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The cathedral complex at Nisibis

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Abstract

The cathedral complex at Nisibis sits within what is currently a large excavation site. The excavations, continuing on and off over the last 12 years, have yielded exciting discoveries. This article is not a report of the excavations as such, but, in the light of them, it revisits the cathedral complex in an attempt to reconstruct the possible cathedral on the site and to establish the building phases of the only standing structure on the site, known as the 'Church of Mor Yaqub', which was the baptistery of the cathedral.

Özet

Nusaybin'deki katedral kompleksi bugün büyük bir arkeolojik kazı alanıdır. Son on iki yıldaki arkeolojik kazılar bazı heyecan verici sonuçlar ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu makale kazıların bir raporu değildir, ancak onların ışığında katedral kompleksini yeniden ele alarak, katedrali yeniden kurgulamaya ve arazide ayakta duran ve bugün Mor Yakup kilisesi olarak adlandırılan vaftizhanenin çeşitli yapı evrelerini saptamaya çalışacaktır.

Nisibis (modern Nusaybin, situated close to the Turkish/Syrian border) was an important late antique military, commercial and intellectual centre located at the frontier of the Byzantine empire with the Sasanians. It was considered 'the strongest bulwark of the Orient' (Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* 25.8.14). In addition, together with Edessa it was described in AD 359–360 as a city 'possessing the best businessmen who were rich and supplied with all goods' (*Expositio totius mundi et gentium* 22). From Diocletian's time, Nisibis was the official market for Roman and Persian trade, and it retained this status after its surrender to the Persians in AD 363. The loss of Nisibis was a great shock to the Romans, who continued to threaten the city from their newly-founded city of Dara, built just opposite Nisibis, to the irritation of the Persians (fig. 1). The treaty signed at the end of the war in AD 561–562, over half a century after the foundation of Dara in AD 505, states that 'Henceforth the Persians shall not complain to the Romans about the foundation of Dara. But in the future neither state shall fortify, i.e. protect with a wall, any place along the frontier, so that no pretext for trouble shall arise from this and the treaty thus be broken' (Menander frg. 6.1.314–97 in Greatrex, Lieu 2002: 133). Nonetheless, the Romans tried to retake the city many times, but failed. Nisibis, together with most of northern Mesopotamia, eventually fell to the Muslim Arabs in AD 639.

Nisibis had been an important centre of Syriac-speaking Christianity, but its theological school was relocated to Edessa after the conquest of Nisibis by the Persians. The best-known of its many prolific authors is Mor Ephrem, who also wrote hymns about Nisibis (Ephrem the Syrian, *Carmina Nisibena*) which give insights into the contemporary state of affairs, especially the tensions with the Persians in the fourth century. The Christians of Nisibis continued to survive under the Persians. The east Syrian metropolitan province of Nisibis was established in AD 410 and continued until the 14th century. In the AD 470s Narsai, a well-known Syriac-speaking poet and a former teacher at the theological school of Edessa, re-established the school at Nisibis. When the Edessa school was closed by Zeno in AD 489, many of Narsai's former colleagues and students joined him, making Nisibis the main centre of theological studies for the Church of the East.

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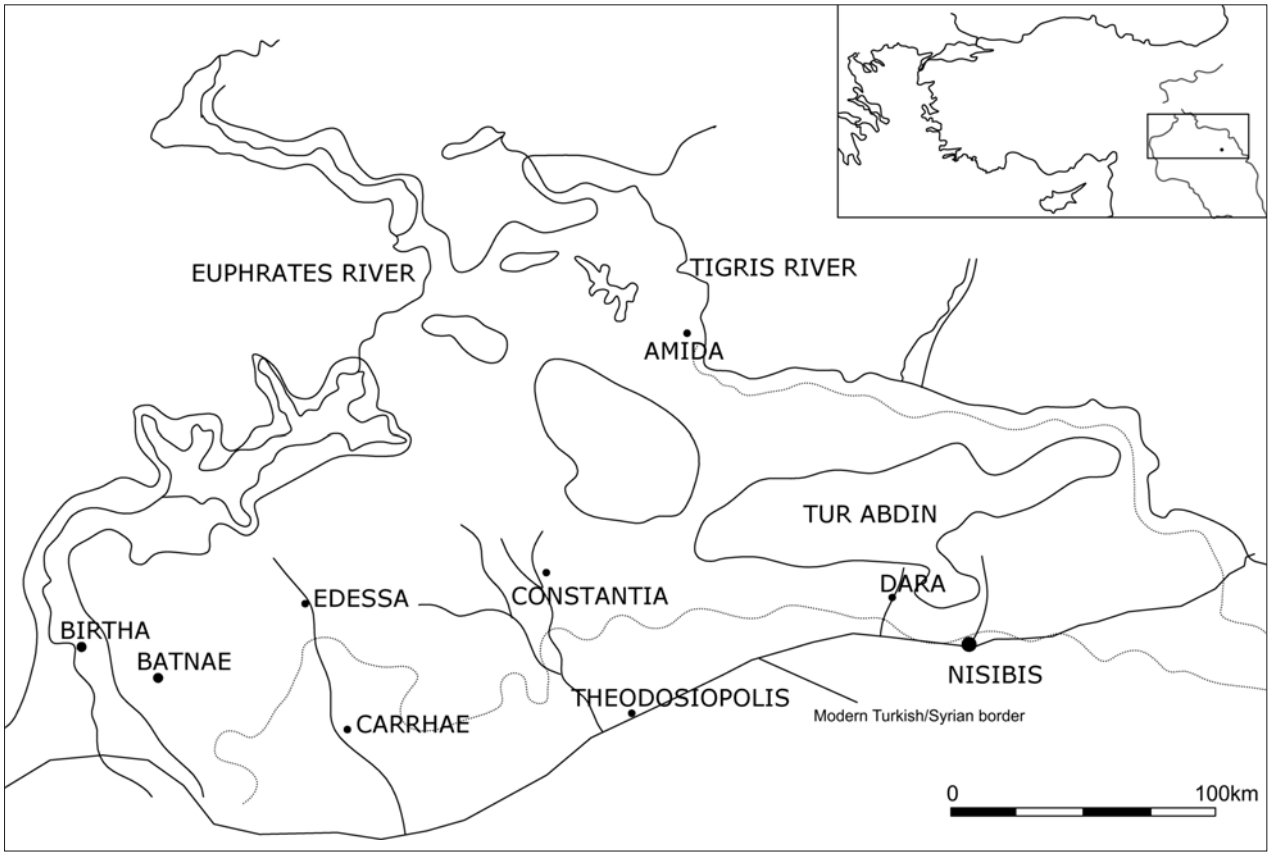


Fig. 1. Map of northern Mesopotamia

The few remains from the late antique city of Nisibis consist of the following: the building which is today known as the 'Church of Mor Yaqub' (or Church of St James); some columns with Corinthian capitals standing in the no-man's land between the Syrian and Turkish borders (Bell, Mundell Mango 1982: pl. 68); some architectural fragments displayed in the public park of the municipality; and a mosaic which is now in the Gaziantep Museum. Of the ancient bridge recorded by Gertrude Bell (Bell, Mundell Mango 1982: pl. 69), nothing has survived. The scant remains may partly be due to an earthquake which destroyed the city in AD 717. Simeon of the Olives (Brock 1979: 176), a monk of the monastery at Qartmin and later bishop of Harran, built and restored many churches in the early eighth century when the city was under Arab rule, but there are now no traces of these.

The difficulty of reconstructing the physical topography of the late antique city of Nisibis in the absence of any substantial evidence has recently been discussed (Russell 2005). However, some hypothetical guidelines can be suggested based on the accounts of the city by contemporary writers and later Arab travellers, the travel notes of J.M. Kinneir (a 19th-century traveller), the modern layout of the town and general tendencies in the city plans of the region in the late antique period.

Two accounts may indicate that the eastern wall of the city ran alongside the river. During one of the many Persian sieges of the city in the fourth century, King Shapur stopped the river Mygdonius by means of a dam. When the river was ready to overflow, his men burst the dam and the water brought down the walls of the city (Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.26). Kinneir, visiting the city in 1813–1814 reports that the ruins occupied a large space along the bank of the river Mygdonius (Kinneir 1818: 443). Kinneir estimates the circumference of the walls at three miles or more. This is close to the perimeter given by the 14th-century Arab historian al-Müstevfî, who states that the circumferance of the city was 6,500 paces (Le Strange 1905: 95), about 4.8km. If we imagine a rectangular layout with a 4.8km perimeter, we see that the ancient city stretched further south than the modern city, towards the Syrian border (fig. 2). If we accept this suggestion for the general contours of the ancient city, the modern main roads conveniently divide the city as a *cardo maximus* and a *decumanus maximus* would be expected to (fig. 2). In the neighbouring late antique cities of Amida (modern Diyarbakır) and Edessa (modern Urfa), we also find that the modern arteries follow the lines of the ancient streets. Al-Muqaddasi (d. after 998) tells us that Nisibis

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had a castle, walls, four gates and a mosque at its centre. A market stretched from one gate to the other (Çevik 2009: 71). Unfortunately, no traces of any of these monuments remain.

The only standing building with late antique phases is the so-called 'Church of Mor Yaqub', part of the original cathedral complex of the city. This building is located towards the southern edge of modern Nusaybin, but was almost in the centre of ancient Nisibis. Over the past 12 years excavations have been undertaken in and around this building. Despite its enormous importance, archaeological excavations could not be undertaken in this area for many years due to continuous habitation of the standing structure and, from 1984, the conflict between the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) and the Turkish government. When the political situation improved in the region, excavations commenced in the vicinity of this structure in 2000 under the supervision of the Diyarbakır Museum. Some photographs of the site and some small finds have been published in a booklet by the Nusaybin Municipality (Soyukaya, Tanhan 2001). In 2002 the Mardin Museum took over responsibility for the excavations and published a short report about them on the museum's website (http://www.mardinmuzesi.gov.tr/mardinmuzesi/detay.asp?id=140&kategori=KAZILAR). We shall start our discussion of this area of late antique Nisibis with the cathedral, followed by the extant standing building.

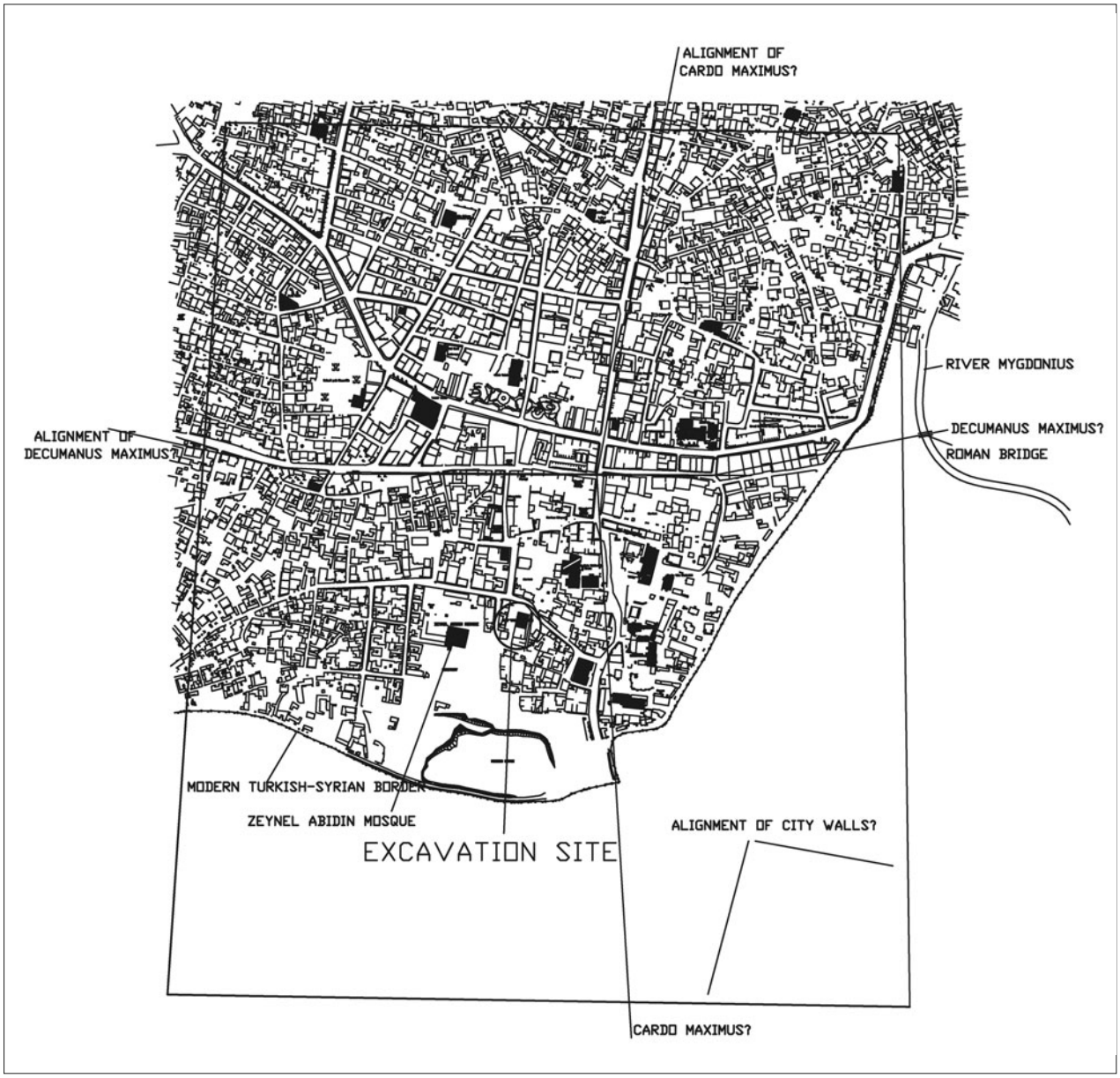


Fig. 2. The hypothetical contours of late antique Nisibis laid on the current plan of the city (the latter by Zilan Doğan)

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The cathedral

The cathedral of Nisibis was built by Bishop Yaqub (bishop AD 308–338) between AD 313 and 320 (Elias of Nisibis, cited by Fiey 1977: 23). Constantinian churches had a public monumental character (Krautheimer 1967: 127), and the cathedral at Nisibis, dating to Constantine's time and built soon after the basilica of the Lateran and at the same time as the large cathedral at Tyre (ca AD 317) and that at nearby Edessa (AD 313–323), must have been a monumental undertaking. In a strategically important city like Nisibis, located at the frontier where the emperors would be conscious of the image they presented to the enemy, one would expect to find a basilica similar to those in other important cities of the empire.

The only known ancient text to mention a physical feature of the cathedral at Nisibis is by John Moschos, who tells a story about a faithful woman and her husband. According to the story, the cathedral of Nisibis had five large doorways (πύλη) in a portico (John Moschos 155). The story implies that the five doors opened out onto the same courtyard, rather than being located on different façades. The five doors may have led to any type of church plan, but a five-aisled arrangement has been tentatively suggested by Cyril Mango (personal communication, 2006). Given the dating of the cathedral to the fourth century, when several five-aisled basilicas were built, such as St Peter's and the Lateran in Rome and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, it is highly possible that the cathedral of Nisibis was also of such a plan. Evidence from the recent excavations also favours this idea.

In the first stages of the excavations in 2000, in the area to the west of the extant standing building (the so-called 'Church of Mor Yaqub'), irregularly situated column bases, a well and some foundations were found. At the same level to the south of these finds and immediately to the west of the southern platform (indicated on fig. 3), around 300 tombs were excavated (mostly of the 19th and 20th centuries). One of the most exciting discoveries in this location is probably the tombstone of the famous writer Ishoyab, reused as a lid for a later tomb (Palmer forthcoming). In 2007 and 2008, the expropriation of the houses just to the northwest of the extant standing structure enabled the extension of the excavations further west (around 45m, towards the Mosque of Zeynel Abidin) and further north (12m towards the street) (fig. 3). This extension revealed impressive building foundations. Around 14m west of the extant standing structure, one can see the foundations of the corner of a monumental edifice, built with large blocks of stone. From this corner, the building stretches towards the west and north (figs 3, 4).

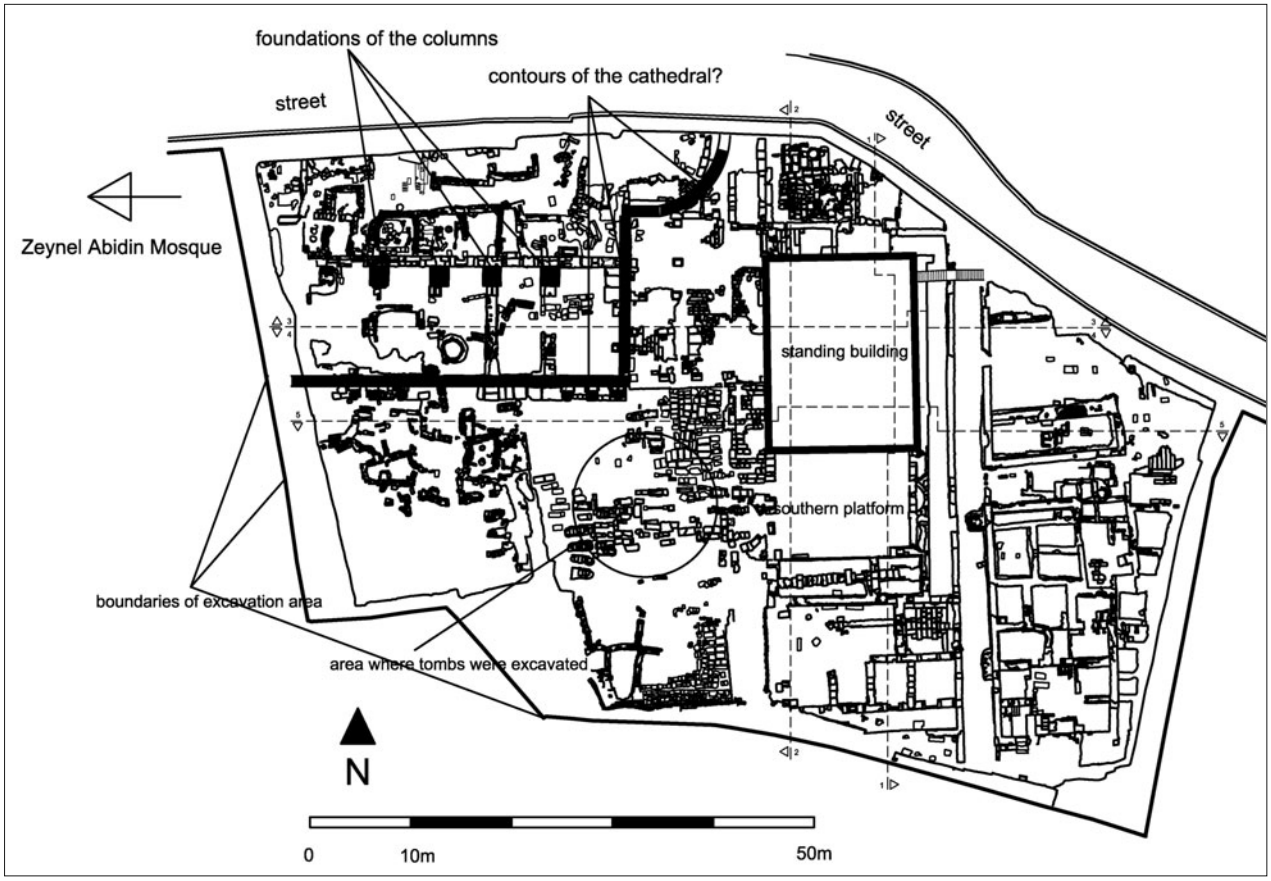


Fig. 3. Plan of the excavation site (original drawing by Zilan Doğan)

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Fig. 4. The excavations located to the west of the standing building: the location of the cathedral, looking west



Fig. 5. The trefoil piers engaged to the southern wall of the cathedral looking north

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Fragments of six trefoil piers have been uncovered, engaged in the southern wall (figs 3, 5, 7). They are grouped in two sets of three; one group towards the eastern side and another towards the edge of the excavation area. It is clear that the wall extends further west and the line of engaged piers continued in that direction so as to decorate the façade. For three of the engaged trefoil piers, only the bases have survived. The other three remain to a height of between 1m and 2m.

In the north-central area of the excavation site are the foundations of an apse-like structure (figs 3, 6). Within this zone, fragments of mosaics have been reported but not recorded. The foundations of the southern part of the eastern wall and around 33m of the southern wall have survived (figs 3, 4). There are large piers around 7m north of the monumental blocks behind the engaged trefoil piers. These large piers are 3.5–4m distant from each other and they define the southern aisle of the building (fig. 7). These are probably the foundations of the columns separating the aisles of the structure. The distance between the piers and the foundations of the apse is large. This does not allow for a three-aisled reconstruction. There must have been at least another aisle. Thus, the building can be tentatively reconstructed as a five-aisled structure, reflecting Moschos' account of the form of the cathedral. Judging from the remains, the outline was probably 50m by 90m (fig. 7). Based on these dimensions, more than half the structure to the west is under the garden of the Zeynel Abidin Mosque and over half of it to the north is under the modern road. This monumental building was clearly the cathedral.



Fig. 6. The foundations of the apse of the cathedral, looking south

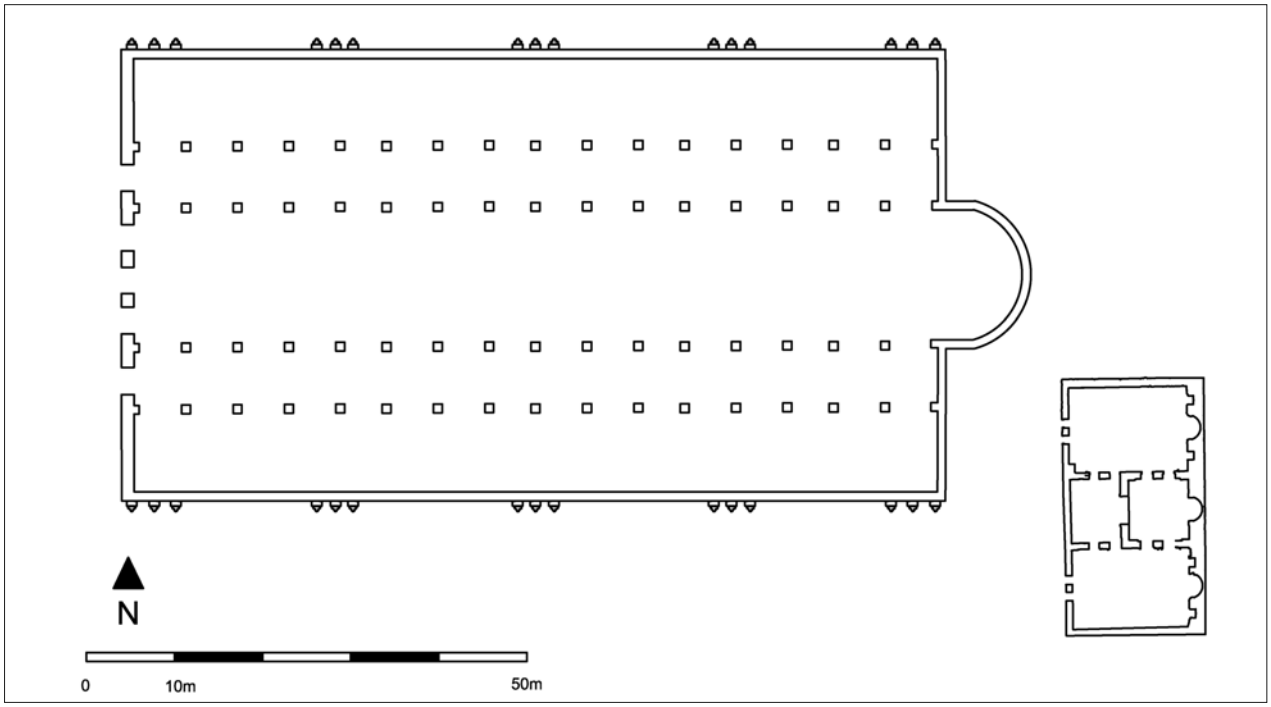


Fig. 7. Reconstruction of the cathedral of Nisibis as a five-aisled basilica and the baptistery as a three-hall structure

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The huge blocks of stone used for the masonry suggest that parts of the extant standing building and the recently uncovered cathedral were more or less contemporary. The walls that we see inside the contours of the cathedral are medieval foundations, and these were probably small workshops. Excavations in this area have uncovered a considerable number of medieval pottery sherds. The excavations have only recently started to reach the late antique layers, and future excavations promise to shed more light on the late antique cathedral.



Fig. 8. The western and southern façades of the standing building, looking northeast

The baptistery

The baptistery of the cathedral is identified by an inscription on the south façade of the building standing to the southeast of the cathedral. Baptisteries were almost always either attached to churches or were located close by. The extent of the remains of surrounding buildings uncovered in the vicinity of the baptistery at Nisibis points to the existence of an episcopal complex of which the baptistery was once a part. Such a monumental and impressive baptistery matches well the monumental cathedral described above. The inscription on the south façade states that the baptistery was built in AD 359/360 (see below), while the northern half of the standing building has been identified with a Church of Mor Yaqub built by Bishop Cyprian (AD 741–767) and completed in AD 758/759 (with construction having commenced in AD 713; Fiey 1977: 74–76). It is not clear when the cathedral, built in AD 313–320 by Bishop Yaqub, was destroyed. This may have happened in AD 573, when the Christians were temporarily expelled by the Persians, or during the Byzantine/Persian wars in the early seventh century, when Nisibis was an important military base for the Persians, or, alternatively, during the earthquake that devastated the city in AD 717 (Fiey 1977: 74). In any case, the cathedral was probably no longer standing in AD 758/759 when Cyprian, who 'built the conch and the sanctuary of "the great church" [= cathedral]' (Fiey 1977: 74) of Nisibis, consecrated the Church of Mor Yaqub.



Fig. 9. The doorways on the southern façade of the standing building

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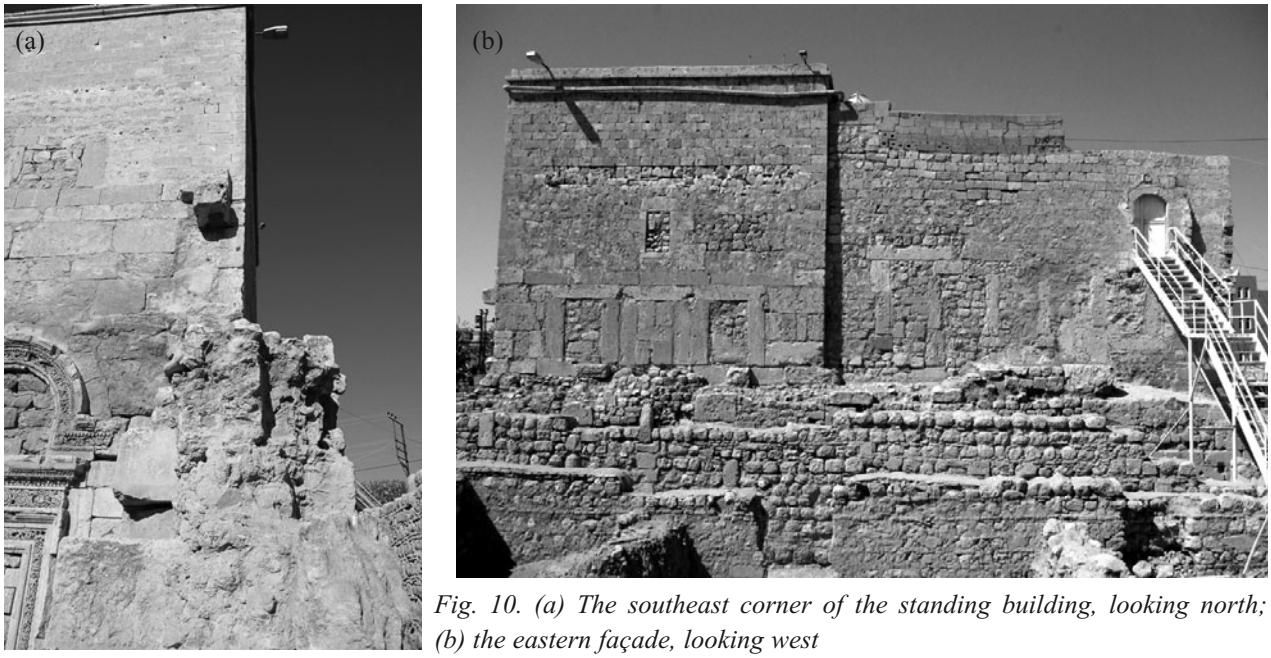


Fig. 10. (a) The southeast corner of the standing building, looking north; (b) the eastern façade, looking west

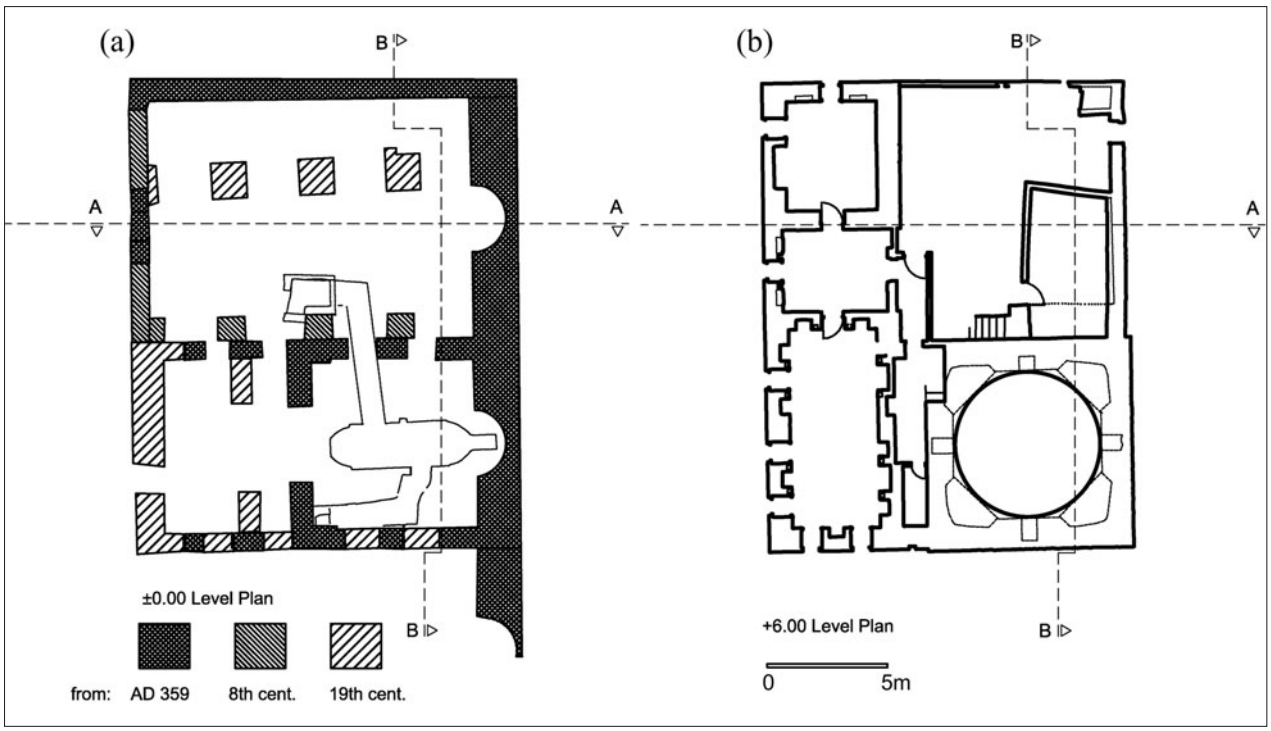


Fig. 11. Plan showing the two storeys of the standing building. (a) The ground floor with building phases and the straight eastern wall indicated (adapted from Sarre, Herzfeld 1911: 2.315); (b) the upper floor (by Zilan Doğan)

The extant standing building is located towards the centre of the large, irregularly-shaped excavation area (fig. 3). Excavations have taken place here since 2000 at three locations around this building. These comprise the removal of 7m of earth from the southern façade of the structure (figs 8, 9), the removal of another 5m from the eastern façade (fig. 10) and the uncovering of a 10m-wide stone-paved area at floor level in front of the southern façade of the extant building (the southern platform; figs 3, 8, 13b, 23). Here, at the east end, were revealed a niche/apse and, at the west end, traces of two doorways. The excavation has also revealed a mosaic pavement with geometric motifs under the stone slabs of the paved area, which is now covered for protection. A large area to the south (around 20m) and east (around 24m) of this paved platform was also excavated and considerable building

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foundations were discovered (see fig. 24). They are highly complicated and need further detailed analysis to ascertain their functions. They seem to be mostly late medieval or modern foundations featuring a long corridor, many small spaces and brick constructions.

The standing building is a multi-phased two-storey structure which is today composed of two main parts (fig. 11): the southern structure and the northern structure.

The southern structure

The southern part of the standing structure is composed of two spaces (east and west) divided by two monumental piers supporting an arch (figs 11, 12). In the east there is a cubical space which is around 7m wide from wall to wall. This has two doorways in its southern wall and two in its northern wall. There is an apse in the eastern wall (2.64m wide and 1.5m deep) and above that three windows, which are now filled-in (figs 12, 13 section B–B). The main feature of this space is its sculpture. On the interior eastern wall the sculpture adorns the apse



Fig. 12. The monumental piers supporting an arch dividing the southern structure of the standing building. In the background can be seen the eastern apse, the blocked windows with upright blocks, and the upper and lower friezes surrounding the walls

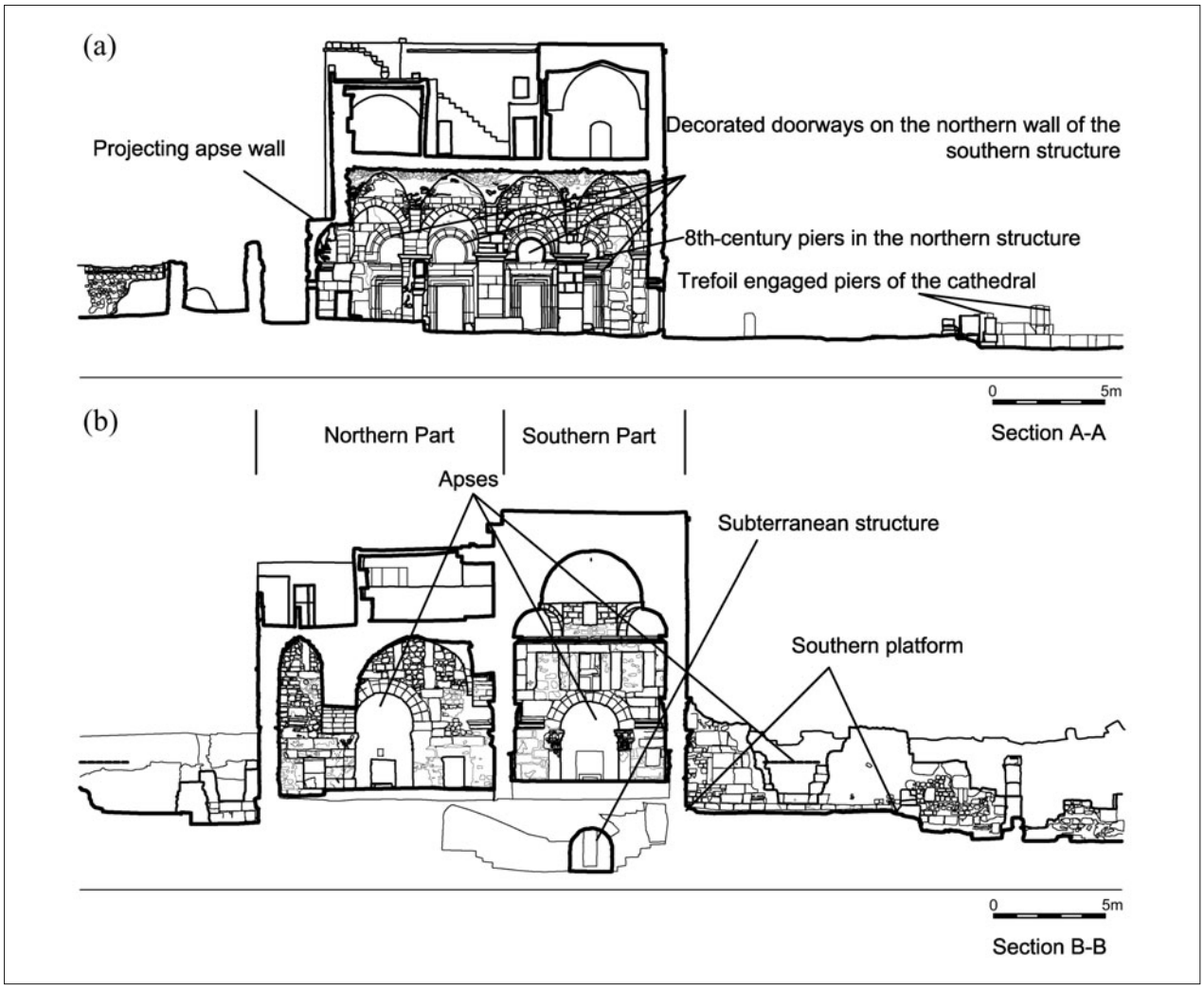


Fig. 13. Sections of fig. 11. (a) A–A; (b) B–B

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archivolt (fig. 12), then becomes a frieze and takes the shape of the relieving arches located on top of the doorways in the northern and southern walls (fig. 14b) and the archivolt on the west, surrounding the whole space. The frieze takes the following order: fascia, bead and reel, fascia, vine scroll, dentils, egg and leaf, flutes, bead and reel, and acanthus leaves (fig. 18). There is a narrow cornice in the apse conch, which is composed of dentils, egg and leaf, flutes, and bead and reel. A plain moulding at a higher level (fig. 19), where the walls and the roof meet, runs all around the interior walls.

As mentioned above, two monumental piers divide the southern structure into two areas (figs 11, 12). The western part of the structure also has two doorways on both its northern and southern walls, but unlike those of the eastern part, which have decorated relieving arches (fig. 14b), they are completely undecorated on the interior. The archivolt on the piers rests on Corinthian imposts, but the western parts of the imposts are not decorated (fig. 12). In actual fact, unlike the eastern part, the area to the west of the piers is completely undecorated, indicating the importance of the eastern part. The area to the west of the large piers has two further piers which carry arches (figs 11, 19 at the rear), but they are clearly of a much later date.

The exteriors of all eight doorways, both in the northern and the southern walls, are highly decorated. The sculpture on the exterior southern wall of the southern structure (figs 9, 14a, 15) was uncovered in 2000 when the earth encasing the façade up to the friezes linking the relieving arches was removed. The sculpture of the northern façade was already enclosed within the building constructed against the southern structure (figs 11a, 17). We shall first describe the sculpture of the southern façade.

The relieving arches of the doorways are slightly horseshoe-shaped (fig. 14a) and all have the same decoration in the following order: fascia, bead and reel, fascia, rinceau, dentils, egg and leaf, flutes, bead and reel, and fascia. In the crown of the doorways, we find a profile similar to that of the relieving arches, though a floral band is added after the top flute and a relatively wider band is added between the two fascias at the bottom, resulting in the following order: fascia, a wide

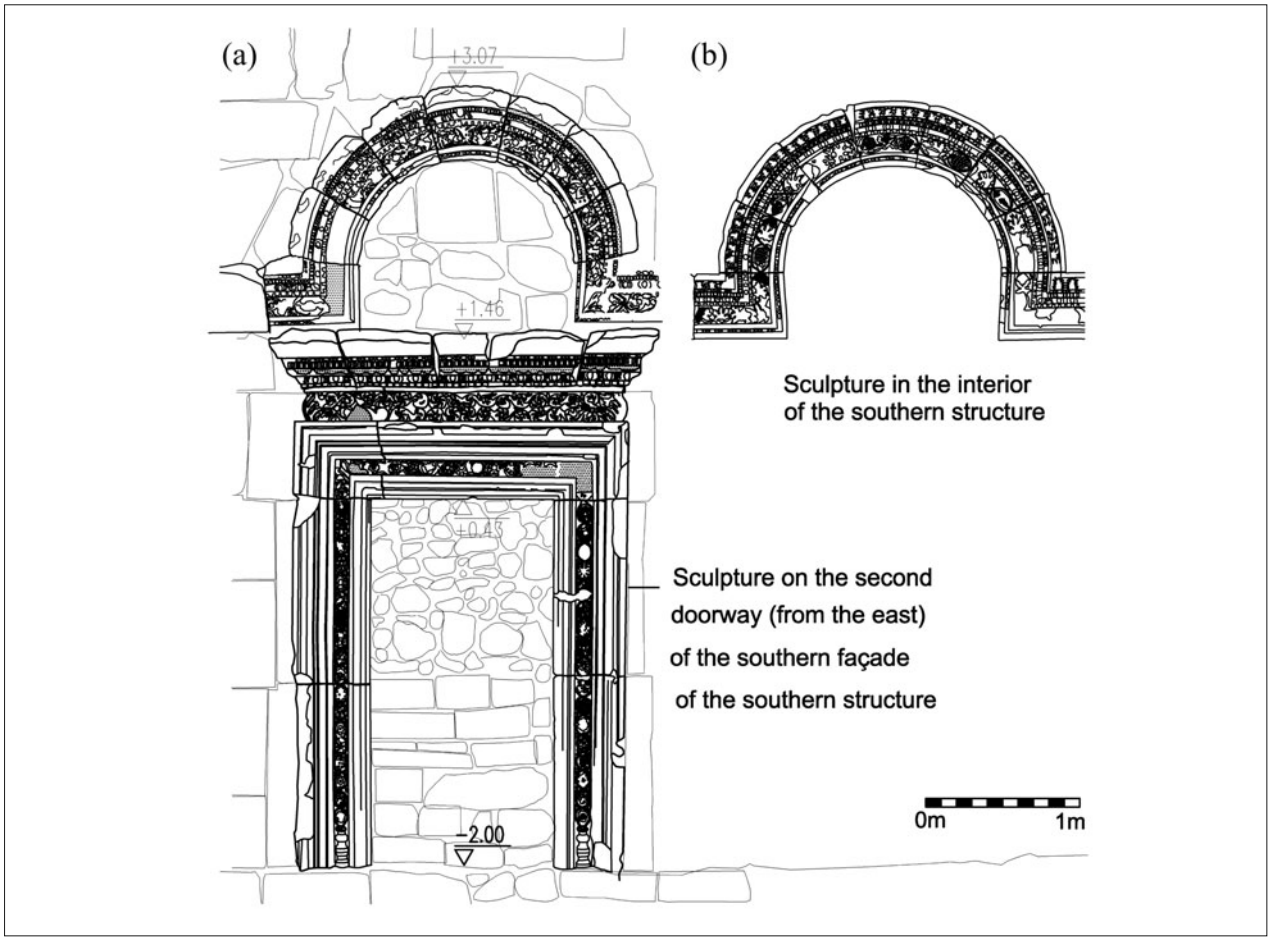


Fig. 14. Detail of the sculpture on the doorways of the southern structure of the standing building. (a) Exterior; (b) interior

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Fig. 15. Detail of the sculpture on the southern façade of the southern structure of the extant standing building (first doorway from the east)

band with ornamentation, fascia, dentil, egg and leaf, floral band, flute, and bead and reel. The decoration in the wide band is different on every doorway. On the first doorway from the east (fig. 15), it is a scroll with flower-shaped rosettes composed of smaller rosettes. On the second doorway from the east (fig. 14a), the wide band is composed of two rows of acanthus scrolls flowing in opposite directions. On the third doorway, we find two rows of small scrolling foliage and, on the fourth, there are acanthus leaves and palmettes.

The mouldings on the posts and lintels of the four doorways (fig. 9) look the same from afar, but are different in detail. There are ornaments on the mouldings only at their centre. On the first (fig. 15) and fourth doorways from the east, the central part is a scroll of leaves and grapes. Each scroll is divided into a number of parts by other intersecting scrolls and they are filled either with a single large leaf or six leaves, or grapes and leaves together. On the second doorway (fig. 14a), the central band is a smaller version of the wide band on the crown of the first doorway, namely a scroll with flower-shaped rosettes composed of smaller rosettes. On the third doorway, there are overlapping laurel leaves. On all four doorways, the central decoration on the lintels emerges ultimately out of a vase motif at the base. On the relieving arches of the third and fourth doorways, the vase motif appears also in the corner where the arch and frieze meets.

The third and the fourth doorways from the east are distinct from the first two. Their decorated posts finish higher than the others. The vase (from which the decoration stems and thus the lowest level of the doorway) is at a higher level (fig. 9), indicating that the floor in the west space was built higher than in the east space. There were possibly exterior steps in front of these doors. However, today the floor level inside the building in the western part is actually 20cm lower than the east. This confusing picture is the result of many restorations that the building has undergone and alterations to the floor level due to the transformation of the building to a church. For the latter function, a stone platform which is 80cm higher than the rest of the floor was also added (fig. 13a). The two different floor levels, with the western part being originally higher than the eastern part, fit with the division of the southern structure into two by monumental piers. As described above, the eastern part is highly decorated whereas the western part is void of any decoration. The decorated part may have been where believers descended into the water, and thus the lower floor to the east may be explained by a font installation.

On the frieze between the two central doorways of the south façade there is a Greek inscription which identifies the building as a baptistery (fig. 16). Before the removal of the 7m of earth in the south of the building, the Greek inscription was just above ground level, which has allowed it to be recorded in the past. The inscription reads:

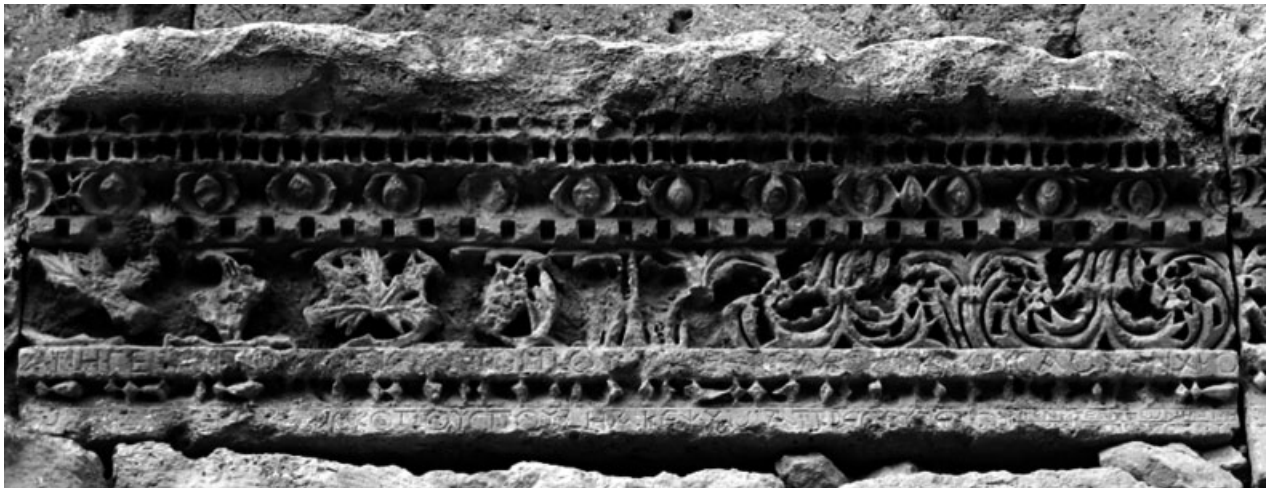


Fig. 16. The Greek inscription on the southern façade of the southern structure of the standing building

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ἀνηέρθη τὸ βαπτιστήριον τοῦτο κὲ ἐτελέσθη ἔτους
αοχ᾽ ἐν χρό–
νῳ Οὐολαγέσου ἐπισκόπου σπουδῇ Ἀκεκψύμα
πρεσβυτέπρόυ γενῆτε αὐτῶν ἡ μνή–
[μη... ἀ] πιόντο [ς ...] θυ

This baptistery was erected and completed in the year 571 [Seleucid era, i.e. AD 359/360] at the time of Volagesus the bishop, by the effort of the presbyter Akepsyma. May their memorial remain before God (Cyril Mango, personal communication, 2006).

F. Sarre and E. Herzfeld published the first drawing of the inscription. However, the inscription is not of four lines as shown in their drawing (1911: 340), but arranged in two-and-a-half lines as recorded by F. Canali De Rossi (2004: n.62). This text clearly identifies the building as a baptistery. It is actually one of the earliest known inscriptions identifying a building as a βαπτιστήριον.

Although one can see this inscription from ground level, its location and squeezed arrangement make reading impossible. This may indicate that it was carved for recording purposes.

The clearing of the soil from this façade also revealed a Syriac inscription carved on the fascia of the moulding of the post of the second doorway and some Greek graffiti on the inner doorposts of the same doorway. These graffiti remain unpublished. The Syriac inscription, probably dating to the eighth century, has its letters inscribed vertically and mentions a deacon. One of the Greek graffiti reads ‘Lord help your servant Leontios’. Others are not clear, but seem to be a series of similar personal invocations (Cyril Mango, personal communication, 2006).

The sculpture on the northern façade, which, as mentioned earlier, is now the southern wall of the adjoining northern structure, is almost identical to that on the south (fig. 17). The crowns have the same sequence of ornamentation, except in the case of the wide band. On the crown of the doorway corresponding to the second doorway from the east on the southern façade, we find horizontal split palmettes with scrolling ends, arranged in couples forming petal-like ornaments. Two petals come together to enclose a rosette. The motif on the frame of the doorway is, again, leaves with scrolling ends. They are placed in two rows, in pairs forming a band with the tops of the leaves touching each other. On the first doorway from the east on the northern façade, an eroded rinceau decorates the crown. On the crown of the third doorway, we find a rinceau with rosettes in the middle. The doorposts have vine leaves and trefoils.

At first glance, one might think that the sculptural decorations inside the southern structure and on its façades are identical. However, they are not (figs 14, 18). The main difference is a row of acanthus leaves at the very top of the sculpture inside the building. Apart from that, the decoration on the interior has a vine scroll, which is common in later Christian buildings in the region. Of the noteworthy specimens of the classical tradition in the region (Mundell Mango 1982), especially sixth-century examples have survived. While strongly resembling the fifth- and sixth-century sculpture of the region, the decoration inside this building is more delicately carved, enabling us to locate it sometime in the fourth century. On the other hand, the sculpture on the northern and southern façades lacks any parallel in northern Mesopotamia. With its variety, it resembles the sculpture of Syria dating between the fourth and seventh centuries (Naccache 1992). In terms of style and the ornamental bands, it can be dated to the fourth century.

Mainly due to being unable to find a parallel, J. Gaborit suggests that the sculpture on the façades may be earlier than the sculpture inside, and that the baptistery



Fig. 17. The view south from within the northern structure of the standing building

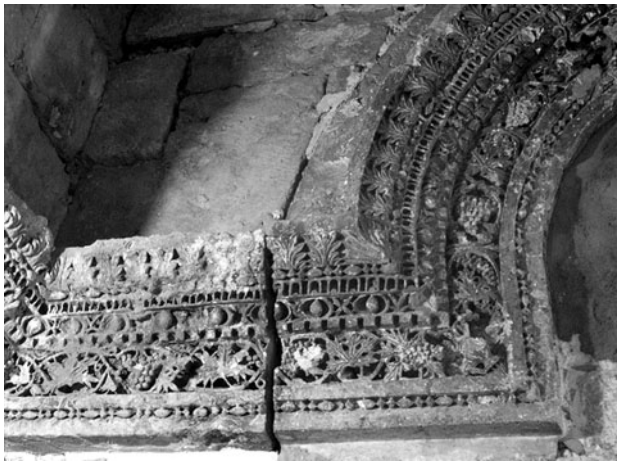


Fig.18. The interior frieze of the east wall of the southern structure of the standing building

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had an earlier phase: a rectangular building of unknown function, pierced with eight doors. According to her, when converted to a baptistery in AD 359, two halls were added on either side of this rectangular building and an eastern projecting wall containing three apses for the three spaces was built. She suggests that it was in this alteration period that the apses and the eastern part of the original structure were decorated with a frieze (Gaborit et al. forthcoming). The masonry of the building is so confusing that it is not possible to prove this theory. For example, we might consider the upright blocks used in the building. In the eastern wall of the southern structure, there are three windows composed of lintels resting on two monolithic uprights (fig. 10b on the left), a feature common in fourth-century churches in Syria (Bell, Mundell Mango 1982: 143, 151). Similar upright blocks exist on the eastern façade of the northern structure (fig. 10b on the right) and on top of the archivolt separating the eastern and western parts of the southern structure (fig. 19). The latter and those on top of the apse of the southern structure are on the same level. Uprights on the eastern wall of the northern structure are only slightly higher than those on the eastern wall of the southern structure. Similar blocks also exist on the southern façade. They are higher than the level of the later dome and about 1m higher than those on the eastern façade. This may illustrate the reuse of the blocks in different places. Nowhere in the building can one easily follow a pattern of masonry or 'proper' corners.

Unlike the northern and southern exterior walls, the eastern wall of the southern structure is devoid of any sculpture on the exterior (fig. 10). However, what is remarkable about this wall is its two-tiered arrangement. A projecting wall of about 4.65m in height from the floor level of the extant building is built against the eastern wall (figs 10a, 13a). This lower tier encompasses the apses of the southern and northern structures and the southern platform.

Before moving to the northern structure we should also note what lies above and below the southern structure. There is a crypt under the eastern part (figs 11, 13b). This capsule-like structure is around 6m long and 2m wide. Its eastern and western ends terminate in semi-circular niches (fig. 20). O. Parry mentions an inscription in the crypt, but gives no text (Parry 1895: 226). There is a marble sarcophagus in the crypt measuring 2.2m by 0.9m by 0.9m. It is of plain design with a Greek cross at the head and has a gable-roof lid with corner acroteria (Preusser 1911: 42, pl. 49; Fiey 1977: 123). The sarcophagus is believed to contain the body of Mor Yaqub (d. 338, known also as St Jacob or St James), who was appointed bishop of the city in 308 and who is credited with the construction of the cathedral of Nisibis (313–320).



Fig. 19. The view northwest from within the southern structure of the standing building

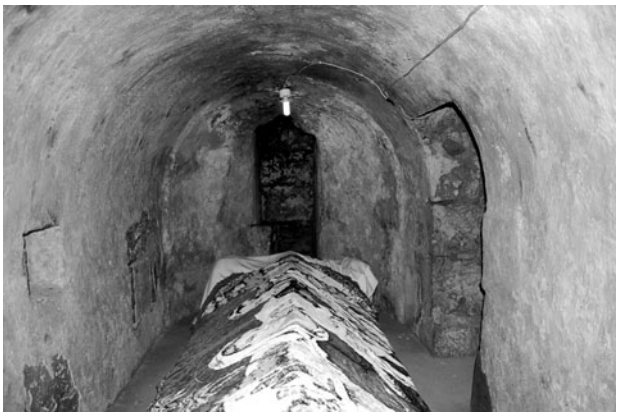


Fig. 20. The crypt of the southern structure of the standing building, looking east

Above the southern structure there are modern buildings (fig. 11b). The eastern part of the southern structure is covered with a dome dated to 1872 by an inscription (Sarre, Herzfeld 1911: 339). In 1885, a structure was built on top of the dome (Akyüz 2006: 243). The room above the western part, matching the height of the present dome, is contemporary with the dome. Today a Syrian Orthodox family lives in these rooms.

The northern structure

The second part of the extant standing building sits to the north of the above-mentioned southern structure and is built against it (fig. 13b). The two doorways in the west wall (one is blocked today, but easily discernible from the outside; fig. 8 on the left) and some parts of the northern wall (fig. 21) are clearly earlier than the rest of the structure and contemporary with the southern structure. In terms of both sculpture and size (figs 22, 13b), the apse in the eastern wall (width 2.7m; depth 1.5m) is identical to that of the southern structure – indicating that they were built at the same time. The

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Fig. 21. The northern and western walls of the standing building, looking southeast



Fig. 22. The apse of the northern structure of the standing building blocked by a later pier arch on the left

piers of the lateral arcade that carry the vault of this structure obscure the fine sculpture on the doorways on the northern wall of the southern structure. Three free-standing piers (probably dating from the 19th century) located off the centre, closer to the northern wall, also carry the vault (figs 11a, 13a). One of these pier arches blocks the apse decoration (fig. 22). Judging from their masonry, an eighth-century date can be suggested for the lateral arcades, which seem to be especially common at this time in churches of the Tur Abdin (a limestone plateau located just to the north of Nisibis). In the construction of these piers, some stone blocks from an earlier building were reused (fig. 17). It is argued elsewhere that the addition of lateral arcades to several churches in the Tur Abdin may have been due to the destruction caused in the region after an earthquake (Keser-Kayaalp forthcoming). The northern structure has the same length as the southern structure, but it is around 9.5m wide.

Analysis and reconstructions of the baptistery

In recent publications in Turkish there has been no mention of the inscription or the function of the building as a baptistery (for example Dalkılıç, Halifeoğlu 2006; Akyüz 1998; 2006: 234). In these publications, the history of the structure is rewritten solely as that of a Syrian Christian monument. In previous, international scholarship (for a summary of the earlier scholarship and drawings, see Bell, Mundell Mango 1982: 143–44) almost no doubt was expressed about the function of the southern structure as a baptistery because of its inscription. The northern structure, on the other hand, has been identified with the Church of Mor Yaqub, built by Cyprian in the eighth century, with later additions (Sarre, Herzfeld 1911: 315). The facts that the apse at its east end is identical to the apse in the southern structure and that it has masonry on the northern and western walls which seems to be contemporary with the southern building have not been noted.

S. Ristow, who has published the most extensive catalogue of late antique baptisteries, includes the Nisibis example in the category of buildings which are not securely dated or identified as a baptistery (Ristow 1998: 7), and there are indeed some features which may lead one to be suspicious of the baptismal function: there is a crypt under the building; there is no ancient baptismal font (there is a later baptismal basin which still stands in the building; Bell, Mundell Mango 1982: pl. 82); and the inscription seems incorrectly sized and misplaced. These issues, coupled with the above-mentioned arguments, may have led Gaborit to search for an earlier phase of the building (her arguments will be presented in detail in a forthcoming article).

Thanks to the recent excavations at the site, we are now in a position to discuss the three earlier reconstructions of the baptistery, by F. Sarre and E. Herzfeld, A. Khatchatrian and M. Falla Castelfranchi, and to suggest a new one (fig. 7). Sarre and Herzfeld reconstruct the building as having a cubical core with an added porch. They suggest that the roof of the core was a tent-shaped structure and reconstruct the west façade of the porch of the baptistery with two columns carrying an arch and covered with a pitched roof (Sarre, Herzfeld 1911: 2.341). They consider the northern structure to date from the eighth century and later. However, as described above, the northern structure has parts clearly contemporary with the southern structure.

Khatchatrian, on the other hand, basing his argument on the wall fragment that protrudes from the southeast corner (fig. 23), suggests that the cube was originally surrounded by an ambulatory similar to that at the Gülbahçe baptistery near Urla in Izmir. He also associates the Nisibis baptistery with the baptisteries at

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Gerasa, Side and Jerusalem, which all had apses at their eastern ends. He traces the historical contexts of the three distinctive features of the baptistery – namely the baldachin, the porch and the ambulatory. He sees Nisibis as a transitional building between the plan types of antiquity and early Christianity. He calls the extant structure a *baldaquin cubique* (Khatchatrian 1957: 411).

Falla Castelfranchi also employs the piece of wall protruding from the southeast corner as evidence for the existence of adjacent structures. However, her reconstruction does not have an ambulatory, but two large halls flanking the central cubical space. According to her, there were small apses in the eastern walls of these halls (Falla Castelfranchi 1980: fig. 58). She does not point out the fact that the architectural sculpture on the apse of the northern structure (fig. 22) is identical to that of the apse of the southern structure (fig. 12) and that they therefore need to be regarded as contemporary. The discovery of a stone-paved platform under which there is a mosaic pavement, of the same length (16m) as both the southern and northern structures and of the same width (9.5m) as the northern structure, along with the uncovering of foundations of a niche to the eastern end of this platform, which is of the same dimensions (width 2.7m; depth 1.5m) as the apses in the southern and the northern spaces (fig. 23), supports Falla Castelfranchi's suggestion that the baptistery was a triple-hall structure – with the southernmost of the three halls no longer standing.

In the current situation, the free-standing niche at the eastern end of the southern platform reminds us of an architectural entity, namely the *beth slutho*, an outdoor oratory. This was a common feature in the Syrian Orthodox churches of the Tur Abdin (Bell, Mundell Mango 1982: pl. 68), mainly after the eighth century. The earthquake that possibly destroyed the cathedral, as mentioned above, must have considerably damaged the baptistery as well. The southernmost structure (the third hall of the baptistery, no longer standing) may have been destroyed then. It is possible that after being converted to a church in the eighth century, the floor of the southern structure, which was originally covered with mosaics, was paved with stones and the remains of the structure in the east – the apse wall – were used like an outdoor oratory.



Fig. 23. The southern platform with remains of an apse at the eastern end and the stone protruding from the southeast corner of the standing building, looking east

The triple-hall arrangement was a common layout in the baptisteries of the East. To cite a few examples: the baptisteries of Qalat Siman and Zenobia in Syria (De' Maffei 1990: 167–70) and St Menas in Egypt (Falla Castelfranchi 1995: fig. 2), those of Side (dated variously between the fourth and sixth centuries) and Ephesus in Asia Minor and Gerasa in Jordan, and various baptisteries in Cyprus (Megaw 1976: 363). According to Falla Castelfranchi, the baptistery of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (AD 333–336) was the prototype for baptisteries with a triple-hall arrangement. She asserts that the baptistery at Nisibis (AD 359/360) is the oldest example where this influence is seen. Actually, there are only about 25 years between their construction dates (Falla Castelfranchi 1980: 76). The claim that an important baptistery such as the baptistery of the Holy Sepulchre was a prototype for the tripartite baptisteries mentioned above may seem compelling. However, the textual and archaeological evidence that we have for the baptistery of the Holy Sepulchre is ambiguous (Tinelli 1973: 95–104; Ousterhout 1989; Wharton 1992: 319).

The crypt

Sarre and Herzfeld suggest that the crypt under the southern structure dates to the same period as the northern structure (AD 758/759) attached to the baptistery and that the sarcophagus, which had been in the cathedral, was moved to the baptistery at that time (Sarre, Herzfeld 1911: 344). Falla Castelfranchi supports this idea, basing her argument on the inscription's identification of the building as a baptistery, not a martyrium (Falla Castelfranchi 1980: 75). However, it is difficult to dig a crypt and moreover place a sarcophagus in it – with access through narrow staircases – after a building is finished. The crypt must have been an original feature of the building. The ancient bricks visible in the vault of the staircase leading to the crypt and the large ashlar blocks of the structure support this notion.

Sarre and Herzfeld and Falla Castelfranchi perhaps object to the idea of combining a crypt and a baptistery, and this has led them to conclude that the crypt must have been added later. However, there is a symbolic connection between death and baptism, as indicated in the following words of St Paul:

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> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk into the newness of life (Romans 6.3–4).

In the wider Christian world, we can point to examples of baptismal fonts placed in catacombs (such as those of St Priscilla and Pontianus) and of a baptistery connected to a cemetery basilica (near Tarragona) (Krautheimer 1942: 28). Likewise, tombs were placed in baptisteries. At the Council of Auxerre in AD 578, burials in baptisteries were prohibited. This shows that this practice must have been employed before that date (Krautheimer 1942: 28). Thus, the baptistery, which was part of the cathedral complex (with the cathedral itself built between AD 313 and 320), may have held the body of Mor Yaqub (d. AD 338) from its very beginning.

Baptisteries and sepulchral architecture were related to each other also in terms of architectural origins. R. Krautheimer (1942) discusses the issue of the genesis of the forms of baptisteries in detail, including arguments concerning both baths and funerary architecture, and concludes that it is more likely that baptistery architecture has its roots in sepulchral architecture.

According to the triple-hall arrangement suggested above (fig. 7) and the existence of the crypt, the movement in the building might have been as follows: preparations would have taken place in the (original) southern hall, before those to be baptised entered the western side of the southern structure, were submerged in the water in the eastern side and then visited the crypt – which may have symbolised the grave of the baptised – before emerging from the northern hall as baptised and reborn. The doors towards the east, on the northern and southern walls of the southern structure, may have been for watching the ceremony.

Conclusion

In this article some hypothetical contours for the layout of the late antique city of Nisibis have been suggested. The current excavation site, which is located in the central part of this hypothetical layout, has been introduced. The extant standing building on the site, known as the Church of Mor Yaqub, and elements of the recent discoveries that are related to late antique Nisibis have been analysed.

According to these analyses, it has been argued that the current excavation site was the location of the cathedral complex of the city, with the cathedral built in AD 313–320 and the baptistery in AD 359/360. Both buildings were constructed on a monumental scale. The cathedral is located to the west of the baptistery. In its present condition, one can make out the apse and parts of the southern and eastern walls. Engaged trefoil piers decorated the southern façade. The piers that separated the aisles are visible. The cathedral was probably five-aisled. Excavations in the cathedral are currently focused on a level which is the same as the floor level of the baptistery. The area where the cathedral used to stand is now filled with medieval installations. After the recording and removal of these layers, further evidence related to the cathedral will hopefully be uncovered.

The baptistery can be reconstructed as a triple-hall structure. The most decorated part, the central space, was clearly the most important part of the building where the baptismal liturgy probably took place. The flanking halls probably had decoration only in their apses and on the walls with decorated doorways which they shared with the central space. This structure has undergone many alerations over the centuries. It must have been converted to a church after the cathedral next to it was destroyed. Since then it has come to be known as the Church of Mor Yaqub and to be associated with the Syrian Orthodox community.

As mentioned in the abstract, this article is by no means an excavation report, but instead focuses on the late antique cathedral complex of Nisibis. More work needs to be done on the other, later layers of the excavation (fig. 24) and the area to the southwest of the standing building.

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Fig. 24. Excavations located to the south of the standing building, looking southeast

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