

THE CHURCH AT KHIRBET DEIR SITUN

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It is a great pleasure to write an article in honour of Professor Hideo Fujii, who as Director of the Institute for Cultural Studies of Ancient Iraq at Kokushikan University and as leader of their archaeological mission to Iraq, has made distinguished contributions to the archaeology and history of Mesopotamia¹⁾. His interests have been wide-ranging, extending from prehistoric times, as shown for example by his excavations at Tell Songor in the Hamrin basin, down to the Parthian period, represented by the magnificent textiles found by him in the Al-Tar caves near Karbala. Even later is the church at Ain Sha'ia near Najaf which was excavated by Professor Fujii and his team between 1986 and 1989. Because of Professor Fujii's interest in early Christian architecture, I thought it would be appropriate to include in his *Festschrift* a preliminary report about a church at Khirbet Deir Situn which was investigated by a British Museum expedition in 1985–86²⁾.

Between 1983 and 1986 the British Museum expedition working in the Saddam Dam Salvage Project in northern Iraq excavated at six different sites now mostly submerged beneath the lake behind the dam. Three of these sites were Late Assyrian or post-Assyrian (Qasrij Cliff, Khirbet Qasrij and Khirbet Khatuniyeh) and two were Hellenistic (Tell Deir Situn and Grai Darki). It was while working at the two Hellenistic sites in the autumn of 1985 that we were invited to examine the nearby site of Khirbet Deir Situn³⁾. The remains clearly represented a collapsed building or buildings, presumably on account of the name a monastery or church, constructed of stone rubble and mortar, and therefore likely to be of medieval or Islamic date. As our programme of research did not then extend to the Islamic period, we were at first reluctant to take on this extra commitment. However, there were several indications that the site might repay some limited investigation.

First, there was some interesting pottery on and around the site, and secondly the site had been previously visited by Fr Jean Fiey, the Dominican priest who has published extensively on Christian monuments in Northern Iraq. In his *Assyrie Chrétienne*, Fiey (1965: II, 620–5) includes an intriguing section about the site. He suggests that Deir Situn should be interpreted as 'the monastery with the (single) column', in which case, so he says, it could have been a foundation of the Stylites, the curious sect named after St. Simeon Stylites (c. 390–459 AD), the austere hermit who lived on a pillar for 30 years without ever descending. Fiey goes further and proposes that Deir Situn was founded in about 598 AD by St. Michael, the soldier of Nineveh, on the grounds that he was a renowned Jacobite Stylite who had died in this area.

The story of St Michael is given in a Syriac text preserved in the Vatican Library that describes the history of St Acha. It is eloquently paraphrased and put into its proper historical context by Fiey (1965: II, 621–624). In the course of the long struggle between the Sasanian and Byzantine empires, in AD 572 a Byzantine army besieged Nisibin on the orders of Justin II. In spite of a lengthy siege they were unable to take the city, partly because of dissension amongst their own commanders, and they were obliged to withdraw, pursued by a Sasanian army commanded by Chosroes I himself. The Persians took many Byzantine prisoners, one of whom was Acha, who became the slave of Michael of Nineveh. Michael was in reality a crypto-Christian, who outwardly observed the official religion of the army but

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1) My thanks are due to Dr. St. John Simpson who read through an earlier draft of this paper and made a number of helpful suggestions.

2) The final report on this excavation is being prepared jointly by J.E. Curtis and St. J. Simpson.

3) For brief preliminary reports on the excavations at Khirbet Deir Situn, see Curtis 1987 and 1989.

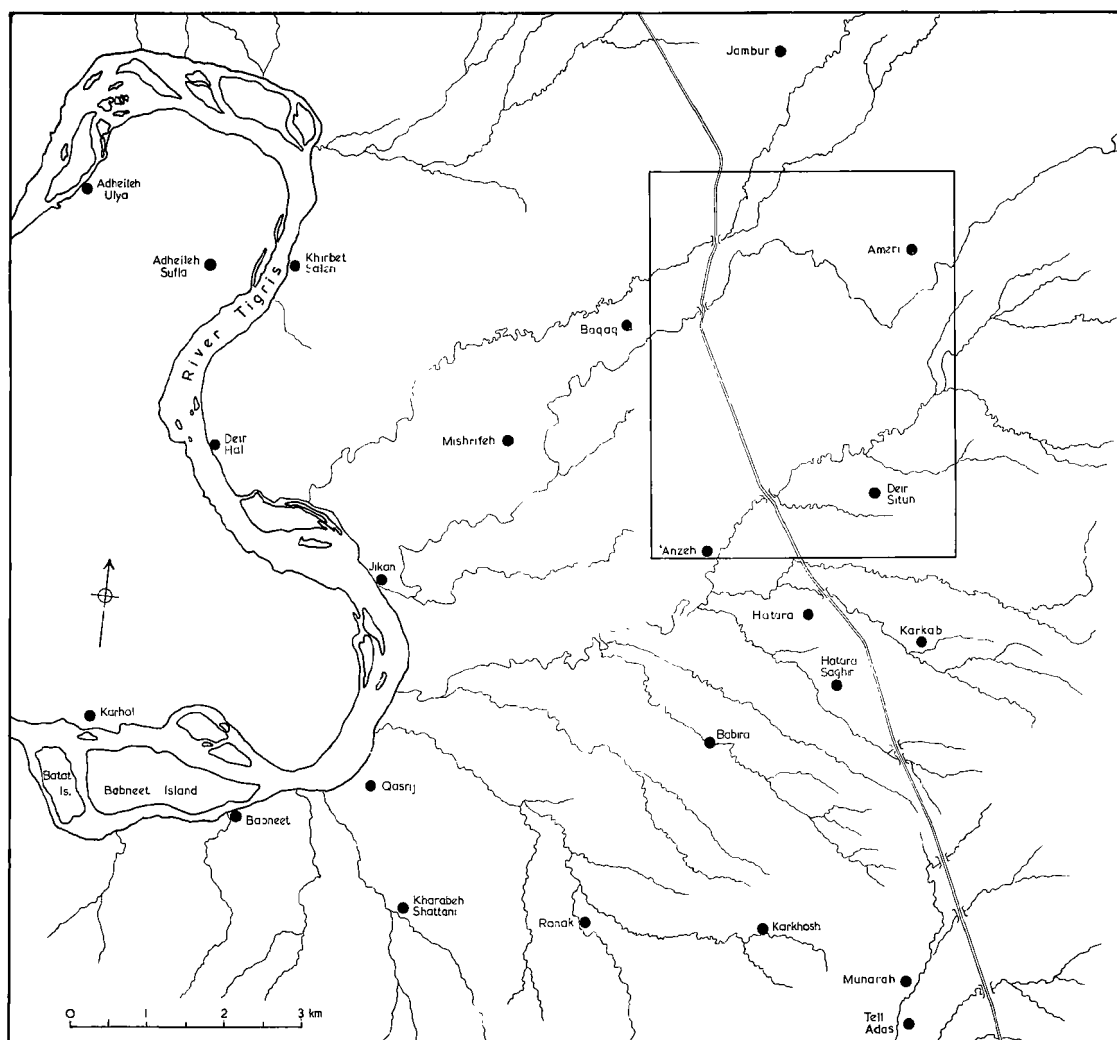


Fig. 1 Part of the area affected by the Saddam Dam Salvage Project showing the location of modern villages. Drawing by Ann Searight.

in fact had a cross hidden in his helmet. Acha was soon officially recruited into the Sasanian army, and he and Michael spent the next eighteen years as soldiers, fighting during the day and passing the night in prayer, covered in ashes and haircloth. At the end of this time they determined to return to the west and live as proper Christians. They founded a monastery (of St Acha)⁴ which Fiey thinks was in the neighbourhood of Nisibin, but after five years Michael became homesick and returned to the Nineveh area where he built himself a monastery. This would have been in around AD 598. Within the monastery Michael constructed a column, on which he sat until his death.

It was obviously tempting to test Fiey's hypothesis, and at the same time recover more information about the Sasanian and early Islamic periods in this area. There was also the consideration that the site was going to be flooded, and it obviously deserved to be investigated. If we decided not to work there it was unlikely anybody else would be able to do so. For this reason, we determined to make at least a preliminary investigation of Khirbet Deir Situn. Thus in the autumn 1985 season, John Curtis, Anthony Green and Marian Melnyczek excavated at Khirbet Deir Situn in the period 19th-27th November. The results proved to be so interesting that the expedition returned in autumn 1986 to work solely at Khirbet

4) For St Acha, see Holweck 1924: 9.

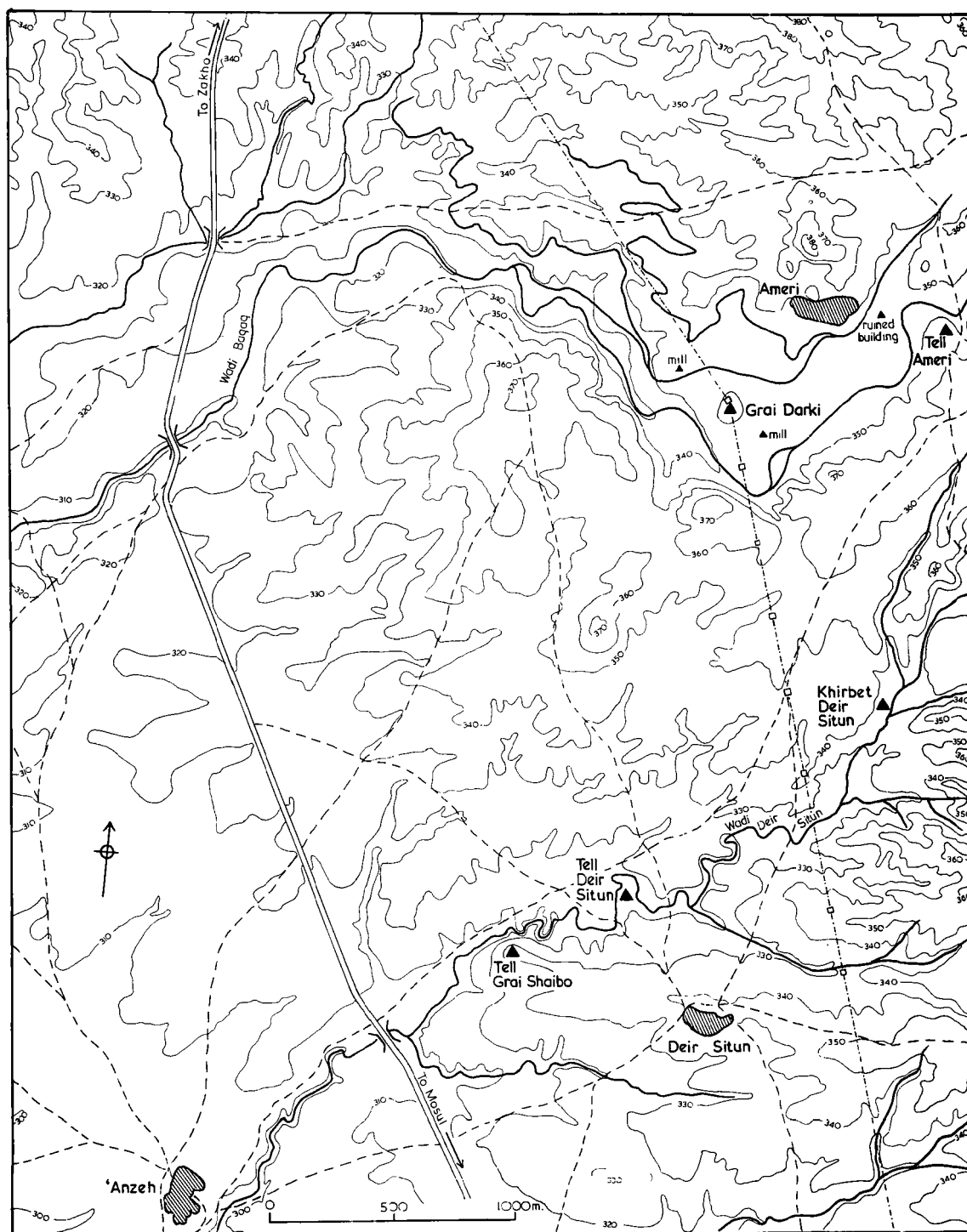


Fig. 2 Khirbet Deir Situn and its environs. Drawing by Ann Searight.

Deir Situn. We worked there from the 25th October to the 8th December. The team comprised John Curtis (Director), Marian Melnyczek and Timothy Matney (Site Supervisors), Ruth Goldstraw (Conservator), Bronwen Morgan (Architect), Helen McDonald (Illustrator) and St. John Simpson (Pottery). Throughout our work at Khirbet Deir Situn we enjoyed the support and co-operation of the Iraqi State Organisation for Antiquities and Heritage, in particular Dr Muayyad S. Damerji, Dr Behnam Abu es-Soof, Sd Mohammed Subhi, Dr Abdul Sittar Azawi, and last but not least, our representative, Sd

Mamoon Ghanim Hussain. We are also grateful to the officers of the British Archaeological Expedition to Iraq, Jeremy Black, Warwick Ball and Roger Matthews, who helped in various ways.

Khirbet Deir Situn is about 40 km north-west of Mosul (Figs. 1–2), set in the rolling, hilly countryside nearly 5 km to the east of the Mosul-Dohuk road. The ruins lie to the north-east of the old village of Deir Situn, and are situated on the banks of the same wadi as that running past the Hellenistic site of Tell Deir Situn (Pl. 1a). The site⁵⁾ is located on a low bluff to the west of the wadi, overlooking a spring and a cluster of mulberry trees, which is a popular spot with shepherds and goatherds.

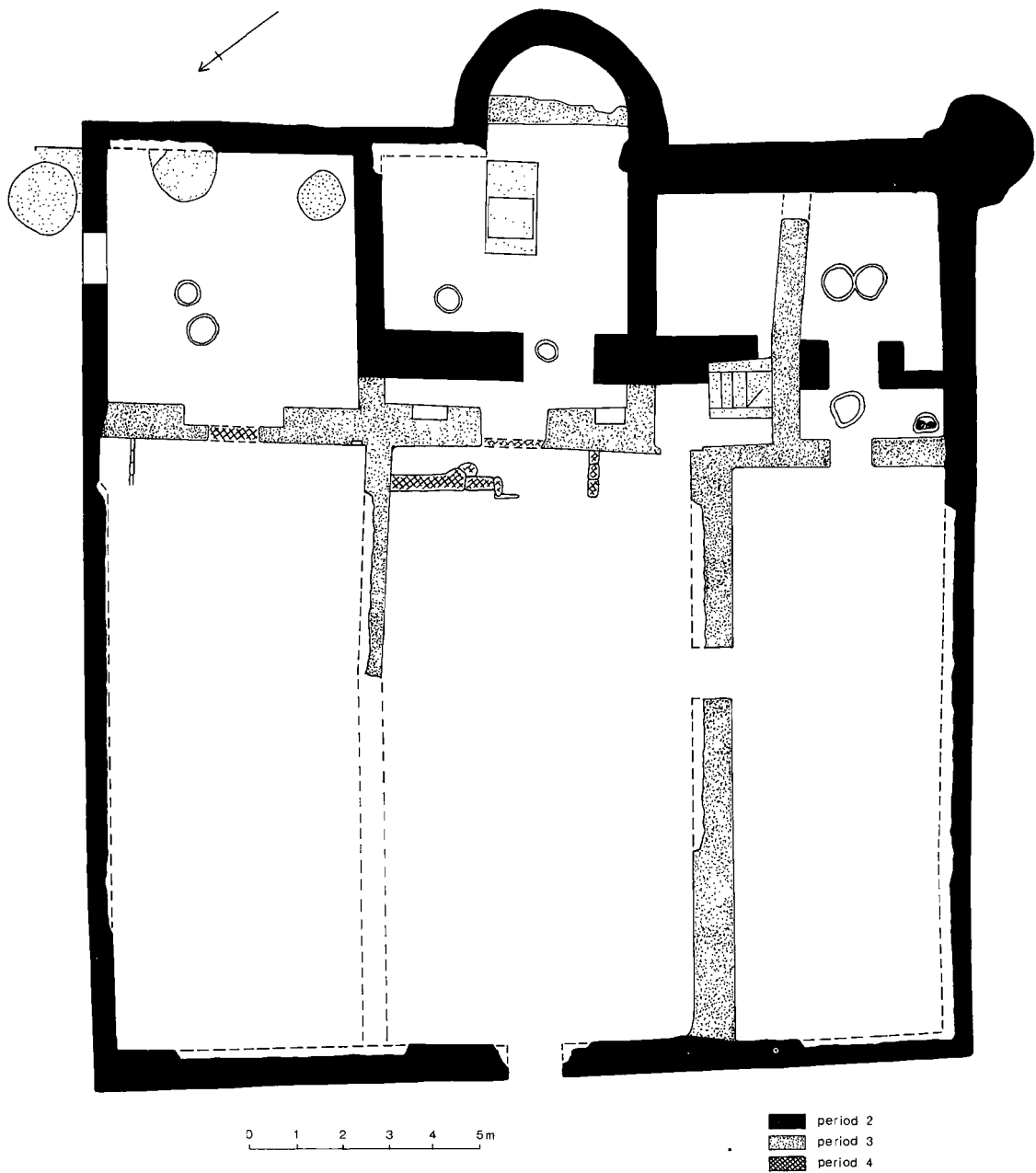


Fig. 3 Plan of the excavated building at Khirbet Deir Situn. Drawing by J.E. Curtis.

5) Khirbet Deir Situn is site no. 30 on the map of 'Archaeological Sites at the Mosul Dam Reservoir' prepared by the State Organisation of Antiquities and Heritage.

As we have said, the surface remains indicated a structure built of rubble and mortar that was much eroded at the east end, where it faced the wadi. Although straightforward from an archaeological point of view, lifting the fallen stones proved difficult, and great care had to be taken as the crevices in the rubble had become a haven for scorpions and snakes. In the east part of the building we were able to clear down to the different floor levels, but in the western part, because of the depth of deposit, it was not possible to do much more than trace the tops of the walls. Excavation showed that the history of the building was much more complicated than first thought, and it can best be described by dealing with each period in turn (Fig. 3, Pls. 1b, 2a).

Period 1

The earliest attested occupation on the site was during the Sasanian period, represented by a red-coloured deposit that underlies the later building. There were no walls or floors definitely associated with this occupation, but it is possible that the floors were removed by the later builders and the walls incorporated in the later structure which would account for their not being distinguished during the excavation. Alternatively, it may be that this reddish deposit represents an external accumulation of refuse mixed with redeposited natural subsoil from elsewhere on the site. In this case, the original building would have been in a slightly different position to its successor, perhaps a little further up the hill to the west and away from the wadi edge. Recovered from the red-coloured deposit was an interesting collection of broken pottery, including sherds of 'smeared ware' and 'brittle ware' that are typical of the Sasanian period. Most interesting, though, was a collection of 140 stamped sherds, of which a number could be joined together (Fig. 4; Pls. 4a-b, 5a-b). On these stamps there is an interesting repertoire of designs including goats, stags, birds, hump-backed bulls, crosses, 'Catherine wheels', and circular geometric designs. Such stamped pottery has been found at a number of other sites in the Saddam Dam Salvage Project, for example at Aqar Babira (Sürenhagen 1987: figs. 2-3) and Qaradere (Roaf 1983: fig. 9/1-5). There is a good collection from Nineveh (Campbell Thompson and Mallowan 1933: pl. LXXVII), including a fine example published by Layard (1853: 591). There is also an almost complete jar of this kind in the British Museum collections, excavated at Birs Nimrud (Borsippa) in Mesopotamia in the last century, stamped with browsing stags (Pl. 5c), but generally such pottery is uncommon. In fact, the collection recovered from Khirbet Deir Situn is the largest group yet found. The purpose of this Late Sasanian stamped pottery is quite unclear: the stamps might have been put on jars containing a particular commodity, or they might be indications of the place of manufacture. It is even possible that their distribution could be restricted to Christian communities, but this is all speculative. There were also a few fragments of glass associated with the earliest phase.

Period 2

During the Islamic Period a large building was constructed on the site, approximately square and measuring 19.85m north-south and 19.50m east-west. It was made from stone rubble held together with gypsum mortar. The east end of the building was divided into three rooms, and in the middle of the east wall was an apse (Pl. 3a). This sort of arrangement, with a large hall or nave and a tripartite division at the east end, comprising a chancel flanked by a room on either side, is fairly typical of early churches. Both the chancel and the room in the south-east corner had walls on the west side through which narrow doorways gave access to the nave. For the room in the north-east corner no corresponding wall was found, but this could have been removed by the later builders. Alternatively, it may be that the plan is irregular, which would suggest that the central room at the front is a chapel within a monastic complex rather than the chancel of a church. It is also curious that the apse is off-centre in relation to the chancel but this might reflect some rebuilding, perhaps of the apse itself, which was not detected during excavation. A few moulded sherds, some potsherds of glazed 'sgraffiato' ware, and a 'barbotine' handle (Pl. 6a) point to a foundation date for this building in the late Abbasid or early Ilkhanid period, that is in the 12th



Fig. 4 Sasanian stamped sherds from Khirbet Deir Situn. Drawings by J.E. Curtis.

or 13th century A.D. There was no pottery that could be certainly ascribed to the Early Islamic period, although sites of this date are known from elsewhere in this rescue project. Alternatively, it is possible that the absence of recognisably early Islamic pottery may be due to its having been dumped elsewhere and sealed under stone rubble.

In a later phase of the period 2 building there were some modifications to the structure. These consisted of a later gypsum floor in the chancel, and some alterations to the south-east corner of the building. At this point where the outside ground level is sloping away steeply towards the spring it seems likely that the corner of the building collapsed, and was rebuilt and buttressed on the outside with a substantial mass of stones in which two wall faces could be distinguished. They were built leading out from the corner, presumably to make the buttress as strong as possible.

Period 3

In this period there was a substantial rebuilding of the earlier structure. The technique of construction was the same as in period 2, using rubble and gypsum mortar with a gypsum rendering, but the building of this date is characterised by a curious architectural technique which made use of drafted corners and ‘dadoes’ fashioned in plaster. The basic ground-plan of the earlier building was maintained, but the rooms at the east end were enlarged by moving the back wall further to the west, and it now continues to form the western boundary of the north-east room. This wall is cut by four doorways, the most elaborate being that in the north-east room which has reveals on either side. In addition, a partition wall was built in the south-east room with a spiral staircase abutting it on the east side (Pl. 3b). These rooms at the front of the church apparently had barrel-vaulted roofs, to judge from the large fragments of collapsed roof found on the floor in the south-eastern room. In the chancel there are large niches on either side of the doorway in the west wall (Pl. 2b) and there is a low rectangular structure in the front centre of the room that probably marks the site of an altar. Whether or not the apse was still in use at this time is unclear, but a roughly built wall along its front may date from this period. It might represent secondary blocking, but it could also be part of the foundations of the apse, in which case it would be an original feature. At this point the site is badly eroded, and either interpretation is possible. Also associated with period 3 are two large sunken features, perhaps grain bins, and a semicircular plinth of mortared rubble against the front wall of the building. Its purpose is unclear, but it is possible that this plinth represents a font placement, in which case this south-east room would have served as a baptistry. If so, the south-east room could have been the sacristy. The exact date of some ‘tannurs’ or ovens found in this south-east room is uncertain, but they could belong with this phase of occupation. In this connection, it is interesting to note that in some Assyrian churches the sacristy serves as the “office of the baking of the bread” (Wigram 1929: 201). Such rooms are “furnished with a fireplace and oven” for the baking of the eucharistic bread. Also in this period, walls were built the length of the nave dividing it into three parts. However, the floor-level in the nave was only reached at the east end, so the precise arrangement of features here remains uncertain.

Period 4

The period 4 occupation is represented by the flimsy walls blocking the western doorways of two of the rooms at the front of the building, some rudely constructed walls in the former nave and a number of ‘tannurs’ or ovens in the rooms at the east end. It is possible that the rooms at the east end of the complex had partially collapsed prior to Period 4, or at least they were no longer roofed over. In any case, it seems clear that the function of the building changed at this time; it was perhaps inhabited by people who took advantage of the surviving structure merely to provide shelter. Dating from period 4, but after there was a build-up of deposits on the floor, is a group of nine pottery vessels, found in an alcove under a collapsed section of the spiral staircase (Fig. 5). These were smashed ‘in situ’ when the staircase collapsed, providing us with a possible date for the final occupation of the building. A number of these vessels are hand-made, with crude incised decoration and sometimes small panels or spots of green glaze (Pls. 6c-d). This sort of coarse, hand-made pottery is quite common at Khirbet Deir Situn and has also been found at other sites in the Eski Mosul Dam Salvage Project, for example at Baqaq 3, a short distance to the north-west of Khirbet Deir Situn. Here there was a caravanserai, built of rubble

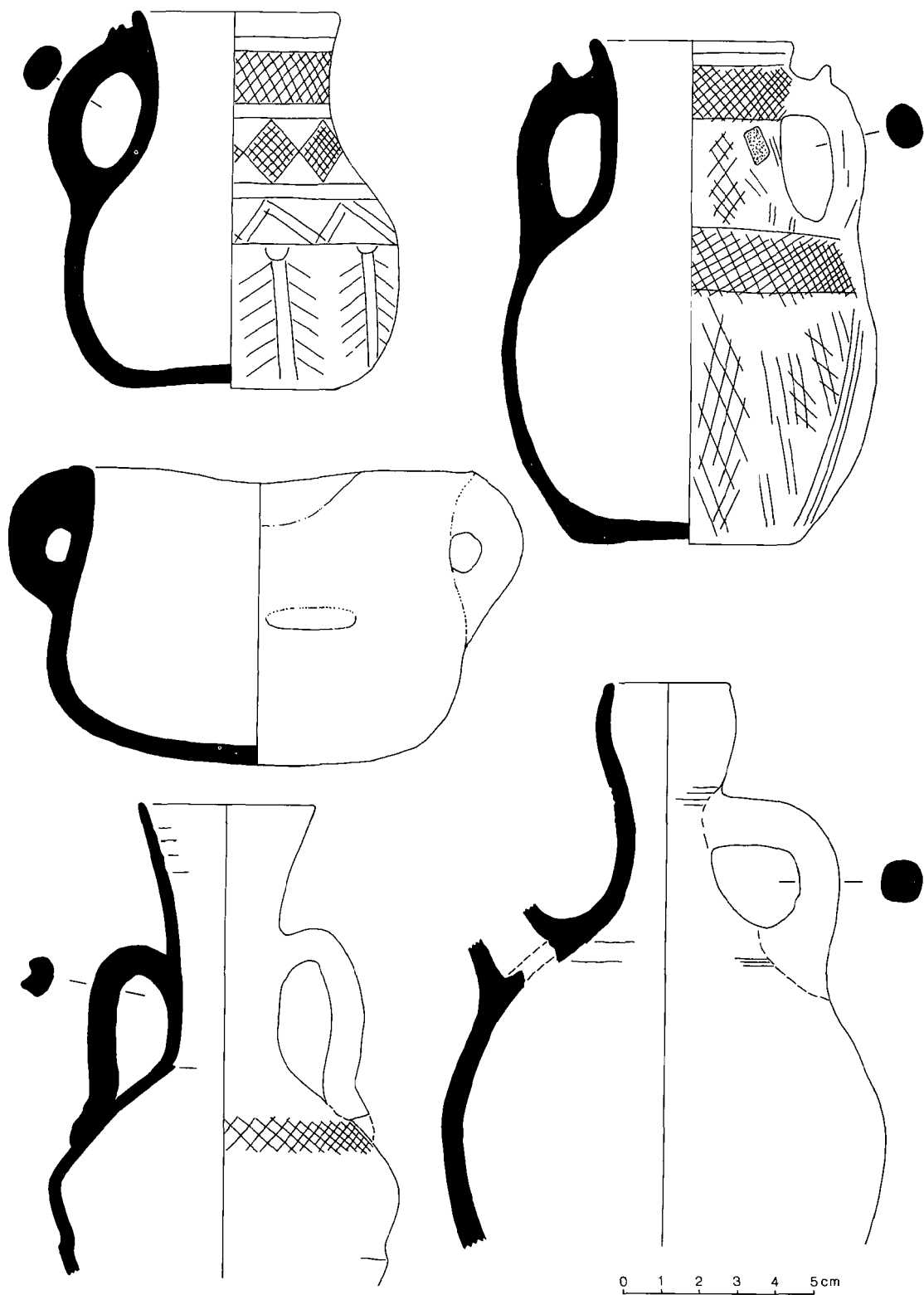


Fig. 5 Pottery vessels found beneath the collapsed staircase at Khirbet Deir Situn. Drawings by J.E. Curtis.

and gypsum mortar and with 'drafted corners' just as in the church at Khirbet Deir Situn. It was provisionally dated by the excavator, Sd Kerim Toma, to the Ilkhanid period⁶. Sherds of this pottery were also found in the large sunken feature or grain bin outside the north-east corner of the building, in association with a coin and a base of blue-and-white frit ware, decorated with what is probably a representation of a cypress tree (Pl. 6b). This type of ceramic can be well dated and this base is probably of late 15th century date. Unfortunately the coin is in poor condition, and one surface is completely abraded. On the other side there is a 4-line Arabic inscription in Kufic script. This, together with the size of the coin (diameter 2.15 cm., thickness 0.4 cm), suggests that it might date from one of the following dynasties: the Zangids (AD 1127–1222), Badr-ad-Din Lulu (AD 1222–1259) or the Seljuqs of Rum (AD 1077–1307)⁷. Whatever its exact date might be, the coin certainly seems to be earlier than the blue-and-white base, in which case the latter must be used for dating this deposit and the associated pottery. We may conclude that the crude incised pottery with panels of green glaze is unlikely to date from before the late 15th century or early 16th century AD, and could be even later. It might well be contemporary with the final abandonment and collapse of this building.

Period 5

Over the area of the site, usually in the topsoil, were found more than 40 moulded clay tobacco pipes or fragments of pipes. There are some typical Turkish clay pipes where the head is made in one piece with the stem-socket, but the majority of them are of "poppy-head" type, so-called because they resemble an inverted opium poppy head. They have a hole in the side of the bowl for inserting a tube, and are often embellished with fluted decoration. Such pipes are comparatively modern, dating from the last two or three centuries, and consequently have often been dismissed as being of little interest. As a result, little is known about their date, distribution and place of manufacture. This is especially true of the "poppy-head" pipes, of which a relatively small number of examples has been published. A detailed study of these pipes has been prepared by Dr. Timothy Matney, which will appear in the final report. Probably of similar date to the tobacco pipes are fragments of glass bracelet of which nearly 20 were found. Some were of plain coloured glass, but the more elaborate examples have brightly-coloured patterns on the outside surface. These are equally as interesting as the pipes and potentially just as informative. Associated with the pipe fragments and glass bracelets were potsherds again of comparatively modern date. All this material derives either from shepherds bringing their flocks to the nearby spring or from a former settlement on the hillside to the south-west of the excavated area where the pottery appears to be later than that associated with the monastery site.

Conclusions

The original occupation of the site of Khirbet Deir Situn was during the late Sasanian period, probably 6th-7th centuries AD, but there are no structural remains definitely associated with the deposits of this period. Either they were further to the west, or they were incorporated in the later building and are not now recognisable. If this is the case, it is possible that the plan of the Sasanian building is preserved in that of the later Islamic church. If this is so, how does the plan of the church at Khirbet Deir Situn compare with other early churches? We have already referred to the church excavated by Professor Fujii and his team at Ain Sha'ia near Najaf (Fujii *et al.* 1989), perhaps dating from as early as the late 7th century AD. Like Khirbet Deir Situn, this has a tripartite sanctuary and a triple-aisled nave. At the east end of the chancel, however, there is a rectangular niche rather than a semicircular apse. Plans of other early churches in Iraq have very conveniently been gathered together by Yasuyoshi Okada (1991: Fig. 2). We can see that the churches at Ctesiphon and Hira are broadly comparable in that they have

6) Personal communication.

7) Thanks are due to Mrs H.W. Brown, formerly of the Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and Dr. Venetia Porter of the Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum who have seen and commented on photographs of this coin.

three rooms at the front with relatively narrow entrances from the nave, but access to these churches is from the sides and not from a doorway at the west end. The churches at Tell Museifneh, also in the Eski Mosul Dam Salvage Project, and Qasr Serij, to the north-west of Mosul, both have apses at the east end, as Khirbet Deir Situn, but these churches are of the basilica type consisting of a large hall with an apse at one end which is really an extension of the hall. Lastly on the subject of the plan, it is interesting that a number of the medieval churches in Mosul, some of them with reputedly early foundation dates, have ground-plans that can be roughly paralleled at Khirbet Deir Situn (Fiey 1959).

If the church at Khirbet Deir Situn was founded in the Late Sasanian period, which is entirely plausible, it might not have survived for very long into the Islamic period, as many monasteries did not fare well at this time. It could have been abandoned, and then refounded in the 12th or 13th century AD, either on the same spot or in a slightly different location. This foundation was either a church associated with a nearby settlement or, perhaps more likely, a monastic establishment. The practice of moving the position of churches and monasteries is well attested, and can be seen for example at the monastery site of Mar Behnam near Nimrud. Later Deir Situn fell into disuse as a church, and was occupied by people who built crude partition walls and dug a number of bread ovens into the earlier floors at the east end. The building finally collapsed probably in the late 15th or early 16th century AD.

No evidence was found to support Fiey's hypothesis that the name of the site reflects a monastery with a column, but the normal practice in Stylite foundations would have been to site the column in the courtyard facing the main west door of the church. However, we were unable to clear this area because of the depth of accumulated rubble, so the possible presence of a column could not be verified. In fact, there is no certain evidence for any Stylite monastery in the vicinity of Mosul⁸, and nor can we even be sure that this establishment belonged to the Syrian church, to which the Stylites were attached. It is also possible that it was a Nestorian foundation, especially as the Nestorian church was particularly strong in the area around Nineveh. The Syrian church, on the other hand, was more securely established in north-east Syria and south-east Turkey. It is very much to be hoped that in due course textual evidence will be found that provides the answer to this intriguing question, as well as giving a firm foundation date for the church at Khirbet Deir Situn.

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8) Personal communication Dr. Chase F. Robinson (letter of 28/8/91).

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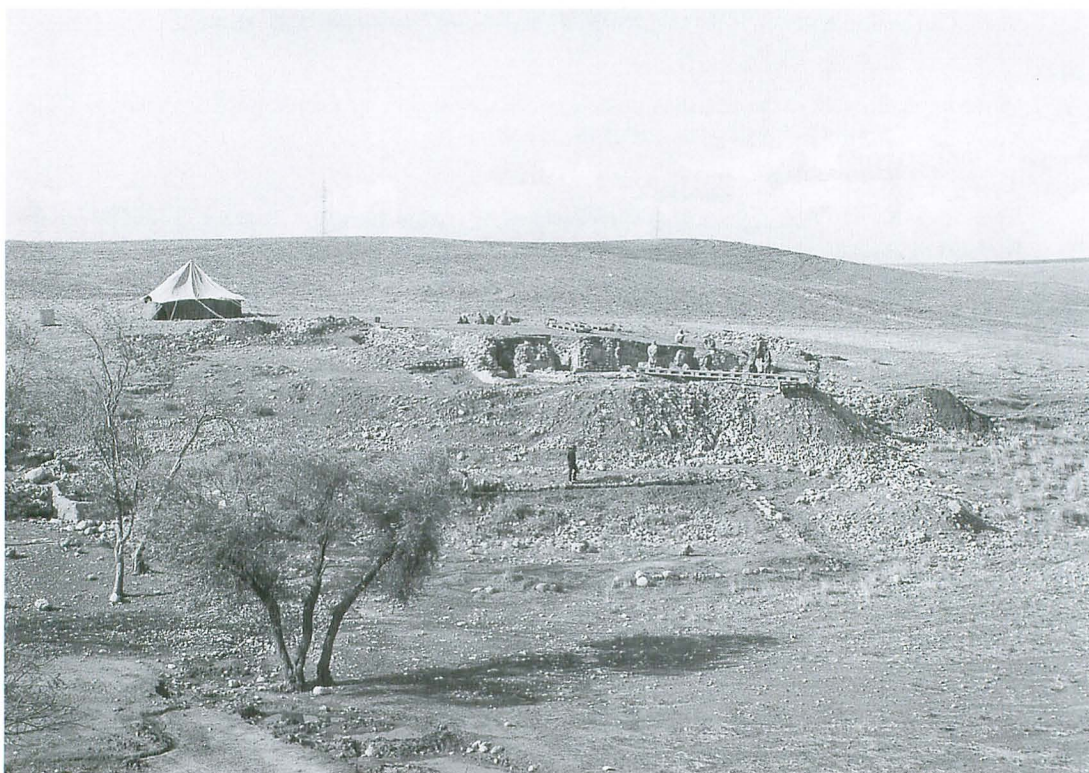
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a The site of Khirbet Deir Situn viewed from the west, with the spring in the foreground. The rectangular enclosure below the site is probably modern.



b Excavations at Khirbet Deir Situn, viewed from the west.



a The excavated building at Khirbet Deir Situn, viewed from the west.



b The west side of the chancel at Khirbet Deir Situn showing the doorway through to the nave with niches on either side.



a The apse at the east end of the chancel at Khirbet Deir Situn.



b The remains of the spiral staircase at Khirbet Deir Situn.



a Sasanian stamped pottery from Khirbet Deir Situn.



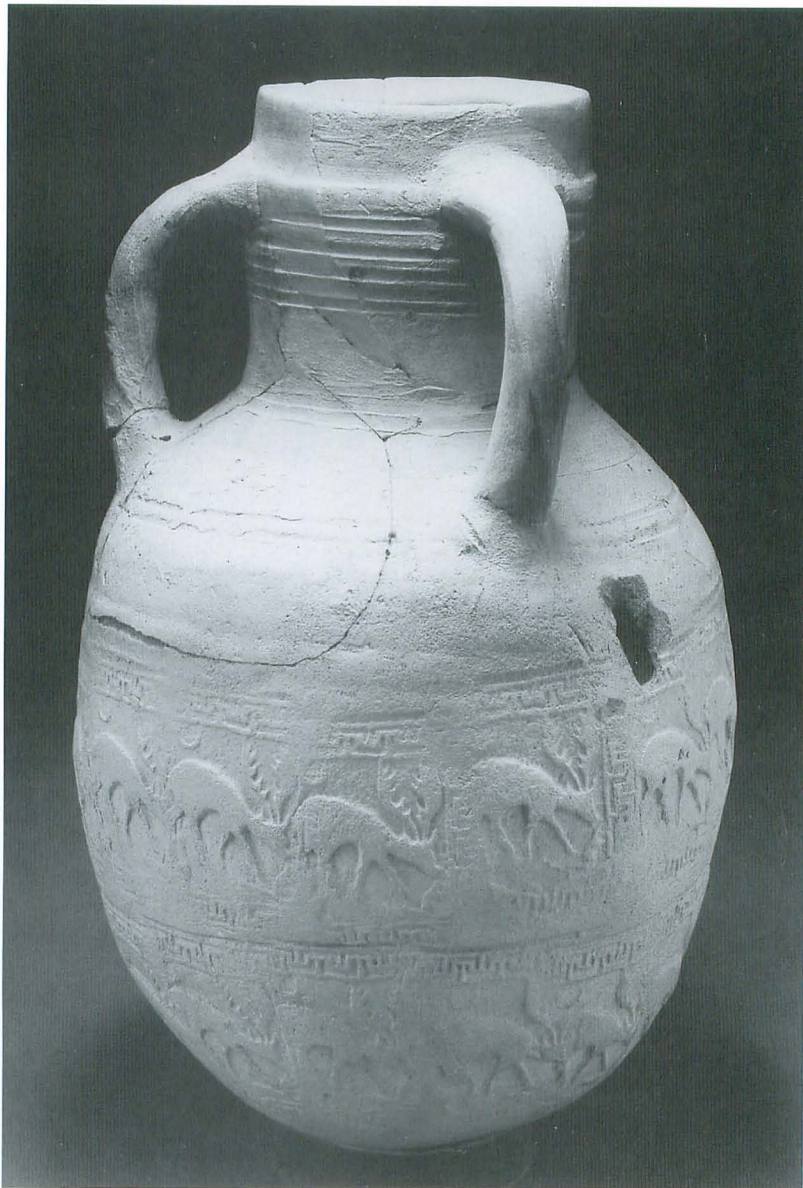
b Sasanian stamped pottery from Khirbet Deir Situn.



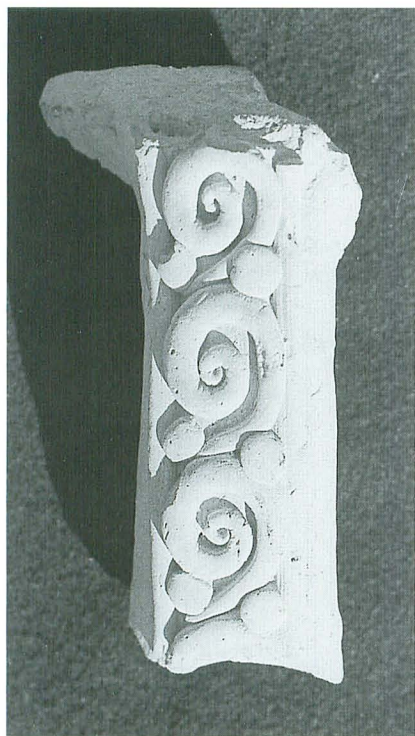
a Sasanian stamped pottery from Khirbet Deir Situn.



b Sasanian stamped pottery from Khirbet Deir Situn.



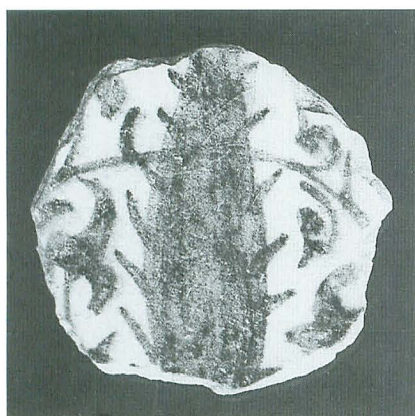
c Pottery jar with stamped designs from Borsippa in Mesopotamia. British Museum 92394B.



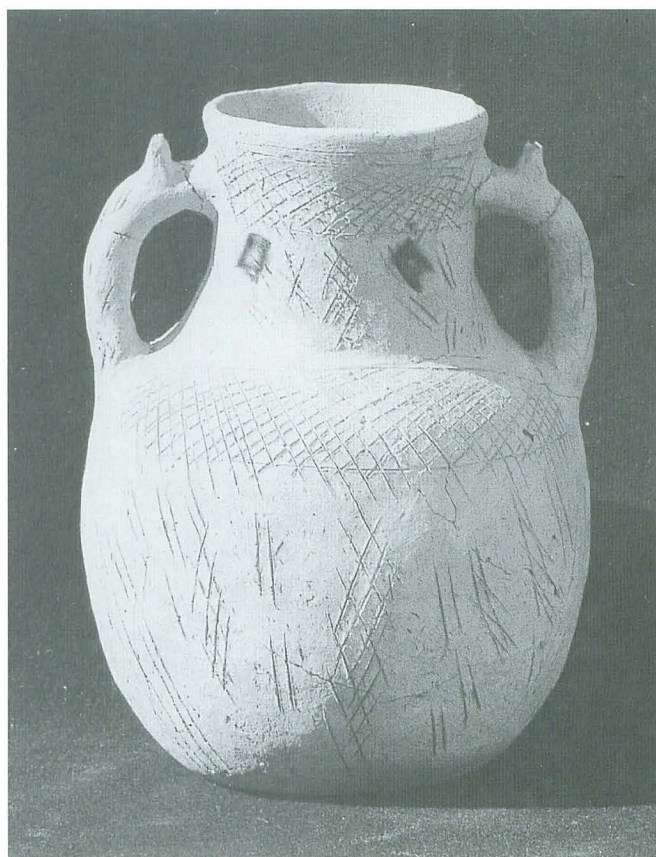
a Pottery handle with 'barbotine' decoration from Khirbet Deir Situn.



c Handmade pottery jar with incised decoration and panels of green glaze, from Khirbet Deir Situn.



b Base of blue-and-white frit ware from Khirbet Deir Situn.



d Handmade pottery jar with incised decoration and panels of green glaze, from Khirbet Deir Situn.