

Baptistery

A baptistery is a part of a church or a separate church building used for the sacrament of BAPTISM. It contains a basin, pool, or font for water. The basic problem in analyzing Egyptian [baptisteries](#) is to establish their date. The fact that many are in churches of an earlier date or underwent several stages of alteration does not mean that baptistery and church evolved simultaneously. This article will consider baptisteries unveiled during archaeological investigations; although medieval ones, reflecting changes in the baptismal ceremony, should also be studied. Some rooms thought to be baptisteries by some scholars—in churches at DANDARAH, KHIRBAT AL-FILUSIYYAH, and OXYRHYNCHUS—are not discussed here because their function has not been confirmed by archaeology or furnishings.

[Baptisteries](#) dated from the fifth to the ninth century occur throughout Egypt. The largest group is in the Western Delta and the Abu Mina region, chiefly because of the archaeological research there. All known Egyptian baptisteries are connected with churches, either as an integral part or as an annex. None is freestanding. They are connected to large churches, such as the Martyr Church of Abu Mina, the basilica of al-Ashmunayn, and the church of Dayr Anba Shinudah, and to smaller ones in places such as Tud or Madinat Habu. These churches might be the seat of a bishop, as at al-Ashmunayn and Qift; pilgrim centers, as at Abu Mina; monastery churches, as in KELLIA and at Dayr Anba Shinudah; or parish churches.

The location of the baptistery within the church building was not strictly defined, but there can be seen a clear trend toward placing it in the eastern end of the building, usually adjoining the sanctuary (or altar area, see below). In Egypt generally the predominant trend seems to have been to locate the baptistery in the northeastern part of the church, irrespective of the size of the building or the baptistery. In some churches in Upper Egypt, however, at Tud, Madinat Habu, and Suhaj, the

baptistry was in the southeastern part of the complex. In Abu Mina the baptistry occupies the western part of the church complex.

Though this location seems to have been quite alien to Egyptian practice, there are other examples of a western location in churches in Kurum al-Tuwal, by the pylon in Luxor, and in Medamud. In the enlarged church of Makhurah, a baptistry has been confirmed in the [extreme](#) eastern part of the building, behind the sanctuary. A similar site is used in the North Church in Khirbat, if the small basin in the space behind the altar has been correctly interpreted.

Egyptian [baptisteries](#) are usually square or rectangular, with no special architectural treatment. This is because as an integral part of the church, they are completely subordinated to the shape of the building. In the larger church complexes, such as those at al-Ashmunayn, Abu Mina, and Luxor (church by the colonnade of Ramses II), the baptistry is more extensive and consists of two or more rooms, functionally situated. The only baptistry that received a separate architectural shape was that of the Martyr Church of Saint Menas in Abu Mina; it was a central octagonal room with four corner niches and a dome and was connected by passages with all the surrounding rectangular rooms.

From the [liturgical](#) point of view, the most complete example is the baptistry of the North Basilica in Abu Mina, which consists of several rooms in a row, the central one having a large baptismal basin and the eastern one having three small apses with altars on its eastern wall. It seems also that the [baptisteries](#) of the East Church in Abu Mina and in Makhurah were each connected with a room with an altar, although in different architectural arrangements.

The main furnishing of a baptistry is the baptismal pool, basin, or font. The early receptacles are usually large pools, built below floor level, for the total immersion of adults. They are usually in the center of the room, sometimes occupying almost the whole interior. They are generally made

of brick or stone lined inside with waterproof plaster. Those at Abu Mina and Qift were incrustated in decorative marble. Some pools had a ciborium (superstructure, see below) supported by four or six columns over them, as in Makhurah, the North Basilica at Abu Mina, and the church in front of the pylon at Luxor. Others were surrounded with a low superstructure repeating their shape, as at Kellia and Medamud.

Later, especially during the Middle Ages, by which time infant baptism was general, the large pool was replaced by a smaller basin of terra-cotta or stone close to the eastern wall of the room or in a niche in the wall.

Taking into account three criteria—the shape of the pool or basin, the access to its interior, and the level on which it was placed—one can group Egyptian baptismal receptacles into the following types:

1. Large circular pools with vertical walls and two flights of stairs leading down into them, as at Abu Mina, al-Ashmunayn, Qasr al-Wahaydah at Kellia, Makhurah, and Suhaj. One version of this type is the western pool of the sixth-century baptistery of Abu Mina: two flights of stairs, one above the other, lead into the round basin. Such an arrangement results from limited access to the pool, which is in a shallow niche in a relatively narrow room.
2. Large cruciform pools with steps in the western arm of the cross leading down into it, as at Qift and Kurum al-T
3. Large circular pools with internal stairs on either side, an evolution of type 1, as in Luxor's church by the colonnade of Ramses
4. Circular pools built below the floor level with a high shoring on the floor and without stairs, as at Medamud, Tud, and Luxor's church in front of the
5. Rectangular pools built below floor level with a high shoring and internal stairs, as at Kellia and Qusur 'Isa, a type related to types 3 and
6. Small circular basins built within a square or rectangular structure on the floor of the baptistery room, a type very popular in the Middle

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