

UNDERGROUND EXPLORATIONS AT HORVAT QASRA, SOUTHERN JUDEAN FOOTHILLS, ISRAEL

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Abstract

Horvat Qasra is located on a hilltop in the southern Judean Foothills, Israel. The site consists of a central building, with rooms built around an inner courtyard; A well-built tower stands at the corner of the architectural complex. Its foundations are protected by a sloping wall (protechisma) on the outside, an architectural type known from elsewhere in Judea. Under the main building, a typical rock-cut hiding complex was explored. It included three underground installations, linked by narrow, low and winding burrows. Additional rock-cut cavities were carved into the soft chalk of the slopes surrounding the architectural complex: underground quarries, two cross-shaped columbaria installations and some cisterns. According to architectural parallels from other Judean sites, and due to the absence of dating archaeological material, we suggest that the underground installations were rock-cut initially during the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods. They were used for chalk quarrying, storage of water and agricultural products, underneath the buildings of a fortified estate. During the preparations of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, the installations' original openings were blocked and they were interconnected by typical burrows. The system was used by the local residents for hiding purposes, apparently during this revolt. In the southern part of the site, a Jewish rock-cut burial complex from the 1st-2nd centuries CE was excavated. During the Byzantine period (5th c. CE), the burial complex was transformed into a Christian chapel; Numerous inscriptions and graffiti, mostly Greek, incised on its walls attest that Holy Salome was worshipped here until the Early Islamic period.

Keywords

Judean Foothills, Christian archaeology, inventio loca sancta, holy tomb, burial complex, hiding complex, Bar-Kokhba revolt, columbaria, chalk quarry, underground quarries.

1. The Archaeological Site

Horvat Qasra extends over 7.5 acres on a hilltop in the southern Judean Foothills. The site consists of a central building (c. 20 X 20 m) with rooms arranged around an inner courtyard; A well-built and fortified tower stands at the corner of the architectural complex. Its foundations are protected on the outside by a sloping wall built of large stones (Fig. 1). This feature – known as a protechisma – was a Hellenistic fortification element, designed to block tunnels dug by the enemy against the foundation of a building or a wall, and provided protection against siege machinery (Lawrence 1979, 277).



Figure 1. Tower with sloping wall – looking south (B. Zissu).

Ancient settlements having similar features were recorded elsewhere in Judea - at Rujum Hamiri, Rujum e-Deir, Khirbet al-Qasr, Nahal Eshtamoa, Rujum al-Qasr, Rujum Abu Hilal, Khirbet Qumran, Ofarim, Khirbet Canaan, Horvat Tsalit and 'Aroer (Zissu 2001, 262-260). These sites control their immediate surroundings and access roads. Scholars differed as to the purpose of these sites: whether they served as forts, fortresses, fortified settlements, or fortified manor houses (Hirschfeld 1998, 2000). The paucity of excavations and the scarcity of publications about these sites do not make it possible to determine with certainty their purpose and their chronology (Zissu 2001, 265-261).

2. The Hiding Complex

Under the central building, a typical rock-cut hiding complex was explored. It consists of three underground halls (A, B, C), each functioning independently during the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods: A – a storage hall, A1 – a water installation and A2 – apparently a ritual immersion bath; B and C functioned as underground chalk quarries. A, B and C were connected by narrow, low and winding tunnels and burrows, converting it into a typical hiding complex. Some square chambers (as D, F, H, K) were hewn in the walls of these tunnels and burrows, apparently serving hiding and storage purposes.

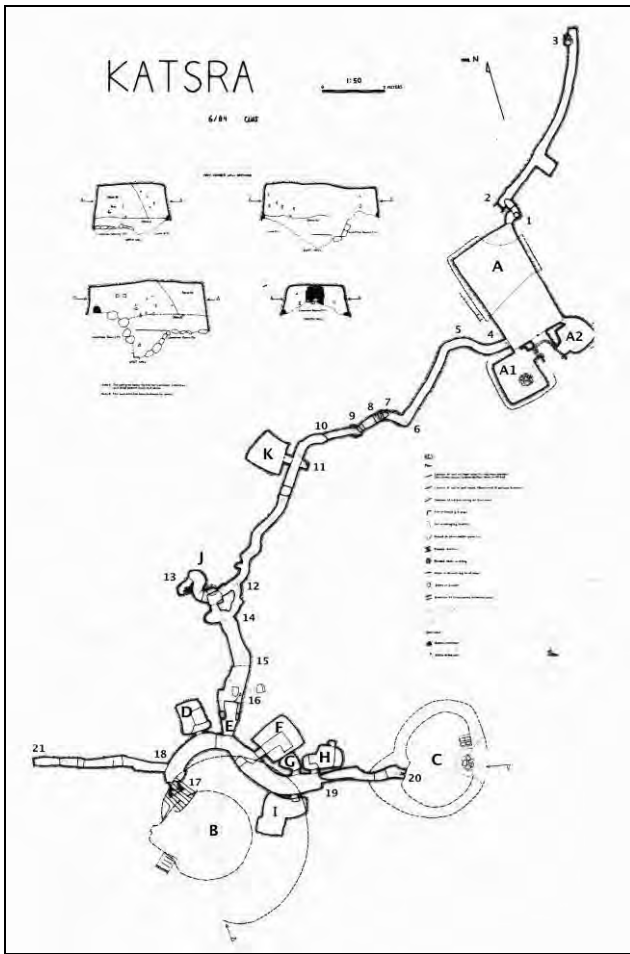


Figure 2. Hiding complex - plan and sections (A. Kloner).

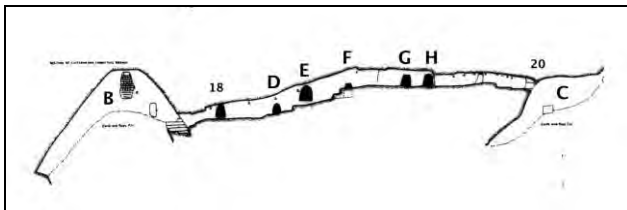


Figure 4. Hiding complex – long section (A. Kloner).

We assume that the hiding complex hewn underneath the ancient settlement, served the residents of the ancient settlement during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132 - 136 CE), when the Jews rebelled against the Roman rule and established in Judea independent government institutions (Eck 1999; Eck 2007; Eshel and Zissu 2015).

We have no comprehensive, first-hand historical work describing the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The writings of Roman authors, the Church Fathers and Rabbinic literature contain a few brief accounts of the revolt, some of which are biased and contradict one another. Therefore, a careful study of archaeological evidence is much needed for the understanding of the events (Eshel and Zissu 2015).

According to most scholars, the account given some eighty years after the war by Cassius Dio in his Roman History (69, 12-14; trans. E. Cary) - is a fairly comprehensive and reliable overview of the revolt from a Roman perspective (Eck 1999).

Dio reports on the reinforcement of militarily advantageous sites with fortifications, passages and underground networks, and the rebels' tactic of avoiding

head-on clashes with the Roman army:

"To be sure, they [the Jews] 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" (Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 69, 12)."

This account is consistent with the finds of the Judean hiding complexes, which were prepared as secret underground bases for the rebels.



Figure 5. Opening of burrow into Hall B – looking north (B. Zissu).

One of the characteristics of this revolt, is the extensive use of underground cavities for hiding, escape and refuge purposes. Scholars are distinguishing between two main groups of cavities in use: hiding complexes and refuge caves. (The refuge caves are found mainly in the Judean Desert, in the steep cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley. These natural caves served as places of refuge for people from the Judean Mountains and the Jordan Valley when they fled for their lives at the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Few refuge caves are situated in the western part of the Judean and Benjamin Mountains. The refuge caves are beyond the scope of the present paper).



Figure 6. Hall A looking north. Notice opening of burrow (marked 1) into corner of hall (B. Zissu).

The complex at Horvat Qasra, has similar characteristics in common with other hiding complexes found in the Judean Foothills. These complexes were hewn artificially under or near residential buildings in ancient settlements. They include several rock-cut chambers connected to each other by a maze of low, narrow and winding burrows. Passage through the burrows requires one to kneel down, crawl and sometimes even to creep. The burrows are the typical feature that identifies a rock-cut system of underground cavities as a hiding complex. The openings into chambers are always small and low, and require one to kneel down in order to enter. Underground chambers, storerooms, halls and burrows could be sealed from the inside. Thus, the complexes were designed so that the occupants could defend themselves from within, against an enemy attempting to enter. Rock-cut cavities and installations, which clearly antedate the revolt were connected by burrows and created an underground system. Burrows covertly connected various parts of the upper settlement. They descended to the tunnels by means of shafts carved into the floors and courtyards of the houses. The shafts were most probably blocked with stone slabs that could be camouflaged. The edges of the system sometimes led to escape openings located outside the settled area (Kloner and Zissu 2003; 2009; Zissu and Kloner 2014).

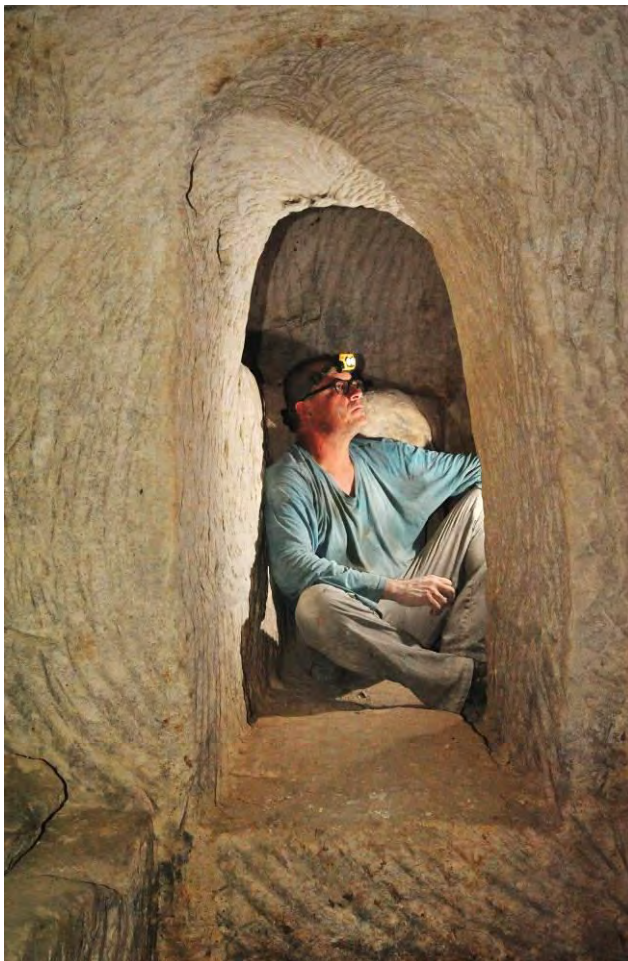


Figure 7. Opening of chamber F, looking west (Y. Zissu).

According to architectural and typological parallels from other Judean sites, and due to the absence of dating

archaeological material, we suggest that the underground installations at Horvat Qasra were hewn initially during the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods. They were used for stone quarrying, storage of water and agricultural products, underneath the buildings of a fortified estate.

During the preparations of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, the installations' original entrances were blocked and they were interconnected by typical burrows. The complex was used by the local residents for hiding purposes, apparently during this revolt.

2. Columbaria and Additional Rock-Cut Cavities

Additional rock-cut cavities were carved into the soft chalk of the slopes surrounding the architectural complex: underground quarries and water cisterns, and two cross-shaped columbaria installations (or dovecotes).



Figure 8. Columbarium no. 2, looking east (B. Zissu).

Pigeon-raising in ancient Israel, particularly in the area of the Judean Foothills, dates back as far as the third century BCE; it flourished during the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods.

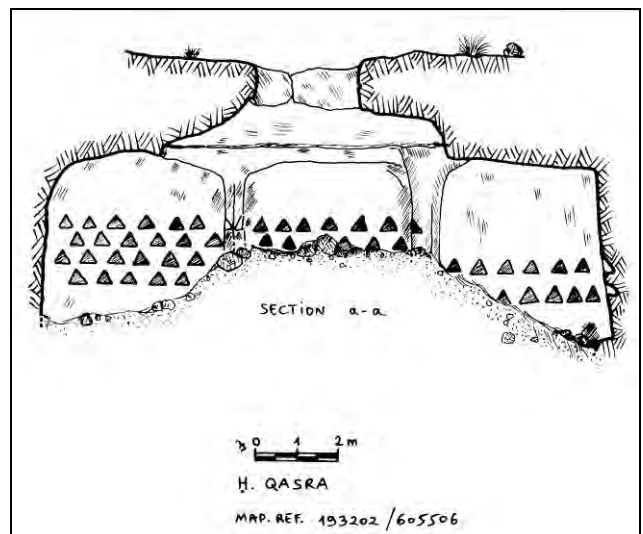


Figure 9. Columbarium no. 2; Section (B. Zissu).

Hundreds of rock-cut, underground columbaria have been found in Israel; Most of them are located in the Judean foothills. The number and technological sophistication of

underground columbaria reached their peak this region. This large number may be due to the ease of hewing the soft limestone and the structures' durability even when subjected to secondary use in later periods. The built columbaria, on the other hand, generally did not survive, and archaeological excavations conducted in Israel have uncovered only few built dovescotes (Zissu 1995).

A great deal of research has been devoted to ascertaining the purpose of the columbaria, and numerous explanations have been offered. Today, most researchers tend to agree that the structures in question were used to raise pigeons for the production of fertilizer and meat (Zissu and Rokach 1999; Kloner 2001; 2003).

Archaeological and artistic evidence, ancient classical and rabbinic sources, and the practice of pigeon-raising today, all attest to the crucial role played by pigeon-raising in ancient farming and societies.

3. A Rock-Cut Jewish Burial Complex and Christian Underground Chapel

A monumental burial complex situated on the southern outskirts of the ancient site was explored. It was initially breached into and looted and subsequently excavated by the second author.

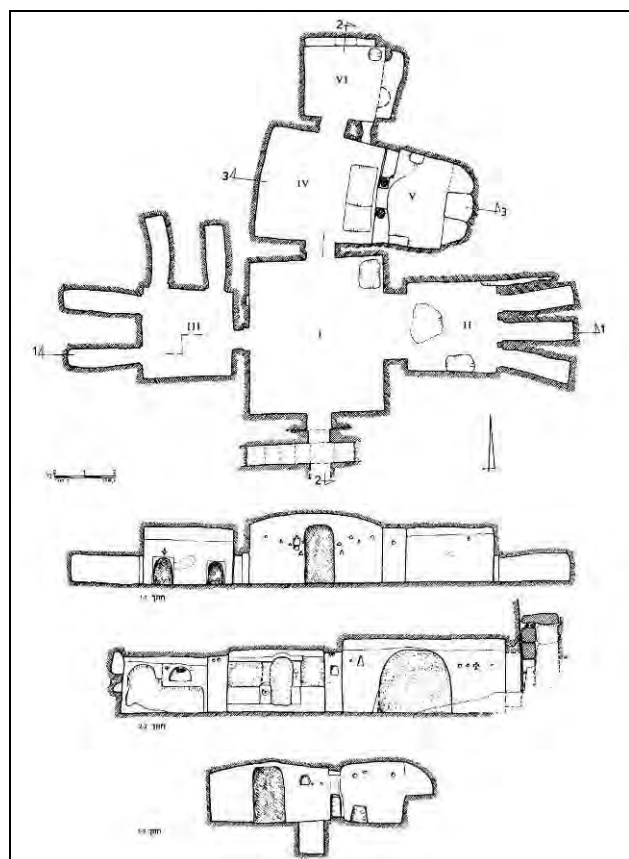


Figure 10. Plan and sections of the tomb (A. Kloner and IAA).

Two major periods of use were observed. In the first phase

- the first and second centuries CE - the cave was used for burial – and apparently served the Jewish residents of the site. It consisted of a rectangular antechamber (I) probably blocked with a round blocking-stone, which led to three inner chambers (II-IV). Rooms II and III contained seven arched *kokhim* (elongated burial niches) while Room IV, which underwent extensive alterations in the later phase, appears to have served for storage of ossuaries. Finds of the first period of use include fragments of four ossuaries, red painted and decorated in geometric patterns, first and second century CE oil-lamps, and a limestone 'measuring cup' of a similar date.



Figure 11. Unaltered chamber III – looking west (B. Zissu).



Figure 12. Chamber IV was converted into a chapel – looking east (B. Zissu).

In the second phase - the Byzantine (from c. the 5th century CE), and Early Islamic periods - the cave became a subterranean Christian chapel complex. Within this complex, Rooms I-III retained their original function of antechamber and burial place. Modifications included the widening of the passage into Room II and the carving of an inscription on its right doorpost, the installation of iron lamp hooks in the ceiling of Room I, and the carving of a cross over kokh No. 6. Rooms IV and V constituted the center of the chapel. The entrance from Room I was remodeled as an archway, adorned with Greek inscriptions on the soffit (Di Segni and Patrich, 1990), as well as

Arabic and Syriac graffiti on the doorpost.



Figure 13. Greek inscription – dedicated to Holy Salome, on the soffit (B. Zissu).

Room IV was also adorned with various graffiti and inscriptions, and was further modified by the excavation of a cist tomb in the floor, and the addition of an apsed chancel (V) to the east. The entrance to the chancel was flanked by columns and a chancel screen; these too bore inscriptions in Greek and Arabic, as well as crosses and other graffiti.



Figure 14. Greek and Arabic inscription – dedicated to Holy Salome (B. Zissu).

A semi-detached stone slab at the center of the apse served as an altar, and two similar slabs along the south and north walls were apparently used as benches. Inscriptions in Greek and Arabic were carved in the apse, and the remaining walls of the chancel also bore inscriptions in Greek, Arabic and Syriac. Room VI was originally furnished with a small apse in the east and an elongated niche in the northern wall, above which lay a smaller niche. In the center of the apse an encircled cross was carved in relief in its center, and was flanked by two smaller Maltese crosses. The three crosses were all painted red. A ledge at the base of the apse may originally have extended to the end of the wall. The elongated niche

in the north wall was probably used to accommodate oil-lamps, as testified by the thick layer of soot on the wall. At a later phase, a deep recess was cut into the northern part of the east wall. The walls of this chamber carried Greek inscriptions and graffiti.



Figure 14. Crosses and Arabic inscription (B. Zissu).

Finds from the second period of use include many ceramic fragments of Byzantine and Early Islamic date, including a great number of lamp fragments.

4. Discussion and Conclusions.

Numerous inscriptions and graffiti, mostly Greek, but also Arabic and Syriac incised on the walls indicate that the previous Jewish tomb was venerated during the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods - as the Tomb of a certain Holy Salome. This Salome was perhaps the follower of Jesus who is mentioned in the canonical gospels and in some apocryphal writings. She is sometimes identified as the wife of Zabedee and the mother of the Apostles James and John.

Early Byzantine sources afford a number of reports of *inventiones*—miraculous discoveries of tombs of biblical figures or Christian saints. This phenomenon was not restricted to the Holy Land; it is also recorded throughout the Christianized Roman Empire. In other parts of the Empire, *inventiones* pertained almost exclusively to Christian martyrs, whereas in the Holy Land the focus was on biblical figures. Only obviously ancient tombs, it would seem, could be identified with a personage from Scripture; these were usually tombs or other rock-cut features of the Second Temple period and sometimes even of the Iron Age (Di Segni 2007).

L. Di Segni summed up this phenomenon as follows:

“It is clear that the “archaeological” process of discovery of ancient tombs had a particular effect in Byzantine Palestine, namely the foundation of memorial churches, some of them in a very early phase of the Christianization of the country. These churches were not erected to serve a community but as pilgrim sites, to focus the Christian cult on potentially non-Christian holy places throughout the country.”

Interestingly, the cult of Holy Salome continued during

the Early Islamic period (on this phenomenon see Patrich 2011).

To sum up, the H. Qasra tomb complex of the first-second centuries CE was converted into a chapel complex during the Byzantine period, (Kloner 1990; Di Segni and Patrich 1990). The evidence for the early Islamic utilization of the complex suggests that the Arabic inscriptions, which employ Christian phraseology, were carved by Arabic-speaking Christians of the Early Islamic period, rather than Christian Arabs of the Byzantine times. It appears that these inscriptions are evidence of the Arabization in Palestine in the early phase of Arab rule, which preceded by a few generations the processes of Islamization.

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