

Byzantine Monasteries in the Northern Negev Region

In the northern Negev, many monasteries are known from the Byzantine period (fourth century until the early seventh century). Some of them are located close to, or within localities, and others in places far from a locality, though usually near ancient roads. Most of the monasteries that were excavated also had agricultural-industrial facilities, mainly wineries and large storage rooms. The monasteries seem to have played an important role in the regional economic system, especially in terms of wine production and trade, which was among the main industries in the south of the country.

Keywords *Byzantine, Beer Sheva, Negev, Monasteries, wine.*

Introduction

Christian monasticism began in the Holy Land at the beginning of the fourth century C.E. The first monks we know by name are Hilarion from Tawata, who lived in the Gaza area; Epiphanius, who settled near Eleutropolis, in the Shephela lowlands; and Hariton, a native of Iconium in Asia Minor who became the founder of many monasteries in the Judean desert. The monastic movement spread throughout the Holy Land during the Byzantine period, ruins of monasteries have been found in several areas, from the Galil in the north to the Negev desert in the south. At the emergence of the monastic movement a large part of the monasteries were built at holy sites and pilgrimage sites, in or around large cities while others were established in desert areas. Later, the monasteries were built all around the area.

There is a large number of monasteries dated to the Byzantine period in the northern Negev. Some were located close to towns or within them, and others in places far from a town, though usually close to road junctions. Some of the monasteries were only surveyed or partially documented while others were excavated. The typical components for a standard monastery include: a church or a chapel, a residential building and dining room. Not always all those components were found in excavated monasteries. In some cases, the identification of a site as a monastery complex is not certain and needs an archaeological excavation to validate the claim. Sometimes, even after an archaeological excavation was conducted the identification of a site as a monastery is uncertain as no church, chapel, or inscription indicating its use have been exposed. The monastery excavated at Hura (see below) is such an example.

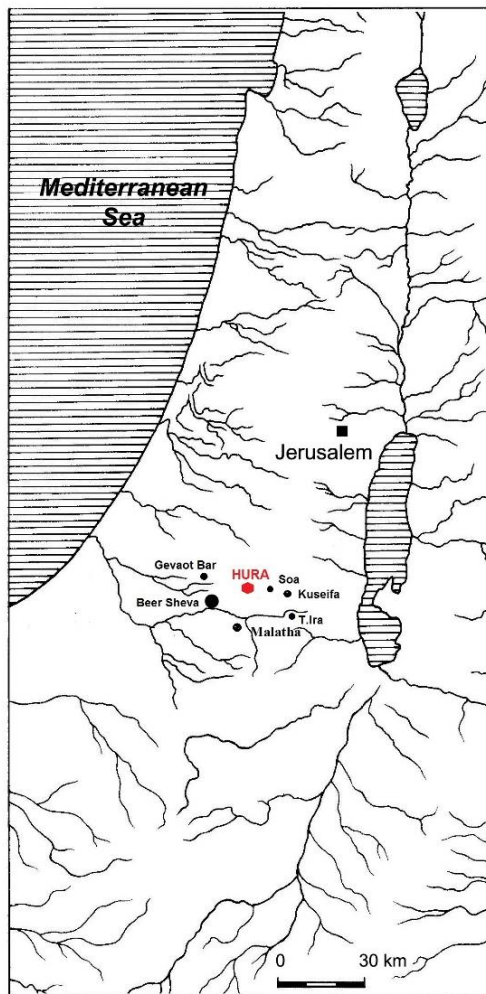
Congregations of monks lived in the monasteries according to a rigid principle of prayer and work (*Ora et Labora*). Daily duties preformed in monasteries as in any household included: cooking, cleaning, farming, etc. To some extent the activity of the monastery can be compared to the activity of a Roman villa rustica. In some monasteries there were agricultural installations, mainly wineries with adjacent large storage rooms. The number and size of the

agricultural installations indicates industrial activity which would produce far beyond that required for self-consumption.

The monasteries seem to have had an important and central role in the regional economic system, especially in relation to wine production and trade which was one of the main industries in the south of the country.

This article will review the known monasteries in the northern Negev with special emphasis on the monasteries located in Beer Sheva, and on those exposed in the settlement of Givot Bar and on the outskirts of the town of Hura (Fig. 1). We will discuss the deployment and meaning of these monasteries in relation to the regional economy.

Figure 1. *Location Map*



Beer Sheva Monasteries

Beer Sheva is mentioned in many historical and epigraphic sources. The main historical source about Roman Beer Sheva is a Roman Imperial document is the *Notitia Dignitatum*. The document likely originally from the time of emperor Diocletian (284 - 305 CE), which list senior army officials and units in the Roman Empire and their seat. This document states that the *Equites Dalmatae* cavalry unit from Illyria was stationed in Beer Sheva. Another important source is the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea. In the chapter on Jesus, Eusebius describes Beer Sheva as a large village where a large Roman garrison is located (Notley and Safrai 2005: 87–91). Another important historical source are the so-called beer sheva edicts. Those are tablets mentioning names of the cities of the three provinces of Palestine Prima, Secunda and Tertia, and the sums of money their inhabitants are obliged to pay to the army. Three fragments of the "Edicts of Beersheba" tablets were found; One by merchants in the nineteenth century (Abel 1903: 429), the second used in the construction of a drainage canal from the Ottoman period (Avi-Yonah 1944: 201) and the third in the excavation of the great church, in secondary use in an Early Islamic period floor (Gilad and Fabian 319: 2008). The tablets are dated to the 6th century CE, to the days of Emperor Justinian 565-527 CE and were designated for the army commander of all of Palestine whose headquarters were in Beer Sheva (Di Segni 2004: 148–151).

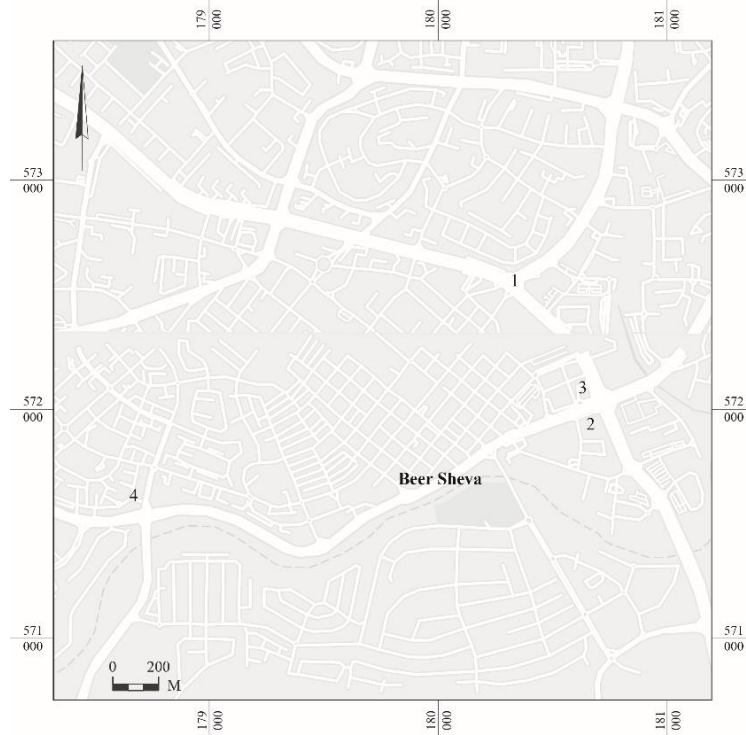
The writings of the monk Hieronymus Million, who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE, and the chronicles of Pseudo-Bishop Ocherius from the fifth century CE (Wilkinson 1977: 54), add information about daily life at Late Roman and Byzantine Beer Sheva.

In the epigraphic testimonies of Beer Sheva two papyri from Nessana can be accounted. These, from the beginning of the seventh century CE relate to different social groups such as soldiers, farmers, clerics, and administrators in different social situations (paying taxes, getting married, sowing and harvesting, buying and selling, preparing for journeys etc.). Another important source is the geographical description of the Land of Israel in the Madaba mosaic from the 5th century CE, there Beer Sheva appears as a city with a large church.

More recent historic documents include the journals and writings of 19th and 20th century scholars and pious travelers who visited Beer Sheva and described the ancient remains of the city. Robinson visited Beer Sheva in 1838 (Robinson 1841: 300–303), Zitzan in 1854 (Zitzan 1854), Seetzen and Abel arrived in 1903 (Seetzen and Abel 1903: 429), Abel and Musil in 1907 (Abel and Musil 1907: 63), Woolley and Lawrence visited the area in 1914 (Woolley and Lawrence 1914: 107–111). It is possible that the two churches that were seen in the area at the beginning of the 20th century and appear on the map of Abel (Abel and Musil 1907: 63), are the ones unearthed by Yael Israeli, then director of the Municipal Museum of the Negev (Israeli: 1967) and Peter Fabian on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Gilad and Fabian: 2008).

At present four monasteries have been identified in Beer Sheva, all within a 4 km radius. The first monastery excavated and likely one of the churches on Abel's map was excavated in 1967 at the intersection of Eilat road and Hanasiim Blvd (Fig. 2,1). The church, 15×24 m, had three apse and a marble tile floor resting on a chalk stone foundation, only a few of which survived on their site. On the outer walls bore marks a decreteive painted decoration in frescoes. Beneath the central apse floor was an earlier floor, paved in the Opus Sectile technique employing a variety of colors: white, black, green, and a shade of red. The skeleton of a child (with no additional finds) was discovered buried in the space between the two floors. South of the main building of the church were several rooms, the walls of one of which were decorated with in green, blue, yellow and red glass squares. These remains indicate that some parts of the interior of the church was decorated with mosaics and frescoes. The identification of this church as a monastery complex was proposed by Israeli (1967: 29) and supported by Figueras (1990: 150).

Figure 2. *Known Byzantine Monasteries in Beer Sheva*

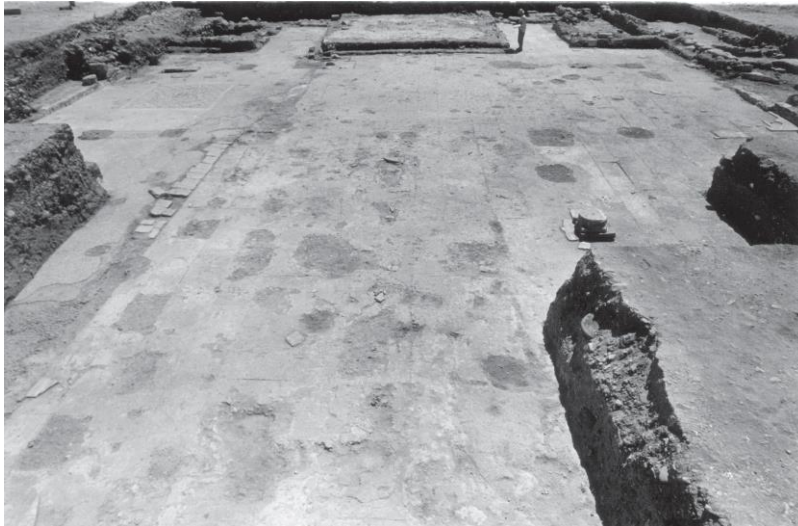


In 1968 a second monastery was exposed in the municipal market, southwest of the intersection of Hebron and Eilat streets (Fig. 2,2), by Rudolf Cohen on behalf of the Antiquities Division (Cohen 1968). This may be the building Abel identified as a church at the bottom of his map. The church's nave is paved with a mosaic. The center of the mosaic is decorated with geometric motives surrounded tendril medallions housed by animals including exotic ones such as giraffe, tiger, snake, lion and wild boar.

According to the style of the mosaic carpet the mosaic can be dated with some degree of certainty to the fifth century CE, similar to the mosaics in al-Hammam, Beit Shean, and Khirbet Shalala. In addition to the mosaic floor, Cohen exposed rooms paved with stone slabs on which Byzantine period pottery was found.

In 1994, a huge church that was, apparently, the main church of Byzantine Beer Sheva and the second church of Abel's map was exposed in the southeast corner of the municipal market and northwest the Eilat and Hebron Road junction (Fig. 2,3) (Gilad and Fabian 2008). The excavation, conducted by Peter Fabian, revealed a rectangular church (28 × 14 m). Its interior divided to resembled a cross (Fig. 2). The original floor of the church was paved with mosaics (Ustinova and Fabian 2020: 222-223). Most of the mosaic carpets were white, and in some places at the nave, aisles and bema were placed colorful carpets decorated with geometric patterns, and a few birds. At a later stage all the mosaics were removed and marble tiles were placed. The only carpet left in place was in the northern aisle. This carpet included an inscription which according to the Eleutheropolis census, may be dated to 553/552 CE. The church therefore appears to have been built in the late 5th or first half of the 6th century CE. The church fell out of use during the 7th century CE, with some rooms used in the Early Islamic period for a variety of purposes. It seems that the building was finally abandoned at the end of the 8th century CE (Gilad and Fabian 2008: 321–320).

Figure 3. *The church at the Eilat and Hebron Road junction, Beer Sheva. Looking East (Photo: Peter Fabian)*



The fourth monastery was exposed in Horbat Matar, Neve Noy neighborhood in 1991 (Fig. 2,4). This monastery is roughly two kilometers west of the municipal market, and near the north bank of the Beer Sheva River (Gilad, Rosen, and Fabian 1993) and thus beyond the limits of Byzantine Beer Sheva. Excavations conducted by Yitzhak Gilad and Steve Rosen on behalf of the Department of Archeology at Ben-Gurion University and Peter Fabian on

behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority revealed a large structure (16×25 m). It was exposed in the fillings and landslides suggest that a considerable part of the building was paved with mosaics, with several rooms paved with stone slabs. Pillar bases found in situ, column fragments and a staircase all indicate several levels in the structure and its public character. A gravestone with a Greek inscription was recovered from the structure. The inscription names the deceased, Sadela, and the year 537/538 according to the Eleutheropolis calendar (Figueras and Ustinova 1996). The building dates to the 6th century CE. The building was partially destroyed in the beginning of the Early Islamic period and became an agricultural farm. Despite the many excavations carried out in Beer Sheva, the possibility of additional churches and monasteries in Byzantine Beer Sheva cannot be ruled out.

The monastery in Gevaot Bar

A small monastery (33×33 m) was uncovered within the boundaries of the modern community of Gevaot Bar (Paran 2009) east of the city of Rahat, in an area saturated with agricultural farms from the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Fig. 3).

The preserved and excavated remains of the Gevaot Bar monastery include a central yard (5×9 m), the entrance to which was through a narrow opening to the east, with service wings on its eastern and southern sides. The monastery external walls were preserved to a height of 0.5–0.4 m. In the center of the courtyard was a depression, probably a collapsed cistern. An industrial winepress, from which a rectangular treading floor and collecting chamber survived, was exposed at the northeastern end of the monastery. The treading floor was paved, and the sides are walled. Some of the stone slabs of the treading floor were looted, but their imprints remained in the gently sloping plaster to the south. A ditch led the must from the treading floor to the collecting chamber.

In the northern part of the courtyard there were three rooms. The main room serving as a chapel that was partly paved with a (2×2 m) mosaic with a Greek inscription indicating the name of the monastery, "Beit Mor".

A vine grows, forming five medallions arranged in two rows. The bottom row shows a donkey on the right with a bird with its head down. In the left medallion are two baskets of grapes or moist loaves and in the medallion above which is a fish. Between the bird and the fish is placed another medallion with a figure of a person in a prayer position. The inscription indicates the deacon and abbot of the monastery and the names: Fidos, Selmon, and Zanis, who also had the Apocryphal religious title; apocrisiarius in the third line it is said "God bless the covenant of the house of Mor [or the house of Morsi] artist" (Paran 2009). At the floor level of the building were found a small amount of pottery fragments from the end of the Byzantine period (6th and 7th centuries CE). Also were uncovered about 30 iron nails indicative of a wooden roof, as well as a bronze hook for hanging a lamp.

Figure 4. *The monastery in Gevaot Bar (Photo: Emil Aljem)*



The Hura Monastery

Another monastery was uncovered on the southwestern outskirts of a large Byzantine settlement in Horbat Hur, on the part of which the modern Bedouin town of Hura is built (Varga and Talgam 2023). This ruin extends over two elongated hills that are located in an east-west axis and about 20 hectares in size (Peretz 2012). The ancient settlement at the site dates to the Roman period. At the beginning of the 20th century, Lawrence and Woolley write (Lawrence and Wolley 1914: 48-49) that Horbat Hur looked like Tel Sheva, but larger. The settlement reached its peak of development, apparently, in the Byzantine period. Many buildings were surveyed from this period, some of which have been preserved up to a height of one meter and more. At the northeastern end of the ruins are the remains of a large Basilical shaped church (21 × 51 m), and around it were built a few rooms (Ein Gedi; 2000 Govrin 2002, Carmel 2009). It is presumed that there are other churches that have not yet been discovered. Two agricultural farms were exposed nearby (Ein Gedi 2000; Varga 2002); presumably, other such farms existed in the area that have not yet been discovered yet.

Figure 5. *The Hura Monastery (Photo: Sky View Ltd.)*

The monastery (22×28 m) is divided into halls built on the east-west axis, except for the dining room built on the north-south axis. The exterior walls of the building were preserved up to two courses high and were built of flint and chalk, and between them were placed small stones and mud as bonding material. The inner walls were preserved to a height of one course and were built of mud and small stones.

All the walls were plastered with light gray plaster. The entrance to the monastery was through the partially preserved western wing (5.0×6.5 m.) that included three service rooms at least. There may have been another room to the north that did not survive. The rooms were paved with white mosaics that were mostly destroyed when the building collapsed at the end of the Byzantine period, or the beginning of the Islamic period. The building has an opening leading from the service area to an open, unpaved central beaten-earth courtyard, which was later canceled for an unknown reason. The northern wall of the courtyard was almost completely destroyed, probably due to the collapse of a cistern in the area (Fig. 4). No signs of conflagration or violence were found and therefore, the destruction of the structure is attributed to a minor earthquake that apparently occurred in this area at the end of the Byzantine period. Two entrances led from the courtyard to a large hall that served as a refectory (5.5×10.0 m), and another one led to it from the north. The refectory was 0.40 m lower than the other parts of the building, so two steps were added at the entrances to the courtyard.

In the main room of the building (5×8 m) was placed the main inscription indicating the date of construction of the monastery. The room was entered from the courtyard to its north, and from another room to its west. Another hall, probably a Bema, was built at its eastern end, with a stage elevated by

about 0.15 m that an iconostasis separated them. The stage was close to the modern surface and was almost completely destroyed, so it is not possible to know if there was an internal apse in the room at its eastern end. These two rooms seem to have been the prayer room and chapel of the monastery. Another room (4×6 m), perhaps a narthex, was west of the prayer room, and was entered outside the building to the south. A rectangular pit (1.2×2.5 m); dug in the center of the room, was probably a grave that had been cleaned or looted after the collapse of the building. At the eastern end of it was placed a bilingual inscription in Greek and Christian Palestinian Christian (Fig., 5) which implies that the monastery belongs to the Nestorian stream (Vainstub, Sokoloff and Varga 2017).

Figure 6. *The bilingual address at the Hura Monastery. Looking East (Photo: Nicki Davidov)*



It is not inconceivable that the monastery had additional buildings and agricultural industrial facilities that did not survive. The lack of rooms for the residence of the monks may be the result of the destruction that has taken place around the monastery, especially in recent decades. However, it is possible that the monks lived in the settlement of Horbat Hur, which borders the monastery, a phenomenon that was identified in the monasteries in the Carmiel region in the Galilee (Aviam and Ashkenazi 2014). The pottery assemblage from the monastery is very poor. It includes local vessels alongside imitations of Cypriot and North African bowls. The assemblage dates to the sixth–beginning of the early seventh centuries CE. Several vessels appeared in the fifth and continued till the sixth century CE. Not one sherd of the Early Islamic period was found, confirming that the monastery was out of use before the Islamic conquest.

A cemetery was uncovered c. 15 m southeast of the monastery. It was discovered during supervision of development works that were carried out following the excavation. About 40 graves, built of white square and rectangular limestone slabs (1.9–2.1 m long, c. 0.6 m wide), were discovered in the cemetery. Four of the single burials, arranged in rows generally oriented east–west, were excavated; In each one was found a single skeleton. The heads of the deceased were to the east facing north. A preliminary examination of the bones showed that the deceased were adult males. Based on the proximity of

the graves to the monastery and the identification of the individuals as adult males, it can be almost certainly concluded that this was the monks' cemetery.

Additional monasteries

Several complexes of buildings identified with some degree of confidence as monasteries are known to us alongside the main road from the Arava Valley to Beer Sheva (Fig. 1). Most of these complexes have not been excavated, so their identification as monasteries is rather uncertain. In Khirbet Kasifa, a settlement from the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, two churches are known in the center of the site and a third church c. 150 m north of it (Shmueli 2012). Although the center of the site has never been excavated, it seems that the southern of the two churches, located on the outskirts of the Byzantine settlement, was part of a complex of buildings - probably a monastery. In Tel Ira, a complex of buildings from the Byzantine period, which is identified as a Monastery was built on the remains of a fortress from the Iron Age (Beit-Arieh 1999: 162). The buildings include a chapel, a courtyard, and several rooms.

A complex of buildings from the Byzantine period was identified on top of the hill in Horbat Sua. It includes a large basilical church dated to the Justinian era (Govrin 2002: site 124). This complex can be identified as a monastery. At Tel Mashosh, which is also located on the banks of the Beer Sheva River, on a road leading from the Arava to Beer Sheva roads, a monastery (20 × 30 m) dating to the end of the Byzantine period was uncovered. It has several rooms around a central courtyard (Aharoni Kempinski and Fritz 1975:100-106). The monastery was built at the southern end of the Iron Age settlement (Aharoni 1974). The church is located in the eastern wing of the monastery and below it was discovered a crypt with seven tombs. According to inscriptions in Cristian Palestinian language, it appears that the monastery belonged, as the Hura monastery, to the Nestorian stream (Aharoni 1975) This monastery continued to exist In the Umayyad period in the eighth century CE.

Summary

In the Byzantine period, the monasteries at the northern Negev, as in the rest of the Early Cristian World, subsisted by donations from the community, although usually these donations were not their only source of income. First, not all monks were poor from home; Sometimes they came from affluent families, and they had money and property that they might have brought with them to the monastery as a donation. Second, the works on the farm provided for the needs of the monastery, but they also had a welcome increase in income, and sometimes were even the main source of income. Some monasteries had extensive areas including many field crops, agricultural industrial facilities such as mainly wineries, and also herds. From the fields

they obtained large crops than they need for their daily life. Thus the monasteries became rich as the owners of 'secular' farms did.

Indeed, in many cases it is difficult to distinguish between a monastery and a 'secular' farm. The monasteries in the northern Negev were not unusual in this respect, despite the great difficulty in fully understanding their function. This difficulty is due to the poor level of preservation of most of the monasteries, and mainly due to the fact that most of them have not yet been excavated. The winepress unearthed in the monastery in Gevaot Bar is a good example of overproduction, as it is clear that the wine production capacity of the winepress is clearly greater than the wine consumption of the tiny monastery, which was probably inhabited by a few monks. Further evidence of the importance of wine production are the amphorae and vines that serve as central motifs in the mosaic floors that have been unveiled in recent years in the dining room of the monasteries at Hura (Varga and Rasiuk 2018) and in the chapel of the monastery in Gevaot Bar (Paran. 2009). At Hura survived only one building and it is not possible to determine if it was the only building there, or part of an entire complex with agricultural facilities and other buildings around it. It seems that in order to complete the overall picture of the monastery system and its integration into the region's economy, additional monasteries among those known in the northern Negev must be uncovered. These monasteries seem to have traded their produce in the villages and towns of the region, thus becoming an important component of the regional economy. The monasteries of the Judean Desert near Jerusalem existed mainly from donations (Taxel 2009: 196), while it seems that the monasteries of the northern Negev subsisted largely on their agricultural produce. It is not impossible that the products of the monasteries were sold in the markets of Beer Sheva, the largest city in the northern Negev at the time and contributed greatly to its economy.

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Captions

- 1 Location Map (Daniel Varga)
- 2 Known Byzantine monasteries in Beer Sheva. (Naama Laitner)
- 3 The church at the Eilat and Hebron Road junction, Beer Sheva. Looking East (Photo: Peter Fabian)
- 4 The monastery in the wild hills (Photo: Emil Alajem)
- 5 The Hura Monastery (Photo: Sky View Ltd.)
- 6 The bilingual inscription in at the Hura Monastery. Looking East (Photo: Nicki Davidov)