

Citation style

Rizos, Efthymios: review of: Thilo Ulbert (ed.), *Forschungen in Resafa-Sergiupolis*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016, in: *Plekos. Elektronische Zeitschrift für Rezensionen und Berichte zur Erforschung der Spätantike*, 22 (2020), p. 67-74, DOI: 10.21245/rec.ant.235582883, downloaded from Website



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Thilo Ulbert (ed.): *Forschungen in Resafa-Sergiupolis*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2016 (Resafa 7). X, 154 p., 86 ill., 95 plates, 6 loose inserts. € 99.95. ISBN: 978-3-11-046746-8.

As the world is waiting for peace and normality to resume in Syria, the archaeological community has welcomed the publication of the seventh volume of the *Resafa* series, which appeared in 2016, while the project itself was regrettably discontinued due to the war. The last volume of the series to be edited by Thilo Ulbert contains reports on three components of the Resafa project, work on which research was undertaken at various stages between 1980 and 2002.

The first part of the book offers a full architectural and epigraphic documentation of the standing structure of the so-called al-Mundhir Building, on the slopes north of the walled settlement. This fine example of *Bauforschung* comprises two lengthy papers on the structural remains and the architectural sculpture, by Thilo Ulbert and Gunnar Brands respectively, a brief survey of epigraphy by Pierre-Louis Gatier, and an architectural reconstruction essay by Felix Arnold. Ulbert's architectural documentation is based on photogrammetric surveys conducted in 1980 and 1982.

Closely tied into the study of the al-Mundhir Building is a chapter authored by Michaela Konrad (except for a catalogue of coins by Hans Roland Baldus), which offers a report from the archaeological investigation of the north necropolis within and around the building itself and its adjoining south courtyard. These excavations produced important evidence for understanding the building itself and the demography of Resafa from the Tetrarchy to the mid-sixth century.

The third and final section, fully authored by Thilo Ulbert except for an architectural reconstruction study by Dietmar Kurapkat, offers the publication of Basilica C, the smallest of the intramural churches of Resafa, whose excavation took place between 1986 and 2003. With this publication, a major piece of evidence is added to our knowledge of the city of Saint Sergius. The church, an ornate three-aisled basilica of the early sixth century, preserves marble architectural sculpture and interesting liturgical fixtures.

One of the best preserved structures in Resafa-Sergiupolis, the al-Mundhir Building is a vaulted hall of a cross-in-square plan which has been invoked as a foreshadow of this architectural type's spread in Byzantine ecclesiastical

building.¹ Had the building survived only on ground-plan level, it would have been interpreted as a cemeterial church of the sixth century. Its prominent position within the necropolis on the slopes north of the town of Saint Sergius and the eastward orientation of its apse would have probably led to its interpretation as a church, and it is indeed as a church that the building was first published by Herzfeld and Guyer in 1920.² Yet the good preservation of the building has allowed the survival of an inscription which simplifies dating, but complicates interpretation. Monumentally carved within the relief frieze of the apse, it reads: Νικῆ ἡ τύχη Ἀλαμουνδάρου. This allows identifying the founder of the building as the Ghassanid king al-Mundhir ibn al-Ḥārith who was a federate leader in East Roman service from AD 569 to 582, and died after 602. Thus the building has been unanimously dated to his times, but the wording of the inscription has created interpretation problems, because, instead of following the usual style of dedicatory epigraphy, it is formulated as a secular acclamation. Based on this, Jean Sauvaget suggested in 1939 an alternative interpretation as a secular audience hall, and his view was widely accepted in subsequent bibliography, until Gunnar Brands and Elizabeth Fowden called for a return to the building's reading as a church – or as a church secondarily used for secular gatherings and audiences, according to Fowden.³

Resafa 7 furnishes new evidence from excavation which confirms the date suggested by the inscription (Konrad, 50–51), but leaves the question of the building's original character and purpose open. Commendably, both sides of the debate are represented in the volume, showing that, even though the discussion can now be conducted on a better-informed basis, different paths of interpretation are still possible. Brands repeats his arguments from his 1998 paper, adducing a detailed analysis of the sculpted decoration (32–37). By contrast, Konrad supports Sauvaget's argument, using observations from

- 1 R. Krautheimer: *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*. Fourth Edition, Revised with S. Ćurčić. New Haven 1986 (*The Pelican History of Art*), 326.
- 2 S. Guyer: Rusafah. In: F. Sarre/E. Herzfeld (eds): *Archäologische Reise im Euphrat- und Tigris-Gebiet 1*. Berlin 1920 (*Forschungen zur islamischen Kunst* 1,1), 1–45.
- 3 J. Sauvaget: *Les Ghassanides et Sergiopolis*. In: *Byzantion* 14, 1939, 115–130; G. Brands: *Der sogenannte Audienzsaal des al-Mundir in Resafa*. In: *DaM* 10, 1998, 211–235; E. Key Fowden: *An Arab Building at al-Rusafa-Sergiopolis*. In: *DaM* 12, 2000, 303–324.

her excavation and making comparisons with audience halls from early Roman, late antique and pre-Islamic Arabian fortresses and residences (66–70).

In his architectural survey, Ulbert refrains from taking position on the interpretation problem, though he corroborates Sauvaget's argument from negative evidence, stressing that the al-Mundhir Building lacks many of the features characterising church architecture in Resafa, like marble incrustation, mosaic, and liturgical fixtures (16–18). The apse had a raised floor, but there are no traces of a liturgical screen parapet. In my opinion, these features cannot document a secular character for the building. The basilicas within the walls of Resafa belong to an early to mid-sixth century context, when the whole city and its shrines were built with imperial support and funds. There is no reason to expect a late sixth-century church dedicated by a federate Ghassanid leader to have emulated the earlier imperial shrines in every respect. Second, the lack of marble incrustation and other decoration can also indicate that the building was just unfinished. In his study of the sculpture, Gunnar Brands indeed points out that the pillar capitals are generally roughly worked, as if the builders decided for a quick and summary way of carving, perhaps due to lack of funds (32–34).

Brands' approach focuses on positive evidence, stressing that the architectural sculpture of the building has parallels in sixth-century ecclesiastical decoration from North Mesopotamia and Osrhoene. These parallels come from the early and mid-sixth century, leading Brands to the conclusion that the style of the al-Mundhir Building was very conservative in its late sixth-century context. Brands' selection of parallels omits two monuments from the Tur Abdin region, which I think are worth taking into consideration: the church of El-'Adhra (Yoldat Aloho) at the village of Hah and the church of the Mor-Ya'qub Monastery at the village of Salah near Midyat. Both churches feature semi-finished Corinthian capitals, very similar to those of the al-Mundhir Building. At Salah, they adorn pillars at the gate of the sanctuary, while at Hah they flank the door of the narthex. The Hah capitals, in particular, create a contrast with the ornate capitals of the sanctuary apse, recalling the different levels of finishing observed in the Resafa building.⁴

4 C. Preusser: *Nordmesopotamische Baudenkmäler altchristlicher und islamischer Zeit*. Leipzig 1911 (Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 17), 35–38, pl. 47 (reprinted, Osnabrück 1984); E. Keser Kayaalp: *Églises et monastères du Tur Abdin. Les débuts d'une architecture „syriaque“*. In: F.

Brands also stresses the relief frieze with motifs of sea monsters in the apse of the al-Mundhir Building, which he regards as an eminently funerary iconographic theme, based on which he suggests that the building may have been built as a mausoleum. In support of this argument, one may add that a strikingly similar motif adorns the entrance of the burial chapel of the Saffron Monastery near Mardin.⁵

The Mesopotamian monuments I mention here display affinities with the Resafa building, not only in decoration, but, to some extent, also in architectural concept. The Hah church, in particular, can provide a clue for reconstructing the central bay of the al-Mundhir Building, as its dome recalls one of the reconstruction scenarios proposed by Felix Arnold (22–25).

Konrad presents the results of excavations in twenty-six trenches, which were conducted in 1998 and 2000 within the al-Mundhir Building, its adjacent side structures and surrounding area. The necropolis represents the population and burial customs of Resafa from the first centuries of its existence down to the construction of the al-Mundhir Building, with all dated material ending shortly after the middle of the sixth century. The burials point to a population and culture of a predominantly local, Mesopotamian character, which is otherwise consistent with the information of the *Notitia Dignitatum* that Resafa was home to a cavalry unit of indigenous recruits (*equites promoti indigenae*) (50, 51, 62–64). The only exception is Grave 4 which was housed in a funerary chapel adorned with wall paintings. This structure, described as a *cella memoria* by the excavator, was clearly the most prominent monument of the necropolis and represented a form of burial structure which is currently unique in inner Syria (54, 62).

It appears that, shortly before the construction of the al-Mundhir Building, the site was cleared from burials, including the demolition of the ornate *cella memoria*. Konrad sees in the finds a heavy-handed intervention which she regards as incompatible with the spirit of a religious building, and compares it with examples of removals of tombs for the construction of secular buildings and fortifications. Her argument implies that the Ghassanids destroyed a part of the necropolis of Resafa, in order to build their *praetorium*. One may

Briquel-Chatonnet (ed.): *Les églises en monde syriaque*. Paris 2013 (Études syriaques 10), 269–288, esp. 275–283.

5 Preusser, *Nordmesopotamische Baudenkmäler*, 53 (as in note 4).

ask whether such an act would have been tolerated by the authorities and families of Resafa.

I am not convinced that the excavated evidence allows an understanding of the clearing and levelling of the site as aggressive or disrespectful. It does not point to violent destruction, except for traces of burning in the *memoria* chapel, which, as the author states, may indicate planned demolition. Konrad assumes that a religious building project would have involved a “more pious treatment of earlier burials” (einen pietätvolleren Umgang mit älteren Gräbern) (51, 64–65). A planned removal and reburial, however, does not mean desecration or disrespect, if it is conducted in order to protect the remains of the dead from being trodden over by the users of a new building. Besides, Eastern ecclesiastical custom prohibits burials in churches – except burials of saints – and the construction of a church within a pre-existing necropolis would have required the removal of graves. The clearing of the remains of the dead can mean respect for both the dead and the new sacral building.

Konrad is right, however, in pointing out that the al-Mundhir Building did not preserve any of the tombs which preceded it, thus refuting the assumption of Brands that it marked the site of martyrdom and first burial of Saint Sergius (64). The saint’s *Passio* points out that the site of the martyr’s execution and the empty tomb of his first burial received veneration and were associated with miracles even after the relics were transferred to the city.⁶ One would have indeed expected the miracle-working empty tomb to have been preserved, and its absence indeed seems to discredit Brands’ theory.

Konrad’s paper includes an extensive discussion of the interpretation of the al-Mundhir Building in its local and broader architectural and cultural context. She expands Sauvaget’s argument by adducing comparisons with halls from military sites of the early Roman and late Roman periods, and the sixth-

6 Passio Sergii et Bacchi (BHG 1624) 30: Πολλὰ δὲ σημεῖα καὶ ἰάσεις ἐπιτελοῦνται πανταχοῦ μὲν ὅπου ἐστὶν ἅγιον αὐτοῦ λείψανον, μάλιστα δὲ ἐν τῷ μνήματι ἐνθα ἔκειτο τὸ πρότερον· σχέσει γὰρ τῆς ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τελειώσεως ἐκδυσωπῶν τὸν Θεόν, ὁ ἅγιος πάντας τοὺς συντρέχοντας νόσοις ποικίλοις ἐξεταζομένους ἰᾶται [...]. “Now several miracles and healings are performed at any place where there is a holy relic of his, but especially at the tomb where he reposed in the first place. For, by virtue of his death on that site, he implores God and heals all those who resort there, being troubled by diseases or harmed by impure spirits.” Ed. by I. Van der Gheyn: *Passio antiquior SS. Sergii et Bacchi*. Graece nunc primum edita. In: *AB* 14, 1895, 375–395. Text and translation: E. Rizos: *Cult of Saints*, E02791 (online database: <http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk>, accessed 21/01/2020).

century pre-Islamic Arab fortress of Tulul al-Ukhaidir/Qasr Bani Muqatil in Iraq. However, the parallels she invokes are problematic. None of her Roman examples postdates the times of the Tetrarchy, whilst the Arab one comes from outside the empire. This leaves us with hardly any sixth-century *praetorium* sharing the plan of the al-Mundhir Building. By contrast, ecclesiastical parallels can be found readily. Another problem in Konrad's architectural argument is that all of her parallels come from fortified sites and complexes of buildings, and none of them is an isolated structure outside a fortification like the al-Mundhir Building. Konrad repeats the older argument which justifies the extramural position of the building based on the specific nomadic character of the Ghassanid community which she imagines pitching tents outside the city and using the al-Mundhir hall as a centre of power (65–66). I find it implausible that the federate troops would have been quartered outside the city, even if their ethnic background was nomadic. From an institutional point of view, the place for al-Mundhir's military functions was inside the walls of Resafa. There was one institution, however, which the Ghassanid king represented and whose place was indeed outside the walls: his church. Al-Mundhir was not a member of the imperial Chalcedonian Church, but belonged to the non-conformist Monophysite community – he was personally connected to Jacob Baradaeus – whose worship was excluded from the walled cities, and therefore its leadership was based at monasteries and villages.⁷ If al-Mundhir was to build a church for his people in Resafa, it would have been Monophysite and would have had to be outside the walls.

Central in Konrad's arguments is, of course, the controversial inscription. Following Gatier's remarks (19–21), she affirms that the phrase Νικᾷ ἡ τύχη Ἀλαμουνδάρου echoes acclamations which will have been used in military ceremonies held by the Arab federates (69). Gatier's paper provides a more extensive discussion of the parallels for such acclamations, demonstrating their association with the secular world of agonistic spectacles and factions. Konrad further argues that the phrase's connotations can even be recognised

7 F. Millar: Christian Monasticism in Roman Arabia at the Birth of Mahomet. In: *Semitica et Classica* 2, 2009, 97–115; R. Hoyland: Late Roman Provincia Arabia, Monophysite Monks and Arab Tribes: A Problem of Centre and Periphery. In: *Semitica et Classica* 2, 2009, 117–139; E. Key Fowden: Des églises pour les Arabes, pour les nomades? In: F. Briquel-Chatonnet (ed.): *Les églises en monde syriaque*. Paris 2013 (*Études syriaques* 10), 391–420.

as pagan, associated with the ancient divinities of Nike and Tyche, which, of course, would have been unacceptable in an ecclesiastical context.

It seems the volume of *Resafa* 7 had already been concluded when the church of Tall al-Umayri in Jordan was discovered (Gatier indeed published its inscription). This is an epigraphically identified martyrium of Saint Sergius, dedicated by the same al-Mundhir and a number of people associated with him.⁸ It has a basilical plan with four pillars, which can be read as a cross-in-square arrangement, like the Resafa building. Its dedicatory inscription has the form of a typical Christian invocation, demonstrating that the Resafa text is indeed odd even within the devotional activity of its own commissioner. Nevertheless, the matter is not so straightforward. If the al-Mundhir inscription in Resafa conforms to the wording of secular acclamations, it does not conform to their normal epigraphic medium. It is a monumental inscription, whereas the vast majority of the *καὶ ἡ τύχη* texts are known from informal graffiti. In this respect, it is unusual for an acclamation no less than a dedication. Second, the word *tyche* was not necessarily understood as a pagan concept or divinity, as Konrad argues. It certainly did not belong to normal Christian parlance, but it does appear in a devotional context within the dedicatory letter of the Persian king Khosrau II, which accompanied his gifts to Saint Sergius in 591. In it, we read the phrase *διὰ τῆς τύχης τοῦ ἁγίου Σεργίου τοῦ πανσέπτου καὶ ὀνομαστοῦ*.⁹ In other words, the saint himself was defined as a *tyche/genius*, and the word is not understood as a deity, but as a spirit. This phrase, of course, comes from a pagan devotee, but it still was accepted and prominently displayed at Resafa. In conclusion, the wording, form, and position of al-Mundhir's inscription do not allow its categorisation as secular or religious nor can they be used with confidence in defining the character of the building.

- 8 G. Bevan/G. Fisher/D. Genequand: The Late Antique Church at Tall al-Umayri East. New Evidence for the Jafnid Family and the Cult of Saint Sergius in Northern Jordan. In: BASOR 373, 2015, 49–68; P. L. Gatier: Les Jafnides dans l'épigraphie grecque au VIe siècle, In: D. Genequand/C. Robin (eds): Les Jafnides. Des rois arabes au service de Byzance (VIe siècle de l'ère chrétienne). Actes du colloque de Paris, 24–25 novembre 2008. Paris 2015 (Orient et Méditerranée 17), 193–222, esp. 201–203. Text, translation and commentary: P. Nowakowski: The Cult of Saints E02545 (online database: <http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk>; accessed 21/01/2020).
- 9 Theophyl. Sim. hist. 5,13,1–7; Evagr. Schol. h. e., 6,21. Text and translation: E. Rizos: Cult of Saints, E00025, E00028 (online database: <http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk>, accessed 21/01/2020).

I wish to congratulate the editor and the authors for this exemplary publication and for their contribution to the study of this important site. With regard to the debate on the character of the al-Mundhir Building, I see more positive evidence in support of the ecclesiastical interpretation. The question, of course, cannot receive a conclusive solution at the moment, but *Resafa 7* made a major and much needed contribution to it.

Efthymios Rizos, Oxford
efthymios.rizos@classics.ac.ox.uk

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Efthymios Rizos: Rezension zu: Thilo Ulbert (ed.): *Forschungen in Resafa-Sergiupolis*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2016 (Resafa 7). In: *Plekos* 22, 2020, 67–74 (URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2020/r-ulbert.pdf>).
