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Jewish Ritual Immersion in the *Longue Durée*: From Earliest Manifestations until Today

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Jewish ritual immersion has been practiced among Jews for over two thousand years, from the late second century BCE until today. Although much has been written in recent years on various aspects of this ritual as it was performed in different periods, no study has surveyed the practice from the perspective of the *longue durée*—from its earliest manifestations until the modern era. The present study does just that; it examines the textual evidence and material remains that shed light on how the ritual was performed over the course of the past two millennia, exploring who practiced it in each period, and how it developed and changed over the centuries.

Keywords: Judaism, ritual purity, ritual immersion, ritual immersion pools, ritual baths

Archaeologists and historians investigating early Judaism often adopt a naïve, synchronic approach toward Jewish ritual practices, which assumes that modern-day Jewish observances are largely similar to ancient modes of performance. This approach fails to appreciate the extraordinarily dynamic development that Jewish ritual practices have undergone over the course of more than two millennia and leads to gross anachronisms in the interpretation of both the archaeological remains and the ancient written texts.

The present study aims to address this unfortunate scholarly tendency by highlighting the evolutionary character of Jewish ritual in general, through the examination of a specific ritual practice from the perspective of the *longue durée*. Jewish ritual immersion has been practiced among Jews for over two thousand years, from the late second century BCE until today. Although much has been written in recent years on various aspects of this ritual as it has been performed in different periods, to date no studies have surveyed the evolution of the practice from its earliest manifestations until the modern era. This study examines the textual evidence and material remains that shed light on how the ritual was performed, who practiced it in each period, and how it developed and changed over the centuries.

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BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Pentateuch includes a large set of laws regulating ritual impurity, mostly concentrated in Leviticus 11–15 and Numbers 19. These laws delineate the root causes of impurity, how impurity is transferred from one person or object to another, and how purity is restored. These prescriptions provided the legal foundations for the actual practices that emerged only some time after these texts were first compiled (see below).

The Pentateuchal system prescribes various procedures for the purification of people who have become ritually impure, depending on which impurity is involved and the manner whereby the impurity was contracted. In most cases, the procedure includes the impure person waiting a prescribed amount of time (until evening, seven or fourteen days, and/or—where a pathology is involved—until the pathology clears up) and/or 'bathing' in water (Hebrew verb: רחץ; e.g., Leviticus 15:5–8). A man who experiences a pathological emission from his penis is instructed to bathe specifically in 'living water' (מים חיים; Leviticus 15:13). A woman who experiences menstrual bleeding is designated impure for seven days but is not instructed to bathe (Leviticus 15:19); likewise, a woman is designated impure for seven days after the birth of a male child, and for fourteen days after the birth of a female child (Leviticus 12:5), but nothing is said of bathing. A woman who experiences abnormal uterine bleeding outside the normal menstrual cycle is to wait for seven days after the bleeding has stopped (Leviticus 15:28), but, as in the previous cases, she is not instructed to bathe.[2]

Certain inanimate objects may also become impure, and some are to be purified using water. Clothing, for example, can become impure and must be laundered in water (verb: כבס; e.g., Leviticus 11:25, 28, 40). Water is also used to remove certain impurities that have affected utensils made of specified materials: wood is "rinsed in water" (ישטף במים; Leviticus 15:12) or "put into water" (במים יובא), as are also cloth, leather and sacking (Leviticus 11:32), and metals that cannot withstand fire are to be "passed through water" (תעבירו במים; Numbers 31:23).

A passage in Leviticus prohibiting various sexual unions, such as incest, adultery and bestiality, also prohibits sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman: "And to a woman while she is in her menstrual impurity you shall not approach to uncover her nakedness" (Leviticus 18:19). Although the matter at hand is a sexual prohibition rather than the impurity regulations, the injunction makes oblique reference to impurity, and here too, nothing is said about the woman bathing in water to permit sexual intercourse after menstruation has ended.

While these biblical texts were probably compiled around the middle of the first millennium BCE, no compelling evidence has survived to indicate that these Pentateuchal

[2] Some scholars (e.g., Milgrom 1991:934–935) have posited that bathing is to be taken for granted in all these cases. While a legal-exegetical case may be made for this view (as eventually the rabbis in fact did), I question our ability to access original authorial intent on such matters. Regardless, what is important for our purposes is the indisputable fact that the Pentateuchal text itself includes no explicit instructions for women to bathe following menstruation, childbirth, or abnormal uterine bleeding.

purity laws were being widely observed among ancient Judeans prior to the second century BCE (Adler 2022b:50–86).[3]

The Late Second Century BCE to the Second Century CE

From around the second half of the second century BCE, we begin to encounter texts and material remains which suggest that Jews had begun to observe the Pentateuchal requirement to purify through 'bathing' by entirely immersing in a pool of water. In the subsequent centuries, this practice became extraordinarily widespread and was probably observed by most Jews on a regular, if not daily basis.

Textual Evidence

The earliest references to ritual purification carried out specifically through full-body immersion in water are found in texts that are usually dated to the late second or first century BCE.[4] In the Book of Judith (12:7–9), the heroine 'immersed' (ἐβαπτίζετο) in a spring to purify herself before praying and eating her daily meal. Similarly, the Greek version of Ben Sira (34:30) asks rhetorically: "If one immerses after [touching] a corpse (βαπτιζόμενος ἀπὸ νεκροῦ) and touches it again, what has been gained by his washing (ἐν τῷ λουτρῷ αὐτοῦ)?". The earliest surviving Hebrew reference to purificatory immersion is a Qumran fragment (4QToharot A [4Q274] 2 i, 4–5), which states that a man, utensil or garment that comes into contact with semen "shall be immersed" (יטבול). This conceptual development from a generalized 'washing' to a more specified 'immersion' may be understood as the result of a process of ritualization whereby ritual purificatory washing became increasingly distinguished from conventional bathing (Adler 2018).

Texts dating to the first century CE suggest that by this time, purificatory immersion had already become a common practice among Jews. For example, the Gospel according to Mark (7:3–4) asserts that "… the Pharisees, and all the Jews … when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they immerse (ἐὰν μὴ βαπτίσωνται); and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the immersing of cups and pitchers and copper utensils and dining couches (βαπτισμοὺς ποτηρίων καὶ ξεστῶν καὶ χαλκίων καὶ κλινῶν)".

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[3] It should be noted that the famous scene of Bathsheba bathing in 2 Samuel 11:2 is not portrayed as a ritual purification, although some commentators have interpreted the statement following the account of the sexual encounter with David: "and she was sanctifying from her impurity" (והיא מתקדשת מטמאתה; 2 Samuel 11:4), as an awkwardly retroactive explanation for the bath described two verses earlier. None of this necessitates that the author of this story had the Pentateuchal laws in mind, and certainly none of this suggests that the Pentateuchal laws were widely practiced at the time this narrative was composed.

[4] Although the undoubtably earlier narrative in 2 Kings 5:1–27 relates that the Aramean general Naaman 'immersed' (verb: טבל) in the Jordan River to 'purify' (verb: טהר) his skin disease, the story is not so much about ritual purification as it is about a miraculous healing of a physical malady.

The Gospel according to Luke (11:37–38) presents a scene in which Jesus sits down to eat without first immersing, which surprises his Pharisaic host: "The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first immerse before the meal (ὅτι οὐ πρῶτον ἐβαπτίσθη πρὸ τοῦ ἀρίστου)".[5]

Texts from this early period generally make no allusions to requirements relating to the quantity or quality of the water used for purificatory immersions. The Damascus Document (CD x, 10–12) is exceptional in this regard, as it specifies: "One who purifies in water: a man should not bathe in sullied waters (במים צואים) or in those which are not enough to cover(?) a man (ומעוטים מדי מרעיל איש); nor should a vessel be purified in them." The term "sullied waters" is obscure, but likely refers to some sort of physical pollution, perhaps mud or excrement. The meaning of waters that "are not enough to cover a man" is even less certain, but this may be a call for full-body immersion.

It is noteworthy that texts from this period still make no mention of immersion (or any other sort of bathing) for women following menstruation or childbirth.

Material Remains

Archaeology provides critically important data for elucidating who was practicing ritual immersion at this time, why they were doing so, and how the rite was observed. From about the beginning of the first century BCE, a new type of water installation begins to appear at sites associated with Jews. These installations are deep pools (usually 1.5–2.0 m deep), often hewn in bedrock, with steps descending from the top edge down to the floor, and walls and steps covered with a thick layer of hydraulic plaster (Fig. 1). The floor area is usually quite small, enabling a single person to stand. The form of these installations clearly suggests that they are immersion pools. The fact that these pools are found only in geographical regions known to have been settled by Jews (Judea proper, Galilee, Golan and Perea) indicates that they are specifically a Jewish phenomenon. Since contemporary texts show that Jews were practicing immersion for the purpose of ritual purification at this time, these installations may justifiably be regarded as Jewish ritual immersion pools (Adler 2022a).

A close analysis of the distribution of these installations allows a better understanding of who was using these pools and for what purposes. Hundreds of these pools are known at dozens of sites in the Southern Levant between the first century BCE and the early second century CE (Fig. 2; Adler 2011:319–343). It is quite common to find several such pools at any given site within Jewish areas of settlement dating to this timeframe. Most of the pools are found in private domestic contexts, either in houses or in private or shared residential

[5] In the early first century CE, a man known as John the Immerser is said to have regularly immersed fellow Jews in the Jordan River, but the aim of his ritual immersions seems to have been repentance from sin rather than fulfilment of the Torah's prescription to remove ritual impurity though bathing; see Matthew 3:1–17; Mark 1:4–11; Luke 3:1–22; Acts 1:5, 21–22; 10:37–38; 11:16; 13:24–25; 18:25; 19:3–4; John 1:19–34; 3:22–36; 4:1; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18:117–118.

Fig. 1. Ritual immersion pool at Qumran, L118 (photography: Y. Adler).

courtyards, whilst immersion pools of a more communal character are often found adjacent to a settlement synagogue (Adler 2008a; Reich 2013:241–245). The ubiquitous character of these installations probably meant that every family would have had access to an immersion pool, either their own or a shared one. The large number of pools, and their extraordinarily widespread distribution, suggest that these installations were being used on a regular—perhaps even daily—basis, by most members of the Jewish population living in the Southern Levant. There seems to be little reason to distinguish here between men and women, priests and commoners, or Jews belonging to the various sects and those affiliated with none (Adler 2016).

Ritual immersion pools have also been uncovered in non-residential contexts. Pools found adjacent to olive presses and winepresses were probably intended for workers in order to maintain the ritual purity of the oil and wine (Adler 2008b; Reich 2013:253–256), whilst pools found at pottery production sites were probably for potters to maintain the ritual purity of their products (Adler 2011:129–134), and pools found near burial caves were presumably for funeral goers after a burial ceremony (Adler 2009; Reich 2013:251–253). Finally, several immersion pools found near the gates of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem were most probably for the use of priests and for pilgrims visiting the Temple precinct (Adler 2006; Reich 2013:233–237).

Why were so many people so frequently ritually purifying themselves in immersion pools? Scholars have assumed that the focus of this concern with purity and purification

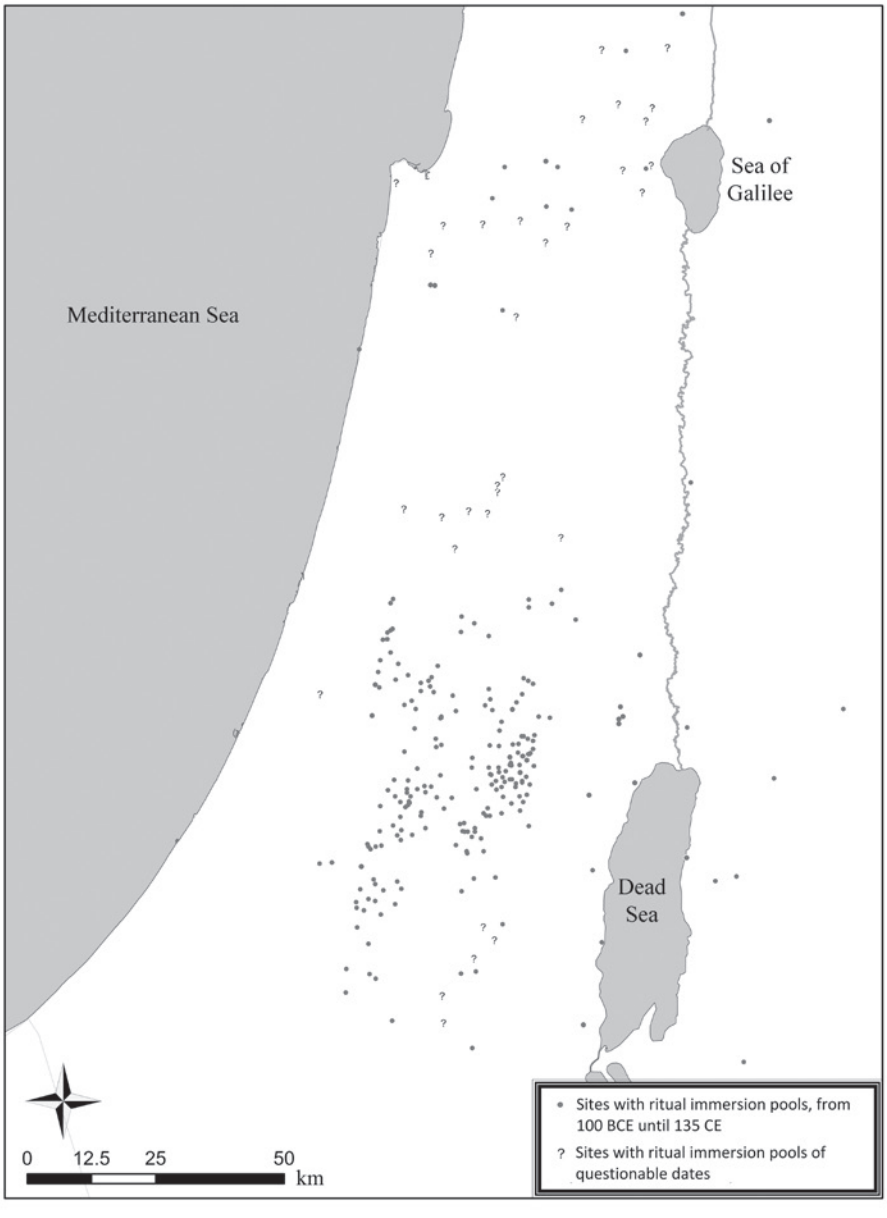

Fig. 2. Distribution map of sites with ritual immersion pools dating from c. 100 BCE until 135 CE (adapted from Adler 2011:349, Map 2).

was the Temple cult (e.g., Reich 2013:232), but this notion is not supported by the nature of the archaeological remains. First, ritual immersion pools are found not only in Jerusalem and its vicinity, but also in Galilee, Golan, Idumea and Perea—all located at significant distances from the Temple (Adler 2016:232–240). Second, the phenomenon continues unabated for decades after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE, until the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 132–135 CE (Adler 2017:277–281). It is more likely that

Fig. 3. Ritual immersion pool at Magdala, filled with groundwater (photography: A. Amitai).

those who made regular use of these pools did so with the simple intention of fulfilling the Pentateuchal instruction to bathe after contracting ritual impurity. It seems that until around the mid-second century CE, it was widely understood that purity was to be maintained on a daily basis for its own sake, without regard for the Temple or its cult (Poirier 2003; Adler 2016:245–248; Adler 2017:279). Sexual intercourse and many other root causes of impurity were certainly a part of everyday life, and frequent immersions would have been necessary to restore ritual purity on a regular, if not daily basis.

All the immersion pools contained a large volume of water sufficient to allow full-body immersion, suggesting that this was regarded as a ritual necessity. Aside from this, the archaeological finds provide little reason to suspect the existence of any special ritual requirements relating to the water itself. The water collected in ritual immersion pools was usually rainwater, like water collected in cisterns for everyday uses such as drinking, cooking and laundering. At Magdala, on the Sea of Galilee, where water for everyday purposes was drawn from shallow wells that filled with groundwater, the immersion pools were similarly constructed as stepped wells that filled with groundwater (Fig. 3; Reich and Zapata Meza 2014). There is no indication that the water—whether rainwater or groundwater—was regarded as in any way ritually special.

From the Mid-Second Century CE Through Late Antiquity

In the centuries following the two Jewish revolts against Rome (67–70 CE, 132–135 CE), the early rabbis began to develop a complex set of rules regulating the kind of water fit for ritual immersion and how immersions were to be practiced. At this time, however, the ritual appears to have been practiced less frequently and by fewer people than in its initial stage. The notion that immersion was required for married women following menstruation and childbirth first appears during this period as a rabbinic exegetical innovation.

Textual Evidence

An entire tractate in the Mishnah and Tosefta—*Miqwa'ot*—is dedicated to elucidating the laws concerning the ritual purity status of pools (singular: *miqweh*, מקוה; plural: *miqwa'ot*, מקוָאות), their validity for purificatory immersions, and how immersions are to be undertaken. The rabbis legislated a minimum volume for a valid pool as 40 *se'ah* (סאה), probably c. 300 liters (*Miqwa'ot* 1:7; 2:1–3).[6] They regarded water drawn intentionally in a utensil by human agency (מים שאובין) as invalid, and if three *log* (לוג; circa one liter) of drawn water fell into a pool containing less than 40 *se'ah*, the pool became invalid for ritual immersion (*Miqwa'ot* 2:3 et passim). Pooled water must be standing (not flowing) to purify, whilst flowing spring water purifies regardless of its volume or the addition of drawn water (*Miqwa'ot* 1:7; 5:1–6). The water must come into contact with the entire surface area of the immersed person or object, and anything interposing and preventing such contact (חציצה) invalidates the immersion (*Miqwa'ot* 8:5–10:8).

More generally, the rabbis also elucidated the circumstances requiring purificatory immersions.[7] Anyone entering the (now defunct) Temple or intending to come into contact with offerings or other material related to the cult (קדשים) was required to be fully purified. Priestly dues, such as heave offerings (תרומה and תרומת מעשר), dough offerings (חלה) and first fruits (ביכורים), along with second tithe (מעשר שני) eaten in Jerusalem, could only be eaten by the ritually pure, and they were invalidated if touched by the impure. Whilst the Pentateuch was silent about women bathing after waiting periods following childbirth, menstruation and unusual uterine bleeding, the rabbis prescribed ritual immersion seven days after bleeding stopped before contact with sacred or priestly foodstuffs and before sexual intercourse.[8]

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[6] For simplicity, I have only cited here from the Mishnah. Apart from the laws found in the parallel tractate in the Tosefta, there are laws relating to pools and immersion in various works categorized as Midrash Halakhah, and in the two Talmuds, neither of which have tractates dedicated to the topic.

[7] A comprehensive list of citations is impossible, as these rules are spread throughout rabbinic literature. For a modern attempt at systemization, see Neusner 1994.

[8] The rabbinic requirement that a menstruant wait until the bleeding has stopped before counting seven days, rather than counting seven days from the onset of bleeding, came later than the call for menstruants to immerse (see BT, *Berakhot* 31a; BT, *Megillah* 28b; BT, *Niddah* 66a; Secunda 2020:153–174). For bathing after menstruation among the Christ-following group addressed by the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, see *Didascalia* 241–242.

Beginning in the late first or early second century CE, rabbis began to require that those who experienced a nocturnal emission of semen or who engaged in sexual intercourse had to immerse before studying Torah or engaging in prayer (see sources cited in Adler 2008a:65, nn. 64–66).[9] Several third-century CE rabbis rescinded this requirement, citing the difficulty of implementing it (see Adler 2008a:67–72).

Ritual immersion was also required, according to at least some of the rabbis, for male or female gentiles wishing to convert to Judaism (Sifre, *Numbers* 108 [ed. Horovitz:112]; JT, *Qiddushin* 3:12, 64a; BT, *Yebamot* 46a). The rabbis also required ritual immersion for metal food utensils purchased from gentiles (and for glass vessels according to some rabbis; JT, *ʿAbodah Zarah* 5:15,45b; BT, *ʿAbodah Zarah* 75b).

According to the early rabbis, these were the only occasions when ritual immersion was mandatory. Although the rabbis considered it commendable for even ordinary food to be eaten in a state of purity, they asserted that this was not strictly required by the Torah (Noam 2008).

While the rabbis would have almost certainly wanted all their legal views to be widely followed, it is difficult to gauge from the rabbinic literature the extent to which ordinary Jews in antiquity actually did follow any of the rabbinic directives and strictures. For example, it is difficult to determine the extent to which married women commonly practiced ritual immersion following menstruation.[10] Conversely, it is also difficult to assess whether common practices may have been stricter than rabbinic Halakhah demanded.[11]

What does seem clear is that, from the late second century CE onward, very few people were keeping the purity rules in their daily lives (Adler 2014b). Rabbinic statements from the late second and early third centuries CE allude to the fact that at least some rabbis recognized that the ritual purity regulations were no longer being observed at this time as widely as in the past (Tosefta, *Shabbat* 1:14 [ed. Lieberman:3–4]; Tosefta, *Maʿaser Sheni* 5:30 [ed. Lieberman:274]). By the mid-third century CE, purity observance in daily life seems to have diminished even among the rabbis (Furstenberg 2013:287–319; 2016:261–266, 313–393; Adler 2017:278).

Material Remains

At Jewish settlements in Galilee and Judea, immersion pools persist in settlement levels postdating 135 CE, but in far smaller numbers than in earlier levels. Whereas before the

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[9] Under certain circumstances, some rabbis ruled that immersion in a valid pool could be replaced by immersion in drawn water or by rinsing the entire body with water measuring nine *qavs* (קב; probably c. 12 liters); see, e.g., *Miqwa'ot* 3:4; 8:1; Tosefta *Miqwa'ot* 6:1 (ed. Zuckermandel:657–658).

[10] The Babylonian Talmud (BT, *Shabbat* 14a) alludes to a period of time when many of the common people replaced immersion with rinsing with drawn water, but it is difficult to know if this should be accepted as historical.

[11] See, for example, Secunda 2020:130–133; Krakowsi 2020:256–264.

Bar Kokhba Revolt it was common to find several immersion pools at any given Jewish settlement—whether in private houses and courtyards, in the public sphere near synagogues, at agricultural installations, at pottery kilns and near tombs—after 135 CE, we almost

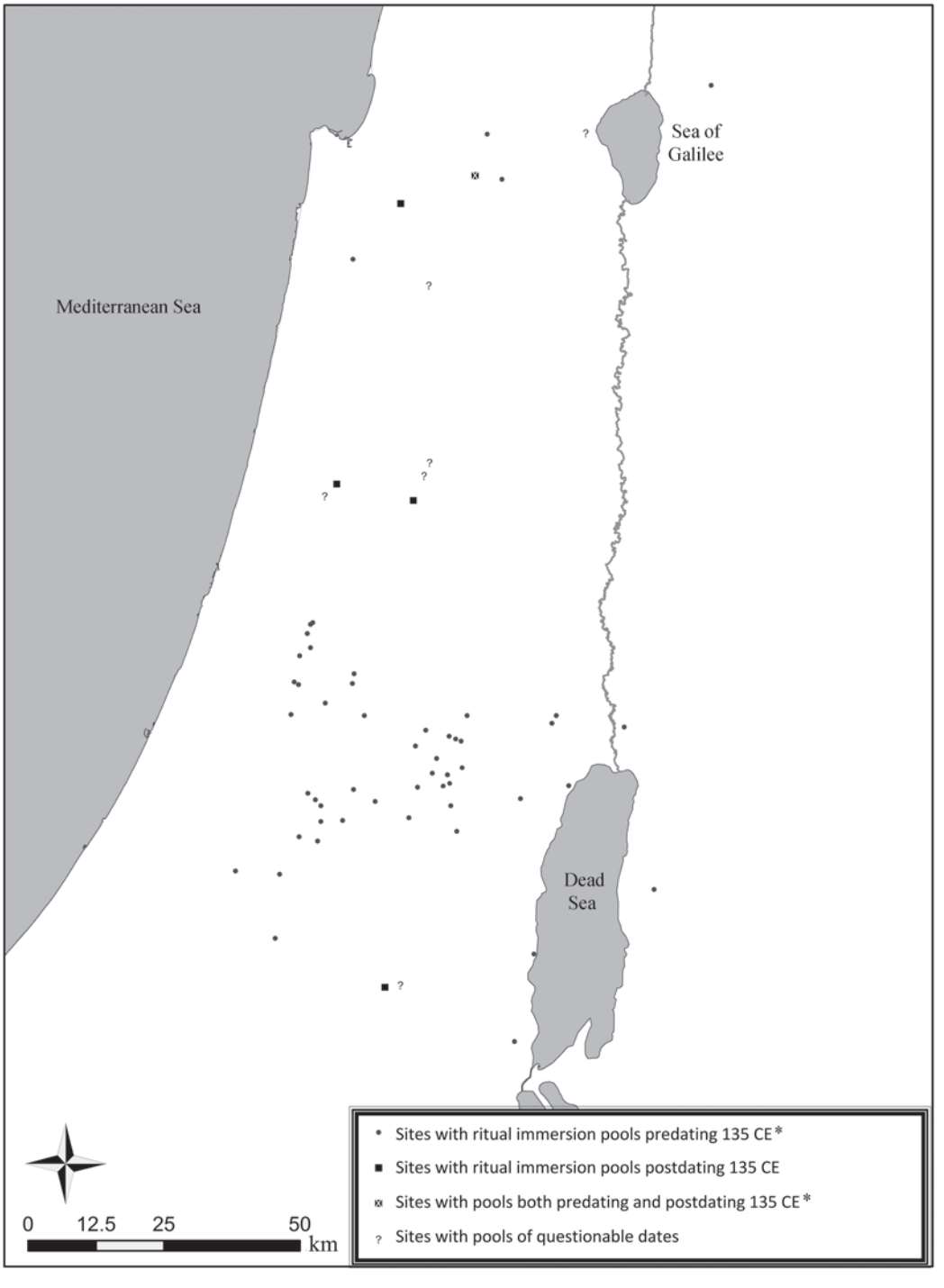

Fig. 4. Distribution map of sites where three or more ritual immersion pools have been uncovered (adapted from Adler 2011:355, Map 5).

invariably find only one or two immersion pools at any one Jewish settlement site, and this usually only in the residential area (Fig. 4; Adler 2011:66–68; 2017:270–273). It seems likely that this change reflects a decline in ritual purity observance in daily life among the masses, perhaps as a result of significant social upheavals associated with the failure of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (Adler 2017:277–281).[12]

The archaeological remains provide little to no evidence regarding whether Jews in antiquity were widely following the rabbinic regulations regarding ritual immersion: who is required to immerse, what kinds of water may be used for ritual immersions, and how such immersions are to be undertaken. For example, we cannot deduce from the archaeological record how common it might have been for women to immerse (or otherwise bathe) after their menstrual periods. We also cannot deduce from the archaeological remains if the water used in the pools would have been valid according to rabbinic regulations. As was common for most cisterns and pools at the time, the immersion pools were constructed to collect rainwater, but it is not known whether those using the pools were cognizant of the rabbinic regulations concerning drawn water, and whether they exercised caution in allowing only rabbinically approved water into the pools. While immersion in water clearly was important to those who constructed these pools, there is little reason to assume that they might have regarded this water as in any way ritually special.

The Middle Ages

As heirs to their rabbinic forbears of Late Antiquity, the rabbis of the Middle Ages continued to develop and embellish the early rabbinic legal conversation surrounding ritual immersion. By this time, however, the practical halakhic discussions about immersion were focused mostly on married women immersing after menstruation and childbirth to permit resumption of sexual relations. The maintenance of ritual purity in daily life and surrounding priestly dues was now a distant memory of the past, and a vision for a messianic future.

The Medieval rabbinic literature is surveyed here, alongside the contemporary material remains of ritual immersion pools, with the aim of determining who practiced ritual immersion at this time, how widespread the practice was, and the manner whereby the ritual was carried out among the common people.[13]

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[12] Another archaeological phenomenon that attests to commonplace observance of the purity laws in daily life prior to 135 CE is the widespread distribution of tableware and storage vessels made of chalk (Adler 2011:161–220). The disappearance of chalk vessels around the mid-second century CE likely attests to the same decline in daily purity observance inferred here from the data regarding immersion pools (Adler 2017:273–277).

[13] Contemporary Karaite literature presents another avenue of inquiry into practices relating to ritual purification, but this path of research is not pursued here for lack of space.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

The Medieval rabbis continued to discuss and develop earlier rabbinic treatments of the ritual purity laws, although this entire category of ritual law was now almost completely theoretical in nature. By the Middle Ages, the red heifer ashes required for purification of corpse impurity were no longer available, and since it was assumed that all would sooner or later contract corpse impurity, the Medieval rabbis gave up the idea that the purity laws could be maintained before the coming of the Messiah, when the Temple would be rebuilt and ashes of a new red heifer would be prepared.[14] One of the few areas where purity laws continued to be relevant was the laws pertaining to menstruation and childbirth; as a couple was forbidden to have sexual intercourse if the woman had experienced menstrual or postpartum bleeding, the Medieval rabbis held that married women still needed to be purified after menstruation and following childbirth in order to permit marital coitus (despite the fact that these women were otherwise regarded as impure due to the ubiquitous corpse impurity). Since the earlier rabbis required ritual immersion to achieve this purification, the Medieval rabbis continued to regard ritual immersion for married women as a practical necessity.[15]

The Medieval rabbis appear to have been far less concerned with the ritual immersion of men, which by this time seems to have been practiced only on rare occasions. A source from the early Medieval period noted a difference between Palestine, where men were accustomed to immerse after seminal emission, and Babylonia, where they were not (*Otzar Hilluf Minhagim 9* [ed. Lewin:23]). In the late twelfth century, Maimonides noted a difference between communities in Islamic lands—singling out Mesopotamia and the Maghreb—where men would 'bathe' (רוחצים) after seminal emission, and "all the cities of Rome, France, and Provence" where they would not (*Qovetz Teshuvot* 140 [ed. Lichtenberg:25a]). He further noted that rabbis from Christian lands visiting Jewish communities in Muslim-controlled Spain would often deride the local Jews that their custom to wash after semen emission was adopted from their "Ishmaelite" neighbors who would regularly cleanse themselves before prayer. Indeed, the degree to which this custom had its roots in an ancient Halakhah—the requirement that semen-impure men immerse before studying Torah or engaging in prayer—or if it was inspired by Islamic practices, remains unclear. In any event, by the High Middle Ages, even in the Islamic lands Jewish men were probably not practicing full-body ritual immersion, but rather were simply rinsing off their bodies, as was

[14] While this is certainly true of the mainstream of rabbinic literature of the time, Jeffrey Woolf (2015:145–153) has collected scattered evidence for Medieval purity observances surrounding priests eating dough-offerings and laymen eating profane food in purity.

[15] Although some Medieval-period rabbinic texts testify that in many communities, menstruating women practiced additional restrictions apart from sexual abstinence (see discussions in Woolf 2015:89–95, 141–145; Krakowski 2020), the main objective of ritual immersion, according to the rabbinic writers, was invariably to allow resumption of sexual activity within a marriage.

customary among Muslims.[16] The only exception appears to have been immersion before certain festivals, especially Yom Kippur, which became common to varying degrees among Medieval communities in Ashkenaz (Woolf 2015:99–104, 124–126; Bodner and Lehmann 2019:69–73).

Proselyte immersion for men and women continued to be discussed by Medieval rabbis (e.g., Jacob ben Asher, *Ṭur Yoreh De'ah* 268), although it is questionable how common it was for gentiles to convert to Judaism during the Middle Ages. The rabbis also continued to discuss and develop the laws relating to the ritual immersion of metal and glass vessels purchased from gentiles (e.g., Jacob ben Asher, *Ṭur Yoreh De'ah* 120; 202), a practice considered still relevant even after the bulk of the purity laws had become obsolete.[17]

Regarding the legal specifications surrounding precisely how ritual immersion is to be performed, the Medieval rabbis took up where the earlier Talmudic literature left off, discussing issues such as whether a woman may immerse during the day or only at night, whether she can immerse alone or if she must be accompanied to ensure she has immersed properly, what preparations are necessary prior to immersing, in what rivers one may immerse (e.g., Jacob ben Asher, *Ṭur Yoreh De'ah* 197–201), what rules determine how an immersion pool may be cleaned, and whether warm water may be poured into the immersion pool (e.g., Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, *Or Zaru'a* 336, 366).

A survey of the Medieval rabbis' comments on communities who ignored their rulings indicates where their rulings were being followed and where they were not. Famously, Maimonides found it necessary to take action against the common practice in Jewish communities in late twelfth-century Egypt, whereby women did not immerse after menstruation, but instead ritually purified themselves through a practice they called "the pouring" (Judeo-Arabic: السكب = אלסכב), which involved a ritually pure woman pouring water over the body of the postmenstrual woman (*Responsa* 242 [ed. Blau:434–444]).[18] Elsewhere in Mediterranean lands, rabbinic literature records protestations against communities where women immersed after the end of their menstrual impurity period, but in public bathhouses containing halakhically invalid drawn water. Rabbi Abraham ben Nathan of Lunel (late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries), for example, complained that in Jewish communities throughout Spain, it was common for women after menstruation to "immerse in bathhouses

[16] See discussion and sources cited in Miller 2015:326, n. 75. Jeffrey Woolf (2015:133–139) argued for a prevalent custom for men to immerse, or at least rinse, to purify from semen impurity before prayer and Torah study even in Ashkenaz, but I am not convinced that the evidence at hand supports his contention.

[17] For an obscure practice among German-Jewish communities of ritually immersing metal and wood vessels after they were made kosher for Passover through boiling or firing, see Bodner and Lehmann 2019:59–69.

[18] For studies considering this practice as possibly ancient, rather than borrowed from contemporary Karaite practices, see Cohen 1999:94–95; Krakowski 2020. Whether or not this practice was observed among contemporary Jewish communities outside Egypt is an intriguing question, as noted by Krakowski (2020:264): "Jews in regions of the Islamic world beyond Egypt may plausibly have done the same without leaving visible historical traces, having no Maimonides to chastise them." For textual references to possible purpose-built immersion pools around this time in both Egypt and Jerusalem, see Krakowski 2020:277, n. 103.

(מרחצאות) and then have sexual intercourse with their husbands" (*Sefer HaManhig*, Laws of Niddah 119 [ed. Raphael:548–549).[19] Rabbi Isaiah ben Mali de Trani the Elder (late twelfth to mid-thirteenth centuries) expressed similar consternation that women in Jewish communities in the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean were immersing in the drawn water of bathhouses rather than in valid immersion pools: "Among all the communities of Rhomania (רומניאה = Ῥωμανία; i.e., the Byzantine Empire) there is not one where [the women properly] immerse, only in the stench of the bathhouses" (בצחנת המרחצאות) (*Teshuvot HaRid* 62 [ed. Wertheimer:320]).[20] In contrast, rabbis in contemporary Germany and France must have assumed that the women in their communities immersed in accordance with Halakhah, as the complaints voiced by these rabbis about common menstrual practices were far more ancillary and minor (see Cohen 1999:84–87; Emanuel 2007).[21]

Material Remains

Architectural remains compellingly identified as Medieval-era Jewish ritual immersion pools have been unearthed throughout Europe: in Germany at Cologne, Andernach, Limburg an der Lahn, Friedberg, Worms, Speyer, Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Offenburg, Sondershausen and Erfurt; in France, at Strasbourg and Montpellier; in Spain, at Besalú and Girona; in Hungary, at Buda; in London; and in Sicily, at Syracuse and likely also at Palermo.[22] Several other extant installations are less securely identified as Jewish immersion pools, and dozens more, whose physical remains have not (yet) been recovered, are known to us from historical records.[23] The securely identified surviving structures share specific characteristics that appear to have been essential to their function, all (apart from the two baths in London) being stepped pools located deep underground, at a precise elevation slightly below the hypothesized level of the Medieval-era water table, with a comfortably proportioned staircase leading from ground level directly down to the pool. Where the groundwater level is located very deep beneath the surface, an impressively long stairwell was built to reach the elevation of the subterranean water table (Fig. 5). The almost universal practice of designing ritual immersion pools filled with groundwater is attested

[19] For an analysis of this text, see Cohen 1999:87–88.

[20] For an analysis, see Cohen 1999:89–91. Stuart Miller (2015:297–306) contended that women in Egypt, Spain, and Byzantium may all have depended upon literal interpretations of biblical law, not mediated by rabbinic legal thought.

[21] Another strong indication that women in Medieval Ashkenaz were largely regarded as compliant with Halakhah in their practice of ritual immersion may be found in a responsum of Rabbi Israel ben Petaḥiah Isserlein writing in central Europe in the mid-fifteenth century, who asserted that only "in some of the distant lands" (במקצת ארצות הרחוקות) there are women who are negligent in their practice of ritual immersion (*Terumat ha-Deshen* 254 [ed. Walden:92]).

[22] For citations to the archaeological literature, see Adler and Zeldes 2021:58–59, nn. 16–21.

[23] Stefanie Fuchs, pers. comm. 15.12.21. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Stefanie for our many wonderful discussions about the wealth of data she has collected on this subject.

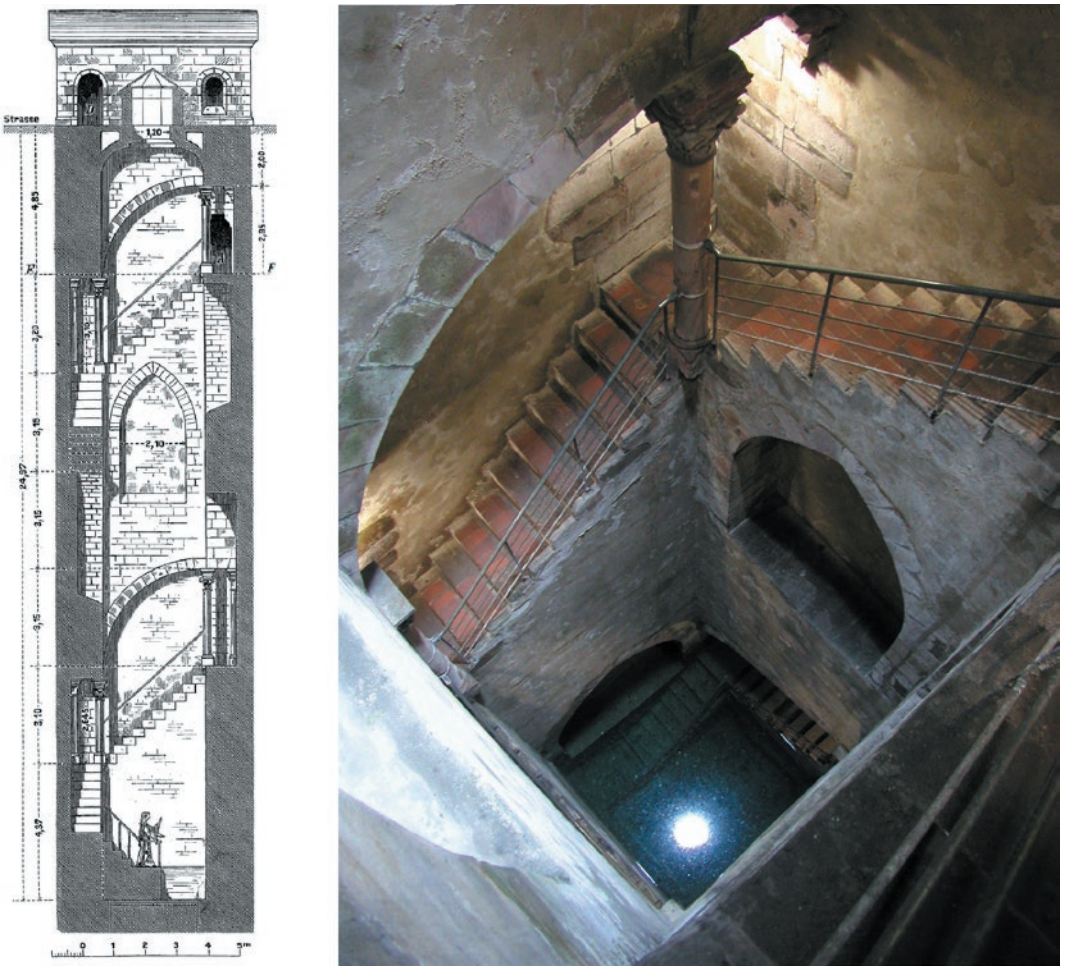

Fig. 5. Deep underground ritual immersion pool at Friedberg, Germany, showing long stairwell in central shaft, and groundwater in lower part of the shaft (photography: K. Augustin; section drawing: H. Kratz; Courtesy of the Friedberg Municipal Archive).

to not only in the archaeological remains of these structures, but also in the contemporary rabbinic literature authored in the region (Adler 2015). The considerable effort invested into constructing these deep structures to bring those immersing down to the water, rather than simply drawing the water up to the people on ground level, seems to reflect a conscious effort to adhere to rabbinic regulations regarding the invalidity of drawn water. It is here, I believe, that we first encounter immersion pools whose water was likely regarded as having a 'special' ritual status.

Another feature common to many of the Jewish ritual baths of Medieval Europe is the existence of apertures providing a view from various points along the stairwell down to the immersion pool below, examples of which are found at Cologne, Andernach, Friedberg, Worms (Fig. 6), Speyer, Montpellier and Syracuse. Aside from providing light for the

Fig. 6. Windows looking down from the stairwell to the ritual immersion pool at Worms, Germany (photography: Y. Adler).

immersion chamber, these windows may have also been intended to allow attendants to supervise the immersion, as Medieval rabbinic law required (e.g., Abraham ben David of Posquières, *Baʿalei Hanefesh*, 'Gate of Immersion' [ed. Qafih 76]; Solomon ben Abraham ben Aderet, *Torat Habayit*, 7:7 [387]).

MODERN DAYS

Following the Medieval period, ritual-immersion practices continued to develop into the modern period in manifold directions. In what follows, I will only briefly touch on some of the more interesting changes that took place regarding who was (or was not) observing the practice, and how the design of immersion pools underwent a substantial evolution as a result of new standards of hygiene and modern plumbing conventions.

Textual Evidence

After the Middle Ages, ritual immersion seems to have remained widespread in Islamic countries. In Egypt, for example, the halakhic literature of the sixteenth century records a fierce rabbinic polemic over the common practice among the Jewish women of Cairo to ritually immerse after menstruation in a certain bay (خَلِيج = כ'ליג') in the Nile (Arad 2008:189–192). As ritual immersion had apparently become the norm by this time, it would seem that the campaign begun by Maimonides centuries earlier had eventually succeeded (Krakowski 2020:276–278). Legal debates in the sixteenth-century halakhic literature regarding the validity of the water in immersion pools in the Syrian cities of Hama and Aleppo suggest that constructed pools designated for Jewish ritual immersion in these communities were assumed to be in use at this time (Arad 2008:192–194). A mid-sixteenth century responsum by Rabbi Joseph Karo reports large expenses incurred by the Jewish communities of Thessaloniki and Adrianople (today Edirne, Turkey) to replace their purpose-built rainwater immersion pools with groundwater immersion pools (Joseph Karo, *'Avqat Rokhel* 55 [ed. Fischel:50a]).

In Europe, it seems that the practice of married women's monthly ritual immersion remained quite widespread until the rise of the reformist and secularist movements of the nineteenth century, when a steep decline in Jewish ritual observances in general led to a large-scale abandonment of women's ritual immersion (Meyer 2014).[24] By the early twentieth century, observance of ritual immersion was waning even among women nominally identified as Orthodox, in Europe and especially in the growing Jewish communities of North America (Cooper 2011; Meyer 2014). Orthodox rabbinic literature from this time reflects a steep decline in the observance of ritual immersion among married women, and an investment of significant, and sometimes quite innovative, efforts on the part of rabbinic figures to try and stem the tide of wholesale neglect (Cooper 2011).

It appears that this tide began to turn toward the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries when interest in ritual immersion has been rekindled even among the non-Orthodox. In recent decades, interest in women's monthly immersions began to spread within the American Conservative movement, and the Reform movement began to endorse ritual immersion for its conversion ceremonies (Meyer 2014:147–153). In Israel, where non-Orthodox movements have relatively few adherents and where most Jews identify as 'secular', anyone marrying through the Chief Rabbinate (the only legal venue to wed) is required to produce written evidence that the bride ritually immersed before the wedding (Meyer 2014:152). While today, the practice of regular ritual immersion following menstruation is observed chiefly among the Orthodox and those who identify as 'traditional,'

[24] But see Meyer 2014:143–144, noting a common misconception that the Reform movement already in its early years was opposed to the practice of women's monthly ritual immersion. The evidence he cites from as late as 1845 indicating Reformist support for continuing the practice probably reflects a rite that had become deeply entrenched in Central Europe by this time.

recent years have witnessed the rise of ritual immersion among the non-Orthodox (both men and women) for non-traditional, celebratory and restorative occasions such as lifecycle events and recovery from illness (Meyer 2014:151–153). Recent years have also seen an apparent spread in the practice of ritual immersion among Orthodox men, especially before Sabbaths and even daily before morning prayers. As of present writing, however, I am not aware of any study mapping how common all the various newer manifestations of the practice are today.

An interesting development of the modern era relates to a complete revamping of the physical designs of ritual immersion pools. From the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century, ritual immersion pools in Europe were almost invariably dug down to the level of the local groundwater, which meant that the water was usually cold and stagnant. From the nineteenth century onward, increasing sensitivity surrounding personal hygiene, comfort and convenience led to mounting efforts to change the design of immersion pools and the character of the water used in them (Sternberg 2021; Schostak 2022). At the same time, secular health authorities in European jurisdictions began to regulate the functioning of Jewish immersion pools, especially in enforcing the heating and regular changing of the water (Schlich 1995; Schostak 2022:149–236, 297–355). These developments led communities throughout Europe, Britain and North America to replace the old, deep groundwater pools with modern installations built at ground level and filled with tap water which could be comfortably heated, regularly changed, and eventually also chlorinated (Sternberg 2021:154–311). Although many rabbis regarded such water to be ritually valid, others ruled tap water to be ritually invalid 'drawn water' and insisted that the tap water be rendered ritually valid through a novel halakhic contrivance. A small side pool, which came to be known as an *ʾôṣār* (אוצר, treasury), was constructed to hold valid rainwater that was connected to the immersion pool via a pipe—thus ritually validating the water in the immersion pool and conferring on this water its 'special' ritual status. The earliest textual evidence for this sort of installation comes from an early nineteenth-century responsum penned by Rabbi Moses Schreiber (Sofer) which mentions the existence of such a pool in Pressburg (now Bratislava, Slovakia) some time prior to 1806 (*Ḥatam Sofer* 212 [ed. Stern:84a]). Although many rabbis throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rejected this innovation (Goldstein 1981:256–260, 318–334, 347–348), by the mid-twentieth century, virtually all immersion pools were built according to a version of this design (Shenberger 1974:71–112). This new form of ritual immersion pool had become so prevalent by this time that the archaeologist Yigael Yadin, when excavating at Masada in 1964, anachronistically interpreted the installations he unearthed there as first-century CE examples of the novel nineteenth and twentieth century design of these pools (Adler 2014a)!

Fig. 7. Ritual immersion pool at Heubach-Kalbach, Germany, dating to 1843–1844, connected via a concealed pipe with an *ʾôṣār* ("treasury") installation at upper right (photography: K. Keßler).

Material Remains

While hard data is lacking for the number of Jewish ritual immersion pools constructed during the modern era, the numbers certainly stand in the thousands. In Germany alone, more than 2800 pools dating from the Middle Ages until the early twentieth century have been documented, based on both archaeological and historical data (Keßler 2015). Remains of dozens of other ritual immersion pools from the modern era have been unearthed in excavations in both the Old and the New World (e.g., Leibman 2009; Miller 2015:332–342). Along with historical records, archaeology provides an excellent tool for analyzing the spread of modern-type immersion pools that used tap water, with or without the addition of an *ʾôṣār* (Fig. 7; Keßler 2015:60–62). And, of course, many pools constructed in more recent decades cannot be categorized as 'remains,' as they continue in active use until today.

CONCLUSIONS

This panoramic survey enables us to chart the evolutionary development of Jewish ritual immersion over the span of more than 2000 years. Although the Pentateuch prescribed 'bathing' to remove various forms of ritual impurity, there is no evidence suggesting that the practice was widespread any time prior to the mid-second century BCE. During the late second century BCE, Jews began to observe this Pentateuchal requirement by entirely immersing their bodies in a pool of water. This was performed in artificial pools, usually filled with rainwater, large numbers of which have been unearthed throughout the Southern Levant. At this time, ritual immersion was likely practiced on a regular basis (perhaps even daily) by most Jews living in Judea—both men and women—in adherence to the complex set of purity laws found in the Torah (and independent of the Jerusalem Temple). In this early period, it is not known if women practiced immersion after menstruation, and few, if any, regulations were associated with the water used for immersion.

From the mid-second century CE onward, a sharp decline in the number of immersion pools per Jewish settlement site suggests a significant waning of ritual purity observance in daily life among the masses. During this period, the rabbis developed intricate laws about how ritual immersion was to be practiced and in what kind of water, but the extent to which these rulings were widely acknowledged and followed at this time remains unknown.

By the Middle Ages, ritual immersion was no longer practiced widely by men, and instead was limited primarily to women following menstruation and childbirth. In some regions, such as Germany and France, women immersed in deep pools filled with groundwater, in compliance with rabbinic law, and it is likely here that the water in the immersion pools was first regarded as having a special ritual status. In other regions, such as Spain and Byzantium, Jewish women immersed in bathhouses in contravention of rabbinic prescriptions, or such as Egypt, replaced immersion with a ritual pouring of water over their bodies.

The modern era, especially from the nineteenth century onward, witnessed significant developments in the ways that Jewish communities throughout the world approached adherence to Torah law in general, and these also affected the practice of ritual immersion among married women. The nineteenth century also witnessed a revolution in the design of ritual immersion pools, in which pools holding clean and comfortably heated tap water replaced the less agreeable rainwater pools of antiquity, and the groundwater pools of the Medieval and early modern periods. A novel halakhic contrivance called an *ʾôṣār* was installed in many of these pools to ritually validate the water in the immersion pool, and by the mid-twentieth century, this new feature came to be found in virtually all immersion pools in use throughout the Jewish world.

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