Baptistery in the North Church of Shivta: Structure, ritual, art.

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**Shivta and its North Church: historical and archaeological context**

This paper focuses on a baptismal chapel in the North Church complex in the Byzantine village of Shivta (Soubeita/Sobota (Sobata)/Esbeita),[[1]](#footnote-1) located in the Negev highlands. Shivta reached its peak during the Byzantine period (5th–6th centuries CE), and was abandoned following a significant decline during the Early Islamic period (Evenari, Shanan, and Tadmor 1989; Rubin 1990; Shereshevski 1991: 61–82; Negev 1993; Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994: 234; Magness 2003: 185–187; Baumgarten 2004; Avni 2014: 263, 265–267; Tepper, Weissbord and Bar-Oz 2015; Tepper, Erickson-Gini, Farhi and Bar-Oz 2018).

Shivta has been extensively studied, surveyed, and excavated throughout the twentieth century.[[2]](#footnote-2) Regrettably, much of the documentation and findings remain unpublished or lost, including those relating to the site’s most important excavations, conducted by H.D. Colt in his expeditions between 1933 and 1936 and in 1938 (Baly 1935; Crowfoot 1936; Youtie 1936; Colt 1948). The site has also been subject to several restorations and reconstructions which have disturbed its authentic architectural settings. These projects have been poorly documented, thereby compromising scholars’ ability to differentiate between the original and restored features (Shoeff 2019).

Shivta was not large, but it was wealthy, with around 170 houses, some two-storied (up to 350m2 in size), housing approximately 2,000 inhabitants (Segal 1981; 1983; 1986; Negev 1993; Hirschfeld, 2003: 12; Hirschfeld and Tepper 2006; Ben-Yosef 2016). Vast farmlands testify to the villagers’ extensive agricultural activities (Kedar 1957; Evenari, Shanan, and Tadmor 1989; Tepper, Porat and Bar-Oz 2020). The monumental remains of Shivta’s three churches, once extensively decorated with carved lintels and marble capitals, wall paintings, mosaics, and inscriptions, still dominate the landscape (Segal 1983; Negev 1993; Di Segni 1997; Golan 2020; Maayan Fanar 2017; 2019; Linn et all 2018, 2019; Fischer and Tepper 2021). The North Church lies on the village’s outskirts and is the largest and most elaborate of the three. Presumably originally part of the monastery,[[3]](#footnote-3) it comprises a tri-apsidal basilica. At some point, the apses were fully clad in marble, to which a chapel and a baptistery had been attached on the southern side. The complex was fully excavated by H.D. Colt in the 1930s, who suggested that the church had been dedicated to St. George.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Negev argues that although both Shivta’s North and South Churches had originally been built as mono-apsidal in 400 to 450, when rebuilt in the early sixth century, perhaps because of earthquake damage, they became tri-apsidal (Negev 1989: 138–9, 142).[[5]](#footnote-5) The North Church’s adjacent chapel and Baptistery are attributed to the early phase of building (Margalit 1989: 147). Margalit found evidence that the North Church originally had one apse augmented by two square side rooms—*pastrophoria*—connected by a passage behind the apse (Margalit 1987; Margalit 1989: 147). Margalit dates this phase to the mid-fourth century, based on several coins dated to that period found during excavations (Margalit 1987: 111–16).[[6]](#footnote-6) Such an early date seems to contradict the Nilus *Narratio* (c. 400) that mentions Shivta by the name Subeita, describing it as being pagan during that time. If such an early date for the church is correct, this would make it one of the earliest churches in the Negev, and among the earliest in the Holy Land.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The second phase of the North Church is can be dated on the basis of recent research undertaken in Shivta,[[8]](#footnote-8) including a study of marble pilasters (discovered earlier by Colt), suggesting that they date from the second half of the fifth to the mid-sixth centuries. These had been imported to the Negev and testify to the wealth of the North Church at Shivta during this period (Fisher and Tepper 2021).[[9]](#footnote-9) A similar date range is proposed by a recent comparative study of Shivta’s mosaics (Talgam et al. forthcoming). Further, a series of unpublished c.14 dates found on a plastered wall in the North Church, and in the side chapel’s mortar plaster (Tepper and Bar-Oz 2020),[[10]](#footnote-10) support the late dating, as already noted in Fisher and Tepper’s research (Yan at el. in process).

Negev suggested that the architectural change from mono- to tri-apsidal in this and possibly other churches (Elusa’s East Church, Rehovot’s Central Church, Nessana’s North Church in Nessana and Petra’s “Great Church”) was prompted by expansions of the cult of relics and martyrs (Negev 1974: 400–421; Negev 1989: 141).[[11]](#footnote-11) Reliquaries were discovered in several different churches in the Negev, supporting the importance of a cult of relics (e.g., North Church, Oboda; East Church, Mampsis; North Church, Nessana).[[12]](#footnote-12) Shreds of a reliquary were also found in the North Church in Shivta, close to the floor of the northern lateral apse (Rosenthal Heginbottom, 1982: 44–45). These are clearly visible today, having become incorporated into the northern niche of this apse.[[13]](#footnote-13) Additionally, an inscription evoking St. Stephan, the first martyr (“O Lord of St. Stephan, martyr, help your servant…”) is cited by Negev (1981: 62, no. 70). The location of this inscription, however, is uncertain.

According to Patrich, this architectural development can be explained by a change in liturgy (Patrich 2003: 476–7; Patrich 2006a; 2006b: 387–92). Thus, the side rooms were probably used to display gifts of the Holy Eucharist. Eucharistic offerings proceeded from there to the altar. Evidence from the *Mystagogia* of Maximus the Confessor indicates that sometime in the late fifth or early sixth century, the Great Entrance was introduced as part of the pre-anaphoral rite in Palestine (PG 91, 657–718; Patrich 2006a: 349–50). The closed side rooms were converted into lateral apses, while their functions of housing and displaying the Eucharistic gifts were moved to a chapel, one usually added to the church from its southern side (Patrich 2006b: 391; see also: Linn, Ecker and Tepper 2019).

Although Negev and Margalit date the annexed chapel in Shivta’s North Church to its first phase, the chapel may not have been part of the original plan, but added at a later stage (Patrich 2006a: 343). The chapel was once decorated with wall paintings, from which only fragments have survived near the apse. It also has a mosaic floor with common geometric designs and a dedicatory inscription in Greek:

Under the most holy bishop Thomas this work has been completed, by the care of John the priest and of the clarissimus John the vicarious, in the month of Daisios of the 10th indiction (Di Segni 1997: no. 337).

According to the latest archaeological findings (Tepper and Bar Oz 2020), the mosaic floor predates the construction of the chancel screen and the apse, and was originally set for a larger area (which was at some point reduced in size); however, its date remains unclear. Negev dates it to 517; alternatively, Di Segni suggests 607.[[14]](#footnote-14) The inscription mentions the names of Thomas the bishop (otherwise unknown) and John the vicarious, most probably local administrative officials or army officers (Di Segni 1997: 817).[[15]](#footnote-15) The name of John the vicarious can be found in Shivta’s inscriptions on a few occasions (Negev 1981: inscriptions no. 337, 338, 323). Presumably, John’s son, the child Abraham, was buried in the baptistery, which was attached to the chapel in 612. The child seems to have had special status, since nearly all others buried in the baptistery are related to clergy (Di Segni 1997: 839–841).[[16]](#footnote-16)

While the date of Abraham’s grave is the earliest certain date related to the baptistery, it is not necessarily the date when the Baptistery was constructed. Ben-Pechat challenges Negev’s early date, suggesting it is actually contemporaneous with the complex’s second building phase, after the main church had become tri-apsidal (Ben-Pechat 1990: 502).

Only a small number of baptisteries in Palestine, such as those placed in important centers of worship and pilgrimage, can be confidently dated to the fourth century, (Day 2009). According to Ben-Pechat, most baptisteries in small towns and villages in the area are dated to the sixth century, with some even dated to the seventh (e.g., the baptistery at St Sergios Church, Nessana was constructed in 602, Di Segni 1997: 782–3), when Christianity was already widespread. The issue of the North Church Baptistery in Shivta becomes even more tangled, since it is almost identical in size, shape, and masonry work to the baptistery attached to Shivta’s South Church.[[17]](#footnote-17) According to Baly, the South Church baptistery is earlier than the North “because of its position and better decoration” (1935: 177).[[18]](#footnote-18) Nevertheless, the wealth of decoration is most probably due to a chance of survival. Both fonts were sheathed in marble. Some shreds of marble are still visible in South Church baptistery, while marble on the North Church font had been removed by robbers sometime in the early twentieth century. In addition, a wall painting of the Baptism of Christ found recently in the apse of the North Church testify that it was painted with religious scenes similar to the South Church (Maayan Fanar & all 2018). Ben Pechat attributes the South Church baptistery to the early fifth century (together with Eleona and Mampsis/Kurnub), “according to archaeological conviction” (Ben Pechat 1989: 172), and states that it was built when catechumens still existed. In contrast, Ben Pechat concludes the North Church Baptistery, although used to baptize adults, was dedicated by monks for local nomads and perhaps pilgrims (Ben-Pechat 1990: 511–14). Even if this is correct, it cannot be considered a testimony for the baptistery’s date, since nomad conversions by monks are documented already in the fourth to fifth centuries.[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact, this early date of the South Church Baptistery is consistent with the church’s proposed dating; which as noted, is considered by most scholars to be earlier than the North Church. However, this remains to be proven.

The North Church is the only one in Shivta to incorporate burials: those inside the atrium are dated to the late sixth or the seventh century, and only laymen were buried there. The burials inside the baptistery, presumably at its western end, date from 612 to 679. All but two, that of the child Abraham, son of vicarious John, and Stephan son of Abraham (died 643 AD),[[20]](#footnote-20) are of clergy and have a monastic character. Some tombstones were decorated with crosses, either simple or elaborate, a common symbol of the Christian faith (Goldfus 2006: 415).

By the sixth century, burials inside churches became extremely popular and widespread. To be buried next to holy relics was considered a privilege and symbol of status (Saradi 2006: 436–7). In the Negev, apart from Shivta, this is attested at Nessana, particularly in the North Church. There, clerics and laymen were buried in the sixth to seventh centuries without being separated, while in the Martyrium, clergy were buried in the second half of the fifth century. Other examples include the Oboda-South Church (from 541) and the Rehovot-North Church, dated between 488 to 555 (Negev 1981: 94–5; Goldfus 412; Tzafrir 1988: 25–7, 36; Negev, oboda final report 1997: 135).[[21]](#footnote-21) The custom continued to flourish despite being prohibited by Justinian legislation (Saradi 2006: 437). The Synod of Dvin (527?) declares “There must be no common place of burial in the church” (Canon 21; after Johnson 2009: IV, 198), while the Council of Auxerre (578 AD) forbade this practice in the West. Shivta provides clear evidence for the existence of such a custom well into the seventh century.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The earliest burial in the North Church is from 582 (Atrium 7) and the latest is dated to 679 (Baptistery 34). Some names of the deceased can be related to names mentioned in the seventh-century papyri discovered in Nessana. Although dating the North Church complex by its burials may be based on what seems like circumstantial evidence, these chronological brackets join other dated findings from the Church. This suggests that during the late sixth and early seventh centuries, the North Church complex may have been renovated and/or expanded.[[23]](#footnote-23) A similar expansion of ecclesiastic building activities in the late sixth to the seventh century is also attested in nearby Nessana (Di Segni 1997: 782–3, 792; Urman 2004:115; Ruffini 2011: 218–219).

We may thus summarize this discussion on the North Church’s date. Whether the earliest mono-apsidal church was built in the late fourth (or most probably in the early 5th century), it was rebuilt and transformed as tri-apsidal sometime in the sixth century, perhaps as a monastery (Tepper 2019a). The inscription in the side chapel belongs to the beginning of the seventh century, while the burials in the baptistery, which began in 612, suggest either a later trend or a later date for the baptistery. The latest burial dated to 679 is evidence that the complex was functional at least until that time. Being also the last secure date found in Shivta, and correlating with a reference to it in the seventh-century Nessana papyri (Kraemer 1958: 212–14, no. 75; 227–233, no. 79), this is testimony that its Christian population survived at least 50 years after the entire area fell under Islamic rule during the seventh to ninth centuries CE.[[24]](#footnote-24) Arabic inscriptions in the narthex’s north room of the North Church complex—together with the small mosque adjoining the South Church Baptistery (Baly 1935: 175–177; Moor 2013: 96–108)—clearly reveal an Early Islamic occupation of the site. The nature of interaction between Christian and Muslim populations, if there was any, remains unclear. A late seventh-century petition against heavy taxes from Nessana papyri (no. 75), which mentions Shivta among the petitioners, suggests that its occupants were still Christians. Based on paleography, Moor dates Arabic inscriptions to the eight century at the earliest, which still leaves about half a century between the last dated evidence of Christian presence at the site.[[25]](#footnote-25) In fact, despite the mosque being built on the side of the South Church Baptistery without damaging its font, there is no evidence to support claims of possible contemporary and peaceful occupation of Shivta by Christians and Muslims worshiping in shared spaces (Magness 2003; Avni 2007; 2014; Moor 2013: 107–8). According to Tepper, the use of *spolia* from the church—including reuse of lintels decorated with crosses and other Christian symbols—as a pavement leading to the mosque, questions any coexistence between the South Church and the mosque. This suggests that the two religious structures did not exist simultaneously, and that the mosque was built only after the church’s destruction (Tepper 2019b).[[26]](#footnote-26)

Further, recent excavations of refuse mounds clearly show separation between Byzantine and Early Islamic deposits (Tepper et al. 2018). This confirms scholarly conclusions regarding the site’s slow abandonment, which had already begun in the sixth century (Hirschfeld 2006; Tepper et al. 2015), along with a decline in agricultural activities,[[27]](#footnote-27) which finally ceased sometime in the seventh century (Tepper, Porat, and Bar-Oz, G., 2020). Similarly, the act of cleaning water reservoirs, an obligation of Shivta’s residents (Youtie 1936), stopped sometime in the eighth century (Tepper et al. 2018; Area H). All this suggests that the churches at Shivta were already ruined prior to Islamic occupation of the site. This occupation was probably quite modest considering the mosque’s small size. Additionally, most of Shivta’s residents had left either because of heavy taxes (O’Sullivan 2015: 50–74), natural disasters,[[28]](#footnote-28) plagues,[[29]](#footnote-29) or a combination of these and other causes.

**Baptistery: structure and rite**

*Comparative analysis and parallels with the North and South Church Baptisteries*

We will now turn to a discussion of the baptisteries in Shivta in an attempt to ideate the interconnections between shape and ritual. With no direct evidence on the nature of baptismal rites in Shivta or the Negev in general, our main, but not only,[[30]](#footnote-30) source remains Cyril of Jerusalem. Cyril’s *Catechetical Lectures* were read during the Easter liturgy until the decline of catechumenate, and its disappearance in about the seventh century (Liturgy in Byzantine Jerusalem, 8; Taft).[[31]](#footnote-31) We refer here to Day’s excellent studies of baptismal liturgy and ritual in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt (Day 1999, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2018). Day extracts the structure of the baptismal rite from Cyril’s *Catechetical Lectures*, and summarizes it as follows: a summons to baptistery; pre-immersion rituals, which included a confession of sin and exorcism ritual of some kind; a profession faith; and a pre-immersion anointing. The immersion included: a consecration of the font with a Trinitarian formula; a complete immersion and some sort of ‘partaking of names and ‘sealing’. The evidence supporting post-immersion anointing or white robing is weak. The ritual ends with a procession into the Church, and the Eucharist. (Day, The Catechetical Lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem, 1189–1200). In his analysis of baptism accounts performed in Gaza, Day concludes that the ceremony there was similar to those in Jerusalem. He further suggests that these accounts correspond to the Palestinian ritual followed elsewhere in the area (Day 2009: 16–18, 33).

The existence of two baptisteries in Shivta, a rural settlement in an arid environment, has raised questions among scholars. Bagatti sees possible support for two different Christian movements within the village. However, there is no evidence to support his argument (Perrone 1998: 13, note 16).[[32]](#footnote-32) Perhaps the existence of several baptisteries within a village or a small town was not uncommon.[[33]](#footnote-33) For example, in the Djebel Barisha area of Northern Syria, baptisteries (with most dated to the 6th century, such as Bashmishli, Dar Qita), were attached to even small churches. Occasionally, two or more baptisteries existed in one town (Butler 1903; Tchalenko 1953: 317).[[34]](#footnote-34) It has been proposed that in Dar Qita, one of the baptisteries served locals while the other was connected to the St. Sergius church, which functioned as a regional pilgrimage center (Pena 1997: 95–6). Small baptisteries in Syria did not accommodate large groups and were perhaps intended for family use (Pena 1996: 96). We will argue that despite their general similarity, the two baptisteries in Shivta are not identical. Differences, seemingly minor, may point to either different chronologies.

Both baptisteries in Shivta constitute a chapel attached to the main church, confirming to the general structure of baptisteries in small rural settlements in the country’s east. Most of these were of a relatively modest size, and at times were indistinguishable from other chapels connected to the church.[[35]](#footnote-35) The baptistery next to the North Church was built at its southern side. It has a prolonged rectangular structure with an apse facing east; the font is placed in front of this.[[36]](#footnote-36) A passage leads from within the apse to the adjacent chapel, which has an apse at its eastern end, and from there to the southern aisle of the church.[[37]](#footnote-37) On the western side of the baptistery is an ante-room, forming a perpendicular angle with the baptistery’s main nave. It is also connected to the narthex of the church by another passage.

The South Church Baptistery is located north-west of the main church. It consists of two spaces (F and G) separated by a stylobate with two pillar bases. The baptistery is entered either from room E or from the narthex. Another entrance connects the baptistery with a rectangular chapel (Q), leading to the main church. Thus, in order to enter the South Church Baptistery, one did not need to enter the Church (the entrance is from the narthex or from the street). However, to enter the North Church Baptistery, one had to enter the main church through its southern nave. This arrangement, which suits the so-called “Syrian” mono-apsidal type (Mulholland 59) may confirm changes the Northern Church underwent from its mono-apsidal to its tri-apsidal form.

Both baptisteries comprise three spaces: an ante-room, a nave, and an apse with the baptism font. These spaces are not closed rooms but are separated from each other by inner divisions.[[38]](#footnote-38) In the South Church Baptistery, catechumens entered through the western area of the pillars and exited, after baptism, through the eastern part into adjacent chapel (Khatchatrian 1982: 38) that connected the baptistery to the main church. In the North Church Baptistery, entrance was from the west; the perpendicular angle of the ante-room separated it more strictly from the nave of the baptistery chapel. After exiting the font, the catechumens entered through another passage into an adjacent chapel and from there into the Church. Thus, in both cases the two currents of neophytes did not meet. It seems that in the North Church complex, a total separation of the neophytes was accomplished.

It is not unusual for a baptistery to have two different entrances interconnecting various arrangements of space. Thus, the baptistery in the East Church at Mampsis had two entrances, one leading to the southern aisle of the basilica (later blocked) and another to a chapel. The space of the Mampsis Baptistery is nevertheless very different from that in Shivta, since it is a small room of irregular shape (5.5 x 6.5 m).[[39]](#footnote-39) In the fifth-century baptistery at Qalat Sim’an, the font is located within the apse. This has two lateral openings, especially designed for large movements of people (Tchalenko 1953: 1, 237–8). In the fifth-century Petra Church, the baptismal font situated in the middle room has entrances into adjacent rooms (Bikai 2002: 272). The sixth-century baptistery in Washnary (Ozurgeti region, village Gurianta) had two doorways, in the western and northern walls; the northern door was directly connected to the church’s interior (Berdzenishvili 2014: 296–8). These entrances served a ritual purpose: a person enters through one entrance as an “old man” and exits as reborn, prepared to participate in the Eucharistic mysteries (Pena 1997: 96).

Baptismal fonts in both of Shivta’s churches are placed within the apse. In the North Church Baptistery, in the wall of the apse just above the cruciform font, a small hole is visible, at the entrance of the pipe through which water entered the font from a water reservoir just on the back of the apse wall (Evenary & all 1984: 165; Tepper and Bar Oz 2020; area E).[[40]](#footnote-40) According to the baptismal rite articulated in the *Didache*, running water symbolized “living water” (Bogdanović 2017: 62). After the ceremony, all water had to be drawn out of the font.

In the North Church Baptistery, the font is set on a platform, raised two steps above the level of the nave. It is enclosed by a chancel screen, which set the area apart from the chapel nave. Similarly to the main church and chapel, the chancel screen functioned as a “barrier that impeded access to, but not the visibility of, the mysteries performed at the altar” (Isar 2014: 32) or in case of the baptistery, during the sacrament of baptism.

Cyril of Jerusalem and John Chrysostom compare acts of baptism with the Garden of Paradise, stressing the importance of nakedness, with the catechumen awakening the awareness of nakedness for Adam and Eve, who were not ashamed of until they “took up the garment of sin” (John Chrysostom, *Baptismal instructions*, cited from Whitaker 1970: 38; *Myst. Cat*. I.1. Weiss 2006: 20; Day 2018: 83N4). As people most likely removed their clothes before entering the font, in the words of Cyril of Jerusalem, “you were naked in front of everyone and you were not ashamed” (MC2.2; Day 2018: 87). The chancel was not meant to hide the naked person but to emphasize the sacredness of the act.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Alternatively, in the South Church Baptistery, the font is not elevated above the nave level and does not have a chancel screen. However, it was almost certainly placed under a canopy (ciborium), which visually defined it in the space, while curtains could partially hide the act of baptism. Although today it is undetectable, a remnant of one column that would have held the canopy is still visible in Colt’s photograph of the Baptistery font from the 1930s.[[42]](#footnote-42) Canopies are attested in the Baptistery of the Nessana Church of St Sergius and Bacchus (Ristow 1998: #318) dated from 464 to 527/65; in the Mampsis Baptistery (Ristow 1998: # 313); in the Petra Church (5th century, Ristow 1998: #443; Bikai 2002: 272), and in Old Diaconicon on Mount Nebo (Michel 1998: 405). Even considering these examples, they were probably more widespread than the surviving evidence shows.[[43]](#footnote-43)

In the eastern liturgy, both the altar and baptismal font must be covered (Pena 1997: 100). In her recent study of canopies, Bogdanovic states that in “church canopies that were most directly related to liturgy and the two major sacraments were altar canopies that framed the holy table and the performance of the Eucharist, and baptismal canopies that enclosed baptismal fonts” (Bogdanovic 2017: 50). In fact, a tradition of enclosing the baptismal font within a canopy goes back to the third-century Baptistery of Dura Europos (Bogdanovic 2017: 51–2; 144–7).[[44]](#footnote-44) Evidence from ninth-century Carolingian ivories (e.g., Drogo Sacramentary Book Covers, 9th c; Remigius of Reims baptizing Clovis I, Reims, 875–899[[45]](#footnote-45)), as well as Byzantine illuminated manuscripts (e.g., Gregory Naziansus, Oratio XL, Iviron Monastery, 10th c) also point to the use of a canopy above baptistery fonts (see also Underwood 1950). Curtains were most probably hung within canopies, which may also have held some lighting devices (Ristow 1998: 74)

Both North and South baptism fonts at Shivta are large monoliths[[46]](#footnote-46) of a sunken cruciform shape, and are very close in size (S.C.: 137 cm length, 87 cm depth; N.C.: 132 cm length, 88 cm depth). Three steps are cut inside two opposite arms of the cross, in the direction of the length of the nave (east and west). The fonts are placed so close to the wall of the apse that one can only wonder if the steps on its east side could have been used at all. They may have been unserviceable, and only cut for aesthetic reasons (Ben Pechat 1989: 176). Since both fonts are about 60 cm above floor level, they were probably reached by a portable ladder.

No standardization exists among baptismal fonts in the Negev; each has its own peculiarities. The baptismal font in Mampsis/Kurnub (Ristow 1998: #313), was cruciform in its first stage, sunk into the floor with steps descending from each arm of the cross (Negev 1988: 48–50). At some point, the font arms were blocked, perhaps to diminish water use (Negev 1988: 49–50). A composite font (square in plan on the exterior and semicircle on the interior; Colt 1962: 37; Negev 1997) at Nessana, dated 464 to 527, was entered by two steps (Ristow 1998: #318). The North Church Baptistery at Oboda/Avdat, presumably dated to the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century, has one of the earliest cruciform-shaped fonts inscribed in a semicircle (Ristow 1998: #300 (date 5/6c); Negev 1974: 413; Ben Pechat 1989: 172). It is the most closely comparable to Shivta’s baptisteries, although Oboda’s font has no steps (Negev 1997: 117).

By the sixth century, cruciform-shaped fonts were already widespread.[[47]](#footnote-47) The earliest secularly dated examples of cruciform fonts belong to the fifth century. An impressive example comes from Alahan monastery, Turkey (Ristow 1998: # 643). Another early example of a cruciform font can be found at Kourion, Cyprus (at the side of the Episcopal Church of Zeno), dated to the fifth century, and perhaps even to the fourth (Ristow 1998: #785; Ferguson 2009: 827). A similarly shaped font can be seen at the sixth-century Church B at Salamis (Ristow 1998:# 788). Additional examples include: cruciform fonts in churches at the fifth-century Petra “Great Church”, one of the best-preserved cruciform baptisteries in the East (Bikai 2002: 272); Jabal Harun (the burial place of Aaron), originally built in the late fifth century but abandoned and rebuilt as a cruciform in the early seventh century (both phases are best compared to baptisteries in Petra [Fiema 2001: 41–9; Fiema 2018: 136–7]; Madaba Cathedral, phase two, 575/6 [Ristow 1998: # 442]; Old Diaconicon at the Memorial of Moses on Mt. Nebo, dated to 530 AD[[48]](#footnote-48) (Bagatti 1968:261, fig. 160); and Umm ar-Rasas (8th century; Ristow 1998: #447). Ben-Pechat proposed that this is one of the most popular font forms within the Holy Land; it occurs in 60 percent of fonts (e.g., Upper Khirbet Karkur [Figueras 1994:123 Fig. 122], Magen, phase 2 [Ristow 1998: # 316]; Et-Taiyiba/Umm et Tuba [Ristow 1998: # 324], Nir Gallim [Gorzalczany 2002], and more).[[49]](#footnote-49) Its shape is closely linked to the symbolism of baptism as Christ’s death on the cross (Fiema 41; Ben-Pechat 1989: 184).

The cruciform fonts in Shivta and three descending steps to the font correspond perfectly to the symbolism of baptism based on the Pauline theme of being buried and raised up, with Christ as the font symbolizing the grave, death and resurrection (Ferguson 2009: 819–820):

You descend dead in sin, you come up made alive in righteousness; for if you have been planted together in the likeness of the Saviour’s death, you shall be deemed worthy too of his resurrection. For just as Jesus died carrying the sins of the whole world so that by putting sin to death he might rise in righteousness so, too, do you descend into the water, buried in the water as he was in the rock, and you rise up again” walking in the newness of life. (Cat 3.12; PG33, 444; Day 2011: 1185).

This symbolism around the act of baptism was widely accepted; for example, as expressed by Theodore of Mapsuestia:[[50]](#footnote-50)

vi. [. . .] According to the apostle, when we baptize or minister the Lord’s table, we do so in memory of the death and resurrection of Christ our Savior so that hope in the resurrection may be strengthened in us.

vii. As to the resurrection, he said, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”(249)

To mimic the idea of Christ’s death and resurrection after spending three days in Sheol (Brook 2006: 41–43),[[51]](#footnote-51) the baptismal rite required full triple immersion of the neophyte. Cyril of Jerusalem insists that the neophyte should be completely immersed in the water (Day 2011: 1195–6). Ps. Dionysios Areopagite elaborates on the symbolism of this mystic ritual:

Thus it is right that those seeking initiation be completely immersed into the water. This signifies the death and burial whereby all form is lost. By this symbolic lesson whoever is baptized and is thrice plunged into the water learns by way of mystery to imitate this divine death, which was the burial of Jesus, the source of life, a burial lasting three days and three nights. We imitate God insofar as possible when ac­cording to a deep and secret tradition of Scripture the prince of this world found nothing (The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy II,2,7. In Johnson 2009: IV, 203)

It has been argued, however, that no baptistery font in the Holy Land supports full immersion of a standing person, as they were not deep enough.[[52]](#footnote-52) A similar unanswered question exists regarding initiation by either full immersion or through sprinkling water in Northern Syrian baptisteries (Lassus 1947: 218f; Pena 1997: 97), as well as in western practices (Thompson 2019). We agree with Ben Pechat, who suggests that catechumen can, with the help of the priest, adjust themselves into a position enabling full immersion, either by leaning on the steps at the East side of the font (which would make these steps usable [see previous comment regarding their capacity for use]), or by standing on the knees, with the priest holding the catechumen’s head under the water (1989: 180–1). The latter solution finds support in the *Didascalia* (ch. 17) and in Theodore of Mapsuestia’s account (Hom. XIC, 15). According to Mapsuestia, candidates are on their knees while receiving the *gift of baptism* through three full immersions, while their heads are held under water by the priest’s hand (Wharton 1992; Rouwhorst 2019: 42):

The priest places his hand on your head and says, “Of the Father”, and with these words he causes you to immerse yourself in water, while you obediently follow the sign of the hand of the priest and immediately, at his words and at the sign of his hand, immerse yourself in water…. You therefore immerse and bow your head while the priest says, “And the Son”, and causes you with his hand to immerse again in the same way… Then the priest says, “And the Holy Spirit”, and likewise presses you down into the water… After this you go out of the water. (Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Instructions to Candidates for Baptism*, part 2, Sermon 4; cited from Whitaker 1970: 49)

In the South Church Baptistery, at the side of the main cruciform font is another, much smaller, round alcove (c. 38 cm deep and c. 42 cm wide). The existence of such an alcove was also proposed for the North Church Baptistery (Ben-Pechat 1990: 511), although no evidence has been found in field.[[53]](#footnote-53) Small variously shaped alcoves at the side of baptismal fonts are also attested at Oboda/Avdat (North Church) and Kurnub/Mampsis (Ben Pechat 1989:179), the Petra Church (Fiema & all 2001: 47), and others. However, their function remains unclear.[[54]](#footnote-54) It has been posited that they were used to hold the oil used for anointing in the Baptismal rite. However, this seems unlikely as the alcoves are too large for the small amounts of oil needed. It is more reasonable to suggest that the oil was kept in glass bottles. If the alcove was used for oil, perhaps the oil was used to sanctify the font by pouring it into the water before baptism.

Another suggestion was that the alcoves could be used for washing the feet of neophytes, symbolizing humility and referring to Christ washing feet the apostles’ feet. This practice is known from Ambrosian ritual and is described in connection with a Neonian baptistery in Ravenna (Wharton 1987: 365); it seems to be unknown in the East (Mailis 2006: 304).

Bagatti and Ben Pechat proposed that a small alcove was used for infant baptism to reduce water use (Ben Pechat 1989:177–8). This is still the leading theory regarding their function (Ferguson 2009: 822–3; Fiema & all 2001: 47–8). It is generally accepted that, although infant baptism became more common during the fourth and fifth centuries, even in the sixth century, most people were still baptized as adults,[[55]](#footnote-55) mainly during Easter Sunday but also on Epiphany and other special holidays (Ferguson, 629). The status of catechumenates during this time is not entirely clear. Adult catechumenates were still common in Constantinople at the beginning of the fifth century and remained so to some extent into the seventh century. They are mentioned for the last time at the Quinisext Council in Trullo (691–2). Evidence for their importance during the sixth century is inconclusive (Taft 2009; Mathews 1971: 127–9). The maintenance of this division, which suited the adult baptismal ritual, in Shivta’s baptisteries suggests that they were built when catechumenate was still in practice.

Despite overall similarities between the two baptisteries, their different positions within the chapel, as well as differences in the general spatial arrangement, prompt some questions.

The closest regional parallel to the South Church Baptistery remains the East Church Baptistery in Mampsis. It has a cruciform font, is enclosed within a canopy and has a small alcove at its side. Although East Church Baptistery in Mampsis has not been precisely dated, it cannot be later than the fifth century.[[56]](#footnote-56) Similarly to the South Church Baptistery in Sivta, its ante-room is divided from the room with the font by a stylobate with two column bases.

Another close parallel is seen with the Petra Church. Its font is also cruciform, placed under canopy and has a small alcove next to the main font. In contrast to Shivta, but similar with Mampsis, the baptistery is situated in the middle of the room. Also notable is that Petra’s Baptistery was built in the mid- to late fifth century, before the church became tri-apsidal, and it was located at a certain distance from the early church (Fiema & all 2001: 45–8).

So far the best regional parallels for the South Church font in Shivta come from baptisteries dated to the fifth or early sixth centuries, although none of those listed above contain a font inside the apse behind the chancel screen. Although fonts within apses are known already in the third century (Dura Europus), also existing in fourth- and fifth-century Syrian baptisteries (Dar Qita, Qalat Siman), the closest regional parallel is in North Church, Oboda. Here, the baptistery has a cruciform font (albeit without steps leading into it) in the apse and a small alcove at its side. As in Shivta’s South Church, a stylobate with two column bases (pillars) divides the western and eastern parts of the baptistery, These pillars could support curtains that were closed during the ceremony (Negev 1997: 117). This church is attributed to the late fourth or fifth century (Negev 1997; Ovadiah 1970: 24).

The South Church Baptistery in Shivta seems to combine most elements that exist in late fourth to fifth-century baptisteries. It should be mentioned, however, that it is the only one situated in the apse and enclosed with a canopy, thus combining several earlier elements found in different baptisteries. To this we may add that it has a monolith font, different from earlier masonry fonts.

The North Church Baptistery in Shivta shares most features with that of the South Church, but it also includes a raised bema and a chancel screen, architectural elements that function as a clear barrier between the font and nave. A chancel screen can be best paralleled to the Mount Nebo Baptistery of 597, although there the font is not set on a bema. The Basilica of Moses on Mount Nebo has two baptisteries. The earlier baptistery (530 AD) is cruciform, and was placed within the northern chapel, possibly under a canopy.[[57]](#footnote-57) A semicircular basin is integrated within the step of the font’s southern arm (Ben Pechat 1989). When abandoned, another baptistery with a differently shaped font was constructed within the southern chapel’s apse and enclosed with a chancel screen (597 AD). This font did not have a canopy. Perhaps this change had a liturgical justification.

Thus, while the South Church Baptistery in Shivta aligns more with the regional variety of baptisteries dated to the fifth and early sixth centuries, the North Church Baptistery took on greater uniformity within the church’s later phase with the addition of specific architectural elements such as bema and the chancel screen, which seem to suit later regional developments.

*Imagining baptism ritual in Shivta*

Liturgical sources do not reveal much about actual baptismal rites. Early depictions of baptisms may shed additional light on the ceremony performed.[[58]](#footnote-58) One source is the ninth-century illuminated manuscript from Constantinople: Homilies of Gregory of Naziansus (BNF, gr. 510 = Paris 510). Its miniatures may reflect an early iconography of the Church of the Holy Apostles (Heisenberg 1908: 209); therefore, miniatures showing initiations (fols. 87v, 332v, 426v)[[59]](#footnote-59) most probably refer to the early Byzantine rite of baptism (Ristow 1998: 68).[[60]](#footnote-60) On fol. 87v, Gregory the Elder (the father of Gregory Naziansus) is shown naked, immersed up to his shoulders in font of cruciform shape. The font is raised on a platform. The bishop stands on the steps at the font’s side, reclining towards and placing his right hand upon the neophyte’s head.

This font echoes that of Shivta’s North Church, not just because of its cruciform shape, but also because it too is raised on a platform. As in Paris 510, the priest most probably stood beside the font elevated with portable wooden steps. This is also confirmed by the Canons of Hippolytus (c.500): the priest (presbyter) stands beside the font, “he takes his (neophyte) right hand and turns his face to the east in the water” (Canon 121, cited after Whitaker 1970: 89). The priest is inclined toward the neophyte and his hand is placed upon neophyte’s head. His body’s movement suggests that he is about to push the neophyte’s head down into the water, matching Theodore of Mapsuestia’s account cited above.

An image on fol. 426v adds more important details to our knowledge of the baptismal rite. Twelve apostles are shown on a mission to convert nations to Christianity through the act of baptism. Each is shown in a separate frame. All twelve apostles have a nimbus and stand on a stepped platform next to the variously shaped—round, square, quatrefoil, or cruciform—fonts, placing their right hand on the neophyte’s head. The variety of font shapes depicted in Paris 510 reflect actual sixth-century archaeological findings. Neophytes are depicted naked, immersed into water up to their chest or shoulders, with hands stretched to the side or crossed on the chest. On the other side of the font, a person enclosed in white is depicted, with hands raised toward the font and covered with white cloth for the newly baptized Gregory Nazianzen, Oratio 37. His appearance suggests the presence of additional person in the area of the font, probably clergy, waiting to present the newly initiated neophyte with white garments after they exit the font.

Taking together liturgical, archaeological and visual evidence, the Baptism rite in Shivta can be reconstructed as follows. After renouncing Satan in the ante-room (turning to the West) the catechumens were disrobed, “putting off the old man” (Col. 3.9); in this, they imitated Christ, “who hung naked on the Cross” (MC 2:2; Whitaker 1970: 29); they then proceeded to the baptismal font, to the East, toward the divine light.[[61]](#footnote-61) A candidate was probably led into the font, as prescribed by Cyril, climbing portable steps to enter it, and then descending into the font, a perfect projection of the grave and the womb, via the three steps cut inside it. The candidate then kneeled and was pushed into the water three times, thus symbolically dying and being resurrected with Christ (Jensen 2011), by the priest who laid his right hand upon the neophyte’s head to press him into the waters. The priest[[62]](#footnote-62) stood next to the font, elevated above it by standing on portable steps. After this part of the rite, the newly initiated person would emerge, ascending the steps as Christ ascended from the grave.

After the baptism, he would receive post-baptismal anointment by chrism,[[63]](#footnote-63) associated, according to Theodore of Mapsuestia, with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Baptismal Homilies 14.27; The search for the Origins of Christian Worship 109–110). He then put on white garments, symbolically becoming a child of light (Brook 2006: 43; Brock 1977; Klijn 1963). This could be done within the area of the baptismal font (Day 1999: 14), as suggested by images from Paris 510, fol. 426v. In the North Church Baptistery, it was done in a more intimate way behind the chancel screen, while in the South Church Baptistery, the nakedness could be more visible. It was only after this that a neophyte proceeded to the court of the adjusted chapel through the entrance in the apse area (North Church) or the eastern part between the pilasters (South Church). The neophyte could partake in the mystery of Eucharistic liturgy only after being baptized and receiving chrism. After this, he probably entered the procession into the main church for his first communion. This procession symbolizes entrance into the kingdom of heaven and the paradise left by Adam (Brook 2006: 49). Alternatively, the side chapel itself could perhaps serve for the first communion after baptism.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Thus, even if the date of the baptisteries remains unclear, with the South Church Baptistery seemingly earlier than the North, the baptismal rites performed in the South Church seem publicly oriented. This can be supported by the central position of the South Church complex, close to the pools and the public area, with its baptistery easily accessed from the street. The North Church Baptistery, enclosed within the North Church complex and accessed only from within the church, could serve the monastery’s more private purposes.

**Forgotten art: suggested reconstruction of the scene of the Baptism of Christ**

*History and importance of the finding*

Although our information on the decoration of early Byzantine baptisteries is rather limited (except for the mosaic floors), it should not be surprising to find traces of wall paintings in the baptistery. The walls of Byzantine churches and monasteries were usually laden with mosaics or paintings.[[65]](#footnote-65) Traces of paintings were found throughout the Levant and Egypt (Burdajewicz 2019, 2020; Vitto 2019). While in Syria almost nothing has survived, extensively painted walls of churches and monasteries throughout Egypt may provide clues on the importance and wide distribution of monumental art in the region. The mosaics in St. Catherine’s monastery in Sinai constitute a splendid, albeit unique, example of the richness of religious church decoration, both material and symbolic (Gerstel and Nelson 2010). Painted fragments, including Tyche’s head from Hippos-Sussita (Burdajewicz 2017: 161–180), the depiction of saints and Christ among the apostles from Caesarea Maritima (Avner 1999), and a painted tomb from Lohamei HaGetaot (Tzafrir 1989; Michaeli 2005–6, Maayan-Fanar 2010) constitute only a few examples of once rich legacy of early Byzantine wall paintings in the Holy Land.[[66]](#footnote-66) More knowledge of early Byzantine church iconography in Syro-Palestine may be deduced from surviving descriptions, tokens, and votive objects, scenes which probably based on once-existing wall paintings and mosaics in important churches such as the Holy Sepulchre, the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, and the Church of Resurrection (Polanski 2013). Several fragments of wall paintings were also attested in the Negev: in Beersheba (Figueras, Beersheva in the Roman Byzantine period, 150), Sa’adon (Ericson Gini 2018: 46, fig. 13–14), Rehovot in the Negev (Tzafrir 1988: ill 94–5),[[67]](#footnote-67) and in the North and South churches in Shivta itself (Linn, Ecker and Tepper2019). Most notable is the recognizable scene of the Transfiguration of Christ in the South Church. It was acknowledged by Wooley and Lawrence in 1914 and was later studied by Figueres (2006) and our team (Linn, Tepper, Bar Oz 2017; Maayan Fanar 2017; 2019; Linn & all 2018, 2019).

Only shreds have survived from the wall painting in the apse of the North Church Baptistery.[[68]](#footnote-68) Due to its poor condition, the subject of the painting is hard to decipher. Early scholars such as Palmer and Drake, Musil, Wooley, and Lawrence did not mention painting. Wiegand (1920, 78–9) was the first to recognize outlines of figures and traces of red, yellow and blue colors on the baptistery apse. He describes three figures: the middle one frontal and long, with a halo surrounding his head. Below the figures are red and blue stripes placed one upon the other. Wiegand interpreted the figures as a part of a scene depicting the Transfiguration of Christ or the Glorification of Mary, both popular in early Christian apse imagery. Describing it as a chapel that received light from three windows, Wiegand was, however, unaware of the function of the chapel as baptistery, since the font was still hidden under refuse. His proposed plan of the North Church compound, with no baptistery indicated, proves this assumption. Early twentieth-century photographs also confirm that the space below the hole for a water pipe was completely covered with refuse. For this reason, Wiegand probably interpreted the shreds of figures according to the widespread use of similar scenes in the context of early churches, without considering the Baptism of Christ as a theme. Interestingly, he saw the outlines of three figures, some of which have since degraded and disappeared.

In 1926, Laverngne and Tonneau from Ecole biblique saw the outlines of two figures and were the first to propose identifying the scene as the Baptism of Christ. This identification was confirmed, albeit in passing, by Mallon, who visited Shivta several times and eventually published a short note on the North Church Baptistery (1930: 227–229). Mallon was already aware that the chapel was a baptistery. He also managed to describe and measure its font. By that time, the whole area of the bema had been cleaned. This amazed Mallon, who tried to determine who had cleaned the area, and he perhaps even undertook a scientific exploration at the site. Being unsuccessful in his efforts, he concluded that the area had been cleaned and looted by treasure hunters. Returning later in 1930, he witnessed more damage: the corner of the font was broken, as well as the pavement, which only strengthened his presumption that the damage had been cause by gold hunters.

The painting was in such a poor state that no one could discern the figures despite the site being extensively excavated and studied in the twentieth century. It was only in 2018 that the scene was finally identified with certainty as representing the Baptism of Christ.[[69]](#footnote-69) Two figures can still be traced, albeit faintly, on the upper part of the apse. Christ as a youth is depicted in the center; only traces of his head, down to his shoulders are still visible. His face—turned slightly to the right, with emphasized and oversized eyes, an elongate nose, a small mouth placed close to the tip of the nose, and short curly brownish (?) hair—was most probably surrounded by a halo. Although most of the remaining lines and paint belongs to the underpainting, some bright pink spots of paint suggest that Christ was depicted naked and with bright skin. Above his head is a half-circle in red, descending alongside the figure as if framing it from both sides.

To the left, outlines of the upper part of another, much taller figure—probably John the Baptist—are barely traceable. A halo surrounding figure’s head is still visible, but the details of his face have disappeared. Since in Shivta, only the right half of the apse preserve traces of painting, while the Christ figure is in its very center, it is logical to suggest that another figure was depicted opposite that of John the Baptist. Traces of round lines at the level of the figure on the left support this suggestion. This was probably the third figure that Wiegand saw. In addition, spots of red and blue paint on the apse suggest that the scene occupied the whole apse.

Surprisingly, the Baptism of Christ scene is found within baptisteries relatively late; thus, no Baptism of Christ scene has been preserved in Dura Europus, where the Good Shepherd stepping on little figures of Adam and Eve is depicted just above the font, symbolising the theme of salvation and redemption from original sin through baptism. The scene did not seem to appear in theBaptistery of St. John*,* Naples Cathedral, although its mosaics partly survived. Other surviving scenes recall baptism through “types of Baptism” from the Old and the New Testaments and a focus on “water symbolism” (Maier 1964: 38–45).

In other cases, wall decorations have not survived at all, leaving scholars to speculate about their possible iconographic programs, while floor mosaics usually show animals drinking from a water source, a symbolic depiction of living water often related to the Psalms, which stress its salvific power.[[70]](#footnote-70) A notable example in this respect is a fifth-century baptistery at Stobi. It is mostly known for the unique mosaics on the font, which are perfectly preserved, and depict animals drinking from *kantharoi*. Fragments of painted plaster reveal that its walls were painted with images of Evangelists and perhaps also healing miracles (?), recalling the Dura Europos and Naples baptisteries. It is possible that there was also an image of Christ’s baptism, which did not survive (Downing 1998: 273). Downing argues that in Stobi, mosaic floors reflected the iconographic program of the wall paintings (1998: 274–5). The choice to depict the miracle of a blind person being healed strengthens the connection to water symbolism and the power of baptism. This connection is revealed in the ninth-century Paris Gregory (BNF, gr. 510), where the water source is depicted as a cruciform font (fol. 316), identical to the font in which Gregory’s father is baptized (fol. 87v).

The Neonian/Orthodox (c. 500) and the Arian (425–50) baptisteries in Ravenna are the earliest surviving examples of the Baptism of Christ within a baptistery.[[71]](#footnote-71) In both cases, the scene occupies the cupola just above the baptismal font. Another example is a seventh-century (or later?) wall painting in the Catacomb of Pontianus in Rome, which also served as an underground baptistery (Jensen 2011: 189–190). Visual connections between the ceremony of baptism and the specific Baptism of Christ may reflect the establishment of the commemoration of Christ’s baptism on 6 January, an innovation of the fifth century. This was directly connected with the introduction of 25 December as Christ’s birthday as an independent feast (Rouwhorst 2019: 46). One important symbolic link is that of Christ purifying the waters of the Jordan River, which is identified with the waters of baptismal font. It is perhaps since this time that a visual connection between the act of Christ’s baptism and ceremonial baptism in general became prominent. Christ is depicted sanctifying the waters in which the candidate is baptized. Thus, Shivta’s baptism scene appears to be among the earliest surviving examples—and the earliest in the Holy Land—that can be viewed in its original architectural context. This highlights the importance of the finding, notwithstanding its fragmentary state of preservation.

*Proposed reconstruction of its general iconography*

Portraying one of the most important events in the Gospels (Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–23), the Baptism of Christ scene is frequently found in early Christian and Byzantine art.

By the fifth century, the main iconographical features of the baptismal scene were already well established and it is found in illuminated manuscripts, paintings and mosaics adorning walls of churches and monasteries as part of the Christological cycle, with portable objects, furniture decorations, and other elements. Although the scene did not survive in an architectural setting in Palestine, it exists in illuminated manuscripts and many small objects (e.g., plaques, such as the Gold plaque, Dumbarton Oaks, 45.2; Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, Handbook [1967], cat. 183; p. 52; pilgrim tokens such as the “Baptism on an Eulogia Token," 'Atiqot, XIV [1980], pp. 109–110; fig. 1; pl. XXIII.4; textiles such as the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, no. 6849; Hamm, Gustav Lübcke Museum, Ägypten, Schätze aus dem Wüstensand [1996], cat. 390b; p. 341) from Syro-Palestine and Egypt, which can serve as points of comparison between the iconography and the Shivta scene.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Christ is usually depicted as a beardless youth, completely naked, perhaps reflecting the nakedness of catechumens, and covered with waters from the Jordan River up to his chest or waist. The figure of John the Baptist was usually depicted as a large-sized, bearded man with long hear, inclined toward the much smaller figure of Christ, and placing a hand on Christ’s head. The contrast in sizes between the two figures is maintained throughout most baptism scenes. From the ninth century onward, John would be depicted standing on the rock, which placed him at a higher position than that Christ, although they would become much closer in height and age.

The scene may be reduced to two main figures, or it may include additional figures, frequently identified as an angel or several angels on the opposite side of the Jordan River, compositionally balancing the figure of John. Thus, a figure (or figures) carrying garments for Christ, is depicted in Bawit, on the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary, an ampulla now in Bonn Institute, Dolger-Institute; on a sixth-century gold medallion from Syria or Palestine, where the two figures are identified as angels by their wings, and other examples. Depictions of an angel or angels may refer to the presence of a sponsor (or clergy) in the actual ceremony of baptism (Jensen 2011: 115). As such, they can be paralleled to the depiction of baptism in Paris Gregory (fol. 426v). In most scenes of baptism, a dove descending from above (or from the hand of God in the sky segment) is depicted. It is an essential motif, associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit, referring to its liturgical importance (Jensen, 112).

Sometimes, the personification of the Jordan River was added to the main scene. In the fifth-century Arian Baptistery and on Werden casket of c. 425–450,[[73]](#footnote-73) his representation follows a classical type of river personification and represents a place where the baptism took place. However, in the Neonian Baptistery (c. 500) the Jordan River is already shown as an active figure, a witness of Christ’s baptism, who approaches him with clothes. In Bawit, Chapel XXX, the personification of the Jordan has recoiled, with his hands raised up; on an ivory from Lion Museum, John the Baptist steps upon his head, his body turned back to Christ,[[74]](#footnote-74) while in the sixth-century Cathedra of Maximianus in Ravenna (546–556 AD),[[75]](#footnote-75) and the ivory from Egypt in British Museum (no. 1896,0618.1)—which share a very similar iconography (Jensen 2011: 101–104)—he is in full movement, turning back to Christ (Ps.114:3) and even trying to escape from his presence. Already in the sixth century, but especially from the ninth century onward, the Jordan River would receive demonic features, merging with the satanic forces overcome by baptism. Later, more demonic figures would be added to emphasize the danger of unpurified water, and the act of their purification by Christ’s baptism. Deep, dangerous waters inhabited by demonic forces, endangering everyone entering them, are symbolically connected to the core of the rite of baptism, the first step of which is to denounce Satan and step into the waters cleaned by Christ through his own baptism (Spinks 2006: 83–5). Thus, Cyril of Jerusalem makes clear links between Christ’s “destruction of the dragon who inhabits the water” through his baptism and saving the baptized from death. *(Cat.* 3.12; PG 33:444; Day 2011: 1185)

We can only ponder if the waters in Shivta’s baptism scene were populated by fish or perhaps also by a personification of the Jordan River, as in so many surviving examples of the baptism. However, numerous blue spots in the lower part of the apse below, and all around the surviving fragment of Christ’s figure, suggest that it occupied enough space to contain such motifs.

Whatever the waters looked like, a semi-circle above and behind Christ’s figure most probably circumscribes the banks of the Jordan River. Similarly, the waters of Jordan meet on the top behind Christ’s figure as depicted, for example, on the sixth-century wall painting in Bawit, Chapel XXX, on an ivory from the eastern Mediterranean, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, and the sixth-century Sancta Sanctorum reliquary from Syria or Palestine.[[76]](#footnote-76) The figure of Christ is enclosed within the semi-oval shape of the river, perhaps referring to the symbolism of baptism as rebirth from the womb (John Chrysostom, Catech. Illum. 4.1.; Dionysios Areopagite calls Baptism font “the womb of all adoption” The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy).[[77]](#footnote-77) Font-womb (rather than font-grave) symbolism was especially strong in eastern Syrian baptismal liturgy (Brock 2008: 171–2; Brook 2006:41); the neophyte is compared to a “babe” born from the womb (Narsai, Homily 21). Ephrem and Narsai refer to the font as both a womb and a grave (Brock 1980: 40–41; Narsai I, 345, 346; Brook 2006: 54). The parallelism of three mystical wombs, those of Mary, Jordan, and Sheol (Seppälä 2011: 1146), provide a clear link between, birth, rebirth, and resurrection “that is to be at the end” (Witkam 2018: 45; Splinks 2006: 71–3).

Three times he bows his head at their Names, that he may learn the relation-that while They are One They are Three. With a mystery of our Redeemer he goes into the bosom of the font after the manner of those three days in the midst of the tomb. Three days was our Redeemer with the dead: so also he that is baptized – the three times are three days….

As a babe from the midst of the womb he looks forth from the water; and instead of garments the priest receives him and embraces him… Mystically he dies and is raised and is adorned; mystically he imitates the life immortal. His birth [in Baptism] is a symbol of that birth which is to be at the end, and the conduct of his life of that conversion which is [to be] in the Kingdom on high. (Narsay, *Homily 21: On the Mysteries of the Church and on Baptism*, cited after Whitaker 1970: 55-56)

Thus, this iconographic element may refer to Syrian perceptions of baptism. More common seems to be a depiction of two separated banks of the Jordan, emphasizing the living water itself, which covers the standing figure of Christ to his knees, waist, or shoulders. (e.g., the Neonian and Arian baptisteries in Ravenna, the cathedra of Maximilian, the 6th–7th century Armenian Gospels (Erevan, Matenadaran, MS 2374, fol. 229v; Armenia Sacra. Memoire chretienne des Armeniens (IV–XVIII siècle, Paris, muse du Louvre, 21 fev.-21 mai 2007, 108-109). The “womb” shape of the river nevertheless persists in later Byzantine iconography (e.g., Gospel Book, BNF, gr. 75, fol. 95, 12th c; Icon from Crete, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, BXM 11263, 15th century; Kılıçlar Kilise, Göreme, 10th c; Karanlik Kilise, Göreme 1040-60, and many more).

One last point should be made concerning the position of Christ’s hands. In most cases, his hands are depicted alongside his body. Hands of the candidates in the Paris Gregory (Paris 510), are shown in a similar way, or are crossed on a chest, perhaps mimicking certain position of the hands of a neophyte during baptism. This may be the case in Shivta as well; however, several spots of a pinkish color, similar to those in the area of his face and upper body, can be seen on Christ’s left, on the level of his face. These might suggest that his hands were lifted. Although we cannot be sure of this before the wall painting is cleaned and more of it revealed, at least one example of this already exists in a sixth-century painting from the Bawit monastery (Chapel XXX), where Christ is depicted with his hands raised in the orans position. This detail in Bawit is very rare, and if it did exist in Shivta, we might have evidence of a common ground between both scenes. This act of prayer during the baptismal rite is referred to by Theodore of Mapsuestia, who specifically mentions the candidate standing or kneeling with “with outstretched arms in the posture of one who prays” during baptismal ritual (Witcamp 2018: 192, 198–207).

*The face of Christ*

The best-preserved piece of the wall painting is the face of a young beardless Christ framed with short curly hair. Although this iconographic type seems to be less familiar today, it coincides with early iconographic schemes of Christ as infant found in catacombs and sarcophagi, reflecting the symbolism of baptism as rebirth.[[78]](#footnote-78) The youthful image of Christ is kept in the fifth to seventh centuries, although the details vary. Thus, for example, on the sixth-century ivory plaque from Syria or Egypt (British Museum, 1896,0618.1), in a miniature from the Armenian Gospels, (Erevan, Matenadaran, MS 2374, fol. 229v), or the sixth- to seventh-century pilgrim tokens from Qal’at Sem’an (British Museum, 1973,0501.29[[79]](#footnote-79) and 1973,0501.30[[80]](#footnote-80)), Christ is depicted as beardless and with short hear. In the Rabbula Gospels (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. Plut. I, 56, fol. 4b), Christ is depicted with short hair, but also a short beard.[[81]](#footnote-81) In the baptism scene on the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary, Christ is depicted as bearded and with long hair falling on his shoulders. Two scenes of the Baptism of Christ were discovered in the Bawit monastery: in one Christ appears bearded and with long hair (XVII); in the other as a youth with short hair (XXX; Cledat 5-6; Badawy 1978: 252). This suggests thes coexistence of these two types.[[82]](#footnote-82)

While in the east, a short-haired Christ prevailed (although with certain inconsistencies and variations in detail),[[83]](#footnote-83) in the west, a long-haired Christ seems to be more common. Thus, in the fifth-century Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, Christ is depicted as a beardless youth with long hair. Similar depictions of long-haired youths appear in the seventh-century (?) wall-painting in the catacomb baptistery in Rome. In the c. 500 Neonian Baptistery, Christ appears as bearded adult. Unfortunately, we cannot trust this image to be original, as the area of both Christ’s and John the Baptist’s heads, as well as other important details of the scene, were restored and possibly altered by Felice Kibel in the nineteenth century (Ferguson 2009: 129).

A short beard added to some images (Santa Sanctorum, Rabbula, and perhaps Neonian baptistery) may suggest the first signs of transition to more mature type of Christ: from a youth to an adult. This transitional type of Christ can be seen in St. Stephanos Church, Cappadocia, attributed to the seventh to the ninth centuries. Here Christ is depicted as proportionally much smaller than John the Baptist. However, as far as can be seen from this fragmentary mural, his hair is long, falling down to shoulders, and his face is elongated with traces of a beard. The ninth-century marginal psalters (e.g., the Chludov Psalter, State Historical Museum, gr. 129 Moscow, fol. 117; Pantokrator Monastery, Mount Athos 61, fol. 98v) show an already stabilized depiction of a mature, bearded Christ. This image would become widespread in later Byzantine iconography around his baptism.

Finally, some words should be said about depictions of Christ with short curly hair, which appears common in early Byzantine representations of Christ in general, especially in the east. Christ in the Syriac Gospels (Diarbakir, church of Mar Yakub, 7th c), as well as a number of depictions from Egypt and Saqqara, correspond to this portrait type, with or without the addition of a short beard. In other instances (e.g., in Bawit), his hair is long but heavy and wooly. Conversely, in the scene of Transfiguration at St. Catherine’s monastery, Sinai, Christ is depicted with long smooth hair, parted in the middle (Bacci 2014: 116–130). In the sixth century, Christ could be depicted differently within the same monument (e.g., San Vitale) or manuscript. The Rabbula Gospels may be a good example of the combination of several Christ types within the same manuscript. Thus, he is a young man with short curly hair in the scene of the communion, while in a crucifixion scene, he is depicted as bearded and with long hair. This inconsistency may be due to the use of different models and later restorations (Bernabo 2014: 345).

It is not within the present paper’s scope to deal with the problem of this variety of visual representations of Christ, nor to establish his image in light of his “paradoxical visibility” (Bacci 2014: 108).[[84]](#footnote-84) Yet it should be noted that even when Christ’s image was modelled upon the iconography of ancient deities, the issue of authenticity regarding his image was significant. Thus, in an early sixth-century text, a painter was severely punished by a divine power precisely because he portrayed Christ in the likeness of Zeus (Polanski 2013: 65–66; Bacci 2014: 115–16). According to this source, there exists another, more authentic portrait of Christ with woolly and short hair.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Scholars suggest that since this type is more frequent in Syro-Palestine images, it could have originated in the east, perhaps even in Palestine (Breckenridge 1959: 59–60). For a short period it was also used in the west. Justinian II, who was the first emperor to introduce Christ’s portrait on coinage, made use of both long, soft haired and short, curly haired (with a short beard) types of Christ (Bacci 2014: 131–2). The latter became widespread especially during his second reign (705–711) but would disappear from coinage. After the Iconoclasm, only one type, that with a broad face and long hair falling behind his shoulders, would be used on coins. Breckenridge suggests that the ninth century iconophiles adopted this image as it was regarded a faithful copy of Christ’s image in the Chrysotriclinium, destroyed by the iconoclasts (1959: 56). The short-haired Christ would almost entirely disappear from Byzantine iconography, together with the eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire that were lost in the seventh century, and only occasionally used in later times. In contrast, the long-haired version become an almost exclusive element of Christ’s image, believed to be more authentic.

**Epilog**

The North Church Baptistery in Shivta dates to the later period of Christian occupation of the settlement. Even if it had been constructed in the sixth century, it was still used heavily during the seventh century. Being a part of the monastery, it could remain in use even when most of the building had been abandoned. The baptistery was constructed for adult baptism. Its use in the late seventh century attests to this. Its form acknowledges the variety of baptismal structures in the area, which were adapted according to the needs of the monastery. The scene of the Baptism of Christ complements, even if partially, our knowledge of the links between architecture, liturgy, and art within the space. The scene is placed directly above the cruciform font, establishing a visual and symbolic link between both events: “Christ descended into the waters to sanctify them and the Christian descended in order to be sanctified by the baptismal water” (Rouwhorst 2019: 45). Thus, the neophyte is baptized in the presence of Christ, the priest being a meditator. The priest places his hand on the head of the neophyte, echoing John the Baptist, who places his hand on Christ’s head. The neophyte is fully immersed three times—buried in the water only to be resurrected and reborn.

The words of St. Chrysostom come to mind:

We faithful have believed in things which our bodily eyes cannot see…Therefore, God has made for us two kinds of eyes: those of flesh and those of faith.

When you come to the sacred initiation, the eyes of the flesh see water; the eyes of the faith behold the Spirit. Those eyes see the body being baptized; these see the old man being buried. The eyes of the flesh see the flesh being washed; the eyes of the spirit see the soul being cleansed. The eyes of the body emerging from the water; the eyes of the faith see the new man come forth brightly shining from that sacred purification. Our bodily eyes see the priest as, from above, he lays his right hand on the head and touches [him who is being baptized]; our spiritual eyes see the great High Priest as he stretches forth his invisible hand to touch his head. For, at that moment, the one who baptized is not a man but the only-begotten Son of God. (John Chrysostom, *Baptismal instructions*, cited from Whitaker 1970: 35–36)

The image of the Baptism of Christ thus shows what “eyes of faith” see during an actual baptism, providing a symbolic and mystical link between both events, while reminding the faithful that man does not baptize him, but rather “those whose names have been invoked, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (John Chrysostom, *Baptismal instructions*, cited from Whitaker 1970: 36).

Regrettably, the state of preservation of the wall painting in the North Church Baptistery at Shivta does not allow us reconstruct the painting as a whole. Although its iconography might not be unique, the importance of this finding is that it constitutes the only surviving example of the Baptism of Christ in context of an original baptistery and within a monastic compound in Byzantium’s eastern realm. Within the monumental remains of Shivta, the baptismal rite takes shape, introducing us to the religious and cultural world of the people who lived in this arid and remote, but by no means isolated, area. The nature of Shivta’s monasticism remains unknown, along with the kind of connections it maintained with the local villages. Shivta keeps its mysteries, and we must dig deeper to unravel them.

1. Shivta is identified in ancient sources by two distinct names: Soubeita or Sobota (Sobata). The name Soubeita appears in *Narrations* of Ps. Nilus (PG 79, 587–694) dated to c. 400, as a village (*kome)*, indicating that in the late fourth century it was a small market place where tribes from the region sold and exchanged goods. In some copies of the text it is referred asa *kome* (*κώμη*) village, called *Souka (Σουκa)* (PG 79, 688). Abel argued that the name was misspelled by copyists, and should be read as Soubeita (Abel 1924). Confirmation of this was found in a text (Code St. Croix 5, fol. 55c) that referred explicitly to Soubeita (Abel 1935). In the sixth to seventh century papyri from Nessana (Kraemer 1958: nos. 75, 79), the village is called Sobota/Sobata and not Soubeita. It is possible that Sobata was equivalent in Greek to Soubeita, which may have been Aramaic in origin. On the etymology of Shivta’s name, see Moor 2013: 81–2.

   Claudine Dauphin argues that during the Byzantine period, Shivta evolved into a small town; its population had increased and agriculture had intensified, indicating a status similar that of Jewish settlements in the Golan (*ayarot*) (Dauphin 1987:259–262). We prefer to follow Hirschfeld (1997; 2003) and refer to Shivta as a village under the administrative jurisdiction of Elusa (Elliott 1982: 36, 58). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The most recent excavation seasons in Shivta were conducted by Tepper and Bar-Oz (2016–2017; 2018–2019). For earlier research and exploration see Fischer, M. and Tepper 2021; Hirshfield 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The North Church complex’s function as a monastery depends on the interpretation of *Insula* I (excavated by Colt)—adjacent to it—as either monastic quarters or a local commercial center (Rosenthal 1974; Segal 1983 vs Negev 1993; Hirschfeld 2003; see also Tepper 2019a). The identification of a garden to the rear of the North Church, near *Insula* I, might support the assumption that it was a monastery (Langgut et al. 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to early publications by Colt (1948: figs. 9, 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While most scholars suggest that South Church in Shivta was built earlier than the North Church, Negev proposes the same early first-phase date for both. He dates the Central Church to the seventh century (Negev 1989: 129–142). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rosenthal dates the church’s early phase to the second half or the last quarter of the fifth century (Rosenthal 164). During excavations in the North Church, Margalit found fragments of a pierced marble screen in the filling of the apse, which probably belonged to the early phase (Margalit). However, the screen seems very similar to those found in Nessana’s North Church (Colt 1962: plate XVIII) and Petra (Kanellopoulos and Schick 2001: figures 15, 17; Mulholland 2014: 64). Both the Nessana and Petra churches are at least a century later than the date proposed by Margalit for the first phase of Shivta’s church. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Christianization of the rural regions around Gaza is attributed to Hilarion (292–371) and his followers, who established several monasteries and are also responsible for Christianizing the Arabic population of Elusa (c. 350), while its Greek population remained pagan. Another renowned figure was Epiphanius of Salamis (bishop of Salamis in Cyprus 367–403), who established a monastery in the area of Elautheropolis around 335. Nevertheless, by the end of the fourth century, the Christian community was rather small, with a mere 127 members in Gaza. Only a few churches were built before 361, mainly in important pilgrim centers (Patrich 2016; for an early Christian prayer hall, dated to the third century CE, see Tepper and Di Segni 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Patrick noted a *terminus post quem* for the second phase of the North Church to 527–538, based on coins from the early reign of Justinian found in excavations (Patrich 2006a: 342–3, note 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Fisher compares the marble pilasters to Corinthian capitals in Abu Mina, the Round Church in Beth Shean and Caesarea, all from the mid-fifth to sixth centuries. Another comparison can be made with the East Church of Elusa, most probably from its second phase (Negev 1981: 127, 128). This suggests a close relationship between the two sites and that the most elaborate designs in Shivta were dependent on fashions in the regional capital city (Goldfus, Arubas and Bowes 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The excavation conducted by Tepper and Bar-Oz on behalf of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, the University of Haifa and the Israel Antiquities Authority was funded by the National Parks Authority and supported by research grants from the Israel Science Foundation (Grant 340-14) and the European Research Council under the EU’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant 648427) (see Tepper et al. 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. An architectural transformation from a mono-apsidal to a tri-apse church has been suggested for a number of churches in the Negev, a feature considered unique to the area. Side rooms and chapels existed in Syrian churches but not many had three apses. In Illyricum Orientale, tri-apse basilicas can be traced to the sixth century, while in Cyprus they are known from early sixth century (Mailis 2006: 300). Matthews and Taft believe that while in Greece, “Syrian” tripartite sanctuaries appeared only in the mid-sixth century, while tri-apse churches became common in Constantinople only in the tenth century (Taft 1975: 181–4). According to Balderstone, a tri-apse architectural type existed already in the late fourth century; in the sixth century it was appropriated by Chalcedonian supporters and emerged in Palestine, Cyprus and Arabia (Balderstone 2007: 21; 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a useful summary on the cult of relics and martyrs in the Holy Land, see Patrich 2006b: 381–385. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bagatti mistakenly places the reliquary in the South Church (Bagatti 1968: 254). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Unpublished c.14 research supports a later dating (Yan Xin) et al. in process). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Di Segni discusses at length what the title ‘vicarious’ might mean in context of the Negev. She concludes that it is most likely a military title. Vicarious is mentioned in a fragmentary letter from Nessana, P.Nessana no.134. Theophanes in Chronographia; AM 6123 discusses vicarious Theodorus, an officer stationed in a village Motha who was in charge of several garrisons in Palestina Tertia, and who achieved victory over the Arabs in 631 (Di Segni 1997: 107–113; 817). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Another son of John the vicarious, Stephan, was buried in the Narthex on November 21, 646 (Negev 1981: 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rosenthal suggested that they could have been built at the same time, although she contradicts her own statement in the same work (Rosenthal 148 cf. 167). See further discussion on this topic at [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Baly states that the South Church Baptistery was highly decorated with paintings, sculpted reliefs and marble (1935: 177). Only some of the reliefs can still viewed in situ, while some spots of paint are all that remain from the paintings which once covered the apse. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Accounts of the conversion of nomads and pagans to Christianity in the late 4th and 5th centuries can be found in Jerome’s *Life of Hillarion* c. 391; Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymius* (Wood 2010: 234–5; Shahid 1989; Day 1999: 28–33). *The Life of Porphyrius* provides some details of the rite of baptism performed in Gaza in the 5th century (Day 1999: 9, 14–18). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It is not known if he had any special importance. His tomb is beautifully decorated with palm branches and crosses. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Negev suggested that the initiation of burials in Negev churches may be connected to the spread of plague in 541 (Negev 1981: 30, 82, 94–5). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Unpublished research on the belt accessories found at the graves of the North Church at Shivta support this later dating (Bollók and Tepper in progress). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Except for problematic early date on the lintel in the South Church in Shivta (415/435), no dated inscriptions from the Negev predate the mid- 5th century. The earliest Christian inscriptions are from Nessana—464, Beer-Sheba—516, Elusa—530/1 and Oboda—541 (Caner 2010:14). In Shivta, one of the earliest inscriptions can be probably dated to 545/6, and another to 560 (Negev 1981). To this may be added that the South Church was renovated in 639/40, as commemorated in its floor inscription. Inscriptions indicating renovations found in various churches in the area (Elusa, Deir Ayyub, Suma, Rihab) testify to the continuation of Christian life and patronage till the 660s (Reynolds 2013: fig. 3.7, 171–3). Although such settlements as Rehovot in the Negev, Elusa, and Nessana (and in a way Shivta itself) probably continued to be occupied after the 8th century (Reynolds 2013: 187–8), Negev’s Christians show no signs of the prosperity evident in Trans-Jordan churches and monasteries. On the increase in ecclesiastic building activities in Provincia Arabia during 7th to 8th centuries see Hamarneh 2010: 64–5. Archaeological, botanical and zoo-archaeological research supports some reduction of the Christian population at Shivta and its continuation at other sites, such as Nessana. See Tepper et al. 2015; Tepper et al. 2018; Tepper 2019a; Marom et al. 2019: Fuks et al. 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Sobata is mentioned in the Nessana papyri up to the late 7th century CE. (Kraemer 1958; see note 1). Its decline at that time, and a complete abandonment of the site during the 9th century CE, is supported by the latest excavations at the site and its environment (see Tepper er al. 2015; 2018; 2020a). For additional reasons to explain the abandonment of the region in general, and the site of Shivta in particular, see Avni (2008: 1–26), Avni (2014: 325–331, 344–348), Hirschfeld (2003; 2006: 19–32), Hirschfeld and Tepper (2006), and Bar Oz (et all 2019). For further early Islamic period findings from Shivta and a discussion, see also Tepper 2019b; Amitai-Preiss, Tepper, and R. Linn. 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. On the Arabic inscriptions at the Church of Mamphis, which indicate activity in the early Islamic period, see Nevo, Cohen, Heftman 1994: 15. The Churches of Mamphis are discussed in Negev 1988. On the North Church of Rehovot-in-the-Negev, see Tsafrir 1988a. On Nessana, see Kendall 1962: 25–45 and Kraemer 1958. See also Moor 2013: 108–110. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a different approach, suggesting the apotropaic use of Christian symbols by Muslims, see Peers 2011. Since this position of lintels suggests the dishonoring of Christian symbols (which does not fit the proposed thesis of Christian-Muslim coexistence during the early Islamic period), Moor blames modern renovations for this arrangement (Moor 2013, no. 197). For a different approach, see Tepper 2019b, and for a broader discussion on this subject see also Guidetti 2016. Without deeper exploration of this subject, which needs to be studied separately, here we will just refer to the example from Pella, where a Monophysite church was converted to Chalcedonian. A chancel post from the earlier church was reused as a step in the renewed sanctuary, causing the Chalcedonian clergy to step on it while entering the sanctuary (Smith and Day 1989: fig. 33, and plate 35A; Mulholland 67). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. An apparent paradox of flourishing of Shivta churches in the 6th and 7th centuries versus a decline in agricultural activities and urbanism has also been noted in relation to Petra (Fiema City and Countryside in Byzantine Palestine). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For possible earthquakes, which could cause considerable destruction in the area, see Korjenkov and Mazor 1999: 265–282; Russell 1985: 37–59. Recent studies of seismic activities in Rehovot in the Negev have identified several waves of earthquakes, causing significant damage in the 5th century (447, 498, 502), as well as the 7th (destroyed Avdat) and 9th centuries (Korzhenkov and Mazor 2014). For updated records of earthquake events, see Zohar et al 2016. Unpublished earthquakes research has been undertaken in Shivta recently (by Lian Kombelis and Motti Zhoar, Haifa University and by Claudio Modena, Francesca dal Porto and Michol Rampdao from the University of Padova). None of this supports the assumed dating mentioned above (see also Hirschfeld and Tepper 2006; Tepper et al. 2018). For climate effects on the Negev region, see Hirschfeld 2006; Langgut, et al. 2020; Fuks et al. 2020; Vaiglova, et al. 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For example, Theophanes talks about a famine in Syria and Palestine in 686–687 (*The Chronicle*, 507; Benovitz 2014; O’Sullivan 2015: 68). For a different approach, see also Mordechai et al. 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Syrian and Egyptian sources would also be important because of the region where Shivta is situated. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Mystagogical Catecheses* are ascribed to Cyril (Yarnold 1978; Doval 2001), but according to Day should be attributed to his successor John of Jerusalem. They date to the early 5th century and testify to the transformation of Jerusalem’s ritual by incorporating other models into it (Day, 2011: 1201–3). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lassus has raised the same argument concerning Northern Syrian churches; he is however skeptical if indeed two different Christian movements could perform different baptismal liturgies within small villages, as for example Dar Qita (1947: 224–5). In the 6th century, a number of baptisteries within the same town is attested also in Italy and North Africa, perhaps suggesting a number of people baptized simultaneously during Easter. From the late 4th century onward, baptism was also celebrated during Epiphany, as well as during the days of commemorating important martyrs. In the East, baptisteries are found in martyr’s and saint’s sanctuaries (e.g., St John at Ephesus, Abu Menas [Egypt], Qalat Siman [Syria]), which drove great numbers of pilgrims there (Brandt 2011: 1597–1598). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Mampsis/Kurnub has two baptisteries; however, the baptistery of the West Church is seemingly later than that of the East Church (dated by Negev to the mid-4th century; Negev 1988: 51). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Surprisingly, in south and southeast Syria, a very small number of baptisteries were identified, perhaps because side chapels served a number of functions. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Curiously, until the baptismal font was discovered in the North Church Baptistery in Shivta, the function of the chapel as baptistery was unknown. Butler describes a similar situation in northern Syria. Thus, at the East Church, Ksedjbeh of 414 and at Kasr Iblisu of 431, the baptisteries were attached to the south-east corner of the churches; both had small, eastern apses. A separate baptistery with its font in the form of a basin in the small, eastern apse was located south of the Church of SS. Paul and Moses at Dar Qita, dated to 422AD. The only other separate, centralized baptistery recorded was the hexagonal one with a central font at Der Seta dated to the 6th century (Butler 1969: 155–6; Beldersone 2007: 32). Baptisteries of a large size and distinct shapes are also known in the East. Parobably influenced by the Constantinopolitan imperial model, they are mainly situated in important religious centers, and are mostly dated to the 5th century (e.g., St. John at Ephesus, Qal’ar Sim’an, Northern Syria; Gerasa, Jordan; Abu Mina, Egypt; Brandt 2011:1593). They were certainly constructed for massive baptisms of pilgrims or nomads. It seems that, contrary to the 5th century baptisteries which constituted large, impressive and separate buildings serving to convert masses of catechumens, by the 6th century, most baptisteries had become modest, serving local communities or occasional converts (Pena 1997: 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Such an installation of the font within the niche of the apse is found in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, e.g., Doura, Dar Qita, Antioch-Kaossie, Nebo, Luqsor, Ain-Mahmoudieh, Emmaus, Gerasa; in Crème: Cherson I and II, Balkans, Greece and Roman Africa. (Khatchatrian 1982: 11; Tchalenko 1953: 286). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The similar placement of baptisteries in the church is characteristic of monuments from Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Balkans (Berdzenishvili2010: 579). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Analyzing early examples of the so-called Cathedral type of baptistery in Jerusalem, Gerasa, Dor, Ashkelon and Gaza, Day conclude that the baptistery had to have at least two rooms: the candidates, after waiting in the court, attended an ante-room for renunciation and then moved to the font to be baptized, anointed and dressed (Day 2009: 27). Various baptisteries throughout the Mediterranean have additional rooms to the one where the ceremony took place. Their numbers differ from one place to another. Their role in the liturgical rite is hard to decipher as they can have multiple functions. Thus, the Holy Sepulcher baptistery probably had a three-part division of the baptistery complex, akin to three main liturgical units of the *Mystagogical Cathechesis* by Cyril of Jerusalem: the renunciation, the font and the chrismation and robing (Day 2018: 77). The two-room baptisteries attached to the basilica (such as at Dora and Nicopolis) are characteristic of Palestine (Day 1999: 24–7; 2018: 82). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. According to Negev, both the East and the West churches in Mampsis were destroyed in the 6th century (Negev 1988: 66). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. No such hole is visible in the South Church Baptistery. Shivta’s drainage system collected water from the slopes above it. The North Church is located at the highest point on the site. Two drainage water collecting systems have been documented there. The first, a long canal, collected water for more than two kilometers, and enters the site near the church from the east. It directs the water toward the North Church and toward the Central Church (which is not discussed here).The canals that led to the North Church directed water to the cisterns. One of the cisterns is located at the back of the church, behind the baptistery. The water collected in it could be poured through a wall-mounted pipe, directly into the baptismal font. The second, short canal, collected water in a large cistern in the churchyard. In addition, water collected from the roof of the church was also drained into this cistern. It is likely that these water systems were established and maintained by and on behalf of the church/monastery (Tepper and Bar Oz 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ben Pechat suggests that in Qalat Seman, Gerasa and Apamea, the baptismal fonts were enclosed within the apse and shaded from outside viewers. The architecture was designed in such a way that the nephyte’s nakedness remained hidden. This attitude toward nakedness is also attested in Cypriot baptisteries. This connection is made by Ben Pechar as showing the influence of Epiphanius of Salamis, native of Palestine. Baptism may appear as a result of his influence (Ben Pechat 1985: 289–300; Ben Pechat 1989: 185–6). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The existence of a canopy in the North Church Baptistery is less clear, although it was suggested by early discoverers of Shivta, who saw holes in the apses as being part of the canopy structure. Since such holes exist in all apses in both churches, one can ask if canopies occurred in all cases or if they were made for a different purpose. If it existed, the canopy in the North Church Baptistery, symbolically framing the sacredness of the space, would be at least partially behind the chancel screen, reducing visibility of the ceremony even more (Bogdanović 2017: 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. According to Ristow, canopies can be reconstructed in 139 early baptisteries, but mostly they framed fonts placed in the center of the room (Ristow 1998: 32–34). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Bogdanovic lists 24 Byzantine baptismal fonts, 18 dated to the 4th–6th centuries and 1 to the 7th–8th centuries (2017: Appendix). It appears that in the period before Iconoclasm, the practice of placing a baptismal font under the canopy was more common than in the later period. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Bibliothèque nationale de France; Goldschmidt, A., Die Elfenbeinskulpturen, I (1914) , p. 41; pl. XXX (74); Musée de Picardie < Amiens; Deshman, R., "Otto III and the Warmund Sacramentary," Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, XXXIV (1971) , p. 3; fig. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Masonry-built fonts are usually earlier than monolithic fonts dating from the 6th century and later (Ben Pechat 1985:I, 277–284). Brandt suggests that fonts developed from being broad and shallow in the 4th century, and being used to baptize a large number of adults to becoming smaller, narrower, and deeper in the 5th century. Further diminishing in size in the 6th century they became monolithic, covered with marble and lifted high above the floor level. He sees this development as reflecting the shift from adult to child baptism (Brandt 1593–4). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. According Sebastian Ristov’s study, who analyzed 1061 baptisteries from the 3rd to the 9th century, 16% of all fonts have a cruciform shape (Ristov 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. The Old Diakonikon Baptistery with a cruciform shape is dated to 530; it was covered and replaced in 597 with another baptistery constructed in the apse of the Southern chapel (Michel 1989: 405–7). In Magen, the cruciform baptistery (Building D) is separated from the main church. According to Tsaferis, it was built in the late 5th century, together with a new church, after the old building (including a baptistery of different kind) was destroyed (Tsaferis 1985:13). In Jabal Harun Monastery, the font is located close to the western part of the chapel despite it having an apse (Fiema 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ferguson asserts that half of the baptisteries discovered in Israel have a variation of the cruciform shape (2009: 822), while Ben Pechat (who documented and analyzed 53 baptismal fonts throughout the Holy Land found a cruciform shape in 10 cases only (Ben-Pechat 1989; Patrich 2006b: 380–81). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Burials in Shivta North Church Baptistery correspond to a common tradition and emphasize a symbolic connection between birth, death, and rebirth through baptism, and the eventual resurrection expressed already by Paul in Rom 6: 3–11 (Jensen, Living water). Thus, for example, tombs can be attested in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, with the earliest belonging to its foundation. A number of burials are located in the Stobi baptistery (Downing 1998). Tombs dated to as late as the 9th century were found in the Byzantine Baptistery of Santa Severina in Calabria (Jensen 2011: 242). Already from the 4th century, free-standing baptisteries were shaped as Mausolea (Jensen 2011: 237–42). Conversely, iconography that symbolically recalls the Baptism of Christ is frequently found in early Christian tombs and sarcophagi, including in the Lochamei Ha Getaot tomb (Maayan Fanar 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Rufus tells us that Peter Iberian baptized a child by splashing water on his back. This story suggests that full immersion was not the only way to baptize a person at that time (Ben Pechat 1990: 451–512). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. The depth of most known Byzantine baptisteries around the Mediterranean is less than one meter, with the average being between 70 and 90 cm (Ben-Pechat 1990: 511). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Mallon was probably the only one to see the area of the font in its undamaged state. In his description, he does mentions neither columns that might point to canopy, nor a small alcove at the side of the cruciform font. Possibly, they did not exist, and are only suggested by scholars because of the overall similarity to the South Church Baptistery (Mallon 1930). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. The construction of additional small sized installations of various shapes on the site of the main font is common and regionally widespread. They can be found in Iberia, Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Asia Minor, and Greece (especially at Kos). Ristow lists a significant number of such small installations at the side of main font, measuring between 0.30 and 0.60 m deep and mostly in direct contact with the baptismal font. According to him, they can be dated to the 6th century or later; in some cases, the installation post-dates the main font (Ristow 1998: 48–9;see also Ben Pechat 1989: 187–8).Their function is disputed and may vary according to regional practices (Mailis 2006: 304–305). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. The 8th-century *Barberini 336* Euchologion contains two texts. The oldest contains Catechumenate rites, the newer one has a prayer during baptism on the 8th day after birth and a prayer on the 40th day after birth, referring to infant baptism (Spinks 2006: 96; Stevenson 1987: 179–182) [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Negev proposes dating the baptistery to the mid- or late 4th century (Negev 1988: 48–51), but as later than the church. Ben Pachat dates it to the 5th century (Ben Pechat 1989: 169–70). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. A canopy was mentioned in the inscription but was not found during excavations (Piccirillo 1976: 305–12; Fiema & all 2001: 47, 129 (note 171). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. The earliest known visual representation of a baptized person, which has not survived, is that of Constantine the Great. It once existed in the narthex of the 6th century Polyeuctus church (Mango & Sevcenko 1961; Bardill 2006: 383). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Another depiction of baptism (fol. 332v) is that of Cyprian, immersed into a natural source of water. The image accompanies a sermon “To Cyprian,” but is possibly related to the lost poem “Life of Cyprian” composed by Eudoxia Augusta (probably the wife of Theodosius) (Brubaker 1985: 1–13, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Later depictions of the baptism in illuminated manuscripts suggest a standardization of the iconographic scheme (Tomeković 1988, figs. 6, 7, 9, 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. The original Syraic practice included one pre-baptismal anointing. The practice later changed and started to include post-baptismal anointing associated with the Holy Spirit. Some sources suggest that two pre-baptismal anointings, a mark on a forehead and one for the whole body, existed already in the 4th century. The evidence, however, is inconclusive (Brock 1977: 180). See also Spinks 2006: 38–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. The ceremony could be performed not just by a bishop, but also a priest or even a monk (Ben Pechat 1990: 501–8). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. “And ye were first anointer on your forehead… Then on your ears… Then on your nostrils… Then on your breast… (MC 3.4; Whitaker 1970: 30) According to Day, the post-immersion anointing with chrism was introduced into Jerusalem rite in the 5th century, influenced by *Apostolic Tradition* (Day 2011: 1203). Jensen observes that in many instances the eastern rites omit the post-baptismal anointing (2012: 175, no 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Many early churches in the east had more than one altar. The side chapel with an altar could serve for a liturgy celebration (which could not be performed at the same altar twice a day) or even as a chapel for private worship, perhaps as in Cappadocia (Teteriatnikov 1996; Babic 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Choricius of Gaza describe extensive decorative programs of the 6th-century churches of St. Sergius and St. Stephen in Gaza (Polanski 2013). See also Hamarneh for the remains of wall mosaics in Jordan (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. The wall paintings from the monastery of St. Theoctistus (Wadi el-Muqallik), once attributed to the early Byzantine period, were re-dated to the 12th century. For the early date see Goldfus, Arubas, Alliata “The Monastery of St. Theoctistus (Deir Muqallik”; for the later date, see Kuhnel, Boaz. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Palmer describes shreds of paint in the northern apse of the South Church in Nessana (Palmer 1871: 369). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Fragments of architectural decorations were published by Segal (1988) and most recently by Golan. Most were not found in situ, but had been restored in places during the 20th century. They display a variety of styles from local provincial workshops and are difficult to date. Some are close in style to the Rehovot in the Negev, others to Nessana. Some items, found in connection with the South Church are interesting, as they resemble stylistically items from the Central Church in Nessana (built in the late 7th or early 8th century) (Golan 2020: 346). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. The condition of the wall painting does not allow for stylistic analysis. Nevertheless, the application of paint directly on stone and the colors used recall the scene of the Transfiguration in the South Church. In addition, a wavy line circumscribing Christ’s hair looks similar to that of Peter’s hair. All three apses of the North Church were painted and at a later stage clad with marble (Baly 1935: 175). It is possible that the wall painting in the Baptistery relates to this earlier stage, which, as with the Transfiguration scene in the South Church, can be broadly attributed to the early 6th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. These motifs find parallels on two doorjamb bases on both sides of the now-blocked entrance, leading from the northern side room of the narthex to the baptistery of the South Church in Shivta (Golan 2020: 21–22, pls. 15–16). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Fiema notes that a plaster fragment with the painted Greek letters ΠΡΟΔΡΟΜΟ were found in the area of the baptistery in the late 5th century Jabal Harun church (Fiema 2002: 42). Perhaps the inscription refers to John the Baptist and may indicate a wall painting of the Baptism of Christ. If this is so, it might have been relatively contemporary to that in Shivta, suggesting this theme was widespread in the region. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. The iconography of baptism in Early Christian and Byzantine times was comprehensively analyzed by Jensen in her book *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*. Discussing the iconography of the baptism scene, Jensen convincingly showed that it changed from the earliest 2nd and 3rd century examples found mainly in funerary contexts, becoming stabilized by the 5th and 6th centuries. Since Shivta’s example can be linked to this later iconography, the earliest examples are beyond the scope of the present study. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. V&A Museum, London, inv. No. 149B-1866; Jensen 2011: 95, fig. 3.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Musée des beaux-arts, Lyon, D 313; Volbach, W. F., Elfenbeinarbeiten (1976) , cat. 149; pp. 98–99; pl. 78 (149). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. The provenance of the Cathedra is disputed. It is variously attributed to the western, Alexandrian, or Constantinopolitan workshops. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. A reliquary box, dating from around 600, from the “Treasury” of the Chapel of the *Sancta Sanctorum* in the Lateran Palace (Rome Cat. 61883.2.1–2 and now in the collection of the Vatican Museums), contains a virtual pilgrimage through the Holy Land (Pantanella 2010, 36 (cat. no. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ephrem of Syria shows parallels between incarnation and baptism. In *Hymns on Church* and in Hymnen de Epiphania “Virgin Mary and Jordan are depicted as two wombs that bore the Divine light” (*HEcc* 36:3; *HEpi* 8:13, 10:3, 14: 20, 14: 34. Seppälä 2018: 1146). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Already Clement of Alexandria stresses the notion of Christians as children, while rebirth is perceived as gaining perfection: “Jesus, who wanted to become like us in every way, was himself a child.” (*Paed*. 1.24.2–3) “When we were reborn, we straightaway received the perfection for which we strive” (*Paed*. 1.25.1)” (Hägg 2011: 981–2). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1973-0501-29> [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1973-0501-30> [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Rabbula’s images should be viewed with great caution, as many were later repainted and altered. Despite Bernabo’s convincing argument that the quires with illuminations do not belong to the part that connects it to Rabbula and a 586 date (in fact, the manuscript was assembled together in the 15th century, and then rebound and the miniatures refreshed in 1574 in Florence; see Bernabo 2014), scholars still prefer to date it as such. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Although there was an assumption that the painting in Chapel XVII might be earlier than that in Chapel XXX, there are indications that it has undergone alteration. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. A very different image of an aged and bearded Christ with an almost round face is depicted on an ampula (Franz Dölger-Institut, Bonn, no. 132; Engemann, J., “Palästinensische Pilgerampullen in Bonn,” Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, XVI (1973) , pp. 5–27; pls. 1a, 8d). This image is similar to that of Christ in crucifixion scenes depicted on Monza ampulae. Since those were most probably produced near Jerusalem, this could have originated in Palestine. This image seems unusual for a baptism scene. On other ampulae, Christ is depicted as young and with short hair (Museo e Tesoro del Duomo di Monza, Monza, no. 2; Grabar, A., Ampoules de Terre Sainte (1958) , pp. 18–20; pls. V–VII) [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. On Christ’s visibility in a variety of forms and faces in Early Christianity, see Jensen 2005; Taylor 2018; Bacci 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. From the lost *Ecclesiastical History* of Theodoros Anagnostes, written in the early 6th century: cf. G. 1’1oravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica,* I. *Die Byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Turkvolker,* Budapest, 1943: 324; PG LXXXVI, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)