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Social aspects of the late-antique village of Shivta

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Shivta (Arabic es-Sbeita) lies in a remote spot c.40 km southwest of Beersheva and c.15 km southeast of the main route in antiquity that crossed the Negev to the Sinai;¹ even today the site is isolated. This helps account for the fact that it is one of the world's best-preserved late-antique sites: many walls of houses are preserved to a height of 2-4 m, and the churches stand to 8-10 m.² The lines of most streets are still discernible, as are the agricultural installations and cultivated plots on the margins. It has an arid desert climate with an annual rainfall of less than 100 mm³ and lies in the centre of the Qorhah valley, which occupies c.40 sq. km at an elevation of 320-360 m asl (fig. 1). The site lies on the N bank of one of the valley's upper tributaries (Nahal Zeithan). A ridge to the northwest (elevation 420 m asl) forms an effective barrier against the sand dunes that have encroached from the direction of the coast. The site itself is built on a layer of hard crystalline limestone of Turonian age. This layer, 2-3 m thick, mitigated the effects of earthquakes on the buildings. Below it is a layer of soft limestone that is easily quarried (and was in antiquity to construct cisterns beneath the houses⁴). Both types of limestone produced building material for the settlement.

Although the site was probably first settled by Nabataeans in the Early Roman period, finds from that period are few. Most of the archaeological evidence relates to the late-antique (Byzantine), Umayyad and early Abbasid periods (4th-8th c.). Most of the visible structures seem to have been built in about the late 4th c.⁵ and remained in use for three or four centuries,

- 1 For its identification and location, see Y. Tsafir et al., *Tabula Imperii Romani — Iudaea Palaestina* (Jerusalem 1994) 234.
- 2 Following earlier work in the area by E. Palmer, A. Musil, C. L. Woolley and T. E. Lawrence, and Th. Wiegand, the first substantial excavations at the site by the Colt expedition ran for 4 long seasons (1933-36), during which the three churches, extensive parts of streets, and 18 houses were uncovered. In 1936 the expedition house was burnt down and the excavation diaries and most of the finds were lost (A. Segal, *The Byzantine city of Shivta [Esbeita], Negev Desert, Israel* [BAR S179, Oxford 1983] 4 n.8). The Colt expedition then turned its attention to Nessana. For brief reports on its work at Shivta, see *PEQSI* 68 (1935) 171-81; *QDAP* 4 (1935) 210-12; *ibid.* 5 (1936) 198-99; *ibid.* 8 (1939) 158; see also H. D. Colt, "Castles in Zin," *Archaeology* 1 (1948) 84-91. Additional data on excavations in the period of the British Mandate survive in the archives in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem (file no. 71: Esbeita). For the architectural elements of the site see A. Segal, *Architectural decoration in Byzantine Shivta, Negev Desert, Israel* (BAR S420, Oxford 1988) and *id.*, "The 'stable house' at Shivta," *Eretz-Israel* 17 (1983) 272-81 [Hebrew]; *id.*, "Art at Byzantine Shivta," in A. Schüller (ed.), *Zeev Vilnay volume, vol. 2* (Jerusalem 1987) 190-94 [Hebrew]; *id.*, "Shivta, a Byzantine town in the Negev Desert," *JSAH* 44 (1985) 317-28. R. Rosenthal-Heginbottom has studied the churches, particularly the N church: *Die Kirchen von Sobota und die Dreiseitenkirchen des Nahen Ostens* (Wiesbaden 1982), and *ead.*, *The North Church and monastery at Sobota* (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew Univ., Jerusalem 1974). For descriptions of the site see A. Negev, "Sobota," *NEAEHL* 4, 1404-10; J. Shereshevski, *Byzantine urban settlements in the Negev* (Beer Sheva 1991) 61-81. Negev has also published more than 30 inscriptions (A. Negev, *The Byzantine inscriptions of the Negev* [Jerusalem 1981] 47-67) and they have benefitted from a new study by L. Di Segni as part of her 1997 Ph.D. dissertation at Hebrew University.
- 3 On its climate and geographical characteristics, see Y. Kedar, "Ancient agriculture at Shivtah in the Negev," *IEJ* 7 (1957) 178-89.
- 4 See now Z. Tsuk, "The water-supply system of Shivtah in the Byzantine period," in C. Ohlig, Y. Peleg and T. Tsuk (edd.), *Cura aquarum in Israel!* (Siegburg 2002) 65-80.
- 5 The excavations by S. Margalit in the North Church (probably the latest of the group) showed that it was founded in the late 4th or early 5th c.: *PEQ* 119 (1987) 106-21. There was a general expansion of settlement in Palestine in the 4th c. and after: cf. Y. Hirschfeld, "Farms and villages in Byzantine Palestine," *DOP* 51 (1997) 33-72. The main reasons seem to have been the stabilization of the frontiers and