

# MAREA

## SIXTH SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS

Hanna Szymańska, Krzysztof Babraj

*The sixth season of Polish excavations at Marea lasted from August 9 to September 28, 2005.<sup>1</sup> The objective was to continue the excavations in the basilical church, started in the previous two campaigns (2003 and 2004). These were completed in three areas of the church:*

- eastern part, where further sections of the nave and north aisle were unearthed;*
- latrine and two rooms contiguous to the north wall of the basilica;*
- area by the southwestern corner of the church, where the exploration of adjacent room 9 was completed; the clearing of the side aisle and nave commenced in order to locate the colonnade that separated the two areas.*

*Building conservation works were performed in order to reinforce the wall under the steps leading to the apse. Moreover, two walls of the two crypts in the apse were consolidated (see contribution by Barbara Wronska Kucy in this volume).*

*In addition, coins from the previous season and part of this year's finds underwent cleaning and conservation.*

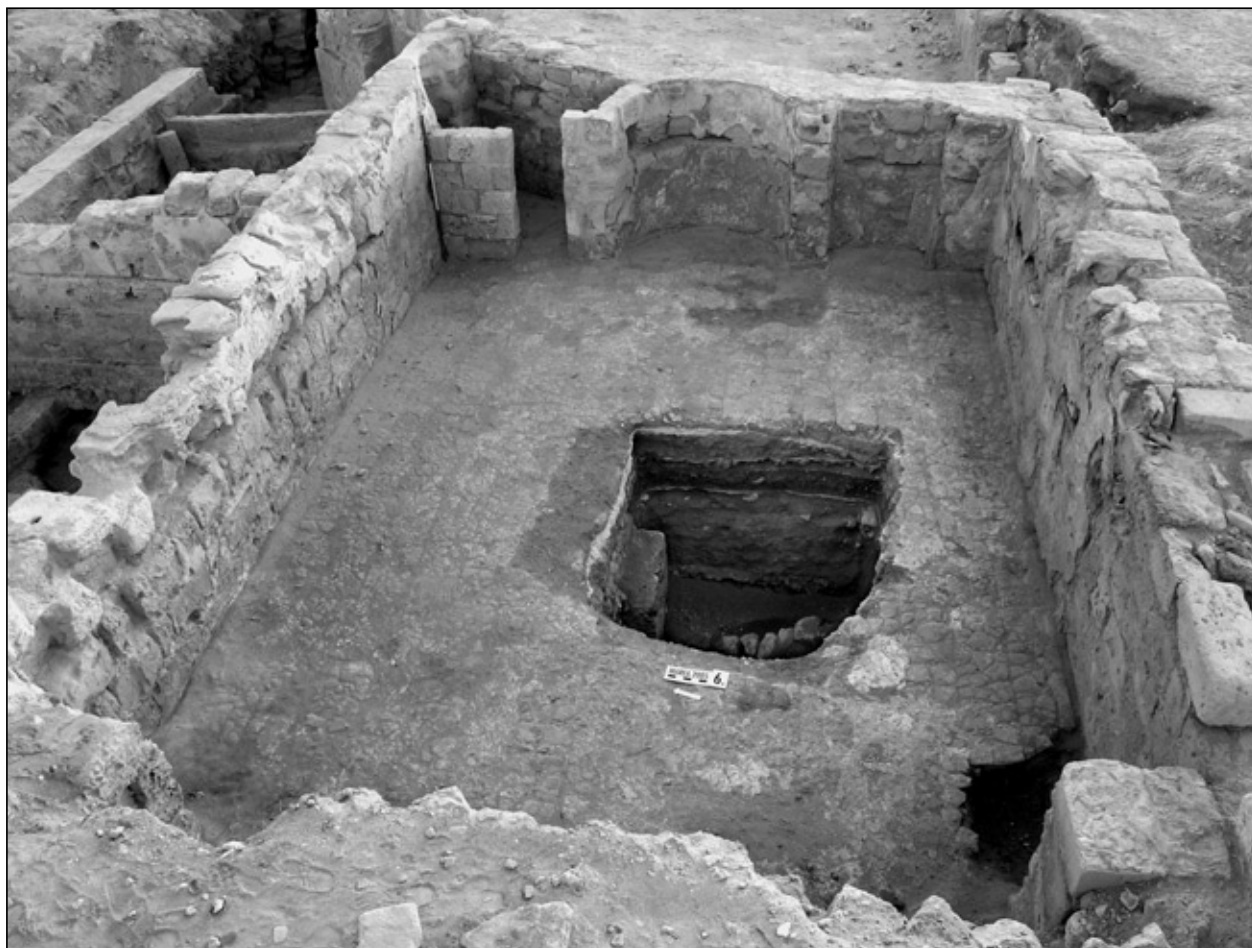
1 The team was directed by Dr. Hanna Szymańska, Mr. Grzegorz Kieferlingska and comprised: Mr. Krzysztof Babraj, Deputy Director; Ms Dorota Dziedzic, Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk and Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, archaeologists; Ms Daria Tarara and Ms Beata Błaszczuk, architects; Mr. Grzegorz Kieferling, archaeologist and conservator; Ms Joanna Babraj, documentalist, student of conservation; Mrs. Barbara Wrońska-Kucy, architect and conservator, and Mr. Jacek Kucy, photographer. The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by inspectors: Mr. Hamed El Sayed Elhosaini, archaeologist, and Mr. Abdelhaye Shehata Abdelfatah, conservator.

## STRATIGRAPHY

The first task of the mission was to clear three robber pits dug in our absence following the last season: in the centre of the chapel (pit C), in the northern aisle (pit B), and behind the eastern wall of the church (pit A), across the road leading to the lake. This proved to be an opportune way of checking the stratigraphy inside the basilica.

The most relevant information was supplied by pit C, which was excavated down to culturally sterile layers. The nearly

square pit (2.20 x 2.40 m) had been cut into the floor of the chapel; it was dug to a depth of 2.00 m [Fig. 1]. A wall of stone blocks, oriented N-S, undoubtedly a relic of an earlier structure, passed down the middle. A pile of human bones, contemporary with this wall, was uncovered in the western pit wall; the bones turned out to be a virtually complete skeleton belonging to a tall man (lacking only the finger bones),<sup>2</sup> obviously secondarily interred above a crushed amphora of the 2nd-3rd century.<sup>3</sup> The other



*Fig. 1. Pit C cut into the floor of the chapel  
(Photo D. Dziedzic)*

2 Kindly identified by anthropologist R. Mahler based on photo documentation.

3 The pottery was identified and dated by Dr. G. Majcherek.

MAREA  
EGYPT

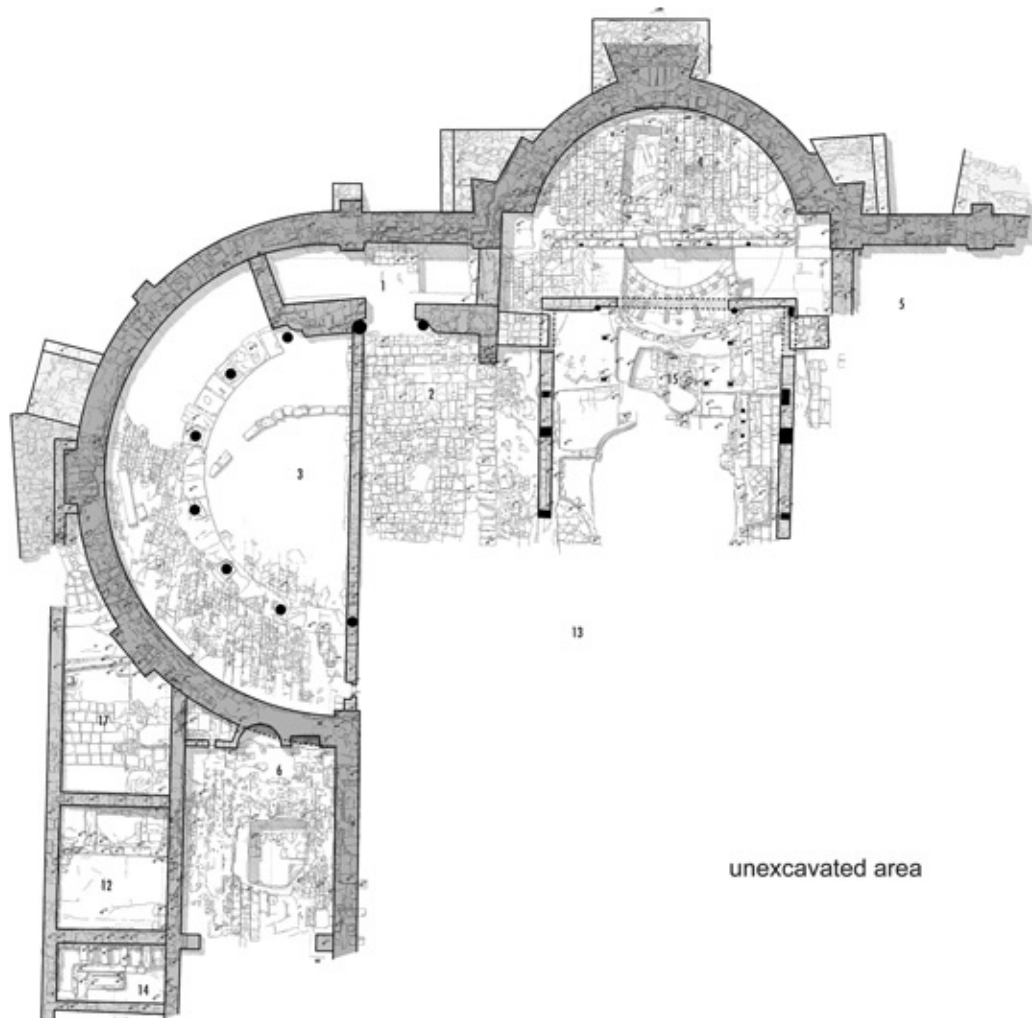
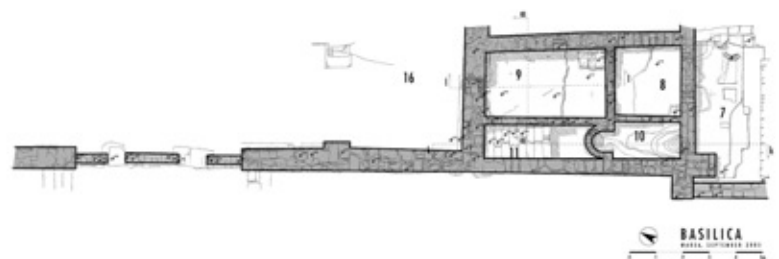


Fig. 2. Plan of the basilica in Marea after the 2005 season  
(Drawing D. Tarara)



three pit walls revealed clear stratigraphical evidence of four successive lime-mortar floors [Fig. 3]. The earliest floor (IV) was laid after the last occupation level, which included the above-mentioned wall, had ceased to function. Over it, on a leveling layer nearly 0.40 m thick, another floor (III) was laid. It was carefully constructed, on a substructure made of two layers: pebbles set in mortar mixed with ash, and sand with crushed shells. Above it, there was a wall of mud-brick preserving patches of thick plaster. Only floors II and I belonged to the basilica. Level measurements indicated that

particular layers in the described pit corresponded to the occupation levels uncovered in the nave of the church (see below). There is much to show that the basilica was founded on top of an older mud-brick structure.

Sections of the nave (7.00 m) and northern aisle (3.80 m) were cleared excavating westward. A baptistery [Fig. 2: no. 15] was found 1.80 m from the wall of the pottery kiln uncovered in 2003. This structure, originally part of the mud-brick building, reached down to the level of the grate of the kiln. Despite considerable

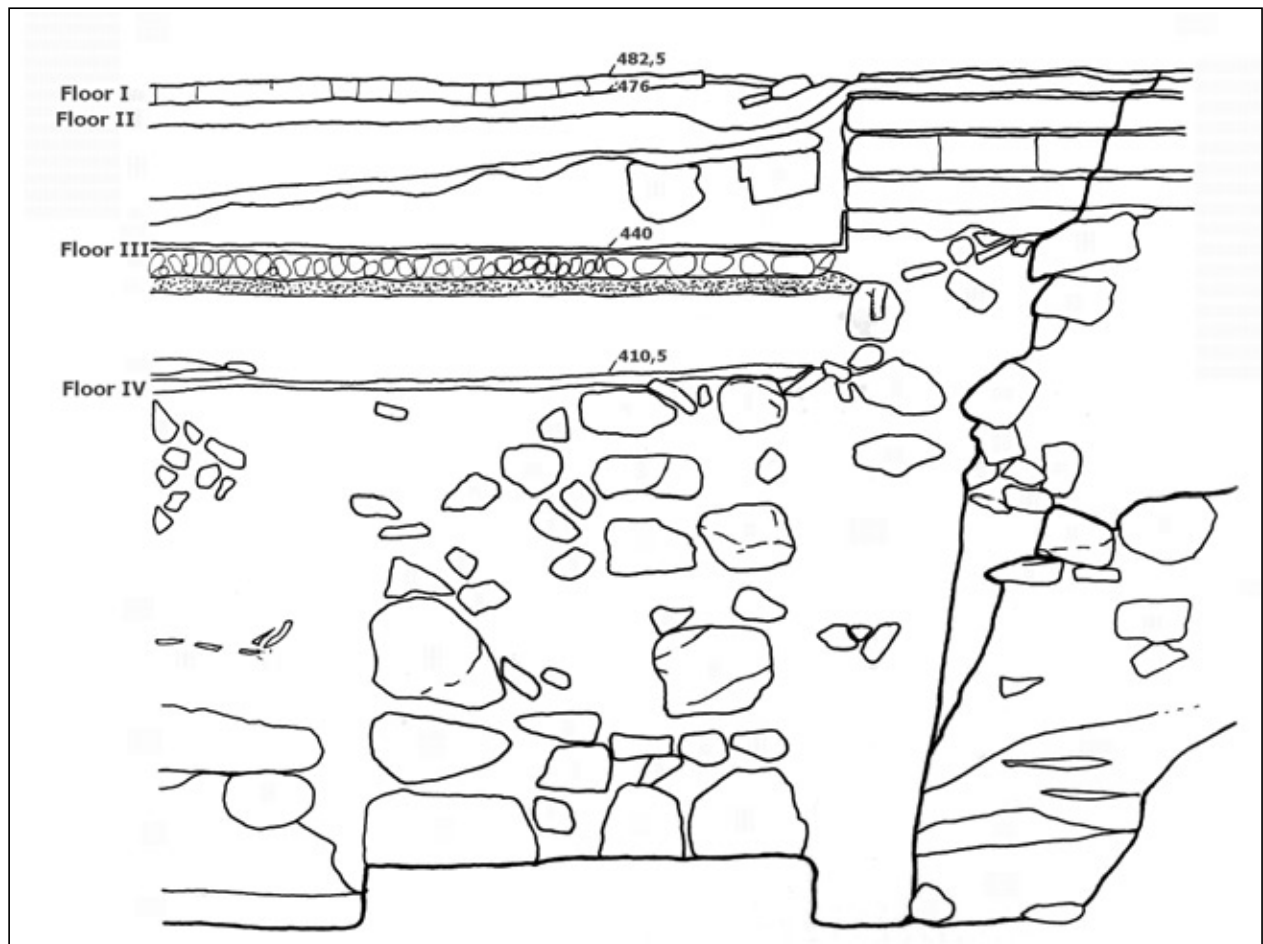


Fig. 3. Section through strata underlying the basilica (south trench wall in pit C). Scale 1:10. Note successive floors: I and II (lime mortar); III (lime mortar on a substructure of pebbles poured with mortar mixed with ashes, on top of a layer of sand with crushed shells and a leveling layer of soil mixed with potsberds, plaster, rock); and IV (lime mortar on top of a similar leveling layer) (Drawing D. Dziedzic)



deterioration, its shape is clearly discernible [Fig. 4]. It belongs to the round *piscina* type (1.08 m in diameter and 1.00 m in depth), with descending flights of steps situated facing each other on the eastern and western sides, two steps on each side.<sup>4</sup> The wall of the basin, preserved only on the south side, and the steps, were made of lime mortar and covered with red, waterproof plaster (*opus signinum*). Vertical imprints are proof of marble revetment on facing the walls. The location of the baptistery below the floor and under or in the vicinity of the altar points to a dating earlier than the

basilica. Presumably it was part of a sanctuary (chapel?) that preceded the structure currently under excavation.

The work in the nave supplied data on the successive building stages of the basilica. Moving westward, the debris of stone blocks, which had fallen from the side walls of the basilica and remained in the fill, ended c. 2.50 m from the wall of the kiln. Found here was a small number of fragments of marble column shafts, 0.24, 0.30 and 0.35 m in diameter, as well as, appearing here for the first time, polygonal column bases [Fig. 5], which are typically Byzantine<sup>5</sup> and which were



Fig. 4. Baptistery. View from the north  
(Photo J. Babraj)

4 Baptisteries of this type were also found in the Abu Mena basilica, cf. A. Khatchatrian, *Les baptisteres paléochrétiens* (Paris 1962), 8, 60 a and b; P. Grossmann, *Abu Mina II. Das Baptisterium* (Mainz 2004).

5 Cf., e.g., G.G. Gounares, *Eisagoge sten Palaiochristianine Archaialogia* (Thessalonike 2000), 146, Figs 237-239.

a common element of the decoration of the Abu Mena basilica.<sup>6</sup>

The biggest accomplishment of the season was the provisional distinguishing of subsequent occupation levels inside the church and the position of chancel posts. In previous seasons, two marble posts and numerous fragments of screens from a barrier surrounding the altar were excavated in the fill of the kiln and in its vicinity. As mentioned above, the layers of mud brick, encountered both in this part of the basilica, and in pit C, testify to the existence of a structure immediately prior to the last phase of the church, when the highest floor was laid. A fragment of this pavement, in the form of impressed mortar and waterproof plaster<sup>7</sup> that constituted a bedding for marble tiles, was left for the sake of evidence in the southern part of the explored part of the nave [Fig. 7]. A wall contemporary to this floor enclosed the area (9.80 x 9.20 m) around the altar that had once stood there. Its eastern part (disturbed in the center) and two lateral wings are preserved [cf. Fig. 2]. The *cancelli* were fixed to this wall, as made evident by the rectangular impressions of pillars of various dimensions and orientation that can be observed on its surface. Considering the change in the placement of grooves for mounting screens observed on a pillar found last year,<sup>8</sup> it can be inferred that they were moved when the wall was rebuilt. The east wall has two circular, symmetrically spaced openings for fitting small columns.

A fragment of a shaft of one of these columns, 0.22 m in diameter, was found in 2003 in the debris filling the kiln.

An earlier occupation level was distinguished in the southern and the northern parts of the explored section of the nave. A pavement of stone slabs was found under a bedding of crushed rock and clay, 0.40-0.50 m thick, recorded beneath the preserved evidence of the latest floor. Immediately above it is a small wall with three square openings for fixing small pillars. Perhaps this was an inner passageway, with a threshold on the south side of which there is a layer of plaster painted black. In the northern part, the following objects contemporaneous with this level were found: a thick floor of lime mortar with traces of waterproof plaster, un-

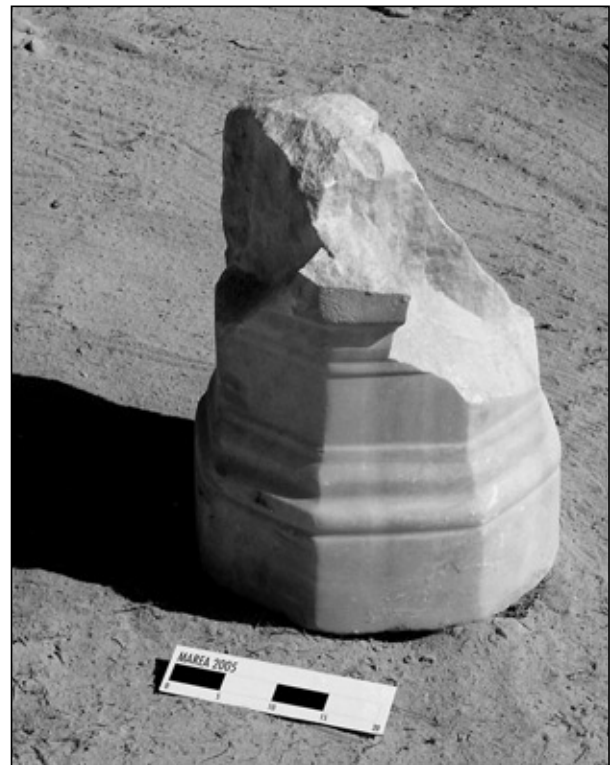


Fig. 5. Polygonal column base from the nave of the basilica (Photo H. Szymańska)

6 P. Grossmann, Abu Mina I. Die Gruftkirche und die Gruft (Mainz 1989), 61, Fig. 9.

7 On the basis of observations made when excavating the basilica, one can conclude that in this time and location the use of *opus signinum* was widespread and frequently not motivated by technological reasons.

8 Cf. PAM XV, Reports 2004 (2005), 50 and Fig. 8.





*Fig. 6. Stylobate under a colonnade separating the nave from the northern aisle of the basilica  
(Photo J. Babraj)*



*Fig. 7. Southwestern part of the nave showing remains of two floor levels. View from the west (Photo J. Babraj)*



covered over an extended surface (2.20 x 2.20 m), and the remains of a curious round structure (only a part of it has been unearthed) with preserved fragments of plaster-coated walls. It was presumably a basin (baptismal font?). In order to reveal its full form and function, a section of the upper floor of the basilica ought to be removed. On the limestone pavement of the structure, small pieces of colored plaster were found (green and yellow, as well as red with floral motifs). At that time, a different altar barrier was obviously in use, enclosing a much smaller space (5.00 x 2.20 m) than the later one and located closer to the apse [cf. *Fig. 2*]. What remains of it is one wall on the southern side and five quadrangular impressions of chancel posts. The said two levels cor-

respond to floors I and III in pit C inside the chapel.

In the northern aisle, yet another part of a floor with tile imprints was uncovered, as well as a stylobate under columns separating it from the nave [*Fig. 6*].

Adjacent to the northern wall of the chapel are three rooms built simultaneously with the chapel. From the lake side they are delimited by a wall that reaches the part of the buttress supporting the transept wall in the second reconstruction phase of the basilica.

First from the west was a rectangular latrine (4.00 x 2.20 m) [cf. *Fig. 2*, no. 14]. Three toilet seats were aligned along the eastern wall [*Fig. 8*], preserving *in situ* only the blocks supporting the seating, the latter being found in the debris. Two of the



*Fig. 8. Latrine uncovered behind the northern wall of the chapel*  
(Photo D. Dziedzic)

seats measured 0.75 by 0.46 m and 0.40 by 0.20 m. In the southeastern corner, there was a fourth toilet, which was converted into a water tank (?) at a later time. Alongside the toilets there is a stone foot rest, and in front of it a deep and well preserved basin made of stone slabs, measuring 1.40 x 0.80 m, presumably for washing hands and rinsing sponges. Both the inner and the outer walls of the basin were coated with waterproof plaster that bears traces of water stains. A thick layer of *opus signinum* is also visible in the north-eastern corner of the latrine. Originally, the latrine was accessible from the church, specifically from a room situated behind the western entrance to the chapel (to be excavated next year). The second entrance was in the western wall of the latrine. Both doorways were later blocked. The exploration of the latrine, which will also be continued in the upcoming season, yielded many finds, including fragments of a painted Coptic plate with motifs of birds and fish [Fig. 9], two terracotta figurines

(horse and rider, and painted head of a woman), a bronze ring with stamped decoration on the bezel and a bone pin.

In the next room, measuring 4.00 x 4.50 m [cf. Fig. 2, no. 12], two occupation levels were uncovered: one contemporary with the floor of the chapel, preserved only in the form of an offset by the eastern wall, and a second, earlier one, c. 0.50 m below, with a floor of stone slabs [Fig. 10]. On this lower level, by the northern wall, there were found the remains of a primitive, small oven with traces of burning. Above it, fragments of two floors were preserved: one of clay and the other of lime mortar. It seems that these relics date from before the room was built, except for the southeastern corner, in which a small cellar (?) was found. Judging from notches in the wall used to install individual steps, stairs had once led from this spot to a floor above the chapel. This room yielded most of the 314 coins discovered this year, in similarity to the case of the "shops" behind the southern wall of the basilica [cf. Fig. 2 nos 9,10,11]

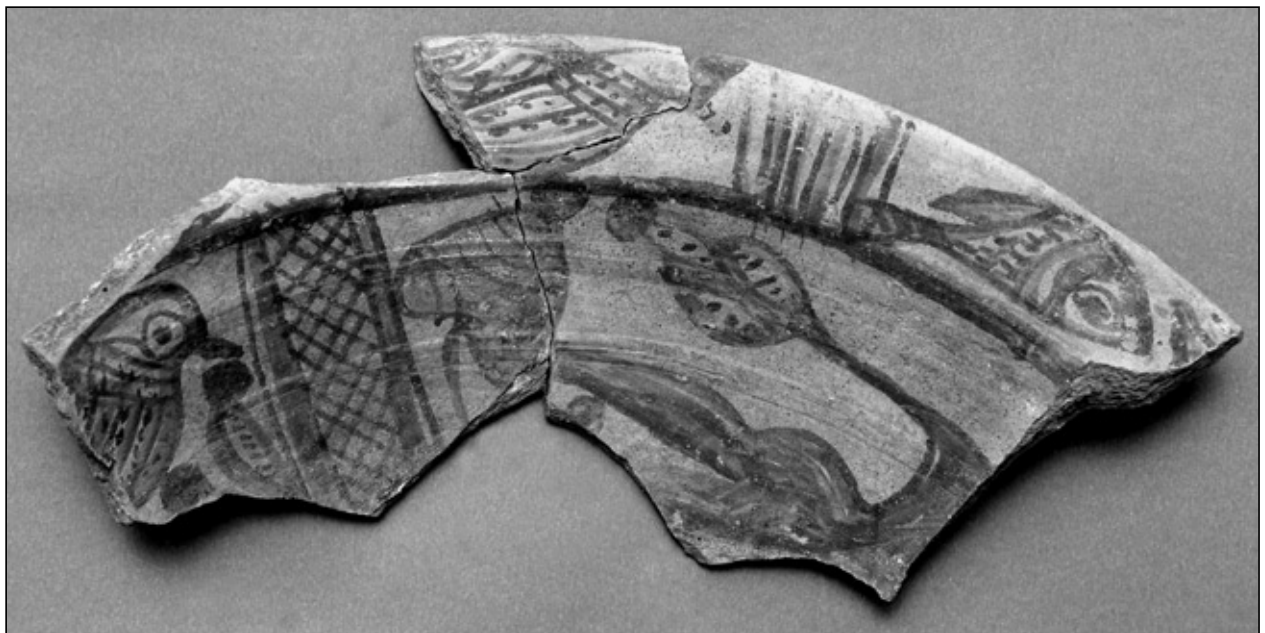


Fig. 9. Fragment of a Coptic plate with painted animal motifs  
(Photo D. Dziedzic)



*Fig. 10. Room 12 behind the northern wall of the chapel. View from the west  
(Photo J. Babraj)*



*Fig. 11. Room 17 behind the northern wall of the chapel. View from the north  
(Photo J. Babraj)*



observed last season. This leads to the conclusion that a trading and industrial sector had existed adjacent to the church walls, providing pilgrims with the opportunity to buy various devotional products as well as food.

Another room [cf. *Fig. 2*, no. 17], measuring 4.00 x 4.80 m, was, like the ones discussed above, created as a result of closing a space behind the chapel wall. From the east, it was delimited by a diagonal wall of limestone slabs, which reached the western buttress reinforcing the transept wall [*Fig. 11*, bottom left]. There is much to suggest that the unit served industrial purposes. By the northern wall there are two sturdy counters for preparing food, made of stone blocks and

covered with a thick layer of lime mortar sealed with *opus signinum*. Inside they were filled with tiny potsherds, the rounded edges of which suggest water erosion. In the wall between the counters, there are three round openings for wooden beams that probably supported another counter or table (?). In the northeastern corner, there stood a limestone washbasin stand [*Fig. 12*], confirming the utilitarian purpose of the room. The floor was covered with limestone slabs that reached up to the part of the northern buttress added in the second phase, for the building of which another washbasin stand was used.

Explorations by the western entrance to the basilica permitted room 9 [cf. *Fig. 2*] to be cleared completely; this was the 'money-



*Fig. 12. Washbasin stand in room 17. View from the west  
(Photo J. Babraj)*

exchange office', called so because of the coin weights and over 100 coins found there last year.<sup>9</sup> Originally, it was accessible from the southern aisle through a doorway, which was later blocked. Then two entrances were opened: one in the south wall of the 'money-exchange office' and the other in the west wall, connecting it with rooms 8 and 11 respectively. In the debris, a column shaft fragment of marble was found; with a diameter of 0.084 m it is the smallest uncovered hitherto in the basilica.

The excavation of the northern aisle and nave of the church, instead of revealing the expected stylobate under a colonnade separating the two parts, brought the discovery of a wall which perhaps closed the narthex of the church. This issue will have to be resolved in the upcoming season. In both of the explored sections, pieces of stucco decoration were found: acanthus leaves painted to imitate marble in the aisle, and fragments of a cornice in the nave.

9 This year, another 22 coins were found here.