, covering the Small East Church, the Large East Church, the West Church, and the Cemeteries. These are followed by the Discussion of Kellis in Context, Appendices, Bibliography, and Colour Plates. The three sections relating to the churches present the evidence from each site, including the stratigraphy, then the finds by type and material, followed by discussion. The fourth section covers the three cemeteries in three sub-sections, each of which deal with grave numbers, buildings, burial details and materials, and finds, and conclude with discussion; all as listed in the Contents. The whole volume is meticulously presented, and is a major achievement, given the long period of excavation and the large number of people who worked there.

Since my main interest is in the churches, I will focus my comments primarily on them. To begin with the Small East Church, in particular the apse: the three-quarter circle plan suggests the roof could possibly have been a cupola. However, the section showing the front of the sanctuary (Figure 1.7) indicates that the central arch springing would have been too high for a cupola to rest on top of the arch, indicating that the first one third of the apse was barrel-vaulted behind the arch, finishing with a half dome over the rear section. Either way, the engaged half column slightly north of centre on the east wall is puzzling, and is not explained in the discussion of the church. Together with the painted columns either side, it suggests to me the intention to partially encircle the altar with an engaged colonnade, as described by Eusebius in

Constantine's original martyrium basilica at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Coüasnon 1974: 44). Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* was written in the year of Constantine's death, 337, so the apse he described was presumably finished before then. At the Kellis church there are niches in the north and south walls of the apse, as well as painted cupboard doors imitating niche cupboards of similar size, between the painted columns. There are painted panels of a geometric design, with *crux ansata* at the centre arranged below the niche level around the apse. These do not line up below the niches. No complete drawing of the apse decoration is provided, and there is no investigation of the chronology of the decoration in the apse.

An example of this apse type, not mentioned by Bowen, is a partly rock-cut church in the Nile Valley at Dair al Bakarah (Convent of the Pulley, now known as Deir Al Adhra) at Qulusna, north of El Minya. It was recorded by Alfred Butler towards the end of nineteenth century (Butler, 1884: 348–351, fig. 25). Four applied columns with three niches between them surrounded the semi-circular apse, plus one column either side of the apse opening. This cave chapel within the monastery is held by Coptic tradition to mark one of the Holy Family's resting places as they travelled through Egypt. The church, including the apse, was altered by removal of the stone roof and extended upwards in the 1930s. Further south along the Nile, the White Monastery church at Sohag, dating from around 440, has a triconch sanctuary in which each apse had attached columns interspersed with niches (Grossman 1991: 768). Another example of this apse type is the subterranean convent church of St John in an ancient quarry at the town of Madinah, near the ruins of Antinoöpolis. The deep apse or haikal is crowned by a cupola and surrounded by engaged columns alternating with niches (Butler, 1884: 364–366, fig. 29). However, this church is not a basilica-type church like the others, but has domes and semi-domes over the nave and aisle bays, suggesting it is of a later date.

The apse of the Large East Church at Kellis takes a similar form to that of the Small East Church. The plan is a three-quarter circle and it was perhaps roofed with a similar combination of barrel vault and semi-dome. Traces of painted columns and painted dado lines containing a foliate scroll were found around the walls of the apse, together with two niches to north-east and south-east. Fragments of painted plaster decoration found in the east aisle, bema and apse area included stylised vines, geometric designs, flowers, and *cruces ansatae*. The apses differ in that the Large East Church has a door opening between the apse and the south side chamber. The bema projects into the east aisle and is approached from steps at either side, whereas in the Small East Church there are no aisles or bema and the apse is raised by only two steps at the front, above the floor of the nave. The Large East Church has a central, rectangular colonnaded nave,

with aisles returning across the east and west sides, as well as along the north and south. In this it is considered by Grossman, as quoted in the discussion, as a further development of the Southern Cemetery Church at Antinoöpolis, also dated to the fourth century.

Both churches were partially built into existing buildings. Three phases have been identified for the Large East Church, but only two for the Small East Church. It is not clear whether the earlier structures in each case could have been used for religious purposes before they were modified to accommodate the churches. However, the apse design in each case does corroborate a Constantine date, as indicated by the coins, but doesn't negate the possibility of Christians using the pre-existing buildings from an earlier date.

The discussion at the end of the Large East Church section mentions two other fourth century churches in the Dakhleh Oasis, and one in the Kharga Oasis, none of which have a similar apse design. It does not contemplate that the East Church apses, with their painted colonnades, can be seen as the forerunner of the *ciborium* or baldachin over the altar. Coptic churches from the sixth century have the altar and *ciborium* placed further out from the apse, to allow for the seating of the clergy around the apse behind the altar. The Church of Abu Sargah (St Sergius) within the old fortress of Babylon, Old Cairo, built over a well where the Holy Family was believed to have found refuge on its flight into Egypt, is an early example (Butler, 1884: 181–205, plan after 182).

The West Church is located north-west of the East churches, just north of the temple area and adjacent to a burial ground (Enclosure 4 Cemetery). It was purpose-built as a church with adjacent service rooms, rather than adapting existing buildings, as with the East churches. The east end comprises a central semi-circular apse flanked by two side chambers. As in the Small East Church, the floor of the apse is raised two steps above the aisleless nave. But here there is a small square bema located centre-front of the apse, raised one step above the level of the apse floor and accessed from the nave by three steps. There was no encircling colonnade and only one niche in the south wall of the apse.

The discussion dates the church to the mid-fourth century. It considers that the church may have functioned a funerary church for the adjacent Enclosure 4 Cemetery, and points to Tomb 32 at Oxyrhynchus as a similar example, fitting into Grossman's category of cemetery churches from that period.

The cemeteries covered in Section IV include the Enclosure 4 Cemetery, North Tomb I, and Kellis 2 Cemetery. Enclosure 4 Cemetery contains burials identified as Christian by their east-west orientation, and is assigned to the late fourth century. The function of the small, two-room Building A is unknown. Graves appear to have been clustered in family groups.

The North Tomb I building dates from the first or second century, and was published by Hope in 2003. It contains 24 intrusive pit graves identified as Christian. The discussion finds that the burials follow the same practice as those in Enclosure 4. It is considered that it was regarded as a family tomb, and is not the only tomb in the Dakhleh oasis to be appropriated by Christians. It is noted that the pharaonic iconography decorating the walls of such reused tombs was apparently not of concern to the Christians who reused them.

The Kellis 2 Cemetery is located some distance to the north-east of the north tomb group, and separated from the settlement. The location doesn't show on the plan given in the publication. Excavated by a team of bioarchaeologists, the cemetery comprises pit graves, some located within small tomb enclosures. Detailed plans are given with grave and tomb enclosure numbers shown. An illustration of 24 grave types given as sections is provided, together with an accompanying tabulated description. Table IV.12 gives a summary of over 700 graves, burials and contents. The discussion focusses on demography, wealth and status, cemetery organisation, the date of the cemetery, and parallels of similar period. This last included another cemetery in Dakhleh, Bagawat and el-Deir in Kharga, Saqqara, and further afield, that of Poundbury in Britain. In summary, it was concluded that the uniformity of burial practices within the Roman Empire suggests a directive by the Church from at least the early years of the fourth century.

The Kellis in Context discussion concludes the overall account of these investigations. It begins with consideration of the vast array of texts on papyrus and wooden boards found in the residential buildings of Area A, north-east of the East church complex, written in Greek, Coptic, and some in Syriac. They include a large number of texts identified as belonging to the Manichaean sect, as well as many identified as belonging to the Institutional or catholic Christian community, dating from the late third and first half of the fourth century. This evidence for a Christian presence in Kellis is supported by ostraca found elsewhere in Dakhleh, dating from the early fourth century. Coptic documents found in Kharga, dating from the third century, add to the evidence for a Christian presence in both the Dakhleh and Kharga oases from the late third and early fourth centuries. There was no evidence to indicate whether the churches belonged to Manichaeans or Institutional Christians. Similarly, there was no evidence to assign burials to one or the other community.

The discussion concludes from documents found in the Main and West Temples that Christianity co-existed with the traditional Egyptian/Roman religion during the late third and early fourth centuries, and for longer among the people generally, as attested by the terracottas found in their houses.

In the discussion of the churches, a number of other churches in Dakhleh are listed as awaiting investigation, including the triconch monastery church at Dayr Abu Matta in central Dakhleh, of similar plan type to the White Monastery at Sohag. It is noted that the oases would be familiar with the monasteries and churches of Middle Egypt, as there was constant contact between the two regions, evidenced by documents from Kellis, in particular one recording exchange of ownership rights with properties in the Antaiopolite district.

Not discussed is the expectation that the Church leadership in Kellis would have known about the design of churches being built in other places along the Nile, and why they adopted particular forms. Pilgrims were visiting Jerusalem and the place of Crucifixion, where Constantine's Basilica was being built, and continued to do so later in the fourth century (Patrich 1993: 110 & 112). Descriptions would surely have reached Christians along the Nile. It is conceivable that, when a special place needed to be marked by a shrine or chapel, the design would follow what was known from Jerusalem, as is indicated by the cave chapel at Qulusna. So, one wonders why the colonnaded apse was chosen for the East Churches at Kellis? It seems likely the Small Church was built first – did it house a reliquary under the altar? Did the first church prove too small, so a second, larger church had to be built to house the reliquary, and to allow for pilgrims and processions to pass easily along the aisles around the church and in front of the altar? No evidence of such a scenario has been found. But it could explain the existence of the 'chancel' or second pulpit at the rear of the Large East Church, which would allow the officiating priest to be better heard by additional people at the rear, crowding in from the narthex on special feast days.

Bowen concludes with the Legacy of Kellis, in which she records that the Ismant al-Kharab investigations confirm the presence of Christians in the oases during the third century, and that the region was Christianised by the end of the fourth century. She concludes that the Large East Church dating to the reign of Constantine confirms that the Institutional Church was developing its architectural form in Upper Egypt in line with that of the liturgy.

Regarding the claim that developments (meaning the tri-partite east end) 'previously considered to be of a later date or of Syrian origin are now known to be Upper Egyptian and firmly rooted in the fourth century', I would disagree that they are of Egyptian origin. The tri-partite east end is known in Palestine from the time of Constantine's church at Bethlehem, with chambers either side of the central octagon over the place of the Nativity (Tsafirir 1993: 7, based on Richmond's excavations). In Syria, although the earliest known dated example is the Church of the Holy Apostles at Farfirtin, dated by inscription to 372 (Butler 1969: 33, ill. 32), there are other similar examples recorded by Butler whose date could

be considerably earlier. Brad Cathedral in Syria (Smith 1950: fig. 205) is dated to 392. The tri-partite sanctuary arrangement fulfills the requirements of the liturgy set out in the Syrian document of the third century, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. Hence, its widespread adoption in Syria. Its early adoption in Egypt is likely as the Church had access to that document. The finding of Syriac texts at Kellis may indicate the presence of Syrian Christians, although these texts apparently belong to the Manichaean community. The Manichean presence is said to be unexpected, although it is known that Manicheans spread through Egypt in the third century. The number of texts found belonging to their community is apparently far greater in number than those belonging to the Institutional Church, and of considerable interest in furthering knowledge of their beliefs.

To reiterate, the publication is a major achievement by all concerned, particularly Gillian Bowen, who has pulled it all together. The data has been excellently laid out, and together with the appendices on coins, personal names, textile fragments from the graves, and the list of publications on the Bioarchaeology of Kellis, provide a depth of information for other scholars to use and compare. For me it was of great interest to discover the East Churches. I am sure the publication will have a wide appreciation.

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