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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Baptismal Rites in an Early Christian Basilica at Stobi, Macedonia

IT IS the accepted view of the Baptist denomination that the early church reserved the sacrament of baptism solely for believers, excluding baptism of infants, and that this interpretation persisted here and there for several centuries in the face of a general switch to infant baptism. The support for such a view is complex and often contradictory, embedded as it is in textual and iconographic materials. *Baptist Quarterly* readers may, therefore, be interested in a newly discovered baptistry in Macedonian Yugoslavia which brings fresh information to bear on the problem.

Strategically located at the confluence of the Vardar and Crna rivers (50 miles south of the modern city of Skopje) is the city of Stobi, which enjoyed a long, and at times influential, history before the final collapse of city life some time in the sixth century A.D. Yugoslavian archaeologists have excavated here sporadically since World War I and have revealed much of the ecclesiastical and more grandiose domestic architecture of the Early Christian Period (fourth to sixth century A.D.). The large, elaborate and in many ways unusual early Christian baptistry was discovered in July 1971 by a joint Yugoslav-American archaeological team which began work at Stobi in 1970.¹

Christian Stobi had at least six churches in or near the city; the most splendid and important was the Episcopal Basilica of Bishop Philip, a sumptuously decorated structure with polychrome figured mosaics, frescoes and ornate carved marbles. The bishop lived in a residence flanking the church on the north side.² On the opposite (south) side, and at a much lower level than the body of the church, was a complex of baptismal rooms entered via a sandstone stairway leading down from the *narthex*, or foyer, of the church. (This finding, it may be noted, was possible only after the removal of well over four metres of rubble that had fallen from the church walls above at the time the building went out of use in the sixth century). The baptistry proper, it now appears, was surrounded on all sides but the north by smaller rooms which, if comparisons with baptistries elsewhere are reliable, were probably used for the rites preparatory to and accompanying baptism (e.g. removal of clothes, renunciation and exorcism, declaration of faith etc.). To say precisely what was the purpose of each room would require more detailed archaeological evidence than is actually present.

The baptismal room is a square with sides just under 10m. long, but its internal plan is symmetrically modified by apses rising to

vaults. Each corner has a brick-arched entrance, with an additional principal doorway piercing the south wall. Set centrally into the floor of this unusually shaped room is a big circular font (*piscina*) 2.4m. across and 1.3m. deep, lined internally with red and white marble slabs and surrounded by a low parapet. A cylindrical red marble pipe, carved with spiral flutes on the exterior, projects up through the centre of the floor of the font. The baptismal candidate, we may surmise, would have stepped up on to the parapet and descended into the pool via one of three small marble stairways; attendant church officials may have stood in two semicircular niches at the east and west side of the font. In and around the font, the excavators uncovered various kinds of architectural debris, including six small painted columns (apparently supporting a small canopy-like structure over the font) and six larger columns that stood directly on the mosaic floor surrounding the font. They also found a large, ornate white marble *cantharos* (flaring vase) set into the parapet and standing nearly a metre high.

The awkward shaped floor of the baptistry is totally covered with a fine polychrome mosaic divided into panels by a band of running spirals. Its subject and treatment are characteristic of the late fourth and fifth century: pairs of peacocks, a buck and does, and waterbirds face each other across four *cantharoi* from which gush the waters of life—appropriate symbols for the liturgy and beliefs surrounding baptism in the early church. The walls too were decorated with brightly coloured figured scenes including human portraiture. Scarcely any of these wall frescoes are still *in situ*, but Yugoslav experts hope to be able to reconstruct and interpret the paintings from the thousands of tiny fragments collected during excavation. It is clear, in short, that when in use the baptistry would have given an impression of splendour, colour and elaborate craftsmanship—an impression equally vivid for today's visitor, since the mosaic floor and font are preserved almost intact, and the walls stand over four metres high in places.

The Stobi baptistry is among the best preserved because it has not been disturbed since it was abandoned about 1,400 years ago. What, therefore, can be said about the rites and practices that took place there? How were baptisms performed and what kinds of subjects were baptized? Questions such as these are hard to answer using archaeological data, because the religious and ideological life of a community is an intangible entity that cannot itself be excavated. Some purely tentative (and also preliminary, since work continues) interpretations are presented here.

The baptismal pool clearly was sufficiently large to accommodate adult baptisms by immersion, being over six feet in diameter and about four feet deep. This observation is reinforced by several architectural details. The pool was apparently supplied or filled with water by a subfloor pipe; the joints in the floor of the pool are carefully sealed, suggesting that the pool was designed to hold a

body of water; some drainage facilities exist. However, we must not assume that, simply because the font is large enough, adult immersion actually occurred. Baptistries of the early Christian period tend to be very similar structurally, whether used for immersion, affusion, or both. The reason is that the architectural settings for baptism were designed to reflect baptismal symbolism rather than baptismal practices: the sacrament of baptism was, and is, pervaded by the themes of death, burial and resurrection, which receive architectural and ritual expression in the act of descending into the pool and resurrecting through the "waters of life".³ Furthermore, the ample dimensions of the baptismal pool at Stobi may be a function of the size and splendour of the baptisterial complex as a whole, rather than a deliberate provision for a specific type of ritual practice.

There is some evidence, admittedly slender, for a change in baptismal practice during the life of the baptistry. Some time after the baptistry was built, the mosaic floor was broken through in one place in order to extract the subfloor pipe (made of valuable lead), thus cutting off the pool's water supply. Does this indicate that a plentiful supply of water was no longer required because infant baptism had supplanted adult immersion? Unfortunately, the archaeologists cannot tell with any precision when the pipe was dug out, although obviously it happened after the baptistry was built in the late fourth or fifth century and before its destruction some time in the sixth century. Was the water cut off as part of the final abandonment or destruction of the church, or years and even decades previously? Our reconstruction of ritual practices in the baptistry depends in part on the answer to this question.

What was the purpose of the large marble *cantharos* set into the parapet next to the font? The *cantharos*, overflowing with foliage, or gushing with the fountain of life from which thirsty animals drink, is a common enough representation in Early Christian iconography⁴—indeed, there are four examples in the mosaic floor of the Stobi baptistry itself. However, the size of the *cantharos* on the parapet—the only such large vessel known from any baptistry—suggests a more than merely symbolic function. The best alternative is the suggestion that it held "holy" water. If this is the case, at least four plausible interpretations of its use can be suggested:

1. Baptism for all candidates involved affusion with water from the *cantharos*, whilst standing in the pool.
2. Baptism for adult believers was by immersion in the pool, whereas infants were sprinkled with water from the *cantharos*.
3. Baptism involved partial immersion *and* affusion. Although in most baptistries in the eastern empire from the fourth to eighth centuries affusion without immersion was common, there is evidence that partial immersion combined with sprinkling continued in the west.⁵
4. The water in the *cantharos* was not used for the sacrament itself,

but for some other purpose such as purification of the observing congregation.

In general, then, the evidence suggests that provision was made for adult baptisms, but it is hard to make definitive interpretations of the baptismal practices at Stobi. It should be remembered that the period from the fourth to sixth century was one not only of ritual and doctrinal formulation but also one that saw considerable change both within the church and in the larger external political and economic structures within which it operated. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find a good deal of variability from church to church and from region to region. Overriding the local variations, however, is a pan-Christian unity of thought concerning the necessity, significance and symbolic nature of the sacrament of baptism.

Finally, a word of warning. Archaeology, because it deals with things that are tangible and material, has often been expected to supply "proof" of particular viewpoints or opinions. Indeed, much archaeological information has been used (often out of context) by writers on religious subjects, on the assumption that archaeology is somehow like the pictures that illustrate a book. Unfortunately, the knowledge of the past that archaeology provides is always slanted, according to the kinds of questions we are asking. Even so, the answers are all too often unsatisfyingly imprecise or ambiguous, and—as in the case of the Stobi baptistry—must be employed only in conjunction with other lines of inquiry such as texts and iconography.

NOTES

¹ These most recent excavations are jointly directed by Professor J. R. Wiseman (Boston University) and Professor Djordje Mano-Zissi (National Museum, Belgrade), and are funded by the Foreign Currency Reserve Programme of the Smithsonian Institution of Washington. The present writer was a member of the archaeological staff at Stobi in 1971 and 1972; he is grateful to the directors for permission to write this note. Preliminary reports on the results of the new excavations have appeared in *American Journal of Archaeology*, 1971: 395-411; 1972: 407-424. The site of Stobi, including the baptistry, is open to the public; it lies on the principal road and rail route from Belgrade to Athens.

² This church has been described and illustrated by A. Hoddinott: *Early Byzantine churches in Macedonia and Southern Serbia* (1963).

³ See J. G. Davies: *The architectural setting of baptism* (1954), ch. 1.

⁴ For examples from mosaics in Greece, see J. P. Sodini: *Mosaïques paléochrétienne de Grèce*, BCH 94 (1970): 699-753.

⁵ L'abbé J. Corblet: *L'Immersion et l'infusion baptismale* (1880).

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