

FIVE INCISED STONE SLABS FROM MARESHA

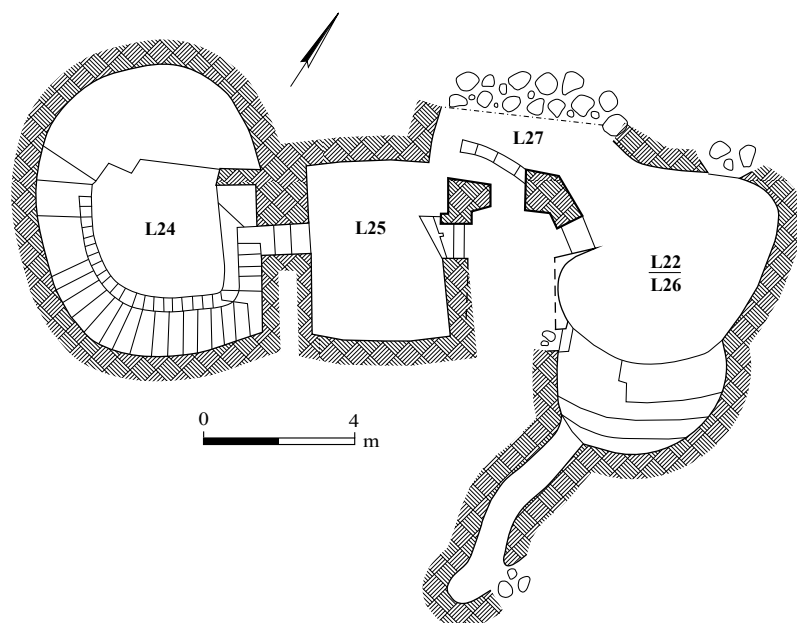
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A group of five fragmentary stone slabs, each bearing incised or engraved figures, was unearthed at Maresha in the Judean Lowlands (Shephelah). The slabs derive from Loci 22, 26, 41 in Room 1 of Subterranean Complex 57 (map ref. 190551/611000; Plan 1; see also Stern and Alpert 2014:5, Fig. 2.1), whose mixed fills contained primarily Hellenistic material (c. 90%), but also Iron Age II and Persian-period remains (Alpert and Stern 2007; Stern 2014:1; for a general map of the subterranean complexes at Maresha, see Kloner et al. 2010: Plan 1.1).¹

The slabs are carved from local, compact soft limestone (*qirṭon*), the main geological layer at the site. The softness of this stone permits easy engraving and carving with simple tools (see Roaf and Boardman 1980), but it also affects the general appearance of the slabs, creating crumbly edges and rough sides. Indeed, some of the slabs seem to have broken during the incision process. One face of each slab was smoothed to create a surface suitable for incision or engraving. The other faces were usually left untouched, and still bear the signs of cutting. The incisions were made by a pointed object, and are of a consistent thickness (c. 1 mm in width, 0.5–2.0 mm in depth). Combinations of deep (and therefore clearer) and shallow (and therefore fainter) incisions are evident on various slabs. The figure depicted on Slab 4 appears to have been carved with a chisel.

It is difficult to attribute graffito-art to a specific period on stylistic grounds alone, but these slabs probably date to the Hellenistic period, i.e., the third or second centuries BCE (see below). Some images on the slabs also occur elsewhere, with examples both within Israel and farther afield. Such parallels, although possibly earlier or later than the pieces

¹ The excavation (Permit Nos. A-4099, A-4687) was conducted in 2004–2006 by Bernie Alpert and Ian Stern on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority and Archaeological Seminars, with the funds and staff of Archaeological Seminars and participants from around the globe, and with the cooperation of Tsvika Tsuk of the Israel Nature and National Parks Authority and of the staff of Bet Guvrin National Park. Sonia Shaharit and Ludmilla Laborsky were responsible for pottery restoration and registration; Clara Amit of the IAA, for the photographs; and Silvie Yogev, for the plan of Maresha SC 57. I am especially grateful to the excavators for allowing me to study and publish the stone slabs. My thanks to Rina Talgam, Silvia Rozenberg, Rivka Gersht, Roni Amir, and the anonymous referee for their time and useful comments. Special thanks to my friend and colleague, Rona Evyasaf for introducing me to Dr. Stern, and for her valuable information and help. Raphael Isserlin and Aviva Schwarzfeld edited the article.



Plan 1. Maresha, Subterranean Complex 57.

under discussion, are cited to give a broader picture and to show that the various images at Maresha are in fact common.

CATALOGUE

1. Reg. No. 57-41-305 S-6; 38.0 × 20.5 × 11.8 cm; Figs. 1, 2.

Description: The upper face is roughly rectangular. On the right-hand side are graffiti of two heads (Profiles A and B), very shallowly incised. Profile A, near the bottom right-hand corner, is clearly incised, and Profile B, slightly higher to its left, is fainter and smaller.

Profile A depicts a male head with diadem. The eye is represented in frontal view, pupil at the center, and a series of short, rhythmic incisions on the top of the head depict a short-cropped hairstyle. The nose is straight, and the chin prominent and rounded. The diadem is indicated by two parallel lines on the forehead, narrowing to a single line along the side of the head, above the ear line. It ends in two fluttering ribbons. Profile B is fainter and less-detailed. Apart from the front contour, there is no indication of other facial features. Here too, the nose is straight and pointed and the chin is prominent and rounded.

Both profiles have a Grecian appearance, indicated either by the presence of a diadem or by the specific profile lines mentioned above. In addition to these two profiles, the slab bears other graffiti, most of which seem arbitrary, but on the bottom-central side of the rectangle are incisions that might recall a donkey's ears, depicted one in front of the other. The ears are oval and end in a point; a series of short, straight lines indicate the texture of fur.



Fig. 1. Slab 1.



Fig. 2. Slab 1, detail of Profile A.

Parallels: Profiles of heads, such as those that appear on Slab 1, are a frequent subject for graffiti. The closest parallels are two profiles incised in the burial cave at Tel Za‘aquqa near Maresha (Kloner, Regev and Rappaport 1992:29*–30*, Figs. 5, 6), and one incised in the Tomb of Apollophanes at Maresha (Erlich 2004:94, Fig. 87). Langner has catalogued numerous examples from other archaeological sites (Langner 2001:43, Taf. 21–29, Nos. 407–632). The profiles on Slab 1, especially Profile A, are artistically better than those at Tel Za‘aquqa or the Tomb of Apollophanes. The facial details are located correctly; lines depicting the chin and neck give a sense of plasticity; the ribbons flutter; and the general appearance of the heads is naturalistic.

The diadem with fluttering ribbons in Profile A is a detail not documented in graffito art elsewhere at Maresha. Comparison with the hunting scene painted on the south wall of the Tomb of Apollophanes reveals a significant similarity: the trumpeter there has two fluttering ribbons painted in red (Peters and Thiersch 1905:23, Pl. VI; Erlich 2004:106–107, Pl. 21, No. 93). Unfortunately, the head of that figure was deliberately destroyed, but it is obvious that both it and Slab 1 Profile A were viewed in profile, facing right. This detail may suggest a close connection between this wall painting and the graffito on Slab 1, both of which were probably modeled after a well-known contemporary. Thus, while most unattributed heads and busts need not signify anything more than representations of a human face (Langner 2001:34), the facial profile on our Slab 1 may have a specific context, albeit unknown.

2. Reg. No. 57-41-332 S-1; 52 × 26 × 18 cm; Figs. 3, 4.

Description: A long rectangular slab, of which much of the upper right portion is broken. There are few graffiti. On the left-hand side is incised a frontal bust. It has a round, flat face with large almond-shaped eyes; the pupils are indicated by round sockets. The nose is long and broad, and the mouth small and rectangular. A few short lines on the chin form a triangle (a beard?). The neck does not appear clearly, but the shoulders and arms are quite visible: a clear horizontal line represents the shoulders, and the arms are folded in front of the chest. The treatment of the lower part of the body is not so clear or detailed, but it seems to be rounded in form. Next to this figure is depicted a long vertical object with a rectangular base and a long column that narrows at the top. On the right-hand side of the slab are additional incisions, the significance of which is unclear.

Parallels: The frontal head or bust is less frequent in graffito art, although Langner documents at least 50 such instances (Langner 2001: Taf. 26–29, Nos. 567–628).² As in the case of heads in profile, the closest parallel(s?) are found at Maresha itself and at Tel Za‘aquqa (Kloner, Regev and Rappaport 1992: Figs. 7, 17, 18). In terms of artistic quality, once again, the quality of the Maresha example is far superior to that of Tel Za‘aquqa. It is apparent in the confident rendering of the Maresha bust, which uses continuous and clear lines for the facial features and arms—in contrast to the hesitant lines of the Tel Za‘aquqa head.

Graffiti of structures and architectural features occur at several sites in Israel, but differ in form from that incised on Slab 2. One such image, on the right-hand doorjamb of the Tomb of Apollophanes, consists of a rectangle crowned with two triangles (Peters and Thiersch 1905:20, Fig. 4). It may represent a cenotaph (Erlich 2004:94). Another image

² See also Langner 2001: Taf. 10, 11, Nos. 189–200, 206, 209–212 (under the category of symbolic images with inscription); Taf. 17, Nos. 323, 325, 326, 330, 334 (under the category of heads and bust with particular hairstyle).

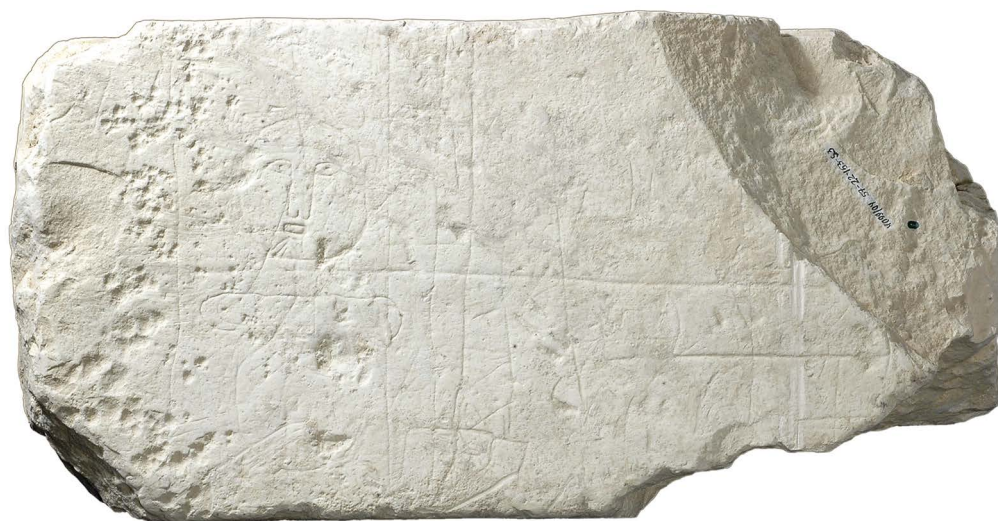


Fig. 3. Slab 2.

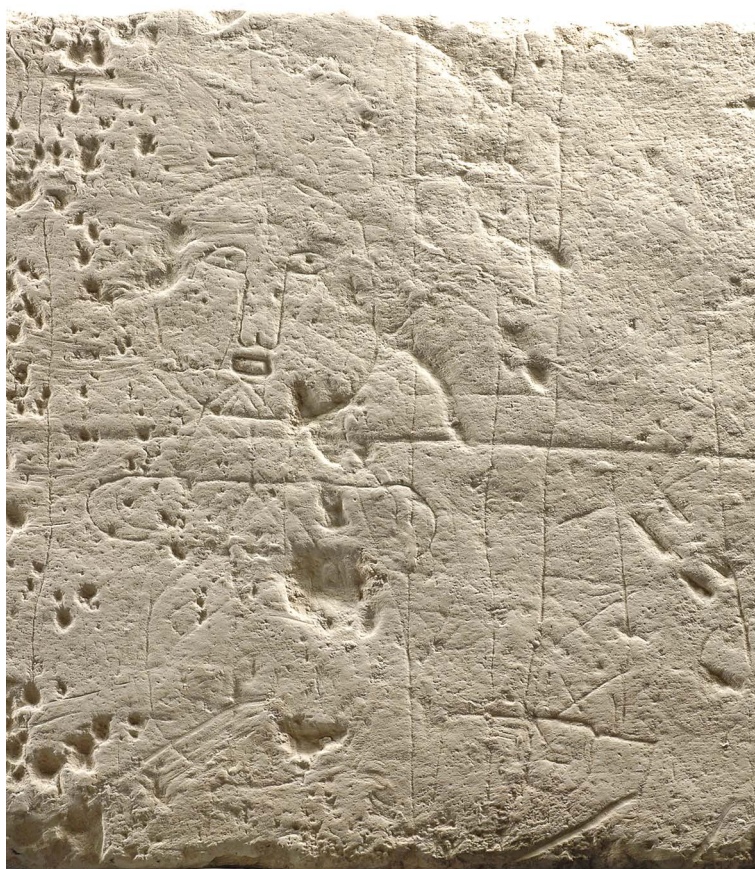


Fig. 4. Slab 2, detail of bust and column.

is incised on the western wall of the burial cave at Tel Za‘aquqa, depicting the front and side of a triangular object or structure decorated with rhythmic horizontal lines. This image has been interpreted as a Nilometer, or possibly a cenotaph (Kloner, Regev and Rappaport 1992:29*, 31*, Fig. 8). A similar graffito of a column patterned with X-shaped lines occurs at the *tepidarium* at Herodium (Testa 1972:36, Fig. 22; Langner 2001: Taf. 148, No. 2290). We may also add here the architectonic plan found in a drainage tunnel in Jerusalem (Reich and Shukron 2007:30, Fig. 3; see below).³

Langner catalogues structures similar to that on Slab 2 (Langner 2001:71, Taf. 148, Nos. 2284–2292).⁴ A column decorated with an X-shaped pattern and a wide base, as on Slab 2, is the most common motif, and it may occur in isolation or as a part of a combined image. In our example, it is difficult to decide whether the frontal bust and the structure are isolated images, or part of a group. A similar combination, but probably much later in date, occurs at Dura-Europos, with a frontal figure standing next to a structure in a manner reminiscent of our Slab 2 (Langner 2001:129, Taf. 81, No. 1250); however, the Dura-Europos graffito bears a religious connotation that is not apparent in the imagery on Slab 2 from Maresha.

3. Reg. No. 57-22-153 S-3; 25 × 14 × 11 cm; Fig. 5.

Description: A rough, partly damaged rectangular slab, the upper portion of which is decorated. Three fragmentary animals are depicted on this slab. Of the first, only the lower portion survives. It has four legs, two with small hooves; a rounded belly; and another organ that might recall an elephant’s trunk. The position of the four legs indicates that it was walking or climbing. Of the second animal, only the rear portion survives; it has rounded hindquarters and its legs are spaced as if it were walking. Below this animal lies the image of the hind portion of a third similar animal. Other graffiti cannot be made out.

Parallels: Two of the three graffiti incised on Slab 3 represent the hindquarters of herbivorous animals, indicated by the shape of the leg and the hooves. Langner catalogues numerous graffiti of horses, stags and other quadrupeds (Langner 2001:64–65, Taf. 93–100, Nos. 1405–1520). One graffito of a standing deer, incised on the right-hand doorjamb of the Tomb of Apollophanes (Peters and Thiersch 1905: Pl. III; Erlich 2004: Pl. 19, No. 88), is very similar to the hindquarters depicted on Slab 3. A charcoal drawing of a resting stag on the northern wall of the porch of Jason’s Tomb in Jerusalem, dates to the late Hellenistic period (Rozenberg 1999:38*, Fig. 63). Another graffito in a rock-hewn cave at Ḥorbat Zikhri depicts a rider and two horses, although their shape is very different from that of the animals on Maresha Slab 3 (Zissu 1996:19*–20*, Fig. 5; Langner 2001: No. 1314). The dating of the cave is uncertain, but Zissu suggests dating it and the graffito to the Hellenistic period.

³ For a further discussion on such structures, see Stern 2018:115–117.

⁴ See also Langner 2001: Taf. 80, Nos. 1241, 1244, 1245.



Fig. 5. Slab 3.

Elephants are exceptional subjects for graffiti. The presence of the motif at Maresha can be explained by the existence of a readily available artistic model in the Tomb of Apollophanes, where an elephant appears in the animal frieze decorating the southern and northern walls. The wall paintings in the tomb—depicting mostly isolated animals, among them wild and fantastic ones, but also a few animal scenes—are widely thought to be connected to Alexandria of the third century BCE (Meyboom 1995:44–49; Rozenberg 2001:313–314, 316, Fig. 1; Kloner 2003:21–24; Erlich 2009:69–75, 125). Langner documents only two clear examples of elephant graffiti,⁵ both from the Piazzale delle Corporazioni at Ostia (Langner 2001: Taf. 69, No. 1128; Taf. 100, No. 1538). It is interesting to note that at the same site there is a black-and-white mosaic of an elephant. The Ostia example too, although later in date, points to a possible connection between known works of art and nearby graffiti. Moreover, it is reasonable to presume that the wall painting at Maresha and the mosaic from Ostia influenced the graffito-makers in their vicinity, and not vice-versa.

4. Reg. No. 57-41-313 S-6; 29.0 × 25.0 × 14.5 cm; Figs. 6, 7.

Description: The slab probably had a rounded shape, but the top face is badly damaged. Both top and sides were smoothed to facilitate the carving of graffiti. The upper surface bears a grid of more-or-less evenly-spaced lines. A frontal face, probably female, was carved into the upper edge. Evidently, this location was intentionally chosen. The face is round and

⁵ Langner (2001: Taf. 100, No. 1537) catalogues another example of an elephant from Nymphaion, but its shape is faint and the legs are very thin.

the hair long. The mouth slants downward, and the nose is broken. An additional rounded strip encircles the head, suggesting some kind of a headgear or shawl. In contrast to the soft relief of the curved head, the neck and torso are incised. Next to this face can be discerned additional graffiti, for the most part illegible.

Parallels: A few statues have been found at Maresha with renderings of human faces similar to that depicted on our Slab 4. The closest, in terms of style, are two examples from Subterranean Complex 169 (Erlich 2004:27, Pl. 3, Nos. 9, 10). Both of these are very small with characteristics that Erlich terms “owl face,” namely, flattened face, broad nose and recessed eyes. Execution is minimal, and depictions of facial features lack detail. A



Fig. 6. Slab 4.



Fig. 7. Slab 4, detail of frontal female face.

combination of engraving and incision is apparent on all three faces. On Slab 4, the mouth and eyebrows are indicated by shallow incisions. The hair, and what seems to be some form of headgear, are engraved as a continuous, simple, strip. The neck and the lower part of the body are indicated with minimal incisions.

5. Reg. No. 57-26-281 S-6; $24.5 \times 25.5 \times 11.0$ cm; Figs. 8–10.

Description: The upper left-hand side of the slab was probably cut away deliberately. The upper surface and sides were smoothed by a flat chisel. The incised scene on the face of the slab includes trees, an animal, a wall and perhaps a building. The animal is climbing a tree, which has a long stick-like trunk and bare branches (Fig. 9). The animal stands on one leg; the two others are raised, and the fourth cannot be discerned. Its hooves are small, and a short mane is visible on the neck. The animal's mouth is wide open, and it seems to be chewing a branch. Below this image are depicted two denticulate lines, one above the other, in a manner that resembles crenellated walls (Fig. 10). To the left, another small stick-like tree is depicted. Its left-hand side is partly hidden by an unidentified flat, square object (a building or pool?). Between the two tree trunks is an object that appears to be a double axe. A few short vertical lines cross a clear ground line that is visible near the bottom side of the slab.

Parallels: There does not seem to be any close parallel to the scene incised on this slab, neither in graffiti nor in painting. Some of its details do occur on other graffiti, but the overall depiction and the combination of the various details are probably unique. Depictions of trees, either isolated or combined with other elements are infrequent in graffiti art. Langner documents two examples—one from the Palatine in Rome, the other from Catacomb 1 at Bet She'arim—and both are later in date (Mazar 1973:77, Pl. IX 3.4; Langner 2001: Taf. 115, Nos. 1842, 1843).⁶ Both examples include animals as well: probably a fox and a raven in the scene from Rome, and a dog in the one from Bet She'arim. Although a connection between a tree and an animal is apparent in either case, the scene on Maresha Slab 5 is very different as the animal is actually climbing the tree and eating a branch.

A palm tree, very similar to those depicted on Slab 5, decorates an altar dated to the Persian period from Tel Lakhish (IAA No. 36.1815). In that example, two parallel vertical lines indicate the tree trunk, but the foliage is executed in a very similar manner to the one incised on Slab 5. It is also pertinent to mention a wall painting from Anfushy, Alexandria, where Rooms 2 and 5 of Tomb V were decorated with painted trees, as part of an overall scheme. In Room 2, date-palms alternate with deciduous trees. In Room 5, there are also shrubs and aquatic plants (Venit 2002:85–90, Figs. 70–75, Pl. IV). Although the trees at Anfushy are painted and very different from the trees incised on our Slab 5, the presence of trees in a funerary context is nonetheless notable.

⁶ The graffiti found in the catacomb are described by Stern (2018:100–103), although the tree is not mentioned.



0 4

Fig. 8. Slab 5.



Fig. 9. Slab 5, detail of upper part of scene.



Fig. 10. Slab 5, detail of lower part of scene.

The climbing animal has a mane and small hooves. As stated earlier, graffiti of quadrupeds are common. Langner catalogues two horses in Rome, at the Paedagogium, Room 8 (Langner 2001:65, Taf. 93, No. 1396). Both animals, probably racehorses, named *Phitolaus* and *Digonus*, have branches (*palmae*) in their mouths, and are accompanied by an inscription. The scene and context, however, are very different from that depicted on Slab 5.

Graffiti of buildings with similar denticulate finials occur at Dura-Europos (Langner 2001:71–72, Nos. 1354, 2304, 2305) and at Bu Njem (*Gholiaia*) in Libya (Langner 2001: No. 2306), both late in date. It may be noted that at Anfushy Tomb 2, a *dipinto* (painted graffiti) of a lighthouse(?) bears a similar finial at the top. At Maresha, the bottom line apparently continues to the rectangular socket at the left-hand side of the slab. The clear ground line might be part of the building in the same manner as the examples from Dura-Europos and Bu Njem. If this assumption is correct, then the smaller tree is depicted in front of the wall.⁷

The image of a double-axe, located between the two tree-trunks, cannot be paralleled in any other graffiti art, although Langner, following Mazar, cataloged a similar graffiti at Bet She‘arim Catacomb 2 as “Psychai” in the form of a butterfly (Mazar 1973:163, Pl. XXVI 4; Langner 2001: No. 1827).⁸ The double-axe on Slab 5 has a single vertical line, while the “souls” at Bet She’an have two such lines.

Of interest is another Persian burning altar, decorated with two palm trees flanking a “double-axe” image and a pomegranate(?) (Stern 1982:299, Fig. 8). Although this depiction cannot be classified as a graffiti, it combines two elements, which also appear on the lower part of Slab 5. The fact that the altar is a specific object with a specific function (in contrast to that of Slab 5, which remains obscure), makes it difficult to connect these two scenes. Furthermore, they were probably made in different periods.

On Slab 5, architectural depictions and nature scenes are combined. It may represent a garden with a building, trees and an animal eating from one of them. A graffiti representing a garden with the same combination of buildings (gate and surrounding wall) and trees of two types was found on the upper terrace of the northern palace at Masada (Avi-Yonah et al. 1957:27, Fig. 11A, Pl. 5B; Netzer 1991: Plan 10; Hirschfeld 2007:220–221, Fig. 19). Avi-Yonah speculated that this graffiti might represent “anything from the date gardens of Engeddi to paradise,” and that it was “executed by soldiers on guard before the palace, who thus whiled away the tedious hours of duty” (Avi-Yonah et al. 1957:27). Hirschfeld pointed to its close connection with manor houses. The main difference between these two pictorial representations is that the Masada graffiti combines an aerial view with a frontal one, while the Maresha graffiti is only in frontal view with some overlap. In this respect, the Maresha graffiti exhibit a different conception of space.

⁷ Graicer (2012:86) suggested that this building may have been related to a nearby monumental building.

⁸ The graffiti found in the catacomb are briefly described by Stern (2018:103–104), although the “Psychai” are not mentioned.

Pictorial representations of combined architecture and natural elements, such as gardens, are depicted in Egyptian paintings decorating private tombs (e.g., Anfushy Tomb V.2; see above), palaces and temples, dating to the New Kingdom (Wilkinson 1998:6–19). The garden theme, combining architecture and nature, also occurs in Neo-Assyrian art. One such is the famous relief sculpture of Ashurbanipal, now in the British Museum, showing the garden described by Sennacherib (Dalley 1993:9–10, Fig. 2). The relief combines the same elements: trees of two types; an architectural element; canals; and, in addition, a path with an altar and aqueduct. Both the Egyptian and Assyrian gardens also depict animals of various kind. As Maresha was strongly influenced by Ptolemaic Egypt, it seems reasonable to assume that pictorial representations of Egyptian gardens served as a model for this graffito. The precise interpretation of this scene is unclear, as Avi-Yonah and others remarked on the garden representation at Masada.

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Composition

The five slabs under consideration may be divided into two categories, as defined by Langner, depending on whether their composition is arbitrary or planned. The first category is what Langner (2001:12–13) classifies as graffito art, its two basic criteria being simplicity and arbitrariness in the subject and placement of the images.⁹ Slabs 1 and 3 seem to fit well with this definition, as their composition is arbitrary, without any preliminary planning. Slabs 4 and 5, by contrast, represent a different approach to composition, and therefore, belong to Langer's second, planned category. These depictions are carefully placed, as is apparent from the way the elements are aligned to the edges of the surface (Slab 5) or where two sides join (Slab 4). According to Langner's definition, Slabs 4 and 5 should not be considered graffito-art at all. Slab 2 may represent a borderline case: the depictions are placed one next to the other as if they were on the same level and oriented in the same direction, but on the other hand, they are very simple and fit well with the common subject of graffito art in general (see below).

Incised Graffiti in the Shephelah and Vicinity

Other graffiti have been found at the site of Maresha, on a fragmentary slab similar to those under discussion, and also on the walls of some of the burial caves. The fragmentary slab, also of the local chalk (excavated by F.J. Bliss and R.A. Macalister, but first published by

⁹ Langner also mentions location as an important criterion for the definition of graffiti, but this is irrelevant in our case due to the slabs' condition and context. Stern offers the most updated discussion of graffiti as a medium of expression; however, the Bet She'arim graffiti differs from that of Maresha both ethnically (Jewish versus pagan) and chronologically (Stern 2018:13–25). It is important to note that Stern claims that in many cases the location of the graffiti is deliberate, albeit this does not make them less graffiti.

Brindley 1919), bears a graffito of a ship. It is rather shallowly incised and some of the details are extremely faint (Gibson 1992:27; Langner 2001: No. 1903).

The graffiti on the walls of the burial caves at Maresha are well-documented. In Tomb I, Tomb of Apolophanes, a few graffiti were incised into the soft stone of the flat doorjambs (see Peters and Thiersch 1905:19–20, 58, 60, Figs. 3, 4, 20; Erlich 2004:93–94). On the northern doorjamb are depicted a burning altar, a head seen in profile, an eagle with drooping wings, and a stag with all four legs raised. On the opposite, southern doorjamb, above a painted Cerberus, is a female head with long hair viewed *en face*, and a bearded man depicted in profile. Peters and Thiersch (1905:58) speculate about possible romantic circumstances in which these images were made: “here in the twilight shadows they [sc.: lovers] may have waited for one another on the benches and while they waited, scribbled all sorts of signs on the wall.” This picturesque conjecture demonstrates the two basic points characteristics of graffiti: that were made haphazardly and by untrained persons. The Tomb I graffiti thus fit the first category mentioned above, featuring the same unplanned composition as on Slabs 1 and 3. The graffiti images are random, rendered in different directions, and to no common scale.

Tombs III and VI were excavated by Oren and Rappaport (1984). In Tomb III, a few graffiti were incised on the doorjambs and above the *kokhim*—one of them is of a ship with oars, the others are illegible. In Tomb VI, a schematic head viewed *en face*, perhaps a mask, was deeply incised into the wall above *kokh* 2 (Oren and Rappaport 1984:121, 129, Pl. 13:A). Haddad, Stern and Artzy (2018) published graffiti of ships, which were found in another subterranean complex at Maresha; this motif was common throughout the Mediterranean (Stern 2018:120).

Graffiti also occur at other sites in the vicinity of Maresha. At Tel Za‘aquqa, a few were incised into the walls of a burial cave (Kloner, Regev and Rappaport 1992:29*–31*, Figs. 5–8). They include two heads in profile and one frontal; a ship; and what seems to be an architectonic depiction. Graffiti are not confined to funerary context, of course. One graffito of an architectural plan was incised into the western wall of a drainage tunnel in Jerusalem (Reich and Shukron 2007:29, Fig. 3). It used the same technique, i.e., incision into a soft stone.

Technique

The engraving technique, such as occurs on Maresha Slab 4, occurs either on small statues or as reliefs on the walls of burial caves (Erlich 2009:14–22, Figs. 6–23). The softness of the stone is a major factor in the final appearance of these objects. The most characteristic feature is the flat planes used to indicate the body or facial organs. This occurs on the upper surface of Slab 4. It is worth pointing out that both techniques were used to decorate a few small altars found at Maresha (Peshin 2002: Nos. 8, 33). The same techniques were also applied on limestone altars dating to the Persian period, and occur at several sites in Israel, though engraving is rare (Stern 1982:183, 186).

Function

The fragmentary condition of the slabs, and their unclear stratigraphic context, preclude any possibility of determining their function. However, the distinction between arbitrary and planned composition may be a consequence of different usage: a convenient surface for sketching, planning or decorating. It is notable that the woman depicted on Slab 4 was probably carved after the game-grid was already there. This might be an indication that the slab was reused. A hint of the primary function of Slab 2 lies in the fact that both its long sides were carved. This means that it was a freestanding object, possibly a table or stool. The small Greek letter α incised on one side of the slab, just above the molded cornice, may be considered some sort of mason's mark. A larger limestone tabletop, with two rebated edges decorated with frets and circles, was excavated by Bliss and Macalister (Kloner 2003:17, Fig. 2.3). On Slab 5, the presence of a clear ground line and planned composition with a certain degree of space, may indicate that the graffito was executed as a preliminary sketch.

Dating

The dating of graffito art constitutes a complex problem; Langner (2001:15) points out that neither style nor technique form a sufficient criterion. Only rarely does a graffito contain a detail that may indicate an accurate date. In most cases, according to Langner, we have to rely on external evidence. At Maresha, we apparently have to take several factors into consideration. As stated in the *Introduction*, these slabs were unearthed from a mixed fill (L22; see Plan 1) containing Iron Age II and Persian-period (generally fourth-century BCE) material, together with mostly Hellenistic finds (approximately 90%) dating from the third or second centuries BCE. The fact that the site of Maresha was finally deserted at the end of the second or the beginning of the first century BCE (Kloner 2003:5) may be used as a *terminus ante quem*. In addition, the possible connection between the wall painting of the Tomb of Apollophanes and the graffiti incised on Slabs 1 and 3 points to a Hellenistic date, as the animal frieze in the tomb is dated to the third century BCE (Erich 2004:105, 114). That some of the graffiti have close similarities to those at Tel Za'auqa may corroborate this date: the burial cave there is dated—based on small finds, an Achaemenid earring, and early Hellenistic pottery—to the third century BCE (Kloner, Regev and Rappaport 1992:35*–36*, 47). In the light of all this, we may posit that the Maresha slabs can be dated to the third or second centuries BCE.

CONCLUSIONS

The figurative depictions on these five slabs are an important addition to the Hellenistic assemblage at Maresha, and broaden its iconographic repertoire. Their technical features—in particular the use of shallow incision or engraving—match the primary techniques used by local artists in making artifacts from the local soft limestone. The most significant point, however, is the relatively high artistic quality exhibited by the graffiti on these slabs. This is especially true of Slabs 1, 4, and 5: the head profiles are rendered in a quite naturalistic

fashion; the engraved frontal female bust is relatively detailed (and may be compared to the better-quality heads mentioned by Erlich 2004); and the depiction of the garden is comparatively developed in term of space and depth. It seems that the person or persons who executed these images, and whose identity remains unknown, had a certain degree of artistic skill. Nevertheless, these images are in the local idiom, and even the better ones bear features that locate them in a very simple artistic tradition.

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