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Marea: Excavations 2008

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MAREA EXCAVATIONS 2008

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Abstract: Excavations in the Christian basilica in Marea proceeded for the fourth season in a row, clearing further parts of the nave at its eastern end. The discovery of stone piers in the sanctuary provided ultimate proof for a dome rising above it, a conclusion already suggested, among others, by mosaic glass cubes, including tesserae of sandwich-glass with embedded gold foil. A reconstruction of building phases was also made possible by the excavations in the sanctuary. Fragments of architectural decoration, both sculpted and painted, were recovered from the fill. Units behind the southwestern corner of the church were also explored, including, among others, a courtyard in front of the main gate, a room with remains of an *opus sectile* floor, another courtyard with a brick installation and bread oven in the corner and finally a room with two deep ceramic containers sunk in the floor. An appendix to the report describes current preservation work on the walls of the apse of the basilica, carried out as a separate subproject.

Keywords: Marea, basilica, church, Byzantine period in Egypt

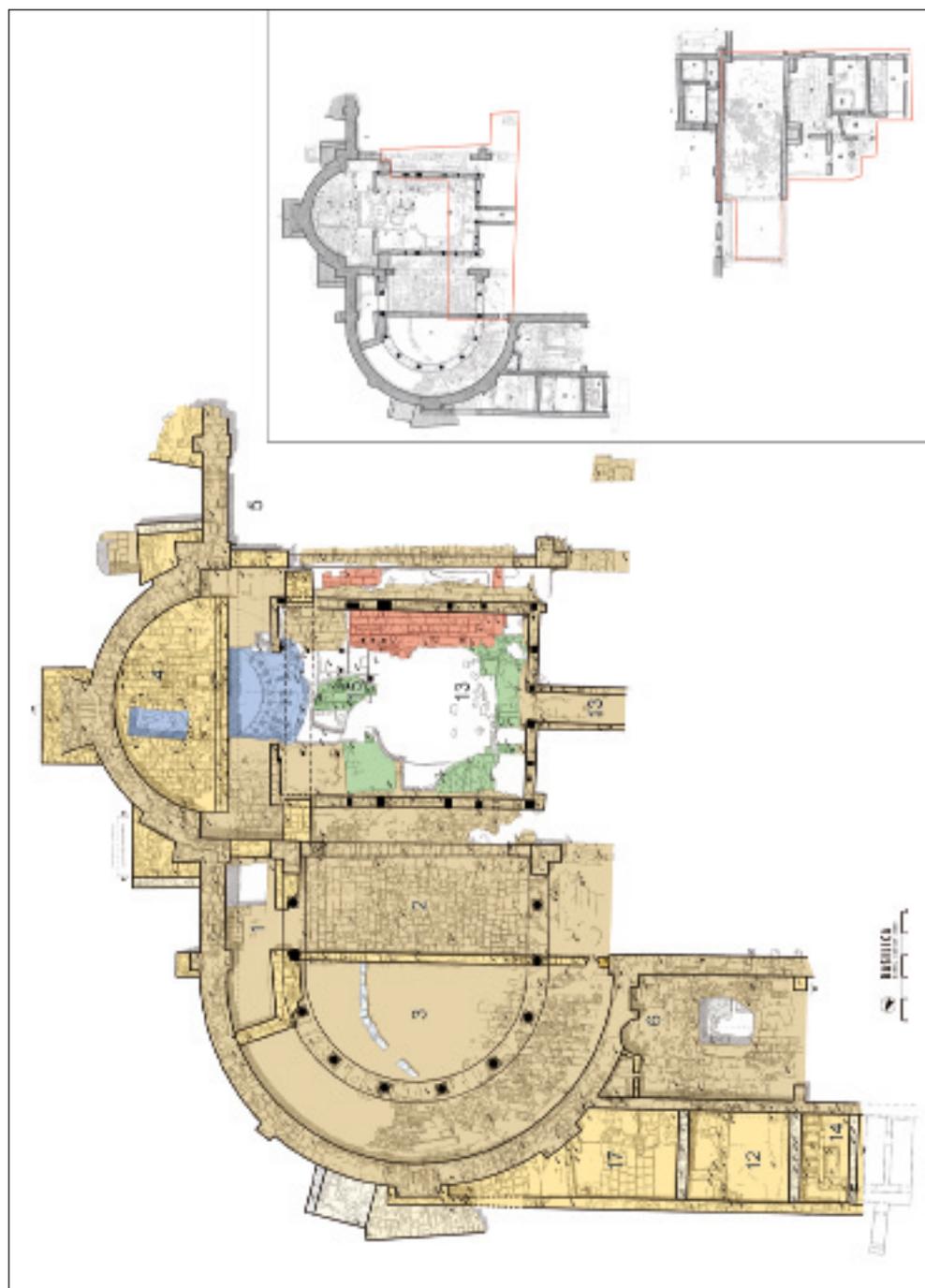
In its ninth excavation season, and the fourth season of fieldwork in the building of the Christian basilica at Marea, the mission concentrated on further clearing of the eastern end of the nave and on exploring the units behind the southwestern

corner of the church [see *Fig. 1* inset]. Preservation work, carried out as a separate subproject, continued on the walls of the basilica apse. Technical possibilities for building a roof over the apse and sanctuary of the church were also considered.

EXCAVATIONS IN THE BASILICA

In the eastern end of the church, exploration covered about 7.50 m running of the nave going west, the eastern part of the northern aisle and the area between the sanctuary and southern aisle. Three stone piers discovered in the sanctuary (the fourth, in the southeastern corner, has yet to be explored) [*Fig. 1*], provided

ultimate proof of the presence of a dome over the sanctuary. A dome had already been suggested by remnants of brick arches found in the rubble above the pottery kiln and vicinity in 2003 (Szymańska, Babraj 2004), as well as by numerous colored glass cubes, including sandwich-glass tesserae with embedded gold foil, still with



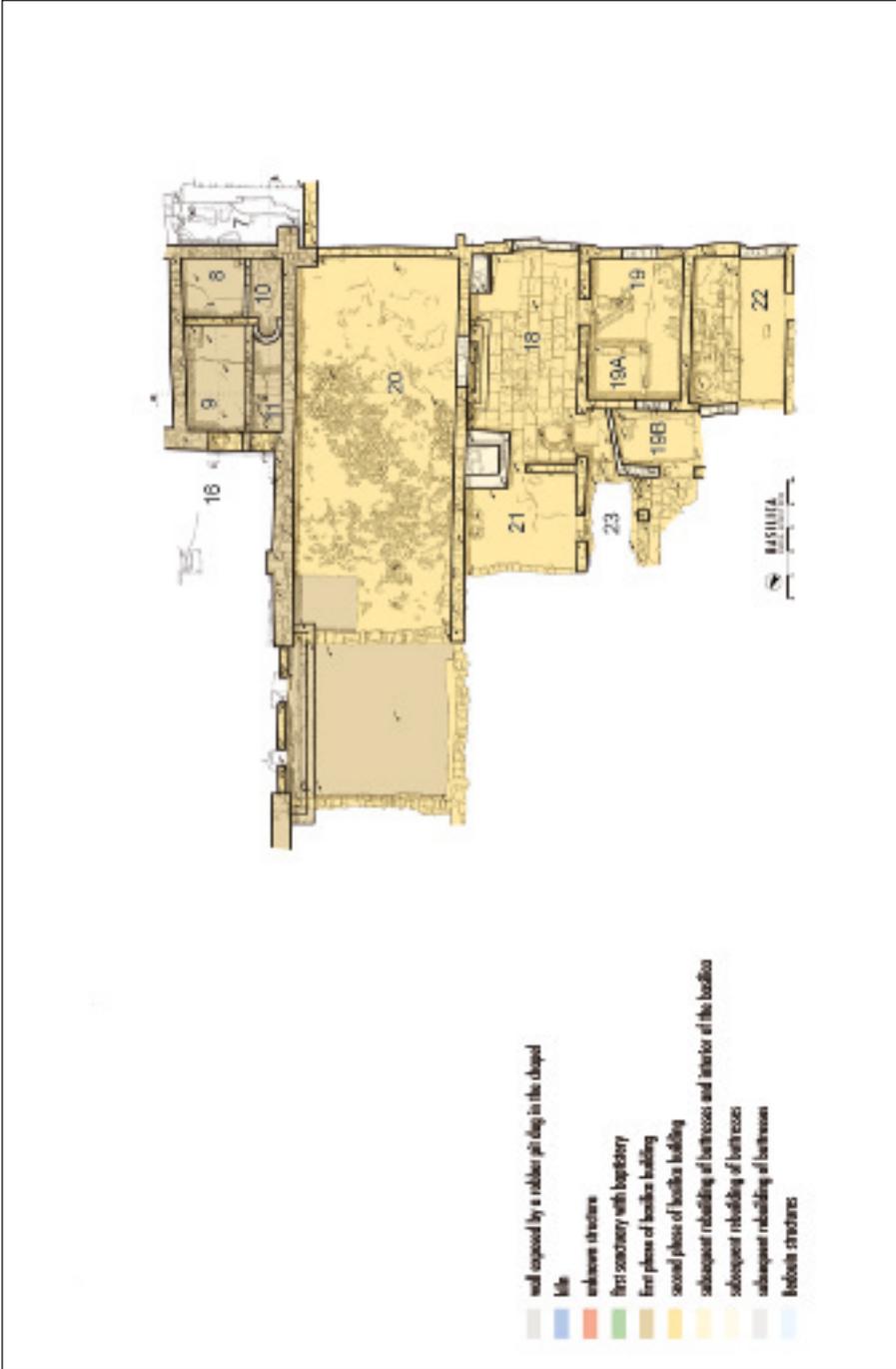


Fig. 1. (centerfold) Plan of the basilica, marked different building phases; inset (opposite page), plan with areas excavated in 2008 outlined in red (Drawing by D. Tarana)

adhering mortar from the bedding and featuring the characteristic uneven surfaces that promised light effects on wall mosaics (see Maguire 2005: 333) [*Fig. 2*].

EXCAVATIONS IN THE SANCTUARY

Excavations in the sanctuary enabled a reconstruction of building phases. Remnants of a mud-brick feature, fragmentarily exposed around the baptistery and in the chapel in a pit dug illicitly sometime between the 2004 and 2005 seasons (Szymańska, Babraj 2007: 56, *Fig. 1*), proved to be the oldest structure on the

spot [see *Fig. 1*, gray]. It may have been contemporary with the pottery kiln from the 2nd–3rd century AD [see *Fig. 1*, blue] (Szymańska, Babraj 2004).

The next phase, marked in pink in *Fig. 1*, comprised a limestone pavement identified in the southern end of the nave and in the adjacent aisle. The baptistery (loc. 15) and sections of a lime-mortar floor found within the boundaries of the later sanctuary have been marked in green.

The first phase of the basilica and the general framework of the church and chapel (loc. 6) are presented in *Fig. 1* in brown. The pastophories (northern one

Team

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excavated in 2003, loc. 1), along with the domestic units on the south side and the latrine (in light brown) represented a sub-phase. The buttresses reinforcing the wall structure of the apse and transept were buttressed themselves in a later stage (light and dark gray shading in *Fig. 1*).

At least three phases have been recognized in the sanctuary, the western end of which, dating from the last phase of the functioning of the church, was cleared this year [*Fig. 3*]. The reconstruction of phases has been based on the different sets of sockets cut in *cancelli* posts remaining in the limestone base under the successive altar screens. More pieces of marble screens with a *palmetto* motif were discovered in



Fig. 2. Glass mosaic cubes embedded in mortar (Photo P. Suszek)



Fig. 3. Eastern part of the basilica with sanctuary cleaned in 2008 (Photo P. Suszek)

the rubble (for earlier finds, see Szymańska, Babraj 2004; 2005; 2007; 2010). The altar screen had an opening in the western side, 1.50 m wide, set between two *cancelli* posts and leading into a passage marked out on the ground with two stylobate walls, which may have supported a colonnade at some time. One possible interpretation of this feature is as a processional way running from the main entrance on the west to the sanctuary. There are parallels from churches in Syria to support this idea (see Donceel-Voûte 1988: 174–175, 522ff.). However, the passage may be rather too narrow to be interpreted plausibly as a processional way, even if it featured a mosaic floor executed in the *opus sectile* technique. None of the marble tiles have survived, but the characteristic technique of cut pieces of amphorae set in the bedding is sufficient proof (the same floor technique was used in room 20, see below and Fig. 8) [Fig. 4]. Once this surface had been destroyed, the floor of the passage was coated with lime

mortar. Another interpretation which can be conjectured is an ambo¹ with a platform supported on small columns, two on each side, standing on the stylobate walls (the socket holes can still be seen). The issue will be resolved once the remaining part of the nave is cleared.

The stylobate under columns dividing the southern aisle from the nave was uncovered and excavations were completed

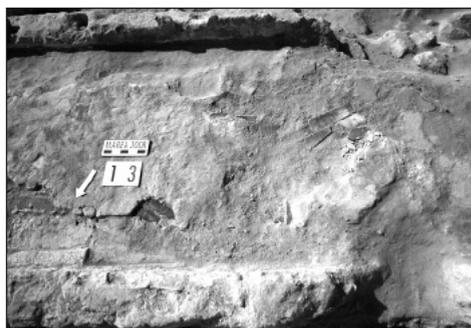


Fig. 4. Floor of the passage from the sanctuary to the nave (Photo P. Suszek)

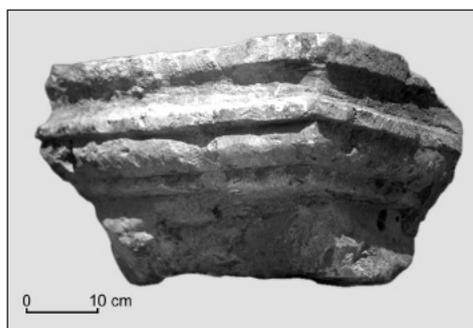


Fig. 5. Top of a limestone pillar (left) and marble Ionian capital (Photos P. Suszek)

¹ In churches from northern Jordan the ambo is generally located in the northern or southern corner of the sanctuary (see Michel: 2001: 81–87). The churches in Abu Mena (North and Great Basilicas), which were excavated by C.M. Kaufmann and P. Grossmann, contained a similar structure, also placed in the central part of the western exit from the sanctuary (see Grossmann 2002: 408–409, Figs 20, 22).

of paved room 2 between the northern pastophory and the western part of the transept stylobate [see *Fig. 3*].

Fieldwork this season yielded a number of pieces from the marble decoration of the sanctuary and adjoining aisles.² Among the best preserved is a Corinthian capital, found in the northern aisle, and two Attic bases in the central part of the sanctuary. A few other fragments of Corinthian capitals were discovered, an *ovoli* fragment from an Ionic capital and a spattering of entablature and cornice fragments. Acanthus leaves, one with traces

of painting, and a spiraling volute front in stuccowork, as well as the profiled top of a pillar in limestone were also discovered [*Fig. 5*, left]. A perfectly preserved Ionic capital (Theodorescu 1980: *passim*), which must have been taken from the decoration of the basilica, came from one of the test pits that was excavated east of the piers of the exterior wall of the apse in preparation for installing protective sheltering [*Fig. 5*, right]. Small fragments of different color plasterwork [*Fig. 6*], some pieces imitating alabaster, were also once part of the church decoration.



Fig. 6. Fragments of different color plasterwork (Photo P. Suszek)

² Assuming the fragments from Marea are of Proconessian marble (it was not examined), they could be part of the general supply of ready-made architectural elements from the Proconessian quarries for North African churches (for a load of such products found in a shipwreck from the first half of the 6th century off the coast of Sicily, see Kapitän 1969).

EXCAVATIONS BEHIND THE SOUTHWESTERN CORNER OF THE BASILICA

Six small units were uncovered behind the southwestern corner of the church, adjoining the shops excavated in 2005 along the south wall of the basilica. Testing of the surface layer in room 19 in the previous season had yielded a plethora of small finds, including numerous sherds of early byzantine painted pottery, 7th century coins etc.

A large unit (loc. 20), 16.50 m long and 7.00 m across, stood south of the entrance behind the west wall of the basilica. The floor lay some 0.45 m above the setting of the lower step leading to the original

gate of the church, demonstrating its later construction. It was demarcated from the courtyard in front of the main gate by a secondary wall [Fig. 7]. The mosaic floor in this locus was executed in the *opus sectile* technique; surviving elements revealed the pattern comprising hexagonal tiles of gray marble joining at the corners and red porphyry tiles filling the triangular spaces in between [Fig. 8]. A characteristic bedding technique involved cut pieces of amphorae;³ the 7th century dating of these sherds combined with the overall



Fig. 7. Courtyard in front of the main gate, looking east
(Photo P. Suszek)

³ For a 1st–2nd century parallel from Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria, see Majcherek 2007: 31, Figs 20, 23–24. On this bedding technique, see Guidobaldi 1994: 257–258.

stratigraphic position of the floor with regard to the western gate placed the date of this feature in the 7th century.

Locus 20 was entered from a small courtyard paved with large limestone slabs (loc. 18). A monumental doorway in the west wall once had three steps lined with marble slabs [Fig. 9]. The wall, solid but narrow, had two huge buttresses supporting it from the side of the courtyard. A bread oven was cleared in the northwestern corner of the courtyard [Fig. 11]. It was constructed of three brick courses separated one from the other by flat tiles of baked clay with an arched opening. An oven in such a location could have served to bake

the Eucharist bread used during mass. Two practically intact amphorae, Kellia type 173 and 177, were found on top of the oven.

A still later level in the courtyard yielded an installation of unknown purpose, consisting of a strip of bricks to which blocks of three bricks each were joined perpendicularly at set distances [Fig. 10]. Neither is the purpose known for a clay trough measuring 40 x 25 cm, built to the north of the steps leading into room 20 (similar 'troughs' hollowed in limestone have already been found previously in the basilica, including unit 20).⁴ In unit 21, from which a passage led to courtyard 18, two storage vessels cut at



Fig. 8. *Surviving mosaic floor in opus sectile technique from locus 20*
(Photo P. Suszek)

⁴ E. Jastrzębowska recently (2008: 333–339) suggested an interpretation of these artifacts as containers for offerings brought to the temple.



*Fig. 9. Courtyard (loc. 18) leading to room 20, looking east; steps in west wall doorway
(Photo P. Suszek)*



*Fig. 10. Brick installation cleared in courtyard 18, looking east
(Photo P. Suszek)*

one third height to form deep bowls (for kneading dough?) were found sunk into the ground by the west wall [Fig. 12, see also Fig. 1 on page 100].

Courtyard 18 was reached through three doorways, which were later blocked, in the north wall (passage to room 21), west wall (passage to room 19) and south wall. The fill yielded many small finds, including early byzantine painted ceramics with images of human busts, stylized animals and floral ornaments, and amphorae with inscriptions of presumably metric nature. One such vessel contained fish, if the powdered fish bones found inside it are any indication. The fill of the courtyard also produced a bronze ring, a bone appliqué from a wooden casket and 18 oil lamps. A lime-mortar stopper with

stamped acrostich was also found (Egloff 1977: vol. 1, 112; vol. 2, Pl. 20) [Fig. 13].

The small unit 19 had a stone-built feature in the northeastern corner (unit 19A), presumably connected with money-related trading [Fig. 14] as 250 coins were discovered inside the feature; 30 of these have been cleaned. Testing to the south of the feature inside the unit revealed a channel of sorts 1 m below the room floor, exiting from the east wall and blocked in the center of the unit. The fill of the test pit was dated by amphorae sherds to the 7th century; it also yielded examples of early byzantine painted pottery and two Late Roman B plates with Christian symbols stamped on the floor: *crux gemmata* [see Fig. 15 and Fig. 3 on page 101] and a Christ figure holding

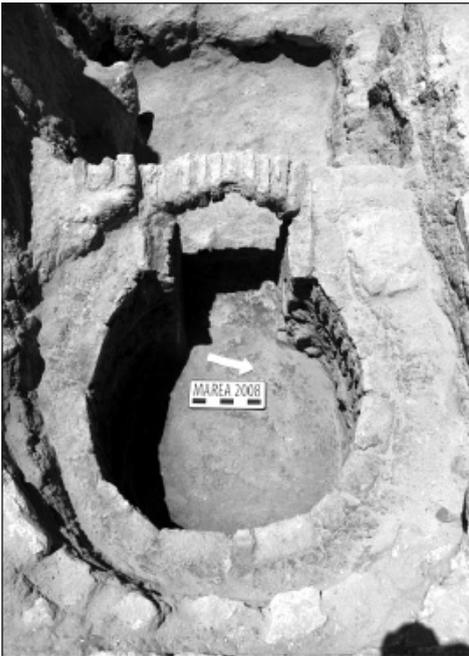


Fig. 11. Bread oven in the northwestern corner of loc. 18, looking west (Photo P. Suszek)



Fig. 12. Unit 21 with two deep bowls sunk in the floor (Photo P. Suszek)



Fig. 13. Lime mortar stopper with stamped acrostic on one side (left) and rosette on the other (Photo P. Suszek)



Fig. 14. Room 19, looking north (Photo P. Suszek)

a cross, as well as an ampulla of St Menas in very good condition. Passages were cut through the north wall of the unit (into room 19B) and the south one; both were later blocked. A third doorway opened into the courtyard (unit 18); it remained in use until the very end of occupation of the building.

Room 22, which was entered independently from the south, was partitioned by a N-S wall [Fig. 16]. The eastern part was paved with irregular limestone slabs; it was set off with a wall and contained a small brick bread oven and an apparent stone bench. A clay pot-stand for an amphora was cut into the pavement. The ceramic evidence from the fill of the room is mostly of 7th century date. A chain and hook from a bronze balance were among the small finds.

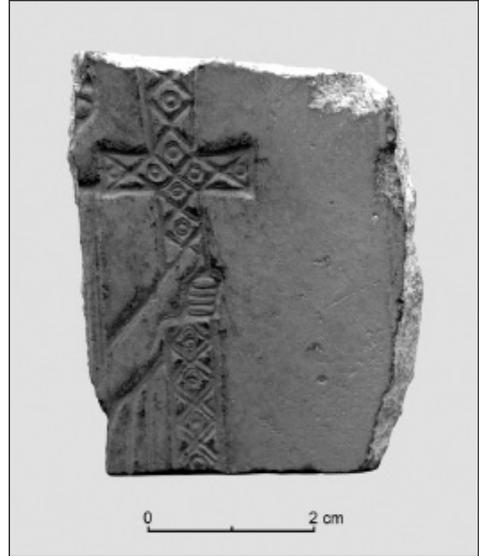


Fig. 15. Late Roman B plate with stamped figure of Christ holding a cross (Photo P. Suszek)



Fig. 16. Room 22, looking north (Photo P. Suszek)



*Fig. 17. Apse of basilica before (top) and after conservation works (bottom), looking east
(Photo J. Kucy)*

OTHER FINDS

Altogether 572 bronze coins were found during the season. Of these, 78 were cleaned. Almost all of the identified pieces were *dodekanummia*, often from the reign of Chosroes II, that is, from the 7th century. A single coin from locus 21 has been recognized as an Arabic issue (Lichočka 2008: 146, 149; Krasnowolska 2010: 251).

An unexpected find of wall paintings was made in one of the domestic units cleared on the northern side of the basilica in 2005 (Szymańska, Babraj 2007: 65, Fig. 11). Traces of dark red diamonds and triangles forming a geometrical pattern came up on the red *opus signinum* ground of the south wall of locus 17, presumably in effect of humid air access.

CONSERVATION WORK

Contributed by Barbara Wrońska-Kucy
Bone/Levine Architects

Conservation work included restoration of the basilica apse wall and repairs to the miscellaneous masonry within the apse and transept area. The crown of the basilica wall and adjacent piers were restored with limestone blocks to the level of the top of partially preserved layer of the walls. The limestone plaster of the interior face of the wall was secured around the edges and re-adhered with a mix of lime, sand and

10% PRIMAL AC33. Additionally, the top layer of the preserved plaster was treated with FUNCOSIL KSE 300E manufactured by Remmers [Fig. 17]. In preparation for introducing a protective roofing over the apse and kiln, some exploratory trenches were cut in the place of the proposed shelter supports, yielding among others, an intact Ionic capital [see above, Fig. 5, right].

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