

*'Let streams of living water flow': the
archaeology of a secular settlement in a
monastic landscape*

Article

Published Version

Harris, A. (2007) 'Let streams of living water flow': the
archaeology of a secular settlement in a monastic landscape.
Reading Medieval Studies, XXXIII. pp. 37-67. ISSN 0950-3129
Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84511/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the
work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: University of Reading

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law,
including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other
copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in
the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



‘Let streams of living water flow’: the Archaeology of a Secular Settlement in a Monastic Landscape

Anthea Harris
University of Birmingham

Much has been written about the experience of men and women retreating into the desert from the third century onwards, in order to escape first persecution and then the temptations of ‘degenerate’ Late Roman society.¹ Scholars have also explored the idea that the ‘desert experience’ was perceived as less a ‘retreat’ from the world and more as an alternative means of exploring spirituality, specifically the quest to purge oneself of sin.² The development of desert monasticism took place all over the Near East and North Africa – in Syria, Ethiopia, Palaestina and Egypt – and remained the subject of intense interest throughout the medieval period and beyond. Through contemporary writings, and more recently through archaeology, the lives of the Late Roman and early medieval desert fathers and mothers continue to fascinate: by the hardships of their daily existence and the realities of survival, their fractious relations with authority, their sometimes extreme ascetic practices, and how they came to formulate new understandings of themselves and of God.

The desert that they entered is sometimes characterised as a pristine one, devoid of all other occupants. Yet, in reality, it was already populated by sometimes very long-established communities. Some areas of the desert were scattered with settlements, often very substantial indeed. Willingly or not, the monks would have encountered people from these settlements from time to time; they would have had to interact and exchange information; they would have occasionally had to turn to each

other for provision. Their contacts would also have been facilitated by people streaming into the desert on pilgrimage; these individuals would have needed refreshment and temporary accommodation, as well as guidance from those with local knowledge of the area, for travelling in such a hostile environment was fraught with difficulties.

Yet very little has been written on how secular communities and lay people developed a philosophy for coping with life in the desert, and how they interacted with monastic communities or with individual eremites. To what extent did they, too, have a so-called 'desert experience' and, if so, what characterised it? How did it differ from that of the monks?

Shivta and the Negev

This paper starts to address these questions by focusing on one particular secular settlement in the Negev desert, a harsh arid and semi-arid landscape in what is now southern Israel but was, between the fourth and the eighth century, first in the Byzantine province of Palaestina Tertia and then within the Islamic Caliphate (Fig. 1.). To the east of the Negev lies the Arabian peninsula and to the west lies the northern-most point of the Sinai peninsula. This is an inhospitable land, with low rainfall and ferocious dust storms, both now and in the Late Roman and early medieval period.³ The northern Negev has an annual rainfall of less than 200mm, while the southern part of the desert has less than 100mm.⁴ The north-west of the region, between Beersheba and Nessana, is characterised by a wide area of shifting sand, sweeping up from the northern Sinai, and with a low rainfall, which begins in October, reaches its maximum between October and March and decreases between April and May.⁵ There is usually no precipitation thereafter until the following autumn and in the summer temperatures can reach 42 degrees.

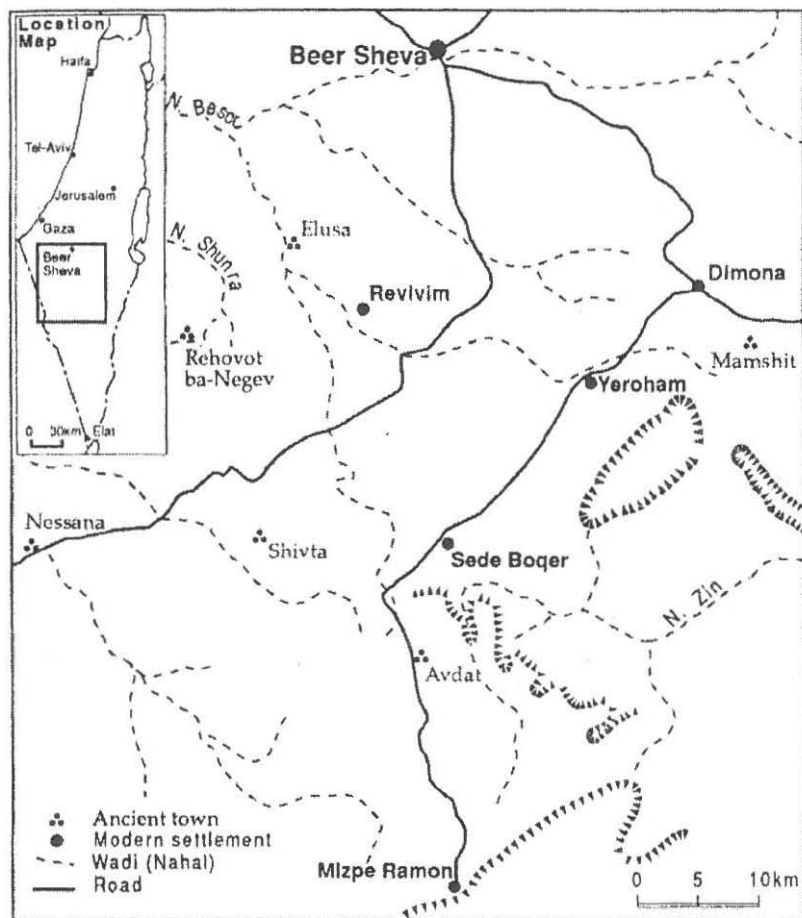


Fig. 1. Map of region, showing position of Shivta in northern Negev desert. (After Rubin, 1991)

Dust-storms are common, particularly in spring, eroding what remains of the top-soil, having a destructive effect on agriculture and driving particles of dust into even the most apparently well-sealed corners, cupboards and drawers. It is difficult to comprehend how settlements survived in such bleak conditions, how people worked the land and maintained ways of life that were

comparable to those elsewhere in the Byzantine world. And yet they did.

There are several abandoned towns, villages and farmsteads with an identifiable Byzantine phase still visible in the Negev, and many more visible only as earthworks. Modern synthetic work on the historic landscape of this region has begun to shed new light on key research questions, enabling archaeologists to understand the nature of settlement and land-use.⁶ However, the focus of this paper is one particular settlement, Shivta (in Hebrew; alternative spellings include Isbaita, Sobata or Subeita) (Fig. 2.). This is one of the best-known settlements and, unusually, provides evidence of the interaction between secular and monastic communities. Located approximately 43 kilometres south-west of Beersheba, Shivta is a settlement of some 11 hectares, lying approximately 350 metres above sea-level.⁷ Recent estimates put the population during the Byzantine period at approximately 1,100, although a figure of 3,000-4,000 was suggested by a 1970s survey of the site and its environs.⁸ Estimates must remain tentative but, either way, this was a small settlement compared to some in the Negev.

Nevertheless, the archaeology of Shivta is one of the best preserved in the region and has been the subject of research since it was re-discovered by Western travellers in the nineteenth century, although there has still been little excavation and publication of stratified deposits and, therefore, the stratigraphy of the site remains largely unknown.⁹ The early twentieth-century publication of Leonard Woolley and T.E. Lawrence, which describes Shivta in detail and attempts some analysis of the way it functioned, remains useful even today.¹⁰ It is fortunate that the archaeological evidence is of such a high standard, since there is very little documentary evidence relating to Byzantine and early Islamic Shivta: there are some inscriptions, mainly from the churches, and there is occasional mention of Shivta in the so-called Nessana papyri, which date from between 505 and 689 and comprise a collection of many hundreds of fragments, found just west of Shivta at the larger settlement of Nessana.¹¹

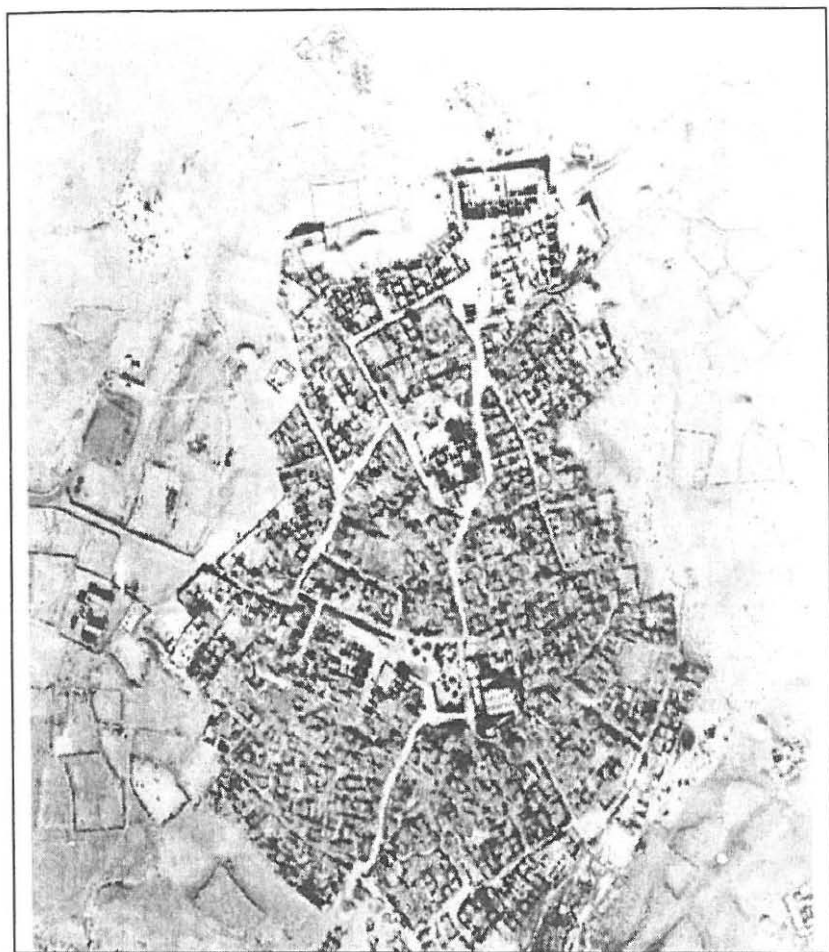


Fig. 2. North-south aerial photograph of Shivta. Scale: 1:1,000 (After Segal, 1985)

To conceptualise Shivta as a city, as some scholars persist in doing (e.g. Segal, 1983), is misleading, for it is scarcely more than a small town and, indeed, the Nessana papyri imply that it was

conceptualised as a 'large village' in the Byzantine period.¹² With the exception of churches and associated buildings (which may be monastic in any case), it has few of the public buildings and meeting places that are usually considered prerequisites for towns, let alone cities, although it does have some key public amenities, most notably the water supply.¹³ Clive Foss has criticised the tendency to describe desert settlements, both here and in Syria, as 'cities', suggesting that scholars have been too easily impressed by the standing archaeology and have imbued it with a romanticism denied other, less visually striking, remains.¹⁴

Shivta is orientated on an approximate north-south alignment, with several satellite settlements – smaller villages and farms – in its vicinity. There is a large double reservoir in the centre of the southern part of the settlement (Fig. 3) and there are three substantial churches: one near the reservoir, known as the south church (although it is by no means on the southern periphery of the settlement), one at the northern extremity of the town, known as the north church and one mid-way between the two, which is referred to as the central church. There are a number of main streets dividing the city into blocks of very irregular size and shape, with smaller lanes providing access to individual houses. There is no separate enclosing wall, although a *de facto* enclosure is formed from the exterior walls of the houses on the edge of the settlement. In total, Shivta appears to have had just over a thousand rooms.

The origins of the site are Nabataean, although little survives from this period, with the exception of the pottery and inscriptions published in the early twentieth century.¹⁵ The main period of growth appears to have been during the Byzantine period: although early Byzantine Shivta was described by contemporaries as a 'village', by the seventh century it had expanded to include three churches, at least one market place and hundreds of houses, some even with stables attached.¹⁶ The houses had roofs made of transverse arches covered with large flat limestone slabs, the typical construction technique in the Negev. Like other Negev

settlements, Shivta had a relatively sophisticated agricultural base, which was explored in detail in the 1950s by Yitzak Kedar, who estimated that more than 80 household groups owned fields in the vicinity of the town.¹⁷



Fig. 3. South-westerly view of Shivta's double reservoir.

It has long been suggested that the northern-most one of the three churches may have formed part of a monastic complex but Pau Figueras's suggestion that there were three monasteries at Shivta, each with its own church, has implications for the study of monastic-lay interaction in a desert context.¹⁸ These would, self-evidently, not have been inhabited by monks seeking an eremitical way of life; neither would all three have comprised central *coenobia*, for there is little evidence in the locality of the type of *laurae* well-known from the Judean and Egyptian deserts. The

exception is the small settlement of Mitzpe Shivta, some six kilometres to the west, with its rock-cut caves and fortress-like tower.¹⁹ These have been interpreted as *laurae* and as a place of refuge for travellers. Its location, together with an inscription invoking the help of St George, suggest that this is the 'fort... guest-house' mentioned in the late-sixth-century account of the anonymous Piacenza pilgrim.²⁰ This aside, it is likely that at least two of the Shivta monasteries were inhabited by monks (or possibly nuns) who were dedicated to a way of life more akin to that instituted and encouraged by Basil of Cappadocia, for example, where the monastic community lived alongside and served the lay community, providing practical help and support, than the Egyptian or Judean monasticism inspired by Anthony or Pachomius.²¹

How did a settlement as substantial as Shivta survive, even apparently thrive, in such harsh conditions? Agriculture was vital, as the field system identified by Yitzak Kedar attests, and viticulture, in particular, was important.²² There is a large wine-pressing system adjacent to the north church, and two more just outside the settlement, suggesting that wine production played a large role at Shivta. It is possible, of course, that some of the wine produced at Shivta was for ecclesiastical use and not sold on – the wine-press immediately adjacent to the north church is likely to have served this purpose, given that it does not have the compartmentalised threading area seen in other Negev wine-presses. These compartments are usually interpreted as areas for the inspection of the weight and quality of grapes brought by different groups or families to a common press. As Figueras points out, there would have been little need for this exercise if the grapes were of a common ownership.²³ Nevertheless, commercial activities of some kind are likely to have been more important, especially given Shivta's strategic place on north-south routes running through the Negev.

Pilgrimage-related activities would have also played a key role in the economic and social life of Shivta. From the fourth century

onwards, the Negev was traversed by pilgrims journeying south to visit the biblical and monastic sites in Egypt, and by Egyptian pilgrims making their way north to visit Jerusalem and the Galilee area. Among the Egyptian sites with Biblical associations, the temporary home of the Holy Family after their flight from Bethlehem and before their return to Nazareth took precedence; among the monastic sites, places associated with the desert fathers – Anthony and Pachomius, for example – were popular and, later, during the course of the sixth century, centres such as St Catherine's on Mount Sinai or the monastery of Abu Menas attracted many hundreds of pilgrims. The distribution of clay *ampullae* from the latter site attests to the seriousness with which pilgrimage was taken by people from across Christianised Europe and the Near East.²⁴

Shivta lay on one of the roads leading to the south of the Sinai peninsula and was also near (but not directly on) the main route between Beersheba and the major port of Aila, on the western side of the Persian gulf. From Beersheba, people would travel north to Jerusalem or west to Gaza, another major commercial centre. At Aila, Indian ships put into port, before turning south and making their way to the southern end of the Red Sea, where their sailors disembarked with cargoes of cotton and spices.²⁵ It would not be surprising if some pilgrims left the ship at Aila and made their way north to Jerusalem, and possibly also the Galilee, breaking their journey at Shivta and or a neighbouring settlement. Pilgrimage traffic increased exponentially in the fifth century: Jerome wrote that *every day* he greeted pilgrims in his monastery in Bethlehem, and that some of these people had travelled from as far afield as India, Persia and Ethiopia.²⁶

At such a strategic location, therefore, one would also expect the provision of hospitality for pilgrims and other travellers to have been a long-term generator of income, directly and indirectly, although it might have necessitated a substantial outlay in the first instance. As pilgrimage became more popular and accessible to a wider range of people, there was a need, too, for

the provision of local guides. There seems to have been a rapid response to this demand: for example, a priest in Nessana apparently required the transfer of 270 and a half *solidi* to organise a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai in the sixth century. Since a local Bedouin guide in the Sinai peninsula could apparently be hired for about 3 *solidi* a day, it would appear that some clergy in the Negev had no qualms about profiting from pilgrimage.²⁷

Yet, to participate in any of these activities in conditions where rainfall was usually less than 200mm a year, and where summer temperatures could reach 42 degrees centigrade, required special efforts of planning that were not required elsewhere. The desert experience was, at its most basic level, an exercise in careful planning and in storing enough resources to be able to cope with the extreme environment.

It is curious, therefore, that a recent analysis argues that Shivta and various other settlements in the Negev, 'developed in an organic way apparently independent of central planning principles. In these cases the absence of a grid plan reflects the fact that these towns were not developed by the government but were spontaneous creations'.²⁸ This seems rather to miss the point. We would not expect government agents – either at a central or provincial level – to be interested in planning what was, at the beginning of the Byzantine period, merely a substantial village and, according to Foss, scarcely merited the term 'town', let alone 'city', even by the sixth century.²⁹ Classical principles of urban planning were just not relevant here.

It is equally misleading to characterise Shivta as developing in an 'organic' way. Granted, it was not centrally planned, but it *was* planned, as has long been recognised.³⁰ It was planned in such a way that the maximum possible amount of water was collected, stored and then distributed. Channels ran down the side of each street, feeding water either into the large reservoir partly adjacent to the west entrance to the south church, or into the many cisterns constructed under individual houses and groups of houses throughout the settlement (Figs. 6 and 7). Water ran into these

cisterns through a series of gutters and pipes, while people wishing to extract water from them did so through a cistern head (Figs. 4 and 5). These are still to be seen at Shivta, often scored with rope marks, presumably from the lifting of buckets.

The archaeology testifies to an expectation that water would, on occasion, be plentiful. Stone panels could be inserted into grooves cut across the channels, thus blocking the flow and permitting water to be diverted. There was also provision for excess water to be piped out of individual cisterns and into channels running down the side of the street, terminating in the reservoir.³¹ A typical rock-cut cistern at Shivta had a storage capacity of 150 cubic metres, which, given that a family of six might need approximately nine cubic metres per annum, meant a plentiful supply of water, even if the cistern was only ten per cent full. If they had livestock comprising two camels, a donkey and ten sheep or goats, this would create a demand for only a further nine cubic metres of water per annum.³²

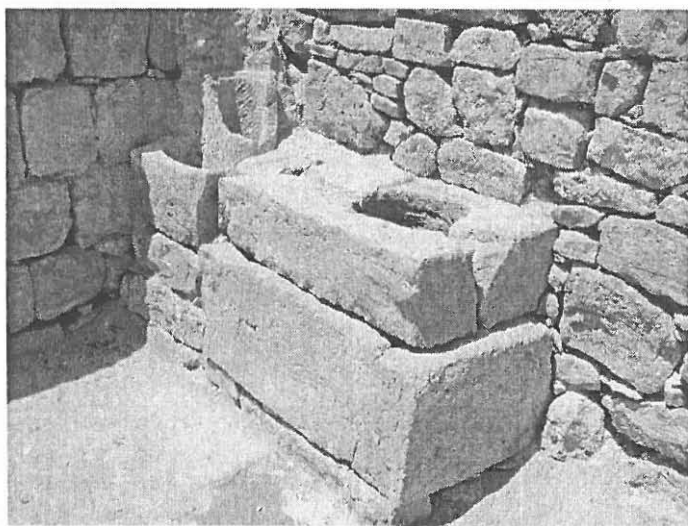


Fig. 4. Cistern-head and pipes channelling water into household cistern at Shivta.



Fig. 5. Cistern-head, showing rope-marks.



Fig. 6. Water-collecting channel. Note vegetation growing in channel, indicating that it still serves as a conduit for water.

Fig. 7. Water-collecting channel at Shivta.



These observations are made most eloquently in Kenneth Gutwein's PhD thesis on urbanism in the Negev, which summarises the planning of Shivta in three points.³³ He argues that 'the essential character of the settlement was reflected in its hydrological system, which divided the settlement into a number of insulae and plazas.' Secondly, he points out that the planners were not concerned with overall composition or with comprehensive pre-planning, but only with the most efficient drainage pattern, and that, thirdly, streets were therefore planned to serve primarily as water conduits and only secondarily as conductors of traffic.

One might also point out that Shivta is built on a north-south facing slope and the north church stands at a higher altitude than the south church. This being the case, the large plaza outside the north church served as more than a meeting place or a focus for

ecclesiastical processions (Fig. 8). It enabled run-off water to pass more easily down the slope to the cisterns and to the reservoir. The orientation of the plaza paving is at 45 degrees to the church, an alignment which, while it might first appear as indicative of careless planning, actually facilitates the more efficient and, in fact, more equitable, distribution of water to household cisterns, rather than having it gush down the slope straight into the reservoir, where it was likely to evaporate quickly or, if the rainfall was particularly torrential, to flood.

So, Shivta was very much a planned settlement. Indeed, the very location of Shivta heeds the need for water collection, sited as it is in the wide Wadi Zaythan drainage basin.³⁴ This is a dry valley for the most part, only containing water periodically, usually during the occasional intensive rain storms of the winter months, when approximately 25% of the entire annual precipitation can collect in a couple of days. At these times, it was imperative to collect as much of the run-off as possible and to store it in such a way that evaporation was minimised. It is possible that, during these rare occasions when the reservoir was filled with water, the reservoir was covered in order to prevent evaporation – perhaps with animal skins.

At the same time, in upland areas, a system of field terracing was put in place to ensure that the sudden and dramatic rainstorms did not wash away precious crops and top-soil into the stream, but irrigated the fields in such a way that the flow of water was controlled and slowed, ensuring that it was distributed through as much agricultural land as possible.³⁵ The terrace walls were made up of parallel single, double or triple (depending on the steepness of the slope) lines of dry-stone wall. The space between these walls was filled with rubble and earth. Kedar estimated that 90-100 acres of land surrounding Shivta were irrigated in this very deliberate way.³⁶ Every metre of uncultivated land in the vicinity of the settlement was integrated into this run-off collecting system. Furthermore, a series of dams about 4 kilometres from

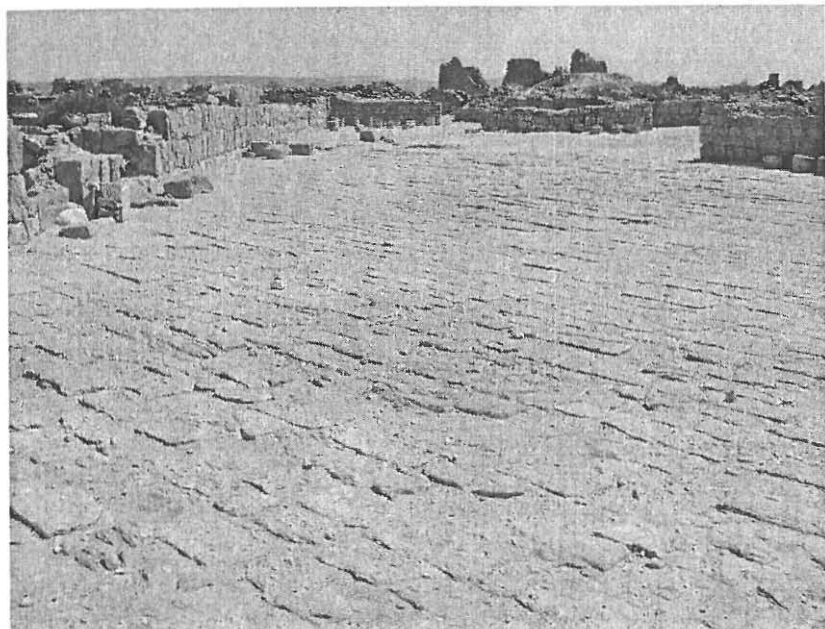


Fig. 8. View from southern wall of north church, showing 45 degree orientation of plaza, permitting water to flow into cisterns.

Shivta may have also been part of the settlement's water collection system.³⁷ It included a system of canals and reservoirs, covering about 90-100 acres. The walls of the canals stand at about 15 feet high and are about 10 feet thick. They may have been used for either irrigation or the provision of drinking water. The need to conserve precious irrigated agricultural land may partly explain the tightly-packed configuration of buildings at Shivta, which otherwise seems incongruous in a desert landscape where land was plentiful.³⁸

This level of extra-mural planning was particularly important at Shivta, for the water table was so low here that *digging* for water here was almost out of the question. M. Abel's study of wells in the Beersheba region, published in 1933, indicates that

the water table in the vicinity of Shivta was lower than elsewhere in the region by up to 86 feet. He claimed that water could be found at 26 feet at Elousa and at 39 feet at Beersheba. No figures are available for Shivta itself, but at Nessana and Ruheiba, two close-by settlements, the figures are 65-110 feet and 126 feet respectively.³⁹ These are thought to be the deepest in all the provinces of Byzantine Palaestina.

The human and economic cost of maintaining such hydraulic and agricultural systems would have been considerable and, although not yet identified archaeologically, one assumes that there would have been some sort of sewerage system, too.⁴⁰ Maintenance work alone would have occupied the physically-fit for several days a month. A sixth-century *ostrakon* gives an insight into this matter, partly reading: 'to Flavius Gormos, son of Zacharias: You have completed one compulsory work for the cistern. Written on the 25th of the month of Dios in the 9th indiction'.⁴¹ Other *ostraca* also show that compulsory labour was organised for the proper maintenance and repair of the water distribution systems. For example, 'Abbot John, son of Victor, lector,' is acknowledged as having completed nine of his cistern-cleaning duties.⁴²

It was previously thought that most of the settlements of the Negev were abandoned at the beginning of the Islamic period as Christian pilgrimage activities declined. Landscape survey in the region now disputes this, demonstrating significant agricultural activities up to the end of the tenth century in some places and casting doubt on analyses that have placed pilgrimage at the heart of the desert economy. Nessana, another town in the area, which has usually been thought to have been abandoned in the seventh century, has recently been demonstrated to have functioned until the eighth or ninth century.⁴³ Shivta, perhaps the smallest of the Negev towns, appears to have been occupied until the ninth century at least. Yet the question of settlement continuity and change in the Byzantine provinces of Palaestina in the wake of the

Arab invasions remains very much an open one, in part because some of the evidence is so fragmentary as to be un-useable.

However, at Shivta there is some helpful evidence from inscriptions. At the south church, an inscription (in the south aisle) attests that the floor was re-laid in 639, while 13 cross-marked tombstones in the north church indicate burials taking place there between 582 and 679.⁴⁴ At least seven of these persons were priests. Inscriptions in a Kufic script were also found in the north church, in both the atrium and the narthex, and were, tentatively, ascribed to the ninth century.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, they do not survive, either as text or as artefacts, because the excavator deemed them to be 'of no historical significance being chiefly invocations to God'.⁴⁶ Most of the pottery excavated from Shivta has also disappeared, much of it without being properly published, although Petersen has recently identified eighth- and ninth-century Islamic buff-moulded wares from photographs.⁴⁷

This would be consistent with the best evidence that life at Shivta continued past the seventh century: the presence of a mosque which was apparently in use at the same time as the churches. It is, in fact, physically attached to a church, being located alongside the north wall of the south church, just on the other side of the wall from the baptistery. This seems to be the only evidence for the cooperative co-existence of institutional Islamic and Christian worship in the Negev. The mosque at Shivta has a small sanctuary and a courtyard, both paved with flagstones. It is entered via a set of steps made from re-used lintel slabs, some of which are decorated with stylised rosette-crosses. Interestingly, these are not defaced and were used with the decoration facing upwards, although whether the presence of the crosses in the step-slabs, where they would have been trodden on by people entering the mosque, was intended as a snub to their Christian neighbours, is not clear. However, there appears to be no evidence in the extant sculptural evidence from Shivta of crosses being defaced (and there are many crosses extant), although there is some evidence of the possible defacing of human and animal figures. In

fact, it is possible that the decoration on the steps was not perceived as 'Christian' at all, for these particular crosses are more stylised than most elsewhere at Shivta.

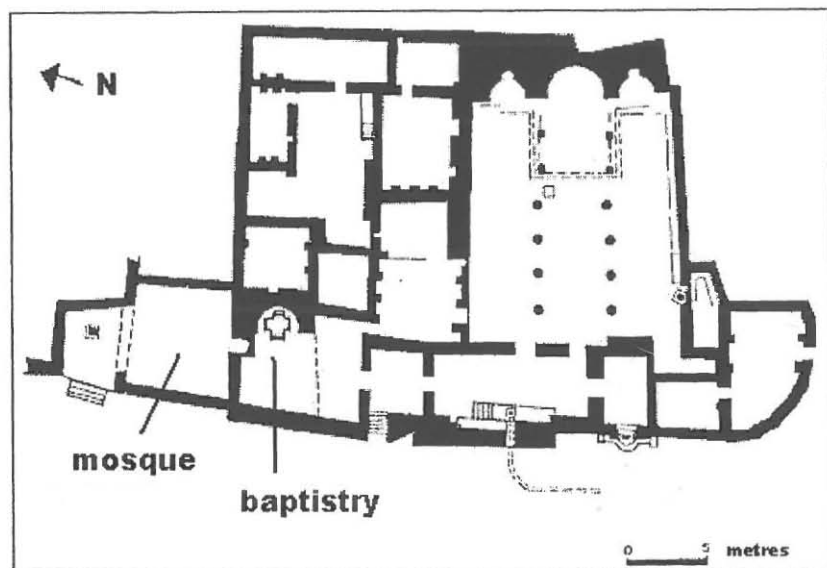


Fig. 9. The south church and (monastic?) complex, showing later mosque adjacent to baptistry (After Segal, 1985).

The *mihrab*, a deep, concave, feature, which is inserted into the south wall (some 300mm away from the font in the adjoining room), has recently been identified as an eighth-century form, although this does not mean that the *mihrab* could not have been a later addition to a pre-existing mosque.⁴⁸ Although the precise date at which Shivta was abandoned remains elusive, it would appear to be still functioning in the eighth century and, on the basis of the pottery evidence, until at least the ninth century.

Shivta and the 'desert experience'

How did the business of living in a desert town shape the community that lived there? In many ways, the apparent 'normality' of life is striking, even in regard to the use of water. For example, at least four bath-houses have been identified, complete with hypocausts, not necessarily features one would expect in a settlement where water was so precious, for each would have consumed a vast quantity of water. Here, again, a high level of planning was in evidence: the used bath water was drained out into plaster-lined vats and re-cycled.⁴⁹

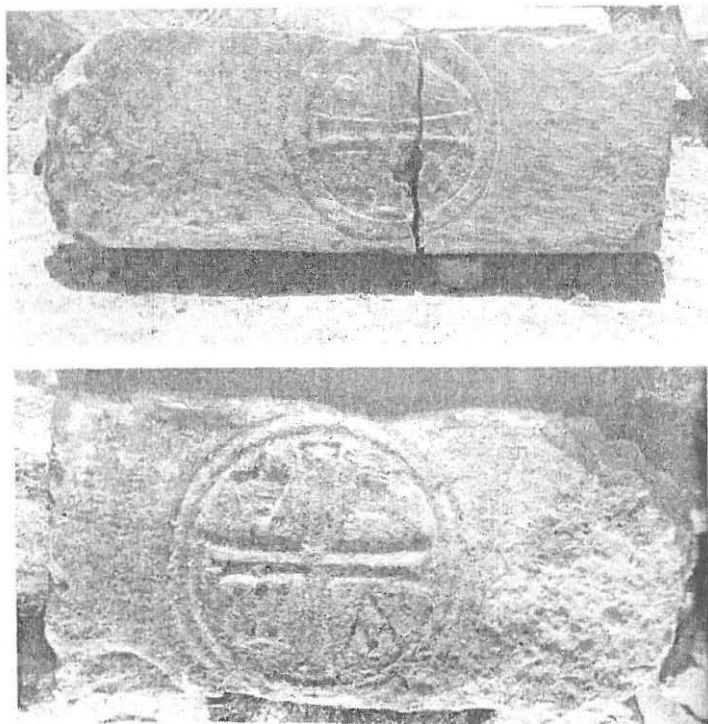
In ecclesiastical life, as well, there is much that would have been found in towns throughout the Byzantine world. This might attest to a desire to be part of broader society, although plainly there was a high level of commitment to the desert way of life. For example, the standard of architecture used in the three (tri-apsidal) churches of Shivta is comparable to many fifth to seventh century churches elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the inscriptions attest the presence of a priest there until at least the mid-seventh century.⁵⁰

Two carved lintel stones should be singled out here: these are analogous to other decorated sculptural pieces from Shivta but for the fact that the Greek letters 'Alpha' and 'Omega' are carved as 'Omega-Alpha'.⁵¹ The context of deposition is not known but the lintels are similar to those still *in situ* at the south church. Several questions immediately arise: was the carving a 'mistake', was it relegated to some dark corner of the south church or other building, or did it carry meaning for those who looked upon it? Of course, it is impossible to tell but it is perhaps credible that the dominance of a Semitic script amongst the local population has a part to play, and the capital might provide an insight into the relationship between Greek-language dominated Palestinian monasticism and the local, Aramaic-speaking, population. Did the stonemason who carved these pieces 'write' the phrase as he would have read it, or must we, as Segal suggests, 'assume that the local artists did not always

know the meaning of the letters or simply were illiterate'?'⁵² If the former, it suggests a high level of engagement with the function of the building and a familiarity with the Greek descriptor for Christ.⁵³ It might also corroborate the evidence of the *ostraca* that at least basic levels of education were available at Shivta.⁵⁴

It was not only a community prepared to invest heavily in its religious life, but was one with an appreciation for aesthetics. A glass plate with painted busts of saints from the vicinity may suggest the presence of an artist, for example.⁵⁵ Perhaps more saliently, Shivta provides rare evidence of a coordinated scheme of church decoration. At the south church, the dog-tooth ornamentation around the apsidal east end of the north aisle, for example, is echoed in the carving on the limestone capitals at the entrance to the same aisle, as well in the continuous pattern on the arch-stones (Figs. 10 and 11). Fragments of frescoes still extant appear to depict human figures. At the south church, Woolley and Lawrence identified scenes of the Transfiguration in the apse, which, given that they are painted directly onto the stone, may be part of the original decoration of the church (they were probably covered by plaster in the later Byzantine and early Islamic periods).⁵⁶

It is likely, too, that an elaborate system of drapery existed in the churches: a corner pillar capital from Shivta, now lost, depicts three arched arcades, each with a horizontal rod and an attached curtain. Segal has commented on the similarity between the arrangement of the drapes here and those depicted on the Ark of the Covenant mosaic from the Hammat Tiberius synagogue in Galilee.⁵⁷ The stone was of local carving and depicts three arcades, each with curtains. The discovery of a fragment of sixth-century locally-woven silk at Nessana makes it possible that the drapes in the churches at Shivta were also of silk.⁵⁸



Figs. 10 and 11. Carved lintel stones with 'Omega-Alpha' inscription. (After Segal, 1988, 51-52)

High levels of investment in church-related fabric are not surprising, of course, if Figueras's argument that Shivta was home to three monasteries is accepted. Yet, the postulated monastic buildings make up only a small percentage of the infrastructure of the town and the churches would principally have served a lay community. The desert experience of the monks at Shivta would not, therefore, have been one of retreat from the world, but of coming closer to it: living alongside lay people with whom they had an interdependent relationship. Monks and laity together comprised people who, to a far greater extent than many others in

the Byzantine world, were reliant on mutual cooperation for their very survival.



Fig. 12.
'Dog-tooth'
painted
decoration in
south church
(south apse).

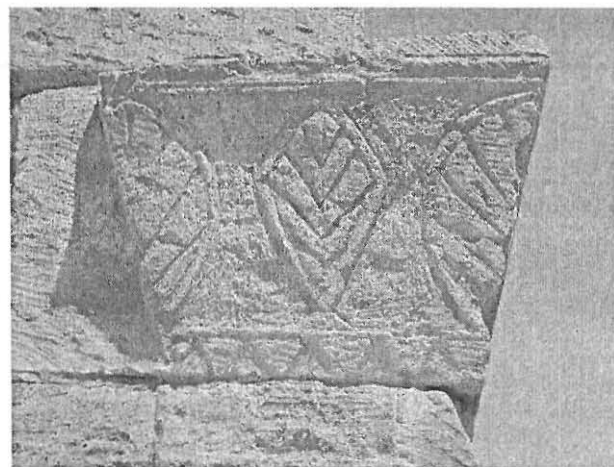


Fig. 13. South
church: carved
capital with
'dog-tooth'
decoration on
lower register.

The complex water collection and distribution system was a communal one. In order for it to operate efficiently, each part had to be regularly maintained. As we know from the *ostraca*, the task

of maintaining the water system was shared within the community, rather than being the sole responsibility of one group of officials; and responsibilities were shouldered by both monks and laity. Other tasks may also have been shared, of course, although there is no direct evidence for this. It is instructive, however, that the orientation of plaza adjacent to the north church permitted water to be carried away from that area and distributed to the cisterns of houses further down the slope. Its planners could, if they had wished, have designed the plaza in such a way that water was retained in that catchment area, perhaps being channelled into a cistern beneath the plaza itself.⁵⁹ Instead, although there is a cistern under the north church atrium, most of the water was permitted to trickle down the slope into other cisterns, ensuring some equity in its distribution.

This is not to depict Shivta as some sort of idealised community: the existence of the *ostraca* suggests a degree of regulation, and perhaps coercion was even necessary to persuade some people to fulfil their responsibilities. Perhaps the building of the diagonally-orientated plaza was part of an agreement between the townspeople and the developers of this highly desirable piece of land, situated on the highest point of the settlement. Yet a high level of self-discipline, as well as community discipline, would have been required to maintain such a highly fragile way of life for several centuries, withstanding substantial economic, political and religious change. It is interesting, therefore, that this was a form of discipline which appears to have been submitted to willingly, rather than resisted, and it suggests that, like the monks, the lay community of Shivta found its own desert experience somehow worthwhile and possibly enriching. By the fifth and sixth centuries, social and economic conditions were such that many people could have moved to a more hospitable part of Palaestina Tertia, had they been desperate to do so, even if it was simply to move north to the larger town of Beersheba.



Fig. 14. View from the atrium of the north church, looking east

Like the monks, the laity of Shvta chose, in the widest sense, to live out their lives in the desert. It is possible that the experience of living and working together in such harsh physical conditions gave the community a coherence that was seldom seen elsewhere. In this context, it is interesting that recent literature on the lives of the desert fathers has turned away from focusing on the ascetic extremes practiced by some of them (admittedly the most famous ones) and has explored the desert fathers' emphasis on the need for constant and extravagant forgiveness and mercy. In an environment where alienation of the individual would have been potentially dangerous to the entire community, harsh judgements and discipline would have been counter-productive. If the ultimate aim was to achieve the reconciliation of the individual to the rest of the community, and that individual was committed to being reconciled,

then the quality of mercy and forgiveness extended would have been more important than the harshness of the punishment. Deterrence was less of an issue than reconciliation in these conditions.

Perhaps we should not be so surprised at the existence of the bath-houses, and the extravagant use of water that they imply. We do not, after all, know how often – if ever – they were used, and there is no evidence, as yet, that they were all in use at the same time.⁶⁰ It is very likely that, if they were used at all, it was in the rainy winter months. However, in a dust-blown desert climate, where water was at a premium, the opportunity to be washed clean would have been constantly welcome and longed for. The bath-houses may have had a vital role to play in the psychological health of the Shivta community.

Conclusion

Water was, then, more than a treasured resource. The need to conserve it, to exercise wise stewardship over it and to enjoy those rare occasions when it gushed down the slope over the rocks and flooded into the cisterns and reservoirs were ever-present metaphors for the way that life had to be lived at Shivta: laboriously and patiently, communally, ever with an eye to the future and the need to devise new strategies for survival, yet with a sense of time and place, and the promise that there would, eventually, be times of renewal and replenishing of supplies.

In the sense that the overall community of Shivta was not as self-selecting a group as the inhabitants of the great monasteries of the Sinai and Judean deserts, be they eremitical or coenobitical foundations, it might even be argued that its members' so-called 'desert experience' was close to that sought by many in the monastic world. Indeed, in the crucial sense that members of the laity did not actively chose their neighbours, whereas the monks did, they were, possibly, engaging *more* actively in the spiritual

exercises which were the focus of the ‘desert experience’, albeit inadvertently. They were forced to exercise restraint, cooperation and, surely in some circumstances, sacrificial giving towards people who were very different to them in temperament, outlook and social and economic standing. By the seventh century, they were also apparently exercising these qualities across religious divisions.

Lawrence Freeman has recently commented on the nature of community in a desert monastic context: ‘The desert wisdom teaches rather than preaches. Its authority is experimental not theoretical... [the desert fathers] were also persons held together in a network of realistic relations in community’.⁶¹ At Shivta, it would seem, the community was living out this experimental spirituality; monks and laity were living alongside each other, cooperating in the practicalities of everyday living – including maintenance of the water-storage systems, provision of viticulture and field-systems, as well as, presumably, providing hospitality and services for pilgrims and other travellers. To reiterate, this is not to claim that Shivta was an ideal community in any sense, neither is it to argue that peace and harmony always prevailed. With houses packed as densely as they were, this is likely to have been impossible. More prosaically, in fact, this paper has simply argued for a more synthetic approach to the early medieval ‘desert experience’; that, in order to obtain a more rounded picture of life in a monastic landscape, monastic archaeology must be synthesised with a deeper understanding of how secular settlements operated, and not simply on a physical level.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was read at the University of Reading Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies Annual Symposium. I am grateful to participants at that conference for their constructive comments, and also to Dr Eliya Ribak-Feldman for making it possible for me to visit the site.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Yizhar Hirschfeld, 1950-2006.

¹ Marilyn Dunn, *The emergence of monasticism: from the Desert Fathers to the early Middle Ages* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000).

² Benedicta Ward (ed. and trans.), *The Desert Fathers: sayings of the early Christian monks* (London, Penguin, 2003); Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: the wisdom of the desert* (Oxford, Lion Publishing, 2003).

³ Although there is no scholarly consensus on climate change in the Byzantine-Islamic period, it is generally agreed that the climate of the Negev was probably comparable to that of the present day. S. A. Rosen, 'The decline of desert agriculture: a view from the classical period Negev', in *The Archaeology of Drylands: Living at the Margin*, ed. Graeme Barker and David Gilbertson (London, Routledge, 2000; *One World Archaeology*, 39), pp. 45-62.

⁴ Andrew Petersen, *The towns of Palestine under Muslim rule, AD 600-1600* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1381, 2005); p. 45.

⁵ Kenneth C. Gutwein, *Third Palestine: A Regional Study in Byzantine Urbanization* (Washington D.C., University Press of America, 1981).

⁶ For example, Yitzak Kedar, 'Ancient Agriculture at Shivta in the Negev', *Israel Exploration Journal* 7 (1957): 178-189; Gutwein; S. A. Rosen, 'Byzantine Nomadism in the Negev: Results from the Emergency Survey', *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 14 (1987): 29-42; Rehav Rubin, 'Settlement and Agriculture on an Ancient Desert Frontier', *Geographical Review*, 81 (1991): 197-205; Joseph Shereshevski, *Byzantine Urban Settlements in the Negev Desert* (Beersheva, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1991); Yizhar Hirschfeld, 'Farms and Villages in Byzantine Palestine', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 51 (1997): 33-71; Doron Bar, 'Population, settlement and economy in Late Roman and Byzantine Palestine (70-641 AD)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 67 (2004): 307-20.

⁷ Arthur Segal, 'Shivta - A Byzantine Town in the Negev Desert', *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 44 (1985): 317-28; p. 323.

⁸ Petersen, p. 45, n. 2.

⁹ Previous archaeological work is summarised in Arthur Segal, *The Byzantine City of Shivta (Esbeita), Negev Desert, Israel* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 179, 1983); Segal, 'Shivta - A Byzantine Town'; Avraham Negev, 'Sobata', in *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations*

in *the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 1404-10. More recent work is cited in Peterson, pp. 62-63, notes 23 and 24.

¹⁰ C. Leonard Woolley and T. E. Lawrence, *The Wilderness of Zin* (London, Stacey International, 2003; 2nd revised edition).

¹¹ Avraham Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev* (Jerusalem, Franciscan Printing Press, 1981; *Studien Biblicum Franciscanum*, Collectio minor 25).

¹² Segal continues to characterise Shivta as a city, whereas Hirschfeld has led the way in refuting this: Hirschfeld, *Farms and Villages*, p. 38; Yizhar Hirschfeld, 'Social Aspects of the Late Antique Village of Shivta', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 16 (2003): 395-408; Yizhar Hirschfeld and Yotam Tepper, 'Columbarium Towers and other structures in the environs of Shivta', *Tel Aviv*, 33 (2006): 63-116.

¹³ Alan Walmsley, 'Byzantine Palestine and Arabia: Urban Prosperity in Late Antiquity', in *Towns in Transition: Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Neil Christie and Simon Loseby (London, Scholar Press, 1996), pp. 126-158.

¹⁴ Clive Foss, 'The Near Eastern countryside in late antiquity: a review article', *Journal of Roman Archaeology, Suppl. Series* 14 (1995): 213-234; p. 225.

¹⁵ G. M. Crowfoot, 'The Nabatean Ware from Sbaita', *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, (1936): 14-27.

¹⁶ Claudine Dauphin, *La Palestine Byzantine: peuplement et populations* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 726, 1998).

¹⁷ Kedar.

¹⁸ Pau Figueras, 'Monks and Monasteries in the Negev Desert', *Liber Annuus*, 45, (1995): 401-450, pls. 53-58 (pp. 436-42).

¹⁹ Yaacov Baumgarten, 'Mitzpe Shivta', in *New Encyclopedia of Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 1059-61; Figueras, 'Monks and Monasteries', pp. 420-23.

²⁰ *Ibid.* John Wilkinson (trans. and ed.). *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (Warminster, Aris and Phillips, 2002; revised ed.), p. 145.

²¹ Yizhar Hirschfeld, 'Monasteries and Churches in the Judean Desert in the Byzantine Period', in *Ancient Churches Revealed*, ed. Yoram Tsafrir (Jerusalem, Israel Exploration Society, 1993), pp. 149-154; Pau Figueras, 'Palestinian

monasticism in the early Muslim period', *Proche-Orient Chrétien*, 50 (2000): 267-78; Haim Goldfus, 'Urban Monasticism and Monasteries of Early Byzantine Palestine', *ARAM*, 15 (2003): 71-79.

²² Kedar.

²³ Figuras, 'Monks and Monasteries', p. 439, n. 44.

²⁴ Susanne Bangert, Menas ampullae, long-distance contacts and the evidence from Britain, *Reading Medieval Studies*, 32 (2006), forthcoming.

²⁵ René T. J. Cappers, *Roman Foodprints at Berenike: Archaeobotanical Evidence of Subsistence and Trade in the Eastern Desert of Egypt* (Los Angeles, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, 2006).

²⁶ F. A. Wright (trans. and ed.), *Select letters of St. Jerome* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press/Heinemann), p. 343.

²⁷ Robert Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: a historical and archaeological study* (Darwin Press, Princeton, 1995; Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 2).

²⁸ Petersen, p.104.

²⁹ Foss, *passim*.

³⁰ e.g. Gutwein, pp.165-167.

³¹ T. Tsuk, 'The Water Supply of Shivta in the Byzantine period', in *Cura Aquarum in Israel. Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on the History of Water Management and Hydraulic Engineering in the Mediterranean Region, Israel, 7-12 May 2001*, ed. C. Ohlig, Y. Peleg and T. Tsuk, (*Schriften der Deutschen Wasserhistorischen Gesellschaft*, Band 1, 2002), pp.65-80.

³² These figures are based on experiments carried out in the Negev and published in Michael Evenari, Leslie Shanan, Naphtali Tadmor et al, *The Negev: the challenge of a desert* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1971).

³³ Gutwein, pp. 165-167.

³⁴ Hirschfeld, 'Farms and Villages', p. 58.

³⁵ Kedar.

³⁶ Quoted in Gutwein, p. 74.

³⁷ Gutwein, p. 199. On desertification and flood-water farming, see also: Graeme Barker, 'A tale of two deserts: contrasting desertification histories on Rome's

desert frontiers', *World Archaeology*, 33 (2002): 488–507; *Ancient Desert Agriculture Systems Revived* project website, www.mnemotrix.com/adasr (consulted 29/12/06).

³⁸ Segal, 'Shivta – A Byzantine Town', p. 323.

³⁹ Quoted in Gutwein, pp. 66–67.

⁴⁰ Stratigraphical excavation would be necessary to address this question.

⁴¹ Gutwein, p. 242; Segal, *The Byzantine City of Shivta (Esbeita)*, p. 6, n. 7.

⁴² Figueras, 'Monks and Monasteries', p. 442.

⁴³ Petersen, pp. 45–64. See also Pau Figueras, 'The Impact of the Islamic Conquest on the Christian Communities of South Palestine', *ARAM*, 6 (1994): 279–93.

⁴⁴ Schick, pp. 457–8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Colin Baly, 'S'beita', *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, (1935): 171–81, quoted in Petersen, p. 63.

⁴⁷ Petersen, p. 45–64.

⁴⁸ Petersen, p. 63.

⁴⁹ Gutwein, p. 202.

⁵⁰ Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom, *Die Kirchen von Sobota und die Dreiapsiden-Kirchen des Nahen Ostens*, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1982; S. Margalit, 'The North Church of Shivta: The Discovery of the First Church', *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, 119 (1987): 106–121.

⁵¹ Arthur Segal, *Architectural Decoration in Byzantine Shivta, Negev Desert, Israel* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 420, 1988).

⁵² Segal, *Architectural Decoration*, p. 154.

⁵³ This would be consistent with Doron Bar's recent argument that monasticism played a key role in the evangelisation of the Palestinian countryside. See Doron Bar, 'Rural Monasticism as a Key Element in the Christianization of Byzantine Palestine', *Harvard Theological Review*, 98 (2005): 49–65.

⁵⁴ It is also possible that the order of the letters results from the stonemason misreading a template, but this is unlikely given that the upper part of the capital is not 'back to front'.

⁵⁵ Claudine Dauphin, 'Review of *Excavations at Rehovot-in-the-Negev I: The Northern Church* by Yoram Tsafrir et al', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 95 (1991): 186-88; p. 188.

⁵⁶ Woolley and Lawrence. The paintings are now (2006) too damaged to confirm this identification.

⁵⁷ Segal, *Architectural Decoration*, p. 75, no. II-22.

⁵⁸ Gutwein, p. 277.

⁵⁹ Since no public buildings have been identified at Shivta, one supposes that ecclesiastical authorities or monks were the principal planners of this plaza, given its location adjacent to the north church.

⁶⁰ Although there is no evidence for a military presence at Shivta, the fortress at nearby Mitze Shivta has been interpreted as a military outpost: Figuras, 'Monks and Monasteries', pp. 420-421. This being the case, it is possible that one or more of the Shivta bathhouses were built as provision for the military. However, Negev ('Sobata', p. 1405) has suggested that, since the name Shivta is missing from the Nessana papyrus listing the recipient towns of the *annona militaris* in the Negev, this may suggest that the city had no permanent garrison. Stratigraphical excavation is probably required to shed light on this matter.

⁶¹ Lawrence Freedman, 'Introduction', in Williams, *Silence and honey cakes*, pp. 8-14 (8).

© All photographs copyright Anthea Harris unless otherwise attributed.