This talk will concentrate on one of the most interesting sites in the Holy Land, a little gem hidden in the sands of the Negev desert, even called the Pompeii of the desert because of the unique preservation of its ruins, which still capture our mind. Shivta (Sobbota/ Soubaita/Esbeita) was a rural settlement in the Negev, neither especially important nor situated on any important roads or trade routes. It flourished from the 4th or 5th to approximately 8th century and then gradually declined and finally abandoned. At its peak, the village was not very large but relatively rich, with about 170 houses, some two-storied, housing approximately 2200 people. The settlement had an advanced system of water collecting with pipes running throughout the place and two extensive water reservoirs, vine press and other installations, telling about people’s secular life, habits, and professional occupations in this desert place with drained climate, and commercial connections with close and far away places. Particularly interesting for our presentation are three monumental churches evincing for extensive religious activities within the settlement during the Byzantine era. It would perhaps seem strange and unusual that there are three large churches within one small settlement, however, in context of the Negev, where a number of Byzantine settlements were discovered, each has an average of two to four churches, some, as for example nearby Nessana, and the only actual city, capital of the district – Elusa, even more.

Shivta captured scholarly attention already in the 19th century and during the 20th century was extensively excavated and studied by scholars. In 1870, two British explorers, Edward Palmer and Tyrwhitt Drake, made a special effort, crossing the desert by foot, to describe and photograph its ruins. Shivta left an unforgettable impression on them. In their own words: “**There is nothing larger than El 'Aujeh and El 'Abdeh, except Sebaita, which is grander than either”**. In 1871 Palmer published a book about their incredible journey, in which he included illustrations based on authentic photographs made by Drake from various sites, Shivta included. The photographs were made in the wet collodion technique, popular in the 19th century, and copied for the publication as engravings. To make the journey more attractive for the reader, figures of the two researches were added to most of the illustrations (they did not constitute part of the original photographs).

Today’s presentation is illustrated not just with the photographs produced by means of the most advanced digital camera, but also with photographs made exactly in the same 19th-century technique of wet collodion and printed in variety of techniques which were used in the 19th century, such as albumen on paper, cyanotype and more. This photographic journey was undertaken by an Israeli photographer Dror Maayan who followed the footsteps of Palmer and Drake. Through these photographs we will attempt to introduce the unique atmosphere of this exceptional place.

I became involved in research of Shivta in 2016-7. As an art historian and a Byzantinist, I was asked by a group of archaeologists from the University of Haifa to look at shreds of the wall painting found in situ. We will get there in a minute, but first a little bit about the archaeological project. The current project called, The Negev Byzantine Bio-Archaeology Research Program, addressed a problem of people leaving in the Negev desert 1500 years ago, trying to understand who were those people, how they were able to survive and even flourish in such difficult environmental conditions of the desert and why, eventually, the settlements were abandon and their residents left. The project was supported by a European Research Council and Israel Science Foundation. Thus the project tried to reach to the people, and what can be more suitable to this purpose than their artistic expressions. This talk will be devoted to religious imagery, but small findings, which include furniture decorations, personal jewelry, amulets, and more, evince diverse artistic expressions of people leaving in this seemingly remote area.

The churches were decorated with crosses and rosettes, birds, and other decorative elements, some still bear traces of paint. Those are of different styles, some left unfinished, testifying for use of churches for relatively long period of time. All in all these ornaments are of a provincial type and probably executed by local artisans.

The walls of the churches were once extensively painted with religious scenes and figures. Not much have survived of these once colorful wall paintings, but even small surviving fragments bring forth surprises that could not been expected. It was customary to decorate early Byzantine churches with religious scenes and figures executed in mosaics and wall paintings. To these ornate mosaic floors and sculptured capitals, lintels and other architectural elements were added. Thus, Shivta churches constitute part of this widespread religious and aesthetical approach. However, because the place was deserted sometime in the 8th or 9th century, never fully resettled, just reached by some Bedouin tribes, and because of the dry climate of the desert, Shivta’s walls still preserve precious fragments of religious scenes that disappeared from other places. I must nevertheless warn you not to expect clear, easily recognizable images. The remaining images are extremely fragmentary and in very bad state of preservation. Therefore, I’ll show you reconstructions to increase their visibility and clarity.

The wall painting in the Southern apse of the South Church appears to be such an example of the precious but badly preserved religious scene, the Transfiguration of Christ. It was discovered and described already in the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, British archaeologists Sir Leonard Wooley and colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence, who was also an army-officer and a diplomat, explored Shivta in 1914 and describe in details the painting they saw in the South Church:

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

Since then the wall painting deteriorated even further, and today, looking on that apse one can ask himself, was it there imagination only? Still, this is the only scene, which remains to be identified in Shivta and even received further scholarly attention. What you see here is our reconstruction of the scene based on the details, which can still be seen with bear eyes and captured by most advanced digital camera. Let us go through the details. According to the New Testament accounts, Christ ascended a high mountain, later identified as Mount of Tabor and, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, revealed his divine nature to three of his disciples: Peter, Jacob and John. In what remains of the painting, we can see outlines of the figure of Christ with a halo around his head, depicted inside mandorla (an almond-shaped halo around his body) of light. In addition to the outlines, one can see some spots of paint, especially this beautiful blue – Egyptian blue, which was used as an underpainting for the scene. Only outlines of the figures on the left (Christ’s right) have survived, the opposite site being whipped out by rains. Three figures, all in different postures, can be seen. The bowing figure to which a hand, one of the beautiful surviving fragments belong, is John, identified by his name inscribed next to it. Behind him is a figure of Peter, which preserves one of the best surviving fragments in the whole wall painting. Look at the area of his beard: you can see beautiful brushstrokes of bright colors overlapping each other. The last, standing figure, is either of Elijah or Moses. The figure of another prophet as well as that of Jacob disappeared with time. Mountain, a crucial element of the narrative, seems to be absent.

Although, the scene of Transfiguration represents one of the most important events in the Gospels, very few examples of it have survived from the Early Byzantine period. In fact, there are only two: one in Ravenna and another in Sinai, St. Catherine Monastery, both beautiful 6th-century mosaics, and in both, the scene is depicted differently. There are many speculations, which try to explain the reasons for it, but, Shivta’s image suggests, that perhaps many more images existed but have not survived.

The closest comparison to Shivta’s Transfiguration is the extraordinary 6th century mosaics in the apse of St. Catherine monastery, an important pilgrimage centre. Pilgrims crossed the desert to reach it, one of the ways to get there was through Nessana, a village not far from Shivta. In St Catherine, we can clearly observe Christ inside mandorla, two standing Old Testament figures – Moses and Elijah, and three apostles, all identified by inscription. No mountain once again. There is one motif, however, which is clearly visible in Sinai but cannot been seen in Shivta: the rays of light. This motif will reappear in almost all the depictions of the Transfiguration from the 9th century on. So, is it possible that Shivta’s Transfiguration is an exception? Indeed, rays of light cannot been seen with bare eyes. However, by using special photographic technology – VIL technique, the rays emerge. This was one of the biggest surprises regarding Shivta’s image, which only could be detected by using modern technology. Thus, Shivta’s image is quite similar to that of Sinai. Similar, but not identical.

Reading the Gospels, it becomes obvious that Shivta’s image is much closer to the narrative of the text than that in Sinai in what concerns the postures of the apostles as well as Peter’s gesture of speech. In fact, in later depictions of the Transfiguration of Christ, the figures also reflect the text by means of postures and gestures. Consequently, these later images are much closer to Shivta’s Transfiguration than to Sinai. Shivta’s image is the only survival of this iconography, which was believed by scholars to emerge only after iconoclasm (from 9th century on). Discovery and analysis of Shivta’s Transfiguration changes the whole perception concerning early, pre-iconoclastic, iconography of the scene. Needless to say that traces of paint on two other apses is a reminder that the church was fully decorated with religious scenes. Unfortunately, those cannot be reconstructed.

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

The North Church is the most beautiful of three Shivta’s churches. It was build on the edge of the settlement and perhaps constituted a part of the monastic complex. According to archaeological research it was first built with one apse and changed into three-apse church probably sometime in the early 6th century. Its walls were first painted with wall paintings and at a later stage covered with marble. It is not known when exactly the baptistery attached to the church was build. Some scholars suggest that it should be dated to the 4th century, contemporary perhaps with the earliest church. However, it seems more likely to date it to the 6th century, probably when the church was turned into three-apsidal. Some tombs were discovered in the Baptistery during the excavations of 1930s performed by Colt. Their date range from early 7th century to 679, providing us with the latest existing date of the whole site of Shivta.

The baptistery is constructed as a side chapel with an apse on its East end. Within it is a cross-shaped monolith baptismal font, raised on two-stepped platform, which was separated from the aisle of the chapel by a chancel screen. The font can be compared to another, very similar baptistery font at the side of the South Church. The eyes I saw were directly above the font. How the painting remain undiscovered for such a long period? In fact, in the early 20th century outlines of three figures were seen by one of the researches, although he interpreted them as either exaltation of Christ or Mary, two familiar scenes from early Byzantine iconography. At his time, the font was buried under rubbish and he could not know the function of the chapel as a baptistery. In late 1920s, Dominican fathers from Ecole Biblique, surveyed the church. The font was already exposed, perhaps by gold seekers and robbers who damaged it. The Dominicans also saw the outlines of the figures and even proposed to identify the scene as Baptism of Christ. But the painting was in such a bad state that no one else saw them. So, for 100 years the painting waited to be rediscovered, until now. Let us look closer at the shreds of painting. Only outlines of two figures can be barely seen. Fortunately, they are structured according to the well-known iconographic scheme, and thus the theme can be easily recognized despite loss of most of the details. The scene is the Baptism of Christ. Its position within the baptistery strengthens this suggestion.

Despite its fragmentary condition, it reveals a frontally positioned figure of a youth with short curly hair, prolonged face, big eyes, and elongated nose. The body’s neck and upper part are also traceable. Left of it, another, much bigger face, surrounded by a halo, is visible. Paint traces throughout the apse suggest they were part of a wider scene, which could contain additional figures.

Relating to one of the most important events in the Gospels (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-23) the Baptism of Christ scene is frequently found in early Christian and Byzantine art. The best-known are the mosaics in the Arian and Neonian baptisteries in Ravenna (c. 500), we will return to them later. Although the scene did not survive in architectural setting in Palestine, it exists in illuminated manuscripts (e.g., the Rabbula Gospels, fol. 4b) and many small objects (e.g., plaques, pilgrim tokens, textiles) originating in Syro-Palestine and Egypt which can serve for comparison of iconography with Shivta's scene.

Following the scene’s early Christian iconographic convention, John the Baptist’s figure is proportionally larger than Christ’s, who is depicted much smaller and younger. Despite the obscurity of detail, this proportional distinction is clearly observed in the Shivta painting. Christ is depicted inside the waters of the Jordan river, which cover his body, most probably nude, akin with the common iconography, up to the hips or shoulders. The red curve line in Shivta’s painting perhaps outlines the banks of the Jordan river similarly to its depiction in the 6th-century Bawit panting from Egypt. Being essential part of the event, the hand of God and a dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, are usually depicted in the scene. Even though we cannot see the dove in Shivta, it was surely there. To those necessary motifs, which define the scene of the Baptism, other can be added: among them an angel or several angels, personification of the river Jordan and more. We do not know if those existed in Shivta, however, spots of paint detected in various places on the apse, the space left on the right and bottom of it as well as a testimony of the existence of the third figure from the early 20th century, may point to the fact that the scene was much wider than what is visible now. Evidently, more details of the painting are hidden by a thick encrustation, which protects the paint layers from further deterioration, but also hides its details.

Christ’s face is the best surviving part of the painting. I was trying to manipulate a bit the slides to show the face in a best possible way. When it was first published, and because it remained unseen for centuries, many were sceptical if the image was indeed there, or it’s just my imagination. Today, even the tour guides, knowing exactly where to look and what they are looking at, easily find the face of Christ projecting from the stones, and show it to the tourists.

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

We must remember, however, that in early Christian and Early Byzantine art, Christ was depicted in variety of ways, at times within the same monument or manuscript. In the Baptism scene his youthful image reflects a theological convention, symbolic notion of the Baptism as rebirth. He is shown as such the 5th-century Arian Baptistery in Ravenna. In the Orthodox Baptistery the image is different, and Christ is depicted more mature. Unfortunately, most of the upper part of the image, including his face, underwent restoration, so we do not know if in fact current depiction follows the original. By the 9th century the iconographic change was already accomplish, and from then on, Christ in the Baptism scene would be depicted mature, reflecting the age he was baptized by John.

While in Ravenna, longhaired type of Christ prevails, Shivta’s image belongs to the iconographic scheme of a shorthaired Christ, especially widespread in Egypt and Syro-Palestine. Early 6th-century texts include polemics concerning authenticity of Christ’s visual appearance, including his hairstyle, curiously, the short hair was perceived more authentic back then. While in the 6th century, both images were common, the shorthaired Christ will later disappear together with the Eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire lost in the 7th century, only occasionally used in later times, while the longhaired image will become widespread, and from 9th century on it would be perceived authentic.

Saying all that, we can now return to the baptistery in Shivta and look at the wall painting in context. We can imagine how a catechumen enters the cruciform font by three steps to be baptized, while priest stands next to the font awaiting for him. The scene of Christ’s Baptism is depicted 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”. Thus, person undergoing baptism does it in the presence of Christ, the priest being a meditator. He places his hand on the head of the person echoing John the Baptist, who places his hand on Christ’s head. The person is buried thrice in the water only to be resurrected and reborn.

The importance of the find of the wall painting in the Baptistery of the North Church at Shivta is enormous: it is a rare survival of early Byzantine iconography and original wall painting in its architectural setting, providing insight into the religious and cultural life of Byzantine Shivta and into Christianity in the Negev, of which only magnificent ruins remain.