



# Early Christian Archaeology: A State of the Field

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## Abstract

This article considers the history and trajectory of early Christian archaeology. Focusing principally on the built environment, it addresses the status of research on third-century Christian *domus ecclesiae* or house churches, urban topography, Christian euergetism, pagan/Christian temple conversion, monasticism and pilgrimage, parish churches, and rural Christianity. It suggests that this largely conservative field continues to wrestle with its relationship with Christian texts, and remains dominated by formalist and positivist paradigms. The expansion of the discipline into adjacent fields in recent years signals something of a shift, but more holistic studies are needed that contextualize Christian remains within their local topographic, social, ecclesiastical, and, above all, economic circumstances.

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From a discipline that was once confined largely to one city (Rome) and one constellation of sites (the catacombs), the study of Christian material culture has witnessed a certain thematic explosion. A quick glance at the recent meetings of the International Congress of Christian Archaeology now reveals subjects as diverse as rural topography and human anthropology, as well as a preponderance of the more traditional architecture and art historical approaches. Thus, to attempt a summary of the whole field in a single article would either make the article impossibly long, or the coverage pointlessly superficial. This short summation thus focuses on the archaeologies of buildings and space, leaving images for separate discussion. Within those confines, it addresses only a selection of the major themes that have preoccupied the discipline – third-century archaeology, urban churches and topographies, monastic archaeology, and the countryside – and limits even these considerations to material of late antique date, that is, from the third to sixth centuries AD. The growing numbers of excavations and the felicitous, albeit limited expansion of the discipline beyond the demonstrably ‘religious’ into social history writ large, means that even with these constraints, much will still be left out or glossed over. Nonetheless, it is hoped that even such a sketch will provide a sense of the discipline’s history, its trajectory, and the challenges it faces, particularly regarding its relationship with Christian textual history, as a conservative field in a changing scholarly world.

*Historiography*

Christian archaeology was born in post-Reformation Rome under the auspices of the Catholic church, and these circumstances, both geographical and denominational, would have a formative impact on the field's subsequent development. The earliest formal excavations of Christian sites were catacomb excavations, begun by Antonio Bosio in the early seventeenth century and taken up again by Giovanni Battista de Rossi in the nineteenth century (De Rossi 1864–1877; Baruffa 1994). It was work whose ideological cast was oddly bifurcated. On the one hand lay the baldly stated desire to use material culture to prove Apostolic presence, demonstrate the extent and sophistication of Christian origins, particularly in Rome, and more tacitly, to use that Apostolic splendor to bolster a weakening post-Enlightenment church. On the other hand, particularly De Rossi's masterful surveys of the catacombs and painstaking collection of Christian inscriptions were monuments of mid-nineteenth-century encyclopedic data collection, meticulous products of an ecumenical accumulation of knowledge for its own sake, and a desire to preserve a friable historical record for posterity (De Rossi 1864–1877, 1861–1888, 1922–).

Whatever their Janus-faced ideological cast, these early excavations and the surveys that summarized them for broader consumption (e.g. Marucchi 1902; Testini 1958) shared a confidence in what constituted 'Christian' objects or monuments. As the burial places of the Roman martyrs and the (wrongly) presumed refuge of the persecuted, the catacombs and all that lay within them were assumed to be products of specifically Christian efforts; similarly, the Roman-period remains beneath the titular churches like San Clemente were likewise identified as early Christian *domus ecclesiae* or house churches (Mullooly 1869; cf. Guidobaldi 1992). The assumptions derived in large part from a reliance on textual sources, often of later date or dubious interpretation, to make sense of material remains. To blame, too, was a tendency to use inverse deductive reasoning to analyze a site's evolution: if the site had demonstrable Christian presence in a later phase, one could safely assume that the earlier phases also accommodated Christian functions, whether or not the remains actually indicated this or not (e.g. Kirsch 1918, critiqued by Duval 1978; Pietri 1978b). The confidence that a discernibly 'Christian' material culture exists and can be archaeologically defined has been challenged by a series of new studies (Elsner 2003; Rebillard 2003) that question the degree to which religious affiliation is reflected in the material record, and highlight the amorphous and misleading quality of pagan/Jewish/Christian categorization.

By the mid-twentieth century, these assumptions were being gradually undercut and the discipline began a slow revolution. Richard Krautheimer's magisterial survey of the churches of Rome, begun in the years before the Second World War, applied the newly developed principals of architectural stratigraphy, or buildings archaeology, to the tangled remains of Christian

buildings (Krautheimer et al. 1937–1977). In place of inverse deduction, he offered neutral phase analyses, using masonry styles as chronological indicators. His work and those of his peers, like Friedrich Deichmann (e.g. 1948) and André Grabar (e.g. 1946), also witnessed a new emphasis on architectural typology, both as dating tool and, eventually, as functional indicator. Their strenuous debate over the form and function of martyria typified the formalist method (Ward-Perkins 1965; Krautheimer 1969b; Deichmann 1970). Architectural form, plan, liturgical furnishings, roofing solutions, etc., became the principal analytical tool for approaching Christian architecture (Deichmann 1948, 1983; Khatchatrian 1962; MacDonald 1962; cf. Mango 1976, pp. 9–11; Krautheimer 1986). Local forms were identified and parsed, and regional catalogs of churches began to appear in ever-increasing numbers. Indeed, this remains one of the principal methodologies of Christian archaeology today, as exemplified by the forthcoming pan-European catalog of pre-Medieval churches, organized by region.<sup>1</sup> These studies have rejected, often vociferously, the earlier methodologies' reliance on texts or text-based categories to understand material remains (e.g. Apollonj Ghetti 1978; Duval 1978). Form and to a lesser extent, stratigraphic analyses are the principal analytic tools of studies whose goal is the careful dating and categorization of forms themselves. Be it the plan of a church, the profile of an altar table or the form of a baptismal font, form provides both a beginning and an end in what remains a largely positivist enterprise.

While that positivism is to be found more or less wherever specifically Christian-oriented archaeology is practiced, its supporting evidentiary corpus varies enormously in quality and quantity from region to region. Rome's early history of Christian archaeology and concomitant early detailed study of Christian remains is, in this respect, something of an oddity: in many areas, particularly Greece and Turkey, a preoccupation with Greco-Roman remains and dismissal, even distaste, for later periods led to the wholesale destruction of Christian-period buildings and stratigraphy in pursuit of what lay beneath. In these areas, the study of Christian archaeology has lagged behind that of its classical sister disciplines, the disparity exacerbated by educational and governmental apparatus in which Christian-period archaeology is a minority discipline. Conversely, in other areas, such as Britain, France, and Italy, a deep interest in Christian remains has produced a plentiful corpus with its own problems. A tacitly nationalist agenda drove much of this archaeology, intent on proving the particularly early, particularly pious, or particularly local brand of Christian expression. So intense was the desire to 'find' Christianity that many sites were identified as 'Christian' on insufficient evidence – the so-called basilica at Silchester (King 1983) or the many misidentified 'oratories' in Aquileia (Holden 2002) are some examples. Nowhere, however, has Christian archaeology carried more overt political baggage than in the Holy Land; from the Franciscan identification (now largely discredited) of the house of Peter in

Capernaum (see below), to the wholesale destruction of a major circular church by the University of Pennsylvania in order to uncover the acropolis temple at Beth She'an, to the almost total lack of real archaeology at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem (the exception is Biddle 1999), Christian archaeology in the Holy Land is a poster child for the challenges, from neglect to fanaticism, facing Christian archaeology, and a warning of the agendas inherent within even the most neutral cataloguing effort.

Alongside these cataloguing projects developed more historically oriented studies. Since the early twentieth century, historians of Christianity like William Ramsay (1893); Adolf Deissman (1901, 1912); Adolf von Harnack (1908), had used material culture in their narratives, where it was used to bolster or prove textual accounts, particularly as part of a Protestant effort to elucidate the 'authentic' church of the Apostolic age. A later generation of historians, like Charles Pietri (1976) and W. H. C. Frend (1952, 1984, 1996), in contrast, had absorbed the cautionary lessons of their archaeologist contemporaries regarding texts; instead, they interrogated material evidence to tell the stories left out of texts, issues like church wealth, Christian demographics, 'popular' belief, and doctrinal debate. A florit of such social historical studies have appeared in the last two decades, the most influential of which have been the works of Peter Brown, and it is now the case that much Christian social history is written with at least a nod to material evidence.<sup>2</sup>

If there is anything that distinguishes Christian archaeology from its sister discipline of classical archaeology, it is perhaps the strident voice of its concomitant texts, which, as defining parts of the field, demand to be reckoned with in some way. Despite the new sensitivity to evidentiary issues, however, the relationship between archaeology and texts remains strained. Theological treatises may be used to interpret iconography, apocalyptic writings are used to make sense of settlement patterns, and anti-pagan treatises have been adduced to identify archaeological instances of Christian idol smashing (e.g. Murray 1981; Brogiolo & Chavarría 2005; Sauer 1996, respectively). The problem is exacerbated by the near-absence of a theoretical discourse on texts and material culture; although the adjacent field of biblical archaeology has meditated long and hard on the problem, with the exception of Moreland's (2001) brief but stimulating survey, there still exists no theoretical apparatus to help scholars of Christianity mediate between the world of things and the world of words.

This lacuna may reflect the discipline's distrust of theory generally; preoccupied with fact-finding, text verification, or historical narrative, Christian archaeology has rarely spared a moment for meditations on itself or its processes. With some few exceptions (mostly in Anglo-American scholarship) (e.g. Elsner 1995, 2001; Wharton 1995), it has remained largely insulated from literary, anthropology or archaeology-based theoretical models that have so transformed its sister disciplines. One searches in vain for the writings of a Foucault, a Geertz, or a Hodder in the footnotes of

Christian archaeology as the field clings resolutely to its positivist heritage. While in part this conservatism can be traced to disciplinary training within art history, history and classical archaeology departments, the problem may again be a product of Christian archaeology's particular relationship with its attendant texts. Many of the most potentially useful theoretical models – ritual theory, cognitive archaeology and post-processualism – were developed to understand prehistoric societies, that is, text-less worlds. The Christian world was one of frantic text production, and while that those texts cannot be used to decode the material, neither, as generations of Christian archaeologists have intuitively known, can it be wholly ignored.

### *Christian Origins*

#### THE 'DOMUS ECCLESIAE'

The archaeology of third-century Christianity is one of those topics over which the amount of ink spilled is inversely proportional to the evidence at hand. Excavations carried out in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century in Rome claimed to have unearthed traces of early Christian activity, particularly the houses used by Christians for worship.<sup>3</sup> The term 'domus ecclesiae' was paraphrased from a more complex ancient vocabulary to describe these presumed meeting houses, reflecting the assumption that since early Christians met in homes, and since the later Christian 'basilica' was derived from domestic architecture, there must have existed some sort of distinctive and recognizable 'proto-church' architecture.<sup>4</sup> The 1931 discovery of a well-preserved, mid-third-century Christian meeting house at Dura Europos seemed to offer definitive proof for house-based Christian meetings (Baur 1934; Hopkins 1934; Kraeling 1967) (Figure 1). At Dura, the house in question had been altered to accommodate a meeting hall with raised dias, and a baptistery decorated with frescos depicting miracle scenes, like Christ Healing the Paralytic and the Maries Approaching the Tomb. The discovery of Dura spawned a series of teleological histories tracking the evolution from house to basilica (e.g. Lowrie 1947, pp. 105–28; Deichmann 1964; Gamber 1968, critiqued by Klausner 1968/9; Duval 1978). For many scholars, this evolution manifested Christianity's own departure from ur-Christian 'norms', and adoption of a Greco-Roman belief in the sacrality of place (as noted by Finney 1988). The most clinical of these, formulated by Richard Krautheimer, posited three stages of architectural adaptation, prompted by the group's changing socio-economic circumstances (Krautheimer 1969a, 1986, pp. 23–37). In the Apostolic and Pauline periods, Krautheimer posited, meetings took place in dining rooms as Christian ritual focused on the *agape* or communal meal. In the mid-second to mid-third centuries as Christian groups increased in numbers and prominence, basic liturgical equipment was inserted into the

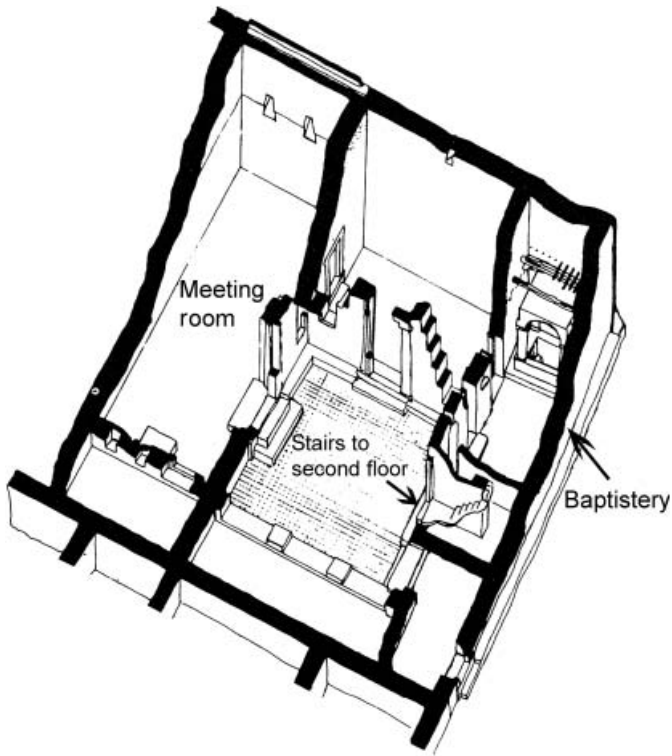


Fig. 1. Reconstruction, Dura Europos house-church, third century AD (after White 1990, fig. 18).

house itself, which, now owned by the communal group, was physically modified: this phase he labeled the *domus ecclesiae* and pointed to Dura Europos as its principal exemplar. Rising wealth and numbers in the mid-third century produced the so-called *aula ecclesiae*, large, even free-standing axial spaces that Krautheimer claimed to have discovered at San Crisogono or San Clemente in Rome. Despite the similarities with basilican architecture, Krautheimer denied any direct tie between *aula ecclesiae* and later basilicas, ascribing to Constantinian agency the use of the Roman secular basilican form for the first Christian basilicas in Rome and Jerusalem.

As L. M. White, the most recent scholar to address the problem, has observed, all of these theories were preoccupied with architectural form, and assumed the so-called *domus ecclesiae* constituted a distinctive Christian architecture (White 1990, 1997, reviewed by Finney 1992). His own study emphasized the adaptive quality of all unofficial Roman cult buildings, from Mithraea (Figure 2) and Jewish synagogues to Christian meeting houses, all of which modified pre-existing private buildings to accommodate ritual needs. White argued that the form of the original building and, above all,

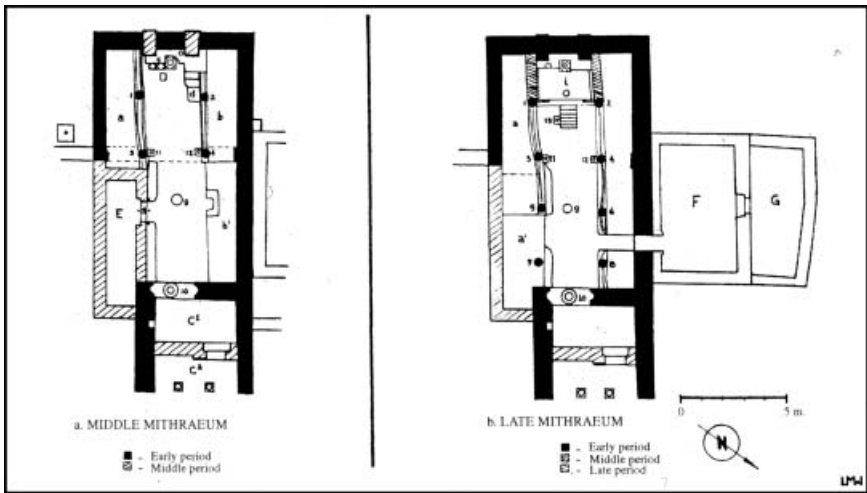


Fig 2. Phased plan, mithraeum, Dura Europos, second to third centuries AD (after White 1990, fig. 8).

the cult's changing size and economic power produced the building's architectural form, rather than some impulse towards basilican forms.

All these theories share a conviction that architecturally adapted Christian meeting houses existed in some numbers by the third century, that is, that something like the *domus ecclesiae* actually existed. Yet, even this assumption is highly problematic. The number of definite third- and early fourth-century worship spaces has been steadily eroded as earlier excavations are re-evaluated and new chronological evidence brought to light. San Clemente and San Crisogono's earliest Christian phases may now be dated as late as the later fourth or early fifth century (Guidobaldi 1992; Cecchelli 2001, pp. 232–7), and other purported sites, like Peter's House in Capernaum (Corbo 1969), have been critiqued for demonstrating no evidence of early Christian activity (Strange & Shanks 1982). The recent discovery of an alleged third-century meeting house in Kefar 'Othnay, Israel, remains to be definitely dated (Tepper & Di Segni 2006). In other words, Dura Europos is emerging not as the tip of a *domus ecclesiae* iceberg, but as an *unicum*. It is beginning to appear that even in cities with relatively large Christian populations, like Rome, third- and fourth-century Christians may not have modified their buildings for meeting purposes, but simply continued to meet in the homes of their wealthiest members (Pietri 1978b; Cantino Wataghin et al. 1996, p. 27), perhaps in the increasingly popular apsed audience halls, without causing any archaeologically discernable changes to these structures (Guidobaldi 1993, 1999, 2000). Conversely, the adaptation of the house at Dura seems could be understood not as normative, but quite possibly the opposite, a radical break from Christian practice in other cities, produced by particular local exigencies. Given the frenetic,

check-by-jowl character of religious building at Dura, with a mithraeum, a synagogue and the Christian church all on one street, plus the thriving cults to the Palmyrene and other eastern deities, the Dura house church may be a particular product of socio-religious competition in a heterogeneous garrison town (Elsner 2001). Thus, the Dura House church may tell us very little about 'Christian origins' writ large, but rather a lot about what it meant to do religion on the edges of the empire.

Second- and third-century material culture, be it Christian or not, has played an increasingly central role in Christian social histories. These studies, produced largely by historians of religion, have endeavored to de-ghettoize Christianity from a position of ontological 'uniqueness', and integrate it more firmly in second- and third-century Greco-Roman or Judeo-Roman contexts. Recent studies have juxtaposed Christian and Greco-Roman houses and households, relying on a diverse evidentiary grab-bag, including the Dura house church, Pompeiian and Palestinian houses, the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline letters, and the apocryphal acts (Meeks 1983; White 1989; Moxnes 1997; Osiek & Balch 1997; Balch & Osiek 2003). They have noted the similarity between Christian (i.e. Dura) and non-Christian living spaces, and/or used Pompeian or Palestinian houses to add flesh to the bare-bones biblical narratives that describe a house-based Christian world. Others have drawn on the totality of material culture of Roman and late Roman Palestine to reconstruct Christianity's Judeo-Roman environment (Meyers & Strange 1981; Manns & Alliaia 1993). Through these imaginative combinations of evidence, first- through third-century Christian communities are provided a lively *mis-en-scene*, their families and their houses blending into an ancient cityscape. These scenes are often generated through a simple juxtaposition of 'pagan', 'Jewish', and 'Christian' evidence (the categories remain uncontested), privileging sameness over difference to emphasize Christianity's kinship with its formative Roman and Judaic contexts.<sup>5</sup> Material culture often provides a generic stage set that is re-peopled by texts; it thus remains un-interrogated for its own stories, often ignoring the recent archaeological literature that has emphasized the regional and chronological diversity of house forms and social conditions (e.g. Nevett 1999; Grahame 2000; Baker 2002; Hales 2003).

#### THE CATACOMBS

If the study of the house churches has suffered from a lack of evidence, the same cannot be said of the Roman catacombs. With their miles of galleries, their frescoed decoration and their volumes of inscriptions, the catacombs comprise the majority of material evidence for third- and early fourth-century Christianity. However, to what extent this evidence is third and early fourth-century in date and to what extent it is even Christian have all been questioned in recent studies.



The phenomenon of mass underground burial grounds was not limited to Rome – smaller examples are known in Syracuse and Naples, for instance – but it was the particular confluence of geology and economic expediency that allowed them to flourish in the capital city. Land for burial in the Roman suburbs was in short supply and, by the first century AD, extraordinarily expensive (Purcell 1987; Hesberg 1992, pp. 9–10). The soft, yet resilient tufa beneath Rome proved easy to excavate and thus provided a cheap alternative to surface burial (De Angelis d'Ossat 1930–1932). Gravel pits, like that at San Sebastiano, could be expanded through their sides; early underground water channels, like those at Ss. Pietro e Marcellino, might be widened and lengthened, and from these re-used spaces, wholly new systems could be dug with relative ease and speed. The cheapest and most abundant burials lined these long corridors; *loculi*, or burial shelves, where individual bodies were superimposed, the *loculus* cover each time being sealed with re-used tiles, the deceased perhaps remembered by a rudimentary inscription. More expansive settings were provided by *arcosolia*, tombs covered by an arched niche, or by *cubicula*, small chambers holding both *arcosolia* and *loculi*.

Dating catacombs is notoriously tricky: with little masonry to date and very few stratigraphic excavations, most of the Roman catacombs have been dated by their earliest inscriptions, the style of their wall paintings, or their association with a particular martyr.<sup>6</sup> More recent studies have carefully mapped the inscriptional and frescoed evidence onto the structural history of the catacomb, creating more reliable histories for these multiphased monuments (e.g. Deckers 1987, 1991, 1994; Guyon 1987; Saint-Roche 1999; Spera 2004). The earliest phases of the catacomb of Callistus have been dated to the final years of the second century (see Figure 3), but for the most part, it is only in the third century when underground gallery systems – the hallmark of the catacomb – appear in at the catacombs of Priscilla, Praetextatus, and Domitilla. The heyday of building in most of the catacombs seems to take place in the later half of the third century and in some instances, such as the well-studied network at Ss. Pietro e Marcellino, the first two decades of the fourth century. Thus, the bulk of catacomb construction took place in the 75 years or so between the mid-third and first quarter of the fourth century, rather than earlier, as is often supposed (Fiocchi Nicolai et al. 1999).

Catacombs are often described as the burial of the poor, and certainly their underground location made them potentially cheaper than the same space allotment above ground. However, it is notable that while in some catacombs like Domitilla and Praetextatus, galleries and *loculi* comprised the bulk of burials spaces, in many others like Ss. Pietro e Marcellino, Priscilla, Callistus (Figure 4), the third and early fourth century saw the expansion of *cubicula* and *arcosolium* tombs, that is, more expensive burials. Most of the Christian paintings in the catacombs date from this period and are found in *cubicula*. By the late third century, catacombs could no

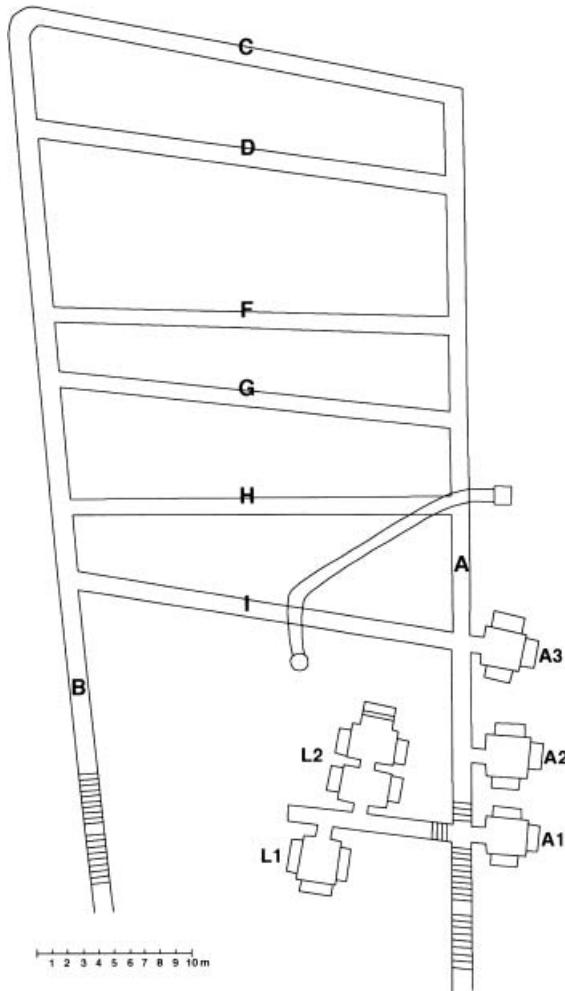


Fig. 3. Plan, early phases of catacomb of Callistus, late second to mid-third centuries AD (Ficchi Nicolai, Bisconti, & Mazzoleni 1999, fig. 6).

longer be categorized as spaces of cheap, collective burial, but had taken on the character of above-ground cemeteries, namely, a mixture of poor and rich, jumbled together in which the rich were ever more the focus of attention. Although the paucity of *in situ* inscriptional evidence (much of which was removed by the eighteenth excavators of the catacombs) makes it difficult to know who commissioned the *cubicula*, it seems likely they served, as did their sister-mausolea above ground, to hold families and burial societies. That is, the increasing emphasis on *cubicula* shifted the emphasis from collective burial to small-group or family burial.



Fig. 4. Plan, catacomb of Callistus, late third to fourth centuries AD (after Focchi Nicolai, Bisconti, & Mazzoleni 1999, fig. 30).

Below-ground burial had never been the exclusive province of Christians; from the time of the Scipios, pagans had constructed subterranean hypogea – chambers used for inhumation and/or cremation burials (Hesberg 1992, pp. 76–93). The Scipio's hypogea was a purposeful attempt to evoke ancient (probably Etruscan) burial habits, while economic exigency motivated the majority of such spaces, like those on the Via Appia or Via Aurelia. The catacombs, however, have traditionally been viewed as a special case: the description of collective burial grounds in texts like the *Refutatio* of Hippolytus (9.12.14), the particular gallery form with its emphasis on collective, cheap burial and most importantly, the association of catacombs with martyr burial and cult, have all lead scholars to suppose that catacombs were exclusively Christian burials spaces, run by the institutional church for the exclusive use of its members. The discovery in 1955 of a small, late fourth-century catacomb on the Via Latina displaying both pagan and Christian-themed frescoes is seen as a late exception that proves the rule (Ferrua 1991). A new study by John Bodel, however, has questioned this most basic assumption: using rough calculations of Rome's morality rate, the maximum number of Christians and the number of extant, excavated graves, the author notes that it would be a highly unlikely that Rome's

catacombs could contain exclusively, or even a majority of Christians (Bodel, forthcoming 2008). The study is convincing not least because it uses as its statistics those numbers that would be most likely to disprove its conclusions (i.e. an overly high estimate of Christian numbers, an overly low mortality rate).<sup>7</sup> If it is correct, not only must we imagine a far more heterogeneous catacomb population, but we must also disabuse ourselves of the notion of segregated Christian burial.

Indeed, the assumption of church-controlled, exclusive Christian burial, both in the catacombs and more generally, has also been recently questioned. Departing from the very texts that have been used to argue for church control of burial as well as the archaeological evidence itself, a group of studies, mostly prominently by Eric Rebillard, have suggested that bishops, including the bishop of Rome, showed little interest in either maintaining segregated Christian burial grounds or controlling the rituals that went on inside them (Harries 1992, p. 61; Rebillard 1993, 1997, 2003; Johnson 1997). Families, not the church, continued to bury the dead and provide for their commemoration, and families were as often as not, of mixed religious persuasion. The catacombs, which had begun as private burial plots, thus continued to be controlled and managed by families at least through the mid-fourth century. Both of these studies, when taken together, posit a much smaller and weaker Roman institutional organization than archaeologists had previously supposed, a notion supported by some textually based histories (Brent 1995, critiqued by Simonetti 1996). They also present a wholly new social context in which particularly the catacombs' paintings must now be situated, a context of far more fluid Christian identity, of shared rituals and thus potentially eschatology with pagan neighbors, or, conversely, of neighborly competition.

### *Christianity in the Late Antique City*

While the last 20 years has seen virtually no new evidence for third-century Christianity, the reverse is true for the post-Constantinian period. Major excavations in cities as diverse as Rome, Tarragona, Carthage, and Caesarea, and a burgeoning interest in late antique urbanism generally have produced explosion of publications, both monographic and analytical, on urban Christianity of the fourth through sixth centuries (e.g. Rich 1992; Christie & Loseby 1995; Brogiolo & Ward-Perkins 1999; Brogiolo et al. 2000; Lavan 2001; Liebeschuetz 2001).

Ancient cities were organisms of constant, restless change. Construction and abandonment were continuous, the building programs of the emperors transforming city centers into construction sites for decades, while the projects of their predecessors were allowed to fall into gentle decay until political mileage might be gained through their restoration. In this respect, the later Roman city was no different, except, perhaps, that the ratio of abandonment/rebuilding had shifted toward the former, first in the West

and later in the East, and new construction was changing in type, patronage and timing. The monumentality of the Roman city was a product of that characteristically Roman practice of *euergetism*: civic philanthropy, very often in the form of buildings, produced political capital that the giver translated into ever-higher offices, and, in turn, into ever more magnificent acts of generosity. As proximity to the imperial court and its bureaucratic apparatus became the principal avenue for advancement, and as that court became increasingly peripatetic, the political advantages of either building new buildings or repairing the old shrank. Building was gradually monopolized by the emperors and where the emperors took no interest, little or no building happened. As local politics took a back seat to imperial action, the local town councilors or *curiales* found no benefit, and little funding, for infrastructure maintenance. The Roman city, itself a fragile product of a particular political climate, began inexorably to change. Tracking those changes is complicated, however: the changing character of *euergetism* brought about a decline in the 'epigraphic habit', that is, the propensity to mark (and thus date) one's gifts with inscribed words. The absence of inscriptions that are the principal source for urban building projects may mean a decline in building, or it may simply describe a decline in inscriptions: excavation is required to tell the difference. Despite these difficulties, it is becoming clear that in Italy and perhaps northern Gaul, the process had already begun in the later third century (Ward-Perkins 1984). In North Africa and parts of Spain, the process did not set in until the fifth century (Lepelley 1979–1981, 1994). In the East, the process began later, typically in the later fifth and sixth centuries (Roueché 1989; Lewin 1991). While the timing varied significantly from region to region, the result was same: water-supplies and drains failed; baths shrank in numbers and size; footpaths took the place of streets choked with debris and everywhere the great public buildings of the high empire were modified for private use – as stables, houses, and graveyards. Conversely, in the fourth and fifth centuries, the houses of the wealthy were enlarged, taking up a greater proportion of the cityscape. The late antique city became predominantly a place of private, rather than collective, enterprise.

#### THE FOURTH CENTURY

The exception to these trends, we are told, was the church. In many cities, churches were the only new, monumental structures, the product of their communities' collective donations. With the conversion of Constantine, each city was soon covered with a carpet of churches, its old civic topography replaced by a web of Christian presence. However, the picture as it is emerging in excavations from Spain to Syria is more complex.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps most significant is the generally slow pace of church construction: the vast majority of urban churches in both East and West date to the fifth century and later. Only a small number can be definitely attributed to

Constantine and his house, and in general, fourth-century church building was a limited affair, restricted in most part to the final years of the century. There are exceptions, like the great Constantinian projects of Rome and Jerusalem, and martyrial basilicas in North Africa and Dalmatia, but when good archaeological evidence is available, church dates are trending later rather than earlier. The implications are significant. Many cities have fourth-century Christian communities described in texts, but no contemporary basilica: where, then, did they meet? Very likely where they had always met – in house-based meetings (Pietri 1976, vol. 1, p. 116, and Krautheimer 1980, p. 18; Cantino Wataghin et al. 1996, p. 27). The Christian house-based community seems to have had a far longer life than was previously supposed, and for Christians in the hundreds of smaller cities throughout the empire and even in Rome, it remained the locus of their collective devotions for a century. A series of recent studies on Christian wealth and demographics suggest that it could hardly have been otherwise; while texts like Ambrose's attacks on pagan practices and Augustine's sermons to crowded churches seem to describe the church's rapidly growing wealth and power, the vast majority of episcopates had limited resources and limited political clout throughout the fourth and much of the fifth centuries (Sotinel 2005, 2006). The actual number of Christians in these communities is likely to have remained relatively low in comparison with non-Christians through this period (cf. Hopkins 1998), and it is only in the early fifth century that the truly wealthy joined the church in any significant numbers (Pietri 1978a). The fourth-century church, in other words, resembled in wealth and popularity its third-century predecessor far more than was previously thought, and its physical presence was correspondingly fairly limited.

#### CHRISTIAN TOPOGRAPHIES

The Christian topography of the late antique city is also coming into sharper focus. In the many cities, Christian presence was Janus-faced. One center lay outside the wall in the urban necropolei. Some of these churches show signs of early martyr cult and most accommodated burial. As was the case in the third century, the graveyard remained the focus of Christian material presence in the fourth century, and it may have been the activities of families and/or small groups that provided the catalyst, if not the funding, for churches whose *raison d'être* remained strongly funerary. Conversely in some cities, such as Milan and Rome, these extramural churches can be more definitely linked to episcopal intervention (Figures 5 and 6). Here, Ambrose (Krautheimer 1983, pp. 68–92) and Damasus (Ferrua 1942; Trout 2003), respectively, are credited with marking major approach roads with martyr shrines, and using the cult of the saints to vanquish rival claimants to the episcopal throne. In the case of Damasus, the martyrial structures were small in scale, and commemoration occurred principally through a

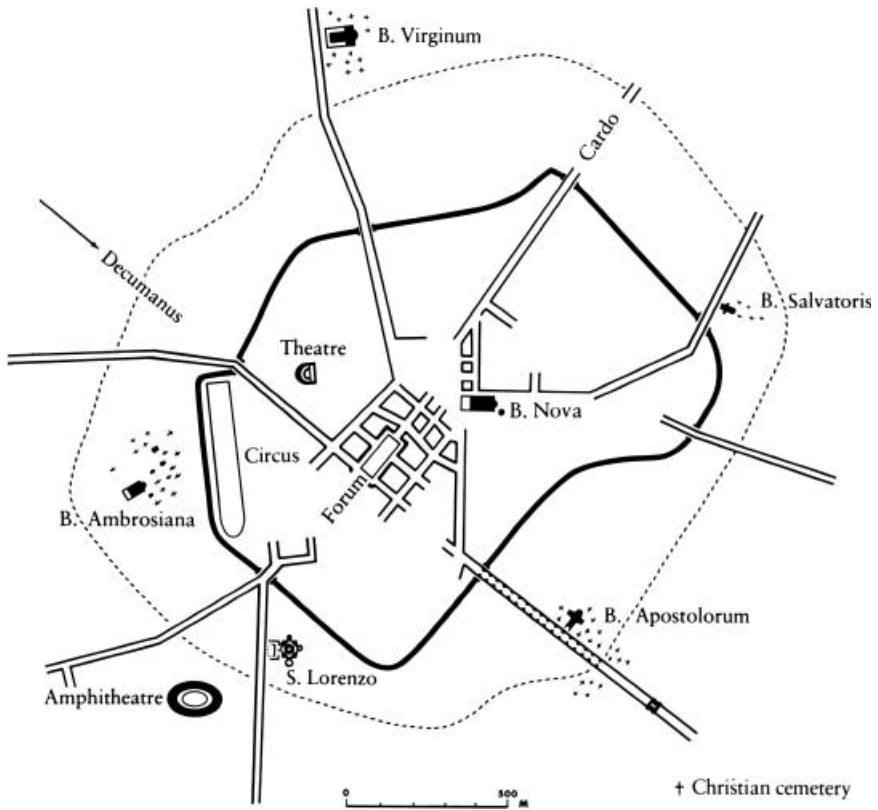


Fig 5. Map of Milan showing churches century 400 (Krautheimer 1983, fig. 63).

series of finely carved verse inscriptions. The sites chosen for commemoration and the content of the inscriptions were not simply reflective of popular piety, but reflected a subtle attempt on Damasus' part to discredit his rival, Ursinus, and bolster support for his tumultuous episcopate.

Cities' other center of Christian presence was intramural churches, presumably associated with the episcopate. Their location varies, as does the evidence for episcopal presence. In Italy, for instance, intramural churches are located in a wide variety of habitation areas, although not typically in the monumental forum area (Testini et al. 1989). The inconsistent location of these churches is probably a product of the vagaries of private donations; churches were built wherever land was provided by private donors and the ability of bishops, even in cities like Rome, to effectively 'plan' church topography was probably very limited. Thus, the oft-noted absence of churches in Rome's forum area was both a product of a traditionally-minded elites' control of those areas, but also a by-product of euergetism: most churches were built on donated land and that land lay in residential neighborhoods, not the forum area where almost all the land was public

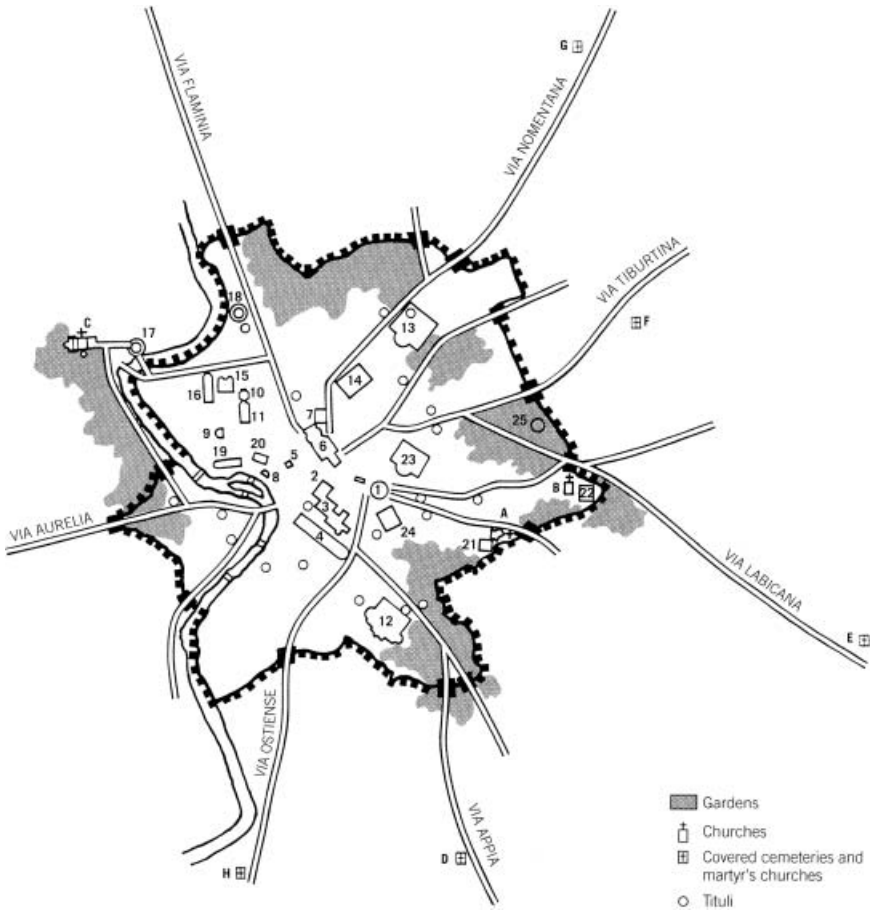


Fig. 6. Map of Rome showing churches century 400 (after Elsner 1998, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, Oxford/New York, fig. 96).

(Krautheimer 1980; Frascetti 1999; cf. Reekmans 1989). Constantinople and Antioch, cities with more permanent imperial presence, had imperial *euergetes* and thus the possibility of building on more centrally located plots (Krautheimer 1983).

Nonetheless, even in these cities as well as other smaller centers, what constituted 'the bishops's church', might be highly fluid. The issue is typified by the location of urban baptisteries, typically assumed to indicate episcopal presence: in Italy generally, baptisteries quickly appeared in the extra-urban funerary and martyrial churches (Testini et al. 1989), while in Rome, the Lateran soon vied with the splendid early fifth-century *Sta. Maria Maggiore*, and titular and martyrial churches with baptismal fonts (Fiocchi Nicolai 1999; Saxer 2001; Cosentino 2002). Even in Constantinople, the Constantinian Holy Apostles, rich with imperial associations, sometimes



vied with the Hagia Sophia for cathedral status (Ullmann 1851, p. 223; cf. Mayer 2000).

Newer work has broadened topographic analysis beyond the individual city to the region and meta-region. The location of major urban churches within a region often reflected, and indeed, produced, local economic and political realities. The recent discovery of a series of large, unusually rich fifth-century churches in southern Italy, for instance, may be read as a product of a local economic 'boom', carefully calculated episcopal expansion, and the region's strategic position in Byzantine/Roman relations (Volpe 2007). In Asia Minor, a careful consideration of early church building is laid against the rich textual evidence for religious practices of all kinds, revealing a land in which 'pagan', 'Jewish', and 'Christian' distinctions remained highly fluid (Mitchell 1999). In some areas, the archaeological corpus has become large enough that the topography of silence may be carefully probed for historical significance. In Hispania, for instance, the general paucity of material evidence for martyr cult prior to the fourth and even fifth centuries contrasts starkly with a post-Reformation Catholic historiography claiming the opposite; late antique Hispania, far from being fervently Christian, is emerging as region where Christian centers remained few, far-between, and ill-funded and where the few martyr shrines were limited to local heroes (Duval 1993; Castillo Maldonado 2005).

#### CHURCH TYPOLOGIES

Typology – the planar and other formal qualities of Christian buildings – continues to provide one of the most popular analytic approaches in Christian archaeology. Since the master works of architectural historians like Richard Krautheimer and André Grabar, churches continue to be studied through an assessment of their plan type, liturgical furnishings (baptismal fonts, chancel arrangements, location of martyr's relics), and structural apparatus. Most of these studies are now regionally based (either modern countries or ancient provinces), with their goal the articulation of local church forms and liturgical habits.<sup>9</sup> The evolution and liturgical *raison d'être* of North Africa's striking double-apsed churches (Duval 1973); the square-ended, triple chancels of Hispania with their 'counter-choirs' (Godoy Fernández 1995) (Figure 7), so similar to their brethren in the far-off Syrian uplands with their ubiquitous tiny martyr shrines (Crosby Butler 1929; Tchalenko 1953–1959; Lassus 1957; now Peña et al. 1987, 1990, 2003) (Figure 8); and the Judean desert monastic churches (Hirschfeld 1992, 1993); comprise just some of the regional forms elaborated in these careful encyclopedic studies. Other recent collections of church architecture organized along these lines include catalogs of material from Tunisia, Dalmatia, France, and various Italian regions.<sup>10</sup> These regional collections have served as a critical step in the further investigation of Christian activity in their respective areas, for they not only provide a clear picture of

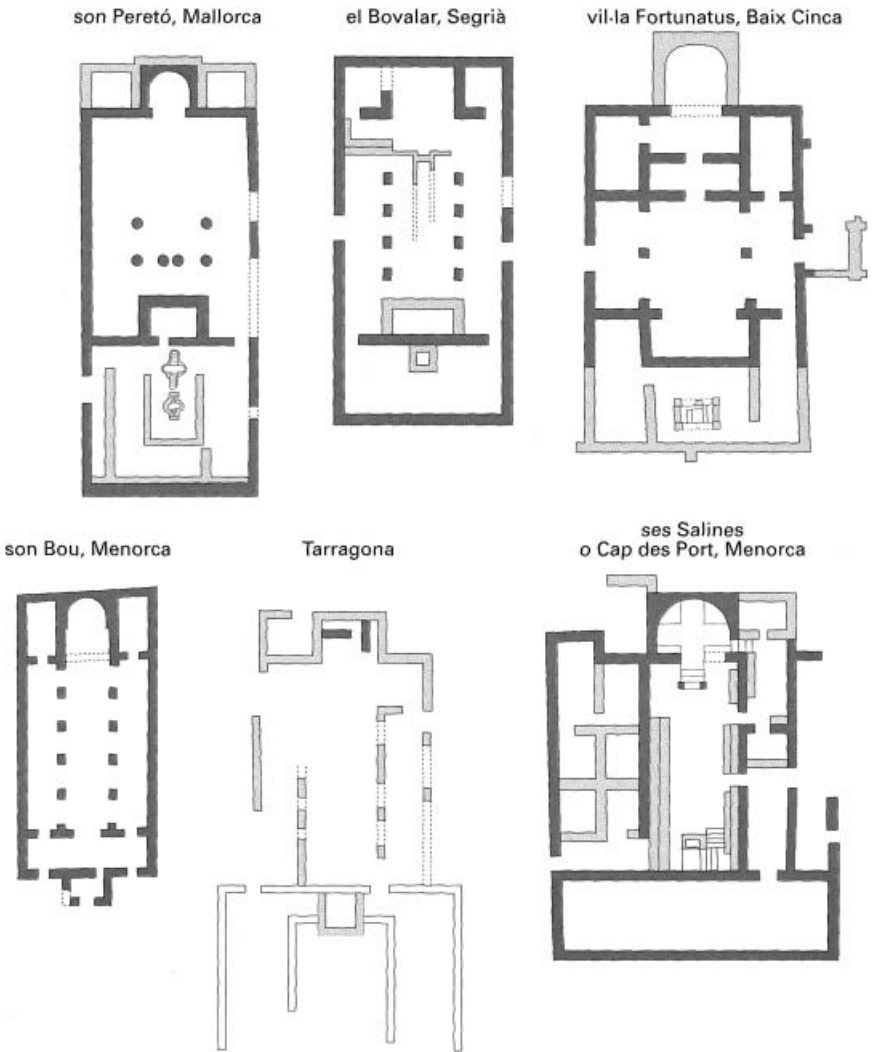


Fig. 7. Plans of some Spanish churches (after Palol 1999, 'Els edificis religiosos', in *Del Romà al Romànic*, Barcelona, pp. 163–72).

Christianity's local physical face, they also offer a critical analysis of Christian building chronology, the presence or absence of the cult of martyrs, and frequently the only evidence for local Christian liturgies. What all this means in terms of the nature of local Christian communities, their scale and wealth, episcopal power, that is, the social conditions in which these buildings were produced, tends not to form part of these collections. Texts are interrogated only insofar as they provide basic dates and episcopal reigns under which buildings might be categorized. Thus, stripped of other

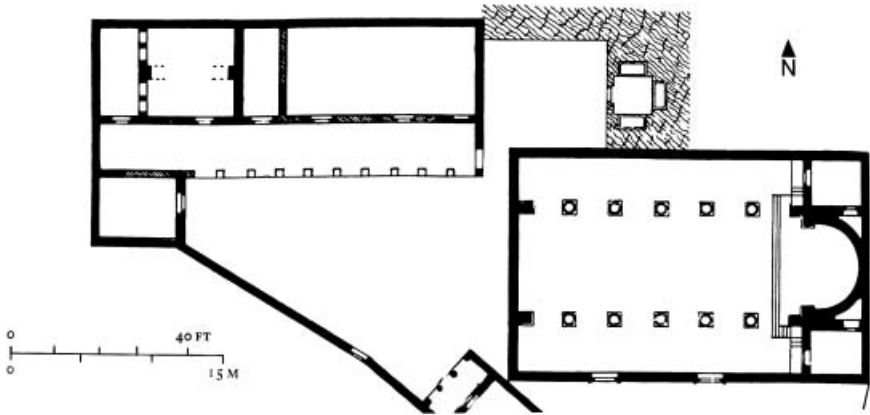


Fig. 8. Plan, Dar Quita, Syria, fifth century (after Krautheimer 1986, fig. 97).

contextualizing delimiters, these detailed and exacting catalogs of churches, liturgical equipment, and martyrs' cults tell a simple story of growing Christian material presence, and thus, seemingly, growing Christian power. In its artless simplicity, however, lies a troubled logic: buildings do not necessarily equal power, but rather, like their sister texts, serve as rhetoric in stone, projections of an ideal, and **not necessarily reflective of a reality.** Indeed, were the church's progress measured by church building activity, one would have to conclude that Christianity suffered a serious set-back in the eighth century, when very few urban churches were built and many fell into disrepair.

That this simple teleology is not the only story has been suggested by **the few studies that have attempted to integrate typology and social history, archaeology and texts, to examine the fullness of circumstances surrounding the construction of particular churches or groups of churches.** One new study, for instance, suggests that the development of basilican architecture was not simply a result of 'tweaking' civic basilicas for Christian use, but was fundamentally impacted by local burial patterns and communal memory (Yasin 2002). Detailed studies of individual buildings or communities, such as those for Rusafa in Syria and its patron, Saint Sergius (Fowden 1999) (Figure 9), **or the complex built by the aristocrat Paulinus at Nola, Italy (Lehmann 2004), have combined an analysis of the archaeological remains with the social histories of site and its attendant politics.** The result in each case reveals the church site as a particular organism, the product not simply of local architectural or institutional imperatives, but also the motivations of individual actors and the exigencies of place, economy, and local expectations. At Rusafa, frontier realities of trade and defense produced a Janus-faced church, a bulwark against invaders and a meeting place of cultures, while Paulinus' complex emerges as both testament to the power of a local (originally) lay aristocrat to shape local martyr cult, and to the

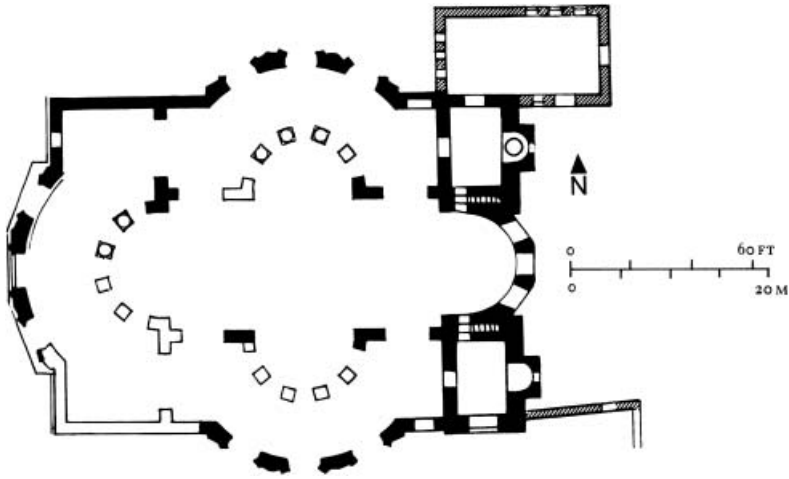


Fig. 9. Plan, St. Sergius, Rusafa, sixth century AD (after Krautheimer 1986, fig. 221).

influence of pre-existing structures, both on architectural form and Paulinus' well-documented perception of his project.

#### CHRISTIAN EUERGETISM

The complex process by which cities slowly shed their earlier monumental trappings and grew a new, often thin, skin of churches is not only illuminated through the archaeology of buildings, but also of words. Epigraphic studies have revealed how Roman euergetic habits mutated under Christian influence (Brown 1982; Caillet 1993; Duval & Pietri 1997; Pietri 2002). It is a tale of both remarkable continuity and equally radical change. The wealthy and even moderately wealthy continued to direct their excess wealth into building projects, simply of different form. Whereas earlier Roman euergetes poured their monies into baths, statues, and spectacle production like the great amphitheater games and circus races, Christian philanthropists, while continuing in some cases to continue these projects, funneled ever more of their pious capital into church construction, charitable foundations like homes for the sick and elderly (*xenodochia* and *gerontochia*), and monasteries. In some sense, the changing physical character of the late antique city can be tracked through the changing direction of aristocratic donations. On the other hand, philanthropic psychology began to change in ways that would have been wholly foreign to a Roman of the first century AD. Dozens of anonymous donations, unthinkable in a world in which the whole point of giving was self-presentation, were used to pave the churches of Italian towns (Caillet 1993) (Figure 10), or to purchase liturgical equipment for local churches in Asia Minor (Moralee

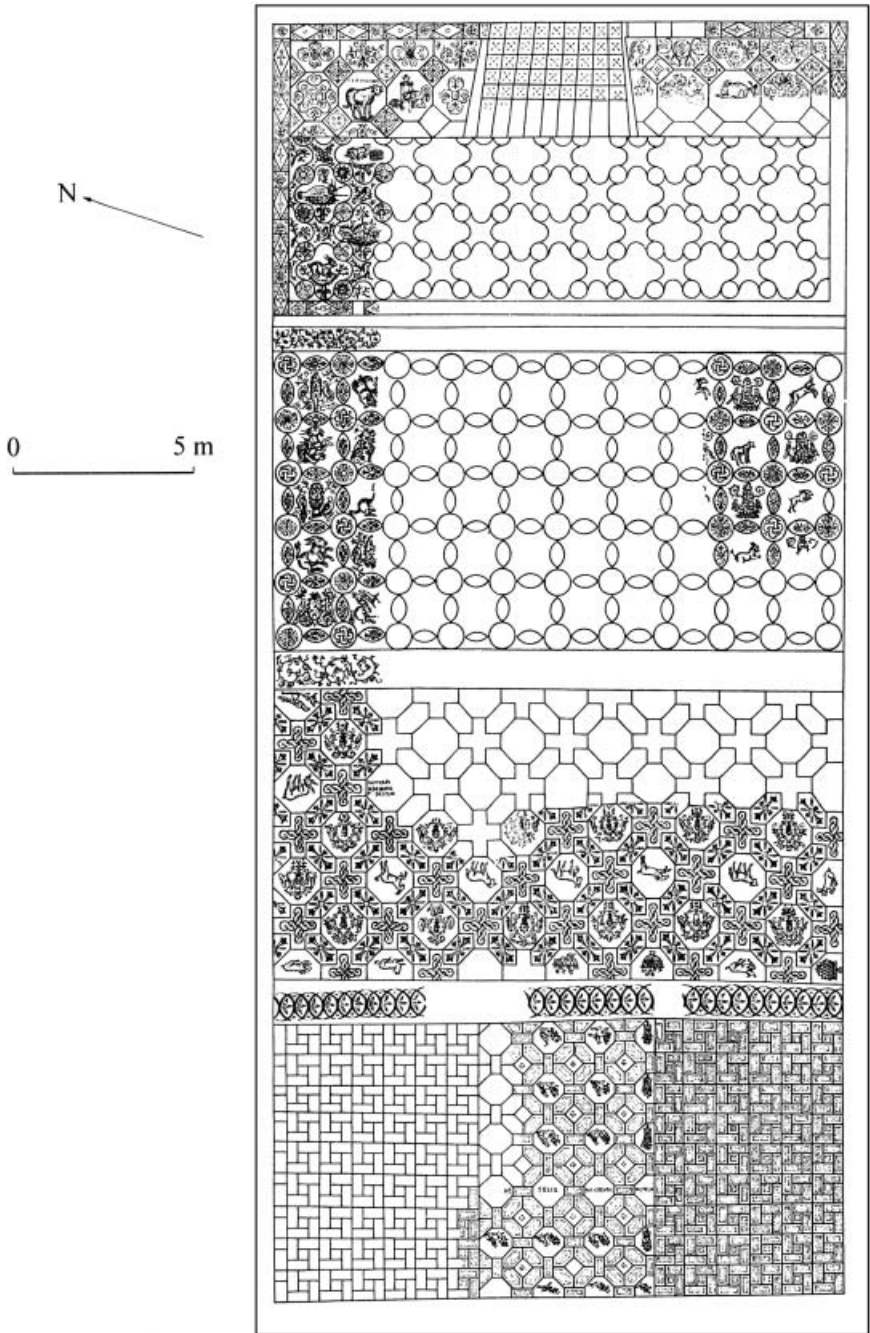


Fig. 10. Floor mosaic, cathedral church, Aquileia, fourth century AD (after Sotinel 2005, fig. 5).

2004). Votive gifts to the gods in exchange for health, success, and safety, a particular form of *quid pro quo* euergetism, had helped to populate the ancient city with statues and buildings. Now, one channeled one's hopes for salvation into the larger stream of the church collective, and instead of stand-alone monuments, an individual's gifts formed pieces – the chancel legs, the altar top, the oils for the lamps – of the collective edifice. If Roman modes of giving did not simply promote, but actually helped shape individuals identity, the Christian transformation of euergetism signaled a new way of regarding the self and his or her relationship with the broader collective.

#### TEMPLES TO CHURCHES

As described above, the processes by which the ancient city 'became' Christian were far more complex than simply building churches. Thus, archaeologists and historians have been understandably fascinated by one type of transformation that seems to sweep away the ambiguities and glacial pace of late antique urban change and distill it in one building and one dramatic gesture. **This is the transformation of pagan temples into Christian churches.** For no less a historian than Gibbon, wandering through Santa Maria in Aracoeli on the Capitoline and pondering the fate of the Capitoline Jupiter, temple–church conversion embodied late antiquity itself, **the victory of one faith over another,** the imposition of an authoritarian institution over a collection of amorphous traditions.

**A series of recent studies on temple–church conversion** have disabused us of these notions, exposing the phenomenon in all its complexity and local variation (e.g. Deichmann 1939; Speiser 1976; Caillet 1996; Cantino Wataghin 1999; Ward-Perkins 1999; Rothaus 2000; Bayliss 2004). Much, and **in the West, perhaps even the majority of superimposed churches seem to have been built long after the temples in question had fallen into disrepair, even ruin.** The conversion of the Pantheon in Rome into Santa Maria dei Martiri took place in 609, **centuries after pagan ritual ceased there.** In the East, where the majority of the textual descriptions of violent conversions and destructions are set, conversion seems to begin earlier, in the fifth and sixth centuries, and is potentially, at least in Egypt, far more common (Frankfurter 1998a,b). An active debate exists as to whether these conversions were motivated by a dim memory of their previous function, or simply the practical reuse of an extant, centrally located building (Ward-Perkins 1999). In the West, where temple conversion began in an era when demographic decline had produced lots of empty lots and extra building materials, the exigency theory is less persuasive. In the East, however, where some convertive episodes began while cities were still densely populated, building plots were at a premium and some temple conversion may have been simply an astute real estate transaction.

It is unlikely, however, that exigency was ever the sole factor. Ancient cities were landscapes of memory, nowhere more so than in their monumental, temple-filled downtowns. The construction of a church on the forum or agora at the very least signaled the coming-of-age of its bishop impressarios, whose cathedra now sat where the emperor's representatives had governed. This 'changing of the guard' was glaringly apparent to Quodvultdeus in Carthage (*Lib. prom.* 3.38), who witnessed the construction of a church inside a temple of the local goddess Caelestis; the similarity between the local bishop's name, Aurelius, and that of emperor Marcus Aurelius whose dedication inscription still emblazoned the building's façade, confirmed the conversion's triumphant inevitability. Similarly, even in the case of some late temple conversions, such as the Parthenon (Frantz 1965) (Figure 11) or the temple of Jupiter at Baalbeck (Caillet 1996, p. 195), the builders might take special care to preserve the temples' peripteral colonnade or tenemos – those parts of the building that most clearly broadcast its previous function – while inserting the church into the temple's cella or courtyard. The building's past was thus proudly claimed by its new owners. Other examples, like the temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodesias, seem to exhibit a more overt eradication of memory (Herbert 2000): here the building was reoriented, the dipteral colonnade converted into nave supports, and the whole encased in a new wall – temple literally swallowed by church. The meaning of these various technologies of conversion is rarely clear (Gutteridge 2004): do they reflect a church inserting itself into the city's glorious civic past, or the church's victory over that past? Or both, simultaneously?

Textual descriptions of temple-church conversion tend to linger on incidents of violent conversion. These texts seem to cluster in certain regions – in Egypt, in Gaul – and monks are often listed as the impresarios of the attacks (e.g. Gaddis 2005). Archaeologically, instances of violent destruction are hard to locate: while it is tempting to associate broken statuary and burning levels with purposeful violence, the slower violence of abandonment, accidental burnings and other acts of nature produce similar results. Attempts to match the Egyptian and Gallic evidence with archaeological 'proof' are thus not always convincing. The removal of Isiac reliefs and the insertion of a cross at the temple of Isis at Philae, for instance, probably did not occur until some time after the initial temple's conversion (Grossman 1984) (Figure 12), while the broken statuary in rural Gallic sanctuaries (Sauer 1996, 2003; cf. Gordon 1999) is hard to attribute to Christian hands when Christian numbers were so few in those areas (see below). Rather, it is probably better to understand the texts themselves, rather than the characters and events they describe, as having the real power of destruction. These texts mapped onto a still-active pagan cityscape a language of struggle and resistance that it very possibly lacked, urging its readers to see their cities (and countryside) with eyes alert to the power of the pagan *daimones* (Caseau 2001).

*Archaeology of Asceticism and Pilgrimage*

In no area of Christian archaeology is the relationship between texts and objects more immediate and confounding than asceticism. Archaeologists have relied particularly heavily on ascetic texts in the interpretation of sites, not least because these texts, from the *Rule of the Master* to the *Apophthegmata patrum*, are often unusually rich in physical detail, providing exacting information on location, types of buildings, number of inhabitants, frequently written by ‘eye-witnesses’. It is easy to forget that ascetic texts, particularly early ones, are powerful, polemical documents whose physical language is meant to invoke powerful, convertive responses in their readers; monastic rules and tales from the desert are not reportage, but carefully constructed efforts to produce, through the effort of the word, a not-yet-extant world. The example of pre-Christian Jewish ascetic site at Qumrân is indicative (Vaux 1961): Qumrân has been associated with the Essenes, a group who, according to Josephus, Pliny and so-called Dead Sea Scrolls found near the site itself, often disavowed marriage, withdrew from society and gave up their belongings. The site of excavated at Qumrân is a large, almost monumental collection of well-built buildings, complete with a sophisticated water system, scriptorium, ceramic workshops, and a large communal hall. Clearly, this product of a communal effort is far wealthier than one might expect from an uncritical reading of the texts. Similarly, a careful examination of the extant Christian archaeology suggests a very different picture than that implied in the writings of Jerome or Benedict.

Identifying ascetic sites and distinguishing them from other kinds of sites is particularly problematic. In the West, ascetic practice took place principally in homes, both urban and rural, until the sixth or seventh centuries. Rules, established hierarchies, and necessary renunciation of property only become systematized with the sixth-century monastic ‘rules’, like that of ‘the Master’ or Benedict, and it is only then that we can really begin to speak of monasticism *per se*. Thus, the early ascetic abodes were simply houses, and as such, indistinguishable archaeologically from other houses (Duval 1986; Cantino Wataghin 1997). Even in the East, where coenobitic monasticism was established already in the mid-fourth century, distinguishing monasteries from houses, fortresses, or other types of settlements is often difficult.

For this reason in the West, there exists no ‘monastic archaeology’ *per se* in the fourth through seventh centuries. No definitive monastery of this date has been excavated, although many have been proposed. The most convincing of these proposals are based on textual information – the proposed monastery at San Sebastiano in Alatri (Fentress et al. 2005), mentioned in the Dialogues of Benedict, or the earlier *domus* near the church at Hippo (Bizot 2005), where Augustine described his own monastery. But the former has no convincing sixth-century remains (Hodges 2007), while the later is simply a *domus*, with no outward signs of anything



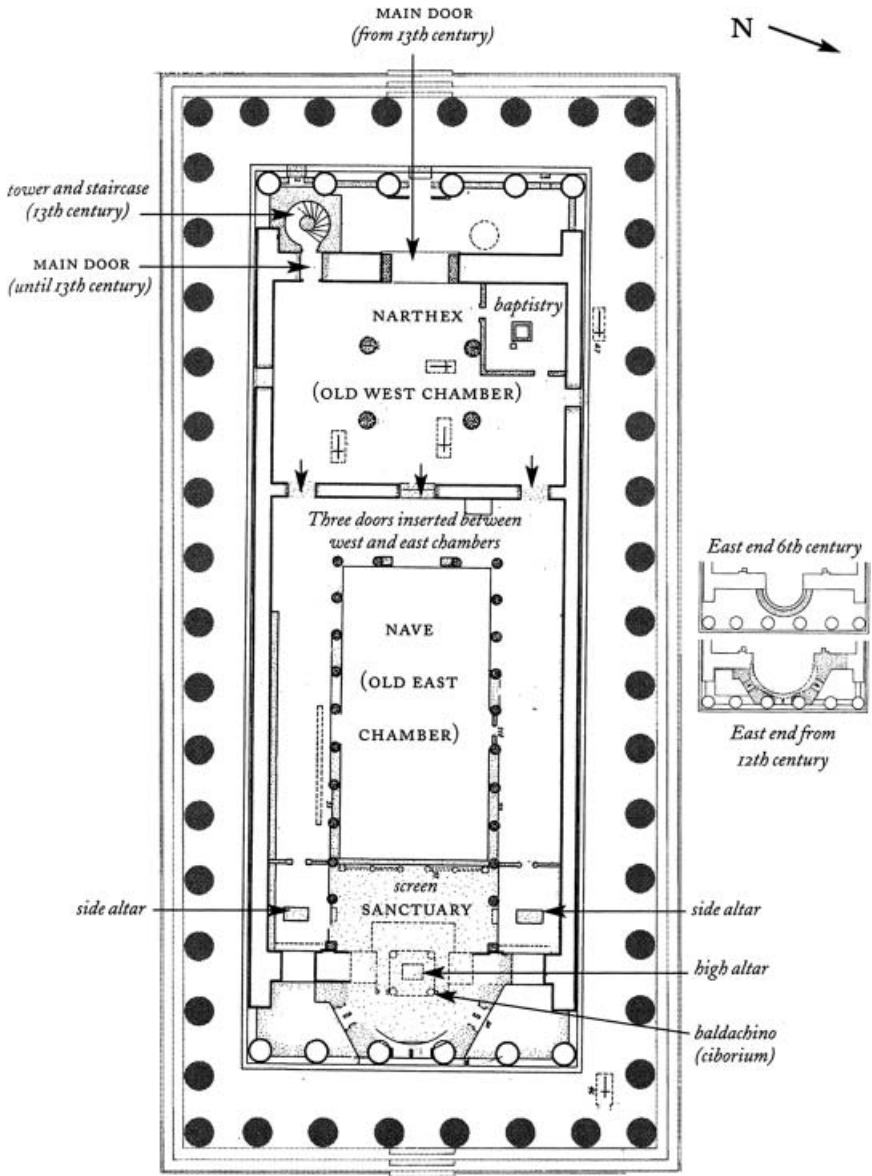


Fig. 11. Plan, Parthenon, showing church phases, seventh century AD (after Beard, 2003, *The Parthenon*, fig. 4).

specifically ‘monastic’, such as cells or a common eating area. Other examples, such as the complex at Diaporit near Butrint in Albania (Bowden & Përzhita 2004), or that discovered outside Tarragona at Parc Central (Mar et al. 1996), display physical signs we associate with later monasteries – such as a church accompanied by a range of rooms around a courtyard,



Fig. 12. Philae, Ptolomaic reliefs damaged during Christian phase, fifth century AD (author).

but that have also been plausibly identified as the hostelries of martyr shrines. It is only in the later seventh and eighth centuries that charter evidence and archaeology together convincingly allow us to more convincingly identify monastic sites, although again, typically only the church is preserved (Cantino Wataghin 1997; Cantino Wataghin et al. 2000). When other buildings are preserved, such as at Roumainmotier or Augsburg, there does not seem to be any consistent monastic architecture *per se*, but rather a variety of site arrangements centered around the monastic church. The cloister only really appears as such in the eighth century, and is used sporadically and in a variety of forms, as the well-excavated site of San Vincenzo with its small 'garden' and open courtyard, indicates (Hodges 1993).

In the East, identifying ascetic sites is helped by a superabundance of texts, while the faster growth and popularity of the ascetic movement here produced a larger body of early ascetic sites. Fourth-century anchoritic sites are mostly to be found in Egypt, where excavations at Kellia, Sketis, and Esna have produced some remains, while coenobitic monasteries, such as those of Pachomius at Pbow (Lease 1991) or Shenoute at al-Dayr al-Abyad (Grossman 1991), have also been identified. In many cases, however, early excavations interpreted the remains principally through the texts and seem to have dated them accordingly. The more recent excavations at Kellia, for instance, have found very few fourth-century remains and instead revealed a site whose heyday was the sixth and seventh centuries. Similarly, few convincing remains of Pachomian age have yet been unearthed at Pbow. While new, scientific excavations are needed in abundance to clarify the picture, fourth-century monasticism was probably more limited than has previously been supposed, and the 'eye-witness' accounts by

Jerome or Rufinus, who counted monastic communities numbering in the several thousands, should be taken with some caution. Similarly, studies on monastic topography have revealed that many Egyptian monasteries were set near populous villages, and few were located in the true 'desert', but rather near or within fertile agricultural zones (Wipszycka 1994; Goehring 1996). The 'flight to the desert' so touted by monastic writers thus often took place in a bustling rural landscape, not only the wind-swept desert these texts call to mind (Goehring 1993).

Eastern ascetic sites display strong regional characteristics. In the Egyptian oases, semi-excavated miniature houses, complete with a courtyard, kitchen, pantry, latrine, two or more cells, and an oratory, all decorated with frescos, are the norm in the sixth- to seventh-century phases at Esna (Sauneron & Jacquet 1972) and Kellia (Daumas & Guillaumont 1969; Haeny & Leibundgut 1999; Henein & Wuttmann 2000-) (Figure 13). In the Nile

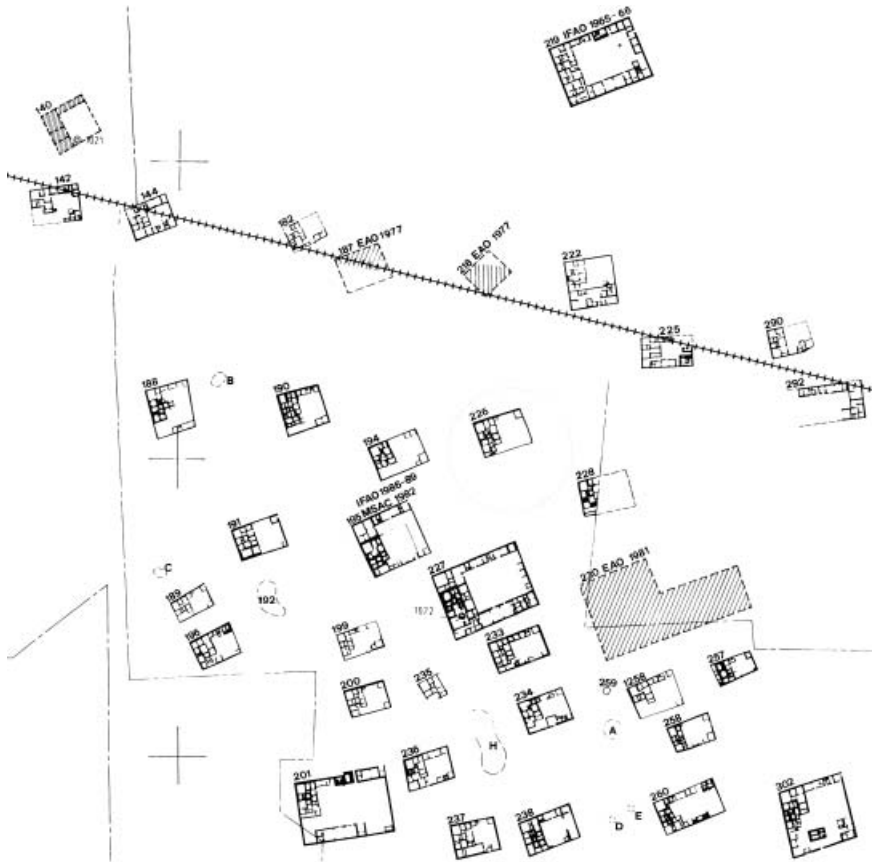


Fig. 13. Plan, cells at Kellia, area QR 195, sixth to seventh centuries AD (Henein & Wuttmann 2000-, fig. 2).

valley, however, cliff-sides and, above all, earlier Pharonic tombs were used for cells (O'Connell 2007). In Palestine, particularly in the Judean desert, cave and cliff-based structures are most common, consisting of more rudimentary, smaller habitations, and a cave church (Patrich 1995; Hirschfeld 1992). The archaeology of coenobitic sites is similarly varied: Palestinian coenobia tend to be built on flat ground, unlike the cliff-based lavras, but their plans varied from orthogonally planned sites like the monastery of Martyrius outside Jerusalem to the more irregular Judean desert monasteries. Boundary walls, however, are common to all. In Egypt, the archaeology of fourth- and fifth-century 'Pachomian' monasticism is very much the archaeology of the village: not only did Pachomius' earliest coenobitic settlement at Tabbenese bear that name, but his foundations were often set in deserted villages, or near living ones (Wipszycka 1994; Goehring 1996). Similarly in Syria, monasticism flourished in and near populous villages; Tchalenko (1953–1959) claimed to have located a series of coenobitic establishments near town churches, while in the agricultural hinterland, towers were built or reused for anchoritic practices, with the anchorite inhabiting the top and a helper or two stowed in the ground floor (Peña et al. 1980, 1983). It is in this town and village hinterland, too, that the great stylites like the elder and younger Simeon plied their trade.

When one considers the archaeological corpus as a whole, what is perhaps most striking is the blurriness of the anchoritic/coenobitic boundary (Goehring 1990, 1993; Wipszycka 1996), which seems so neatly encapsulated in the sources, and which seduced both ancient western observers like Jerome and John Cassian, as well as a previous generation of modern scholars. From Sabas' first coenobitic monastery with its handful of monks to the great Kellian lavrae with dozens occupying a single 'cell' by the sixth and seventh centuries if not earlier, many sites seem to blur the solitary–communal distinction, and display a whole spectrum of monastic solutions born of individual choice and local exigency.

Local economic activities – buying and selling property, serving as landlords, making and exporting wine and oil – had a formative impact on monastic life in all these areas, and monks, in turn, seemed to have played a central role in local economies (Wipszycka 1972; Goehring 1990; Hirschfeld 1992, pp. 103–11; Bagnall 1993; Heiska 2003). Indeed, the heyday of eastern monastic material culture coincides in many cases with that of their general region; Egypt's late agrarian florescence and Palestine's burgeoning caravan and wine-export markets both parallel monastic growth, and current research finds monks well-entrenched in, if not dominating these booming economies (Banaji 2001; Wickham 2005, pp. 242–55; 419–28; 759–69; 770–80; 443–59).

Closely allied to the phenomenon of asceticism is that of pilgrimage, itself a form of ascetic devotion as the pilgrim displaced him- or herself from home and country to seek the foreign holy, be it a place or a person. Sources as diverse as the travel account of Egeria, Vigilantius' attack on

pilgrimage, and relic collecting, not to mention the hundreds of so-called pilgrimage ampullae, flasks containing holy oil or dust and imprinted with images of a holy site, suggest a world that had suddenly ‘tuned in and dropped out’ (cf. the contributions in Ousterhout 1990). But how prevalent was late antique pilgrimage? How did pilgrimage impact local communities? The answer is predictably different for the different halves of the empire. Field surveys around the suburban martyr shrines in Rome’s hinterland (e.g. Quilici & Quilici Gigli 1993, cf. Fiocchi Nicholai 2002) have identified only a handful of contemporary clustering structures and habitations, nothing like the apparatus one would expect from a reading of Prudentius, who describes frenetic late fourth-century Roman pilgrimage traffic. One is left wondering how prevalent pilgrimage really was in most areas of the West prior to the Early Middle Ages. In the East, at least by the sixth century, the matter was different (see now Frankfurter 1998a,b): the still-impressive remains at Qual’at Sim’an with its octagonal church built around the column of Simeon Stylites include a huge complex of buildings to accommodate visitors, echoing the rambunctious accounts of buying, selling, fighting, and consensus described in the saint’s vita. Jerusalem and its environs itself must have seen considerable pilgrim traffic, and the great basilica–rotunda complex at the Holy Sepulcher built by Constantine and the Bethlehem octagonal church over the grotto of the Nativity hosted Egeria and her successors. One must be careful, however, of assuming these grand structures were built with pilgrimage in mind: many, if not most, of the Holy Land’s major *locus sacer* monuments were the product of imperial euergetism, and at least among the Theodosian empresses, had become a *de rigueur* marker of imperial piety. While often commemorating an imperial visit, it is unclear to what degree these great churches imply concomitant pilgrim hoards, or describe an effort to emulate Constantinian euergetic practice.

The most important pilgrimage in any case was not the trans-Mediterranean variety such as Egeria’s, but local, and it is here where the pilgrimage site, much like the monastery, intersected with local and regional economies. As Peter Brown (1971a) pointed out over 30 years ago, the Syrian holy man was born of a bustling Syrian economy (see now Tate 1992) for which the ascetic’s roost acted as both mediation point and market place. Conversely, the remains at Qual’at Sim’an (Crosby Butler 1929) and Abu Mina (now Grossman 1998) in Egypt find pilgrimage sites as major new rural centers, complete with baths, markets, and other quasi-urban amenities. Like the temple complexes that sprouted up in newly Romanized Gaul, these centers were a product of not only their holy occupants, but also of a socially charged rural landscape (*contra* Tate 1992) where hobnobbing, production to meet tax demands, and trade all went hand-in-hand. To sponsor one’s local stylite and to monumentalize his site was to put one’s pious capital where it would be most productive, in the countryside, before one’s landed peers and tenant dependents.

*Christian Landscapes*

Just as Christian activities in the city were profoundly shaped by the social and economic qualities of those cities, so, was Christianity in the countryside a product of its particular environment. The late antique countryside is now a very different place than was imagined even 20 years ago: earlier narratives were populated by abandoned lands (*agri deserti*), marauding barbarians, and a latifundia system that destroyed the small landowner and transformed the free tenant (*colonus*) into a slave (e.g. Jones 1964). Much of this picture has been revised or rejected through a reconsideration of the historical sources and above all by an exponential increase in rural archaeology (Ouzoulias et al. 2001; Bowden et al. 2004; Christie 2004; Wickham 2005). Field surveys and excavations of everything from rural ceramic workshops to rural churches have multiplied and dozens of volumes now appear each year on some facet of the Roman and late Roman landscape. The results have emphasized both the heterogeneity of rural life across the empire, as well as some major trends. In certain areas of the West, such as Hispania, southern Gaul, southern Italy, and Pannonia, the fourth- and early fifth-century landowners built on a scale unprecedented in those regions. While the shine was coming off the buildings in local cities, the countryside gleamed with new or rebuilt villas – large rural estate buildings – covered with mosaic floors and stuffed with sculpture collections. By the later fifth century, this monumental apparatus, too, was crumbling, as export markets plummeted. In the East, the boom begins somewhat later, in the fifth century, and took the form of a carpet of small farms and booming villages as landscapes from Greece to the Syrian highlands were pushed to produce for profitable export and currency markets (Banaji 2001).

In both East and West, Christianity's first material signs appear in the context of the respective economic booms that transformed first the western, then the eastern countryside. In many regions of the West, such as Britain, Hispania and parts of Gaul, and Italy, the first Christian buildings appear in the same places where building and elite competition was most intense, namely, the villa (Figure 14). These structures, frequently mausolea, memoriae, or chapels, were often not churches strictly defined, nor typically meant to serve the wider population, but rather the owner's family and perhaps some dependents (Bowes 2007). Thus, they were not convertive tools as would be the later parishes, but rather, like the great villas of which they were a part, monuments of personal power and identity. Indeed, in these same areas the later parish churches were built over or near the remains of earlier villas, serving either residual populations or reusing a conspicuous landmark of power for proselytic purposes (cf. Chavarría 2007).

In the East, particularly in the Aegean, Egypt, and Asia Minor, the first churches likewise appear as part of an increasingly bustling fifth- and

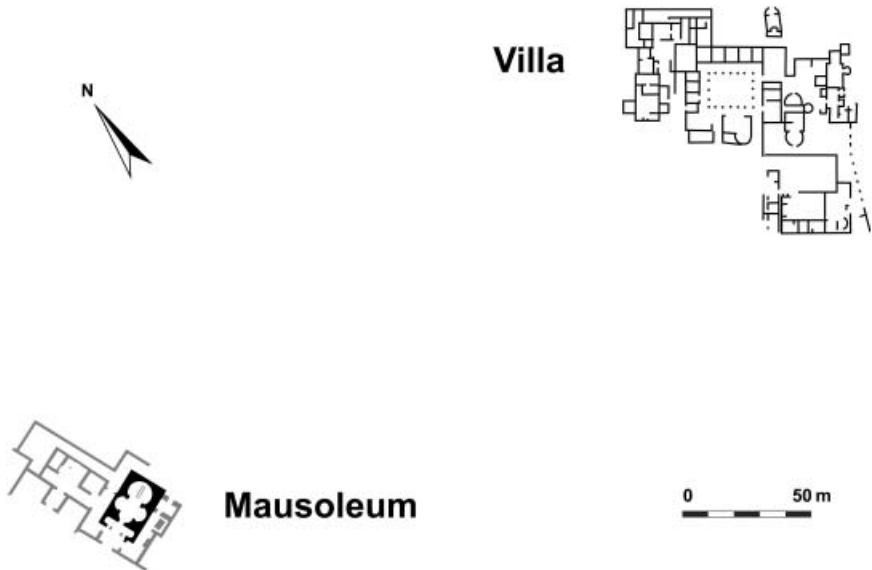


Fig. 14. Plan, La Cocosa villa, showing villa and Christian (?) mausoleum, first to sixth century AD (author, after Palol 1967, *Arqueología Cristiana de la España Romana. Siglos IV–VI*, Madrid/Valladolid, fig. 57 and Schlunk & Hauschild 1978, *Die Denkmäler der frühchristlichen und westgotischen Zeit*, Mainz am Rhein, fig. 6).

sixth-century landscape of villages, small farms, and occasional villas, either located within these entities or set some distance away.<sup>11</sup> These churches frequently served as a nexus of new settlements, although it is often difficult to know if the church attracted habitation or vice versa. Martyr shrines sometimes appear at the fringes of these villages or in solitary points in the landscape, serving, as did the rural pagan sanctuaries of the archaic period, as points of mediation and competition for a ring of local villages.

In both East and West, then, the growth of local rural economies seems to have played a profound role in church building patterns. The appearance of Christian buildings, however, is not necessarily synonymous with Christian institutional growth. In the West, throughout the fourth, fifth, and even the early sixth centuries, institutional Christianity remained an urban religion as bishops found their hands full managing their urban flock, and the countryside was left to rural elites whose Christian impulses were largely confined to their immediate families. The parish church, it is becoming clear, became a real factor only much later: previous work on the origins of the parish assumed that parishes, at least as territorial units, sprang into being with the constitution of the public church in the fourth century, a basic element of church organization (e.g. David 1947; Griffe 1947). The notion was seemingly supported by fourth-century church councils in which rural populations are termed ‘parochiae’. Recent studies, however, have noted that the fourth-century sources use the term only infrequently,

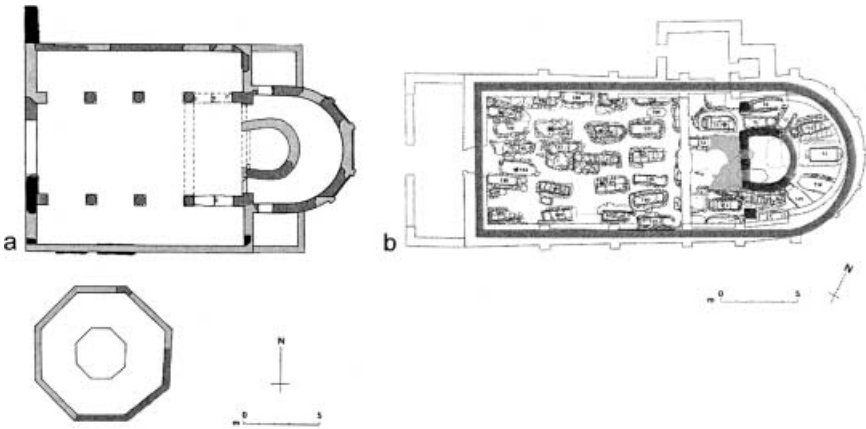


Fig. 15. a. S. Vittore di Sizzano. b. S. Lorenzo di Gozzano, late fifth to sixth centuries AD (Pejrani Baricco 2003, 'Chiese rurali in Piemonte tra V e VI secolo', in GP Brogiolo (ed.), *Chiese e insediamenti nelle campagne tra V e VI secolo*, Mantova, fig. 15).

when it rarely carries the notion of a territory or institutional framework (e.g. Février 1994; Monfrin 1998). It is only in the mid-fifth and sixth centuries that the term appears with any frequency: the correspondence of Gelasius and Pelagius finds the popes trying to impose distinctions between private churches and such 'parrochiae', restricting certain rituals like baptism and burial to the latter, while later Gallic and Spanish councils gradually place private clergy and estate churches under the control of parish administration (Violante 1982; Pietri 2002, 2005). In other words, not only do these sources describe a much later development of clearly defined parish boundaries and responsibilities, but they also suggest that the concept of parish itself – the various liturgical acts that contributed to the so-called 'care of souls' – stemmed not from an *a priori* notion of diocesan organization, but grew out of a tension-filled dialectic with private churches that claimed the same rights. Archaeological evidence is tending in the same direction, although identifying parish churches in the archaeological record is tricky. Seemingly clear markers of parish identity, such as baptisteries or collective graveyards, turn out to be false friends. Cautious studies in Spain, France, and Italy, have unearthed the earliest probable parish buildings beginning in the later fifth century and expanding in the sixth century (Pergola 1999; Brogiolo 2003; Delaplace 2005) (Figure 15). Interestingly, although church councils describe parish systems as expanding in numbers and complexity through the seventh century, with the exception of Hispania, relatively few new seventh-century rural churches have been found and almost none of eighth century date, a product probably of our poor understanding of seventh- and eighth-century ceramics that would date these buildings, and/or the general economic collapse that took place at the end of the sixth century.



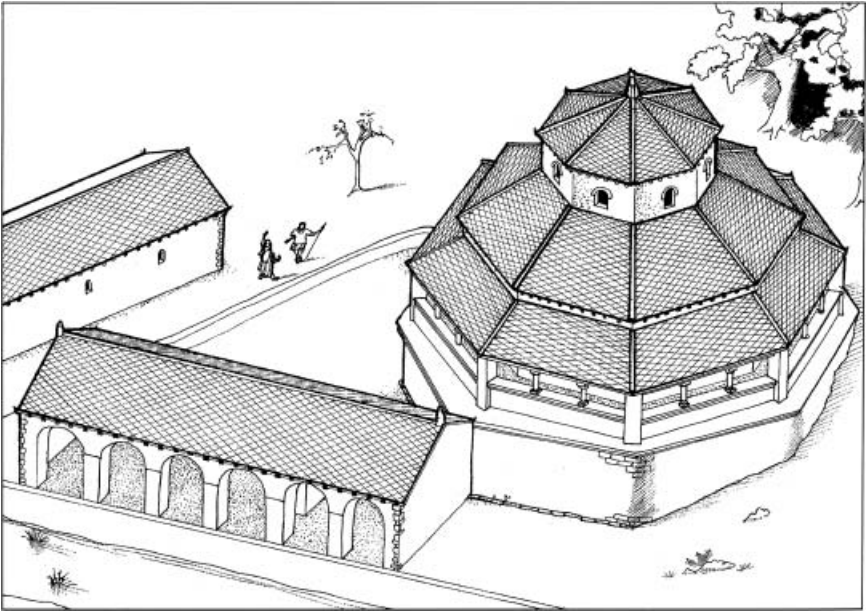


Fig. 16. Temple of Apollo, Nettleton, Britain, fourth century AD phase (Bédoyère 2001, *The Buildings of Roman Britain*, Stroud, fig. 135).

In the East, Christianity's institutional presence began somewhat earlier and took a different, more decentralized form. *Chorepiscopi* – sub-bishops dependent on a local urban episcopate and responsible for a rural territory – seem to have organized rural flocks as early as the later fourth century (Leclercq 1907–1953). Their spread throughout the fifth and sixth century is paralleled by an explosion of rural church construction in those centuries, although as in the West, the precise institutional status of a given church is rarely clear from the archaeological evidence. The finely-built churches with martyr's relics and baptisteries that peppered Syrian villages (Tchalenko 1953–1959; Lassus 1957; Tate 1992), for instance, might be built by local elites, local villagers, or episcopal largess, and supervised by a *chorepiscopus*, local priests, or some combination.

Christianity in rural North Africa assumed a form particular to its own demographics, rural economy, and sharply polarized origins. Here, regular bishops (not *chorepiscopi*) were frequently stationed in villages and great estates (Markus 1979; Dossey 1998). In part, these 'rural bishops' were a product of North Africa's extraordinary rural demographics, in which estates, *vici*, or castella might rival the size of a small city (Lepelley 1979–1981, 1994). The Donatist–Catholic split also resulted in two bishops in many centers and the inflation of episcopal numbers on both sides by using rural ordinations (Frend 1952, 1967, 1979). Despite the presence of rural bishops and other institutional agents from the mid to late-fourth

century, Christian church building seems to have lagged. While well-dated buildings are rare, most seem to date to the fifth and sixth centuries, when they were built by local *coloni*, elites, bishops, or some combination.

Monks and bishops both deride the persistence of pagan practices in rural areas, bemoaning the unrepentant ignorance of the peasantry and the reluctance of local landowners to interfere with a notoriously touchy – and rebellious – workforce (Dölger 1950). Archaeological traces of active paganism are harder to find although by no means non-existent: in Britain, for instance, small, but richly appointed fourth-century shrines have been interpreted either as a sign of resurgent, grassroots paganism, or as part of the broader elite monumental building culture (Watts 1998; cf. Millett 1990, pp. 195–6) (Figure 16). On the other hand, despite the accounts of an active, even aggressive local paganism, Martin of Tours' battles with pagan *daimones* seems to have taken place in a landscape of largely abandoned rural temples (Fauduet 1993, p. 120; cf. Sauer 2003). In Egypt, the region best supplied with accounts of deeply entrenched paganism, rural public shrines seem to have dwindled in popularity or converted to Christian use beginning in the fifth century; practices may then have moved inside to the domestic sphere, where statuettes of Harpocrates, Bes, and other deities continue to appear with some frequency (Frankfurter 1998a,b).

### Conclusions

Forcing some kind of concluding order on a body of material that is not only impossibly broad, but frequently not in dialogue with itself, is bound to be something of an artificial exercise, an act of imposing self-reflection on a discipline that has generally refused it. Some very basic observations, however, both on the material and the field, might be cautiously offered.

The first regards the historiographic dilemma with which this essay began – the particular relationship between Christian archaeology and Christian texts. In many ways, Christian archaeology finds itself in a more fortuitous position than its sister discipline of biblical archaeology: embedded ever more firmly in the study of late antiquity, Christian archaeologists are surrounded by colleagues whose training and outlook is resolutely, and increasingly, interdisciplinary. Younger scholars particularly are comfortable using both texts and material culture to tell stories. The next step, perhaps, is a new 'discomfort', a recognition that, like Wittgenstein's lion, our understanding of one kind of historical language does not provide us sufficient empathy to understand the other. A new level of theoretical discourse in which we ask how texts and material culture speak, and how we think we understand their languages, seems in order.

Our increasing knowledge of the material itself is already providing some fine fodder for this discourse. The problem of dating is illustrative: archaeologically derived dates for Christian structures – be they the alleged third-century house churches in Rome or the fluorescence of

Christian buildings in cities and the countryside more broadly – are all trending later. In other words, Christianity now seems to have had only a limited material presence until the fifth century and in places, even later. The implications for textual history are enormous: first, it is ever more important to get times and places right when juxtaposing texts and objects. The fifth and sixth centuries are now patently a very different world than the fourth, and Gregory of Tours or Shenoute cannot be used to make sense of fourth-century Gallic or Egyptian remains. Second, the disjunction between the ecstatic voices of a Athanasius or Damasus and the paltry Christian churches over which they presided should patently *not* convince us that one or the other kind of evidence must be ‘wrong’, or that they have nothing to say to one another. To imagine Damasus striding through a Rome in which the episcopate was relatively poor and weak and the majority of his parishioners still met in houses allows us to see his (and Prudentius and Jerome’s) images of fourth-century Christian Rome for what they are – science fiction, imaginings of a world that might be, that could be made to be by the sheer power of the word. Damasus’ inscriptions thus become not a grand belt of holy power, but more like the carefully carved epitaphs of early imperial freedmen, small-scale appropriations of the script of Roman power, designed to channel some of that power to his own, embattled episcopate. In other words, a healthy divorce between texts and material culture empowers both forms of evidence, and produces far richer histories, than an unproblematized marriage.

Conversely, aspects of Christian life that fall wholly outside the textual radar have not been probed as much as they might. The economy is one such area: a number of recent studies on property management have attempted to elucidate what one scholar has called a Christian ‘salvation economics’ – the various habits and attitudes toward pious giving and the institutional church’s management of those gifts (e.g. Marazzi 1998; Trout 1999). But economies of giving are only the tip of a much larger economic iceberg with which Christians collided. It is gradually becoming clear that the development of Christian urban and particularly rural topographies are not simply the product of episcopal proselytization, but also of local economies – elite seigniorial economies, trade economies, and tax economies. Archaeology – in the form of pots, luxury goods, road networks, or building technologies – is often the only way this economic landscape becomes visible and Christian archaeologists are thus well-positioned to set churches and other ritual remains within their local economic universes. That they have not done so reflects disciplinary divides that have rendered to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s: even the burgeoning scholarship on the late Roman economy has largely ignored Christianity’s contribution – either as institution or as an economic mind-set – such that one can barely trace Christianity’s progress in any of the great new economic histories of the period (McCormick 2002; Wickham 2005). How Christian attitudes influenced wealth production and

management, how settlement and trade became tied to Christian institutions, how lay elites competed with and colluded with the ever-more powerful institutional church for land, people, and influence – these are all stories that have yet to plucked from pots and walls.

Slowly and in fits and starts, the archaeology of Christianity is moving in these directions, edging out of its disciplinary moorings in art and architectural history toward the broader stream of late ancient history. By reckoning more fully with its concomitant texts and by breaking down still-confining disciplinary boundaries, it may finally cast itself free.

### *Short Biography*

Kim Bowes received her PhD from Princeton University and completed a post-doctoral fellowship at Yale University. She has published on subjects ranging from Christian archaeology and domestic architecture to settlement dynamics and the late Roman economy, and has excavated Roman and late Roman sites around the Mediterranean. She is currently an assistant professor of archaeology in the Department of Classics at Cornell University.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> *Atlante Europeo di Architettura Cristiana*, organized by Miljenko Jurković of the Center for Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages in Zagreb.

<sup>2</sup> Brown's hugely influential *World of Late Antiquity* made abundant use of material culture as illustrative material: Brown 1971b.

<sup>3</sup> For example, San Clemente: Mullooly 1869; Ss. Giovanni e Paolo: Germano di Stanislao 1907; S. Martino ai Monti: Vielliard 1931; San Crisogono: Mesnard 1935, among several. See also the survey in Marucchi 1902; Kirsch 1918, for the early excavations.

<sup>4</sup> The Latin term 'domus ecclesiae' does not appear in any second- or third-century sources, but only in post-Constantinian contexts where it means a house for the bishops or clergy: c.f. Saxer 1988, who intimates that the term and its Greek equivalent 'oikos tes ekklesias' appear in the third century, but provides no supporting citations.

<sup>5</sup> On the paradigms of sameness and difference in comparative studies of early Christianity and paganism; Smith 1990.

<sup>6</sup> See the instructive debate about the dating of one of the most thoroughly studied catacombs, that of Ss. Pietro e Marcellino: Guyon 1987; Deckers 1992. More generally, see Fiocchi Nicolai & Guyon 2006.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent discussion of Christian population numbers generally, see Hopkins 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Surveys of church building and topography include: France: Gauthier & Picard 1986–; Italy: Testini et al. 1989; Turkey: Sodini 1989; Syria: Lassus 1957; Ulbert 1986; North Africa: Gui 1992; Duval 1989; Berthier 1943; Gsell 1911; Palestine: Piccirillo 1989; Tsafir ed. 1993; Constantinople: Janin 1953; Dagron 1974; and Rome: Pietri 1976; Reekmans 1989.

<sup>9</sup> The systematic study of the eastern Mediterranean has generally lagged behind that of the West, often owing to less interest on the part of the respective countries in documenting their Christian (*versus* classical or Islamic) remains and thus a smaller number of researchers working in these areas.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Gui 1992 (Algeria); Chevalier 1996 (Dalmatia); Duval 1995–1997 (Gaul); Testini et al. 1989 (Italy).

<sup>11</sup> On the Greek landscape in late antiquity, see Alcock 1993; Avraméa 1997; Sanders 2004; on churches in Greece, see a partial catalogue in Caraher 2003; on Syria, Tchalenko 1953–1959; on the late Roman economy in the East generally, see now Wickham 2005; Banaji 2001.

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