

A Perfect Church on Earth—— The New Discovery of an Ancient Church Site in Tangchao Dun, China

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Abstract: Archaeologists have recently announced the discovery of a 7–9th Century church site in Tangchao Dun, 115 km north of Turpan, Xinjiang, China. From the two site photos released, it is evident that the church was a rare and perfect bema church belonging to an episcopal or archiepiscopal see of the Church of the East in the region.

Key Words: Church of the East; Jingjiao; East Syriac Bema Church; Tangchao Dun; History of Christianity

1. Introduction

On October 10, 2021, in what was supposed to be a routine expert panel meeting on the on-going archaeological excavation of 唐朝墩 Tangchao Dun (Fig. 1), an ancient city ruin in Xinjiang, the archaeologists (任冠 Ren Guan and 魏坚 Wei Jian of the Renmin University of China) announced a major discovery: a complete Jingjiao (Tang Christianity) church site had been found in the central part of the city, together with a large number of murals bearing Jingjiao cross images as well as Yelikewen (Yuan Christianity) notations written in Uighur. Ren and Wei dated the site to the Gaochang-Uighur period of the area (commencing 866 CE.), but did not rule out earlier dates, including the Tang rule in the area (commencing 640 CE.)^[1]

The city itself, however, is dated to the 6th Century.^[2] It lied on the northern route of the Silk Road, at where the Shuimo River ran down the hill of Tian Shan northward. Beiting, the capital city for the region at the time, was 30 km to the west, and Luntai (today's Urumqi) was 170 km still further. In the other direction, Dunhuang, the checkpoint for entering and leaving the Mainland, was 820 km down the Road. Across the Tian Shan to the south was the city of Gaochang (today's Turpan), servicing the southern route of the Silk Road as Tangchao Dun doing the northern (Fig.

[1] “新疆考古重大发现,唐朝墩古城发现景教和罗马式浴场遗址” (“Significant archaeological discoveries in Xinjiang, ruins of Jingjiao church and Roman bathhouse were discovered in the ancient city of Tangchao Dun”). 搜狐网 Shouhu Wang, October 21, 2021. https://m.sohu.com/a/496386388_115479?_trans_=010004_pcwzy. (Viewed on October 31, 2021).

[2] 任冠 Ren Guan, 于柏川 Yu Baichuan. 2020. 新疆奇台县唐朝墩城址 2018—2019 年发掘简报. (“The Excavation Report of the Tangchao Dun Site in Qitai County, Xinjiang from 2018 to 2019”), Kaogu vol. 5, 38-64. 44.

1). The majority of city ruin of Tangchao Dun, about 160,000 square meters (Fig. 2), has been put under heritage protection for decades, and archaeological excavation work began in 2018 under the leadership of the Renmin University of China (中国人民大学) and the Xinjiang Archaeological Research Institute (新疆文物考古研究所). The major finds so far, besides the Jingjiao church site, are a Roman public bathhouse at the northeastern corner of the city, and a Buddhist temple also in the central area, to the south of the church site.

Little is known about the church site so far, as neither an archaeological report (such as the one published for the bathhouse site^[3]) nor photos for the mural fragments showing cross images have been released. It is therefore, at this moment, not clear how the site has been determined by the archaeological team to be of Jingjiao (Church of the East, or East Syriac) tradition. The two aerial photos released, one for the entire site (Fig. 3a) and one as a close-up on a large rectangular mount in the middle of the site (Fig. 3b), however, are stunning and offer much information for some preliminary discussions on, e. g., the nature of the original building, its affiliation, historical significance, etc.

2. The Photos and the Options

The photos (Fig. 3a, b) show a rectangular building site in an east-west disposition, with a wall running down its longitudinal middle separating the building into two nearly equal sides, one northern and one southern. The two sides are quite symmetrical in layout, with an elevated stage at the east end and a long hall below it. Set-backed on the stage and facing the hall are three chambers, serviced (apparently) with a corridor at the back. The two sides of the building are internally connected with openings on the separation wall, one between the adjacent chambers on the stage and two between the two halls. The main entrances to the building appear to be located at the northwestern quarter, one opened to the north and one to the west. The northern side is slightly wider and bigger, has a larger middle chamber on stage and most conspicuously, possesses the large mount in the middle of the hall. It therefore appears to be the primary side of the building.

The large mount is highly unusual for a building, and it therefore could serve as a focus for our examination. Its large size, obviously, limits space and circulation, making the building highly unlikely to be a public hall for courts or other official functions, like a basilica in a Roman city. (This point is worth making as not too far from this site, in the northeastern direction, is a Roman-style public bath of respectable size and layout.) For the same reason, the possibility of an indoor performance theatre or banquet hall can be ruled out. These leave not many other possibilities except that of, say, a religious building. It turns out, in three religions, Judaism, Manichaeism and Christianity (Syriac), there was a tradition of placing a large platform in the middle of their worship hall, facing an apsidal or rectangular stage.

In a Jewish synagogue, it is common from the ancient time to have a platform erected in the hall facing the Torah Ark (or Aron Kodesh) in an apse on the wall in the direction of (ideally)

[3] 任冠 Ren Guan, 魏坚 Wei Jian. 2020. 唐朝墩古城浴场遗址的发现与初步研究. (“The Discovery and Preliminary Study of the Ruins of the Ancient Bathhouse in Tangchao Dun.”) *Xiyu Yanjiu*, vol. 2. 58-68.

Jerusalem. This platform is called a “bimah”, meaning “an elevated place”. This synagogue-type worship probably has a beginning at the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE, but it did not become fully institutionalized after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE. ^[4] Two elements in the Tangchao Dun photos, however, make the synagogue option doubtful. The first is that its rectangular mount faces a large stage with three chambers, not a wall structure that could have an apse housing the Torah Ark. Even for a grand synagogue with a large apsidal stage like the Diplostoon of Alexandria, that stage is usually unitary, without partitions or chambers (Fig. 4a). ^[5] Second, the Tangchao Dun photos appear to show that on the side of the mount facing the stage, there is a staircase carved into the mount for accessing the top of the mount (Fig. 3a, b). For a synagogue, however, that side of the bimah is occupied by a lectern, sometimes large and highly elaborate, for the cantor and other co-celebrants lay down the Torah after its retrieval from the apse, open it and read (sing) it aloud, facing the Torah Ark and Jerusalem the whole time (Figs. 4b, c, d). ^[6] A staircase, therefore, cannot be placed on this side of the bimah. As such, the Tangchao Dun site was unlikely for a synagogue.

The Manichaeans called the platform set up in the worship hall “gah” (Middle Persian), or “caidan” (Turkish), ^[7] but Augustine of Hippo, who was once a Manichaean, called it a “bema”, which meant “platform,” “stage,” or “judge’s seat.” ^[8] The Manichaeans celebrated a bema festival every year in commemoration of the death of Mani, and that was their holiest day of the year. Information about this festival or the bema itself is scant, comprising only a few Manichean bema hymns, a fragmentary Sogdian description of a bema formulary, and a book illustration from Turpan that probably depicts a bema ceremony. ^[9] Augustine had written briefly about the festival, and in terms of the bema he said, “... great honor is paid to your (feast of the) bema, that is, the day on which Manichaeus was martyred, when you erect a platform with five steps, covered with precious cloth, placed conspicuously so as to face the worshippers.” ^[10] This gives a sense that the Manichaean bema was not a permanent structure, but a temporary one erected every year for the festival. Gardner and Lieu seem to have this same understanding when they write, “... the most important festival remained the commemoration of Mani’s martyrdom when a judgement seat (bema) was raised in the middle of the worshipping congregation. Upon this was placed a portrait of Mani to celebrate his continuing presence in the community of the elect; and to symbolize his position as proxy for Jesus until his return as judge.” ^[11] The rectangular mount at the Tangchao Dun site looks

[4] Hickey, D. 1966. The Ambo in Early Liturgical Planning—a Study with Special Reference to the Syrian Bema. *Heythrop Journal*, 7(4), 407-427, 417.

[5] *Ibid.*, 416.

[6] “... the ḥazzan has a separate reading stand immediately in front of and facing the ark from which he conducts the service.” (“Bimah”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 3, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, pp. 701-702. Gale eBooks, available online at link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587502982/GVRL?u=utoronto_main&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=19bc4394. (Viewed on 31 Oct. 2021).

[7] Werner Sundermann, “BEMA,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. IV, Fasc. 2, pp. 136-137; available online at <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/bema-festival-manicheans> (Viewed on 26 October 2021).

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Trans. in Gardner, I., & Lieu, S. N. C. 2004. *Manichaean texts from the Roman Empire*. Cambridge University Press, 237.

[11] *Ibid.* 25.

like a permanent structure, and therefore was unlikely one for a Manichaean site.

This leaves us with the Christian options, as there is a history of bema use in both the East Syriac and the West Syriac Churches. For the former, there are substantial documentations of such use in church design and liturgy, but very few extant sites showing signs of a bema. The three surviving sites are the two (Sites V and XI) in Al-Hira in Southern Iraq, and the one in Bazian, Sulaymaniyah of Northern Iraq (Fig. 5), all of the 6th Cent. ^[12] For the West Syriac, there is very little documentation but quite a few sites (a cluster of forty-five) in an area known as Limestone Massif in northwestern Syria (Fig. 5). For differentiation of the West and East Syriac churches, perhaps the shape of the bema (particularly that of its western edge) and the form of the sanctuary. For the West, a bema is always in horseshoe shape (i. e., its western edge is always curved), and its sanctuary is either apsidal or flat. A church with a rectangular bema and a flat-wall sanctuary, like the one in Tangchao Dun, does not appear in the West Syriac cluster. Furthermore, the pathway shqaqona linking the bema and the sanctuary is also absent for all the sites in the West Syrian cluster. ^[13] For these reasons, as well as the fact that there is a clear history of East Syriac (Jingjiao) presence in the region (Turpan, e. g.) and in the Mainland, but little if any with respect to the West Syriac, it can be concluded that the Tangchao Dun site belongs to Jingjiao.

3. Agreeing with the Idealized Plan and the Actual Built-Form of Al-Hira Sites

As mentioned, there is clear documentation of bema use in the East, for liturgy and church design. These include the gist of the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410 CE.) as recorded in *Syndicon Orientale*, the commentaries by Gabriel Qatraya (7th Cent) and Abraham bar Lipeh (7th Cent.), and the prescriptions in *Anonymi Auctoris Expositio* (9th Cent.). The *Expositio*, reflecting even older documents and incorporating teachings from the Catholicos Isho'yahb III (7th Cent.) and Timothy I (9th Cent.), was the last commentary to speak of the bema when the bema was still in use. ^[14]

Based on the *Expositio*, J. M. Fiey works out an idealized layout for a bema church, ^[15] and this plan, as illustrated by Baumer, is shown in Fig. 6. ^[16] There are two sides in the layout, north and south, separated by a wall with doors in between. On the north side, there is a three-chamber stage at the east end, facing a hall (nave) with a bema in the middle. The southern side is a forecourt-cum-cemetery with a "house of prayer" (beth Slutho; **בֵּית סְלוּתוֹ**), likely serving as an open-air chapel

[12] "These were mound 1, mound v, and mound XI. The two latter turned out to hide the remains of churches, both of which probably date from the 6th century, though they had undergone repairs more than once at subsequent dates." (Rice, D. T. 1932. "The Oxford Excavations at Hira". *Antiquity*, 6, 276-291), 279. "Further evidence of a bema at the site of Sulaimaniya in northwest Iraq, dating from the sixth century, was included when Taft's article was republished." (Cassis, 2010. "The Bema in the East Syriac Church in Light of New Archaeological Evidence". *Hugoye* 5(1), 195-212. 201-2.


[13] Loosley, E. 2012. *The architecture and liturgy of the bema in fourth- to-sixth-century Syrian churches*. Leiden: Brill. 10.

[14] Taft, R. F. 1968. "Some notes on the Bema in the East and West Syrian Traditions", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 34, 326-359. 337.

[15] As shown in Cassis, 2010, 202.

[16] Baumer, Christoph. 2016. *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. NY: I. B. Tauris. 124.

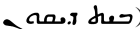
where people can come and go doing their daily prayers,^[17] and if weather permits, where the “summer church” (liturgy of the catechumen) can be held. The northern side is therefore the worship hall on this idealized plan, and the southern side complimentary to it.

In more detailed terms and following Baumer’s illustration, the worship hall is laid out along an east-west axis and is accessed through two southern doors, one for men (7) and one for women (8). At the east end are three chambers with the sanctuary hosting the Eucharist altar (14) at the center, the sacristy (16) on the north side and the baptistry (5) on the south. Before the sanctuary is a platform (qestroma) (20) extended out into the lower nave, and from the center of qestroma a narrow pathway (shqaqona; ) (21) extended further into the nave to almost reach the staircase for accessing the top of the bema (22). On top of the bema are an altar (Golgotha) (23) hosting the gospel and cross and two lecterns that Taft characterizes as elevated pulpits (24SE and 24NE) of equal height for the readings of the Old and New Testament.

If we place Fiey’s plan for the worship hall side by side with that of the Tangchao Dun church site (Fig. 7), we will find them astonishingly similar. The general disposition and layout, the three-Chamber east end, the location of the bema, the two southern entrances, etc., are all in agreement between the idealized plan and the actual layout of Tangchao Dun. As to the shqaqona pathway (21), which is a defining feature of East Syriac bema churches, it does not seem to be visible on the site photo. It should be noted, however, that what we see at the site is largely a hardened base structure supporting a super-structure, which was probably made of wood. The shqaqona, a low and short walkway connecting to the carved-out staircase of the bema and a (likely) wooden staircase at the sanctuary-qestroma, would have been made of wood and did not survive the years.

If we line up all the four East Syriac bema church sites against the plan (Fig. 11), we can see the Tangchao Dun site adhering not only with the idealized plan but also the built-forms of the Al-Hira sites at the East Syriac heartland. (The Sulaymaniyah-Bazian church (Fig. 10) was not that typical as it was within of a large monastery complex, and it had a longer bema-altar axis extended to the east to connect to a martyrium behind the sanctuary. Also, the bema is of horseshoe shape, probably a sign of influence from the West Syriac bema churches (Fig. 5)).

4. A Perfect Church on Earth

A bema church, as prescribed in the *Expositio*, has the nave representing the World and the bema signifying Jerusalem. On top of the bema are the altar of the Gospel (Golgotha) and the two pulpits proclaiming the Word of God. The sanctuary-qestroma symbolizes the Paradise and Heaven (Figs. 6, 7), and the sacristy (bet-diakon; ) stands for Nazareth. The celebration of the liturgy in this setting reminds one of what God and Christ have accomplished for mankind. In the word of the author of the *Expositio*:^[18]

[17] Baumer, 2016, 124.

[18] Connolly, R. H. ed. 1911–1915. “*Expositio officiorum ecclesiae, Georgio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta & Abrahae Bar Lipheh interpretatio officiorum*”, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Scriptorum*, Syri 150.

(Fig. 12).^[21]

This is, however, not the way the south side of the Tangchao Dun site looks like, as it does not seem to be an open-air space but an enclosed one, with only internal doors connecting to the northern hall (Fig. 3a). It could, as the picture shows, serve a narthex or antechamber facilitating the waiting and entry of men and women into the main hall through their respective door, and accommodating the catechumen when were dismissed at the start of the Eucharist. Also, given the limited space in the main hall because of the bema, it is conceivable that the two sides were used jointly on regular or feast days. In this sense, the church can be thought of as a double-nave church, like the one in Sufyon (south of Samarqand) discovered in 2004-7 (Fig. 13).

It should also be noted that this auxiliary side, like the main hall, has a three-chamber stage as well, although the central chamber is much smaller, thus not being a sanctuary. This east end could therefore serve as a beth Slutho for performing non-Eucharist liturgies such as the daily offices, sacraments of matrimony, oil of unction, etc., and for educating catechumen and recruiting new converts.

6. Concluding Remarks

Archaeological works are on-going in Tangchao Dun, and given the immense size of the ground, it will not be soon before a full picture of the city and its people, as well as that of the church and its community, to be revealed. We would, however, note that the archaeologists have dated the city to the 6th Century, and the church site to the Tang period (commencing 640 CE.) or Gaochang-Uighur period (commencing 866 CE.). The current range of estimate is broad and will no doubt be refined as the archaeological works continue. We could, if we indulge, speculate on what an early and a late date could mean for the history of Christianity in China (or Christianity in general, if one so views it).

Should it be of a later date, could the Christians leaving the Mainland after 845 CE because of an imperial decree banning monasticism have something to do with the building of this church? It seems unlikely, as these Christians, after two centuries of worshipping in Chinese-styled 大秦寺 Daqin Shi [Jingjiao temple], would unlikely want to or know how to build a church of this kind. That means that this church was built by a Christian community already in existence in the region. If so, this seems to mean that there was an East Syriac presence in the Western Region at the same time when Jingjiao was being propagated in the Mainland under the auspice of the 638 CE. Decree.

In the scenario of an earlier date (say, early 7th Century), it would mean that East Syriac Christians arrived in the region in the late 6th Century if not earlier, as it would take time for them to establish themselves in society to, for example, obtain the privilege of building a church in the central part of the city. In a typical ancient walled city, such a location implies endorsement (and perhaps membership) of the upper and ruling class.^[22] Alopen journeyed into the Mainland in 635 CE. We

[21] Ufuk Elygit, Tahsin Korkut, "Beth Slutho (Summer Church / Prayer House) Tradition in Tur Abdin Region." *The Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, 2020, 49, 175-206. http://www.yyusbedergisi.com/dergiayrinti/tur-abdin-bolgesinde-beth-slutho-yazlik-kilise-dua-evi-gelenegi_1225 (Viewed on Nov. 1, 2021)

[22] Mumford, L. (1989). *The city in history: its origins, its transformations, and its prospects*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 35, 63.

could ask, did he travel past them (staying perhaps briefly as a guest), or did he come from within them? In any case, this scenario also presumes an East Syriac presence in the Western Region in parallel with Jingjiao in the Mainland. [23]

Lastly, it is worth noting from Fig. 5 that the three East Syriac bema church sites prior to this new discovery are all in the western end of the vast Church of the East domain, whereas the new discovery is at the eastern end. In between, no bema churches have been discovered or are known to have existed. Furthermore, the three sites were high-profiled churches in the East Syriac heartland, with Al-Hira Site V (Fig. 8) and Site XI (Fig. 9) belonging to the East Syriac Patriarchal Province of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and the Sulaimanya-Bazian site lying only 150 km from Erbil, the birthplace of the Church of the East. The Tangchao Dun church, therefore, resonates with these three most historical and important churches of the Church of the East. His Holiness Mar Awa III, the current Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church, in learning about the discovery news and seeing the photos, advised this author in audience that “it is most likely here in Tangchao Dun an episcopal or archiepiscopal see.”

Gratitude: I would like to thank Prof. Zhu Donghua, Prof. Paulos Huang, Mr. Daniel Yeung, Dr. Liu Boyun and the Jingjiao WeChat Group for their advice and support.

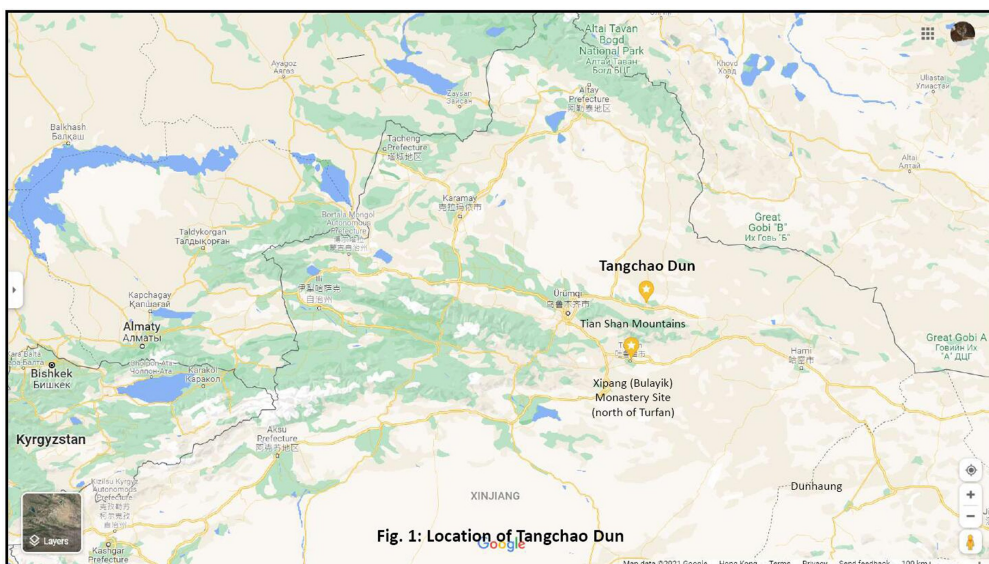


Fig. 1: Location of Tangchao Dun

[23] This author, in a separate paper, has argued that the Jingjiao manuscript Yishen Lun (On One-God) is originated in the Western Region (such as Gaochang), and as such, it hints at the existence of a Christian community in that region before and in parallel with Alopen’s mission into Mainland China. See 谭大卫 David Tam. “古代文书《一神论》的写作地点” (“The Place of Authorship for the Ancient Christian Document Yishen Lun (On One-God)”). 道风基督教文化评论 Logos & Pneuma, 55 2021, 172-173.



Fig. 1: Location of Tangchao Dun Church Site

Source: <https://wemp.app/posts/a5c2aaa9-2753-4622-b41a-8f77ef866c22> (Viewed on Nov. 2, 2021)

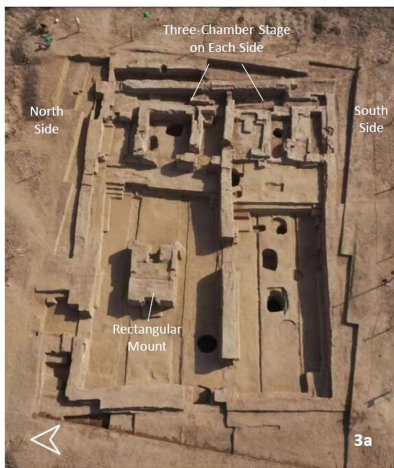
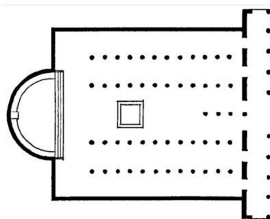
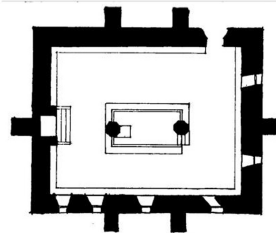


Fig. 3a and b: Photos of the Tangchao Dun Church Site

Source: http://www.360doc.com/content/21/1012/13/58656721_999437777.shtml (Viewed on Nov. 2, 2021)



4a: Diplostoon of Alexandria synagogue (Hickley, 1966:417)

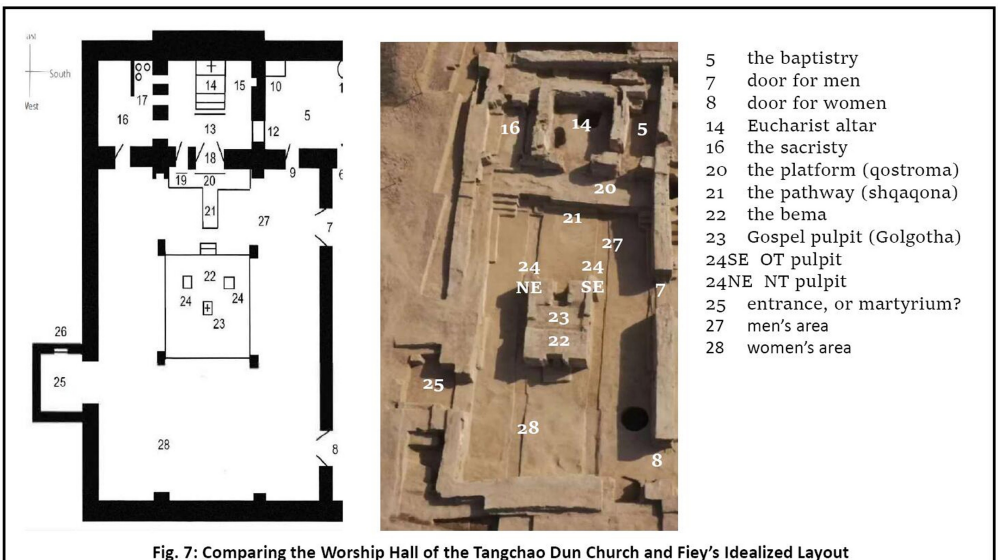
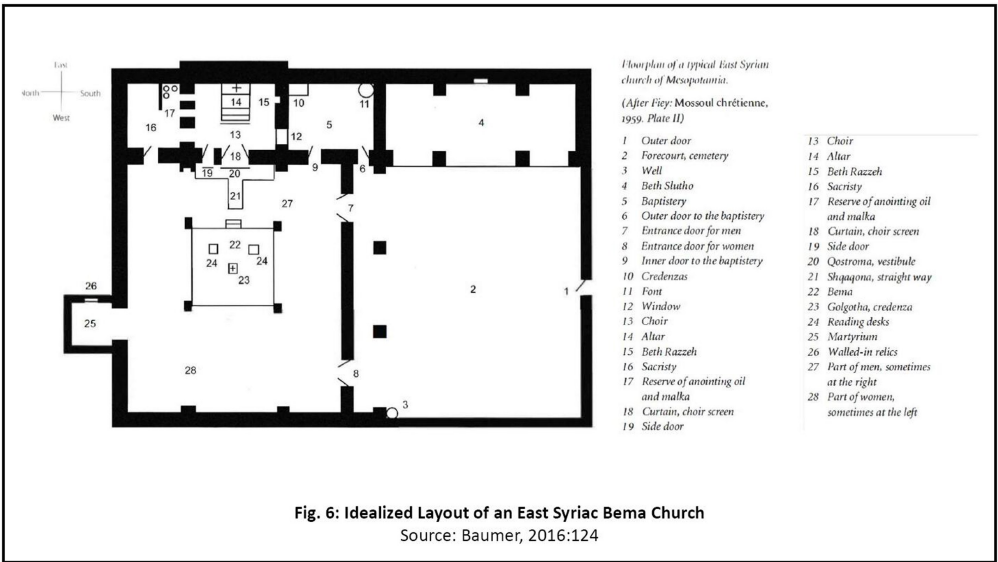
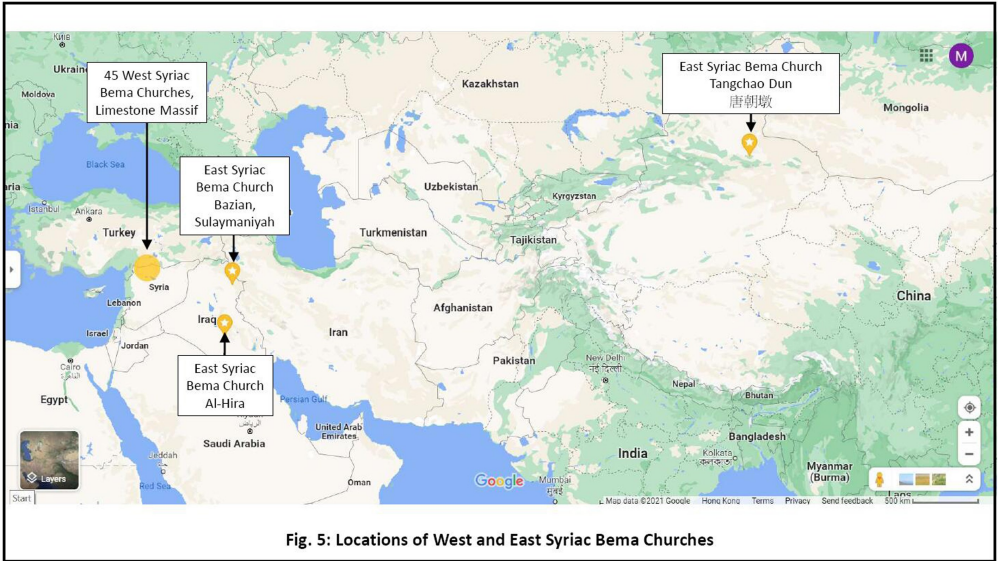


4b: Altneu synagogue, Prague (Hickley, 1966:420)



4c: Former Blackpool Synagogue, UK. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gydz_SmyVGw

Fig. 4: Bimah in ancient and contemporary synagogues



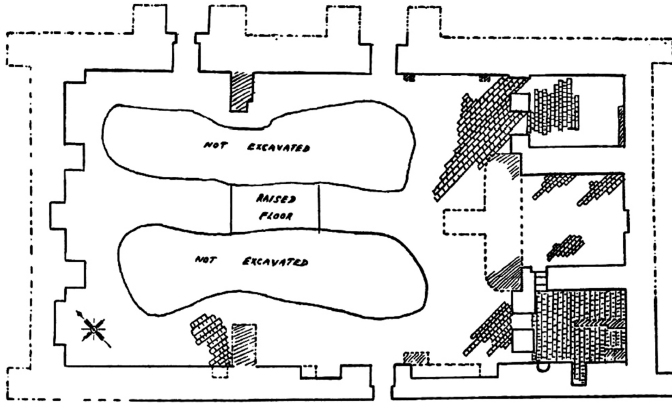


FIG. 2. CHURCH (No. V) AT HIRA
— Original building. - - - Repairs or modifications. - - - Restored or not excavated.
//// Baked brick. ——— 5 metres

Fig. 8: Al-Hira Site V

Source: Rice, 1932:281

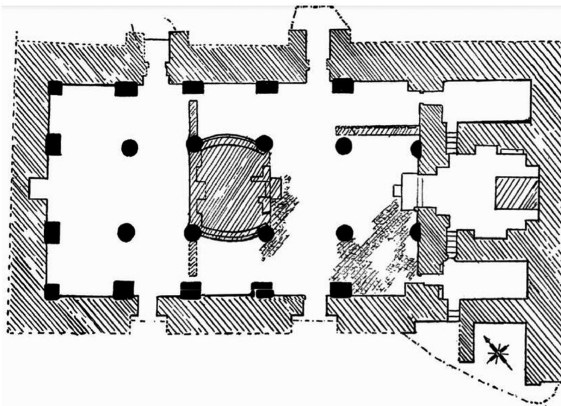


FIG. 1. CHURCH (No. XI) AT HIRA
■ Baked Brick. ≡ Mud Brick. /// Subsidiary Construction.
- - - Limit of Excavation. - - - Restored. ——— 3 metres

Fig. 9: Al-Hira Site XI

Source: Rice, 1932:280

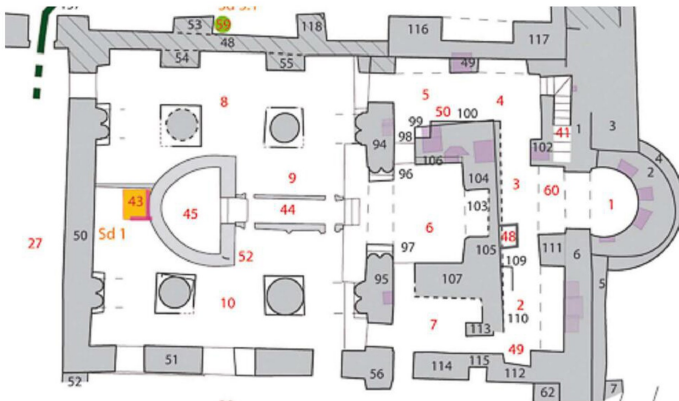
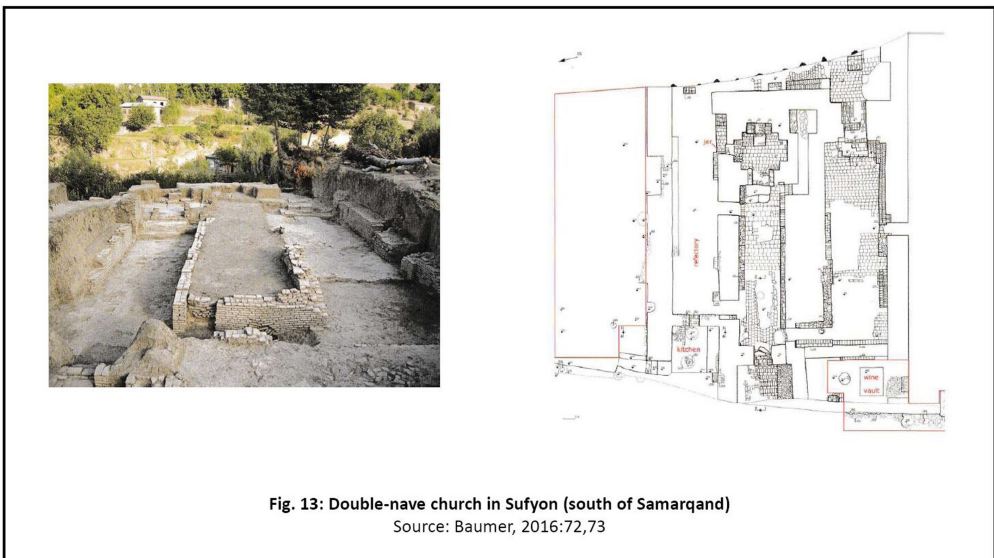
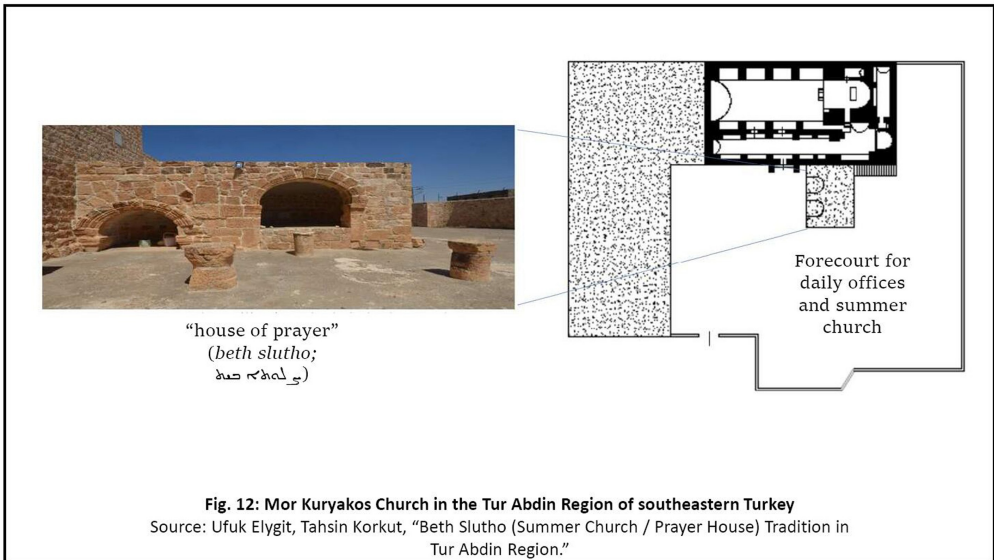
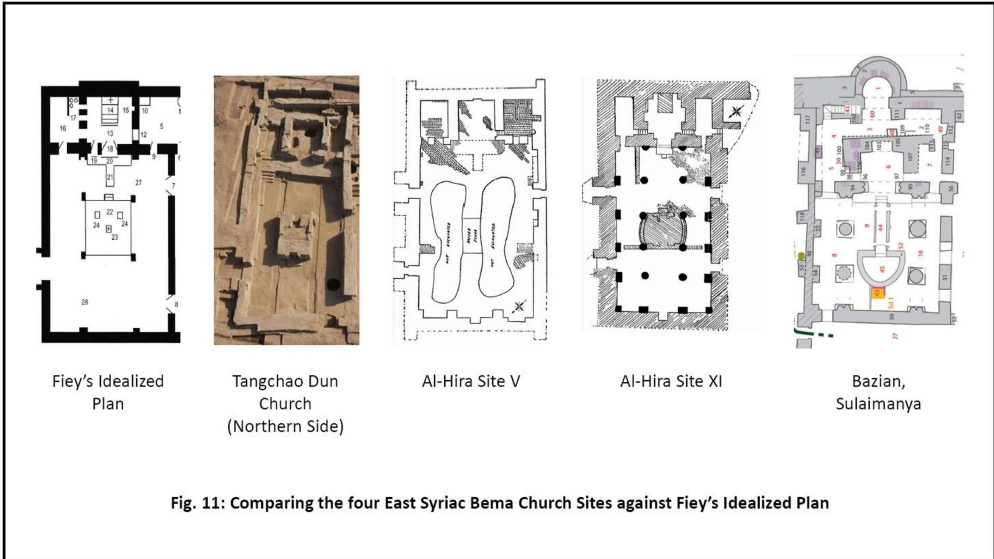


Fig. 10: Bazian, Sulaimanya Site

Source: <https://www.mesopotamiaheritage.org/en/monuments/le-site-archeologique-de-bazyan-et-son-patrimoine-chretien/> (Viewed on Nov. 2, 2021)



中文题目：

地上的完美教堂：一个 7—9 世纪唐朝墩古代教堂遗址在新疆的新发现

谭大卫

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