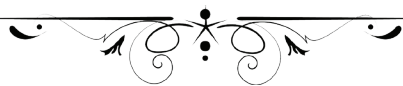


THE BAPTISTERY WITH CIBORIUM AND BAPTISMAL FONT OF THE BASILICA OF ST. PHILOXENUS AT OXYRHYNCHUS (EL-BAHNASA, EGYPT)



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Abstract

During the 2019 and 2020 campaigns in Sector 24, a new room was discovered in the Basilica that had not been studied yet. It allows us to study in depth some of the ritual elements of the first centuries of Christianity such as baptism and in addition to the infrastructures that accompany this rite of passage, such as the baptistery, ciborium and baptismal font, as well as its symbology and evolution.

Keywords: St Philoxenus, ciborium, baptismal font, baptistery, Oxyrhynchus.

مُلخَص البَحْث

المعمودية مع السيوريوم وجرن المعمودية في بازيليك القديس فيلوكسينوس في أوكسيرينخوس (البهنسا، مصر) خلال موسم الحفائر لسنة ٢٠١٩ و٢٠٢٠ في القطاع (٢٤)، تم اكتشاف غرفة جديدة في البازيليك لم تتم دراستها بعد. هذه الغرفة تتيح لنا أن ندرس بعمق بعض العناصر الطقسية في القرون الأولى للمسيحية مثل المعمودية، بالإضافة إلى البنى التحتية التي تصاحب طقوس العبور هذه، مثل المعمودية والسيوريوم وجرن المعمودية، بالإضافة إلى رموزها وتطورها.

الكلمات الدالة: القديس فيلوكسينوس، سيوريوم، جرن المعمودية، المعمودية، أوكسيرينخوس.

1- Introduction

As we all know, the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus is located next to the present-day town of el-Bahnasa, in the province of Minia, about 190 km from Cairo. Its proximity to the river port at Bahr Yussuf and the connection with the routes to Libya have made it a place of great importance since ancient times, as far as we know from the Saita period, being called *Pr-Mdd*. The city continued into Alexander's time, being called Oxyrhynchus, as

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well as into the Roman and late Roman period, when it was known as Pemdje, until the arrival of Islam, when the city was abandoned.

The first news we have about the site are from the early nineteenth century when Vivant Denon visited the city³ and it was not until 1886 when Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt would devote themselves to the incessant search for papyri in the city's rubbish,⁴ which gave way to the excavations of Ermenegildo Pistelli and Giulio Farina from 1910 to 1914,⁵ followed by Flinders Petrie in 1922,⁶ and Evaristo Breccia, who investigated the site between 1927 and 1934.⁷

It was not until recently that the excavations were resumed in 1982 with Ali El-Khouli⁸ and Mahmoud Hanza in 1984,⁹ until ten years later, in 1992, when the University of Barcelona took charge of them under the direction of Josip Padry until 2019, when they were taken over by PhD. Maite Mascort and PhD. Esther Pons.¹⁰

These last decades, under the direction of the University of Barcelona, have made it possible to document and verify different areas of the city: the so-called Necropolis Alta, the Osireion, the Basilica of St. Philoxenus and the monumental gate of the city, among other important elements.¹¹

³ Denon, D.-V. (1802), 239.

⁴ Grenfell, B. P. (1897).

⁵ Bastianini & Casanova (2009), 46; Turner, E. G. (1952), 80

⁶ Petrie, W. M. F., et al. (1925).

⁷ Breccia, E. (1933), ; Pintaudi, R. (2007), 104.

⁸ Leclant, J. (1984), 370; Leclant, J. & Clerc, G. (1985), 363.

⁹ Leclant & Clerc. (1986), 265.

¹⁰ The archaeological intervention in this sector has been possible thanks to the aid of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Spain, University of Barcelona-IPOA, Palarq Foundation and Catalan Society of Egyptology.

¹¹ Erroux-Morfin & Padry Parcerisa, (2008), ; Mascort Roca, M. (2016); Padry i Parcerisa, J. (2007), ; Padry et al., (2014),; Pons Mellado, E. (2021); Subhas Pascual, E. 2008.





Figure 2. Aerial photo of the basilica in 2016 with the location in yellow where the baptistery and baptismal font were found.

The different architectural elements found in the sector; bases, columns, capitals, plinths and lintels tell us of a space dedicated to a saint of whom we had no evidence until it was possible to identify him through the inscriptions in the crypt and their subsequent confirmation in papyri, so that the studies carried out on the archaeological, papyrological and epigraphic documentation found in recent years¹³ seem to support the identification of this building with the basilica of St. Philoxenus.

The papyri provide references to a church consecrated to St. Philoxenus,¹⁴ such as P.Oxy. XVI 1950, which gives us a date on its use in the 5th century A.D., the P.Oxy. XVI 2041 (VI-VII AD), which tells us about the transport of materials for its construction, directly linked to its architectural renovation in the 6th century AD¹⁵ or P.Oxy. XI 1357, which documents a feast dedicated to this saint on the 22nd of the month of Khoiak and the 12th of the month of Phamenoth.¹⁶ Archaeological and papyrological data that denote the importance of the basilica of St. Philoxenus in the city.

Structurally, the basilica has five naves, an east-west orientation and a floor plan similar to that of the church of Antinoupolis¹⁷ (Grossmann, 2002, p. 55); however, the

¹³ Martínez Garcha & Mascia, (2023), ; Mascia & Martínez Garcha, (2021), ; Padry et al..., (2018).

¹⁴ P.Oxy. LXVII 4617 (400-499 CE); P.Oxy. LXVII 4620 (475-550 CE); P.Oxy. XVI 1950 (487 CE); PSI VII 791 (500-599 CE); P.Oxy. XI 1357 (535-536 CE); P.Oxy. XVI 2041=P.Cairo 10122 (500-699 CE); P.Lond. V 1762 (500-699 CE).

¹⁵ Papaconstantinou, A. (2005).

¹⁶ Papaconstantinou, A. (1996), 150.

¹⁷ Papaconstantinou, A. (1996), 150.

Oxyrhynchite religious complex took advantage of structures belonging to an older building. These spaces were transformed into the crypt of the Christian building, which is accessed via a 12-meter-long ramp that starts at the foot of the basilica's altar.

The crypt has a quadrangular main chamber of eight meters on each side, which gives access to another central space that served as a corridor leading to two vaulted chambers, located to the north and south. This crypt has an east-west orientation with a 10° deviation in its inclination relative to the axis of the basilica. This fact seems to show that at the time of the reconstruction of the basilica, the initial crypt project was significantly modified and the south chamber was amortized, taking into account that the foundations of the columns are located in this chamber.

It is interesting to note how the basilica of St. Philoxenus, as suggested by several documented papyri,¹⁸ now confirmed by more than 150 figurative and textual graffiti discovered in the building, inherited in the early Byzantine phase¹⁹ (Papaconstantinou, 2001, 336-337), the role formerly played by the Sarapeion, becoming the main oracular center of the city.²⁰ Although we still lack precise evidence as to the nature of the pre-existing building on which ruins the Christian sanctuary was built, the continuity of the ancient oracular practice in this basilica could lead us to consider the possible identification of this complex with the Greco-Roman temple of Serapis.

3. the baptistery with ciborium and baptismal font

During the campaigns of 2019²¹ (Padry i Parcerisa et al., 2019) and 2020 (Mascort Roca et al., 2020) appeared in the area indicated in Figure 2, the pillar of the baptismal font and the remains of the structure that configures the ciborium or dome-like structure, where the baptismal font and very possibly the baptismal pool were located, of which there are no remains, except for the water drainage channel.

The baptistery and ciborium is located at the head of the church in its southern area as seen in Figure 2, breaking as in most cases with the instructions provided by the Didaskalia, where it says that it should be located at the end of the northwest aisle of the church, to the left of the entrance narthex²² (Burmester, 1955, p. 14), in fact it is rare to find it outside the church as is the case in the White Monastery where it is located in another building in the northern part of the monastic complex²³ (Blanke, 2019).

¹⁸ P.Oxy. VIII 1150 (sixth CE); P.Oxy. XVI 1926 (sixth CE); P.Rendel Harris 54 (sixth CE).

¹⁹ Papaconstantinou, A. (1996), 150.

²⁰ P.Oxy. VIII 1148 (first CE); P.Oxy. LXXIV 5017 (I-II siglo d.C.); P.Oxy. VIII 1149 (II siglo d.C.); P.Oxy. IX 1213 (II siglo d.C.); P.Oxy. XXXI 2613 (II siglo d.C.); P.Oxy. XLII 3078 (siglo d.C.); P.Oxy. VI 923 (175-225 d.C.).

²¹ Papaconstantinou, A. (1996), 150.

²² Papaconstantinou, A. (1996), 150.

²³ Papaconstantinou, A. (1996), 150.





Figure 3. Aerial view of the area where the corners of the columns of the ciborium can be seen.



Figure 4. Side view of the baptistery showing the column bases and the drainage system for emptying the baptismal font or pool.

The structure that configures the baptistery measures 4 x 4 meters, with only two column bases in the corners to the east of it, so we understand that very possibly these are part of a ciborium, access to which would be from the west. In its interior there is hardly anything remarkable as it seems that in late period the room was used as a room and home, reusing some architectural elements such as the walls.

It is worth noting the typical water drainage system that can be found in some baptisteries and elevated baptismal pools,²⁴ in which the exit of the water used is done through a channel or lower sewer as can be seen in Figure 3 and 4.

We cannot provide any information about the possible baptismal pool, except to assume that it was an elevated one, possibly quadrangular which would have been inside the ciborium, symbolizing the tomb of Christ, although circular pools are also known, such as the Borg El Arab pool in Taposiris Magna, from the 4th and 5th century, or hexagonal and octagonal examples²⁵ or cruciform as in Pelusium.²⁶

The history of baptismal architecture does not begin until the beginning of the 2nd century A.D., since before that baptism was administered in rivers, lakes or the sea²⁷ or even in the east of the empire many religious activities took place in private houses.²⁸

The baptisteries of the 3rd and 4th centuries were generally square or rectangular, with few exceptions such as some documented in Egypt, Greece, North Africa, Palestine or Syria until the 7th century.

The structure we present here raises the question of whether we are facing a square baptistery of which we have only the demarcation of the four walls due to their later reuse, the columns of the ciborium and in the subsoil the remains of the drainage of the main fountain.

We also have the foot of a small font or baptismal font (36 cm base x 45 cm high) that could have been used for infant baptism (fig. 5). A similar example can be found in the ciborium of St. Demetrius in Thessalonica.²⁹

The Coptic church had in its churches what is known as an Epiphany pool, with dimensions between 2 and 4 meters, but they could also have another smaller vessel for the mandatum or washing of feet and ablutions.³⁰

²⁴ Jensen, R. (2010), 229.

²⁵ Anwar, M. M. (2020), 5.

²⁶ Grossmann, P. (2001).

²⁷ Davies, J. G. (1962), 2.

²⁸ Davies, J. G. (1952), 12.

²⁹ Mango, C. (1978), 46.

³⁰ Cabrol, F. (1920), 457; Rogers, C. F. (1903), 316.



We know from parallels that the baptismal font and baptistery in very few cases in Egypt is located in an annex building, i.e. it usually used to be in the same building, but as we have already mentioned, in some cases it has appeared in different locations inside the church depending on the case study, such as at the entrance of the church or next to the altar.³¹ We have some clear examples in the church of Shenuda³² or the church of Al Mu'allakah in Old Cairo, in Kellia the oldest church has a baptistery,³³ at Hermopolis Magna there is another baptistery which also had a drainage channel³⁴ at Ain Mahura, east of Taposiris Magna, it also has a baptistery,³⁵ at Burg al-Arab south of Taposiris Magna, it has a baptistery with ciborium,³⁶ the church of Quft (Koptos) also has a 5th century baptistery and a long pool,³⁷ and the baptistery of Abu Mina consists of three construction phases studied by Ristow (1998, fig. 3), to cite some prominent examples. The use of the baptismal font is evident from the need for infant baptism, since this led to the search for a convenient solution for the practitioners, and this form was the most suitable, as full immersion was gradually being abandoned.³⁸

The font or baptismal font found does not have its upper part or cup containing the sacred water, although we do have the foot of the font with four pillars at the corners symbolizing the four cardinal points, which at the same time, refer to the four evangelists (fig. 5),³⁹ and there is also a hints at some kind of decoration that has been lost, most likely some religious motif.

We have evidence that in the city of Oxyrhynchus there were baptisteries, as reflected in the P.Oxy. I 147, where the monks of Abbot Andrew wind up the machine of Santa Maria's garden for use in the baptistery.⁴⁰

We also have other documented parallels throughout Egypt, such as in the Church of Sergius and Bacchus in Cairo, where we find in the narthex of the Coptic church a baptismal font, which we understand was not for the immersion of adults, but for children or infants and has a chronology that could be framed in the 4th/5th century AD.⁴¹

³¹ Butler, A. J. (2019), 265.

³² Bute, J. P. C.-S. (1908), 10.

³³ Grossmann, P. (1989,1855).

³⁴ Grossmann, P. (1989,1875).

³⁵ Grossmann, P. (1989,1847).

³⁶ Grossmann, P. (1989,1848).

³⁷ Weil, (1911).

³⁸ Davies, J. G. (1962), 65.

³⁹ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, (1997), 397.

⁴⁰ P.Oxy I 147 (556): † ἐδόθη δι(ὰ) τῶν μοναζ(όντων) τοῦ ἀγίου ἀββᾶ Ανδρέου εἰς τὴν μηχ(ανήν) τοῦ κηπίου τῆς ἀγίας Μαρίας ἐπὶ τῷ ἀντλήσαι ὕδωρ / εἰς τὴν ἀγί(αν) κολυμβήθραν σχοιν(ιον) ἦτοι κρίκον ἕνα, γί(νεται) σχοιν(ιον) ἦτοι κρίκ(ος) α μό(νον). (hand 2) γί(νεται) κρίκ(ιον) α ἐν μόγγ. / (ἔτους) σλβ καὶ σα, Φαρμοῦθι ιβ, ινδ(ικτίονος) τετάρτης. †

⁴¹ Brown, H. F. (1965), 79; Gabra et al., (2008), 70.



Figure 5. View of the 4 faces of the fuste of the baptismal font.

Baptism is an initiatory rite of passage used in different religions,⁴² understood as a symbolic communal process and an act related to important transitions in a person's life,⁴³ in the Christian case it is the imitatio christi,⁴⁴ emulating Jesus in his death and resurrection.⁴⁵

Alongside the biblical references we have some sources that deal directly with baptism in the 2nd century such as Barnabas (11.1,8,11), The Shepherd of Hermas (Vision 3.3.3, 5) and (Mandate 4.3.1-2), the Didache, Justin Martyr (Apology I, 61), (Dialogue 138.2), P.Oxy. V 840, Pseudo-Cyprian (Against the Jews 10.79-82, Melito of Sardis (On baptism), Theophilus (Apology to Autolycus 2.16), Irenaeus (Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching 3 and 42), Clement of Alexandria (The pedagogue 1.6.25.3) or Tertullian (On baptism 1).⁴⁶

Some researchers such as Tripp (1992) or Bovon (2000) interpret that in P.Oxy. V 840 studied by some experts⁴⁷ we have some of the first references that could make mention of a Christian baptism, also discussed by Ferguson.⁴⁸

The baptismal font for the Egyptian church is usually referred to as "Jordan", this being a representation of the river where Christ was baptized (Matthew 3, Mark 1:4-13, Luke 3:21, John 1:29-34) and the analogy is often made of the font as the mother's womb, great agent of transformation from the past to the future.⁴⁹

During the first three centuries of Christianity it is probable that the places for the celebration of the sacrament of baptism were in rivers, lakes, seas or areas of natural water,⁵⁰ although the Didache (70 A.D.) mentions that in the absence of natural water it could be performed with other waters, since in all societies and times the purification of the body was performed through water as a means of expression of the purity of the soul by which man approaches the deity,⁵¹ which led to be performed in public baths or fountains in private homes, documenting the first baptismal font in Dura-Europos (Syria) in the mid-3rd century AD.

⁴² Brown, H. F. (1965), 6.

⁴³ Stauffer, A. (1998), 14.

⁴⁴ Ben-Pechat, M. (1989),183.

⁴⁵ Bedard, H. F. (1951), 9.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, 1999, 29-32.

⁴⁷ Blumell & Wayment, (2015), 278-282; Kruger, M. J. (2002), ; Wayment, T. (2013), 190-192.

⁴⁸ Wayment, T. (2013), 270.

⁴⁹ Day, J. (2007), 7; Kuehn, R. (1992), 7.

⁵⁰ Stauffer, S. A. (2010), 6.

⁵¹ Cote, W. N. (1870), 11.

From this time onwards, the ritual seems to have spread throughout the East and West with a design focused on adult baptism, so that the fountains were mostly configured as immersion pools until the 8th century,⁵² with some specialists documenting more than seven hundred baptisteries from the early Christian period.⁵³

While we know that baptisteries were in cathedrals and were presided over and officiated by the bishop, they were eventually moved to parish churches.

In the 8th century these baptismal pools focused on adults were gradually configured for infants and replaced by small baptismal basins or fonts more suitable for newborn children, to the point that from the 12th century they were on a pedestal like the one analyzed here.

Baptism can be performed by different modes or systems, either submersion, immersion, affusion and sprinkling,⁵⁴ which require, by their very definition, major or minor infrastructures, ranging from a pool in which to immerse to a small fountain.

The act in the baptisteries is produced in three parts when the immersion takes place; the descent through the steps, which is the descent to the tomb of Christ, and the exit on the opposite side that symbolized the resurrection to a new life, but no less important is the moment of crossing the waters, configuring the three movements with a great symbolic meaning,⁵⁵ and although it is not known exactly the Didache clarifies: "Pour the water three times over his head ... in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit".⁵⁶

Conclusions

Throughout these lines we have tried to understand the archaeological context in the first centuries of Christianity and its relationship with baptism through two significant material elements found in the basilica of St. Philoxenus.

These elements tell us about the experience and importance of baptism in the first centuries in Egypt despite the fact that references from monastic sources such as those of Pachomius or Shenoute are scarce, as attested by Veilleux (1968) or the few examples documented in the Oxyrhynchite papyri mentioned above, prevailing the sources of foreign authors on baptism, up to the already Egyptian writings of Athanasius, Serapion of Thmuis, The Canon of Hippolytus, Didymus the Blind, or the Papyro Berolinsis 13415, from the 4th century⁵⁷ and that involved changes in the liturgy,⁵⁸ which would be

⁵² Stauffer, S. A. (2010), 13.

⁵³ Brandt, O. (2011), 1591; Khatchatrian, A. (1962, 1982), ; Ristow, S. (1998).

⁵⁴ Stauffer, S. A. (2010), 9.

⁵⁵ Stauffer, S. A. (2010), 11.

⁵⁶ Page, T. E. (1912), 319.

⁵⁷ Ferguson, E. (2013), 455-472.

⁵⁸ Johnson, M. E. (2007), 148.

culminated by the work of Cyril in the 5th century,⁵⁹ debtor and follower of Athanasius, or the Coptic Rite.⁶⁰

Since the 3rd century baptismal fonts have been made in various shapes and sizes, being simple, polygonal, cruciform, poly-lobed, as well as having various other shapes.⁶¹

Baptismal fonts such as the one we have found are usually composed or structured in cup, foot and shaft, and can be made in one or two pieces, separating the cup from the foot and shaft that are usually together⁶² (Gannholm, 2021, p. 6).

In the 3rd century there is more evidence of infant baptism, since in previous centuries it was frowned upon due to the importance of voluntary baptism,⁶³ although it is not ruled out that it was even practiced by the apostles,⁶⁴ although Origen, one of the first fathers of the Church, said that infants should be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Homily in Lucam 14), as did Cyprian of Carthage (Ep. 58, To Fidus, par 2.), but it was not until the XVI Council of Carthage when in 418 the need for infants to be baptized was mentioned,⁶⁵ and although this question was not problematic since most baptisms were of adults until at least the 6th century.

The rituals, including that of baptism, were similar to those of the Greek church until the schism of 451, a period from which they became clearly differentiated from the latter.⁶⁶

From these centuries the increase in the frequency of infant and newborns baptism somehow triggered the search for systems by which children were immersed in small receptacles or fountains, being from the 9th and 10th centuries, with the arrival of the Romanesque, when there was throughout Europe the expansion of small-sized baptismal fonts with a decoration also composed of columns like the one found in medieval churches in Gotlanden Sweden⁶⁷ or in churches in England,⁶⁸ where Sasanian and Byzantine Macedonian influences are clearly visible.

We cannot therefore define the exact chronology of the baptistery and ciborium, which we assume to have the same chronology in general lines as that of the basilica, although it could have been carried out during a phase of rehabilitation between the 5th and 8th centuries. The same problem arises with the shaft of the baptismal font, although in this case and due to the tendency of infant baptism in later times, it is more likely to be closer to the 8th century.

⁵⁹ Keating, D. (1999).

⁶⁰ Finn, T. M. (1966), 229.

⁶¹ Khatchatrian, A. (1982), 69-78; Stauffer, S. A. (2010), 14.

⁶² Stauffer, S. A. (2010), 13.

⁶³ Brown, H. F. (1965), 24.

⁶⁴ Allen, A. V. G. (1898), 406.

⁶⁵ Hefele & Clark, (1872), 458.

⁶⁶ Evetts, B. T. A. (1888), 10-11.

⁶⁷ Gannholm, T. (2021), 15-16.

⁶⁸ Combe & Paley, (1844); Simpson, F. (1828).

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