'Atiqot 112, 2023

Coins in Niches: Enigmatic Coin Deposits in the Southern Church of Shivṭa

Yotam Tepper and Yoav Farhi[1]

Three churches are known in Shivṭa: the Northern, the Central and the Southern. All three were fully excavated by the Colt expedition in 1934–1938. Recently, a full documentation of the exposed walls was undertaken, recording the remains of paintings, engravings and inscriptions. When the Transfiguration scene on the southern apse of the Southern Church was re-examined in this project, three coin deposits were revealed. In this paper we will present the data and offer an interpretation thereof.

Keywords: Byzantine period, coins, Shivta, Negev, Southern Church, church Deposits, Christian liturgical deposits, wall deposits, construction and renovation hoards

Introduction

The site of Shivṭa (Byzantine Sobata/Sobota; Arabic: Subeita) is located in the northern Negev Highlands. The ancient village, whose beginnings are still shrouded in mist, was probably founded as early as the Roman period (late first–early second centuries CE), flourishing in the Byzantine period (fifth–sixth centuries CE) and gradually abandoned at the end of the Byzantine–Early Islamic period (seventh–nineth centuries CE). Due to the isolated location of the site, about 15 km from the main road that crosses the Negev to Sinai, it was well-preserved. The boundaries of the ancient settlement and its streets are still clearly visible, the walls of some of the buildings are preserved to a height of 2 m, and the walls of the public buildings are preserved up to 8–10 m high (Shereshevski 1991:61–62; Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994:234; Hirschfeld 2003:395; Tepper et al. 2018).

Shivṭa was first surveyed in 1870 by A.H. Palmer (1871:30–32) and later, by a large number of scholars and travelers (for a review of the history of research, see Shereshevski 1991:61–62). The first archaeological excavations at the site were conducted in the 1930s by H.D. Colt. These excavations were extensive, and exposed the three churches of Shivṭa, its streets, residential buildings, large water reservoirs and other installations (Colt

[1] Dr. Yotam Tepper, Israel Antiquities Authority and the University of Haifa; Dr. Yoav Farhi, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

1947:316). The results of Colt's expedition were never published in a comprehensive and final archaeological report, but only in a number of short publications (Baly 1935:171–180; Colt 1935:7–11; 1936:198–199; 1947:316), including the publication of ceramic finds and coins that were uncovered in a midden outside the settlement (Crowfoot 1936:15–27).

Recently, several hundred items from Colt's excavations surfaced in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, and were published as part of a study conducted at the University of Haifa (Peleg and Tepper 2019:18–19; Tepper 2019a:101–102). However, these publications did not include information concerning the coin finds (see below).

Extensive surveys were conducted at the site over the years. Of these, we note the comprehensive studies of Segal (1983; 1985; see also Brimer 1981) and Hirschfeld's updated mapping (Hirschfeld 2003; Hirschfeld and Tepper 2006:83). Limited archaeological excavations were conducted in the Northern Church (Negev and Margalit 1986:110; Margalit 1987; Negev 1993:1405). In 2011–2019, Tepper and Bar-Oz directed the Shivṭa Excavation Project,[2] focusing on the Northern and Southern Churches, the mosque, the public water reservoirs, several areas of the streets, a number of residential buildings, as well as the water canal system and the drainage channels (Tepper, Weissbrod and Bar-Oz 2015; Tepper and Bar-Oz 2016; 2019; 2020; Tepper et al. 2018:121–122; Levi-Hevroni, Tepper and Bar-Oz, forthcoming).

Publications of coins from Shivṭa are scarce. Most of the information can be gleaned from G.M. Crowfoot's article on Nabataean pottery from Colt's excavations in 1933–1935. In her discussion, Crowfoot mentions an Agrippa I coin (41/2 CE), an Antoninus Pius coin (152/3 CE) from the mint of Ascalon (Crowfoot 1936:16, 24), and 44 other coins ranging in date from the reign of Constantius II (324–361 CE) to the 'late Byzantine' period, including one Axumite coin from the time of Justinian, which was identified by Sir Flinders Petrie (Crowfoot 1936:26–27). The coins were also examined by C. Lambert who wrote: "The coins seem mainly late fourth–fifth centuries A.D. Their chief interest seems to be the way in which some specimens have been deliberately cut into halves or quarters indicating a shortage of currency or peculiar conditions under which the metal itself was of more account than the token value of the coins" (Crowfoot 1936:27).

According to documents relating to the Colt excavations that are stored in the IAA archive (see Peleg and Tepper 2019:16, n. 15), it seems that some 322 bronze coins that

[2] The excavations at Shivṭa (2016 and 2019 seasons) were conducted by Y. Tepper and G. Bar-Oz on behalf of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology of the University of Haifa, supported by research grants from the European Research Council under the EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant 648427) and the Israel Science Foundation (Grant 340-14). The first season was conducted on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (License Nos. G-87/2015, G-4/2016). The second season (License Nos. G-82/2018, G-5/2019) was funded by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (Rakefet Foundation). The excavation of the Southern Reservoir (2019) was completed as part of a collaborative project carried out by Y. Tepper and G. Bar-Oz on behalf of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology of the University of Haifa, with A. Levi-Hevroni, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Permit No. A-8552/2019).

were found by Colt were exported to the USA in 1935. These coins were never published, and their current location is unknown.

Later mentions of coins from Shivṭa include the find of an unidentified coin in a Byzantine-period building excavated in 1983 (Segal 1984:62), and two coins from a 1985 excavation in the Northern Church, one a coin of Constantinus II or Gratian, and the other of Justinian I (Negev and Margalit 1986:110). Two coins, one from 351–354 CE, and one from 518–527 CE, were found in the plaster of the Southern Reservoir during Hirschfeld's excavations in 2000 (Hirschfeld 2003:397, 399, Fig. 6).

Recently, the authors summarized the information about the coins collected in surveys and excavations in Shivṭa, including the ones listed in the IAA National Coin Database (Farhi and Tepper 2023). The coins from the three deposits discussed here were not incorporated in that publication due to their unique context and the circumstances of their finding, and as they were found at a relatively late stage of the research and as part of a study of the church's walls.

It should be noted that of all the abovementioned coins, only one small group was found as an assemblage: nine coins dating to the fifth–sixth centuries CE, which were found under the floor of a room (Area I; L909) in Building 86 (Tepper et al. 2018:137–139, Fig. 10).

Based on the updated research of the Shivṭa coins, we pointed out the almost total absence of Nabataean or other Early Roman period (first–second centuries CE) coins, a fact that we considered to support the suggestion that Shivṭa was established later than the Roman annexation of Arabia (105/106 CE; Farhi and Tepper 2023). This understanding is still valid considering the single Hasmonean and the single Nabatean coins found in Deposit C (see below). The small number of third-century CE coins from Shivṭa may indicate the beginning of the settlement at that time, although its extent has not yet been clarified. Most of the numismatic finds from all seasons corroborate the claim that the settlement significantly expanded in the early Byzantine period (fourth century CE) and flourished during the fifth–sixth centuries CE. The very few Early Islamic coins on the other hand, suggests a rather short period and a relatively small area which was inhabited during the Early Islamic period (mid-seventh to late eighth centuries CE).

The Findspot: The Southern Church

Three small deposits of small bronze coins of low denomination—*minimi*—dated to the fourth and fifth centuries CE were discovered in the walls of the Southern Church. These are discussed following a brief description of the church and its dating.

During the Byzantine period, three churches were constructed at Shivṭa: the Northern Church, the Central Church and the Southern Church. According to Baly, the Southern Church was the oldest, the Central Church followed, and the Northern Church was the latest of the three (Baly 1935:174). Negev and Segal accepted this assessment of the Southern Church but suggested that the Northern Church was founded shortly thereafter, and that the Central Church was built last (Negev 1976:20; Segal 1983:155).

The huge investment reflected in the three churches further attests to the importance and central role of churches in the spiritual, religious, administrative and economic life throughout

the Byzantine period (Segal 1985:326; Hirschfeld 2003:400). These were probably the most impressive structures in the village, and unlike the residential buildings at the site, whose roofs were flat, the churches had sloping roofs that were visible from afar and stood out in the landscape of the village and its surroundings. The Shivṭa churches were also conspicuous for the wealth of their interior decorations and architectural items, some of them made of imported marble and hence also providing evidence of the public investment in money and labor required for their construction (Segal 1985:326; 1988:156; Fischer and Tepper 2021).

The Southern Church (Fig. 1) was founded in the southern part of Shivṭa, adjacent to the two water reservoirs on the west. Its non-standard plan (below) was probably an adaptation to the conditions of the place and the buildings in this part of the site (Segal 1985:323; Shereshevski 1991:74).

The church was first surveyed by Palmer (1871:30–32), and then by Musil, who was the first to publish its plan (Musil 1908:42–43, Fig. 28). Subsequently, the structure was visited and described by Jaussen, Savignac and Vincent (1905:257); Woolley and Lawrence (1914:88–90, Fig. 22); and Wiegand (1920:82, Figs. 78, 79). In 1934–1936 and in a short season during 1938, the Colt expedition conducted extensive excavations in the Southern Church, and fully exposed it. The plan of the church from these excavations is preserved in the British Mandate Archive in the Rockefeller Museum (Baly 1935:173; Colt 1936:198).

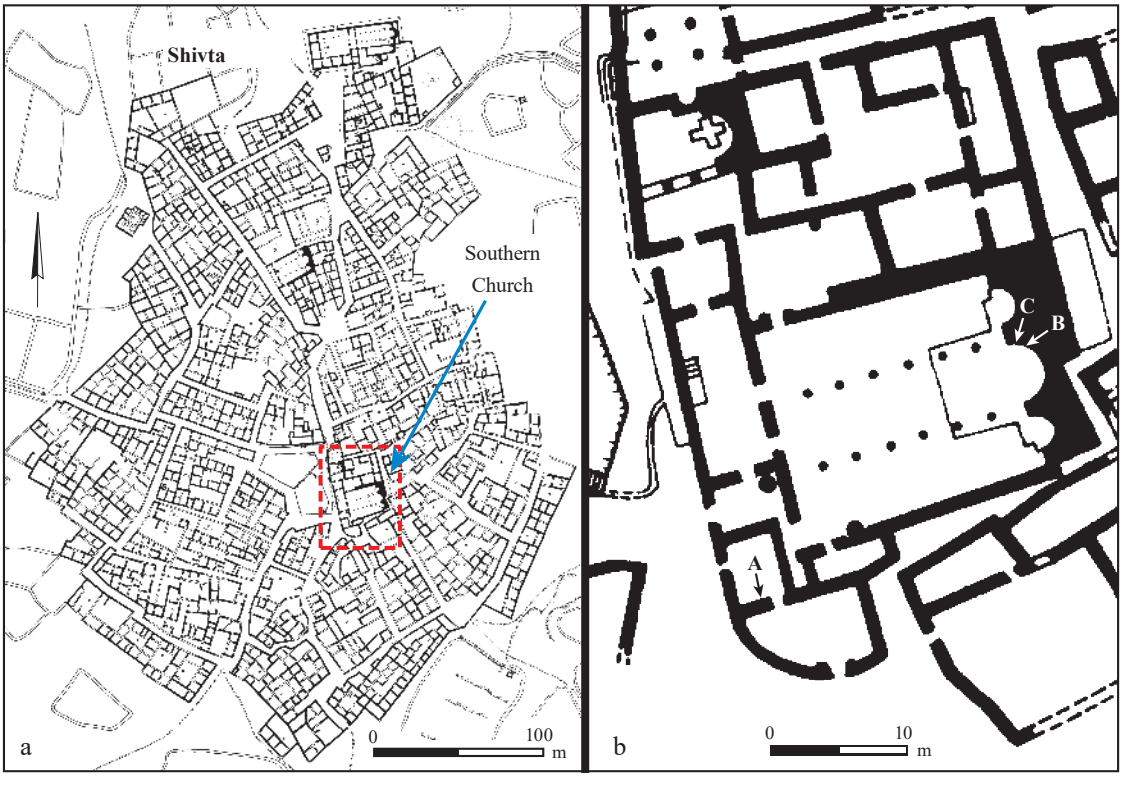

Fig. 1. Site map showing (a) the location of the Southern Church; and (b) the location of the coin deposits within it (after Hirschfeld 2003: Fig. 3).

A limestone lintel was discovered in the southern part of the building. The partially preserved Greek inscription inscribed on it led Colt to suggest that it was founded in the first quarter of the fifth century CE (Colt 1936:199). Negev argued that the lintel dates between 415 and 430 CE (Negev 1993:1407), while Di Segni suggested a later date, in 508–528 CE (Di Segni 1997:819–821). It therefore seems impossible to determine whether the lintel belongs to the phase of the founding of the church or of subsequent renovations. Colt's expedition reported several phase of renovation in the building (Colt 1936:198), and it is likely that in the first half of the fifth century CE, the church had a northern wing, and at the beginning of the sixth century CE, two side apses were installed in the prayer hall of the building. It is also interesting to note that in 640 CE, a new floor was laid in the church hall. The time of this event is indicated by the building inscription set in the floor, which offers further evidence of the renovations that the building underwent in a later phase (Negev 1981:61–62; Di Segni 1997:827–828). In 2015–2017, Tepper and Bar-Oz conducted two trial excavations in the church, one in the southern part, and the other in the nave, but discovered no finds that could be dated earlier than the Byzantine period (Tepper et al. 2018:146).

The church compound has two main entrances from the direction of the public water reservoirs, in which stairs were installed. The southern entrance led those entering the church to a square entrance room, with an ornate niche in its southern wall (see below). From this room it was possible to enter the southern nave of the church and the narthex. The northern entrance also led to a passageway room, from which it was possible to turn north to the baptistry or south to the narthex. The narthex, which is located between the two entrance rooms, was a narrow rectangular open space (Woolley and Lawrence 1914:88; Shereshevski 1991:74). Two openings in the eastern wall of the narthex led to the main prayer hall (17.0 × 18.2 m) of the church (Baly 1935:177). The main hall was divided by two rows of six columns into a nave and two aisles (Woolley and Lawrence 1914:88–89; Negev 1993:1406). At the eastern end of the prayer hall, three bemas were erected, a higher one opposite the nave, and two lower ones opposite the aisles (Shereshevski 1991:74). The nave was paved with marble slabs, and the two aisles, with stone slabs (Baly 1935:177).

In the eastern wall of the prayer hall were three apses, a large one in the center, flanked by two smaller ones. Baly suggested that all three were part of the original construction phase of the church (Baly 1935:176). Negev, on the other hand, considered that they were added as part of a later renovation phase at the beginning of the sixth century CE. Each of the side apses was 1.4 m deep and 2.4 m wide, and in both, semirounded niches were set, 0.82 m deep and 0.92 m wide. The niches are likely to have housed reliquaries (Negev 1993:1406). The central apse (2.5 m deep, 3.7 m wide, 6.5 m high) is twice as high as the two side apses (Musil 1908:43; Woolley and Lawrence 1914:88).

On the walls of the southern apse, fragments of a poorly-preserved colorful mural were discovered and identified as the Transfiguration scene. This painting was documented by Palmer in 1870 (Palmer 1871:32), and again, by Woolley and Lawrence in 1914, who identified individual remains of paint also on the walls of the central and northern apses (Woolley and Lawrence 1914:89–90; see also Baly 1935:176). In the early 2000s, Figueras documented

poorly preserved and fragmented painting remains and confirmed the identification of the Transfiguration scene at that spot (Figueras 2006–2007:128). A few years later the scene in the southern apse was studied using advanced technological methods and sophisticated photographic equipment as part of a study conducted in the Shivṭa churches on behalf of the University of Haifa. These analyses led to the exposure of details not previously seen in the painting (Linn, Tepper and Bar-Oz 2017:12; Maayan-Fanar 2017:2–4; Linn et al. 2019:196–197; Linn, Maayan-Fanar and Tepper 2023). The date of the Transfiguration scene in the Southern Church is accepted by all scholars as the beginning of the sixth century CE, and it is reasonable to suggest that it is associated with the construction of the two side apses in the church (Figueras 2006–2007:133; Maayan-Fanar 2017:15).

The time of the (partial?) abandonment of the Southern Church is unknown, but it is likely that a mosque was built near it after its abandonment. For the construction of the mosque, lintels were dismantled from the main church openings and moved to serve as entrance stairs for both the mosque and an adjacent building (the 'pool house'; see Tepper 2019b; Tepper and Bar-Oz 2019). It is probable that during this period the marble slabs that originally adorned the interior of the church were plundered. At that time, or shortly thereafter, graffiti were written and engraved on the exposed stone walls of the apses (1–2 m above the floor of the stage). They included many identifying marks (*wassems*) of local Bedouin tribes, who probably stayed at the site or randomly visited it at the beginning of the Early Islamic period, after the abandonment of the church (Tepper 2019b). Among the engravings was a single Armenian graffiti on the northern part of the main apse, 2.8 m above the bema's floor. The inscription contains only two letters, most likely the initials or the first letters of the engraver's name. The palaeography suggests a date no later than the ninth–eleventh centuries CE. This Armenian inscription was probably engraved in the period following the abandonment of the site. Its appearance on the Apse's stone points to a visit of Christian pilgrims, who probably made their way through Shivṭa to the Christian sites on Mount Sinai (Tchekhanovets, Tepper and Bar-Oz 2017:446, 451–453; Tepper et al. 2018:145).

The Three Coin Deposits[3]

The Archaeological Context

Deposit A (Fig. 2) included four coins and a bronze buckle. It was found in the sediment between the stones, above the bottom of a built niche, located in the southern wall of the

[3] Deposits A and C were found by Yotam Tepper. Deposit B was found by Aviya Elharar, during an academic tour on behalf of the Conservation Department at Haifa University; we wish to thank her for this find. The coins, which were highly corroded, were preserved by Miriam Lavi at the laboratories of the Institute of Archaeology at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; we are grateful for her fantastic work. Our thanks to Avishay Blumenkrantz, for his assistance in the field; Sapir Hadd, for the figures; and Shahar Krispin, for his advice in the initial phase of the research. Special thanks are extended to the two anonymous readers, whose valuable comments improved the article.

Fig. 2. The niche (a) and Deposit A (b); the white arrow marks the location where the coins and buckle were found (photography: Y. Tepper).

entrance room to the church. The niche is 1.5 m high and 0.5 m wide, and was likely used to hold water vessels or other ritual objects. A round depression (diam. 24 cm, depth c. 10 cm) is carved into its base and a decorated arch, with triangular reliefs and remnants of paint is carved at its top.

Deposits B (3 coins) and C (5 coins) were found in two built and carved square niches in the central apse of the church (Fig. 3). Both were found at the back of the niches, within a stiff, hard, grayish sediment used to fill the gaps between the stones and the spaces behind them. Seven hewn niches were recorded in the wall of the apse, one each at its southern and northern ends, and between them, five more, arranged at almost identical intervals. The square niches were carved into the fourth stone course of the apse wall, about 1.2 m above the floor of the bema (for the function of the square niches, see below).

A photograph from the British Mandate Archive (Isbeita File No. 1582), taken in 1934, before Colt's excavation, shows the three apses of the Southern Church (Fig. 4:a).[4] The niches are partly visible under debris, which covered the structure around the apse, and the main hall of the church, prior to the excavation. Although we do not have an early photograph of the entrance room where Deposit A was found, a distant view taken from the

[4] We wish to thank Ram Shoef for discussing with us this issue and sharing the information. Thanks to the Archive of the Department of Antiquities of Mandatory Palestine (1919–1948), IAA, for access to Isbeita, SRF_71(100 / 100), Photographs: 1582 and 4880. http://www.iaa-archives.org.il/search.aspx?srfs=71&type_id=

Fig. 3. The central apse of the Southern Church (a), showing the square niches, where Deposit B (b) and Deposit C (c) were found (photography: A. Elharar, Y. Tepper).

west of the church (Fig. 4:b; Isbeita File No. 4880), allows us to determine that this area of the Southern Church was also under rubble prior to Colt's excavations.

The fact that all three deposits were covered with debris before the excavations is important to assess the authenticity of their location. However, one could argue that these

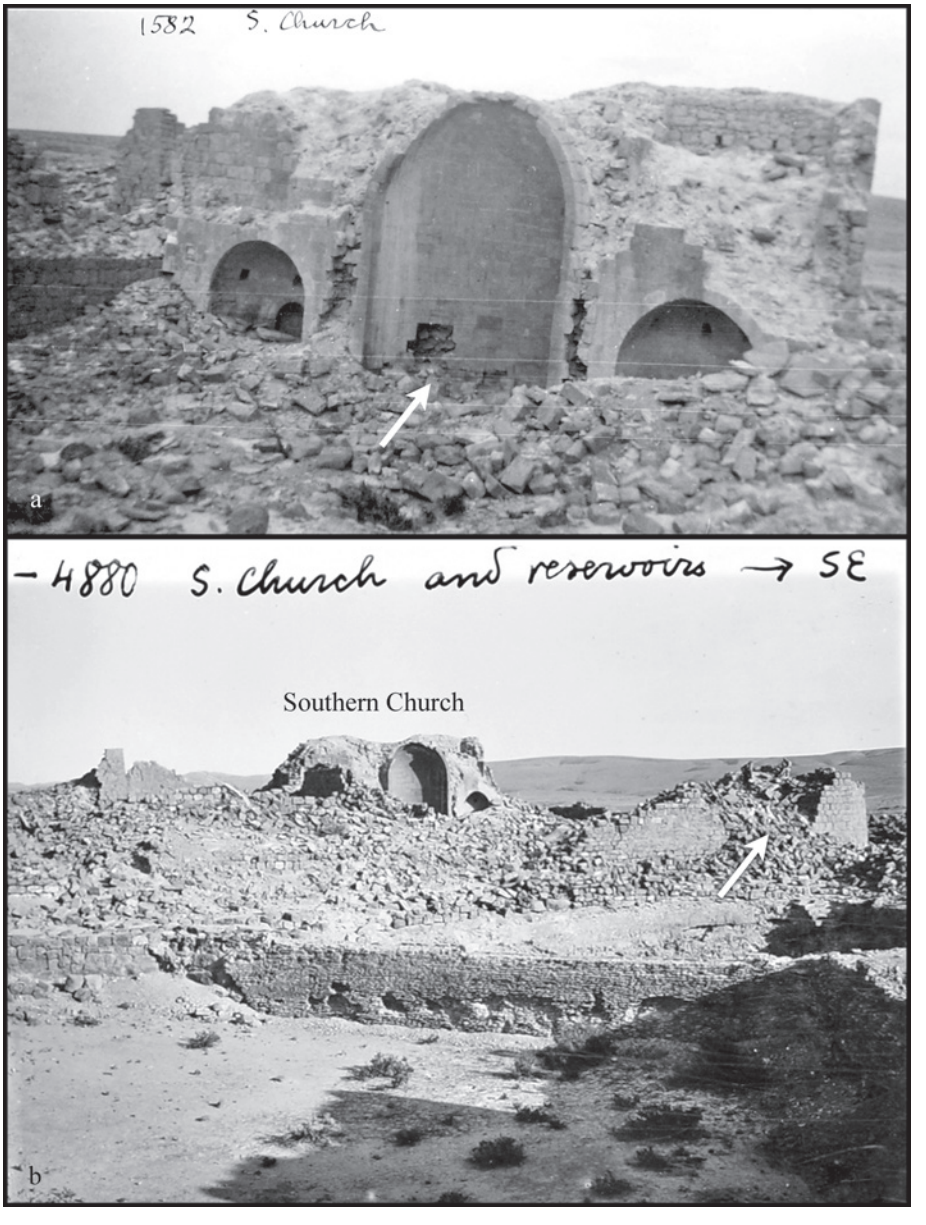

Fig. 4. The Southern Church in 1934, before the Colt Expedition (see n. 4): (a) the three apses, looking east, with the debris covering the lower part of the apses—the white arrow marks the location of the square niches (photograph No. 1582); (b) the church, looking north—the white arrow marks the location of the entrance (photograph No. 4880).

deposits, and especially Deposit A, could have been concealed after Colt's excavations. Although we cannot totally exclude this possibility, the fact that Deposits B and C were found between the stones of the wall, and the known practice of concealing coins in the context of constructions and renovations—in antiquity and in modern times (below)—

reinforce our opinion that they were concealed in antiquity, during the church's construction or subsequent renovations.

The location of the niche where Deposit A was discovered may attest to its use in a ritual context. This arched niche at the entrance to the church could have been used to place water vessels for the benefit of those entering the church from the direction of the water reservoirs. The location of Deposits B and C, within the square niches in the central apse, requires more explanation. These niches may have been used to fasten wooden beams into the apse wall, perhaps to support a wooden seating structure (*synthronon*),[5] attached to the stone cladding and decorations covering the apse wall. In any case, it is reasonable to assume that the niches were concealed within the wall and were not visible to the worshipers in the church.

Thus, we suggest that Deposits B and C date the stage of incorporating wooden beams into the apse, as part of the construction of the *synthronon*, not earlier than the fifth century CE. As the coins were inserted between the apse stones and covered by the wall decoration, they should be considered foundation deposits of a specific stage of construction. Regarding Deposit A, we could argue that it also dates to a time of construction, but that construction may be of the niche or maybe of the entire entrance room to the church.

The Numismatic Composition of the Deposits

Deposit A comprised four bronze coins and a bronze buckle (Fig. 2:b). All the coins seem to be of Late Roman types and date to the late fourth and fifth centuries CE (Fig. 5). Coin No. 4 is cast, and thus dates this deposit to not before the mid-fifth century CE.

Deposit B comprised three bronze coins (Fig. 6), all Late Roman types (Byzantine period), probably from the fifth century CE, two of which are cast (Nos. 1, 2). Coin No. 1, a VICTORIA AVG type from the mid-fourth century CE, seems to be the first of its type cast in Israel.[6] Considering the total absence of molds for these cast coins, Bijovsky suggested that the ones discovered in Israel most likely made their way from Egypt, where the practice of producing cast coins was common (Bijovsky 2012b:128).

Deposit C comprised five bronze coins (Fig. 7): one Hasmonean (No. 1), one Nabatean (No. 2) and three of Late Roman types, probably from the fifth century CE (Nos. 3–5). In contrast to the first two deposits, which are homogeneous and contain only coins of Late Roman types, this deposit includes two much earlier coins. The Hasmonean and Nabatean coins are the earliest to be found in Shivṭa so far, as no other Hellenistic or Early Roman coins, except for one coin of Agrippa I (dated 41/42 CE), are known from the site (Farhi and Tepper 2023). The inclusion of much older coins—some of them, such as the Hasmonean

[5] The *synthronon* is common in churches in Palestine and Transjordan, and many were added at the later stages of the churches, mainly after the fifth century CE (Mikkola et al 2008:109). For the types of *synthrona* in the Negev, see Rosenthal-Heginbottom (1982:154–156) and for the absence of stone *Synthrona* in the churches excavated in Shivṭa see Colt (1962:11). For further research on the *synthronon* at the site, see also Maayan-Fanar and Tepper, Forthcoming.

[6] We wish to thank Gabriela Bijovsky for sharing her insights with us.

Fig. 5. Deposit A (photography: Y. Farhi).

No.	Locus/ Basket	Weight (g)	Diam. (mm)	Axis	Obverse	Reverse	Date (CE)	Notes
1	980/9612	0.87	10.0–11.0	3	Head r.	Figure stg. l.	Late 4th c.	Worn
2	980/ 9611	1.45	11.5–12.0	-	Head r. (?)	Figure stg. l. (?)	Same	Worn
3	980/9613	0.44	9.5	-	Illegible	Illegible	Late 4th–early 5th c.	Worn
4	980/9610	0.26	9.0–11.0	-	Illegible	Illegible	5th c.	Cast

Fig. 6. Deposit B (photography: Y. Farhi).

No.	Locus/ Basket	Weight. (g)	Diam. (mm)	Obverse	Reverse	Date (CE)	References	Notes
1	981/ 9614	0.51	12.0–12.5	Head r.	[---] Two Victories stg., facing one another, each holding wreath	5th c. (?)	Bijovsky 2012b:119–128	Cast; date of prototype: 341–346 CE
2	981/ 9615	0.25	10.5–11.0	Illegible	Illegible	5th c. (?)		Cast
3	981/ 9616	0.70	9.0	Head r. (?)	Illegible monogram in wreath (?)	5th c. (?)		Worn

Fig. 7. Deposit C (photography: Y. Farhi).

No.	Locus/ Basket	Weight (g)	Diam. (mm)	Axis	Obverse	Reverse	Date	Mint	References	Notes
Hasmonean **Alexander Jannaeus (104–76 BCE)**										
1	982/ 9623	0.78	13.0	–	Eight-pointed star in dotted circle	Illegible	80/79–76 BCE	Jerusalem	Cf. *TJC*: 210, Group L, Nos. 1–2	Worn
Nabatean										
2	982/ 9622	2.77	12.5–14.5	–	Jugate heads to r.(?)	Two crossed cornucopias; between them, illegible Nabataean legend (?)	c. 8/7 BCE–105/106 CE			Worn
Byzantine Period										
3	982/ 9620	0.72	10.0–10.5	6	[---] Bust r., pearl diademed and draped	CONCORDIA AVG Cross	404–406 CE			Worn
4	982/ 9621	0.43	8.5–11.0	–	Illegible	Illegible	Late 4th–5th c. CE			Worn
5	982/ 9619	0.38	8.0–9.0	–	Illegible	Illegible	5th–early 6th c. CE			Worn

coin, of fabric and module similar to the fourth–fifth century CE *minimi*—although not common, is known from other hoards, including deposition hoards in churches (Bijovsky 2012a:346, Deposit B). The two early coins from Deposit C could have arrived at the site soon after they were struck, or conversely, long after, and thus should not be seen as evidence for an early settlement at the site or in the area of the Southern Church.

Discussion

The custom of deliberately concealing tiny, low-value copper coins, and especially worn *minimi* as deposition hoards, either in walls or beneath floors, during the construction or renovation of buildings in the Byzantine period is well-known in Israel, especially in synagogues (see below), as well as in various sites outside the country (see, for example, Huffstot 1998; Jacobs 2015; Gullbekk et al. 2021).[7]

So far, we know of only one church in Israel, Khirbat Faʻush (near Makkabim), where foundation deposits were discovered (Bijovsky 2012a). Yet, Deposits B and C from Shivṭa are the first to clearly derive from within walls of a church in Israel. Although the phenomenon of depositing coin finds within walls of ancient buildings is known, it was not widespread, possibly as not many walls survived to a sufficient height, or because they were not searched for coins.

The fact that the coin deposits from the Southern Church of Shivṭa were found inside the walls, as well as the low value of the coins and the relatively poor condition of most of them, indicate the custom of concealing sums of money as foundation deposits for apotropaic or votive reasons (Suchodolski 1996:322–324). Such assemblages were placed in both private and public buildings during construction or renovation.[8] In contrast to savings hoards or emergency hoards, which were concealed by their owners with the intention to later being retrieved, foundation deposits were not meant to be retrieved. Thus, these deposits in the Southern Church possibly served as foundation deposits related to some renovations.

By the end of the fifth century CE, debasement of copper coinage led to an inflationary process, which led to a monetary reform by Emperor Anastasius I in 498 CE (Bijovsky 2012b:177). It is possible that the importance of the small Late Roman bronze types (*minimi*) decreased following this monetary reform. Thus, we suggest that these small coins, which perhaps lost some of their value with the introduction of the new coins into circulation, were concealed not before the early sixth century CE. However, there is evidence from excavations in Carthage that due to the shortage of low-value issues, old fourth- and fifth-century coins

---

[7] We wish to thank John Huffstot for discussing this subject with us.

[8] For further examples of small accumulations of coins interpreted as foundation deposits, see Meshorer 1976; 2007; Bijovsky 2004; Ariel 2007:423; Farhi 2016:617–618; 2022:101; forthcoming. For floor foundation deposits in synagogues (such as, for example: Barʻam, Chorazin, Ḥ. Qanef, Merot, Ḥ. Rimmon), see Ahipaz 2013; Ahipaz and Leibner 2021; Bijovsky 2022. For further evidence from the Byzantine period from Israel and abroad, see Bijovsky 2012b:90–99.

continued to circulate and became worthless only around the 650s CE (Bijovsky 2012b:99). Moreover, based on excavations in Jerash, it was argued that this phenomenon lasted up to the end of Umayyad rule in 750 CE (Schulze and Schulze 2018:202–203). These later dates, however, are less relevant to the case discussed here, as no other evidence at the site supports such a late date for the Southern Church. It seems that although the coins were probably still in circulation at the time of their deposition, they were deliberately concealed without the intention of retrieval.

The location of the deposits in Shivṭa is noteworthy, as they were placed at key liturgical or sacred spaces (see above), supporting Gilchrist's (2019:175) conclusion regarding deposits in medieval churches:

> It seems very likely that placed deposits in churches were licit acts, fully compatible with Christian beliefs, and often conducted publicly. It is equally plausible that some deposits were made as private acts of commemoration by the laity. But the location of placed deposits in the restricted space of the chancels of churches strongly suggests that the clergy were active agents in this process. Objects were placed in churches for a variety of complex motives, in connection with acts of spiritual protection, memory and ritual disposal. But to medieval people, these material practices may simply have been regarded as prayers.

This evidence of coin deposits from the Southern Church at Shivṭa, together with deposits found at the church near Makkabim, may point to a wider phenomenon, which was common in churches, as it was in many synagogues during the Byzantine period. The fact that one church is located between Byzantine Lod and Jerusalem and the other in the Negev, suggests that this phenomenon was probably widespread. More attention by excavators to the possible finding of deposits within walls and floors may shed more light on this enigmatic practice.

A modern example of the practice of concealing coins of low denominations in walls of sacred/religious locations was recently discovered in the Cave of Elijah on Mount Carmel, a cult place for Jews, Christians, Druze and Muslims, where some 10 new *agorot* coins were found within a crack in the cave wall and under the floor (Tepper et al., forthcoming). It should be noted that the practice of concealing coins in the foundations of buildings for good luck is extant in modern Jewish traditions as a popular belief.[9] Thus, it seems that this practice, among other magical ones, is to be found in modern times, although probably less popular than it was during the Byzantine period.

9 See for example, "Hacontras Hyehieli, part 3- Beit Haadam" (1928, assigned to the kabbalist Rabbi Alfiyah), with instructions on how to build a house, section 11: https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?sits=1&req=34849&st=%D7%9E%D7%98%D7%91%D7%A2&_rnd=0.5435212129025637.

References

Ahipaz N. 2013. Floor Foundation Coin Deposits in Byzantine-Period Synagogues. In O. Guri-Rimon. *Hoards and Genizot as Chapters in History* (Hecht Museum Catalogue 33). Haifa. Pp. 63*–69*.

Ahipaz N. and Leibner U. 2021. Floor Deposits in Ancient Synagogues. *Ẓion* 86:211–230 (Hebrew; English summary, pp. XIII–XIV).

Ariel D.T. 2007. Coins of En-Gedi. In E. Stern. *En-Gedi Excavations* I: *Conducted by B. Mazar and I. Dunayevsky; Final Report (1961–1965).* Jerusalem. Pp. 423–427.

Baly C. 1935. S‘baita. *PEFQSt* 67:171–181.

Bijovsky G. 2004. Coins from Ashqelon, Semadar Hotel. *‘Atiqot* 48:111–121.

Bijovsky G. 2012a. Coins from Khirbet Fa‘ush, Maccabim. In N. Carmin ed. *Christians and Christianity* III: *Churches and Monasteries in Samaria and Northern Judea* (JSP 15). Jerusalem. Pp. 345–362.

Bijovsky G. 2012b. *Gold Coin and Small Change: Monetary Circulation in Fifth–Seventh Century Byzantine Palestine* (Polymnia: Numismatica antica e medievale. Studi 2). Trieste.

Bijovsky G. 2022. The Coins from the Synagogue at Ḥorbat Merot, Upper Galilee. *‘Atiqot* 109:117–155.

Brimer B. 1981. Shivta: An Aerial Photographic Interpretation. *IEJ* 31:227–229.

Colt H.D. 1935. British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem: Report for the Season, 1933–1934. *PEFQSt* 67:6–18.

Colt H.D. 1936. Isbeiṭa. *QDAP* 5:198–199.

Colt H.D. 1947. Who Read Virgil in Zin? *The Classical Journal* 42:314–323.

Colt H.D. 1962. *Excavations at Nessana (Auja Hafir, Palestine)* 1. London.

Crowfoot G.M. 1936. The Nabataean Ware of Sbaita. *PEFQSt* 68:14–27.

Di Segni L. 1997. *Dated Greek Inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine Periods*. Ph.D. diss. The Hebrew University. Jerusalem.

Farhi Y. 2016. The Coins. In O. Lipschits, Y. Gadot and L. Freud. *Ramat Raḥel* III, II: *Final Publication of Yohanan Aharoni's Excavations (1954, 1959–1962)* (Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology Monograph Series 35). Tel Aviv. Pp. 588–623.

Farhi Y. 2023. The Numismatic Finds from Khirbet el-Maqatir. In S. Stripling. *The Excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir: 1995–2001 and 2009–2016* 2: *The Late Hellenistic, Early Roman, and Byzantine Periods*. Oxford. Pp. 95–142.

Farhi Y. Forthcoming. The Numismatic Finds from Ramat Raḥel 2005–2010 Excavations: Isolated Coins, Two Hoards from the Roman Period and Related Objects. In O. Lipschits, L. Frued, M. Oeming and Y. Gadot. *Ramat Raḥel* V: *The Renewed Excavations by the Tel Aviv-Heidelberg Expedition (2005–2010): The Finds, Summary and Conclusions* (Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology Monograph Series). Tel Aviv.

Farhi Y. and Tepper Y. 2023. The Dating of Shivta in Light of the Numismatic Finds from New Excavations at the Site. *ZDPV* 139:78–112.

Figueras P. 2006–2007. Remains of a Mural Painting of the Transfiguration in the Southern Church of Sobata (Shivta). *Aram* 18–19:127–151.

Fischer M. and Tepper Y. 2021. A Group of Pilaster Capitals from Shivta: Marble Import in the Byzantine Negev. *PEQ* 154:35–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2020.1866328

Gilchrist R. 2019. Ritual Objects: Placed Deposits in Medieval Churches. In C. Ljung, A.A. Sjögren, I. Berg, E. Engström, A.-M. Hållans Stenholm, K. Jonsson, A. Klevnäs, L. Qviström and T. Zachrisson eds. *Tidens Landskap: En vänbok till Anders Andrén*. Lund. Pp. 173–175.

Gullbekk S.H., Kilger C., Kristensen S. and Roland H. 2021. *Coins in Churches: Archaeology, Money and Religious Devotion in Medieval Northern Europe.* London–New York.

Hirschfeld Y. 2003. Social Aspects of the Late-Antique Village of Shivta. *JRA* 16:395–408.

Hirschfeld Y. and Tepper Y. 2006. Columbarium Towers and Other Structures in the Environs of Shivta. *Tel Aviv* 33:83–116.

Huffstot J. 1998. Votive(?) Use of Coins in Fourth-Century Lusitania: The Builders' Deposit in the Torre de Palma Basilica. *Revista portuguesa de arqueologia* 1/1:221–226.

Jacobs I. 2015. Archaeological Evidence for Building and Termination Deposits in a Christian Age. In A. Bosselmann-Ruickbie and L. Ruickbie eds. *The Material Culture of Magic*. Leiden. Pp. 1–15.

Jaussen A., Savignac R. and Vincent H. 1905. Ṣbaïta. *RB* 14:256–257.

Levi-Hevroni A., Tepper Y. and Bar-Oz G. Forthcoming. Shivta: Southern Water Reservoir. *HA–ESI*.

Linn R., Maayan-Fanar E., Tepper Y. and Bar-Oz G. 2019. Study of the Early Christian Transfiguration Wall Painting in Shivta, Israel. *Aram* 31:195–206.

Linn R., Maayan-Fanar E. and Tepper Y. 2023. *In Situ* Implementation of Imaging Techniques Reveals Key Motifs in the Early Byzantine Wall Painting of Christ's Baptism at Shivta, Israel. *NEA* 86:58–63.

Linn R., Tepper Y. and Bar-Oz G. 2017. Visible Induced Luminescence Reveals Invisible Rays Shining from Christ in the Early Christian Wall Painting of the Transfiguration in Shivta. *PLoS ONE* 12. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0185149 (accessed June 18, 2023).

Maayan-Fanar E. 2017. The Transfiguration at Shivta: Retracing Early Byzantine Iconography. *Zograf* 41:1–18.

Maayan-Fanar E. and Tepper Y. Forthcoming. Old Ground Plan—New Insights: The Central Church Compound in Shivta Revised. *PEQ*.

Margalit S. 1987. The North Church of Shivta: The Discovery of the First Church. *PEQ* 119:106–121.

Meshorer Y. 1976. The En-Gedi Hoard. In *Acts du 8ème congrès international de numismatique, New York–Washington, september* 1973. Paris. Pp. 111–112.

Meshorer Y. 2007. The En-Gedi Hoard. In E. Stern. *En-Gedi Excavations* I: *Conducted by B. Mazar and I. Dunayevsky; Final Report (1961–1965).* Jerusalem. Pp. 411–421.

Mikkola E., Labelma A., Fiema Z.T. and Holmgren R. 2008. The Church and the Chapel: Analysis and Phasing. In Z.T. Fiema and J. Frösén eds. *Petra—The Mountain of Aaron. The Finnish Archaeological Project in Jordan* I: *The Church and the Chapel*. Helsinki. Pp. 99–185.

Musil A. 1908. *Arabia Petraea* II: *Edom—Topographischer Reisebericht*. Vienna.

Negev A. 1976. Churches in the Central Negev—Historical Survey. *Qadmoniot* 33:16–21 (Hebrew).

Negev A. 1981. *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev* (SBF Collectio Minor 25). Jerusalem.

Negev A. 1993. Sobata. *NEAEHL* 4. Pp. 1404–1410.

Negev A. and Margalit S. 1986. Shivta, 1985. *IEJ* 36:110–111.

Palmer E.H. 1871. The Desert of the Tin and the Country of Moab. *PEFQSt* 3:3–80.

Peleg M. and Tepper Y. 2019. Mysteries in the Desert: The Archaeological Finds of Colt's Excavation at Shivta. *Michmanim* 28:9–22 (Hebrew; English summary, p. 58*).

Rosenthal-Heginbottom R. 1982. *Die Kirchen von Sobota und die Dreiapsidenkirchen des Nahen Ostens* (Göttinger Orientforschungen. II.Reihe. Studien zur spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst 7). Wiesbaden.

Schulze I. and Schulze W. 2018. Working with Coins in Jerash: Problems, Solutions, and Preliminary Results. In A. Lichtenberger and R. Raja eds. *The Archaeology and History of Jerash: 110 Years of Excavations* (Jerash Papers 1). Turnhout. Pp. 195–205.

Segal A. 1983. *The Byzantine City of Shivta (Esbeita), Negev Desert, Israel* (BAR Int. S. 179). Oxford.

Segal A. 1984. Shivta. *ESI* 3:97.

Segal A. 1985. Shivta: A Byzantine Town in the Negev Desert. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 44:317–328.

Segal A. 1988. *Architectural Decoration in Byzantine Shivta, Negev Desert, Israel* (BAR Int. S. 420). Oxford.

Shereshevski J. 1991. *Byzantine Urban Settlements in the Negev Desert* (Beer-Sheva V). Be'er Sheva'.

Suchodolski S. 1996. Absence of Mind or Magic? A Few Remarks on the So Called Small or Single Coin Finds. *Numismatica e Antichità Classiche* 25:317–327.

Tchekhanovets Y., Tepper Y. and Bar-Oz G. 2017. The Armenian Graffito from the Southern Church of Shivta. *RB* 124:446–454.

Tepper Y. 2019a. The Archaeological Findings from the "Forgotten Suitcase" in Context: In Light of the Colt Excavations at Shivta. *Michmanim* 28:101–122 (Hebrew; English summary, pp. 64*–65*).

Tepper Y. 2019b. 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 and D. Vainstub eds. *Worship and Burial in the Shfela and the Negev Regions throughout the Ages (Proceedings of the 15th Annual Southern Congress)*. Be'er Sheva'. Pp. 167–182 (Hebrew).

Tepper Y. and Bar-Oz G. 2016. Shivṭa. *HA–ESI* 128 (May 4). http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=24977&mag_id=124 (accessed June 18, 2023).

Tepper Y. and Bar-Oz G. 2019. Shivṭa. *HA–ESI* 131 (February 7). http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25518&mag_id=127 (accessed June 18, 2023).

Tepper Y. and Bar-Oz G. 2020. Shivṭa. *HA–ESI* 132 (October 22). https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25825&mag_id=128 (accessed June 18, 2023).

Tepper Y., Ecker A., Bar-David N., HaCohen Y.T. and Avrahami M. Forthcoming. The Cave of Elijah. *HA–ESI*.

Tepper Y., Erickson-Gini T., Farhi Y. and Bar-Oz G. 2018. Probing the Byzantine/Early Islamic Transition in the Negev: The Renewed Shivta Excavations, 2015–2016. *Tel Aviv* 45:120–152.

Tepper Y., Weissbrod L. and Bar-Oz G. 2015. Behind Sealed Doors: Unravelling Abandonment Dynamics at the Byzantine Site of Shivta in the Negev Desert. *Antiquity* 348/39. http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/bar-oz348 (accessed June 18, 2023)

TJC: Y. Meshorer. *A Treasury of Jewish Coins from the Persian Period to Bar Kochba.* Jerusalem–Nyack, N.Y. 2001.

Tsafrir Y., Di Segni L. and Green J. 1994. *Tabula Imperii Romani; Iudaea-Palaestina: Eretz Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods; Maps and Gazetteer*. Jerusalem.

Wiegand T. 1920. *Sinai* (Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen des deutsch-türkischen Denkmalschutz-Kommandos 1). Berlin–Leipzig.

Woolley C.L. and Lawrence T.E. 1914. *The Wilderness of Zin: Archaeological Report* (PEFA III). London.