

A Unique Mikveh in Upper Galilee

A mikveh in the Holy Land which shows a cross on its wall.

By Eldad Keynan

Bar Ilan

Israel

September 2015

Conventionally, when an ancient mikveh is discovered, we consider the ancient settlement “Jewish”, as a mikveh (a Jewish ritual bath) was typical to Jewish populations throughout the Second Temple era and well into late antiquity and later, until our time. Dozens have been found in Israel, north and central. They differ in size; the Jewish Halakha (law) sets the minimum amount of water to 40 “seah” (סאה), around 1000 liters or one cubic meter. This rule meant to create a complete submergence of the body while bathing for ritual purpose. Fig. 1, below, shows a relatively small, rectangular mikveh, on the slope about 300 meters south of the ancient Jewish village known today as “Khurvat Amudim”. This mikveh is located among a few tombs:



Fig. 1, Amudim mikveh (E. Keynan).

Carved on top of the back wall (left side hand, up) there is a small basin; right beneath it is a small pit in the floor corner. Both were probably meant to reduce the amount of solid fragments floating in the water. Another, much larger mikveh, is located in Khurvat Makhoz, a few miles north of the modern city of Karmiel.



Figs. 2, 3, 4: Makhoz mikveh (E. Keynan).

Although this mikveh is larger, I could not find any “basin” on its walls; since it still contained water (5\16\2015) one cannot see whether or not there is a pit for solid fragments in its floor, but reasonably there must be one, as according to Jewish law floating solids annul the purifying effect of the ritual bath. Both the larger steps in the middle of the staircase and on its end meant to allow for the bather to turn. As we can see above, the Amudim mikveh was smaller and its staircase was straight down to the floor, so no turns are required. The Makhoz mikveh is almost twice the size of the Amudim mikveh. Another Galilean mikveh has been discovered in Keren Naftali, Upper East Galilee. This one is even larger:



Fig. 5¹

Even if it was only 3X3 meters it could probably contain a great amount of water, around 25 cubic meters when we consider the staircase. One can note the larger step of the staircase: like the Makhoz mikveh, it is wider than the other steps in the set, to allow the bathers to turn.

In terms of dating, the Amudim mikveh is probably dated 1st - 2nd century CE; the Makhoz mikveh could be dated 1st century BCE to 2nd-3rd century CE. The Keren Naftali mikveh is dated 1st century BCE.² The form, the size and the conclusions of the excavators regarding the Keren Naftali mikveh might help with the mikveh which is the focus of this paper:



Fig. 6: upper-west Galilee mikveh (E. Keynan).

¹ Aviam, 1st century, p. 14, following R. Rabinowitz.

² Aviam, 1st century, pp. 14-15, 19.

Obviously, it has a significant basin-shaped recess to allow for adding water while preventing the solids from floating-circulating in the water. This mikveh relied on nearby bell-shaped water reservoir (Fig. 7):



Fig. 7: the bell-shaped water reservoir (E. Keynan).

The size of this mikveh is impressive – it's almost as big as the Keren Naftali mikveh. Yet the most impressive and surprising detail is presented in the next figure:



Fig. 8: the cross on the mikveh wall (E. Keynan).

As far as we know, this is the only mikveh in the Holy Land which shows a cross on its wall. About 50 meters west one can see the remains of a public building, probably an ancient church, as it has the remains of a small apse, directed east:

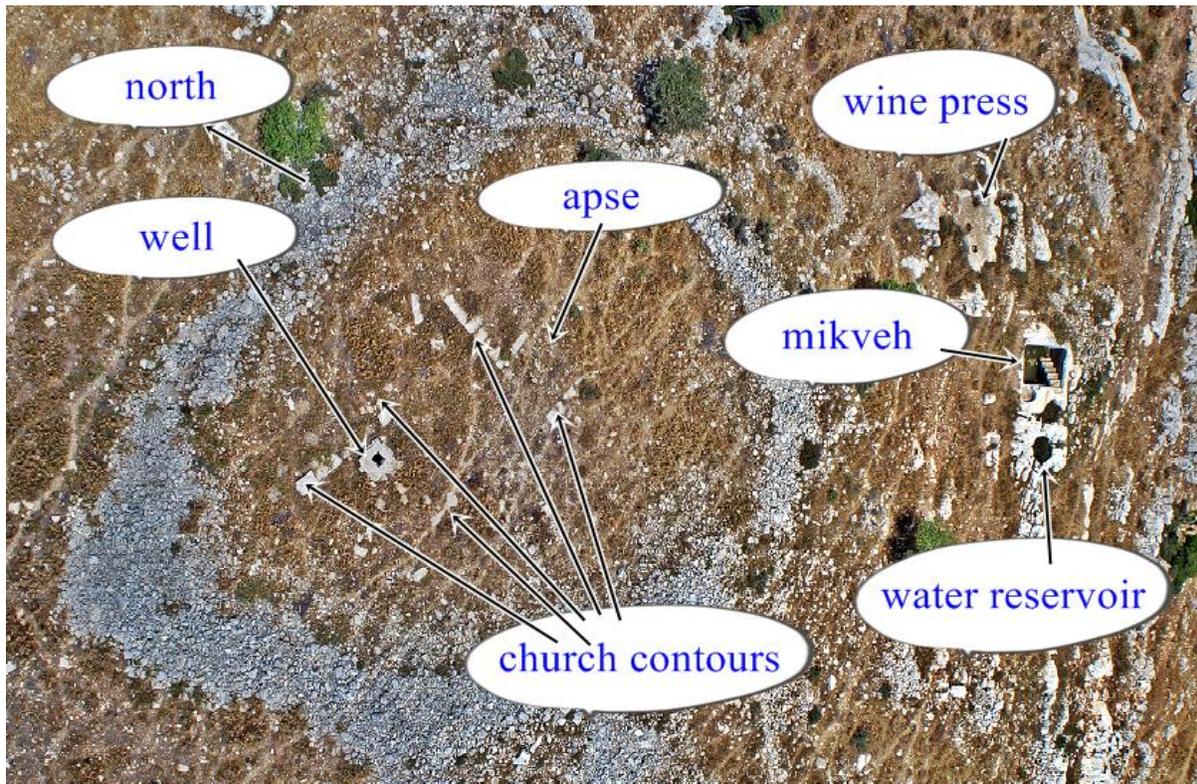


Fig. 9: view from above the site (Shorer-Levite airphoto).³

The well is located in the western part of what seems to have been the main hall of the building. Now it has modern concrete frame around the water hole – which locals probably used until a few decades ago for their flocks.

The mikveh and its reservoir are the oldest man-made structures visible at the site today; the wine press might be as old as well. Whether the church was built on the remains of a former synagogue is still to be studied as the entire site should undergo a serious excavation. The cross on the wall is not only a one-of-a-kind find. Clearly, the mikveh underwent a process of Christianization. There are two reasonable explanations; 1. The Jews who inhabited the village

³ Shorer and Levite took the photos of this site using their minicopter; the altitude is about 80 meters. This photo proves the high value of minicopters in the field.

converted to Christianity and by incising the cross on the wall turned the mikveh to a baptismal basin. 2. The Jews who used to live here left for some reason and Christians “inherited” the village; the “newcomers” needed a baptismal basin so they added the cross to the wall. Either way, it’s hard to imagine a rabbinic Jew entering the mikveh when it has a cross on its wall. It seems likely that rabbinic Jews lived here until the cross had been added to their mikveh’s wall.

As the church is later than the baptismal basin (the former mikveh), baptismal ceremonies took place in this basin until the church was built. The cross on the wall is the solution Christians employed here, which is a reminder of a much larger phenomenon in the south of the Holy Land: the cruciform baptismal basins.



Fig. 10: (left): cruciform baptismal basin, original, Shivta, Fig. 35 (right) cruciform baptismal basin, partially reconstructed, Mamshit (Mamphis), late 4th century CE,⁴ (EK).

There are other such basins in the south, but those are enough to show the idea: a Christian is unified with Jesus from birth, all through her\his life, and so in death. Interestingly, the cruciform baptismal basins are common in the south, while they “cannot be found in the north at all”.⁵ When we look at the southern basins in Figs. 1-5 above and compare them to the mikveh with the cross (Figs. 6-8) we can explain Ben Pechat’s correct comment: only a few Jews, if any, lived as far south as Shivta, Mamshit and the Negev area; thus there are no mikvehs in this area, nor do we find typical Jewish tombs. When the Byzantines took over the entire area, Christianity arrived at these areas in its complete “form”: not as the followers of Jews or Judeo-Christians,

⁴ Ben Pechat, fonts, p. 184.

⁵ Ibid, p. 171.

but as the legal heirs of the former pagan Nabateans. It had to build its own baptismal basins – and it did. Things could have been a bit easier in the areas north of the Negev: there was original, formerly Jewish, “infrastructure” in terms of people and buildings; either by taking over or by conversion, Christianity could, and did, use this infrastructure. Thus, just as the cruciform symbolizes unification with Jesus, so does the cross on the wall of the Upper Galilean former mikveh. Following Ben Pechat’s dating we could accept the suggestion that the cross has been incised on the mikveh wall around the late 4th century CE, or even earlier.

The “crossed” mikveh is located very close to the remains of human inhabitation; but, so far and after a long circular search on foot, I’ve found no tombs around, to the distance of ca. 400-1000 meters. As far as I know there might be tombs around; I’ve discovered a box grave on a hill about 400 meters west. Still, the entire area is unstudied and thus unexcavated; as such it is a quite promising excavation possibility.

Bibliography

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