

ARCHAEOLOGY

A BYZANTINE DOMAIN IN THE SUBURBS OF OXYRHYNCHOS

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I present the first campaigns of a domain of great importance for further in depth study of the history of the city of Pemdjé, the Coptic name for Oxyrhynchos.¹ This area covers approximately one hectare, located northwest of the city, near a stretch of wall that we hypothetically attribute to an enlargement of the urban area.² The outskirts of Oxyrhynchos cover a large area and contain various monuments, including a large necropolis area, known since the era of the first explorations of the late nineteenth century by B. Grenfell and A. Hunt,³ and subsequently Flinders Petrie,⁴ who in his excavation report provided various plans of what he described as tombs with a “chapel” — although these ruins cannot be identified today. The discovery of an *Osireion* 1.5 km from the city led to increased interest in exploring the entire outlying area within the Oxyrhynchos archaeological mission, based on the assumption that the Greco-Roman and Byzantine city had expanded and populated the surrounding area with heterogeneous features. This led to survey the area by means of low altitude aerial photography, with the collaboration of Yves Guichard and Thomas Sagory as technicians. The aerial images revealed a landscape that remained hidden from the view of those walking at ground level in the desert, as the size of the sand dunes prevent an overall perception of the relief (Pl. 1).

The excavation of this sector — number 16 in the Oxyrhynchos site — has so far entailed five campaigns of approximately one month’s duration. Therefore, the area excavated to date only accounts for a small part of the entire area, and as such we can only present in this communication working hypotheses about the architectural interpretation.

¹ The Oxyrhynchos archaeological mission, led by Dr. J. Padró, is funded by a contract-programme of the University of Barcelona, Rovira i Virgili University and the Catalan Institute of Classical Archaeology. It also receives contributions from the Ministry of Culture and the Catalan Society of Classical Archaeology.

² For a description of Oxyrhynchos and the surrounding area, see the paper *Oxyrhynchos: metropolis and landscape* in E. SUBÍAS et al. (eds.): *The Space of the City in Graeco-Roman Egypt: image and reality*, International Workshop held at Tarragona (30.09.2010-01.10.2010), Tarragona, 2011.

³ B.P. GRENFELL and A.S. HUNT, *The Oxyrhynchus papyri*, Egypt Exploration Fund. Graeco-Roman Branch, London, 1908 and ff.

⁴ F. PETRIE, *The tombs of the Courtiers*, in *British School of Archaeology* 37 (1925), p. 12-19.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE FORTRESS

Judging by the images obtained from the kite aerial photography, the domain consists of a large parallelepiped enclosure, with annexes attached to the east and west (Pl. 1). The western annexe has not yet been explored, but it includes the remains of a turriform structure that resembles other ruins scattered throughout the outlying districts, which have traditionally been interpreted as being funerary monuments dating from the Roman era. The fact that this tower is part of the later building could be the result of appropriation of an existing monument for purposes that are at present unknown. To the north, the large building is adjacent to another archaeological site which basically includes a tower-house (sector 16-3) and walls defining the boundary of a space that is mostly empty. In our opinion, it is most probably a rural plot and its facilities, although only the housing has so far been excavated. Strictly speaking, these buildings are outside the fortress, but their status as immediate neighbours are also important for the development of the area. On the eastern side, the fortress is attached to another annexe that comprises several buildings related to Christian worship and devotion, and as such it has for the present been named the “church annex” (sectors 16-1 and 16-4). This area was the focus for the first explorations of the fortress due to favourable circumstances, but we have recently begun work on the main site after detecting the presence of a large basilica space in the centre of the site (sector 16-6).

The size and complexity of the ruins suggests that the origins and duration of the fortress are also rich in nuances. In any event, the materials that the excavations have so far provided can be dated to between the 5th century AD and at least the 7th century AD, although several factors point to the continuity or survival of the site long after the Arab conquest. It is also possible to define the building as a fortress not so much because the site was designed as a strategic feature, but because it has a boundary wall with small towers. However, this is the usual appearance of brick buildings in rural areas and those in the outlying areas of towns in late Roman Egypt, with small leaning towers acting as buttresses. The term “domain” is the most appropriate for the time being, until consistent data that enables us to ascertain the primary function of the buildings becomes available. Initially, given its location, one might think that this is a large rural building — perhaps the *oikos* belonging to a large landowner. The ruins of the religious structures we have found would not rule out a primarily agricultural and residential function for the building, as in this period patronage was often related to Christian worship, charity and care, and it is possible that large landowners would have sheltered religious communities. However, the archaeology of early Byzantine Egypt mostly provides evidence of large monastic complexes that also administered farms, and as such it is also possible that the fortress was designed as a large monastery. At present, it is impossible to argue for either

alternative with any certainty. Furthermore, the long life of the buildings led to radical changes in their use, of which we have significant examples, such as the construction of a large defensive tower in the centre of the church annexe.

Sector 16-1: a religious site

Sector 16-1 so far consists of two chapels situated around a courtyard (Pl. 2). The first chapel (B) is a roughly square room that would have been covered with a large brick dome, because during the excavation we found the collapse *in situ*. The hemispherical dome is technically interesting, because it stood on six columns, using the room's eastern and western walls for additional support. The first ring of bricks rested on pieces of wood that were supported by the capitals, and were solid with the walls. The columns are about two metres high, and consist of fragments of reused and very heterogeneous pieces of column-shafts, bases and capitals. In the centre of the room, set firmly into the floor, a circular white limestone slab has grooves for a wooden partition. In our opinion, this partition would have isolated an altar and pilgrims would have gathered round it, circling the room as part of a martyrdom-based ritual. Despite the modest nature of the materials, the chapel is a sophisticated piece of architecture that reproduces models of Christian architectural work found in other provinces of the empire (Pl. 2).⁵

The other chapel (A) initially consisted of a rectangular room in which an inscription has been found, painted in red, concerning a saint or a monk. The plan was subsequently modified to create two apses and the pendentives necessary for a vaulted ceiling. This refurbishment meant the silting of the room's angles, which were filled with rubble, including countless fragments of mosaics and late amphorae. The features dating the transformation of the chapel can be placed in around the 6th century AD.⁶ The new cross-shaped layout suggests that it was liturgical in nature, as it also has a small niche in the north wall. We believe that this is an oratory or chapel, but we have found no conclusive evidence for worship taking place here. The walls had been whitewashed several times and the base of the walls had been reinforced with hydraulic mortar when the space underwent a final change to functions of rural nature. The coatings suggest a workplace for processing agricultural products, and several series of

⁵ For example, the circular chapel of the martyr cult with a dome, or "rotunda" in Damous-el-Karita (Carthage). H. DOLENZ, *Damous-el-Karita. Die österreichisch-tunesischen Ausgrabungen der Jahre 1996 und 1997 in saalbau und der Memoria des Pielgerheiligumes*, Vienna, 2001.

⁶ The presence of LR 5/6 type amphorae suggests this date rather than the 5th century AD, as the excavations in other parts of the city have enabled us to observe some degree of evolution in the ceramological facies. See E. SUBÍAS, *La maison funéraire de la nécropole haute à Oxyrhynchos (el Minyâ, Égypte): du tombeau à la diaconie*, Tarragona, 2008.

incisions scattered along the walls, consisting of grouped lines, suggest accounting operations took place.

This industrious facet is consistent with the transformation of the courtyard providing access to the chapel. It contains three kilns of *Late Roman 7* (herein-after LR7) amphorae and a milling area for grain, which was built largely using recycled items of architectural decoration, which probably came from the previous period when the site was used for religious functions. We do not have enough ceramological data to date the transformation of the courtyard, as the production of type LR7 local amphora falls between the 4th and 9th centuries AD but the transformation of the cross-shaped room during the 6th century suggest a later date for the new function (Pl. 3).

Finally, a large square tower was built in this same area but at a different level of circulation higher from the previous one, which suggests that the area's function changed once again — this time probably to some military purpose. Together with the existence of an inscription in Kufic script inside chapel A, this provides evidence for the hypothesis that the fortress was conquered by the Arabs and that it was used for military purposes, at least for some time.

Sector 16.4: a monastic site?

At the other end of the eastern annex of the domain, excavation has begun on a compact, almost square building, of which only one of the main spaces can be described at present. It is a rectangular room of 13 m × 5 m, with a characteristic Egyptian brick vault with an oval profile. Access was from another room, and it appears to be the main hall of a building for communal use. The space is diaphanous, and is only furnished with a very low bench running around the edge. On the east side, the bench becomes a platform, with impressions of a partition that delimited a tribune. The wall on this side had a latticed window with plaster and glass. Opposite, on the axis, a niche overlooks the room. The floor of the room is limestone, with regular slabs in one area and more heterogeneous stones on the western side. Moreover, at one point in this area, one slab that is rougher than the others suggests that it bore a vertical feature of which no trace remains — perhaps an altar (Pl. 4).

The decoration of the room alludes to the worship of the cross. On the western wall, the cross is flanked by two rams and two gazelles, or another herbivore that is difficult to ascertain. On the eastern wall, there are only two rams between two highly stylized plant motifs that are also present on the opposite side. In fact, the motif on the eastern wall appears to be unfinished, because the colour used on the western wall to complete the drawing of animals is missing. The long sides of the room have hardly any decoration — only a cross and some graffiti above a red stripe that compartmentalizes the entire pictorial space, to coincide with the impost of the vault. The construction of the vault and therefore

of the complex, can be dated back to the 6th century by ceramics filling the shoulder of the vault, in particular an impressed TSAD with a saint motif.

The shape of the room suggests that it was a gathering place, perhaps a refectory, chaired by a tribune for regular readings within a religious congregation. We hypothetically suggest that the building was part of a monastic house and that the monks attended the martyrdom-based worship at the other end of the annex.

Sector 16.6: the basilica

After the initial examination of the annexes of the domain, it was necessary to survey the central space. Here again, the form of the relief suggested the location of an important building, and this was where we began the excavation that has uncovered a building with a basilica floor plan, which provides new issues for the general understanding. In the construction of this building mud-bricks prevail but there are also bricks and stones at certain points in the structure, and particularly at the base of the columns and the apse. The chronology, based on ceramological data, is between the 5th and late 7th centuries AD (Pl. 4).

The basilica plan has the architectural characteristics of a Christian building with variants that have been identified as belonging to an Egyptian tradition. Of particular interest is the arrangement of the columns so as to create an ambulatory instead of parallel aisles.⁷ This arrangement of the columns minimizes the sides and creates a large central area, which in this case is 10 m wide. The perimeter colonnade acts as a support for a gallery, which is accessed by a staircase at the south of the chancel. The southern ambulatory had specific functions, as it was largely separated from the central nave by partitions, the grooves of which are evident at the base of the columns. This nave has a low bench running along the wall, past a number of privileged tombs, meaning that it was sometimes the venue for a funerary ritual.⁸

The northern ambulatory had other functions. The bench along the wall is narrower and interrupted by doors giving access to other spaces that are yet to be excavated, but which are undoubtedly important judging by their architectural decoration. To the East, the nave is completed by a room, with two large columns in front, which contained an altar table and three anonymous tombs

⁷ P. GROSSMAN, *Early christian architecture in Egypt and its relationship to the architecture of the byzantine world*, in R. BAGNALL (ed.), *Egypt in the byzantine world 300-700*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 103-136.

⁸ This disposition suggest the church could also function as an incubation center. See for other examples P. GROSSMANN, *Late antique christian incubation centers in Egypt*, in H. BRANDENBURG, S. HEID, C. MARKSCHIES, *Salute e guarigione nella tarda antichità*, Vatican 2007, p. 125-140.

under the floor. Only one of the graves has a small cross inscribed on the slab cover. The walls were painted with repetitive plant motifs, with no more specific epigraphic or symbolic references.

The chancel, which is tripartite and oriented towards the east, is raised above the nave. There are many variants of Egyptian chancels, and they involve varying degrees of separation from the main nave, by introducing a *khurus*. In this case, there is a staircase of two flights, with a return on the sides, which gives the chancel the appearance of a podium or tribune with limestone slabs. This front was probably monumentalized by columns as we found an imprint in the foundation wall of the chancel. Finally, the chancel of the nave may have housed some sort of partition, as the presence of a small groove for a vertical wooden feature has been observed. However, this is not a structural element of sufficient thickness or importance to suggest an iconostasis.

The central apse would have been built with blocks of limestone, unlike the other walls of the basilica. This material would create a well-defined inner face, capable of supporting a mosaic mural decoration, from which many *tesserae* have been recovered, although it has been impossible to reconstruct any motif.⁹ There is no trace of an altar or a *synthronos* in the apse. Instead the floor of the apse has the remains of a small and low platform with the shape of a *stibadium*,¹⁰ with the imprint of a *sigma* table in the floor.¹¹ This installation, which is relatively abundant in Egypt, suggests a funerary function for the space, because the sigma-shaped altar is used above all for burial rites,¹² but it is necessary to clarify for which ritual it was used for because the space seems to be a liturgical one. This installation seems to be more symbolic than a genuine *refrigerium* seat, considering that the table was found embedded in the ground, which suggests a table of offerings rather than an altar.¹³

As a counterpoint to the chancel, there is an area surrounded by a stone *pluteus* isolating a basin covered by a baldachin. Inside the basin, there are also marks which suggest brackets to hold a table. It doesn't seem to function as a

⁹ The mosaic has crumbled to such an extent that it is possible that the stones in the chancel were looted and stripped of the mosaic layer *in situ*. Interestingly, some of them are undoubtedly part of a mural decoration as they form a relief of flakes.

¹⁰ There are some life-size examples and other smaller ones, the function of which is not doubted and which should be seen as symbolic banquet facilities. See E. MORVILLEZ, *Sur les installations de lits de table en sigma dans l'architecture domestique du Haut et du Bas-empire*, in *Pallas* 94 (1996), p. 119-158.

¹¹ For a review of this issue, see N. DUVAL, *L'Autel paléochrétien: les progrès depuis le livre de Braun (1924) et les questions à résoudre*, in *The altar from the 4th to XVth century*, *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 11, Zagreb, 2005, p. 7-18.

¹² G. ROUX, *Tables chrétiennes en marbre découvertes à Salamine*, in *Salamine de Chypre IV, Anthologia Salaminiana*, p. 133-196, 1973, in particular p. 174.

¹³ E. KITZINGER, *A marble relief of the Theodosian Period*, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 14 (1960), p. 17-42.

baptistery as it doesn't allow any descent for ritual immersion neither it seems appropriate for aspersion rite. In our opinion, the purpose of the installation was to display and sprinkle a relic with oil or water to sanctify the liquid by means of contact.¹⁴ This type of installation suggests a building in which worship led to a pilgrimage, of which many are known in the Early Christian East and also in Egypt. This all supports the interpretation of the basilica as a place of remembrance.

With all these elements, in its overall design the building is clearly a funerary basilica with privileged burial areas for church hierarchies. Possibly a community was created to worship a saint and later the place resulted in a pilgrimage focus. Indeed, an initial reading of the text on the tombstone of the main tomb mentions the deceased Menas, *proestos* or prior of a monastery devoted to St. Kyriakon.¹⁵ The name of Kyriakon could be that of one of the last bishops of Oxyrhynchos, which would date it to the 7th century AD.¹⁶ This date is likely because another epigraphic slab tomb dates from the second half of the 7th century.¹⁷

However, the martyrial functions referred to above may only have taken place during a final phase of the domain and the other findings may lead to changes in the interpretation of the site. Indeed, access to the basilica was by eccentric doors, with no door on the main axis of the building, indicating that the space is part of a complex building with various functions, which has yet to be excavated. In our opinion, the space was perhaps originally conceived as something different, even a reception area for a big house or palace, and it acquired its commemorative function over time.

The building also contains areas of refurbishment which highlight the fact that some more changes occurred after the burial and martyrial phase. For example, the painted decoration of the main walls contains highly schematic motifs of trees and flowers and no reference to Christian worship. Over this layer, some subsequent later touches fill in gaps or breakages without adding any new decorations or inscriptions. Moreover, the room south of the apse was transformed into an oven.

¹⁴ P. DONCEEL-VOÛTE, *Le rôle des reliquaires dans les pèlerinages*, in *Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie (Bonn 22-28 September 1991)* Città del Vaticano, 1995, II, p.184-205.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Jesus Carruesco for his first reading of this tombstone that is currently being studied.

¹⁶ A. PAPAConstantinou, *Sur les Évêques byzantins d'Oxyrhynchos*, in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 111 (1996), p.171-173. K.A. WORK, *A Checklist of Bishops in Byzantine Egypt (A.D. 325-750)*, in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 100 (1994), p.2 83-318.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Jesus Carruesco for the translation of the epigraphic greek text where we find the date of the death, the 20th of Choiak, on the 14th year of the indiction, on 402 of Diocletian era [= 686 dC].

ELEMENTS FOR IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROPERTY

The territory of Greco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt has been the subject of numerous studies based on written references, emphasizing the problem of the configuration of the properties of important landowners.¹⁸ The large rural property is documented especially from the late 5th century AD onwards. For the first time, as far as I have been able to confirm, archaeology may be able to provide the essential complement for considering this question. Although it is early days and perhaps premature, I believe it is important to raise awareness of this fact among scholars of the period.

To begin with, the presence of religious and martyrial elements need not contradict the identification of the domain as a rural property. In the early Byzantine period, the political and the religious spheres were very closely intertwined, with leaders in both fields often members of the same extended families, who were sponsors and promoters of Christian worship. From the point of view of the history of ownership, Oxyrhynchos provides information on various properties and families. The most important was the Apiones, whose main residence was located in the nome, although there are grounds to believe that their properties were scattered across various nomes and many toparchies rather than being concentrated in a single large property.¹⁹ The Apiones family would therefore have had several houses, of which perhaps one was “the *domus gloriosa*” (*eudoxos oikos*) mentioned in the sources.

An important, albeit indirect factor for relating the fortress analyzed here with a property of the Apiones is the relationship that it is possible to establish between a plan by B. Grenfell and A. Hunt and part of the family documents.²⁰ The plan includes the location of large walls in the area in which we have discovered the fortress. We believe that they are the same ruins, and it is therefore highly probable that some of the findings by the papyrologists mentioned above come from this site. Among these documents is a family archive, which according to R. Mazza was found in 1896. The author notes that there are no references to the location of the finding, and he proposes a location with related with the site of the city mentioned on the plan as the “temple”.²¹ However, in our opinion,

¹⁸ For a review of this question, see J.M. CARRIÉ, *Économie et société de l’Égypte romano-byzantine (IV-VII siècle). À propos de quelques publications récentes*, in *Antiquité Tardive* 7 (1999), p. 331-352; for the nome of Oxyrhynchos in particular, see above all J. ROWLANDSON, *Landowners and Tenants in Roman Egypt*, Oxford, 1996.

¹⁹ According to ROWLANDSON, *Landowners and Tenants*, p. 78-79, the nome of Oxyrhynchos has a highly fragmented and discontinuous rural property (even though it belongs to the same owner), with a large diversity of settlements *komai*, *epoikia*, *ktemata*, *xoria*, *topoi*.

²⁰ Consultable online at http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy/VEhhibition/the_site/site_plans.html, dated 1900, i.e. in the early years of exploration of the papyrologists Grenfell and Hunt.

²¹ R. MAZZA, *L’archivio degli Apioni. Terra, lavoro e proprietà senatoria nell’Egitto tardoantico*, Bari, 2001. On p. 18, the author says that the set of papyri leads her to believe that

the coincidence of the plan and the time of the archive discovery incline us towards the hypothesis that the archive comes from the fortress, meaning that it may be a property belonging to the Apiones.

According to R. Mazza, the “*proastion tes pyles*” was the main residence of the family,²² built near the wall outside the city, “*exo tes pyles*” and the sources provide a glimpse of the complexity of the property as it had a *triclinium* and baths.²³ This *proastion* was located near the hippodrome and some dykes, and was also related to important infrastructure for transporting water.²⁴ However, the relationship between the *proastion* of Oxyrhynchos with the Apiones should not be assumed to be resolved, as the term is not necessarily synonymous with ‘palace’, as is commonly thought, and does not even imply a relationship of proximity with the city.²⁵ In any event, the fortress is today a good candidate for fulfilling this function, although the possibility that other complexes met the same or better conditions for being the family’s residential centre should not be ruled out, as the north of the city has now been completely destroyed by fields of crops. It is also possible that the area belonged to one of the great Oxyrhynchos families of the period, such as that of Aurelius Appianus or the Iluui Theones, who were also owners of magnificent residences.

The property underwent a major remodelling at the time of the conquest, and is it interesting to note that a papyrus from the 7th century AD documents how the soldier Onnophris Symmmacho owns items from the *proastion*, including bath items, a triclinium and some doors. As a result, it has been suggested that these properties could have been the result of looting.²⁶ This information is consistent with the impression that the domain changed hands, as there were changes in the main building and the chapels’ annex. These changes are at present contradictory, because on the one hand they sacrifice the dignity of some liturgical areas, by turning the church annex into an agro-industrial area, while on the other hand the central basilica became a place of pilgrimage. This contradiction disappear when taking into account the transformation of the domain into a monastery.

Oxyrhynchos was the home of the central administration of the family’s *oikos*, with properties located throughout the nome.

²² MAZZA, *L’archivio degli Apioni*, p. 18 believes that Oxyrhynchos was the home for the central administration of the family’s *oikos*, with properties located throughout the nome.

²³ MAZZA, *L’archivio degli Apioni*, p. 84.

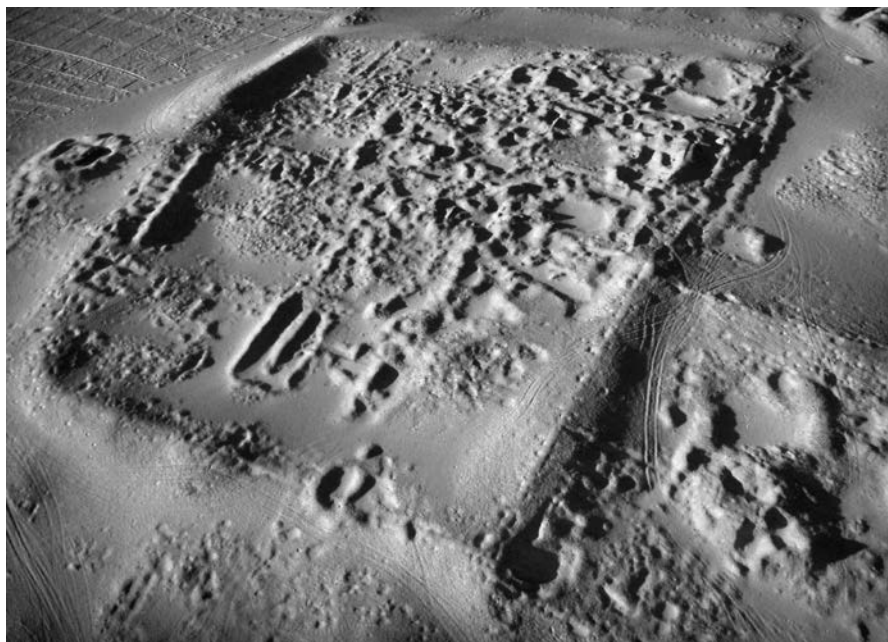
²⁴ MAZZA, *L’archivio degli Apioni*, p. 88 for the *saqqias*, and MAZZA, *L’archivio degli Apioni*, p. 161 for the dykes. The study of the territory of Oxyrhynchos suggests the existence of dykes to the north of the city. See note 1.

²⁵ J. GASCOU, *Nécropolis byzantine IVe-VIIe siècles*, in J.-Y. EMPEREUR, M.-D. NENNA (éd.), *Nécropolis 2 (Études Alexandrines 7)*, Cairo, 2002, II, p. 353-657, in particular p. 653.

²⁶ P.OXY.XVI, 1925. R. ALSTON, *The city in Roman and Byzantine Egypt*, London – New York, 2002, p. 109 and ff.

Finally, the domain was occupied by the conquerors. A key reference in this regard is the existence of an inscription in Kufic script painted on the walls of one of the chapels of the religious site.²⁷ Further evidence is provided by the final functional transformation of the fortress, with the appearance of a defensive tower. These first notes on the fortress show the historical significance of the complex being studied, and the complexity of the changes experienced by the city and the surrounding area within the process of transition from the ancient period to medieval Egypt.

²⁷ The inscription according to Virgilio Martínez Enamorado, to whom we are grateful for the information, mentions the name of Bn Ziyād al-Kabir, possibly one of the first Arab governors of the city.



Pl. 1. Aerial view of the domain in 2004 (photo: Y. Guichard)



Pl. 2. View of the Chapel B in the eastern annex (photo: Th. Sagory)



Pl. 3. Courtyard of the chapels complex (photo: E. Subías)



Pl. 4. General view of the *refectory* in 2008 (photo: E. Subías)



Pl. 5. Appearance of the basilica building after the first excavation campaign in 2009
(photo: Th. Sagory)