The Early Christian *bema* churches of Syria revisited

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Kafar Daret 'Azzeh (above, left): The bema is clearly visible in the foreground mirroring the apse in the distance.

Qirq Bizzeh (above, right): A 1st–2nd-century AD villa has been converted for use as a church. Note the pulpit that still dominates the structure.

Qalb Lozeh: The bema is clearly visible in outline on the floor of the nave. Once again it clearly mirrors the apse even though it is not a raised platform in this case.

Sergibleh (above): In this case the benches that surrounded the bema are still clearly visible.

Resafa: This church became the centre of the cult of St Sergius and became a major place of pilgrimage. Here the local priest illustrates the visual impact of the bema.

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The Limestone Massif of northwest Syria has the largest concentration of late antique churches in the world. All date from between the second half of the 4th century and the first decade of the 7th century and are remarkably consistent in their conformity to a recognizably 'Syrian' architectural style. Almost without exception they are apsed basilicas varying only in terms of size and the quality of decoration.

This region was extensively surveyed in the 1950s by Georges Tchalenko, whose monumental three-volume study *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord* remains the definitive work on the area. Of the many ecclesiastical buildings included in this survey Tchalenko identified a group of approximately 45 churches possessing a *bema*. The *bema* is a horseshoe-shaped structure in the nave that mirrors the curve of the apse. Entered via steps at the east end, it provided benches for the clergy and a pulpit at the west end that was used for scriptural expositions and homilies.

In spite of the interest of both archaeologists and liturgiologists (see especially Renhart 1995, also Loosley 2000) there has been no convincing explanation as to why only a handful of churches possessed a *bema* and no theory to account for their occurrence in particular churches. The aim of the present survey has been to evaluate the current state of preservation of the sites and the extent of any deterioration since Tchalenko's seminal work and in addition to investigate the possibility that visiting the villages would clarify any patterns in *bemata* locations.

Although many sites had generally fared well in the 50 years since Tchalenko's survey, four had deteriorated dramatically. The stones of three had largely been removed for building purposes and the buildings had almost completely vanished. At the fourth site the church interior had been destroyed and the exterior walls were used as the boundary for a field with the apse acting as a pigsty. This represents almost 10% of the total *bema* churches in the region and even more sites are likely to be threatened in future as the rural population continues to expand.

The most illuminating outcome of the present survey was the emergence of a cluster pattern in the distribution of the *bemata*. Whilst it was established early on in the study of the *bema* that only one church per village possessed a *bema* and that *bemata* were never employed in a monastic context, other patterns have now emerged. Each *bema* church was always the oldest church in its village, indicating that status was attached to the age of the church. *Bemata* were also located in clusters of four to six neighbouring villages. Comparison with Tchalenko's chronology revealed that when a group like this occurred, the *bemata* were installed more-or-less contemporaneously with the construction of the newest church in the cluster, which had a *bema* installed as it was built. Furthermore, in one cluster, the same architect was named in inscriptions in five churches. This pattern suggests that the *bemata* in any one group of villages were installed according to the preference of a local patron and/or architect. The fact that all these churches were within the boundaries of the diocese of Antioch (with the exception of two *bema* churches along the trade route of the Euphrates) strengthens this argument as Antioch was the natural centre of influence for the educated or wealthy men of the region. Thus it appears to have been the patronage of influential individuals rather than church ordinances that dictated the distribution of *bema* churches.

References


