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CIRCULAR LEAD TANKS: A SUGGESTION

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Abstract. The question is how we can solve the inconsistency between the following two facts:

1. No baptistery has so far been found in Pannonia. 2. Christians lived in Pannonia at the same time. Upon different analogies (circular lead tanks, church at Zurzach) and examining the rite of the baptism I make hypostatical suggestion: fonts of wood, graves which never contained corpses.

No baptistery has so far been found in Pannonia. This is surprising in view of the fact that Christians lived in Pannonia during the early period. Notwithstanding excavations, investigations, and various suggestions the question has remained open. The present article does not promise a solution either, but offers a new historical conjecture on the basis of various finds and analogies. The most important analogies are the circular lead tanks which have been found in Britain.¹ The earliest discovery was made at Icklingham, Suffolk in the 18th century. Then two further pieces were found at Icklingham. “The construction of all three is identical, although the two later finds are closer in size.”²

year found	max. diam. cm	max. height cm	approx. capacity litre
1725	67	31	109
1939	81	33	170
1971	77	34	158

“The 1939 and 1971 tanks were both found in Horselands Field, the former 150 yds/137 m from a Roman villa site, the latter associated with a late Roman inhumation cemetery, but the findspot of the 1725 vessel... cannot be established; ... the presence of at least three tanks in one small settlement, all made

¹ Only a select bibliography is given; *E. Cecil Curwen*, Roman Lead Cistern from Pulborough, Sussex. *The Antiquaries Journal* 23 (1943) 155-157; *Guy* 1981, 271-276; *Watts* 1988, 210-222; *Mawer* 1994, 232-236; *Watts* 1995, 318-322; *JRS* 25 (1935) 216-217, pl 35-36; *Britannia* 20 (1989) 333-334, pl. 26.

² *Mawer* 1994, 234. The list is also published on this page.

in the same workshop in the same period, two bearing unambiguously Christian motifs while the third apparently lacks any religious symbolism.”³ The Christian motifs are the chi-rho monogram with and without alpha and omega. X-motifs, Ys, and “X-and-vertical design” (iota-chi monogram) can be seen on the lead tank from Brough, Notts.⁴ The Y – according to Dorothy J. Watts – resembles the *orans* attitude, and represents moral choice.⁵ She also examined whether these tanks were connected with baptism. She concludes the basis of the literary sources, which are connected with the ritual of baptism, that these tanks were not fonts, but that they were used at baptism for a foot washing ritual.⁶ Christopher J. Guy has examined the construction, decoration and uses of these tanks.⁷ He writes: “the tanks may be dated on stylistic grounds and stratigraphic evidence” to the fourth century; and “it is possible that all the tanks had Christian owners” in spite of the fact that the chi-rho monogram can only be seen on five tanks while it is absent for seven.⁸ In his view – the tanks were not fonts. They were water containers found in cemeteries. Several of them were found in or near wells. In conclusion he writes: “These may have had a Christian liturgical function, such as for ritual ablution, but such a use cannot be stated for certain and the tanks without the Chi-Rho monogram may have had a different use.”⁹

Such a lead tank has also been found in Pannonia,¹⁰ but it has not been published. Its site is a Roman settlement near natural water. There is no indication that the tank is Christian.

³ Mawer 1994, 236.

⁴ Watts 1995, 320-321.

⁵ Watts 1995, 320. Here she states that eighteen tanks (altogether with the fragments) are known from Roman Britain.

⁶ Watts 1988, 210-222; Watts 1995, 321. Watts 1988, 217: “The evidence is substantial. Although Thomas describes the footwashing rite as “obscure”, there is no doubt that, while it was not carried out in Rome itself, it was practised in Christian churches both east and west of Rome. From the proceedings of the Council of Elvira of c. 305, canon 48 enacts: “*placuit ... neque pedes eorum [qui baptizantur] lavandi sunt a sacerdotibus, sed clericis*”. Ambrose, from his see in Celtic Milan, wrote, in about 390, “*ascendisti de fonte ... pedes tibi lavi*”; and in Gaul, Caesarius of Arles (c. 470-542) mentioned the same ritual. In the African Church, evidence for the *pedilavium* at baptism is found in the writings of Augustine, and for Syria there is a possible reference in Aphraates.”

⁷ Guy 1981, 271-276.

⁸ Guy 1981, 274.

⁹ Guy 1981, 275.

¹⁰ Nagy Á., RégFüz I. 28 (1975) 81: Szabadbattyán. A big Roman lead tank came to light in the course of ploughing along the Sárvíz (a stream), on the Roman settlement which extends up to Sárszentmihály (a village). The villa can be dated the 3rd and 4th centuries on numismatic evidence. *Fülöp Gy.*, RégFüz I. 29 (1976) 74: Szabadbattyán. A rescue excavation was made in the following year on this site. A building was found on this occasion. The thickness of its walls is

The word *baptismus* is not Christian. The *frigidarium* of the public bath (*thermae*) was called *baptisterium*.¹¹ That is why the Christians named this sacrament φωτισμός “illumination”.¹² Melito gave the name *photisterion* to the place of the baptism.¹³ Polycarpus Radó has discussed its theology, and the rite involved on the basis of Saint Paul’s letters¹⁴ Gal. 3, 26-27¹⁵ and Rom. 6, 3-11¹⁶. The main point is to die and to be buried by baptism in order to be free from original sin, and sins. The candidates were plunged three times into the water; this act symbolizes death, and then resurrection, as Jesus Christ was buried three days followed by the resurrection. The Christian initiation consists of the baptism, the confirmation, and the Eucharist together.¹⁷ That is why every part of their ceremony is a symbol at the same time; the baptism leaves supernatural signs (*sigilla, signacula*) for ever. “*Sigillum ergo est aqua, in aquam*

172 cm. The lead tank is now in the Szent István Király Múzeum, Székesfehérvár. Recently, the building has been excavated under direction of Gabriella Nádorfi.

¹¹ Dölger 1910, 5, 84-86; Stommel 1959, 6.

¹² Deichmann 1950, 1158; Radó 1966, 644. Cf. Luc. 2, 32: ... *lumen ad revelationem gentium et gloriam plebis tuae Israel.*

¹³ Radó 1966, 644.

¹⁴ Radó 1966, 643.

¹⁵ Gal. 3, 26-27: *omnes enim filii Dei estis per fidem in Christo Iesu (27) quicumque enim in Christo baptizati estis Christum induistis.* – For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

¹⁶ Rom. 6, 3-11: *an ignoratis quia quicumque baptizati sumus in Christo Iesu in morte ipsius baptizati sumus? (4) consepulti enim sumus cum illo per baptismum in mortem ut quomodo surrexit Christus a mortuis per gloriam Patris ita et nos in novitate vitae ambulemus. (5) si enim conplantati facti sumus similitudini mortis eius simul et resurrectionis erimus. (6) hoc scientes quia vetus homo noster simul crucifixus est ut destruat corpus peccati ut ultra non serviamus peccato. (7) qui enim mortuus est iustificatus est a peccato. (8) si autem mortui sumus cum Christo credimus quia simul etiam vivemus cum Christo. (9) scientes quod Christus surgens ex mortuis iam non moritur mors illi ultra non dominabitur (10) quod enim mortuus est peccato mortuus est semel quod autem vivit vivit Deo (11) ita et vos existimate vos mortuos quidem esse peccato viventes autem Deo in Christo Iesu.* – Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁷ Martimort 1965, 45-46: „In der frühchristlichen Zeit wurden diese drei Sakramente hintereinander in derselben liturgischen Versammlung gespendet, so daß die Einheit der Initiation stärker betont war als die Unterscheidung ihrer einzelnen sakramentalen Teile.”

igitur descendunt mortui, et ascendunt vivi.”¹⁸ Ambrose as well as others reminded audience of the way of life which has to be lived by everyone who is reborn.¹⁹

The ceremony of baptism is roughly the same in Rome, Milan, Gallia, and Spain. The sequence of exorcism, insufflation, and unction was subject to fluctuation.²⁰ Although the foot-washing (*pedilavium*) belonged to the rites of baptism, it was not practised everywhere. This is the point which has been brought out by Watts.²¹ The catechumens took a bath on Holy Thursday, and then they were permitted to eat. But they kept a strict fast during the following two days. When East night came, the bishop spread his hands over them and carried out the exorcism.²² This act signifies that the soul escapes Satan power, and comes under Christ. The bishop breathed on them, and crossed their forehead, mouth, eyes and breast. That was the time for the Easter celebration. It began with reading; the bishop and the priests read portions of Scripture. At dawn, the catechumens took off their own clothes, and turned to the west in order to renounce Satan and all his works. Then they were anointed with the holy oil.²³ Thereafter the bishop asked each of them whether they believed in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The answer was on each occasion: “I believe”. Thereupon the bishop performed the baptism itself; they at once stepped up and were then anointed with the chrism.²⁴ While the bishop marked their forehead

¹⁸ Radó (1966, 644) quoting Hermas Similitudo 9, 16.

¹⁹ *De mysteriis* I, 1, 1. PL 16, 389A: ... *quo renovati per baptismum, ejus vitae usum teneretis, quae ablutos deceret.* I, 3, 11. PL 16, 392C: *si in te quoque justis custodia et forma servetur.* A third Ambrosian passage also provides evidence for the supernatural sign on the heart of the believers; *De virginibus* III, 4, 20. PL 16, 0225C: *Symbolum (creed) quoque specialiter debemus tamquam nostri signaculum cordis antelucanis horis quotidie recensere: quo etiam cum horremus aliquid, animo recurrendum est. Quando enim sine militiae sacramento, miles in tentorio, bellator in praelio?* Augustine exhorted the catechumens to say the creed every day – *Sermo I De symbolo* I, 1. PL 40, 627: *Accipite, filii, regulam fidei, quod Symbolum dicitur. Et cum acceperitis, in corde scribite, et quotidie dicite apud vos: antequam dormiatis, antequam procedatis, vestro Symbolo vos munite.*

²⁰ Schuster 1929, 26-27.

²¹ Watts 1988, 217-218, (see note 6).

²² *Sacramentum Gelasianum* XXIII. (Exorcism of the women) PL 74, 1085D-1086A: *Deus caeli, Deus terrae, Deus angelorum, Deus archangelorum, Deus prophetarum, Deus martyrum, Deus omnium bene viventium, Deus cui omnis lingua [1086A] confitetur caelestium, terrestrium, et infernorum, te invoco, Domine, ut has famulas tuas perducere et custodire digneris ad gratiam baptismi tui. Ergo, maledicte, ut supra.* (the whole text of the exorcism can be read in col. 1084).

²³ Schuster 1929, 24; Martimort 1965, 52.

²⁴ Schuster 1929, 24-25; Martimort (1965, 53-54) has also discussed the Effeta, and the salt given to the candidates. *Sacramentum Gelasianum* XLII PL 74 1106A: *Ephpheta, quod est: Adaperire in odorem suavitatis. Tu autem effugare, diabole, adpropinquavit enim judicium Dei.* 1111D (at anointing): *Deus, omnipotens Pater Domini nostri Jesu Christi, qui te regeneravit ex aqua et*

with the chrism, he said: *Signum Christi in vitam aeternam*.²⁵ The baptism is meant to make one a Christian. This fact is symbolized by sign of the cross. This unction indicates that one becomes a Christian. The baptised candidate has thus obtained the name “Christian”. These newly baptised candidates dressed in white clothes, which were worn until the following Sunday whose name is White Sunday from taking off the white clothes on that day.

The main rite was the threefold immersion in the water while the bishop spoke the baptismal formula. Prescriptions laid down what the water had to be like, and how the baptism had to be performed. The Didache prescribes: “*Quod autem attinet baptismum, sic baptizate: Haec omnia prolocuti, baptizate in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti in aqua viva, deficiente autem aqua viva, in aliam aquam baptiza, si minus potes in frigida, in calida. Quodsi utraque deest, infunde ter aquam in caput in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.*”²⁶ This passage of the Didache is crucial not only as regards the Holy Trinity but also the archaeological sites and finds; a proportion of the tanks came to light at or in wells, from where the water was obtained. This water was not “viva” but was at least “frigida”. Consequently, it was suitable for baptism. The tanks are generally big, but probably not big enough because their depth are not sufficient for standing and immersion, and their widths or diameters is not sufficient for kneeling in them. But their measurements are suitable for perform the “*infunde ter aquam in caput*”. For this reason I should like to suggest that these tanks or at least some of them may have been fonts. The other group of these finds came to light from cemeteries. This fact brings to mind a sentence of Ambrose. Acc to him the water is the cemetery of every sin and misdeed.²⁷ It is likely that Christians in Roman Britain were aware of the potential identity between the water as a cemetery of sins and the ground as a cemetery of corpses. More over, the lead sarcophagi are decorated in almost the same way as the lead tanks.²⁸ The decoration is remarkable because the saltire cross occurs fairly often. Tertullian refers to Jacob’s blessing, when he crossed his hands over his

Spiritu sancto, quique dedit tibi remissionem omnium peccatorum, ipse te linit chrisma salutis in Christo Jesu Domino nostro in vitam aeternam.

²⁵ *Sacramentum Gelasianum* XLII PL 74, 1111D.

²⁶ Radó (1966, 644) quoting Didache ch. 7. Cf. Cyr. Carth., *Epistola de baptisate haereticorum* XII. PL 3 1147A: *Quaestisti etiam, fili charissime, quid mihi de illis videatur qui in infirmitate et languore gratiam Dei consequuntur, an habendi sint legitimi christiani, eo quod aqua salutari non loti sint, sed perfusi.*

²⁷ *De mysteriis* I, 3, 11. PL 16, 392B: “*Aqua est ergo qua caro mergitur, ut omne abluatur carnale peccatum. Sepelitur illic omne flagitium.*”

²⁸ Toynbee 1964, 347: “The plainest decorated British coffins are not figured, but have only simple lines of bead-and-reel or cable patterns, forming either borders or St. Andrew’s crosses in the field.” She then listed the finds.

grandsons' head.²⁹ The line of the hands produced an X. According to Tertulian, the X-shape may not be interpreted as an Andrew's cross, but a Greek chi. Let us suppose that when the bishop marked the forehead of the candidates with chrism he drew an X instead of a +; and that is why the candidates became *Christiani*. That is the sign of Jesus Christ. There has been speculation on the chrism which was so essential that the catechumens heard an exposition of its symbolism.³⁰ Some interpretations have, however, remained unclear spite lengthy explication;³¹ this is nevertheless they crucial for approaching the X-shape on the tanks.

To return to Pannonia. As the tanks are not a regular form of a font, so the Pannonian fonts might be irregular. One may suppose that the fonts were built of common building material in the bathroom of a house or at some special place. On the one hand the Pannonian Christians seem to have followed the example of those who lived in Dura-Europos,³² but for their fonts they may have made "tanks" of wood not far from *aqua viva*,³³ they may have followed a different procedure, like for instance the font of the church at Zurzach.³⁴ This font is like a grave with a step "on the west side only, but the font is in a corner, and those being baptized would have had to step in and out on the same side."³⁵ As regards Pannonia, the grave-shape is very important, because there are graves which have come to light in cemeteries, but they never contained corpses. They may be fonts. All this is of a merely hypothetical, but it could be the right answer.

²⁹ *De baptismo* VIII, 2. PL 1 1208A: *Sed est hoc quoque de veteri sacramento, quo nepotes suos ex Joseph Ephraim et Manassem Jacob (Gen., XLVIII, 14), capitibus impositis et intermutatis manibus, benedixerit, et quidem ita transversim obliquatis in se, ut Christum deformantes, jam tunc portenderent benedictionem in Christum futuram.*

³⁰ Puniet 1910, 2615.

³¹ Cabrol 1913; Leclercq 1913.

³² For instance, there is such a house in the civilian town of Aquincum.

³³ Probably Kékkút was such a place, *D. Gáspár*, Christianity in Roman Pannonia. An evaluation of Early Christian finds and sites from Hungary. BAR International Series 1010. Oxford 2002 21.I.b, 21.I.c. (Reworked in Hungarian, also 21.I.b, 21.I.c. at press 2007).

³⁴ Brown 1971, 228, Fig. 1. Pl XXXII, A.

³⁵ Brown 1971, 228.

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