


## A Note on the Architectural Layout of the Early Islamic Church on Sir Bani Yas Island, UAE


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**Abstract:** It has been suggested that the church on Sir Bani Yas island, dated to the seventh–eighth century, originally had a tower rising over its south-eastern room. This would be a unique feature as other hitherto known churches in the Gulf dated to the early Islamic period did not have towers. One of the arguments for the existence of the tower has been the increased thickness of the northern wall of the south-eastern room. However, close examination of the remains reveals that the increased thickness of this wall is in fact related to the rectangular apse of the chancel. Other arguments used previously to support the claim that the church had a tower are critically assessed in this paper, which concludes that the Sir Bani Yas church had no tower and that its chancel had a rectangular apse, yet another architectural feature it shares with other early Islamic Gulf churches.

**Keywords:** Sir Ban Yas, church, Gulf, archaeology, architecture, apse, early Islamic period

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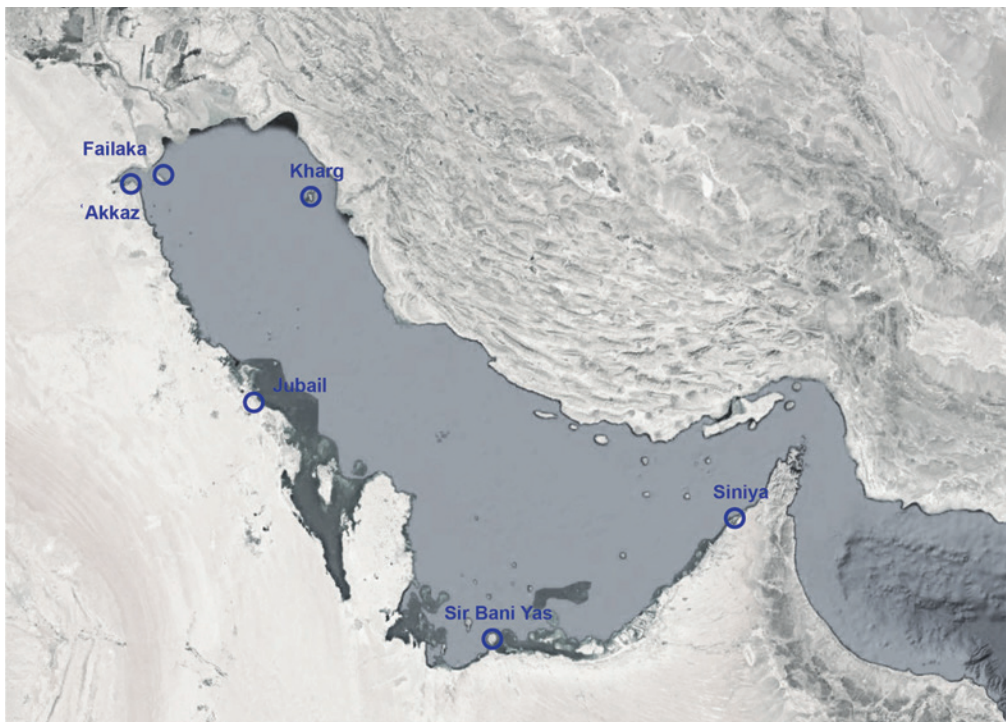
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The church located on Sir Bani Yas island in the emirate of Abu Dhabi (the United Arab Emirates) is dated to around the mid-seventh to mid-eighth centuries<sup>1</sup> and displays several construction phases.<sup>2</sup> It belongs to a group of seven hitherto known churches from the

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<sup>1</sup> Kennet 2007: 92–93; Carter 2008; 2013: 316–320; Phelps, Simpson, Freestone 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The excavators of the church had originally assumed an earlier date of the building, i.e. the sixth century (King, Hellyer 1994; King 1997; 2001; Hellyer 2001; Elders 2001; 2003). It is currently no longer accepted, as thorough studies of the materials, in particular pottery (Carter 2008) and glass (Phelps, Simpson, Freestone 2018) as well as general historical observations (Payne 2011) clearly place the church in the seventh to eighth century.



1. Locations of early Islamic churches in the Gulf (elaborating: R. Zureikat; based on: a satellite photograph by NASA, public domain).

early Islamic period on the coasts and islands of the Arab-Persian Gulf and excavated within the last three decades (**Fig. 1**).<sup>3</sup> Four of these churches – the church on Kharg island in Iran,<sup>4</sup> the church A1 at al-Qusur on Failaka island in Kuwait,<sup>5</sup> the churches at Jubail in Saudi Arabia,<sup>6</sup> and most probably also at ‘Akkaz in Kuwait,<sup>7</sup> share with the Sir Bani Yas church certain features, such as a ground plan with the eastern part divided into three rooms and architectural decorations executed in stucco.<sup>8</sup> These churches belonged to a network of Christian buildings that flourished in the Gulf area in the early Islamic period. The Christian communities they served were a part of the Church of the East – an ecclesiastical structure stretching from Iran and Iraq to China and India – and formed a province known as Bet Qatraye.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Carter 2013; Simpson 2018; Hauser 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Steve 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard, Callot, Salles 1991; Bernard, Salles 1991; Salles, Callot 2013; Bonnéric 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Langfeldt 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Gachet-Bizollon 2011. The remains of the church at ‘Akkaz are badly preserved and it is impossible to fully reconstruct its plan.

<sup>8</sup> Lic 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Carter 2008; 2013; Payne 2011; Walker 2012; Salles, Callot 2013; Bonnéric 2022.

The church on Sir Bani Yas has been investigated and excavated since 1992, but no final publication of the complex has yet been published, only a series of preliminary reports have been presented.<sup>10</sup> The church is located within what was probably a monastic complex with several monastic units within a courtyard and a number of additional houses in the close vicinity. The building had a chancel directed approximately towards the east and measured 11.5 x 16.7m. In 2015–2016, a team from Turath: Architecture and Urban Design Consultants, Amman, undertook a conservation management plan including a detailed documentation of the present state of the complex and in 2022 the present authors again studied the architectural remains on-site (**Fig. 2**).

Whereas in general the tripartite plan of the church and its orientation fit the ecclesiastical architecture of the region well, one of the gaps in our understanding of the architecture of the church is the south-eastern room and its possible elevation. It has been suggested by the excavators that this room was a tower.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation was based on three arguments: (1) two oval notches in the floor plaster, which supposedly indicate fix points for a ladder to reach another storey of the supposed tower (**Fig. 2**), (2) the accumulation of plaster fragments, which were interpreted as remains of a ‘suspended floor’ and (3) the increased thickness of its northern wall necessary for the elevated construction.

It has been proposed that this supposedly elevated structure served as a ‘bell tower’, in which wooden clappers would have been used for calling the believers.<sup>12</sup> Such a feature would be the first known in church architecture in the Gulf region in this period and it would strongly define the outer appearance of the building. Even if no architectural comparisons are hitherto known for such ‘bell towers’, one of the excavators refers to Labīd, an Arabian poet (c. 560–661 CE), who mentions the use of clappers (*nāqūs*) for ‘calling the faithful to prayer’ in the pre-Islamic period, in a village in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>13</sup> Labīd does not, however, mention a tower at all and the function of the clapper is not indicated in this account.<sup>14</sup>

Since the claim of the existence of a bell (clapper) tower in the Sir Bani Yas church has far reaching implications for our understanding of the architecture and the use of churches in the region,<sup>15</sup> it is important to critically assess these arguments.

The two oval impressions in the floor of the south-eastern room cannot be taken as clear evidence for a ladder. It is evident in one of the notches that its central part is uncarved and on the same level as the floor of the room (**Fig. 2**). Such a notch would hardly stabilise the pole of a ladder. Therefore, it is not possible to clearly define the function of the notches; they could have served any wooden construction in the room. The existence in the north-eastern corner of the room of an installation made of stone and plaster, creating

<sup>10</sup> King 1997; Hellyer 2001; Elders 2001; 2003; Beech 2009.

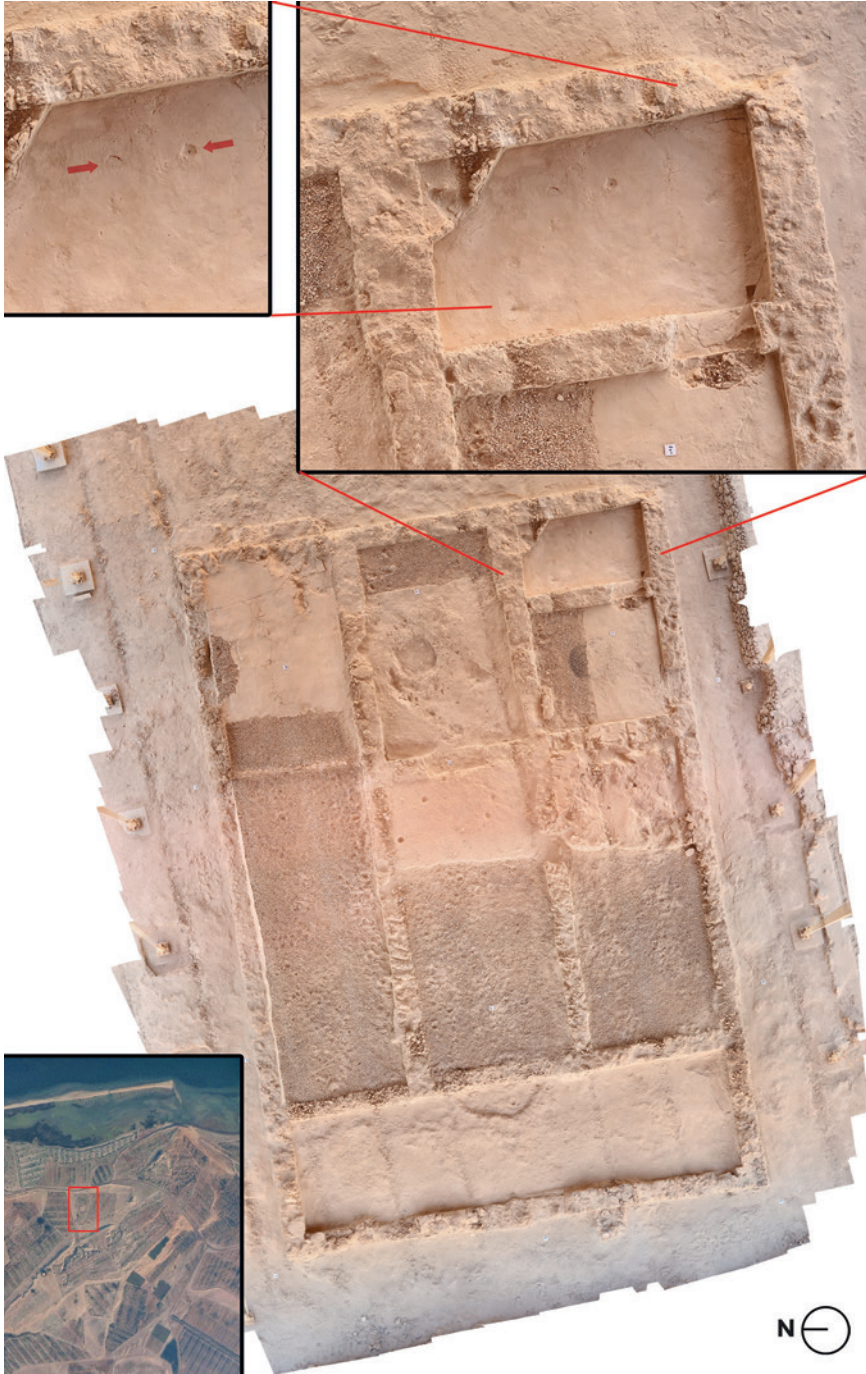
<sup>11</sup> Elders 2001: 51; 2003: 231; see also *Sir Bani Yas 2021*: 6–7.

<sup>12</sup> Elders 2001: 51.

<sup>13</sup> Elders 2003: 231–232.

<sup>14</sup> Labīd ibn Rabī‘ah, *Sharḥ diwān Labīd*: 26.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Simpson’s remarks about the possible use of the alleged tower of the Sir Bani Yas church (Simpson 2018: 13).



2. Sir Bani Yas church: location of the site, remains of the church, the south-eastern room, and the notches in plaster of the south-eastern room (elaborating: Turath: Architecture and Urban Design Consultants; © DCT Abu Dhabi).

a small storage, indicates that this entire space could have possibly been used for keeping e.g. liturgical utensils or even as a baptistery.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the accumulation of plaster in the room, the excavator states about the room: 'It was full of fallen plaster fragments, which proved to have been the remains of a previously suspended floor'.<sup>17</sup> Such a brief description of the archaeological situation, and especially when it lacks the quantification of the material, is not sufficient to support the argument for another storey. An alternative interpretation could be that the plaster fragments are the remains of the roofing of the building.

The thickness of the northern wall of the south-eastern room leads us to propose a different interpretation of the eastern part of the Sir Bani Yas church. A close examination of this northern wall reveals that its increased thickness does not continue further westwards and, in fact, stops before the north-western corner of the room, 1.66m from the eastern wall. If the room had belonged to a tower, one would expect that in particular the corners would have been strengthened. The other walls of the south-eastern room are also not evidently thicker than the walls in the remaining parts of the church.

The northern wall of the room in question widens on its northern face, which is the interior wall of the central eastern room – the chancel. A similar feature is visible on the opposite (northern) wall of the chancel where the wall widens at exactly the same distance (1.66m) from the eastern wall. The thicker sections of the southern and northern walls of the chancel are 0.67 and 0.70m respectively, compared to 0.45 and 0.47m of the remaining parts of these walls. This means that the increased thickness of the wall on both sides belongs to the interior layout of the chancel. This leads us to the conclusion that the extended thickness of the northern wall of the south-eastern room in fact has nothing to do with the south-eastern room but relates to a rectangular apse of the chancel.

Rectangular apses are a common feature across church architecture in the Gulf and Iraq (**Fig. 3**).<sup>18</sup> Many of the other churches which are roughly contemporary with the Sir Bani Yas church have such a rectangular apse, as attested by the above-mentioned church A1 at al-Qusur, the church on Kharg island, and the newly found church on Siniya island (UAE).<sup>19</sup> At Jubail, an apse is not singled out by the walls of the chancel but three engaged columns at each side of its easternmost part create a similar effect, which is intensified by the existence of a low platform adjacent to the eastern wall of the room.<sup>20</sup> In the church at 'Akkaz the state of preservation of the relevant part of the church does not allow a determination of whether the central room ended with such an apse. Usually, a chancel with the rectangular apse was separated from the main part of the nave, as is also the case in the Sir Bani Yas church. Similar is the situation in the so-called church A2 at al-Qusur,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Verstegen 2021: 189.

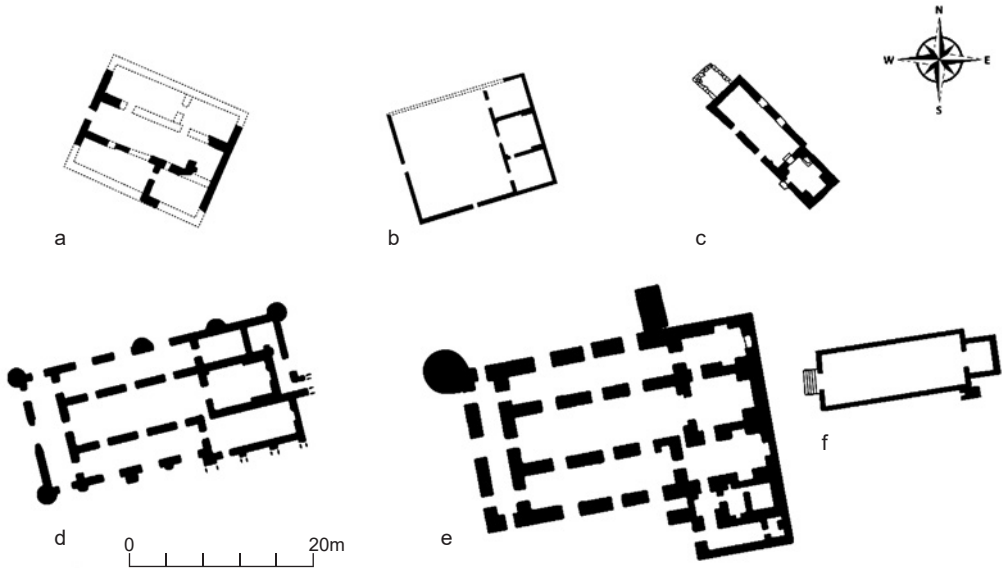
<sup>17</sup> Elders 2001: 51.

<sup>18</sup> Hauser 2007: 100; Verstegen 2021. Rectangular apses in the churches of the Gulf and Iraq have been associated with the Sasanian and earlier architectural tradition of the region (Salles, Callot 2013: 249).

<sup>19</sup> Power *et al.* 2022a; 2022b; 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Langfeldt 1994: 35, Fig. 11.

<sup>21</sup> The identification of the building A2 as a church has been recently debated by Julie Bonnéric (Bonnéric 2021).



3. Plans of the Gulf churches with rectangular apses: a. 'Akkaz; b. Jubail; c. Siniya; d. Kharg; e. al-Qusur A1; f. al-Qusur A2; the plan of the Jubail church is not to scale (Drawing: R. Zureikat; based on: Gachet-Bizollon 2011: Fig. 10; Langfeldt 1994: Fig. 2; Power *et al.* 2023: Fig. 4; Bonnéric 2018: Figs 2–3).

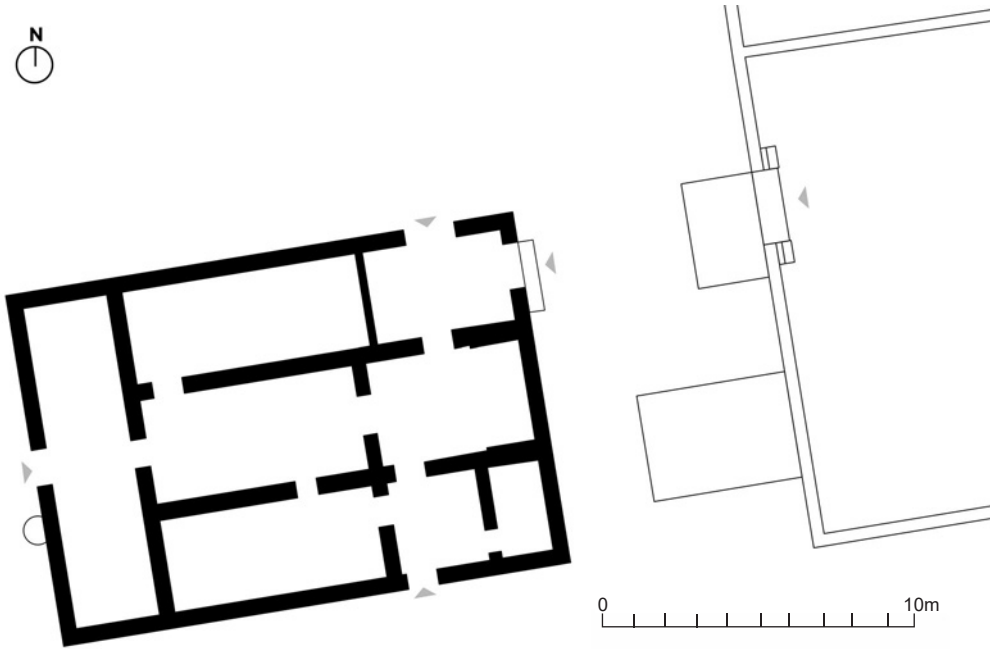
in which the easternmost part of the church has no rectangular apse but the close-to-square chancel is clearly narrower than the main body of the church and is architecturally separated from it. Therefore, the narrowing of the eastern part of the church is well attested in the architecture of the region and the Sir Bani Yas church with its separated chancel and a rectangular apse follows this pattern.

## CONCLUSIONS

The new architectural analysis of the Sir Bani Yas church showed that the central-eastern part of the church had a rectangular apse, which was a common feature for the churches of the region (**Fig. 4**). This conclusion is reached by the observation that the increased thickness of walls does not relate to a tower but to the rectangular apse. The embellishment of this rectangular apse is uncertain although the excavator mentions evidence for vaulting of the chancel.<sup>22</sup> The increased thickness of the walls thus could also have served the supporting of such a vault over the central part of the chancel, a solution known from other churches in the region.<sup>23</sup> But to come to more firm conclusions about vaulting, the final publication of the excavations is needed. To increase the spatial impression of an orientation of the rectangular apse, the thickness of the attached plaster together with stucco friezes

<sup>22</sup> Elders 2001: 51.

<sup>23</sup> Hauser 2019: 441–442; Versteegen 2021.



4. Reconstructed plan of the Sir Bani Yas church (elaborating: Turath: Architecture and Urban Design Consultants; © DCT Abu Dhabi).

that likely decorated the apse furthermore emphasised the centrality of this easternmost part of the chancel. The rectangular apse and the spatial narrowing of the chancel directed the view of visitors towards the centre and gave the interior space a strong architectural orientation towards the chancel. As in the other contemporary churches in the Gulf, the central eastern room was architecturally emphasised in the spatial hierarchy. The Sir Bani Yas church also followed this model and it did not attract the visitor's attention through an external 'bell tower' but through the internal visual dramaturgy that guided the eye towards the central apse.

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## *Table of contents*

EDITORIAL .....	7
SPECIAL SECTION: SOUTH-EAST ARABIA	
ANNE BENOIST, AURÉLIEN HAMEL, CÉCILE LE CARLIER, MICHELE DEGLI ESPOSTI, JULIE GOY Iron Age Metalworking at Masafi-1? A Reconsideration of the Metal Hoards Discovered in the Collective Buildings .....	11
CARMEN DEL CERRO LINARES, CARLOS FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, PAULA GÓMEZ SANZ, ALICIA ALONSO GARCÍA, ARMANDO GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN The Al Khudairah Necropolis (Sharjah, UAE): Reflections from the 2023 Field Season .....	39
KAROL JUCHNIEWICZ, AGNIESZKA LIC Abbasid Jumeirah, Dubai. An Overview of the Site and Its Architectural Stucco Decoration .....	57
AGNIESZKA LIC, ACHIM LICHTENBERGER, RAMI FAROUK DAHER, RANA ZUREIKAT A Note on the Architectural Layout of the Early Islamic Church on Sir Bani Yas Island, UAE .....	83
MARIA PIA MAIORANO, DOMINIK CHLACHULA, ALŽBĚTA DANIELISOVÁ, ROMAN GARBA Investigating the Neolithic Presence in South-Central Oman: The DUQ-25A Rock Shelter .....	93
ALEXIA PAVAN After the Fall of the Caravan Kingdoms. Notes about the Occupation of Sumhuram and the Area of Khor Rori (Oman) from the Fifth Century AD to the Islamic Period .....	111
REGULAR PAPERS	
WOJCIECH EJSMOND, MARTA KACZANOWICZ The Gebelein Region in the Third Intermediate and Late Periods .....	133

MAGDALENA KAZIMIERCZAK

Potmarks on Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom Bread Moulds from the Settlement

Layers of Tell el-Murra ..... 155

ABBREVIATIONS ..... 183