

A BURIAL CAVE FROM THE EARLY ROMAN PERIOD AT GIV'AT SELED IN THE JUDEAN SHEPHELAH

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An early Roman burial cave was discovered on the northern slope of Giv'at Seled (map ref. 1439/1184), some 600 m north of Iḥorvat Midras (Fig. 1; Rahmani 1964:218–228; Kloner 1977; 1978; 1987). Its opening faces east, and it is comprised of two burial chambers: a main chamber containing *kokhim* near the entrance, and an inner room, containing *arcosolia* (Plan 1). The cave was hewn in the steep chalky slope and was blocked by a circular stone (about 1.40 m in diameter and 0.30 m thick) which was rolled in a track about 0.35 m wide and 1.50 m long, ending in a nearly square cell. The track, constructed between two short walls, has an inner edge of natural rock, and an outer, eastern, side of ashlar

stones; it was roofed by heavy stone slabs. (On circular blocking stones see Kloner 1985b; 1985c.) In 1984 antiquities looters, digging a perpendicular shaft through six meters of accumulated earth, broke the edge of the rolling stone, thus penetrating into the cave.¹

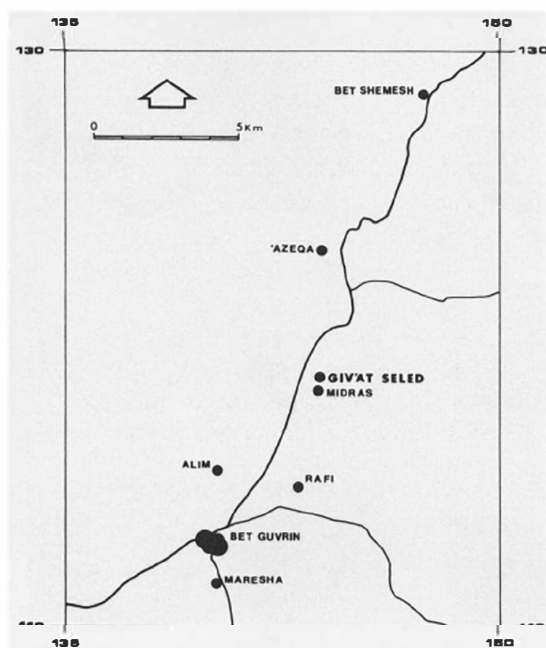
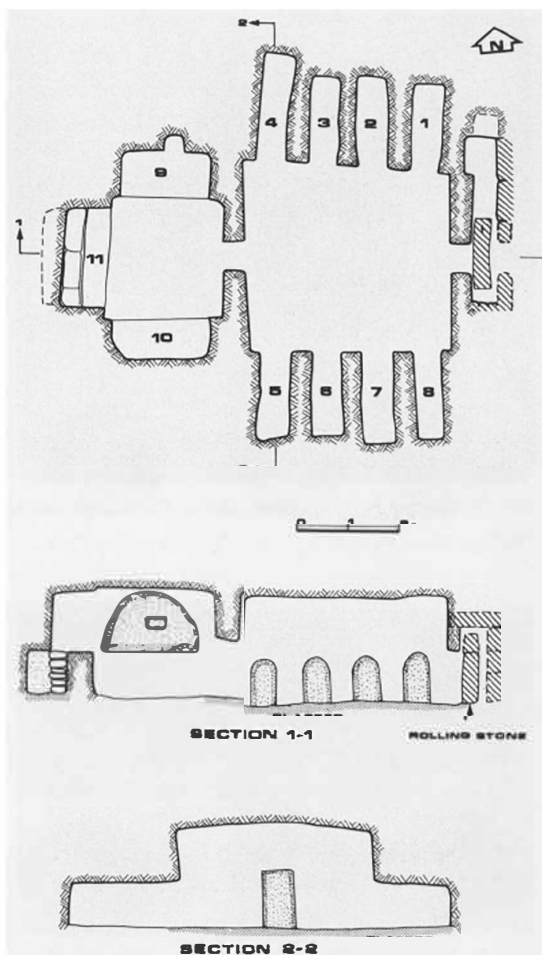


Fig. 1. Location map.



Plan 1. Plan and sections of the burial cave.

The cave entrance, 0.55 m wide and 1.12 m high, is arched (Fig. 2). The eastern, main, chamber is 3.95–4.00 m long, 2.00–2.10 m high and 3.40 m wide at the entrance, widening to 3.70 m at the entry to the inner chamber. The northern and southern walls contain four *kokhim* each (Fig. 3). The length of the northwestern *kokh* (4) is 2.10 m, while the others are 1.70–1.80 long. The width of the *kokhim* is 0.55–0.65 m. The ceilings of the *kokhim* are arched at the front and flatter within. The heights of the openings of the *kokhim* vary between 0.85 and 0.95 m, all the



Fig. 2. Entrance and blocking stone *in situ*, view from inside.



Fig. 3. *Kokhim* in the northern wall of main chamber, blocking stone *in situ*.

kokhim sloping somewhat forward, the level of the floor at the back of the *kokhim* being about 0.04 m higher than at the front. The walls of the *kokhim* are plastered white for a stretch of 0.20–0.30 m from the opening.

Five *kokhim* contained crumbled remains of burials; the other three were completely empty, either never having contained bone fragments or having had their contents removed by the looters and thrown into the center of the chamber. The friability of the osteological material ruled out the possibility of study; the remains were therefore restored to the *kokhim*.

The plastered floor in the main chamber was covered by a 0.10–0.50 m thick layer of silt deposited by rainwater, with a large concentration of soil near the entrance. Two layers of plaster covered the chamber walls and floor; one grey, the other lighter in color. The chamber's western wall had been painted over in a patterned design of which little was preserved *in situ* (Figs. 4, 5). Most of the colored plaster had fallen onto the floor and was mixed with the accumulated silt, indicating that the plaster had disintegrated before the cave was vandalized. The plaster

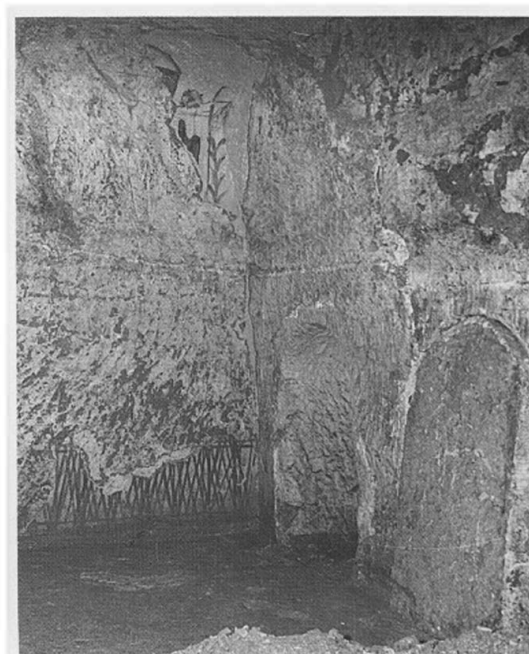


Fig. 4. The northwestern corner of the main chamber; remains of fresco on the western wall.

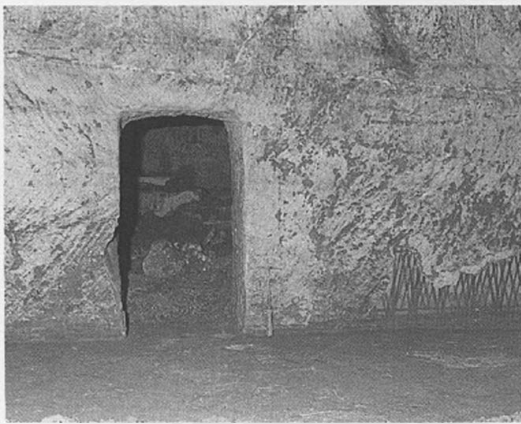


Fig. 5. Western wall of main chamber, showing entrance to inner chamber and fresco remnants.

which remained in the vicinity of the western wall was collected and reconstruction of the fragments was attempted.

Only one sealing stone, an arched slab 0.91 m high, 0.57 m wide and 0.13 m thick, was found. It securely fitted the adjoining *kokh* (No. 3; Fig. 3). No fragments of sarcophagi or ossuaries were found in this chamber. Finds in the cave consisted of one potsherd and two long nails on the floor adjoining the painted wall.

The inner chamber is almost square, the length of its walls being 2.25–2.30 m, and its height in the center 2.05 m. The entry to the chamber is through a rectangular opening (1.10 × 0.62 m). Three *arcosolia*, 1.75–1.95 m long and 0.75–0.90 m deep, were hewn in the chamber walls; the bases of the *arcosolia* are 0.90 m above the floor level; the height of the arches is 1.20 m.

In the center of the rear wall of the northern *arcosolium* (9) there is a rectangular niche 0.30 m high, 0.40 m wide and 0.28 m deep (Fig. 6). This recess, perhaps intended to contain bones, was originally blocked by a stone slab.

The southern *arcosolium* (10) is similar to those of other tombs of the first century CE, in which the lower right-hand corner is elevated by a few centimeters to form a cushion-like slope, where the head of the deceased would rest (Fig. 7). This could well reflect the ancient tradition of burial berths with headrests. *Arcosolia* do not occur in this country prior to the beginning of



Fig. 6. *Arcosolium* 9, in the inner chamber.



Fig. 7. *Arcosolium* 10, with headrest.

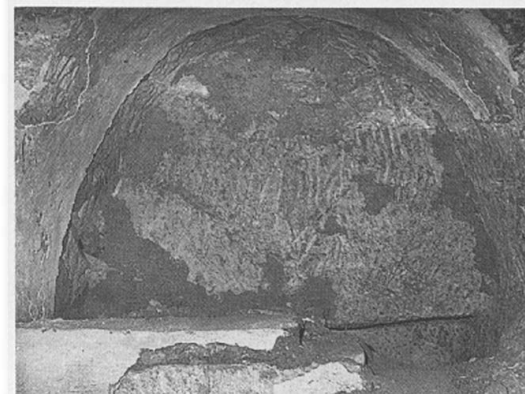


Fig. 8. *Arcosolium* 11, with bone repository.

the first century CE. Their presence is, therefore, indicative of the date of the cave.

In the rear wall of the western *arcosolium* (11) there was a hewn recess 1.00 m wide and 0.90 m deep (Fig. 8). The recess opening was blocked by

both large and small stones and then plastered over, as was the remainder of this *arcosolium*. The looters broke through to the recess, which had probably been used as a repository and emptied it completely.

The floor of the inner chamber, the *arcosolia* walls and the shelves (ledges) were covered with plain white plaster. When the tomb was looted, the *arcosolia* were rifled and earth and smashed bones scattered throughout the chamber. We checked the floor area, but did not clear the accumulation of earth.

THE FRESCOES

The fresco on the western wall of the main chamber was partly preserved, probably due to the tomb having been sealed until recently.

1. Just above the floor, extending along the wall on either side of the entrance to the inner chamber, is a brown-painted segment, consisting of irregular cross-hatching bordered by horizontal lines, creating a long, narrow strip about 0.30 m high (Figs. 4, 5 and color plate). Many fragments of this pattern had fallen off and were collected during the excavation.

2. A section of a drawing (0.40 × 0.70 m) was preserved *in situ* (Fig. 4 and color plate): a perpendicular green stem with pairs of double leaves painted on the white plaster. To its left is a brown-colored object, of which only the top has survived. The object resembles a rolled scroll, but it is difficult to determine its nature or significance. Above it is a brownish-red basket-like object with a curved handle.

3. Close to the ceiling and aligned with the left doorpost of the entrance, two dark brown circles were partially preserved (Fig. 5). In the south-western corner there was another colored segment which includes small green fragments (leaves?).

4. Above the lower strip (described above, §1) were painted panels and designs. Judging by the preserved fragments, they portrayed rich floral patterns including the following elements: yellow-brown stems, 10–15 mm wide, interspersed with green leaves; leaves painted bright green,

40–50 mm long, some of which were framed in black on a light green background. Apparently, most of the wall had been adorned with floral patterns.

Many dark-red plaster fragments were also found, some of which have traces of yellow circles and black patches. Fragments of a painted Ionic capital were also discovered.

Fragments of a Greek inscription, painted in black over a light background, were found in the excavated area. Three lines containing a dedicatory formula were partially preserved (see Di Segni, this volume). The inscription was probably located above the opening leading into the inner chamber.

DISCUSSION

Tombs of similar plan, i.e. a main chamber containing *kokhim* and an inner chamber containing *arcosolia*, are to be found in the caves of neighboring Ḥorvat Midras (Kloner 1977; 1978) and Giv'at Shammah (Dahari and Avni 1985). It is noteworthy that in one of the Ḥorvat Midras caves the walls and floors were faced with large stone slabs, and the ceiling was plastered.

All aspects of the Giv'at Seled cave indicate that it is a Jewish burial cave² dating to the first century CE. Jewish decorated burial caves from the Second Temple era are rare. Recently, a well preserved cave with painted vine tendrils was investigated at Jericho, dating from the same era (Hachlili and Killebrew 1983).

At Mokata Abud, on some walls of a first century CE *kokh* burial cave, there is a strip of geometric designs (Conder and Kitchener 1882: 362–363). Decorated burial caves of similar date have been reported from Jerusalem, their walls also plastered and painted with geometric designs (Kloner 1985b:63, n. 2; Avni and Greenhut 1990:26). At Ḥorvat Midras, the facade of the magnificent burial cave was decorated with frescoes.

The wall paintings and frescoes in burial caves of the first century CE, which show an affinity with late Hellenistic and early Roman tradition, are Herodian in their cultural-artistic definition.

The colored panels are akin to the frescoes in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem and in specifically Herodian sites, such as Masada, Herodion and Jericho, either in homes, palaces or burial facilities. These frescoes — which formed a

decorative element comparable to monumental facades worked into the rock — demonstrate the adoption by the local population of prevailing Hellenistic practices of adornment and decoration.

NOTES

¹ The discovery of the cave was reported on by Halil-Muhamad 'Abd el-Hadi of the Şurif area and M. Katz of Giv'at Yesha'yahu in the beginning of 1985. It was excavated on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, under the author's supervision, for a few days in April 1985, and again in April 1986. Participants in the dig included H. Stark and T. Krinkin-Fabian, as well as volunteers from the youth circle of the Israel Speleological Center.

The cleaning and restoration of finds were carried out by M. Ben-Gal, D. Arbeli and A. Richter. T. Mazzola drew the area map and the cave plan. B. Mindel helped in preparing the article.

For preliminary notes see Kloner 1985a; 1986.

² Major aspects defining this *kokhim* burial cave as Jewish are: (1) The presence of *arcosolia*, a Jewish Jerusalemite innovation of the first century CE, intended mainly for storage of bones and ossuaries. (2) The location of the cave in an area of exclusively Jewish settlement in the first century CE.

As for the use of the pagan formula in the painted inscription (see Di Segni, this volume), it could be related to the widespread influence of magic and astrology in the Jewish population of the first-second centuries CE (Naveh 1989; Lieberman 1984).

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