

Furnaces, Candles, and Other Tricks: Christian Clergy as Baptismal “Magicians”

Nathan P. Chase

Nathan Chase (1990-2025) was Assistant Professor of Sacramental and Liturgical Theology at Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis, Missouri, and Co-editor of Pray Tell blog until his untimely death soon after this year's annual meeting. He studied at St. John's School of Theology and Seminary, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and the University of Notre Dame. He is recognized as an important scholar of early liturgical history and sources with an impressive output of monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles. He was a member of the Problems in the Early History of Liturgy Seminar.

Introduction

The third-century anonymous text *De Rebaptismate* from North Africa talks about the initiatory practice of a group of heretics who tried to denigrate the baptism of the Christian (proto-Nicene) church.¹ Rooted in Mt 3:11 and Lk 3:15, which holds that John the Baptist said that the one who comes after him, Jesus, would baptize with the “Holy Spirit and fire,” the writer of the text states:

And some of them try to argue that they only administer a sound and perfect, not as we, a mutilated and curtailed baptism, which they are in such wise said to designate, that immediately they have descended into the water, fire at once appears upon the water. Which if it can be effected by any trick, as several tricks of this kind are affirmed to be—of Anaxilaus—whether it is anything natural, by means of which this may happen, or whether they think that they behold this, or whether the work and magical poison of some malignant being can force fire from water; still they declare such as deceit and artifice to be a perfect baptism, which if faithful men have been forced to receive, there will assuredly be no doubt but that they have lost that which they had. (*De Rebaptismate* 16)²

1. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 111–12; Robin Jensen, “‘With Pomp, Apparatus, Novelty, and Avarice’: Alternative Baptismal Practices in Roman Africa,” *Studia Patristica* 44 (2010): 81–82.

2. *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 5:676-677. Cyprianus, *Opera omnia*, edited by G. Hartel, CSEL 3.3 (Vienna 1871), 89.28-29

There are two things that appear to be influencing *De Rebaptismate*. The first is the tradition, well documented in scriptural and non-scriptural accounts, of the appearance of fire and/or light on the water during Jesus' baptism. The second is the idea that by some trick or artifice the community referenced by the author of *De Rebaptismate* is actually creating fire on the water during their rites of initiation.

This paper will begin by briefly summarizing the scriptural and non-scriptural accounts of the appearance of fire and light on the water during Jesus' baptism. It will then look at liturgical, literary, and material sources from the fourth century to early medieval period, primarily in the West, that may indicate that the tricks and artifices so objectionable to the author of *De Rebaptismate* were actually embraced by Nicene Christians, though the link to the debate that animated *De Rebaptismate* became largely forgotten.

Fire and Light in the Scriptural and Non-Scriptural Sources

Early scriptural and non-scriptural sources witness to a tradition where fire and/or light appeared on the water during Jesus' baptism, and these have been thoroughly studied by scholars.³ The appearance of fire on the water during Jesus' baptism appears in the Mandaean baptismal liturgy, Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 88.3), and in the *Sibylline Oracles* 7.81-84. It is also attested in *De Rebaptismate* as already seen above, where apparently it was part of a Christian sect that followed the *Preaching of Paul*. Additionally, as Gabriele Winkler has successfully argued, the tradition of fire appearing on the waters at Jesus baptism is older than that of the light tradition.⁴

The continuation of this fire tradition can be seen particularly in Syrian sources, most notably in the writings of "Ephrem, the Acts of John, Jacob of Serug, the Syrian baptismal *ordines*, [and] the Syrians' feast of Epiphany."⁵ To this we can also add the newly published Syriac baptismal service (Sinai, Syriac New Finds M47N, ff. 5r-9v).⁶ It also appears in an illumination from the canons table of the Gospel of Rabbula (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. Plut. I, 56,

3. Kilian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 106–10; Gabriele Winkler, "The Appearance of the Light at the Baptism of Jesus and the Origins of Epiphany: An Investigation of Greek, Syriac, Armenian, and Latin Sources," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. Maxwell Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 291–348; Ferguson, *Baptism*, 110–11; Andrei Orlov, "Kavod on the River: Jesus's Baptism as Revelation of the Divine Glory," in *New Narratives for Old: The Historical Method of Reading Early Christian Theology: Essays in Honor of Michel René Barnes*, ed. Anthony Briggman and Ellen Scully, CUA Studies in Early Christianity 11 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 65–68.

4. Winkler, "Appearance of the Light," 299.

5. Winkler, 303. For the Syrian texts, see Winkler, 303–8.

6. Sebastian Brock, "An Early Syriac Baptismal Service (Sinai, Syriac New Finds M47N)," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 86 (2020): 432.

sixth century Syriac) that appears to show fire at Jesus’ baptism, though some have considered the fire a smudge (see Figure 1: Gospel of Rabbula, fol. 4v. Public Domain.).⁷

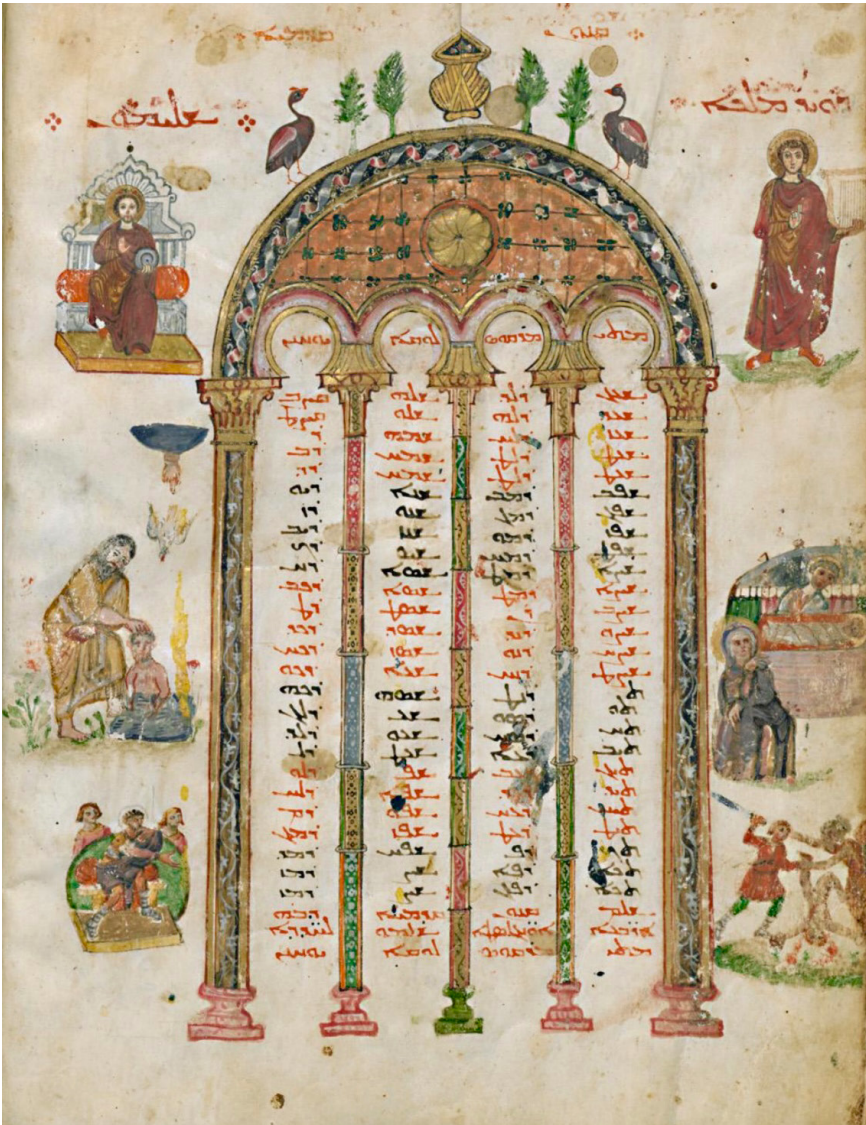


Figure 1: Gospel of Rabbula, fol. 4v. Public Domain.

7. Massimo Bernabò, ed., *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula*. Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, plut. 1.56: *L'illustrazione del Nuovo Testamento nella Siria del VI secolo* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008), fig. 20. For the interpretation of it as a drip of paint, see p. 89.

Outside of the Syrian sources, the fire tradition appears in the Egyptian tradition in the *Book of Jeu* (Bruce Codex, Bodleian Library, Oxford) from the fourth century:⁸

Jesus turned to the four corners of the world with his disciples and invoked this prayer, speaking thus, Hear me, my father, father of all fatherhoods, infinite light. Make my disciples worthy to receive the baptism of fire, and release them from their sins, and purify them from their transgressions... Make Zorokothora Melchisedek come secretly and bring the water of the baptism of fire of the virgin of the light, the judge... Yea, hear me, my father, father of all fatherhoods, infinite light. Let the virgin of the light come and baptize my disciples in the baptism of fire. Let her forgive their sins and purify their transgressions... So, my father, if you have forgiven their sins, and wiped out their transgressions, and made them be numbered in the kingdom of the light, you must give me a sign within the fire of this fragrant incense. And at that instant the sign that Jesus had mentioned happened in the fire, and Jesus baptized his disciples. And he gave to them from the offering and he sealed them on their foreheads with the seal of the virgin of the light, that which makes them be numbered within the kingdom of light. And the disciples rejoiced, for they had received the baptism of fire along with the seal that forgives sins, and because they had been numbered with the inheritance of the kingdom of light.⁹

The fire tradition also appears in Romanos the Melodist a sixth century Byzantine hymnographer.¹⁰

The tradition of a light or “a great/mighty light” appearing on the Jordan during Jesus’ baptism became another prominent tradition in the early Church. Winkler distinguishes between those sources that know of “a great/mighty light” and those that simply know of light, both of which appear rooted in Tatian’s *Diatessaron*. Those that simply know of “light” include Ephrem’s commentary on the *Diatessaron* (with the lacuna in the Syriac version supplied by the Armenian), Ephrem’s hymns, the Syrian Office of Epiphany, the Armenian Feast of Epiphany, and the Syriac *Acts of Thomas*.¹¹ Western sources like the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* (a Middle English Gospel harmony based on an Old French one) and Byzantine sources like Romanos the Melodist also know of this tradition.¹²

Those texts that reference a great/mighty light include the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, the gospel harmony of Išo’dad of Merv (and by extension the gospel commentary of Dionysius bar Šalibi which relies on it), the *Agathangeli Historia*, and some of

8. Jensen, “‘With Pomp, Apparatus, Novelty, and Avarice’: Alternative Baptismal Practices in Roman Africa,” 81; Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), #38.

9. Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 64–66.

10. Winkler, “Appearance of the Light,” 322–23.

11. Winkler, 317–21.

12. Winkler, 321–23.

the Maronite baptismal ordines.¹³ Epiphanius's *Panarion* 30.13.7 also knows of this tradition, quoting the *Gospel of the Ebionites*.¹⁴ Additionally, a reference to an "immense" or "great light" appears after Matt 3:15 in two manuscripts of the *Vetus Latina*, namely the *Codex Vercellensis* (MS *a* from the fourth century) and the *Codex Sangermanensis I* (MS *g*¹ from the sixth century).¹⁵ Other later Western texts not dependent on the *Codex Fuldensis*, the standard Latin copy of Tatian's *Diatessaron*, also include a reference to a great/mighty light. This includes the *Vita Beate Virginis Marie et Salvatoris Rhythmica* (13th century, southern Germany), the *Historia Scholastica* of Peter Comestor (1170, Paris) and *Vita Jesu Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony (d. 1378, Germany).¹⁶ Based on these unique witnesses, which speak of a great/mighty light, instead of simply a light as in Ephrem, Winkler argues "that different versions of Tatian's gospel harmony were in circulation: one form of the text referring to a 'mighty light' at the baptism of Jesus, and another version speaking of the manifestation of the 'light' at the Jordan."¹⁷

There are a few other texts from the West that may point to a knowledge of this fire and light tradition that have not been cited by scholars. The first set of texts appears in the writings of Ambrose of Milan. In *De Sacramentis* 1.6.22 (henceforth DS) Ambrose recounts the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites and connects it with baptism:

Moses held his rod, and led the people of the Hebrews at night in a pillar of light, and in the day in a pillar of cloud. What is the light but truth, since it sheds a full and open brightness? What is the pillar of light but Christ the Lord, who scattered the shadows of unbelief, and poured the light of truth and spiritual grace on human hearts? The pillar of cloud, on the other hand, is the Holy Spirit. The people was in the sea, and the pillar of light went on before; then the pillar of cloud followed, as if the shadowing of the Holy Spirit. Thou seest that by the Holy Spirit and by the water he has shown a type of baptism.¹⁸

Here it is clear that the light proceeds them through the water, while the Holy Spirit as the pillar of cloud follows them. Interestingly, the use of the "shadowing of the Holy Spirit" here parallels the Holy Spirit resting on Jesus in the waters of baptism, best preserved in the Syrian tradition as Winkler has again shown.¹⁹

13. Winkler, 308–15.

14. Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, eds., *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 212–13. Orlov argues this is the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, see Orlov, "Kavod on the River: Jesus's Baptism as Revelation of the Divine Glory," 66.

15. Winkler, "Appearance of the Light," 315.

16. Winkler, 315–17.

17. Winkler, 317.

18. Ambrose of Milan, "*On the Sacraments*" and "*On the Mysteries*," ed. J. H. Srawley, trans. T. Thompson (London: SPCK, 1950), 56. For the critical edition, see Ambrose of Milan, *Des sacraments. Des mystères Explication du symbole.*, ed. Bernard Botte, 2nd ed., Sources chrétiennes, 25 bis (Paris: les Éditions du Cerf, 2007).

19. Winkler, "Appearance of the Light," 323–38.

In other places in DS—and also *De Mysteriis* (henceforth DM)—Ambrose argues that the fire that came upon Elijah’s sacrifice in 1 Kings 18:38 was a prefiguring of baptism:

DS 2.4.11: Elijah called fire from heaven, and fire came down from heaven... Here is another kind of baptism.²⁰

DM 26: Is there still any reason why thou shouldst doubt, when the Father clearly calls to thee in the Gospel and says, This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased; when the Son calls, on whom the Holy Spirit showed himself as a dove: when the Holy Spirit also calls, who descended as a dove: when David calls, The voice of the Lord is upon the waters: the God of majesty has thundered: the Lord is upon many waters: when the Scripture witnesses to thee that at the prayers of Jerubbaal fire descended from heaven, and again, on Elijah’s praying, fire was sent which consecrated the sacrifice?²¹

This is suggestive of a fire-baptism tradition that was known to Ambrose. Further support for this appears in Ambrose’s *De Helia et ieiunio* where, as William Harmless notes, “[Ambrose] set out the prophet Elijah as a model of true fasting and listed benefits Elijah enjoyed from his forty-day fast and that, by implication his hearers, especially the *competentes*, would also enjoy... ‘he drew down fire from heaven’ (just as the *competentes* would draw down the fire of the Spirit).”²² Here the key reference is to *De Helia et ieiunio* 2.2, which reads: “while fasting he drew down fire from heaven.”²³

Elsewhere Ambrose also deals with fire and Pentecost, which at first glance does not appear related to this tradition. In DS 2.5.15, Ambrose states that:

After the death of our Lord Jesus Christ the Apostles were in one place, and they were praying on the day of Pentecost. And suddenly there came a great sound as the Spirit were carried along with great violence, and there appeared divided tongues as fire. What does this mean, but the descent of the Holy Spirit, who wished to show himself to unbelievers in bodily form also; that in bodily form sign, spiritually sacrament? Therefore, there was given an evident proof of his coming. But to us now offered the privilege of faith. For in the beginning signs were shown for unbelievers; now in the fullness of the Church we must gather truth not faith.²⁴

A reference to Pentecost, however, is included alongside the fire-baptism tradition in DM 27:

20. Ambrose of Milan, “*On the Sacraments*” and “*On the Mysteries*,” 62.

21. Ambrose of Milan, 133.

22. William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), 112.

23. Mary Joseph Aloysius Buck (ed.), *S. Ambrosii De Helia et ieiunio*, Patristic Studies 19 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1929), 46/47.

24. Ambrose of Milan, “*On the Sacraments*” and “*On the Mysteries*,” 64–65.

Do not consider the merits of persons, but the office of priests. And thou lookest at merits, consider the priest as Elijah; look at the merits of Peter, too, or of Paul, who received this mystery from the Lord Jesus, and handed on to us. Visible fire was sent to them, that they might believe; for us, who believe, one who invisible acts: to them for figure, to us for admonition. Believe, therefore, that invoked by the prayers of the priests the Lord Jesus is present who says, Where there are two or three, there am I also; how much more where the Church is, where his mysteries are, does he deign to bestow his presence!²⁵

This longer passage from DM 27 sheds light on Ambrose's statement in DS 2.5.15. In both DS 2.5.15 and DM 27, Ambrose seems to be arguing that while in former times the church could see fire—whether at Pentecost or at baptism—to-day the church has no need to physically see fire but can trust in God's promises. A similar argument that the church does not need to physically see the image of fire, like that seen with Elijah's burnt offering in 1 Kings 18:38, features also in Ambrose's treatment of the Eucharistic consecration in DM 52. In this way, Ambrose at first glance seems to want to preserve these images of baptism while also avoiding, like the author of *De Rebaptismate*, the idea that literal fire needs to come upon the waters.

Remnants of the fire tradition may also be seen in Augustine of Hippo and Isidore of Seville. The former talks about the newly baptized being formed like bread in the furnace through their chrismation and Isidore of Seville describes the font as a furnace. More on these witnesses below.

In any event, the traditions of fire and light (either simply a "light" or a "great/mighty light") coming upon the waters at Jesus' baptism were known throughout the East and West into the medieval period. While figures like the author of *De Rebaptismate* would seem to express a distain for those who tried to ensure that fire or light appeared during the initiatory rites, as we will see, later sources from the fourth century onward appear to have done just that. They used similar tricks and artifices to those outlined by the heretical community described by *De Rebaptismate* to make fire and light and other "magical" phenomena appear during baptism, even if these references were taken by most Christians as purely metaphorical.

The Baptismal Font as a Furnace

The first trick that appears to have been deployed by proto-Nicene and Nicene Christians was the heating of the water in baptismal fonts in order for the font to imitate a furnace. This likely was already an issue in the first two centuries of the church. *Didache* 7.2, for instance, speaks out against this practice, preferring baptisms be performed in a cold stream of water: "If you do not have running

25. Ambrose of Milan, 134.

water, however, baptize in another kind of water if you cannot do so in cold water, then do so in warm water.”²⁶ Kurt Niederwimmer argues that Arthur Vööbus was correct in his interpretation that “warm” water here means from a cistern and not water that was warmed, as some scholars have suggested.²⁷ This seems inaccurate and it is more likely, as Erik Peterson had earlier argued, that the issue was one of sectarian differences and practices, which are clearly attested by the third century.²⁸ This trick was for sure an issue by the third century as indicated in *De Rebaptismate*

From the fourth century onward, at the latest, it is likely that some Nicene churches heated the baptismal font in order to replicate the metaphor of the font as a furnace. This subterfuge would also make its way into the Eucharistic liturgy with the practice of adding warm water (*zeon*) to the wine.²⁹ While likely speaking in metaphorical terms, figures like Jacob of Serugh note that “the heat of [the Holy Spirit’s] power warms the waters; and his fire sets the waves on fire before [Christ] descends.”³⁰ In this way, the font serves as a furnace and may even parallel early conceptions of the font as womb, since the ancient saw the womb as being the place where the baby was “cooked.”³¹ In any event, this theology of the font as a furnace exerted a strong influence in Syria, in particular, but such a theology of the font and initiation as a whole appears in a few places in the Western tradition as well.

In several places, Augustine, for instance, likens the catechumens to bread and their initiation to the production of bread in the oven. In *Sermon 227*, Augustine says:

I mean, was that loaf made from one grain? Weren’t there many grains of wheat? But before they came into the loaf they were all separate; they were joined together

26. Cf. Kurt Niederwimmer and Harold W. Attridge, *The Didache: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 125–29, here 125.

27. Niederwimmer and Attridge, 128n20. See Arthur Vööbus, *Liturgical Traditions in the Didache*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 16 (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1968), 24.

28. Erik Peterson, “Über einige Probleme der Didache-Überlieferung,” in *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis: Studien und Untersuchungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1959), 160–62. Other suggestions were that the warm water was for the sick, but Peterson rightly discounts this since they could simply have water poured over them.

29. Stefanos Alexopoulos and Maxwell E Johnson, *Introduction to Eastern Christian Liturgies* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2021), 118–19.

30. For more, see McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 108nn33–35.

31. A. E. Hanson, “Paidopoiia: metaphors for conception, abortion, and gestation in the Hippocratic Corpus,” *Clio medica* 27 (1995): 291–307. This will become even more pronounced in the medieval West, see Teresa Berger, “Mulier eucharistica: Tracing a Marian Eucharistic Motif,” in *Gemeinschaft im Danken: Grundfragen der Eucharistiefeier im ökumenischen Dialog*, edited by Stefan Böntert and FS Irmgard Pahl, 84–96, Studien zur Pastoralliturgie 40 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2015).

by means of water after a certain amount of pounding and crushing. Unless wheat is ground after all, and moistened with water, it can't possibly get into this shape which is called bread. In the same way you too were being ground and pounded, as it were, by the humiliation of fasting and the sacrament of exorcism. Then came baptism, and you were, in a manner of speaking, moistened with water in order to be shaped into bread. But it's not yet bread without fire to bake it. So what does fire represent? That's the chrism, the anointing. Oil, the fire-feeder, you see, is the sacrament of the Holy Spirit.³²

Unlike in Jacob of Serugh where the font itself is the furnace, in Augustine the baking of bread by fire is through the chrismation that occurs after the water bath. Nevertheless, what Augustine's metaphor does seem to suggest is a close connection between the initiatory rites and fire, and perhaps an older theology of the font as the oven/furnace in which the newly initiated were baked.

A theology much more similar to that of Jacob of Serugh appears in Isidore of Seville, who explicitly describes the font as a furnace in *Etymologiae* 15.4.9³³ and in *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*:

The font is the source of all glories. It has seven steps: three downwards for the three things which we renounce, three others upward for the three things which we confess: the seventh is also the fourth, like that of the son of man, extinguishing the furnace of fire [Dan. 3.15], a sure ground for the feet, a foundation for the water, in which dwelleth all the fullness of the godhead bodily [Col. 2.9]. (*De Ecclesiasticis Officiis* Book 2 XXV[XXIV]:4)³⁴

This theology, as Christian McConnell notes, is rooted in Dan 3 and Col 2:9.³⁵ The former is of course the story of the three youths in the fiery furnace (Dan 3). The

32. *Sermon 227*: Hill, *The Works of St. Augustine Sermons 184-229Z* (III/6), 254. A similar explanation appears in *Sermon 229*: Hill, *The Works of St. Augustine Sermons 184-229Z* (III/6), 265; and 272: Hill, *The Works of St. Augustine Sermons 230-272B* (III/7), 301. Elsewhere Augustine likens the fire to temptations, see *Sermon 229A*. For an analysis of this metaphor, see Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 377–78 and 403.

33. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, lib. XV, Section vi “De Acdficiis Sacris,” *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*. Recog. brevisque adnotatione critica instruxit Wallace Martin Lindsay, 1–2 (Oxford 1910-1911 [SCBO]); *The “Etymologies” of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: 3rd printing 2011), 310: “For the font (*font*) in spring-shrines in the place of the reborn, in which seven steps are made in the mystery of the Holy Spirit; there are three going down and three coming up: the seventh is the fourth step (i.e. the bottom of the waist-deep baptismal font), and that is like the Son of Man, the extinguisher of the furnace of fire, the sure place for the feet, the foundation of the water, in which the fullness of divinity dwells bodily.”

34. E. C. Whitaker and Maxwell E. Johnson, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 3rd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 160. Henceforth DBL. Critical edition: Isidore of Seville. *De ecclesiasticis officiis*, edited by Christopher M. Lawson, CSEL 113 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989). See also Christian McConnell, “Baptism in Visigothic Spain: Origins, Development, and Interpretation” (PhD Diss., University of Notre Dame, 2005), 59–60.

35. McConnell notes Col. 1, but the scriptural reference is Col. 2:9, see McConnell, “Baptism in Visigothic Spain,” 59.

imagery of dying and rising and references to fire made Dan 3 especially conducive to the baptismal liturgy.³⁶

Turning to the extant material evidence of the fonts from Seville does not provide any material evidence that Isidore's font was heated; however, in other locations throughout the Christian world there is evidence for heated fonts. Heated fonts appear in both the East and the West at Aosta (II.8), Aquileia (II.10), Apollonia—East Basilica (IX.2), Apollonia—West Basilica (IX.3), Abū Mīnā—Western House Chapel (X.1.5), Kellia—QIsa 366 (X.1.20), Nea Anchialos in Thessaly (XV.42, XV.44), Galata (XVI.11), Philippi (XVII.72), and Vranje (XVIII.65).³⁷ While some have argued that these heated fonts may have been multi-use basins—for baptism or other types of purposes³⁸—it should not be ruled out that these heated fonts were meant as a sort of artifice used to mimic a theology of the font as a furnace, especially since many are found in warm climates. Even in places without explicit signs of hypocausts or other devices used to heat the water, it is not inconceivable that the water was heated elsewhere and brought into the baptistery.

Regardless of whether the fonts were heated or whether the water used was warm, the theology of the font as a furnace was also instantiated through visual and auditory means. Depictions of the youths in the fiery furnace, for example, appear at the cathedral in Faras in three different phases: Cat. #19 (8th cent.), #53 (c. 950), and #120 (c. 1075–1100).³⁹ For our purposes, the most significant depictions at Faras are #19 and #53. The former appears in the south aisle on the baptistery side, and the latter appears in the room leading into the baptistery. If after their baptism the newly baptized processed from the baptistery to the front of the church and then down the center aisle, then they would have passed the youths in the fiery furnace (cat. #19). More significantly, a later depiction of the youths in the fiery furnace (cat. #53) was directly across from the entrance to the baptistery, and so as the newly baptized came out of the baptistery into the church, the first

36. Robin Margaret Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 149, 154; Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 79–84; Nathan Chase, “Pruning the Prayers: Early Medieval Liturgical Adaptation in the Hispano-Mozarabic Easter Vigil,” *Archiv Für Liturgiewissenschaft* 60 (2018): 145.

37. The information on these fonts and their catalogue numbers are taken from Robin Jensen, Nathan Dennis, and Nathan Chase, eds., *Baptisteries of the Early Christian World* (Brill, forthcoming), Henceforth BECW.

38. Gabriel Radle has argued that some of these heated basins may not have been used for baptism but for the performance of charitable baths of the *diakonia*, see Gabriel Radle, “Liturgy and Charitable Ministration in Late Antiquity: Diakonia Prayers in the Earliest Euchologion Manuscripts,” *Ex Fonte—Journal of Ecumenical Studies in Liturgy* 2 (2023): 259–96, especially 277 and 280–88.

39. Stefan Jakobielski, Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, and Magdalena Łaptaś, *Pachoras Faras: The Wall Painting from the Cathedrals of Aetios, Paulos and Petros* (Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2017). For more on the font, see BECW, X.2.6.

thing they would have seen is the image of the fiery furnace. There is even evidence, albeit from the eighth or tenth century, at Qaṣr al-Wizz (Phase 2 of Church) where the *Benedicite* (Dan 3:57-81) has been inscribed into the font.⁴⁰

The font as a furnace was also tied in many places sonically to the baptismal liturgy. Dan 3 with its canticle the *Benedicite* was the final reading at the Easter Vigil in many liturgical traditions in the medieval period.⁴¹ It appears in the Hispano-Mozarabic Rite (in both Tradition A and B), the Gallican Rite, the Roman Rite in the Gelasian sacramentary (but not the Gregorian), in the Byzantine Rite, the Hagiopolite tradition, and the Syrian Capitulare. It also appears at the Easter vigil at Verona at the end of the fourth century. Dan 3 does not appear in the Milanese Rite,⁴² the Syrian Lectionary of the Jacobite Patriarch Athanasius V, the Karšūnī lectionary,⁴³ or the Coptic Rite.⁴⁴ In most of these cases, Dan 3 appears as the final Old Testament reading, and in several traditions the reading from Dan 3 would mark the time when the newly baptized processed into the church.⁴⁵ In fact, as Clemens Leonhard notes, “ending the vigil with a reading from Daniel 3 may rather have musical than theological reasons,”⁴⁶ meaning that it was perhaps chosen less for the reading and more for the chanting of the canticle, the *Benedicite*. The *Benedicite* seems to have concluded the baptismal rites and may have been used for the entrance of the newly baptized into the church in a number of traditions.⁴⁷ The singing of this canticle would have added a sonic dimension to the Christian clergy’s initiatory trickeries.

40. John Barns, “A Text of the ‘Benedicite’ in Greek and Old Nubian from Kasr el-Wizz,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archeology* 60 (1974): 206-211; Artur Obluski, “The Monasteries and Monks of Nubia,” *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 36 (Warsaw: University of Warsaw / The Raphael Taubenschlag Foundation, 2019): 222-24.

41. Chase, “Pruning the Prayers,” 140-41.

42. The reading appears on Good Friday and the canticle at the Easter Vigil, see Friederike Maria Kulczak-Rudiger, “Jünglinge im Feuerofen,” *RAC* 19 (2001): 368.

43. Originally it appears that the reading was used in the Syrian tradition, see Kulczak-Rudiger, “Jünglinge im Feuerofen,” 367.

44. It appears that originally the reading was used in the Egyptian tradition, see Kulczak-Rudiger, “Jünglinge im Feuerofen,” 366. It should be noted, however, that in Egypt most baptisms did not occur at the Easter vigil, see Paul Bradshaw, “‘Diem Baptismo Sollemniorum’: Initiation and Easter in Christian Antiquity,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 137-47.

45. Chase, “Pruning the Prayers,” 144.

46. Clemens Leonhard, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter: Open Questions in Current Research*, Studia Judaica, Bd. 35 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2012), 310n515.

47. Gabriel Bertonière, *The Historical Development of the Easter Vigil and Related Services in the Greek Church*, OCA 193 (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Studiorum Orientalium, 1972), 65-66 and 129-37, see especially 130n52. The same seems to be the case in the Hispano-Mozarabic tradition, see Chase, “Pruning the Prayers,” 143-49. However, the León Antiphonary, at least, gives the *Benedicite* as the final chant of the baptismal liturgy and the *Ecce grex* as the chant for the movement of the baptizands from the baptistery to the choir, see fol. 175 or Louis Brou and José Vives, eds., *Antifonario visigótico mozárabe de la Catedral de León*, Monumenta Hispaniae Sacra, Serie Liturgica 5.1 (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1959), 285.

Candles

Augusto Cosentino argues that one remnant of the fire tradition at Jesus’ baptism can be seen in the use of candles, in particular the paschal candle, in close relation to the baptismal font and liturgy.⁴⁸ The use of the paschal candle is first attested toward the end of the fourth century based on the witness of Jerome, and texts for its blessing appear from the fifth century onward.⁴⁹ Despite this, candles or lamps feature earlier than even the paschal candle in some sources. Cosentino notes, for instance, that lamps surrounded the font according to the *Acts of Thomas* 25-27, dated to the third century.⁵⁰

Greek	Syriac
And they sought after him that they also might henceforth receive the seal of the word, saying to him: “Seeing that our souls are at leisure and eager toward God, give us the seal; for we have heard you say that the God whom you preach knows his own sheep by his seal.” And the Apostle said unto them: “I also rejoice and entreat you to receive this seal, and to partake with me in this Eucharist and blessing of the Lord, and to be made perfect therein. For this is the Lord and God of all, even Jesus Christ, whom I preach, and he is the father of truth, in whom I have taught you to believe.” And he commanded them to bring Oil, that they might receive the seal by the oil. They brought the oil therefore, and lighted many lamps; for it was night. And the Apostle got up and sealed them. And the Lord was revealed unto them by a voice, saying: “Peace be to you, brothers.” And they heard his voice only, but his likeness they did not see, for they had not yet received the added sealing of the seal. And the Apostle took the oil and poured it upon their heads and anointed and chrismated them, and began to say:	And they begged of him that they might receive the sign, and said to him: “Our souls are turned to God to receive the sign for we have heard that all the sheep of that God whom you preach are known to him by the sign.” Judas said to them: “I too rejoice, and I ask of you to partake of the Eucharist and of the blessing of this Messiah whom I preach.” And the king gave orders that the bath should be closed for seven days, and that no man should bath in it. And when the seven days were done, on the eighth day the three of them entered into the bath by night that Judas might baptize them. And many lamps were lighted in the bath. And when they had entered into the bath-house, Judas went in before them. And our Lord appeared to them, and said to them: “Peace be with you, my brothers.” And they heard the voice only, but the form they did not see, whose it was, for until now they had not been baptized. And Judas went up and stood upon the edge of the cistern, and poured oil upon their heads, and said:

48. Augusto Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” in *L’edificio battesimale in Italia. Aspetti e problemi (atti dell’VIII congresso nazionale di archeologia cristiana: Genova, Sarzana, Albenga, Finale Ligure, Ventimiglia, 21-26 settembre 1998)* (Bordighera: Istituto internazionale di studi liguri, 2001), 527–32.

49. A. J. MacGregor, *Fire and Light in the Western Triduum: Their Use at Tenebrae and at the Paschal Vigil*, Alcuin Club Collection, no. 71 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 304–8; Thomas Forrest Kelly, *The Exultet in Southern Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 3, especially 1 and 40–43; Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” 528.

50. Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” 530.

Come, holy Name of the Christ that is above every name. Come, power of the Most High, and the compassion that is perfect. Come, gift of the Most High. Come, compassionate mother. Come, communion of the male. Come, she who reveals the hidden mysteries. Come, mother of the seven houses, that your rest may be in the eighth house. Come, elder of the five members, mind, thought, reflection, consideration, reason; communicate with these young men. Come, Holy Spirit, and cleanse their reins and their heart, and give them the added seal, in the Name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. And when they were sealed, a youth appeared to them holding a lighted torch, so that their lamps became dim at the approach of that light. And he went forth and was no more seen by them. And the Apostle said unto the Lord: “Your light, O Lord, is not to be contained by us, and we are not able to bear it, for it is too great for our sight.” And when the dawn came it was morning, he broke bread and made them partakers of the Eucharist of the Christ.	“Come, holy name of the Messiah; come, power of grace from on high: come, perfect mercy; come, exalted gift; come, sharer of the blessing; come, revealer of hidden mysteries; come, mother of seven houses, whose rest was in the eighth house; come, messenger of reconciliation, and communicate with the minds of these youths; come Spirit of holiness, and purify their reins and their hearts.” And he baptized them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit of holiness. And when they had come up out of the water, a youth appeared to them, and he was holding a lighted taper; and the light of the lamps became pale through its light. And when they had departed, he became invisible to them; and the Apostle said: “We were not even able to bear Your light, because it is too great for our vision.” And when dawn came and was morning, he broke the Eucharist.
--	--

In the Greek text, the caveat is made that lamps were lit “for it was night,” but this does not appear in the Syriac version, and even the Greek at the end of the baptismal scene makes it clear that the lamp light is theologically contrasted with the light of Christ. The appearance of a “great/mighty light” seems to be a motivation behind the text. The lit lamps and the lit torch appear to simulate a light shining over the baptismal font, allowing a certain form of visual trickery.

Further evidence contemporary with the *Acts of Thomas* for the early practice of using lamps or tapers to “trick” the baptizands and other liturgical participants may be seen at Dura-Europos. There, women with tapers process to the bridal chamber next to the baptismal font. This likely mirrors how the catechumens would enter the space and approach the font.⁵¹

It is not, however, just the Syrian tradition that appears to have engaged these artifices to make a great light or fire appear on the baptismal waters. Cosentino also points to the presence of four candles on the mosaic in the font at Kélibia

51. Michael Peppard, *The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), chapters 1 and 4.

phase 2 (VIII.42P2) dated to the sixth century (Figure 2: Font at Kélibia. Photo by Robin Jensen. Used with permission.).⁵² To this we should add that lit candles also appear in the mosaic font in Sidi Jdidi Basilica II (VIII.71) from the fifth/sixth century.⁵³ Cosentino also points to two other images:⁵⁴ 1) a fifth century ivory of the baptism of Jesus in the British Museum with two candles on either side of the image (Figure 3)⁵⁵ and 2) an image from the National Museum of Denmark dated to the end of the sixth century which has two candles and a censor under a ciborium, presumably over a font (Figure 4).⁵⁶ The presence of two candles in the ivory and mosaic, instead of a single paschal candle, would be consistent with the dipping of two candles into the baptismal font in some of the earliest liturgical sources that contain this practice.⁵⁷ This would eventually lead, in the medieval Western tradition, to the dipping of the single paschal candle into the font. The use of multiple candles around the font also appears in *Ordo Romanus* 28A⁵⁸ and also in the supplementary *Ordo baptisterii* of the *Gellone Sacramentary*, no. 2314.⁵⁹

Other Tricks

Cosentino points out one final trick that might have been used to mimic the fire and light tradition during baptism and that is the use of a column on which in-

52. Cf. Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” 530. For a recent study of the font at Kélibia, see François Baratte, Fathi Bejaoui, Noël Duval, Sarah Berraho, Isabelle Gui, Hélène Jacquest, eds., *Basiliques chrétiennes d’Afrique du Nord (inventaire et typologie) II* (Bordeaux: Ausonius Mémoires, 2014), #58 and pp. 165–9. For more, see BECW, VIII.42P2.

53. For a recent study of the font at Sidi Jdidi Basilica II, see Baratte et al., *Basiliques chrétiennes d’Afrique du Nord*, #70, 184–88. For more, see BECW, VIII.71.

54. Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” 530. Accession number 1856,0623.3. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1856-0623-3.

55. Accession number 15137. <https://samlinger.natmus.dk/as/asset/28630>. Scholars have debated whether a font is depicted or not, see Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” 530; Elisabetta Neri, “Les gestes rituels de la liturgie baptismale occidentale. L’exemple d’Ambroise de Milan et d’Augustin d’Hippone,” in *Baptême et baptistères entre Antiquité tardive et Moyen Âge: actes du colloque international qui s’est tenu à Paris, à Sorbonne Université, les 12-13 novembre 2020*, ed. Béatrice Caseau-Chevallier and Lucia Maria Orlandi (Cinisello Balsamo, Milano: Silvana editoriale, 2023), 150. I agree with Neri that a font is depicted.

56. A. J. MacGregor, *Fire and Light in the Western Triduum: Their Use at Tenebrae and at the Paschal Vigil*, Alcuin Club Collection 71 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 476–79. For a general overview, see also Harald Buchinger, “Feuer und Licht in der Osterliturgie des Frühmittelalters: Zur nonverbalen Symbolik,” in *Il fuoco nell’alto Medioevo* (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo, 2013), 277–318. Buchinger argues that the use of two candles may have been adopted from general papal practice.

57. Michel Andrieu, ed., *Les “Ordines romani” du haut Moyen Âge*, Spicilegium sacrum lovaniense 24 (Louvain, 1951), 421–25.

58. A. Dumas and J. Deshusses, eds., *Liber sacramentorum Gellonensis*, CCSL 159 (Turnhout, 1981), 333.



Figure 2: Font at Kélibia. Photo by Robin Jensen. Used with permission.



Figure 3: Fifth Century Ivory © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.



Figure 4: Fifth Century Ivory © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

cense was burned, a features of the baptismal font in the Lateran baptistery (I.6).⁶⁰ According to the *Liber Pontificalis* I.34.13, a source that must always be taken with caution, Constantine supposedly donated a number of things to the Lateran baptistery, which the *Liber Pontificalis* describes as follows:

The holy font where Constantine Augustus was baptised lby the same bishop Silvesterl of stone of porphyry, overlaid on every side within and without and above and as far as the water with purest silver, 3009 lbs. In the centre of the font is a porphyry column, which bears a golden basin of purest gold, weighing 52 lbs., where lis a flame and wherel in the Easter season burns balsam, 200 lbs., and the wick is of asbestos. At the edge of the font lin the baptisteryl is a golden lamb pouring water, which weighs 30 lbs.; to the right of the lamb the Savior of purest silver, 5 feet in height, weighing 170 lbs., and to the left of the lamb John the Baptist, of silver, 5 feet in height, holding an inscribed scroll which bears these words: “Behold the Lamb of God, Behold, Who Taketh Away the Sins of the World,” weighing l125 lbs. or 100 lbs.;l 7 silver stags pouring water, weighing each 80 lbs.; a censer of purest gold set with 49 prases [e.g. precious stones], weighing 15 lbs.⁶¹

The evidence indicates that at the center of the font of the Lateran baptistery was a porphyry column that supported a bowl of incense that was lit.⁶² A similar practice may explain the column in the middle of the font at Sbeïtla/Sufetua—Basilica of Bellator, Chapel of Jucundus from the late fourth/fifth century (VIII.60, see Figure 5: Font at Sbeïtla. Photo by Robin Jensen. Used with permission.),⁶³ as well as the font at San Marcello in Rome (I.11) dated to the same period.⁶⁴ In these cases, the incense represents, in particular, the pillar of fire and cloud from the Old Testament, which first appear in Ex 13. This pillar of fire and cloud, as we have already seen above with Ambrose, are interpreted Christologically or

60. Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” 532–34. For recent studies of the Lateran baptistery, see Brandt and Federico Guidobaldi, “Il Battistero Lateranense: Nuovo interpretazione delle fasi strutturali,” *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 84 (2008): 189–282; Olof Brandt, “The Lateran Baptistery in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries: New Certainties and Unresolved Questions,” in *The Basilica of Saint John Lateran to 1600*, ed. Lex Bosman, Ian P. Haynes, and Paolo Liverani, British School at Rome Studies (Lateran Basilica (Conference), Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 221–38. For more, see BECW, I.6.

61. Louise Ropes Loomis, *The Book of the Popes (Liber pontificalis)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), 50–51. The text in || are variants within the manuscripts. For the critical edition, see Louis Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis: Texte, introduction et commentaire*, 2 vols (Paris, 1886/1892), I:174.

62. Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” 532–34.

63. For a recent study of the baptistery at Sbeïtla/Sufetua—Basilica of Bellator, Chapel of Jucundus, see Baratte et al., *Basiliques chrétiennes d’Afrique du Nord*, #147 pp. 383–86. For more, see BECW, VIII.60.

64. Silvana Episcopo, “Il battistero della basilica di S. Marcello a Roma: Fra tarda antichità e medioevo,” in *Tardo antico e alto medioevo: Filologia, storia, archeologia, arte*, edited by Marcello Rotili (Naples: Arte Tipografica. 2009), 267. For more, see BECW, I.11.

pneumatologically. As Bissera Pentcheva notes within the context of the shrine of Saint Simeon Stylites the Younger, “the perfume of burning incense indicated the descent of divine grace. Smell thus pushed beyond the borders of the visible, allowing the experience of the divine beyond the limit of ocular sight,”⁶⁵ or, put another way, “the intense olfactory experience makes the invisible Holy Spirit sentient and thus perceptible.”⁶⁶ The same would have been the case when used in these baptisteries.



Figure 5: Font at Sbeïtla. Photo by Robin Jensen. Used with permission.

In fact, while not mentioned by Cosentino, incense may have also been used in Ambrose’s baptismery according to references in DS 4.1.1-4 and DM 55:

DS 4.1.1-2 and 4: Now, there was in the second tabernacle the manna; there was also the rod of Aaron, which withered and afterwards blossomed again; there was likewise the censer. What is the purpose of this? It is that you may understand what is the second tabernacle, into which the priest introduced you, into which the high priest was accustomed to enter once in the year, that is, to the baptismery...In the second tabernacle is the censer also, which is wont to diffuse a sweet savour. So you also are now a sweet savour of Christ; no longer is there in you any stain of sins, any savor of ranker error.⁶⁷

65. Bissera Vladimirova Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 37.

66. Pentcheva, 41.

65. Pentcheva, 37.

66. Pentcheva, 41.

67. Ambrose of Milan, “*On the Sacraments*” and “*On the Mysteries*,” 80–81.

DM 55: With these sacraments, therefore, Christ feeds is Church; by them the soul's very being is strengthened. And seeing her continuous growth in grace, he rightly saith to her, How fair are thy breasts become, my sister, my spouse! How fair are they become from wine! And the smell of thy garments is better than all spaces. Thy lips, O my spouse, are a dropping honeycomb; milk and honey are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon. A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed...⁶⁸

Based on these references in Ambrose, alongside what is known about the Lateran baptistery and the mosaic of the censer over the font housed at the National Museum of Copenhagen, it seems very probable that incense wafted through Ambrose baptistery during the rites of initiation.

Incense was also clearly part of the rites of initiation described in the *Book of Jeu*: “you must give me a sign within the fire of this fragrant incense.” The *Book of Jeu*, in fact, makes explicit the link between fire and incense. This link should not be especially surprising given that the smoke generated by incense is generated through the burning of coal. In fact, Jacob of Serug says that “[Christ] the Coal of fire (Is 6:6) went down to wash in the [Jordan’s] streams, and the flames of its sanctifying power poured forth.”⁶⁹ Whether the incense containers were simply bowls on columns (like seems implied at the Lateran baptistery) or hung (which would also be possible⁷⁰) these would have functioned as olfactory artifice(s) replicating the pillar of fire and smoke.

Given these associations, it is perhaps not surprising, then, that censers would often contain depictions of the baptism of Christ on them.⁷¹ Nathan Dennis even observes that Germanos I of Constantinople in the seventh/eighth century writes that: “All together, therefore, give forth the sweet-smelling fragrance. Or again, the interior of the censer points to the font of holy baptism, taking into itself the coal of divine fire, the sweetness of the operation of the Holy Spirit, which is the adoption of divine grace through faith, and exuding a good odor.”⁷² Ultimately, Cosentino believes that the *Exultet* brings together the tradition of the paschal

68. Ambrose of Milan, 148.

69. Winkler, “Appearance of the Light,” 304.

70. See, for example, examples from Palestine in Ilse Richter-Siebels, “Die Palästinensischen Weihrauchgefäße Mit Reliefszenen Aus Dem Leben Christi” (PhD Diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 1990).

71. Richter-Siebels, 87–96; Nathan Dennis, “Vessels of Holy Fire: The Censer and the Womb of the Mother of God in Early Byzantine and Coptic Devotion,” in *Holy Smoke: Censers Across Cultures*, ed. Beate Fricke and Ittai Weinryb (Munich: Hirmer, 2023), 129–51.

72. Germanos, *On the Divine Liturgy*, 30. Text taken from Dennis, “Vessels of Holy Fire: The Censer and the Womb of the Mother of God in Early Byzantine and Coptic Devotion,” 134.

candle with the column supporting the bowl of incense.⁷³ Support for this can be found in the way the *Exultet*, at least in the Franco-Romano text, refers to the “column of light” which allowed the Israelites to pass through the Red Sea and similarly describes the paschal candle as a “column.”⁷⁴

It also should be acknowledged that incense could also lead to hallucinations. This was a critique leveled by Tertullian against the use of incense in Christian circles;⁷⁵ however, as Pentcheva notes, incense was used for just this purpose at the shrine of Saint Simeon Stylites the Younger, whereby “physically inebriated by the smoke of burning incense, some of the people present at the site felt their bodies transform at the descent of the Holy Spirit and saw epiphanies. Smell was both the trigger and the indicator of metamorphosis... The smell of smoke and fragrance signaled this metamorphosis of flesh.”⁷⁶ Baptism as a metamorphosis of the flesh and descent of the Holy Spirit would be an especially conducive time for the use of incense and perhaps even a perfect time to employ its hallucinogenic potential.

One final artifice not directly connected to the fire on water tradition, but which should be mentioned and has already been hinted at above, is the creation of fonts that imitated streams of running water. While it was not possible everywhere to baptize in running water in imitation of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan river, either because of the scarcity of water or because a river was not nearby, the creation of fonts with running water would be key to imitating Jesus’ baptism. A similar concern appears to be behind Didache 7.2, which, as already noted above, calls for baptisms to be performed preferably in a flowing stream of cold water, though other forms of water were also allowed.

With regard to flowing water, it is worth noting that a number of fonts in the early church had mechanisms that would allow the water to be “living” or flowing. It is hard to determine if pipes for inflow and outflow—seen frequently throughout the early Christian baptisteries—were used simply for filling and emptying the font or to create the illusion the running water of a stream, or both. In some cases, however, the early fonts do show elaborate water systems meant to ensure that the water was moving during the performance of the initiatory rites. We see this especially at Milan in its two baptisteries. In Santo Stefano alle fonti, Basilica Vetus/Santa

73. Cosentino, “Il fuoco sul Giordano, il cero pasquale e la columna del Battistero Lateranense,” 534–37. While it might be tempting to see the insertion of the incense grains into the paschal candle as further proof of this connection, the earliest testament to that practice appears in the 10th century, see MacGregor, *Fire and Light in the Western Triduum*, ch. 25.

74. See Kelly, *The Exultet in Southern Italy*, 36, 37.

75. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 42 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 25–26.

76. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon*, 37.

Maria Maggiore (II.71P2) pipes allowed water to flow from above into the font.⁷⁷ Similarly, at San Giovanni alle fonti, Santa Tecla/Basilica Nova (II.70P2) there was an inflow canal as well as spouts around the font and a “floodway” that allowed water to be continuously moving in the font.⁷⁸ Similar devices were deployed at the baptistery of the Lateran basilica, where we know that silver deer/stags surrounded the font and water came out of their mouths as well as a golden lamb.⁷⁹

Fourth Century Christians as the New Magicians?

The third century author of *De Rebaptismate* rebuked strongly the “magical poisons” and other trickeries by which early so-called heretical groups diminished the efficacy of proto-Nicene baptism. It appears, however, that either proto-Nicene Christians were doing similar practices or by the fourth century they had embraced these magical theatrics in their own baptismal liturgies. Moreover, perhaps the age-old adage rings true here: “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.” This was not only the case with regard to baptism, but we can see this in the writings of figures like Shenoute of Atripe. In a sermon (Acephalous Work A14), Shenoute derided those who seek the healing waters and oils of magicians over (or in addition to) those of the church.⁸⁰ The issue was not the use of healing waters and oils, but that Christians were using the *wrong* healing waters and oils.

So had Christians from the fourth century onward, to paraphrase another popular expression, “become what they hated?” On face value that may seem to be the case; however, this seems to put forward too simplistic a narrative between so-called heretics and the “real” Christians (proto-Nicene or Nicene) and between ancient “magic” and Christian ritual. Perhaps here it is worth also noting an observation of Ernest Becker, who, referencing A. M. Hocart, noted: “magic is religion we don’t believe in, and religion is magic we believe in. *Voilà tout*.”⁸¹ It also grants

77. For a recent study of the baptistery of Santo Stefano alle fonti, Basilica Vetus/Santa Maria Maggiore, see S. Lusuardi Siena, E. Dellù, M.L. Delpiano, and E. Monti, “Lettura archeologica e prassi liturgica nei battisteri ambrosiani tra IV e VI secolo,” in *Ambrogio e la liturgia. Atti del settimo Dies Academicus, 4–5 aprile 2011*, ed. R. Passarella (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana; Bulzoni editore, 2011), 92–102, especially 92–93. See also Silvia Lusuardi Siena, Filippo Airoldi, and Elena Spalla, eds., *Milano: piazza Duomo prima del Duomo: la cattedrale di Santa Tecla perduta e ritrovata: archeologia del complesso episcopale milanese* (Cinisello Balsamo, Milano: Silvana editoriale, 2023), especially part 4. For more, see BECW, II.71P2.

78. For a recent study of the baptistery of San Giovanni alle fonti, Santa Tecla/Basilica Nova, see Lusuardi Siena, “Lettura archeologica e prassi liturgica,” 102–111, especially 107–109. See also Siena et al., *Milano: piazza Duomo prima del Duomo*, especially part 5. For more, see BECW, II.70P2.

79. See n. 62.

80. Translation taken from Korshi Dosoo, “Healing Traditions in Coptic Magical Texts,” *Trends in Classics* 13 (2021): 51–52. For more information, see Stephen Emmel, *Shenoute’s Literary Corpus*, 2 vols., Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium; Subsidia, vv. 599–600. t. 111–12 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), II: 692–93.

81. Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 15.

too much truthfulness and righteousness to the apologetic rhetoric expounded by figures like the author of *De Rebaptismate*. In actual fact, the relationship between magical texts and the liturgy has always been a porous one, just as the ecclesial boundaries between the so-called heretics and “real” Christians was permeable.⁸² With regard to the relationship between magic and Christian ritual, Jacques van der Vliet notes that magic brought official liturgy in conversation with social life, “at the intersection of, on the one hand, the world of textually inarticulate social practices and, on the other, that of canonical Church discourse. The latter provides the hegemonic paradigm with which the written magical tradition maintains a dialectic relationship in terms of adaptation and borrowing, no less than differentiation.”⁸³

So, were Christian clergy magicians or at least engaged in magical practices? It appears the answer to both is yes, but not in the sense we would normally imagine. For the proto-Nicene and Nicene Christians who engaged in these so-called trickeries and used these supposed artifices, the intention was not deception but rather the more concrete expression of the church’s theology in its ritual experience. In a period where mystagogy—or reflection on the experience of the ritual celebration—was increasingly important,⁸⁴ why would they not make the ritual experience align more closely with the theology they were preaching? It only makes sense. If the font is a furnace, make it hot! If Jesus’ baptism with the appearance of fire and light on the water is the paradigm for our baptism, make fire and light appear in a font of flowing water! If baptism is transformative, use incense as a sign of metamorphosis! This is not trickery, but rather a real awareness of the importance of sensory experience and the need to cultivate concrete ritual applications for the theological metaphors developed for our liturgies.⁸⁵

82. Kimberly Hope Belcher, Nathan Chase, and Alexander Turpin, *One Baptism—One Church? A History and Theology of the Reception of Baptized Christians* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2024).

83. Jacques van der Vliet, “Tradition and Innovation: Writing Magic in Christian Egypt,” in *Rituals in Early Christianity: New Perspectives on Tradition and Transformation*, ed. Albert Geljon and Nienke Vos, VC, Supplements 164 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 277. See also Jacques van der Vliet, “Christian Spells and Manuals from Egypt,” in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 331.

84. Georgia Frank, “‘Taste and See’: The Eucharist and the Eyes of Faith in the Fourth Century,” *Church History* 70 (2001): 619–43.

85. In fact, it is worth noting that a turn to performance theory would not see these things as theatrical or trickeries but simply how ritual is done and how it is done well. For a helpful introduction to performance theory, see Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, “A Performative Approach to Ritual,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1981): 113–69. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1981)