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Mosaics, Liturgy and Architecture in the Basilica of Dermech I, Carthage

Guy P.R. MÉTRAUX

The work of the *Corpus des mosaïques de Tunisie* during 1992-1995 in the *Parc des thermes d'Antonin* at Carthage included study and excavation in the basilica of the ecclesiastical complex known as Dermech I¹. The history of the basilica has proved more differentiated than it appeared when it was first discovered in the terrain Ben Attar by Paul Gauckler in 1898. In his posthumous publication of 1913 on the Christian basilicas, which was accompanied by a magnificent and evocative drawing by E. Sadoux (fig. 1), Gauckler claimed that the church was essentially of one construction and decoration, Byzantine according to him, and that the liturgical arrangements were of a piece with the structure². For the time, his interpretation was justified even if his plan shows that the main mosaic of isometric coffers continued *under* the carpet of intersecting circles which was the floor of the *solea*: on the face of it, this should have alerted him to a multiplicity of phases in the architecture, its decoration, and especially in the liturgical arrangements of the basilica. His conclusions were not modified by Vaultrin in her article of 1932, and it remained for Noël Duval with his customary skepticism, vigorous accuracy and finesse, to show in his article of 1972 what the sequence of architectural, decorative and liturgical events had been³. Duval emphasized that the history of the *solea* and its liturgical barriers was more complex than it seemed at first, and he was able to alert scholars to what has subsequently proved to be the case in even more interesting ways than before. We are now able to outline the multi-phase history of the liturgical arrangements and show how the

¹ The activities of the *Corpus* at Carthage were authorized by the Institut national du Patrimoine of Tunisia and the help of all kinds given by the Musée national de Carthage and its director, Dr. Abdelmajid Ennabli, whose intellectual hospitality is even greater than his deployment of material aid. The project is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, D.C., by the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies at Harvard University, by Iowa University, by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, and by the Getty Foundation. The directors, Dr. Margaret A. Alexander and Dr. Aïcha Ben Abed, are sadly depleted by the death, in December 1996, of Mme Alexander. Her work of editing the volume, which will appear in 1998, was undertaken by her husband, Professor Robert L. Alexander of the University of Iowa; it has subsequently been taken up by Mme Aïcha Ben Abed. There are many members of the *Corpus* team whom I should like to mention here besides Margaret and Robert Alexander: Mme Aïcha Ben Abed gave generously of her opinions, and the conservator Moez Chelli was a big help, as was the architect, Frank Miller; the field-work of Diana Brulhart, my assistant for a summer, was invaluable, and some of her conclusions I have followed here. I wish to thank Dr. Liliane Ennabli and Professor Anna Gonosová, but most especially Professor Christine Kondoleon for the gift of many hours of conversation on this topic. The generous advice of Professor Noël Duval has been inestimable.

² P. GAUCKLER, *Basiliques chrétiennes de Tunisie, 1892-1904*, Paris 1913, p. 11-19.

³ J. VAUTRIN, "Les basiliques chrétiennes de Carthage", *Revue africaine* 73, 1932, p. 181-318 and 74, 1933, p. 118-156; N. DUVAL, "Etudes d'architecture chrétienne nord-africaine, I, Les monuments chrétiens de Carthage", *MEFRA* 84, 1972, p. 1081-92.

mosaics were part of the liturgical changes in the building (fig. 2)⁴. The discovery of an early floor for the basilica, of an early altar, and of a second apse at the NW end has also added to the sequence of events. Still, what Duval was able to speculate about and suggest in 1972 turned out to be predictions when we were able to investigate the basilica with the help of some excavation.

We took two avenues of approach. The first was excavation prompted by what we needed to know about the floors, and the second was further study of the existing remains as unearthed by Gauckler, as rearranged for public exhibition at various times in the *Parc des thermes d'Antonin*, and as visible to Duval and to us in its present state.

The first discovery was made on clearing and cleaning to the NW of the existing (SE) apse : what was revealed was a mosaic floor lower than the well-known coffer-mosaic. This newly discovered floor was of a substantially different design - a polychrome latchkey meander of swastikas defining boxes decorated with large rosettes, with a rinceau border along the SE side in front of the apse (fig. 3). The floor covered the entire nave width in front of the apse and extended into the second bay⁵. In addition, traces of its foundations were been found in the fifth and seventh nave-bays. As a result, and assuming that its pattern in the first and second bays could be extended throughout the length of the basilica in regular repeats, the architect was able to propose a reconstruction (fig. 4) which fits neatly into eight bays of the nave. The pattern of the mosaic is autonomous and not coordinated with the intercolumniations of the colonnades - it flows independently of the architecture.

Liturgically, this floor bore the marks of the implantation of barriers to define a corridor or a *solea* in front of the SE apse (fig. 3, bottom). Four bases (three of white limestone *in situ* with square holes to hold uprights, one robbed) with their tops at the level of the floor were found defining two openings 80 cms wide, one pair in front of the apse in the axis of the basilica, the others 3 m to the NW. Although the mosaic is repaired in places, it remains to be determined if the bases were laid contemporaneously with the mosaic or dug in afterward. In the absence of other indicators, we can speculate three alternative designs for liturgical barriers at this initial stage : a corridor connecting the apse with a liturgical center to the NW, or else an enclosure of some kind in front of the apse, or else a barrier in front of the apse, a barrier in the second bay, and possibly a connection between the two.

Archaeologically, the floor is associated with a fill of material from which pottery of the late fourth and early fifth century was found, though these dates will remain speculative until our ceramicist, Dr. Lucinda Neuru, is able to report on it more completely. The dating, however, is confirmed by the presence of a late fourth century coin found in the terrace fill.

⁴ See the preliminary report : M.A. ALEXANDER †, A. BEN ABED-BEN KHADER and G.P.R. METRAUX, "The Corpus of the Mosaics of Tunisia : Carthage Project, 1992-1994", *DOP* 50, 1996, p. 361-68, esp. p. 366-68, fig. 18-21.

⁵ The bays are counted from the SE apse.

The second discovery concerned the altar, or, rather, the altars of the church. The newly discovered mosaic suggested that the altar in the third bay might have been a later addition to the basilica, added when the coffer-mosaic replaced the original floor. In addition, study of the coffer-mosaic itself revealed that at some point there had been something important in the fifth bay. This was because, as an addition to the pattern of coffers, a crude border of large jewels had been added on the SE and in the N corner, surrounding the *in situ* bases of the mosaic floor (fig. 5). This told us that some unknown, but honoured, object had stood in the fifth bay. Excavation proved very rewarding, because what was found, at a level comparable to that of the early floor of the basilica, were indications of an early altar, with a round reliquary-receptacle 45 cms deep and about 45 cms in diameter, well-built and finely finished in plaster (fig. 2 and 5). It had a marble surround, visible in fragments, and it had been delimited by liturgical barriers with a canopy or *ciborium* which can be deduced from the presence of large bases 61 x 61 cms with slots at the sides rather than at the center. The sequence of events is clear in outline. At some point, the basilica must have been oriented toward the NW, with this altar three bays distant from the end of the basilica. This early structure in the fifth bay would have included an altar-table of a size comparable to the remains of the later altar observed by Gauckler and confirmed by Duval in the third bay. It would have been equipped with a reliquary below floor-level and with a *ciborium* over it, the whole separated from the *quadratum profanum* with barriers. This newly discovered structure was probably the original altar of the basilica. At some point, when the coffer mosaic replaced the early floor, the altar was adapted to the new, higher level (the later mosaic is 6-10 cms higher than the level of the earlier floor). Then, after the laying of the later floor, it was decided to embellish the location of the altar with a jewelled border. Alternatively, the altar may have gone out of use in favour of the new altar in the third bay, but its location was subsequently marked by the border of jewels.

Whatever the case may have been, the location of the newly discovered altar in the fifth bay strongly suggested that the original orientation of the basilica was toward the NW, and it is in this area that we made a final discovery, that of an apse (fig. 2 and 6). The presence of this apse was deduced by two facts : the last two bays of the church were 50 cms deeper than the others, and the foundation-blocks on a curve could be seen in certain places. Further excavation revealed both the foundations of an apse still *in situ* and the robber-trench for removal of the foundations on the SW side. The apse was of the same diameter as the SW apse, 7,33 m, and it was built of large blocks in two concentric semi-circles with the *cunei* filled with rubble. A further excavation in another position indicated that the lateral aisle was closed one bay from the apse, in a manner similar to the design of the church at the SE end. There would have been rooms in the spandrels of the apse, of which at least one had a mosaic floor and was therefore roofed (fig. 7). The NW apse was therefore an interior apse and did not break forward of the façade on *kardo* XIII.

Thus the basilica was built either with one apse at the NW end and an altar three bays distant from it, or else it was built with two apses, one of which (the one on the SE) had a special liturgical function because it was preceeded by barriers. Alternatively, the original basilica may have had a single apse on the NW end, with the SE apse added to an early flat façade, a solution preferred by Mme Alexander. How this could have been done without seriously damaging the floor associated with it is an open question ; it seems impossible to me, but her opinion on this was very definite. It is not neccessary to reconstruct the basilica as a double-apsed structure originally ; rather, having been begun with a single NW apse, it had gained a second apse by the time the floor was laid⁶.

There were subsequent changes. The NW apse was dismantled in favour of an extended nave, even though this resulted in an awkward situation in which the congregation faced in the direction of the main entrances (fig. 2). This may have been less of a problem than it seems, because the wall dividing the courtyard from the NE side of the basilica has been shown by our excavations to have been an open wall defined by piers, so side-entrances may, in fact, have been the principal entrance-ways to the church (it is possible that there was a similarly open wall on the SW side).

When the NW apse was dismantled, the mosaic floor of isometric coffers was laid over fills which produced pottery and coins giving a date in the first half of the sixth century, perhaps at the cusp of change from Vandal to Byzantine rule (fig. 5). This was a major redecoration, and the isometric geometry of the floor is clearly related to the conception of the basilica as a whole. The coffers are shadowed in such a way as to indicate a light-source coming along the axis of the nave (the dark divisions are reversed on either side of the central axis) and from the NW, with the "dark" diagonal-halves of the coffers (in the W and N corners of each coffer) on the SW and NE sides of the nave and aisles. This new floor may have been coordinated with continued use of the altar in the fifth bay, but at some point the altar was translated into the third bay, nearer the SE apse. The precise rearrangement of the liturgical barriers to surround this new altar is not known, in part because the bases were reused when the latest *solea* was built, and so their original positions are difficult to reconstruct.

A final liturgical reorganization of the basilica ocurred when the floor around the altar was raised on a rubble and concrete platform about 10 cms higher than the rest of the floor of the basilica. At this time, the *solea* took the form reconstructed accurately from the remains by Duval in 1972 (fig. 8). The telescoping form is unusual, extending outward from the altar in a narrow passage which itself emanated from the altar (fig. 9). A gate separated the altar, part of a square area raised on a platform, with further extensions through the seventh bay of the nave. Architecturally, the style is different from the earlier *soleae* because the changes of direction of the *cancellum* occurred in coordination with the colonnade itself (fig. 2). The entire *solea* area

⁶ A full consideration of the architectural and liturgical details of the basilica in its historical and religious context is in preparation and will be published elsewhere.

was covered with a fine mosaic of intersecting circles in black, red and white, and excavation revealed pottery and some coins which give a date in the second half of the sixth century.

In conclusion, the decorative, architectural and liturgical events at Dermech I provide an interesting example of how such an urban ecclesiastical structure developed. An initial orientation toward the NW was accompanied by an early altar, with eventually the construction of an apse at the SE end, itself equipped with liturgical barriers set in an early floor, at a date in the late fourth or early fifth century (fig. 2-7). This was, of course, one of the most brilliant periods of the African church and of Carthage as a religious center. But the church did not stand still. In the later fifth or early sixth centuries, and certainly by the middle of the sixth century, the dismantlement of the NW apse and the extension of the nave to the NW wall made the church larger and reoriented it definitively toward the SE, even though the original altar was webbed into the new floor decorated with coffers. A final embellishment with a new raised platform and a large *solea* as reconstructed by Duval (fig. 8 and 9) was put in in the second half of the sixth century. The coordination of mosaic floors with the liturgical furniture and the building and renovations in the basilica were then complete.

DISCUSSION

Noël Duval : Je suis très admiratif devant les progrès faits par le dossier depuis 1993 où je l'avais examiné sur place, surtout pour l'analyse liturgique et pour l'illustration graphique (reconstruction d'ensemble et détails). J'insiste sur la singularité d'une fosse à reliques ronde en Afrique, mais on a des *loculi* correspondant à des boîtes de même forme creusés dans une pierre sous l'autel. Je préfère aussi la solution d'un changement d'orientation à une église à deux absides. Je souhaiterais une publication d'ensemble de ce très beau dossier qui marquera une étape importante dans l'analyse des monuments chrétiens de Carthage.

Guy Métraux : Je remercie le Professeur Duval de ses propos encourageants et, naturellement, de son travail assidu et illuminant sur les églises et les monuments de la chrétienté africaine, dont tous les chercheurs dans ce domaine lui sont reconnaissants.

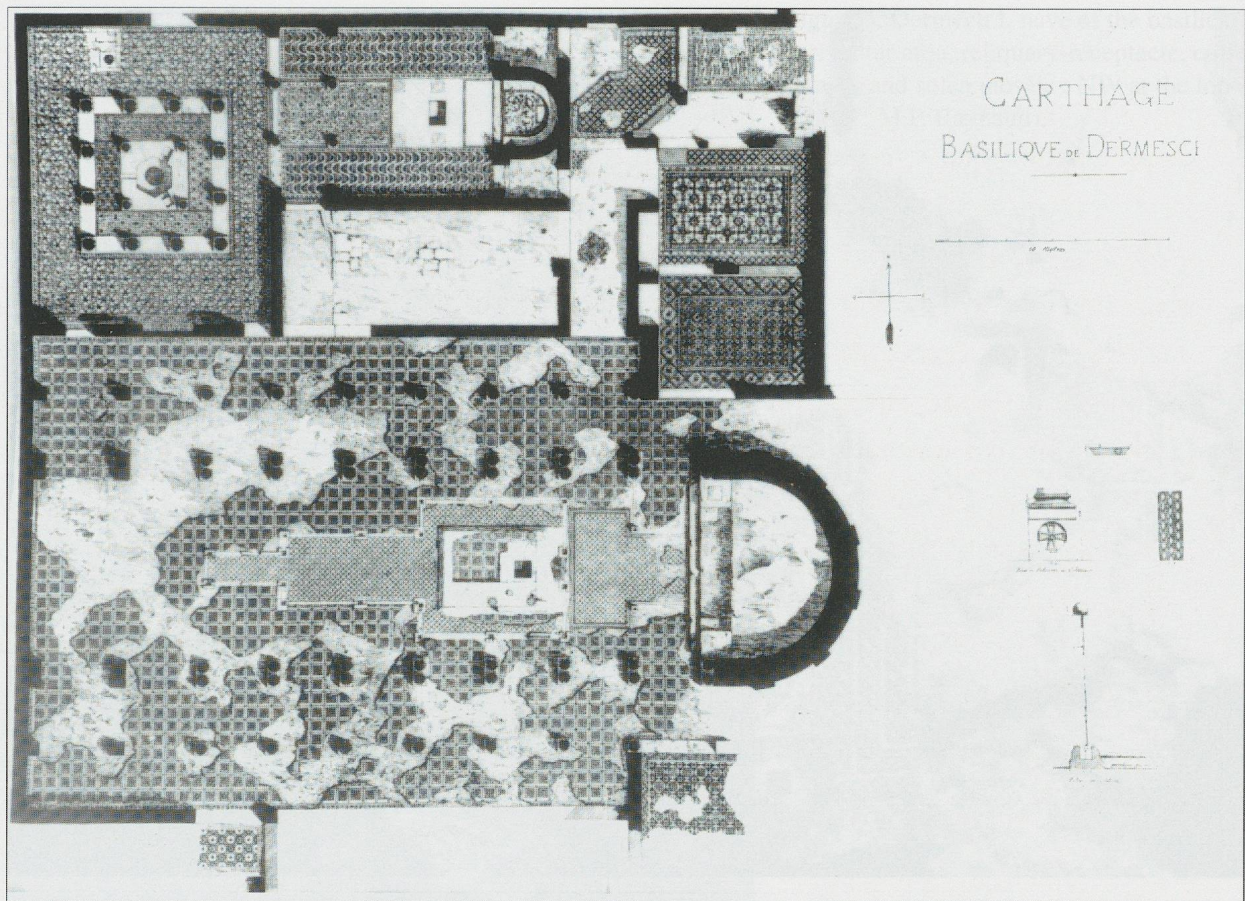


Figure 1. Dermesch I, plan of 1913 by E. Sadoux (after GAUCKLER, *Basiliques chrétiennes de Tunisie*).

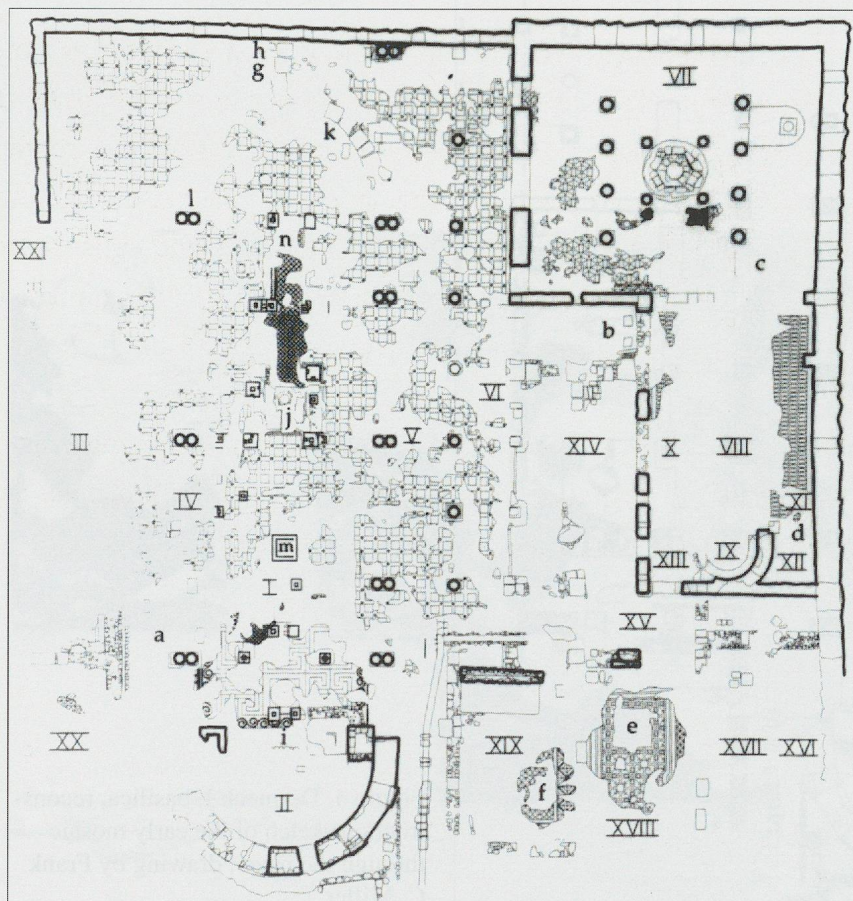


Figure 2. Dermesch I, plan for the *Corpus des mosaïques de Tunisie* by Frank C. Miller.

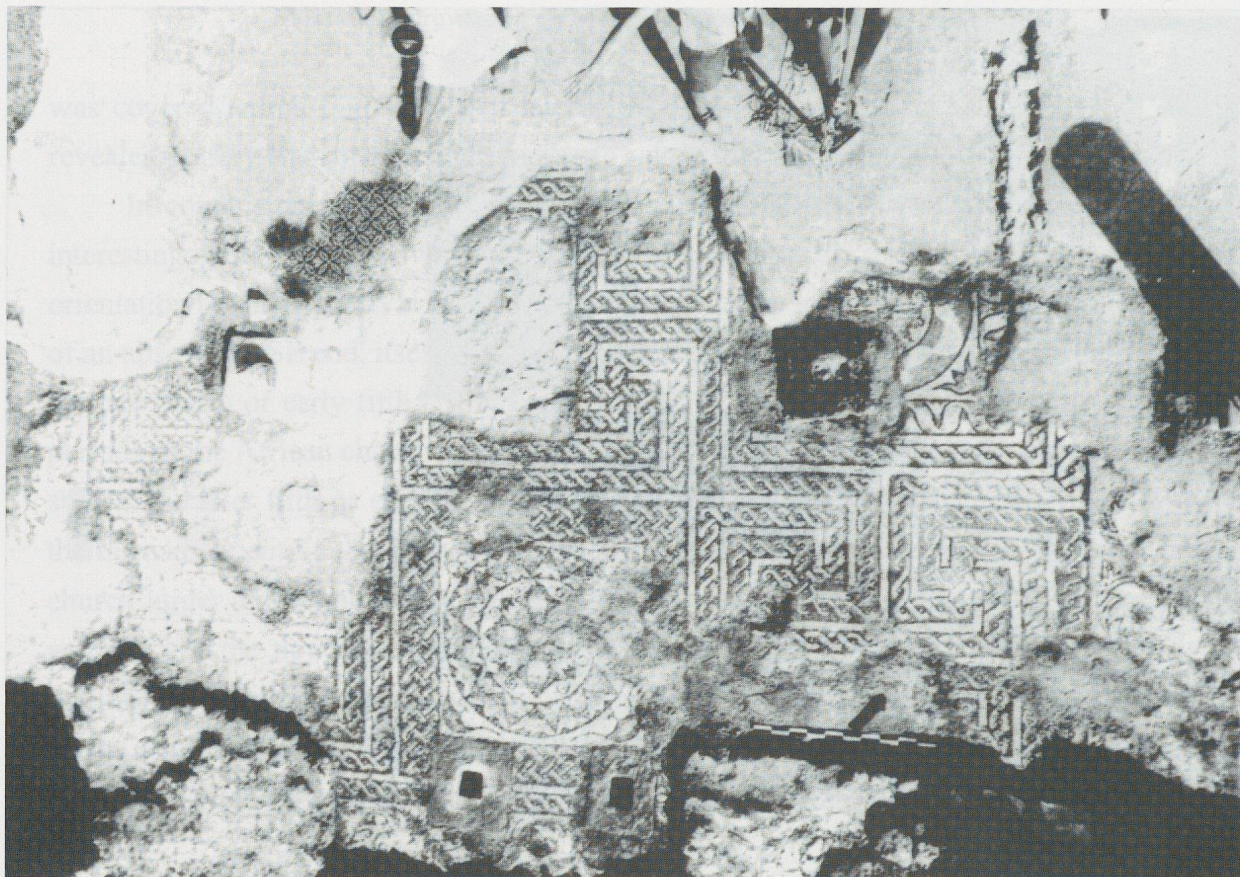


Figure 3. Dermech I, nave of the basilica, early mosaic in the first and second bays ; NW at the top (photo : M.P. Raynaud).

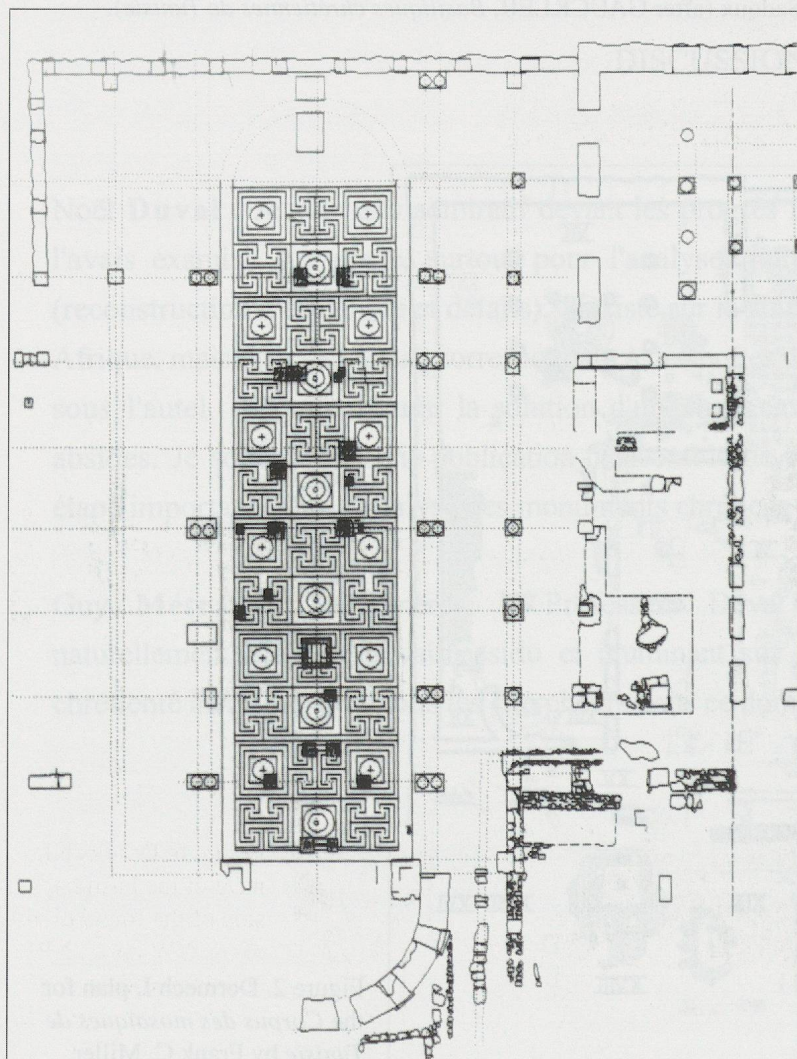


Figure 4. Dermech I, basilica, reconstruction sketch of the early mosaic through the nave ; drawing by Frank C. Miller.



Figure 5. Dermech I, nave of the basilica, early altar area, reliquary-receptacle, coffer mosaic and solea mosaic ; NW at the top (photo : M.P. Raynaud).



Figure 6. Dermech I, nave of the basilica, N side of the foundations of the NW apse ; NW at the top (photo : Robert L. Alexander).

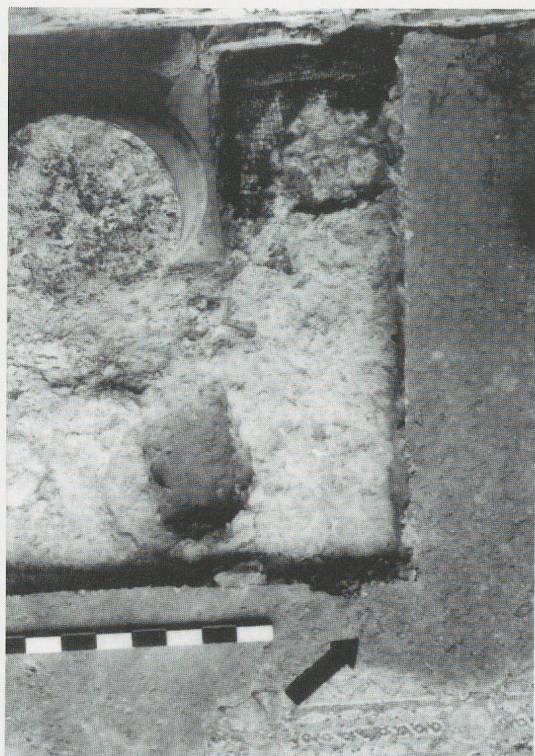


Figure 7. Dermech I, basilica, mosaic remains of a room in the N spandrel of the NW apse ; NW at the top (photo : Guy P.R. Métraux).

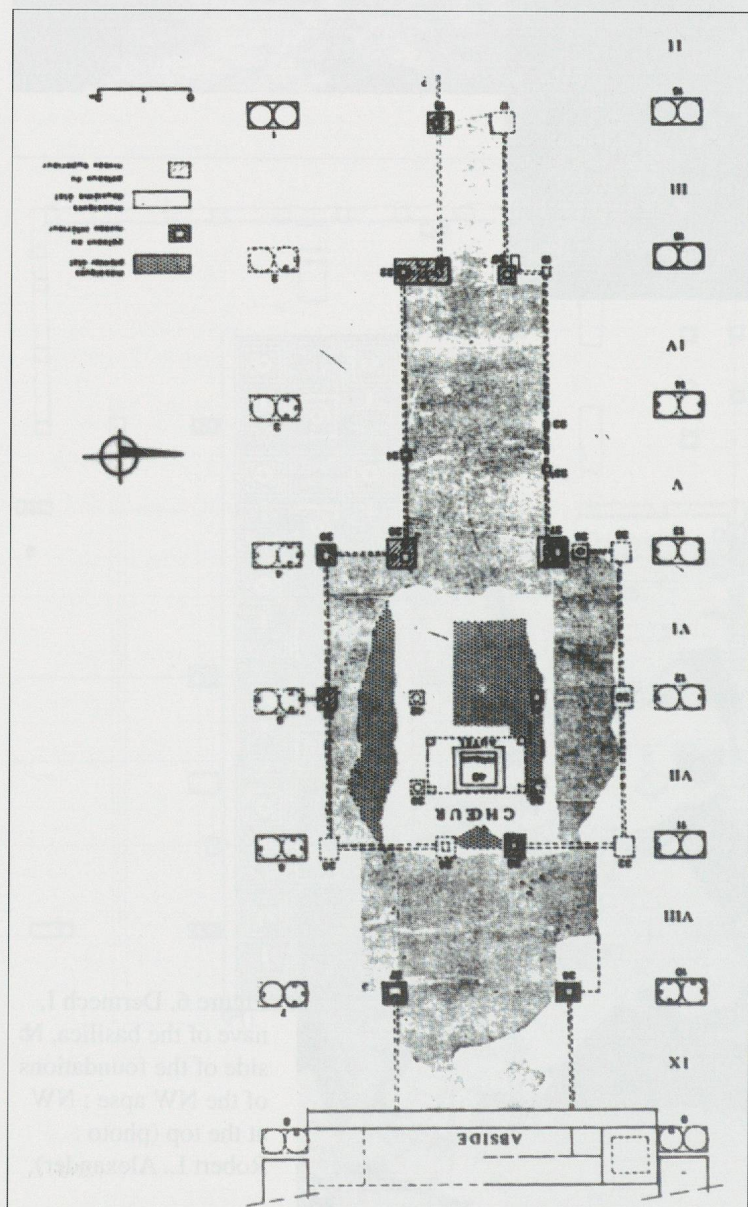


Figure 8. Dermech I, reconstruction drawing by N. Duval of the *solea* in the nave of the basilica ; NW at the top (after N. DUVAL, *MEFRA* 84, 1972).

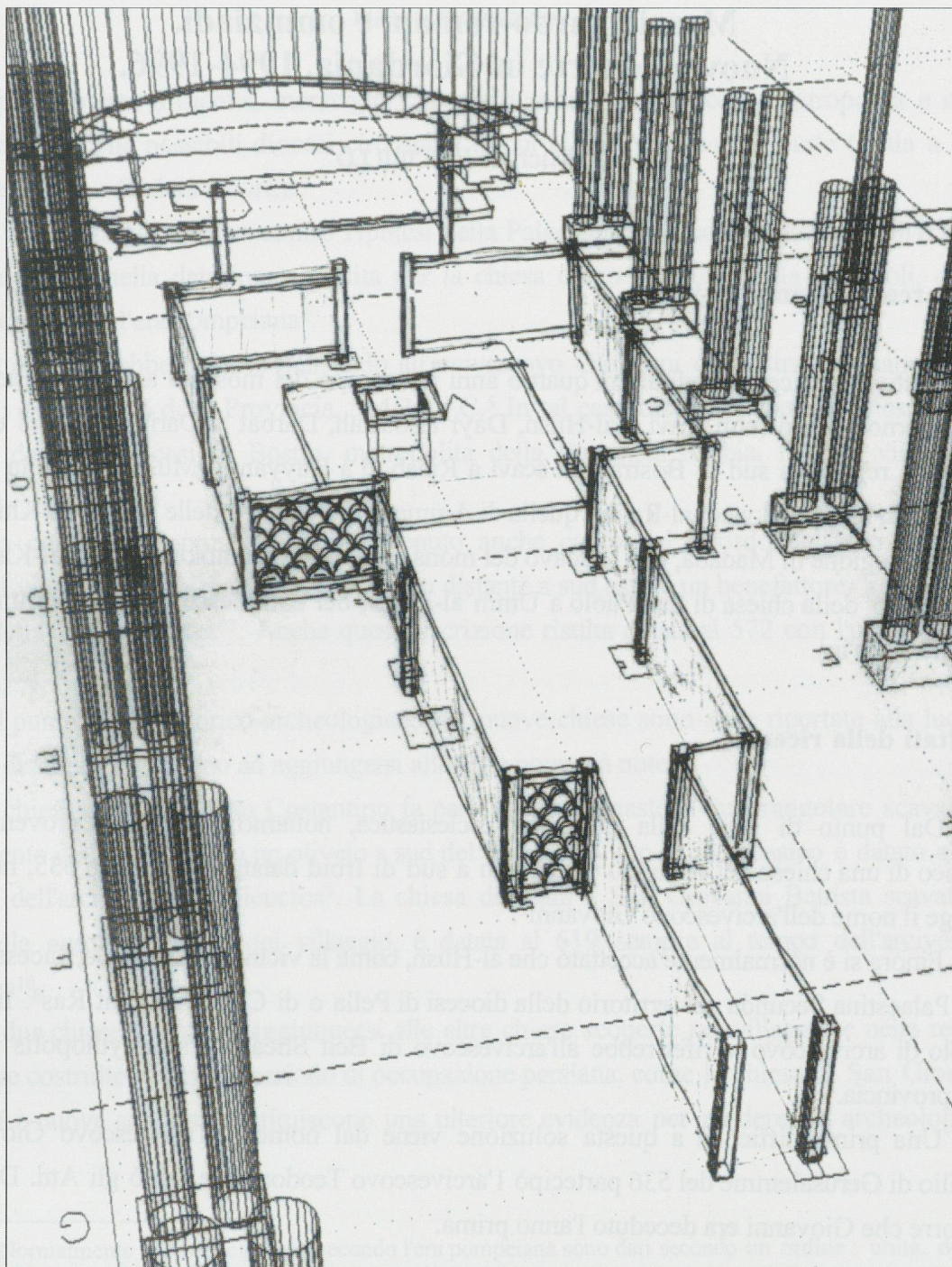


Figure 9. Dermech I, preliminary perspectival reconstruction-sketch of the latest *solea* in the nave of the basilica, viewed from the N ; drawing by Frank C. Miller.