

NOTES
ON SOME CHRISTIAN MONUMENTS
OF TUNISIA

1. The baptistry of Sidi Mansour
and other *rosace* baptisteries ¹.

Ten kilometers north of Sfax, barely a few meters from the shore and in the territory of Sidi Mansour, excavations undertaken by Mr. Novak, with the support of military manpower, in March 1910 have brought about the discovery of a baptismal font, beautifully preserved, to which it seems appropriate to draw attention: during a visit which we made to Sfax the following May, the political events, causing the departure of part of the garrison, have necessitated the interruption of research which are still unable to be continued; however, we thought it useful to publish, without further delay, the first results ².

¹ Before a premature death took him from science, M. Paul Gauckler had greatly wanted to allow us to consult some of the documents that he had brought together on the baptisteries *a rosace* : the pages that you will read owe much to him. We accomplish a pious duty in carrying forward the memory of one who, during a time too short that was given unto know him.! We have been lavish with the generous marks of his benevolent friendship, the homage of our gratitude and our regrets.

² We here extend our most lively thanks to M. Novak who, not content to guide us around the place of his discoveries, has permitted us to study them at leisure and to get to know them. After having examined the ground and those diggings that had been executed though remaining unproductive, we have come to the conclusion the methodical excavations could provide important results, perhaps the discovery of a basilica.

[4] Plan (see last page)

[5]

The baptismal font brought to light is carved in a solid block with a total depth of 0.94m, it is entirely contained within a circumference of 2.25m diameter: in the center, the tank itself is circular, 0.27m deep with a diameter of 0.58m; three steps provide access to it: the first is 0.19m high, has the appearance of a square that is 0.75m on a side; the second is a circular bench, 1.29m in diameter, 0.205m above the previous one; finally, in the third are eight niches have been carved out, the sides rounded, 0.48m deep and 0.28m high, ¹: the whole form is like a flower with eight petals.

A glance at the map and two photographs that we publish, however, reveals that the actual disposition of the tank is not quite as we have described ³: At the ends of diameter A-B, the architect, wanting to arrange the stairs, had to make changes: the walls of niches A and B are transformed into access steps, and instead of being rounded, intersect at right angles; on the other hand, in the original plan, the first two steps have edged too close to the tank to make it possible to use them as steps and it was necessary to cut them in order to provide a place where the foot could conveniently be placed: therefore the lower level has been arranged in the form of a dodecagon and not, as [6] one would think, with the

¹ This is the height that one can measure to the only point where a petal would remain intact.

² Pl. I & fig. 1. M. Emonts, of the Antiquities Department of Tunisia, wanted to draw for us this plan, from our sketches and the measurements that we have obtained.

³ Without discussing some irregularities of detail, due to the poor quality of the construction, which an examination of the plan will reveal.

intention of reproducing the image of the cross in the center of the baptistry ¹.

At no point, it is important to note, there are traces of a canal for water supply or flow of water.

The tank was entirely covered with mosaics; those that decorated the horizontal surfaces are mostly still intact: of those which instead adorned the vertical walls, there remains only debris.

At the bottom of the central basin, on a white background and framed with a circular double row of black and red cubes, the symbol of a lamb is represented rather crudely; behind it, in red cubes (see pl. I, 2) a kind of stake, the significance of which we shall discuss later. The lamb is also represented, with even less skill, at entrance A of the tank, facing to the right, a collar of red cubes around its neck and flanked by two rosebuds. Beside it, so far as we can now judge, can be seen a dove.

The other horizontal surfaces are covered with a mosaic of geometric designs, multicolored chevrons in shades of yellow, green, red and blue; it is the same for the vertical walls. Only, the ornamental niches are different: leafy stem roses are distributed, while on their walls, diamonds or chevrons are drawn in blue, green or red cubes on a white background.¹

¹ This point could be contested if the same modification had not been made in the circular terrace, and for the same reasons : the comparison of cuts A-B and C-D is decisive in this regard.

This description and the accompanying views will permit, we hope, an account to be made with some precision on what those "baptisteries a rosace" once reported by Paul [7] Gauckler¹. It does not perhaps seem irrelevant to review their illuminated study by this example.

M. Gauckler knew five baptismal tanks of this type in Tunisia: two in Sfax, one in Uppenna, one in Henchir el Hakaima², one in Hammam-Lif³, it is worth adding another discovery, that of Zaghouan.

Both of the baptisteries in Sfax, unearthed in 1886 and 1887, the first near the Kasbah, the other in the Mezghani mounds, and destroyed almost immediately, were briefly described by Dr. Vercoutre and M. Gauckler⁴. While it is difficult, according to published information, to represent the first with a precision⁵, this is fortunately not so with the second.

The tank, with a diameter of 1.50m and a total depth of 0.90m, was much less extensive than that of Sidi Mansour and built on a simpler plan. If indeed one finds two staircases at the ends of the same diameter⁶, if in the upper tier, moreover, there had been constructed six cells, it would have been necessary, due to the restricted surface available, to do without [8] the lower level¹. There was, therefore, if we understand the description which has been provided, a deep and narrow central tank, bordered by a circular bench surmounted by a row of six niches.

Our interpretation seems so much more likely given that the baptistry of Hammam-Lif clearly presents this same arrangement². The general appearance is that of a rose with six

¹ P. Gauckler, *Comptes-rendus de l'Acad. des Inscriptions*, 1901, p. 604.

² Or Henchir el Kenisia, in the Sahel, to the north of the Arab village d'Edjouahouda, near l'Henchir-Bouchbil. Cf. *Atlas archéologique de la Tunisie*, sheet LXXIV (Mahdia), n° 19. Discovered in 1889 by M. Sadoux.

³ Near Tunis.

⁴ Vercoutre, *Revue archéologique*, 1887, 2, p. 28 & 192-193. Gauckler, in *l'Inventaire des mosaïques de la Gaule, et de l'Afrique*, II, n° 34 & 35. Cf. also La Blanchère, *Comptes-rendus de l'Acad. des Inscriptions*, 1887, p. 93, & *Collections du Musée Alaoui*, p. 53.

⁵ « A tank with thick walls of poor masonry » ; « steps descending inside and seats fitted in the thickness of the wall », says Dr. Vercoutre ; « three steps in mosaïque », adds La Blanchère; and this permits us to legitimately recognize without doubt a baptistry which approaches the type that we describe here, but without the precise characteristics.

⁶ Oriented S.E.-N.W., whilst in the baptistry of Sidi-Mansour, it is oriented N.-S.

leaflets of which one offers an access step, inscribed in a circumference with a diameter of 1.68m: in the center is the tank itself, 0.60m deep, 0.75m wide, and bordered by a circular bench surmounted by a step of 0.65m; in the upper part the niches open out, 0.20m deep.

Still very similar in its general features, if not its size, is the second baptistry of the basilica of Uppenna³; the central tank is surrounded by a circular bench dominated by a low step, and another above it, in which seven cells are formed "half-cylindrical ... each 0.37m in diameter⁴", and the eighth was converted into steps. [9]

1 This is at least the only interpretation that I could find to the phrases of Dr. Vercoutre: "the upper edge [of the tank] widens and spreads out horizontally to form a narrow circular bench, open in two places and topped by six niches" ... "six niches, immediately above the bench." As for the steps, the description is obscure and contradictory: for one, we are told, four and a half steps have been conserved; for the other, two steps and a half; the steps, very narrow, are each about 0.35m wide and 0.24 high: a simple multiplication shows us that such a height does not correspond to the depth that one attributes to the tank.

2 Gauckler, *Inventaire...*, 11, n° 506. Rogers, *Baptism and Christian archaeology*, in volume V of the *Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica* from Oxford, p. 343, & fig. 60. The figure is reproduced in the *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne*, of Dom Cabrol, volume II, 1, col. 462.

3 Gauckler, *Nouv. Arch. des Missions*, v. XV, 1907, 4th fasc, p. 418-419 & pl. XVII. Cagnat, *Arch. des Missions*, 3rd série, v. XI, p. 20-21 & fig. Cf. also Robin, *Bull. arch. du Comité*, 1905, p. 368-369.

4 Cagnat, *loc. cit.*

At Zaghouan¹ on the contrary, it appears, from the brief description that we have, that the resemblance with the monument of Sidi-Mansour is even closer, the baptismal font, 2.57m in diameter and 1.06m in total depth, has eight cells and three tiers. However, with the tank of Uppenna, it is not lined with mosaics, but simply "bricked and covered with a compact coat in a perfect state of preservation.

So, including among them the baptistry of Henchir el Hakaïma², seven monuments which reproduce entirely, in the essentially points, the same type of which no other copies are found outside of Tunisia. Under what conditions did they try to develop its design? at what time and under what influences was it widespread in Proconsular [Rome] and Byzacena?

It is remarkable that, in the tanks described, there is no indication of where the bishop would stand to confer the sacrament. Two two stairs in place at Sidi-Mansour and Sfax have the purpose of facilitating the *descensio et ascensio fontis* [descent to and ascent from the font] by two different places³, and none of the cells has anything in particular to indicate the role of the officiant. On the other hand, the narrow niches⁴ prohibit the assumption that they could serve as seats, although we wanted to [10] represent some

1 Hannezo, *Bull. arch. du Comité*, 1905 p. 416.

3 The description given of it by P. Gauckler (*Inventaire...*, II, n° 119) is too brief, to permit the determination of the type which best corresponds to that of Sidi-Mansour or that of Hammam-Lif.

3 Cf. the verse of the grammarian Calbulus (De Rossi, *Inser. christ.*, II, p. 240: *Riese, Anthol.*, I, n° 378) and the passages of St. Ambrois cited by Dom Puniet in the *Dict. d'archéol. chrétienne.*, II, 1, col. 320.

4 0.33m to 0.40m at Sidi-Mansour, 0.35m approximately at the Mezghani mounds, 0.37m at Uppenna.

"persons seated ... legs in the tank",¹ a strange position, as ridiculous as inconvenient, that no other document allows us apply to neophytes. Finally think, with Mr. Gauckler, that "many catechumens could take place in order to *simultaneously*² receive the baptism" is impossible: nothing that we know of the baptismal rite authorizes such an assumption and it is obviously in the central tank the triple immersion of the neophyte took place.

We should believe instead, but this is only a hypothesis, that the "elected" are placed around the pool to start with, feet in the niches, and then are immersed one by one³; there is no other way to have so many around the fonts: the stairs would remain free and it would be convenient to reserve the necessary space around the tank for the bishop and clergy who attended. Moreover, whether we adopt that assumption or prefer another, it provides a practical interpretation for these cells uniformly distributed around the periphery of the pool: perhaps we could look for an explanation of the symbolic figure of eight, eight being a perfect number, but then how could we explain the fact that the number of alveoli is not constant, that at Hammam-Lif the escutcheon has six leaflets, and seven leaflets Uppenna? Do not forget, however, that these monuments date back to a period earlier than when they attributed mysterious meanings to architectural forms.

It is indeed from the Byzantine era, specifically the late sixth century that this group of baptisteries should date: an examination of their mosaic decorations had already brought Paul Gauckler to that conclusion, which the study of the tank at Sidi Mansour confirmed. [11]

At Hammam-Lif, Sfax and Henchir el Hakaima, we meet the Greek or Latin cross, sometimes marked with the z and the w and we know that it was only common in Africa in

1 Vercoutre, *Loc. cit.*, p. 198.

2 Our emphasis.

3 Cf. Duchesne, *Origines du culte chrétien*, p. 312-314. It refers to the Roman rite, but we have no proof that the African rite differed in any regard at this point.

the sixth century¹; the baptistry of Uppenna belonged to a Byzantine basilica²; Sidi Mansour finally, where the lamb marked at the bottom of the central tank, brings in a new argument to favor this theory.

We are not really in the presence of one of those banal representations of the Mystic Lamb, which were so common in the decoration of the baptistry, but rather an image of the crucified Lamb. Behind the Lamb, and illustrated in red cubes, was a stake driven into the ground whose presence is inexplicable if we do not consent to see the cross on which – drawn clumsily it is true – the mosaic would have placed the symbol of the Saviour not yet daring to show Christ himself. This subject was more suitable nowhere else than in a baptistry, in the place where the sacrament is administered by which the neophyte who is reborn to a new life is due to receive the sacrifice that Christ has consummated for his salvation; and on this humble monument of African Christianity in the second half of the sixth century, it is not surprising to find a representation as rare and as meaningful. For this theme of iconography only appears in the West in the 6th century and in works where the Byzantine influence is clear: such as for example the cross of St Peter's Basilica, offered by Justin II and the Empress Sophia, and like a earlier columns of the *ciborium* of St. Mark's in Venice³.

We therefore assume that the baptisteries *a rosace* date from the Byzantine era, but what is the origin? Not in the the rest of [12] Roman Africa, nor Italy, nor even in the East

1 Cf. Gsell, *Les monuments antiques de l'Algérie*, II, p. 115-116, note.

2 Ganekler, *Nouv. Arch. des Missions*, t. XV. I^o fase. 1907, p. 118-119.

3 Cf. Leclercq, in the *Dictionnaire d'archéologie* of Dom Cabrol, I, 1, col. 896 ; Venturi, *Storia dell'arte Italiana*, I, p. 510.

has a baptismal pool been brought to light of the same type; we can not find any analogies.

In Algeria, they are very rare: circular pools are known there that are accessed by steps, rounded or rectangular, such as a baptistry in Sidi Feruch¹ with a basin of 1.05m in

diameter in which "three rounded little steps are arranged symmetrically on three sides" to provide access; such as the pool of Gouéa², which you descend by a flight of three steps, to the right and left of which are two semi-circular recesses; or the baptistry at Castiglione³, accessible by "four steps, two rounded and two rectangular ... arranged in a cross." None of these three types can be the origin of the baptistry *a rosace*.

It is probably more appropriate to be looking among the cruciform tanks found in the Orient, such as in particular the pool of Beit' Auwa in Palestine⁴; it consists primarily of a pool, circular or rectangular, with four steps and surmounted by four semi-circular recesses. It is probably in the development of this form, which perhaps had for its origin a symbolic meaning - because the symbolism of the cross is the simplest and most primitive of all - and by a series of intermediaries stages today forgotten, has gradually become the "*rosace*" type. And this does not diminish the originality of the architects of Proconsular Rome and Byzacena that being inspired by foreign models were able to bring this new form to perfection.

Later, we will meet a humble Christian basilica [13] with Eastern influences; why, in these baptisteries to which no monument of Italy comes close, should we not recognize also some Asian origins?

1 Gsell, *Les monuments antiques de l'Algérie*, II, p. 258.

2 Gsell, *op. cit.*, II, p. 198-199 & fig. 122.

3 Gsell, *op. cit.*, II, p. 188-189, & fig. 120.

4 Conder & Kitchener, *The survey of Western Palestine*, vol. III, p. 821 ; cf. Leclercq, in the *Dictionnaire* of Dom Cabrol, II, 1, col. 454 & fig. 1369.

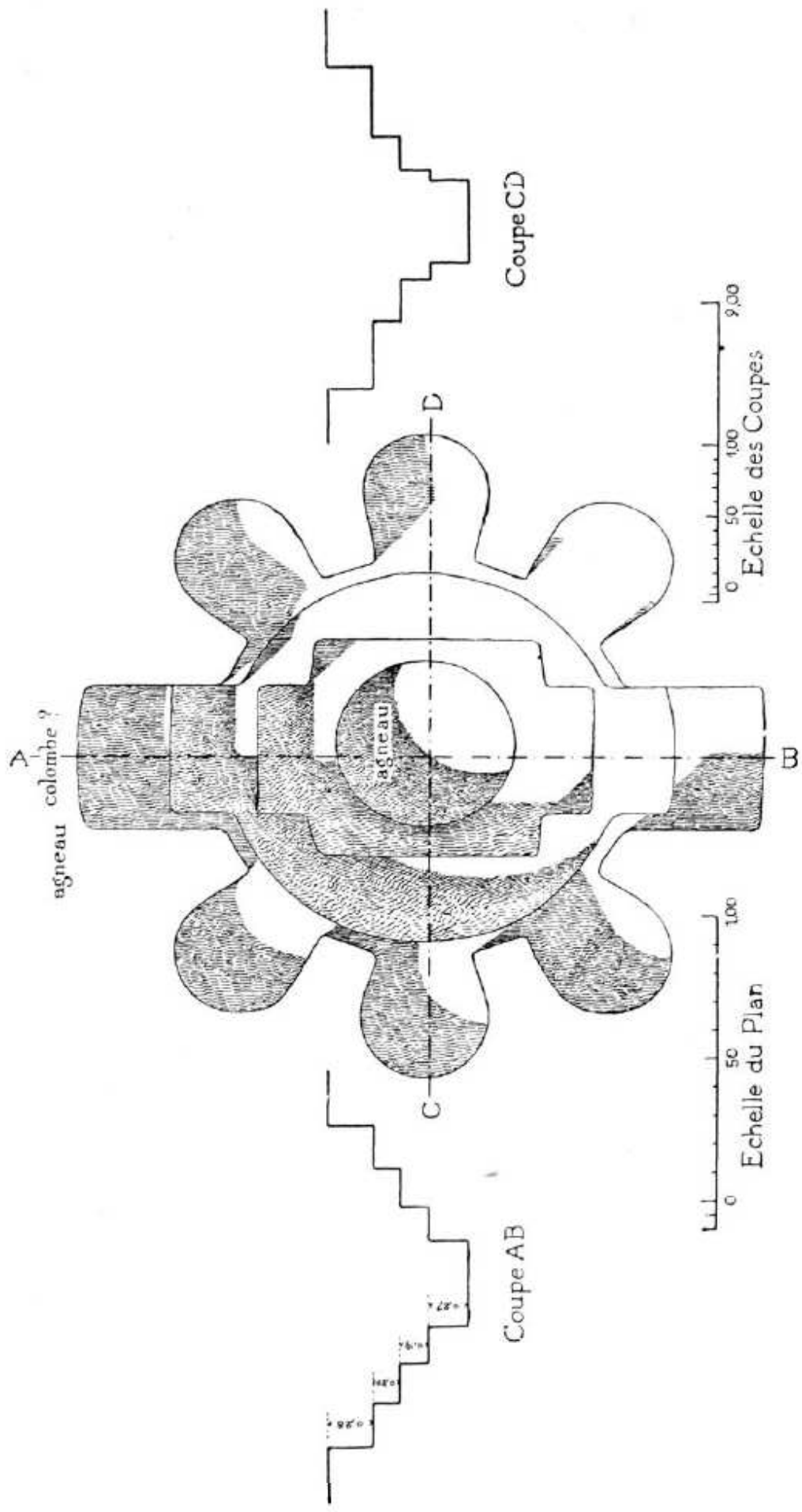


Fig. 1. - Plan of the baptismal tank of Sidi-Mansour

Notes sur quelques monuments chrétiens de Tunisie [Notes on some Christian monuments in Tunisia]

In: Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire T. 32, 1912. pp. 3-26.

Massigli René. Notes sur quelques monuments chrétiens de Tunisie.
In: Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire T. 32, 1912. pp. 3-26.

http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/mefr_0223-4874_1912_num_32_1_7064