

The Church Complex of Ain el-Gedida, Dakhleh Oasis

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The Dakhleh Oasis has proved—and continues to be—a rich source of information on the earliest development of Christianity in fourth-century Egypt, thanks to several documentary and archaeological finds.¹ In particular, the work carried out on the churches of Kellis and currently at Deir Abu Matta by Gillian Bowen has substantially increased our knowledge of Early Christian architecture in the oasis.² It is in this context that the recent excavation project conducted at Ain el-Gedida provides a valuable contribution, as it offers new significant evidence on the development of religious architecture within fourth-century Egypt and, more broadly, on the flourishing of Christian communities in a rural environment. The aim of this essay is to present a preliminary discussion of the evidence gathered particularly for the church complex of Ain el-Gedida and to highlight its significance.

Ain el-Gedida is located three kilometers north of the village of Ma'sara and a few kilometers to the northwest of Kellis. The archaeological remains are spread over five mounds, of which one (mound I) is, at least in modern times, substantially more extensive than the remaining four (pls. 1–2). It is difficult to establish the original overall dimensions of the site. Indeed, the cultivated fields, especially to the east and west of mound I and to the south of mounds II–IV, have likely encroached upon a sizable portion of the

ancient archaeological remains.

Members of the Dakhleh Oasis Project conducted a preliminary survey of the site in 1980.³ The local Coptic and Islamic Inspectorate carried out three seasons of excavation between 1993 and 1995, under the direction of Ahmed Salem and Kamel Bayoumi.⁴ The southern part of mound I was the main object of this archaeological investigation, which unearthed a complex network of interconnected buildings (pl. 3).

Excavation resumed at Ain el-Gedida in 2006 and continued until 2008, focusing on the central and northern sectors of mound I (area B).⁵ Traces of more regular planning could be easily identified in this area, especially in comparison with the southern half of the hill.⁶ Several structures were revealed, including a set of rooms at the north end of the mound, possibly part of a domestic unit, and a domestic dump along the west side of the hill.

The church complex is centrally located on mound I, slightly toward the south, and covers an area of approximately 164 m² (pl. 4). Room B5, the church, is

¹ The available evidence on Early Christianity in Dakhleh is discussed in Aravecchia 2009, 34–44.

² Cf. Bowen 2008; 2003a–b; 2002.

³ A brief report of the work carried out during the 1980 survey is Mills 1981. Ain el-Gedida is mentioned at p. 185, where it is recorded as site no. 31/405-N3-1.

⁴ On the SCA excavations, cf. Bayoumi 1998.

⁵ The excavation was carried out under the direction of Professor Roger Bagnall, with the author as field director.

⁶ Preliminary reports on the 2006–2008 excavation seasons are available on-line: cf. Aravecchia 2006–2008. The publication of the final report is forthcoming.

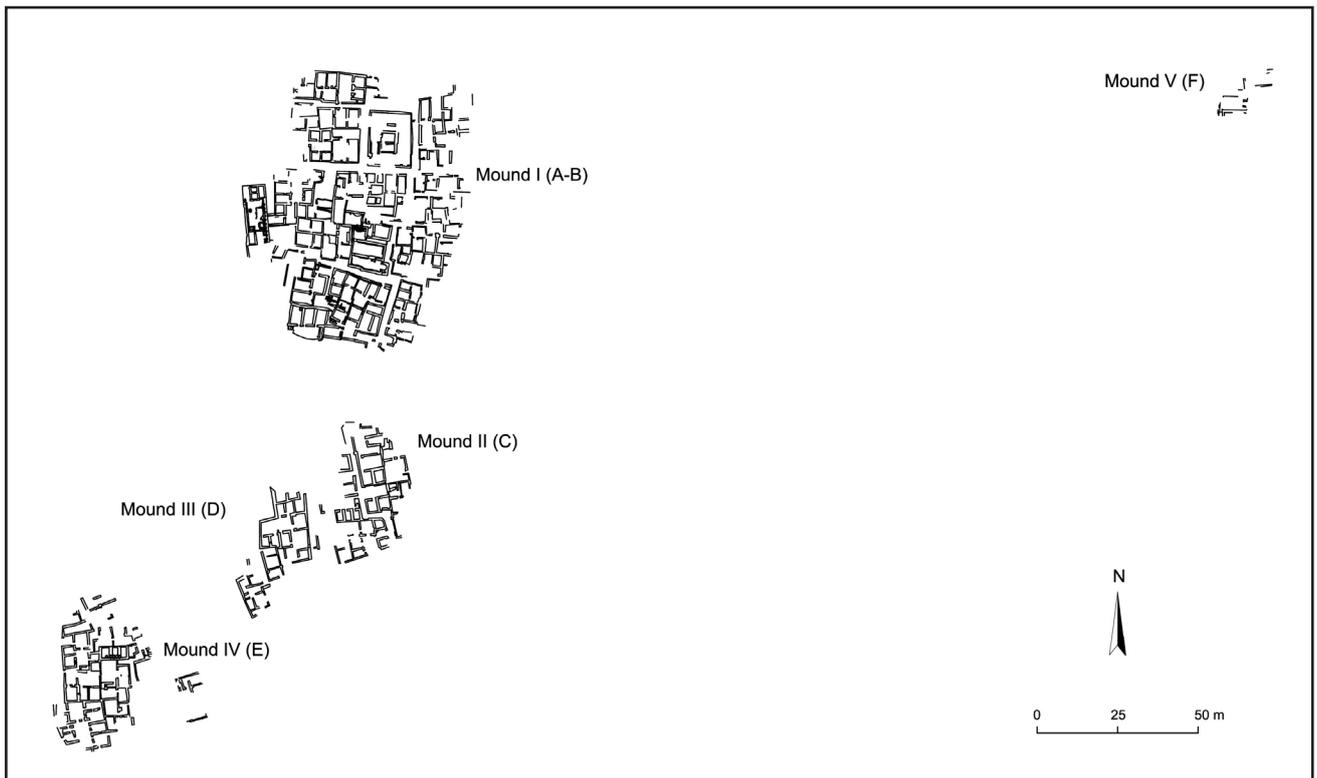


Plate 1: Site Map

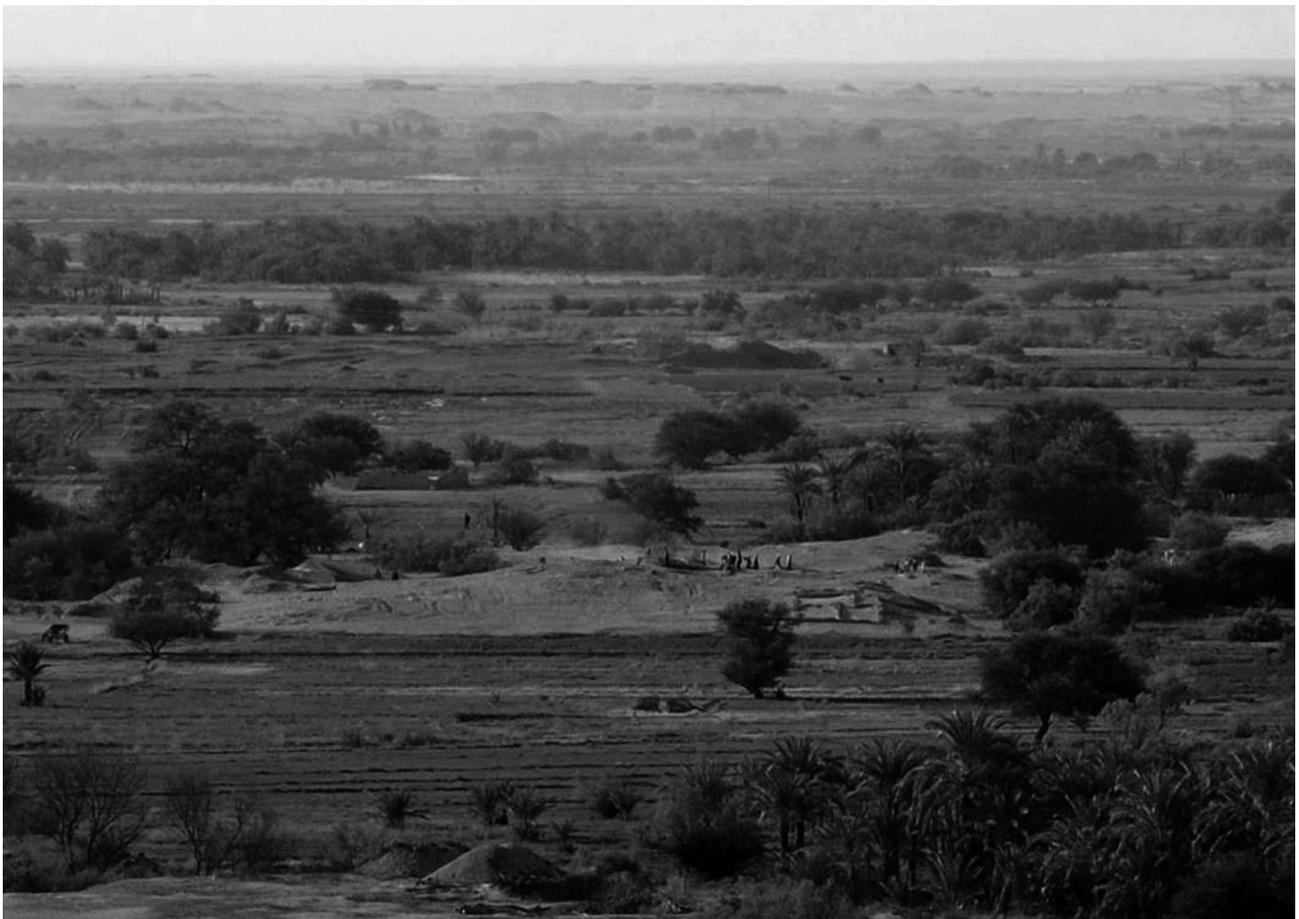


Plate 2. View of mound I (to S).

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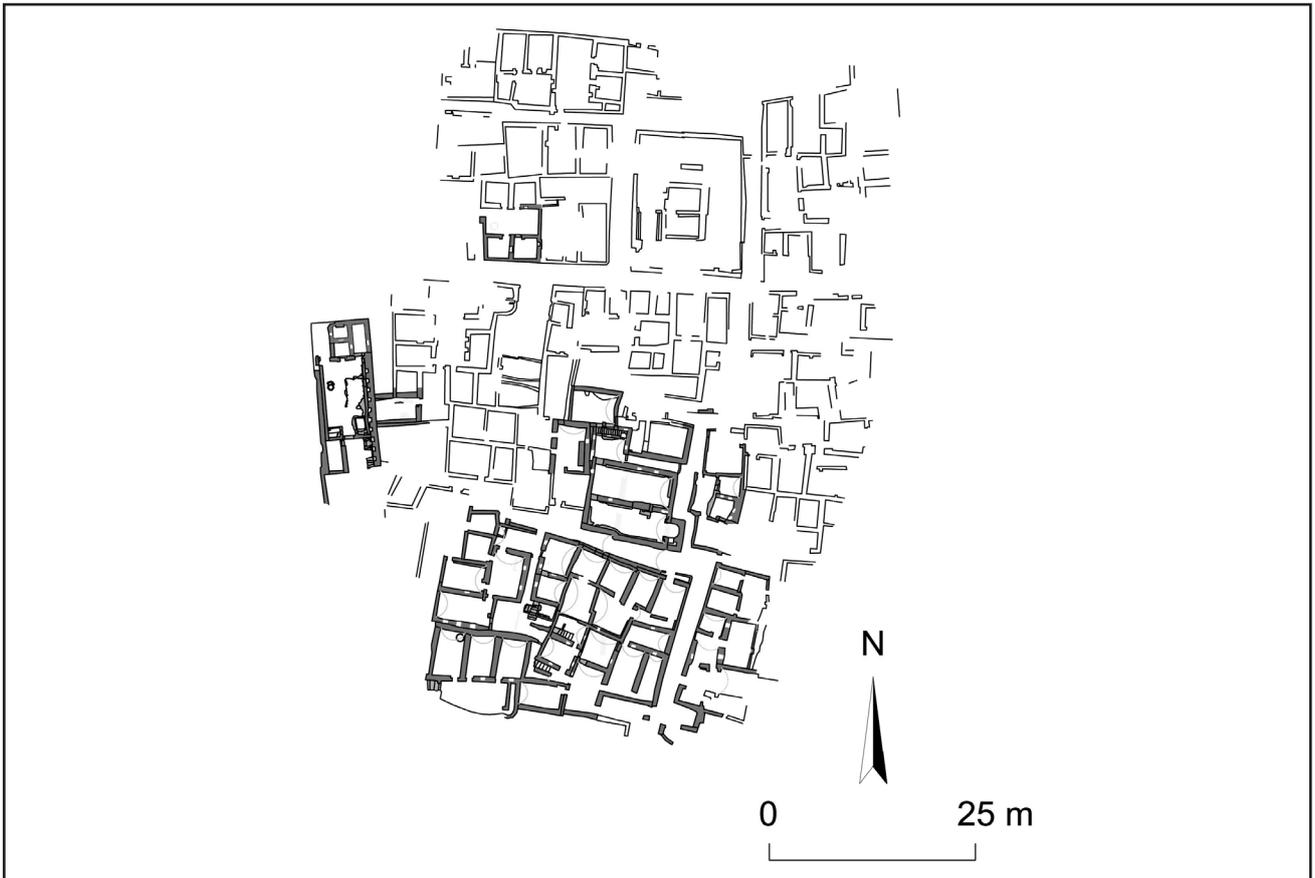


Plate 3. Plan of buildings on mound I.



Plate 4. Plan of the church complex. Plate 4. Plan of the church complex.

the southernmost space of the complex (pl. 5). It is oriented to the east and measures about 3.65 m north-south by 11.35 m east-west, with walls preserved to a maximum height of 2.65 m. There is significant evidence proving that the room was once barrel-vaulted. Mud-brick benches or mastabas run along the north, west, and south walls of this space and a rectangular niche is set into the north wall toward its east end. A small graffito is carved into the north wall, mentioning the Greek name Orikeni (i.e., Horigenes) and, on a second line, possibly the word Pnoute, that is to say, the Coptic term for “God”. A semi-circular apse, with an L-shaped pastophorion to the south, is placed against the east wall. The apse is framed by two engaged semi-columns standing on a low molded base and originally had a floor substantially higher than the rest of the church. No traces of steps leading to the raised sanctuary were found, as the area in front of the apse and the apse itself were the object of heavy disturbance in antiquity.

The church was originally accessible from the north through two doorways, one near the north-

west corner and a large, central passageway along the north side. These connected the nave with room A46, a space (excavated in the mid-1990s by the Egyptian mission) measuring ca. 9.50 m east-west by 4 m north-south; its walls are preserved to a maximum height of 2.84 m. The room was also originally covered by a barrel-vaulted roof and had rectangular niches piercing the north, west, and south walls. Mud-brick mastabas were found running along three of its four walls. Against the south side of the central passageway is a stepped mud-brick podium, accessible only from the church, that once granted people in both rooms the possibility to see and hear the person—possibly a priest or a reader—standing on the platform (pl. 6). At some point, this passageway was closed, preventing access to the podium from room A46 and eliminating its original purpose. The reasons are not clear, but they might be related to a repurposing of room A46 and to the ensuing need of a higher degree of privacy and separation of the church from the gathering hall (or vice-versa).⁷

Room A46 opens to the north onto room B6, a



Plate 5. Aerial view of rooms B5 and A46 (to NE).

⁷ The layout of room A46, and its relation to the church, suggests that the former might have been in use as a space for catechumens, a refectory, a space for laity, or the women's section within the church. However, the available archaeological evidence does not allow for a conclusive answer.



Plate 6. Blocking wall and stepped podium in room B5.

smaller, barrel-vaulted rectangular space (measuring ca. 3.75 m east-west by 2.75 m north-south), which was used, at least in its latest occupational phase, for the preparation of food (pl. 7). Indeed, a hearth with traces of ash and charcoal was found against a low, rectangular platform along the north wall. Also, imprints of jars are still visible on a raised platform against the east wall and along the south wall of the room at floor level. A series of graffiti was found on the west and north walls, including two inscriptions, one in Greek and the other in Coptic, and some drawings such as boats and a bird. Room B6 is accessed from a long corridor (B7) running east-west to the north of room A46 and measuring ca. 5.20 m east-west by 1.10 m north-south (pl. 8). This space ends to the east with a doorway that is the only entrance into the church complex from the outside.

To the north, a narrow, vaulted passageway connects room B6 with room B9, whose outer walls form the northwest boundary of the complex (pl. 9). This is a fairly large space, measuring ca. 5.30 m east-west by 3.70 m north-south, and was once barrel-vaulted. Built in the south wall of the room, by its southeast corner, is a mud-brick recessed feature that may have been used as a cupboard (pl. 10). It is possible that room B9, which did not open onto any other room besides B6, was used as a storage space for it. A doorway located in the northeast corner of room B6 opens onto a

well-preserved staircase (B8) (pl. 11).⁸ This currently leads to the scanty remains of the roof of room B10—a kitchen not directly connected with the church complex—where small industrial installations concerning food production and storage were found (pl. 12).

The excavation also extended to the area immediately to the south and east of the church complex, with the goal of ascertaining the topographical relationship of the complex with the surrounding buildings. A long street (B12), running from north to south, was investigated along the east side of the church complex (pl. 13). It consists of three different sectors and the topographical survey of mound I revealed that it was only a segment of a main axis running from north to south across the hill.⁹ A small open-air industrial area (rooms B14–B15), measuring approximately 4.80 m east-west by 4.55 m north-south, once opened onto B12 near the main entrance of the complex (pl. 14).¹⁰ It is unclear, however, if these spaces were functionally related to room A46, the nearby gathering hall of the church complex. Another passageway (B11) was excavated along the south wall of the church (pl. 15). It measures ca. 10.75 m east-west by 2.15 m north-

⁸ The measurements of the space encasing staircase B8 are ca. 3.80 m east-west by 0.70 m north-south.

⁹ The overall length of the excavated part is ca. 14.75 m.

¹⁰ Room B15 bears evidence of several bread ovens against the west wall.



Plate 7. Aerial view of room B6 (to NE).



Plate 8. Aerial view of corridor B7 (to NW).

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Plate 9. Aerial view of room B9 (to S).



Plate 10. Mud-brick cupboard set into the south wall of room B9.



Plate 11. View of staircase B8 (to SW).

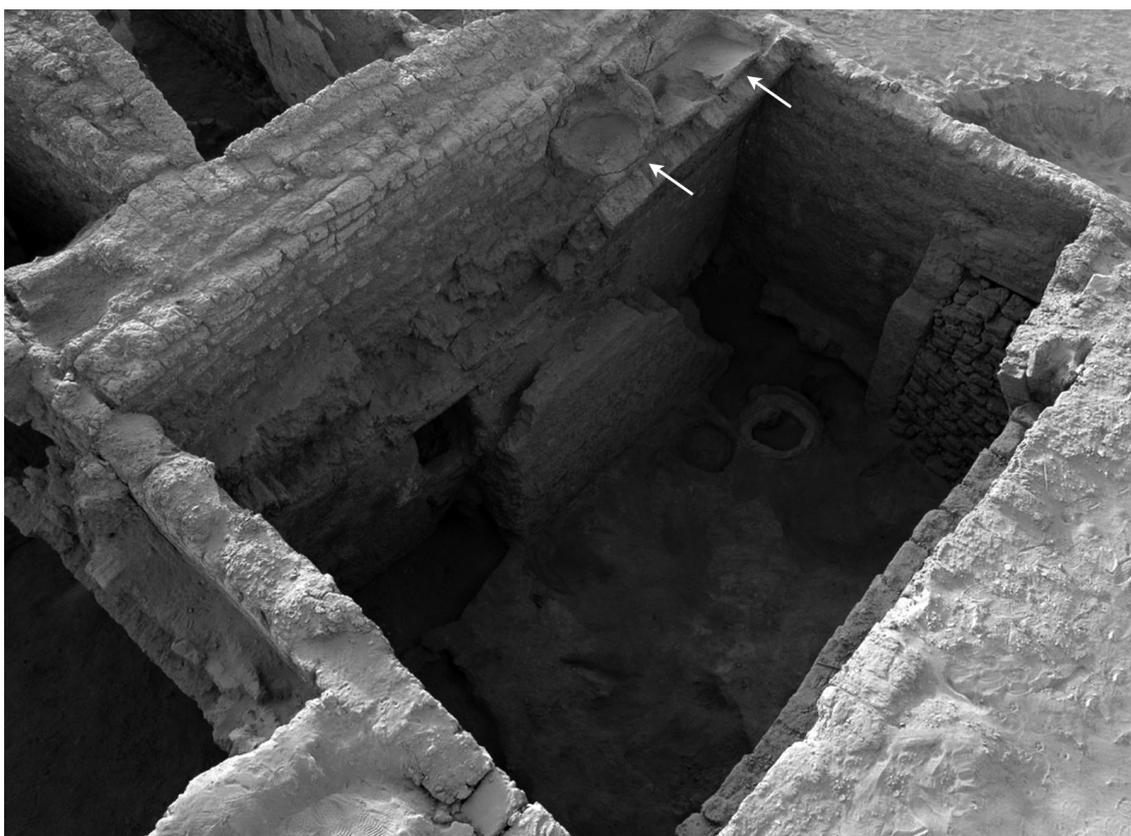


Plate 12. Aerial view of room B10 (to SE); arrows point to remains of clay bins above the vaulted roof.

south and was originally barrel-vaulted. B11 intersects street B12 at the former's east end, where open courtyard B13 is located (pl. 16).¹¹ Evidence of clay and mud-brick features was found here, possibly associated with the feeding of animals.¹²

All rooms of the church complex, indeed all buildings excavated or surveyed at Ain el-Gedida, have walls built of sun-dried mud-bricks, rich in organic inclusions and of standard dimensions (ca. 34 by 17 by 8–9 cm). The walls are generally covered with mud plaster and, in the case of rooms B5, B6, and A46, one (or more) layer of white gypsum plaster. Scanty remains of compacted clay floors were identified in most rooms of the complex. Stone was rarely used at Ain el-Gedida, mostly for the lintels of doorways. No wooden feature was found in situ within any of the excavated rooms, but wood was certainly a common building material, employed for items such as doors and shelves.

The material evidence collected within the church

¹¹ Courtyard B13 has a roughly rectangular shape and measures ca. 4.45 m east-west by 3.40 m north-south.

¹² Similar rectangular bins were found at Douch in the Kharga Oasis. These bins are placed against the outer walls of buildings along the streets, reflecting an arrangement similar to those identified at Ain el-Gedida: cf. Reddé 2004, 25; 207.

and in its proximity is not particularly abundant. It consists of small objects, complete or fragmentary, of diverse categories and consistent with the typology of finds at other sites in the oasis. Among these are fragments of textiles, ropes, dull glass beads and bracelets. A considerable amount of pottery was retrieved, including thousands of fragments and some complete vessels consistent with a domestic assemblage and a fairly poor rural environment.¹³ The ceramic corpus points to a rather homogeneous chronological framework, spanning from the early fourth to the beginning of the fifth century CE, with very few exceptions likely dated to the third century CE.¹⁴

More than one hundred and fifty coins were uncovered at Ain el-Gedida, several of them inside the church, especially in the area of the sanctuary, and a considerable number along the streets running to the east and south of the church.¹⁵ Many of the specimens were retrieved from mixed contexts of dubious reli-

¹³ The analysis and classification of ceramics from Ain el-Gedida was started by Gillian Pyke and is currently under study by Delphine Dixneuf: cf. her essay in this volume.

¹⁴ Their presence within fourth-century contexts may be explained as a consequence of the numerous episodes of vault collapse, which caused several chinking sherds, used for the construction of vaults, to fall into the rooms.

¹⁵ The coins are currently under study by David M. Ratzan.

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Plate 13. Aerial view of street B12 (to SW).



Plate 14. Aerial view of rooms B14-B15 (to SW).



Plate 15. View of passageway B11 (to W).

ability, due either to human activity or contamination brought by windblown sand that followed episodes of wall and vault collapse. The range of the readable coins is quite homogenous throughout the site and is coherent with the results from the study of the ceramic evidence. Most of the specimens were struck in the fourth century CE, with a higher percentage from the first half of the century. A few coins uncovered near the apse of the church are significantly earlier than any other specimen, dated to the second half of the third century CE, but their relation to an earlier construction phase of the church could not be established, due to the unreliability of their archaeological context.¹⁶

The church of Ain el-Gedida is characterized by a fairly unusual layout. An investigation of known architectural types within and outside Egypt allowed the identification of partial parallels, especially with regard to room B5 (an elongated rectangular nave with a semi-circular apse on the short east side, which re-

¹⁶ Even if these coins had once been dropped below the floor of the sanctuary, the fact that they are older than any other coin from the church would not necessarily support their association with earlier construction phases. The site of Kellis provides evidence for the existence of third-century coins, no longer officially minted, alongside early fourth-century issues within the same archaeological context: cf. Bowen 2007, 263. There is no particular reason to think that the situation within room B5 at Ain el-Gedida could not be similar.

sembles a simple basilical type without side aisles).¹⁷ However, the building that shares the most substantial typological similarities still comes from Dakhleh, that is to say, the Small East Church at Kellis.¹⁸ This church has similar dimensions and construction material and has an almost identical layout to the church of Ain el-Gedida, with a large rectangular space opening to the south into an apsidal room through two doorways, a smaller one to the west and a wider passage in the middle. Furthermore, the dating, which is based by and large on the evidence provided by coins, is consistent with that of the church complex at Ain el-Gedida. Nonetheless, there are also differences, which become even more noticeable in the later phases of architectural alteration of the church of Ain el-Gedida.

A considerable amount of data was collected proving the existence of different phases of construction within the church complex. The most noticeable features are the north-south wall found below floor level in the church and continuing into the gathering hall to the north (pl. 17); the already-mentioned mud-brick plug built to seal the central doorway between rooms B5 and A46; the south wall of the church, irregularly laid out and clearly built in different phases; and also

¹⁷ For a lengthier discussion of this topic, cf. Aravecchia 2009, chapter IV (pp. 149–85).

¹⁸ Cf. Bowen 2003a.



Plate 16. Aerial view of crossroads B13 (to SW).

the whole semi-circular apse and pastophorion, added to room B5 at a later stage.¹⁹ The study of the relationships between each wall and its neighboring ones showed how the complex was significantly altered in its western and northern sectors, with the substantial rearrangement of some rooms and the addition of new ones, such as room B9. From the available data, it was possible to identify at least three original rooms (called α , β , γ) in the area later occupied by rooms B6, A46, and B5 (pl. 18). The walls of these structures were either razed or incorporated within the walls of the church complex, which was extended to the west and northwest, but also to the east with the addition of the apse and pastophorion. The architectural changes and additions that led to the creation of the church complex were substantial, deeply affecting the surrounding built environment. Indeed, the early structures that were incorporated into the complex already lay within a densely constructed area, as pointed to by consistent archaeological evidence.²⁰

An intriguing question concerns the nature of rooms β and γ before their alteration into rooms A46 and B5, that is to say, if they functioned as a church before their expansion to the west and the addition of an apse in the area of the sanctuary. In the first centuries of Christianity, gatherings and worship occurred in buildings of a domestic nature, with the basilica form being adopted around the time of Constantine.

¹⁹ The north and south walls encasing the apse and pastophorion abut the north and south walls of room B5.

²⁰ It was noticed, for example, that the irregular layout of the church in its south wall was likely dependent on space limitations to the south, possibly due to the existence of earlier buildings in the area.

There is evidence for the existence of such domus ecclesiae in the ancient world, with the best known example that of Dura Europos.²¹ The possibility that religious ceremonies were carried out in rooms β and γ prior to their enlargement and/or the construction of the apse can-not be ruled out, but there are no available archaeological data to support it.

As the survey of mound I allowed us to establish, the church complex is quite centrally located and provided with a high degree of accessibility. Indeed, an extensive network of streets including a main north-south axis—but also smaller passageways and alleys—must have been quite effective in shaping the movement of people around the main hill and channeling their flow toward the area of the church complex. Although not particularly large, the latter could seat a significant number of people at any given time (over seventy, based on the mastabas along the walls of rooms B5 and A46). This number does not include the people who might have stood in the church or gathering hall or those who accessed the complex to carry out more practical tasks in the other rooms. Considering not only the small-to-average size of the church and of the entire complex, but also the seemingly limited extent of the settlement, especially compared to nearby sites such as Kellis, this is a considerable amount of people. Undoubtedly, it testifies to a relatively large and well-established Christian community that lived at Ain el-Gedida by the first half of the fourth century CE.

The discovery, in 2008, of a large building complex near the west edge of the main hill provided valuable information on the multi-phased construction history of the site and made it clear that a fourth-century dating, as suggested by most of the evidence retrieved on site, particularly from the area of the church complex, cannot be assumed for the original construction of the settlement. The building measures 18.5 m north-south and 7.10 m east-west and has walls better preserved to the east and south than to the north and west, where erosion and human destruction caused severe damage to the structure (pls. 19–20). The east wall is characterized by the presence of ten regularly spaced niches; it is possible that the west wall was niched as well, but it is currently preserved to a lower level than that at which the niches would have been placed. This structure undoubtedly served, at least in its latest occupational phase, as a workshop for the production of ceramic vessels. Indeed, basins used for the kneading of clay were found in a relatively good state of pres-

²¹ Cf. Bowen 2003a, 162–64. Kraeling 1967 is the final report on the excavation of the domus at Dura Europos. For a plan of the building before and after its conversion into a domus ecclesiae, cf. Wharton 1995, 27.

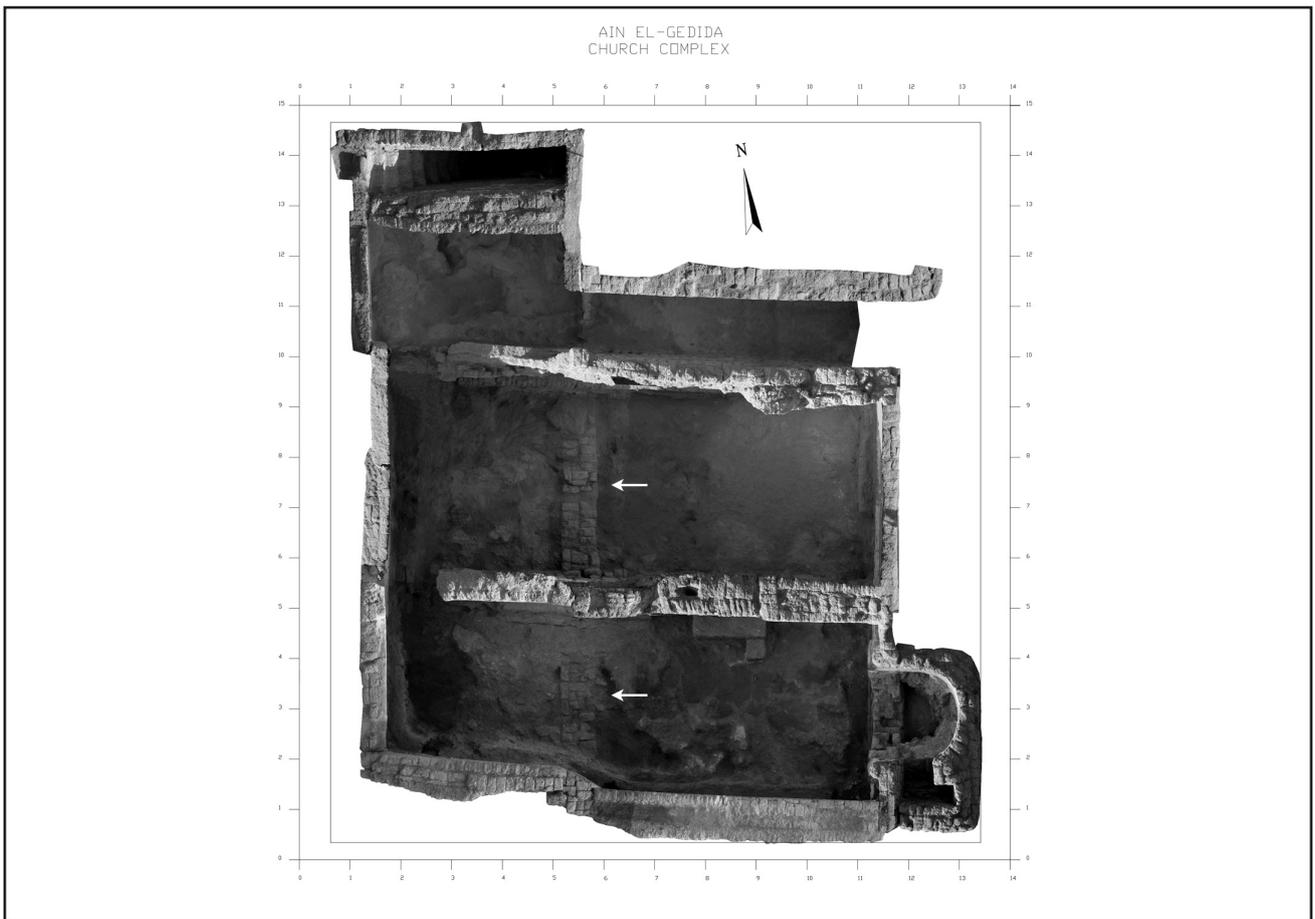


Plate 17. Mosaic of photogrammetric images of the church complex. Arrows point to remains of wall below floor level.

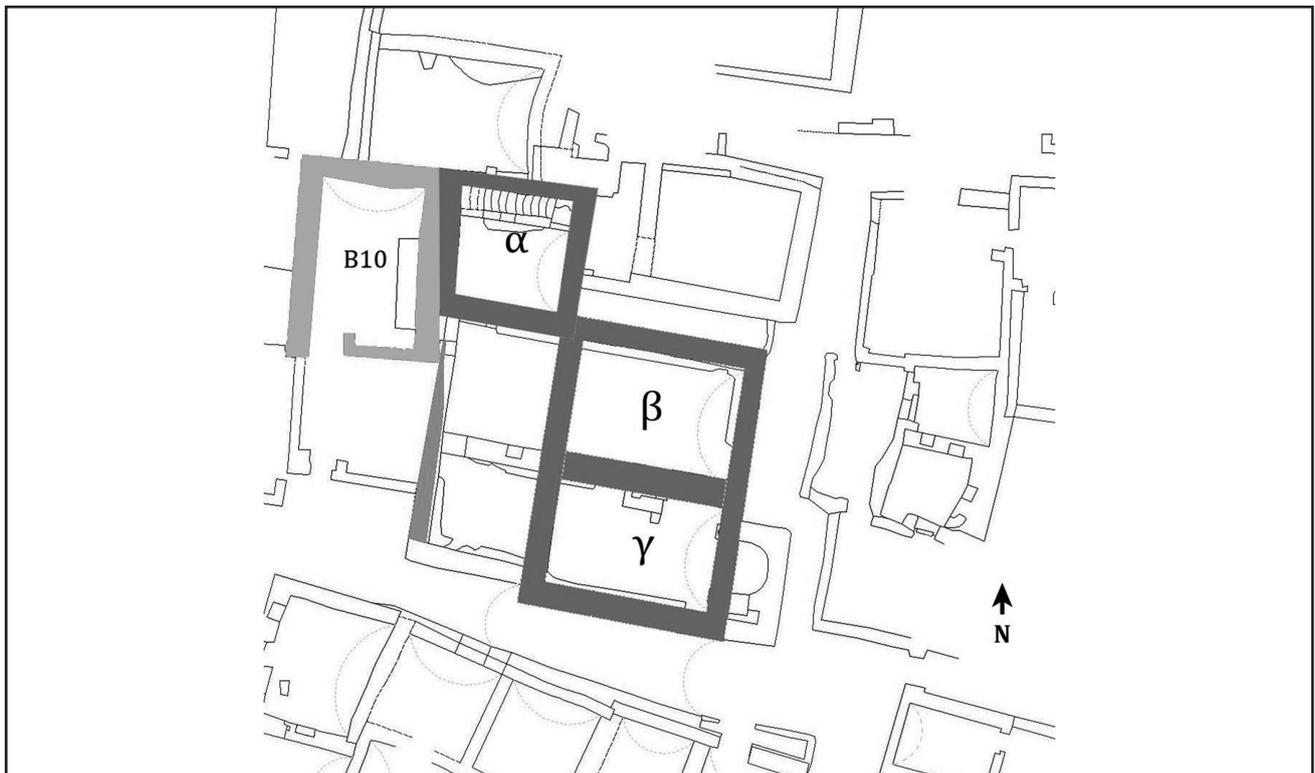


Plate 18. Early structures in the area of the church complex.

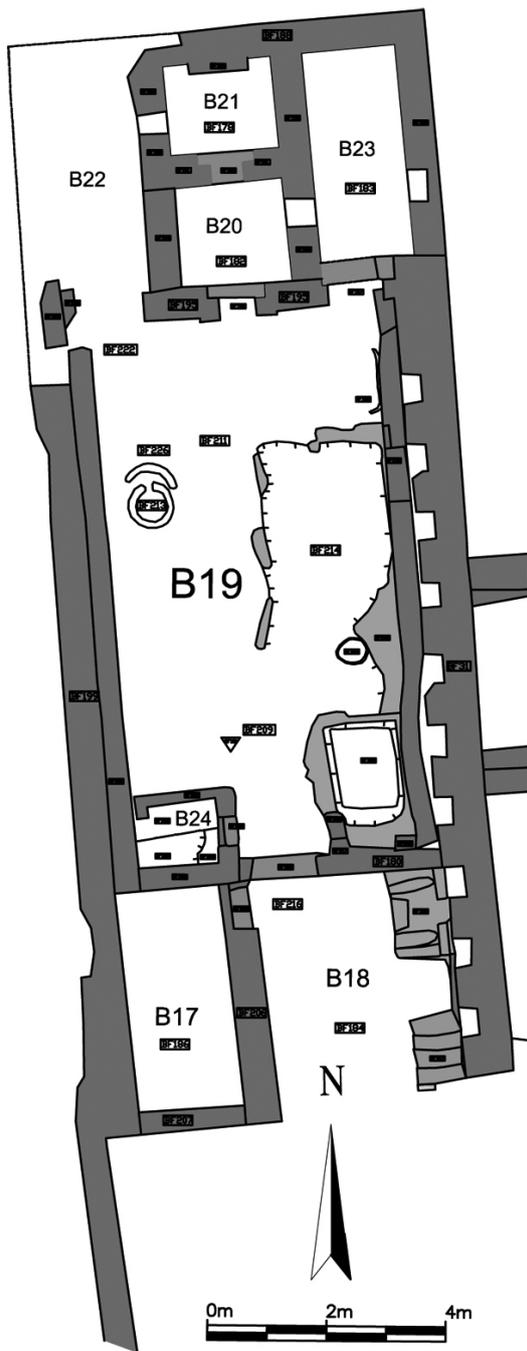


Plate 19. Plan of complex of rooms along the west edge of mound I.

ervation in the large courtyard of the complex. Other evidence pointing to this identification includes lumps of partially worked clay, two fragments of turning wheels, and several fragments of molded but unfired vessels.²²

A study of the original layout, which did not include the partition walls inside the large courtyard, allowed the identification of the west complex of Ain

el-Gedida in its earlier occupational phase as a small-scale mud-brick temple, with the large courtyard leading to two smaller rooms (possibly the pronaos and naos) flanked by rectangular rooms symmetrically arranged. The preliminary results of comparative analysis with other similar buildings from Dakhleh support the identification of the west complex of Ain el-Gedida as a pagan temple.²³ Particularly worthy of mention is the unpublished temple of El-Qusur, located at the east end of Dakhleh. This structure is characterized by a fairly similar layout (with some differences in the area of the pronaos and naos) and the same series of niches set into the long walls.²⁴ What is particularly significant in this context is that the discovery of a pagan temple at Ain el-Gedida suggests a longer history of occupation of the site, which must go back at least to a period when temples were still being built in the oasis. On present evidence, this seems to be the second century CE, or at the latest the early third century.

Still with regard to the occupational history of Ain el-Gedida, a fascinating question concerns the reasons for the abandonment of the church complex, in fact of the entire site, toward the end of the fourth century CE. Unfortunately, the answer is yet unknown. What can be said is that the archaeological record has not provided, thus far, any evidence clearly dated after the end of the fourth/beginning of the fifth century CE. Also, this evidence does not suggest episodes of violent destruction, which might have led the inhabitants to leave the site abruptly. Indeed, no clue pointing to extensive fires was detected in any of the excavated rooms, either on their walls or floors or in their archaeological contexts. Furthermore, no objects of significant value were found in any of the excavated rooms. In general, the archaeological record suggests that the buildings of Ain el-Gedida, at least those investigated on mound I, had been emptied of any valuable object by their owners. Possibly the abandonment of the site was not the outcome of a sudden incident of unknown nature, but a planned episode, whose extent may have been rather limited in time, but not so short that the villagers could not sort their possessions and take with them anything they wanted before leaving. This is a phenomenon that is testified to elsewhere in the oasis,

²² Cf. Dixneuf's essay in this volume for a preliminary discussion of the unfired pottery from Ain el-Gedida.

²³ Although the best known temples in Dakhleh are of stone, originally most pagan cultic buildings in the oasis were of mud-brick: cf. Kaper 1997, 7–9. Cf. also Mills 1983, 129–38, and Mills 1981, 181–82. Mud-brick temples are also known from Kharga: one of them, in rather good condition, is at the site of Douch (cf. Reddé 2004, 179–84).

²⁴ Cf. Kaper 1997, 7–8.



Plate 20. Aerial view of rooms B17-B24 (to N).

although the reasons are yet unknown.²⁵

Another question had raised since the time of the Egyptian excavations in the mid-1990s concerned the nature of the site, preliminarily identified either as a rural village or a monastic settlement.²⁶ One reason stimulating the latter interpretation was the unusual topographical configuration of area A on the main hill. This sector seems to have developed from a central core of buildings, to which other rooms were progressively added, lying against or incorporating the outer walls of the earlier structures.²⁷ Among the rooms whose function can be safely identified are several magazines, which contain clay bins for the storage of

²⁵ Particularly relevant in this context, due to its proximity to Ain el-Gedida, is the site of Kellis, also abandoned toward the end of the fourth century CE: cf. Bowen 2007, 260. Possible reasons for this phenomenon, such as climate changes, economic depression, or political unrest, have not yet been found fully satisfying.

²⁶ Cf. Bayoumi 1998, 57–62. On early Egyptian monasticism, cf. in particular Wipszycka 2009.

²⁷ The later buildings were poorly constructed and seem not to have followed any systematic plan.

crops, and a large kitchen, centrally placed and connected with the northern half of the mound (pl. 21). The room still bears evidence of at least three bread ovens, suggesting that the facility did not satisfy the needs of just one family, but likely served a fairly large group of people. Overall, the absence of clearly recognizable domestic units and the spatial configuration of area A point to a social structure based on communal living rather than separate family households.

The discovery and excavation of the church complex provided new, substantial information, which shed light on the highly Christianized society living at the site in the fourth century. The existence of two large kitchens and their proximity to the church complex, especially to the large gathering hall that was capable of seating a considerable number of guests seem, on one hand, to point to a spatial arrangement entailing the existence, on site, of a large community of people not organized in the manner of a family, whether nuclear or extended. On the other hand, these data do not provide any evidence on who these people were or where they came from.

Although it is unlikely that standardized types

for monastic architecture existed already in the early fourth century CE, no conclusive evidence, either archaeological or documentary, has been gathered pointing to the existence of a monastic settlement at Ain el-Gedida. The overall layout of the main hill is characterized by features that are not necessarily explained by a reading of the site as monastic. At any rate, it seems likely that, if monks or nuns lived at Ain el-Gedida, they did not found a monastic settlement *de novo*. Rather, they occupied a site (or part of a site) with earlier occupational phases, some of them antedating the beginnings of Egyptian monasticism.

The current state of research on Ain el-Gedida does not allow us to exclude that the site was in fact a fourth-century village with an economy based on agriculture.²⁸ Archaeological evidence for late antique Egyptian villages is not very abundant.²⁹ On the other hand, documentary sources abound, shedding light on the economy, society, daily life, and the ties of fourth-century villages with the rest of the country, especially larger towns and cities. Roger Bagnall has analyzed the many aspects of life in Egyptian villages of the fourth century, based on the information provided by written documents on ostraka or papyrus, especially the archives of people involved in the management of land.³⁰ The picture that emerges from the documentary evidence is that of a dynamic world, deeply engaged in the economic, social, political affairs of the time, but also in religious matters. It is attested that villages had small industrial or craft areas functionally related to agricultural activities, which played a primary role in the economy of Egyptian rural settlements. One could usually find, among others, granaries, pigeon towers, bakeries, and spaces to manufacture objects of daily use, for example pottery workshops, all located within a usually irregular spatial arrangement. All these features have been identified at Ain el-Gedida, although some of them only tentatively, on mound I.³¹ Also,

the spatial configuration of area A is, as said above, noticeably irregular, mirroring a seemingly common standard in Egyptian villages.

In fact, rural settlements in fourth-century Egypt did not exclusively include villages. An alternative type, attested to by numerous documentary sources although not yet by substantial archaeological evidence, consists of *epoikia*: that is to say, small rural centers associated with the management of large agricultural estates.³² A work-force could be hired and employed, whether full-time or on a seasonal basis, to work the land under the direction of overseers. It is possible to assume that the workers moved to the estate and lived there for the duration of their contract. The spatial arrangement of these *epoikia* is unknown, because none has ever been identified and excavated. According to a reconstruction made by Dominic Rathbone, largely on the basis of documentary evidence, *epoikia* consisted of buildings functionally associated with the agricultural activities carried out in the farmstead.³³ It seems that Egyptian *epoikia* were created either as an isolated entity, later developing into a regular village, or they were integrated, since their very beginnings, into pre-existing villages. A fully communal life-style should not be necessarily implied for the people involved within the system of the *epoikia*. In fact, it cannot be ruled out that the wage-workers moved to these rural settlements with their families, occupying houses that there is no reason to think differed substantially from those found in other types of settlements.³⁴ At Ain el-Gedida, the south half of mound I might reflect the spatial arrangement of part of an *epoikion*, consisting not of its residential area but rather of a sector where the buildings more closely associated with agricultural activities were concentrated, including installations, such as bakeries, built to satisfy the needs of a relatively large community.³⁵ The existence of a church at the center of mound I, largely consisting of public spaces of a utilitarian nature, is not surprising within

²⁸ On Egyptian villages of the Byzantine period, cf. Keenan 2007, a discussion of considerable documentary evidence.

²⁹ Some data are available mostly from sites excavated in the Fayyum: cf. Davoli 1998. Peasant settlements were less the object of investigation in other regions of Egypt, although a renewed interest in domestic architecture is slowly changing this balance.

³⁰ Cf. Bagnall 1993, 110–47.

³¹ A remarkably large rectangular building, located toward the northern edge of mound I, was identified as a pigeon tower, largely on the basis of comparative evidence from other sites in Dakhleh. Pigeon towers were a typical feature of the oasis landscape in Roman times and during Late Antiquity: cf. Churcher and Mills 1999, 251–65. A published farmhouse from Dakhleh is in Mills 1993. A plan of a columbarium from Kellis is published in Hope and Whitehouse 2006, 315.

³² Cf. Bagnall 1993, 151. On landholding and its role within the economy of Late Antique Egypt, cf. Bagnall 1992, Banaji 2007 (especially chapters 5 and 7), 1999, and Hickey 2007.

³³ Cf. Rathbone 1991, 22–43. The buildings on mound I at Ain el-Gedida reflect a more irregular layout.
³⁴ *Idem*, 31.

³⁵ An ostrakon found at the site (inv. no. 830) acknowledges the payment of money by someone described as ἀπὸ γεωργ(ίου) Πμουβ Βεργου, “from the georgion of Pmoun Berri,” the latter possibly being the name of Ain el-Gedida in the fourth century (Bagnall, personal communication, January 2009). Here *georgion*, a term that might not differ substantially in meaning from *epoikion*, should refer to a farmstead or agricultural settlement and, if indeed it refers to Ain el-Gedida, establish that as the basic nature of the place.



Plate 21. Aerial view of kitchen in southern half of mound I (to E).

the context of an *epoikion*. Indeed, written sources attest to the possibility that churches were associated with this type of rural settlement.³⁶

In conclusion, several questions about Ain el-Gedida and its identification have not yet received a conclusive and unequivocal answer. Nor have the issues regarding the origins and, at the opposite end of the chronological spectrum, the abandonment of the site. Undoubtedly, the full archaeological investigation of the five mounds would provide much needed information on the original extent of the settlement and its overall spatial configuration, especially on the location of the domestic quarters. Nevertheless, the information that was gathered on the church complex and the site is far from being inconclusive. It testifies to a vibrant rural community at Ain el-Gedida that was active in the fourth century. It had well adapted itself to the local environment, exploiting what the surrounding land had to offer and processing the products on site. The small industrial establishments investigated on mound I shed light on a society whose involvement in the local economy extended beyond the activities strictly related to agriculture. People crafted pottery, raised pigeons, and baked bread in large open-air spaces. Most likely, other productive activities were carried

out on site, whose evidence lies beneath the sand of the desert and waits to be discovered. Like their neighbors of Kellis, with which, due to their proximity and similar chronology, strong links existed, these people were also a pro-foundly Christianized society. This is testified to, for the most part, by the church complex, strategically built at the center of the main hill and, undoubtedly, a preeminent landmark of the local physical environment. If the inhabitants of Ain el-Gedida were in fact in part wage-workers of an *epoikion*, villagers, or/and early ascetics living as a community in a rural environment—not so dissimilar, after all, from that of a village—, this is yet to be known, although new, planned excavations at the site might soon shed light on this and other significant questions.

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³⁶ Cf. Sarris 2004, 284.

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