Horvat Midras (Khirbet Durusiya): An Ancient Settlement and its Artificial Cavities in the Judean Foothills, Israel

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Abstract

Horvat Midras is located in the central Judean Foothills, c. 6 kms NE of the Roman city of Beth Guvrin – Eleutheropolis, beside the main Roman road to Jerusalem. At the peak of its development, during the Roman period – 1st century CE, the settlement's built-up area covered more than 12 hectares, which makes it one of the largest ancient rural sites in the region. This Jewish settlement was destroyed during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136 CE). A Late Antique church was excavated by our team in the northern part of the village. The earlier strata, underneath the church floor, include remains of a building and of underground chambers, from the late Hellenistic – Early Roman period. The underground chambers were interconnected by tunnels, and formed a typical hiding system which went out of use following the Bar Kokhba Revolt. After a hiatus during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, the remains of the earlier buildings were leveled and a new basilican structure, paved with a white mosaic floor was erected. Its construction, in the 4th century CE, was associated with a rock-cut venerated tomb – "in our opinion" – "the raison d'etre" *of this architectural complex. This tomb was created within a rock-cut chamber, integrated in the earlier hiding system; the "creation" of the tomb dates to the 4th century. In the next architectural stage, a basilical church with marble columns and capitals and multicolored mosaic floors was erected. The church was built within the former basilical structure and reused some of its columns and walls. The apse was built above the tomb; the passage that gave access to the cave began in a room, built just north of the apse, which thus served as a martyrium. We identified at least two stages in the construction of this church, paved with exquisite multicolored mosaic floors; the second stage 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, as well as 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 findings and the style of the mosaics and capitals, this stage of construction can be dated to the third quarter of the 6th 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. As with other sites in the Judean Foothills, a systematic study of the underground chambers carved out of the local chalk provides details about the site's history. Our survey identified almost 60 artificial cavities and subterranean systems rock-cut under the settlement. They served a variety of purposes: cisterns, quarries, columbaria, ritual immersion baths, storerooms, etc. In ten caves located under the buildings of the ancient settlement, we detected typical hiding systems. A study of the layout and plan of the hiding systems and of the artifacts found in them are an important source of information about the settlement in the late Second Temple period and during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Dozens of rock-cut tombs were hewn out of the slopes that surround the settlement. One hypogeum, built of ashlars and decorated was dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. A tunnel connects this hypogeum to a smaller burial cave with three arcosolia, hewn during the Byzantine period. Red crosses were drawn on the walls of the cave, along with the 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' statement, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:13).*

Key words: Israel Archaeology, Beth Guvrin – Eleutheropolis, Bar Kokhba Revolt, Late Antique church, Hiding system, Late Antique Christian tombs, Christian tomb decoration, Crosses, Greek graffiti, Hypogeum, Multicolored mosaic floors, Martyrium, Baptisterium, Umayyad period, Earthquake - 749 CE, Underground rock-cut chambers, Subterranean systems, Cisterns, Quarries, Columbaria, Jewish ritual immersion baths, Storerooms.

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Riassunto

Horvat Midras (Khirbet Durusiya): Un Antico Insediamento e le sue Cavità Artificiali nelle Foothills della Giudea, Israele

Horvat Midras si trova nella zona centrale della Giudea, circa 6 km a NE della città romana di Beth Guvrin – Eleutheropolis, accanto alla principale strada romana per Gerusalemme. Al culmine del suo sviluppo, durante il periodo romano – I secolo d.C. – l'abitato della colonia si estendeva per più di 12 ettari, il che lo rende uno dei più grandi siti antichi rurali della regione. Questo insediamento ebraico è stato distrutto durante la rivolta di Bar Kokhba (132-136 d.C.). Una chiesa tardoantica è stata scavata dal nostro team nella parte settentrionale dell'insediamento. Gli strati più antichi, sotto il pavimento della chiesa, includono i resti di un edificio e di camere sotterranee, dal periodo tardo ellenistico all'età romana antica. I sotterranei sono stati collegati tra loro da cunicoli e formano un sistema "nascosto" tipico, che è andato in disuso in seguito alla rivolta di Bar Kokhba. Dopo una pausa durante il II e III secolo d.C., i resti degli edifici precedenti sono stati livellati e una nuova struttura basilicale, pavimentata con un mosaico bianco è stata eretta. La sua costruzione, nel IV secolo d.C., è stata associata ad una tomba venerata scavata nella roccia – a nostro avviso – la ragion d'essere di questo complesso architettonico. Questa tomba è stata creata all'interno di una camera scavata nella roccia, integrata nel sistema "nascosto" accennato in precedenza; la realizzazione della tomba risale anch'essa al IV secolo d.C. Nella successiva fase architettonica è stata eretta una chiesa basilicale con colonne e capitelli di marmo e pavimenti a mosaico policromo. La chiesa è stata costruita all'interno della struttura ex basilicale e ha riutilizzato alcune delle sue colonne e le pareti. L'abside è stata costruita sopra la tomba; il passaggio che dava l'accesso all'ipogeo si apriva in una stanza, costruita a nord dell'abside, che quindi fungeva da martyrium. Abbiamo identificato almeno due fasi della costruzione di questa chiesa, pavimentata con raffinati mosaici policromi; la seconda fase è stata segnata dall'estensione verso ovest della bema, dal mantenimento del passaggio tra la navata nord e il martyrium e dalla creazione di un nuovo ingresso da nord, così come dalla costruzione di una struttura – apparentemente una fonte battesimale – in cima al passaggio che conduce dal martyrium alla tomba vuota. Sulla base dei ritrovamenti numismatici e in base allo studio sullo stile dei mosaici e dei capitelli, questa fase di costruzione è databile al terzo quarto del VI secolo d.C. I ritrovamenti numismatici indicano che la struttura è rimasta in uso durante il periodo Omayyade, fino a quando non fu distrutta nel terremoto del 749. Come in altri siti della Giudea, uno studio sistematico delle camere sotterranee scavate nel gesso locale fornisce dettagli sulla storia del sito. La nostra indagine ha identificato quasi 60 cavità artificiali e sistemi sotterranei scavati nella roccia sotto l'insediamento. Tali opere ipogee hanno avuto una varietà di destinazioni d'uso: cisterne, cave, colombari, bagni per immersioni rituali, magazzini, ecc. In dieci sotterranei situati sotto gli edifici dell'antico insediamento abbiamo rilevato tipici sistemi di difesa e rifugio (nascondigli). Uno studio del piano di sviluppo dei sistemi di rifugio e dei reperti trovati in essi sono una fonte importante di informazioni riguardanti l'insediamento alla fine del periodo del Secondo Tempio e durante la rivolta di Bar Kokhba. Decine di tombe scavate nella roccia sono state realizzate lungo le pendici che circondano l'insediamento. Un ipogeo, costruito con conci e decorato, è stato datato al I-II secolo d.C. Un tunnel collega questo ipogeo ad una cavità più piccola, destinata a sepoltura con tre arcosoli, scavata durante il periodo bizantino. Croci di colore rosso furono disegnate sulle pareti della grotta, insieme con le lettere IX (iota e chi, a significare Ιησους Χριστος = Gesù Cristo) e ΑΩ, (alfa e omega, prima e ultima lettera dell'alfabeto greco, un'allusione alla dichiarazione di Gesù, "Io sono l'Alfa e l'Omega, il primo e l'ultimo, il principio e la fine" (Apocalisse 22:13).

Parole chiave: Archeologia in Israele, Beth Guvrin – Eleutheropolis, Rivolta di Bar Kokhba, chiesa tardo antica, sistema nascosto, tombe cristiane, decorazione tombe cristiane, croci, graffiti greci, ipogeo, pavimenti a mosaico multicolore, Martyrium, battistero, periodo Omayyade, terremoto - 749 d.C., camere sotterranee scavate nella roccia, sistemi sotterranei, cisterne, cave, colombari, bagni per immersione rituali ebraiche, magazzini.

Introduzione

Horvat Midras is located in the central Judean Foothills [New Israel Grid (NIG) coordinates 1940/6182] on the northern slopes of a ridge that rises above the southern bank of Nahal Hakhlil (see Figs. 1 and 2)[1]. At its peak, during the Roman period, the settlement's built-up area covered more than 12 hectares, which makes it one of the largest sites in the region. The settlement extends over a series of broad terraces that dominate the agricultural lands in the channel of Nahal Hakhlil and its tributaries, which was probably the main source of the ancient residents' livelihood. The streambed once had a high water table where wells were dug. These wells (known as Biyar el Durusiya) appear on British Mandate-era maps, but their water supply has dwindled in recent decades due to overpumping. As a result of intensive farming, the wells have been covered over with soil and are hardly visible today.

A major road, which connected Gaza and Ashqelon to Jerusalem via Beth Guvrin, passes through the channel that runs north-west of the site. During the Roman period, this was one of the most important roads in the region (Roll, 1983; Roll & Dagan, 1988).

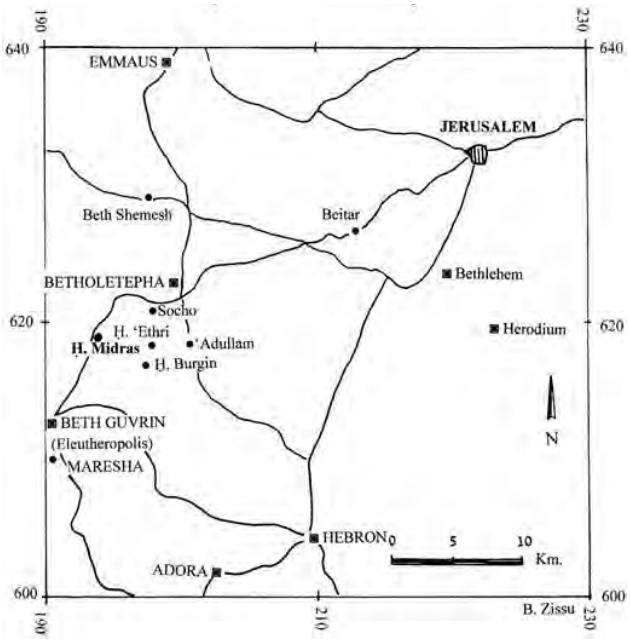

Fig. 1 - Horvat Midras - location map (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 1 - Horvat Midras - Mappa di localizzazione (foto B. Zissu).

Fig. 2 - Horvat Midras - Aerial view showing various features (photo A. Graicer).
Fig. 2 - Horvat Midras - Veduta aerea che mostra i vari ritrovamenti (foto A. Graicer).

The site was first described by Victor Guérin, who provided general information about the public buildings and one of the *columbaria*. Guérin noted that two ancient wells dug in the streambed still provided water (Guérin, 1869, 370). The Palestine Exploration Fund explorers took brief note of the existence of piles of stones, building foundations, a ruined cistern, and several caves (Conder & Kitchener, 1883: 280).

[1] This article summarizes the many 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, architect Giora Solar, Dr. Uzi Dahari, Dr. Yoel Elitzur, and Arieh Rochman-Halperin of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Special thanks to Yair Tsoran, Asael Lavi, Zehava Valdman (Studio Valdman), Yotam and Tamara Zissu for their assistance.

Fig. 3 - Large columbarium, dated typologically to the Byzantine or Early Islamic period; other columbaria at this site were hewn out during the late Hellenistic and Early Roman period (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 3 - Grande columbarium, datato tipologicamente al periodo bizantino o all'inizio dell'età islamica; altre piccionaie in questo sito sono state scavate durante il periodo tardo ellenistico e la prima età romana (foto B. Zissu).

In the late 1950s, Levi Yizhaq Rahmani conducted a partial archaeological survey of the site. He documented (in highly schematic fashion) a large *columbarium* that apparently served for raising pigeons (see 1 on Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). He also documented a "stepped-pyramid", located on the bounds of the ancient site (2 on Fig. 2 see below) - and collected potsherds from the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and later periods (Rahmani, 1964).
The first systematic survey of the underground chambers at the site was carried out in 1981 by the second author, together with Amos Frumkin and members of the Israel Cave Research Center. The explorers noted the large number of artificial cavities and underground chambers, the sophistication of the stone-cutting, and the layout of the ancient site (Kloner, 1987).
A later study, which focused on the remains of three public buildings, was carried out by Zvi Ilan (1991: 272–273). 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 (3 on Fig. 2; NIG map coordinates 193881/618214). Ilan posited that it might have been a synagogue. Several decorated architectural elements were found near this building, planned to be excavated by Orit Peleg-Barkat.
In 1976, following illegal excavations on the western slope of the site, Kloner excavated a rock-cut and ashlar faced burial complex (4 on Fig. 2; see below).
In 2010–2011, a team headed by Amir Ganor excavated a public building, which functioned as a church during the Byzantine period (5 on Fig. 2); beneath it, a system of artificial cavities that served as a hiding complex was explored. These structures will be described below.

The History of the Settlement at the Site

A few potsherds dating to Iron Age II, collected from the bottom of the northern slope, seem to reflect the earliest permanent human habitation. Settlement continued during the Persian and early Hellenistic periods, as attested by scattered potsherds from this period. The settlement grew during the Hellenistic period and reached its zenith during the early and middle Roman periods (first century BCE–second century CE), as evidenced by the scattered pottery and the typology and chronology of the artificial cavities and chambers, rock-hewn underneath the buildings and the burial caves. At this juncture, the settlement was inhabited by Jews. The settlement was destroyed during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136 CE; Rahmani, 1964: 227-228).
At this stage of the research, we have no information about the nature and extent of the settlement during the late Roman period. We cannot say definitively whether any Jews continued to live there after the Bar Kokhba Revolt, or whether the site was resettled by Gentiles (Kloner, 1978; 1987). Only a large-scale excavation could clarify the inhabitants' changing religious affiliation. This process took place between the second and fifth centuries CE, but for now we cannot tell whether the locals converted to Christianity collectively or whether the site was resettled by Christians who hailed from elsewhere in the Roman/Byzantine Empire.
Whatever the case, the Byzantine period residents - especially those of the fifth and sixth centuries CE - were Christian. A church was erected in the northern part of the village (see below), and there may have been a community of monks. The remains left behind from this period suggest that the settlement covered less ground than during the late Second Temple period and Bar Kokhba Revolt (Ganor et al., 2011). The burial caves decorated with crosses (see below) also date to the Byzantine settlement.
Some portions of the site suggest activity during the early Muslim period, Middle Ages, and Ottoman times: corrals built using stones from the earlier settlement, other secondary uses of ancient building materials and rock-hewn cavities, and some scattered sherds.

Geographic and Historical Identification

The site's Arabic name is Khirbat Drousia (درسيا, as transcribed by Guérin, 1869: 370), Khirbat Durusiya (as per the British Mandate 1:20000 Maps; see Fig. 4), 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" (Stewardson, 1888: 370).
F.M. Abel (1938: 30) proposed identifying Kh. Durusiya with Drousias, which is mentioned in Claudius

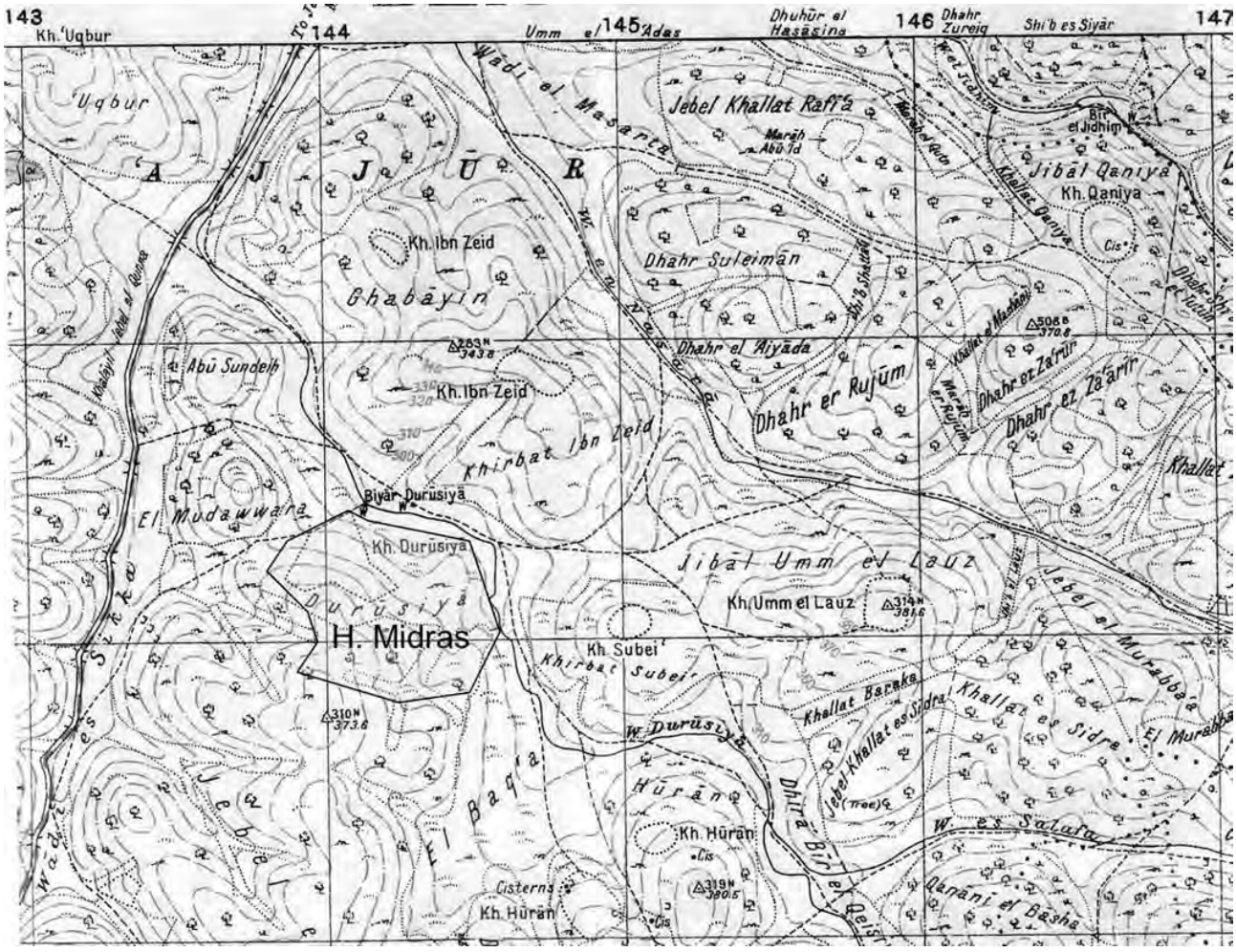

Fig. 4 - Khirbat Durusiya, on a British Mandate 1:20˙000 Map, 1945.
Fig. 4 - Khirbat Durusiya, in una cartografia del Mandato Britannico, anno 1945, scala 1:20˙000.

Ptolemy's *Geographia* (5.16.6–8)[2]. Ptolemy included Δρουσιάς (Drousias) in his list of the 19 most important town 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), which indicates 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 coordinates, which place Drousias in northern Judea or southern Samaria (Avi-Yonah, 1951: 129). Abel believed that Ptolemy's coordinates were mistaken (as they frequently are) and should be ignored. Despite this problem, Yoram Tsafrir et al. (1994: 114) and others (see works cited in Tsafrir et al., 1994, see also Schmitt, 1995: 136) accepted the identification of Drousias with Horvat Midras.

We second the opinion of Abel and later researchers and believe that Drousias should, indeed, be identified with Khirbet Durusiya, i.e. Horvat Midras. We would like to carry this one step further and suggest that King Herod gave the settlement the name Drousias as a way of "refounding" or "upgrading" an important town in southern Judea/Idumea - the district from which his family originated (Kokkinos, 1998: 100-112; Shatzman, 2013; see also Stiebel, 2013).

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[3],

[2] 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 and Jones, 2000: 5, 31–40, 43–45.

[3] The name "Drusus" was common among members of the Julio-Claudian family. The Emperor Tiberius' son, also named

Drusus' death was a severe blow to Augustus and naturally led to a need to commemorate him (Crook, 1996: 137–138; 1996a: 178–182).

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[4] and Caesarea, respectively (for more on the establishment of Sebaste, see *Jewish Antiquities* 15.292–298; *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.22 [403]). The Caesarea harbor was designated as 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, where 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 (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.331–341; *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.5–8 [408–415]; *Jewish Antiquities* 16.136–138; *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 and Grainger, 1997). Herod rebuilt Anthedon and named it Agrippias in honor of the emperor's son-in-law and right-hand man, Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (*Wars of the Jews* 1.21.8 [416], *Jewish Antiquities* 13.357). 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. (For detailed lists of Herod's building projects, see Rocca, 2008).

Rock-Cut Chambers and Underground Systems

As with other sites in the Judean Shephelah, a study of the typology and spatial distribution of rock-cut chambers provides details about the site's history. A 1981 survey of Horvat Midras identified 56 underground caves and subterranean systems hewn from the chalk under every part of the settlement. They served a variety of purposes: cisterns, quarries, columbaria, storerooms, etc. In ten caves located under the buildings of the ancient settlement, researchers found typical hiding systems, some of them labyrinthine. A study of the layout and plan of the hiding systems and of the artifacts found in them are an important source of information about the settlement at Horvat Midras in the late Second Temple period and during the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

The following paragraphs offer a brief summary of the plans and artifacts associated with four hiding systems that have been studied (for a more detailed Hebrew description of the systems, see Kloner, 1984; Kloner, 1987: 137–145).

System 6 (30 on Fig. 2) links three ancient cisterns (two of which were used to collect water) by means of typical tunnels. The system was originally more extensive, but only part of it has been discovered and documented.

System 20 (20 on Fig. 2; Fig. 5), which is 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 (17). The system includes additional ancient cavities, such as a columbarium (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 (12,13,14,16). Bath (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 (1) is also rectangular, though larger (3.6 × 3.3 m); two steps

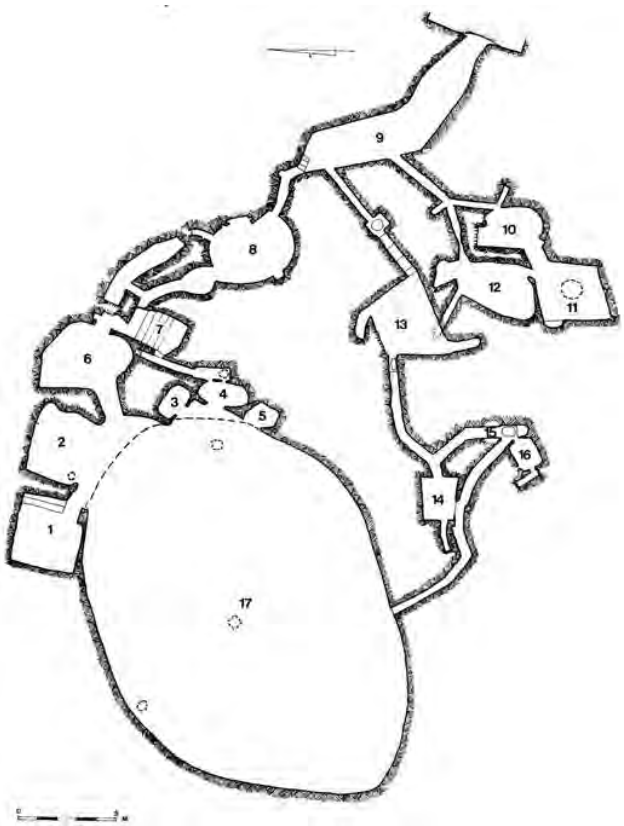

Fig. 5 - Plan of underground System 20 (drawing A. Kloner and A. Frumkin).

Fig. 5 - Planimetria del sistema sotterraneo 20 (disegno A. Kloner e A. Frumkin).

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 has been found inscribed on an ossuary from that city (Ilan, 2002: 330, see references there).

[4] "Sebastia" is derived from "Sebastos," which is the Greek equivalent of "Augustus."

are preserved on its eastern side. This bath predates the hiding system. Together with bath 7, it probably served the residents of the large building on the surface, whose plan cannot be reconstructed without excavation (Reich, 2013: 287–289).

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, two coins minted in Ascalon during the reign of Domitian and other items. All these objects are characteristic of the first and second centuries CE.

System 30 (30 on Fig. 2; Fig. 6) consists of a series of earlier underground quarries (1,2) and cisterns (3,4,5). These cavities seem to have been further modified when they were incorporated in a hiding system (6,7,8). This system, 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 (7) as well as two smaller chambers (6,8). A stepped tunnel linked them to the quarries and cisterns.

In **System 31** (31 on Fig. 2; Fig. 7) winding burrows connected earlier 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 and 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 System 20, these, too, appear to have been hewn beneath residential buildings for use by their residents.

In this system, we 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. We 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 mishnaic 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 (Yadin, 1963: 46; Zissu & Ganor, 2004; Meir & Zissu, 2010).

The hiding systems at Horvat Midras are similar to hundreds of complexes that have been found under Jewish settlements in the Judean Foothills, reflecting a phenomenon typical to the Bar Kokhba era (Kloner & Zissu, 2003; 2009). In these systems, labyrinthine narrow and branching burrows linked artificial cavities that had previously served as cellars, cisterns, ritual baths, granaries, columbaria, or underground olive-presses. The original openings were sealed and

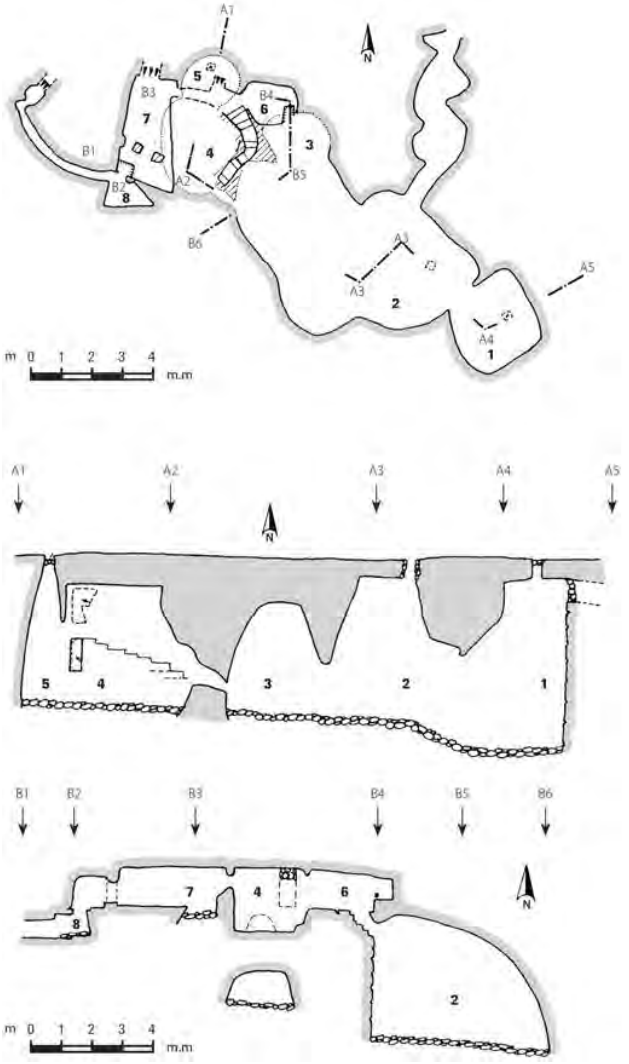

Fig. 6 - Plan and sections of underground System 30 (drawing A. Kloner and A. Frumkin; Studio Valdman).
Fig. 6 - Planimetria e sezioni del sistema sotterraneo 30 (disegno A. Kloner e A. Frumkin; Studio Valdman).

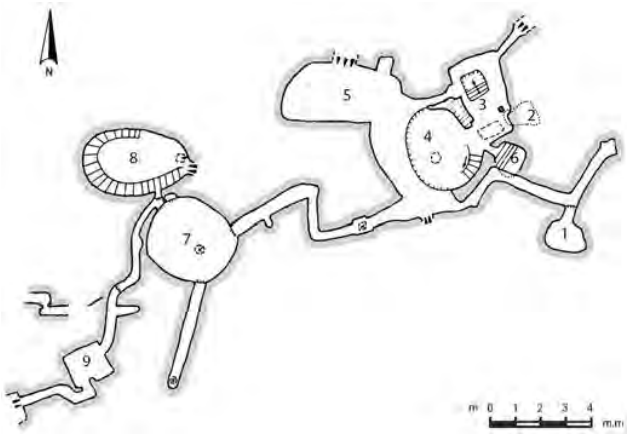

Fig. 7 - Plan of underground System 31 (drawing A. Kloner and A. Frumkin; Studio Valdman).
Fig. 7 - Planimetria del sistema sotterraneo 31 (disegno A. Kloner e A. Frumkin; Studio Valdman).

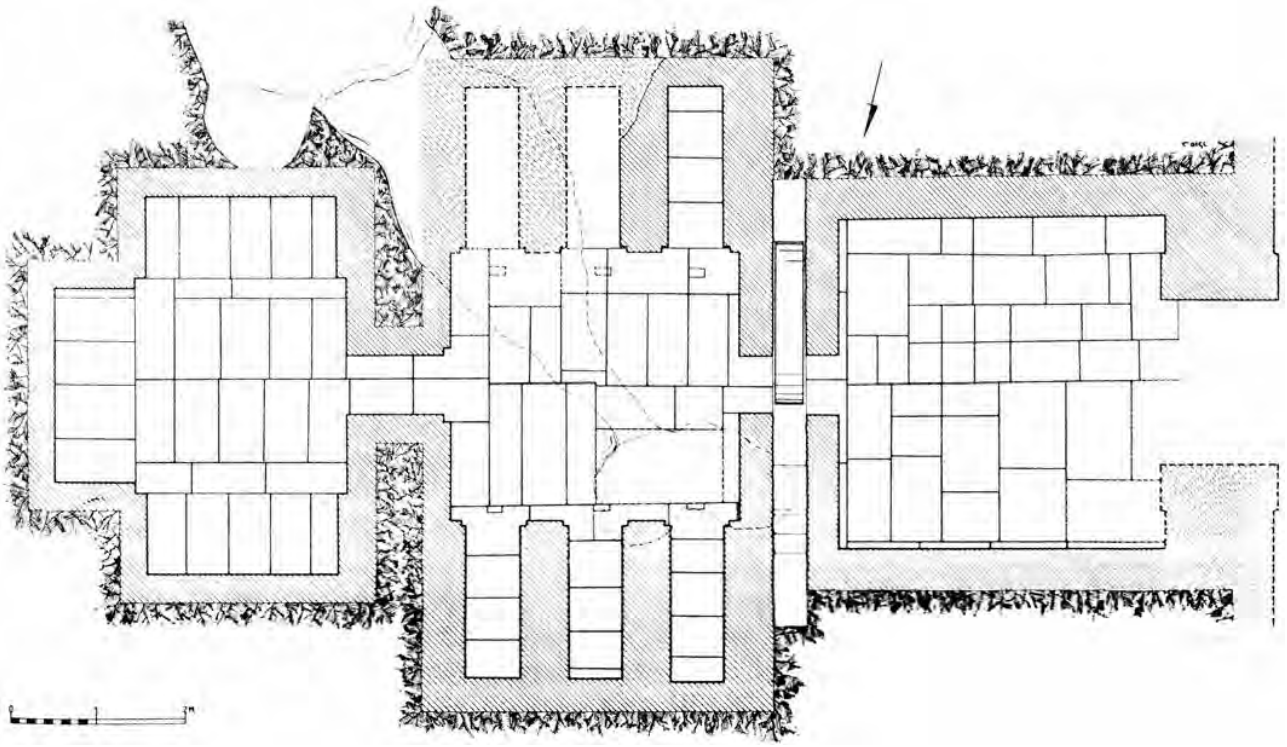

Fig. 8a - Plan of hypogeum (drawing G. Solar).
Fig. 8a - Planimetria dell'ipogeo (disegno G. Solar).

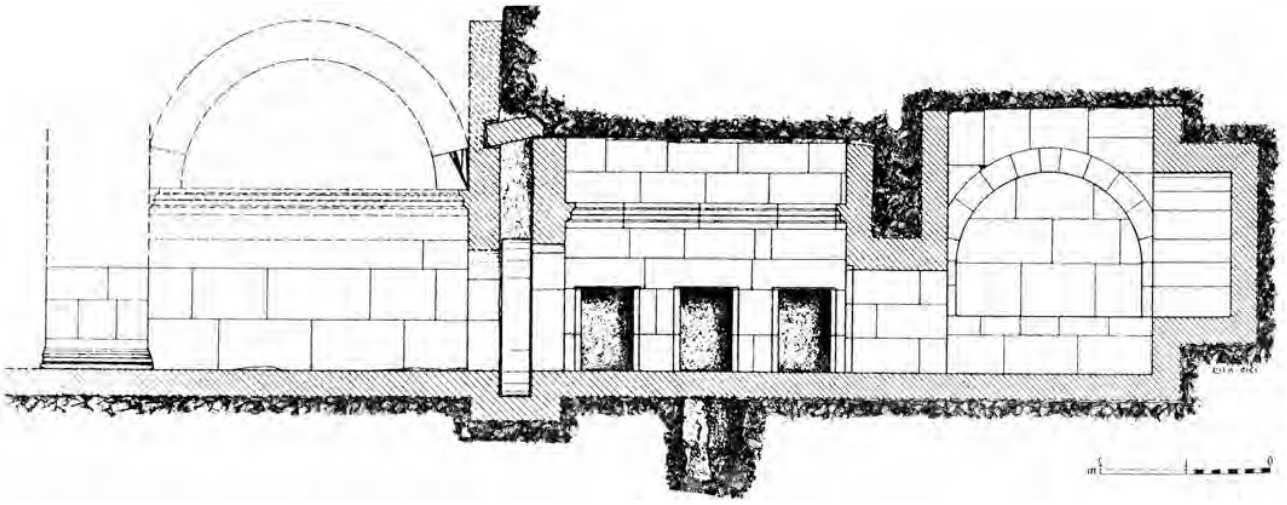

Fig. 8b - Section of hypogeum (drawing G. Solar).
Fig. 8b - Sezione dell'ipogeo (disegno G. Solar).

camouflaged, after which the cavities were joined by a network of rock-hewn tunnels and burrows, with chambers, food storage installations, concealed access to water cisterns, and mechanisms to block the passages. The burrows and tunnels effectively eliminated the chambers' original purposes and damaged essential facilities which formerly served the local residents. The Roman historian Cassius Dio (second–third centuries CE) 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" (*Historia Romana*, 69.12.3–69.13.2, trans. Cary).

According to Cassius Dio, 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 systems 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" (commentary on Isaiah 2:15).

During the Bar Kokhba Revolt, extensive use was made of this type of tunnels and cavities, clearly prepared in advance. The difficulty of life underground is described in contemporary Jewish sources, which convey the fear, darkness, crowded conditions, and lack of privacy, which led even to mixing up newborn infants (Samet, 1986)

The Necropolis

Dozens of burial caves were dug out of the slopes that surround the settlement. The location of these hypogeal - which were rock-cut and typically located outside the populated area - demarcate the boundaries of the ancient settlement.

In 1976, after the site was vandalized by antiquities looters, Kloner excavated a decorated burial system from the Early Roman period, which was part of the settlement's main cemetery on the western slope (Kloner, 1978: 115–119). This system essentially marks the town's western limit. The elaborate system 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 (known also as ossuaries, used by Jewish population for secondary burials of bones, from the late 1st c. BCE to the 2nd c. CE), were placed in the *arcosolia*. Two ossuaries survived the looters. The pottery sherds found in this hypogeum have been dated to the 1st century BCE-early 2nd century CE.

Some 15 m south of the decorated cave (see Fig. 11), a smaller burial cave with three arcosolia was cut 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' statement, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:13, RSV); (see Fig. 13). Additional Byzantine period' tombs are known from the vicinity. This Christian tomb was connected to the earlier, decorated hypogeum by a wide tunnel, roughly cut, whose purpose remains unclear.

Fig. 9a - Photo of hypogeum' vestibule, looking east (photo Z. Radovan).
Fig. 9a - Foto del vestibolo dell'ipogeo (A), guardando ad est (foto Z. Radovan).

Fig. 9b - Photo of chamber with burial niches (kokhim) in hypogeum, looking north (photo Z. Radovan).
Fig. 9b - Foto della camera con loculi (kokhim) dell'ipogeo (A), guardando verso nord (foto Z. Radovan).

Fig. 9c - Photo of opening to inner arcosolia chamber, looking east (photo Z. Radovan).
Fig. 9c - Foto dell'accesso alla stanza più interna con tombe ad arcosolio, guardando ad est (foto Z. Radovan).

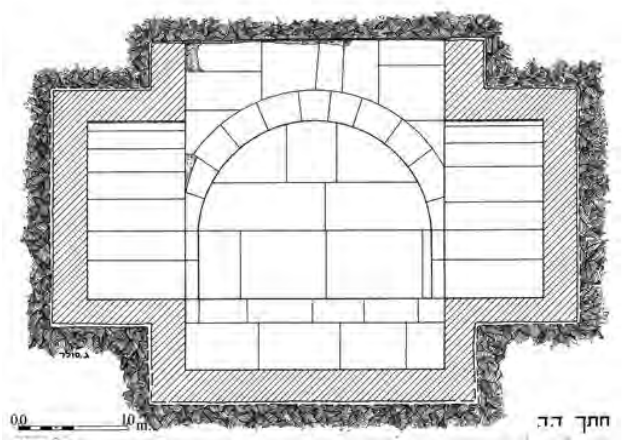

Fig. 10 - Section of inner, arcosolia chamber (photo G. Solar).
Fig. 10 - Sezione della stanza più interna con tombe ad arcosolio (disegno G. Solar).

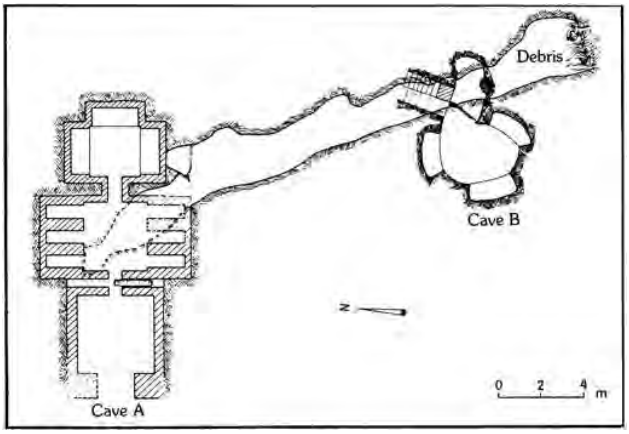

Fig. 11 - Ian showing hypogeum (A) and nearby Byzantine tomb (B). They are connected by a wide, rock-cut tunnel (photo G. Solar).
Fig. 11 - Planimetria dell'ipogeo (A) e della vicina tomba bizantina (B). Essi sono collegati da un'ampia galleria, scavata nella roccia (disegno G. Solar).

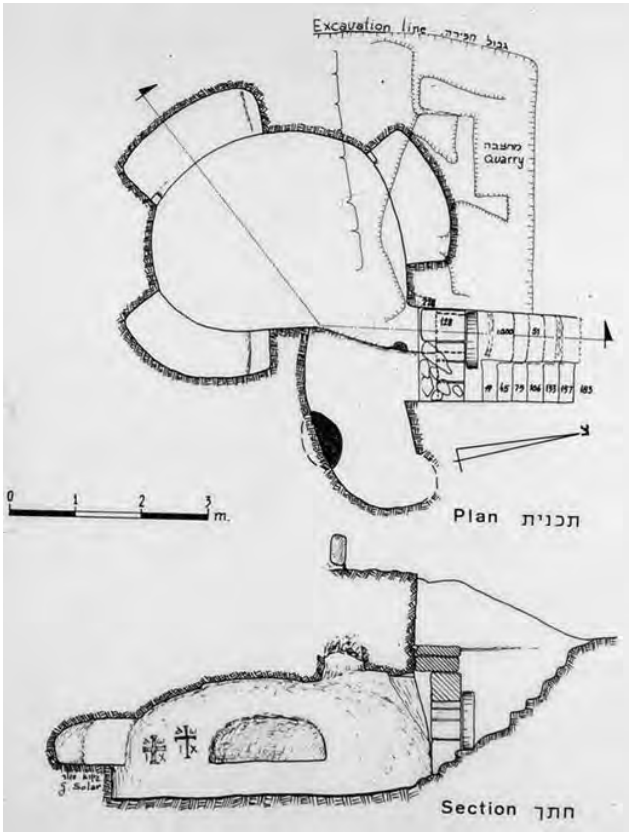

Fig. 12 - Detailed plan and section of the Byzantine burial cave (B) (drawing G. Solar).
Fig. 12 - Planimetria dettagliata e sezione della camera sepolcrale sotterranea bizantina (B) (disegno G. Solar).

During the 1970–1980s, at least 16 burial caves, most of them from the Early Roman period, were broken into by the looters. 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 (for a list of ossuary fragments collected at the site, see Rahmani, 1994: nos. 523–524).

At the top of the hill - a location with a good view and visible from a distance - are the foundations of a pyramid-shaped structure built of ashlars, which was documented by Rahmani (1964: 223–228). It has a base about 10 m on a side and rises to a height of 3.5 m today (2 on Fig. 2). The pyramid originally reached a height of about five meters. It evidently was a *nephesh* or grave marker for a hypogeum hewn out to its north. That hypogeum consisted of a courtyard, vestibule, perhaps also a *kokhim* chamber, and a room with *arcosolia*. Most elements of the hypogeum collapsed; only the *arcosolium* room, the innermost, which was built of ashlars, survives in part. The location of this grave marker delineates the settlement's southern edge.

The Church And Its Underground System

The site was again inhabited during the Byzantine period. The church described below and the hewn-out burial caves with Christian decorations, described above, date to this 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 and 15). The church and the adjacent structures continued to be used during the early Islamic era (Ganor et. al., 2011).

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

Stage 1 consists of rock-hewn chambers and storage areas that were associated with aboveground structures that have not survived. This layer was dated to

Fig. 13a,b,c - Photos of the Byzantine burial cave (B), showing painted crosses on the walls (photo Z. Radovan).
Fig. 13a,b,c - Foto della camera sepolcrale sotterranea bizantina (B), con le croci dipinte sulle pareti (foto Z. Radovan).

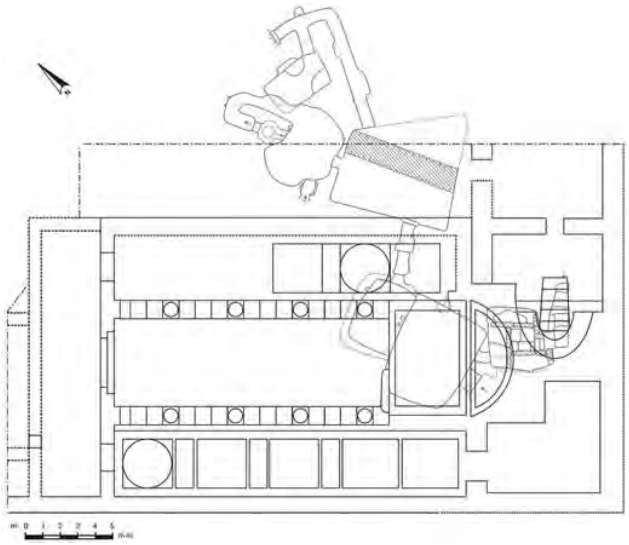

Fig. 14 - Plan of basilical church, built atop an underground system of artificial cavities from the Roman period (drawing B. Zissu; Studio Valdman).
Fig. 14 - Planimetria della chiesa basilicale, costruita al di sopra di un sistema sotterraneo di cavità artificiali di epoca romana (disegno B. Zissu; Studio Valdman).

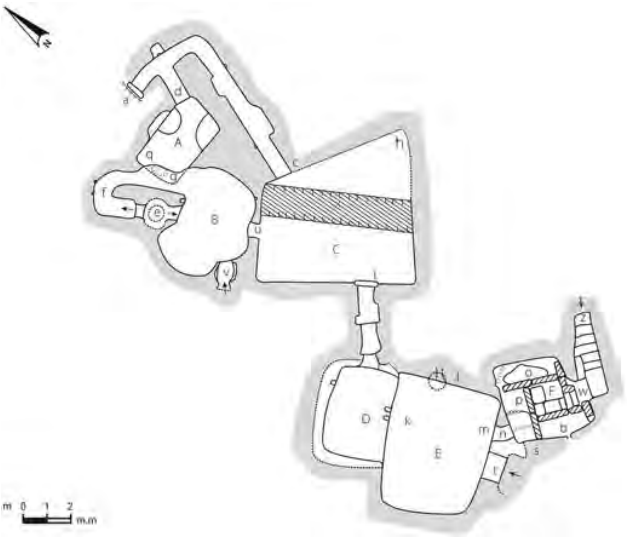

Fig. 15 - Detailed plan of underground system (drawing B. Zissu, Y. Zissu; Studio Valdman).
Fig. 15 - Pianta particolareggiata del sistema sotterraneo (disegno B. Zissu, Y. Zissu; Studio Valdman).

the first century BCE through the first century CE on the basis of coins and potsherds.
Stage 2 is represented by an extensive hiding system that integrates earlier underground chambers (from Stage 1); this stage also includes sections of walls and a floor. Similar hiding complexes have been found at the site under discussion and in dozens of ancient sites in the surrounding region. Stage 2 has been dated to the period from after the Jewish War until the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (70–136 CE).

Stage 3 includes a basilical structure, paved with white mosaic floors. The structure was constructed of local limestone, and its dimensions were similar to those of the Stage 4 church (see below). Coins and pottery were found below the white mosaic floor; the latest were coins of the fourth century CE and a fragment of a Beit Nattif oil-lamp from the third–fourth century CE. Stage 3 includes also a rock-cut tomb F with three burial troughs (found empty of finds). The tomb was created within an artificial cavity used initially as a storage chamber (Stage 1) and later incorporated

Stage	*Main artifacts*	*Chronology*	*Notes*
1	*Underground storage chambers; scanty remains of walls (?)*	*First c. BCE–first c. CE*	*The remains were detected in the underground system 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 system*	*Between the two Jewish revolts and during the Bar Kokhba Revolt*	*Remains were found only in the underground system and in test pits.*
3	*Basilical building, with a consecrated rock-cut tomb under the apse (Stage 4)*	*Fourth–sixth c. CE*	*The early basilical building (church?) was built of local stones and had a simple, white mosaic floor.*
4	*Ornate church; a martyrium to the east combines a baptistery and access to the rock-cut tomb*	*Sixth–seventh c. CE*	*Ornate church with marble ornamentation and with 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*	*Seventh–first half of eighth c. CE (until 749 CE)*	*Cultic(?) activity in the martyrium; the main church was empty and was 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*	*Eighth–twelfth c. CE*	*Scant remains of temporary dwellings; looting of building stones.*
7	*Agricultural terraces atop the ruins of the church*	*Twelfth–twentieth c. CE*	*Agricultural activity; looting of building stones.*

Table 1 - Stratigraphy of the Site.
Tabella 1 - Stratigrafia del Sito.

in the hiding complex of Stage 2. A plaster-covered wall was built between the tomb and an earlier set of steps (initial entrance to the chamber in Stage 1); a coin from the second half of the fourth century CE (the reign of Constantius II) had been inserted into the plaster.
In Stage 4, the basilical structure from Stage 3 was converted into a church, oriented along an east-west axis. The entrance was by means of large doors on 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). It was about 9 m wide, with a length probably the same as that of the nave (though only 3 m were excavated). The limestone flagstones (of varying dimensions, approximately 0.4 × 0.5 m) were worn from use. The remains of two square stone pillars (0.6 × 0.6 m) were found on the eastern side of the atrium, dividing the eastern end of the atrium from the narthex. We noted some repairs to the floor in the atrium and the secondary use of some architectural elements. The entrance to the narthex is from the eastern end of the atrium. The atrium seems to have been constructed as part of Stage 3 and continued to be used in Stage 4.
In the original structure (Stages 3 and 4), the narthex and atrium were separated by pillars that essentially created an outer narthex (exonarthex). The narthex is approximately 2.8 m wide and 12.5 m long. It had a white mosaic floor ornamented with medallions, of which only small sections survived. The narthex was reused in Stages 5 and 6, and various architectural elements were reused to build new walls. The builders used the western façade to close off the three rooms. The three openings in this wall were sealed off with reused items, including a marble screen decorated with crosses. This area was used for routine daily activities, during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. By contrast, there were no signs of either secondary

Fig. 16 - Aerial view of basilical church (photo Skyview).
Fig. 16 - Veduta aerea della chiesa basilicale (foto Skyview).

Fig. 17a,b - Exquisite multicolored mosaics covering southern aisle (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 17a,b - Mosaici policromi che coprono la navata meridionale (foto B. Zissu).

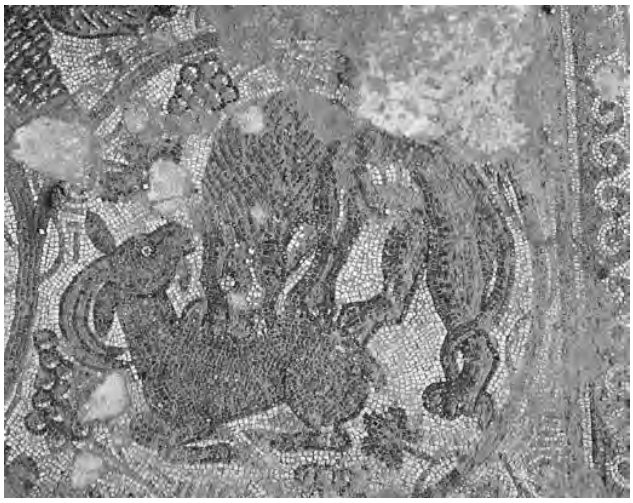

Fig. 18 - Details of mosaics covering nave (a.) and apse (b.) (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 18 - Dettagli dei mosaici che coprono la navata (a.) e l'abside (b.) (foto B. Zissu).

construction or significant use of the church interior then and the entrances remained blocked. We believe that the church structure stood abandoned in Stage 5, when parts of it were dismantled. As a result, what remained of the church collapsed in the earthquake of 749 CE.

The Stage 4 church has a nave (5.3 × 10.6 m) and two aisles, set off by two parallel rows of four columns each (a total of eight columns). The columns have identical bases and Corinthian capitals (see Fig. 16). All these elements are made of imported light-gray marble. The south aisle is 2.7 m wide and 14 m long; the north aisle is wider. To the east is an apse with two chambers. In Stage 4, all the floors in the church were decorated with exquisite multicolored mosaics (see Figs. 17, 18). We detected two stages in the construction of the church. The earlier stage (4a) consisted of the mosaic floor in the nave and aisles. During the later stage (4b), two steps faced with marble were built to extend the bema westward over the floor of the nave. A marble chancel was built around the bema, as indicated by the depressions in the upper step, fragments of posts, and pieces of the screen. The narrow space that remained open north of the bema created a walkway (solea) to the pulpit (ambo). A broken piece of the leg of a marble ambo was found, out of place, in the northeastern section of the nave.

Two narrow openings gave access from the aisles to the bema. The apse was built as a square space enclosed by three walls. The eastern (outside) wall of the apse is part of the outside wall of the two rooms on either side of it. These rooms have the same shape, that of a Greek gamma (Γ): the northern room is a proper gamma, while the southern is its mirror image.

The room south of the apse is the only one that has a marble floor, which indicates its importance. Perhaps some sacred relic was displayed here on a portable base. The room north of the apse must also have had special importance, because its southern wall has a rounded interior topped by a cornice. This section of the room contains a hallway with steps leading south to the empty tomb from Stage 3.

Given its location under the apse, the rock-cut tomb

Fig. 19 - The room north of the apse, looking east; notice baptismal font (1) and steps (2) leading south to Tomb F (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 19 - La stanza nord dell'abside, guardando ad est; notare il fonte battesimale (1) e i gradini (2) che portano a sud verso la tomba F (foto B. Zissu).

seems to have been the *raison d'être* for the construction of the church. Initially (Stage 4a), access to the northern room was through a doorway at the eastern end of the north aisle of the church. The difference in the levels of the floors required the addition of stairs - perhaps of wood - between the north aisle and the room attached to the passage leading to the empty tomb. The white mosaic floor of this room has not been excavated, so it is unclear whether it dates from Stage 4 or Stage 3. In Stage 4a, the southern section of the room was roofed with a semi-dome, as evidenced by the cornice (see Fig. 19). Below the cornice, traces of red and yellow paint survive on the layer of plaster that covered the hewn stones. The room seems to have been decorated with frescoes and architectural sculpture. Because this room laid above and permitted access to the holy site - the empty tomb (Tomb F, see Fig. 20) - that inspired the construction of the church, it can be termed a "martyrium."

In Stage 4b, the bema was expanded westward, the wall of the apse was built, and a multicolored mosaic floor was laid on the bema and in the apse. At this stage, the opening between the north aisle and the martyrium was sealed, allowing the construction of a stone bench in the martyrium along the common wall. It is possible that the passage to the empty tomb was sealed with hard white plaster and stone slabs were laid down the length of the passage. These slabs damaged the edges of the white mosaic floor in the martyrium around the passageway. A plastered mudbrick structure was built against the southern wall of the martyrium. It has a semicircular shape, with a bench running along its upper section. This was probably a baptismal font that was deliberated positioned above the entrance to the empty tomb (see below, "The Underground System"). Another change we date to Stage 4b or 5 is a new door to the martyrium, cut through its northern wall. This new entrance allowed direct passage from outside the church to the martyrium with no need to go by way of the north aisle.

Fig. 20a - Tomb F, looking east (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 20a - Tomba F, guardando ad est (foto B. Zissu).

Fig. 20b - Tomb F, looking west; notice modifications and short burrow (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 20b - Tomba F, guardando ad ovest; notare le modifiche e il breve cunicolo (foto B. Zissu).

Underground System And Remains Of The Ancient Settlement

As noted, the baptismal font was installed (in Stage 4) above the stepped dromus that led down to the rock-cut tomb (F). It turned out that the tomb was based on an earlier underground storage chamber (see Fig. 20). The modifications, done in Stage 3, included hewing, new construction, and plaster. A short burrow whose entrance was blocked by a wall and plaster when the tomb was created, allowed access to an underground hiding system 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 system, which we entered from tomb F.

We now turn to a description of the underground system, starting with the baptistery.

The system was composed of a number of rock-cut chambers - most of them storage chambers (see Fig. 21) - 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 permit us to define this as a typical hiding system 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 system. They converted one chamber of this system into Tomb 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 covering the wall of tomb F, allows us to set the mid-fourth century CE as the earliest date for this conversion. The hiding system was blocked off and retired from use when the burial cave was created. Another action that seems to have taken place when the church was built in Stage 4 is the construction of a massive wall running the width of one of the underground chambers (Chamber C; Fig. 21a, b). This was apparently intended to support the chamber's roof and prevent it from collapsing under the weight of the newly erected church above it.

The hiding system 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 system. 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. 21 b,c). Today the system includes later elements (Tomb F and Wall x), which belong 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 system phenomenon in the Judean Foothills (Zissu & Ganor, 2009). For example, System IV in Horvat

Fig. 21a - Torage chamber C, looking north, along wall x, towards opening to chamber B (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 21a - La camera di immagazzinamento C, guardando a nord, lungo la parete x, verso l'apertura alla camera B (foto B. Zissu).

Fig. 21c - Tunnel i, looking west (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 21c - Tunnel i, guardando ad ovest (foto B. Zissu).

Fig. 21b - Storage chamber C, looking south, along wall x, towards opening to tunnel i (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 21b - La camera di immagazzinamento C, guardando verso sud, lungo la parete x, verso l'apertura di tunnel i (foto B. Zissu).

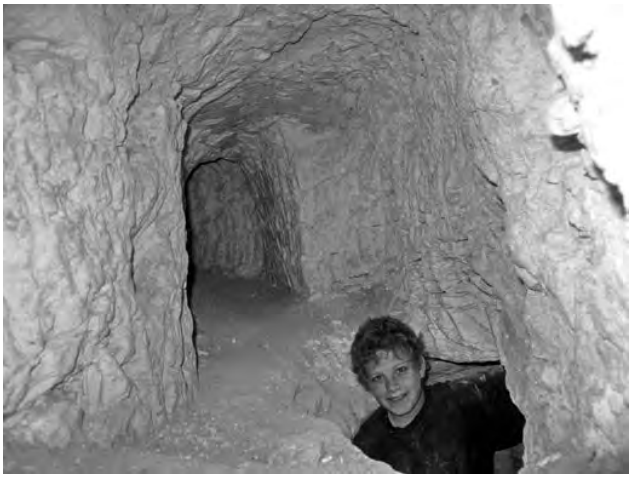

Fig. 21d - Tunnel g, looking north (photo B. Zissu).
Fig. 21d - Tunnel g, guardando a nord (foto B. Zissu).

ʿEthri dates from the first century CE and went out of use during the Jewish War. The small "home" systems dug out under residential buildings in Horvat ʿEthri include elements that are known from larger and more complex systems, such as arrangements for camouflaging and blocking off the system, twisting tunnels that keep changing their direction and level, and small storage chambers. The data from other sites in the Judean Foothills as well as the present location suggest that the hiding complexes appeared before the Jewish War, but the phenomenon reached its zenith during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (Kloner & Zissu, 2003; 2009).

Most of the few artifacts found in the chambers of the hiding system date to 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 Ashqelon, minted in the years between the two revolts (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 Tomb 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 cave's design is consistent with this period.

In terms of chronology, it appears that the mosaics were laid in two stages: first in the aisles and nave and later in the apse and presbyterium (third quarter of the sixth century CE). The interval between these stages was not great. Perhaps the same artisan was called 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 christograms (☧: a monogram of the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*, short for *Christos*) were found in the rockfall in the southern section of the church. Indentations in these pillars reflect a stage when the southern aisle was roofed over. At a later stage, the pillars were covered with a thin coat of plaster that obscured the crosses; this may well have been done by Muslims when they took over the church.

The church collapsed in the earthquake of 749 CE. Subsequently, in Stage 5, there was new construction near the narthex, the 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. Agricultural terraces were built south of the church, using the older stones and architectural elements.

Conclusion

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

The archaeological record attests to the existence of a Jewish settlement at the site during the 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 then. 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 was erected in the fourth century CE (Stage 3). Its construction was associated with a tomb, created inside an earlier chamber of Stage 1 (incorporated in the hiding complex from Stage 2; F in Fig. 15). The tomb itself dates to the fourth century (Stage 3) and was important to the local Christian cult.

The basilical structure erected in the fourth century above the tomb had a white mosaic floor. Its nature will not be entirely clear until the completion of the excavations in the area of the apse. We need to determine whether this empty tomb was associated with the church from the outset, or with some other and 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 Stage 3 structure. The apse was built above the Stage 3 burial cave; the passage that gave access to the cave began in the room just north of the apse, which thus served as a 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 included also 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 the involvement of a wealthy donor, who may have been 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 construction of the church? At first glance, the floor plan appears to be standard and the dimensions are not particularly noteworthy. It appears, however, that the church comprised two or perhaps three separate cult sites to attract 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. The access to the empty tomb and the structure above it (baptistery?) were 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 suggests that the church collapsed during the earthquake of 749 CE. There was a revival of activity in the narthex during the Abbasid period, apparently during the second half of the eighth century or in the ninth century. But the settlement was no longer prosperous. There was no longer a central public building, but only hovels that recycled the building materials of the ruined church. Although it is not clear precisely when the site was abandoned, agricultural activity, which included the construction of animal pens and terraces, was renewed during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

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