The Fourth-Century Churches at Ismant el-Kharab

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During the 1981–82 survey of the site three purpose-built churches were identified (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 189, 201, 205). One, a two-room basilica with an adjoining complex of rooms, is located at the westernmost extremity of the village (Hope this volume, Figure 1). This structure was excavated in the 1992–93 season and a brief report of its main features has been published (Hope in Bowen et al. 1993, 23–5). A more detailed report, together with a discussion of its architectural features and chronology, is included here. The other two churches, a large basilica and a small two-roomed chapel, are set upon the Nubian-clay terrace overlooking the south-east wadi, again on the periphery of the village (Hope this volume, Figure 1). These two churches lie in close proximity to one another and form part of a larger ecclesiastical complex that extends to the west (Figure 1). Although minimal excavation was undertaken in both of these structures in 1983 (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 205–8), work began in earnest in the large church in 1995 (Hope and Bowen 1997, 49–64) and is ongoing. The antiquity of this church, which is tentatively dated to the reign of Constantine I, and its remarkable state of preservation, warrant a comprehensive description. This report places the structure within its overall context.

The East Churches

The Western Enclosure

The architectural survey of the region to the immediate west of the large church exposed an extensive complex comprising numerous rooms, courts and corridors (Figure 1). The area is imprecisely mapped due in part to the degree of preservation of the walls, which renders it impossible to locate buried doorways, and in part to extensive alterations that have been carried out on several of the structures within (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 205). The east wall of the enclosure extends 35 m north-south; the south wall can be traced for about 27 m from its juncture with the east wall before it becomes lost beneath sand. The small church and its adjoining north room are located in the south-east of this enclosure wall, 10 m north of the south-eastern corner. The large church was built against the outer side of the enclosure wall, to the north-east of the chapel. Its construction post-dates the wall as is shown by the lack of bonding at its junction with both the north and south walls, and by the insertion of two doors cut into the pre-existing enclosure wall to allow access to the church.

As yet it has not been possible to determine the full extent of the ecclesiastical complex nor the relation of the small church to the large. During the 1997 season, surface sand was cleared from some of the chambers immediately west of the large church and it can now be stated with confidence that at least three of these rooms formed an integral part of the access to the church. Rooms 5a, 5b and 7 (Figure 2) underwent modification, perhaps with the construction of the church, when the doors were cut through the enclosure wall. The outline of what was once either a wall or a pillar can be seen on the inner face of the enclosure wall immediately to the north of the central doorway; it aligns with an east-west wall 4.5 m to the west. This east-west wall has itself been modified by the addition of a half column modelled onto its eastern face. J. Dobrowolski, in his architectural report on the complex, states that the dimensions of Room 5a, 6.5 m by 6 m, suggest that it was probably unroofed and therefore functioned as an open courtyard and the doorway connecting it and Room 5b was either framed by half-columns or was covered by a portico. Sufficient sand was cleared from Rooms 5a and 5b to reveal three doorways opening to the west. One door at the southern extremity of the west wall of Room 5a gives access to the barrel-vaulted Room 6; the other two doors communicate between Room 5b and Room 7. These are located in the north and the south of the west wall on an axis with the south and central doors of the church. An arched doorway in the south wall of Room 5b once opened onto a corridor; however, this doorway had been carefully blocked, gypsum plastered and a niche inserted, thus precluding access to the church from the corridor.
Figure 1  Plan of the East Church Complex (drawing by J. E. Knudstad).

Figure 2  Plan of the East Churches (drawing by J. Dobrowolski and J. E. Knudstad).
The Large East Church

The Large East Church, built on an east-west axis, measures 20 m east-west by 17 m north-south (Figure 2; Plates 1 and 2). It comprises a central nave with two side aisles, a return aisle on the west, a transverse aisle on the east, an eastern apse flanked by two side chambers, and four rooms, built integrally with the church, along its southern wall. The building material is mud brick with gypsum coating on the inner walls of the body of the church, the columns and the main features. The walls are preserved to a height of 3.8 m in the northwest and have eroded to a height of 2 m in the northeastern corner. The south wall is preserved to a height of 2 m at its westernmost point and 1.1 m at its most easterly. The state of preservation is such that many of the features set within the walls remain intact. There are no signs of roof-beam emplacements but from the few palm beams found amongst the debris it may be assumed that the structure had a flat roof.

The Entrance System

Sole access to the church is through three doors in the western wall: two double and one single (Figure 3). The central and northern doorways were cut into the pre-existing wall whilst the single doorway in the southwestern end of the wall is probably contemporary with the building of the enclosure wall and therefore original. The church is constructed on a lower level than the rooms to the west and the approach from the northern, and probably the central door, is via two steps set with sandstone blocks. Two small, narrow walls frame the central door and it is reasonable to assume that this door provided the main access for ritual purposes. The southern door appears to have seen greater use than either of the others and was probably used for daily access; this is indicated by the build-up of floor deposits within the region of the doorway. A low bench along the west wall pre-dates the building of the church and was cut through when the central door was inserted. The bench forms the lower step into the church from the northern doorway. The church is asymmetric; neither the central door nor the short span of wall that separates the north and central doorways are aligned with the apse. Moreover, the western colonnade comprises three columns whilst its eastern counterpart has four. J. Dobrowolski suggests that the location of the central door may have been the determining factor in the interior design. This door was not cut into the middle of the wall but slightly to the south, presumably to allow access to the church from the already existing Room 5b rather than the courtyard, Room 5a.

The Return Aisle

All entrance doors open into the return aisle that occupies the western section of the church (Figures 2–3). The bench that runs along the west wall, continues for about two-thirds of the way along the north side aisle. The short south wall, into which a cupboard was built, is on the same alignment as the south wall of Room 5b, though not bonded to it. It extends a distance of 1.4 m before making a 90 degree turn to form the west wall of Room 4. An engaged half-column, placed at the junction of the two walls, presumably served an aesthetic function. The return aisle is separated from the nave by three columns that comprise two triple-engaged corner columns on the north and south and a single column located 1.2 m south of the northern column. The single column has a rectangular feature built against it on the south (Plates 1–3), which comprises two steps on the south that give access to a platform. This structure is 1.26 m in length, 70 cm in height at the point where it abuts the column, and 70 cm wide; the length of the platform is 66 cm. This feature is discussed in greater detail below. A mud-brick emplacement for a wooden screen wall occupies the space between the base of the northern triple-corner column and the single column. From the height of the vertical gouges visible in both columns, and the fixing holes at the top of the gouges, it can be ascertained that the wooden screen wall stood one metre high in total. There is no screen wall between the central feature and the southern triple column; this area gives direct access to the nave from the central door. There is no indication of a fourth column (contra Grossmann this volume).

The Side Aisles

The colonnades of the nave and the side aisles each comprise five columns that were once fitted with one-metre high, wooden screen walls. Impressions for these frames are visible in the extant columns. The north wall of the church was unbroken; two intact niches (Figure 3) and the lower part of a third were set high in this wall and it is possible that there were others that have been lost due to erosion. The intact niches, both of which were arched, were 48 cm high, 53 cm wide and 40 cm deep. Their function is difficult to determine for they were set 2.7 m above the floor, too high to be accessed with ease. The white-gypsum coating displayed no traces of oil or smoke to suggest that they once held lamps. The only other niche in the north aisle is located in the east wall and is of a height that is readily accessible. It is an elongated niche that is rounded at the top; the dimensions are 1.35 m high, 0.65 m wide and 0.41 cm deep. The low bench against the north wall

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1 A large pit has been cut into the central doorway, presumably to remove the stones following the abandonment of the church, and consequently the steps are missing.

2 The section of the wall with the niches collapsed in the course of excavation.
Plate 1  The Large East Church showing displaced stone pavement, looking east.

Plate 2  The Large East Church after excavation, looking west; the bricking on the west is to prevent sand collapse.
Figure 3  Large East Church, north-south section through the west end and Room 4 (drawing by J. Dobrowolski).

Figure 4 Painted-soffit fragment from the apse of the Large East Church (drawing by J. Dobrowolski).
terminates at a point parallel with the second column from the east.3

The wall of the south aisle is less well preserved in height than the north and consequently no evidence remains for the presence of upper niches. Four rooms to the south are accessed from this aisle: three directly and one indirectly. All were fitted with wooden doors. The central room has an elaborate entrance that is 1.5 m wide and is flanked by engaged half-columns. A further engaged half-column of the same proportions is set into the wall of the south aisle opposite the easternmost column of the south colonnade; it has no counterpart on the north wall and its purpose is unknown. The south wall of the aisle has a single niche and two cupboards. The niche, which is located to the east of the door into Room 4, is half-domed and of the same dimensions as the rounded niche in the east wall of the north aisle. One cupboard is set between the niche and the entrance to Room 3, and the other is mid-way between the doorways to Rooms 3 and 1; neither is preserved in its entirety, although each preserves a full width and depth. The dimensions are 73 cm wide by 39 cm deep for the former and 65 cm wide by 42 cm deep for the latter. The remains of two further cupboards are visible in the east wall. One is 60 cm wide by 25 cm deep; the other is 58 cm wide by 30 cm deep.

The Nave

The nave, 9 m by 6 m, was flagged in sandstone throughout. It is delineated on the east by a row of single columns. Two mud-brick blocks with a gypsum coating are set between the innermost columns of the east colonnade, each abutting the respective column; their dimensions are 80 cm high, 75 cm wide, and 90 cm deep (Plate 2). A raised floor was laid between the blocks and the 62 cm gap was bridged with a screen. Several fragments of flat painted glass, decorated with scenes reminiscent of gospel stories (Marchini, below), were found amongst the rubble immediately to the east of this feature and it is conceivable that a glass panel, set within a wooden frame, formed part of this screen.4 The blocks themselves are coated on the top with a layer of oil and traces of red and yellow paint are visible on the western faces and on the top of the northern block.5 There were no screen walls in the east colonnade and thus free access was possible between the nave and transverse aisle. The nave was fitted with benches; two rows were placed east-west alongside the south colonnade and a single row alongside the north colonnade. These comprised sandstone blocks held in position with mud plaster and wooden beams placed on top, the impressions of which are visible in the mud plaster of two of the blocks. Some of the blocks were reused; one preserves part of a cavetto cornice. The remaining feature within the nave is that attached to the single column of the west colonnade (see below).

The Transverse Aisle and Sanctuary

A low mud-brick bema, 2.45 m long, 1.0 m wide, and 50 cm high, occupies the area immediately in front of the apse (Plate 2, foreground). It projects into the transverse aisle leaving a space 1.5 m wide. The bema is approached by two sandstone steps on either side. Narrow walls, 10 cm high and 9 cm wide, abut the pilasters that flank the entrance to the apse and frame the bema on its northern and southern extremities. The impression of a timber beam is visible along the front of the bema suggesting that it was once screened. Three deposits of oil, at intervals of 65 cm, were found on the top of the bema immediately to the east of the beam emplacement. The oil from the central deposit had spilt down the front of the bema and onto the floor below and is presumably the spill from lamps. The bema was once gypsum plastered.

The Apse

The apse is contiguous with the bema and is framed at the entrance by low pilasters (Plate 2, foreground). The remains of beam emplacements are preserved at the base of the pilasters on their inner face, and these, together with a row of mud bricks laid in header fashion to form a sill, indicate that the bema and the apse were separated by a screen. The apse spans 2 m at its entrance, widens to 2.8 m and is 2 m deep; its curve is set against the outer wall of the church. The extant floor is paved in wedge-shaped mud bricks that are 1/6 segments of column drums,6 and was presumably laid with an upper floor. A doorway directly behind the south pilaster communicates with the south pastaphorion; to the east of this doorway is an arched niche and a similar niche is located on the north wall. The dimensions of the niches are 52 cm deep (maximum) by 46–48 cm wide.

The Pastophoria

The apse is flanked by two narrow side chambers of equal dimensions: 2.1 m by 4.4 m. The entrance door to each room is located at the base of the lower step of the bema. The south pastophorion differs to that on the

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3 Although the bench is broken at the eastern end, there is no indication on the gypsum plaster of the north wall that it continued further.
4 Other fragments of painted glass were found in the collapse to the south of the bema and in Room 4.
5 The area between the two blocks has been robbed and the flooring removed; traces of gypsum plaster provide evidence for the floor.
6 The segments are the same size as those used in the construction of the columns in the body of the church.
north in that it has direct access to the apse, approached by two steps set immediately to the left of the entrance door (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 208; figures 13.32 and 13.33). Both chambers are mud plastered and the south chamber has a band of gypsum plaster 1.15 m above the floor that runs partially around the room (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 207). The only feature in the north pastophorium is a small niche set high in its west wall; the dimensions are 54 cm high by 51 cm wide and 42 cm deep. There is no complementary niche in its counterpart to the south.

The South Rooms
Four rooms, numbered 1 to 4 from east to west, are built along the south wall. Three of these, Rooms 1, 3 and 4, give direct access into the church; Room 2 can only be accessed via Room 3 by a door in the southernmost end of their interconnecting wall. Rooms 1 and 2 are of equal size: 3.15 m by 3.2 m; Rooms 3 and 4 are both 3.15 m by 4.3 m. Room 4 preserves two ovens and must have served as a kitchen, perhaps for baking bread for the Eucharist. A flight of stairs along the south wall of Room 4 gave access either to a roof or gallery or upper storey that may have been built over the return aisle (Plate 4). The latter may account for the use of triple-corner columns at the western end of the church that could have provided support for such. An under-stairs cupboard is set within the west wall. The function of the remaining three rooms is unknown; they are devoid of features except for a single, small niche in each. The elaborate entrance of Room 3 suggests that it may have served a ceremonial function.

Decoration
Only the apse and the wall above its entrance appear to have been decorated but little of this survives. Knudstad and Frey (1999, 207–8) note that the decoration comprised a painted dado 40 cm high onto which three columns, set upon exaggerated bases, were painted. The central column was grey with horizontal black lines across its base; those that flanked it were yellow.8 Fragments of mud-brick architectural elements found in the debris indicate that the apse was arched and roofed by a semi-circular dome. One large fragment, found directly below its original position (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 208), preserves the decoration: the soffit is painted deep maroon with four rows of simple, four-petaled flowers in gold and yellow (Figure 4); the flat surface of the fragment, which formed the front of the wall above the apse, is decorated with a 25 cm band of the same maroon paint which gives way to a deep yellow. Numerous fragments of maroon and purple on white plaster, some with scroll or vine motifs, were found amongst the debris in front of the apse during the current excavations. The quantity found indicates that maroon and purple on white were the primary colours used in the region of the sanctuary, although fragments of deep yellow, red, pink, brown and green plaster retrieved from the vicinity suggest that a more elaborate decorative scheme was used. Painted-plaster fragments of a crux ansatae motif (Figure 5) were retrieved from the rubble just in front of the northern end of the bema and two further shaft sections were found in a pit which was dug in antiquity beneath the central feature of the east colonnade (Figure 6).9 Both fragments retrieved from in front of the bema preserve their upper torus moulding and one retains a full section of its capital. The base colour is pale yellow with a maroon torus moulding; a maroon vine with stylised grapes is painted immediately below the torus of one column. The larger section has no decoration on the shaft but above the maroon torus are alternating bands of yellow and white; V-shaped red lines radiate from the torus, and between these is a freely-drawn, open-leaf motif. The top of the capital is edged with a maroon band beneath which were a series of small cruciﬁes painted in deep yellow. The original placement of this pair of engaged columns is unknown.

Specific Architectural Features
The Columns
The columns are set upon pedestals surmounted by torus moulding. Each column is composed of six wedge-shaped mud bricks that give a diameter of about 70 cm. One capital is preserved to a height of 50 cm; it comprises a torus moulding above which the plaster flares out from the four corners simulating palm fronds, with a frond motif executed in low raised relief on each of the four faces (Figure 7).10 The height of the shafts of the triple-corner columns is 2.5 m from the base of the

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7 The south pastophorium was excavated in 1982 and not re-excavated in 1997.
8 The decoration is no longer visible.
9 The column fragments appear to have been thrown into the pit together with two intact mud bricks. Excavation of this pit in its entirety revealed fragments of the same pale-yellow plaster with which the half columns were painted, buried beneath floor material at a depth of between 10 cm and 45 cm below the floor of the transverse aisle. Their presence cannot be explained.
10 Palm-frond motifs are found on capitals at Saqqara, see C. C. Walters, Monastic Archaeology in Egypt, Warminster, 1974, 184–5, Figures 32 and 33.
Plate 3 Large East Church: the single column with the attached feature in the return aisle.

Plate 4 Large East Church: Room 4 showing the staircase and ovens.
lower torus but insufficient of the capital is preserved to determine its exact height. The single columns of the east-west colonnades were taller, and although no single column is preserved intact, an estimate of the overall height can be gained from the fallen shafts. The columns, including the capitals, were in excess of 4.5 m. Fragments of moulding, possibly from the abacuses, were found amongst the debris as were several fragments of palm beams; the latter suggests that these, rather than arches, spanned the columns. The discrepancy in the height of the triple-corner columns and the single columns may indicate the presence of an upper storey above the return aisle.

Architectural Feature in the West of the Nave

The architectural feature which abuts the single column of the west colonnade is enigmatic (Plate 3; Figure 2). The feature was tripartite comprising the stepped rectangular structure, a semi-circular element, and a small, low platform. The first element comprises two steps that give access to a small platform. The top of the platform is damaged but appears to have had a depression that could have held a basin; alternatively, some of the mud bricks may be missing and the platform could have had a flat surface. The second element is attested only by a semi-circular, plaster outline that is visible on the floor of the nave immediately to the east of the stepped feature with which it was contiguous. This is indicated by a mud- rather than gypsum-plaster surface of its eastern face. The semi-circular outline commences at the base of the first step and extends 80 cm along the stepped element at which point it abuts the low platform. It projects 62 cm into the nave at its widest point; its height is indeterminable. The floor within the plaster outline is the only section of the nave that was left unpaved. The small platform is set against the column on its east and may delineate the northern boundary of the feature as a whole. It comprises two mud bricks with two small pieces of sandstone set in the top. The northern and eastern sides are mud plastered but the side that was contiguous with the semi-circular element was left unplastered. Peter Grossmann (this volume) has identified the stepped feature as a chancel(amb), if this is so, the function of its component parts require defining. Deposits of oil on the flagstones of the nave in close proximity to the plaster impression suggest that some aspect of church ritual took place within the vicinity.

Stratigraphy

The upper deposits in the nave, the south, return and transverse aisles, and the south rooms were filled with windborne sand over collapse from the walls, roof and south colonnade; by contrast, the north aisle contained only sand. The majority of the collapse derives from the southern part of the building that fell into the nave whilst the northern remained standing and was gradually eroded by the elements. An articulated section of wall comprising 25 courses of mud brick had fallen into the north pastophorium some 2 m above the floor; this section, which derived from the north wall of the pastophorium, lay atop windborne sand. Amongst the collapse in the nave were the remains of several capitals, shafts of columns and other architectural elements that were encountered about one metre above the floor. In the centre of the nave, below this architectural debris, beginning approximately 80 cm above the floor, some 200 sandstone paving blocks were found lying in brick rubble and sand (Plate 1). These had once paved the nave floor directly below their place of deposition; how they reached their final resting-place is unknown but it is obviously the result of post-abandonment activity. One of these paving stones proved to be a carved libation table (31/420-D6.1/A/7/131) that had presumably been taken from one of the tombs for reuse in the church (Plate 5). The debris within the vicinity of and on top of the bema was particularly compact. This comprised architectural elements including the decorated plaster and the small half columns described above.

A one metre sondage sunk between the north triple-corner column and the north wall revealed a hard mud-plastered surface 50 cm below the floor level. This surface is 10 cm thick and was laid directly onto the basal clay; the foundation of the north triple-corner column was set onto this sub-surface. The fill between the mud surface and the floor contained ceramics and a few terracotta figurine fragments (Stevens this volume); these were topped with a layer of ash. The same hard clay sub-floor surface is observable in several places: beneath the robbers’ pit in the east colonnade, in trenches sunk along the south wall of both the north and south pastophoria, and at the base of a pit that had been cut in antiquity in the south-east corner of the south aisle. It is possible that this hard surface underlies the church in its entirety.

11 Jaroslaw Dobrowolski suggests three steps that give access to a platform as illustrated in Figure 2.

12 At the time of Dr Grossmann’s visit to Ismant el-Kharab, the floor of the nave had not been fully excavated and the semi-circular component had not been revealed.
Figure 5  Large East Church: fragments of a painted crux ansata retrieved from the rubble covering the bema.

Figure 6  Large East Church: fragments of engaged columns from the area of the apse (drawing by J. Dobrowolski).
Traces of an earlier structure
An earlier wall has been revealed running in an east-west direction beneath the south aisle and pastophorium just north of the wall, and continues beyond the eastern wall of the church; it is also discernible outside Room 4. Excavation in the south pastophorium in 1982 showed that this early wall was built upon the same hardened clay surface as mentioned above. Sub-floor walls, running both east-west and north-south, are also visible in Room 3. All of these earlier walls appear to have been cut down with the erection of the church. The sub-floor structures (Figure 2) will be the focus of investigation in forthcoming field seasons.

Post-Abandonment Activity
Activity is attested in the church following its abandonment as a place of formal worship. Timber fittings were removed, as were the large sandstone blocks that formed the steps leading from the central door, and numerous paving stones from the nave, as mentioned above. At some point a pit was dug beneath the central feature of the east colonnade. Some activity also took place in the north pastophorium and continued well after the church had ceased to function. An extensive ash layer was found above the floor level and a small feature, large enough to hold a ceramic vessel, was built against the north wall on top of the accumulated sand and rubble at least 50 cm above the upper floor. In excess of 60 large mud-jar sealings, some inscribed, and numerous ceramic lids were found at various levels throughout the fill, many as high as one metre above the floor. Large quantities of animal bones, including two charred human bones, were also retrieved from the pastophorium (Churcher this volume). There is no indication of such post-abandonment activity in the other rooms of the church. Whilst it is not possible to date the intrusive use of the church, the fill within the pastophorium shows no sign of sand accumulation at floor level that might be expected if the building had remained vacant for some time. Similarly, the dismantling of the floor of the nave occurred before the sand intruded for no windborne sand had accumulated on those paving stones that remained in situ.

Further evidence for exceptionally late activity was the blocking of the central door of the church with 16 courses of mud bricks. The bricks rested on windborne sand some one metre above floor level and extended to the top and slightly over the eroded bricks of the west wall. There were no artefactual remains associated with this blocking in the sand on either side of the wall.

Artefacts
Small finds from the church are minimal and provide no information relating to the function of the south rooms. The most plentiful category of object after potsherds is coins; some 140 have been retrieved from every part of the church. These are invaluable for dating the period of use of the building and are discussed below in relation to this issue. Fragments from glass vessels were found in each of the rooms and within the body of the church, but perhaps the most surprising discovery is the thin, flat painted glass that was concentrated in the rubble on and to the south of the bema and to the east of the central feature of the east colonnade. Painted glass, decorated with a scroll motif, was also retrieved from Room 4. Narrow, rectangular blocks of glass were identified by Carla Marchini (below) as frames for the painted panels that were subsequently set into larger wooden frames. Notable amongst the other small finds were an amethyst ring in a silver setting engraved with a menaid found on the floor in Room 3 (31/420-D6.1/A/7/61, Plate 6),13 a small bronze figurine of a female in classical style from Room 1 (31/420-D6.1/A/7/1, Plate 7), and a limestone head from a statuette of a draped female figure (31/420-D6.1/A/7/64) found in the north pastophorium.

The Small East Church
The location of the Small East Church Complex is described above. Minimal clearance undertaken in the 1983 season entailed complete excavation of the apse and partial clearance of the north and south side chambers (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 205–8). The degree of preservation makes it impossible to determine the location of doorways other than that which connects the church with the room to its north. The following observations may be made. The church measures 8.5 m by 5.5 m and comprises a nave, an apse with north and south side chambers and an adjacent north room of equal size to the church. The church must be preserved to a height of at least 4 m at the west. Both the apse and the side chambers are later additions to an existing room as is evidenced by the presence of gypsum plaster that is discernible on the east wall where the faces intersect, and by curve of the apse which is cut into that wall. It is anticipated that the structure will be excavated during the 2000 field season.

The West Church Complex
This complex is in the north-western corner of Enclosure 4 at the western extremity of the site (Hope this volume, Figure 1). The mud-brick structure comprises a small two-roomed church and a suite of rooms to the south; these two discrete components are roughly equal in size (Bowen et al. 1993, 23–5) (Figure 8). The ancillary structure is an integral part of the church for it provides the only means of access to the latter. A single

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13 The identification was made by Dr D. Bailey.
Figure 7  Large East Church: column capital from the nave (drawing by J. Dobrowolski).

Figure 8  Plan of the West Church Complex (drawing by J. E. Knudstad).
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The west wall of the complex has suffered badly from erosion and only three courses of mud brick are preserved. The north wall is similarly deflated in the west but at its easternmost point it is preserved to a height of about 1.0 m. By contrast, the south wall of the nave and those of the ancillary Rooms 3–7 have an extant height of at least 1.75 m.

The church measures 15 m east-west by 7 m north-south and comprises a nave with an apse built integrally with the east wall and flanked by small side chambers, a west room, which presumably functioned as a narthex, and a magazine that opens into the south wall of the narthex (Plate 8). The church is approached via a wide corridor that opens off the north wall of Room 1 at its easternmost point and communicates with the narthex. Wooden doors were set into each end of the corridor.

The Narthex

The narthex is a simple rectangular room, 7.42 m by 5.3 m. A doorway in the centre of the east wall gives access to the nave. A continuous bench, with an average height of 25 cm, abuts the entire length of the north and west walls and a section of both the south and the east walls. As the walls of the narthex have suffered badly from erosion and are poorly preserved, no other architectural features can be identified. A narrow room, Room 8, which measures 3.4 m by 0.9 m, opens off the south wall immediately west of the entrance corridor and may have functioned as a magazine. Excavation below floor level revealed traces of two walls that may indicate that the church is built over an earlier structure.

The Nave

The nave measures 7.4 m by 5.3 m and is set 17 cm lower than the narthex from which it was closed off by a wooden door. It too has a continuous bench, 25 cm high, built against the walls and broken only at the entrance door, in front of the engaged columns that flank the apse, and in front of the bema. The south wall has a small niche, 23 cm high, located 93 cm above the bench; the north and west walls are too eroded to determine whether there were further niches. There are no columns, or emplacements for such and the roof must have been supported entirely by wooden beams. The floors of the nave and the narthex have been badly damaged by the action of water and salt, and consequently it was impossible to distinguish individual floor levels. Excavation below the salt-hardened floor in the south of the nave exposed a layer of chert mixed with clay that probably formed the bedding for the floor, and exposed two sections of laid mud brick.

Bema and Apse

The bema, located in the nave immediately in front of the centre of the apse, is a simple platform, 77 cm by 74 cm and 48 cm high, approached by two steps on the west. The semi-circular apse is elevated above the floor of the nave and is approached by a step on either side of the bema. The apse is framed by two engaged columns that sit atop a pedestal; a torus moulding separates the pedestals from the shafts. Two shallow pilasters, 35 cm by 9 cm, flanked the entrance itself. There is no evidence to indicate the presence of a screen wall or curtain to close off the sanctuary from the congregation but this could have been portable.

The only feature within the apse is a small niche in the south wall, 48 cm wide by 31–40 cm deep. The apse walls retain their mud plaster but might once have been gypsum coated.

The Side Chambers

The two small side chambers that flank the apse each measure 1.8 m by 1.35 m. They too are elevated from the floor of the nave with the bench functioning as the lower step above which the doorsills are located. Both chambers had wooden doors that opened directly into the nave. The south chamber is devoid of features but the north chamber is fitted with three storage bins, one of which contained large sheets of blank papyrus.

Stratigraphy/Post-Abandonment Activity

There is no evidence of post-abandonment activity within the church. The structure was covered with a deposit of windborne sand beneath which architectural debris was soon encountered. The floor was littered with collapse that included a number of palm beams, the largest being 3.7 m in length, palm-frond ribs tied together with 2 ply rope; this had clearly formed the roof. The absence of windborne sand on the floor itself suggests that the roof had fallen before the sand has an opportunity to encroach.

Artefacts

The body of the church yielded very few artefacts. A coin, an incense burner, two ivory knobs, uninscribed papyrus, sherds from glass vessels, and seal-impressed, mud jar sealings were retrieved from the nave; five ceramic vessels, two coins and 11 ostraka were found in the narthex and a further 21 ostraka were retrieved from Room 8. The majority of ostraka record economic transactions. The coins were too corroded to identify the issuing emperors but the size indicates that they all date to the fourth century as are the ceramic vessels.

14 The area to the immediate south of the complex has not been excavated.
The Adjoining Suite of Rooms

As stated, the adjoining eight-roomed structure is an integral part of the church complex (Figure 8; Plate 9). The only external door to both the church and the ancillary building is located in the western extremity of the south wall of the latter. This entrance room, Room 1, which measures 5.0 m by 5.4 m, probably functioned as a vestibule for there are benches built against the east, south and west walls whilst the remnants of a hearth and numerous jar impressions in the floor might be indicative of food preparation or food and beverage consumption. A flight of stairs, abutting the north wall directly opposite the door way, gave access either to the roof of Rooms 2 and 8 or the narthex. The door of the corridor to the church, Room 2, also opens off the north wall. The door that connects the entrance room with the remaining rooms of the ancillary building is located in the north-end of the east wall; this gives access to an inner courtyard, Room 3, which is 4.5 m square. A narrow stall covered with a low, palm-rib roof occupies the north-western corner of the courtyard; two mud-brick bins are built against the east wall of this stall and a third occupies the north-eastern corner. Deposits of straw were found in the bins, and as numerous impressions of donkey hooves were observed on the floor, it is not unreasonable to suggest that animals were kept here. Three narrow rooms, Rooms 5–7, built against the east wall, open off the courtyard. These are uniform in size, 3.0 m by 2.3 m, although Room 5, on the south, is longer by 90 cm than the other two to accommodate the doorway which opens into the courtyard from the south rather than the east. Room 4, 3.2 m by 3.0 m, opens onto the courtyard via a door in its north wall. All rooms have a single niche and the courtyard has three. There is nothing in any of these rooms to indicate the type of activities that took place within.

Artefacts

Forty-six coins and 47 ostraka were amongst the artefacts found in the ancillary building.15 As with those from the narthex and Room 8, the majority of ostraka were of an economic nature; some preserve lists of names. A few fragments of inscribed papyrus were also retrieved, including a large piece from a codex that preserves parts of two personal letters.16 Six complete, or near-complete, ceramic vessels and an incense burner were amongst the finds, as were fragments of basketry.

The Nature of the West Church Complex

The nature of the structure has been called into question and it should be acknowledged that P. Grossmann (1995, personal communication, January) does not regard the complex as ecclesiastical but has suggested that it was a public building, perhaps a magistrates hall, that served a multiplicity of functions.17 Dr Grossmann’s primary reason for rejecting the identification is the lack of any visible means of screening the sanctuary from public view.

Contrary to Dr Grossmann, I would argue that the complex is undoubtedly ecclesiastical; this is confirmed by its association with a Christian cemetery immediately to its east.18 During the 1995 field season, two burials were discovered located against the outer east wall of the church, directly behind the north apse side chamber (Plate 10); both contained the bodies of females (Hope 1995, 57–8, plate 6). The graves are simple pits cut into bedrock and large enough to hold a single interment. Each grave was covered by a low stepped, mud-brick superstructure that in turn was finished with a layer of mud plaster. The graves are cut on an east-west axis and the bodies, neither of which was wrapped or provisioned with grave goods,19 were placed with their heads to the west. The deceased must have been Christians. Immediately to the east of the church are two monumental, stone tombs that are tentatively dated to the second century (Hope and McKenzie 1999, 60); one, West Tomb 1, was re-used for the burial of eleven individuals in either the late third or early fourth century (Hope and McKenzie 1999, 61).20 At the end of the 1999 field season, whilst sinking a sondage on the north side steps of West Tomb 1, a grave aligned on an east-west axis was found. Further investigation within Enclosure 4 revealed more graves cut on the same alignment, and it is possible that the mud-brick sections beneath the floor of the nave of the church are also graves.

The association of church and cemetery is well attested; in the church the faithful could celebrate mass

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15 The majority of coins derive from just within the doorway of Rooms 6 and 7.
16 I am extremely grateful to Klaas Worp who was kind enough to provide me with his translation and commentary on this unpublished text.
17 Dr Grossmann has visited the site on two occasions and inspected the complex in both 1995 and 1997.
18 Colin. A. Hope argued for the ecclesiastical nature of the complex well before the discovery of the cemetery (personal communication, 1996). His assessment was based primarily upon the architecture and the location of the structure; it is unlikely that a magistrate’s hall would be built on the periphery of the village. Since this assessment, it has been possible to date the foundation of the building to the fourth century and, as R. S. Bagnall (1999, personal communication, January) notes, no magistrates halls were built in villages at that time.
19 Minute fragments of linen were found in the graves which may indicate that the bodies were once covered with a shroud.
20 There is nothing within the tomb that betrays the religious persuasion of its occupants.
Plate 5  Large East Church: libation table re-used as a paving stone.

Plate 6  Large East Church: cast of the amethyst ring in a silver setting engraved with a menaïd from Room 3.
Plate 7  Large East Church: bronze figurine of a female found in Room 1.

Plate 8  The West Church Complex looking south-east.
for the repose of the souls of the departed or could hold meals for the dead. Although the exact function of the West Church and its ancillary building cannot be determined, the complex may have been associated with mortuary practice.

**Suggested Dates of Establishment of the Excavated Churches**

As the churches have furnished a minimal amount of written material, and certainly no dated papyri, an alternative method was required in an attempt to chart their founding and period of use. The principal body of material used to establish a chronology was the coins. It is acknowledged that the use of coins for dating is problematic for it is difficult to determine the length of time specific specimens remained within the currency pool. It was therefore necessary to treat the numismatic evidence with a degree of caution. A method was established in order to estimate the average life-span and longevity of certain issues, to identify those coins that were in concurrent circulation and to ascertain those issues that should predominate in the currency pool at a given time (Bowen 1998, 175–242). A starting point for this study focused upon the coins retrieved from structures at Ismant el-Kharab that were known from papyrological and artefactual evidence to have been occupied only during the late third and the fourth centuries and which had yielded a significant quantity of coins from well-stratified contexts. These coins were examined both individually for signs of wear, and collectively for volume and contemporaneity. The archaeological context was appraised in an effort to assess its reliability. The results from each of the structures were then compared and were shown to reflect a similar pattern of coin loss; this was taken as representative of the site as a whole for the period under examination. The second step in the study was the examination of eleven bronze hoards from sites within the Nile Valley and Cyrenaica, presumed to be deposited at different times during the fourth century, and six Egyptian hoards dated to the first quarter of the fifth century. This gave an indication of the predominant issues in circulation at specific periods during the fourth century as well as their potential longevity in the currency pool. The results of both studies were then applied to the coins found within the churches.

**The Large East Church**

One hundred and forty coins have been retrieved from the Large East Church; of these only 50 have been identified. The sample is meagre but its composition is pertinent. They range in date from the late third century to a single specimen of Theodosius (Table 1).21 The best represented are those of the ‘Falling Horseman’ series struck under Constantius II between 348–58, followed by the Secvritas Reipublicae type struck by Valentinian I and Valens between 364–78. Hoard evidence has shown that the former were predominant in the currency pool until 365 after which their numbers decreased dramatically; by 370 the Secvritas Reipublicae issues accounted for 72% of coins in circulation but this type was superseded in the 390s by the Salvs Reipublicae issues, struck between 388–95.22

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Type/Emperor</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre–296</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>313–18</td>
<td>Soli Invicto Comiti</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>317–26</td>
<td>Crispvs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>324–30</td>
<td>Providentia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>313–37</td>
<td>Constantine I</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>336–40</td>
<td>Gloria Exercitvs (1 standard)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>337–40</td>
<td>Quadriga</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>347–48</td>
<td>vot/xx/mvt/xxx</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>347–48</td>
<td>VN MR</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>348–58</td>
<td>Falling Horsemann</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>355–63</td>
<td>Spes Reipublice</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>337–61</td>
<td>Constan…</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>364–78</td>
<td>Gloria Romanovrn</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>364–78</td>
<td>Secvritas Reipublicae</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>378–83</td>
<td>Theodosivs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most significant issues for the dating the foundation of the church are the third-century tetradrachms, minted until 296, followed by the Sol Invictvs issues struck between 313 and 318. These issues account for 26% of the coins identified. In theory, third-century tetradrachms were withdrawn from circulation following the major currency reform undertaken by Diocletian in 296.23 The official withdrawal of coins from the currency pool is not necessarily reflected in practice and the tetradrachms could have continued to circulate within Egypt. Tetradrachms were absent from all but one24 of the hoards examined, however, including the three that are presumed

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21 The coin, initially identified by A. Easson as an issue struck between 367–95 (Knudstad and Frey 1999, 208), has been re-identified as belonging to Constantius II, 347–8 (A. Easson 1994, personal communication, November).

22 It is of note that only two Salvs Reipublicae specimens are amongst the 400 coins which have been identified. One of these specimens was found in the ancillary building of the West Church Complex.


24 Two specimens, one struck by Philip I and one by Claudius II, were amongst the 5826 identifiable coins in the Ihnasyah hoard. Also included in this hoard, deposited around 348, was a coin of Domitian and a stray dating to the fourteenth century. It cannot be argued that the inclusion of two tetradrachms in a large hoard, the contents of which spanned the years 306–48, is indicative of their continued circulation. See J. G. Milne, ‘A Hoard of Constantinian Coins from Egypt,’ Journal International d’Archéologie Numismatique 6 (1914) 1–27, and F. H. Armstrong, ‘The Ihnasyah Hoard Re-Examined’, Phoenix XIX, (1965) 51–61.
Plate 9  West Church Complex: view across Rooms 3–7 of the ancillary building, looking north; the church apse is visible in the upper right.

Plate 10  Christian graves outside the outer east wall of the West Church.
to have been deposited between 321 and 326.\textsuperscript{25} Research carried out on late \textit{tetradrachms} over a twenty-year period by William E. Metcalf (1997, personal communication August) serves to confirm the hoard evidence.\textsuperscript{26} Melcalf has found no indication of their continuing circulation following the reform. His study has shown that the condition of the \textit{tetradrachms} struck by Diocletian is proportional to its distance from year 12 of the emperor, the final year of the striking; the earlier the issue the greater the wear, with little or no wear on those of the final year.\textsuperscript{28}

West and Johnson (1967, 111) claim that no pre-Diocletian issues have ever been found in Egyptian hoards of post-Diocletian coins, but suggest that the recall did not take place immediately; they cite as evidence a document (SB IV 7338) dated to 300 which records a dispute regarding a deposit of old coins. The text is incomplete and provides no conclusive evidence for the continuing circulation of \textit{tetradrachms}.\textsuperscript{28} It is reasonable to suggest, however, that \textit{tetradrachms} continued to circulate until such time as the new currency became established in the currency pool.

\textit{Sol Invictvs} issues do not appear in hoards after the 340s.\textsuperscript{29} If the demonetization of 318 affected the East to the same degree as it affected the West, the pre-318 currency would cease to circulate widely soon after that date (King 1979, 80).

The occurrence of the \textit{tetradrachms} and the \textit{Sol Invictvs} coins within the church is significant for determining the foundation date. It should be stated that although three were found embedded in the floors of Room 1, there is no evidence to suggest that these coins are associated with the earlier structure over which the south rooms of the church appear to have been built. Other specimens were found in the compacted surface of the return aisle, the north aisle and the north and south \textit{pastophoria}. One of the \textit{Sol} issues was retrieved from the ash fill below the lowest floor of the south \textit{pastophorium}. From the evidence of the coins, therefore, it can be argued that the church was founded during the reign of Constantine. Ceramic evidence can be cautiously used to supplement the proposed foundation date of the church. The \textit{sondage} beneath the floor of the north aisle revealed the thick clay deposit on which the column bases were built. The fill between the clay foundation layer and the floor contained intact ceramic vessels as well as a plethora of potsherds; no fourth-century vessels or potsherds were encountered. This ceramic assemblage parallels that of the first to third centuries and is similar to the fill found beneath a lower wall of House 4 and in a trench excavated below the floor in House 3 both of which were built in the late third or early fourth centuries (Patten 1996, 51–5; Dunsmore this volume).

### The West Church

Only 49 coins have been retrieved from the West Church Complex and of these 31 are identifiable (Table 2). Three coins were found within the church itself but these are too corroded to permit identification. The numismatic evidence therefore relies entirely on the coins found within the ancillary structure, predominantly from Rooms 6 and 7.

The pattern of coin loss from the West Church Complex suggests a foundation date after the mid-fourth century with the building operational until the 390s which, on papyrological and numismatic evidence found thus far, coincides with the abandonment of the village. There are no diagnostic ceramics from the fill of the structure to assist with dating.

<table>
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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Gloria Exercitvs (1 standard)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>347–48</td>
<td>Victoriae DD AVGGQ NN</td>
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</tr>
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<td>347–48</td>
<td>vot/xxx/mvt/xxx</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>348–58</td>
<td>Falling Horseman</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>337–61</td>
<td>Constantius II</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>355–63</td>
<td>Spes Reipvblic</td>
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<td>363–64</td>
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<tr>
<td>378–83</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>388–94</td>
<td>Salvs Reipvblicae</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{26} I am most grateful to Dr Metcalf, Curator of the American Numismatic Society, for providing me with details of his study of the \textit{tetradrachm}s.

\textsuperscript{27} This relates in particular to the coins from Karanis.

\textsuperscript{28} I am indebted to Klaas Worp and Roger Bagnall both of whom gave me the benefit of their expertise in interpreting SB IV 7338.

\textsuperscript{29} Thirty-two coins of Constantine I and Licinius were among the 5828 identifiable coins that comprised the Ihnasyah hoard that is believed to have been deposited \textit{circa} 348.
Conclusion

The numismatic evidence suggests that the construction of the Large East Church preceded that of the West Church Complex by at least twenty years if not more. A Constantinian date for the large church should not be surprising; modest, purpose-built churches were probably in existence before the Edict of Toleration: S. Criogono and S. Sebastiano in Rome may be cited as examples (Krautheimer 1981, 38, 43). Churches built on a basilica plan were erected in the Roman empire from circa 313; the cathedral at Aquileia is believed to date from that time and that of Tyre was consecrated in about 316–17 (Krautheimer 1981, 43, 45). A cathedral must have been erected at the important see of Alexandria at about the same time.\textsuperscript{30} With the rapid increase of converts to Christianity in the wake of the Peace of the Church, it cannot have been too long before Christian basilicas were constructed in the major metropoleis throughout Egypt. The people of Kellis were in regular contact with the Nile Valley, including the capital of the Thebaid, Antinoopolis, and neighbouring Hermopolis.\textsuperscript{31} Papyri from Antinoopolis attest a Christian community there by the second century and at Hermopolis by the third century.\textsuperscript{32} It is obvious that both cities would have had purpose-built churches by the early fourth century. It is not impossible that the basilica at Antinoopolis or Hermopolis was the inspiration for that of Kellis.

Appendix: A Note on Glass from the Large East Church (Carla Marchini)

Amongst the glass found during the excavation of the Large East Church were numerous fragments of a rare type: they are absolutely flat, certainly not from vessels but resemble panels, painted on the back but showing the image on the front. The designs are painted with red, white, green, brown and black. Some of the motifs are human and several faces can be identified: a small, young male head, and with it is preserved also part of the dress; a large female (?) head, but very badly preserved, with only one eye and part of the hair. Geometrical and floral patterns are painted in red and black and are better preserved than the human figures; they consist of lines, circles and palmettes. The shape of the fragments suggests that the geometrical motifs were employed as a frame around an panel that was probably painted with (biblical?) scenes. The edges around the geometrical fragments are cut intentionally with a blade and they probably fit one with the other to form the frame. The fragments do not have all the same thickness, this might suggest they come from different panels. Together with these fragments were found pieces of glass paste, blue and turquoise in colour, again completely flat. Fragments were found in several of the south rooms and others came from the area of the sanctuary. Various suggestions can be made concerning the identity of the pieces, especially as there are no comparisons for flat-painted glass in the fourth century: the first of this kind is reported to appear in the sixth century. Unfortunately, as for other examples from early excavations we cannot be sure of the dating. Known types of flat glass are:

\begin{itemize}
\item Window glass: the first windows are found from the sixth century CE (Saqqara), they are not painted but they are made of pieces of flat glass set into plaster in the walls.
\item Panels hanging from the wall.
\item Panels set between columns.
\item Painted panels inserted in wooden (?) boxes.
\end{itemize}

The complete study of these fragments is still in progress; tentatively they may be identified as from panels between columns. The rest of the glass from the church is in very bad condition; it is all fragmentary and so it is very difficult at the moment to present a description of the church equipment. We found two fragmentary conical lamps and fragments of a bowl, some bottles and flasks, but not much more.

\textsuperscript{30} A cathedral at the relatively unimportant see of Orleansville in North Africa is attested from about 325 (Krautheimer 1981, 45).

\textsuperscript{31} See P.Kell. I Gr. 2, 19a and 20, which attest contact with the praeses of the Thebaid during the opening years of the fourth century. K. A. Worp (1996, personal communication, January) informs me that the praeses was installed either at Antinoopolis or Hermopolis.

\textsuperscript{32} P.Ant. I.7, a fragment of Psalms has been dated variously to the second or early third centuries whilst a fragment of Origen is known from Hermopolis dated palaeographically to around 300. See J. van Haelst, Catalogue des Papyrus Littéraires Juifs et Chrétiens, Paris 1976, numbers 179 and 694 respectively. Eusebius (Historia Ecclesiastica VI.46.2) notes that the bishop of Alexandria, Dionysius, corresponded with Kolon, bishop of the community of the Hermopolitans. Dionysius’ episcopate dates from 247–circa 264.
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