

THE ARMENIAN GRAFFITO FROM THE SOUTHERN CHURCH OF SHIVTA

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ABSTRACT

The brief report is dedicated to a fragmentary Armenian graffito, recently discovered in the apse of the Byzantine Southern Church of Shivta, in the Negev desert. The location of the graffito and its paleographic analysis allows to date it to the 9th-11th centuries, already after the abandonment of the site, and testifies to the continuous tradition of Christian pilgrimage, connecting Palestine with the sanctuaries of the Sinai.

RÉSUMÉ

Le bref rapport est dédié à un graffito fragmentaire arménien, récemment découvert dans l'abside de l'église byzantine de Shivta, dans le désert du Néguev. L'emplacement du graffito et son analyse paléographique le font remonter aux 9^e-11^e siècles, déjà après l'abandon du site, et témoignent de la continuité du pèlerinage chrétien, reliant la Palestine aux sanctuaires du Sinai.

Shivta (ancient Sobota: Arabic- Isbeita or Subeita) is a large Byzantine village (about 90 dunams: 9 hectares), is located on the northern

bank of Naḥal Zitan in the Central Negev Desert, about 8 miles (10 km.) east of Nessana, at extensive agricultural region. Shivta, identified with Σόβατα, was apparently established as early as the first century C.E., and reached its zenith during the Byzantine period, in the fifth – sixth centuries C.E., when it was embellished by three churches. The decline of Shivta during the Early Islamic period (seventh – eighth centuries C.E.) evident distinct episodes of social upheaval. Unlike other important Byzantine sites at the region (Nessana, Elusa and Rehobot) which were established along main roads, Shivta is located at a remote location, far from the main commercial and Holy Land pilgrimage routes (Fig. 1).¹

As part of our ongoing archaeological project that aim to reconstruct the causes for the emergence, long-term persistence and ultimate collapse of Shivta we also explored the main features of the southern church and its adjacent structures.² The various depictions observed there provide direct evidence to our endeavor to attach a face and a name to the material remains that are used as catalyst to detect the presence of discrete socio-cultural groups and reconstruct their respective economies, politics and environments from specific material fingerprints.

The Southern church of Shivta, probably the oldest one in the site, most probably was built during the late fifth – early sixth century as a

¹ See: Yehuda KEDAR, “Ancient Agriculture at Shivtah in the Negev”, *IEJ* 7 (1957) 178-189; Arthur SEGAL, *Shivta: Portrait of a Byzantine City in the Negev Desert*, Haifa, University of Haifa, 1986 (Hebrew); Joseph SHERESHEVSKI, *Byzantine Urban Settlements in the Negev Desert* (Beer-Sheva, 5), Beer Sheva, Ben-Gurion University, 1991, 61-82; Yoram TSAFRIR, Leah DI SEGNI and Judith GREEN, *Tabula Imperii Romani. Iudaea – Palaestina*, Jerusalem, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994, 234; Pau FIGUERAS, “Monks and Monasteries in the Negev Desert”, *LASBF* 45 (1995) 401-450, 436-442; Ya’akov BAUMGARTEN, *Shivta. Archaeological Survey of Israel*, 166, Jerusalem, Israel Antiquities Authorities, 2005:

http://www.antiquities.org.il/survey/newmap_en.asp#zoom=8.0000;xy:34.80852508545,31.298049926757;mapname=166; Yizhar HIRSCHFELD, “Social Aspects of the Late-Antique Village of Shivta”, *JRAR* 16 (2003) 395-408; Yizhar HIRSCHFELD and Yotam TEPPER, “Columbarium Towers and Other Structures in the Environs of Shivta”, *TA* 33 (2006) 83-116, and more reference therein. For routes in the Negev, see: Y. TSAFRIR, L. DI SEGNI and J. GREEN, *Tabula*, Roman road map, South.

² This study was conducted under the license of the Israel Antiquities Authority (G-87/2015, G-4/2016) and permit of Israel Nature and Parks Authority (6002/16). The project has received funding from the European Research Council under the EU’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (648427) and the Israel Science Foundation (340–14). Thanks the National Parks authority, especially to Avi Bitton from Shivta National park and to Ami and Dina Oah from Nabato Farm at Shivta for their help. We also wish to thank Avi Blumankrantz for field drawings and Sapir Haad for the illustrative materials for this article.

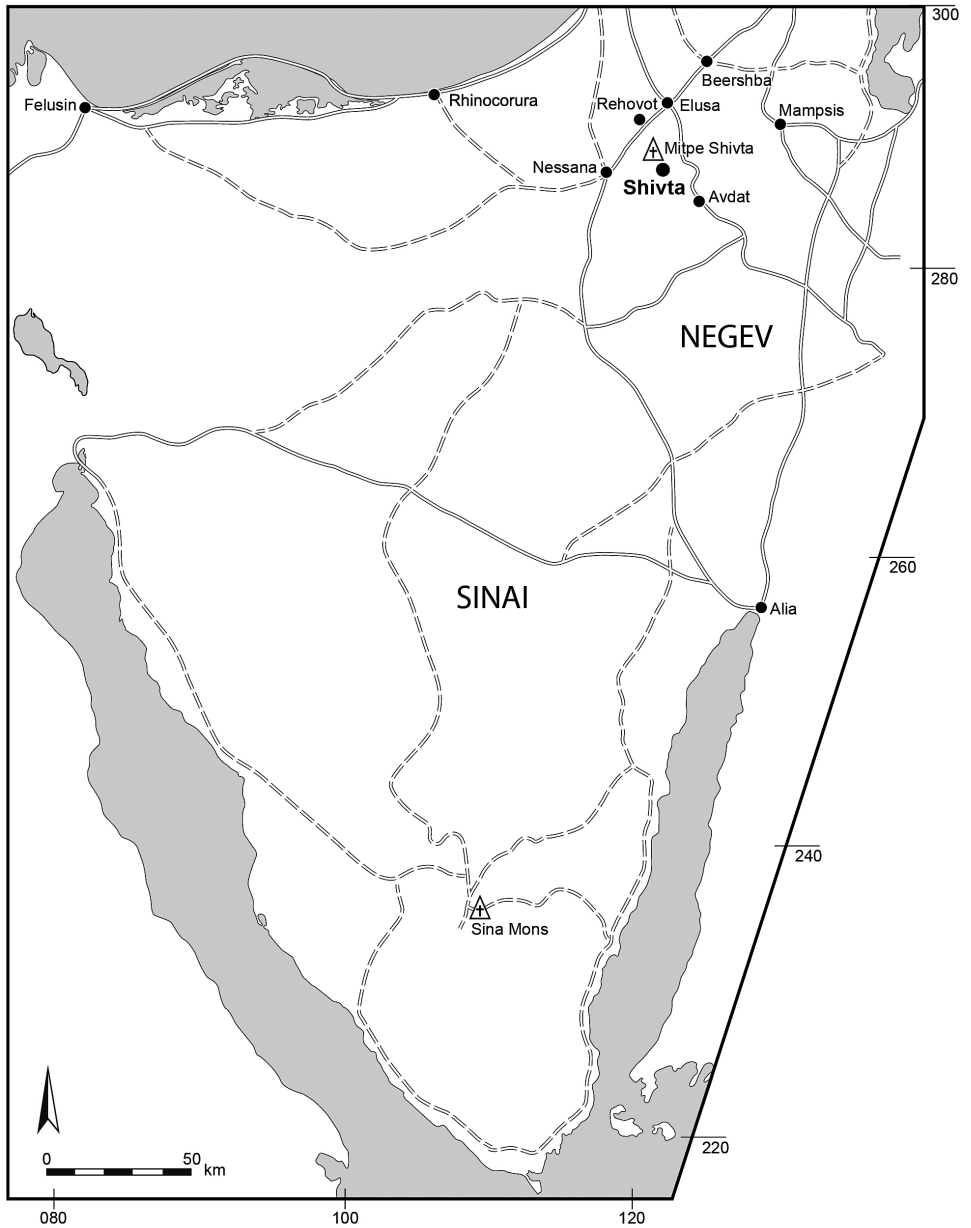


Fig. 1. Pilgrims' routes in the Negev and the Sinai. After Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994.



Fig. 2. The Southern Church of Shivta. Photo: Y. Tepper

triapsidal basilica, measuring 19 by 14.3 m.³ According to Figueras, a Greek graffito detected on a wall, marks the church possible dedication to St. Stephen.⁴ Similar to other structures on the site, the walls of the southern church are preserved standing on a significant height (Fig. 2).

³ Colin BALLY, "S'beita", *PEQ* 67 (1935) 171-181, 176-177; Renate ROSENTHAL-HEGINBOTTOM, *Die Kirchen von Sobota und die Dreiapsidenkirchen des Nahen Ostens*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1982, 63-83; Arthur SEGAL, "Shivta, A Byzantine Town in the Negev Desert", *JSAH* 44 (1985) 317-328, 322-323; A. SEGAL, *Shivta*; Avraham NEGEV, "Sobata", in: Ephraim STERN (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Vol. 4, Jerusalem, Israel Exploration Society, 1993, 1404-1410; Y. HIRSCHFELD, "Social Aspects". For inscriptions found at the southern Church see: George E. KIRK, "Era Problems in the Greek Inscriptions of the Southern Desert", *JPOS* 17 (1937) 209-217; Avraham NEGEV, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev*, Jerusalem, Franciscan Printing Press, 1981, 61-62; Leah DI SEGNI, "Dated Greek Inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine Periods", PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997, 819-823, who dates the southern annex of the church to the years 508-529.

⁴ P. FIGUERAS, "Monks and Monasteries", no. 4, Fig. 5; Pau FIGUERAS, "New Greek Inscriptions from the Negev", *LASBF* 46 (1996) 265-284. For more inscriptions from Shivta mentioning St. Stephen, see A. NEGEV, *Inscriptions from the Negev*, nos. 51-52, 58-59, 69-70, 72.

In the southern apse of the Church painting depicting the scene of the Transfiguration was still clearly visible in the late 19th – early 20th century.⁵ The Greek inscription preserved in the southern aisle records that the floors were relaid in 639/640 by a bishop George and the archdeacon and economus Peter.⁶ Based on parallels from other Negev sites, it was proposed that the side chapels of the church were containing the holy relics that were exposed for numerous pilgrims.⁷

Similar to other Negev sites, Sobota was abandoned sometime after the Arab conquest. Some of the architectural fragments of the church décor were reused for newly built mosque.⁸ Cufic inscription dates its construction to the late 7th – beginning of the 8th century C.E.⁹ The date of the final abandonment of the site is debatable, weaving between the seventh to the tenth (beginning of the eleventh) centuries C.E.¹⁰

⁵ The painting was first record by Edward Henry PALMER, *The Desert of the Exodus. Journeys on Foot in the Wilderness of the Forty Years' Wanderings*, Cambridge, Deighton, Bell and Co., 1871, 375. The scene first identified by C. Leonard WOOLLEY and Thomas E. LAWRENCE, *The Wilderness of Zin (Archaeological Report)*, London, Palestine Exploration Fund, 1914-1915, 89-90; see also Pau FIGUERAS, "Remains of a Mural Painting of the Transfiguration in the Southern Church of Sobata (Shivta)", *ARAM* 18-19 (2006-2007) 127-151. The scene was examined lately by modern methods, see Ravit LINN, Yotam TEPPER and Guy BAR-OZ, "Visible Induced Luminescence Reveals Invisible Rays Shining from Christ in the Early Christian Wall Painting of the Transfiguration in Shivta", *Plos One*, forthcoming.

⁶ See L. DI SEGNI, "Dated Greek Inscriptions", 826-827, no. 327, and more references therein.

⁷ Pilgrims' hospice (*xenodochium*) with a small church and various facilities for travellers was discovered in Mizpe Shivta, 6 km north of Shivta. Its identification with a hospice of St. George mentioned by *Piacenza Pilgrim* 35, was verified by Greek inscriptions, dated to the late 6th century: see Pau FIGUERAS, "The Location of *xenodochium Sancti Georgii* in the Light of Two Inscriptions in Mizpe Shivta", *ARAM* 18-19 (2006-2007) 509-526; Ya'akov BAUMGARTEN, "Mitzpe Shivta", in: A. SEGAL, *Shivta*, 97-108 (Hebrew).

⁸ Glenn PEERS, "Crosses' Work Underfoot: Christian Spolia in the Late Antique Mosque at Shivta in the Negev Desert (Israel)", *Eastern Christian Art* 8 (2011) 101-119. As part of our present research (see note 2, above), we also study the spolia elements in Shivta in general and those removed from the Christian buildings, such as the Southern Church, in particular. The results of this study will be published later.

⁹ Bilha MOOR, "Mosque and Church: Arabic Inscriptions at Shivta in the Early Islamic Period", *JSAI* 40 (2013) 73-141.

¹⁰ For Byzantine-Islamic transition debates, see Rehav RUBIN, "Urbanization, Settlement and Agriculture in the Negev Desert: The Impact of the Roman-Byzantine Empire on the Frontier", *ZDPV* 112 (1996) 49-60; Jodi MAGNESS, *The Archaeology of the Early Islamic Settlement in Palestine*, Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, 2003, 77-194, esp. 185-187; Gideon AVNI, "The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in the Negev: An Archaeological Perspective", *JSAI* 35 (2008) 1-26; ID., *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine: An Archaeological Approach*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, 261-267, for Shivta - 263; see also Yotam TEPPER, Lior WEISSBORD and Guy BAR-OZ, "Behind Sealed Doors: Unravelling

Since its complete abandonment Shivta remained in destruction until the nineteenth century when the increasing curiosity of adventurers and researchers to explore the Negev sites discovered its magnificent ruins.¹¹ Post its abandonment the apses of the Southern church were left in well preserved heights, with the remains of original paintings on the northern apse and some minor remains also on the southern apses. On the other hand, the wall of the central apse was probably covered with marble and plaster, which were removed in unknown time, most probably at a short time after the destruction of the Church. Following years of abandonment numerous graffiti were concentrated on this barren wall.¹² This include a single Armenian wall writing which is the focus of this paper.

The Armenian graffito inscription (Fig. 3), is incised by a sharp instrument, chiseled from the middle of a hewn stone (0.25 × 0.5 m.) at the eastern side of the apse on the eighth row of stones, at the height of 2.8 m. above the church floor. The graffito width is 0.24 m, letters' height is 0.17 m. The text consists of only two uncial letters:

ԲՍ,
BA

The inscription is too fragmentary to propose reading. Possibly, the two letters represent initials, or beginning of the visitor's name.¹³ Judging by the shape of the second letter, the inscription most probably dates to the ninth – eleventh centuries, i.e. already after the abandonment of the site.¹⁴ This paleographic dating matches well with its context. Clearly, no pilgrim could possibly leave his signature on the apse wall of the

Abandonment Dynamics at the Byzantine Site of Shivta in the Negev Desert", *Antiquity Project Gallery* 348 (2015): <http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/bar-oz348>.

¹¹ See for example, E. H. PALMER, *The Desert of the Exodus*, 375.

¹² It should be mentioned, that beside the Armenian letters, dozens of graffiti suggested as Bedouin marks (wisāms) are seen on the very same apse wall. Those wisāms will be publish in a separate research, we want to thank Rabei G. Khamisy for his help in that issue. Although, the fragmentary character of the discussed graffito lead to its possible interpretation as Bedouin wisām, its position on the apse wall, situated in an isolated manner from the other graffiti at the higher eastern side of the apse, and its visual dissimilarity to all known wisām marks, supports our assumption to identify the graffito as Armenian.

¹³ Unfinished Armenian inscriptions, consisting one or two letters, are attested from the Sinai: see, for example Michael E. STONE, *The Armenian Inscriptions from the Sinai*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982, 67, S ARM 1; 96-97, M ARM 4; 97, M ARM 5; 99, H ARM 1; 122, H ARM 30.

¹⁴ Deep gratitude should be expressed to Michael E. Stone of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for preliminary dating of the inscription.



Fig. 3. The Armenian grafitto and its location. Photo: Y. Tepper.

functioning church. Most probably, the by-passer wrote it when standing on the heap of stones that collapsed from the church wall. For unknown reasons, the inscription was never completed.

Up to date, the Armenian pilgrims' graffiti dated to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods were discovered in archaeological excavations in Jerusalem¹⁵ and in Nazareth.¹⁶ Nearly a hundred Armenian graffiti were recorded on the Sinai Peninsula, along the pilgrimage routes leading to Mount Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine. They were discovered during the survey carried out by the Rock Inscriptions and Graffiti Project and usually found in the vicinity of holy sites, with the earliest examples dated to the fifth century.¹⁷ The increasing wave of pilgrims visiting Sinai reached its peak during the sixth and seventh centuries, with particularly large groups of Armenians, consisting of several hundred each (*Anast. Sin.*, 38).¹⁸

The Christian pilgrimage movement towards the Sinai sanctuaries did not stopped also after the Arabic conquest and continued, almost without interruption till modern era and Armenians were not the exceptional.¹⁹ Numerous Armenian graffiti were found in the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, in the Holy Sepulchre Church and the sanctuaries of the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem.²⁰ However, all of these should be dated to the

¹⁵ Ronny REICH and Eli SHUKRON, "The Western Extramural Quarter of Byzantine Jerusalem", in: Michael E. STONE, Roberta ERVINE and Nira STONE (eds.), *The Armenians in Jerusalem and the Holy Land*, Leuven, Peeters, 2002, 193-201; Michael E. STONE, Doron BEN-AMI and Yana TCHEKHANOVETS, "New Armenian Inscriptions from the City of David, Jerusalem", *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 23 (2014) 149-152; ID., "Armenian Graffito from the City of David, Jerusalem", *REArm* 37 (2016-2017) 283-286.

¹⁶ Michael E. STONE, "Armenian Inscriptions of the Fifth Century from Nazareth", *REArm* 22 (1990-1991) 315-322.

¹⁷ M. E. STONE, *Inscriptions from the Sinai*; ID., "The Greek Background of Some Armenian Pilgrims to the Sinai and Some Other Observations", in: Thomas J. SAMUELIAN and Michael E. STONE (eds.), *Medieval Armenian Culture* (ArTS, 6), Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 1984, 194-202.

¹⁸ François NAU, "Le texte grec des récits du moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sinai", *OrChr* 2 (1902) 58-89; ID., *Les récits inédits du moine Anastase*, Paris, Picard et Fils, 1902. For discussion see M. E. STONE, *Inscriptions from the Sinai*, 27-31.

¹⁹ Casper J. KRAEMER, *Excavations at Nessana (Auja Hafir, Palestine)*, Vol. III: *Non-Literary Papyri*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1958, 205-208; Avraham NEGEV, *The Inscriptions of Wadi Haggag, Sinai* (Qedem, 6), Jerusalem, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1977, 76-80; Philip MAYERSON, "The Pilgrim Routes to Mount Sinai and the Armenians", *IEJ* 32 (1982) 44-57; Uzi DAHARI, *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in Byzantine Period. The Archaeological Remains* (IAA Reports, 9), Jerusalem, Israel Antiquities Authority, 2000.

²⁰ See the database of the "Rock Inscriptions and Graffiti Project": <http://www.rockinscriptions.huji.ac.il>.

Crusader period or later times, mostly to the 14th – 17th centuries, at the zenith of the Armenian pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

It is not clear what could attract the Armenian pilgrim to Shivta, already when the site lost its importance as a pilgrimage station and its sanctuaries were completely abandoned. Perhaps, the tradition of its veneration was not completely forgotten, and continued to engage occasional visitors. Possibly, the road passing through Shivta was preferable to Armenians, who, according to certain evidences, seem to avoid beaten tracks in their pilgrimage journeys.²¹

In any case, this first, modest Armenian evidence from the Negev region may supply “a missing link” in the Armenian pilgrimage route connecting between the major holy sites of central and northern Palestine and the Sinai Peninsula.

²¹ See the distribution of the Armenian pilgrim graffiti on Sinai, along the roads passing via Wadi Mukatab and Wadi Haggag, noted by M. E. STONE, *Inscriptions from the Sinai*, 41-51. Wadi Mukatab together with Wadi Maghara were parts of the main route through Western Sinai, and according to the historical records, was the road that is most frequently mentioned as used by pilgrims. The Wadi Haggag road runs through the Eastern part of Sinai. The distribution of the Armenian inscriptions described by Stone is surprising: only five graffiti were found along the western road, while seventy inscriptions were discovered in Wadi Haggag. Notably, the distribution of the Greek Christian inscriptions, recorded by A. NEGEV, *Wadi Haggag*, is equal along both roads, eastern and western. Stone explains this phenomenon by the anti-Chalcedonian dogmatic position of the Armenians, schismatic in the eyes of the Christian majority.