Baptistery in the North Church of Shivta: structure, ritual, art

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

In the center of this paper is a Baptismal chapel in the North Church complex in the Byzantine village of Shivta (Soubeita/Sobota (Sobata)/Esbeita),[[1]](#footnote-1) situated in the Negev highlands. Shivta reached its pick during the Byzantine period (5th –6th centuries CE), and was abandoned following a significant decline in 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and excavated throughout the 20th century.[[2]](#footnote-2) Regrettably, most of the documentation and findings remain unpublished or lost, including those of the most important excavations of the site carried out by H.D. Colt expedition between 1933-1936 and in 1938 (Baly 1935; Crowfoot 1936; Youtie 1936; Colt 1948). The site also underwent a number of restorations and reconstructions disrupting its authentic architectural settings and, being poorly documented, compromising scholarly ability to differentiate between the original and restored (Shoeff 2019).

Shivta was not very large, but wealthy, about 170 houses, some two-storied, up to 350m2 in size and housing approximately 2.000 inhabitants (Segal 1981; 1983; 1986; Negev 1993; Hirschfeld, 2003: 12; Hirschfeld and Tepper 2006; Ben-Yosef 2016). Vast farmlands testify for extensive agricultural activities of the villagers (Kedar 1957; Evenari, Shanan, and Tadmor 1989; Tepper, Porat and Bar-Oz 2020). Monumental remains of its 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 fringe of the village and is the largest and most elaborate of the three. It presumably constituted a part of the monastery.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is comprised of a tri-apsidal basilica, at some point its apses were fully clad in marble, to which a chapel and a baptistery are attached on the southern side. The complex was fully excavated by H.D. Colt in 1930s, who also suggested it was dedicated to St. George.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Negev argues that, originally built as mono-apsidal in 400-450, both North and South Churches of Shivta were rebuilt as tri-apsidal in early 6th century, perhaps because of the damage caused by an earthquake (Negev 1989: 138-9, 142).[[5]](#footnote-5) The adjacent chapel and the baptistery of the North Church are attributed to the early phase (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). He dates this phase to mid. 4th century based mainly on a number of the mid- 4th-century coins which were found during excavations (Margalit 1987: 111-16).[[6]](#footnote-6) Such an early date seems to contradict the Nilus *Narratio (c. 400)* which mentions Shivta by the name Subeita, and describes it as pagan during that time. If indeed such an early date for the church is correct, it would be 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 datable due to most recent research undertaken in Shivta.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus, recent study of marble pilasters, discovered already by Colt, suggests their second half of the 5th- mid. 6th century dating. Those were imported to the Negev and testify to the prosperity of the North Church at Shivta during this period (Fisher and Tepper 2021).[[9]](#footnote-9) Similar range of dates is proposed in recent comparative study of the mosaics in Shivta (Talgam & all, forthcoming). Further, a series of unpublished c14 dating, performed on plastered wall in the North Church and in the mortar plaster of the side chapel (Tepper and Bar-Oz 2020)[[10]](#footnote-10), support the late dating, as was present above, in Fisher and Tepper research (Yan at el, in process).

Negev suggested that the architectural change from mono- to tri-apsidal in this and possibly other churches (East Church in Elusa, Central Church in Rehovot in the Negev, North Church in Nessana, Petra “Great Church”), was prompted by expansion of the cult of relics and martyrs (Negev 1974: 400-421; Negev 1989: 141).[[11]](#footnote-11) Reliquaries were discovered in different churches in the Negev, supporting the importance of the 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) and clearly visible today being incorporated into the northern niche of the lateral apse.[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition, inscription evoking for the name of St. Stephan, the first martyr (“O Lord of St. Stephan, martyr, help your servant…”) is sited by Negev (1981: 62, no. 70). Its location, however, is uncertain.

According to Patrich, this architectural change can be mainly explained by a change in liturgy (Patrich 2003: 476-7; Patrich 2006a; 2006b: 387-92). Thus, the side rooms, *pastrophoria*, were probably used to display gifts of the Holy Eucharist. From there Eucharistic offerings were led in procession to the altar. Evidence from *Mystagogia* of Maximus the Confessor indicates that sometime in the late 5th or early 6th century the Great Entrance was introduced in Palestine into the pre-anaphoral rite (PG 91, 657-718; Patrich 2006a: 349-50), the closed side rooms were turned into lateral apses while the function of *pastrophoria* as a keeper and exhibiter of the Eucharistic gifts moved to a chapel, 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 the North Church in Shivta to the first phase of the church, it well might be that chapel was not part of the original plan but added at a later stage (Patrich 2006a: 343). The chapel once decorated with wall paintings, from which only shreds have survived in the area of the apse, has also a mosaic floor with common geometric designs and a dedication 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 the bigger 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 names of Thomas the bishop, otherwise unknown, and John the vicarious, most probably local administrative official or army officer (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, attached to the chapel, in 612. The child seems to be of a special status, since nearly all other buried in the Baptistery are related to clergy (Di Segni 1997: 839-841).[[16]](#footnote-16)

The date of Abraham’s grave is the earliest secure date related to the Baptistery, however, it is not necessarily the date when the Baptistery was constructed. Ben Pechat challenges Negev’s early date of the baptistery, suggesting that it is contemporary with the second building phase of the complex, after the main church was turned into tri-apsidal (Ben-Pechat 1990: 502).

Only a small number of baptisteries in Palestine can be securely dated to the 4th century, those placed in important centers of worship and pilgrimage (Day 2009). According to Ben Pechat, majority of baptisteries in small towns and villages in the area are datable or dated to the 6th and some even to the 7th century (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 the South Church in Shivta.[[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. Thus, both fonts were sheathed in marble. Some shreds of marble are still visible in South Church baptistery, while chopped from the North Church font by robbers, sometime in the early 20th century. In addition, the wall painting of the Baptism of Christ found in the apse of the North Church just recently testify that it was painted with religious scenes similarly to the South Church (Maayan Fanar & all 2018). Ben Pechat attributes the South Church baptistery to the early 5th century (together with Eleona and Mampsis/Kurnub, “according to archaeological conviction” (Ben Pechat 1989: 172), and states that it was built at times catechumens still existed, while the baptistery in the North Church, although used to baptize adults, was dedicated, in her opinion, to baptize local nomads and perhaps pilgrims by monks (Ben-Pechat 1990: 511-14). Even if this statement is correct, it cannot be considered as a testimony for the date of the baptistery, since nomad conversions by monks are documented already in the 4th-5th centuries.[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact, this early date of the South Church baptistery is consistent with the proposed date of the church, which, as noted, is considered by most scholars earlier than the North Church. This statement, however, 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 6th century or the 7th century, only laymen were buried there. The burials inside the Baptistery, presumably at its western end, date from 612 to 679, and all but two, that of child Abraham, son of vicarious John and Stephan son of Abraham (died 643 AD),[[20]](#footnote-20) are of clergy and monastic character. Some of the tombstones were decorated with crosses, either simple or more elaborate, a common symbol of Christian faith (Goldfus 2006: 415).

By the 6th century, burials inside churches became extremely popular and widespread. To be buried next to the holy relics was considered a privilege and symbol of status (Saradi 2006: 436-7). In the Negev, apart from Shivta, such practice is attested at Nessana, particularly in the North Church. There, clerics and laymen were buried in the 6th-7th century without separation, while in the Martyrium, clergy were buried in the second half of the 5th century. Other examples include Oboda-South Church (from 541) and Rehovot- North Church, dated between 488-555 (Negev 1981: 94-5; Goldfus 412; Tzafrir 1988: 25-7, 36; Negev, oboda final report1997: 135).[[21]](#footnote-21) The custom continued to flourish despite prohibited by Justinian legislation (Saradi 2006: 437). 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 a clear evidence of the existence of such a custom well into the 7th 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 of the names of the diseased can be related to the names mentioned in the 7th-century papyri discovered in Nessana. Although, dating of the North Church complex by its burials may be circumstantial, these chronological brackets join other dated findings from the Church, pointing that during the late 6th-early 7th centuries the North Church complex could be renovated and/or expanded.[[23]](#footnote-23) Such an expansion of ecclesiastic building activities in the late 6th -7th centuries is attested also in nearby Nessana (Di Segni 1997: 782-3, 792; Urman 2004:115; Ruffini 2011: 218-219).

We may thus summarize the discussion on the date of the North Church. Whether the earliest mono-apsidal church was built in the late 4th or most probably at the early 5th century, it was rebuilt and transformed into the tri-apsidal sometime in the 6th century, perhaps as a monastery (Tepper 2019a). The inscription in the side chapel brings us into the beginning of the 7th century, while the burials in the Baptistery which began in 612, suggest either later trend or later date for the Baptistery. The latest burial dated to 679 evinces that the complex was functional at list until that time. Being also the last secure date found in Shivta, and correlating with reference to it in the 7th-century Nessana papyri (Kraemer 1958: 212-14, no. 75; 227-233, no. 79), it testifies that its Christian population survived at least 50 years after the whole area fell under Islam during the 7th-9th century CE.[[24]](#footnote-24) Arabic inscriptions in the narthex’ north room of the North Church complex together with the small mosque adjoined to the South Church Baptistery (Baly 1935: 175-177; Moor 2013: 96-108), clearly testify in favor of Early Islamic occupation of the site. The nature of interaction between Christian and Muslim populations, if there was any, remains unclear. Late 7th 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 8th century at the earliest, which still leaves us with about half a century between the last dated evidence of Christian presence at the site.[[25]](#footnote-25) In fact, despite the mosque 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 the 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 pavement leading to the mosque, questions the co-existence of the South Church and the mosque, allowing to offer that these two religious structures didn’t exist simultaneously, and that the mosque was built only after destruction of the church (Tepper 2019b).[[26]](#footnote-26)

Furthermore, latest excavations of trash mounds clearly show separation between Byzantine and Early Islamic trash (Tepper et al. 2018). This joins scholarly conclusions on slow abandonment of the site, which started already in the 6th century (Hirschfeld 2006; Tepper et al. 2015) as well as decline of agricultural activities[[27]](#footnote-27) which finally stopped sometimes in the 7th century (Tepper, Porat, and Bar-Oz, G., 2020). The same can be said concerning the cleaning of the water reservoirs, an obligation of Shivta’s residents (Youtie 1936), which stopped sometime in the 8th 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, which was probably quite modest taken in account small size of the mosque, while most of Shivta’s residents left either because of heavy taxes (O’Sullivan 2015: 50-74), natural disasters,[[28]](#footnote-28) plagues[[29]](#footnote-29) or any combination with any other reasons.

**Baptistery: structure and rite**

*North and South Churches baptisteries comparative analysis and parallels*

We will now turn to the discussion of the baptisteries in Shivta in attempt to ideate the interconnections between shape and ritual. With no direct evidence on the nature of Baptismal rite in Shivta or in the Negev in general, our main, but not only,[[30]](#footnote-30) source remains Cyril of Jerusalem whose *Catechetical Lectures* were read during Easter liturgy until the decline of catechumenate and its disappearance at about 7th century (Liturgy in Byzantine Jerusalem, 8; Taft).[[31]](#footnote-31) We refer here to the excellent studies by Day 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: Summons to baptistery; Pre-immersion rituals which included a confession of sin and exorcist ritual of some kind; A profession faith and A pre-immersion anointing. The Immersion includes a consecration of the font with a Trinitarian formula; A complete immersion and some sort of ‘partaking of names and ‘sealing’; week evidence were found to post-immersion anointing or white robing. The ritual ends with the procession into a Church and Eucharist. (Day, The Catechetical Lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem, 1189-1200). Analyzing accounts of Baptism performed in Gaza, Day concludes that the ceremony in Gaza was similar to that in Jerusalem and suggests that these accounts correspond to the Palestinian ritual followed elsewhere in the area (Day 2009: 16-18, 33).

Existence of two baptisteries in Shivta, a rural settlement in an arid environment, raised questions among scholars. Thus, Bagatti saw in them a possible testimony for two different Christian movements within the village. There is no evidence however to support his suggestion (Perrone 1998: 13, note 16).[[32]](#footnote-32) Perhaps, existence of several baptisteries within a village or a small town was not such an uncommon practice.[[33]](#footnote-33) For example, in the Djebel Barisha area in Northern Syria, the baptisteries, majority dated to the 6th century (e.g., Bashmishli, Dar Qita, were attached even to small churches and occasionally there existed two or more baptisteries in one town (Butler 1903; Tchalenko 1953: 317).[[34]](#footnote-34) It was proposed that in Dar Qita one of the baptisteries served locals while the other was connected to St Sergius church, which functioned as regional pilgrimage center (Pena 1997: 95-6). Small sized baptisteries in Syria did not serve to accommodate large groups and perhaps functioned for family use (Pena 1996: 96). We will further argue that albeit general similarity, the two baptisteries in Shivta are not identical. Differences, seemingly minor, may point to either different chronology dates or implications.

Both baptisteries in Shivta constitute a chapel attached to the main church, confirming to general structure of the baptisteries in small rural settlements in the East, most of which were of relatively modest size, and at times indistinguishable from other chapels connected to the church.[[35]](#footnote-35) Baptistery next to the North Church was built at its southern side. It has a prolonged rectangular structure with an apse facing east in which the font is placed.[[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 perpendicular angle with the main nave of the baptistery, and connected to the narthex of the church by another passage.

The South Church baptistery is placed to the north-west side of the main church. It consists of two spaces (F and G) separated by 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 shaped 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), whether to enter the North Church baptistery it was necessary to enter the main church through its southern nave. This arrangement, which more suits the so-called “Syrian” mono-apsidal type (Mulholland 59) may confirm to the change the Northern Church underwent from mono-apsidal into tri-apsidal.

Both baptisteries are composed of three spaces: an ante-room, a nave, and an apse with the baptism font. These spaces do not constitute closed rooms but are separated from each other by inner divisions.[[38]](#footnote-38) In the South Church Baptistery catechumens entered through the western part of the pillars and exited, after the baptism, through the eastern part into adjacent chapel (Khatchatrian 1982: 38), which connected the baptistery to the main church. In the North Church baptistery, the 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 adjacent chapel and from there to the Church. Thus in both cases the two flows did not meet. It seems that in the North Church complex total separation of flows was accomplished more fully.

It is not unusual for a baptistery to have two different entrances interconnecting between various space arrangements. Thus, 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 (5.5x6.5 m).[[39]](#footnote-39) In the 5th-century Baptistery at Qalat Sim’an the font is located within the apse which has two lateral openings, especially designed for large flows of masses (Tchalenko 1953:1, 237-8). In the 5th-century Petra Church the baptismal font is situated in the middle room has entrances into adjacent rooms (Bikai 2002:272). The 6th-century baptistery in Washnary (Ozurgeti region, village Gurianta) had two doorways, in western and northern walls; the northern door was directly connected to the interior of the church (Berdzenishvili 2014: 296-8). In fact, those entrances serve ritual purpose: the 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 churches in Shivta 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, an 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 already in *Didache*, running water was used to symbolize “Living water” (Bogdanović 2017: 62). After the ceremony, all the 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, and 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 act of baptism with the garden of Paradise stressing the importance of nakedness of the catechumen awaking nakedness of Adam and Eve who were not ashamed of it until “took up the garment of sin” (John Chrysostom, *Baptismal instructions*, cited from Whitaker 1970: 38; *Myst. Cat*. I.1. Weiss 2006: 20; Day 2018: 83-4). Since most probably, the person took his cloth of before entering the font, in 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 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, but was, almost certainly, placed under a canopy (ciborium), which visually defined it in space, while curtains could be used to hid partially the act of baptism. Although today undetectable, a remnant of one column to hold the canopy is still visible on Colt’s photograph of the baptistery font made in 1930s.[[42]](#footnote-42) Canopy is attested in the baptistery in Nessana church of St Sergius and Bacchus (Ristow 1998: #318) dated to 464-527/65; in Mampsis baptistery (Ristow 1998: # 313) as well as in the Petra Church (5th century, Ristow 1998: #443; Bikai 2002: 272) and in Old Diaconicon on Mount Nebo (Michel 1998: 405), although they were probably more widespread than surviving evidence show.[[43]](#footnote-43)

According to the Eastern liturgy both the altar and the baptism font are required to 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, tradition of enclosing the baptismal font within canopy goes back to the 3rd-century baptistery in Dura Europos (Bogdanovic 2017: 51-2; 144-7).[[44]](#footnote-44) Evidence from the 9th- 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 from Byzantine illuminated manuscripts (e.g., Gregory Naziansus, Oratio XL, Iviron Monastery, 10th c) also point to the use of canopy above the baptistery fonts (see also Underwood 1950). Curtains were most probably hung within canopies, which also perhaps could serve to hold some lightening 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 be used at all. A proposal was made that they were unserviceable, cut for aesthetic reasons (Ben Pechat 1989: 176). Since both fonts are about 60 cm above the floor level, they were probably reached by a portable ladder.

There is no standardization among the baptismal fonts in the Negev, each has its own peculiarities. The baptismal font in Mampsis/Kurnub (Ristow 1998: #313), was cruciform at its first stage, sunk into the floor with steps descending from each arm of the cross (Negev 1988: 48-50). At some point, the arms of the font were blocked, perhaps to diminish use of water (Negev 1988: 49-50). The font of a composite type (square in plan on the exterior and semicircle on the interior; Colt 1962: 37; Negev 1997) at Nessana, dated to 464-527, was entered with two steps (Ristow 1998: #318). North Church Baptistery at Oboda/Avdat, presumably dated to the end of the 4th-beginning of the 5th century, has one of the earliest fonts of cruciform shape inscribed in a semicircle (Ristow 1998: #300 (date 5/6c); Negev 1974: 413; Ben Pechat 1989: 172). It remains to be one the closest comparison to Shivta’s baptisteries, although Oboda’s font does not have steps (Negev 1997: 117).

By the 6th century, fonts of cruciform shape were already widespread.[[47]](#footnote-47) The earliest secularly dated examples of cruciform fonts belong to the 5th 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 5th century, perhaps even to the 4th (Ristow 1998: #785; Ferguson 2009: 827). Similar shape of the font can be seen at the 6th-century Church B at Salamis (Ristow 1998:# 788). Additional examples include cruciform fonts in churches at 5th-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 5th century but abandoned and rebuild also as a cruciform in the early 7th 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 – 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 forms of the font within the Holy Land, and can be found in 60% of the 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) Is shape is linked in the best possible way 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 steps to descent into it correspond perfectly to the symbolism of Baptism based on Pauline theme of being buried and raised up with Christ the font symbolizing place of 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).

Such symbolism of the act of baptism was widely accepted as, for example, 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)

In order to mimic the idea of death and resurrection of Christ 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 was argued, however, that no Baptistery font in the Holy Land supports full immersion of a standing person, since they were not deep enough.[[52]](#footnote-52) Similar question on the way of initiation by either full immersion or sprinkling of water remains unanswered regarding Northern Syrian baptisteries (Lassus 1947: 218f; Pena 1997: 97) as well as western practices (Thompson 2019). We agree with Ben Pechat who suggests that the catechumen can in fact, with the help of the priest, adjust himself in the position enabling for full immersion, either by leaning on the steps in the East side of the font (which make these steps usable after all), or by standing on his knees, with priest pressing his head under the water (1989: 180-1). The later solution finds support in the *Didascalia* (ch. 17) and the account by Theodore of Mapsuestia (Hom. XIC, 15). In fact, according to this account, the candidate is on the knees while receiving *gift of baptism* by three full immersions while his head was pushed under water by 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). Existence of such an alcove was also proposed in connection to the North Church Baptistery (Ben-Pechat 1990: 511), although no evidence of it have been found in field.[[53]](#footnote-53) Small variously shaped alcoves at the side of the baptismal font are also attested in Oboda/Avdat (North Church) and Kurnub/Mampsis (Ben Pechat 1989:179), the Petra Church (Fiema & all 2001: 47) and more. However, their function remains unclear.[[54]](#footnote-54) Proposals were made that they could be used for oil anointing as a part of Baptismal rite. It seems however unlikely as it is too big and would require a lot of oil to be pulled into it. It is more reasonable to suggest that oil was kept in glass bottles. If it was used for oil, perhaps it was oil to sanctify the font by pouring it into the water before baptism.

Another suggestion was that those alcoves could be used for washing of the feet of the neophytes symbolizing humility and in reference to Christ washing feet of the apostles. This practice is known from Ambrosian ritual and is described in connection with Neonian baptistery in Ravenna (Wharton 1987: 365), but 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 diminish use of water (Ben Pechat 1989:177-8). This remains a leading theory for the time being for its function (Ferguson 2009: 822-3; Fiema & all 2001: 47-8). It is generally accepted that, although infant baptism became more common during the 4th-5th centuries, even in the 6th century majority of people were still baptized as adults,[[55]](#footnote-55) mainly during Easter Sunday but also Epiphany and other special holidays (Ferguson, 629). In fact, it is not entirely clear what was the status of catechumenate during this time. The adult catechumenate was still common in Constantinople at the beginning of the 5th century and survived for some extent into the 7th century being mentioned for the last time in Quinisext Council in Trullo (691-2). The evidence for its importance along the 6th century are inconclusive (Taft 2009; Mathews 1971: 127-9). Keeping with the division, which suited the adult baptism ritual, baptisteries in Shivta may suggest that they were built when catechumenate was still in practice.

Despite overall similarity between the two Baptisteries, their different position within the chapel as well as differences in space arrangement as a whole call for some thoughts.

The closest regional parallel to the South Church baptistery remains East Church baptistery in Mampsis. It has cruciform font, enclosed within a canopy and with a small alcove at its side. Although East Church baptistery in Mampsis is not precisely dated, it is not later than the 5th century.[[56]](#footnote-56) Similarly to the South Church baptistery in Sivta its ante-room is divided from the room with the font by stylobate with two column bases..

Another close parallel comes from the Petra Church. Its font is also cruciform, placed under canopy and has a small alcove next to the main font. Differently from Shivta but similarly to Mampsis, the baptistery is situated in the middle of a room. It should also be pointed that Petra’s baptistery was built in the mid.-later 5th century, before the church turned tri-apsidal, and 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 the baptisteries dated within the 5th or early 6th century, though none of the listed above examples contain font inside the apse behind the chancel screen. Although, appearance of the font within the apse is known already in the 3rd century (Dura Europus) and exists in 4th-5th-century Syrian baptisteries (Dar Qita, Qalat Siman), the closest regional parallel is in North Church, Oboda, which has a cruciform font, albeit without steps leading into it) in the apse and a small alcove at its side. Here, as in the South Church, Shivta, a stylobate with two column bases (pillars) divided between western and Eastern parts of the Baptistery, These pillars could support curtains which were shut during the ceremony (Negev 1997: 117). This church two is attributed to the late 4th or 5th century (Negev 1997; Ovadiah 1970:24).

South Church baptistery in Shivta seems to combine most of the elements which exist in the late 4th-5th century baptisteries. Should be mentioned, however, that it is the only one to be situated in the apse and enclosed with a canopy, thus combining several earlier elements found in different baptisteries. To this may be added that it has a monolith font, differently from earlier, masonry ones.

The North Church baptistery in Shivta shares most features with the South one, but adds a raised bema and a chancel screen, architectural elements, which function as a clear barrier between the font and the nave. A chancel screen can be best paralleled to the Mount Nebo later baptistery of 597, although there the font is not set on a bema. In fact, in the Basilica of Moses on Mount Nebo has two baptisteries. The earlier baptistery (530 AD) is cruciform while placed within the northern chapel, possibly under canopy.[[57]](#footnote-57) A semicircular basin is integrated within the step of the southern arm of the font (Ben Pechat 1989). When abandon, another baptistery with a font of a different shape was constructed within the apse of the southern chapel, enclosed with a chancel screen (597 AD). This font did not have a canopy. Perhaps, such change has some liturgical justification.

Thus, while the South Church baptistery in Shivta fits better within the regional variety of the baptisteries dated to the 5th early 6th century, the North Church baptistery tends to more uniformity within the later phase of the church by adding unique 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 tell much about actual baptismal rite. Early depictions of baptism may shed additional light on a ceremony performed.[[58]](#footnote-58) One such source is the 9th-century illuminated manuscript from Constantinople: Homilies of Gregory of Naziansus (BNF, gr. 510 = Paris 510). Its miniatures may reflect early iconography of the Church of the Holy Apostles (Heisenberg 1908: 209), therefore miniatures of 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 nude, immersed up to his shoulders into the font of a cruciform shape. The font is raised on a platform. The bishop stands on the steps at the side of the font, reclining toward him and placing his right hand upon neophyte’s head.

This font echoes North Church Shivta’s font not just because of its cruciform shape but also because it is too, raised on a platform. As in Paris 510, the priest most probably stood beside the font elevated by means of 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, his hand is placed upon neophyte’s head. Movement of his body suggests that he is about to push neophyte’s head down into the water, confirming to Theodore of Mapsuestia account cited above.

An image on fol. 426v adds more important details to our knowledge of baptismal rite. Twelve apostles are shown on a mission to convert to Christianity nations of the world through the act of baptism, each shown in a separate frame. All twelve nimbed apostles stand on a stepped platform next to the variously shaped - round, square, quatrefoil, or cruciform fonts, placing right hand on neophyte head. The variety of fonts’ shapes depicted in Paris 510 reflect actual 6th-century archaeological findings. Neophytes are depicted nude, immersed into water up to chest or shoulders hands stretched to the sides or crossed on the chest. On the other side of the font a person enclosed in white is depicted, hands raised toward the font and covered with white cloths for the newly baptized Gregory Nazianzen, Oratio 37. His appearance suggests presence of additional person, probably a clergy, in the area of the font, who is waiting to present the newly initiated with white garments after exiting the font.

Taking together liturgical, archaeological and pictorial materials, 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 also imitating Christ, “who hung naked on the Cross” (MC 2:2; Whitaker 1970: 29), and proceeded to the baptismal font, to the East, toward the divine light.[[61]](#footnote-61) A candidate was probably lead into the font, as prescribed by Cyril, climbed portable steps to enter it, and then, descended into the font, a perfect projection of the grave and the womb, by three steps cut inside. He then kneeled and was pushed three times into the water, thus symbolically died and resurrected with Christ (Jensen 2011), by the priest who laid his right hand upon neophyte’s head pressing him into the waters. The priest[[62]](#footnote-62) stood next to the font, elevated above its level by means of portable steps. Afterwards, the newly initiated would come out, 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), and putted 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 nudity could be more visible. Only after that, a neophyte proceeded to the court of the adjusted chapel through the entrance in the apse area (North Church) or eastern part between the pilasters (South Church). It is only after being baptized and receiving chrism, the neophyte could partake in the mystery of Eucharistic liturgy. Thus, he probably entered in the procession into the main church for the first communion. This procession symbolizes entrance into the kingdom of heaven and paradise left by Adam (Brook 2006:49). Alternatively, the side chapel itself could perhaps serve for the first communion after the ceremony of baptism.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Thus, whether the date of the baptisteries remains unclear, the South Church baptistery seemingly earlier than the North, baptismal rite performed in the South Church seems to be public oriented. This can be supported by the central position of the South Church complex, close to the pools and the public area, its baptistery being easily accessed from the street. The North Church Baptistery, enclosed within the North Church complex and accessed only from within the church, could serve inner purposes of the monastery.

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

*History and importance of the finding*

Although, except for mosaic floors, our information on the decoration of early Byzantine baptisteries is rather limited, it should not be surprising to find traces of wall paintings in the baptistery. Walls of Byzantine churches and monasteries were usually lad with mosaics or painted.[[65]](#footnote-65) Traces of paintings were found throughout Levant and Egypt (Burdajewicz 2019, 2020; Vitto 2019). While in Syria almost nothing have survived, extensively painted walls of churches and monasteries throughout Egypt may give clues on widespread and importance 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), depiction of saints and Christ among the apostles from Caesarea Maritima (Avner 1999), a painted tomb from Lohamei HaGetaot (Tzafrir 1989; Michaeli 2005-6, Maayan-Fanar 2010) constitute only few examples of once rich legacy of early Byzantine wall paintings in the Holy Land.[[66]](#footnote-66) More knowledge on early Byzantine church iconography in Syro-Palestine may be deduced from surviving descriptions, tokens and votive objects, scenes which were probably based on once existed wall paintings and mosaics in such important churches as the Holy Sepulchre, Nativity Church in Bethlehem, Church of Resurrection, and more (Polanski 2013). A number of fragments of the 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 still recognizable scene of the Transfiguration of Christ in the South Church. It was acknowledged already by Wooley and Lawrence in 1914 and 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. In fact, early researches and scholars such as Palmer and Drake, Musil, Wooley & Lawrence made no mention of the 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 surrounded his head. Below the figures are red and blue strips placed one upon the other. Wiegand proposed to interpret the figures as a part of the scene the Transfiguration of Christ or Glorification of Mary, both popular in early Christian apse imagery. Describing it as a chapel which received light from three windows, Wiegand, was, however, unaware of the function of the chapel as baptistery, since the font was still hidden under rubbish. His proposed plan of the North Church compound, where no Baptistery is indicated, proves this assumption. Early 20th century photographs also confirm that all the space below the hole of a water pipe was completely covered with rubbish. Probably for this reason, Wiegand interpreted shreds of figures according to widespread use of scenes in context of early churches, and haven’t even thought in direction of the Baptism of Christ. On the other hand, he saw outlines of three figures, some of which degraded and disappeared since.

A few years later, in 1926, Laverngne and Tonneau from Ecole biblique saw outlines of two figures only and were the first to propose to identify 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 in fact a baptistery. He also managed to describe and measure its font. By that time, the whole area of the bema was cleaned, the fact that amazed Mallon, who tried to figure out who exactly cleaned and perhaps even made a scientific exploration at the site. Being unsuccessful in his efforts, he concluded that the place was cleaned and looted by treasure hunters. Returning a year later in 1930, he evinced more damage: the corner of the font was broken, as well as the pavement, which only strengthened his presumption that the place was damaged in search for gold.

The painting was in such a poor state that no one else could discern these figures despite the site being extensively excavated and studied along the 20th century. Only in 2018, the scene was finally identified with certainty as 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 shoulders are still visible. His face, turning slightly to the right, with emphasized oversized eyes, elongate nose, 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 paints belong to the underpainting, some bright pink spots of paint suggest that Christ was depicted nude 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 details of his face are all gone. Since in Shivta only right half of the apse preserve traces of painting, while Christ figure is in its very center, it is logical to suggest that another figure was depicted just opposite that of John the Baptist. Traces of round line at the level of the figure on the left support this suggestion. This was probably the third figure, which Wiegand saw. In addition, spots of red and blue paint in various places of the apse suggest that the scene occupied the whole apse.

Surprisingly, the scene of the Baptism of Christ 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 stressing symbolically the theme of salvation and redemption from the original sin through baptism. The scene did not seem to appear in theBaptistery of St. John*,*Naples Cathedral, although its mosaics survived but partly. Other surviving scenes recall Baptism by using “types of Baptism” from the Old and the New Testaments and focusing on “water symbolism” (Maier 1964: 38-45).

In other cases, wall decorations haven’t survived at all, leaving scholars with speculations concerning their possible iconographic programs, while their floor mosaics usually show animals drinking from the water source, a symbolic depiction of living water and often related to Psalms which stress its salvific power.[[70]](#footnote-70) A notable example in this respect is a 5th-century Baptistery at Stobi. It is mostly known for unique mosaics of the font, perfectly preserved, with depiction of animals drinking from *kantharoi*. Fragments of painted plaster reveal that its walls were painted with images of Evangelists and perhaps also healing miracles (?), recalling Dura Europos and Naples baptisteries. It is well possible that there was also an image of Christ’s baptism, which, however, didn’t survive (Downing 1998: 273). Downing argues that in Stobi mosaic floor reflected the iconographic program of the wall paintings (1998: 274-5). The choice for healing miracle of the blind strengthen connection to water symbolism and a power of baptism. This connection visually comes out in the 9th-century Paris Gregory (BNF, gr. 510), where the source of water 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 in fact the earliest surviving examples of the Baptism of Christ within the Baptistery.[[71]](#footnote-71) In both cases, the scene occupies the cupola just above the baptismal font. Another example is a 7th-century (or later?) wall painting in the Catacomb of Pontianus in Rome, also served as an underground baptistery (Jensen 2011: 189-190). Visual connection between the ceremony of Baptism and the Baptism of Christ may reflect establishment of the commemoration of the Baptism of Christ on 6 January, an innovation of the 5th century and was directly connected with the introduction of 25th of December as Christ’s birthday as an independent feast (Rouwhorst 2019: 46). One of the important symbolic links is that Christ purified the waters of the Jordan, which were identified with the waters of baptismal font. It is perhaps since this time visual connection between act of Christ’s baptism and ceremonial baptism became prominent. Christ is depicted sanctifying the waters in which the candidate is baptized. Thus, Shivta’s Baptism appears to be among the earliest surviving examples, and the earliest in the Holy Land, which can be viewed in its original architectural context, hence 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 5th century, the main iconographical features of the scene were already well established and it can be found in the illuminated manuscripts, paintings and mosaics adorning walls of churches and monasteries as part of the Christological cycle, portable objects, furniture decorations, etc. Although the scene did not survive in an architectural setting in Palestine, it exists in illuminated manuscripts and many small objects (e.g., plaques (Gold plaque, Dumbarton Oaks, 45.2; Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, Handbook (1967) , cat. 183; p. 52), pilgrim tokens (“Baptism on an Eulogia Token," 'Atiqot, XIV (1980) , pp. 109-110; fig. 1; pl. XXIII.4), textiles (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 usually depicted as a beardless youth, is completely nude, perhaps reflecting the nakedness of catechumens, covered with waters of the Jordan River up to his chest or waist. The figure of John the Baptist was usually depicted as a large-sized, bearded, with long hear, inclined toward a much smaller figure of Christ, placing hand on his head. The contrast of sizes between the two figures is kept throughout most scenes of Baptism. From the 9th century on, John would be depicted standing on the rock, which puts him on higher position than that of Christ, although they would become much closer in height and age.

The scene may be reduced to two main figures only, or include additional figures, frequently identified as an angel or several angels on the opposite side of Jordan river, compositionally balancing the figure of John. Thus, a figure (or figures) carrying garments for Christ, is depicted in Bawit, Sancta Sanctorum reliquary, an ampulla now in Bonn Institute, Dolger-Institute, a 6th century gold medallion from Syria or Palestine, where the two figures are identified as angels by their wings, and other examples. Depiction of an angel or angels may in fact refer to a presence of the sponsor (or clergy) in the actual ceremony of Baptism (Jensen 2011: 115), and as such 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 Jordan was added to the main scene. In the 5th-century Arian Baptistery and on Werden casket of c. 425-450[[73]](#footnote-73) his representation follows classical type of river personification and represents a place where the baptism took place, but in the Neonian Baptistery (c. 500) it is already shown as an active figure, a witness of Christ’s baptism, who in fact, approaches him with cloths. In Bawit, chapel XXX, the personification of Jordan has recoiled, with his hand raised up, on an ivory from Lion Museum John the Baptist steps upon his head, his body turned his back to Christ,[[74]](#footnote-74) while in the 6th-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 move, turning back to Christ (Ps.114:3) and even trying to escape from his presence. Already in the 6th century but especially from the 9th century on the Jordan would receive demonic features merging with satanic forces overturned 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 rite of Baptism, the first step of which is to denounce of Satan and to step into the waters cleaned by Christ through his baptism (Spinks 2006: 83-5). Thus, Cyril of Jerusalem links clearly 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)

It can only be guessed if the waters in Shivta’s baptism were populated by fish or perhaps also by personification of Jordan, as in so many surviving examples of the Baptism. However, numerous blue spots in the lower part of the apse below and all around surviving fragment of Christ’s figure suggest that it occupied enough space and might include at least some of the abovementioned motifs.

Whatever the waters could look like, a semi-circle above and behind Christ’s figure most probably circumscribes the banks of the Jordan River. Similarly, waters of Jordan meet on top behind Christ’s figure are depicted, for example, on the 6th-century wall painting in Bawit, Chapel XXX, an ivory from Eastern Mediterranean, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, and the 6th century Sancta Sanctorum reliquary from Syria or Palestine.[[76]](#footnote-76) The figure of Christ is in fact 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). In fact, parallelism of three mystical wombs: Mary, Jordan and Sheol (Seppälä 2011: 1146), clearly 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 suggest reference to Syrian perception of baptism. More common seem to be a depiction of two separated banks of Jordan, emphasizing the living water itself, which covers 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).

The 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 crossed on a chest, perhaps mimicking certain position of hands of a neophite during baptism. This can be a case in Shivta as well, however, a few spots of pinkish color, similar to ones in the area of his face and upper part of the body, can be seen on Christ’s left, on the level of his face, just might suggest that his hands could be lifted. Although, we cannot be sure of that before the wall painting is cleaned and more of the painting will be unraveled, there exists at least one example, a 6th-century painting from the Bawit monastery (Chapel XXX), where Christ is depicted with hands raised in orans position. This detail in Bawit is very rare, and if it did exist in Shivta, we might evince 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 a 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 scheme of Christ as infant found already in the catacombs and sarcophagi, and reflecting the symbolism of baptism as rebirth.[[78]](#footnote-78) Youthful image of Christ is kept in the 5th-7th centuries, although he may vary in details. Thus, for example, on the 6th-century ivory plaque from Syria or Egypt (British Museum, 1896,0618.1), a miniature from the Armenian Gospels, (Erevan, Matenadaran, MS 2374, fol. 229v), or the 6th-7th-century pilgrim tokens from Qal’at Sem’an (British Museum, 1973,0501.29[[79]](#footnote-79) and 1973,0501.30[[80]](#footnote-80)), he is depicted beardless and with short hear. In the Rabbula Gospels (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. Plut. I, 56, fol. 4b) Christ is depicted with a short hair, but also has a short beard.[[81]](#footnote-81) In the Baptism scene on Sancta Sanctorum reliquary, Christ is depicted bearded and with long hair falling on his shoulders. Two scenes of the Baptism of Christ were discovered in the Bawit monastery, in one of them Christ appears bearded and with a long hair (XVII), in the other – as a youth with short hair (XXX; Cledat 5-6; Badawy 1978: 252), suggesting coexistence of the two types side by side.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Whether in the East, short-haired Christ prevailed although with certain inconsistencies and variations in details,[[83]](#footnote-83) in the West long-haired Christ seem to be more common. Thus, in the 5th-century Arian Baptistery in Ravenna Christ is depicted as a beardless youth with a long hair. Similar depiction of long-haired youth appears in the 7th-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, since the whole area of both Christ’s and John the Baptist heads as well as other important details of the scene, were restored and possibly altered by Felice Kibel in the 19th century (Ferguson 2009: 129).

Short beard added to some images (Santa Sanctorum, Rabbula, and perhaps Neonian baptistery) may suggest first signs of transition to more mature type of Christ from a youth to adult. Such transitional type of Christ can be seen for example in St Stephanos Church, Cappadocia, attributed to the 7th-9th centuries. Here Christ is depicted proportionally much smaller than John the Baptist, but as far as can be seen from this fragmentary mural, his hair is long, falling down to shoulders, his face elongate with traces of a beard. The 9th-century marginal psalters (e.g., the Chludov Psalter, State Historical Museum, gr. 129 Moscow, fol. 117; Pantokrator Monastery, Mount Athos 61, fol. 98v) show already stabilized depiction of mature, bearded Christ. This image would to become widespread in later Byzantine iconography of his Baptism.

Lastly, some words should be said about depiction of Christ with short curly hair, which appears to be 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 his depictions from Egypt and Saqqara, correspond to this portrait-type, with or without addition of a short beard, while in other instances (e.g., in Bawit), his hair is long but heavy and wooly. On the other hand, in the scene of Transfiguration, St Catherine monastery, Sinai, Christ is depicted with a long smooth hair, parted in the middle (Bacci 2014: 116-130). In fact, in the 6th 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 combination of several types of Christ 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 bearded and with a long hair, although this inconsistence may be due to different models and later restorations (Bernabo 2014: 345).

It is out of the scoop of the present paper to deal with the problem of variety of visual representations of Christ and establishing of his image in light of his “paradoxical visibility” (Bacci 2014:108).[[84]](#footnote-84) Yet, it should be pointed that even when Christ’s image was modelled upon iconography of ancient deities, the issue of authenticity of Christ’s image was of much importance. Thus, in an early 6th-century text a painter was severely punished by 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)

Scholarly suggest that since this type is more frequent in his images in Syro-Palestine and ma, it could be 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) and but would disappear from coinage and after the iconoclasm, only one type, that with a broad face and long hair falling behind his shoulders, would be used on coins. Breckenridge suggested that the 9th century iconophiles adopted this image as it was regarded a faithful copy of image of Christ in the Chrysotriclinium, destroyed by the iconoclasts (1959: 56). In fact, the short-haired Christ will almost entirely disappear from Byzantine iconography together with the Eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire lost in the 7th century, only occasionally used in later times, while the long-hair become 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 was constructed in the 6th century, it was heavily used especially during the 7th century. Being a part of the monastery, it could remain in use even when most of the place was already abandon. The baptistery was built for adult baptism, proving by its very existence that it was still in use in late 7th century, acknowledging baptismal variety of structures in the area, but adapting and changing them according to the needs of the monastery. The scene of the Baptism of Christ complements, albeit partially, our knowledge on bondage of architecture, liturgy and art within the space. The scene is placed directly above the cruciform font, establishing 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, 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 thrice fully immersed - buried in the water only to be resurrected and reborn.

Here come to mind words of St. Chrysostom:

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 actual baptism providing symbolical and mystical linkage between both events, while reminds the faithful that not man baptizes him but “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 North Church baptistery at Shivta does not allow to put all missing pieces together and to reconstruct the painting in whole. Although its iconography might not be unique in itself, the importance of this finding is that it constitutes the only surviving example of the Baptism of Christ in context of the original Baptistery and within the monastic compound in the East of Byzantium. Within monumental remains of Shivta baptismal rite takes shape, introducing us into religious and cultural world of people living in this arid and remote but by no means isolated area. It remains yet unknown what was the nature of Shivta’s monasticism and what kind of connections did it maintain with the local villages? Shivta keeps its mysteries, and we need to 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 4th century was a small market place, where tribes from the region sold and exchanged goods. In some of the 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). The confirmation of his suggestion was found in a copy of the text (Code St. Croix 5, fol. 55c) with explicit reference to the place as Soubeita (Abel 1935). In the 6th-7th- century papyri from Nessana (Kraemer 1958: nos. 75, 79), the village is called Sobota/Sobata and not Soubeita. It is possible that Sobata was an equivalent in Greek to Soubeita, which could’ve been of Aramaic origin. On the etymology of Shivta’s name, see Moor 2013: 81-2.

   Claudine Dauphin argues that during Byzantine period Shivta had evolved into a small town with its population having increased and agriculture intensified, indicating a status similar that of to the Jewish settlements in the Golan (*ayarot*) (Dauphin 1987:259-262). We prefer to follow Hirschfeld (1997; 2003) and to 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 function of the North Church complex as a monastery depends on the interpretation of *insula* 1 (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). Identified of a garden in the back 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, Negev proposes the same early date for the first phase to both. He dates the Central Church to the 7th century (Negev 1989: 129-142). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rosenthal attributes the early phase of the church to the second half or the last quarter of the 5th 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 of the church (Margalit). However, the screen seems to be very similar to the screens found in the North Church in Nessana (Colt 1962: plate XVIII) and Petra (Kanellopoulos and Schick 2001: figures 15, 17; Mulholland 2014: 64).Both 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 is also responsible for Christianizing Arabic population of Elusa (c. 350), while its Greek population remain pagan. Another renowned figure was Epiphanius of Salamis (bishop of Salamis in Cyprus 367-403), who established a monastery at the area of Elautheropolis in about 335. Nevertheless, by the end of the 4th century Christian community was rather small, and in Gaza was comprised of only 127 members. Only few churches were built before 361, and those built were mainly in the important pilgrim centers (Patrich 2016; for an early Christian prayer hall, dated to the 3rd century CE, see Tepper and Di Segni 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Patrick noted that *terminus post quem* for the second phase of the North Church to 527-538 based on the coins of 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, Round Church in Beth Shean and Caesarea, all from the mid. 5th-6th centuries. Another comparison come from the East Church of Elusa, most probably from its second phase (Negev 1981: 127, 128). This may suggest close relation between the two sites and dependents of most elaborate designs in Shivta on fashion in 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 mono-apsidal to tri-apse church has been suggested for a number of churches in the Negev, a feature considered to be unique to the area. Side rooms and chapels existed in Syrian churches but not many of them had three apses. In Illyricum Orientale tri-apse basilicas can be trace to the 6th century, while in Cyprus they are known from early 6th century (Mailis 2006: 300). Matthews and Taft believe that while in Greece, “Syrian” tripartite sanctuaries appeared only in the mid. 6th century, while tri-apse churches became common in Constantinople only in the 10th century (Taft 1975: 181-4). According to Balderstone a tri-apse architectural type existed already in the late 4th century but in the 6th century it was appropriated by Chalcedonian supporters and emerged in Palestine, Cyprus and Arabia (Balderstone 2007: 21; 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For 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 c14 research support a later dating (Yan (Xin) at el, in process). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Di Segni discusses at length what the title vicarious might mean in context of the Negev. She comes to conclusion that most probably it is a military title. Vicarious is mentioned in a fragmentary letter from Nessana, PNessana no.134. Theophanes in Chronographia, AM 6123 tells about vicarious Theodorus an officer stationed in a village Motha and was in charge of several garrisons in Palestina Tertia who achieved victory over the Arabs in the 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 be built at the same time, although she contradicts her own statement within the same work (Rosenthal 148 cf. 167). See further discussion on this topic here, pp. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Baly states that the South Church baptistery was highly decorated with paintings, sculptured reliefs and marble (1935: 177). Only some of the reliefs can still seen in situ, while some spots of paint is all that remains from the paintings which once covered the apse. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Accounts of 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 was of any special importance. His tomb is beautifully decorated with palm branches and crosses. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Negev suggested that initiation of burials in the Negev churches may be connected to the spread of the plague of 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 such 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 mid. 5th century. The earliest Christian inscription is 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, 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 for continuation of Christian life and patronage till 660s (Reynolds 2013: fig. 3.7, 171-3). Although such settlements as Rehovot –in-the—Negev, Elusa, and Nessana (and, in a way, Shivta) probably continued to be occupied after the 8th century (Reynolds 2013: 187-8), Negev’s Christianity do not show signs of prosperity as is evident in Trans-Jordan churches and monasteries. On increasing building ecclesiastic activities in Provincia Arabia during 7th-8th centuries see, Hamarneh 2010: 64-5. Archaeology Botanical and Zoo-archaeological researches support some abandonment of the Christian population at Shivta and its continuation at other site, 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 till late 7th century CE. (Kraemer 1958; see note 1). It’s decline at that time and a complete abandonment of the site, during the 9th century CE., as latest, supported by the excavations at the site and its environment (see Tepper er al. 2015; 2018; 2020a). For an additional estimates that have been raised 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 Islam period finding from Shivta and 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. On a different approach, suggesting apotropaic use of Christian symbols by Muslims see Peers 2011. Since such position of lintels suggests dishonor of Christian symbols which does not fit proposed thesis of Christian-Muslim coexistence during 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 can be see also : Guidetti 2016. Without getting deep into this subject, which should be studied separately, 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 into a renewed sanctuary, causing 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 vs a decline of agricultural activities and urbanism were also pointed out regarding Petra (Fiema City and Countryside in Byzantine Palestine). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For possible earthquakes, which could cause considerable destructions in the area see Korjenkov and Mazor 1999: 265–282; Russell 1985: 37–59. Recent study of seismic activities in Rehovot in the Negev identified several waves of earthquakes, which caused it significant damage: in the 5th century (447, 498, 502), 7th (destroyed Avdat) and 9th centuries (Korzhenkov and Mazor 2014). For the updated records of earthquakes events, see Zohar et al 2016. Unpublished earthquakes researches have been taken in Shivta recently (done 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 them can supported the assumption dating, mentioned above (see also Hirschfeld and Tepper 2006; Tepper et al. 2018). For a 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 tells 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*, ascribed to Cyril (Yarnold 1978; Doval 2001) but according to Day should be attributed to his successor John of Jerusalem and date to the early 5th century and testify of transformation of Jerusalem ritual by incorporation of other models into it (Day, 2011: 1201-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lassus 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 village, as for example Dar Qita (1947: 224-5). In the 6th century, 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 on, baptism was celebrated also during Epiphany, as well as during days of commemorations of 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 there great numbers of pilgrims (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 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 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, probably influenced by Constantinopolitan imperial model, they mainly situate in important religious centers, and most 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 served to convert masses of catechumens, by the 6th century most baptisteries became modest, to serve local communities or occasional converts (Pena 1997: 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Such 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 for the monuments from Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Balkans (Berdzenishvili2010: 579). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Analyzing early examples of the so- called Cathedral type of the Baptisteries in Jerusalem, Gerasa, Dor, Ashkelon and Gaza, Day concludes that the baptistery had to have at least two rooms: the candidates, after waiting in the court attended ante-room for renunciation and then moved to the font to be baptized, anointed and dressed (Day 2009: 27). Various baptisteries throughout Mediterranean show that they have additional rooms to the one where the ceremony took place. Their number differ from one place to another. Their role in the liturgical rite is hard to decipher as they can held multiple functions. Thus, the Holy Sepulcher baptistery probably had 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 e.g., Dora and Nicopolis) are characteristic for 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, long canal, collecting water for more than two kilometers, enters the site near the church from the east, and directs the water towards the North Church and towards 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 into it could be poured through a wall-mounted pipe, directly into the baptismal font. The second, short canal, collected water into 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 baptism fonts were enclosed within the apse and shaded from outside viewers. The architecture was designed in such a way that nephyte’s nudity remains hidden. Such attitude toward nudity attested also in Cyprus baptisteries is connected by Ben Pechar with 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. Existence of a canopy in the North Church baptistery is less clear, although it was suggested by early discoverers of Shivta, who took holes in the apses as a part of the canopy structure. Since such holes exist in all apses in both churches, one can ask if canopies occurred in all the cases or the holes were made for a different purpose. If existed, the canopy in the North Church baptistery, framing symbolically sacredness of 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 century (2017: Appendix). It appears that in the period before Iconoclasm the practice of placing 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 dated from the 6th century and later (Ben Pechat 1985:I, 277-284). Brandt suggests that fonts developed from broad and shallow in the fourth century, used to baptize a large number of adults to smaller, narrower and deeper in the fifth century. Further diminishing in size, they, in the 6th century, became monolithic, covered with marble and lifted high above the floor level. He sees this development as a reflection of shifting of baptism from adults to children(Brandt 1593-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. According to the study of Sebastian Ristov who analyzed 1061 baptisteries from the 3rd to the 9th century, 16% of all the fonts are of cruciform shape (Ristov 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. The Old Diakonikon baptistery of a cruciform shape is dated to 530, 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 baptistery of different kind) was destructed (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 cross-shape (2009: 822), while Ben-Pechat who documented and analyzed 53 baptism 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 symbolic connection between birth, death, rebirth through baptism and 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 while the earliest belonging to its foundation. A number of burials are 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), on the other hand, iconography which symbolically recalls Baptism of Christ is frequently found in early Christian tombs and sarcophagi, including in 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 emersion was not the only way to baptize a person at that time (Ben Pechat 1990: 451-512). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. In fact, depth of most known Byzantine baptisteries around the Mediterranean is less than a meter, an 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 still undamaged. In his description he does not mention neither existence of columns which might point to canopy, nor a small alcove at the side of the cruciform font. It well might be that they did not exist, and are suggested by scholars because of the overall similarity to the South Church baptistery (Mallon 1930). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Construction of additional small sized installations of various shapes on the site of the main font are not rare and regionally widespread. They can be found in Iberia, Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece (especially at Kos). In fact, 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 actual baptismal font. According to him they can be dated to the 6th century or later, in some cases, the installation postdates the main font (Ristow 1998: 48-9;see also Ben Pechat 1989: 187-8).There 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 older one contains Catechumenate rites, the newer one has a prayer during baptism on the eighth day after birth and a prayer on the fortieth day after birth, referring to infant baptism (Spinks 2006: 96; Stevenson 1987: 179-182) [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Negev proposes to date the baptistery to mid or late 4th century (Negev 1988:48-51), but later than the church, Ben Pachat dates it to the 5th century (Ben Pechat 1989: 169-70). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Canopy was mentioned in the inscription but 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, 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 natural source of water. The image accompanies 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 the illuminated manuscripts suggest 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 anointing, a mark on a forehead and of 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 bishop but priest or even 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. In many early churches in the East there were more than one altar. The side chapel with an altar could serve for liturgy celebration, which couldn’t 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 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 early date see Goldfus, Arubas, Alliata “The Monastery of St. Theoctistus (Deir Muqallik”; for later date Kuhnel, Boaz. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Palmer tells about 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 of them were not found in situ, but restored in places during restorations along the 20th century. They display variety of styles of 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 to the South Church is of some interest as it resembles stylistically items from the Central Church in Nessana which was 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 performing its stylistic analysis. Nevertheless, application of paints directly on stone and colors used recall the scene of Transfiguration in the South Church. In addition, 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 also 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 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 painted Greek letters ΠΡΟΔΡΟΜΟ[ were found in the area of baptistery in the late 5th century Jabal Harun church (Fiema 2002: 42). Perhaps, the inscription refers to John the Baptism and can indicate that there existed a wall painting of the Baptism of Christ. If it is indeed so, it might be relatively contemporary to that in Shivta, suggesting that the topic 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 iconography of the Baptism scene, Jensen convincingly showed that it changed from the earliest 2nd-3rd century examples found mainly in funerary context and stabilized by the 5th-6th century. 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, variously attributed to the western workshop, but also either to 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 within it a virtual pilgrimage through the Holy Land (Pantanella 2010, 36 (cat. no. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ephrem of Syria 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 dealt with much caution, since many of them were later repainted and altered. Despite Bernabo’s convincing argumentation that the quires with illuminations do not belong to the part which connects it to Rabbula and 586 date (in fact the manuscript was assembled together in the 15th century, the manuscript was rebound and the miniatures refreshed in 1574 in Florence) (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 the chapel XXX, there are indications that it has undergone alteration. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Very different image of aged bearded Christ 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 produce in the vicinity of Jerusalem, it could be originated in Palestine. This image seems to be unusual for the Baptism scene. In a matter of fact, on other ampulae Christ is depicted 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 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)