This talk will focus on one of the most interesting sites in the Holy Land, a little gem hidden in the sands of the Negev desert. It has even been called the Pompeii of the desert because of the unique preservation of its ruins, which still capture our imagination. Shivta (Sobbota/Soubaita/Esbeita) was a rural settlement in the Negev, neither especially important nor situated on any important roads or trade routes. It flourished from the fourth or fifth to approximately the eighth century. After that, it gradually declined and was ultimately abandoned. At its peak, the village was not very large, but it was relatively rich, with about 170 houses, some two storied, housing approximately 2,200 people. The settlement had an advanced system of water collection, with pipes running throughout and two extensive water reservoirs. It also had a vine press and other systems, which offer insight into the inhabitants’ secular life, habits, and occupations in this arid desert setting, from which they also had trading relations with nearby and distant populations. Particularly interesting for our presentation are three monumental churches that indicate that there was extensive religious activity within the settlement during the Byzantine era. It might seem strange that there are three large churches within one small settlement. However, in the context of the Negev, where a number of Byzantine settlements were discovered, each settlement had an average of two to four churches, and some, such as nearby Nessana, and Elusa, which was the capital of the district and the only actual city, had even more.

Shivta captured scholarly attention as early as the nineteenth century, and during the twentieth century it was extensively excavated and studied by scholars. In 1870, two British explorers, Edward Palmer and Tyrwhitt Drake, went to extreme lengths, crossing the desert by foot to describe and photograph its ruins. Shivta left an indelible impression on them. In their own words, “There is nothing larger than El ’Aujeh and El ’Abdeh, except Sebaita, which is grander than either.” In 1871 Palmer published a book about their incredible journey, in which he included illustrations based on authentic photographs taken by Drake at various sites, including Shivta. The photographs were developed through the wet collodion technique, which was popular in the nineteenth century, and copied for the publication as engravings. To further draw readers in, the two researchers added figures of themselves to most of the illustrations (they did not appear in the original photographs).

Today’s presentation is illustrated not just with photographs taken by the most advanced digital camera, but also with photographs produced through the same nineteenth-century wet collodion process and printed in a variety of techniques that were used in the nineteenth century, such as albumen on paper, cyanotype, and more. This photographic journey was undertaken by an Israeli photographer, Dror Maayan, who followed in the footsteps of Palmer and Drake. I will use these photographs to attempt to give you a feel for the unique atmosphere of this exceptional place.

I became involved in research on Shivta in 2016–2017. As an art historian and a Byzantinist, I was asked by a group of archaeologists from the University of Haifa to look at shreds of the wall painting found in situ. We will talk about that in a minute, but first a little bit about the archaeological project. The current project, the Negev Byzantine Bio-Archaeology Research Program, studies the people who lived in the Negev desert 1,500 years ago, trying to understand who these people were, how they were able to survive and even flourish in the harsh desert environment, and why the settlements were eventually abandoned by their residents. The project was supported by the European Research Council and the Israel Science Foundation. The project tries to reach the people, and what could be more suitable for this purpose than their artistic expression? This talk will be devoted to religious imagery, but small findings, which include furniture decorations, personal jewelry, amulets, and more, display the diverse artistic expression of the people living in this seemingly remote area.

The churches were decorated with crosses and rosettes, birds, and other decorative elements – some of them even still bear traces of paint. Those are of different styles. Some of them are left unfinished, testifying to the fact that the churches were used for relatively long periods of time. All in all, these ornaments are of a provincial type and were probably made by local artisans.

The walls of the churches were once painted extensively with religious scenes and figures. Not much has survived of these once-colorful wall paintings, but even small surviving fragments offer surprises for those of us studying them. It was customary to decorate early Byzantine churches with mosaics and wall paintings depicting religious scenes and figures. Sculpted capitals, lintels, and other architectural elements were added to these ornate mosaic floors. The Shivta churches are in keeping with this widespread religious and aesthetic approach. However, because the settlement was deserted sometime in the eighth or ninth century and never fully resettled – just reached by some Bedouin tribes – and thanks to the dry desert climate, Shivta’s walls still preserve precious fragments of religious scenes that disappeared from other places. I must nevertheless warn you not to expect clear, easily recognizable images. The remaining images are extremely fragmentary and in a very bad state of preservation. I’ll be showing you reconstructions for the sake of visibility and clarity.

The wall painting in the southern apse of the South Church appears to be one such example of a precious but poorly preserved religious scene, the Transfiguration of Christ. It was discovered and described in the early twentieth century when British archaeologists Sir Leonard Wooley and Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence, who was also an army officer and diplomat, explored Shivta in 1914. They offered a detailed description of the painting they saw in the South Church:

In the southern apse alone could any coherent design be distinguished. . . . Only by wetting the stone were we able to make out and roughly to sketch the original painting. The subject was the Transfiguration. In the centre is Christ, full-face, with hands raised and brought together over the breast, The chiton was seemingly of light pink edged with gold, the himation of dark blue; the halo was a plain yellow ring with white centre; the vesica [mandorla] of light pink. The figure was too much damaged to be copied. Below the feet is a semi-prostrate figure, probably of St. Peter, and beyond, on the spectator’s left, a kneeling figure identified by a fragmentary inscription . . . ANNIC, in red paint, as S. John; turning half-round to the front, he raises his left hand, as if pointing to Christ. A few lines on the right of the vesical are all that is left of S. James. On either side of the apse, a little distance from the central group, a blurred mass of red colours seems to represent figures standing on a slightly higher level than the Apostles: these are probably Moses and Elijah.

Since Wooley and Lawrence’s exploration, the wall painting has deteriorated even more, and today, when we look at the apse, we might wonder if it ever truly existed. Nevertheless, this is the only scene that remains to be identified in Shivta and that has received further scholarly attention. What you see here is our reconstruction of the scene based on the details that can still be seen with the naked eye and that have been captured by the most advanced digital camera. Let us go through the details. According to the New Testament, Christ ascended a high mountain – later identified as Mount Tabor – and, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, revealed his divine nature to three of his disciples: Peter, James, and John. In what remains of the painting, we can see outlines of the figure of Christ with a halo around his head, depicted inside a mandorla (an almond-shaped halo around his body) of light. In addition to the outlines, we can see some spots of paint, especially this beautiful blue – Egyptian blue, which was used as an underpainting for the scene. Only outlines of the figures on the left (Christ’s right) have survived; the right side was wiped out by rain over the years. Three figures, all in different positions, can be seen. The bowing figure attached to this hand – one of the beautiful surviving fragments – is John, identified by his name inscribed next to it. Behind him is a figure of Peter, and this is one of the best surviving fragments in the whole wall painting. Look at the area around his beard: you can see beautiful brushstrokes of bright colors overlapping each other. The last figure, which is standing, is either Elijah or Moses. The figure of another prophet and that of James disappeared over time. The mountain, a crucial element of the narrative, seems to be absent.

Although the scene of the Transfiguration represents one of the most important events in the Gospels, very few examples of it have survived from the early Byzantine period. In fact, there are only two: one in Ravenna and the other in Sinai, in St. Catherine’s Monastery. Both are beautiful sixth-century mosaics, and each depicts the scene differently. There are many speculations as to why this is the case, but the Shivta image suggests that many more images might have existed but did not survive.

The closest comparison to the Shivta Transfiguration is the extraordinary sixth-century mosaic in the apse of St. Catherine’s monastery, an important pilgrimage site. Pilgrims crossed the desert to reach it, and one of the ways to get there was through Nessana, a village not far from Shivta. At St. Catherine’s we can clearly observe Christ inside a mandorla, two standing Old Testament figures – Moses and Elijah – and three apostles, all identified by inscriptions. The mountain is also missing from this image. There is one motif, however, that is clearly visible in Sinai but cannot been seen in Shivta: the rays of light. This motif reappears in almost all the depictions of the Transfiguration from the ninth century on. So is it possible that the Shivta Transfiguration is an exception? In fact, the rays of light cannot be seen with the naked eye. However, thanks to the use of a special photographic technology, the VIL technique, the rays emerge. This was one of the biggest surprises regarding the Shivta image, which could be detected only by using modern technology. It therefore shows that the Shivta image is quite similar – but not identical – to the Sinai one.

A reading of the Gospels reveals that the Shivta image is much closer to the narrative of the text than the Sinai one when it comes to the apostles’ positions and Peter’s gesture of speech. In later depictions of the Transfiguration of Christ, the figures also represent the text through their positions and gestures. Consequently, these later images more closely resemble the Shivta Transfiguration than the Sinai one. The Shivta image is the only surviving example of this iconography, which scholars believed did not emerge until after the iconoclasm, from the ninth century on. The discovery and analysis of the Shivta Transfiguration changes the entire perception of early, pre-iconoclastic, iconography of the scene. Needless to say, traces of paint on two other apses are a reminder that the church was fully decorated with religious scenes. Unfortunately, those scenes cannot be reconstructed.

For more than a century it seemed that no other religious scene could be identified in Shivta. However, this magical place is full of surprises. During one of my visits to Shivta, I was sitting in the shade of the baptistery apse of the North Church in an attempt to escape the heat. Some spots of paint caught my attention, and it felt like eyes were looking at me from within the apse. At first I thought it was just an illusion caused by the heat. But then, with the help of the advanced camera, I could see a close-up of the image. There were eyes and a face. You can imagine my excitement at that moment. I just needed to figure out what exactly was depicted there.

The North Church is the most beautiful of Shivta’s three churches. It was built on the edge of the settlement and perhaps constituted a part of the monastic complex. According to archaeological research it was first built with one apse and probably became a three-apse church sometime in the early sixth century. Its walls were first painted with wall paintings and then later were covered with marble. It is not known exactly when the baptistery attached to the church was built. Some scholars suggest that it should be dated to the fourth century, perhaps contemporary with the earliest church. However, it seems more likely that it dates to the sixth century, probably when the church became triapsal. Some tombs were discovered in the baptistery during the excavations performed by Colt in the 1930s. Their dates range from the early seventh century to 679, providing us with the latest existing date of the whole site of Shivta.

The baptistery is constructed as a side chapel with an apse on its eastern end. Within it is a cross-shaped monolith baptismal font, raised on a two-step platform that was separated from the aisle of the chapel by a chancel screen. The font can be compared to another, very similar baptistery font at the side of the South Church. The eyes I saw were directly above the font. How did the painting remain undiscovered for so long? In fact, in the early twentieth century one of the researchers saw outlines of three figures, but he interpreted them as either the exaltation of Christ or Mary, two familiar scenes from early Byzantine iconography. At the time, the font was buried under rubbish and he could not determine the function of the chapel as a baptistery. In the late 1920s, Dominican priests from the École Biblique surveyed the church. The font was already exposed, perhaps by gold seekers and robbers who damaged it. The Dominicans also saw the outlines of the figures and even suggested that the scene portrayed the baptism of Christ. But the painting was in such a poor state that no one else saw these figures. So for one hundred years the painting waited to be rediscovered, and that is what has happened now. Let us look closer at the shreds of the painting. Only outlines of two figures can be seen faintly. Fortunately, they are structured in keeping with the well-known iconographic scheme, and thus the theme can be easily recognized despite the loss of most of the details. The scene is the baptism of Christ. Its position within the baptistery gives credence to this hypothesis.

Despite its fragmentary condition, it reveals a frontally positioned figure of a youth with short curly hair, elongated face, large eyes, and long nose. The body’s neck and upper part are also traceable. To the left of this figure, another, much bigger face, surrounded by a halo, is visible. Traces of paint throughout the apse suggest these figures were part of a wider scene, which may contain additional figures.

Depicting 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. The best-known examples of it are the mosaics in the Arian and Neonian baptisteries in Ravenna (c. 500); we will return to those later. Although the scene did not survive in an architectural setting in Palestine, it exists in illuminated manuscripts (e.g., the Rabbula Gospels, fol. 4b) and many small objects (e.g., plaques, pilgrim tokens, textiles) originating in Syro-Palestine and Egypt that can serve as a comparison between the iconography and the Shivta scene.

In line with early Christian iconographic convention, in this portrayal of the scene John the Baptist’s figure is proportionally larger than that of Christ, who is depicted as much smaller and younger. Despite the obscurity of detail, this proportional distinction is clearly seen in the Shivta painting. Christ is depicted in the waters of the Jordan River, which cover his body – which is probably nude, in keeping with the common iconography – up to the hips or shoulders. The curved red line in the Shivta painting perhaps outlines the banks of the Jordan River, similar to its depiction in the sixth-century Bawit painting from Egypt. The hand of God and a dove, which symbolize the Holy Spirit and are an essential component of the event, are usually depicted in the scene. Even though we cannot see the dove in Shivta, it was surely there. Other motifs that define the scene of the baptism can be added to these required motifs: these include an angel or several angels, the personification of the Jordan River, and more. We do not know if these elements existed in Shivta. However, spots of paint detected in various places on the apse, the space left on the right and bottom of it, and an early twentieth-century testimonial mentioning the existence of the third figure may point to the fact that the scene was much wider than what is visible now. Evidently, more details of the painting are hidden by a thick encrustation, which protects the paint layers from further deterioration but also hides its details.

Christ’s face is the best-preserved part of the painting. I tried to manipulate the slides a bit to give you the best possible view of the face. When this image was first published, and because it remained unseen for centuries, many were skeptical that the image was indeed there, thinking it was just my imagination. Today, even tour guides, who know exactly where to look and what they are looking at, easily find the face of Christ projecting from the stones, and they show it to tourists.

The face of Christ was an important discovery since it is the only one to survive in an architectural setting in the Holy Land. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the discovery sparked worldwide attention. Yet it was received with special devotion because many do not expect Christ to look like he does here – young and beardless, with short curly hair. Even in the scene of his baptism, both in Byzantine and Western art, we are used to seeing Christ as a mature and bearded man with long wavy hair falling below his shoulders. I was asked repeatedly if, since the image was discovered in the Holy Land, it is possible that it shows what Christ really looked like.

We must remember, however, that in early Christian and early Byzantine art, Christ was depicted in variety of ways, sometimes even within the same monument or manuscript. In the baptism scene his youthful image reflects a theological convention – the symbolic notion of the baptism as rebirth. He is shown this way in the fifth-century Arian baptistery in Ravenna. In the Orthodox baptistery the image is different, and Christ is depicted as more mature. Unfortunately, most of the upper part of the image, including his face, underwent restoration, so we do not know if in fact the current depiction follows the original. By the ninth century the iconographic change was already complete, and from then on, Christ would be depicted as mature in the baptism scene, reflecting the age when he was baptized by John.

Whereas the longhaired Christ prevails in Ravenna, the Shivta image belongs to the iconographic scheme of the shorthaired Christ, which was especially widespread in Egypt and Syro-Palestine. Early sixth-century texts include polemics concerning the authenticity of Christ’s visual appearance, including his hairstyle – curiously, the short hair was perceived as more authentic back then. Although both images were common in the sixth century, the shorthaired Christ later disappeared together with the eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire that were lost in the seventh century, and were used only occasionally in later times. On the other hand, the longhaired image became widespread, and from the ninth century on it would be perceived as authentic.

Having said all of this, we can now return to the baptistery in Shivta and look at the wall painting in context. We can imagine a catechumen descending the three steps into the cruciform font to be baptized, while the priest stands next to the font waiting for him. The scene of Christ’s baptism is depicted 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.” Thus, the person undergoing baptism does it in the presence of Christ, and the priest is a meditator. He places his hand on the person’s head just like John the Baptist, who places his hand on Christ’s head. The person is plunged three times in the water and emerges resurrected and reborn.

The importance of the finding of the wall painting in the baptistery of the North Church at Shivta is enormous: it is a rare surviving example of early Byzantine iconography and an original wall painting in its architectural setting, and consequently provides insight into the religious and cultural life of Byzantine Shivta and Christianity in the Negev, of which only magnificent ruins remain.