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# The Layout of a Military Shrine in Egypt's Eastern Desert

MICHEL REDDÉ

Tadeusz Sarnowski, who long excavated the *principia* of Novae, endeavoured to meticulously unravel the decoration and interior layout of these *loci religiosi* in a learned article in the *Bonner Jahrbücher*, taking a special interest in the statues of divinities (SARNOWSKI 1989). Here, in tribute, I would like to take up a few points about the excavation of a sanctuary recently discovered in the *praesidium* of Dios / Iovis (Abu Qurrayya), on the caravan trail between Koptos and Berenice, in the middle of Egypt's eastern desert. Its quite exceptional state of preservation provides insights into a number of questions specialists have about the interior layout of these religious edifices.

The *aedes* of Iovis was excavated as a matter of some urgency at the very end of the 2008 campaign by E. Botte and J.-P. Brun. The archaeological aspect was the subject of a preliminary publication in the journal *Chiron*. H. Cuvigny rapidly published a series of oracular ostraca discovered in the excavation situating them in context (CUVIGNY 2010). I draw on her description to outline the features necessary to understand what follows and leave it to the excavators themselves to complete the details of their discovery in a future publication. The following points are considered here:

1-The *praesidium* was founded in AD 114/115. A Latin inscription discovered in the gateway attests to this (CUVIGNY 2010: no. 1). Like all fortlets along these caravan trails, it was built of dry stone around a large central well. The presence of the well meant the barrack rooms had to be

set back against the ramparts. The fortlet's outer dimensions (59 m × 53 m) place it in the upper category of the series, but they are not exceptional (REDDÉ 2014). Its walls still stand up to a height of 2.65 m.

2-The shrine to be discussed was built against the curtain wall, on the right, after the entrance. But this was a secondary development replacing earlier barrack buildings. The early sanctuary has not been found, but I situate it, based on theory, opposite the entrance (REDDÉ 2004). The initial layout of the fort was completely restructured on several occasions, especially in this sector. However, I uncovered two inscriptions in the flight of rooms opposite the entrance. The first, in Greek, naming the architect who constructed the fort under Trajan, was dedicated to Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis (CUVIGNY 2010: no. 2). The second, in Latin, includes an erasure indicating a *damnatio memoriae*, most likely that of Caracalla or Severus Alexander rather than Commodus (CUVIGNY 2010: no. 3). The new layout was probably therefore from the early third century, with the *aedes* moved to a position opposite where it had initially stood. Two other similar transfers have been recorded in the *praesidia* of this desert (CUVIGNY *et al.* 2011; REDDÉ 2015).

3-The new sanctuary occupies the emplacement of room 49 of the fort and measures 4.25 m × 3.5 m (**Fig. 1**). It is characterised by a series of specific features that form the subject of this note.

At the back, facing the main entrance and standing against the rampart is a large podium

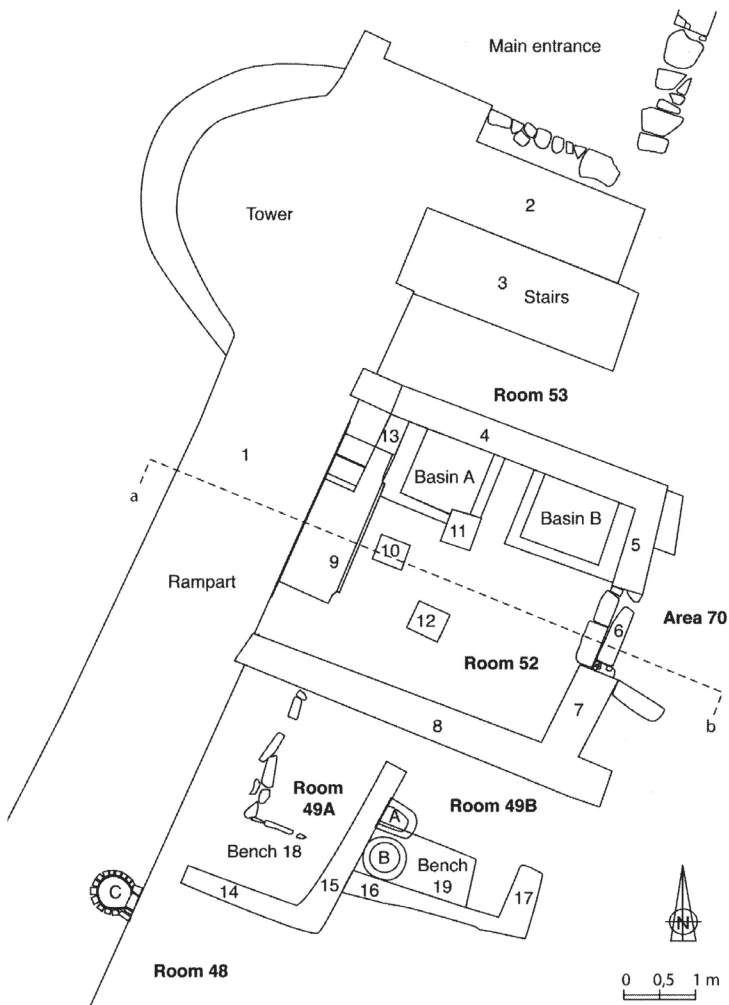


Fig. 1. Plan of the chapel of Dios / Iovis and its immediate vicinity (after CUVIGNY 2010: fig. 5a)

Fig. 1. Plan de la chapelle de Dios / Iovis et de ses abords (publié dans CUVIGNY 2010: fig. 5a)

that has been fully preserved ( $L = 2.25 \text{ m} \times l = 0.745 \text{ m} \times H = 1 \text{ m}$ ). It is built of re-used bricks from the baths or the cisterns and of limestone blocks bonded by mortar. The decor is akin to an *opus sectile* of steatite and limestone slabs. Various graffiti and “proskynemata” adorned the facade. The podium was served, from behind, by three steps leading to a side door in the north-eastern corner of the room.

Various statues have been found, some on the ground and some sealed to the podium itself. They include a throned god (Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis?), a clay head of Cerberus, the statue of a Graeco-Roman god standing, still sealed to the podium, and the statue of an Egyptian divinity

standing (Fig. 2). Representations of other divinities, almost all for the cult of Sarapis, are also present, together with inscriptions and graffiti (CUVIGNY *et al.* 2011).

According to the published description, the upper surface of the podium underwent a series of changes from what the published description says. Initially, it seems it was flat but may have borne some of the statues found. Then it seems the surface was raised with a mortar aggregate that still seals the foot of one of the statues and four wooden pegs (6–7 cm  $\times$  3 cm) forming a square around a hole in the podium (Fig. 3). After being violently destroyed, the podium was restored with re-used materials (Figs. 2 and 4), and, at the time it was discovered, it still had on it, from north to south, an oil lamp, the knees of the statue of Sarapis (?) sitting, and the sealed statue. Behind this last statue, excavation revealed a statuette of Jupiter wielding a lightning bolt. At that time, the passage to the side door was completely blocked off, a baked brick construction having been added to the northern upright of the podium (Fig. 4). The stairs, made unusable, were filled with sand and rubble among which the oracular ostraca described by H. CUVIGNY (2010) were found.

At the southern end of the podium, a sort of receptacle open to the outside stands atop the repairs to the podium (Fig. 4). For this reason (contrary to the published description), I think it belonged to the last state of construction.

In front of the podium, the room was initially adorned with a black and white (schist and quartz) mosaic pavement forming various geometric patterns (Figs. 2 and 3), i.e. a chequerboard pattern covering over one half of the room next to the door; a uniformly white floor in the part in front of the podium with a black frame surrounding a white centre located along the centre line.

On either side of this frame are two square bases of baked bricks coated with lime, set atop the mosaic. At the foot of the podium, on the centre line, stands a third smaller pedestal.

The space was redeveloped several times. In a second stage, two “basins” were fitted, set

upon the mosaic flooring, along the northern wall. These basins probably held recipients, the imprints of which are worn into the floor. The one nearest the podium blocked the passageway leading to the side door and the stairs behind the altar. After that, a floor of re-used baked bricks covered the mosaic flooring and the basins, hiding the central pedestal No. 10 (*Fig. 1*).

The detail of these developments is not dated precisely. They must have been made in the course of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, although the end date cannot be given. It should be pointed out, however, that 4<sup>th</sup>-century material is completely absent from these forts, barring a few sporadic finds, indicating limited travel along the route but continued occupation of the forts. We now situate the end of the occupation of the *praesidia* around the reign of Gallienus.

I have given no more so far than a simple description, already published, even if the details need refining here and there. A coherent interpretation of the arrangement described is still required. The whole of it is absolutely exceptional for its state of conservation. Space for a more in-depth discussion is unfortunately lacking here.

The existence of a podium in a military *aedes* has already been proposed several times in the learned literature, in view of the various discoveries of which T. Sarnowski himself drew up a list that should probably be updated now (SARNOWSKI 1992: note 9). He cited in particular Castell Collen (NASH-WILLIAMS 1969: 159), Caerleon (*Archaeologia Cambrensis* 1970: 14, fig. 2), Chesterholm (BIRLEY, RICHMOND, STANFIELD 1936: 229), Risingham (RICHMOND 1940: 110) and Aalen (PLANCK 1984: 22). The best-conserved example architecturally is probably the barracks of the *vigiles* at Ostia, which has, as at Iovis, side stairs (SABLAYROLLES 1996: fig. 4). This was also the case at Risingham and it is known that this architectural arrangement was still operative in the legionary camp of Lejjun (Jordan) in Late Antiquity. There the podium ran around the sides of the room, as indeed it did at Caerleon, and was served by both a side and a central staircase, facing the apse



Fig. 2. General view of the chapel of Dios/Iovis (phot. by M. Reddé)

Fig. 2. Vue générale de la chapelle de Dios/Iovis (phot. par M. Reddé)

(PARKER 2006: fig. 4.5 A). In the case of Novae, T. Sarnowski suggested a wooden stage, traces of which are found on the floor (SARNOWSKI 1992: 226), and it is likely such arrangements were common but often escaped the attention of early research and went unreported. This may be the type of set-up Tacitus alludes to in an often quoted passage about the advent of Otho, placed *in suggestu*, amid the insignia of the *castra praetoria*, in the very place where the golden statue of Galba had stood before (*Hist.* I 36). However, the exact interpretation of this passage remains controversial because it is related to the idea we have of the presence of imperial statues in the *principia*,



Fig. 3. View of the podium from the rampart. The central hole in which the standard could be fitted is arrowed. The wooden pegs cannot readily be seen (phot. by M. Reddé)

Fig. 3. Vue du podium, depuis le rempart. La flèche indique le trou central dans lequel pouvait s'insérer l'enseigne. Les ergots de bois sont en revanche peu visibles (phot. par M. Reddé)

and especially in the *aedes*, from the start of the Principate (STOLL 1992).

How can the pedestals of bricks in front of the podium in the fort of Dios/Iovis be accounted for? The central pedestal, smaller than the other two, could not have shared any architectural function with them. It is hard to say what could have been erected on a base of three pedestals. The most likely solution is that it was an altar. It can then be suggested without risk that the other two were column supports. But as two isolated columns make little sense, I suggest there was a baldachin above the podium resting on one side on the column and on the other side on corbels in the rampart, or even a simple system of beams fitted into the wall and resting on the columns at the front. An inscription discovered recently at Alba

Iulia pleads in favour of this hypothesis. It refers to the construction of a *tetrastylum* offered by a primipilus of the *legio XIII Gemina* with a single silver eagle (MOGA, PISO, DRÎMBAREAN 2008). A similar arrangement was probably used later in the Tetrarchic camp of Luxor, in the ancient chapel of the royal Ka which became the military *aedes* of the new *legio III Diocletiana* (REDDÉ 1986). I have suggested elsewhere, against the editors' opinion and relying on the case of Iovis, that the *tetrastylum* of Alba Iulia was designed to house the new standard fitted in the position of the old one (REDDÉ 2011).

Was there, by analogy, but also by what we know of all these buildings, a standard in the *praesidium* of Dios / Iovis? Common sense says there must have been. It is unimaginable there could have been a Roman army post even in the middle of Egypt's eastern desert and even partly populated by civilians without a *signum*. But obviously it could not have been a legionary eagle. For a small detachment as in our fortlets, a *vexillum* would have been enough. The study of these standards recently taken up and collated by K. Töpfer with an exhaustive iconography saves the need for lengthy research, even if much of the documentation, never so conveniently grouped before that study, was already familiar to specialists (TÖPFER 2011). When they were not with the troops, the *vexilla*, like the eagles, were fitted into a stand, as illustrated by the Matteotti sarcophagus of Modena (TÖPFER 2011: pl. 103, SD 49). Two iconographic representations from Hadrian's wall, one from Corbridge, the other from Vindolanda (TÖPFER 2011: pl. 121, RE 13 & pl. 122, RE 21) also depict these *vexilla* between two columns (Fig. 5). Nothing could be more like the reconstruction I suggest for the *aedes* of Dios/Iovis.

Was there an emplacement on the podium of this *praesidium* for such a standard? The plaque from Vindolanda shows the *vexillum* was slotted into some sort of chest, probably a wooden device where it could be stood without tilting. Precisely this type of device is conserved at Iovis, because four wooden pegs around a hole in the podium

have been discovered. H. Cuvigny sees this as a system for fastening a statue of Sarapis. I suggest that it was where the *vexillum* was emplaced.

The presence of statues on the podium, including statues of divinities, or of altars, does not contradict the hypothesis of a military *aedes* as are found in other camps in the West. Here again T. Sarnowski's survey is illuminating and I refer readers to his table 5 showing, in the *aedes* itself, the presence of various *dii militares*, and even of local gods (SARNOWSKI 1989). This hypothesis is obviously associated with the presence of Jupiter, supreme god of the armies, and of the ruling emperor, usually in a smaller format (SARNOWSKI 1989; STOLL 1992; REDDÉ 2004).

The Jupiter honoured at Iovis, it will be said, was not a purely Roman god, since it was a Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis (CUVIGNY 2010: no. 2). Accordingly, all of the artefacts found in the *aedes*, but also the oracular practices, are indicative of a sarapist cult, which might cast doubt on the interpretation that the device found was purely military. Was it therefore a Roman sanctuary? A temple to Sarapis? Or both at once?

G. Tallet has recently proposed that the figure of Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis was an Egyptian god made in the Alexandrian environment for Romans, especially soldiers. She shows that the spread of this new divine entity was related to the network of military garrisons and probably began under Trajan (TALLET 2011). This spread of Egyptian cults in the camp environments was older, though, even in Western garrisons. I have reported elsewhere that it was found in the Rhineland from the time of Nero (REDDÉ 2014). It has parallels in the East, as shown by the robust survey by O. Stoll on this question (STOLL 2001). Thus, in the oasis of Jawf, where the presence of soldiers is well attested, there is a dedication *pro salute domm(inorum) nn(ostrorum) (duorum) I(oui) O(ptimo) M(aximo) Hammoni et sancto Sulmo* (SPEIDEL 1984). Dedicated by a centurion of the III *Cyrenaica*, it dates from the reigns of the Severan emperors. At around the same time, in Bostra itself, a cornicularius had his wish

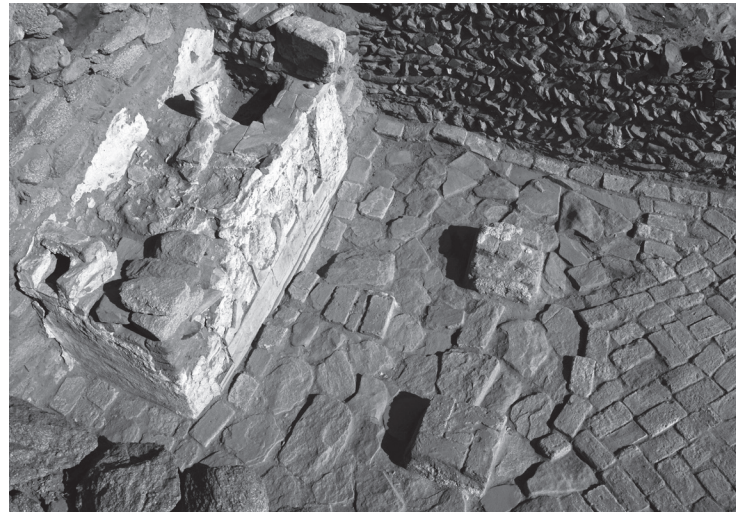


Fig. 4. View of the final state of the *aedes*. Notice the tabernacle at the southern end of the podium (phot. by M. Reddé)

Fig. 4. Vue du dernier état de l'*aedes*. On observera le tabernacle à l'extrémité sud du podium (phot. par M. Reddé)



Fig. 5. The Chesterholm plaque (= RIB 1710) showing a *vexillum* standing between two columns (drawing by M. Reddé, after TÖPFER 2011: pl. 122, RE 21)

Fig. 5. La plaque de Chesterholm (= RIB 1710) montrant un *vexillum* fiché entre deux colonnes (dessin M. Reddé, d'après TÖPFER 2011: pl. 122, RE 21)

engraved to *Io(ui) Op(timo) Max(imo) Genio Sancto Hammoni* (AE 1952, 248). In Sûr, in Lejaa, a *tabula ansata* bears a *Ioui Hammoni* dedication composed by an *quaestionario* (CIL III 13604). This type of divine association was so commonplace in the army of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that a papyrus at Dura indicates that the password of the day (27–28 May 239) was *Iupiter Dolichenus*. Many more examples could be given. Especially, and this is one of the strong points of O. Stoll's argument, concurring with N.D. Pollard's opinion, there is no reason to think the military and civilian religious spheres were radically separate. Relations must have oscillated permanently between

*Integration* and *Abgrenzung*, particularly in the East (POLLARD 1996; STOLL 2001).

The very fact that the divinity honoured in the *praesidium* of Iovis was Zeus Helios Megalos Sarapis does not therefore make it a god alien to the Roman military environment and should not lead us to think that the arrangements for worship observed in the *aedes* were not in keeping with the ordinary religious practices of the camps. All of the installations found have their counterparts in Western settings, which justifies incidentally that the chapel of the post of Didymoi, on this same trail from Koptos to Berenice, is called *πρινκίπια τῶν κυρίων* that should be adorned with garlands, for a festival that was probably part of the Roman religious calendar (CUVIGNY 2012: no. 31, l. 5). It should not be forgotten that the divinity of the place was also a Sarapis and that the future could be enquired into by oracular practices clearly attested to by the ostraca<sup>1</sup> (CUVIGNY

2010). These various religious practices are only radically excluded in our modern minds. A further instructive example of the transfer of the early military *aedes* is found at Didymoi, but the installations discovered there are much closer to a classical Serapeum, even if it is decorated with a picture showing a line of armed soldiers and if a schist plaque depicts one of the Dioscuri in military attire. The good state of preservation of these fortlets is therefore not only instructive for our knowledge of the local religious environment; it also teaches us a great deal about the general development of religious practices within the Roman army in the course of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

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1 It is not clear how these oracular practices were conducted. The presence of the small staircase on the side of the podium is not, as said, exceptional and cannot be seen as a special arrangement for oracular practices even if it probably facilitated them. The question currently unresolved is whether these oracular practices began with the transfer of the new sanctuary to its present position, as H. Cuvigny argues, because she thinks the ostraca found are rubble mixed with sand and probably date from the construction of the new chapel. It will be objected that oracular practices presuppose the presence of a priest in a concealed place and that this could only have been achieved when the passage to the side door and stairs were masked by being stopped up. If not the hoax would have been too crude. I wonder whether the kind of tabernacle at the southern end of the podium, and which I think was part of the final phase of repair, was not for believers to leave their petitions. It is a mere hypothesis and unverifiable. It is not impossible that some liturgical trapping (curtain?) has escaped us.

## Les aménagements d'une chapelle militaire dans le désert oriental d'Égypte (Résumé)

La découverte, dans un des petits postes militaires qui jalonnent les pistes du désert oriental d'Égypte, d'un sanctuaire oraculaire clairement consacré au culte de Sérapis (**Fig. 1**) pose la question des cultes pratiqués par les soldats dans le courant du 3<sup>e</sup> siècle. Le très bon état de conservation de cette chapelle (**Fig. 2**) permet d'en reconstituer l'aménagement intérieur et d'y reconnaître des dispositifs cultuels similaires à ceux d'autres *aedes principiorum* (**Figs. 3 et 4**). Dans ce milieu égyptien, la transformation de

Jupiter, dieu protecteur des armées par excellence, en Zeus Helios Megalos Sarapis explique l'imbrication de pratiques religieuses qui trouvent d'autres parallèles, notamment en Orient.

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### Abréviations

AE	<i>L'Année Épigraphique</i> , Paris 1888 ff.
AMN	<i>Acta Musei Napocensis</i>
CENiM	Les Cahiers « Egypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne »
FIFAO	Fouilles de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale (IFAO) du Caire. Rapports préliminaires (Cairo)
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
MIFAO	Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) du Caire

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