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e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro

Boaz ZISSU
Bar-Ilan University, Israel
boaz.zissu@biu.ac.il

Amir GANOR
Israel Antiquities Authority, Israel
ganora26@gmail.com

Rina AVNER
Israel Antiquities Authority, Israel
rinaavner@gmail.com

Alon KLEIN
Israel Antiquities Authority, Israel
kleinalon1@gmail.com

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS ABOVE AND BELOW GROUND AT HORVAT MIDRAS, JUDEAN FOOTHILLS, ISRAEL

This paper is dedicated to the memory of our dear friend and colleague, Prof. Amos Kloner ז"ל, whose pioneering explorations of the Judean Foothills continue to inspire our research

Abstract: Horvat Midras is situated in the central Judean Foothills, approximately 6 km northeast of the Roman city of Beth Guvrin–Eleutheropolis, alongside the primary Roman route to Jerusalem. At its zenith during the Roman period in the 1st century CE, the settlement spanned over 12 hectares, making it one of the largest ancient rural sites in the area. This Jewish settlement was destroyed during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136 CE).

Our excavation team uncovered a Late Antique church in the northern section of the village. Beneath the church floor, we found earlier strata that include remains of a building and underground chambers from the Late Hellenistic to Early Roman periods. These interconnected underground chambers, forming a typical hiding complex, fell out of use after the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Following a period of abandonment in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, the remnants of the earlier structures were leveled to make way for a new basilica, which featured a white mosaic floor. This construction, dating to the 4th century CE, was linked to a venerated rock-cut tomb, which we believe was the primary purpose of the architectural complex. The tomb, created within a rock-cut chamber integrated into the earlier hiding complex, also dates to the 4th century.

In the subsequent architectural phase, a basilical church with marble columns, capitals, and exquisite multicolored mosaic floors was built within the former basilica, reusing some of its columns and walls. The apse was constructed above the tomb, with access provided via a room north of the apse that served as a martyrium.

We identified at least two construction phases for this church, distinguished by the mosaics in their floors. The second phase, dating to the third quarter of the 6th century CE, involved extending the bema westward, sealing the passage between the north aisle and the martyrium, creating a new northern entrance to the martyrium, and constructing what appears to be a baptismal font atop the passage leading from the martyrium to the empty tomb. Numismatic evidence and the style of the mosaics and capitals support this dating. The structure remained in use during the Umayyad period until its destruction in the earthquake of 749 CE.

As at other sites in the Judean Foothills, the study of the subterranean chambers carved out of the local chalk provides valuable insights into the site's history. The survey revealed nearly 60 artificial cavities and subterranean complexes, including cisterns, quarries, columbaria, ritual immersion baths, and storerooms. Ten cavities beneath the ancient settlement contained typical hiding complexes, which, along with the artifacts found, offer important information about the settlement during the late Second Temple period and the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Additionally, dozens of rock-cut tombs were excavated from the surrounding

slopes. One decorated hypogeum built of ashlars dates to the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. This hypogeum is connected by a tunnel to a smaller rock-cut tomb with three arcosolia, hewn during the Byzantine period. Red crosses and the Greek letters IX (iota and chi, representing Ιησους Χριστος, or Jesus Christ) and AΩ (alpha and omega, alluding to Jesus's statement "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" [Revelation 22:13]) were found on the tomb walls.

Keywords: Horvat Midras, Judean Foothills, Bar Kokhba Revolt, Late Antique church, Christian tombs, hypogeum, multicolored mosaic floors, martyrium, baptistery, artificial cavities.

Horvat Midras is located in the central Judean Foothills (New Israel Grid [NIG] central coordinates 1940/6182), on the northern slopes of a ridge above the southern bank of Nahal Hakhlil (see Figs. 1–3).[1] At its peak, during the Roman period, the settlement's built-up area covered more than 12 hectares, making it one of the largest sites in the region.

The settlement extends across a series of broad terraces that overlook the agricultural lands in the Nahal Hakhlil channel and along its tributaries, which were likely the primary source of livelihood for the ancient inhabitants. Wells were dug in the streambed, which had a high water table. These wells, known as Biyar el-Durusiya, are marked on British Mandate–era maps. However, their water supply has significantly diminished in recent decades due to overpumping. Consequently, intensive farming has caused the wells to become covered with soil and hardly any traces of them are now visible.

A major road that connected Gaza and Ascalon to Jerusalem via Beth Guvrin passes through the channel west of the site (2 on Fig. 3). During the Roman period, this was one of the most significant highways in the region.[2]

The site was first described by Victor Guérin, who provided general information about the public buildings and one of the columbaria. Guérin observed that two ancient wells dug in the streambed were still supplying water at the time.[3] The Palestine Exploration Fund explorers briefly noted the presence of piles of stones, building foundations, a ruined cistern, and several caves.[4]

In the late 1950s, Levi Yizhaq Rahmani conducted a partial archaeological survey of the site. He documented a large columbarium (see no. 1 on Fig. 2 and Fig. 4a) that was apparently used for raising pigeons for the production of fertilizer and meat and perhaps also for religious purposes. Archaeological and artistic evidence, written sources, and the practice of pigeon-raising in neighboring countries all attest to the crucial role played by pigeon-raising in ancient farming.[5] Rahmani also documented a pyramid-shaped mausoleum located on the peak of the hill, on the bounds of

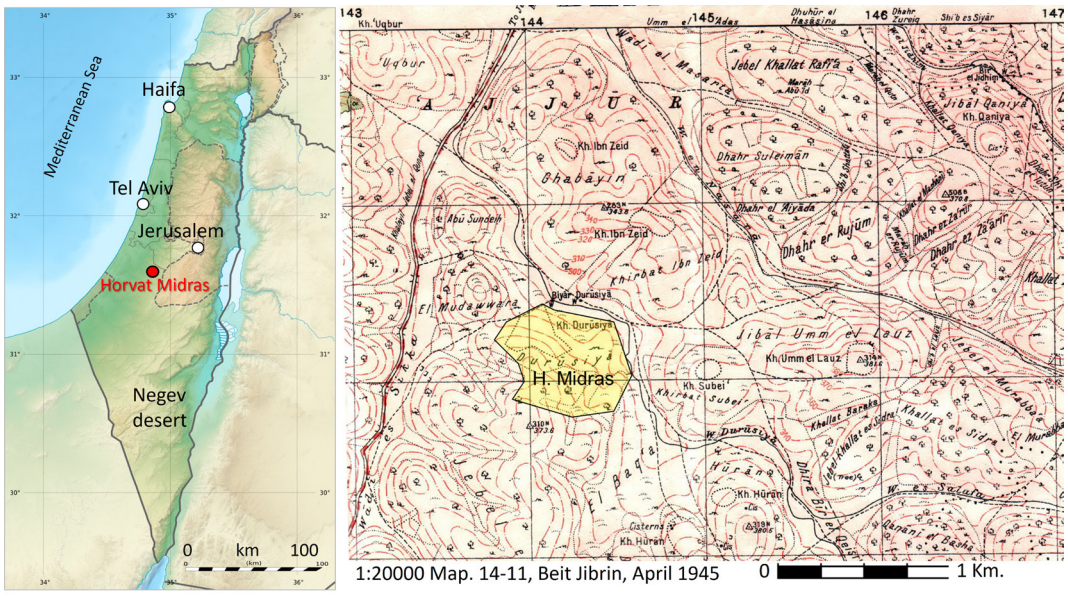

Fig. 1. Horvat Midras: composite location map; Khirbat Durusiya, on a British Mandate 1:20000 map, 1945 (B. Zissu)

Fig. 2. Horvat Midras: aerial view showing various features (A. Graicer)

[1] This article summarizes years of research that the authors have conducted at and near the site. We would like to thank our colleagues and friends Prof. Amos Frumkin, director of the Cave Research Unit at the Hebrew University, the architect Giora Solar, Dr. Uzi Dahari, Dr. Yoel Elitzur, and Arieh Rochman-Halperin of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Special thanks to Deborah Stern, Yair Tsoran, Asael Lavi, Zehava Valdman (Studio Valdman), and Yotam and Tamara Zissu for their assistance.

[2] THOMSEN 1917; ROLL 1983; ROLL/DAGAN 1988.

[3] GUÉRIN 1869, 370.

[4] CONDER/KITCHENER 1883, 280.

[5] TEPPER 1986; ZISSU 1995.

Fig. 3. Horvat Midras (1); location of Roman highway (2); Hakhlil Valley (3): oblique aerial view to the southwest (B. Zissu)

Fig. 4a. Large columbarium, dated typologically to the Byzantine or Early Islamic period; other columbaria at this site were hewn during the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods (B. Zissu)

Fig. 4b. Pyramid (B. Zissu)

the ancient site (no. 2 on Fig. 2 and Fig. 4b; see below), and collected potsherds from the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and later periods.[6]

The first systematic survey of the underground chambers was carried out in 1981 by Amos Kloner and Amos Frumkin. They noted the large number of artificial cavities and underground chambers, the sophistication of the stone-cutting, and the extent and layout of the ancient site.[7]

A study focusing on the remains of three public buildings was carried out by Zvi Ilan.[8] One of the buildings, located at the summit of the ridge at the settlement's northern end, was built of ashlars decorated with marginal drafting (no. 3 on Fig. 2; NIG map coordinates 193881/618214). Ilan posited that it may

[6] RAHMANI 1964.
[7] KLONER 1987.
[8] ILAN 1991, 272–273.

have been a synagogue. Trial excavations and a recent study conducted by Orit Peleg-Barkat and Eitan Klein suggest that this building may have functioned as a sanctuary or temple during the Late Roman period.[9]

In 1976, following illegal excavations on the western slope of the site, Kloner excavated a monumental rock-cut and ashlar-faced burial complex (no. 4 on Fig. 2; see below).

In 2010–2011, a team headed by Amir Ganor on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority excavated a church from the Byzantine period (no. 5 on Fig. 2); beneath it, a system of older artificial cavities that served as a hiding complex during the Early and Middle Roman periods was explored. These structures will be described below.

Since 2015, Orit Peleg-Barkat and Gregg E. Gardner have been leading a research project that combines excavations and surveys at the site. Their goal is to deepen our understanding of acculturation, occupation, migration, and resistance in this region during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Their work seeks to shed light on the cultural, religious, and economic aspects of life in this rural area. The excavations have uncovered a variety of structures, including what seem to be the remains of a Roman temple, residential buildings, agricultural installations, hiding complexes, a funerary monument, and some rock-cut tombs.[10]

THE HISTORY OF THE SETTLEMENT

A few potsherds dating to Iron Age II, collected from the bottom of the northern slope, seem to reflect the earliest human habitation. Settlement continued during the Persian and Early Hellenistic periods, as attested by scattered potsherds. The project led by Peleg-Barkat and Gardner has significantly advanced our understanding of the site's chronology. Initially a rural Idumean settlement during the Hellenistic period, the site was abandoned after the Hasmonean conquest at the end of the second century BCE. About a century later, it was resettled as a prosperous Jewish village inhabited by affluent families, and it reached its zenith during the Early and Middle Roman periods (first century BCE–second century CE), as evidenced by the scattered pottery, the typology and chronology of the artificial cavities and chambers hewn underneath the buildings, and the distribution of tombs. This settlement was later abandoned following the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136 CE), as evidenced by coins minted by the rebels and the presence of hiding complexes.[11]

Subsequently, the site was repopulated by the Roman administration with non-Jewish polytheistic elements. Peleg-Barkat and Klein discussed the possible identification of a prominently located monumental building as a Roman temple or sanctuary. However, beyond this building, there is limited information about the nature and extent of the settlement during this period. The polytheistic population gradually became Christian between the second and fifth centuries CE.[12] It remains unclear whether this change was due to large-scale conversion to Christianity by the local population or if the site was resettled by Christians from elsewhere in the Empire.

Regardless of the specifics, it is clear that the residents in the Byzantine period, particularly during the fifth and sixth centuries CE, were Christian. A church was constructed in the northern part of the site (see below), and there may have been a community of monks. Rock-cut tombs adorned with crosses (see below) are associated with the Byzantine settlement. Evidence from this period indicates that the settlement was smaller than during the Early and Middle Roman periods.[13]

There are archaeological indications of activity at the site during the Early Islamic period, the Middle Ages, and Ottoman times. These include scattered pottery sherds, corrals built from stones repurposed from the earlier settlement, and secondary use of ancient building materials and rock-cut cavities.

A review of population census records from the 16th century reveals that Durusya, a village in the Hebron district, was one of the significant settlements in the area. The village had several satellite settlements (*mazra'ahs*) and paid a particularly high tax, three to six times more than neighboring villages. The sources also provide information on the number of households in the area and changes in population size starting from the mid–16th century.[14]

GEOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL IDENTIFICATION

The site's Arabic name is Khirbat Drousia (خربة ادريس, as transcribed by Guérin),[15] Khirbat Durusiya (as per the British Mandate 1:20000 maps; see Fig. 1), or Kh. ed Druseh (Survey of Western Palestine map). The British 1:100,000 maps have Kh. Durusya. The Hebrew name Horvat Midras was assigned by the Government Names Committee as an allusion to the Arabic. E. H. Palmer translated the Arabic name as "the ruin of the obliterated paths."[16]

F. M. Abel proposed identifying Kh. Durusiya with Drousias,[17] which is mentioned in Claudius Ptolemy's *Geographia*.[18] Ptolemy included Δρουσιάς (Drousias) in his list of the 19 most important towns in Judea (Rafah, Gaza, Jamnia, Lydda, Antipatris, Drousias, Sebaste, Beth Guvrin, Sebous or Bebous, Emmaus, Gofna, Archelaïs, Phaselis, Jericho, Jerusalem "which is now called Aelia Capitolina," Thamna, Ein Gedi, Bethoron, and Thamar), indicating its importance in his day. Unlike the other cities on the list, Drousias is mentioned only by Ptolemy, which suggests the town rose to glory during his lifetime and declined soon after.

The major problem with this identification is Ptolemy's

[9] PELEG-BARKAT/KLEIN 2019.
[10] PELEG-BARKAT 2017; GARDNER/PELEG-BARKAT 2024.
[11] RAHMANI 1964, 227–228; KLONER 1978; KLONER 1987; PELEG-BARKAT 2017; ROGOVSKI *et alii* 2018.
[12] PELEG-BARKAT/KLEIN 2019.
[13] GANOR *et alii* 2011.
[14] ROGOVSKI *et alii* 2018; BUKHIT/SAWARIYYAH 2005–2012.
[15] GUÉRIN 1869, 370.
[16] STEWARDSON 1888, 370.
[17] ABEL 1938, 30.
[18] Ptolemy, *Geographia* 5.16.6–8. Ptolemy (Claudius Ptolemaeus) was a scholar, mathematician, geographer, and astronomer who lived and worked in Alexandria during the second century CE. His *Geographia* lists thousands of localities (along with their coordinates) all over the ancient world—in Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Eight early manuscripts of the *Geographia*, dating from approximately 1300, are known. The work is not error-free, notably when it comes to the coordinates. The problems with the coordinates result, *inter alia*, from the copying of the original text during the Middle Ages. See the discussion in LENNART-BERGGREN/JONES 2000, 5, 31–40, 43–45.

coordinates, which place Drousias in northern Judea or southern Samaria.[19] Abel believed that Ptolemy's coordinates were mistaken (as they frequently are) and should be ignored. Despite this problem, Yoram Tsafrir and others have accepted the identification of Drousias with Horvat Midras.[20]

We second the opinion of Abel and later researchers and believe that Drousias should, indeed, be identified with Khirbet Durusiya, i.e., Horvat Midras. Carrying this one step further, we suggest that King Herod named the settlement Drousias as a way of "refounding" or "upgrading" an important town in southern Judea/Idumea—the district from which his family originated.[21]

It seems plausible that the name Drousias (known only from Ptolemy's work) was granted in honor of Augustus's younger stepson Drusus (Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus), who died prematurely in 9 BCE after falling off a horse during a campaign in Germany.[22] Drusus's death was a severe blow to Augustus and naturally led to a need to commemorate him.[23]

Herod's close ties to Augustus were expressed in a variety of ways. He named both of the new cities he built, on the sites of Samaria and Strato's Tower, for the emperor—Sebaste and Caesarea, respectively.[24] The Caesarea harbor was designated Sebastos Limen, and one of the large towers at the edge of the breakwater by the entrance to the harbor was named for Drusus. This coincided with the prevalent custom, whereby vassal kings vied amongst themselves to build cities in honor of the emperor and his family (Herod's sons, Antipas and Philip, continued this practice). Temples to Augustus and to Rome were built in these cities; festivals and games to honor the emperor were instituted in Caesarea.[25] Herod rebuilt Anthedon and named it Agrippias in honor of the emperor's son-in-law and right-hand man Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa.[26] Other, less important cities were named for members of Herod's own family: Phasaelis (for his brother) and Cypros (for his mother) in the lower Jordan Valley and Antipatris (for his father) near Rosh Ha'ayin. Finally, he named Herodium—which included a palace, fortress, toparchy seat, and mausoleum—after himself.[27]

[19] AVI-YONAH 1951, 129.

[20] TSAFRIR /DI SEGNI/GREEN 1994, 114; see also studies cited there. See also SCHMITT 1995, 136.

[21] KOKKINOS 1998, 100–112; SHATZMAN 2013; see also STIEBEL 2013.

[22] The name Drusus was common among members of the Julio-Claudian family. The Emperor Tiberius's son, also named Drusus, was a childhood companion of Agrippa I, who named his own son Drusus (KOKKINOS 1998, 276). During the first century CE, the name was common even among Jews in Jerusalem, and it has been found inscribed on an ossuary from that city (ILAN 2002, 330; see references there).

[23] CROOK 1996b, 137–138; CROOK 1996a, 178–182.

[24] "Sebastia" is derived from *Sebastos*, which is the Greek equivalent of Augustus. For more on the establishment of Sebaste, see JOSEPHUS, *Jewish Antiquities* 15.292–298; JOSEPHUS, *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.22 [403].

[25] JOSEPHUS, *Jewish Antiquities* 15.331–341; JOSEPHUS, *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.5–8 [408–415]; JOSEPHUS, *Jewish Antiquities* 16.136–138; JOSEPHUS, *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.8 [415]; STERN 1991, 174; SCHÜRER 1973, 304–310. For more on this practice in the Hellenistic world, see COHEN 1978; GRAINGER 1997.

[26] JOSEPHUS, *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.8 [416]; JOSEPHUS, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.357.

[27] For detailed lists of Herod's building projects, see ROCCA 2008.

ROCK-CUT CHAMBERS AND UNDERGROUND COMPLEXES

As with other sites in the Judean Foothills, a study of the typology and spatial distribution of rock-cut chambers provides details about the site's history. The 1981 survey of the site identified 56 underground cavities and subterranean complexes hewn from the chalk under every part of the settlement. They served a variety of purposes: cisterns, quarries, columbaria, storerooms, etc. In ten cavities located under the buildings of the ancient settlement, researchers found typical hiding complexes, some of them labyrinthine. The layout and plan of the hiding complexes and the artifacts found in them are important sources of information about the settlement at Horvat Midras during the Early and Middle Roman periods—until the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

The following section provides a brief summary of the layout and artifacts associated with four hiding complexes studied by Kloner and his team.[28] Rogovski et al. reported on three additional hiding complexes, presenting a plan and sections for one of them.[29]

Complex 6 (no. 30 on Fig. 2) links three ancient cisterns (two of which were used to collect water) by means of typical tunnels. The complex was originally more extensive, but only part of it has been discovered and documented.

Complex 20 (no. 20 on Fig. 2; Fig. 5), the most extensive refuge system we know about to date, is more than 100 m long. At present, one enters it through a large underground quarry (no. 17). The complex includes additional ancient cavities, such as a columbarium (no. 9), two storerooms, and two ritual baths (*mikva'ot*). These were connected by a network of burrows that give access to four small hiding chambers (nos. 12, 13, 14, 16). Bath no. 7 was retired from use and its wall breached by typical burrows. The original entrance, located in the bath's northern wall, was sealed. The bath is rectangular; its relatively small dimensions, 2.8 ×1.8 m, show that it was a private facility. Six rock-hewn stairs along its entire width lead to the bottom. Bath no. 1 is also rectangular, though larger (3.6 × 3.3 m); two steps are preserved on its eastern side. This bath predates the hiding complex. Together with Bath no. 7, it probably served the residents of the large building on the surface, whose plan cannot be reconstructed without excavation.[30]

Various artifacts were left behind by the antiquities looters, including fragments of storage jars and cooking pots, a handle of a limestone vessel, a knife-pared "'Herodian" oil lamp, a perutah from Year 2 of the Jewish War, and two coins minted in Ascalon during the reign of Domitian. All these objects are characteristic of the first and second centuries CE.

Complex 30 (no. 30 on Fig. 2; Fig. 6) consists of a series of older underground quarries (nos. 1, 2) and cisterns (nos. 3, 4, 5). These cavities seem to have been further modified when they were incorporated into a hiding complex (nos. 6, 7, 8). This complex, which was reached via a burrow leading down from the cellar of a building on the surface, includes a storage chamber whose ceiling was supported by two columns

[28] For a detailed description in Hebrew, see KLONER 1984; KLONER 1987, 137–145.

[29] ROGOVSKI *et alii* 2018.

[30] REICH 2013, 287–289.

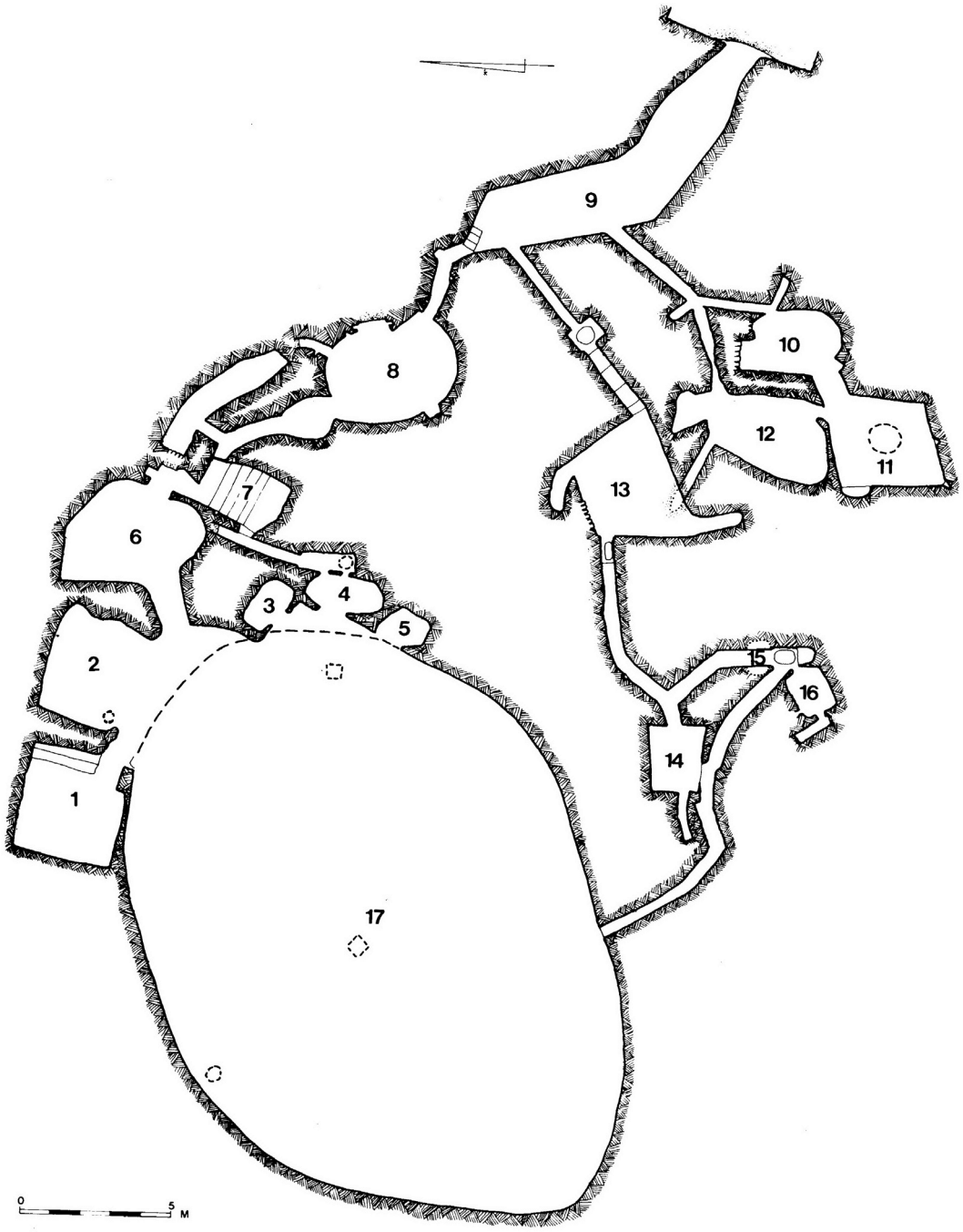

Fig. 5. Plan of underground complex 20 (A. Kloner and A. Frumkin)

(7), as well as two smaller chambers (6, 8). A stepped tunnel linked them to the quarries and cisterns.

In **Complex 31** (31 on Fig. 2; Fig. 7), winding burrows connected older water cisterns. A rectangular chamber (3) breached by the burrows was carved out next to one of the cisterns. A rectangular structure (1.2 ×1.4 m) with plastered walls was hewn out at the center of this chamber. Three rock-cut steps running its entire width lead to the bottom. Based on its plan, the structure seems to be a ritual bath (*mikveh*) of a non-standard type. The second structure (6), which opens off the eastern wall of Chamber 3, has features familiar from other ritual baths: a large opening leads to a trapezoidal, well-plastered immersion chamber with rounded corners. Four rock-cut steps running its entire width lead to the immersion basin. Like the baths that were incorporated into Complex 20, these, too, appear to have been hewn beneath residential buildings for use by their residents.

In this complex, Kloner found a coin from the reign of Vespasian minted in Ascalon, as well as fragments of cooking pots, all dating to the first and second centuries CE. He also found a silver pendant with the face of a woman wearing a horned headcover, who can be identified with the goddess Isis. Her features were defaced carefully and purposefully, in accordance with the rabbinic directives for purging artifacts of idolatry (M Avodah Zarah 4:5). We know of three other cases of defaced pagan images from the Bar Kokhba Revolt.[31]

[31] YADIN 1963, 46; ZISSU/GANOR 2004; MEIR/ZISSU 2010.

Fig. 6. Plan and sections of underground complex 30 (A. Kloner and A. Frumkin; Studio Valdman)

The hiding complexes at Horvat Midras are similar to hundreds of complexes that have been found under Jewish settlements in the Judean Foothills, reflecting a phenomenon that became widespread during the Bar Kokhba era.[32]

Hiding complexes are characterized by labyrinthine, narrow, branching burrows, which linked artificial cavities that had previously served as cellars, cisterns, ritual baths, granaries, columbaria, or underground olive presses. The original openings were sealed and camouflaged, after which the cavities were joined by a network of rock-hewn tunnels and burrows, with chambers, food storage installations, concealed access

[32] KLONER/ZISSU 2003; KLONER/ZISSU 2009; ESHEL/ZISSU 2019; RAVIV/ZISSU 2022.

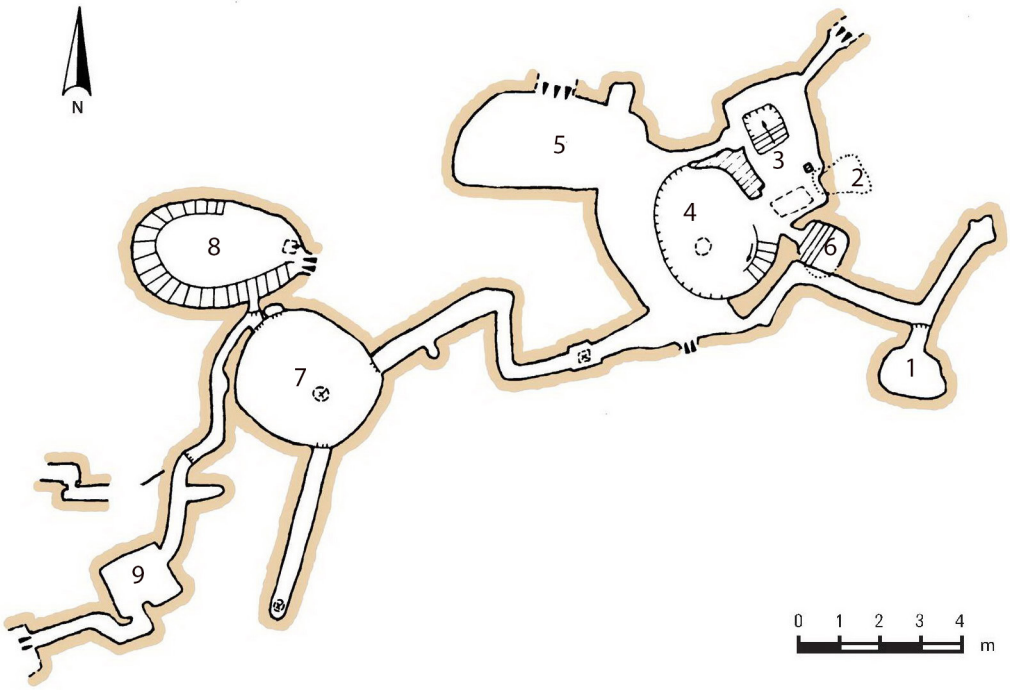

Fig. 7. Plan of underground complex 31 (A. Kloner and A. Frumkin; Studio Valdman)

to water cisterns, and mechanisms to block the passages. The complexes often formed intricate mazes beneath ancient settlements. The burrows and tunnels effectively eliminated the chambers' original purposes and damaged essential facilities that had formerly served the local residents.

These subterranean rock-cut complexes are predominantly found beneath Jewish settlements from the Roman period in the Judean Shephelah and Lower Galilee. Since the late 1970s, numerous studies have explored the significance, geographical distribution, and historical context of these complexes. Artifacts from the Bar Kokhba Revolt and a short description by the Roman historian Cassius Dio (second–third centuries CE) regarding Jewish preparations for this revolt suggested that many hiding complexes date to this period.

Cassius Dio described the rebels' methods as follows: "They did not dare try conclusions with the Romans in the open field, but they occupied the advantageous positions in the country and strengthened them with mines and walls, in order that they might have places of refuge whenever they should be hard pressed, and might meet together unobserved underground; and they pierced these subterranean passages from above at intervals to let in air and light. At first the Romans took no account of them. Soon, however, all Judaea had been stirred up.... Then, indeed, Hadrian sent against them his best generals."[33]

According to this source, the burrows were prepared because of the Jews' fear of open clashes with the Roman legions. However, the archaeological evidence suggests that the Jewish rebels who dared to revolt against the strongest empire in the world operated out of their hometowns and in close proximity to their families. It follows that the hiding complexes were meant first and foremost to protect civilians who were liable to be harmed by the fighting. St. Jerome (fourth–fifth centuries) described the situation as follows: "And the people of Judea reached such a state of distress that they, together with their wives, children, gold, and silver in which they trusted hid in underground tunnels and in exceedingly deep caves."[34]

However, recent excavations in Judea and Galilee indicate that some complexes existed as early as the late Second Temple period, specifically the late first century BCE.[35]

Our recent study on Judean hiding complexes presented an updated corpus of 439 complexes at 252 settlement sites, including around 90 previously unknown sites.[36] Of the complexes discussed, 202 (at 142 sites) can be dated based on finds or relative chronology. Among these, 139 complexes (at 109 sites) were definitively dated to the period between the revolts or to the Bar Kokhba Revolt, while 28 complexes (at 18 sites) were broadly dated to the first or second century CE. Artifacts from the first century BCE and CE were found in 37 complexes (at 17 sites) and 24 complexes (at seven sites), respectively, often within earlier installations repurposed for hiding. Notably, complexes containing finds from 70–136 CE (129 of 142) generally did not include earlier artifacts, supporting the view that most complexes were created between the revolts and during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The geographical distribution of complexes with finds from the Early Roman period and the interbellum period (70–136 CE) indicates their widespread presence throughout Jewish settlement areas in Judea.

The difficulty of life underground is described in contemporary Jewish sources. These convey the fear, darkness, crowded conditions, and lack of privacy, which even led to mixing up newborn infants.[37]

In 2018 and 2022, Orit Peleg-Barkat's team discovered

[33] CASSIUS DIO, *Historia Romana* 69.12.3–69.13.2, trans. Cary (1968).

[34] JEROME, *commentary on Isaiah* 2:15.

[35] MELAMED 2020; RAVIV/ZISSU 2022.

[36] RAVIV/ZISSU 2022.

[37] SAMET 1986.

three coins restruck by the Bar Kokhba administration. One coin was found in 2018 in Area B, in an underground chamber integrated into a rock-cut hiding complex beneath a residential building. This complex had not been disturbed by antiquities looters but had been altered during the Byzantine period and Middle Ages. The tunnel leading to the chamber contained only artifacts from the interbellum period and the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Two additional bronze coins overstruck by the rebels were discovered in the summer of 2022 in Area E, above Complex 20.

The distribution of the coins is a crucial archaeological tool for determining the extent of the territory under the Bar Kokhba administration's control or influence. It also contributes to understanding various aspects of the Jewish population during the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

The scarcity of Bar Kokhba coins from controlled excavations—given that most known examples come from illegal digs and are of unknown provenance—highlights the significance of those found through proper archaeological methods.[38] Additionally, in the absence of detailed textual sources, these archaeological finds are vital for reconstructing the history of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Given the insight that hiding complexes were not exclusive to this revolt, the relevance of provenanced Bar Kokhba coins in reconstructing the geographical scope of this war has recently increased.

A renewed systematic survey of the site, its subterranean chambers and complexes, surroundings, and related features was conducted by Tal Rogovski and his team. This study, which considered pottery distribution, the location of various cavities, architectural remains, and rock-cut installations, has provided a more precise delineation of the site's boundaries and, in some cases, its functional divisions across different periods. The clearest picture emerged for the Early Roman period. During this time, the settlement boundaries were well defined by an ancient necropolis extending along the upper part of the spur surrounding the site to the east, south, and west. Additional tombs were identified at Giv'at Shema and Giv'at Seled to the northwest, bringing the total number of known Early Roman period tombs to 14. Whereas these tombs were carved into the top of the slope, hiding complexes—typically located in residential basements—were found in the central part of the slope, with seven complexes currently documented.[39]

The new study supports our previous insight that, unlike the usual pattern where settlements are situated atop hills and tombs are carved into slopes, at Horvat Midras the tombs are situated in the upper part of the spur, above the site. Rogovski and his team assumed that the settlement likely developed near agricultural fields and water sources in the Hakhlil Valley, making the slope more suitable for residential construction. They also noted the fact that it was unnecessary to build agricultural terraces due to the valley's accessibility and the fertility of Nahal Khalil and its tributaries, which facilitated the placement of residential houses on the slope. Additionally, favorable rock outcrops high up on the slope may have influenced the decision to quarry tombs there, as the potential for visible tomb markers and monuments likely led to the preference for locating tombs on the upper parts of the northern slope and at the top of the spur.[40]

THE NECROPOLIS

Dozens of burial caves were dug out of the slopes surrounding the settlement. The location of these hypogea—which were rock-cut and typically located outside the populated area—demarcates the boundaries of the ancient settlement.

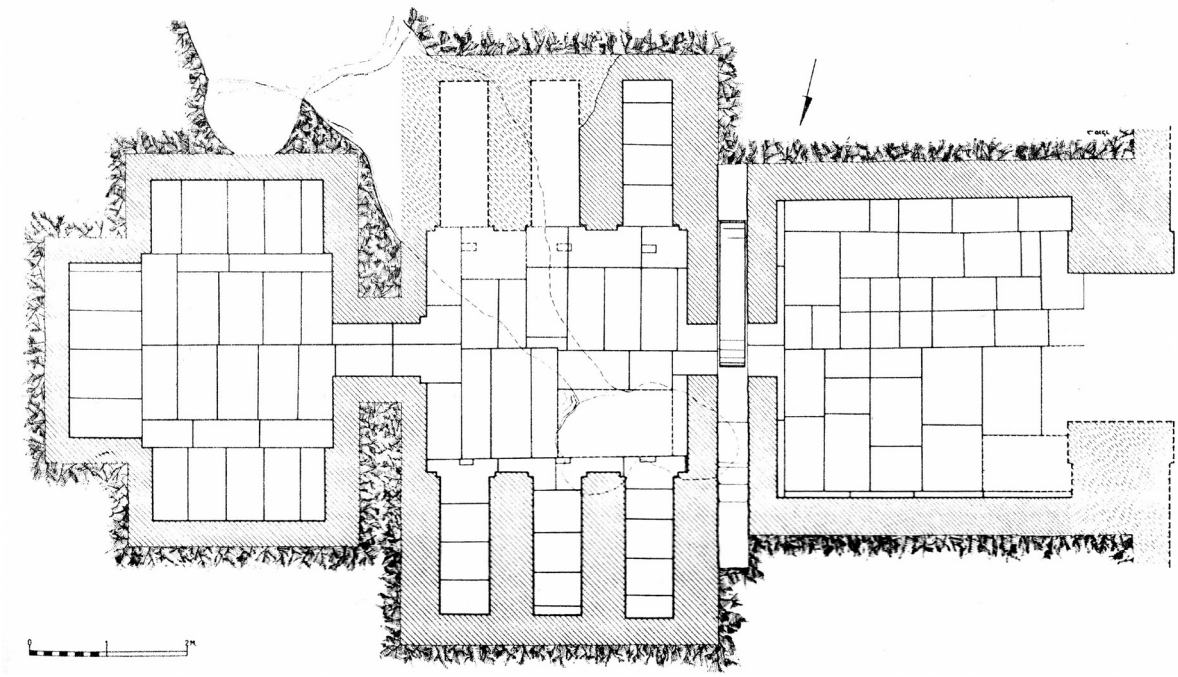

Fig. 8a. Plan of hypogeum (G. Solar)

[38] ESHEL/ZISSU 2019; RAVIV/ZISSU forthcoming.

[39] See ROGOVSKI *et alii* 2018 for a preliminary report.

[40] ROGOVSKI *et alii* 2018.

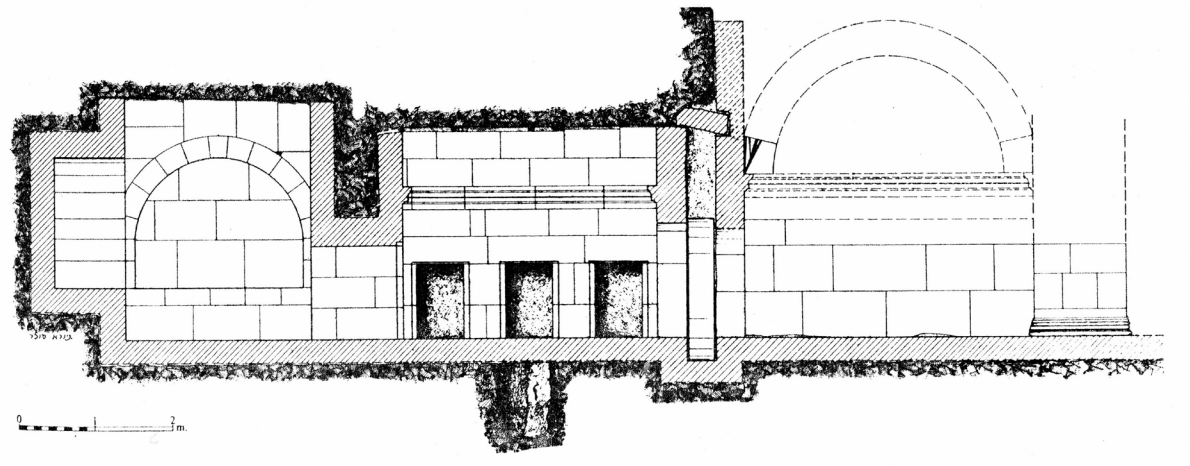

Fig. 8b. Section of hypogeum (G. Solar)

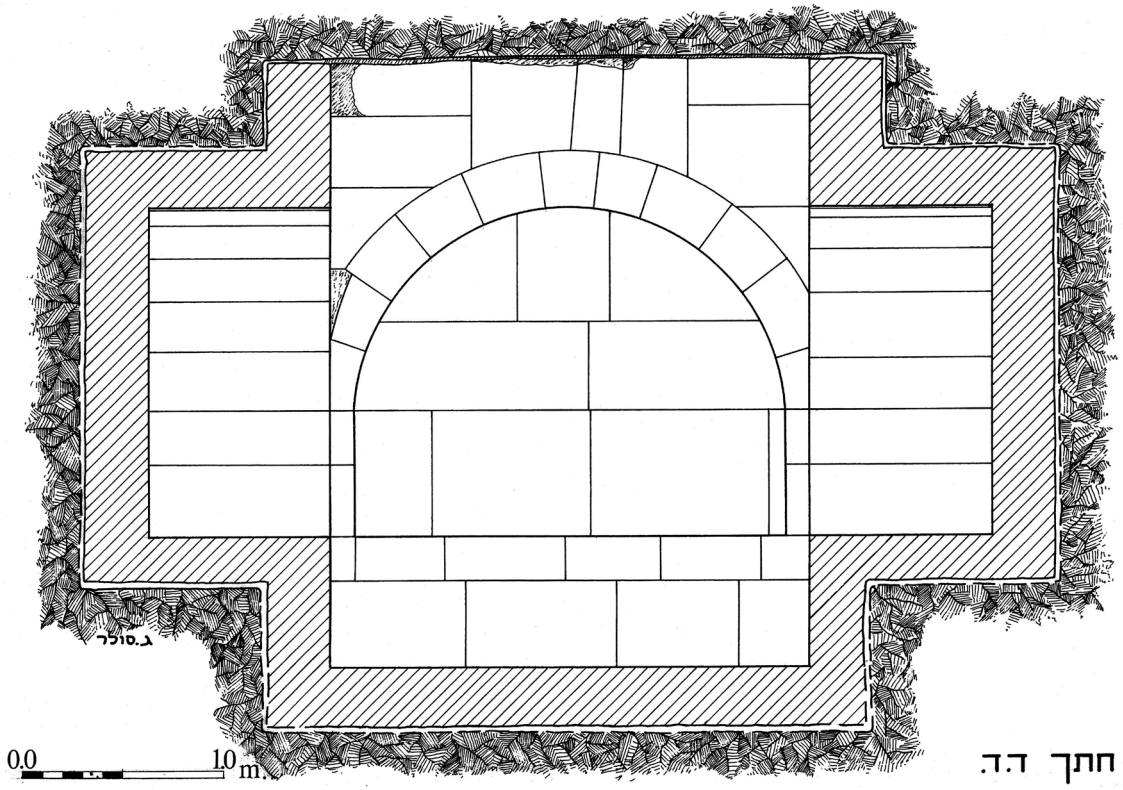

Fig. 8c. Section of hypogeum – the inner, arcosolia chamber (G. Solar)

In 1976, after severe antiquities looting, Kloner excavated a decorated burial complex from the Early Roman period, which was part of the settlement's necropolis along the western slope.[41] This complex essentially marks the town's western limit. The elaborate complex was rock-cut and faced with ashlars (4 on Fig. 2; Figs. 8 and 9); it included a domed vestibule with plastered and painted walls, a chamber with burial niches (*kokhim*) that was entered through an opening that could be closed with a round blocking stone, and a room with arcosolia (arched burial niches; see Fig. 10). Stone boxes (also known as ossuaries, used by the Jewish population for secondary burial of bones from the late first century BCE to the second century CE) were placed in the arcosolia.[42]

Two ossuaries survived the looters. The pottery sherds found in this hypogeum have been dated to the first century BCE–early second century CE.

Some 15 m south of this hypogeum (see Fig. 11), a smaller burial cave with three arcosolia was hewn during the Byzantine period (see Fig. 12). Red crosses were painted on the walls of the tomb, along with the Greek letters IX (*iota* and *chi*, standing for Ιησους Χριστος = Jesus Christ) and ΑΩ, (*alpha* and *omega*, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, an allusion to Jesus's statement, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end)"[43] (see Fig. 13). Additional Byzantine-period tombs are known from the vicinity. This Christian tomb was connected to the

[41] KLONER 1978, 115–119.

[42] For a summary of Jewish burial customs during this period, see ZISSU 2024, 424–426; RAHMANI 1994.

[43] Revelation 22:13, Revised Standard Version.

Fig. 9a. Photo of the hypogeum vestibule, looking east (Z. Radovan)

Fig. 9b. Photo of chamber with burial niches (kokhim) in hypogeum, looking west (Z. Radovan)

Fig. 9c. Photo of opening to inner arcosolia chamber, looking east (Z. Radovan)

Fig. 10. Fragmentary ossuary from the hypogeum (T. Sagiv)

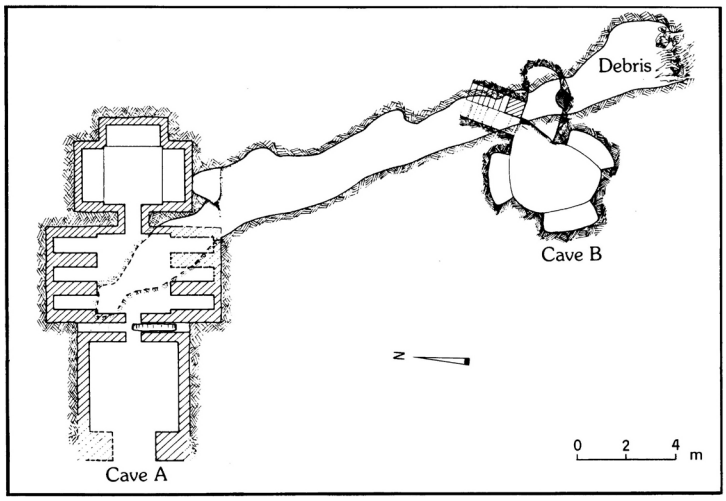

Fig. 11. Plan showing hypogeum (A) and nearby Byzantine tomb (B), which are connected by a wide, rock-cut tunnel (G. Solar)

earlier decorated hypogeum by a wide tunnel, roughly cut, whose purpose remains unclear.

During the 1970s and 1980s, at least 16 burial caves, most of them from the Early Roman period, were broken into and looted. They contained ossuaries indicating that the burial practices among Jewish residents of the Judean Foothills were similar to those practiced in Jerusalem and other areas of Israel.[44]

At the top of the hill—a location with a good view and visible from a distance—are the foundations of a pyramid-shaped mausoleum built of ashlars, which was first documented by Rahmani.[45] It has a base of about 10 m on a side and rises to a height of 3.5 m today (2 on Fig. 2 and Fig. 4a). The pyramid originally reached a height of about 5 m. It evidently was a *nephesh* or grave marker for a hypogeum hewn to its north. That hypogeum consisted of a courtyard, vestibule, perhaps also a *kokhim* chamber, and a room

[44] For a list of ossuary fragments collected at the site, see RAHMANI 1994, nos. 523–524.

[45] RAHMANI 1964, 223–228.

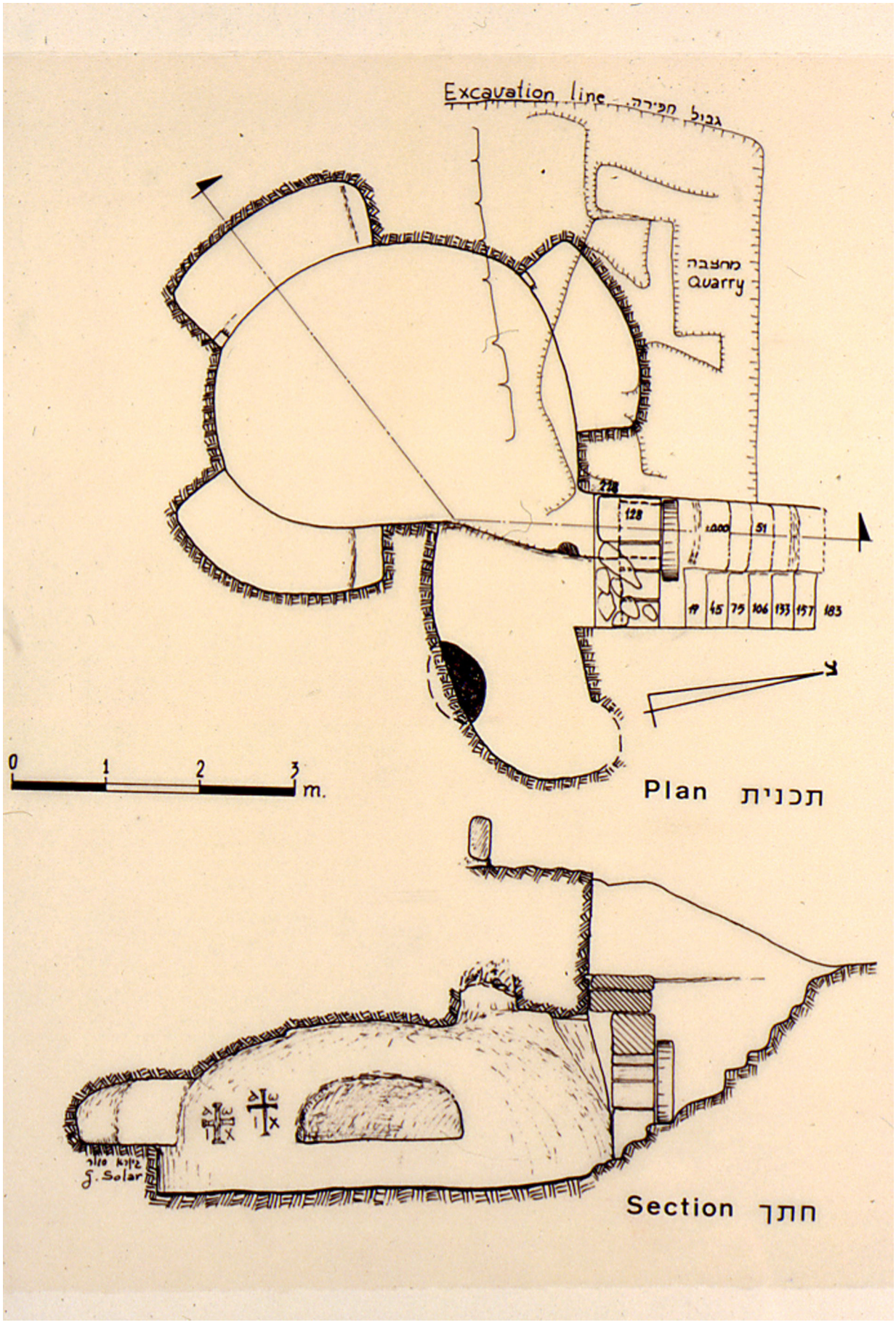

Fig. 12. Detailed plan and section of the Byzantine burial cave (B) (G. Solar)

Fig. 13a, b, c. Photos of the Byzantine burial cave (B), showing painted crosses on the walls (Z. Radovan)

with arcosolia. Most elements of the hypogeum collapsed; only the arcosolium room—the innermost room, which was built of ashlars—survives in part. The location of this grave marker delineates the settlement's southern edge.

Recent excavations around the pyramid-shaped mausoleum, led by Orit Peleg-Barkat and Michael Chernin, revealed its construction methods, presented its connection to the high-quality ashlar burial complex beneath it, and provided an architectural reconstruction of the monument.[46] The new study also suggests a first-century CE date for the construction of the mausoleum. The study of the mausoleum and its burial complex indicates that it was one of the most impressive tombs from the late Second Temple period in the Judean Foothills. This find aligns with other decorated tombs outside Jerusalem, in western Samaria and the Hebron Hills,[47] which were associated with local elites.

THE CHURCH AND ITS UNDERGROUND COMPLEX

The church described below and the rock-cut burial caves with Christian decorations described above date to the Byzantine period.

During the excavations we conducted in August and December 2010 and January 2011 in the wake of illegal excavations at the site, we uncovered a Byzantine church that had been built atop the remains of walls and rock-hewn chambers from the Roman period (5 on Fig. 2; Figs. 14, 15, 16). The church and the adjacent structures continued to be used during the Early Islamic era.[48]

In this excavation, we identified seven stages (see Table 1).

Stage 1 consists of rock-hewn chambers and storage areas associated with aboveground structures that have not survived. This layer was dated to the first century BCE through the first century CE on the basis of coins and potsherds.

Stage 2 is represented by an extensive hiding complex that integrates earlier underground chambers (from Stage 1); this stage also includes sections of walls and a floor.

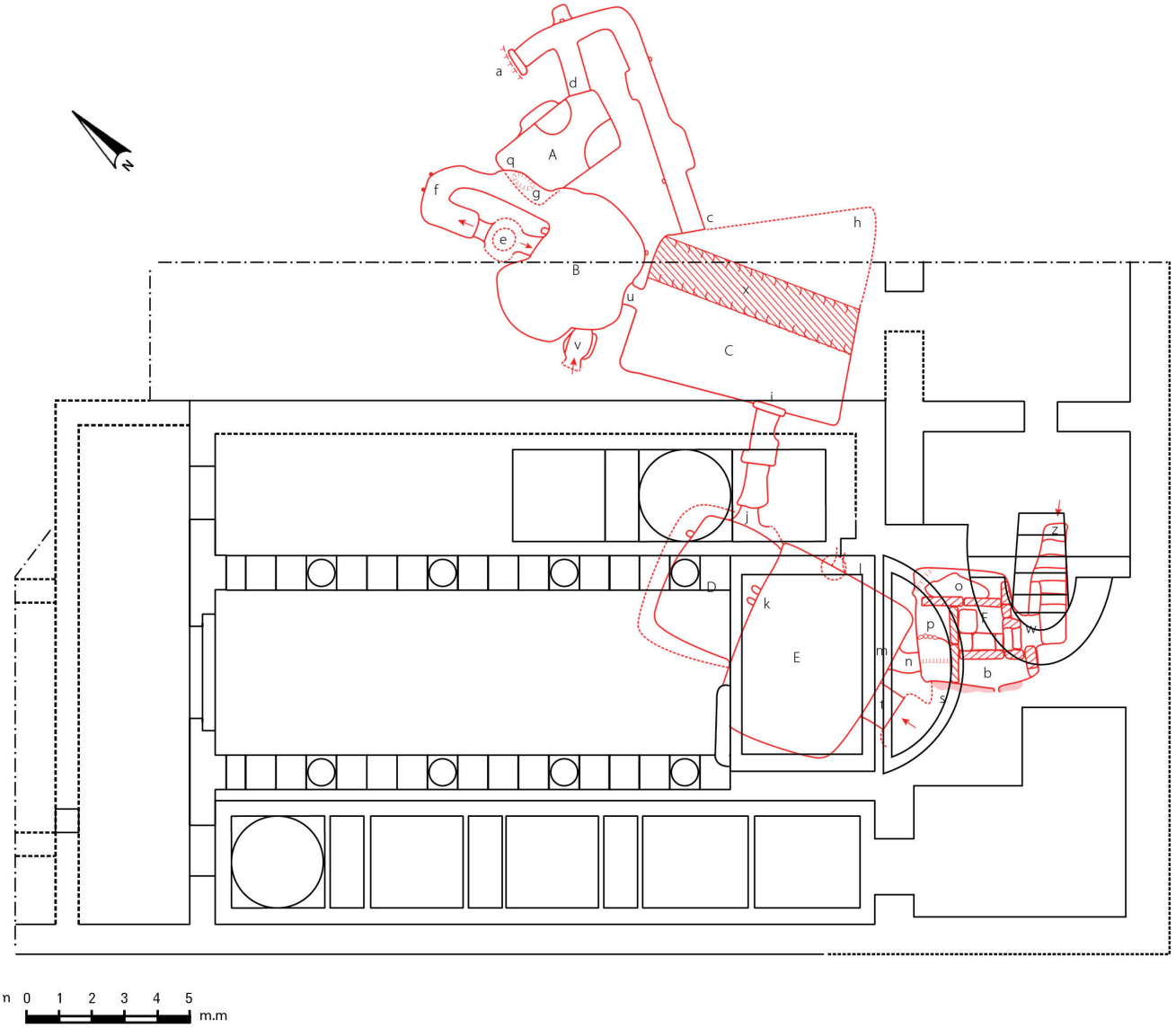

Fig. 14. Plan of basilical church, built atop an underground complex of artificial cavities from the Roman period (B. Zissu; Studio Valdman)

[46] PELEG-BARKAT/CHERNIN 2018.

[47] RAVIV/ZISSU 2020.

[48] GANOR *et alii* 2011.

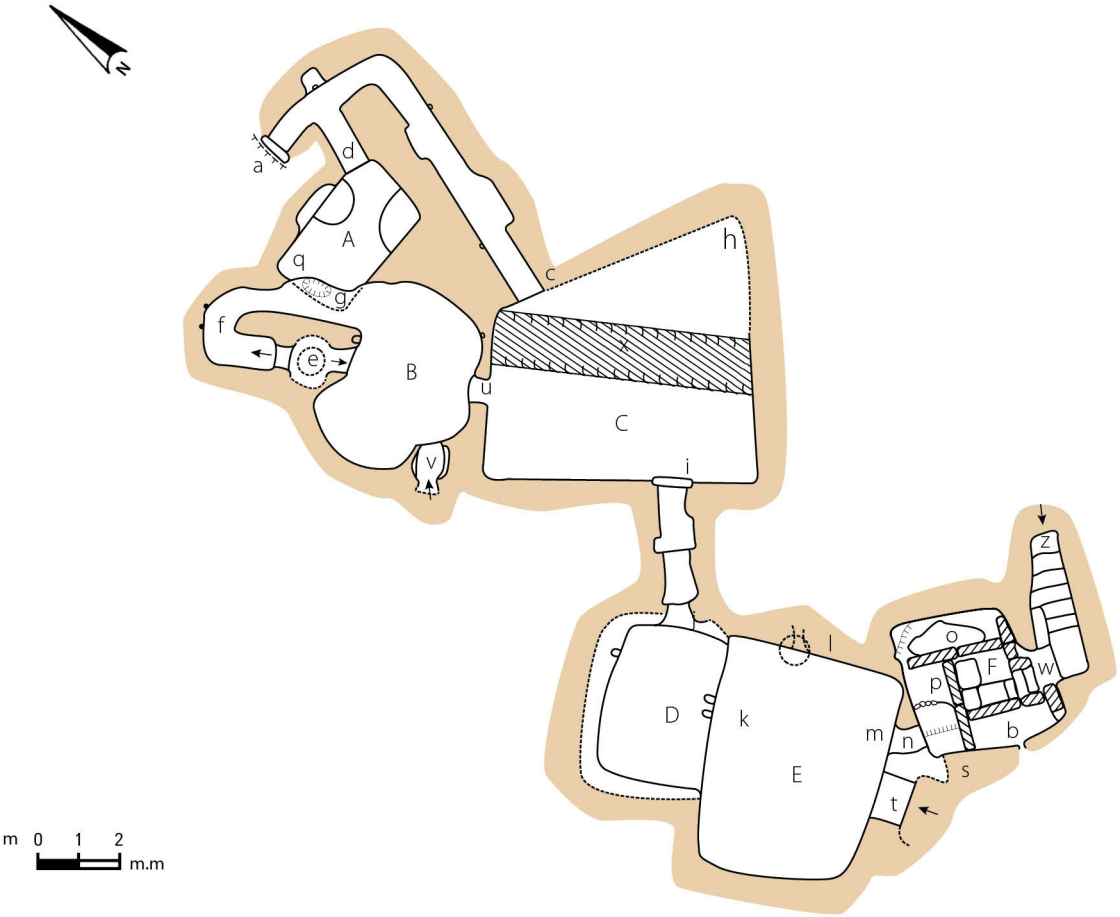

Fig. 15. Detailed plan of underground complex (B. Zissu and Y. Zissu; Studio Valdman)

Fig. 16. Aerial view of basilical church (Skyview)

Table 1: Stratigraphy of the Site

Stage	Main artifacts	Chronology	Notes
1	Underground storage chambers; scanty remains of walls (?)	1st c. BCE–1st c. CE	The remains were detected in the underground complex and in deep test pits. The cavities were associated with buildings that have not survived.
2	Remains of walls; a section of floor; extensive hiding complex	Interbellum period and Bar Kokhba Revolt—70–136 CE	Remains were found only in the underground complex and in test pits.
3	Basilical building (early church?), with a consecrated rock-cut tomb under the apse (see Stage 4)	4th–6th c. CE	The early basilical building (a church?) was built of local stones and had a simple white mosaic floor.
4 (a+b)	Ornate church; a martyrium to the east combines a baptistery and access to the rock-cut tomb	6th–7th c. CE	Ornate church with marble ornamentation and a multicolored floor mosaic
5	Activity in the martyrium east of the church and living quarters in the atrium and narthex; continued use of the church and martyrium; crosses plastered over	7th–first half of 8th c. CE (until 749 CE)	Cultic(?) activity in the martyrium; the main church was empty and partially dismantled; the atrium and narthex were turned into temporary living quarters.
6	Church and martyrium left in ruins; sparse occupation in the atrium and narthex	8th–12th c. CE	Scant remains of temporary dwellings; looting of building stones
7	Agricultural terraces atop the ruins of the church	12th–20th c. CE	Agricultural activity; looting of building stones

Similar hiding complexes have been found at Horvat Midras and at dozens of ancient sites in the surrounding region (see above). Stage 2 has been dated to the interbellum period and the Bar Kokhba Revolt (70–136 CE).

Stage 3 features a basilical structure with white mosaic floors, which apparently functioned as a church. Constructed from local limestone, it had similar dimensions to those of the Stage 4 church (see below). Coins and pottery discovered beneath the mosaic floor include fourth-century CE coins and a fragment of a Beit Nattif oil lamp from the third–fourth centuries CE. Stage 3 also apparently included Burial Chamber F, which had three burial troughs, though these were found empty. Burial Chamber F was created within an earlier artificial cavity with two openings (a ritual bath?) from Stage 1 that was later incorporated into the hiding complex of Stage 2. A plaster-covered wall was built between Burial Chamber F and the original set of steps (the entrance to the cavity from Stage 1); a coin from the second half of the fourth century CE (the reign of Constantius II) was embedded in this plaster layer.

In Stage 4, a basilical church was built above the Stage 3 building. The entrance was by means of large doors at the western end, through an atrium and exonarthex.

THE BASILICAL CHURCH

The church was accessed through an atrium, a large courtyard paved with stone slabs (see Fig. 16). The atrium was approximately 9 m wide, with a length likely similar to that of the nave, although only 3 m of it was excavated. The limestone flagstones, varying in dimensions (approximately 0.4×0.5 m), showed signs of wear from use. On the eastern side of the atrium, the remains of two square stone pillars (0.6×0.6 m) were found, dividing the atrium from the narthex. Some repairs to the floor in the atrium were noted, as was the secondary use of certain architectural elements. The entrance to the narthex was located at the eastern end of the atrium. The atrium appears to have been constructed in Stage 3 and remained in use during Stage 4.

In the original structure (Stages 3 and 4), the narthex and atrium were separated by pillars that created an outer narthex (exonarthex). The narthex was approximately 2.8 m wide and 12.5 m long and featured a white mosaic floor adorned with medallions, although only small sections of the mosaic remain. Three doors led from the narthex: the largest, central door (width 2.3 m) opened to the nave, while the side doors provided access to the aisles. The lintel of the central doorway has survived, lying fallen near the doorjambs above the debris (Fig. 17a, b). The dimensions of the lintel are 3.44×0.8 m, with a height of 0.6 m. The surface of the lintel features an embossed rectangular surface decorated with graduated bands (*fasciae*) extending downward. At the center, there is a relief of a garland with a double Hercules knot, with branches extending from both sides and ivy leaves at the ends. The decoration within the center of the knot (possibly a cross or chi-rho?) is worn and unclear.

The narthex was repurposed for routine daily activities during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods (Stages 5 and 6). Makeshift walls were constructed using various repurposed decorated architectural elements. Three rooms were constructed along the western façade, with the three doors of the church blocked by reused architectural fragments. A fragment of a marble screen post, decorated with crosses, was embedded in the sealing of the main door (Fig. 17b, c). In contrast, there were no signs of secondary construction or significant use of the church interior during this period, and the entrances remained sealed. It is presumed that the church was abandoned during Stage 5, with portions of it dismantled.[49] Consequently, what remained of the church collapsed during the earthquake of 749 CE.

The Stage 4 church is a basilica, oriented along a west-east axis, featuring a central nave (5.3×10.6 m) flanked by two side aisles.[50] The nave is delineated by two parallel rows of four

[49] For an overview of the fate of Judean Desert monasteries following the Islamic conquest, see PATRICH 2011.

[50] Patrich has noted that the most common type of Christian place of worship in the Holy Land was the basilica. This architectural form, originating in various Roman structures such as civic forum basilicas, palatial

Fig. 17a. Lintel from the central church doorway, as found on the surface in 2010 at the start of the excavations, viewed from the west (B. Zissu).

Fig. 17b. (1) Lintel from the central church doorway, viewed from the northeast; (2, 3) doorjambs in situ; (4) fragment of a marble screen post decorated with crosses, embedded in the sealing of the main door (B. Zissu)

Fig. 17c. Detail of the screen post (B. Zissu)

Fig. 18. Column and capital, collapsed on the mosaic floor (B. Zissu)

columns each, for a total of eight columns. These columns supported two colonnades with architraves or arches, which, in turn, upheld a wooden structure that carried a gabled tile roof.[51] The columns have identical bases and Corinthian capitals and are made of imported light-gray marble (Fig. 18). The colonnades divided the interior into a high, central nave with two narrower, lower aisles on either side. Illumination was provided by windows in the clerestory.

The south aisle is 2.7 m wide and 14 m long, whereas the north aisle is wider. At the eastern end, the nave extends into the sanctuary, where the bema opens into the internal apse. The apse is bounded on the east by a concave interior

basilicas, and assembly halls of Eastern religious sects, was adopted by Constantine for the churches he erected in the region. Although there were many variations in the specifics, these basilicas shared numerous common features (PATRICH 2006, 374–375).

[51] Interestingly, no tiles or fragments of tiles were found on the church floor, suggesting that they were carefully removed for reuse elsewhere, possibly during Stage 5.

Fig. 19. The eastern end of the church: (1) baptismal font, built above (2) a stepped corridor leading south to Burial Chamber F; (3) reliquary(?) embedded in the martyrium floor; (4) sondages beneath the bema and apse; (5) gamma-shaped room; (6) end of the south aisle; (7) end of the north aisle; (8) entrance to the martyrium; (9) original entrance to the martyrium, now sealed with a wall and bench (Skyview and B. Zissu)

Fig. 19a. The eastern end of the church during excavation. (1) baptismal font, built above (2) a stepped corridor leading to Burial Chamber F (B. Zissu)

Fig. 20. The martyrium, looking south (B. Zissu)

wall. Its location was carefully planned, built directly above an earlier artificial cavity that was converted into Burial Chamber F; this burial chamber was found empty of bones or artifacts. In Stage 4, the church floors were adorned with exquisite multicolored mosaics.

Stage 4 consists of two technical phases, both dating from the sixth century CE, as evidenced by coins, pottery, and glass vessels. The earlier phase (4a) included the mosaic floor in the nave and aisles. During the later phase (4b), two marble-faced steps were constructed to extend the bema westward over the nave floor. A marble chancel was built around the bema, as indicated by depressions in the upper step, fragments of posts, and pieces of the screen. The narrow space left open to the north of the bema created a walkway (*solea*) leading to the pulpit (*ambo*). A broken piece of a marble ambo leg was found in the northeastern section of the nave, though it was out of place. Although the exact layout of the apse and bema during the earlier phase is not entirely clear, their existence is almost certain. Two test pits revealed a segment of a wall constructed from ashlar blocks and remnants of a mosaic floor. Later, the bema was expanded westward, and two steps leading to it from the nave were built on top of the existing mosaic floor. Following this alteration, repairs were made to the edges of the mosaic floor in the south aisle near the bema, just south of the stairs. Thus, it is evident that the mosaic floors in the bema and apse, as well as those in the nave and aisles, belong to the later phase 4b.

At the eastern end, two narrow openings provided access from the aisles to the bema. The inscribed apse was constructed as a square space enclosed by three walls. The eastern (outer) wall of the apse forms part of the external wall of two symmetrical rooms on either side. These rooms are shaped like the Greek letter gamma (Γ): the northern room is a proper gamma, while the southern room is its mirror image (see Fig. 19).

A stepped corridor descending to the empty Burial Chamber F was cut into the floor of the northern room. This room also had an opening in its northern wall, offering direct access from outside the basilica. The southern wall of the room was apsidal, with its upper part adorned with a cornice. In Stage 4a, the southern section of the room was roofed with a semi-dome built above the cornice (see Fig. 20). Below the cornice, traces of red and yellow paint were visible on the plaster that covered the hewn stones, indicating that the room may have been decorated with frescoes and architectural sculpture.

The location of Burial Chamber F beneath the apse suggests that it was the *raison d'être* for the construction of the church.[52] The layout, with rooms flanking the apse, implies that patrons viewed the empty burial chamber as a *locus*

[52] Early Byzantine sources document numerous reports of *inventiones*—miraculous discoveries of tombs of biblical figures or Christian saints. This phenomenon extended beyond the Holy Land, with similar occurrences recorded throughout the Christianized Roman Empire. In other regions of the Empire, *inventiones* primarily involved Christian martyrs, while in the Holy Land, the emphasis was predominantly on biblical figures. It appears that only tombs with clear ancient origins could be linked to scriptural personages; these were typically tombs or other rock-cut chambers from the Second Temple period and sometimes even from the Iron Age (DI SEGNI

Fig. 21. Detail of reliquary(?) embedded in the mosaic floor of the martyrium (B. Zissu)

sanctus, possibly housing sacred relics or linked to a tradition considering the older cavity a sacred tomb. In the absence of an inscription or clear reference in sources from the period, we are unfortunately unable to identify the figure to whom the "tomb" was attributed. The chamber probably commemorated revered figures or a sacred event to which the church was dedicated. The chamber and its access room (see Figs. 19, 20) functioned as a martyrium, integral to the original design of the basilica.[53]

Initially (Stage 4a), access to the northern room was via a doorway at the eastern end of the north aisle of the church (Fig. 19:9). The difference in floor levels required the addition of stairs—possibly wooden—between the north aisle and the room leading to the empty tomb. The white mosaic floor of this room has not been excavated, so its dating to either Stage 3 or 4 remains unclear.

In Stage 4b, the bema was extended westward, the apse wall was constructed, and a multicolored mosaic floor was laid in the bema and apse. At this stage, the opening between the north aisle and the martyrium was sealed, allowing for the construction of a stone bench along the common wall in the martyrium. The passage to the empty tomb may have been sealed with hard white plaster and stone slabs laid along the length of the passage, damaging the edges of the white mosaic floor in the martyrium (Fig. 19:2). A plastered brick structure, likely a baptismal font, was built against the southern wall of the martyrium (Fig. 19:1). It had a semicircular shape with a shelf running along its upper section, possibly positioned above the entrance to Burial Chamber F (see "The Underground Complex and Remains of the Ancient Settlement" below).

Since the lower part of this baptismal font was deliberately destroyed in antiquity, it is unclear how the font functioned

2007). Such tombs were subsequently remodeled and incorporated into memorial churches.

[53] In Byzantine church architecture, a *martyrium* is a church or shrine built to honor and commemorate a Christian martyr. The term derives from the Greek word *martyrion*, meaning "testimony" or "witness," reflecting the martyr's role as a witness to the faith. A martyrium is typically situated at the site identified as the burial place of the martyr or where significant events in their life or death occurred. These structures often feature elaborate designs and may have a circular or octagonal plan to emphasize the centrality and sanctity of the location. The martyrium serves not only as a place of worship but also as a focal point for pilgrimage and veneration.
One of the most famous examples is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, constructed by Helena, the mother of Constantine, on the site associated with the burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This church was one of four Constantinian martyria, which marked the establishment of the first proper Christian churches in the Holy Land. In two of these, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, a clear distinction was maintained between the basilica and the martyrium (PATRICH 2006, 368–370).
This distinction was later set aside (PATRICH 2016, 274). From the latter half of the fourth century onward, basilical churches were frequently used as martyria, in addition to serving as places of worship. Subsequent concentric martyria, such as those at the Church of the Ascension, Cathisma, Mt. Gerizim, Caesarea, and Capernaum, drew inspiration from the circular rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre and the octagonal plan of the Church of the Nativity. Interestingly, at Horvat Midras, there is a clear distinction between the basilica and the martyrium, possibly adhering to an early plan established as early as the fourth century (Stage 3).

and, in particular, how it interacted with the corridor leading to the tomb located beneath it. It is unclear whether the font completely obstructed access to the tomb or if its placement left a narrow opening that would allow entry to the tomb if necessary.

Clearly, the special placement of the baptismal font above the entrance corridor to the tomb is not coincidental. The font was positioned in this symbolic location to connect it with the sanctity of the tomb.

A related issue concerns the possible identification of a reliquary integrated in the martyrium floor. We uncovered a hole in the floor, meticulously framed by marble slabs encircled with white mosaic (Fig. 19:3; 21). (Fig. 21)

Due to the circumstances of the excavation, we were unable to dismantle the mosaic floor and the marble slabs. In our estimation, this feature served as an embedded reliquary, where pilgrims would pour a liquid, such as oil, and soak it (and its purported sanctity) with a piece of cloth. This phenomenon is known from reliquaries in other churches of the Holy Land.

Another change attributed to Stage 4b or 5 is the addition of a new door in the northern wall of the martyrium, providing direct access from outside the church without the need to pass through the north aisle.

The mosaics

The tesserae used throughout the church are uniformly sized and share a consistent palette of colors—red, yellow, green, gray, white, black, orange, and pink—along with various shades (two shades each of yellow and green, and three shades each of red, pink, and orange). There is no distinction between the mosaics in the aisles and nave from the earlier stage and those in the bema and apse from the later stage. This suggests that the raw materials likely came from the same supplier and that the same workshop was responsible for creating the mosaic floors during both stages of the construction of the church.

Despite earthquake damage, the mosaics were preserved well enough to reveal their planning and composition (Fig. 16). The mosaics in the south aisle are almost entirely intact, except for a cistern mouth later installed in the floor and minor damage at the eastern end. Elsewhere, preservation is partial. However, it is clear that the aisles had identical mosaic arrangements: each aisle floor was divided into four square pavements with three narrower rectangular pavements between them. In the eastern part of each aisle, two adjacent square mosaics were placed near the entrances to the rooms flanking the apse.

Unlike this division of the floor surfaces, the nave, bema, and apse had only one pavement each. In these three areas, which were also the most important parts of the basilica, the mosaic pavements featured images of animals (there may also have been images of people that were destroyed by the earthquake). In contrast, in the aisles almost all the pavements featured geometric patterns. The exceptions in the aisles are three rectangular pavements placed at a fairly significant distance from one another, such that they were swallowed up by a row of geometric mosaic pavements.

Whereas the arrangement of mosaic pavements in the nave, bema, and apse is a common one (one pavement each), the arrangement in the aisles is unusual. In many churches from the Byzantine period, the aisle floors are decorated with several mosaic pavements—rather than one pavement as in the nave, bema, and apse—but in the aisles under discussion close attention was obviously paid to the size of the pavements and the ratio of the dimensions of the rectangular pavements to the square ones.

This close attention, however, is not seen in the eastern part of the aisles. Toward the eastern end of the south aisle there is a rectangular pavement that is slightly longer than the square ones. In the north aisle, to the east of the eastern square pavement, there is a strip decorated with an ivy branch, which was intended to "extend" the eastern square pavement further out. The room south of the apse must also have been important because it was floored with marble slabs, an expensive building material.

MOSAICS WITH IMAGES

The nave: The largest surviving section of the mosaic floor of the nave was discovered on the western side, beneath the debris. Small mosaic segments were preserved in the east, next to the stairs to the bema. The steps were placed on top of the small mosaic segments and on the foundation of the mosaic floor that was preserved throughout the nave. From the surviving mosaic segments in the east and west it seems that the entire nave was covered by a single pavement, which featured a vine scroll pattern going from west to east and rows of medallions inhabited by animals. Each row contained three medallions.

In the western mosaic, we can see the medallions in the second and third rows from the west. The first row from the west, which was next to the entrance to the nave from the outside, remains buried under debris. In the second row, two baskets, apparently made of braided reeds, were preserved in the medallions at the ends. The baskets are shown from two angles: the sides and handles of the baskets are depicted from the side, whereas the tops of the baskets are shown from above so that we can see their contents. The basket in the southern medallion is tall and contains a cluster of grapes and a fig (Fig. 22). The basket's shape is typical of those depicted in mosaic floors featuring grape harvest scenes.[54]

On the north, to the left, there is a low, wide basket with a high handle. The basket contains black leaves and is full of fruits and vegetables, including pomegranates and squash, a pear or pumpkin, and an eggplant (Fig. 23). In order to fill the "vacuum" in the basket, a narrow white flower was added on the left. The motif in the middle medallion in this row has been completely destroyed.

In the row of medallions above the baskets (the third from the west in the mosaic pavement), the southern medallion (on the right) contains two animals: a lion bending down and devouring a horned animal (Fig. 24). The lion is shown from

[54] Some examples are at Beit Shean, el-Hamam, and the Church of the Virgin Mary (TALGAM 2014, 149, figs. 229–232; 198, Fig. 284); at Mt. Nebo, the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius, and the Chapel of the Priest John in Jordan; and in the Church of the Deacon Thomas at 'Uyun Musa (PICCIRILLO 1993, 157, Fig. 205; 173, Fig. 224; 182, Fig. 255; HACHLILI 2009, 141–142).

Fig. 22. Nave mosaics: basket in the southern medallion featuring a cluster of grapes and a fig (B. Zissu)

the side. His tail is wrapped around his hind leg nearest to the viewer. The illusion of volume is created both by the use of shades of color and by partial overlap of parts of the body. His prey, too, is seen from the side, other than the neck, which appears to be erect and at an unclear angle (either in profile or three-quarter view). The head is depicted in profile, such that it is looking back at the lion in a physiologically illogical way. The prey appears completely expressionless.

In the northernmost (left-hand) medallion, there was an animal antithetic to the lion. A foot with black claws has survived, attesting that this medallion, too, showed a predator from the big cat family. The two predators in the two medallions on the ends are facing the medallion in the middle of the row. In this medallion the body of an ox was partially preserved.

As in the case of the prey, the ox's body seems to be shown from the side as he faces left (north), but from the neck it appears as though his head is turned back to face south. We can see from the mosaic segment on the western side of the nave that the middle column of medallions in each row formed a central axis. The medallions on the ends were inhabited by similar motifs and animals, providing balance to the

Fig. 23. Nave mosaics: basket filled with fruits and vegetables (B. Zissu)

Fig. 24. Nave mosaics: a lion bending to devour a horned animal (B. Zissu)

Fig. 25. Nave mosaics: a leopard walking (B. Zissu)

composition of each row. The animals in the medallions on the ends were shown facing the middle medallion. These are the features identified by R. Hachlili for Group I mosaics featuring inhabited vine scrolls.[55] In the middle medallion that was preserved on the eastern side of the nave, among the small mosaic segments on which the steps to the bema were built, is a segment in which we can reconstruct a bird cage, a common motif in mosaics with the vine scroll pattern.[56]

The mosaic pavement in the nave was enclosed by an inner frame featuring an acanthus rinceau inhabited by animals. Four medallions have survived in the southwest, each depicting a single animal. In the medallion near the southwestern corner of the frame, a crouching lioness is depicted. The next medallion to the east shows a leopard with round spots, walking (Fig. 25). The leopard's body is shown in profile, as though moving eastward, but its neck and chest are presented in three-quarter view. Its head, however, is turned back 180 degrees, resembling a pose often associated with prey. Facing the leopard in the adjacent medallion is a long-tailed sheep. In the easternmost medallion, a bear is depicted. The bear's jaw is missing due to repairs to the mosaic that did not reconstruct its shape, though the head has been preserved.

At the southeastern end of the large mosaic segment, under the second marble pillar from the west, which fell from the row of pillars separating the nave from the south aisle, the lower body of a partridge was preserved in the space between the medallions. This detail emphasizes how rich the mosaic in the nave was in images of animals and also attests to *horror vacui*. In other words, the white background of the mosaics was filled with tesserae of various colors to create patterns, motifs, birds, or red spots.

The apse: The mosaic floor of the apse also featured a vine scroll inhabited by animals. This area, near the eastern end of the church, was severely damaged by large ashlar blocks that fell from the stone dome in the apse ceiling; therefore, the parts of the mosaic that were preserved are near the wall of the apse (Fig. 19). Two inhabited medallions, skillfully executed, have survived in that area. The one in the middle is inhabited by a colorful rooster; a partially preserved goose remains in the medallion to its right (Fig. 26).

The heads of the rooster and goose are shown from the side, whereas their bodies are seen in three-quarter view. To the left of the rooster, outside the medallions formed by the vine scroll, the tail of a bird with heart-shaped feathers was preserved. Despite the poor preservation of the mosaic pavement in the apse, this detail attests to the richness of the pattern.

The bema: The mosaic pavement on the bema features a geometric guilloche composed of pairs of interlinked shapes resembling Roman shields (*scuta*)—elongated hexagons

[55] HACHLILI 2009, 111–129.
[56] HACHLILI 2009, 140–141.

Fig. 26. Apse mosaics: a colorful rooster and a goose (B. Zissu)

with their opposite narrow sides short and convex.[57] These interlinked hexagons are arranged in rows and columns. The area enclosed by both interlinked hexagons is an octagon.

Between the rows of interlinked hexagons enclosing octagons, round medallions were formed. Each octagon and each medallion was inhabited by an animal (Fig. 27), except for one medallion in the middle of the top (eastern) row of octagons, which is inhabited by a geometric pattern. Below it, in the middle of the first (westernmost) row, a peacock displaying his tail was preserved in the octagon. He is shown from the front (Fig. 28), and his chest and claws appear in three-quarter view, whereas his neck and head are seen from the side with the peacock facing right.

The octagon to the right of the peacock is inhabited by a predator from the big cat family, poorly preserved. He is facing the center, toward the peacock. The octagon on the far left was completely destroyed by fallen debris. In the second row, two round medallions are inhabited by deer or gazelles. In the southern (right-hand) medallion, the lower body of an animal was preserved, and its split hooves are clearly visible. A hoof seen from the side was preserved from the animal in the northern (left-hand) medallion.

[57] AVI-YONAH 1933, H5; BALMELLE *et alii* 1985, 237a.

Above them, in the octagons in the top row of the mosaic pavement, the body of a duck, facing the middle of the pattern, was preserved. In the octagon on the north (left), a head with a beak, resembling the goose in the apse, survived. Both of these birds face the middle octagon, which is inhabited by a geometric motif and is surrounded by a garland of red buds.

The south aisle: The second pavement from the west in the south aisle is rectangular and features a scene borrowed from depictions of Nilotic landscapes (Fig. 29). At the bottom of the pavement is a colorful, wavy strip representing the body of water. Above it, as if hovering against the white background, are two pairs of antithetic fish swimming toward the center of the pavement. Above the fish are large lotus bushes extending over the entire length and width of the mosaic pavement. Some of them have fruit with seeds, some have red flowers, and some have pink and red buds. At the top (eastern part) of the pavement are three pairs of birds nesting on the lotus flowers.

Another figurative pavement in the south aisle is the third one from the east and the sixth from the west. It features partridges pecking at bushes with red buds and flowers (Fig. 30).

At the bottom of the pavement, the ground is shown as a

Fig. 28. Bema mosaics: partially preserved peacock in an octagon (B. Zissu)

Fig. 27. Bema mosaics: partially preserved bird in an octagon (B. Zissu)

Fig. 29. The south aisle: "Nilotic" landscape with fish, birds, and lotus bushes (B. Zissu)

Fig. 30. The south aisle: partridges pecking at bushes, with geometric pavement (N. Davidov)

Fig. 31. The north aisle: partially preserved frame with partridges (B. Zissu)

colorful strip of arches, resembling a body of water. All over this entire pavement, too, are large bushes. The bushes have small, elongated green leaves and large red flowers and buds. Partridges are scattered around against the white background. Like the fish, they appear to be hovering over the ground at the bottom of the pavement; some of them are pecking at the flowers.

The north aisle: The theme of partridges pecking at bushes with red flowers and buds is also seen in the rectangular pavement in the north aisle—the fifth pavement from the east. Only the northwestern corner of this pavement has survived (Fig. 31). In this small segment are a baby bird and two adult partridges with their backs to each other. Clearly, the artists depicted the same scene in two mosaic pavements, but did not use the same stencil to make the pavements. Apparently, they were given some freedom of action and could decide where and how to place the partridges against the background of the flowering bushes.

GEOMETRIC MOSAICS

The south aisle: The five square pavements in the south aisle, as well as one small rectangular pavement, feature geometric patterns. Of them, two pavements have patterns based on the meander motif: One is at the western end of the aisle and has colorful, winding strips in a meander pattern. It is contained within a circle enclosed in a square that forms the frame of the pavement. The other pavement is the fifth from the west and the fourth from the east. Here, the strips feature winding ropes and form a square containing two rows and two columns in a meander pattern.

Geometric pavements with similar patterns in the southern and northern aisles: Other square pavements in the south aisle are based on guilloches of colorful strips that create the illusion of intertwined circles and squares. One such pavement is the third from the west; the other is at the eastern end of the aisle (Fig. 32). In the north aisle, too, there are two pavements based on colorful strips that create an illusion of interlocking, intertwined, and overlapping circles (Fig. 33).

A square mosaic pavement in the south aisle, the second from the east (Fig. 34), features a pattern identical to that in the easternmost pavement in the north aisle: a modular (repeating) motif of a black rectangular strip with a colorful rope fringe, with a pelta-like motif.[58] They divide up the surface of the floor in such a way that the motifs are repeated at fixed intervals, and each such motif is perpendicular and adjacent to identical motifs.[59]

The spaces between the strips and the peltae form equilateral rhombuses. Each rhombus contains colored tesserae in a rainbow pattern (adjacent rows in different colors) produced with various designs (double rows of one color, a broken line, colorful triangles, etc.). Another motif that fills the

[58] AVI-YONAH 1933, I14.
[59] For a variant, see BALMELLE *et alii* 1985, 298–299, Pl. 189a.

Fig. 32. The south aisle: geometric pavement (B. Zissu)

Fig. 33. The north aisle: geometric pavement (B. Zissu)

Fig. 34. The north aisle: geometric pavement (B. Zissu)

Fig. 35. The south aisle: geometric pavement (B. Zissu)

rhombuses is based on the meander pattern and resembles the letter H.[60] This pattern is rare. It appears in a mosaic pavement excavated at Khirbet Kufin near the village of Beit Umar in the Hebron area.[61] A variant of this pattern was used in the mosaic floor at Hammat Tiberias.[62]

Two other mosaic pavements in the two aisles have similar but not identical geometric patterns: the fourth one from the west in the south aisle and the fifth one from the east in the north aisle. Both pavements are rectangular. Triangles run all the way along the frames, except in one place where there is a rectangle against the frame. The triangles and rectangle are done in various rainbow and geometric patterns.[63] In the middle of the pavement are two rhombuses alternating with two squares, each with a different geometric pattern (e.g., a ribbon guilloche, colorful rhombuses, or patterns based on a meander or swastika; Fig. 35).

[60] BALMELLE *et alii* 1985, 294–295, Pl. 187b; 298–299, Pl. 189a.
[61] BARAMKI 1935, 121, Pl. LXIX.
[62] TALGAM 2014, 318, Fig. 393.
[63] BALMELLE *et alii* 1985, 314–315, Pl. 199a–199d, 200b–220c.

The north aisle: In the large mosaic segment preserved at the eastern end of the north aisle, the following mosaics were preserved (from west to east): a rectangular pavement with partridges, a square featuring a guilloche of colorful strips that create the illusion of interlocking and overlapping circles, a rectangular pavement similar to the one described above in the south aisle, a pavement with a pattern resembling a figure eight, and a pelta pattern. The last two pavements were described with their parallels from the south aisle.

PARALLELS, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

The mosaic pavements in the nave and apse feature a typical composition of vine scrolls and acanthus rinceaux, populated with various images and objects. This design is commonly found in the northwestern Negev, the Gaza region, and Jordan.[64] Apparently, the church patrons who decided on the decoration and funded the work chose image-rich mosaics for the interior spaces. For the side aisles, they preferred geometric mosaics, with the exception of small rectangular sections that contain depictions of birds (including partridges) and fish.

The mosaics were apparently produced by a local workshop that used tesserae of uniform size. The repertoire of colors and shades is uniform in both the early mosaics in the nave and aisles and the mosaics from the later stage of the church on the bema and in the apse. This conclusion is supported by minor details, especially the motifs filling the small spaces on the bema and in the aisles and the way in which the strips creating the guilloches were colored.

The rare pelta motif that is common to the mosaic pavements in the aisles is also seen in the church at Khirbet Kufin.[65] This suggests that the same workshop, or at least two workshops that operated in geographical proximity to each other, produced these pavements using a similar repertoire of patterns.[66]

From a stylistic standpoint, the geometric pavements in the aisles have close parallels at other Judean sites. For instance, the westernmost pavement in the south aisle, based on a circle enclosed in a square and with a meander inside the circle, resembles a mosaic from ʿEin Dab.[67] Another example is the pavement based on a guilloche of antithetic ribbons that create an illusion of partly overlapping circles, which parallels a mosaic from the nave of the church at Shiloh.[68] The similarity to mosaics from the hill country is also manifested in the details of the various rainbow patterns, the high quality of the work, and the *horror vacui*.

The mosaic pavement on the bema also has parallels, particularly in the Judean Hills and Judean Desert,[69] as well as in Jordan.[70]

The scuta motif on our bema is identical to the one in the nave at Khirbet Massuh in Jordan. The arrangement of mosaic pavements in the aisles there is also identical to the arrangement in our aisles.[71] There seems to have been a connection between the arrangement of mosaics in these two churches, despite the geographical distance.

Inhabited vine scrolls and acanthus rinceaux were common throughout the Mediterranean Basin in the Roman and Early Byzantine periods. The mosaic in the nave features acanthus rinceaux (in the frame) and vine scrolls (in the pavement). It is inhabited by animals and is typical, in terms of the theme, its colorful nature, and the illusion of light, of mosaics from the sixth century CE.[72] The mosaics on the bema and in the apse, which also feature animals, match the criteria determined by Amir and Talgam for mosaics from the sixth century CE.[73]

Despite the stratigraphic difference, we assume that the mosaics from the early stage 4a, in the nave and the aisles, were created during the sixth century CE. The congregation evidently favored images. They did not refrain from depicting them and the images were not deliberately defaced. Y. Peleg, who studied the defacement of images (iconoclasm) in churches[74] and synagogues in Judea, has shown that images of human beings and animals were defaced in most of the churches in the Judean Shephelah and along the road leading up into the hills, as well as in the synagogues in the

[64] AMIR 2012, 474.

[65] BARAMKI 1935, 121, Pl. LXIX.

[66] A variant of the pattern can be seen in the mosaic floor at Hammat Tiberias (TALGAM 2014, 318, Fig. 393).

[67] AMIR 2012, 484, Fig. 1.

[68] AMIR 2012, 177, Fig. 21, Pl. 1.

[69] Parallels from Judea include the mosaics in the church at Horvat Hanot (SHENHAV 2003, 271, figs. 1–2), at Horvat Berachot (TSAFRIR/HIRSCHFELD 1993, 179, 209–211; TALGAM 2014, 151, Fig. 236), in the Martyrius Monastery (MAGEN 2015, 75–80, figs. 83, 84, 87, 89, 91–93, 95, 96; TALGAM 2014, 150, Fig. 233; 172, figs. 263, 264), and at the Naʿaran synagogue (VINCENT 1961, 170, Fig. 19; TALGAM 2014, 304, Fig. 370; 307, Fig. 375).

[70] For example, in the assemblage from the Chapel of the Martyr Theodore in the Madaba cathedral (PICCIRILLO 1993, 109, Fig. 97; 117, figs. 109, 111–115; TALGAM 2014, 190, Fig. 279), in the Church of the Acropolis at Maʿin (PICCIRILLO 1993, 196–197, Fig. 299; 199, Fig. 103; 201, figs. 308–310; TALGAM 2014, 392, Fig. 474), and at Khirbet Massuh (PICCIRILLO 1993, 252, Fig. 435; 253, Fig. 441).

[71] PICCIRILLO 1993, 252–253, figs. 435, 441.

[72] AMIR 2012, 481.

[73] AMIR 2012, 481; TALGAM 2014, 158–159.

[74] At Beit Loya, there was systematic defacement of the mosaic in the nave that included a vine scroll inhabited by images (PATRICH/TSAFRIR 1993, Pl. XVIIIc, XIXa, XIXb). At Mahat el-Urdi in Beit Guvrin, images of humans and animals in the mosaic were defaced, but the defacement was not done thoroughly, as oxen and peacocks were preserved—perhaps due to symbolic meaning attributed to them in a Christian context (BARAMKI 1972, 136–137, Fig. 4). In the church at Maresha, the head of a deer was defaced in the southern section, and geometric patterns were chosen for the nave (KLONER 1993, 260, 262). The practice of choosing geometric patterns so as to avoid human or animal images is known from the church at Khirbet Hubeila (ABEL 1925, 281, Fig. 8; 1939; VINCENT 1939). At Roglit, a mosaic featuring a geometric guilloche inhabited by a tree with two large ivy leaves at the bottom was preserved; very likely, this is the result of a repair job following the defacement of images (ZVILICHOVSKY 1960, Pl. XXVIIa). The mosaic near Tel Socho features a vine scroll, but images of a camel, hare, deer, and apparently also other unidentifiable animals were defaced (GUDOVITCH 1996, 19*–21*, Fig. 1). For the church at Beit Natif, geometric patterns were selected (BARAMKI 1935, 120, Pl. LXIX). At Khirbet Fattir, images of a lion, goat, and bear were defaced (STRUS 2003, 191, 198, Fig. 6.10; 200, Fig. 6.2; 201, Fig. 6.14), but images of birds and peacocks and part of a person's head were preserved in the mosaic on the bema (STRUS 2003, 205, 207, Fig. 20). An eagle (which was ascribed Christian significance) adorns the floor of the Church of the Glorious Martyr in Ramat Beit Shemesh, where few indications of iconoclasm were reported (HABAS 2014). At the church of Horvat Hanot, there are indications of iconoclastic defacement followed by repair using mostly white tesserae (SHENHAV 2003, 271, figs. 1–2). The mosaic at Battir featured a geometric guilloche and fish, which were also ascribed significance in a Christian context (VINCENT 1910, Pl. I–II). In other words, the common decision was to avoid depicting images, with the exception of creatures that could be interpreted as Christian symbols.

southern Hebron hills.[75] In his opinion, the defacement took place in the eighth century CE.[76]

The closest iconophiliac congregations are near Matta in the Jerusalem hills,[77] and at Horvat Berachot in the Hebron hills.[78] The Horvat Midras congregation thus belonged to a minority that supported and preserved images in its mosaic floors. Perhaps the blocking of the passage between the north aisle and the martyrium east of the aisle was done to keep outsiders visiting the martyrium out of the basilica, as some of them would presumably have objected to the depiction of images of animals and people.

THE UNDERGROUND COMPLEX AND REMAINS OF THE ANCIENT SETTLEMENT

As explained above, the baptismal font (Fig. 19) was installed (in Stage 4) above the stepped dromos that led down to Burial Chamber F. It turns out that the chamber was based on an earlier underground installation: a ritual bath with two openings or a storage chamber (see Fig. 36). The modifications, done in Stage 3, included hewing, new construction, and plastering. A short burrow, whose entrance was blocked by a wall and plaster when the tomb was created, allowed access to an underground hiding complex from Stages 1 and 2.

We found remains of architecture from the first and second centuries CE when we cut into the northeast corner of the north aisle. These included a wall resting on a bedrock foundation. A packed earth floor approximately 10 cm thick had been laid down atop the bedrock. We found fragments of a jug, an intact cooking pot, and two coins that date the last use of the floor to the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Shafts hewn from the floors of the houses of Stages 1 and 2 led to underground storage rooms, which were connected by branching tunnels. We investigated these shafts from inside the underground complex, which we entered from Burial Chamber F. We now turn to a description of the underground complex, starting with the baptistery.

The complex was composed of a number of rock-cut chambers—most of them storage chambers (see Fig. 37)—linked by holes in their walls and winding, narrow burrows, where we found devices ready to hand to block them. The discovery of the characteristic tunnels and other features permits us to define this as a typical hiding complex of the sort common in the Judean Foothills. The ceramic and numismatic finds point to the date of last use: the first third of the second century CE—that is, the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The builders of the church knew about the underground complex. They converted one chamber of this complex into Burial Chamber F, to which, given its location under the apse, they clearly ascribed special sanctity (see Fig. 14). The discovery of a coin of Constantius II in the plaster coating the wall of Burial Chamber F allows us to set the mid-fourth century CE as the earliest date for this conversion. The hiding complex

Fig. 36a. Tomb F, looking east (B. Zissu)

[75] PELEG 2012, 485, Fig. 1.
[76] PELEG 2012, 491.
[77] OVADIAH/OVADIAH/GUDOVITCH 1976, 427, Pl. XXXIX; 430, Pl. XVIIIc, XIX.
[78] TSAFRIR/HIRSCHFELD 1993, 21.

Fig. 36b. Tomb F, looking west; notice modifications and short burrow (B. Zissu)

was blocked off and retired from use when the burial cave was created. Another action that seems to have taken place in Stage 4, or perhaps even earlier, in Stage 3, is the construction of a massive wall running the width of one of the underground chambers (Chamber C; Fig. 37a, b). This was apparently intended to support the roof of the chamber and prevent it from collapsing under the weight of the newly erected church.

The hiding complex in question includes underground storage chambers (A, B, C, D, E, and F) that were part of the settlement's infrastructure during Stage 1 and predate the hiding complex. The tunnels (e-f-g, i-j, b-c, m-n) and opening (u) should be dated to the hiding activity (Stage 2; see Fig. 37b, c). Today, the complex includes later elements (Burial Chamber F and Wall X) belonging to the church and baptistery (Stages 3 and 4).

Chambers A and B were used for storage, but they were entered via a shaft and a narrow tunnel. We have found similar arrangements at Horvat ʿEthri, where we described them as the "prototype" of the hiding complex phenomenon in the Judean Foothills.[79] For example, Complex IV at Horvat ʿEthri dates from the first century CE and went out of use during the Jewish War. The small "home" complexes dug out under residential buildings in Horvat ʿEthri include elements that are known from larger and more sophisticated complexes, such as arrangements for camouflaging and blocking off the complex, winding tunnels that keep changing their direction and level, and small storage chambers.[80] The data from other sites in the Judean Foothills as well as the present location suggest that the hiding complexes appeared as early as the first century BCE, but the phenomenon reached its zenith during the Bar Kokhba Revolt.[81]

Few artifacts were found in the chambers of the hiding complex. Most of them date from its last stage of use, during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. This is evident from the characteristic potsherds, lamp fragments, and one coin from Tiberias and two from Ascalon, minted in the interbellum period (Stage 2). Perutot of Agrippa I and from Year 2 of the Jewish War apparently derive from the earlier stages of use of the underground chambers (Stage 1), although we should not rule out the possibility that they were still in circulation at the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Because there were no artifacts that could date Burial Chamber F, the discovery of a small bronze coin of Constantius II minted in 351–355 CE, stuck into the plaster on its wall, provides a *terminus post quem* for the date of its construction, apparently during Stage 3. Moreover, the cavity's design is consistent with this period.

In terms of chronology, it appears that the mosaics of Stage 4 were laid in two phases: first (4a) in the aisles and nave and later (4b) in the apse and presbyterium (third quarter of the sixth century CE). The interval between these phases was not great. Perhaps the same artisan was called

[79] ZISSU/GANOR 2009.

[80] ZISSU *et alii* 2021.

[81] KLONER/ZISSU 2003; 2009; RAVIV/ZISSU 2022; MELAMED 2020.

Fig. 37a. Storage chamber C, looking north along wall x towards opening to chamber B (B. Zissu)

Fig. 37b. Storage chamber C, looking south along wall x towards opening to tunnel i (B. Zissu)

Fig. 37c. Tunnel i, looking west (B. Zissu)

Fig. 37d. Tunnel g, looking north (B. Zissu)

back to execute the later mosaics after the modifications to the eastern section of the church.

The ceramic and numismatic finds from the church indicate that activity continued at the site, in one fashion or another, until the earthquake of 749 CE. Four massive pillars decorated with crosses or staurograms[82] were found in the debris in the southern section of the church (Fig. 38). Fragments of similar pillars were found reused in later makeshift walls. Their original purpose is still unclear. Indentations in these pillars may reflect a stage when the south aisle was roofed over. At a later stage, while still *in situ*, the pillars were carefully covered with a thin coat of plaster that obscured the crosses or staurograms. This may well have been done by Muslims when they took over the church or by Christians in the Early Islamic period.

The church finally collapsed in the earthquake of 749 CE. Subsequently, in Stage 5, there was new construction near the narthex and atrium and north of the ruined building. Walls were built by reusing blocks and architectural elements from the church. Ovens were found in several rooms; the ceramic finds included cooking pots from the Abbasid period.

The numismatic and ceramic record suggests limited use of the site during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

[82] A staurogram is an early Christian monogram or symbol that combines the Greek letters for "cross" (tau, T, and rho, P) to form a cross-like figure. It was used to symbolize Christ and is found in early Christian art and inscriptions. The staurogram is a visual representation of the crucifixion and is considered an important Christogram in Christian iconography (HURTADO 2006).

Fig. 38. Massive pillar adorned with a carved and painted staurogram. The indentation cut under the staurogram, which damaged it, may indicate a phase when the south aisle was roofed over. Note the later careful application of plaster obscuring the staurogram. (B. Zissu)

Agricultural terraces were built south of the church, using the older stones and architectural elements.

CONCLUSION

The archaeological data demonstrate continuous settlement at the site. The finds in the layers beneath the church floor make it clear that the earliest structures in this portion of the site (Stage 1), those resting on the bedrock, date to the late Second Temple period (first century BCE–first century CE) and were destroyed at the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (Stage 2).

The archaeological record attests to the existence of a Jewish settlement during the late Second Temple period, its inhabitants' preparations to resist the Roman campaign to quash the Bar Kokhba Revolt, and an interlude after the settlement was destroyed during the revolt. Wall and floor fragments and a typical hiding complex belong to this period.

After a hiatus during the second and third centuries, the ruins of the earlier stages were leveled and a new structure, apparently a Christian basilica, was erected in the fourth century CE (Stage 3). Its construction was associated with a revered tomb (F), created inside an earlier underground chamber from Stage 1 (incorporated in the hiding complex from Stage 2; Fig. 15). The tomb itself dates from the fourth century (Stage 3) and was important to the local Christian cult.

The basilical structure erected above the tomb in the fourth century had a white mosaic floor. Its plan will not be entirely clear until the excavations in the area of the apse have been completed. We need to determine whether this empty tomb was associated with the church from the outset, or with some other, perhaps simpler structure whose identification remains uncertain.

Stage 4 includes a church with marble columns and capitals and multicolored mosaic floors. The church was built within the walls of the Stage 3 structure. The apse was built above the Stage 3 tomb (F); the passage that gave access to the tomb began in the room just north of the apse, which thus served as part of the martyrium.

We identified at least two stages in the construction of the church; the second, Stage 4b, was marked by the westward extension of the bema, sealing of the passage between the north aisle and the martyrium, and creation of a new entrance to it from the north. It also included the construction of a structure—apparently a baptismal font—atop the passage leading from the martyrium to the empty tomb.

On the basis of the numismatic record and the style of the mosaics and capitals, this stage of construction can be dated to the third quarter of the sixth century CE. The numismatic record indicates that the structure remained in use during the Umayyad period, until it was destroyed in the earthquake of 749 CE.

The mosaic floors and marble columns in the church attest to a wealthy donor, perhaps the bishop of nearby Eleutheropolis or some layman who worked in coordination with the bishop. We dated the church based on the numismatic record and stylistic parallels to the mosaics and capitals.

What local event took place in the third quarter of the sixth century CE that permitted and perhaps even triggered the construction of the church? At first glance, the floor plan appears to be standard and the dimensions are not particularly noteworthy. Apparently, however, the church contained two or perhaps three separate cultic sites that attracted pilgrims. In addition to the apse and bema, where the usual rite of the Eucharist and holy day liturgy were conducted, it abutted a holy site—the empty tomb—that was the reason for its construction. Perhaps another ritual was conducted in the marble-floored southern room, related in some fashion to relics that were displayed there on a portable base.

The church continued to be used after the Muslim conquest. The crosses that adorned the large stone pillars were deliberately covered over with a thin layer of plaster. Access

to the empty tomb and the structure above it (baptistery?) was altered so as not to require passage through the church itself. This revision raises the question of the religious affiliation of those who used the church. Could it have served both Christians and Muslims, together or separately? Perhaps the worshipers were local Christians who had converted to Islam?

The numismatic record indicates that the church collapsed during the earthquake of 749 CE. There was a revival of activity in the narthex during the Abbasid period, likely in the second half of the eighth century or in the ninth century. However, the settlement had lost its prosperity. The central public building was gone, replaced by hovels constructed from the ruins of the church. Although the exact timing of the abandonment of the site remains unclear, agricultural activity, including the construction of animal pens and terraces, resumed during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

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