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Divine Interiors: Meaning, Spirituality, and Evolution in Baptismal Ritual Space.

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Divine Interiors: Meaning, Spirituality, and Evolution in Baptismal Ritual Space.



Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Arts

of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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To mom and dad, I love you, and I am forever grateful for the people you are, and for the person
you have helped me to become.

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Introduction

Baptism is one of Christianity's richest and most fascinating sacraments; a ritual whose form is in many ways a primal one - fixated on belonging, on the trials of acceptance and the sacred integrity of community. Baptism is a rite of inclusion, yet it is also a means of violent exclusion, an ordeal designed to break the chains and hobbles of the human condition, to banish the spiritual and bodily defilement of animal existence, and, in so doing, to deny the harsh realities of the flesh. The complexity of baptism as a social and spiritual phenomenon extends also into the realm of visual culture, whose history is a telling and vital mechanism for understanding the ritual as a whole. From the time of its earliest practice to the establishment of its final, canonical, and, for all intents and purposes, still current form, the baptismal ritual underwent massive change. Alongside this evolution in ritual practice necessarily came an adaptation in the spatial and visual mediums employed to house it. These changes, evident in the scale, layout, and decoration of surviving baptisteries, fonts, and image programs from across Europe and the Mediterranean, offer an unique portal into the shifting universe of Christian semiology, eschatology, and popular religion as it developed through the turbulent and seminal centuries dividing the twilight of imperial Rome in the 4th century and the peak of medieval civilization in the 13th.

Through this project I aim to investigate the ways in which baptism - as ritual, as space, and as experience - developed throughout the Early Christian and medieval periods in tandem with the evolution of cultural context. By investigating a series of iterations of baptismal ritual and space I hope to generate distinct lenses through which to view the phenomena of Christian baptism - as both expressions of a wider system of belief and practice, and as raw materials for the generation of individual significations. These case studies will in turn enable me to define the

ways in which different cultures, times, spaces, and conditions drew in the medieval period, as they continue to do today, upon broader cultural and theological concepts as breeding grounds for individual and communal experience.

To accomplish this I will be addressing three structures, architectural and otherwise, designed to house and facilitate the performance of the baptismal ritual. Throughout this discussion I will utilize primary sources proximate to the dates of my respective case studies, alongside secondary sources that treat these sites. Beginning with the earliest known dedicated baptismal structure, located in Dura Europos, Syria (ca.235 C.E.), Chapter 1 will focus mainly on the use of baptismal space within a wider complex to dramatize the ritual on a somatic, symbolic, and communal level; a discussion that will in turn feed my analysis of the visual program within the baptistery, linking the topography of the ritual to the visual stimuli of its environment. This analytical integration of spatial and visual design will serve to introduce the more complex artistic and architectural program found in Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna, Italy (late 4th century C.E.) - which I will discuss in Chapter 2. In addressing this monument, constructed later and under drastically different conditions than the baptistery at Dura Europos, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the baptistery's design, and its function as both a ritual space and a symbolic focal point of the community, reflects the conditions under which it was conceived. Finally, Chapter 3 pursues these ideas into the high medieval context through an investigation of the baptismal font at Hildesheim, Germany (early 13th century C.E.), a monument whose distinct form and usage characterize the changes that occurred in the practice and meaning of baptism during the Middle Ages, and the significance of these changes as they relate to the wider role of the Christian Church within society.

Together, these three monuments will, I hope, offer a series of highly socially, historically, and culturally specific iterations of the visual, spatial, and ritual event that is baptism. In articulating the changing particularities of the baptismal ritual as it evolved through and within the spaces built to house it across historical and geographical landscapes, and in placing these spaces within an overarching symbolic, artistic, and theological framework, I will attempt to lend grounding and context to these otherwise distinct iterations of baptismal practice. This approach treats baptism as a cross cultural, pan-historical practice; a structure of belonging rooted in a stable and consistent core of religious doctrine, but one that at the same time preserves within this universality a flexibility capable of adapting to changing contexts. Scholarship on baptism so far has treated baptismal spaces only on an individual basis, and with little consideration of ritual outside of the most generic contextualization. In characterizing baptism as a ritually and spatially diverse sacrament bound by a common theology, I hope to expand our understanding of the relationship of ritual to space - not just as practical filler for artistic and architectural creations, but as the dialectic partner to shifting ritual arenas, capable of reacting to the changing realities of religious, social, and political history. This approach provides a way to consider the intersections between visual culture, ritual, social context, and baptismal space within the shifting timeline of the sacrament; thereby de-isolating the spaces and image programs it addresses and putting them in dialogue with both their predecessors and their successors as distinct but related manifestations of the same basic function - moments in dialogue with one another across changing realities.

To begin discussing baptism as it existed through the Early Christian and medieval periods it is necessary to first outline the ritual. A framework of doctrinal, symbolic, and ritual generalities underlies the baptismal rite; generalities that serve to bind the ritual to itself across

history, offering a cohesive and universally applicable set of concepts underlying the finer details of time, place, and social meaning. Baptism was, in its most essential form, a rite of admission - a point of entry into the arena of Christian practice and belief; indeed being a Christian was first and foremost defined by having received the sacrament of baptism. This identificatory function has its origins in the context, both social and spiritual, that originally surrounded and inspired the sacrament of baptism. Specifically, the division of the Christian community into those who, having undergone the baptismal rite, were considered fully Christian, and those who were not yet initiated, provided the foundational structuring mechanism through which the baptismal ritual attained both its social importance and its specific religious meaning. In the early Church, the community of unbaptized believers, called catechumens - who in the early centuries of the Christian Church were mostly adult converts - were held at a distance from the practicing congregation during the initial phase of their assimilation into the Church; a period of time during which they were expected to learn the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Moreover, prior to baptism, catechumens were disallowed access to the primary mysteries of the Church - most notably the sacrament of the mass; and thus the baptismal rite, as the first sacrament in which the catechumens were allowed to participate, embodied a point of transition between exclusion and integration - between the ignorance of an outsider and the understanding of one privy to the mysteries of the Christian Church.¹

This transition from outsider to member was in turn given spiritual justification through the soteriological meaning ascribed to the baptismal ritual. For in being baptized the individual was believed to undergo a kind of rebirth, a transformation of body and soul by which he or she would attain eternal life. This belief was in turn grounded in the soteriological and eschatological

¹ St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, trans. T. Thomson B.D. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 45-46.

doctrines surrounding the person, and the sacrifice, of Christ. Specifically, the baptismal rite aimed to unite both physically and spiritually the person the initiate with that of Christ - thereby allowing the individual to participate in the promise of resurrection bought through His death. Thus it was after Christ's active and moral example that the baptismal ritual was modeled both practically and symbolically. In joining itself to the life and person of Jesus Christ the baptismal ritual provided a medium of interaction between the initiate and God - a point of communion through which to channel the immortal benefit of Christ's act of redemption. Symbolic ritual emulation thus precipitated actual spiritual benefit; and the state of original sin that burdened mankind as a result of Adam and Eve's transgression was replaced through the act of baptism by the promise of resurrection and eternal life won for humanity through Christ's sacrifice. This essential piece of theological doctrine can be found expressed in St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in which he characterizes the role of Christ as a kind of moral counterweight to original sin, "For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."²

This core theology provided the groundwork for the salvational, communal, and spiritual meanings of baptism; and in turn reified the function of baptism as the official rite of admission into the Christian community. For in being baptized the individual became bound to his or her fellows in faith via the shared participation in Christ during the baptismal ritual - a common experience that was often characterized as a kind of shared paternity - a common ancestry tied not to the flawed legacy of Adam but to the redemptive parentage of Christ. This adoptive theology finds expression in the words of the fourth century bishop Pacian of Barcelona; "...the righteousness of Christ must pass on to the whole human race. And just as Adam, by sin, had caused the destruction of his own descendants, so Christ by his righteousness would give life to

² *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Corinthians 15:21.

his whole race.”³ Moreover, the paternal understanding of the relationship between Christ and those who underwent baptism in turn enforced the accompanying belief that baptism was in a sense a return to infancy - that in being absolved of his or her sins, and freed from the burden of Adam’s parentage, the baptizand reverted to the spiritual and bodily innocence of childhood. This return to moral infancy in turn encouraged an understanding of Baptism as a literal re-birth, the doorway to a new and unending life. Thus the Christological theology surrounding the spiritual meaning of baptism extended into the communal and social realm, binding the Christian community through ties of spiritual kinship.⁴

Finally, the notion that baptism rendered the Christian congregation not merely members of the Church but spiritual descendants of Christ encouraged the allegorization of the Christian congregation as the living body of Christ on earth. Through the baptismal ritual the Church united the historical person of the Savior with the communal body of the congregation, and thus each individual Christian became in essence a part of the spiritual body, the legacy, of Christ; a notion expressed with famous eloquence in the writings of Saint Paul, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ...your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God...”⁵ Moreover, the body itself was a magnificent, if flawed, creation, a mark of the great craftsman; the enigma of which St Basil wrote,

Do not despise the wonder that is in you. For you are small in your own reckoning, but the Word will disclose that you are great...I have discovered in wonder knowledge concerning...the craftsmanship that is in me, understanding by what wisdom my body is structured. From this small work of construction, I understand the great Fashioner.⁶

³ Pacian of Barcelona, “On Baptism,” *Iberian Fathers vol. 3: Pacian of Barcelona, Orosius of Braga*, trans. Craig L. Hanson (*The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*. Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1999), 91.

⁴ Pacian of Barcelona, “On Baptism,” 91.

⁵ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Corinthians 6:15-19.

⁶ St. Basil, *On the Human Condition*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison Ed. John Behr and Augustine Casiday (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 32.

This reverence and concern for the body as both a divine creation and a member of Christ's earthly corpus found expression via the somatic elements of the baptismal ritual; which as we will learn acted as aid and counterpart to its spiritual meaning.

Thus the context for the development and perpetuation of the baptismal ritual was essentially one of division and integration - of the need to unite and distinguish the Christian community through its shared participation in the spiritual legacy of Christ. The soteriological doctrine born out of Christ's life, death, and sacrifice held up the communal significance of the ritual - synthesizing unity through the shared benefits of ritual participation, and through the assurance of an eventual resurrection into eternal life. This shared benefit was in turn precipitated through the ritual emulation of Christological themes; a medium of contact and communication that can be traced through the active components of the ritual itself.

The first phase of the baptismal ritual involved, in the Early Christian period at least, a simple acknowledgement of the soon to be baptized initiate - public or private - in which he or she would be recorded among the lists of faithful kept by his or her native Ecclesiastical foundation.⁷ Following this, the initiate would be led away from the public, congregational arena into a more private space, in which he or she would undergo a symbolic "opening" of the senses, in which the Bishop would touch the noses and ears of those to be baptized before allowing them to enter the sacred space of the baptismal chamber. This act, as explained by St. Ambrose in his treatise, had a specific purpose and model, "... in performing the mystery of the "opening" we said Ephpheta, or 'be opened,' so that each one who is coming to grace might know what he is asked, should be bound to remember what he answered. This Mystery Christ performed in the

⁷ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, Ed. John Farina (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 203.

Gospel, as we read, when he cured the deaf and dumb man.”⁸ As Ambrose makes clear, the opening gesture - designed to engage the senses and open the mind - finds its precedent in the miraculous gesture of Christ who, in curing a deaf and dumb man by touching his ears and mouth, opened his senses and soul to the word of God.⁹ Here, then, we find a scriptural and symbolic parallel between the example of Christ as miracle worker and the emulative ritual motions of the priest, who in copying Christ’s actions invokes a state of sensory and spiritual readiness in the initiate - opening both body and spirit to the grace of redemption.

Thus from the outset the baptismal ritual was infused with Christological parallels, an attribute grows in strength and significance with the progression of the ritual. Evidence of this interweaving ritual and scripture can be found in the fifth century writings of Pseudo-Dionysius; which offer one of the earliest, and the most comprehensively explained accounts of the ritual of baptism. In Dionysius’ account, the initiate, after having obtained the support of his or her “sponsor,” a member of the Christian community called upon to instruct the new convert in the faith, and having had his or her name enrolled among the list of the faithful in the presence of the Christian congregation, submits him or herself to a complex series of ordeals.

When they have been enrolled he [the bishop] offers up a sacred prayer. All those of the assembly join him. He unties the man’s sandals and has the deacons remove his garments. Then he puts him facing westward with his hand outstretched in a gesture of abhorrence. Three times he bids him breathe his rejection of Satan...Three times he speaks the words and the other repeats them. Then he turns him Eastward with eyes raised and hands lifted to heaven and he commands him to Christ and to all divinely granted sacred lore. This done, he calls upon him three times to make his profession of faith and when the other has done this he prays for him, blesses him, and places his hand upon him. The deacons divest him completely and the priests bring the holy oil for unction. The hierarch [bishop] begins the process of unction with a threefold sign of the cross, leaves it to the priests to cover the body of the man completely with oil, and goes himself towards the mother of all divine adoption. With sacred invocations he consecrates the water, completing this by pouring the most holy ointment three times into it, each pouring being made in the form of the sign of the cross...Then the priests guide

⁸ St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries...*, 46.

⁹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Mark 7:31-37.

the man to the water and there he is handed over to the hierarch, who, standing on a more elevated spot, immerses three times the initiate whose name is called out across the water...with each immersion. Each time the initiate is plunged into the water and emerges the hierarch invokes the three persons of the divine blessedness...¹⁰

This passage, while its details are specific to the era of its composition, provides a decent account of the skeleton of the ritual, which remains basically unmodified to the present day. To begin exploring the symbolic meaning of this framework it makes sense to discuss the initial undressing of the initiate, his or her rejection of Satan and affirmation of Christ, and the anointing with holy oil. What is striking about these actions is the distinct element of physicality and somatic drama they embody. The undressing and anointing of the initiate would have put him or her in a position of exposure and vulnerability; and while in the centuries after this account was written the custom shifted and initiates were more commonly clothed for baptism, their clothing would nevertheless have been distinctive - mostly likely white robes - and thus would have placed them in a similar position of visibility. In addition, the gestural aspect of the denial and affirmation procedure again indicates an element of physical drama; for here the initiate is described as making a gesture of “abhorrence” while professing his denial of Satan, and is called upon to raise his arms and eyes to heaven while announcing his faith in Jesus Christ. Finally, the anointment of the initiate would have offered a distinctly physical, sensory rite of preparation. For not only would the anointment have produced distinct physical sensations, smells, and would have involved the exposure of the body to the eyes and touch of others, it carried with it the connotation of empowered physicality, even violence. For the anointing of the initiates was understood as signifying their entrance into spiritual combat in the name of Christ, a particularly bold characterization expressed by St. Ambrose when he writes,

¹⁰ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 46.

“Thou wast anointed as Christ’s athlete, as about to wrestle in the fights of this world...”¹¹ Thus the body of the initiate was made an object of preparation, even veneration, during the ritual; an ascription that reinforced its identity as a divinely created member of Christ’s earthly progeny.

This series of sensory events serves as a prelude to the act of baptism itself, evoking the imminent physical and spiritual rebirth of the initiate through and into the salvific personhood of Christ. This somatic drama, moreover, finds meaning and completion through the act of baptism itself, which engages the entire passage of ritual action within its symbolic and Christological scope. Specifically, the moment of baptism as it is described in Dionysius’ account makes reference to two key symbolic and scriptural events - the baptism and the Passion of Christ - thereby transposing their meaning onto the ritual, and ultimately onto the individual. However before exploring these parallels it is necessary to first elucidate the practical components in the act of baptism. Dionysius describes a triple immersion, accompanied by the evocation of the three “persons of divine blessedness,” meaning the Trinity.¹² Moreover, Hippolytus of Rome, a third century theologian, in his text *The Apostolic Tradition*, describes a triple immersion in which each dunk is preceded by the priest questioning the initiate on his or her belief in one of the persons of the Trinity, and by the initiate’s affirmation of his or her belief.¹³ This detail, as we shall see, is crucial to the interpretation of this event on multiple levels, and will become a key element in discussion the iconography of the monuments I will discuss.

¹¹ St. Ambrose of Milan. *On the Mysteries...*, 77.

¹² Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 46.

¹³ And when he who is being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say thus: Dost thou believe in God, the Father Almighty? And he who is being baptized shall say: I believe. Then holding his hand placed on his head, he shall baptize him once. And then he shall say: Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead? And when he says: I believe, he is baptised again. And again he shall say: Dost thou believe in the Holy Ghost and the holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh? He who is being baptized shall say accordingly: I believe, and so he is baptised a third time. Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, trans. Burton Scott Easton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 46-47.

Of the two major Christological events mentioned above, the baptism of Christ is perhaps the least symbolically rich; yet it carries a certain relevance with regards not only to the actual performance of the ritual, but also to the way in which the interaction between the person being baptized and God was envisioned. Three of the four evangelists - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - describe Jesus' baptism in roughly similar terms. Of these, Matthew's account, as the most coherent and detailed, offers the best opportunity for investigating the narrative and its symbolic content. In describing Christ's baptism Matthew writes,

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? But Jesus answered him 'Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'¹⁴

Matthew's account, like those of his fellow evangelists, gives very little detail regarding the actual event of Christ's baptism. Only the most essential aspects of the ritual - the immersion of the body in water, and the presence of a third party, a figure of authority capable either by training or, in the case of John the Baptist, by divine grace, of conferring the sacrament - are evidenced in the Gospel account. Yet while the practical details here seem scant, the symbolic actions and divine events that accompany them in Matthew's account provide the spiritual and historical basis for the practice and meaning of the baptismal ritual.

While the formal details of ritual practice find little elaboration in Matthew's narrative, the essential relationship between the historical baptism of Christ and baptism as a sacrament does. Specifically, in characterizing Christ's baptism as an act of divine will, an initiative of Christ's own to which he even had to persuade John the Baptist, Matthew's account makes clear the willingness with which Christ, though sinless, made his own actions and body an exemplar

¹⁴ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Mat 3:13-17.

for the moral and physical purification of his followers. The function of baptism as an act of symbolic emulation, and the conscious and deliberative role of Christ in establishing its precedent, is stated in succinct and eloquent fashion in the words of the sainted bishop Ambrose, the fourth century patriarch of Milan, who wrote in his *Treatise on the Sacraments*,

Why, then, did Christ descend, unless that that flesh might be cleansed, the flesh which he took of our nature. For the washing away of sins was not necessary for Christ, who did not sin; but it was necessary for us who remain subject to sin. Therefore, if baptism is for our sake, a pattern has been established for us, the pattern of our faith has been set forth.¹⁵

Moreover, as the beginning of his ministry, Christ's baptism marked the starting point of his sacrificial narrative, a narrative completed and validated through the soteriological function of the baptismal ritual. Thus in demonstrating Christ's willingness to be baptized in order to "fulfill all righteousness" Matthew's account emphasizes Christ's willingness to embark upon the path of his own death for the sake of mankind, while at the same time lending validity, even sanctity, to the mimetic elements of the baptismal ritual.

Here, then, the connection between the historical event of Christ's baptism and its ritual emulation finds confirmation through scripture. Of more importance, however is the demonstration given in Matthew's account of the complete presence of the Holy Trinity - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - at Christ's baptism. This triple presence is demonstrated when, at the moment of Christ's baptism, the Holy Spirit descends into Christ in the form of a dove, followed by a voice from heaven declaring, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."¹⁶ Here the heavenly drama of Christ's baptism manifests the unified presence of the Godhead; a moment of totality in which the hidden divinity of Christ is expressed. It is this momentary but powerful manifestation of the tripartite Godhead that lends the rite of baptism its particular potency, reenacting as it does a crucial moment of divine unity. In calling upon the

¹⁵ St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries...*, 81.

¹⁶ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Mat 3:13-17.

tripartite Godhead during the act of immersion the ritual evokes the complete presence of the Divinity at the moment of baptism - thereby reinforcing both the mimetic effectiveness of the ritual, and the meaning of the event as a rare moment of contact between the embodied soul and God. Moreover, by invoking the Trinity the ritual also implies the role of the Holy Spirit in facilitating this contact. For it was the Holy Spirit that, in entering into the initiate as it entered into Christ, drew his or her matter and soul into contact with the salvific example provided by the Son. Moreover, in invoking the Holy Spirit during the act of immersion the ritual combines the spiritual experience of the joining of Holy Spirit and flesh with the physical sensation of immersion and envelopment - thereby evoking the body's function - mentioned previously - as an earthly vessel for the Spirit of God. Thus the three persons of the Trinity are here invoked as a single cooperative entity; the Father commanding, the Son enacting, and the Holy Spirit transferring the benefit baptism - the promise of resurrection and eternal life.

The Trinitarian themes that inhabit both Matthew's Gospel account and the baptismal ritual itself find expression not just in the theological reading of the ritual but also in its action. Specifically the persistence of certain motifs - the application of holy oil and water, the recitation by the initiate of phrases and invocations, and the insistence on triple repetitions of certain actions - gives the ritual a coherence and uniformity that in turn reinforces the significance of its various parts. Within this rhythm of ritual repetition can be found an expression of the perceptible, unified presence of the Trinity at the moment of Christ's baptism. A tripartite meter of action runs through Dionysius' account; the triple profession of faith by the initiate, the triple sign of the cross performed by the Bishop before the initiates' anointment, the triple purification of the font, and the triple immersion of the initiate accompanied by an invocation of the three

persons of the Trinity,¹⁷ offer a basic form of repetition that, either explicitly or by association, evokes the presence of the Trinity within the ritual itself.

Finally, this drawing together of ritual action and scriptural narrative finds perhaps its most striking and crucial expression through the symbolic and soteriological parallels to the passion of Christ evident within the baptismal ritual. These associations permeate the entire program of ritual action, though they find their most essential expression during the act of baptism itself and the moments following. However before elucidating these major symbolic points it is necessary to briefly go over again the initial phases of the ritual described above, for it is through their connection to the passion of Christ that these actions act as preparation for the spiritual ordeal the initiate is about to undergo in emulation of the passion. For example, in casting off of the devil and divesting him or herself of clothing the initiate asserted his or her rejection of sin, discarding the physical remnants of his or her worldly existence - the vanity of rich garments or the shame of poor. This ritual “casting off” in turn referenced the death of the old Adam and the defeat of the devil by Christ, for in symbolically removing him or herself from the social markers of dress and belongings the initiate likewise put distance between his or her own existence and the fragile, tainted vanity of human nature. Moreover, this divestment and renouncing of worldly concerns, and thereby also of sinful life, can be compared to Christ’s own divestment, his humiliation, during his passion. Finally, anointment, while it symbolized, as already discussed, the initiate’s newly adopted duty as an athlete of Christ, the moral and spiritual champion over sin and the defender of the Christian faith, also referenced the process of anointment associated in the Christian faith with death. As part of the rite of the dead those about to pass away received anointment with holy oil, and thus its inclusion in the baptismal ritual resonated with Christ’s own death, in which the initiate was to participate through ritual

¹⁷ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 46.

emulation. In addition, the anointment of the initiate also referenced Christ's own - drawn from the Gospel narrative in which Christ's feet, or in some accounts his head - is anointed by a woman (sometimes claimed to be Mary Magdalene) who, as Christ tells his followers, does so in order to prepare him for the death that soon awaits him.¹⁸ Thus through anointing the initiate shared in the narrative of Christ's passion; a communion with suffering and death that was, as we will see, completed in the act of baptism itself.

Returning to the act of baptism itself, its connection to the death and resurrection of Christ found strongest expression through the act of triple immersion described previously. For the triple immersion of the initiate, beyond evoking the three persons of the Trinity, also signified also the three days and nights Christ spent in his tomb; while the submersion of the initiate's body in water enacted the spiritual death, burial, and rebirth of the soul through the life giving water of the font. Thus just as Christ had absolved the debt incurred by Adam in suffering on the cross, so too did the initiate, in going under the water as into a tomb, cleanse him or herself of original sin; and just as Christ rose again on the third day of his entombment, thereby remaking the very nature of the flesh in death as proof of the eternal life promised to both body and soul after the Final Judgment, so too the initiate, in undergoing a triple immersion, emerged from the water remade in the image of eternal life.¹⁹ Moreover, the sign of the cross, made both over the initiate and over the font, served as a mark of purification and as a reminder of the suffering endured for the sake of mankind. For the cross, as the instrument of Christ's passion and the symbol of his victory over death, functioned as a historical sign, a link to the events of the passion. Finally, the act of baptism itself would have been sensorially striking; the coldness of the water, the chanting voices of the Bishop and priests, the darkness of the baptismal space,

¹⁸ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Luke 7:36-50 and Mat 26: 6-13.

¹⁹ Pacian of Barcelona, "On Baptism," 91.

the smell of oil and incense, and the repeated sensation of being buried in water and drawn out again, would have lent the ritual an element of physical drama that would have acted in complement to the symbolic associations of the ritual; making the abstract theological meaning of the sacrament come to life through the embodied, sensate experience of divine presence. Thus in reenacting symbolically the historical events of Christ's passion, the baptismal rite linked the performative, symbolic death of the initiate, and by extension the entire Christian community, to the actual, effective death of Christ. In crossing briefly the boundary between life and death - between the sensate embodiment of the initiate and the redeeming agony of Christ - the initiate separated him or herself from earthly life; and in dying with Christ on the cross he or she was resurrected with Christ into the life-giving grace of the Holy Trinity. This transformation through and beyond the veil of death again finds famous expression in the words of that foremost apostle Paul; "Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."²⁰

The final stage of the ritual returns again to the ultimate symbol of Christ's passion, the spiritual "seal" made in the sign of the cross made over the initiate, sometimes with the aid of oil or balm, after his or her baptism. This seal functioned as the somatic counterpoint to the opening, a way to seal in the divine grace of spiritual rebirth; and as a mark of authenticity, proof of the initiate's newfound moral and spiritual devotion.

Wherefore recollect that thou hast received the spiritual seal, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and godliness, the spirit of holy fear, and preserve what thou hast received. God the Father hath seal'd thee, Christ the Lord hath confirmed thee, and hath given the earnest of the Spirit in thy heart, as thou hast learned from the apostolic lesson.²¹

²⁰ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Romans 6:3-4.

²¹ St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries...*, 63.

Here, then, the body of the newly baptized, having undergone a symbolic death and entombment in the font, having been reborn in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, and having professed his or her faith in the presence of God, is proven in his or her transformation through the sign of the cross. The instrument of Christ's torture and sacrifice now becomes an emblem of the salvation He bought for mankind, a mark to be worn in and upon the very flesh of those who, like Christ, have chosen to die to the world in the name of eternal life.

The spiritual seal marked the end of the transformative process of baptism; an ordeal that found completion in the culminating phase of the ritual, in which the newly baptized were clothed, usually in clean white garments, given candles or lamps to hold, and processed from the baptismal hall out into presence of the amassed congregation. This dramatic re-entry of the new initiates into the Christian community symbolized their transition from tainted outsider to spiritual sibling - liberated from worldly concerns, and from the stain of original sin. The wearing of white garments and the holding of lighted candles thus offered yet another sensorial proof of the spiritual efficacy of the sacrament.²² The ritual that had begun by divesting the initiate of his or her old identity, ended with the re-dressing and re-forming of the newly reborn individual into the image of a perfect Christian, the embodiment of an as yet untainted and unburdened return to the spiritual and moral purity of infancy.

This discussion, in road-mapping the baptismal ritual both in practice and in symbolic content, has laid out a series of parallels and associations between ritual action and its specifically Christological scriptural precedents and meanings. This exploration has revealed the soteriological themes within the ritual, and how these themes were effected through active engagement of meaningful events in Christ's life, as well as through symbols linked to his

²² Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," *The Art Bulletin* 69 (Sep. 1987), 358-375.

sacrifice. In so doing it has provided a groundwork of theological and ritual understanding on which to draw in the subsequent chapters. However, while the sequence of discussion in this introduction has brought us through a distinct series of actions and a very particular set of meanings ascribed to these actions, this model finds different applications within the distinct structures I investigate. The purpose of this chapter is not to dictate the order and content of my analysis of these sites, but to provide a basic understanding of the ritual and its Christological and scriptural themes from which to draw when discussing individual visual and architectural programs. For, as we shall see in the subsequent chapters, each of the sites I investigate adopts and construes the theological and ritual model described above differently; a variety of expression resulting from the particular social, religious, and political conditions under which each monument was constructed. The ritual of baptism, as I have described it here, is thus an inherently varied structure of action and meaning; a diversity reflective of the evolving conditions that shaped and influenced the ritual over time and reflected in the structures built to contain and express it. For the baptismal ritual was by necessity experienced in and through space; the undressing, anointing, baptizing, blessing, clothing, preparation, and re-entry of the initiate required a series of distinct, dedicated spaces and furnishings - amenities whose design ultimately embody the concerns and priorities of their time and social context. In exploring these priorities, and in tying them to the soteriological, Christological, and communal themes discussed previously, I hope to offer an interpretation of baptismal ritual and space over time that takes into account the standard elements of baptism and its theological content, while at the same time demonstrating the variety of applications and expressions of these themes, and the conditions - social, political, and communal - that engendered this variety.

Chapter 1: Dura Europos

The previous chapter utilized primary sources in order to outline the baptismal ritual, and to elucidate the major Christological narrative and symbolic themes that populated and defined its components. However, while the writings of the Church fathers may offer insight into the form of the ritual and into its spiritual meaning, the spaces that were built to house it provide in many ways a more concrete, more real evocation of what the ritual was and how its performance was aided, enhanced, and even explained through sensory drama. Moreover, it is through the examination of the material remains of baptismal practice that the particular and variant conditions of its performance, visibility, and social meaning may be extrapolated; and thus it is to these remains that we must turn if we are to understand what baptism was in actuality, in lived experience, and in real, perceptible signification. To begin investigating these more concrete ritual arenas, this chapter looks at the baptismal space and adjoining Christian complex at Dura Europos, Syria. In mapping the baptismal ritual onto this site I will investigate how the design, layout, and painted decoration of the baptismal hall at Dura Europos embodies - in conversation with the structures around it - an adaptation of the thematic and practical aspects described in the introduction to fit the particular conditions, concerns, and demands of the Early Church.

The town of Dura Europos is situated on the banks of the Euphrates river in modern day Syria. Founded as a garrison town in the fourth century BCE by Macedonian Greeks, Dura Europos quickly became a multicultural mercantile center. When the Romans conquered the town in the mid 2nd century CE it experienced an influx of religious and cultural influences. Among these new arrivals was Christianity, whose presence at Dura Europos is prominently and interestingly preserved through the archaeological record. Specifically, the Church and baptistry of the Christian community at Dura Europos, located within what was once a private dwelling,

has been preserved in its layout and decoration, and affords crucial insight into the nature and manifestation of Early Christian religious practice within the context of the Late Roman world.²³

The Church and accompanying baptismal space at Dura Europos typifies a form of worship common in Early Christian practice. The questionable legal status of Christianity during the first few centuries after the death of Christ, along with the localized nature of its religious administrative structure and the humble status of many of its leaders and adherents, meant that the earliest practitioners of the Christian faith often met and worshiped in small, private communal spaces. In addition, many Early Christian Churches, including the one at Dura Europos, were not designed as congregational centers but were converted from private dwellings. At Dura Europos this process of conversion seems to have revealed the priorities of its Christian occupants, for it focused a lot of attention on the provision of the baptistery. The baptismal chamber is not only the only room to have been painted - though the images are somewhat crude and rudimentary in design - it is distinguished from the rest of the complex by its small size and odd, somewhat secluded position. This implies that a certain level of importance was placed on facilitating, and even enriching - however humbly - the process and experience of baptism at this site. This provision can be justified by considering that Christianity at Dura Europos, and elsewhere in the Roman Empire at the Time, would have been competing with various other mystery cults for membership. Thus the baptismal rite, as proof of conversion and affirmation of communal identity, would have held special importance as a relative indicator of success against other cults. Finally baptism was a communal ritual, performed with multiple initiates and in the presence of the entire congregation; a visibility evident in the interaction of baptismal, communal, and liturgical space within the Christian complex.

²³ Patricia Deleeuw, "A Peaceful Pluralism: The Durene Mithraeum, Synagogue, and Christian Building," *Dura-Europos; Crossroads of Antiquity* (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMuller Museum of Art, 2011), 189-199.

However, the communal practice of baptism is at first difficult to situate within the cramped interior of the Church complex. The Christian Church at Dura Europos is only about 20 by 20 meters (Figure 1). Moreover, the scale, shape and location of the baptismal hall at Dura Europos challenge any conception of mass movement through or within the space. Situated in the north-western corner of the complex, the baptistery takes the form of a long and rather small side room, probably no more than 10m in length and 5m wide, laid out longitudinally east to west with the font at the western end under an arched niche. The font consists of a projecting stuccoed arch framing a small rectangular tub.²⁴ The tub itself is only about 4m long, and of maybe a meter in width and depth; a diminutive scale whose implications for the performance of baptism will be discussed later in this chapter. There are two doors in the southern wall of the baptistery. The first enters into its eastern end from the courtyard that occupies the center of the complex, while the second enters into its western end from another room, situated against the western wall of the complex, separating the baptistery from the longitudinal prayer hall located along the southern wall of the complex.²⁵

It is difficult to glean from this modest interior, or from the baptistery's rather awkward location - shoved into a corner of the complex with restricted access to the main congregation area and no clear line of motion either into the prayer hall or out onto the street - any notion of how the liturgical drama of baptism would have played out within it. However, when looked at in light of the pattern of ritual motion described by the authors in the previous chapter, and with regards to the social conditions surrounding baptism, and indeed the whole practice of Christianity, at the time of the baptistery's construction, the location and layout of the baptismal hall at Dura Europos acquires a certain practical logic. The baptismal ritual as described in the

²⁴ Eric M. Moorman, "Dura Europos: A Case Study," *Divine Interiors: Mural Paintings in Greek and Roman Sanctuaries* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001), 199.

²⁵ Patricia Deleeuw, "A Peaceful Pluralism: The Durene Mithraeum, Synagogue, and Christian Building," 189-199.

previous chapter is characterized via its progression from a public to a private setting - from the public profession of faith to the private divestment of clothing, anointment, and immersion. This movement would have necessitated to the kind of spacial division evident in the layout of the Durene Church complex. Specifically, the multiple entrances into the baptismal space at Dura Europos would have facilitated the kind of processional motion implied in the accounts given previously, in which the initiate is lead through a series of spaces and actions in a prescribed order, and in which evidence of his or her transformation is given via a movement away from, then back into, the congregation.

The public aspect of this ritual can be noted in the fact that the Baptistery is connected through a door with the inner courtyard of the complex, and area designed for assembly and display. Thus one can imagine the community gathered within the courtyard in order to witness the catechumens' public enrollment in the list of the faithful kept by the Church, an event described by Pseudo Dionysius when he writes that the bishop, upon receiving a new convert for baptism, "...summons the whole sacred rank into the sacred precinct to join in celebrating this man's salvation...He then instructs the priests to enroll this man and his sponsor."²⁶ This acknowledgement of the soon-to-be initiated member is followed, in Dionysius' account, by the divestment of clothing and anointing with oil.²⁷ At the Durene Church one can perhaps attribute the conjoining of the baptismal hall and the courtyard to the need for privacy implicit in this procedure. This arrangement would have allowed for the direct progression of the initiate from the public area of the courtyard to the private interior space of the baptismal chamber, whose eastern end would have provided the necessary space for the removal and setting aside of clothes, and for the storage of vessels for oil. Additionally, beginning the ritual outside the

²⁶ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 49.

²⁷ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 49.

baptismal chamber would have offered an obvious and meaningful context for the “opening” ritual discussed previously. The liminal zone between the exterior courtyard and the closed interior of the baptismal hall would have provided a point at which the initiates could be stopped, as well as an appropriate moment for the symbolic awakening of the senses, opening up the mind and body in preparation for entry into the sanctified realm of the baptistery. Moreover, the liminality of the space can be read in the context of the “opening” as an expression of the initiate’s physical and spiritual state; embodying the moment of transition from the structured, visible realm of human society and religion to the immaterial, unbounded presence of God.

The act of baptism itself would have been performed in the font at the western end of the baptismal hall. The baptismal niche, evocative in its close and confined interior of a cave or womb, would have offered an appropriate space within which to situate the re-incubation of both body and soul. The closeness of the overhanging arch, and the probable darkness, confinement, and heat of the chamber itself - poorly lit by smoking lamps, stuffy with incense and the humid warmth of living bodies - would have possessed an evocative, almost primal note of mystical vitality; an atmosphere that brings to mind the breath of God hovering over the darkened primordial sea before the advent of life and light, the perfect setting for a ritual drama designed to enact a mystical re-creation of soul and body. Yet the closeness of the space also reminds the viewer of the claustrophobic interior of a tomb; and thus the primal anthropomorphism of the interior as womb acquires an anxious, constricting closeness, a reminder the ritual death and entombment enacted within. Here, then, the effect of spatial design and orientation is not only to facilitate the movement of the ritual from exterior to interior, or to provide a setting and vessel for ritual immersion, but rather is one of active participation in the drama, and implicitly also in the performance, of the ritual. The space in itself reinforces the conceptual understanding of the

ritual as a death and rebirth by performing it; and thus it is the somatic, tangible, experiential arena of ritual that fulfills its meaning, that makes actual the conceptual, and in so doing makes what was a system of belief constructed on a groundwork of theological doctrine, symbolism, emulation, and scripture a living, knowable reality.

This use of spatial sensation to generate spiritual comprehension finds its parallel in the visual program that covers the interior of the baptismal chamber; narrative scenes and that would have served to reinforce and elaborate the somatic, spiritual, and semiological experience provoked through the design of the space itself. Specifically, the images that adorn the northern wall of the chamber, facilitate the reading-in of meaning to ritual action. These images, arranged in two registers, would in their original context have served to frame the approach of the baptizand from the eastern end of the chamber towards the font at the western end. Paralleling the actual motion of the initiate, the painted figures of three women in white robes process from east to west along the lower register of the northern wall of the baptistery, towards a white tent like structure situated just before the meeting of the northern wall and the edge of the font (Figure 2). The most commonly accepted interpretation of this scene is that it depicts the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins, bridesmaids at a wedding who go out at night to meet the bridegroom. The wise bridesmaids had brought extra oil with them, and so when their lamps burned down they were able to revive them. The foolish bridesmaids, however, brought no extra oil, and so were forced to leave the wedding to buy more, and by the time they returned the wedding was already underway and the bridegroom, not recognizing them, did not admit them to the feast. This parable seems somewhat out of place of the walls of a baptistery, yet one can understand its significance in light of the meaning given to it in the gospels. For Christ, in the account given by Matthew, uses this parable to illustrate the nature of the kingdom of heaven.

“For to all those who have, more will be given, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”²⁸ This statement can be understood as indicating the division that is to be made at the Last Judgment between the righteous - here personified by the wise bridesmaids - who in striving to emulate the life and teachings of Christ have prepared themselves for the Final Judgment, and the sinners - personified by the foolish bridesmaids - who out of the love for worldly things and lack of moral vigilance arrive on the final day unprepared. In the context of the baptistery this narrative image serves to warn the initiate of the obligations inherent in his or her adoption into the Church. This moral message, moreover, would have been appropriate as an intermediary between the approach to and the act of baptism, reminding the initiate of the weight of his or her commitment to the faith.

Above the lower register on the northern wall of the baptistery can be made out a few smaller scenes; one depicting a man carrying a bed on his back (Figure 3), the other showing two men standing in or on the water in which a ship also floats (Figure 4). These scenes illustrate respectively the accounts given in the gospels of Jesus’ healing of the paralytic, and of Christ and St. Peter walking on water. Like the scene of the wise and foolish virgins, these images would have reminded the initiate of the moral and spiritual significance of baptism. Both narratives deal in different ways with miracles of bodily healing or preservation; events in which the faith of an individual and the mercy of Christ protected and renewed the flesh in spite of its inherent frailty. These miracles in turn serve as proof of the transformation of bodily existence promised at the Last Judgment. “For if on earth He [Christ] healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection, so that the flesh shall rise perfect and

²⁸ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Mat 25: 29.

entire.”²⁹ What these scenes illustrate, then, is the promise of resurrection and eternal life through baptism. Thus while the images in the lower register served as warning, those in the upper register promised reward, balancing the threat of failure with the promise of immortality.

Passing by these images the initiate would be lead to the font; a movement whose directionality - guided by the east-west orientation of the chamber - indicates a correspondence with the practice described by Dionysius in which the initiate first faces west to deny the Devil, then east to affirm Christ.³⁰ In view of the location of the font at the western end of the baptismal chamber, one can picture the initiate facing the font in order to confess his or her rejection of Satan, before entering the baptismal niche, whose orientation would have forced him or her to face outwards, towards the east, in order to affirm his or her acceptance of Christ. Moreover, the implication that the initiate would face east while being baptized speaks to a conflation of the directional, physical, and verbal components of the ritual. For, in facing the initiate to the east, the traditional direction of Christian prayer, and one whose associations with the rising sun and with the location of Eden would have served to highlight the regenerative nature of the rite, the space itself transformed physical act of baptism, with its accompanying verbal formulae, into a form of embodied prayer - an association that in turn resonates with the salvific theme of the rite.

This link between the space of the font and the veneration, with both body and spirit, of Christ by the initiate can be furthered via the images found on the font. Located against the western wall underneath the arch that covers the baptismal niche, and thus placed in such a way as to limit their audience to those in or around the font, are two separate scenes rendered side by side. The first, on the upper left, depicts the good shepherd - here envisioned as a young man in a tunic - with a sheep slung over his shoulders, while the second in the lower right depicts Adam

²⁹ Kirby, Peter, “Historical Jesus Theories,” *Early Christian Writings* (2016): accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.earlyChristianwritings.com/text/1clement-hoole.html>, Justin Martyr Ch.IV.

³⁰ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 49.

and Eve flanking the Tree of Knowledge, with the serpent wrapped around it (Figure 5). Above these images the underside of the arch, painted deep blue and punctuated by silver-white stars, lends the entire composition a cosmic sense of place. The young shepherd calls to mind the identification of Christ as both the good shepherd and the Lamb of God - both the keeper of God's people and the vehicle of their redemption. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep..."³¹ Christ, as the good shepherd, became by virtue of his love for mankind - his flock - the sacrificial lamb by which humanity was saved. The baptismal significance of this metaphor is heightened by the potential reading of the sheep as a reference to the baptized - the faithful who in receiving baptism join the Lord's flock. Likewise, the image of Adam and Eve serves as a reminder to the initiate of the state of sin in which he or she was born, reinforcing the necessity of the ritual by which this sin will be removed and the weight of death lifted. Thus the ensemble around the baptismal niche serves to communicate the importance of the baptismal ritual, reminding the initiate of his or her own sinful nature, while affirming the regenerative potency of baptism through the person of the good shepherd - the savior in whose death and subsequent resurrection the initiate shares. This complex series of associations is in turn set beneath a celestial canopy, reminding the initiate of the unbounded nature of the divine mysteries of which he or she, in being baptized, is allowed to partake.

It is also important to note that the nature of the baptism would at the Durene Church have necessarily been somewhat different from what was described previously. For, as mentioned above, the baptismal font at the Dura Europos is quite small, not big enough or deep enough for full emersion. However the accounts given in the introduction imply that full immersion was necessary for the proper completion of the ritual. An answer to this apparent contradiction between space and ritual can be found in the *Didache*, a short but historically

³¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, John 10:11-16.

significant first century treatise on the liturgy, catechism, and Christian ethics. This volume, in its description of the baptismal liturgy, reads

Concerning baptism, you should baptize this way: After first explaining all things, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in flowing water. But if you have no running water, baptize in other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, then in warm. If you have very little, pour water three times on the head in the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.³²

What this excerpt makes clear, and what the size and orientation of the baptismal font supports, is that, either due to lack of space or ritual preference, the baptisms performed at Dura Europos most likely did not involve full immersion but rather a pouring of water over the initiate. The orientation of the font niche supports this interpretation. The stuccoed arch is taller than it is wide, and thus appears to have been designed to frame and focus attention on a standing or kneeling figure underneath it, an arrangement congruent with pouring water over the head rather than immersion. Here, then, we can perceive, even in one of the very earliest attempts at generating a dedicated spatial arena for baptism, the aforementioned flexibility of the baptismal rite. The account given in the *Didache*, which emphasizes not the procedural regularity of the ritual but rather its adaptiveness in accommodating the vast range of urban, environmental, and social contexts of the Late Roman world, coupled with the evidence at Dura Europos, seems to indicate that the baptismal rite was at this time defined by the irregular, re-purposed, or simply nonexistent settings of Early Christian practice.

Following the act of baptism, the initiate would have been given new clothes, usually white robes, as a symbol of purity, and prepared to re enter the congregation. The proximity to the font of the door connecting the baptistery with previously described side chamber along the western wall of the complex, dividing the baptistery from the prayer hall, acquires a certain

³² *The Didache or The Teachings of the Lord to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles*, Trans. J.B. Lightfoot (Bruster: Paraclete Press, 2016), 3.

practical logic in this context (Figure 1). For this arrangement would have allowed the initiate to pass directly from the font to the side chamber, where he or she could be clothed before entering the prayer hall. Additionally, the side chamber would have offered an appropriate space in which to anoint the newly baptized with the sign of the cross, the spiritual “seal” by which his or her identity as a Christian is confirmed. In addition, the interposition of the antechamber within this ritual motion can, with reference to the actions that may have been performed within it in preparation for entry into the prayer hall - the dressing of the initiates, anointment, and the lighting of candles - be understood as providing a kind of preparatory zone; a secluded area in which to re-assemble the initiates following the intense personal and spiritual drama of baptism - to remake the newly re-born baptizands as members of the Christian community. Here, then, the motion of the ritual would have passed from the public but “exterior” space of the courtyard, through the private, intimate arena of the baptistery, and finally out, by way of the antechamber, into the public but “interior” space of the prayer hall, the Locus Sanctus of the congregation. Thus the initiate, having been approved by the faithful, exits their presence an outsider, but returns a member of the congregation.

Finally, this layout makes reference to an element of the baptismal ritual that, while not discussed previously, bears a certain relevance with regards to the way in which space orchestrates meaning within the Durene complex. Specifically, in leading the newly baptized into the prayer hall from the baptismal chamber, the layout of the complex not only facilitates the re-entry of the initiates into the congregation, but implies the final, and what was considered to be the culminating, aspect of the ritual; namely the symbolic consumption of bread and wine, representative of the blood and body of Christ - the sacrament of the Eucharist. Taking the Eucharist during mass was, as mentioned in the introduction, considered in the Early Christian

period to be the exclusive right of those who were full members of the Church; thus in taking the Eucharist after baptism the new initiates asserted their membership amongst the faithful - those whose participation in the Eucharistic sacrament stood as testament to their spiritual, and indeed physical, victory over death. For in taking the blood and body of Christ the newly baptized made his substance their substance, made his sacrifice their sacrifice, and thus made his resurrection their guarantee of eternal life: "...this meat...which thou receivest, is the living bread which came down from heaven? and furnisheth the substance of eternal life; and whosoever eateth this, shall never die: and it is the body of Christ."³³

In this context the conjoining of the baptismal chamber to the western end of the prayer hall implies that the newly baptized would have processed through the congregational space, amongst and in front of their peers, to receive their first communion. This final motion back into the congregational space would have completed the spatial map of the baptismal rite, drawing the newly expanded community back together within the basilica. Moreover, the spectacle of the initiates as they processed into the basilica, newly clothed in pristine white garments and holding lighted candles, would have illustrated the illumination of their persons, imaging their transcendence of spiritual ignorance and bodily mortality.³⁴ Finally, the fact that this reentry was combined with the Eucharistic ceremony served to demonstrate the spiritual kinship shared by the newly re-formed congregation. For in taking the body and blood of Christ together, the congregation demonstrated its shared participation in Christ's bodily nature - both through emulation during baptism and through ritual consumption during the mass - and thus ultimately in his earthly corpus and lineage. Altogether, then, the organization of motion, and the shaping of

³³ St. Ambrose of Milan. *On the Mysteries...*, 66.

³⁴ [You know how your Master] makes you shine brilliantly, how you lay aside your corruption in the grave of the bath, how the Spirit raises you up to the new life, how he clothes your body with shining garments, how the lamps you hold in your hands symbolize the illumination of the soul.
Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," 365.

perception through ceremony, dress, and light, would have offered a satisfying crescendo to the spiritual pageant of baptism, and a mechanism by which to publicly acknowledge the symbolic and literal transformation manifested through the ritual.

The baptismal space at Dura Europos offers a unique survival of the baptismal sacrament expressed through architecture and imagery. Its layout indicates an alternation within the ritual between visibility and isolation - in which the baptized passes out of the public space of the courtyard and into the alternate reality of the baptismal hall, before re-entering into the congregation in open arena of the prayer hall. This traversal of spaces and boundaries embodied a passage from one state to another - from the condition of sin to the state of rebirth. In addition, the particularities of ritual practice evident in the layout of the complex and the size of the font provide an early iteration of the flexible coherence of ritual and space that, as we will see in later examples, became a defining feature of baptism. Finally, the coordination of visual program and ritual action, and the ways in which this coordination served to enact moral or spiritual meaning alongside ritual action, exemplifies the link between the liturgy and its soteriological, and Christological, meaning. For while the image program does not directly address the scriptural parallels discussed in the introduction, it does draw on Christological narratives and imagery in order to express the moral and salvational meaning of Christ - as the good shepherd, miracle worker, and healer who offers palliative and protection against sin and death. Finally, the small scale of the baptistery and surrounding Church, the fact that it was not a dedicated space but a repurposed one, and the ways in which the ritual navigated this arrangement so as to facilitate the expression of ritual meaning both in images and through somatic and spatial effects, represents the genesis of what would become a much more focused emphasis on the choreography of space and ritual. For while Dura Europos reflects the conditions of the early Church, the centuries that

followed its construction saw ferocious growth in the Christian community - and even its elevation to the status of state religion of the Roman Empire.³⁵ This expansion precipitated the construction of large scale baptisteries - spaces designed exclusively to serve and house the ritual - and it is to this development, and its socio-political implications, that we must now turn.

³⁵ Frederick B Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages: An Historical Survey*, 3rd Ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 65-94.

Chapter 2: The Neonian Baptistery

The baptismal space at Dura Europos embodied in its layout and decoration the complex liturgical, symbolic, and theological associations of the ritual of baptism. Its multiple mediums and modes of expression - spatial, visual, symbolic, and narrative - combined to form an intricate web of meaning into which the entire person of the initiate was bound, and through which he or she was received into the wider realities of Christian faith and the doctrine of salvation. However Dura Europos was, despite its already highly developed ritual organization, still an immature form of baptismal space; one whose liturgical adaptations - the disposition of space to facilitate ritual motion, the selective inclusion of decoration, and the integration of public and private functions - developed throughout the Early Christian period into a clearly defined and regularized spatial and decorative idiom. Specifically, while the Durene complex represents a retrofitting of a preexisting space for ritual purposes, later structures witnessed the development - alongside the growth and official recognition of Christianity - of dedicated structures built from the start as baptisteries, whose design and decoration is therefore more purposeful in its direction. To investigate this shift in the design and construction of baptismal space, and in the meaning and importance of the baptismal ritual, I will be focusing on the Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna. Throughout this discussion I rely heavily of Annabel Wharton's 1987 article "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," as an interpretive model. Utilizing Wharton's novel perspective on the Neonian Baptistery's spatial and ritual configuration, I hope to reconstruct the practice of baptism at this monument, and in turn to link this practice to the interests of its patrons and the political environment of its time.

During the time of the Neonian Baptistery's construction, in the late 4th and early 5th centuries C.E., the city of Ravenna was enjoying peace and prosperity as the capital of the

Western Roman Empire. Largely bypassing the strife that troubled much of the rest of the empire, Ravenna enjoyed ample trade, and the city's Christians held favor at the imperial court. It was during this time that the city saw a boom in the building of religious monuments, of which the Neonian Baptistery was one. This building craze was inspired by the overtly political and competitive motives of the Christian bishop of Ravenna.³⁶ In building large scale, lavish monuments such as the Neonian Baptistery, the bishop not only asserted his power and political influence within the capital and its imperial court, he flaunted his dominance over other dioceses. Thus the tremendous growth of Christianity from the time of Dura Europos to the construction of the Neonian Baptistery found expression in the development of competitive, politicized building projects; and in particular in Ravenna of projects whose design and function asserted the religious and political authority the bishop, as the guardian of a growing congregation, held over the urban center of Ravenna.³⁷

The Neonian Baptistery itself is a free-standing octagonal structure, roughly 10-12m in diameter and perhaps 20m high, with niches set into four of its eight walls and a large octagonal piscina in the center (Figures 6 and 7). Its decorative highlights include a domed mosaic program above the piscina, consisting of a central roundel at the apex of the dome enclosed by two lower registers. These mosaics extend down into the spandrels of the arched window openings in the upper register of the baptistery's two-tiered elevation, underneath which are matching blind arcades framing a series of painted stucco panels.³⁸ Altogether, this ensemble offers one of the most complete and evocative surviving iterations of baptismal space.

The most striking distinction between this fifth century baptistery and its third century predecessor at Dura Europos is its scale and location in relation to the Church with which it was

³⁶ Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 31.

³⁷ Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," 358.

³⁸ Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," 362.

associated, namely the 4th century Basilica of bishop Ursus.³⁹ The sheer size of the building and its situation apart from the congregational center is reflective of the heightened publicity of the baptismal ritual following Constantine's legalization of Christianity in 313 C.E, at which time Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. This increase in recognition and popularity in turn necessitated the expansion and codification of baptismal space; for baptism, in its universal and overtly political guise as the official rite of inclusion for the state religion of the Roman Empire, had become, by the time of the Neonian Baptistery's construction, a popular and highly visible ritual. Thus the Neonian Baptistery was, at its core, a public edifice; a sacred space, which, though restricted in its use and access, played a crucial, even defining, role in the life of every Christian in Ravenna.

So important was the ritual of baptism to the growth of the Christian community that its performance was incorporated into one of the primary feasts of the Christian calendar, the celebration of Easter, the day of the Lord's resurrection.⁴⁰ Thus the vaguely communal nature of the baptismal ritual evident in the primary sources discussed previously, and implied in the layout of the baptismal space at Dura Europos, had developed by this time into a single day of celebration with a specific meaning. For the Easter festival not only fit the symbolic theme of the baptismal rite, but, in its connection with the coming of spring and the renewal of life, proved an ideal time for a celebration of spiritual rebirth and the defeat of death.⁴¹

The conjoining of baptism and Easter heightened the drama and publicity of the ritual via its incorporation into the Easter week celebrations and into the seven-week period of Lent. It was during this time that those among the catechumens, again at this time all adult converts, who

³⁹ Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," 361.

⁴⁰ Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," 361.

⁴¹ Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. Vol.5 (1942): 1-33.

wished to receive baptism were instructed in the law of the Old and New Testament.⁴² In the final week leading up to Easter, beginning on Palm Sunday with a profession of faith by which the catechumens became neophytes, or new converts, a series of lectures led by the bishop prepared those about to be baptized.⁴³ In these lectures the neophytes learned of the true spiritual, historical, and eschatological significance of baptism. This period, characterized by Pseudo Dionysius as an “incubation,” brought to fruition the spiritual formation of the catechumens, preparing them for induction into the Church.

...it is the all wise understanding of sacred things that first acts to incubate the catechumens. It gives them the introductory food of scripture which shapes them and brings them toward life. Later, when their being has been brought to fruition by the divine birth it acts for their salvation and...it allows them to enter into the communion with that which will illuminate them and will bring them to perfection.⁴⁴

Baptism, then, had become by the time of the Neonian Baptistery 's construction an extended, highly communal, and highly visible ritual; one which impacted the spiritual life and communal integrity not just of the congregation but of the entire city.

Thus the weeks of preparation, the multiple levels of initiation, and the final week of instruction, ended in a ritual that, while it was performed in private, took on level of visibility unprecedented in earlier iterations. Moreover, in limiting the initiation of converts to a single day within the liturgical year, the Early Church effectively created a demand for dedicated and multi-functional baptismal spaces - capable of choreographing an alternation of public and private functions while at the same time engaging a much broader urban audience. One of the most notable aspects of this development was the expansion of the processional component of the baptismal ritual. As at Dura Europos, the baptismal ceremony in Ravenna would have been characterized by a movement away from the community, into the privileged space of the

⁴² St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 66.

⁴³ Richard Krautheimer, “Introduction to an ‘Iconography of Medieval Architecture,’” 1-33.

⁴⁴ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 215.

baptistery, and then back out again. This movement, however, due to the increased significance of the baptismal ritual within society, would at Ravenna have been performed in the open, a practice to which the free-standing nature of the Neonian Baptistery attests. This construction of ritual motion through open public space marks a departure from the self-contained religious space seen at Dura Europos, where baptismal chamber, courtyard, antechamber, and prayer hall were all set within the walls of a single, enclosed structure. At the Neonian Baptistery, on the other hand, the structural autonomy of the building would have made it imperative that the initiates approach and enter the baptistery from a public space, most likely the street outside, and likewise it would have been necessary that they progress after baptism back out into the open air of the town in order to make their way to the Church for their first communion. Thus by its location the Neonian Baptistery implies its function as the setting for a manifestly public liturgical drama, one that “usurped the urban landscape as a stage, and the entire population, Christian and non-Christian, as audience.”⁴⁵

The urban setting of the Neonian Baptistery thus magnified the public aspects of the baptismal ritual in a way that was not possible at Dura Europos. However the broader social significance of the rite was not limited in its visibility to the exterior of the baptistery, rather the interior of the baptismal structure expresses in its plan, spatiality, and decoration the broader socio-political meaning of the ritual it housed. This broadening of scope from the relatively rudimentary and somewhat disjointed image program at Dura Europos speaks to a newfound emphasis on structuring meaning through both social and religious hierarchy. This emphasis would have been evident to the initiate from the moment he or she entered the baptistery. Specifically, the painted images that adorn the north and northwest walls of the baptistery, opposite its southern door, showing Christ giving the law and Christ trampling the Devil,

⁴⁵ Annabel Jane Wharton, “The Baptistery of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem...,” 320.

represented here as a snake, flanked by narrative images of Jonah and the whale and Daniel in the lion's den, reference the social meaning of baptism within a scriptural context that resonates with the spiritual themes of the rite (Figures 8 and 9).

These images would have been the first thing the neophytes saw as they entered the baptismal space, and thus they would have provided a grounding piece of visual stimulus, a metaphorical roadmap to ritual meaning.⁴⁶ The recognizably iconic Christological imagery would have served to guide and circumscribe the viewer's interpretation the narrative action depicted in the Old Testament scenes. Specifically, the authority of Christ as the Word of God, implied via his characterization as lawgiver, and His triumph over death, symbolized by His trampling of Satan, would have offered thematic types by which to interpret the narrative images. For both narrative scenes reference instances in the Old Testament in which God's power over evil is affirmed, and in which His ability to protect the faithful from the threat of death is made evident. Thus the narrative imagery references Old Testament accounts as proof of the salvational efficacy of God; and in doing so within the context of images that represent Christ's triumph over ignorance and death, it prefigures the expression of this efficacy in the person of Christ. Additionally, the narrative imagery would have served to ground the Christ-centered symbolism of the first two scenes within the broader scriptural context of the Old Testament tradition.

Here, then, the visual program addresses the historical significance of the baptismal ritual, drawing the abstract theology of salvation into communion with the grounding authority of the Judaic tradition. Taken in conjunction with the evident social and political importance of the Neonian Baptistery as a center of communal religious practice and an edifice symbolic of the ever-expanding popular body of the Christian Church, this careful and deliberate fusion of

⁴⁶ Wharton, Annabel Jane. "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," 362.

Christological imagery with Old Testament narratives takes on a peculiar social and political importance. The visual combination of Old and New Testament themes implies the continuation of the legacy of the chosen people through Christian Church and its representatives, and in particular the bishop, who as successor to Christ continues the work of salvation. The Church, as the spiritual body of Christ on earth, lays claim to the authority of the Old Testament tradition; and in doing so it not only unites Christ with the lineage of Abraham, but also ties the newly emerging power structure of the Christian Church to a legacy of spiritual authority reaching back to the roots of creation, and forward to the end of days. Thus the concerns of social and political control mentioned previously find expression here through Christ's mastery of Old Testament themes; placing the Church in a position of dominance over its religious opponents, and perhaps also its political ones. Moreover, in appealing to Old Testament mythology the imagery of the Neonian Baptistery would have enunciated the power and authority of the Church, and of the salvific miracle offered through baptism, in terms immediately recognizable to the neophytes as part of their religious education. Thus in binding the body and structure of the Church to the historical vision of the Old Testament, the imagery of the Neonian Baptistery brings together the tradition of the Old Testament and the promise of the Last Judgment, while reinforcing the spiritual and scriptural education received by the initiates.

Thus the initial piece of visual stimulation submitted for the baptizands' consideration would not only have brought to mind the person of Christ- His sacrifice, the promise of immortality, and the unwavering moral obligations of the Law - but would also have prompted the neophyte to understand the ritual he or she was about to undergo as part of a deeply rooted narrative of salvation; one grounded in the historical and scriptural authority of the Church as keeper of the covenant between Christ and the faithful - the precursor to the heavenly city on

earth. This association between earthly power structure and heavenly authority reappears throughout the remainder of the image program in the Neonian Baptistery; and particularly in the mosaics in the dome over the font (Figure 10). The synthesis of image and action facilitated through this visual program would have complimented the involvement of members of the clergy, particularly the bishop, in the ritual, a fact which in turn speaks to the growing importance of the bishop as the social and political leader of the Early Christian community, which was fast engulfing the entire populace.⁴⁷

Following the structure of the baptismal liturgy the neophytes, after entering through the southern door of the Neonian Baptistery, would have turned westwards to renounce the Devil.⁴⁸ In light of this movement, the images of Christ and the Old Testament scenes can be understood also as offering a reminder to the initiate of the triumph of Christ over the Devil whom he or she was renouncing, and of the saving power of God illustrated by the Old Testament narratives of deliverance; a function that would in turn have fed the identification of the Church as a locus of salvational power. Following this the neophyte would have turned to the east, a movement which would have directed his or her gaze across the font in the center of the space, and towards the niche located in the southeast wall of the building, within which the bishop would have either stood or sat enthroned in his cathedra.⁴⁹ Here, under the gaze of the bishop, the neophyte would have been called upon to proclaim his or her faith in Christ.⁵⁰ In this position the initiate would have been ideally situated to view the mosaic medallion positioned at the top of the dome, particularly if he or she stood “with eyes raised and hands lifted to heaven” as Pseudo Dionysius describes. Within this medallion the neophyte would have seen Christ, naked, standing up to his

⁴⁷ Annabel Jane Wharton, “Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna,” 361.

⁴⁸ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 203.

⁴⁹ Annabel Jane Wharton, “Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna,” 365.

⁵⁰ Pseudo Dionysius. *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 49.

waist in water, flanked on his right by John the Baptist, and on his left by a half figure emerging from the water and holding out a green cloth (Figures 10, 11 and 12). A Latin inscription identifies this figure as the personified river Jordan, and thus the entire scene represents the baptism of Christ. This identification is confirmed by the dove hovering above Christ's head, illustrating the descent of the Holy Spirit "as a dove" described in the Gospels.

Thus the initiate, in turning eastwards, not only faced the person of the bishop, the terrestrial arbiter of his or her salvation, but was able to witness in the dome above the historical moment upon which the ritual which he or she was about to undergo was modeled. Moreover, while facing eastwards the initiate would have seen the image of Christ above the head of the bishop, a visual parallel that would have strengthened the spiritual legacy implicit in the bishop's ecclesiastical status. For bishops, in their function in guiding and officiating the spiritual service of a particular community, acted as successors to Christ in teaching and preserving Church doctrine and performing the sacramental rituals. In this context the position of the dove implies in its line of descent a trajectory through Christ and onto the bishop, and by extension also the initiate. Thus the role of the bishop as heir to Christ is reinforced via the interaction of image and space. The moment at which the Holy Spirit descended onto Christ finds its temporal extension and corollary in the person of the bishop who, in inhabiting the didactic and salvational role of Christ on earth - the messenger of God and heir to the authority of the Word - acts as conduit for the promise of eternal life offered through the historical reality, and the ongoing spiritual legacy, of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Here we again witness the shift in conditions from Dura Europos to Ravenna; for while the modest scale and decoration of the Durene baptistery places emphasis on somatic experience over abstract signification, the Neonian Baptistery, in asserting the divine role of the bishop through the spatial-iconographic coordination of signs, reflects the

increasingly abstract concerns of power signification and religious hierarchy present in the baptistery's image program.

However, the image of Christ's baptism also implies the sanctity and importance of the ritual immersion over which it presided. After having renounced the devil and affirmed his or her faith in Christ, the neophyte would have progressed to the actual rite of immersion. Guided by the bishop, the initiate would have been asked to proclaim his or her belief in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and after each proclamation would have been plunged into the water of the font. The image of Christ's baptism would at this point have served to establish the power of the ritual itself; visually demonstrating the presence of the tripartite divinity, as recounted in scripture, within the context of the liturgy. Moreover, the personification of the Jordan would have offered a metaphor for the life-giving water of the font. There is some evidence to suggest that the font in the Neonian Baptistery was provided with plumbing in order to provide flowing, "living" water for baptism; thus realizing the vital, regenerative connotations of living water as an expression of the Holy Spirit.⁵¹ Here the Neonian Baptistery again makes clear the inherent adaptability - though in this context it is adaptation by design rather than necessity - of the baptismal space. Moreover, in providing a visual model for ritual action and setting, the image of Christ's baptism embodies the foundational purpose of the ritual in extracting spiritual potency from historical model, and thereby transcending temporal limitations to unite man with God in a moment beyond the furthest reaches of decay, death, and the passing away of material things.

However the image of Christ's baptism not only demonstrates divine presence, it sanctifies the space below it by invoking Christ's purpose in giving, rather than receiving, purification through baptism; a phenomenon described by St. Ambrose when he writes

⁵¹ Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," 364.

Christ descended, the Holy Spirit also descended. Why did Christ descend first, the Holy Spirit afterwards, since the form and practice of baptism provides that the font should be consecrated first, and then the person to be baptized should descend?...That the Lord Jesus might not seem himself as it were to need the mystery of sanctification; but that he might sanctify, and the Spirit also sanctify.⁵²

Thus the presence of Christ in the dome above the font implies not only a compression of time, unifying model and manifestation, but also actively participates in the sanctification of the waters in supplement to the priests, and specifically to the bishop who, as Wharton relates, “On Holy Saturday... entered the baptistery, exorcized the font...and then delivered an invocation and prayer insuring the sanctity of the waters and the presence of the Trinity.” Thus the image in the dome of the Neonian Baptistery acted in complement to multiple components of the baptismal ritual. In visualizing the moment of Christ’s baptism, the image evoked the tripartite presence of God referenced in the scripture and affirmed through the ritual; and in representing the descent of the Spirit through the historical body of Christ, it complemented the sanctification of the waters by the bishop, validating his authority as the spiritual successor to Christ and conduit for the saving grace of the Holy Spirit.

These associations are reinforced and completed in the lower registers of the dome, as well as in the space of the baptistery itself. The register below the center medallion depicts the twelve Apostles, holding crowns and moving around the dome in a double procession whose opposing directions meet beneath Christ’s feet (Figure 12). This procession has been interpreted by Wharton as a reaffirmation of the bishop’s authority as heir to Christ through the didactic legacy of the Apostles.⁵³ This reading can in turn be connected to the theme of the Trinity and the descent of the Holy Spirit . For it was the Apostles who received the Spirit through the blessing of the risen Christ at Pentecost, and it was the Apostles who began the work of

⁵² St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 82.

⁵³ Annabel Jane Wharton, “Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna,” 361.

spreading this Spirit throughout the population via the ritual of baptism. Thus the Apostles here act not only as intermediaries but as secondary conduits for the Holy Spirit. Passing from the abode of the Father in heaven, through to the historical body of Christ, to those of the Apostles, then to the bishop, and finally to the initiate, the Holy Spirit here completes the tripartite presence of God in and through which the entire ritual is consummated. Moreover, in placing the bishop ahead of his congregation within this line of descent, this program implies a divinely ordained hierarchy; asserting not only the religious, but the social and political primacy of the bishop, which, by virtue of his divinely ordained authority as Christ's successor and heir to the Apostle's mission, holds sway over government and populace alike. Finally, this line of descent is brought to fruition in the rebirth of the initiate, who, in receiving the Holy Spirit through the lineage of Christ on Earth, finds in the baptismal waters not just the power and promise of salvation, but also his or her own place in the celestial and worldly hierarchy of Christian society.

In addition, the crowns held by the apostles can be understood as references to the characterization of baptized as athletes of Christ, engaging in spiritual combat against the forces of sin and corruption. This analogy not only makes reference to the anointing of the initiates in preparation for baptism, which as mentioned previously was associated this notion of spiritual athleticism, it again draws together the promise of salvation and the sacred lineage of the Church and its leaders. For the crown was not only a symbol of spiritual victory, it was an attribute of those who had already attained salvation - prophets, apostles, saints, martyrs, and ecclesiastics. Thus the crowns held by the apostles - who in processing gradually lift the crowns in gestures of offering whose opposing momentums meet below Christ's feet, directly in the line of sight of the initiate standing in or near the font, and thus directly above the bishop - again act as a reminder

of the celestial, ecclesiastical, and social hierarchy into which the neophyte was bound, and at the bottom of which he or she stood.

This complex amalgamation of soteriological and socio-political themes finds completion in the third and final register of the mosaic program. Here one finds an alternation of thrones and altars (Figures 14 and 15); visual signs which represent jointly the locus of salvation on Earth - the altar of the Church which as the symbolic tomb of the Lord and the home of the Eucharist facilitates the continued sanctification and distribution of the Holy Spirit through the body of Christ- and the throne of Christ in the Last Judgment - the emblem of his final consolidation of the faithful within the kingdom of heaven. Here, then, we find in the altar images a reminder of the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ; an association that in turn signifies the symbolic participation of the neophytes in that sacrifice through their ritual “burial” and rebirth in the baptismal font. In addition, we find reference to the sacrament of the mass, the ultimate stage in the baptismal process, and one that yet again manifests ecclesiastical authority. For the clergy, including the bishop, were in charge of mediating access to the Eucharist; and thus the ecclesiastical hierarchy defined and mediated a corresponding hierarchy of access and admission to the faith - one that was coming to define a social and political as well as religious structure. In the thrones, by contrast, we find an expression of the soteriological promise of baptism - namely resurrection into eternal life within Christ’s heavenly kingdom. Finally, the thrones also carry a dual meaning, as their appearance would have paralleled the bishop’s cathedra, set up in the baptistery and highly visible to initiates, and thus would again have called to mind the correspondence between the role of the bishop as monarch of the Church just as Christ is monarch of heaven.

The image program in the dome of the Neonian Baptistery offers a dizzying array of scriptural, symbolic, and eschatological references. However, the ritual did not end under the dome, rather it progressed out of the font and into the presence of the bishop, whose job it was to finish the rite. Here it is worth mentioning an additional phase in the ritual that, while not discussed previously, is relevant with regards to the thematic content of the image program just discussed. The ritual of foot washing, performed by the bishop for the newly baptized in emulation of Christ's washing of his Apostles' feet, was an aspect of ritual not universally practiced. However in Ravenna, as Wharton explains, the practice can be posited with some certainty due to the inscription over the northeast niche which references Christ's washing the feet of the Apostles (Figure 16).⁵⁴ Thus it is likely that the initiates in Ravenna, after leaving the font, would have processed towards the northeast niche in order to have their feet washed by the bishop. This practice was, as Ambrose explains, symbolic both of the purifying function of baptism and of the humility and obedience of both bishop and baptized, who, following the example of Christ, discard their pride even as they have discarded their sins in the font.

... He says, If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, how much more ought ye also to wash one another's feet ? For since the Author of salvation Himself redeemed us through obedience, how much more ought we, his poor servants, to display the service of humility and obedience.⁵⁵

In performing an act of humility in emulation of Christ, the bishop strengthened the parallel between them. For, in washing the feet of the newly baptized - in acting obediently in the image of the Christ- the bishop reinforced the notion that Christ acted through him in performing and sanctifying the baptismal rite.

This use of emulation as a method for communion between divine agency and earthly mediators, bringing the presence of God into proximity with temporal events, can in turn be

⁵⁴ Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," 365.

⁵⁵ St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 59.

related to an element of the Baptismal ritual discussed previously; namely the spiritual “seal” by which the baptized were marked and confirmed in their faith. This rite, like the foot washing, was a moment in which the baptized came into direct contact with the officiating presence of the bishop. And like the foot washing, the seal represented a moment in which the bishop became an active representative and conduit of divine authority. Throughout the ritual, as had been mentioned, the bishop stood as a figure of authority, embodying the delegation of sacred teachings, of divine agency, and of salvific and sacramental power, through the ecclesiastical hierarchy. However during the foot washing and sealing ritual the bishop becomes not merely a static symbol but an active presence, orchestrating and stewarding the performance of sacred rites, during which the lines between divine and earthly events are blurred. This active role, which would have carried over also into the taking of the Eucharist, can be understood in this context as representing the power of the Church to act as a force for the execution of divine will. For in expanding the community, in keeping alive the teachings of Christ and the memory of His sacrifice, and in providing a mechanism for moral, social, and even political control - a form of governance that would become the basis for the functioning of whole societies - the Church and its leaders became in effect the active presence of God on earth, and in so doing manifested a sacred echo, a shadow of the eternal hierarchy that was one day to reign across all creation.

This symbolic chain, linking history, to ritual, to eternal realization, and tying the authority of tradition to the divine eschatology of the Christian doctrine, is finally expressed in the exterior construction of the Neonian Baptistery itself. Its octagonal form would have called to mind the meaning often given to the number eight in Christian thought. Signifying the transcension of time, the number eight embodied the hypothetical “final day” of the traditional seven day week; the day that breaks the rhythm of earthly life, moving beyond the bounded

reality of mortal existence. The octagonal form, moreover, reemphasized the interplay of life and death that characterized the baptismal ritual; for the centralized octagonal structure had in the ancient world a funerary connotation, being often used in the construction of mausolea. Thus,

It must have seemed perfectly natural to any Early Christian believer to use the pattern of a mausoleum for an edifice in which his old sinful Adam was to die and where he was to be buried with Christ so that he might be resurrected with Him...the mausoleum type would transfer to the baptistery all the implications of burial and resurrection which Early Christianity connected with baptism. Indeed Roman mausolea would contain an element which in connection with a sepulchral monument was bound to hint specifically at the resurrection: an octagonal pattern which was in itself a symbol of resurrection and regeneration...for eight is the number of salvation...and the beginning of a new life.⁵⁶

Altogether, then, the Neonian Baptistery represents in all its parts a visual, spatial, and by extension liturgical strategy of representation. For while it retains the essential symbolic and historical themes that define the baptismal ritual, it reinterprets these themes in order to highlight the concerns of its own time and socio-political milieu. The importance of the Christian Church as the rising official religious institution of its day, and by extension of the bishop as the spiritual father of his community, found appropriate expression in the rite of baptism, due to its function as a point of inclusion and catalyst for the popularization of the Christian faith. The Neonian Baptistery embodies in its plan, location, arrangement, and decorative program an intersection of spiritual meaning and institutional power structure; and in so doing reflects the desire of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Early Christian period to mold the public profile of religious practice to the benefit of their own social, and by extension political dominance. Thus ultimately the Neonian Baptistery, by maintaining the formal and symbolic continuity of the baptismal ritual while at the same time manifesting its special importance within the Early Christian world, evidences the socially conditioned yet spiritually consistent nature of baptism as an expression of the way in which life and history adapt and reinvent religious meaning.

⁵⁶ Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture,'" 29.

Chapter 3: Hildesheim

Finally, the flourishing of the baptismal ritual as both religious rite and public spectacle during the Early Christian period, while it produced a number of exceptional monuments of which the Neonian Baptistery provides only a taste, failed to carry over into the medieval period. Rather, these monumental baptisteries proved all too successful, and as the number of non-Christians in medieval Europe declined, the importance of adult baptism did as well. With nobody left to convert the Church had to find a new use for the baptismal rite, and so gradually what had once been a vast public ceremony devolved into an intimate and socially circumscribed ritual reserved not for adult Neophytes but for infants.⁵⁷ The association between baptism and infancy in turn encouraged identification between the symbolic admittance into the body of the Church and the literal reception of the newborn into the community. This development meant that baptism became at once less spatially, artistically, and symbolically autonomous - assimilating a much wider range of visual and religious material - and more reflective of social concerns surrounding the preservation communal integrity and identity.

As the rule and influence of the Christian Church grew to engulf the entirety of medieval European society, the role of the baptismal liturgy shifted from one of conversion and unification, focused on expanding the Christian community and promoting the political and social leadership of the bishop, to one of exclusion and integration. This shift in emphasis can be understood through the changes in ritual practice that accompanied new social anxieties surrounding the practice of infant baptism. This development is in turn exemplified in the change in attitudes that occurred during the Middle Ages with regards to the proper context for baptism. The tradition of holding baptism on either Easter or Pentecost remained consistent throughout

⁵⁷Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture,'" 28.

much of the medieval period.⁵⁸ In practice, however, the demands of popular religion within a society in which many died in infancy necessitated a transformation in the practice of baptism. The growing concern in the medieval period for the state of the soul after death - during the liminal period that separated individual demise from final resurrection - led to an increased desire for prompt, even immediate, baptism after birth; a development explained by Roberta Gilchrist in her essay “The medieval Church and the Cemetery: The Quick and the Dead.”

The anxiety that surrounded unbaptized infants impacted...on the performance of baptism as a sacrament. Technically, baptism did not require the priest to be present; it could be performed by any member of the laity, male or female. It was common practice for local priests to instruct midwives in the proper form of words to be used in emergencies, where the child was not expected to survive.⁵⁹

The ritual of baptism was thus to a certain degree de-formalized, reduced to its barest essentials in times of crisis in order to preserve the spiritual integrity not only of the infant but of the entire community. For to die unbaptized was to be denied eternal life, whether amongst the saved or the damned, and thus unbaptized infants risked absolute exclusion from the plan of salvation. Moreover, the crucial role played by Christianity in defining social structure and membership during the medieval period meant that, even excluding the possibility of death, unbaptized infants were perceived as somehow foreign not just to the spiritual ecclesia but to the secular community. Thus baptism, in spite of its reduction to a lay ritual, performable by anyone and dependent only on the “correct recitation of the verbal formula,” remained a crucial, even definitive, event in an individual’s life and in the life of the community, representing as it did the unity and integrity of the congregation as both cultural entity and spiritual edifice.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Richard Krautheimer, “Introduction to an ‘Iconography of Medieval Architecture,’” 28.

⁵⁹ Roberta Gilchrist, “The Medieval Church and Cemetery: the Quick and the Dead,” *medieval Life* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 185.

⁶⁰ Roberta Gilchrist, “The Medieval Church and Cemetery: the Quick and the Dead,” 185.

It was not only the context of baptism but also its setting that changed. As mentioned previously, the baptismal liturgy in the medieval period served to bind the baptizand not just to the religious community but to society as a whole; and while the sacrament still maintained as its goal the benefit and salvation of its subject, the fact that this subject was now most often an infant, and thus was no longer able to actively participate, meant that the ritual itself was performed primarily for the benefit of the family and community. This inverted relationship between subject and viewer, in which those witnessing became the primary recipients of ritual meaning, action, and experience, lead to an increased reliance on the use of symbolic language, gesture, and imagery - rather than on the somatic and visual curation of space - to impress upon witnesses the efficacy of the ritual. This drama of signs in turn required a setting that could adequately express the new spiritual, social, and communal meaning of the rite. To this end, the configuration of baptismal space was dramatically transformed. Gradually the grand and often free-standing monuments that had defined the public presence of Early Christian baptism were subsumed within the edifice of the Church. Consigned to side chapels or abandoned in the vast interior of the nave, the baptismal space shrank throughout the Middle Ages. As a result the edifice of the Church itself became the primary setting for the ritual.

The medieval baptismal ritual, like the Early Christian one, would have begun not inside but outside the building; though the unity of baptismal space and Church interior meant that the movement from outside to inside was expressed simply by entrance into the Church.⁶¹ Given the newly intimate nature of the rite, this procession from interior to exterior evolved in the medieval context from public spectacle to custodial precaution, designed to ostracize the unbaptized from the sacred body of the congregation.

⁶¹ Roberta Gilchrist, "The medieval Church and Cemetery: the Quick and the Dead," 185.

...baptism aimed to purify the body before entry to the Church and was therefore situated in a marginal zone. The sacrament of baptism began in the porch of the parish Church, where the baby was exorcised from evil using salt, saliva and the sign of the cross...The baby could then be taken inside the Church to the font, which was located in the western part of the nave, close to the main lay entrance to the Church.⁶²

Thus movement from exterior to interior in the context of medieval Christian baptism became a ritual exorcism, provisionally expelling the “otherness” of the unbaptized flesh in order to preserve the sanctity of the Church interior during the liminal period that separated the moment of entry from the moment of baptism. The porch that guarded the Church portal served as the point of contact between the sacred interiority of the Church, and by extension also of society, and the dangerous otherness of the outside world. This liminality made the porch space the ideal location for the ritual exorcism of the unbaptized infant; an intermediary zone within which the contamination affiliated with the unbaptized body as an object as yet still foreign to the spiritual body of the Church, could be safely expelled.

This exorcism, as the initial phase in the baptismal ritual, represented the desire to assimilate, on a familial and communal level, the alien entity of the unbaptized child. To this end the exorcism of the unbaptized infant embodied a re-adaptation of a traditional and deeply rooted aspect of the baptismal ritual. This process of re-adaptation can be perceived not only in the movement from porch to nave - paralleling the passage from exterior to interior evident in Early Christian baptismal processions - but also in its use of symbolic actions and gestures in order to engage the physical and perceptual *Umwelt* of the soon-to-be-baptized infant in the sensory and spiritual drama of the ritual. Evidence of the attention given to sensory receptivity within the baptismal exorcism can be found in the 12th-century account of this ritual given by Hugh of St. Victor, a prominent and influential medieval theologian.

⁶² Roberta Gilchrist, “The medieval Church and Cemetery: the Quick and the Dead,” 185.

First the one to be baptized is signed with the sign of the cross on the forehead, on the breast, on the eyes, on the nostrils, on the ears, on the mouth, so that the senses of the whole body may be fortified by this sign...Afterwards blessed salt is put in his mouth, that fortified with wisdom he may be free from the noisomeness of iniquity and furthermore may not grow rotten from the vermin of vice. Then a strong breath is blown forth that spirit may be expelled by spirit. Afterwards his ears and nostrils are touched by saliva, that by the touch of supernal wisdom his ears also may be opened to hear the word of God and the nostrils similarly to discern the odor of life and death. this is the sacrament of opening...⁶³

In characterizing the exorcism as a “sacrament of opening,” Hugh here makes reference to an aspect of the baptismal ritual already discussed, namely the “opening” of the initiates before baptism. Throughout the Early Christian world - and most likely at the two monuments discussed previously - Neophytes underwent a ritual “opening” designed to ready the body, and by extension also the spirit, to receive the baptismal mystery. During this event the priest would touch the ears and nostrils of the initiate in a symbolic opening up of the senses in preparation to receive the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ What Hugh’s description suggests is that this “opening” ritual had by the medieval period been conflated with several other ritual actions. These motions served to enhance and expand upon the significance of the “opening,” appealing to the senses in an effort to engage the body of the newborn with the transformation he or she was about to undergo. This sensory evocation of sanctity can be perceived in the use of salt, a preservative mineral employed here as a kind of spiritual and physical preservative against the evils of moral and physical decay, and as a stimulant the sense of taste. Additionally, the use of saliva as a kind of corporeal form of holy anointment, applied to the nostrils and ears in order to ready them to receive the Word of God again attests to the engagement of the body through an awakening of the senses. Finally, in making the sign of the cross over the infant’s forehead, breast, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth the priest enacts a symbolic awakening both of the physical senses and of the mental and

⁶³ Hugh of St. Victor, *The Sacraments of the Christian Faith* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 298.

⁶⁴ St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 46.

intellectual capacities of the infant. Here, then, an ancient precedent is readapted to fit a novel context; the rite of “opening” becomes an act of exorcism, a way to expel foreign entities from the body; to exclude from the social as well as the spiritual realm the unknown “otherness” of the as yet unbaptized infant, and in so doing to ready the senses for the admittance the Holy Spirit.

The ritual of exorcism, signing, and anointment performed outside the Church door allowed the unbaptized infant to enter the sacred space without defilement, and it was within this provisionally sanctified zone that he or she was able to receive the sacrament of baptism, which rendered him or her once and for all a member of the congregation. The rite of baptism itself was performed in a font. Whether the infants were immersed fully or merely sprinkled with water varied by locale, but the basic shape of the font remained relatively consistent throughout the medieval period. Shrunken from a full emersion pool designed for adults down to a basin meant to receive the much smaller body of a newborn, the font provided a worthy vessel for the sanctified water of baptism, while also serving as a diagram in miniature of the structure of its larger predecessors. For the font effectively inverted the inward facing orientation of the baptistery, utilizing instead its outer surfaces for the display of spatial form and visual material; a shift in orientation reflective of the change in ritual emphasis discussed previously, favoring the perspective of spectators located around the font rather than that of the infant contained within.

An example of this kind of symbolic compression can be found in the Romanesque font of Hildesheim, created in the latter half of the thirteenth century, whose elaborate cast bronze decoration speaks to a myriad array of interconnected theological, historical, and ritual themes. At the time of the font’s creation, Hildesheim was one of the largest towns in Northern Germany, and was home to a bishopric that held absolute governmental and social control of the city

throughout the Middle Ages.⁶⁵ Thus the rich and elaborate decorations that adorn the baptismal font at Hildesheim were curated and inspired within the context of a community intimately bound in its social and political identity to the hierarchy and authority of the Church.

The font at Hildesheim is located in the west end of the Hildesheim Cathedral; an accessible location whose proximity to the cathedral's western portal is congruent with the procession from porch to nave interior discussed above. According to Hugh of St. Victor, before the performance of the baptismal rite the font itself would have been "consecrated in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"⁶⁶ by a priest or bishop, as was the much larger font at Ravenna. In addition, the professions of faith uttered by the Neophytes at Ravenna and Dura Europos would also have found their counterpart in the vows taken on the infant's behalf by his or her Godparents.

...the child, when offered for baptism and questioned by the priest, whether he renounces Satan and all his works and all his pomps, replies through the mouths of those who carry him, so that he who was bound by another's iniquity is loosed by another's faith and confession...Then, he is asked whether he believed in God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in one Catholic Church, in the remission of sins, and in eternal life. After this response of faith he is washed of the stains of age with the threefold immersion.⁶⁷

Here again we see the influence of Early Christian tradition transformed and adapted to fit the context of the medieval ritual. The basic pattern of the rite described by Hugh of St. Victor is the same as that performed at Ravenna and Dura Europos. However, the voice of the initiate is here replaced by that of his or her godparent. The role of the godparent in speaking for, and thereby guaranteeing, the child's piety, can be read as a manifestation of the concern for religious education that had been satisfied in the Early Christian Church through the assignation of sponsors for catechumens, as well as through the educational period of Lent. Moreover, this

⁶⁵ Heinz Gunther Borck, *Der Marktplatz zu Hildesheim* (Hildesheim: Bernward, 1989), 24.

⁶⁶ Hugh of St. Victor, *The Sacraments of the Christian Faith* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 298.

⁶⁷ Hugh of St. Victor, *The Sacraments of the Christian Faith* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 299.

transformation in ritual practice again evidences the shift in emphasis in favor of those who witnessed and affirmed, rather than those who underwent, the baptismal rite. For it was the parents and godparents of the infant who truly experienced the ritual, understanding it as a continuation of their own physical and spiritual legacy as members of the earthly, and one day heavenly, congregation. Thus the elaborate and evocative decoration of the Hildesheim font, as an example of medieval baptismal imagery, can be read as a visual program designed to unite and inspire the community in a shared acceptance of the burden of perpetuity, by which they were expected to hand down in word and deed the example and tradition of the Christian faith that bound the social and political hierarchy in which they lived.

To begin investigating this program, it is necessary to address its most recognizable and iconic image, which is also the easiest to interpret within the symbolic and visual culture of baptism. As in the Neonian Baptistery, the font at Hildesheim incorporates an image of the baptism of Christ, which occupies one of the four separate frames that envelope the circular body of the font (Figure 17). This scene, like the one in the Neonian baptistery, depicts John the Baptist standing to Christ's right, while the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. Unlike the Neonian image, however, the scene incorporates two attendant angels on Christ's left, and above his head, at the very top of the frame, the bearded figure of God the Father, reaching down to grasp the tip of the dove's tail.

This configuration not only references the historical prototype for the rite of baptism, but also manifests the presence of the three persons of God within the ritual; linking the persons of the Trinity in a chain of descent passing through the creative agency of the Father, the mobile vitality of the Holy Spirit, and the physical body of Christ, whose sacrificial flesh in turn provides the mechanism of contagion through which all human matter will gain its share in

salvation. This image, much like the mosaic medallion in the Neonian baptistery, would have found its ritual counterpart in the tripartite rhythm of immersion, or in this case pouring, accompanied by a thrice repeated affirmation of the three aspects of the Godhead. Moreover, the role of godparents in providing the voice of the initiate would perhaps have aided the integrative function of the ritual. For in engaging the family in an act of symbolic emulation of Christ alongside their child, the ritual provoked a shared experience of faith equivalent in some ways to the act of first communion performed after baptism in the Early Christian tradition; a rite not performable with infants. Thus the image, in addressing itself to those witnessing and verbally participating in the ritual, invites the family to share with their infant in the act of baptism; an inclusiveness that in turn links the earthly family to the heavenly one - the congregation - who in being baptized is united under the shared paternity of Christ as the new Adam.

In conversation with this scene is the scene of the anointing of Jesus, situated on the adjacent surface of the conical lid that covers the font (Figure 18). This story, mentioned briefly in the introduction, appears in variant forms in each of the four gospels, and tells of Jesus' anointing with fine perfumed ointment by a repentant prostitute, sometimes identified as Mary Magdalene. The image on the font places this woman at Christ's feet, suggesting that the scene was inspired either by gospel of Luke or that of John, both of which specify that the woman anointed the Lord's feet before wiping them with her hair. The moral of this scene in the context of the baptismal font is twofold. For in the scriptural tradition the event of Jesus' anointment is interpreted variously as an act of penance, by which the woman earns forgiveness for her sins, "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love," or as premonition of Christ's death, "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of

my burial.”⁶⁸ Each of these interpretations finds a place in the context of the Hildesheim font. The theme of remittance of sin bears on the absolution offered through the act of baptism, while the premonition of death makes reference to the spiritual death and rebirth of the initiate, who is baptized in emulation of Christ’s saving sacrifice. Moreover, the image itself, as a prototype of humility and repentance, may perhaps have served a similar function to that of the, now absent, act of foot washing performed by the bishop in Early Christian rituals; providing a model of humility for both the infant and his or her earthly guardians and teachers.

Additionally, the act of anointment would have found a parallel in the baptismal ritual; for, as Hugh of St. Victor describes, the final stage in the liturgy involved the anointing of the infant. “When the sacraments of baptism have been completed, after the one baptized has ascended from the font, he is anointed on the head with holy chrism, that by sharing in the spirit of Christ he may thereafter worthily be called a Christian, having been made a coheir of the kingdom and of the glory by the holy unction.”⁶⁹ This anointment in turn bears relation to the spiritual “seal” discussed previously. The chrism specified by Hugh of St. Victor, like the spiritual “seal” described by St. Ambrose, was applied to the forehead in the form of a cross in order to mark the newly baptized as a member of Christ’s spiritual body. This mark, it was believed, would persevere until the Day of Judgment, at which time it would identify those souls worthy of salvation. The chrism thus embodies yet another re-adaptation of an Early Christian ritual element; and while its basic form and meaning remain much the same, the inclusion of a Christological parallel here highlights the purpose of the chrism in affirming the soteriological efficacy of the baptismal ritual. For when interpreted with reference to the image of Christ’s anointment displayed on the Hildesheim font, the application of the chrism can be understood as

⁶⁸ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Luke 7:47 and John 12:7.

⁶⁹ Hugh of St. Victor, *The Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 299.

a reminder of Christ's redeeming sacrifice. Moreover, the foreboding nature of Christ's anointment may also be read as a reminder of mortality, even within the life-giving mystery of the baptismal rite, and perhaps also a reminder to those witnessing the ritual that their own lives, and the life they teach to their children, should follow in the image of Christ's own.

Out of the remaining six scenes that adorn the font at Hildesheim, three reference Old Testament narratives. Of these the two most significant within the overall visual program are the images of Moses parting the Red Sea, and of Joshua with the Ark of the Covenant, leading the Israelites across the Jordan, which adorn the panels on the body of the font directly adjacent to the Baptism of Jesus (Figures 19 and 20). These two scenes can be read as assertions of the Old Testament precedent for the baptismal ritual. Miracles in the Old Testament involving water were commonly referenced as models for baptism; an interpretive precedent that finds expression in the writings of St. Ambrose, who says of Moses' parting of the Red Sea: "Thou observest that even then was holy baptism prefigured in that passing through of the Hebrews, in which the Egyptian perished and the Hebrew escaped. For what else are we taught in this sacrament daily, but that guilt is drowned and error destroyed, while goodness and innocence remained safe to the end?"⁷⁰ The drowning of the Egyptians and the escape of the Hebrews, facilitated through the miraculous power of God as displayed via the agency of his prophet Moses, is here interpreted as a metaphor for the expulsion of evil during the baptismal ritual. This visual allegory finds its active counterpart in the ritual exorcism discussed above, and in the denouncement of the devil offered by the godparents on behalf of the infant; both of which were presided over by the authoritative figure of the bishop, enacting God's will as Christ's counterpart on earth. A similar line of interpretation can be applied to the image of the Israelites crossing the Jordan; for here it is once again through the agency of an individual chosen by God, in this case Joshua, that an

⁷⁰ St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 49.

otherwise impassable barrier is crossed. Here, however, it is not the expulsion of evil but the fulfillment of the covenant of Israel that is the result of this intercession; for in crossing the Jordan the Hebrews finally enter the promised land, and so seal their pact with the Lord. The image of Joshua crossing the river Jordan can therefore be interpreted as a reference to the new covenant forged by Christ, a pact into which the newly baptized infant was about to enter. Thus both scenes embody distinct spiritual and symbolic themes within the baptismal rite, and in so doing validate these themes within the context of scriptural tradition

However these images can also be read in reference to the scene of Christ's baptism to which they are adjoined. Specifically, the relationship between the baptismal ritual and the person of Christ finds precedent in the Old Testament narratives. For, in the Old Testament accounts of Moses' parting of the Red Sea and Joshua's fording of the river Jordan, and in the New Testament narrative of Christ's baptism, the will and Spirit of God becomes an intercessory force and aid of the faithful. In both cases this intercession is enacted via an intermediary figure - the persons of Moses and Joshua in the Old Testament narratives, and in the case of the baptismal ritual, the person of Christ. Thus the Old Testament narratives can be understood as providing precedent for the relationship between the baptismal ritual and the baptism of Christ; a precedent that can in turn be read in the organization of these scenes in relation to one another on the body of the Hildesheim font. Specifically, the bands of wavy lines that indicate water in each of the three scenes seem, by virtue of their continuity from one frame to the next, to flow through all three images; passing from the staff of Moses as he parts the red sea, over the body of Christ as he stands in the river Jordan, and finally over the feet of the Israelites as they carry the Ark of the Covenant into the Promised Land. This arrangement visibly animates the chain of legitimacy between Old Testament and New. In taking his place between Moses and Joshua, the two

individuals through whose agency the first Covenant was solidified, Christ embodies his role as representative of the second Covenant, the living Law through whose teaching not only the Promised Land but the whole world will be made subject to the kingdom of God.⁷¹

Within this context the image on the lid of the font depicting the blossoming of Aaron's rod (Figure 21) takes on a special significance, representing as it does the fertility of the priestly line of Israel, and therefore of the Covenant. This vitality is in turn revived and reinvented through the rabbinic teachings and paschal sacrifice of the Lamb of God; who, in forging the second Covenant, embodied the first fruit of a long and vigorous flowering of faith. This interpretation again reinforces the reading of Old Testament narrative as precedent for the New. Thus the array of Old Testament scenes that adorn the Hildesheim font offer variegated legitimations not only of the baptismal ritual but of the Christian faith, and in so doing highlight the Old Testament ancestry of the congregation as the living body of Christ on earth. Finally, the use of Old Testament narratives in combination with Christological themes echoes similar imagery in the Neonian Baptistery; however here this juxtaposition serves not just to legitimate Church authority, but to highlight the common spiritual ancestry that defines Christian identity.

This integration of Old and New Testament genealogy through the person and legacy of Christ in turn evokes the belief that, in being baptized, the initiate became a child of God through Christ's spiritual parentage. This evocation ties into another image on the font; namely the figure of the Mother of God, shown enthroned with the Christ Child on her lap, located on the side of the font opposite the baptism of Christ (Figure 22). To her left and right stand the two patrons of Cathedral at Hildesheim, Epiphanius of Pavia and Godehard of Hildesheim. At her feet kneels a

⁷¹ St. Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 49.

diminutive figure identified as “Wilbern,” and most likely meant to refer to Wilband van Odelburg, bishop of Hildesheim at the time the font was commissioned.⁷²

Together these figures provide multiple levels of context for the symbolic adoption of the initiate into the body of the Church. Specifically, the iconographical familiarity of the Mother of God imagery would have deepened and enhanced the symbolic and emotional potency of the image program as a whole via its popularity and cultural relevance. For the image of Mary as the Mother of God, portrayed with the infant Christ on her lap, was often revered during the Middle Ages as an icon of intercession - a source of forgiveness, blessing, and protection. The phenomenon of Marian imagery and religiosity is given beautiful illustration in the words of a medieval sermon given at Amiens Cathedral, on whose portal was a carved depiction of the Mother of God that achieved a significant devotional cult during the Middle Ages. This sermon has been translated and recorded by Stephen Murray in his book *A Gothic Sermon*:

Good Gentlefolk, all of you together and each of you individually who recognize the Mother of God, Saint Mary of Amiens, which is your mother Church...The Mother of God, Saint Mary of Amiens, is your lady of all ladies; she is the lady of the world, she is the queen of the glorious heavens, she is the treasure of sinners, she is the savior of souls, she is the spouse of the Lord, she is the mother of Jesus Christ, she is the temple of the holy spirit. This Lady calls back to her those who have strayed, she set the fallen on their feet, she is rescue to the captives. She comforts the sad, she strengthens the weak, she prays for the people, she sustains the despised, she guards women. Remember that sin entered the world through woman, and that good is brought back to the world through woman. The reproach that Eve brought to women was removed by the Virgin Mary.⁷³

This passage reveals the multiple yet coexistent aspects of the Virgin, as the Mother of Christ, as the second Eve through whose virtue the nobility of womanhood was restored, as the spouse of Christ and the queen of the heavens, as intercessor and aid to the downtrodden, as the protector of the poor, the innocent, and of women, and as the personification of the Church. Together all

⁷² *The Baptismal Font*. Hildesheimer Dom. Web. 18 April 2016.

⁷³ Stephan Murray, *A Gothic Sermon: Making a Contract with the Mother of God, Saint Mary of Amiens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 47.

these elements shine through in a lustrous portrait of a woman who was at once cultural icon and living divinity. Of these elements, the most immediate was the symbolic association between image of the Mother of God and the mother ecclesia. For as the vessel for the Word made flesh, the Mother of God offered an embodied metaphor - much like the body of Christ whom she nurtured - for the institution of the Christian Church.⁷⁴ The Virgin personified the maternal face of the Church, offering a more relatable and emotionally immediate alternative to the tragically austere and didactic person of Christ. The person of the Virgin, moreover, provided yet another bridge to the authority of Old Testament tradition. For it was through Mary, who was herself descended from Abraham and the Old Testament kings, that Christ inherited the authoritative genealogy by which he laid claim to the covenant of Israel, remaking it in his own image. This legacy by extension also included Christ's entire adoptive progeny, the ecclesia - living, dead, and not yet born - for and by whom the new covenant was forged.

The role of the Mother of God as both the personification of the mother ecclesia and as the binding link to the Old Testament tradition, of which Christian eschatology claimed to be the completion, is complemented on the Hildesheim image through the figures that accompany her. Specifically, the inclusion of the patron saints of Hildesheim - Epiphanius of Pavia and Godehard of Hildesheim - as well as bishop Wilband, lends the generic symbolism of the Virgin and Child a familiarity that would have allowed viewers to engage with the image and its meaning within a relevant context. The specificity of the local saints, from whose patronage and blessing the newly minted Christian was to benefit in both life and death, added to the maternal, protective, and authoritative figure of the Mother of God an individuality and sense of identity that enabled the religious institution to bind with the social. Moreover, by combining the Mother of God with local saints, whose appearance makes specific reference to the cathedral at

⁷⁴ Hugh of St. Victor, *The Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 299.

Hildesheim that housed their cults, this image implicitly characterizes the cathedral itself as the spiritual and social guardian of the newly baptized infant.

The Mother of God image did not only embody the maternal role of the ecclesia in adopting and nurturing the souls of her congregation, but also provided an actively protective, even salvific presence. In the context of the Hildesheim font, the culturally familiar image of the Virgin as spiritual mother and intercessor acquires a soteriological meaning that in many ways parallels that of Christ. For much as Christ was envisioned as the second Adam, so Mary - as the vessel of the Holy Spirit and the container through which Christ entered this world - was cast in medieval religious thought as the next Eve. This association was in turn based both on Mary's role in completing and validating the Christological narrative - for as Virgin mother Mary gave through the purity of her body the crucial element of un-conceived creation that made Christ free of original sin - and in her function in embodying a kind of female specific redemption. Thus Mary aided, and even in a sense made possible, the Christological narrative of salvation, while offering through her maternal purity a kind of prototype of womanhood, a new Eve to replace the tarnished legacy of the old, much as Christ had redeemed the cursed seed of Adam. This symbolic intertwining of the Virgin Mary and Eve would have held special relevance for women and young children, for as a maternal figure who transcended the pains, dangers, and sins of childbearing, which to medieval women would have been so immediate, Mary offered spiritual and bodily protection to both mother and child; and while the mother would not have been present at the baptism, the image of the Virgin would nonetheless have offered a much needed palliative against the anxieties of parenthood.

Finally, the notion that Mary, as the bearer of Christ and the vessel that brought the Holy Spirit to earth, played an active and crucial role in facilitating the salvation of the human race

offers, in the context of baptism, a reminder of the tragic narrative by which this salvation was bought. The image of Mary with the Christ child on her lap would have offered to those witnessing the baptism a poignant reminder of the brutal death and resurrection that child was to suffer for the benefit of mankind; a reminder made more biting by the potential parallel between the infant Christ and the child who, held in the arms of the priest, was about to symbolically endure the same death and rebirth. However while the image of the Mother of God would have provided a gripping reminder of the Christ's sacrifice, and by extension also of the ordeal of death and rebirth that the infant was about to undergo through baptism, it would also have reminded the spectators of the hope that this sacrifice offered. Specifically, the maternal aspect of the Virgin, imaged through the tender embrace of mother and child, would have embodied the salvific embrace of the mother Church, under whose protection the newborn infant, in receiving the sacrament of baptism, entered into eternal life. Thus the Mother of God offered a counterpart to the scriptural and eschatological meanings of the narrative Christological and Old Testament scenes; utilizing familiar and emotionally charged imagery to engage the familial, maternal/paternal, and spiritual sensibilities of those witnessing the mystery of baptism, and in so doing adding cultural and social immediacy to ritual meaning.

The Hildesheim image of the Mother of God also bears relation in both nature and subject to the personification of Mercy depicted on the lid of the font (Figure 23). Here the figure of Mercy sits enthroned, surrounded on either side by supplicants, the innermost of which on each side kneels to receive from her some kind of drink and bread. This arrangement echoes the Mother of God image, and the identification of the figure as Mercy would have had a particular poignancy in light of the function of the Virgin as pardoner and intercessor. Moreover, the distribution of bread and drink may have been intended as a reference to the Eucharist, in which

case this scene can also be understood as evoking the missing Eucharistic element of the baptismal ritual.

The maternal, protective, and emotionally engaging imagery exemplified in the figures of the Mother of God and Mercy finds a narrative, scriptural equivalent in the depiction of the Massacre of the Innocents located on the lid of the font (Figure 24). This account, taken from the gospels, describes the brutal jealousy of King Herod who, upon hearing that the messiah had been born in Bethlehem, ordered the killing of every infant in the village under the age of two.⁷⁵ This story would have held special significance in the context of infant baptism, for the state of the newly baptized was often equated with the eternal innocence of the massacred infants at Bethlehem. “It was commonly understood that any (baptized) infants who died before the age of two would be among the Holy Innocents, having died without sin.”⁷⁶ Thus for the first few years of their life newly baptized infants were considered in some way distinguished in their moral and spiritual status. The eternal and privileged innocence of the children of Bethlehem thus stood as an iconographic assurance of the sanctity and purity offered through baptism, and also perhaps reassured the parents that their child would be saved whether or not they made it out of infancy.

In making reference to the special state of recently baptized infants the scene of the Massacre of the Innocents also offers an appropriate accompaniment to the closing of the baptismal ritual. For, as with Early Christian baptism, the newly baptized infant would have been presented with white garments and lighted candles, symbolic of the state of spiritual and bodily innocence attained through the ritual. Hugh of St. Victor, in discussing this final phase of the ritual, makes clear the inner meaning of this external transformation:

Then there is given to the Christian a white garment, that he who darkened the splendor of the first nativity by the garments of age may with the habit of regeneration hold forth

⁷⁵ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Matthew 2:16-18.

⁷⁶ Roberta Gilchrist, “The medieval Church and Cemetery: the Quick and the Dead,” 207.

the cloak of glory. Also...his head is covered with a holy veil, that he may understand that he possesses the diadem of the kingdom and sacerdotal dignity. Finally, a lighted candle is put into his hand, that he may be ought to fulfill that part of the gospel where it is said: 'So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.'⁷⁷

This rather dense and esoteric language disguises a simple, visceral truth, which is that the appearance of transformation in the infant, swaddled in clean white garments, veiled and lighted by a candle, would have held an easily perceptible meaning; exhibiting the ethereal, almost unearthly purity of this newly created soul, cleansed of the stains of conception and birth, created anew in the image of Christ - the human being at his or her most innocent. This image of the freshly baptized infant as above the mire of earthly life once again evokes the idea of baptism as a reversion to spiritual infancy. Moreover, in the context of medieval baptism this transformation also ties into the secondary aspect of the baptism, the naming of the Child. This aspect of the ritual, unlike others discussed, finds no precedent in Early Christian tradition; rather it is a unique product of the practice of infant baptism. The closest parallel within Early Christian accounts can perhaps be found in Dionysius's description discussed previously, in which he notes that the priests call out the initiate's name across the waters as he or she is baptized.⁷⁸ This calling out of the name, invoking and affirming the identity, the personhood of the initiate is similar to the naming of the child at the time of baptism. In both cases the ritual of rebirth imparts to the baptizand a freshness and lack of identity to which the name becomes, particularly in the case of medieval infants, who were often named after saints, a sort of prayer or aspiration.

Finally, the binding of life and liturgy catalyzed through the image program finds its culmination in the subtle but crucial symbolism embodied in the allegorical personifications of the four rivers of paradise that form the quadripartite base of the font (Figures 25, 26 and 27).

⁷⁷ Hugh of St. Victor, *The Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, 299.

⁷⁸ Pseudo Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius, the Complete Works*, 49.

Each is differentiated by dress, appearance, and posture, and each holds an upturned jar from whose mouth flow little rivulets winding down to the floor. These figures serve to accentuate the symbolic vitality of the water used during the ritual. As mentioned previously, the association between flowing, “living” water and rebirth through baptism dates back to the earliest prescriptions for the performance of the baptismal liturgy.⁷⁹ The font at Hildesheim belongs to a time and a practice within which such prescriptions had long been obsolete, however, the four allegorical figures of the rivers of paradise could be read as a nod to past tradition - keeping alive the significance, if not the actuality, of earlier practice. Thus these figures serve as a reminder of tradition, grounding the ritual in the events of the past and the precedents of previous practice, while at the same time adding to the mystical aura of the holy water, the sacred medium that draws its potency from the primal life giving Spirit of the first creation.

This work of historical grounding finds its parallel in the second function of these figures, namely their role in indicating an actual physical geography to augment the promise of salvation. The image of the four rivers of paradise naturally carried edenic associations; and the geographical reality of Eden as a land that actually or at some time existed - a mystical paradise far to the east - offered in the context of the font at Hildesheim a concrete and relatable setting for the afterlife. This paradisiacal connotation, in the context of the eschatological meaning of baptism as a doorway to the heavenly afterlife, prompted a visualization of the heavenly kingdom that is played out in the decorative program of the font. Specifically, the images that occupy the intermediary zones within the visual program offer an allegorical rendering of the structure and content of the heavenly city. The images on the font’s body already discussed are set within trefoil canopies supported by four columns, at the base of which are personifications of the four cardinal virtues: Moderation, Valor, Justice, and Wisdom. Above these figures, in the

⁷⁹ *The Didache or The Teachings of the Lord to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles*, 3.

spandrels that separate each trefoil, are images of four of the major Old Testament prophets: Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. Above these are symbols of the four Evangelists: Luke's ox, Mark's lion, John's eagle, and Matthew's angel. Finally, in the upper register of the font, in the spandrels of the much smaller trefoil canopies that frame the scenes on the lid, can be seen figures of Old Testament kings and prophets, some of which are repeated from the registers below: Jeremiah, King David, Isaiah, and King Solomon. These marginal figures impose a superstructure that reaches from the lid of the font all the way down to the four rivers at its foot. Thus they can be understood as framing the larger narrative, allegorical, and iconic scenes within a structural hierarchy that references the Plan of Salvation; personifying the qualities of the blessed life, both immediately through the allegories of virtue and didactically through the examples of the prophets and kings, while at the same time tying the Old Testament tradition to the New Testament vision of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Within this context the rivers of paradise offer - in augmentation to this embodied edifice of salvation represented through the architectural framework and its occupants - a sense of geographical and natural reality to which its viewers could relate. In evoking the environment of Eden, these images play upon the association common in the Middle Ages between the condition of Man in the Garden of Eden and the paradisaical life of the Heavenly Kingdom.⁸⁰ In characterizing the heavenly paradise as a garden, similar in its natural fecundity and otherworldly beauty to the rich and well-watered lands of Eden, the four rivers of paradise on the font at Hildesheim tie the ritual of baptism into a concrete, imaginable vision of its eschatological meaning. For in spatializing and physicalizing the eternal life to come through the edenic motif, the font anchors the architectural canopy, representing the celestial hierarchy, and the image program it contains, with its array of theological and social meanings, in a specifically earthly,

⁸⁰ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: The British Library Press, 1996), 167.

elemental embodiment of paradise. This literal and symbolic grounding of the precipitous structure of signs, allegories, narrative, and scripture built into the image program of the font serves to anchor the whole symbolic web of meaning, association, tradition, ritual, and hierarchy that surrounds the baptismal ritual through an image of the afterlife that is at once primal and deeply relatable, bringing home the binding ideal of the baptismal ritual as a whole - namely to preserve into eternal perpetuity the fragile newness of a living soul.

The rich and beautifully executed image program on the Hildesheim font draws together a series of distinct visual materials. In utilizing a thematic vocabulary already established through previous forms of baptismal space in combination references to popular religion and devotional practices, the font at Hildesheim drew baptism into the broader realm of Christian tradition, devotion, and eschatology. This approach in turn articulated the baptismal mystery as an integral part of the entire soteriological, political, and communal structure of society. For in being baptized the infant was being initiated not simply into the life-giving doctrine of a mystery cult, or into the fast-growing community of a flourishing state religion, but into the very structure of human life and history, indeed of the universe, as it was known through and within the medieval Church. Moreover, the socio-political atmosphere of the Middle Ages, and in particular of Hildesheim, in which ecclesiastical structures, particularly bishoprics, held sway over the regulation and functioning of society, made this conflation of baptismal themes and popular religious imagery more poignant; for it indicated the universalizing significance of baptism within a society in which congregational membership determined social membership. The historical and social specificity of the font's imagery in turn goes hand in hand with its usage; and specifically with what this usage, and the style of viewership it necessitated, reveals about the significance of baptism within the medieval Church. Specifically, the way in which the

externality of the image program would have interacted with the viewing audience positioned around it, and by extension with the cathedral interior within which it was housed, reveals a great deal about the way in which the baptismal space, now subsumed within the body of the cathedral, was understood as part of the broader cathedral fabric. For in facing its visual material outwards into the body of the cathedral the font offers its symbolic, historical, and eschatological meaning as part of a larger, all engulfing edifice of faith - to which the baptismal ritual was no longer a functional extension, a vital mechanism of publicity and prestige, but rather an aspect within a much wider social and political presence.

Conclusion

Starting with one of the earliest known architectural and decorative iterations of baptismal space, the 3rd century baptistery at Dura Europos, I have traced the growth of the baptismal ritual across centuries of evolution and change. The Durene baptistery offered a glimpse into the veiled rituals of the Early Christian rite, and served to introduce many of the active, spatial, and visual motifs that would come to dominate later monuments. Moreover, it offered in its layout a liturgical map whose form reflected the alternation of public and private, interior and exterior settings and stages within the ritual. This map in turn demonstrated the ways in which space and imagery combined to facilitate somatic drama and ritual motion, thereby heightening the emotional and spiritual effect of the rite. Centuries later, the early 5th century Neonian Baptistery embodied in its design, public presence, and visual program the newly evolving characterization of the Christian Church as the living legacy of Christ and his Apostles. The plan and image program of this centralized, free-standing structure, combined with the drama of the baptismal liturgy, offered up a hierarchical diagram of contemporary Christian society articulated through matter and form, through history, scripture, and symbolism, and through the agency and power of the bishop, whose role in presiding over the house of God implied his spiritual authority in mediating and controlling the methods of distribution for religious education and participation. Finally, the 13th century font at Hildesheim demonstrated the ways in which these structures of devotion and social control carried over into the high medieval context. As the Church took on a dominant role in the high medieval period, baptism became an implicit part of the life cycle, often performed at birth, and thus less of a public spectacle. With the normalization of the baptismal ritual came a transformation in the arrangement of baptismal space and imagery. Not only did the setting for baptism recede into the

body of the Church proper, the form of the baptismal font, now the sole dedicated accouterment of the ritual, came to encapsulate the spatial and visual complexity of its larger predecessors. In adapting the traditional form of the baptistery in miniaturized scale, and in reversing the orientation of its visual program, addressing viewers on the outside rather than the baptizand on the inside, the baptismal font at Hildesheim embodied the critical changes in practice, context, and social significance that transformed the baptismal ritual during the middle ages.

By exploring this evolution of ritual space, practice, and meaning, this project aimed to expand the field of inquiry and influence for both these and other baptismal monuments. In articulating the interaction between space and ritual, and in situating the various stages of the baptismal rite within the specific architectural and design elements of each of the monuments I discussed, I have demonstrated the ways in which baptismal spaces and accouterments can be read through and alongside liturgy. In doing this my goal has been to enrich our understanding of both the spaces in question and the events they housed. For in characterizing baptismal space via its construction of somatic ritual motion and drama, and in likewise characterizing the baptismal ritual through the spatial mechanisms it necessitated or navigated, I have bound these two elements to one another in such a way as to demonstrate their coevolution and mutual influence. In addition, by examining the decorative programs belonging to each of my case studies through a similar mechanism - attempting to tie the various motions through and within space that constituted the baptismal rite to the visual stimulus each of these motions would encounter - I have given active context to the symbolic, moral, and narrative meaning of these image programs. Finally, in elucidating the Christological parallels that inhabit and cohere the baptismal rite, and in tracing the soteriological, personal, and communal meanings of these parallels, I have populated this symbiotic structure of ritual, space, and imagery with

significations that in turn serve to impart to the ritual its particular, contextually determined meaning. In doing so I have not only added spiritual, theological, and soteriological substance to the co-construction of ritual, space, and imagery evident in the three monuments I address, but have provided a grounding set of themes - significances that, as stated earlier, bind these various iterations of the baptismal ritual to one another across time and context. Thus I have demonstrated how the baptismal ritual, and its intrinsic Christological meaning, was able to accommodate, adapt, and evolve in order to suit the conditions of its use and social significance; and how this change in ritual performance and meaning in turn inspired change in the spaces, accouterments, and image programs built for and around it.

Finally, I have brought my investigation through a historical trajectory that covers as long a span of time, and as complete an evolution of baptismal practice, as possible within the confines of this project. In taking such a broad and multivalent approach, my aim has been to make available the ideas and methods I have put forward to as wide an application as possible. My ambition in doing so is that this work can open up the field to a new approach, one that investigates baptismal spaces across larger time frames. Rather than attempting to trace the particular origins and interests of a single monument in reference to a limited selection of similar ones, this approach would aim to contextualize each space within a broader perspective on the trajectory of baptismal practice as a social and religious phenomena, and the resultant development in the planning, curation, and content of baptismal space and imagery. Thus my hope is ultimately to bring the baptismal ritual - with its rich and unique array of meanings, and its highly important, and for a long period of history highly visible, public and communal profile - into the discussion of art and architectural history as a significant and multi-dimensional aspect of Early Christian and medieval religious and artistic culture. This exposure, in breaking open

the diverse meanings and applications - social, artistic, architectural, archaeological, and theological - of baptismal history and practice, will, I hope, inspire future, more comprehensive studies; investigations that will perhaps one day allow us to paint a fuller picture of the phenomenon that is the baptismal ritual.

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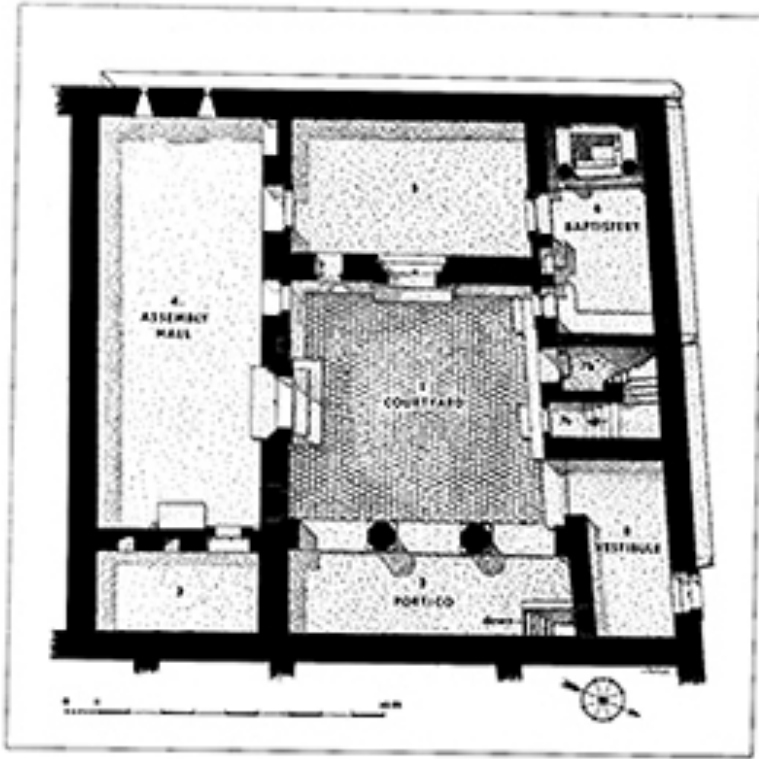


Figure 1: *Reconstructed Plan of the Christian Building, ca.233-256.* The Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. *Yale University Art Gallery.* Web. 17 April 2016.

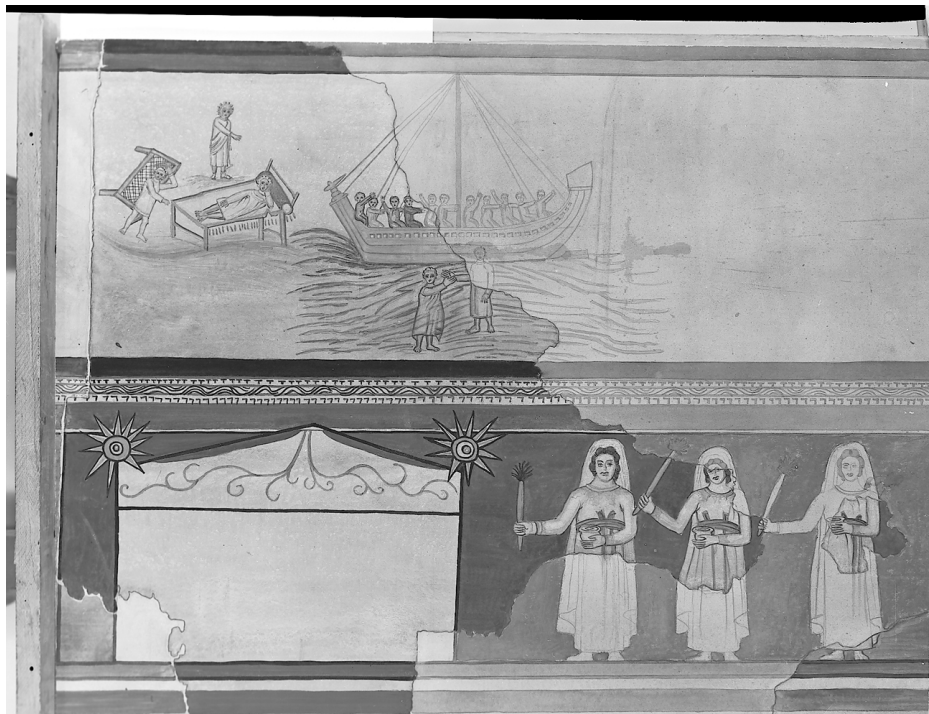


Figure 2: *Drawing of the paintings on the North wall of the baptistery.* The Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. *Yale University Art Gallery.* Web. 17 April 2016.

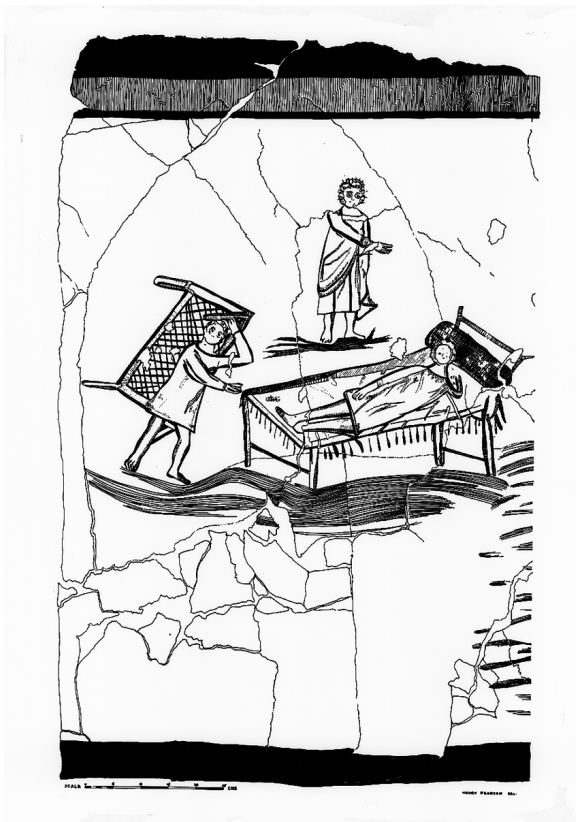


Figure 3: *Drawing of Christ Healing the Paralytic on the north wall of the baptistery.* The Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. *Yale University Art Gallery.* Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 4: *Drawing of Christ Walking on Water on the north wall of the baptistery.* The Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. *Yale University Art Gallery.* Web. 17 April 2016.

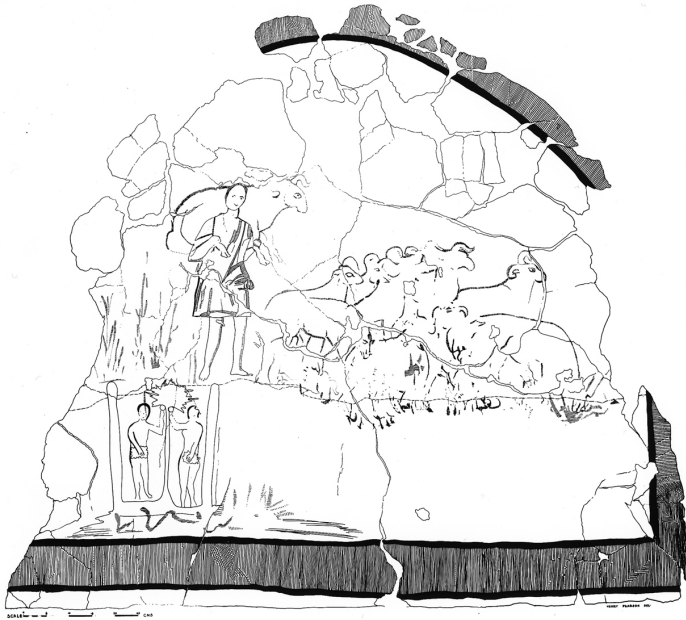


Figure 5: *Drawing of the Good Shepherd on the west wall of the baptistery.* The Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. *Yale University Art Gallery.* Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 6: Hayes, Holly. "View From Northwest." Photograph. *Neonian Baptistery Photos.* Sacred Destinations. Web. 18 April,2016.

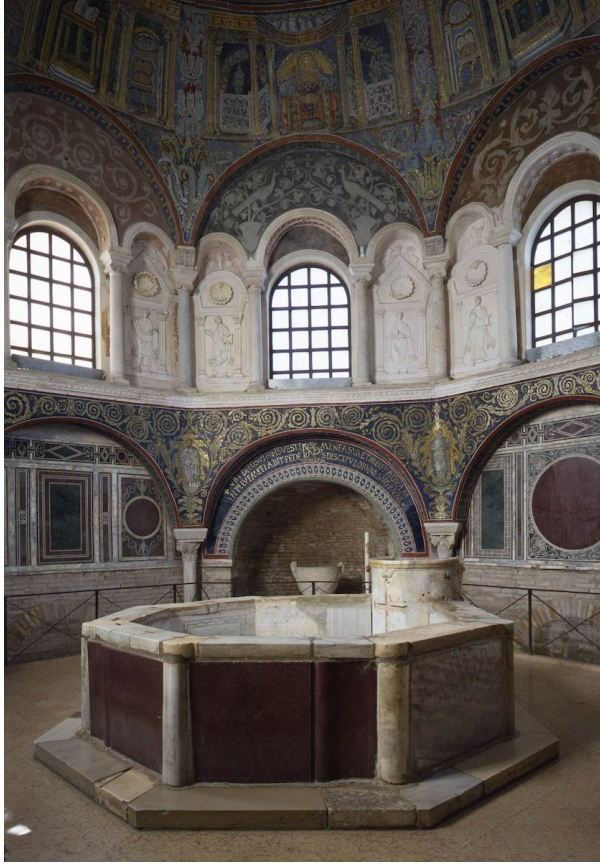


Figure 7: Municipality of Ravenna. “Neonian Baptistery.” Photograph. *Heritage Rout: Ravenna*. Francia Media. Web. 18 April 2016.



Figure 8: Hayes, Holly. “Stucco and Mosaic.” Photograph. *Neonian Baptistery Photos*. Sacred Destinations. Web. 18 April, 2016.



Figure 9: Hayes, Holly. "Stucco Relief: Christ Trampling a Snake." Photograph. *Neonian Baptistery Photos*. Sacred Destinations. Web. 18 April,2016.



Figure 10: Hayes, Holly. "Dome Mosaic" Photograph. *Neonian Baptistery Photos*. Sacred Destinations. Web. 18 April,2016.



Figure 11: Hayes, Holly. "Dome Mosaic: Baptism of Christ." Photograph. *Neonian Baptistery Photos*. Sacred Destinations. Web. 18 April,2016.



Figure 12: Hayes, Holly. "Dome Mosaic: Baptism of Christ." Photograph. *Neonian Baptistery Photos*. Sacred Destinations. Web. 18 April,2016.



Figure 13: Milosevic, Peter. "The Ceiling Mosaic in the Baptistery of Neon." Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 14: Hayes, Holly. "Dome Mosaic: Altar with Gospel of Mark." Photograph. *Neonian Baptistery Photos. Sacred Destinations*. Web. 18 April, 2016.



Figure 15: Hayes, Holly. "Dome Mosaic: Empty Throne." Photograph. *Neonian Baptistery Photos*. Sacred Destinations. Web. 18 April, 2016.



Figure 16: taivaansusi. "Battistero Neoniano presso oil Duomo." Photograph. *Mosaic Art Source*. Wordpress. Web. 18 April 2016.



Figure 17: Flavus, Rabanus, *Baptism of Christ*. Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 18: Flavus, Rabanus. *The Anointing of Jesus*. Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 19: Flavus, Rabanus. *Parting the Red Sea*. Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 20: Flavus, Rabanus. *Crossing the Jordan*. Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 21: Flavus, Rabanus. *The Blossoming of Aaron's Rod*. Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 22: Flavus, Rabanus. *Mary With Child (Donor Portrait)*. Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 23: Flavius, Rabanus. *Personification of Mercy*. Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 24: Flavius, Rabanus. *The Massacre of the Innocents*. Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons, the Free Media Repository*, 16 March 2009. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 25: *Baptismal Font*. Copper Alloy. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *Medieval Treasures From Hildesheim*. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 26: *Baptismal Font*. Copper Alloy. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *Medieval Treasures From Hildesheim*. Web. 17 April 2016.



Figure 27: *Baptismal Font*. Copper Alloy. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *Medieval Treasures From Hildesheim*. Web. 17 April 2016.