

THE NEW BAPTISTERY AT THE EPISCOPAL BASILICA IN NOVAE

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The earliest mention of a bishop of Novae in the written sources dates to the turn of the 5th cent.¹ The bishopric in Novae was most probably established between the years 430 and 449.² So far we know of only three bishops of Novae: Secundinus (448–449), Petrus (458) and Anonymus III (597).³

The martyr Luppis is also associated with Novae. He is mentioned in the entry on the arrival of Peter, the brother of emperor Mauritius (582–601), in Novae on the eve of the day of the martyr Luppis, which in the liturgical calendar was celebrated on August 23.⁴ According to K. Iłski, this visit took place at the beginning of emperor Mauritius' reign and before the destruction of the city by the Avars and the Slavs (in ca. 597).⁵

In the course of our latest research, it has been established that the episcopal complex in Novae occupied a city square of the side of the length of app. 81 m, or of the total area of 6400–6500 sq. m. (Fig. 2A, 3A) It consisted of several detached buildings: the major and minor basilica, the bishop's residence, the baptistery and various auxiliary buildings. The excavation studies conducted over many years have made it possible to specify the essential periods of the construction work, during which the layout of the complex evolved and the application of certain buildings changed.

The construction of the early Christian episcopal complex at the site of the Legionary bath destroyed during the wars with the *foederati* in 376–382 started in the early 5th cent. Based on the abundant archeological material, the beginning of the erection of the episcopal complex in Novae may be dated to the first quarter of the 5th cent.⁶

In 1992, the walls of a one-apse chapel were discovered in the northern part of the atrium. The chapel was initially dated to as late as the 9–11th cent.,⁷ because of both its design and the proximity of its apse to the western wall of the narthex of the basilica (at a distance of app. 1 m), which suggested that the chapel had been erected above the ruins of the atrium and the basilica. Still, when a large baptismal tank was encountered

during the exploration of the interior of the chapel in 2000, it became obvious that the building was not a medieval chapel, but a baptistery, dating to a period from before the one already known; based on the results of previous research, it was expected that an earlier baptistery would be exposed.⁸ (Fig. 1A-D)

The interior of the building is 7.40 m long and 5.05 m wide, and features an apse of the width of 4.48 m at the base. (Fig. 2A-E) The exploration of the baptistery chapel has excavated its western wall with an entrance, previously exposed in a cross-section only, and a section of the ceramic floor of the chapel. The wall, 0.90 m wide, is extant up to the maximum elevation of 50.27 m asl. The entrance, of the width of 1.60 m, is in the middle of the wall. Its threshold (at the elevation of 50.07 m asl) is made of ceramic floor tiles laid on white lime mortar which was poured on the ground. Remnants of white plaster have been discovered on the eastern face of the wall. The floor of the baptistery is laid with ceramic tiles of the size $0.32 \times 0.30 \times 0.03$ m, and elevated between 49.97 and 50.07 m asl. The floor is extant only in the south-western section of the chapel. The chapel could also be accessed through two other entrances, located in the eastern and western wall. At the outer face of the northern wall and on its axis, a huge stone block has been identified, which apparently was a step in front of an entrance located in this wall. Since only the foundations of the western section of the southern wall are extant, it cannot be established if this wall also featured an entrance. The floor of the baptistery is made of ceramic tiles. The diameter of the external, circular part of the baptismal tank, measured along the “North–South” axis, amounts to 2.85 m. This item is preserved up to the height of 0.20 m above the level of the ceramic floor. The baptismal tank proper is a rectangle inscribed into a circle of the internal diameter of 1.65 m, and is surrounded by a wall 0.60 m wide. The dimensions of the rectangular baptismal tank (the *piscina*) are $1.08 \times 0.99 \times 0.27$ m. The total depth of the baptismal tank is 0.70 m, including the central rectangular *piscina* of the depth of 0.25 m. (Fig. 2C-E) The interior of the tank is laid with marble slabs, which were recycled, as suggests a fragment of an inscription (the characters “M” and “O”) on the eastern wall of the pool. The slabs are preserved on the eastern wall of the tank only. The bottom of the tank is at the elevation of 49.37 m asl. Similarly to the walls, it was laid with slabs, now extinct, which were placed on hydraulic mortar. The irregular opening discovered

in the center of the bottom, 0.05 m deep, appeared at the time of the destruction of the floor at the bottom of the baptismal tank. A gutter 0.20 m wide runs off the north-western corner of the tank; it has been explored only at a length of 0.90 m. The inner walls of the gutter were covered with pink hydraulic mortar. The bottom of the gutter is at the elevation of 49.43 m asl. Most probably the gutter removed water from the baptismal tank. The tank was entered from the east and west, by means of two stone steps. Only the two steps on the eastern side of the tank are extant:

1. dimensions $0.60 \times 0.23 \times 0.12$ m, elevation 50.04 m asl,

2. dimensions $0.66 \times 0.22 \times 0.24$ m, elevation 49.89 m asl

– while the steps on the western side have not been preserved, and only their imprints are left. This has led to the discovery of two levels of floor at this site, apparently related to the earlier application of the baptistry:

1. floor of white lime mortar, at the elevation of 49.82 m asl,

2. floor of pink mortar, at the elevation of 49.64 m asl.

The size and the layout of the baptismal tank suggest that it was used to baptize grownups. The fairly shallow depth of the *piscina* indicates that the baptismal ceremony was performed by means of sprinkling the aspiring Christians with water or pouring it onto them rather than of immersion.

The design of the baptismal tank shows that it may have been covered with a ciborium-like structure. Since the wall of the width of 0.60 m which surrounds the tank, is mostly covered with lime mortar, it is impossible to measure all the bricks of which it consists. Its inner surface was laid with marble slabs of the original dimensions of $0.46 \times 0.35 \times 0.03$ m. Only four fragments of the slabs are preserved, three in the southern section and one in the eastern section.

On the outer face of this wall, four elliptic recesses (niches) have been discovered at the “North-East–North-West” and “South-West–South-East” axes, laid with floor tiles with traces of hydraulic mortar. Their dimensions are:

- the north-eastern recess (niche): $0.95 \times 0.37 \times 0.15$ m, partly damaged in its eastern part;

- the north-western recess (niche): $0.39 \times 0.33 \times 0.11$ m, preserved in 50%;

- the south-western recess (niche): $0.70 \times 0.40 \times 0.10$ m;
- the south-eastern recess (niche): $0.80 \times 0.37 \times 0.12$ m, partly damaged in its eastern part.

All of these elements define the outer structure of the baptismal tank, whose floor projection is hexagonal. (Fig.1,2C) The sides of the hexagon are buttresses of a width of between 0.74 and 0.76 m. The buttresses might have provided bases for six columns which constituted a ciborium-like structure above the baptismal tank. The design of similar hexagonal baptismal tanks, among them those in Stobi and Aquileia, suggests that the columns in Novae also supported a ciborium. Still, it is equally possible that the design applied in Novae consisted of simple architrave beams supported by the six columns. The four-concha baptistery in Stobi, with a hexagonal tank covered with a ciborium which was supported by six columns, is dated to the 5th–6th cent.⁹ (Fig.4C.) A similar hexagonal baptismal tank, dated to the late 5th cent., was discovered in the baptistery at the basilica in Aquileia.¹⁰ (Fig.4A,B)

Rectangular baptistery buildings with apses in the east were the most common design in the Balkan Peninsula. N. Èaneva-Deèevska includes in this category the baptisteries in Branipole (Plovdiv), Hisar (basilica No. 8), Jurta (near Hisar) and Sofia (basilica No. 1).¹¹ (3B-E) Fig. Baptisteries of the same floor projection have also been discovered in the territories of the present-day Syria, Israel and Egypt.¹² They are also encountered in the Christian complexes in Gaul, dated to the 5th cent.¹³ When defining the category of the baptisteries in the atria of early Christian basilicas, A. Khatchatrian refers to the buildings in Timgad (Algeria) and Tebessa (Tunisia) dated to the late 4th and the 5th–6th cent.¹⁴ (Fig.4D-E) The baptistery in Novae is a detached building in the atrium, located a little north of the lengthwise “West–East” axis of the episcopal basilica. It certainly was assigned this site because a convenient passage had to be provided to the faithful who entered the court of the basilica from the west and took the closest route directly to the church. The location also resulted from the use of the auxiliary buildings of the *catechumenum* and *consignatorium* type.¹⁵ Thus, several auxiliary buildings had been erected in its vicinity. N. Èaneva-Deèevska notices that many baptisteries were accessed through an entrance hall with a seat.¹⁶ Directly north-west of the baptistery building, at a line following its western wall, at the southern face of

the northern wall of the atrium, a brick structure has been found.¹⁷ It has the shape of a parallelepiped and may well have been a brick seat, similar to the one discovered in room 6 (the *prothesis*?) at the basilica in Jatrus.¹⁸

The entrance hall in the complex of the basilica in Novae may have been the structure with a columned portico located north of the court. Two rooms in this building (the eastern room and the western room in squares XVI/176, 177, 196 and 197) were partly unearthed in the year 2000. The rooms have the dimensions:

1. the western room: 12.10 × 5.60 m,
2. the eastern room: width of 12.10 m, explored length of 7.30 m.

The walls of the rooms were made of roughly hewn irregular stone blocks bound with white lime mortar. The wall is 0.70 m thick.

The eastern room in squares XVI/177 and 197 has been explored down to the level of the light-pink floor, at the elevation of 49.26 m asl. The base of a column was discovered at this level during the previous season. It was placed on the same axis as the base discovered during the same season in the southern part of the room. The distance between the two bases is 5.50 m, and the difference of elevation between them amounts to 0.37 m. A massive stone block of the size of 1.10 × 0.75 × 0.80 m has been encountered in the northern part of the room, the elevation of its upper face amounting to 49.66 m asl. A piece of a column shaft 1.15 m long lay on the ground east of the stone block.

The western room in squares XVI/176 and 196 has been explored down to the elevation of 49.01 m asl. At the height of 49.28 m asl, a floor made of white lime mortar has been discovered and exposed in a cross-section, which may help establish the dates of the functioning of the two rooms. Interestingly, a large amount of ceramic material (pieces of amphorae) has been identified in this room, which according to E. Klenina,¹⁹ who is studying the typology of this find, comes from amphorae used specifically for the transportation and storage of oil.

Whatever the application of the structure with a columned portico was, the baptistery with its large tank, most certainly used for baptizing grownups, required auxiliary buildings with rooms in which those persons undressed and prepared to enter the baptismal chapel. The baptistery was erected in the court of the basilica in order to emphasize the traditional relation of its location with that of the main entrance to the temple. The

bishop might have preferred the liturgical symbolism of the siting of the baptistery on the way to the church, which obviously strongly impressed the participants in the ceremony. Although we do not have detailed evidence of the path along which the catechumens walked, archeological research has identified three door openings in the baptistery. Thus, a separate entrance was provided to the unbaptized in accordance with the liturgy and the baptismal rite, and the newly baptized could be taken to the church by the shortest path after the ceremony. The third door could have been used by the priest administering the baptism. Accordingly, the solemn introduction of the neophytes into the temple through the main entrance acquired the symbolic significance of the mystical passage of people from the profane to the sacred. It is hardly a coincidence that the converts walked from the court to the church building, as both were important parts of the complex of the episcopal basilica. Such considerations were apparently much more important than the fact that the location of the baptistery violated the aesthetic harmony of the complex. In fact, its location in the court can hardly be considered a satisfactory solution in terms of architectural planning, as the baptistery not only hindered the access to the basilica, but also obstructed the view of the northern part of its western façade, and made it virtually impossible to use the northern door leading to the narthex of the basilica. An open columned portico in front of the narthex would at least have produced the optical illusion of an increased space between the baptistery and the basilica.

Based on the available stratigraphic data and archeological material, as well as on comparative studies, the baptistery in the court of the episcopal basilica in Novae should be dated to the last quarter of the 5th cent., or to a period following the invasion of the Huns. It was most probably erected to accommodate the numerous non-Christians who appeared in this area after the invasion, when Moesia Secunda and Dacia Ripensis were inhabited by the Ostrogoths led by Theodoric the Great, and Novae constituted the capital of this king's territory and apparently also his personal residence in the summer of 476 and in the years 486–488.²⁰

Our studies of the archeological material and its stratigraphic sequences also warrant the conclusion that the spatial layout of the episcopal complex in Novae was considerably altered in the early 6th cent. The baptistery in the court of the basilica was demolished at that time, and the western wall of the court was replaced by another one,

located 4.50 m farther to the east and built directly on the floor of the former baptistery. This considerably decreased the size of the court in front of the basilica.

The earthquake of 557²¹ seriously damaged the complex of the episcopal basilica in Novae. Almost immediately afterward, as the damages were repaired in the third quarter of the 6th cent., a new baptistery of a unique design and form was constructed. It was located in the eastern part of the southern aisle of the basilica.²²

Captions for the figures:

Fig. 1.

A. Novae: the baptistery in the court of the episcopal basilica. View from the west. Photograph by A. B. Biernacki.

B. Novae: the baptistery and the complex of auxiliary buildings. View from the south. Photograph by A. B. Biernacki.

C. Novae: the baptismal tank. View from the west. Photograph by A. B. Biernacki.

D. Novae: the baptismal tank. View from the south. Photograph by A. B. Biernacki.

Fig. 2.

A. Novae: the basilica and the bishop's residence: floor projection. Developed by A. B. Biernacki, L. Klenina and St. Medeksza.

B. Novae: the area of the narthex and the court of the episcopal basilica with the baptistery: floor projection. Developed by A. B. Biernacki, M. Łukowska and St. Medeksza.

C. Novae: the baptistery and the baptismal tank in the court of the episcopal basilica: floor projection. Developed by M. Łukowska.

D. Novae: the baptistery and the baptismal tank in the court of the episcopal basilica: floor projection. Featuring the entrance openings and the remnants of the ceramic floor. Developed by M. Łukowska and St. Medeksza.

E. Novae: the baptistery and the narthex of the episcopal basilica: a cross section along the "North-South" axis. Developed by M. Łukowska.

Fig. 3.

A. Novae: the area of the basilica and the bishop's residence: floor projection. Developed by A. B. Biernacki, L. Klenina and St. Medeksza.

B. Branipole: the basilica and the baptistery: floor projection. After D. Cončeva.

C. Hisar: basilica No. 8 and the baptistery: floor projection. After D. Cončeva and K. Madzarova.

D. Jurta: the basilica and the baptistery: floor projection. After M. Madzarova.

E. Sofia: basilica No. 1 and the baptistery: floor projection. After M. Stančeva.

Fig. 4.

A. Aquileia: the hexagonal baptismal tank in the baptistery at the basilica. Stage II (after A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens*, Paris, 1962, fig. 308c).

B. Aquileia: the hexagonal baptismal tank in the baptistery at the basilica. Stage III (after A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens*, Paris, 1962, fig. 308d).

C. Stobi: the baptistery with the hexagonal baptismal tank (after A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens*, Paris, 1962, fig. 178).

D. Timgad: the Northern Basilica: the baptistery with the baptismal tank (after A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens*, Paris, 1962, fig. 215).

E. Timgad: the baptistery at the court of the Eastern Basilica (after A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens*, Paris, 1962, fig. 213).

ARMENKUNGEN

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Fig. 1



A. Novae: the baptistery in the court of the episcopal basilica.
View from the west. Photograph by A. B. Biernacki.



B. Novae: the baptistery and the complex of auxiliary buildings.
View from the south. Photograph by A. B. Biernacki

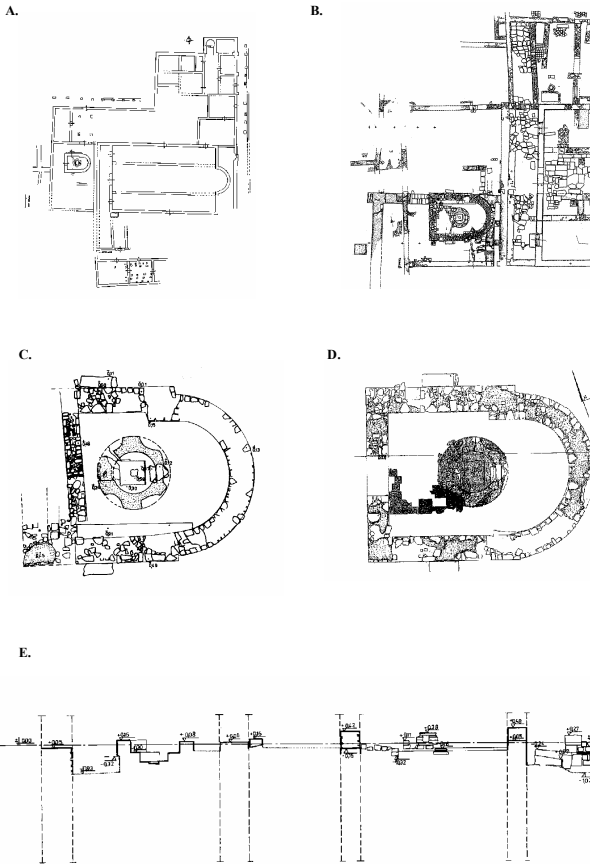


C. Novae: the baptismal tank. View from the west.
Photograph by A. B. Biernacki.



D. Novae: the baptismal tank. View from the south.
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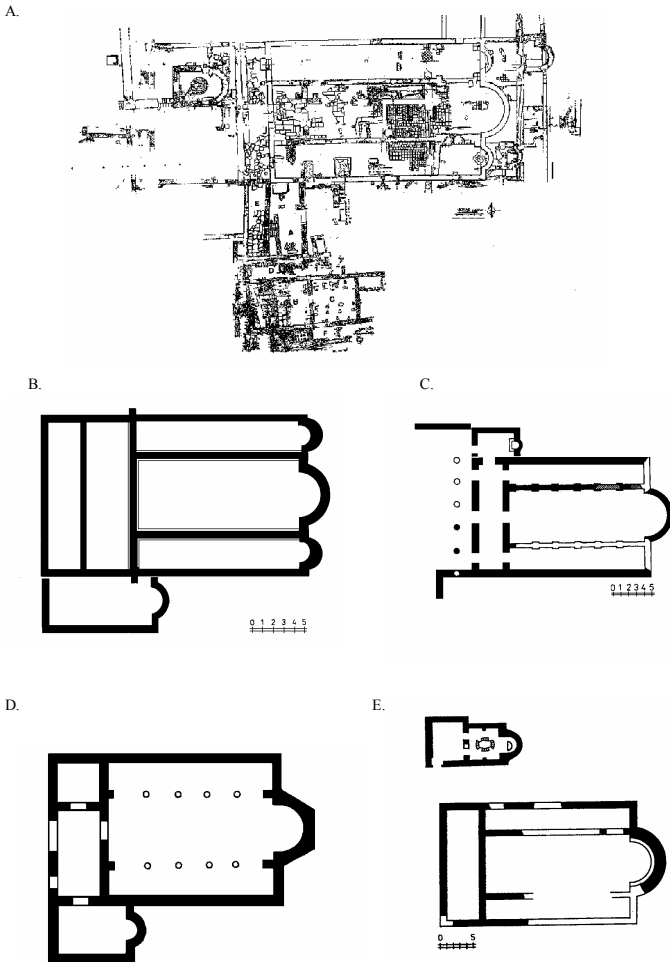
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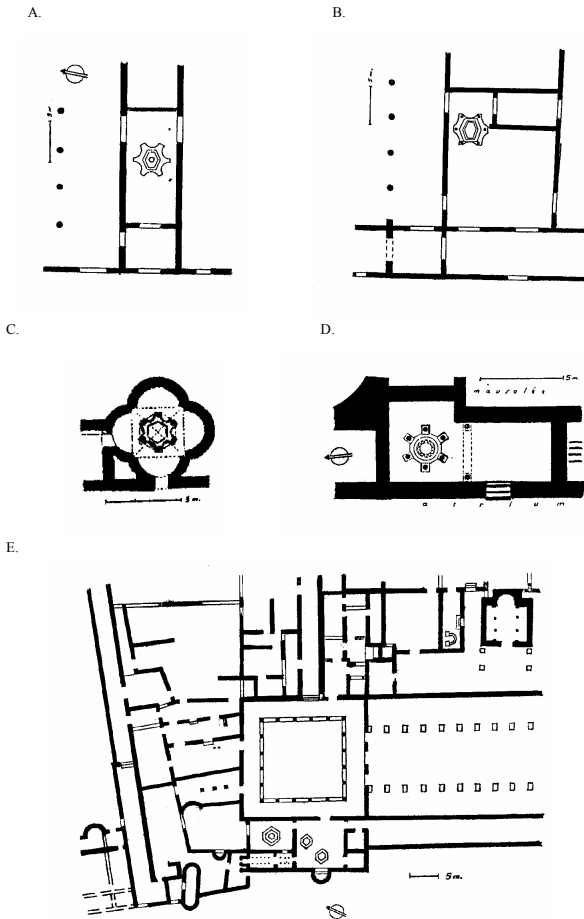
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A. Aquileia: the hexagonal baptismal tank in the baptistery at the basilica. Stage II (after A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens*, Paris, 1962, fig. 308c).

B. Aquileia: the hexagonal baptismal tank in the baptistery at the basilica. Stage III (after A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens*, Paris, 1962, fig. 308d).

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E. Timgad: the baptistery at the court of the Eastern Basilica (after A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens*, Paris, 1962, fig. 213).