

A Proposal for the Restitution of the World's First Baptistry and University, Mor Yakup Church, Turkey

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Abstract: The structure known today as St. Jacob's Church represents one of the oldest Christian medieval monuments in the region. With the emergence of findings suggesting that the structure was the world's first university during recent excavation efforts, it has gained even more significance. Since 2006, the excavation works conducted by the Mardin Museum Directorate in the vicinity of Mor Yakup Church have yielded information about various phases of the structure. However, assessments regarding the nature of the structure are still debated within the academic environment. This study aimed to thoroughly investigate the functional changes and periods that St. Jacob's Church underwent throughout history and to provide a detailed description and restitution for each period. In this study, we utilized excavation reports, data from written sources related to the settlement and structure, information obtained from the structure itself, traces existing on the structure, and data derived from architectural necessities (logic/scenario). The results indicate that this structure served three different functions (baptistry, church, university) and went through two main periods (pre-Christianity and post-Christianity).

Keywords: Medieval monuments; Christian architecture; Conservation; Restitution; Mardin

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, the town known as Nisibis or Nesbin, presently referred to as Nusaybin, is a district located in the province of Mardin, Turkey. The city of Nisibis stands as one of the oldest settlements in Mesopotamia. The structure known today as the Mor Yakup Church in Nusaybin was investigated in this study. Situated in the district of Nusaybin, which is a part of Mardin province, the church was originally built in the year 311 AD by Bishop Mar Jacob of Nusaybin. The building features a three-aisled basilical layout and is characterized by its architecture and intricate high-relief stone ornamentations, reflecting the traits of the late Roman to early Byzantine period ^[1].

There is a limited number of studies available in the literature regarding the structure. Upon reviewing these studies, it was found that there had been no clear understanding of the building's physical stratification and functional coherence. The limited research can be categorized into three main groups: investigations aimed at understanding the historical development of the settlement (Nusaybin) where the structure is located ^[2-11], studies focusing on the identity of Mor Yakup, after whom the building is named ^[12,13], and research centered around the excavations carried out around the structure and the remains discovered ^[14,15].

Upon a detailed examination of these research groups, it becomes apparent that there is an insufficient number of published sources that define the architecture, function, and periods of St. Jacob's Church, which results in a lack of clear historical information about the church's past. While excavation studies showcasing the horizontal coherence of different historical periods reveal the cultural stratification, they fall short of providing adequate information about the vanished parts of the structure, and the scarcity of sources contributes to the limited academic awareness of the building.

In this context, the original nature of Mor Yakup Church remains a topic of debate among researchers. Data obtained from excavation works conducted by the Mardin Museum Directorate around the structure since 2006 has provided information about different periods of the building. However, this information falls short of providing clarity about the building's physical stratification and functional coherence. Assessments regarding the nature of the structure are still under discussion in academic circles, and there exists a significant gap in the literature on this topic. Addressing these needs, the purpose of this study is to thoroughly investigate the functional changes and periods that Mor Yakup Church underwent throughout history and to provide a detailed description and restitution for each period. Within the scope of the study, excavation results are evaluated along with information from written sources to develop an assessment of the structure's past. This assessment leads to periodization and, consequently, the development of a detailed description/restitution. This study demonstrates that the structure served three different functions (baptistry, church, university) and went through two main periods (pre-Christianity and post-Christianity).

2. Materials and methods

Historical research aimed at understanding the past of the structure was compiled from two types of sources. The first group of sources was centered on the remains uncovered through excavation works carried out around the structure. These sources included periodical written and visual references as well as excavation reports.

The second source was derived from written sources related to the settlement and structure, considering the structure's transformations over time, information obtained directly from the structure, traces existing on the structure, and data derived from architectural necessities (logic/scenario). Through these means, a periodization and description (restitution) for each period of the structure was developed.

3. Results

Within the scope of the study, excavation reports were evaluated, along with the characteristics of the structure and information found in written sources. This evaluation led to an assessment of the structure's history, periodization, and subsequently, the development of a completion/restitution. In this section, the changes in the functions of the structure over time, the periods it went through, and the reasons behind them are presented.

3.1. Evaluation of excavation reports, written sources, and similar examples

Ongoing excavations at the Monastery of Mor Yakup Church continue to shed light on its historical significance.

During the 2013 excavations, significant findings were unearthed that illuminate Syriac history. The discovery of the oldest Syriac inscriptions at this site has strengthened the argument that the Nisibis School was one of the earliest universities. In this regard, the structure is considered the world's first educational university, where subjects like philosophy, logic, literature, geometry, astronomy, medicine, and law were taught.

In the excavations conducted in 2013, different areas on the northern, southern, and eastern facades of the building emerged with distinct material qualities, construction techniques, and architectural elements. To the northwest of Mor Yakup Church, remains of a structure were uncovered, where part of the central apse was identified, and some parts were found to be beneath the existing road. The remains of the structure, known as the Nusaybin Cathedral, are attributed in sources to being commissioned by Mor Yakup between 313 and 320 ^[16] (Figure 1a).

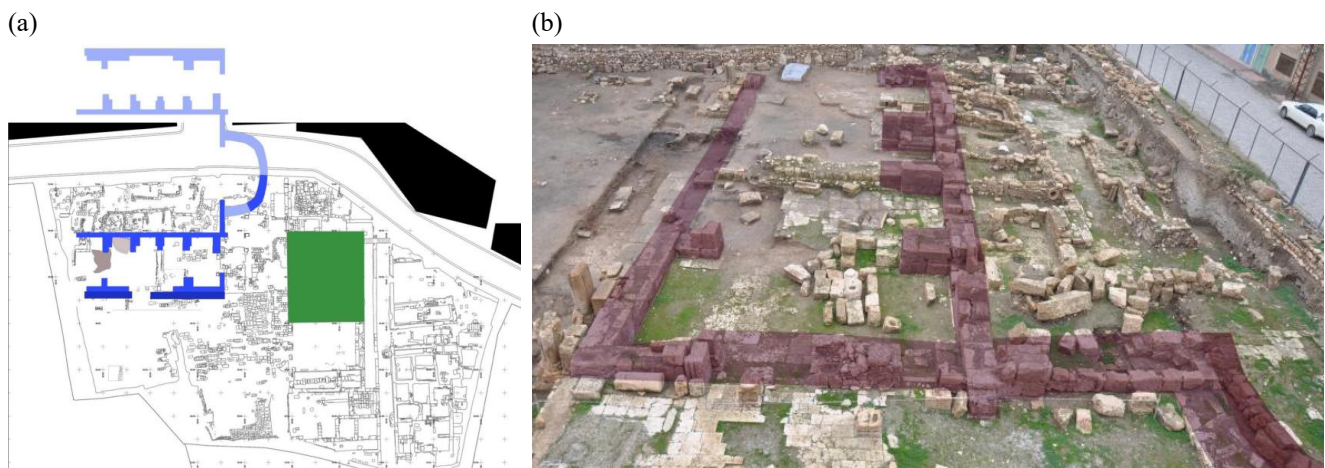


Figure 1. (a) Cathedral ruins uncovered through excavation (dark blue) and reconstruction (light blue)** and preserved section of the church (green), (b) completion of the ruins believed to be associated with Mor Yakup Cathedral.

Today, while no remains of the church are left above the ground of the cathedral, the baptistery section has been preserved up to the present day. The remaining part of the complex, recognized today as a church, is described as the first baptistery with clear depictions, evident in various written documents that have reached us ^[17] (Figure 1b). As indicated by the Greek inscription on the south facade of the structure, the baptistery was constructed in 359. The inscription was actually placed upon an existing structure. However, significant new additions were made to the existing building. Two additional spaces were added to the north and south of the structure, a longitudinal extension was constructed along the eastern wall, and an apse arrangement was added to the east of all three spaces. The descent from the lower space is from the adorned central space, while the exit is from the northern space. This structural feature suggests the idea that those who were baptized would descend and emerge into the northern chamber. The decorations in the central space were also created during this period, around the mid-4th century.

It should be noted that the three-aisled arrangement was a common plan in Early Christian Eastern baptisteries. In this context, comparable examples include Kenīset Bath-Zabbai (Zenobia-Syria), Kenīsat Mār Sim'ān al-Amūdī (Kalat Simean-Syria), Kenīset Mar-Mīna (Egypt), Side and Ephesus (Anatolia), Gerasa (Jordan), and some baptisteries in Cyprus ^[18]. Despite all these similar examples, as highlighted by the inscription, St. Jacob's Church emerges as the oldest baptistery structure (Figure 2). Regarding the standing baptistery structure within the building, it can be suggested that the presence of different periods in the structure is due to interventions arising from changes in the city's historical development and the transformation in the educational system, parallel to changes in system and function over time.

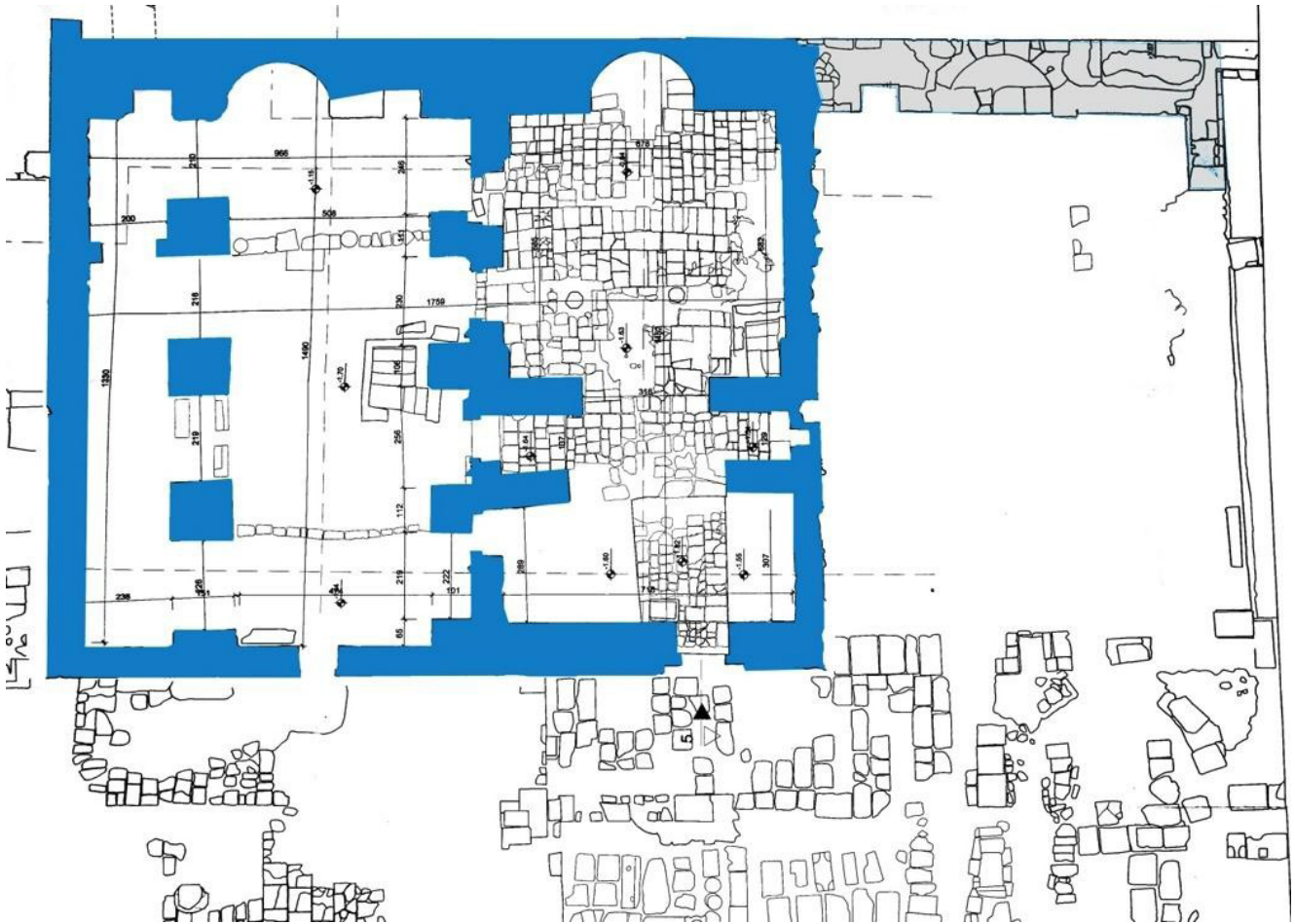


Figure 2. The third aisle on the south side of the revealed structure uncovered through excavation

3.2. The chronological phases and historical periods of the structure

Regarding the standing baptistry structure within the building, the presence of different periods can be attributed to interventions driven by changes in the historical development of the city and transformations in the education system. In parallel with these changes, shifts in system and function over time have contributed to the existence of various periods within the structure. When comparing the existing structure and remains with similar examples, three significant periods aligned with the advent of Christianity can be identified:

- (i) First period (359–717): This phase encompasses the earliest period of the structure, aligning with the historical shift towards Christianity.
- (ii) Second period (741–1871): This period reflects changes and adaptations made to the structure after the Arab-Byzantine wars.
- (iii) Third period (1872–1884) and 1885–2012: This final phase spans the period up until the excavation works from 1885 to 2012.

3.2.1. First period (359–717)

This period covers the Early Christian era and characterizes the structure as a three-unit complex consisting of a baptistry and two churches. The structure, which measures 8.80×16.08 meters, features a dual-space baptistry at its center, with units to the north and south defined as churches. Part of the cathedral complex affiliated with the bishopric, the structure might also be part of a larger configuration along with other adjacent remnants. Data defining the unity of the three spaces include wall thicknesses, material characteristics, construction techniques,

the presence of apses on the eastern facade, organic wall connections between the northeastern and southeastern corners of the central space, and the walls of the northern and southern spaces, as well as the presence of similarly decorated friezes on the walls of the central and northern spaces.

On the structure's wall, a label indicating "baptistry" is found, and in historical sources, the structure is referred to as the "first baptistry with an inscription." During this period, the baptistry and churches of the Nusaybin cathedral were united into a single mass with a colonnaded narthex on the west side. The section identified as the central baptistry consists of two spaces accessed through a door in the narthex area on the west. The upper structure of the space with apses on the north and south sides, which are accessed through two adorned doors, is domed. The entrance area to the west of this space is divided into three sections and features a vaulted ceiling. Small square spaces are situated in the northeast and southeast corners of this area. Due to the special use for the baptism ritual, these spaces have windows opening to the churches. The churches to the north and south of the baptistry unit are accessed through two doors each from the narthex on the west. In the northern church, these doors are present but closed, while in the southern church, openings can be observed in the remaining wall. The churches have a three-aisled plan with a semi-circular apse in the center. The vaulted structure of the colonnaded aisles and the central aisle is shaped according to existing traces and vaults in the walls (**Figure 3**).

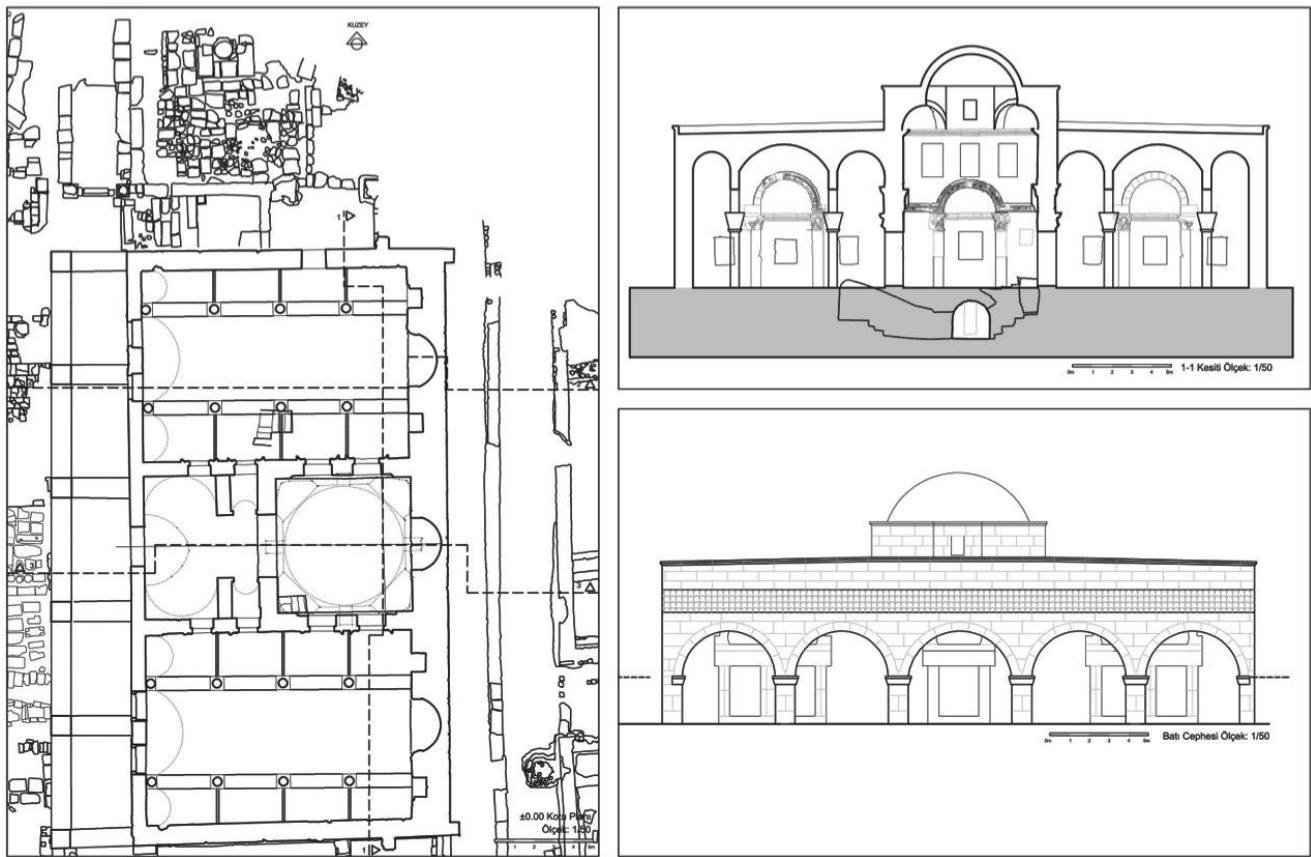


Figure 3. First period (359–717) completion/reconstruction

3.2.2. Second period (741–1871)

Established around 3000 BC, the settlement that was ruled by the Akkadians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Mitanni-ans, Assyrians, Medes-Persians, Seleucids (Seleucids), and later the Abgar Kingdom, came under the dominion of the Romans. Until the year 637 AD, it changed hands between the Romans and the Sassanids. In the year 637, Islamic forces took control. Subsequently, the traces of all periods can be observed in various parts of the

region to varying extents. Throughout this lengthy era, many civilizations and communities settled in and inhabited the geography, only to be destroyed and rebuilt due to various disasters. During the second period, a portion of the structure collapsed in the 7th century due to an earthquake. The baptistery and the northern section of the structure were also reduced in size. It is believed that the collapsed sections were repaired using rubble stones and lime mortar. In this period, the southern part of the ruined structure was transformed into a two-aisled church. Written sources refer to the structure as a church from the 8th century onwards ^[3].

Based on the differences in construction materials and techniques, it can be observed that the ground floor took on its present appearance. Utilizing the characteristics of the regional architecture, it has been determined that the superstructure of the building, except for the domed space on the northeast, consists of vaulted sections and flat roofs. With reference to Gertrude Bell's photographs, it has been identified that the eastern and southern parts of the building are situated in a position partially buried in the ground (**Figure 4**).

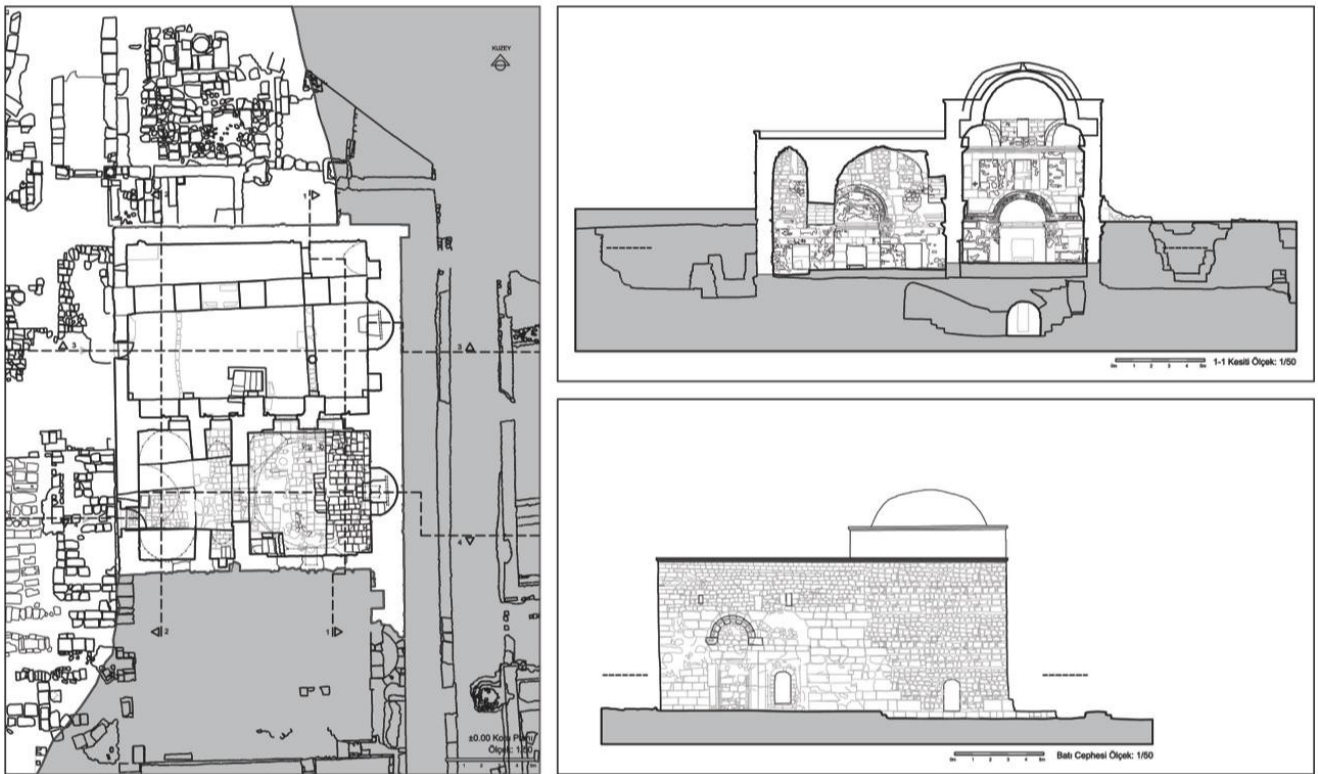


Figure 4. Second period (741–1871) description/restitution.

3.2.3. Third period

The third period is divided into three distinct phases: Phase A (1872–1884), Phase B (1885–2012), and the post-excavation period following the 2013 archaeological dig (Phase C).

(i) Phase A (1872–1884)

During this period, an additional floor was added to the western facade of the structure, and a stone staircase was constructed in the northwestern corner to access this upper floor. The central open eyvân and the two rooms opening into this eyvân were utilized as episcopal spaces. The architectural coherence and integrity of the baptistery dome were achieved in this phase by connecting the added floor with the baptistery dome through a narrow, vaulted area. Due to the introduction of the additional floor, a small toilet unit was appended to the staircase landing on the terrace. Consequently, the building adopted a two-story appearance with a flat roof during this period (**Figure 5**).

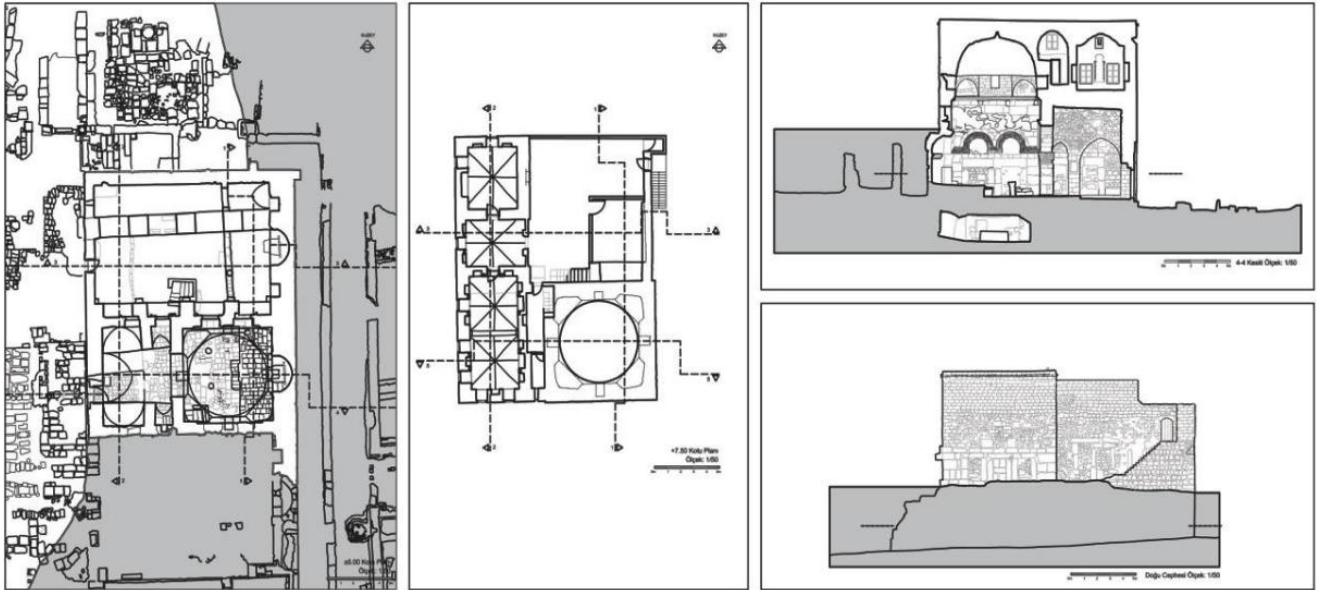


Figure 5. Third period/Phase A (1872–1884) description/reconstruction

(ii) Phase B (1885–2012)

Description/Reconstruction: The information regarding Phase B (1885–2012) is primarily sourced from Gertrude Bell's photographs. These documents reveal significant transformations in the building's architecture during this period.

Based on these records, it becomes evident that during this phase:

- (a) The vaulted space between the dome and living areas was enclosed to create a room.
- (b) The eyvān was closed off with a wall.
- (c) An additional section, now serving as the kitchen, was annexed to the building.
- (d) A staircase leading to the dome was introduced within the vaulted space.

As a result of these changes, the lower floor continued to host spaces for dual-unit religious rituals, while the upper floor was adapted into residential units through the added structures. This upper floor accommodated the individual responsible for the maintenance of the church. Notably, certain sections of the building remained underground, and openings on the lower floor were sealed with rubble, maintaining this state (**Figure 6**).

(iii) Phase C (2013 excavations)

The excavations at the Monastery of Mor Yakup are still ongoing. This monastery was once recognized as the world's first educational university where subjects like philosophy, logic, literature, geometry, astronomy, medicine, and law were taught. The results of the excavations conducted in 2013 have yielded the discovery of the oldest Syriac inscriptions here, further strengthening the argument for Nisibis School being the earliest university. Significant inscriptions found during the archaeological excavations at Mor Yakup Monastery in Mardin Nusaybin also support the notion that the Nisibis Academy was the world's first university. Noteworthy findings related to Syriac history have also been obtained ^[17,19].

4. Discussion

As a result of the excavation findings, the evaluation of the structure's features, the analysis of historical sources, an assessment of the building's past, a chronological classification, and consequently a description/reconstruction have been developed. Through the excavation works and the examination of comparable examples, it can be conc-

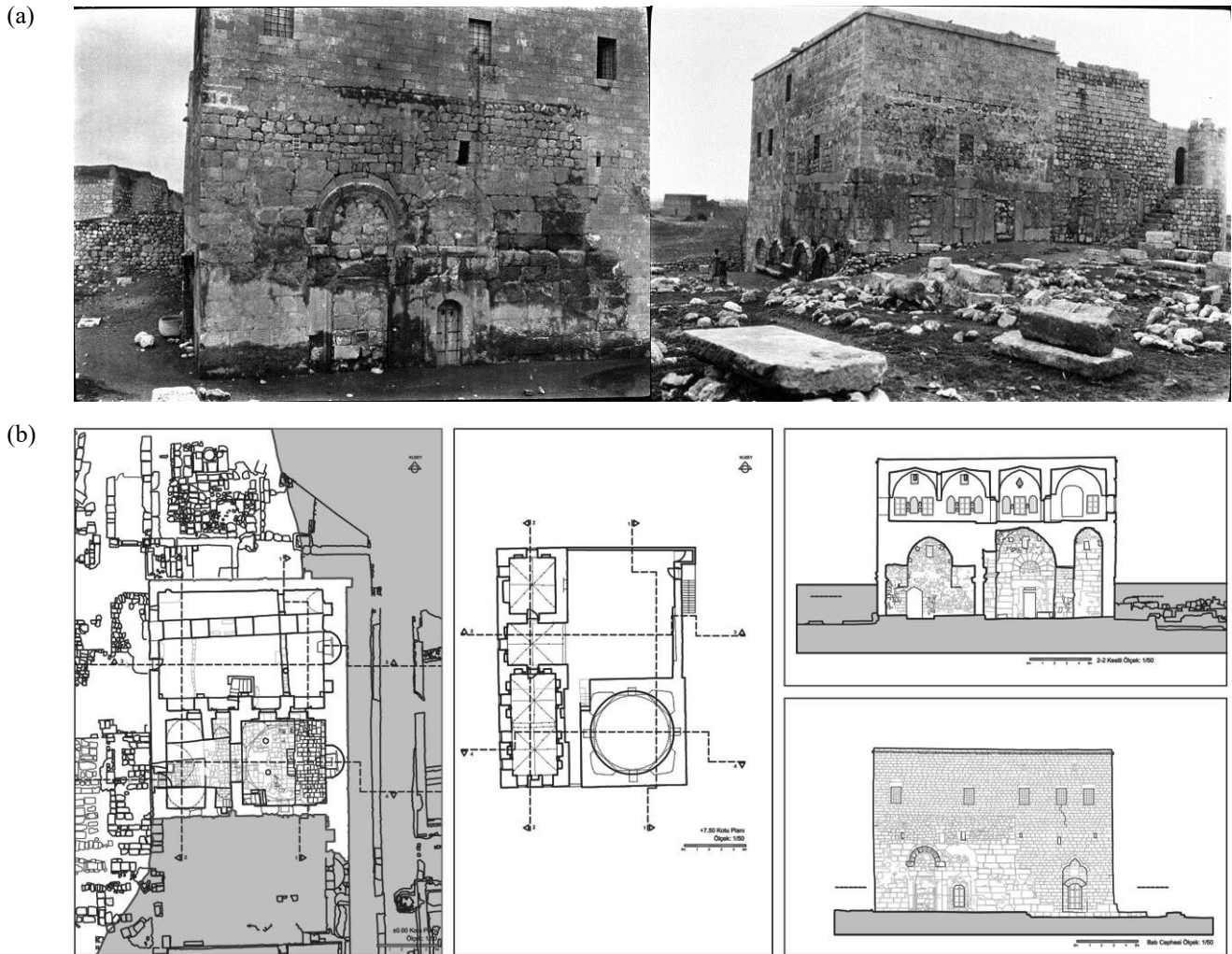


Figure 6. (a) Third period, Phase A: the staircase and toilet on the north facade, along with the sealed openings on the west facade, belong to this phase. (b) Third period, Phase B (1885–2012) description/reconstruction

luded that the standing structure today is the baptistery of the complex, and the adjacent excavation site reveals the remains of a connected cathedral. The evaluation of the excavation results and comparative analysis of similar instances have led to the determination that the existing structure is the baptistery, while the ruins uncovered in the vicinity belong to the associated cathedral. This conclusion has been derived from thorough assessments of the excavation scope, the building's characteristics, and references found in written sources.

In the course of this research, it was observed that the exact timing and circumstances of the cathedral, located at the heart of the city, being completely demolished could not be definitively determined. Within the scope of the study, a discussion can be framed as follows:

One of the possibilities regarding the date of this destruction is linked to the city of Nusaybin's conquest by the Persians in the year 573. During this period, it is known that the Christian population of the city was temporarily displaced. Another possibility arose during the intensification of conflicts between the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanid Persians in the 7th century. In this era, Nusaybin held significant military importance for the Sassanids. The third likelihood is that the massive earthquake in 717 could have been responsible for the city's destruction. According to ancient sources, an earthquake in 717 devastated Nusaybin. In 758, a metropolitan named Cyprian oversaw the reconstruction of the city's cathedral. This structure is likely the one

found through excavations, dated to the 8th century, and located in the northern part of the baptistery.

Presumably, during this period, the cathedral that was previously built by Mar Ya‘qôḇ Nṣîbnâyâ in the 4th century and recently uncovered through ongoing excavations was no longer in its original place. Consequently, the remaining part of the baptistery was likely altered to convert it into a church. Some researchers suggest that during this time, Mor Yakup’s tomb was moved from the old cathedral and placed in the space beneath the former baptistery, which was transformed into a crypt. From then on, the structure came to be known as the Church of Mor Yakup^[3].

Regardless of which possibility is accurate, one certain aspect is that the church was demolished in the year 758/759. After the existing church adjacent to the northern wall of the baptistery collapsed during that time, Bishop Cyprian (741–767) consecrated the baptistery as a church. In his own words, he presented it as “the holy place of the great church of Nusaybin was constructed.” The fact that the present-day church is described as the “great church” indicates the absence of the previous cathedral^[3]. In relation to the structure, Falla Castelfranchi (1980) proposes the following interpretation: He considers the wall that protrudes from the southeastern corner as evidence of adjacent structures and suggests the presence of two wide side chambers extending from the central cubic area. These three chambers feature small apses on their eastern walls. The architectural decorations in the apse of the northern section were found to be identical to those in the southern apse, implying that these two elements should be regarded as contemporary. The discovery of a stone-paved floor in the southern part, the equal length and width of the northern and southern sections, the exposed foundation of apses on the eastern edge of this platform, and the apse’s dimensions aligning with those of the cubic and northern apses all support Falla Castelfranchi’s (1980) view that the baptistery is a three-aisled structure^[18].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the research conducted in this study, the structure has undergone three distinct functions (baptistery, church, university) and can be divided into two primary periods (pre-Christianity and post-Christianity). When examining the functions that the structure has served, it becomes evident that the building known as Mor Yakup Church has a long history even before its role as a church.

The initial phase of a structure with an uncertain function in a significant Roman border town could be attributed to the pre-Christian era. In cities with continuous habitation, repurposing existing structures is often a preferred practice. In the case of Nusaybin, it is highly likely that during the Byzantine period, when the city was built upon the existing Roman settlement, past structures were repurposed. A crypt-like space, evaluated differently from the architectural conventions of the early Byzantine period, could potentially be a remnant from a pre-Christian era. However, concrete evidence for this is lacking.

In summary, considering the existing structure and comparative examples, three major periods coincide with the presence of Christianity within the structure:

- (i) The first period (359–717)
- (ii) The second period (741–1871)
- (iii) The third period (1872–1884) and the period from 1885 to 2012, extending until the 2013 excavation phase

The structure, with the spread of Christianity in the region, was repurposed as a “baptistery” connected to a cathedral and monastery complex. Initially, during the early Christian period, the structure functioned as a baptistery and was later transformed into a church in the 8th century. Today, it is known as the Mor Yakup Church and is associated with the Syriac Orthodox Church. The surviving section of the complex, which is

recognized as a church today, is described in sources as the first baptistery with a clear depiction of its purpose. The 2013 excavations revealed the oldest Syriac inscriptions on this site, further supporting the argument that the Nisibis School was one of the earliest universities. The significant inscriptions discovered during the archaeological excavations at Mor Yakup Monastery in Mardin Nusaybin also bolster the notion that the Nisibis Academy could be considered the world's first university.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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