

## A BURIAL CAVE WITH A GREEK INSCRIPTION AND GRAFFITI AT KHIRBAT EL-'EIN, JUDEAN SHEPHELAH

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A burial cave that had been breached by antiquities' looters south of Kh. el-'Ein (map. ref. NIG 19197/61456, OIG 14197/11456) was inspected and documented by the Israel Antiquities Authority in 1996.<sup>1</sup> The burial cave

is situated near an ancient site of the same name, located on the hill's southwestern slope (triangulation point 340 m; Figs. 1, 2). Nearby were bell-shaped caves with *columbaria* niches, as well as a large cave, probably for

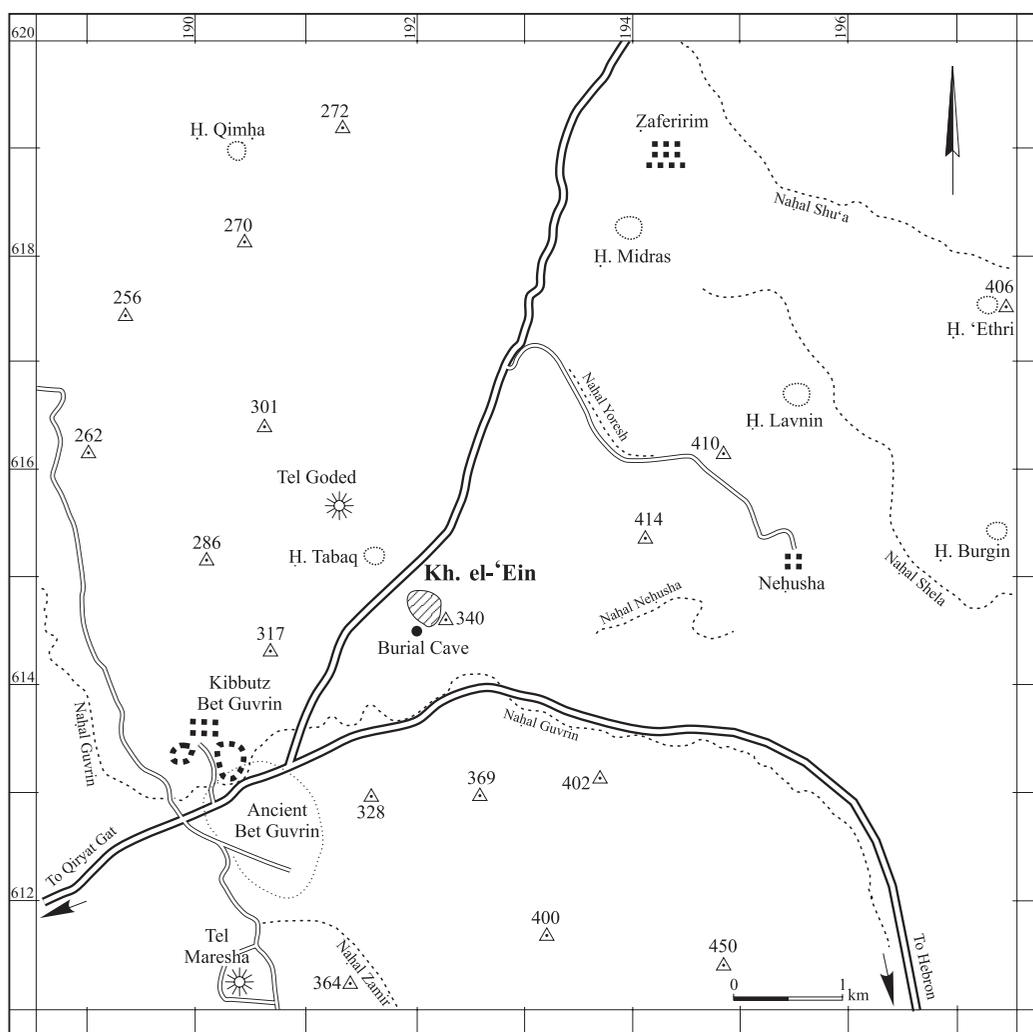


Fig. 1. Location map of Kh. el-'Ein and other nearby Second-Temple-period burial sites.

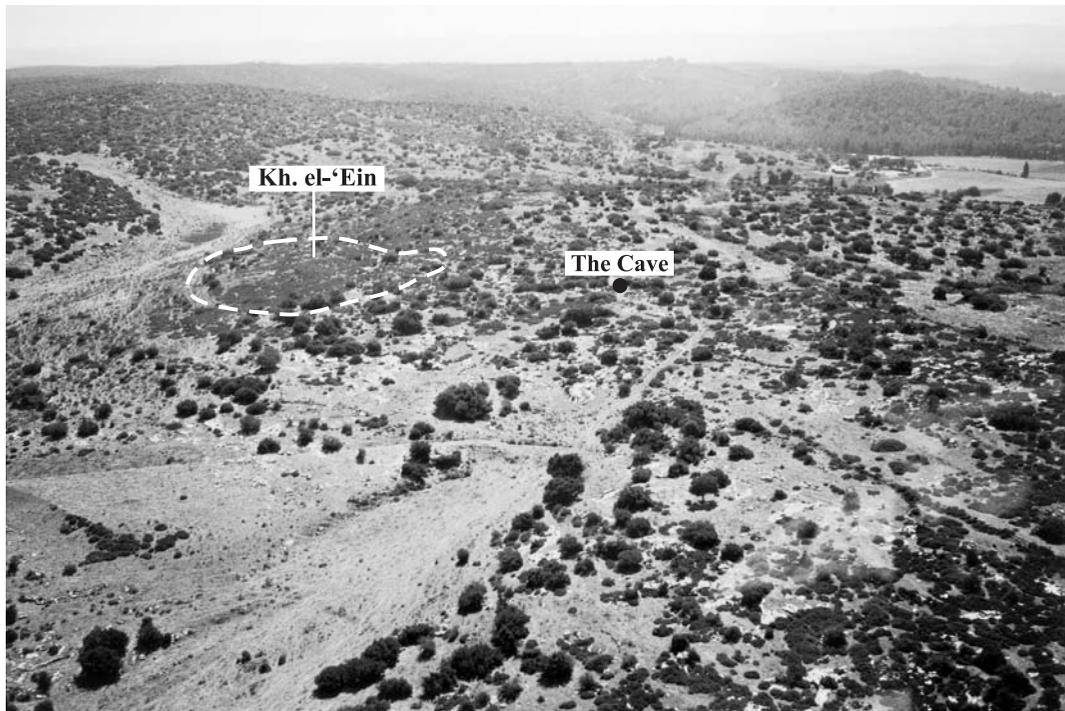


Fig. 2. Aerial view of the site, looking east.

industrial use. R.A.S. Macalister, on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund, recorded some man-made caves hewn in the typical soft chalk (*qirton*) in this area at the beginning of the twentieth century, but apparently did not locate this particular one (Bliss and Macalister 1902: 224–237). Unfortunately, the ancient site is not marked on modern maps.

#### THE CAVE

Although the floor was hidden by debris, the general layout of the complex is clear. This burial cave comprises four main components, arranged along an east–west axis: a courtyard, a vestibule, a burial chamber and an additional room (Plan 1; Fig. 3). Similar axial planning is common in burial caves dating to the first century CE in Jerusalem (e.g., Jason’s tomb, Rahmani 1967; Mount of Olives, Abu Raya 1997:109–110; Abu Tor, Kloner and Zissu 2003:174–175, cave 7–9) and in the Judean

Shephelah (e.g., at H. Burgin, Zissu and Ganor 1997:117–118; 1999:75\*–77\*; H. Lavnin, Zissu 2001:104\*).

The courtyard, hewn into the side of the hill, is rectangular in shape (c. 2.5 × 5.7 m). Steps measuring the entire width of the courtyard descended to the floor level, which was probably c. 3.8 m below the surface. Both the courtyard and the stairs were covered with alluvial soil mixed with chalk debris.

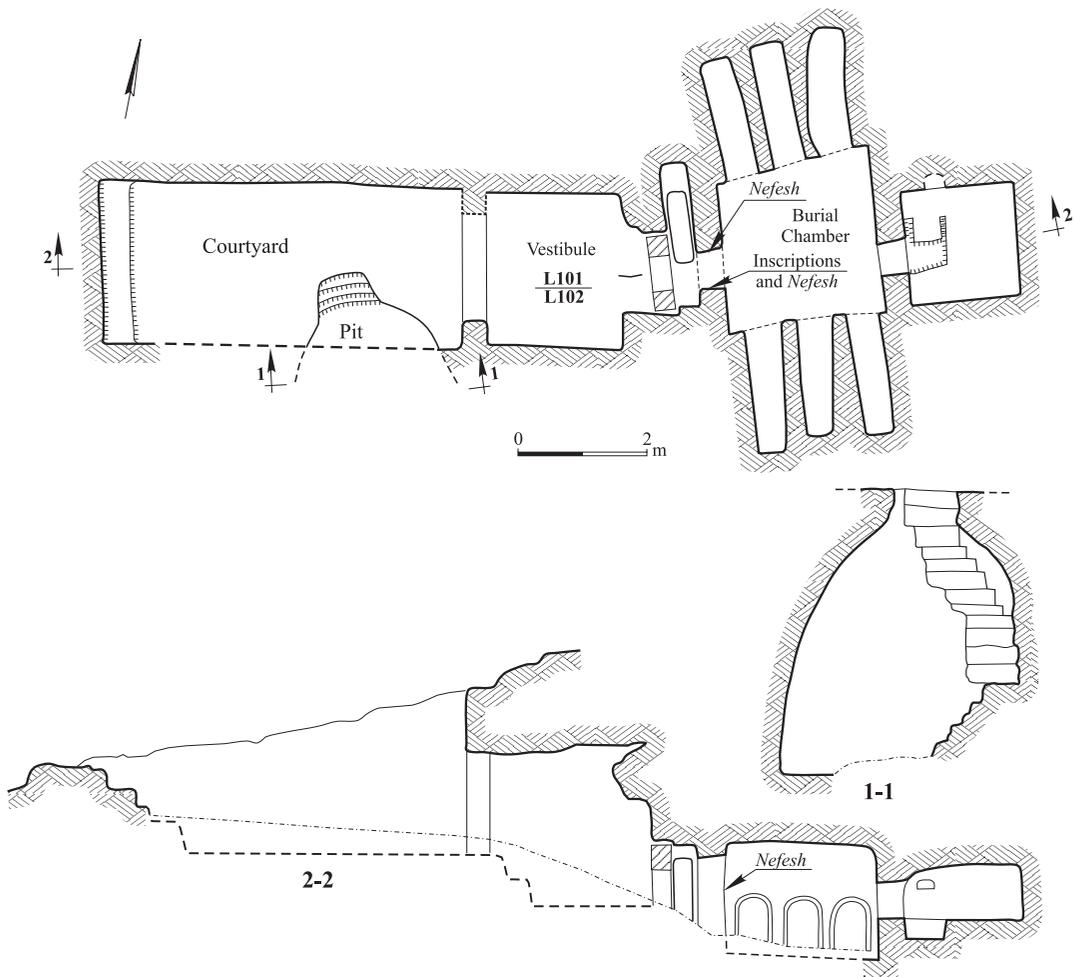
After the burial cave had ceased to function, a deep bell-shaped cave with steps carved along its walls was hewn in the southern wall near the lowest part of the courtyard (diam c. 6 m, depth c. 7.5 m). This cave was probably used as a chalk quarry. The widespread construction of bell caves in the Judean Shephelah dates mainly to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Ben-Arieh 1962:60–61). We may assume that originally, a smaller pit was dug near this side of the courtyard in order to collect runoff water and thereby prevent flooding of the burial cave,

since such drainage pits associated with burial complexes are known at nearby Ḥ. Burgin (Zissu and Ganor 1999:75\*–77\*, Fig. 151).

In the courtyard's eastern wall was a broad opening (reconstructed width c. 1.6 m) leading to a square vestibule (2.0 × 2.4 m). The roof had partially collapsed owing to natural decay. Comparison with those of better-preserved burial caves in the area (including Ḥ. Burgin, cited above) leads us to assume that the entranceway was arched. Chalk debris, 1.0–1.5 m thick, mixed with a few sherds of ribbed vessels (most likely extracted from the bell-shaped cave), filled the vestibule (L101). Below this fill was a 5–10 cm thick layer of brown soil (L102) that apparently accumulated during the

burial cave's last period of use. It contained sherds of a grooved-rim cooking pot from the first century CE and a fragment of a second- to third-century CE Roman discus oil lamp (Fig. 4). This oil lamp is a good chronological indicator, establishing the final stage of the use of the cave to about the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in the first quarter of the second century CE (Zissu 1998).

In the eastern wall of the vestibule an opening led to the burial chamber. An arched doorway was carved into a carefully worked *nari* slab (1.4 × 1.3 × c. 0.35 m) that had been set in a rectangular frame cut into the bedrock. Over this frame, a decorative arch had been incised (Fig. 5). The entranceway was partially blocked



Plan 1. Plan and section of the burial cave and bell-shaped cave.

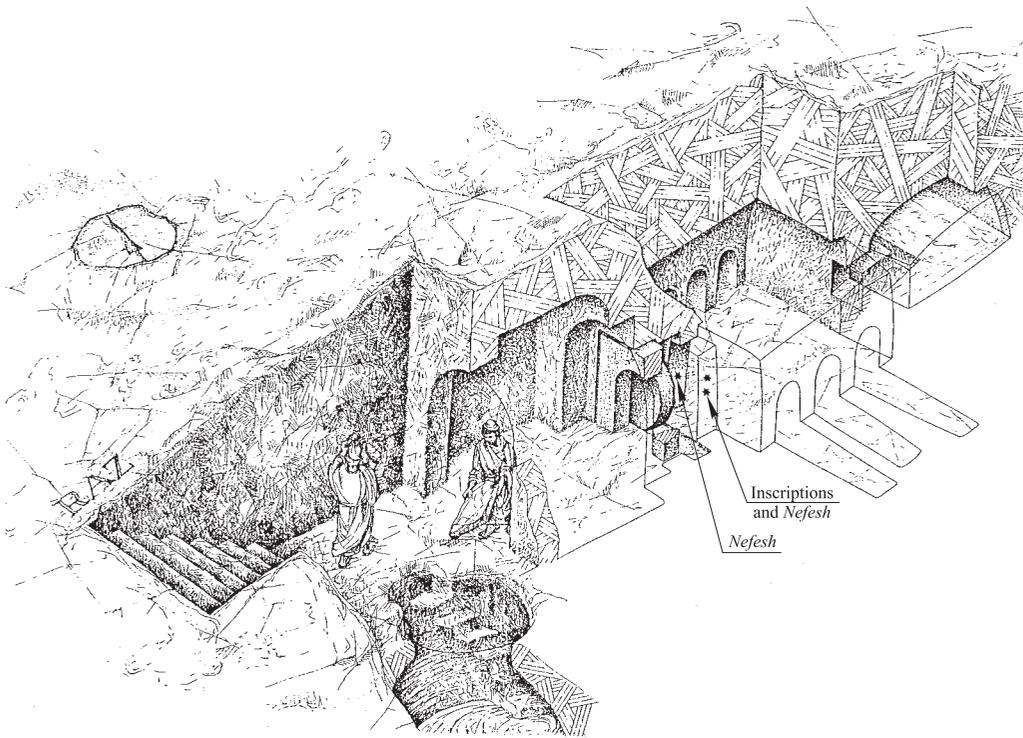


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the burial cave (by Raz Niculescu).

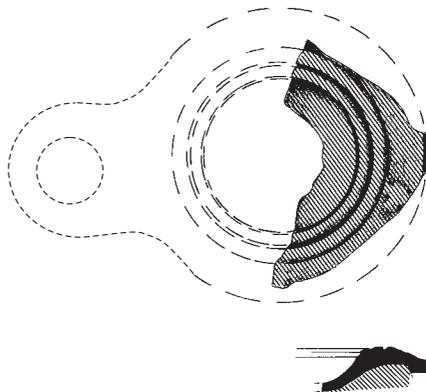


Fig. 4. The Roman discus oil-lamp sherd.

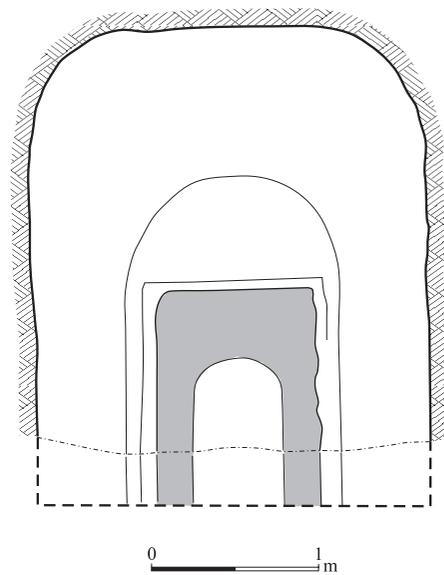


Fig. 5. The burial chamber opening, looking east.

by a cracked *nari* rolling stone (diam c. 0.3 × 0.55 m thick; Fig. 6) that had been rolled back into the northern section of a hewn groove. Although rolling stones are rare in tombs of the Second Temple period, their appearance points to a date range beginning from the second half of the first century CE until the end of the Byzantine period (Kloner 1980:215–216; Kloner and Zissu 2003:24).

The rolling stone's position indicates that the burial cave had already been breached in antiquity, perhaps by the hewers of the bell-shaped cave in the courtyard. The weight of the large mound of earth and chalk debris in front of the entranceway (L101) was certainly responsible for the cracking of the *nari* slab and sealing stone.

The inner section of the entranceway cut in the soft chalk was rectangular (c. 0.6 × 1.1 m).

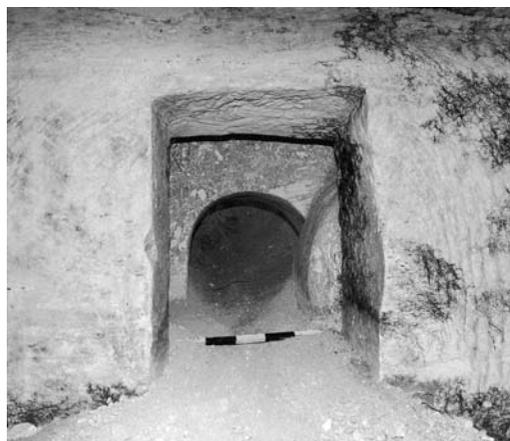


Fig. 6. The opening to the burial chamber from inside, looking west.



Fig. 7. The burial chamber, looking east.

The jambs were delicately smoothed with a broad chisel and were decorated with a long inscription in Greek letters and two *nefashot*, discussed below (see Figs. 9–12).

The trapezoidal burial chamber was carefully hewn (c. 2.5 × 2.3 × 1.3 m). The floor of the chamber was not exposed in its entirety, but appears to have been levelled. The chamber lacks a central pit. In both the northern and southern walls were three *kokhim*, each with vaulted ceilings (Fig. 7). The openings of the *kokhim* were adorned with recessed and arched frames. Typical of the late Second Temple period, caves of this type are found in great numbers in and around Jerusalem and in Judea (Kloner and Zissu 2003). The finds from this chamber comprised several body sherds of store jars and a crudely-fashioned, rectangular stone trough (c. 0.30 × 0.45 × 0.22 m) made from a rectangular block of chalk (Fig. 8). This trough may have been used as an improvised ossuary as well.

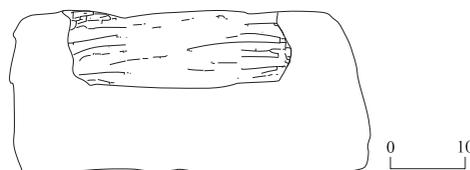
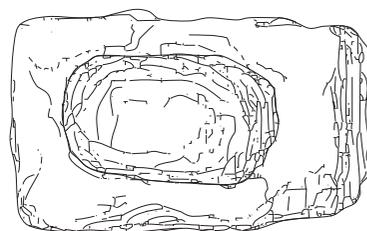


Fig. 8. The stone trough found inside the burial chamber.

In the eastern wall of the chamber was an opening leading to a small room, where ossuaries were most likely stored. On the floor we found small ossuary fragments adorned with rosettes. In its northern wall was a small arched niche—probably for the collection of bones. The chisel marks on the floor indicate

that the hewing of this burial chamber was not completed.

#### *The Inscription and the Nefashot*

A long inscription in Greek letters was incised on the southern jamb of the entrance to the burial chamber (Fig. 9). The inscription is

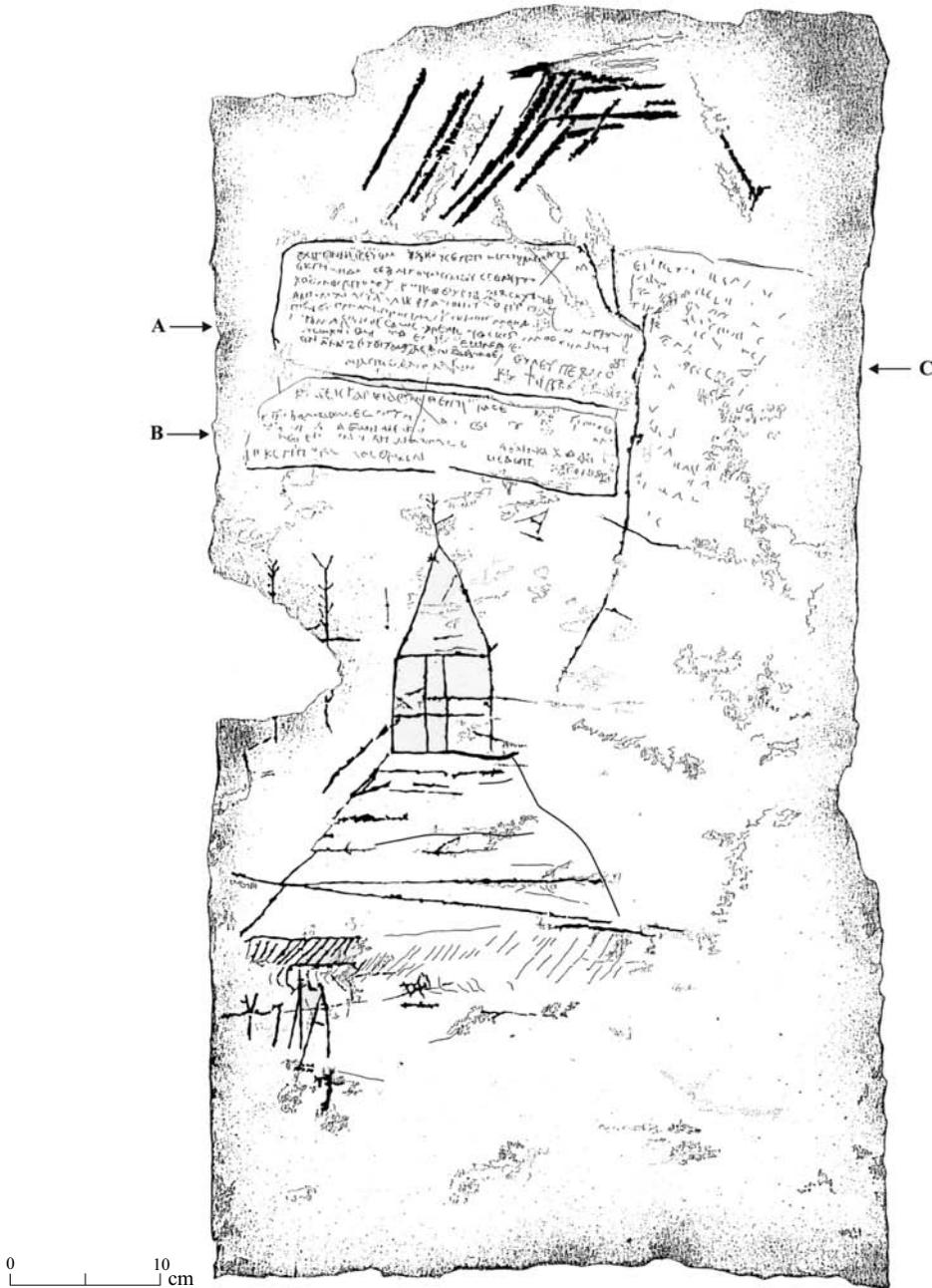


Fig. 9. Drawing of the southern jamb (by Haim Kapsits).

divided into three frames by incised lines: upper-left frame (A), lower-left frame (B), and right frame (C).<sup>2</sup> Frame A (c. 8 × 25; Fig. 10) is the best preserved of the three (see Fig. 11 in rear pocket). The Greek letters are arranged in nine rows, apparently without a coherent meaning. A large X was drawn in the upper right corner of the frame. Frame B (c. 4 × 23 cm; Fig. 10) is also quite well-preserved (see Fig. 11 in rear pocket). The Greek letters are arranged in five rows, again apparently without any clear meaning. In the middle of the frame a large X was scratched. Frame C (c. 18 × 10 cm) is poorly preserved owing to damage from tiny plant roots (Fig. 12); very few letters are discernible. In the lower left corner of the frame, again, a large X was incised.

The inscription could not be deciphered. It may have served a magical purpose, with the formula and exact meaning difficult to understand. Greek and Aramaic *abecedaria* as well as obscure inscriptions—perhaps with magical meanings—are known from

burial caves in Jerusalem and Judea and date from the late Second Temple period until the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. According to Trachtenberg, magical inscriptions were considered as a charm against evil spirits perturbing the peaceful repose of the departed (Dornseiff 1925; Trachtenberg 1961).

Several magical inscriptions dated to the first or early second centuries CE were carved above entrances to Jewish tombs at H. Lavnin (Zissu 2001) and H. 'Eitun (Kloner 1985:99–100). Others appear on ossuaries from tombs at Mount Scopus (Tsaferis 1982:49) and Jericho (Hachlili 1984). Dating to the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, Greek and Hebrew *abecedaria* were discovered above entrances to Jewish catacombs at Bet She'arim (Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974:46–47, n. 137).

Underneath the inscribed frames a depiction of a structure was carved, probably representing a schematic *nefesh* (see Fig. 9). The height to its apex is 40 cm and the base is c. 20 cm wide. The base of the design consists of a stepped trapezoid

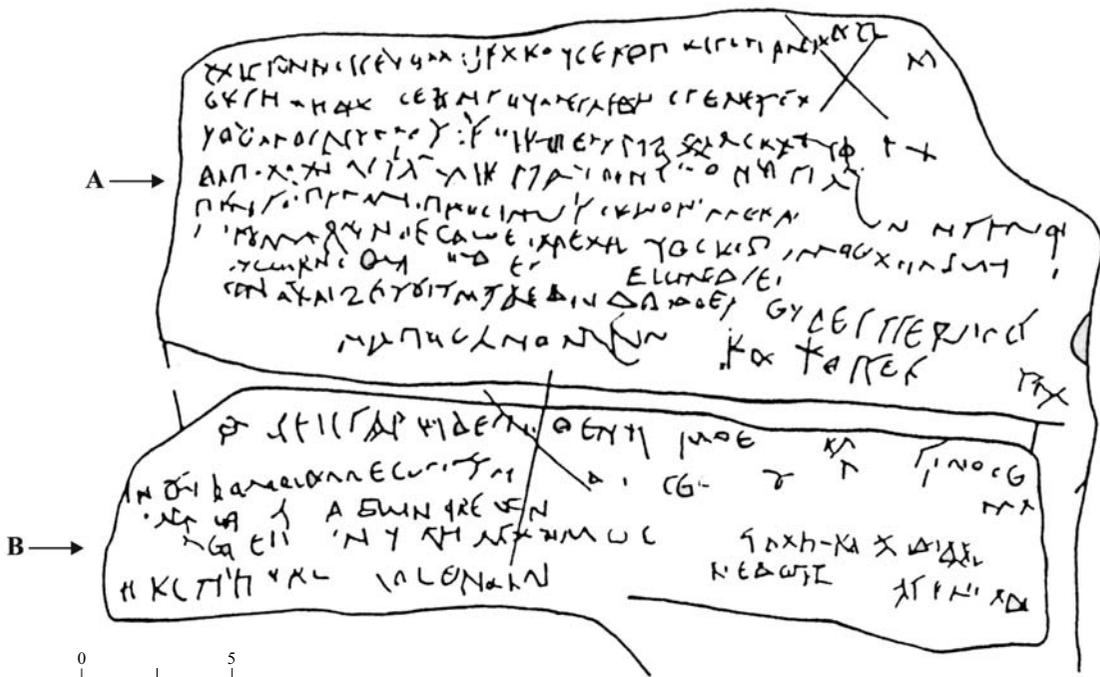


Fig. 10. Drawing of the upper and lower left inscriptions (A, B).



Fig. 12. Greek Inscription C.

form, ornamented by a row of short diagonal lines at its bottom. Above this is a rectangular component, adorned by two parallel vertical and horizontal lines that intersect in the center. On the top of this component is a triangular element. Its top is adorned by a schematically-depicted palm branch. Two similar branches, detached from the design, were carved to its left.

In the center of the same opening's northern jamb is a carving of a rectangular feature, probably another *nefesh* (c. 11 × 14 cm). This design consists of a rectangular base with a gabled top (Fig. 13). The gabled top was filled by a net motif, perhaps representing roof tiles. A schematic palm branch ornamented the top of the gable.

*Nefashot* were tomb markers built above burial caves, a recognized monumental feature in the necropolis landscape (e.g., the monuments in the Qidron Valley, Jerusalem; Avigad 1954). Drawings of *nefashot* are a well-known motif related to death and burial. Perhaps for this reason, graffiti depicting these monuments adorn the walls of burial caves (e.g., at Jericho [Hachlili 1981] and at H. Egoz [Zissu 1999a]), ossuaries (Rahmani 1994: Pl. 33, No. 231; Pl. 86, No. 601; Hachlili 1981:33, Pl. VII; Billig 1996:81, Fig. 84) and oil lamps

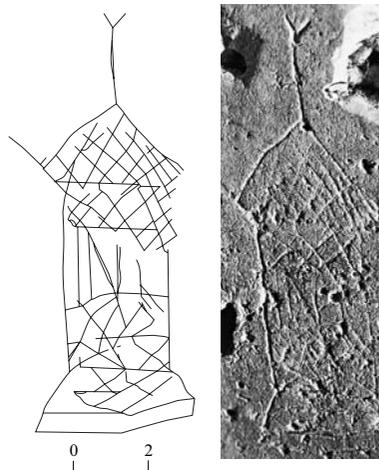


Fig. 13. The *nefesh* from the northern jamb.

(Sussman 1982:57, No. 60). Unfortunately, the significance of this motif is not completely clear, and an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this report (for a systematic study, including the archaeological findings and the ancient sources, see Triebel 1999).

The architecture and meager finds of this burial cave date its construction to the first century CE. It probably remained in use until the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The cave probably served a Jewish family who dwelled nearby at Kh. el-'Ein.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The cave was discovered by Alon Klein and Avshalom Dadosh, inspectors of the Unit for the Prevention of Antiquities' Robbery of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA). The cave was documented and partly excavated by the present author on behalf of the IAA (Permit No. A-2468), with the participation of Alon Klein, Nili Graicer, Abraham Graicer, Amir Ganor, Raz Niculescu (surveying, drafting and isometric reconstruction), Tsila Sagiv and Niki Davidov (photography), Hezi Dan-Gur and Haim Moyal. The inscription removal was directed by Ghaleb Abu Diab with the aid of

Haim Kaptsits (drawing). Of great assistance were Prof. Hannah Cotton, Dr. Leah Di Segni and Dr. Lisa Ullmann, who invested great efforts in the deciphering of the inscription. The jambs with their inscriptions are kept in the IAA collections, Nos. 1999-3031, 1999-3032. For a preliminary note on the discovery, see Zissu 1999b.

<sup>2</sup> The three sections of the inscription were photographed *in situ* and, after its removal, in the photographic studio of the IAA. Drawings and copies also have been made *in situ* and again in the laboratory.

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