

Early Christianity in Iraq and the Gulf: a View from the Architectural Remains

K. De Langhe*

Abstract:

The spread and settlement of Christianity in the Arabic world prior to Islam is not the most popular topic. Archaeological focus was mainly directed to the early historic period and indigenous beliefs. However, the discovery of several sites along the coast of the Arabian Gulf and within the borders of present Iraq has rekindled interest. By creating an inventory of all known Christian-Arabian sites, I've tried to get a clear image of the spread and impact of Christianity in this region. The study mainly focussed on architecture, small finds and less on toponymic evidence. This contribution deals with some of the preliminary conclusions from this phase of the study. It is intended to be a starting point for further research and a call for attention to the problem of early Christianity in the Arabian area.

Keywords: early Christianity¹, Iraq, Arabian Peninsula, architecture, churches, monasteries, Nestorians

North versus south: a view from the architectural remains

Christianity probably entered the Arabian Peninsula through Syria and Iraq. From here it spread throughout the whole of the Near East, and later on also along the Arabian Gulf. It was spread in a peaceful manner, mostly by priests and monks who had fled from the Sassanian heartland due to prosecutions from the early Sassanian rulers². Remnants of early Christian sites are spread over the whole of Iraq, though we can see some differences between the material cultures of the north and the south. The north was closer to Christian Syria and therefore more influenced by it than the south. The churches found in the northern part of Iraq were built according to the blueprints of the Syrian basilica. This means that they consist of a large square room divided into three aisles by means of pillars or walls. Three rooms close the

* Kaatje De Langhe, Ma. Archaeology (Ghent University, Belgium). Email: kaatohee@hotmail.com

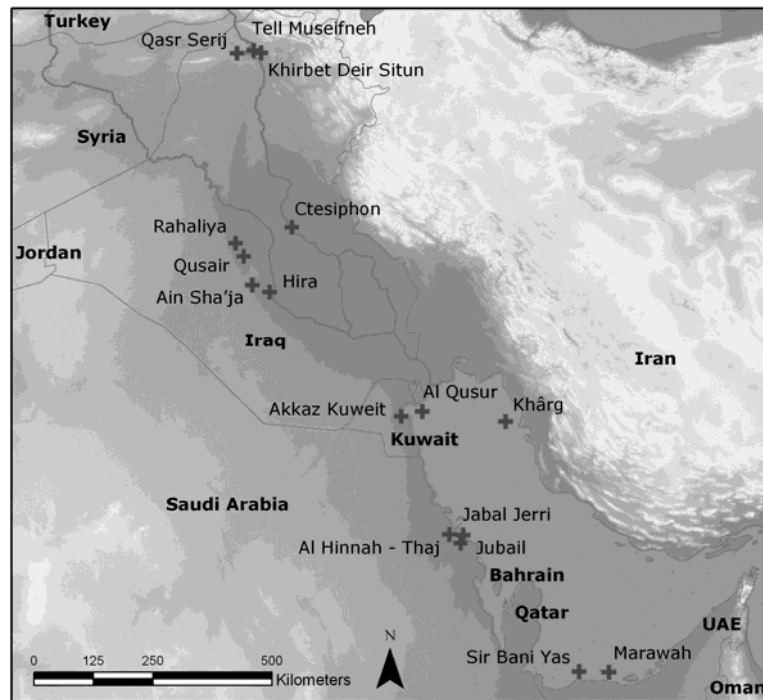
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¹ early Christianity can be dated to the late Sassanian period: 6th-8th centuries A.D.

² Van Rompay, L. 1997. 'Opkomst en groei van onafhankelijke volkskerken in het Oosten tot aan de Arabisch-islamitische veroveringen (451-641)', in Teule, H. & Wessels, A. (eds.), *Oosterse christenen binnen de wereld van de islam*, uitgeverij Kok Kampen: p. 19-21.

building at the east side. The central room serves as a choir and has a rounded eastern wall; the other two rooms, serving different purposes, are called the diakonikon and the martirion. In the west there is often a narthex³. The structure of the basilica had an enormous influence on Christian architecture in general and this is also reflected in the layout and construction of churches all over the Arabian Peninsula.

The Nestorians in the Gulf



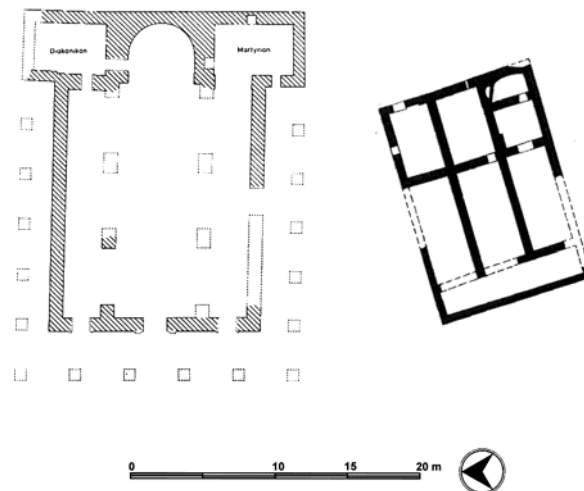
Map of the research area with the location of early Christian sites

When we take a closer look at the different early Christian sites in Iraq, we can see that there are striking differences between the sites in the north and those in the south. Churches found in the north seem to have a much closer connection with neighbouring Syrian churches. Most buildings, as found in Tell Museifneh⁴ and Qasr Serij⁵, resemble closely the classic basilica while churches in the south of Iraq on the other hand seem to have been the result of local building techniques combined with some basic elements of the basilica (see Fig. 1). The most significant architectural differences are found in the partition of the nave and in the construction of the choir. The southern churchbuilders preferred a straight wall to close off the choir instead of an apsidal closing wall. These requirements for the choir are probably linked to the local cult which preferred a deep, spacious and often vaulted room.

³ Lassus, J. 1947. *Sanctuaire Chrétiens de Syrië. Essai sur la genèse, la forme et l'usage liturgique des édifices du culte chrétien en Syrië, du IIIe siècle à la conquête musulmane*, Bibliothèque Archéologique Et Historique tome XLII, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

⁴ Okada, Y. 1991. 'Early Christian Architecture in the Iraqi South-western Desert', *al-Rafidân* vol.12. pp. 75-77.

⁵ Oates, D. 1962. 'Qasr Serij, a Sixth Century Basilica in Northern Iraq', *Iraq* vol. 24: pp. 78-79.



Layout of churches from north Iraq (Qasr Serij, left) and the Arabian Gulf (Sir Bani Yas, right). From: Oates, 1962. plate XXVII and Elders, 2001. pp.54

Several attempts have been made to define categories for Iraqi churches. A proposition to divide them into parish and monastic churches came from Gertrude Bell⁶. She based her proposition on the layout of the churches, and considered structures with a basilical layout to be parish churches. This proposal, however, is contradicted when we take a look at sites such as Ain Sha'ia⁷ and Qasr Serij. Although these buildings had been considered as 'parish' churches, further research showed that they functioned within a monastic environment.

There are, however, some aspects of the architecture and orientation of the structures that we can use to throw light on the differences between churches in northern and southern Iraq. An important architectural difference, as noted above, is the eastern wall of the church. Another observation can be made about the doorways of the buildings. The north, influenced by Syria, has a central doorway in the west while the southern churches have several entrances of equal importance as well as a main entrance in their side walls. Some structures, influenced by the Sassanian palace architecture, completely neglect the axial main entrance in the west. Examples can be seen in Hira⁸ and Ain Sha'ia.

Not only is it important to look at the architecture of a building, it is also necessary to study its physical context. Churches like those in Hira and Ain sha'ia were set in a large urban

⁶ Finster, B. , Schmidt, J. 1976. 'Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen im Iraq', *Bagdader Mitteilungen* vol. 8: p. 7-167.

⁷ Okada, Y. 1991.

⁸ Talbot Rice, D. 1932. 'The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931', *Antiquity* pp. 276-291.

context and were often quite big. They can easily be seen as representatives of a metropolitan while most churches were of moderate size and could be placed in a more rural context.

The Nestorian heritage in the Arabian Gulf

Research on early Christian remains in the Gulf started only a decade ago. Several sites have been discovered, revealing the solid hold of Christianity in this region. Although a lot of sites have not been thoroughly researched and some have only been described, already at this point it is possible to see a quite uniform material culture in the Gulf region. The churches found in the Gulf show great similarities to those found in southern Iraq. This can be explained by the fact that most early Christian sites in the Gulf were founded by Nestorians. Good examples are the churches of Marawah, Sir Bani Yas and Al Qusur (see Fig. 2). Nestorian monks and missionaries fleeing from repercussions by the Sassanian rulers founded churches and settlements along the coast of Arabia, away from the Sassanian heartland⁹. Christianity settled itself along the Gulf at the end of the Sassanian dynasty. This indicates that most churches and monasteries were founded while Islam was rising. Most sites were abandoned by the end of the 7th and beginning of the 8th centuries AD after only a short period of occupation¹⁰.

Sites with early Christian material can be found all over the Arabian Peninsula. Several of these sites were found on islands not far off the coast of Arabia, which met the need for isolation and tranquillity and at the same time were in a very profitable position for trade and missions. The Nestorian missions to India and China probably started from these islands. Until now, four monasteries have been found on the islands of Marawah, Sir Bani Yas (United Arab Emirates)¹¹, Kharg (Iran)¹² and Failaka (Kuwait)¹³ (see Fig. 3). At least two churches have informally been reported for Qatar but these have not been confirmed¹⁴. Apart

⁹ Bin Seray, H.M. 1996. 'Christianity in East Arabia', *Aram* vol. 8 : pp. 315-317.

¹⁰ Steve, M. 1999. 'Sur L'île de Khârg dans le Golfe Persique', *Dossiers d'Archéologie* no. 343 : p. 80.

¹¹ Elders, J. 2001. The Lost Churches of the Arabian Gulf: Recent Discoveries on the Islands of Sir Bani Yas and Marawah, Abu Dhabi Emirate, United Arab Emirates', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* vol. 31: pp. 47-57.

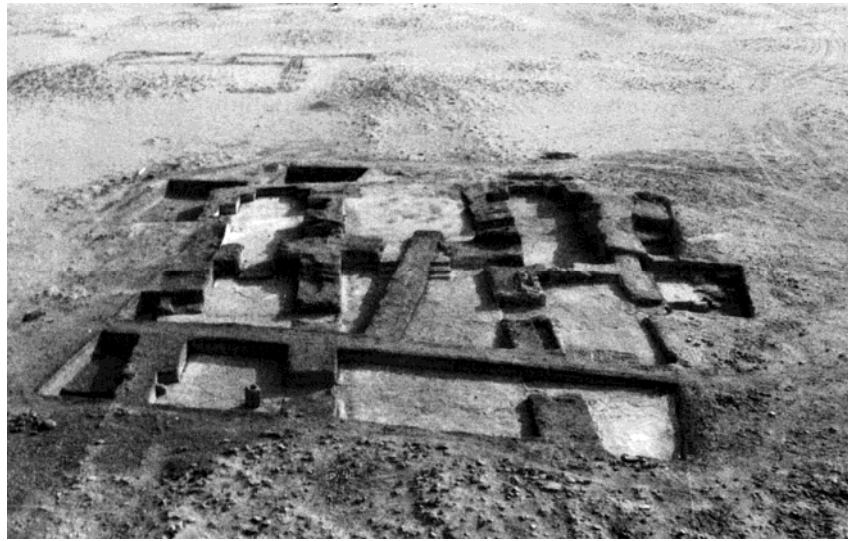
¹² Steve 1999: p. 74-80

¹³ Bernard, V., Callot, O., Salles, J. 1991. 'L'Eglise d'al-Qousour Failaka, état de Koweit, rapport préliminaire sur une première campagne de fouilles, 1989', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* vol.2, no.3: p. 145-181.

Bernard, V. & Salles, J-F. 1991. 'Discovery of a Christian Church at Al-Qusur, Failaka (Kuwait)', *Seminar for Arabian Studies* : pp. 7-21.

¹⁴ Elders 2001: pp. 55.

from this, there are several toponymic indications of Nestorian presence in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries on Bahrain¹⁵.



Layout of the church of Al Qusur, Failaka. From: Bernard & Salles, 1991. pp.20

The blueprints of these monasteries are quite similar, apart from some local adaptations. The monastic churches on Marawah and Sir Bani Yas both have evidence of a bell tower. This is probably a local Arab custom that had been assimilated by the Nestorian monks¹⁶. The tower probably worked with clappers instead of bells. All churches, including those who weren't part of a monastery, had a quadrangular layout. This quadrangle was divided into a nave, possibly with a tripartite partition, three rooms in the east and sometimes a narthex in the west. There are, of course, some exceptions. For example, in Jubail a quadrangular tiled courtyard with three rooms at its eastern side was found. This structure is unlike any church found in an early Christian site, but evidence seems to indicate a liturgical use¹⁷. Another exception might be Thaj, but information on this site is still sparse. The shape of the building differs from the others, and can be explained by the fact that the church of Thaj was built when the surrounding settlement was already in decay. Material used for the construction of this church was recovered from earlier structures in Thaj¹⁸.

The orientation of the churches is always towards the east, although we cannot speak of an exact orientation: most churches deviate slightly towards the north. This deviation seems to be

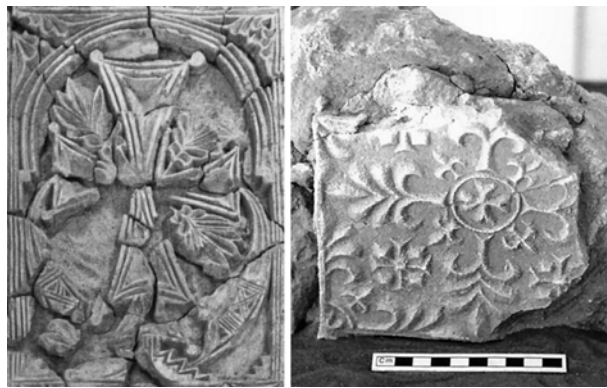
¹⁵ Potts, D.T. 1990. *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity volume II, from Alexander the Great to the coming of Islam*, Cambridge: Clarendon Press pp. 150-151.

¹⁶ Elders 2001: pp. 51.

¹⁷ Langfeldt, J.A. 1994. 'Recently discovered early Christian monuments in North-eastern Arabia', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* vol. 5 no.1: pp. 39-40.

¹⁸ Langfeldt 1994: pp. 46-47.

present in most churches in the Gulf and south Iraq and is in sharp contrast with the Syrian churches where we can see a very strict orientation towards the east. Thus we can conclude that this deviation may be considered typical and has a possible liturgical history¹⁹. Access to the structures was possible from different entrances. The main entrance was in the west, opposite the choir, and was somewhat bigger than the others (mostly located in the south and north walls). Some churches have, apart from their main entrance, several doorways in the south and north symmetrically aligned. Good examples of this more elaborate style can be found in Al Qusur and Kharg.



Stucco cross(AlQusur) and a fragment of plaster decoration (Sir Bani Yas). From: Bernard & Salles, 1991. pp.10. and Hellyer²⁰,1998. pp.121

Local traditions were important in the construction of these Arabian churches. Building material mostly consisted of what was available in the vicinity of the settlement or monastery. Local types of stone, as seen in Akkaz and Kharg, as well as mud brick were used as building material. But all churches, despite what they were built from, were covered with a thick layer of plaster. Plaster was very important: it was used for covering walls, floors and especially to make decorations. Most crosses and ornaments were made of moulded plaster (see Fig. 4).

Preliminary conclusions and further research

The early Christian heritage of the Arabian Peninsula has been known for quite some time. However, it is only during the last decades that research in this area has truly begun. Thanks to this research it was possible to make a comparison of the different sites and area's. This led to the conclusion that it might be possible to determine the origin of the difference between churches in north Iraq and those in south Iraq and the Arabian Gulf. The north of Iraq was deeply influenced by Syria while the south of Iraq and the sites along the Arabian Gulf have a

¹⁹ Okada, Y. 1992. 'Ain Sha'ia and Early Gulf Churches: an Architectural Analogy', *al-Rafidān* vol. 13: pp. 90.

²⁰ Hellyer, P. 1998. *Hidden Riches, an Archaeological Introduction to the United Arab Emirates*, U.A.E.: Union National Bank.

more important monastic element, and differ significantly from their northern counterparts. These differences can be explained by looking at the founders of the churches. In southern Iraq and the Gulf we see mostly Nestorian foundations while the northern churches were often founded by Monophysites. These seem simple conclusions, but they have implications for every aspect of daily life and material culture. Much research remains to be done, for there are plenty of sites that have not been thoroughly investigated, particularly the more inland sites which are often only described.

In the future I would propose further investigation of the early Christian monuments, especially their relationship with their surrounding environment and the role they played within local communities. Furthermore it would be interesting to get an insight on the spread of the Nestorian monasteries, their importance within the trading routes of the Gulf and the impact of their missionaries alongside these trading routes. It is also necessary to continue the research on the placement within the different bishoprics and further investigation of architectural and iconographical links between different sites. And, finally, there exists an opening of research towards Iran. With the important role of the Nestorians within the Sassanian empire, where have those churches gone?