Figure 0.6 Sites discussed in this book (printed in regular script).
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Introduction

Orthodox Roman Christians (Nicene orthodox in the West and Chalcedonian orthodox in the East) established themselves in the late Roman world, a time of great social and political transition, and flourished in the Migration Period of the fifth and sixth centuries. It is widely accepted that Nicene Christians in the West saw themselves as partakers in the Roman world, dissociating themselves from the allegedly non-Roman migrating peoples who still adhered to paganism or non-orthodox Christian faiths, in particular Arianism. Arian migrants, on the other hand, claiming orthodoxy for themselves, certainly did not always agree with being stigmatized as non-Roman.[1] For historians, however, the lifespan of the compound 'Roman' and 'orthodox' is a limited one. At the threshold of the early Middle Ages, 'Barbarian beliefs' were eroded by the increasing acculturation of migrants. Their progressive inclusion into the Nicene church changed the character of the church into a global one, no longer bound to Roman identity.[2]

In what sense did Christians in the post-Roman world consider themselves to be Roman exactly? Was their Romanness, as much scholarship on post-Roman Christianity often assumes, a function of their Christianness? Was Romanness a bundle of independent meanings which Christians subscribed to? This book interrogates material sources to better understand what implications the association of Christianity and Romanness had for the religious identity of Christians in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries. It presents evidence of Christian communities who integrated traditional Graeco-Roman cultural practices into their vision of Christianity and at times broadened the concept of Christianness beyond orthodoxy. The art and material culture of the period show us that Christians treated Graeco-Roman cultural practices, some of which were considered un-Christian by

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[1] Hen 2018, 65–67; Pohl 2018, 23–24; Pohl 2013, 22; Greatrex 2000, 277. Regional perspectives are offered in Conant 2015, 191–192; Whelan 2018; Muhlberger 1992, 36. For Byzantium, see Stouraitis 2018, 131–132.

[2] Pohl 2013, 22–24; Greatrex 2000, 278. See further on the interplay between religion and imperial identities Gantner, Pohl, and Payne 2012.

high-ranking church representatives, as part of Christian culture.[3] Their identity as Romans (or aspirations to this identity) influenced Christians' understandings of what counted as proper and orthodox ways of performing Christianity.

Hence, we should reconsider the conventional belief that late antique Romans were primarily Christians. The evidence presented in this book suggests an alternative perspective: that Christian identity could be a product of Roman identity. By embracing Christianity, neophytes also joined the community of the inheritors of the Graeco-Roman cultural *koine*. While determining whether individuals were more motivated by one or the other incentive for baptism may often be challenging, if not impossible, the analysis of visual and material culture brings this question to the forefront.

In response to the dominant approach of dealing with questions of continuity and rupture with the classical past in late antique Christianity by analysing texts, I will shift the focus to what an analysis of material and visual culture can contribute to the study of Christian religiosity. Here I follow an approach to religion that privileges lived practice over doctrinal ambitions. While the 'lived religion' approach has been productive, especially in the field of Roman religion, the study of late antique Christian art has not yet taken sufficient advantage of this and other approaches which take the exploration of non-elitist, local, and individual perspectives as seriously as the incommensurably better-studied testimonies of the church fathers.[4]

I focus my argument on the decoration of Mediterranean baptisteries, which were built, maintained, and refurbished between the fifth and seventh centuries – spaces which were instrumental to the formation of Christian religious identity in late antiquity. Under the guidance of their ecclesiastical leaders, Christian communities created spaces and celebrated baptismal ceremonies in them, crafting a vision of Christianity in which Graeco-Roman visual culture was an intrinsic component. Often, the material evidence does not allow us to distinguish between baptisteries used by local Roman or Romanized populations and those used by migrants. Where it does, however, it is clear that Graeco-Roman cultural practices were welcomed in the religious lives of both.

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[3] On the Christian invention of 'paganism', see Kahlos 2007, 18–26 and 93–112.

[4] On the role of individuality as a conceptual framework in Roman history and archaeology, see Rüpke 2016; Rüpke and Spickermann 2012; Raja 2012; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015. Recent publications on the impact of regional traditions on continuity and rupture with the Roman past include Mugnai, Nikolaus, and Ray 2016; Bredekamp and Trinks 2017; Stouraitis 2018.

All the case studies are situated in the western half of the Mediterranean. One might question why the book focuses on the Roman West, especially when the artistic examples mentioned relate to a visual culture prevalent in Graeco-Roman antiquity throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. Shifting the focus to lesser-known examples of baptismal art in North Africa and on the Iberian Peninsula aims to challenge the popular view of the Byzantines – the *Rhōmaîoi* – as the self-proclaimed guardians of ancient Roman heritage, which sets the idea of a politically stable Byzantium apart from the so-called post-Roman West.[5] Without denying Byzantium's strong identification with the Roman past, the persistence of Roman identity clearly extends across and indeed beyond the entire Mediterranean region. despite the progressive political disintegration of the western Roman Empire. Also the art, architecture, and liturgy of baptisteries in the West exhibit similar tendencies in the use and reuse of elements of Graeco-Roman culture as do those of the Byzantine East.

One of the striking results of the self-construction of the Roman Empire as a Graeco-Roman entity was that elements of *Graeco-Roman* culture serve as evidence in identifying signs of *Roman* identity.[6] I delve into questions of the interrelation of Roman identity and material culture in more detail below. For the moment, suffice it to say that, in a broad sense, I believe Glen Bowersock hit the nail on the head when contemplating the nature of what he called 'Hellenism' in late antiquity. In Byzantium and beyond, notably across the Byzantine lands of north Africa, southern Spain, and Italy, reconquered for Constantinople under the emperor Justinian in the mid sixth century, local communities expressed their unique traditions through language, myth, and imagery rooted in Greek culture. As demonstrated by Bowersock, these cultural amalgams were distinctly local yet allowed communication with other parts of the Helleno-Roman world.[7]

Similarly, we should be cautious in attributing both local and universal characteristics to Graeco-Roman visual culture. It is possible that the same visual motif adorning a baptistery in Byzantium and another one in the post-Roman West could be interpreted similarly, with the only distinction being its cultural affiliation identified as 'Hellenic' in one place and as 'Roman' in the other. This does not negate the motif's complex genesis

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[5] On Byzantine identity as Roman, see Kaldellis 2007, 2019; Whalin 2021. Most recently on Byzantine identity, see Stewart, Parnell, and Whately 2022.

[6] On the complex interplay of Graeco-Roman and Roman identities in the Roman Empire, see Veyne 2005.

[7] Bowersock 1990, esp. 9.

over centuries of artmaking in the entangled Mediterranean. The subjectivity with which people, rooted in different localities, made sense of visual culture simply needs acknowledgement. Given that this book predominantly explores evidence from the West, I will refer from now on to Roman (visual and material) culture unless specifically addressing Greek traditions.

The case studies in this book form only a small part of the entirety of preserved late antique baptismal art in the western Mediterranean. Late antique baptismal art is particularly rich in modern Tunisia and Italy and can also be found in Algeria, on the Iberian Peninsula, and in southern France. The research for this book brought to light a total of sixty-three western Mediterranean baptismal decorations either still in situ or attested in texts containing information about the location and iconography of the imagery. I discuss six of these in depth (Figure 0.6): the baptisteries of Cuicul (modern-day Djémila in Algeria), Milreu, and Myrtilis Iulia (modern-day Mértola) in southern Portugal; the baptistery of Henchir el Koucha in Tunisia; and the Orthodox and Arian baptisteries of Ravenna.

The sixty-three examples can be divided into three categories: (a) eight examples depict Christian narrative scenes from the New Testament or holy figures; (b) thirty-two examples show ornamental, floral, or animal decorations which allude to the psalms or are combined with Christian symbols or inscriptions; and (c) twenty-three examples show ornamental, floral, or animal scenes which cannot be univocally identified with Christianity. Group (c) comprises most of the case studies, while the baptisteries of Ravenna belong to group (a). Numerically, the subset of the six cases discussed in this book is almost equal to group (a), the entirety of preserved baptismal narrative scenes in the western Mediterranean. Furthermore, I tackle only a fraction of the baptismal mosaics rooted in Roman visual culture, many of which form part of group (c).[8]

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[8] I have taken care to list all late antique decorated baptisteries in the western Mediterranean, be they still extant or simply recorded by modern scholarship or ancient sources, to the best of my knowledge. This list, however, is almost certainly incomplete, and will provide future readers with ample opportunity for improvement. The forthcoming volume *Baptisteries of the Early Christian World*, edited by Robin M. Jensen and Nathan Dennis, will offer greater clarity on the extant corpus of late antique baptisteries.
Category (a)
North Africa: St Cyprian in Carthage, Ad Aquas (Borj Sebbalat el Bey)
Italy, France: Naples, Primulacium, Orthodox Baptistery of Ravenna, Arian Baptistery of Ravenna, Catacomb of San Ponziano, Rome
Iberian Peninsula: Baptistery II in Myrtilis Iulia (Mértola)
Category (b)
North Africa: Bekalta, Bir Ftouha, Bou Achir, Bou Smir, Hadjara-Mengouba, Henchir Errich, Henchir Hakaima, Hammam Lif, Henchir B'ghil, Henchir Messaouda, Henchir Sokrine,

The study of late antique baptismal art has produced a rich literature. The groundwork in the field was laid between the late nineteenth and the mid twentieth centuries, when attempts were made to establish an overview of early baptismal art as a unitary totality and define general iconographic trends.[9] The majority of research in the second half of the twentieth century has consisted of national inventories and typologies of baptismal architecture and art.[10] More recently, a number of studies concerned with local specificities have added nuance to earlier generalist accounts.[11] Interest in baptismal ritual and liturgy and their origins has also increased significantly in recent years.[12] Iconographical studies have emphasized the interconnections between baptismal liturgy and art and have placed a new emphasis on baptizands' bodily experience of decorated baptismal spaces.[13]

The most recent general accounts of baptismal art are Robin M. Jensen's monographs *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism* (2011) and *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (2012).[14] Jensen is concerned with bringing

Henchir Zembra, Kelibia, La Skhira, Henchir el Koucha, Oued Zit, Oumcetren, Basilica of St Vitalis in Sufetula (Sbeitla), Seynane, Baptistery I of Sfax, Baptistery II of Sfax, Sidi Abich, Basilica II in Sidi Jdidi, Sidi Mansour, Thuburbo Maius, west church of Thamugadi (Timgad), Basilica I in Uppena (Henchir Chigarnia)

Italy, France: Albenga, Cividale del Friuli, Grado, Lateran Baptistery in Rome, Pontenove di Bedizzole

Category (c)

North Africa: Bît-el-Assa, Basilica I in Bulla Regia, Basilica III in Carthage, Chott Menzel Yahia, Basilica I in Dermech, Cuicul (Djémila), El-Erg, Hippo Regius, Ksar el Hadouch, Basilica III in Mactaris (Makhtar), Oued Ramel, the Church of Bellator in Sufetula (Sbeitla), the Great Basilica in Tipasa

Italy, France: Aquae Sextiae (Aix-en-Provence), Aquileia, Cimitile, Isola Comacina, Mariana on Corsica, Massilia (Marseille)

Iberian Peninsula: Baptistery I of Myrtilis Iulia (Mértola), Milreu, Montinho das Laranjeiras, Baptistery I in Barcino (Barcelona)

[9] Strzygowski 1885; de Waal 1896; de Bruyne 1957; Stern 1957; Fausone 1982.

[10] On the western Mediterranean, see Iturgaiz 1967, 1968; Lassus 1970; Gui, Duval, and Caillet 1992; Baratte et al. 2014; Buhler 1975; Gandolfi 2001; Bisconti 2001. Comprehensive overviews can be found in Khatchatrian 1962 and Ristow 1998.

[11] For example, Morfino 2011; Schneider 2011; Beltrán de Heredia Bercero and Godoy Fernández 2017; Lück 2018; Brandt 2012, 2016; Ghalia 2016. For a recent substantial contribution see Caseau and Orlandi 2024. The design and decoration of Italian baptisteries, in particular, has received special attention: see Marcenaro 2007; Brandt 2006a, 2006b; Bierbaum 2014; Weinryb 2002; Barber 2018; Ferri 2013; Croci 2019.

[12] Johnson 1999; Spinks 2006; Ferguson 2009; Hellholm et al. 2011.

[13] Bruderer Eichberg 2003; Foletti and Romano 2009; Foletti 2009; Apostolos-Cappadona 2011; Ivanovici 2014, 2016, 19–123; Morfino 2011; Dennis 2017, 2018.

[14] Jensen 2011b, 2012.

the study of baptismal art together with the study of figurative baptismal language in scripture, liturgy, and the writings of the church fathers. Jensen's thoroughly researched work, which provides a model for the study of baptismal art, concentrates on material evidence from the late antique Roman West, like the present study. Preserved instances of narrative imagery are rare in the Roman West and can usually only be found in the most elaborate baptismal settings. Many spaces are composed of images of birds, fish, other animals, shells, flowers, trees, vases, and water. Geometric patterns are often used in tandem with figurative imagery and sometimes dominate the baptismal space. Jensen sees sacramental or paradisiacal meanings expressed in most of the baptismal decorations which are free from narrative – a conclusion shared by a large part of the previously mentioned scholarship.[15]

While I am far from contesting this view, it strikes me that the scholarship reaching this conclusion has often taken the massive body of empirical data from different contexts in the East and the West as evidence of an ideal, theologically conceptualized totality. The quantitative evidence of preserved baptismal decorations hardly backs scholars' claims about the generally orthodox character of baptismal imagery. On the contrary, the numbers suggest that Christian adoptions of Graeco-Roman visual culture, which is bare of one-dimensional Christian significance, shaped late antique baptismal art considerably. As foundational and important as the search for baptismal iconography's scriptural models from the Bible or the church fathers is, it also risks drawing a picture of a hermetic Christianity bent exclusively on orthodoxy. The universalist core assumption all too rarely grants baptismal imagery the potential to be experimental and discursive within a fissile, complex, and diverse range of Christianities.

The case studies presented in this book have been selected to nuance the common assumption that fifth- and sixth-century baptismal art generally endorses and promotes what scholarship would identify as orthodox Christian practice and belief. The results of the present study do not apply to the entirety of late antique baptismal art and do not constitute an alternative reading of baptismal art altogether. Yet, they counterbalance the prevalent vision of what the rite of baptism and decorations of baptisteries were meant to achieve. They also give substance to the growing conviction that late antique Christian identities were multi-faceted, bound to local Roman tradition, and could deviate from official Christian doctrine.

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[15] Jensen 2012, 1; on paradisiacal imagery specifically, 177–213. Jensen establishes the sacramental model in Jensen 2000, 84–88.

Rethinking Christian Identity: Multiple Identities

In recent decades, the traditional binary opposition of pagan and Christian has been extensively questioned.[16] Historians and archaeologists have stressed that, throughout history, Christians experienced their religion in less clear-cut ways than the writings of Christian apologists suggest.[17] Instead, many scholars assume that there was a certain flexibility in Christians' self-conceptions, in regard to both the sheer multitude of confessions, factions, and heresies (Nicene, Arian, Donatist, Syrian, Egyptian, Pelagian, Nestorian, Manichaean, and others), and the readiness or unwillingness to adhere to Christianity's claim to exclusivity.[18] Scholarship which focuses in detail on *how* Christians reconciled ongoing pagan traditions and the exclusivity of the Christian religion is, however, still a minority concern.[19] The popular view that in the fourth and fifth centuries Roman society developed a secular realm which was independent of the religious realm – an argument prominently advocated by Robert Markus – has slowly begun to be criticized.[20] Critics of this theory stress that, at this time, Christians were more integrated into environments still marked by Roman customs and institutions than Markus allowed for.[21] They also seek to deconstruct late antique notions of non-negotiable divides between pagans and Christians as discursive constructs used to establish a common identity among Christians.[22]

In his contribution on Christian identities in North Africa from the third to the fifth centuries, historian Éric Rebillard, using sociological theories of identity formation, has challenged the view that the behaviour of North African Christians was predominantly determined by their Christianity.[23] Instead, he champions an approach which acknowledges

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[16] Many influential studies operate with this opposition. For a prominent example, see Mac Mullen 1986.

[17] On the impact of Christian apologetics on researchers' understandings of Christian religiosity, see Brown 1997, 633–636.

[18] This claim, however, has often been limited to only the fourth and fifth centuries. See Kahlos 2007, 31–38; Rebillard 2012, 95; Cameron 2011, 176–177; O'Donnell 1979; Bowersock 1990, 5–6; Trombley 1993–1994, 147–168; Fowden 1998; Sandwell 2007, 4; Busine 2015.

[19] Some important contributions are Salzman 2002; Kahlos 2007; Sandwell 2007; Rebillard 2012; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015.

[20] Markus 1990.   [21] See for instance Rebillard 2012, 90.

[22] Kahlos 2007; Sandwell 2007; Lander 2016. On Christian identity construction, see also Harrison et al. 2014.

[23] Rebillard 2012, 3. Rebillard's contribution forms part of a wide field of scholarship on late antique religious identity, which is dominated by historians. See for instance the shared volume Frakes and DePalma Digeser 2006. Art historical scholarship of late antiquity is also

the internal plurality of individuals and allows for the multiple social roles ('multiple identities' in Rebillard's terminology) that a person 'activates' at any given time.[24] Rebillard considers being a Christian only one of many social roles a person could play in their lifetime. Rebillard's approach is individualistic insofar as it questions the legitimacy of using 'internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups' – which is how many late antique Christian writers often used the term 'Christians' – as categories of study.[25]

Rebillard argues that North African Christians had plural identities based on 'category memberships [social identities] such as ethnicity, religion and occupation'.[26] Further, following sociologist Don Handelman, he holds that these category memberships were arranged laterally, meaning that a particular social identity will prevail in one situation, while a different identity will prevail in another. This lateral arrangement is opposed to hierarchical category memberships in which a certain category (religion, for instance) predominates and determines an individual's behaviour over other categories.[27] A sermon of Augustine of Hippo (354–430) can be used as an illustration: 'There are plenty of bad Christians who pore over astrological almanacs, inquiring into and observing auspicious seasons and days.'[28] Augustine is speaking about people who actively combine different identities. In a lateral category membership, this behaviour can seem perfectly plausible, while in a hierarchical category membership (like the one Augustine advocates), this kind of astrological interest is illicit and must be stigmatized ('bad Christians').[29]

Rebillard's plea for lateral category membership in late antique Christian identities thus introduces a model for thinking about religious affiliation, which allows for more refined interpretations of religious identifications than the schematic categorizations 'Christian', 'pagan', 'semi-Christian', and so on. Rebillard draws our attention to the possibility that Christian identity was accompanied by other identities which could (but did not have to) take centre stage.

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increasingly using the concept of identity. See for instance Garipzanov, Goodson, and Maguire 2017; Thomas 2016. On the usefulness of the concept of identity for studying material culture, see Pitts 2007; Versluys 2008.

[24] For social identity theory Mead 1934, 2015; Jenkins 1996 and for a critique thereof Brubaker and Cooper 2000. On multiple identities, see Burke 2003a, 167–224; Burke and Stets 2009, 130–154; Josselson and Harway 2012; Settles and Buchanan 2014.

[25] Rebillard 2012, 2. See Brubaker 2004, 164.   [26] Rebillard 2012, 4.

[27] Handelman 1977, 191.   [28] Augustine, Enarr. in ps., 40 (41). Quoted in Rebillard 2012, 72.

[29] Rebillard 2012, 72.

What would lateral category memberships have meant in practice for Christians of the fifth to seventh centuries? Scholars of identity formation agree that actors commonly adopt more than a single role in social situations.[30] For a late antique Christian, this could, for instance, mean that she identified as a Christian community member, daughter, wife, patron of the arts, and so forth, and that in many situations more than one role was activated. She would have had to negotiate these roles, as they mutually determined her actions. A caveat is in order here. Rebillard, questioning the status of Christianness as the most prevalent identity category, is primarily concerned with lay Christianity in North Africa at the turn of the fifth century. In the context of this study, however, the actors examined – namely Christian communities building and using baptisteries – comprise both clerics and lay members who were spread across different locations and moments in the fifth to seventh centuries. Over the course of roughly three centuries, lay and ordained Christians differed in the degree to which their Christianness determined other aspects of their identities. In very general terms, we can expect that the advance of Christianization in these centuries also increased the salience of Christianness for the construction of personal identities.

This book is not concerned with identifying situations in which the identity category of Christianness was not 'activated' or was subordinate to others. On the contrary, we may assume that Christians would have been particularly aware of their Christian identity when visiting baptismal spaces. Nevertheless, the theory of multiple identities is still relevant to my argument, as operating with multiple identity categories can prevent the trivialization of Christians' relationships with other aspects of their lives. For instance, iconographies and monuments like the ones discussed in this book have traditionally been seen as exemplary of the 'Christianization' of Roman society. While such observations are not untrue, they do not take into account that Christian works of art may have been intended to strengthen more than one identity. Stating that a work of art reflects the Christianization of a region without any further specification suggests that the work of art was principally understood in Christian terms. Any other ways in which it might have mattered fall off the radar. Effectively, what the work of art might reveal about the identity of its makers and recipients is decided before any serious consideration is given to the question of what its purpose was. In the language of identity theory,

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[30] Stryker 1968; Turner 1978.