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

With plates VIII–XV

Abstract: This paper focuses on the remains of the Baptistery chapel within the North Church complex on the outskirts of Shivta, a fifth–seventh century Byzantine village in the Negev. Presumably a monastery, the North Church is the largest and most elaborately constructed of the three Shivta churches. After addressing general structural and chronological issues of the complex, a comparison of the North Church Baptistery to the South Church Baptistery aims to clarify the linkage between shape and ritual. The authors propose that the earlier South Church Baptistery probably served the public, while the later North Church Baptistery fulfilled the internal needs of the monastery. The remains of the Baptism of Christ wall painting, recently rediscovered in the apse of the North Church Baptistery, complements, even if partially, knowledge of the links between architecture, liturgy, and art within the space. The study offers a glimpse into the religious and cultural world of the people who lived in this arid and remote, but by no means isolated area.

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Shivta and its North Church complex: historical and archaeological context

Shivta (Soubeita/Sobota(Sobata)/Esbeita),¹ located in the Negev highlands, reached its peak during the Byzantine period (fifth–sixth centuries) and was abandoned following a significant decline during the Early Islamic period.² It was not a large village, but wealthy with around 170 houses, some two-storied (up to 350 m² in size), and approximately 2,000 inhabitants (**Plate VIII/1**).³

1 Shivta is identified in ancient sources by two distinct names: Soubeita or Sobota (Sobata). The name Soubeita appears in *Narrations* of Pseudo-Nilus (PG 79, 587–694) dated to c. 400, as a village (κώμη), indicating that in the late fourth century it was the site of a small market where tribes from the region sold and exchanged goods: F. M. ABEL, *Note sur Sbaita*. *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 15 (1935), 7–11. In the sixth to seventh century papyri from Nessana, the village is called Sobota/Sobata, possibly an equivalent in Greek to Soubeita, which may have been Aramaic in origin: G. J. KRAEMER, *Excavations at Nessana, III: Non-literary papyri*. Princeton 1958, nos. 75, 79. On the etymology of Shivta's name, see B. MOOR, *Mosque and church: Arabic inscriptions at Shivta in the early Islamic period*. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 40 (2013), 81–82; E. MAAYAN-FANAR/Y. TEPPER/Y. ASSCHER, *An angel from Shivta*. *Strata: Journal of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 39 (2021), 145–166, here 145–147.

2 M. EVENARI/L. SHANAN/N. TADMOR, *The Negev, the challenge of a desert*. Cambridge, MA 1971; R. TADMOR, *Urbanization, settlement and agriculture in the Negev Desert – the impact of the Roman-Byzantine empire on the frontier*. *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 112 (1996), 49–60; J. SHERESHEVSKI, *Byzantine urban settlements in the Negev Desert*. *Beer-Sheva*, 5. Beer-Sheva 1991, 61–82; A. NEGEV, *Shivta*, in E. STERN (ed.) *The new encyclopedia of archaeological excavations in the Holy Land*, 4. Jerusalem 1993, 1404–1410; Y. TSAFRIR/L. DI SEGNI/J. GREEN, *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea Palaestina*. Maps and gazetteer. Jerusalem 1994, 234; J. MAGNESS, *The archaeology of the Early Islamic settlement in Palestine*. Winona Lake, Indiana 2003, 185–187; Y. BAUMGARTEN, *Excavation and survey in Israel*, Map of Shivta (166). Jerusalem 2004; G. AVNI, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition in Palestine*. Oxford 2014, 263, 265–267; Y. TEPPER/L. WEISSBROD/G. BAR-OZ, *Behind sealed doors: unravelling abandonment dynamics at the Byzantine site of Shivta in the Negev Desert*. *Antiquity* 348 (2015) <<http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/bar-oz348>>; Y. TEPPER/T. ERICKSON-GINI/Y. FARHI/G. BAR-OZ, *Probing the Byzantine/Early Islamic transition in the Negev: the renewed Shivta excavations, 2015–2016*. *Tel Aviv* 45 (2018), 120–152.

3 A. SEGAL, *Shivta. Plan and architecture of a Byzantine town in the Negev*. Jerusalem 1981; A. SEGAL, *The Byzantine city of Shivta (Esbeita), Negev Desert, Israel*. Oxford 1983; A. SEGAL, *Architectural decoration in Byzantine Shivta, Negev Desert, Israel*. Oxford 1988; NEGEV, *Shivta* (as footnote 2 above); Y. HIRSCHFELD, *Social aspects of the Late-Antique village of Shivta*. *JRA* 16 (2003), 12; Y. HIRSCHFELD/Y. TEPPER, *Columbarium towers and other structures in the environs of Shivta*. *Tel Aviv* 33 (2006), 83–116; E. BEN-YOSEF, *The building stones of Byzantine Shivta: their types, sources and contribution to the study of the site and its surroundings*, in J. PATRICH/O. PELEG-BARKAT/E. BEN-YOSEF (eds.), *Arise, walk through the land*. *Studies in the archae-*

Vast farmlands testify to the villagers' extensive agricultural activities.⁴ The monumental remains of Shivta's three churches, once extensively decorated with carved lintels and marble capitals, wall paintings, mosaics, and inscriptions, still dominate the landscape.⁵

Shivta was extensively studied, surveyed, and excavated throughout the twentieth century.⁶ Regrettably, much of the documentation and findings remain unpublished or were lost, including those relating to the site's most important excavations conducted by H. D. COLT in his expeditions between 1933 and 1936 and in 1938.⁷ The site has also been subject to several restorations and reconstructions that have disturbed its authentic architectural settings. These projects have been poorly documented, thereby compromising scholars' ability to differentiate between the original and restored features.⁸ Recent archaeological surveys and discoveries contributed significantly to our knowledge of the religious,

ology and history of the land of Israel in memory of Yizhar Hirschfeld on the tenth anniversary of his decease. Jerusalem 2016, 163–182 (in Hebrew).

4 Y. KEDAR, Ancient agriculture at Shivta in the Negev. *Israel Exploration Journal* 7 (1957), 178–189; EVENARI/SHANAN/TADMOR, Negev (as footnote 2 above); Y. TEPPER/N. PORAT/G. BAR-OZ, Sustainable farming in the Roman-Byzantine period: dating an advanced agriculture system near the site of Shivta, Negev Desert, Israel. *Journal of Arid Environments* 177 (2020), 104–134.

5 SEGAL, Shivta (as footnote 3 above); NEGEV, Shivta (as footnote 2 above); L. DI SEGNI, Dated Greek inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine periods. PhD Thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1997; K. GOLAN, Architectural sculpture in the Byzantine Negev. Characterization and meaning. *Archaeology of the Biblical Worlds*, 3. Berlin/Boston 2020; E. MAAYAN-FANAR, The Transfiguration at Shivta: retracing early Byzantine iconography. *Zograf* 41 (2017), 1–18; E. MAAYAN-FANAR, Further remarks on Transfiguration in Shivta. *Marginalia* 1–2 (2019), 123–138; R. LINN/Y. TEPPER/G. BAR-OZ, Visible induced luminescence reveals invisible rays shining from Christ in the early Christian wall painting of the Transfiguration in Shivta. *Plos One* 2017 <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0185149>; R. LINN/E. MAAYAN-FANAR/Y. TEPPER/G. BAR-OZ, Study of the early Christian Transfiguration wall painting in Shivta, Israel. *ARAM* 31/1 (2019), 195–206; M. FISCHER/Y. TEPPER, A group of pilaster capitals from Shivta: marble import in the Byzantine Negev. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 2021. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00310328.2020.1866328>.

6 For summary of earlier research and exploration see FISCHER/TEPPER, Group (as footnote 5 above); Y. HIRSHFIELD, The crisis of the sixth century: climatic change, natural disasters and the plague. *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* 6 (2006), 19–32.

7 C. BALY, S'baïta. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 67/4 (1935), 171–181, <https://doi.org/10.1179/peq.1935.67.4.171>. J.W. CROWFOOT, Early churches in Palestine. London 1936; H.C. YOUTIE, Ostraca from Sbeïtah. *AJA* 40/4 (Oct.–Dec. 1936), 452–459; H.D. COLT, Castles in Zin. *Archaeology* 1/2 (June 1948), 84–91.

8 R. SHOEFF, Reconstruction processes in the Byzantine settlements of the Negev. PhD Thesis, University of Haifa 2019.

economic, and environmental aspects of life in this desert village and its fate during the transition from the Byzantine to the Early Islamic periods.⁹

This paper focuses on exceptionally well-preserved monumental remains of the Baptistry chapel within the North Church complex situated on the village's outskirts, the largest and most elaborate of the three churches. The complex, fully excavated by COLT in the 1930s, was probably dedicated to St. George.¹⁰ Presumably originally part of the monastery, it comprises a tri-apsidal basilica, its apses fully clad in marble, that faces a paved public courtyard and constitutes part of a larger compound that includes two *insulae* of disputable function.¹¹ At some point, a chapel and a baptistry were attached on the southern side of the church (**Plate VIII/2**). After addressing general structural and chronological issues as a part of the complex, our study of the North Church Baptistry continues with a comparison to the South Church Baptistry and within regional architectural trends, with the aim of addressing the linkage between shape and ritual. Analysis of the remains of the wall painting discovered in situ¹² will enable a better understanding of artistic trends in Shivta within broader Byzantine iconography and within the specific architectural setting and ritual performed.

The North Church went through several stages. Originally built as mono-apsidal structure from 400 to 450,¹³ it was rebuilt in the early sixth century, perhaps

9 The most recent excavations in Shivta were conducted by TEPPER and BAR-OZ (2016–2017, 2018–2019).

10 According to early publications by COLT, Castles in Zin (as footnote 7 above), figs. 9, 10.

11 The North Church complex's function as a monastery depends on the interpretation of *Insula* I (excavated by Colt) – adjacent to it – as either monastic quarters or a local commercial center (R. ROSENTHAL, *The North Church and Monastery at Sobota (Shivta)*. PhD Thesis, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1974; SEGAL, *Shivta* (as footnote 3 above) vs NEGEV, *Shivta* (as footnote 2 above); HIRSCHFELD, *Social aspects* (as footnote 3 above); see also Y. TEPPER, *The archaeological findings from the "forgotten suitcase" in context: in light of the Colt excavations at Shivta*. *Michmanim* 28 (2019), 101–122, 63*–64* (Hebrew with English abstract). The identification of a garden to the rear of the North Church, near *Insula* I, might support the assumption that it was a monastery. D. LANGGUT/Y. TEPPER/M. BENZAQUEN/T. ERICKSON-GINI/G. BAR-OZ, *Environment and horticulture in the Byzantine Negev Desert, Israel: sustainability, prosperity and enigmatic decline*. *Quaternary International* 2020. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1040618220305218>. On village monasteries in Levant see, J. ASHKENAZI, *Holy Man versus monk – village and monastery in the Late Antique Levant: between hagiography and archaeology*. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57/5 (2014), 745–765.

12 E. MAAYAN-FANAR/R. LINN/Y. TEPPER/G. BAR-OZ, *Christ face revealed in Shivta: an early Byzantine wall painting in the desert of the Holy Land*. *Antiquity* 92/364 (2018), 1–5. <http://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.150>.

13 A. NEGEV, *The Cathedral of Elusa and the new typology and chronology of the Byzantine Churches in the Negev*. *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989), 129–142, here 142. Rosenthal dated the

due to earthquake damage, and became a tri-apsidal structure.¹⁴ The same architectural change was proposed for the South Church, while the Central Church was built as a tri-apsidal from the very beginning.¹⁵

The architectural change from mono- to tri-apsidal in this and possibly other churches (Elusa's East Church, Rehovot-in-the-Negev Central Church; North Church [SS Sergius and Bacchus] in Nessana; and Petra's "Great" Church) could have been prompted by expansions of the cult of relics and martyrs.¹⁶ Rel-

church's early phase to the second half or the last quarter of the fifth century: ROSENTHAL, North Church (as footnote 11 above), 164. Margalit found evidence that the North Church originally had one apse augmented by two square side rooms – *pastophoria*. He dated this phase to the mid-fourth century, based on several coins dated to that period found during excavations: S. MARGALIT, The North Church of Shivta: the discovery of the first church. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 119/2 (1987), 106–121, <https://doi.org/10.1179/peq.1987.119.2.106>. 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. However, the screen seems very similar to those found in Nessana's North Church (H. D. COLT, Excavations at Nessana I. London 1962, pl. XVIII) and Petra (C. KANELLOPOULOS/R. SCHICK, Marble furnishings of the apses and the bema, phase V in the Petra church. Amman 2001, 193–214, see figures 15, 17; B. MULHOLLAND, The Early Byzantine Christian Church. An archaeological re-assessment of forty-seven early byzantine basilical church excavations primarily in Israel and Jordan, and their historical and liturgical context. Bern 2014, 64). Both the Nessana and Petra churches are at least a century later than the date proposed by Margalit for the first phase of Shivta's church.

14 Patrìch noted a *terminus post quem* for the second phase of the North Church to 527–538, based on coins from the early reign of Justinian found in excavations: J. PATRICH, The transfer of gifts in the early Christian churches of Palestine: archaeological and literary evidence for the evolution of the 'Great Entrance', in B. Caseau/J.-C. Cheynet/V. D eroche (eds.), *P elerinages et lieux saints dans l'Antiquit  et le Moyen  ge. M langes offerts   Pierre Maraval. Centre de recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance. Monographies* 23. Paris 2006, 341–393, here 342–343, note 10. A recent study of marble pilasters from the North Church (discovered earlier by Colt) suggests that they date from the second half of the fifth to the mid-sixth centuries. These had been imported to the Negev and testify to the wealth of the North Church at Shivta during this period: FISCHER/TEPPER, A group of pilaster capitals (as footnote 5 above).

15 NEGEV, Cathedral of Elusa (as footnote 13 above), 138–139, 142. While most scholars suggest that South Church in Shivta was built earlier than the North Church, Negev proposed the same early first phase date for both. He dated the Central Church to the seventh century.

16 A. NEGEV, The churches of the central Negev – an archaeological survey. *Revue biblique* 81 (1974), 400–421; NEGEV, Cathedral of Elusa (as footnote 13 above), 141. An architectural transformation from a mono-apsidal to a tri-apsidal church has been suggested for a number of churches in the Negev, a feature considered unique to the area. Side rooms and chapels existed in Syrian churches, but not many had three apses. In Illyricum Orientale, triple-apsed basilicas can be traced to the sixth century, while in Cyprus they are known from the early sixth century: A. MAILIS, The early Byzantine baptisteries of Crete. *Antiquit  Tardive* 14 (2006), 291–309, here 300). According to Matthews and Taft, "Syrian" tripartite sanctuaries appeared in Greece in the mid-sixth century, while triple-apsed churches became common in Constantino-

iquaries were discovered in various churches in the Negev, supporting the importance of a cult of relics (e. g., North Church, Oboda/Avdat; East Church, Mampsis/Kurnub; North Church, Nessana).¹⁷ Shreds of a reliquary found in the North Church in Shivta are incorporated today into the northern niche of this apse.¹⁸ Additionally, an inscription evoking St. Stephan, the first martyr (“O Lord of St. Stephan, martyr, help your servant ...”) was cited by NEGEV.¹⁹ The location of this inscription, however, is uncertain.

According to PATRICH, this architectural development can be explained largely by a change in liturgy, namely the introduction of the Great Entrance as part of the pre-anaphoral rite in Palestine, sometime in the late fifth or early sixth century.²⁰ The closed side rooms, *pastophoria*, were converted into lateral apses, while their functions of housing and displaying the Eucharistic gifts were moved to a chapel, one usually added to the church at its southern side.²¹

The annexed chapel in Shivta’s North Church and the Baptistry could belong to its early phase,²² but most probably were added at a later stage.²³ The

ple only in the tenth century: R. TAFT, *The Great Entrance. A history of the transfer of gifts and other pre-anaphoral rites of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*. OCA, 200. Rome 1975, 181–184. According to Balderstone, a triple-apsed architectural type existed already in the late fourth century; in the sixth century it was appropriated by Chalcedonian supporters and emerged in Palestine, Cyprus and Arabia: S. BALDERSTONE, *Early church architectural forms: a theologically contextual typology for the eastern churches of the 4th–6th centuries*. *Buried History Monograph*, 3. Melbourne 2007, 21 and 43.

17 For a summary on the cult of relics and martyrs in the Holy Land, see J. PATRICH, *Early Christian churches in the Holy Land*, in O. Limor/G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: from the origins to the Latin Kingdoms*. *Cultural encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, 5. Turnhout 2006, 355–400, here 381–385.

18 R. ROSENTHAL HEGINBOTTOM, *Die Kirchen von Sobota und die Dreiapsidenkirchen des Nahen Ostens*. *Göttinger Orientforschungen*, 7. Wiesbaden 1982, 44–45. Bagatti mistakenly placed the reliquary in the South Church: B. BAGATTI, *The church from the gentiles in Palestine: history and archaeology*. Jerusalem 1971, 254.

19 A. NEGEV, *The Greek inscriptions from the Negev*. Jerusalem 1981, 62, no. 70.

20 J. PATRICH, *Early Christian churches in Israel*, in S. Richard (ed.), *Near Eastern archaeology – a reader*. Winona Lake, Indiana 2003, 479–486, here 476–477; PATRICH, *Transfer of gifts* (as footnote 14 above); PATRICH, *Early Christian churches* (as footnote 17 above), 387–392.

21 PATRICH, *ibid.*, 391; see also R. LINN/E. ECKER/Y. TEPPER, *New investigation of unpublished painted plaster fragments with Greek inscriptions from Colt’s excavation at Shivta*. *Michmanim* 28 (2019), 47*–57*.

22 S. MARGALIT, *On the transformation of the mono-apsed churches with two lateral Pastophoria into tri-apsed churches*. *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989), 143–164, here 147.

23 PATRICH, *Transfer of gifts* (as footnote 14 above), 343; M. BEN-PECHAT, *Baptism and monasticism in the Holy Land: archaeological and literary evidence (fourth to seventh centuries)*, in G.C. Bottini/L. Di Segni/E. Alliata (eds.), *Christian archaeology in the Holy Land. New discoveries. Essays in Honour of Virgilio C. Corbo OFM*. Jerusalem 1990, 501–522, here 502.

chapel was once decorated with wall paintings of which only fragments have survived in the apse. It also has a mosaic floor with common geometric designs²⁴ and a dedicatory inscription in Greek:

Under the most holy bishop Thomas this work has been completed, by the care of John the priest and of the clarissimus John the vicarius, in the month of Daisios of the 10th indiction.²⁵

According to recent archaeological findings,²⁶ the mosaic floor predates the construction of the chancel screen and the apse and was originally set for a larger area (which was reduced in size at some point); however, its date remains unclear. NEGEV dated it to 517, while DI SEGNI suggested 607.²⁷ The inscription mentions the names of Thomas the bishop (otherwise unknown) and John the vicarius, most probably a local administrative official or army officer.²⁸ The name of John the vicarius appears in Shivta's inscriptions on a few occasions.²⁹ Presum-

24 See COLT, Castles in Zin (as footnote 7 above). Further, a similar date range suggested by a recent comparative study of Shivta's mosaics, and particularly the chapel mosaic at the North Church, first uncovered by Colt expedition: R. TALGAM / Y. TEPPER / M. PELEG / O. BORTNIK, Shivta mosaics, in W. Atrash / P. Gendelman / A. Overman (eds.), *Cities, monuments, and objects from the Roman and Byzantine Levant: Studies in honor of Gaby Mazor*, forthcoming.

25 DI SEGNI, Dated Greek inscriptions (as footnote 5 above), no. 337.

26 Y. TEPPER / G. BAR-OZ, Shivta, preliminary report. *Excavation and Surveys in Israel* 132 (2020) (Hebrew and English). https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25825&mag_id=128. 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/ERICKSON-GINI/FARHI/BAR-OZ, Probing (as footnote 2 above).

27 NEGEV, Greek inscriptions (as footnote 19 above), 60–61; DI SEGNI, Dated Greek inscriptions (as footnote 5 above), 839–842.

28 In the context of the Negev “vicarius” is most likely a military title. It is mentioned in a fragmentary letter from Nessana, P.Nessana no. 134. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6123 discusses the vicarius Theodorus, an officer stationed in a village Motha who was in charge of several garrisons in Palestina Tertia, and who achieved a victory over the Arabs in 631. DI SEGNI, Dated Greek inscriptions (as footnote 5 above), 107–113; 817. Further, several belt accessories, dated to the seventh century, of which some might have military characteristics, two of them found in burials at the North Church are recently discussed by Á. BOLLÓK / Y. TEPPER, The changing fashion of belt accessories in the Southern Levant: sixth- to seventh-century belt accessories from Shivta. *Liber Annuus* 71 (2021), 441–492. For a Latin metal seal found at Shivta, a finding that is not common in non-military contexts, see W. ECK / Y. TEPPER, A stamp with Latin inscription from Sobata/Shivta in the Negev. *Scripta Classica Israelica* 40 (2021), 141–150.

29 NEGEV, Greek inscriptions (as footnote 19 above), inscriptions no. 337, 338, 323.

ably, John's son, the child Abraham, was buried in 612 in the Baptistery that was attached to the chapel. The dating of Abraham's grave is the earliest certain date related to the Baptistery. The child seems to have enjoyed special status, since nearly all others who were buried in the Baptistery were related to clergy and had a monastic character.³⁰ The burials date from 612 to 679. More burial sites, occupied only by laymen and dated to the late sixth or the seventh century, were found in the atrium.

By the sixth century, burials inside churches had become extremely popular and widespread.³¹ In the Negev, besides the North Church in Shivta, in Nessana, particularly in its North Church, there is evidence of this practice. There, clerics and laymen were buried together in the sixth to seventh centuries, whereas in the second half of the fifth century, only clergy were buried in the Martyrium. Burials within baptisteries are attested also in the Oboda South Church (from 541) and the Rehovot North Church, dated between 488 to 555.³² The custom continued to flourish despite being prohibited by Justinian legislation.³³ The Synod of Dvin (527?) declared "There must be no common place of burial in the church" (Canon 21),³⁴ while the Council of Auxerre (578) forbade this practice in the west. Shivta provides clear evidence that this custom continued well into the seventh century.

The earliest burial in the North Church is from 582 (Atrium 7) and the latest is dated at 679 (Baptistery 34). Some names of the deceased can be related to names mentioned in the seventh century papyri discovered in Nessana. Although dating the North Church complex by its burials may be based on

30 DI SEGNI, Dated Greek inscriptions (as footnote 5 above), 839–841. Another son of John the vicarius, Stephan, was buried in the Narthex on November 21, 646. NEGEV, Greek inscriptions (as footnote 19 above), 52. Apart from the child Abraham, only Stephan, son of Abraham (died in 643) does not belong to clergy. His tomb is beautifully decorated with palm branches and crosses.

31 H.G. SARADI, *The Byzantine city in the sixth century. Literary images and historical reality*. Athens 2006, 436–437.

32 NEGEV, Greek inscriptions (as footnote 19 above), 94–5; H. GOLDFUS, *Burials in ordinary churches and monastic complexes of Byzantine Palestine: a synthesis*, in R. Harreither et al. (eds.), *Acta Congressus Internationalis 14 Archaeologiae Christianae*. Vienna 2006, 411–418, here 412; Y. TSAFRIR/J. PATRICH/R. HEGINBOTTOM, *Excavations at Rehovot in the Negev*, 1: *The Northern Church*. *Qedem*, 25. Jerusalem 1988, 25–7, 36; A. NEGEV, *The Architecture of Oboda: final report*. *Qedem*, 36. Jerusalem 1997, I–XX, 1–214, here 135. Negev suggested that the initiation of burials in Negev churches may be connected to the spread of plague in 541: NEGEV, Greek inscriptions (as footnote 19 above), 30, 82, 94–95.

33 SARADI, *Byzantine city* (as footnote 31 above), 437.

34 Cited after L.J. JOHNSON, *Worship in the Early Church 4: An anthology of historical sources*. Collegeville, Minnesota 2009, 198.

what seems like circumstantial evidence, these chronological ranges are consistent with other dated findings from the Church. This suggests that during the late sixth and early seventh centuries, the North Church complex may have been renovated and/or expanded.³⁵ A similar expansion of ecclesiastic building activities in the late sixth to the seventh century is also evident in nearby Nessana.³⁶

Summarizing the question of the date of the North Church complex, regardless whether the earliest mono-apsidal church was built in the late fourth or in the early fifth century, it was rebuilt and transformed as tri-apsidal structure sometime in the sixth century, perhaps serving as a monastery.³⁷ The inscription

35 Except for problematic early date on the lintel in the South Church in Shivta (415/435), no dated inscriptions from the Negev predate the mid-fifth century. The earliest Christian inscriptions are from Nessana (464), Be'er-Sheva (516), Elusa (530/31) and Oboda (541): D. CANER, *History and hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai, including translations of Pseudo-Nilus' Narrations, Ammonius' report on the slaughter of the monks of Sinai and Rhaithou, and Anastasius of Sinai's tales of the Sinai Fathers*. Liverpool 2010, 14). In Shivta, one of the earliest inscriptions can be probably dated to 545/46, and another to 560: NEGEV, Greek inscriptions (as footnote 19 above). To this may be added that the South Church was renovated in 639/40, as commemorated in its floor inscription. Inscriptions indicating renovations found in various churches in the area (Elusa, Deir Ayyub, Suma, Rihab) testify to the continuation of Christian life and patronage till the 660s: D. K. REYNOLDS, *Monasticism and Christian pilgrimage in Early Islamic Palestine c. 614–c. 950*. PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham 2013, fig. 3.7, 171–173). Although such settlements as Rehovot in the Negev, Elusa, and Nessana – and, in a way, Shivta itself – probably continued to be occupied after the eighth century (*ibid.*, 187–188), Negev's Christians show no signs of the prosperity evident in Trans-Jordan churches and monasteries. On the increase in ecclesiastic building activities in Provincia Arabia during the seventh to eighth centuries see B. HAMARNEH, *Continuity or change? Rural settlement in Provincia Arabia and Palaestina Tertia in the seventh to ninth centuries*. *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 11 (2010), 61–69, here 64–65. Archaeological, botanical and zoo-archaeological research supports some reduction of the Christian population at Shivta and its continuation at other sites, such as Nessana. See TEPPER/WEISSBROD/BAR-OZ, *Behind sealed doors* (as footnote 2 above); TEPPER/ERICKSON-GINI/FARHI/BAR-OZ, *Probing* (as footnote 2 above); TEPPER, *The archaeological findings* (as footnote 11 above); N. HAMARNEH/M. MEIRI/Y. TEPPER/T. ERICKSON-GINI/H. RESHEF/L. WEISSBROD / G. BAR-OZ, *Zooarchaeology of the social and economic upheavals in the Late Antique–Early Islamic sequence of the Negev Desert*. *Scientific Reports* 9 (2019), 6702; D. FUKS/G. BAR-OZ/Y. TEPPER/T. ERICKSON-GINI/L. WEISSBROD/E. Weiss, *The rise and fall of viticulture in the Late Antique Negev Highlands reconstructed from archaeobotanical and ceramic data*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117/33 (2020) 19780–91. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1922200117>.

36 DI SEGNI, *Dated Greek inscriptions* (as footnote 5 above), 782–3, 792; D. URMAN, *Nessana excavations 1987–1995*, in *idem* (ed.), *Nessana: Excavations and studies*, I. Beer-Sheva 2004, 1–118, here 115; G. RUFFINI, *Village life and family power in Late Antique Nessana*. *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 141/1 (2011), 201–225, here 218–219.

37 TEPPER, *Archaeological findings* (as footnote 11 above).

in the side chapel dates most likely to the beginning of the seventh century, while the burials in the Baptistery, which began in 612, suggest either a later trend or a later date for the Baptistery. The latest burial dated to 679 indicates that the complex was functional at least until that time. This being also the last secure date found in Shivta with a reference to it in the seventh century Nessana papyri,³⁸ demonstrates that Shivta's Christian population survived at least fifty years after the entire area fell under Islamic rule during the seventh to ninth centuries.³⁹ Arabic inscriptions in the narthex's north room of the North Church complex, and the small mosque adjoining the South Church baptistery,⁴⁰ clearly reveal an early Islamic occupation at the site. The nature of the interaction between the Christian and Muslim populations, if any, remains unclear. A late seventh century petition against burdensome taxes from the Nessana papyri (no. 75), in which Shivta was mentioned among the petitioners, suggests that its occupants, at least some of them, were still Christians. Based on paleography, MOOR dated Arabic inscriptions to the eighth century at the earliest, which still leaves about half a century between the last dated evidence of a Christian presence at the site.⁴¹ In fact, despite the mosque being built on the side of the South Church Baptistery without damaging its font, there is no evidence to support

38 KRAEMER, Excavations at Nessana (as footnote 1 above), 212–14, no. 75; 227–233, no. 79.

39 Shivta's decline at that time, and a complete abandonment of the site during the ninth century, is supported by the latest excavations at the site and its environment (see TEPPER/WEISSBROD/BAR-OZ, Behind sealed doors (as footnote 2 above); TEPPER/ERICKSON-GINI/FARHI/BAR-OZ, Probing (as footnote 2 above); TEPPER/PORAT/BAR-OZ, Sustainable farming (as footnote 4 above). For additional reasons to explain the abandonment of the region in general, and the site of Shivta in particular, see G. AVNI, The Byzantine–Islamic Transition in the Negev – an archaeological perspective. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 35 (2008), 1–27; AVNI, Byzantine-Islamic transition (as footnote 2 above), 325–331, 344–348), HIRSCHFELD, Social aspects (as footnote 3 above); Y. HIRSCHFELD, Crisis (as footnote 6 above); HIRSCHFELD/TEPPER, Columbarium (as footnote 3 above), and G. BAR OZ et al., Ancient trash mounds unravel urban collapse a century before the end of Byzantine hegemony in the Southern Levant. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116/17 (2019), 8239–48; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1900233116>. For further early Islamic period findings from Shivta and a discussion, see also Y. TEPPER, Church and mosque or church and then mosque – worship and burial in Shivta, 7th–9th c. CE, in D. Varga / Y. Abadi-Reiss / G. Lehmann / D. Vainsub (eds.), *Worship and burial in the Shfela and the Negev regions throughout the ages. The 15th Annual Southern Congress*. Ben Gurion University and the Israel Antiquities Authority. Jerusalem 2019, 167–182 (in Hebrew); N. AMITAI-PREISS / Y. TEPPER / R. LINN, Deciphering early Arabic texts on eighth-and ninth-century CE ostraca from the Colt Expedition findings in Shivta. *Michmanim* 28 (2019), 85–100 (Hebrew with English abstract).

40 BALY, S'baita (as footnote 7 above), 175–177; MOOR, Mosque and church (as footnote 1 above), 96–108.

41 REYNOLDS, Monasticism (as footnotes 35 above), 24, note 62.

claims of possible contemporaneous and peaceful occupation of Shivta by Christians and Muslims worshiping together in shared spaces.⁴² According to TEPPER, the use of *spolia* from the church – including the repurposing of lintels decorated with crosses and other Christian symbols – as a pavement leading to the mosque, calls into question any coexistence between the South Church and the mosque. This suggests that the two religious structures did not exist simultaneously and that the mosque was built only after the church's destruction.⁴³

Furthermore, recent excavations of trash mounds clearly show a separation between Byzantine and Early Islamic trash deposits.⁴⁴ This confirms scholarly conclusions regarding the site's gradual abandonment, which began in the sixth century,⁴⁵ along with a decline in agricultural activities,⁴⁶ that finally ceased sometime in the seventh century.⁴⁷ Similarly, cleaning of water reservoirs stopped sometime in the eighth century.⁴⁸ All this suggests that the churches at Shivta were already in ruins prior to Islamic occupation of the site. Considering

42 MAGNESS, *Archaeology* (as footnote 2 above); AVNI, *Byzantine-Islamic transition* (as footnote 2 above); MOOR, *Mosque and church* (as footnote 1 above), 107–108.

43 TEPPER, *Church and mosque* (as footnote 39 above). For a different approach, suggesting the apotropaic use of Christian symbols by Muslims, see G. PEERS, 'Crosses' work underfoot: Christian spolia in the Late Antique mosque at Shivta in the Negev Desert (Israel). *Eastern Christian Art* 8 (2011), 101–119. For a broader discussion on this subject see also M. GUIDETTI, *In the shadow of the church: the building of mosques in early medieval Syria. Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World*, 8. Leiden/Boston 2016. Without deeper exploration of this subject, which needs to be studied separately, here we will just refer to the example from Pella, where a Monophysite church was converted to Chalcedonian. A chancel post from the earlier church was reused as a step in the renewed sanctuary, causing the Chalcedonian clergy to step on it while entering the sanctuary (R.H. SMITH / L.P. DAY, *Pella of the Decapolis 2. Final Report on the College of Wooster. Excavations in Area IX, the Civil Complex, 1979–1985*. Wooster 1989, fig. 33, and plate 35 A; MULHOLLAND, *Early Byzantine Christian church* (as footnote 13 above), 67.

44 TEPPER/ERICKSON-GINI/FARHI/BAR-OZ, *Probing* (as footnote 2 above).

45 HIRSCHFELD, *Crisis* (as footnote 6 above); TEPPER/WEISSBROD/BAR-OZ, *Behind sealed doors* (as footnote 2 above); D. FUKS / E. WEISS / Y. TEPPER / G. BAR-OZ, *Seeds of collapse? Reconstructing the ancient agricultural economy at Shivta in the Negev. Antiquity* 90/353 (2016), <http://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2016.167>.

46 An apparent paradox of flourishing of Shivta churches in the sixth and seventh centuries versus a decline in agricultural activities and urbanism has also been noted in relation to Petra: Z.T. FIEMA, *City and countryside in Byzantine Palestine. Prosperity in question*, in (eds.) A.S. Lewin / P. Pellegrini, *Settlements and demography in the Near East in Late Antiquity. Proceedings of the Colloquium in Matera, 27–19 October 2005. Biblioteca di "Mediterraneo antico"*, 2. Pisa/Roma 2006, 67–88.

47 TEPPER/PORAT/BAR-OZ, *Sustainable farming* (as footnote 4 above).

48 TEPPER/ERICKSON-GINI/FARHI/BAR-OZ, *Probing* (as footnote 2 above), Area H.

the mosque's small size, this occupation was probably quite modest. Additionally, most of Shivta's residents had left either because of heavy taxes,⁴⁹ natural disasters,⁵⁰ plagues,⁵¹ or a combination of these and other causes.

49 S. O'SULLIVAN, Fiscal evidence from the Nessana papyri, in P. Sijpesteijn/A.T. Schubert (eds.), Documents and the history of the early Islamic world. *Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts*, 111. Leiden 2015, 50–74.

50 For possible earthquakes, which could cause considerable destruction in the area, see A.M. KORJENKOV/E. MAZOR, Earthquake characteristics reconstructed from archaeological damage patterns. Shivta, the Negev, Israel. *Israel Journal of Earth Sciences* 48 (1999), 265–282; K.W. RUSSELL, The earthquake chronology of Palestine and northwest Arabia from the 2nd through the mid-8th century A.D. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 260 (1985), 37–59. Recent studies of seismic activities in Rehovot in the Negev have identified several waves of earthquakes, causing significant damage in the fifth century (447, 498, 502), as well as the seventh (destroyed Oboda) and ninth centuries: A.M. KORZHENKOV/E. MAZOR, Archaeoseismological damage patterns at the ancient ruins at Rehovot-ba-Negev, Israel. *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 2014/1, 75–92. For updated records of earthquake events, see M. ZOHAR/A. SALAMON/R. TADMOR, Reappraised list of historical earthquakes that affected Israel and its close surroundings. *Journal of Seismology* 20/3 (2016), 971–985. Unpublished earthquakes research has been undertaken in Shivta recently (by Lian Kombelis and Motti Zhoar, Haifa University and by Claudio Modena, Francesca dal Porto and Michol Rampdao from the University of Padova). None of this supports the assumed dating mentioned above. See also HIRSCHFELD/TEPPER, Columbarium towers (as footnote 3 above); TEPPER/ERICKSON-GINI/FARHI/BAR-OZ, Probing (as footnote 2 above). For climate effects on the Negev region, see HIRSCHFELD, Crisis (as footnote 6 above); LANGGUT et. al., Environment (as footnote 11 above); FUKS/BAR-OZ/TEPPER/ERICKSON-GINI/WEISSBROD/WEISS, Rise and fall (as footnote 35 above); P. VAIGLOVA et al., Climate stability and societal decline on the margins of the Byzantine empire in the Negev Desert. *Scientific Reports* 10 (2020), 1512. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-58360-5>.

51 For example, Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6179 talks about a famine in Syria and Palestine in 686–687. N. BENOVIKZ, The Justinianic plague: evidence from the dated Greek epitaphs of Byzantine Palestine and Arabia. *JRA* 27 (2014), 487–498; O'SULLIVAN, Fiscal evidence (as footnote 49 above), 68. For a different approach, see also L. MORDECHAI/M. EISENBERG/T.P. NEWFIELD/A. IZDEBSKI/J.E. KAY/H. POINAR, The Justinianic plague: an inconsequential pandemic? *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116/51 (2019), 25546–54. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1903797116>.

Baptistery: structure and ritual

Comparative analysis between the North and South Church Baptisteries

In the following discussion of the baptisteries in Shivta, we attempt to appraise the interconnections between shape and ritual within their well-preserved *in situ* architectural remains. With no direct evidence on the nature of baptismal rites in Shivta, or the Negev in general, our leading source remains Cyril of Jerusalem.⁵² We draw on DAY's excellent studies of baptismal liturgy and ritual in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt,⁵³ where she extracted the structure of the baptismal rite from Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures* and *Mystagogical Catecheses*,⁵⁴ and described it as follows: a summons to the baptistery; pre-immersion rituals, which included a confession of sin and exorcism ritual of some kind; a profession of faith; and a pre-immersion anointing, followed by a consecration of the font with a Trinitarian formula, and a complete immersion. The ritual ends with a procession into the Church, and the Eucharist.⁵⁵ In her analysis of baptism accounts performed in Gaza, DAY concluded that the ceremonies there were similar to those in Jerusalem. She further suggested that these accounts correspond to the Palestinian ritual followed elsewhere in the area.⁵⁶

52 J. DAY, Baptism in early Byzantine Palestine 325–451. *Gorgias Liturgical Studies*, 42. Piscataway, NJ 2009, 11.

53 J. DAY, The baptismal liturgy of Jerusalem: 4th and 5th century evidence in Jerusalem, Egypt and Syria. Aldershot 2007; DAY, Baptism (as footnote 52 above); DAY, The Catechetical Lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem a source for the baptismal liturgy of mid-fourth century Jerusalem, in D. Hellholm/T. Vegge/Ø. Norderval/C. Hellholm (eds.), Ablution, initiation and baptism. Late Antiquity, early Judaism, and early Christianity. *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 176. Berlin/Boston 2011, 1179–1204; J. DAY, Entering the baptistery: spatial, identity and salvific transitions in fourth-and fifth century baptismal liturgies, in E.M. van Opstall (ed.), Sacred thresholds. The door to the sanctuary in Late Antiquity. *Religions in the Graeco-Roman world*, 185. Leiden/Boston 2018, 66–90.

54 In addition to 18 *Catechetical Lectures* delivered in the 350s, the *Mystagogical Catecheses*, from the 380s, are ascribed to Cyril (E.J. YARNOLD, The authorship of the *Mystagogic Catecheses* attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem. *Heythrop Journal* 19 (1978), 143–161; A. DOVAL, Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogue: the authorship of the Mystagogic Catechesis*. Washington, DC 2001), but according to DAY should be attributed to his successor John of Jerusalem. They date to the early fifth century and testify to the transformation of Jerusalem's ritual by incorporating other models into it. DAY, *Catechetical Lectures* (as footnote 53 above), 1201–03.

55 DAY, *Catechetical Lectures* (as footnote 53 above), 1189–1200.

56 DAY, Baptism (as footnote 52 above), 16–18, 33.

The existence of at least two baptisteries in Shivta (**Plate VIII/2–X/6**),⁵⁷ a rural settlement in an arid environment, has raised questions among scholars.⁵⁸ In fact, several baptisteries within a village or a small town was not an uncommon phenomenon even in the Negev, Nessana being a good example.⁵⁹ In the Djebel Barisha area of Northern Syria, baptisteries (most dated to the sixth century, such as Bashmishli and Dar Qita), were attached even to small churches, and, occasionally, two or more baptisteries existed in one town perhaps intended for family use.⁶⁰ It has been advanced that in Dar Qita, one of the baptisteries served locals while the other was connected to the St Sergius Church that functioned as a regional pilgrimage center.⁶¹

The striking overall similarity of North and South Church baptisteries in Shivta sparked discussion on their chronology (**Plate VIII/2–IX/3; cf. IX/4, X/6**).⁶² Both baptisteries comprise a chapel attached to the main church, conform-

57 As only hinted by Colt, the Central Church also most probably had a baptistery. Additional study is required to verify its place and shape.

58 BAGATTI, Church (as footnote 18 above), 310; L. PERRONE, Christian holy places in an age of dogmatic conflicts. *Proche Orient Chrétien* 48 (1998), 5–37, here 13, note 16; J. LASSUS, Sanctuaires chrétiens de Syrie. Paris 1947, 224–225. In the sixth century, a number of baptisteries within the same town is attested also in Italy and North Africa, perhaps suggesting a number of people baptized simultaneously during Easter. From the late fourth century onward, baptism was also celebrated during Epiphany, as well as during the days of commemorating important martyrs. In the East, baptisteries are found in martyrs' and saints' sanctuaries (e.g., St John at Ephesus, Abu Menas [Egypt], Qalat Siman [Syria]), which drew great numbers of pilgrims there: O. BRANDT, Understanding the structures of early Christian baptisteries, in Hellholm et al., Ablution (as footnote 53 above), 1588–1609, here 1597–98.

59 Two baptisteries were discovered thus far in Nessana: one, constructed in 602, in the North (SS. Sergius and Bacchus) Church (COLT, Excavations, as footnote 13 above; DI SEGNI, Dated Greek inscriptions, as footnote 5 above, 782–783), another in the Central Church (URMAN, Nessana, as footnote 36 above). Mampsis has two baptisteries; however, the baptistery of the West Church is seemingly later than that of the East Church, dated by Negev to the mid-fourth century: A. NEGEV, The architecture of Mampsis, final report, II: The Late Roman and Byzantine periods. *Qedem*, 27. Jerusalem 1988, 51.

60 H.C. BUTLER, Architecture and the arts. New York 1903; G. TCHALENKO, Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord. Le Massif du Bélus à l'époque romaine. Paris 1953, 317; I. PENA, The Christian art of Byzantine Syria. Reading 1997, 96.

61 PENA, Christian art, *ibid.*, 95–96.

62 Rosenthal suggested that they could have been built at the same time, although she contradicts her own statement in the same work: ROSENTHAL, North Church (as footnote 11 above), 148, cf. 167. BALY, S'beitat (as footnote 7 above), 177 dated the South Church Baptistery earlier than the North Church one, and so did Ben-Pechat who attributed the South Church Baptistery to the early fifth century: M. BEN-PECHAT, The Paleo-Christian baptismal fonts in the Holy Land: formal and functional study. *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989), 165–188, here 172.

ing to the general structure of baptisteries in small rural settlements in the Eastern region. Most of these baptisteries were relatively modest in size, and, at times, were indistinguishable from other chapels connected to the church.⁶³ The baptistry next to the North Church was built at its southern side (**Plate VIII/2, XIII/11**). It has an elongated rectangular structure with an apse facing east, in front of which the font is placed.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ On the western side of the baptistry is an anteroom, forming a perpendicular angle with the Baptistry's main nave, and connected to the narthex of the church by another passage.

The South Church Baptistry is located northwest of the main church (**Plate X/5–6, XIII/12**). It consists of two spaces (F and G) separated by a stylobate with two pillar bases. The Baptistry is entered either from room E or from the narthex. Another entrance connects the Baptistry with a rectangular chapel (Q), leading to the main church. Thus, in order to enter the South Church Baptistry, one did not need to enter the Church. However, to enter the North Church Baptistry, one had to enter the main church through its southern nave. This arrangement, which conforms to the so-called “Syrian” mono-apsidal type,⁶⁶ may con-

63 Curiously, until the baptismal font was discovered in the North Church Baptistry in Shivta, the function of the chapel as a baptistry was unknown. Butler described a similar situation in northern Syria. Thus, at the East Church, Ksedjbeh of 414 and at Kasr Iblisu of 431, the baptisteries were attached to the southeast corner of the churches; both had small, eastern apses. A separate baptistry 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 422. The only other separate, centralized baptistry recorded was the hexagonal one with a central font at Der Seta dated to the sixth century: H.C. BUTLER, *Early churches in Syria, fourth to seventh centuries*, Princeton 1929, 155–156; BALDERSTONE, *Early church* (as footnote 16 above), 32. Baptisteries of large size and distinct shapes are also known in the East. Probably influenced by the Constantinopolitan imperial model, they are mainly situated in important religious centers, serving massive baptisms of pilgrims or nomads, and are mostly dated to the fifth century (e.g., St. John at Ephesus, Qalat Siman, Northern Syria; Gerasa, Jordan; Abu Mina, Egypt: BRANDT, *Understanding the structures*, as footnote 58 above, 1593).

64 Such an installation of the font within the niche of the apse is found in Syria, Palestine, Egypt (e.g., Doura, Dar Qita, Antioch-Kaossie, Nebo, Luqсор, Ain-Mahmoudieh, Emmaus), Gerasa, Jordan; in Crème: Cherson I and II, Balkans, Greece and Roman Africa: A. KHATCHATRIAN, *Origine et typologie des baptistères paléochrétiens*. Mulhouse 1982, 11; TCHALENKO, *Villages* (as footnote 60 above), 286.

65 The similar placement of baptisteries in the church is characteristic of monuments from Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Balkans: I. BERDZENISHVILI, *Early Christian baptisteries from Western Georgia*, in *Caucasiologic Papers*. Tbilisi 2010, 576–600, here 579.

66 MULHOLLAND, *Early Byzantine Christian Church* (as footnote 13 above), 59.

firm changes the North Church underwent from its mono-apsidal to its tri-apsidal form.

Thus, both baptisteries comprise an anteroom, a nave, and an apse with the baptism font. They are not closed rooms but are separated from each other by inner divisions.⁶⁷ In the South Church Baptistry, the catechumens entered through the western area of the pillars and exited, after baptism, through the eastern part into adjacent chapel that connected the baptistry to the main church.⁶⁸ In the North Church Baptistry, the entrance was from the west; the perpendicular angle of the anteroom separated it more sharply from the nave of the baptistry chapel. After exiting the font, the catechumens entered through another passage into an adjacent chapel and from there into the church. Thus, in both cases the two currents did not meet and in the North Church complex it appears that they were better separated (**Plate XIII/11, 12**).

It is not unusual for a baptistry to have two different entrances interconnecting different arrangements of space. Thus, the baptistry 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.⁶⁹ In another example, the fifth century baptistry at Qalat Siman, the font, located within the apse, has two lateral openings, especially designed for large movements of people.⁷⁰ Other examples include the fifth century Petra Church, where the baptismal font situated in the middle room has entrances into adjacent rooms⁷¹ and the sixth century baptistry in Washnary (Ozurgeti region, village Gurianta) which had two doorways, in the western and northern walls, with the northern door directly connected

67 Analyzing early examples of the so-called Cathedral type of baptistry in Jerusalem, Gerasa, Dor, Ashkelon and Gaza, Day concluded that the baptistry had to have at least two rooms: the candidates, after waiting in the courtyard, attended an anteroom for renunciation and then moved to the font to be baptized, anointed, and dressed. The Holy Sepulchre Baptistry probably had a three-part division of the baptistry complex, akin to three main liturgical units of the *Mystagogical Catecheses*: the renunciation, the font and the chrismation and robing. The two-room baptisteries attached to the basilica (such as at Dora and Nicopolis) are characteristic of Palestine: DAY, Baptism (as footnote 52 above), 24–27; DAY, Entering (as footnote 53 above), 77, 82.

68 KHATCHATRIAN, Origine et typologie (as footnote 64 above), 38.

69 According to Negev, both the East and the West churches in Mampsis were destroyed in the sixth century: NEGEV, The architecture of Mampsis (as footnote 59 above), 66.

70 TCHALENKO, Villages (as footnote 60 above), 1, 237–238.

71 P.M. BIKAI, The churches of Byzantine Petra. *Near Eastern Archaeology* 65/4 (Dec. 2002: Petra: a royal city unearthed), 271–276, here 272.

to the church's interior.⁷² These entrances served a ritual purpose: a person would enter through one entrance as an "old man" and exit reborn, prepared to participate in the mysteries of the Eucharist.⁷³

Baptismal fonts in both of Shivta's churches are placed within the apse (**Plate VIII/2, IX/3–X/6**). In the wall of the apse of the North Church Baptistery, just above the cruciform font, a small hole is visible at the entrance of a pipe through which water entered the font from a water reservoir just on the back of the apse wall.⁷⁴ According to the baptismal rite articulated already in the *Didache*, running water symbolized "living water."⁷⁵ After the ceremony, all the water had to be drawn out of the font.

In the North Church Baptistery, the font is placed on a platform raised two steps above the level of the nave. It is enclosed by a chancel screen that sets the area apart from the chapel nave. As in 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,"⁷⁶ or in case of the baptistery, during the sacrament of baptism.

Cyril of Jerusalem and John Chrysostom compared acts of baptism with the Garden of Paradise, stressing the importance of nakedness, with the catechumen evoking the awareness of the nakedness for Adam and Eve, who were not

72 I. BERDZENISHVILI, Early Christian baptisteries from the eastern Black Sea coast in ethnology and archaeology of Armenia and neighboring countries (25–27 October, 2014, Materials of International Conference). Yerevan 2014, 292–303, here 296–298.

73 PENA, Christian art (as footnote 60 above), 96.

74 No such hole is visible in the South Church baptistery. Shivta's drainage system collected water from the slopes above it. The North Church is located at the highest point on the site. Two drainage water collecting systems have been documented there. The first, a long canal, collected water for more than two kilometers, and enters the site near the church from the east. It directs the water toward the North Church and toward the Central Church (which is not discussed here). The canals that led to the North Church directed water to the cisterns. One of the cisterns is located at the back of the church, behind the baptistery. The water collected in it could be poured through a wall-mounted pipe, directly into the baptismal font. The second, short canal, collected water in a large cistern in the churchyard. In addition, water collected from the roof of the church was also drained into this cistern. It is likely that these water systems were established and maintained by and on behalf of the church/monastery. TEPPER/BAR-OZ, Shivta, preliminary report (as footnote 26 above), area E.

75 J. BOGDANOVIĆ, The framing of sacred space: the canopy and the Byzantine church. Oxford 2017, 62.

76 N. ISAR, Veiled word(s) – sacred silence screening the mystery in the byzantine altar, in P. Grønder-Hansen (ed.), Image and altar 800–1300. Papers from an international conference in Copenhagen 24 October – 27 October 2007. *Publications from the National Museum studies in archaeology & history*, 23. Copenhagen 2014, 27–44, here 32.

ashamed until they “took up the garment of sin.”⁷⁷ As people most likely removed their clothing before entering the font, in the words of Cyril of Jerusalem “you were naked in front of everyone and you were not ashamed,”⁷⁸ the chancel screen was not meant to hide the naked person but to emphasize the sacredness of the act.⁷⁹

Alternatively, in the South Church Baptistery, the font is not elevated above the nave level and does not have a chancel screen. However, it was almost certainly placed under a canopy (*ciborium*), which visually defined it in the space, while curtains could partially hide the act of baptism. Although undetectable in situ today, a remnant of one column that would have held the canopy is visible in COLT’s photograph of the baptistery font from the 1930s (**Plate XI/7**).⁸⁰ Canopies have been identified in several baptisteries: in the Nessana North Church dated from 464 to 527/65;⁸¹ in the Mampsis Church (**Plate XII/9**);⁸² in the fifth century Petra Church (**Plate XII/10**);⁸³ and in Old Diaconicon at the Memorial of Moses on Mt. Nebo, dated to 530.⁸⁴ Considering these examples, canopies were probably more widespread than the surviving evidence indicates.⁸⁵

77 John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, cited from E.C. WHITAKER, Documents of the baptismal liturgy. London 1970, 38; *Mystagogical Catechesis* 1.1 = Cyrille de Jérusalem, *Catéchèses mystagogiques*, éd. A. PIÉDAGNEL. SC, 126. Paris 1966, 82–84; J. WEISS, The relationship between ritual and space at the Neonian baptistery of Ravenna. *Past Imperfect* 12 (2006), 1–26, here 20; DAY, Entering (as footnote 53 above), 83.

78 *Mystagogical Catechesis* 2.2 (ed. PIÉDAGNEL, 104–106; DAY, Entering (as footnote 53 above), 87.

79 Ben-Pechat suggested that in Qalat Siman, Gerasa and Apamea, the baptismal fonts were enclosed within the apse and shaded from outside viewers. The architecture was designed in such a way that the neophyte’s nakedness remained hidden. This attitude toward nakedness is also found in Cypriot baptisteries: M. BEN-PECHAT, *L’architecture baptismale de la Terre sainte du IV^eme au VII^eme siècle: étude historique, archéologique et liturgique*. PhD Thesis. University of Paris Nanterre 1985, 289–300; BEN-PECHAT, *Paleochristian baptismal fonts* (as footnote 62 above), 185–186.

80 The existence of a canopy in the North Church baptistery is less clear, although it was suggested by early discoverers of Shivta, who saw holes in the apses as being part of the canopy structure. Since such holes exist in all apses in both churches, it is reasonable to ask if canopies occurred in all cases or if they were made for a different purpose. If it existed, the canopy in the North Church Baptistery, symbolically framing the sacredness of the space, would be at least partially behind the chancel screen, reducing visibility of the ceremony even more. BOGDANOVIĆ, *Framing* (as footnote 75 above), 52.

81 S. RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*. *JbaC, Ergänzungsband*, 27. Münster 1998, #318.

82 *Ibid.*, #313.

83 *Ibid.*, #443; BIKAI, *The churches* (as footnote 71 above), 272.

84 A. MICHEL, *The liturgical installations*, in: M. Piccirillo/E. Alliata (eds.), *Mount Nebo: new archaeological excavations 1967–1997*. Jerusalem 1998, 390–412, here 405. For a new

In Eastern liturgy, both the altar and baptismal font must be covered.⁸⁶ In her recent study of canopies, BOGDANOVIĆ stated 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.”⁸⁷ In fact, a tradition of enclosing the baptismal font within a canopy goes back to the third century baptistry of Dura Europos.⁸⁸ Evidence from ninth century Carolingian ivories (e.g., Drogo Sacramentary Book Covers, 9th c.; Remigius of Reims baptizing Clovis I, Reims, 875–899),⁸⁹ as well as Byzantine illuminated manuscripts (e.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 40, Iviron Monastery, 10th century) also point to the use of a canopy above baptistry fonts.⁹⁰ Curtains were most probably hung within canopies that may also have held some lighting devices.⁹¹

Both the North and South Baptism fonts at Shivta are large monoliths once sheathed in marble⁹² 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) (**Plate**

study on the monastery see D. BIANCHI, A shrine to Moses. A reappraisal of the Mount Nebo monastic complex between Byzantium and Islam. *Archäologische Forschungen*, 31. Vienna 2021.

85 According to Ristow, canopies can be reconstructed in 139 early baptisteries, but mostly they framed fonts placed in the center of the room. RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (as footnote 81 above), 32–34.

86 PENA, *Christian art* (as footnote 60 above), 100.

87 BOGDANOVIĆ, *Framing* (as footnote 75 above), 50.

88 *Ibid.*, 51–52; 144–147; Bogdanović lists 24 Byzantine baptismal fonts, 18 dated to the fourth to the sixth centuries and one to the seventh to eighth centuries (*ibid.*, Appendix). It appears that, in the period before Iconoclasm, the practice of placing a baptismal font under the canopy was more common than in the later period.

89 Bibliothèque Nationale de France; A. GOLDSCHMIDT, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Zeit der karolingischen und sächsischen Kaiser, VIII.–XI. Jahrhundert*. Berlin 1914, 41, pl. XXX (74); Musée de Picardie, Amiens; R. DESHMAN, Otto III and the Warmund Sacramentary. A study in political theology. *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 34 (1971), 1–20, here 3; fig. 8.

90 See also P.A. UNDERWOOD, The fountain of life in manuscripts of the Gospels. *DOP* 5 (1950), 43–138.

91 RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (as footnote 81 above), 74.

92 Masonry-built fonts are usually earlier than monolithic fonts dating from the sixth century and later. BEN-PECHAT, *L'architecture baptismale* (as footnote 79 above) I, 277–284; S. WATTA, Spätantike monolithische Taufpiscinen aus konstantinopolitanischer Produktion. *JbAC* 51 (2008), 152–187, here 176–178. According to Brandt, fonts developed from being broad and shallow structures in the fourth century, used to baptize a large number of adults, to becoming smaller, narrower, and deeper in the fifth century. Further diminishing in size in the sixth century they became monolithic, covered with marble and lifted high above the floor, reflecting the shift from adult to child baptism: BRANDT, *Understanding the structures* (as footnote 58 above), 1593–94.

IX/3, 4). Three steps are cut inside the two opposite arms of the cross in the direction of the length of the nave (east and west). The fonts are placed so close to the wall of the apse that one can only wonder if the steps on its east side could have been used at all. They may have been unserviceable and only cut for aesthetic reasons.⁹³ Since both fonts are about 60 cm above 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 was a cruciform in its first stage, sunken into the floor with steps descending from each arm of the cross (**Plate XII/9**).⁹⁴ At some point, the font arms were blocked, perhaps to reduce water use.⁹⁵ A composite font (square in plan on the exterior and semi-circle on the interior) at the Nessana North Church was entered by two steps.⁹⁶ The North Church baptistery at Oboda, presumably dated to the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century, has one of the earliest cruciform-shaped fonts inscribed in a semicircle (**Plate XI/8**).⁹⁷ It is the most closely comparable to Shivta's baptisteries, although Oboda's font has no steps.

By the sixth century, cruciform-shaped fonts already were widespread.⁹⁸ The earliest secularly dated examples of cruciform fonts are from the fifth century. One impressive example comes from Alahan Monastery, Turkey,⁹⁹ and another early example of a cruciform font can be found at Kourion, Cyprus (at the side of the Episcopal Church of Zeno), dated to the fifth century, or perhaps even to the fourth.¹⁰⁰ A similarly shaped font exists in the sixth century Church B

93 BEN-PECHAT, *Paleochristian baptismal fonts* (as footnote 62 above), 176.

94 RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (as footnote 81 above), #313; NEGEV, *Architecture of Mampsis* (as footnote 59 above), 48–50.

95 *Ibid.*, 49–50.

96 RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (as footnote 81 above), #318; COLT, *Excavations* (as footnote 13 above), 37.

97 RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (as footnote 81 above), #300 (date 5th/6th c.); NEGEV, *Architecture of Oboda* (as footnote 32 above), 117; NEGEV, *Churches of the Central Negev* (as footnote 16 above), 413; BEN-PECHAT, *Paleochristian baptismal fonts* (as footnote 62 above), 172.

98 According to Sebastian Ristow's study, who analyzed 1061 baptisteries from the third to the ninth century, sixteen percent of all fonts have a cruciform shape: RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (as footnote 81 above).

99 RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (as footnote 81 above), #643.

100 *Ibid.*, #785; E. FERGUSON, *Baptism in the early church: history, theology and liturgy in the first five centuries*. Grand Rapids, Mich. 2009, 827. On the Byzantine baptisteries of Cyprus see R. MICHAIL, *The early Christian baptisteries of Cyprus (4th–7th centuries AD): typological analysis of the architecture and of the baptismal structure*. *Cahiers du Centre d'Études Chypriotes* 43 (2013), 137–153. See also M. HORSTER/D. NICOLAOU/S. ROGGE (eds.), *Church building in Cy-*

at Salamis.¹⁰¹ Additional examples include: cruciform fonts in churches at the fifth century Petra “Great” Church, one of the best-preserved cruciform baptisteries in the East;¹⁰² Jabal Harun (the burial place of Aaron), originally built in the late fifth century but abandoned and rebuilt as a cruciform in the early seventh century (both phases are best compared to baptisteries in Petra);¹⁰³ Madaba Cathedral, phase two, 575/6;¹⁰⁴ Old Diaconicon at the Memorial of Moses on Mt. Nebo, 530;¹⁰⁵ and the eighth century Umm ar-Rasas.¹⁰⁶ This font form was also popular within the Holy Land (e.g., Upper Khirbet Karkur;¹⁰⁷ Magen, phase 2;¹⁰⁸ Et-Taiyiba/Umm et Tuba;¹⁰⁹ Nir Gallim;¹¹⁰ and more).¹¹¹ Its shape is closely linked to the symbolism of baptism that evokes Christ’s death on the cross.¹¹² The cruciform fonts in Shivta and three descending steps correspond perfectly with the symbolism of baptism based on the Pauline theme of being buried and raised up with Christ and as such, the font symbolizes his grave, death and resurrection.¹¹³

prus (fourth to seventh centuries) a mirror of intercultural contacts in the Eastern Mediterranean. *Schriften des Instituts für Interdisziplinäre Zypern-Studien*, 12. Münster 2018.

101 RISTOW, Frühchristliche Baptisterien (as footnote 81 above), # 788.

102 BIKAI, Churches (as footnote 71 above), 272.

103 Z.T. FIEMA/C. KANELLOPOULOS/T. WALISZEWSKI/R. SCHICK, The Petra Church. Amman 2001, 41–49; Z.T. FIEMA, The Memorial Church at the Monastery of St. Aaron near Petra, Jordan. *ARAM* 30 (2018), 133–145, here 136–137.

104 RISTOW, Frühchristliche Baptisterien (as footnote 81 above), # 442.

105 BAGATTI, Church (as footnote 18 above), 261, fig. 160; MICHEL, Liturgical installations (as footnote 84 above), 405–407. In Magen, the cruciform baptistry (Building D) is separated from the main church. It probably was built in the late fifth century, with a new church, after the old building (including a baptistry of different kind) was destroyed. V. TSAFERIS, An Early Christian church complex at Magen. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 258 (1985), 1–15, here 13. In Jabal Harun Monastery, the font is located close to the western part of the chapel, despite it having an apse: FIEMA/KANELLOPOULOS/WALISZEWSKI/SCHICK, Petra Church (as footnote 103 above), 42.

106 RISTOW, Frühchristliche Baptisterien (as footnote 81 above), # 447.

107 P. FIGUERAS, Karkur’ Illit, Horvat, in E. Stern (ed.), The new encyclopedia of archaeological excavations in the Holy Land, 5, supplementary volume. Jerusalem 2008, 1902–03.

108 RISTOW, Frühchristliche Baptisterien (as footnote 81 above), # 316.

109 *Ibid.*, # 324.

110 A. GORZALCZANY, Baptismal font at Nir Gallim. *’Atiqot* 43 (2002), 115–118.

111 FERGUSON, Baptism (as footnote 100 above), 822, BEN-PECHAT, Paleochristian baptismal fonts (as footnote 62 above); PATRICH, Early Christian churches (as footnote 17 above), 380–381.

112 FIEMA/KANELLOPOULOS/WALISZEWSKI/SCHICK, Petra Church (as footnote 103), 41; BEN-PECHAT, Paleochristian baptismal fonts (as footnote 62 above), 184.

113 FERGUSON, Baptism (as footnote 100 above), 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.¹¹⁴

This symbolism around the act of baptism was widely accepted.¹¹⁵ To emulate the idea of Christ's death and resurrection after spending three days in Sheol,¹¹⁶ the baptismal rite required complete triple immersion of the neophyte.¹¹⁷ It has been argued, however, that none of the baptistery fonts in the Holy Land were deep enough to support full immersion of a standing person.¹¹⁸ We agree with BEN-PECHAT, who suggested that catechumens could,

114 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 3.12 = Cyrilli Hierosolymorum archiepiscopi opera, ed. W.C. REISCHL/J. RUPP. Munich 1860; DAY, *Catechetical Lectures* (as footnote 53 above), 1185.

115 Burials in Shivta North Church baptistery correspond to a common tradition and emphasize a symbolic connection between birth, death, and rebirth through baptism, and the eventual resurrection expressed already by Paul in Rom 6: 3–11. R. JENSEN, *Living water: images, symbols, and settings of Early Christian baptism. Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae*, 105. Leiden 2011. Thus, for example, tombs can be attested in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, with the earliest belonging to its foundation. Several burials are located in the Stobi baptistery: C.J. DOWNING, Wall paintings from the baptistery at Stobi, Macedonia, and early depictions of Christ and the Evangelists. *DOP* 52 (1998), 259–280. Tombs dated to as late as the ninth century were found in the Byzantine baptistery of Santa Severina in Calabria. Already from the fourth century, free-standing baptisteries were shaped as Mausolea (JENSEN, *Living water*, 237–42). Conversely, iconography that symbolically recalls the Baptism of Christ is frequently found in early Christian tombs and sarcophagi, including in the Lochamei Ha Getaot tomb: E. MAAAYAN-FANAR, Early Christian tomb at Lohamei HaGetaot: formation of Christological symbolism. *Eastern Christian Art* 7 (2010), 71–89.

116 S. BROCK, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac theology and liturgy*. Aldershot 2006, 41–43.

117 DAY, *Catechetical Lectures* (as footnote 53 above), 1195–96.

118 The depth of most known Byzantine baptisteries around the Mediterranean is less than one meter, with the average being between 70 and 90 cm. Rufus tells us that Peter Iberian baptized a child by splashing water on his back. This story suggests that full immersion was not the only way to baptize a person at that time. BEN-PECHAT, *Baptism and monasticism* (as footnote 23 above), 451–512. Initiation by sprinkling water was already described in *Didache* (ch. 7) and used in Northern Syria, in western practices of initiation and perhaps even in Constantinople: LASSUS, *Sanctuaires* (as footnote 58 above), 218f; PENA, *Christian art* (as footnote 60 above), 97; M. THOMPSON, *Building baptism: theology and ritual in the structure and interior decoration of the Neonian Baptistery of Ravenna. Relics, Remnants, and Religion* 4/1 (2019) <<https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/relics/vol4/iss1/4>>. See also WATTA, *Spätantike monolithische Taufpiscinen* (as footnote 92 above), 171–174.

with the help of the priest, arrange themselves into a position enabling full immersion.¹¹⁹ In Shivta it could be done either by leaning on the steps at the east side of the font (which would make these steps functional) or by standing on their knees, with the priest holding the catechumen's head under the water. The latter solution is supported in the *Didascalia* (Ch. 17) and in Theodore of Mopsuestia's account (Hom. 91.15). According to Theodore, candidates are on their knees while receiving the gift of baptism through three full immersions, while their heads are held under water by the priest's hand:

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.¹²⁰

At the side of the main cruciform font in the South Church Baptistry is another, much smaller, round alcove (c. 38 cm deep and c. 42 cm wide; **Plate IX/4**). Although suggested,¹²¹ no evidence of such an alcove in the North Church Baptistry has been found.¹²² Small, variously shaped alcoves exist at the side of baptismal fonts in Oboda (North Church) and Mampsis,¹²³ as well as in the Petra Church¹²⁴ (**Plate XI/8 – XII/10**), and others, their function, however, remains unclear.¹²⁵ It has been suggested that they could have been used to

119 BEN-PECHAT, Paleochristian baptismal fonts (as footnote 62 above), 180–181.

120 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Instructions to Candidates for Baptism*, part 2, Sermon 4; cited from WHITAKER, Documents (as footnote 77 above), 49. See also A.J. WHARTON, The baptistry of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the politics of sacred landscape. *DOP* 46 (1992), 313–325; G. ROUWHORST, Liturgical mimesis or liturgical identity markers: the initiation of Christians and the Baptism of Christ in early Syriac Christianity, in B. Groen et al (ed.), *Studies in Oriental liturgy. Proceedings of the fifth International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy* New York, 10–15 June 2014. *Eastern Christian Studies*, 28. Leuven/Paris/Bristol, CT 2019, 25–47, here 42.

121 BEN-PECHAT, Baptism and monasticism (as footnote 23 above), 511.

122 Mallon was probably the only one to see the area of the font in its undamaged state. In his description, he mentions neither columns that might point to canopy nor a small alcove at the side of the cruciform font: A. MALLON, Le Baptistère de Sbeita. *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 10 (1930), 227–229.

123 BEN-PECHAT, The Paleochristian baptismal fonts (as footnote 62 above), 179.

124 FIEMA/KANELLOPOULOS/WALISZEWSKI/SCHICK, Petra Church (as footnote 103 above), 47.

125 Additional small sized (between 0.30 and 0.60 m deep) installations of various shapes on the site of the main font and mostly in direct contact with it are common and regionally wide-

hold the oil for anointing in the baptismal rite, or, perhaps, for washing the feet of neophytes, symbolizing humility and referring to Christ washing the feet of the apostles. This practice was familiar from Ambrosian ritual and described in connection with the Neonian baptistery in Ravenna,¹²⁶ but seemingly unknown in the East.¹²⁷ BAGATTI and BEN-PECHAT proposed that the small alcoves were used for infant baptism to reduce water use.¹²⁸ This is still the leading theory regarding their function.¹²⁹ It is generally accepted that, although infant baptism became more common during the fourth and fifth centuries, as late as the sixth century most people were still baptized as adults,¹³⁰ mainly on Easter Sunday but also on the Epiphany and other special holidays.¹³¹ Adult catechumenates were still common in Constantinople at the beginning of the fifth century and remained so to some extent into the seventh century. They are mentioned for the last time at the Quinisext Council in Trullo (691–692). Evidence of their importance during the sixth century is inconclusive.¹³² Both of Shivta's baptisteries were undoubtedly constructed to conform to the adult baptismal ritual,¹³³ suggesting that they were built when catechumenate was still in practice.

spread. They are found in Iberia, Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Asia Minor, and Greece (especially at Kos), and can be dated to the sixth century or later; in some cases, the installation post-dates the main font. RISTOW, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (as footnote 81 above), 48–49; see also BEN-PECHAT, *The Paleochristian baptismal fonts* (as footnote 62 above), 187–188. Their function is disputed and may vary according to regional practices. MAILIS, *Early Byzantine baptisteries of Crete* (as footnote 16 above), 304–305.

126 A. J. WHARTON, *Ritual and reconstructed meaning: the Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna*. *The Art Bulletin* 69/3 (1987), 358–375, here 365.

127 MAILIS, *Early Byzantine baptisteries of Crete* (as footnote 16 above), 304.

128 BEN-PECHAT, *Paleochristian baptismal fonts* (as footnote 62 above), 177–178.

129 FERGUSON, *Baptism* (as footnote 100 above), 822–823; FIEMA/KANELLOPOULOS/WALISZEWSKI/SCHICK, *Petra Church* (as footnote 103 above), 47–48.

130 The eighth century *Barberini 336* Euchologion contains two texts. The oldest contains Catechumenate rites, the newer one has a prayer during baptism on the eighth day after birth and a prayer on the 40th day after birth, referring to infant baptism. B. D. SPINKS, *Early and medieval rituals and theologies of Baptism. From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*. Aldershot 2006, 96; K. W. STEVENSON, *The Byzantine liturgy of Baptism*. *Studia Liturgica* 17/1–4 (1987), 176–190, here 179–182.

131 FERGUSON, *Baptism* (as footnote 100 above), 629.

132 R. TAFT, *When did the Catechumenate die out in Constantinople?* in J. D. Alchermes/H. Evans/T. Thomas (ed.), *Ἀναθήματα ἑορτικά*. *Studies in honor of Thomas F. Mathews*. Mainz 2009, 288–295; T. MATHEWS, *The early churches of Constantinople: architecture and liturgy*. University Park/London 1971, 127–129.

133 BEN-PECHAT, *Baptism and monasticism* (as footnote 23 above), 511–514.

Despite overall similarities between the two baptisteries in Shivta, their different positions within the chapels, as well as differences in the general spatial arrangements, may indicate a certain chronological gap between them.

The South Church Baptistry shares similar features with the East Church Baptistry in Mamphis (**Plate XII/9**). It has a cruciform font, is enclosed within a canopy, and has a small alcove at its side. Although the East Church Baptistry in Mamphis has not been precisely dated, it cannot have been built later than the fifth century.¹³⁴ Similar to the South Church Baptistry in Shivta, its anteroom is divided from the main room with the font by a stylobate with two column bases.

Another close parallel appears at the Petra Church (**Plate XII/10**). Its font is also cruciform, placed under a canopy, and with a small adjacent alcove. In contrast to Shivta, but similar to Mamphis, the baptistry in Petra is situated in the middle of the room. Also notable is that Petra's baptistry was built in the mid-to late fifth century, before the church became tri-apsidal, and it was located at a certain distance from the early church.¹³⁵

Yet, the closest regional parallel to the South Church font in Shivta can be found in the late fourth or fifth century North Church of Oboda, with its cruciform font (albeit without steps leading into it) situated in the apse (**Plate XI/8**). As in Shivta's South Church, a stylobate with two column bases (pillars) divides the western and eastern parts of the baptistry. These pillars could have supported curtains that were closed during the ceremony.¹³⁶

The North Church Baptistry in Shivta has features similar to those of the South Church, but has the addition of a raised bema and a chancel screen, architectural elements that function as a clear barrier between the font and nave. A chancel screen can be best likened to the Mount Nebo Baptistry of 597, although there, the font is not set on a bema. In fact, the Basilica of Moses on Mount Nebo has two baptisteries. The earlier Old Diaconicon Baptistry of 530 is a cruciform structure and was placed within the northern chapel, possibly under a canopy.¹³⁷ A semicircular basin is integrated within the step of

134 NEGEV, *Architecture of Mamphis* (as footnote 59 above), 48–51; BEN-PECHAT, *Paleochristian baptismal fonts* (as footnote 62 above), 169–170.

135 FIEMA/KANELLOPOULOS/WALISZEWSKI/SCHICK, *Petra Church* (as footnote 103 above), 45–48.

136 NEGEV, *Architecture of Oboda* (as footnote 32 above); A. OVADIAH, *Corpus of the Byzantine churches in the Holy Land*. Bonn 1970, 24.

137 <https://universes.art/en/art-destinations/jordan/mount-nebo/tour-memorial/basilica-model>: A canopy was mentioned in the inscription but not found during excavations. FIEMA/KANELLOPOULOS/WALISZEWSKI/SCHICK, *Petra Church* (as footnote 103 above), 47, 129 (note 171).

the font's southern arm.¹³⁸ When abandoned, another baptistery with a differently shaped font was constructed within the southern chapel's apse and enclosed with a chancel screen in 597. This font did not have a canopy. Perhaps this change had a liturgical justification.

Thus, the South Church Baptistery in Shivta more closely resembles the regional variety of baptisteries dated to the late fourth to fifth centuries. Noteworthy, however, is that it is the only one situated in the apse and enclosed with a canopy, thereby combining several earlier architectural elements. In addition, Shivta's South Church Baptistery has a monolith font, different from earlier masonry fonts. Consequently, it can probably be dated later to the sixth century. The North Church Baptistery, with the added specific architectural elements such as a bema and the chancel screen, which seem to conform to later regional trends, reflects greater architectural uniformity in the North Church's later phase, supporting its late sixth century dating at the earliest, also confirmed by other evidence discussed above.

Imagining baptism rituals in Shivta

Liturgical sources do not reveal much about actual baptismal rites, but early depictions of baptisms may offer some insights into the ceremony performed.¹³⁹ One such source is the ninth century illuminated manuscript from Constantinople, *Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (BNF, Paris. gr. 510). Its miniatures may reflect an early iconography of the Church of the Holy Apostles;¹⁴⁰ therefore, miniatures showing initiations (fols. 87v, 332v, 426v)¹⁴¹ most probably refer to the

138 BEN-PECHAT, Paleo-Christian baptismal fonts (as footnote 62 above).

139 The earliest known visual representation of a baptized person, which has not survived, is that of Constantine the Great. It once existed in the narthex of the sixth century Church of St. Polyeuctus. C. MANGO / I. ŠEVČENKO, Remains of the church of St. Polyeuktos at Constantinople. *DOP* 15 (1961), 243–247; J. BARDILL, Anicia Juliana, King Solomon, and the gilded ceiling of the Church of St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople, in W. Bowden / A. Gutteridge / C. Machado (eds.), *Social and political life in Late Antiquity. Late Antique Archaeology*, 3/1. Leiden/Boston 2006, 383.

140 A. HEISENBERG, *Grabeskirche und Apostelkirche: Zwei Basiliken Konstantins*, 2. Die Apostelkirche in Konstantinopel. Leipzig 1908, 209.

141 Fol. 87v: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84522082/f188.item.r=grec%20510>; fol. 426v: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84522082/f864.item.r=grec%20510>. Another depiction of baptism (fol. 332v) is that of Cyprian, immersed into a natural source of water (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84522082/f678.item.r=grec%20510>): L. BRUBAKER,

early Byzantine rite of baptism.¹⁴² On fol. 87v, Gregory the Elder (the father of Gregory of Nazianzus) is shown naked, immersed up to his shoulders in a font in cruciform shape. The font is raised on a platform. The bishop stands on the steps at the font's side, reclining towards Gregory the Elder and placing his right hand upon Gregory's head. The movement of his body suggests that he is about to push the head down into the water, matching Theodore of Mopsuestia's account cited above. This font echoes that of Shivta's North Church, not just because of its cruciform shape, but because it, too, is raised on a platform. As in the Paris.gr. 510, the priest most probably stood beside the font elevated with portable wooden steps.

An image on fol. 426v furthers our knowledge of the baptismal rite in light of additional important details depicted. Twelve apostles are shown on a mission to convert nations to Christianity through the act of baptism, each 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 their right hand on the neophyte's head. The variety of font shapes depicted in Paris 510 reflect actual sixth century archaeological findings. Neophytes are depicted naked, immersed into water up to their chest or shoulders, with hands stretched to the side or crossed on the chest. On the other side of the font, a person enclosed in white is depicted with hands raised toward the font and covered with white cloth for the newly baptized (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 37). His appearance suggests the presence of additional persons in the area of the font, probably clergy, waiting to present the newly initiated with white garments after they exit the font.

In reference to the archaeological remains of the architectural settings, and with some information deduced from albeit limited liturgical and visual sources, the baptism rite in Shivta perhaps may be envisioned as follows (**Plate XIII/11, 12**). After renouncing Satan in the anteroom (facing west) the catechumens were disrobed, “putting off the old man” (Col. 3.9); in this, they emulated Christ, “who hung naked on the Cross” (*Mystagogical Catechesis* 2.2);¹⁴³ they then proceeded to the baptismal font toward the divine light in the east.¹⁴⁴ A candidate was prob-

Politics, patronage, and art in ninth-century Byzantium: The Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus in Paris (B. N. Gr. 510). *DOP* 39 (1985), 1–13, here 11.

142 RISTOW, Frühchristliche Baptistereien (as footnote 81 above), 68; Later depictions of the baptism in illuminated manuscripts suggest a standardization of the iconographic scheme. S. TOMKOVIĆ, Note sur la conversion des Russes dans l'art byzantine. *Zograf* 19 (1988), 5–12, see figs. 6, 7, 9, 10.

143 WHITAKER, Documents (as footnote 77 above), 29.

144 The original Syriac practice included one pre-baptismal anointing. The practice later changed and started to include post-baptismal anointing associated with the Holy Spirit.

ably led into the font, as prescribed by Cyril, climbing portable steps to enter it, and then descended into the font, a perfect projection of the grave and the womb, via the three steps cut inside it. The candidate then knelt and was pushed into the water three times, thus symbolically dying and being resurrected with Christ,¹⁴⁵ by the priest who laid his right hand upon the neophyte's head to press him into the waters. The priest stood next to the font,¹⁴⁶ elevated above it by standing on portable steps. After this part of the rite, the newly initiated person would emerge, ascending the steps just as Christ ascended from the grave.

After the baptism, the neophyte would receive post-baptismal anointment by chrism,¹⁴⁷ associated with, according to Theodore of Mopsuestia, the gift of the Holy Spirit (*Baptismal Homilies* 14.27).¹⁴⁸ Then, he would put on white garments, symbolically becoming a child of light.¹⁴⁹ This could have been done within the area of the baptismal font,¹⁵⁰ as suggested by the images from Paris.gr. 510, fol. 426v. In the North Church Baptistry, the baptism was a more intimate rite, performed behind the chancel screen, while in the South Church Baptistry, the nakedness could be more visible. Then, a neophyte proceeded to the court of the adjusted chapel through the entrance in the apse area (North Church) or the eastern part between the pilasters (South Church), and, from there, entered the procession into the main church for the first communion. This procession symbolizes entrance into the kingdom of heaven and the paradise left by Adam.¹⁵¹

Some sources suggest that two pre-baptismal anointments, a mark on a forehead and one for the whole body, existed already in the fourth century. The evidence, however, is inconclusive: S. BROCK, Syrian baptismal ordines (with special reference to the anointing). *Studia Liturgica* 12 (1977), 177–183, here 180. See also SPINKS, Early and medieval rituals (as footnote 130 above), 38–47.

145 JENSEN, Living water (as footnote 115 above).

146 The ceremony could be performed not just by a bishop, but also a priest or even a monk. BEN-PECHAT, Baptism and monasticism (as footnote 23 above), 501–508.

147 “And ye were first anointed on your forehead ... Then on your ears ... Then on your nostrils ... Then on your breast ...”: *Mystagogical Catechesis* 3.4 (ed. PIÉDAGNEL, 126); WHITAKER, Documents (as footnote 77 above), 30. According to Day, the post-immersion anointing with chrism was introduced into Jerusalem rite in the fifth century, influenced by *Apostolic tradition*: DAY, Catechetical Lectures (as footnote 53 above), 1203. Jensen observes that in many instances the Eastern rites omit the post-baptismal anointing: R. JENSEN, Baptismal imagery in Early Christianity, ritual, visual, and theological dimensions. *Grand Rapids* 2012, 175, no 25.

148 P.F. BRADSHAW, The search for the origins of Christian worship: sources and methods for the study of early liturgy. Oxford 2002, 109–110.

149 BROCK, Fire from Heaven (as footnote 116 above), 43; BROCK, Syrian baptismal ordines (as footnote 144 above); E.F.T. KLIJN, An ancient Syriac baptismal liturgy in the Syriac Acts of John. *Novum Testamentum* 6/2.3 (1963), 216–228.

150 DAY, Baptism (as footnote 52 above), 14.

151 BROCK, Fire from Heaven (as footnote 116 above), 49.

Alternatively, the side chapel itself perhaps could have served as the place for the first communion after baptism.¹⁵²

Regardless of the lack of clarity about the dating of the baptisteries, with the South Church baptistery seemingly dated earlier than the North, the baptismal rites performed in the South Church do seem to have been public, built to serve both catechumens, locals and nomads,¹⁵³ and perhaps even children and infants. This conclusion can be supported by the central position of the South Church complex, close to the reservoirs and the public area, with its baptistery easily accessed from the street. The North Church Baptistery, enclosed within the North Church complex and accessed only from within the church, could have served the monastery's more private purposes and probably for baptizing adults.

The North Church baptistery and its forgotten art

History and importance of the wall painting

We now turn to the last piece of the puzzle in our discussion of the North Church Baptistery in Shivta, the wall painting with the scene of the Baptism of Christ (**Plates VIII/2, XIV/13**). It is depicted in the apse, just above the baptismal font, thus exemplifying its important function within the original context of the actual baptismal ritual.

Although our information on the decoration of early Byzantine baptisteries is rather limited, except for mosaic floors, it should not be surprising to find traces of wall paintings in the baptistery. The walls of Byzantine churches and

152 Many early churches in the East had more than one altar. The side chapel with an altar could serve for a liturgy celebration (which could not be performed at the same altar twice a day) or even as a chapel for private worship, perhaps as in Cappadocia. N.B. TETERIATNIKOV, *The liturgical planning of Byzantine churches in Cappadocia*. OCA, 252. Rome 1996; G. BABIĆ, *Les chapelles annexes des églises byzantines. Fonction liturgique et programmes iconographiques*. *Bibliothèque des Cahiers Archeologiques*, 3. Paris 1969.

153 Accounts of the conversion of nomads and pagans to Christianity in the late fourth and fifth centuries can be found in Jerome's *Life of Hilarion* c. 391; Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymius*: DAY, Baptism (as footnote 52 above), 28–33. *The Life of Porphyrius* provides some details of the rite of baptism performed in Gaza in the fifth century (DAY, *ibid.*, 9, 14–18). See also I. SHAHĪD, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fifth century*. Washington DC 1989.

monasteries were usually laden with mosaics or paintings¹⁵⁴ and traces of paintings were found throughout the Levant and Egypt.¹⁵⁵ While almost nothing has survived in Syria, extensively painted walls of churches and monasteries found throughout Egypt may provide clues on the importance and wide distribution of monumental art in the region. The mosaics in St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai constitute a splendid, albeit unique, example of the richness of religious church decoration, both material and symbolic.¹⁵⁶ Painted fragments, including Tyche's head from Hippos-Sussita,¹⁵⁷ the depiction of saints and Christ among the apostles from Caesarea Maritima,¹⁵⁸ and a painted tomb from Lohamei HaGetaot,¹⁵⁹ are but a few examples of a once rich legacy of early Byzantine wall paintings in the Holy Land.¹⁶⁰ More knowledge of early Byzantine church iconography in Syro-Palestine may be deduced from surviving descriptions, tokens, and votive

154 Choricus of Gaza described extensive decorative programs of the sixth century churches of St. Sergius and St. Stephen in Gaza: T. POLANSKI, *Christian art in oriental literatures. Greek, Syriac and Coptic sources from the 4th to the 7th century*. Salzburg/Horn 2013. See also for the remains of wall mosaics in Jordan B. HAMARNEH, *The visual dimension of sacred space: wall mosaics in the Byzantine churches of Jordan. A reassessment*, in G. Trovabene/A. Bertoni (a cura di), XII Colloquio AIEMA. Venezia, 11–15 settembre 2012, Atti. Verona 2015, 239–247.

155 J. BURDAJEWICZ, *Wall paintings, wall mosaics, and marble wall revetments in Early Christian churches of the Southern Levant*, in (eds.) K. Jakubiak/A. Łajtar, *Ex Oriente Lux. Studies in honour of Jolanta Młynarczyk*. Warsaw 2020; J. BURDAJEWICZ, *Travelling painters' workshops in the Late Antique Levant: preliminary observations*, in M. Ivanova/H. Jefferey (eds.), *Transmitting and circulating the Late Antique and Byzantine worlds. The Medieval Mediterranean*, 118. Leiden 2020, 44–77; F. VITTO, *Wall decoration of early Byzantine churches and synagogues in the Eastern Mediterranean. Byzantine and Eastern Christian Art* 9 (2019), 198–209.

156 S.E.J. GERSTEL/R.S. NELSON (eds.), *Approaching the Holy Mountain. Art and liturgy at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai. Cursor mundi*, 11. Leiden 2010.

157 J. BURDAJEWICZ, *Wall painting decoration from the north-west church in Hippos-Sussita of the Decapolis. Études et Travaux* 30 (2017), 161–180.

158 T. AVNER, *Early Byzantine wall-painting from Caesarea*, in K.G. Holum/A. Raban/J. Patrich (eds.), *Caesarea papers 2: Herod's temple, the provincial governor's praetorium and granaries, the later harbor, a gold coin hoard, and other studies. Journal of Roman Archaeology, Suppl. S. 35*. Portsmouth 1999, 108–128.

159 Y. TSAFRIR, *Christian archaeology in Israel in recent years*, in: *Actes du XIe congrès international d'archéologie chrétienne*. Lyon II, 1989, 1737–70; T. MICHAELI, *Elysium or the Garden of Eden? The case of an early Byzantine painted tomb in Galilee. Asaph* 10–11 (2005–06), 365–380; MAAYAN-FANAR, *Early Christian tomb (as footnote 115 above)*.

160 The wall paintings from the monastery of St. Theoctistus (Wadi el-Muqallik), once attributed to the early Byzantine period, were re-dated to the twelfth century. For the early date see H. GOLDFUS/B. ARUBAS/E. ALLIATA, *The Monastery of St. Theoctistus (Deir Muqallik). Liber Annus* 45 (1995), 247–292; for the later date, see G. KÜHNEL, *Wall painting in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*. Berlin 1988, 184f; A. BOAZ, *Crusader archaeology, the material culture of the Latin East*. London 2017, 210–211.

objects, decorated with scenes probably based on once-existing wall paintings and mosaics in important churches such as the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Nativity Church in Bethlehem.¹⁶¹ Evidence of several fragments of wall paintings were also found in the Negev: in Beersheba,¹⁶² Sa'adon,¹⁶³ Rehovot in the Negev,¹⁶⁴ and in the North and South churches in Shivta,¹⁶⁵ the most notable being the recognizable scene of the Transfiguration of Christ in the South Church. This was acknowledged by WOOLEY and LAWRENCE already in 1914 and was later studied by FIGUERAS and our team.¹⁶⁶

Early scholars such as PALMER and DRAKE, MUSIL, WOOLEY, and LAWRENCE made no mention of the wall painting in the apse of the North Church Baptistry. WIEGAND described three figures: the middle one frontal and long, with a halo surrounding his head, sporadic traces of red, yellow and blue colors on the baptistry apse, and red and blue stripes placed one upon the other at the lower edge of the apse.¹⁶⁷ Unaware of the function of the chapel as a baptistry, he interpreted the figures as a part of a scene depicting the Transfiguration of Christ or the Glorification of Mary, both popular in early Christian apse imagery.

In 1926, LAVERGNE and TONNEAU from the École Biblique saw the outlines of two figures and were the first to propose identifying the scene as the Baptism of Christ. This identification was confirmed, albeit in passing, by MALLON, who visited Shivta several times and eventually published a short note on the North Church Baptistry.¹⁶⁸



161 POLANSKI, Christian art (as footnote 154 above).

162 P. FIGUERAS, Beersheva in the Roman – Byzantine period. *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas* 8 (1982), 135 – 162, here 150.

163 T. ERICKSON-GINI/V. LIFSHITZ/E. ALAJEM, Horvat Sa'adon – Excavations in the Roman tomb and Byzantine church. *Strata. Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 36 (2018), 11 – 56, see figs. 13 – 14.

164 TSAFRIR/PATRICH/HEGINBOTTOM, Excavations (as footnote 32 above), ill. 94 – 95; Palmer describes fragments of paint in the northern apse of the South Church in Nessana: E. PALMER, *The desert of the Exodus, journeys on foot in the wilderness of the forty years' wanderings*. London 1871, II, 369.

165 LINN/ECKER/TEPPER, New investigation (as footnote 21 above).

166 P. FIGUERAS, Remains of a mural painting of Transfiguration in the Southern Church of Sobata (Shivta). *ARAM* 18 (2006), 127 – 151; LINN/TEPPER/BAR-OZ, Visible induced luminescence (as footnote 5 above); MAAYAN-FANAR, Transfiguration (as footnote 5 above); MAAYAN-FANAR, Further remarks (as footnote 5 above); LINN/MAAYAN-FANAR/TEPPER/BAR-OZ, Study (as footnote 5 above).

167 T. WIEGAND, *Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen des deutsch-türkischen Denkmalschutz-Kommandos*. Sinai/Berlin/Leipzig 1920, I, 78 – 79.

168 MALLON, *Baptistère de Sbeita* (as footnote 122 above), 227 – 229. Mallon was already aware that the chapel was in fact a baptistry. He also managed to describe and measure its

The painting was in such a poor state that no one else could discern the figures despite the site having been extensively excavated and studied in the twentieth century. It was only in 2018 that the scene was finally identified with certainty as representing the Baptism of Christ.¹⁶⁹ Two figures can still be traced, albeit faintly, on the upper part of the apse. Christ as a youth is depicted in the center, with only traces of his head down to his shoulders still visible (**Plates XIV/14, XV/15**). His face – turned slightly to the right, with emphasized and oversized eyes, an elongated nose, a small mouth placed close to the tip of the nose, and short curly brownish hair – was most probably surrounded by a halo. Although most of the remaining lines and paint belong to the underpainting, some bright pink spots of paint suggest that Christ was depicted naked and with bright skin. Above his head is a half-circle in red, descending alongside the figure as if framing it from both sides.

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

Surprisingly, the Baptism of Christ scene appears within baptisteries relatively late; thus, no Baptism of Christ scene has been preserved in Dura Europos, where the Good Shepherd stepping on smaller figures of Adam and Eve is depicted just above the font, symbolizing the theme of salvation and redemption from original sin through baptism. The scene did not seem to appear in the Baptistery of St. John, Naples Cathedral, although its mosaics partly survived. Other surviving scenes recall the baptism rite referring to different “types of Baptism” from the Old and the New Testaments and focusing on “water symbolism.”¹⁷⁰ In

font. By that time, the whole area of the bema had been cleaned and looted by treasure hunters, who later also damaged the font and the pavement.

169 MAAYAN-FANAR/LINN/TEPPER/BAR-OZ, Christ face (as footnote 12 above). The application of paint directly on stone and the colors used recall the scene of the Transfiguration in the South Church, however, the condition of the wall painting does not allow for stylistic analysis.

170 J.L. MAIER, Le baptistère de Naples et ses mosaïques. Étude historique et iconographique. *Paradosis*, 19 Fribourg 1964, 38–45. Fragments of painted plaster from the fifth century Stobi Baptistery, mostly known for the unique mosaics of its font, reveal that its walls were painted with images of Evangelists and perhaps also of healing miracles, recalling the Dura Europos and Naples baptisteries: DOWNING, Wall paintings (as footnote 115 above), 273–275.

other cases, wall decorations have not survived at all, leaving scholars to speculate about their possible iconographic programs, while floor mosaics usually show animals drinking from a water source, a symbolic depiction of living water often related to the Psalms to emphasize its salvific power.¹⁷¹

The fifth century Neonian and the fifth- or early-sixth-century Arian (**Plate XV/17**) baptisteries in Ravenna¹⁷² are the earliest surviving examples of the Baptism of Christ depicted within a baptistery.¹⁷³ In both cases, the scene occupies the cupola just above the baptismal font. Another example is a seventh century (or perhaps later) wall painting in the Catacomb of Pontianus in Rome, which also served as an underground baptistery.¹⁷⁴ Visual connections between the ceremony of baptism and the specific Baptism of Christ may reflect the introduction of the commemoration of Christ's baptism on January 6, an innovation of the fifth century. This was directly connected with the introduction of December 25 as Christ's birthday and as an independent feast.¹⁷⁵ Thus, Shivta's Baptism of Christ scene appears to be among the earliest surviving examples – and the earliest in the Holy Land – that can be viewed in its original architectural context; thereby, the importance of the finding is strengthened, notwithstanding its fragmentary state of preservation.

Proposed reconstruction of the general iconography of the wall painting

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

171 These motifs find parallels on two doorjamb bases on both sides of the now-blocked entrance, leading from the northern side room of the narthex to the baptistery of the South Church in Shivta. GOLAN, *Architectural sculpture* (as footnote 5 above), 21–22, pls. 15–16.

172 F.W. DEICHMANN, *Frühchristliche Bauten und Mosaiken von Ravenna*. Wiesbaden 1995; C. JÄGGI, *Ravenna: Kunst und Kultur einer spätantiken Residenzstadt. Die Bauten und Mosaiken des 5. und 6. Jahrhunderts*. Regensburg 2013.

173 Fiema noted that a plaster fragment with the painted Greek letters ΠΙΠΟΔΠΟΜΟ was found in the area of the baptistery in the late fifth century Jabal Harun church: Z.T. FIEMA, *The Byzantine monastic/pilgrimage center of St. Aaron near Petra, Jordan. Arkeologipävät* 2002, 34–49, here 42. Perhaps the inscription refers to John the Baptist and may indicate a wall painting of the Baptism of Christ. If this is so, it may suggest that this theme was widespread in the region.

174 JENSEN, *Living water* (as footnote 115 above), 189–190.

175 ROUWHORST, *Liturgical mimesis* (as footnote 120 above), 46.

features of the baptismal scene were already well established, and the scene can be found in illuminated manuscripts, paintings and mosaics adorning walls of churches and monasteries as part of the Christological cycle, and on portable objects, furniture decorations, and other elements. Although the scene did not survive in an architectural setting in Palestine, it exists in illuminated manuscripts and on many small objects from Syro-Palestine and Egypt that can serve as sources for comparing their iconography with the Shivta scene.¹⁷⁶

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

The scene may be reduced to only two main figures or it may include additional figures, frequently identified as an angel or several angels on the opposite side of the Jordan River, compositionally balancing the figure of John. Thus, a figure (or figures) carrying garments for Christ, is depicted in Bawit, Chapel XXX (**Plate XV/16**), on the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary from Syria or Palestine,¹⁷⁷ an ampulla now housed in the Franz-Dölger-Institut, Bonn,¹⁷⁸ and on other examples. Depictions of an angel or angels may refer to the presence of a sponsor

176 E. g., a gold plaque, Dumbarton Oaks, 45.2: M. C. Ross, *Jewelry, enamels, and art of the migration period*. Washington, DC 2005 (first editin 1965), II, cat. no. 37; pl. XXX; pilgrim tokens (e. g., from Sebastiyah [IAA:1947–3525; <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/536122>]; also, L. A. RAHMANI, *Miscellanea – Roman to medieval: a representation of the baptism on an eulogia token*. 'Atiqot 14 (1980), 109–110; fig. 1; pl. XXIII.4) and more. The iconography of baptism in Early Christian and Byzantine times was comprehensively analyzed in JENSEN, *Living water* (as footnote 115 above). Discussing the iconography of the baptism scene, Jensen convincingly showed that it changed from the earliest second and third century examples found mainly in funerary contexts, becoming stabilized by the fifth and sixth centuries. Since Shivta's example can be linked to this later iconography, the earliest examples are beyond the scope of the present study.

177 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, now in the collection of the Vatican Museums), contains a virtual pilgrimage through the Holy Land: <<https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/cappella-di-san-pietro-martire/reliquiario-in-legno-dipinto-con-scene-della-vita-di-cristo.html>>.

178 Franz Dölger-Institut, Bonn, no. 132: J. ENGEMANN, *Palästinensische Pilgerampullen in Bonn*. *JbAC* 16 (1973), 5–27, pls. 1a, 8d.

(or clergy) in the actual baptism ceremony.¹⁷⁹ As such, they can be likened to the depiction of baptism in Par. gr. 510, 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.¹⁸⁰

Sometimes, the personification of the Jordan River was added to the main scene. In the Arian Baptistry and on the Werden casket of c.425–450,¹⁸¹ this representation follows a classical type of river personification and represents a place where the baptism took place. However, in the Neonian Baptistry the Jordan River was already shown as an active figure, a witness of Christ's baptism, approaching him with clothing. In Bawit, Chapel XXX, the personification of the Jordan is depicted recoiled with his hands raised up (**Plate XV/16**); on an ivory from Lyon Museum, John the Baptist steps upon the head of the Jordan's personification, his body turned back to Christ,¹⁸² while in the sixth-century Cathedra of Maximianus in Ravenna (546–556)¹⁸³ and the ivory from Egypt in British Museum (no. 1896,0618.1) – which share a very similar iconography¹⁸⁴ – the Jordan is in full motion, turning back to Christ (Ps.114:3) and even trying to escape from his presence.¹⁸⁵ Already in the sixth century, but especially from the ninth century onward, the Jordan River received demonic features, merging with the satanic forces overcome by baptism. Later, even more demonic figures would be added to emphasize the danger of unpurified water and the act of their purification by Christ's baptism. Deep, dangerous waters inhabited by demonic forces, endangering everyone entering them, are symbolically connected to the core of the rite of baptism in which the first step is to denounce Satan and step into the waters cleansed by Christ through his own baptism.¹⁸⁶ Thus, Cyril of Jerusalem made clear links between Christ's "destruction of the dragon who inhab-

179 JENSEN, Living water (as footnote 115 above), 115.

180 *Ibid.*, 112.

181 Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. No. 149B–1866; JENSEN, *ibid.*, 95, fig. 3.3.

182 Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, D 313; W.F. VOLBACH, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*. Mainz 1976, cat. 149; 98–99; pl. 78.

183 The provenance of the Cathedra is disputed. It is variously attributed to the western, Alexandrian, or Constantinopolitan workshops.

184 JENSEN, Living water (as footnote 115 above), 101–104.

185 On the problem of interpretation of turning away personification of Jordan river as fleeing from Christ's presence see S. SCHRENK/G. REXIN, *Erstaunen oder Flucht? Zur Darstellung des Jordan in den spätantiken Bildern der Taufe Jesu*. *JbAC* 51 (2008), 180–198.

186 SPINKS, *Early and medieval rituals* (as footnote 130 above), 83–85.

its the water” through his baptism and saving the baptized from death (*Catechesis* 3.12).¹⁸⁷

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

Regardless of how the waters were illustrated, a semi-circle above and behind Christ’s figure most probably depicts the banks of the Jordan River. Similarly, the waters of Jordan meet at the top behind Christ’s figure, as depicted, for example, on the sixth century wall painting in Bawit, Chapel XXX (**Plate XV/16**), on an ivory from the Eastern Mediterranean, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon,¹⁸⁸ and on the sixth century Sancta Sanctorum reliquary.¹⁸⁹ The figure of Christ is enclosed within the semi-oval shape of the river, perhaps referring to the symbolism of baptism as rebirth from the womb. Font womb (rather than font grave) symbolism was especially strong in Eastern Syrian baptismal liturgy;¹⁹⁰ the neophyte is compared to a “babe” born from the womb (Narsai, *Homily* 21).¹⁹¹ Ephrem and Narsai referred to the font as both a womb and a grave.¹⁹² The parallelism of three mystical wombs, those of Mary, Jordan, and Sheol, provide a clear link between, birth, rebirth, and resurrection “that is to be at the end.”¹⁹³

187 PG 33, 444; DAY, *Catechetical Lectures* (as footnote 53 above), 1185.

188 VOLBACH, *Elfenbeinarbeiten* (as footnote 182 above).

189 <https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/cappella-di-san-pietro-martire/reliquiario-in-legno-dipinto-con-scene-della-vita-di-cristo.html>.

190 “Virgin Mary and Jordan are depicted as two wombs that bore the Divine light.” Ephrem of Syria, *HEcc* 36.3; *HEpi* 8,13; 10.3; 14.20; 14.34. S. SEPPÄLÄ, Baptismal mystery in St. Ephrem the Syrian and *Hymnen de Epiphania*, in Hellholm et al., *Ablution* (as footnote 53 above), 1139–79, here 1146. See also FERGUSON, *Baptism* (as footnote 100 above), 409–518; S. BROCK, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian baptismal tradition*. Piscataway, N.J. 2008, 171–172.

191 Narsai, *Homily 21: On the Mysteries of the Church and on Baptism*, after WHITAKER, *Documents* (as footnote 77 above), 55–56.

192 S. BROCK, Some early Syriac baptismal commentaries. *OCP* 46 (1980), 20–61, here 40–41.

193 N. WITKAMP, “In the posture of one who prays”: the *orans* position in Theodore of Mopsuestia’s baptismal rite, in H. van Loon/Gi.de Nie/M. Op de Coul/P. van Egmond (eds.), *Prayer and the transformation of the self in Early Christian Mystagogy. Late antique history and religion*, 18. Leuven/Paris/Bristol, CT 2018, 191–208; SPINKS, *Early and medieval rituals* (as footnote 130 above), 71–73; SEPPÄLÄ, *Baptismal mystery* (as footnote 190 above), 1146.

Therefore, this iconographic element may refer to Syrian perceptions of baptism. More common seems to be a depiction of two separated banks of the Jordan, emphasizing the living water itself, which covers the standing figure of Christ to his knees, waist, or shoulders (e. g., the Neonian and Arian baptisteries in Ravenna, the cathedra of Maximilian, the sixth-seventh century Armenian Gospels).¹⁹⁴ The “womb” shape of the river nevertheless persists in later Byzantine iconography (e. g., Gospel Book, BNF, Paris. gr. 75, fol. 95, 12th c.; icon from Crete, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, BXM 11263, 15th century; Kılıçlar Kilise, Göreme, 10th c.; Karanlık Kilise, Göreme, 1040–60, and many more).

A final point concerns the position of Christ’s hands. In most cases, his hands are depicted alongside his body. Hands of the candidates in Paris. gr. 510, are shown similarly or are crossed on the chest, perhaps emulating certain positions of the hands of a neophyte during baptism. This may be the case in Shivta as well; however, several spots of a pinkish color, like those in the area of his face and upper body, can be seen on Christ’s left hand at the level of his face, suggesting that his hands may have been lifted. Although we cannot be sure of this until the wall painting is cleaned and more of it is revealed, at least one example of such imagery already exists in a sixth-century painting from the Bawit Monastery (Chapel XXX), where Christ is depicted with his hands raised in the orans position. This detail in Bawit is very rare and if it did exist in Shivta, we might have evidence of a common ground between both scenes. This act of prayer during the baptismal rite is referred to by Theodore of Mopsoestia, who specifically mentions the candidate standing or kneeling “with outstretched arms in the posture of one who prays” during the baptismal ritual.¹⁹⁵

The face of Christ

The best-preserved piece of the wall painting is the face of a young beardless Christ framed with short curly hair (**Plate XIV/14, XV/15**). Although this iconographic type seems to be less familiar today, it coincides with early iconographic schemes of Christ as an infant found in catacombs and sarcophagi, reflecting the symbolism of baptism as rebirth.¹⁹⁶ The youthful image of Christ is maintained

194 Erevan, Matenadaran, MS 2374, fol. 229v: J. DURAND / D. GIOVANNONI / I. RAPTİ (eds.), *Armenia Sacra: mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IVe–XVIIIe siècle)* [catalogue de l’exposition, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 21 février–21 mai 2007]. Paris 2007, 108–109.

195 WITKAMP, “Posture” (as footnote 193 above), 192, 198–207.

196 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

from the fifth to the seventh centuries, although the details vary. Thus, for example, on the sixth century ivory plaque from Syria or Egypt (British Museum, 1896,0618.1), in a miniature from the Armenian Gospels (Erevan, Matenadaran, MS 2374, fol. 229v), or the sixth to seventh century pilgrim tokens from Qalat Siman (British Museum, 1973, 0501.29¹⁹⁷ and 1973, 0501.30¹⁹⁸), Christ is depicted as beardless and with short hair. In the Rabbula Gospels (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. Plut. I, 56, fol. 4v), Christ is depicted with short hair but also with a short beard.¹⁹⁹ In the baptism scene on the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary, Christ is depicted as bearded and with long hair falling on his shoulders. Two scenes of the Baptism of Christ were discovered in the Bawit Monastery: in one Christ appears bearded and with long hair (XVII); in the other as a youth with short hair (XXX). This suggests the coexistence of these two types.²⁰⁰

While in the East a short-haired Christ prevailed (although with certain inconsistencies and variations in detail),²⁰¹ in the West a long-haired Christ seems to be more common. Thus, in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, Christ is depicted as a beardless youth with long hair (**Plate XV/17**). Similar depictions of long-haired youths appear in the presumably seventh-century wall painting in the catacomb baptistery in Rome. In the Neonian Baptistery, Christ appears

a child": *Paed.* 1.24.2–3; "When we were reborn, we straightaway received the perfection for which we strive": *Paed.* 1.25.1. H. F. HÄGG, Baptism in Clement of Alexandria, in Hellholm et al., Ablution (as footnote 53 above), 973–987, here 981–982.

197 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1973-0501-29

198 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1973-0501-30

199 <http://teca.bmlonline.it/ImageViewer/servlet/ImageViewer?idr=TECA0000025956&keyworks=Plut.01.56#page/1/mode/2up>. Rabbula's images should be viewed with great caution, as many were later repainted and altered. Bernabò convincingly argued that the quires with illuminations do not belong to the part that connects it to Rabbula and a 586 date. In fact, the manuscript was assembled in the fifteenth century and then rebound and the miniatures refreshed in 1574 in Florence; see M. BERNABÒ, The miniatures in the Rabbula Gospels: postscripta to a recent book. *DOP* 68 (2014), 343–358.

200 J. CLÉDAT, Le Monastère et Nécropole de Baouît. Cairo 1904, II, 5–6; A. BADAWY, Coptic art and archaeology: the art of the Christian Egyptians from the Late Antique to the Middle Ages. Cambridge Mass, London 1978, 252; Although there was an assumption that the painting in Chapel XVII might be earlier than that in Chapel XXX, there are indications that it has undergone alteration.

201 A very different image of an aged and bearded Christ with an almost round face is depicted on an ampulla in Franz Dölger-Institut, Bonn, no. 132: ENGEMANN, Palästinensische Pilgerampullen (as footnote 178 above). This image is similar to that of Christ in crucifixion scenes depicted on Monza ampullae. Since those were most probably produced near Jerusalem, this could have originated in Palestine. This image seems unusual for a baptism scene. On other ampullae, Christ is depicted as young and with short hair, e.g., Museo e Tesoro del Duomo di Monza, Monza, no. 2; A. GRABAR, Ampoules de Terre Sainte. Paris 1958, 18–20; pls. V–VII.

as a bearded adult. Unfortunately, we cannot trust this image to be original because the area of both Christ's and John the Baptist's heads, as well as other important details of the scene, were restored and possibly altered by Felice Kibel in the nineteenth century.²⁰²

A short beard added to some images (Sancta Sanctorum, Rabbula, and perhaps Neonian Baptistery) may suggest the first signs of a transition to a more mature image of Christ from a youth to an adult. The ninth-century marginal psalters (e. g., the Chludov Psalter, State Historical Museum Moscow, gr. 129, fol. 117; Pantokrator Monastery, Mount Athos, 61, fol. 98v) show an already established depiction of a mature, bearded Christ. This image became widespread in later Byzantine iconography of his baptism.

Finally, we offer comments about depictions of Christ with short curly hair, 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.),²⁰³ as well as in several depictions from Egypt and Saqqara, correspond to this type of image, with or without the addition of a short beard. Conversely, in the scene of the Transfiguration at St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Christ is depicted with long smooth hair, parted in the middle.²⁰⁴ In fact, in the sixth century Christ could be depicted differently within the same monument (e. g., San Vitale, Ravenna) or manuscript. The Rabbula Gospels may be a good example of the combination of several Christ types within the same manuscript. For example, he is a young man with short curly hair in the scene of the Communion of the Apostles (fol. 11v), while in the Crucifixion scene (fol. 13), he is depicted as bearded and with long hair. This inconsistency may be due to the use of different models and later restorations.²⁰⁵

It is not within the scope of the present paper to address the problem of this variety of visual representations of Christ or to establish his image in light of his "paradoxical visibility."²⁰⁶ Yet, we note that even when Christ's image was modelled upon the iconography of ancient deities, the issue of the authenticity regarding his image was significant. Thus, in an early sixth-century text, a painter was severely punished by a divine power precisely because he portrayed Christ

202 FERGUSON, Baptism (as footnote 100 above), 129.

203 M. BERNABÒ/G. KESSEL, A Syriac Four Gospel Book in Diyarbakir. *Convivium* 3/1 (2016), 172–203, fig. 1a.

204 M. BACCI, The many faces of Christ. London 2014, 116–130.

205 BERNABÒ, Miniatures (as footnote 199 above), 345.

206 BACCI, Many faces (as footnote 204 above), 108. On Christ's visibility in a variety of forms and faces in Early Christianity, see R. JENSEN, Face to face. Portrait of the divinity in early Christianity. Minneapolis 2005; J. E. TAYLOR, What did Jesus look like? London/New York 2018.

in the likeness of Zeus. According to this source, there exists another, more authentic portrait of Christ with woolly and short hair.²⁰⁷

Scholars suggest that since this type is more frequent in Syro-Palestine images, it could have originated in the East, perhaps even in Palestine.²⁰⁸ For a brief 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) image types of Christ.²⁰⁹ The latter became widespread especially during his second reign (705–711) but later disappeared from coinage. After Iconoclasm, only one type, that with a broad face and long hair falling behind his shoulders, was used on coins. BRECKENRIDGE suggested that the ninth century iconophiles adopted this image as it was regarded a faithful copy of Christ's image in the Chrysotriclinium, destroyed by the iconoclasts.²¹⁰ The short-haired Christ almost entirely disappeared from Byzantine iconography with the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire that were lost in the seventh century, and only occasionally was used in later times. In contrast, the long-haired version became an almost exclusive element of Christ's image, believed to be more authentic.

Epilogue

The North Church Baptistry in Shivta dates to the later period of Christian occupation of the settlement. Even if constructed in the sixth century, it was in considerable use especially during the seventh century. As part of the monastery, its use could have continued even when most of the settlement was abandoned. The baptistry was constructed for adult baptism as attested by its use in the late seventh century. Its form acknowledges the variety of baptismal structures in the area that were adapted according to the needs of the monastery. The scene of the Baptism of Christ complements, even if partially, our knowledge of the links between architecture, liturgy, and art within the space. The scene is placed directly above the cruciform font, establishing a visual and symbolic link be-

207 From the lost *Ecclesiastical History* of Theodoros Anagnostes, written in early 6th century: Thodoros anagnostes, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G.CH. HANSEN. *GCS, N.F.* 3. Berlin 1995, no. 382 (p. 107). POLANSKI, *Christian art* (as footnote 154 above), 65–66; BACCI, *Many faces* (as footnote 204 above), 115–116.

208 J.D. BRECKENRIDGE. *The numismatic iconography of Justinian II (685–695, 705–711)*. New York 1959, 59–60.

209 BACCI, *Many faces* (as footnote 204 above), 131–132.

210 BRECKENRIDGE, *Numismatic iconography* (as footnote 208 above), 56.

tween both events: “Christ descended into the waters to sanctify them and the Christian descended in order to be sanctified by the baptismal water.”²¹¹ Thus, the neophyte is baptized in the presence of Christ, the priest being a meditator. The priest places his hand on the head of the neophyte, echoing John the Baptist, who places his hand on Christ’s head. The neophyte is fully immersed three times, buried in the water only to be resurrected and reborn.

The words of St. Chrysostom come to mind:²¹²

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.

The image of the Baptism of Christ thus shows what “eyes of faith” see during an actual baptism, providing a symbolic and mystical link between both events, while reminding the faithful that man does not baptize him, but rather “those whose names have been invoked, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”²¹³

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

211 ROUWHORST, Liturgical mimesis (as footnote 120 above), 45.

212 John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, cited after WHITAKER, Documents (as footnote 77 above), 35–36.

213 *Ibid.*, 36.

