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Horvat Qasra and the Chapel of Holy Salome: Features, Identity and Archaeological Context

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Horvat Qasra is located on a hilltop in the southern Judaeen Foothills near the ancient road connecting the plains and foothills with Hebron. The site consists of a central building, with a tower and rooms built around an inner courtyard, and a hiding complex cut into the rock below. Additional cavities were carved into the soft chalk of the slopes: underground quarries, two cross-shaped columbaria installations and some cisterns.

In the southern part of the site, a Jewish rock-cut burial complex from the 1st–2nd centuries CE was excavated. This had a monumental entrance, with a roofed vestibule and cliff walls faced with ashlar. In front was a large courtyard. During the Byzantine period (5th c. CE), the burial complex was transformed into a Christian chapel, dedicated to Holy Salome. Numerous inscriptions and graffiti incised on its walls, in Greek, Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Arabic, attest that Holy Salome was venerated here until the Abbasid period (8–9th centuries CE). A Christian structure was erected outside the chapel, in the former courtyard of the tomb, and probably functioned as a monastic compound.

Given the long veneration of Salome in this cave, there is a question about her identity. It has been assumed that she was the 'doubting midwife' of an apocryphal story. We suggest instead that another Salome was remembered as being buried here — Salome the disciple and Myrrhophore.

Keywords

Saint Salome, Horvat Qasra, Second Temple period, Byzantine, cave chapels, columbaria, cult of saints, hiding complexes, manor houses, monasteries

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1982 an intriguing cave chapel came to light in a remote, rural area south of Beth Guvrin, Israel, in the Judaeen foothills. The archaeologist Amos Kloner discovered that a tomb complex from the Second Temple period had been turned into a Christian shrine in the Byzantine era. Crosses painted on the walls were in a remarkable state of preservation. But the most remarkable feature was that the walls were covered with graffiti in Greek, Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Arabic, languages showing long use of the site through a critical time of cultural change (see Kloner 1982; Di Segni 1986; Tsafir, 1989: 1763–65; Zissu and Kloner

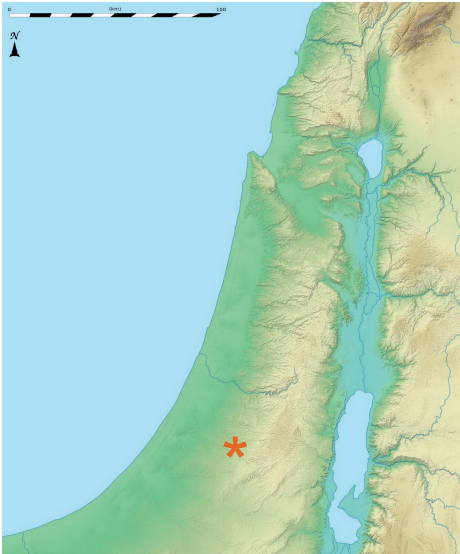
2019: 128–30). The graffiti indicate that this was a holy place and memorial site, dedicated to Holy (or Saint) Salome. But this makes the site mysterious, because it is not clear who this ‘Salome’ was, and nothing was known from the written sources about this chapel and its veneration.

The Chapel of Holy Salome was a sizeable place of devotion. The cave chapel is associated with exterior masonry that shows that a Christian structure existed outside, from which the chapel descended. New excavations were conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority (hereafter IAA) in 2022–2023, and have revealed the lower level of this structure, along with hundreds of clay lamps used by those who participated in ceremonies in the darkness of the cave (Shimshon-Paran 2023; Steinmeyer 2023). Soot from the burning of these lamps can still be seen in the wall recesses. Excavations show that the tomb was originally adjacent to a 1st – 2nd century fortified manor house with a ramified hiding complex hewn underneath and two underground columbaria cut nearby. This paper aims to correlate this new evidence with the previously excavated and investigated material, to present an interpretation of the site, and consider the identity of the figure venerated here.

2. THE LOCATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ḤORVAT QASRA

Ḥorvat Qasra (NIG 193156/605565, OIG 1053/1431) is located geographically at 31.53878 north and 34.926748 east, and the road access is from Highway 6 or 38 from Jerusalem, east on the 3415. This route follows the old road up to Eliav and then loops south, but originally it continued to Idna. At a small roundabout by Moshav Amatzia one takes Route 358, stopping just before Eliav. The site lies about 1.5 kilometres northeast of Amatzia, just north of Eliav, 8 km south–southeast of Beth Guvrin and 8 km southeast of Lachish. There is a flat hill 370 m high, in an area of private land largely planted with vines, very close to the security fence with the Palestinian National Authority. The area of ruins extends over 30 *dunams*, or 7.5 acres (**Figures 1–3**).

The Palestine Exploration Fund’s *Survey of Western Palestine* draft map of 1864 and final printed version (1880: sheet 20; **Figure 4**) show a village named Dawaimeh (or Dawayima) lying *c.* 1 km southwest of the ruins around the cave chapel, on the road that is now route 3415. The map shows this ruin as named Khirbet el-Kusr, meaning ‘ruin of the house or palace’ (Palestine Exploration Fund 1880: 115), in recognition of the wider ruined structures around the cave, hence Ḥorvat Qasra in Hebrew. Khirbet el-Kusr is one of several identified ruins in the area to the northeast of Dawaimeh; the surveyors also noted the presence of cisterns and caves.¹ Dawaimeh (as Dawayima) is also shown on the Survey of Palestine map (1945; **Figure 2**), but does not now exist. Instead, there is the *moshav* of Amatzia nearby. A number of remains from the Roman and Byzantine periods have been found in this area, indicating that there was a small settlement here at



this time (Aladjem 2012; Aladjem and Gendler 2012a; 2012b; Dagan 2006: 101–104).

The evidence of documented Roman milestones and other remains suggest that an ancient road ran through this area from the city of Eleutheropolis (Beit Jibrin/Beth Guvrin; see Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994: 118) to Hebron, connecting with the road that led south from Bethlehem to Hebron. The Roman milestones as found along this stretch of road are shown on Avi Yonah's *Map of*

Figure 1. Location of Horvat Qasra. Illustration by B. Zissu.

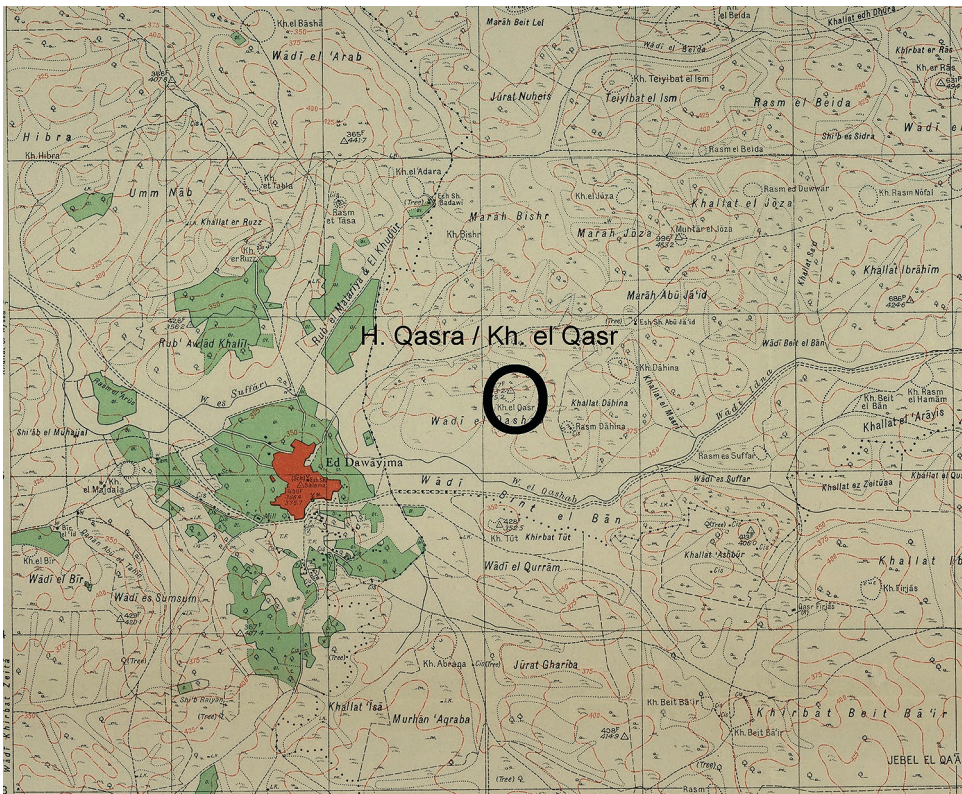


Figure 2. Detail from the 1945 Survey of Palestine map.



Figure 3. Aerial photo of Ḥorvat Qasra before the IAA excavations, looking northeast. 1: The manor house. 2: The tomb/courtyard and Christian monastic complex. Photograph by B. Zissu.

Roman Palestine (1936), and the *Tabula Romani Iudaea-Palestina* map (Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994), as well as in Freeman-Grenville, Chapman and Taylor (2003: Map 7). The cave lies just to the east of the Roman road. The Palestine Exploration Fund surveyors themselves traced this road running due north to Beit Jibrin (ancient Eleutheropolis).

The ancient road here was not a pilgrim route. The pilgrim road usually led from Jerusalem to Nikopolis and then the port of Jaffa, via Diospolis, or less commonly from Jerusalem to Eleutheropolis and then to the coastal road towards Gaza and Egypt (see Wilkinson 2002: 40–44), but it would not have taken pilgrims south to the Ḥorvat Qasra area (**Figure 5**). Thus, it is probably not surprising that the Chapel of Holy Salome is not mentioned in any surviving pilgrim account. However, as a trade route the road between Eleutheropolis and Hebron was the most direct way of travelling from Hebron to the coastal road connecting with Ascalon and Gaza and then Egypt. Travellers from Hebron could turn west, just north of Ḥorvat Qasra, to go on to the coastal highway via Lachish (Roman Lacheis). It was also the way of going from Bethlehem to the southern coast.

This region was identified by Eusebius in his *Onomasticon* as part of the territory of the city of Eleutheropolis and as lying within a geographical sub-region known



Figure 4. Detail of the Survey of Western Palestine map of 1880 showing the area of Khirbet el-Kusr (Palestine Exploration Fund 1880: Sheet 20).

as the Daromas, a term from the Hebrew or Aramaic word (דרום; דרומא) for ‘south’ (Avi-Yonah 1962: 111). This designation continued in use for a long time, as is evidenced by the 10th-century Arab geographer al-Muqaddasi, in reference to the region south of Beth Guvrin (see Magness 2003: 93).

At the time Eusebius wrote his *Onomasticon*, at the very beginning of the 4th century, the Daromas was a thriving Jewish region, and had been for centuries. Eusebius attests that there were large Jewish villages at Eremmon (Horvat Rimmon,

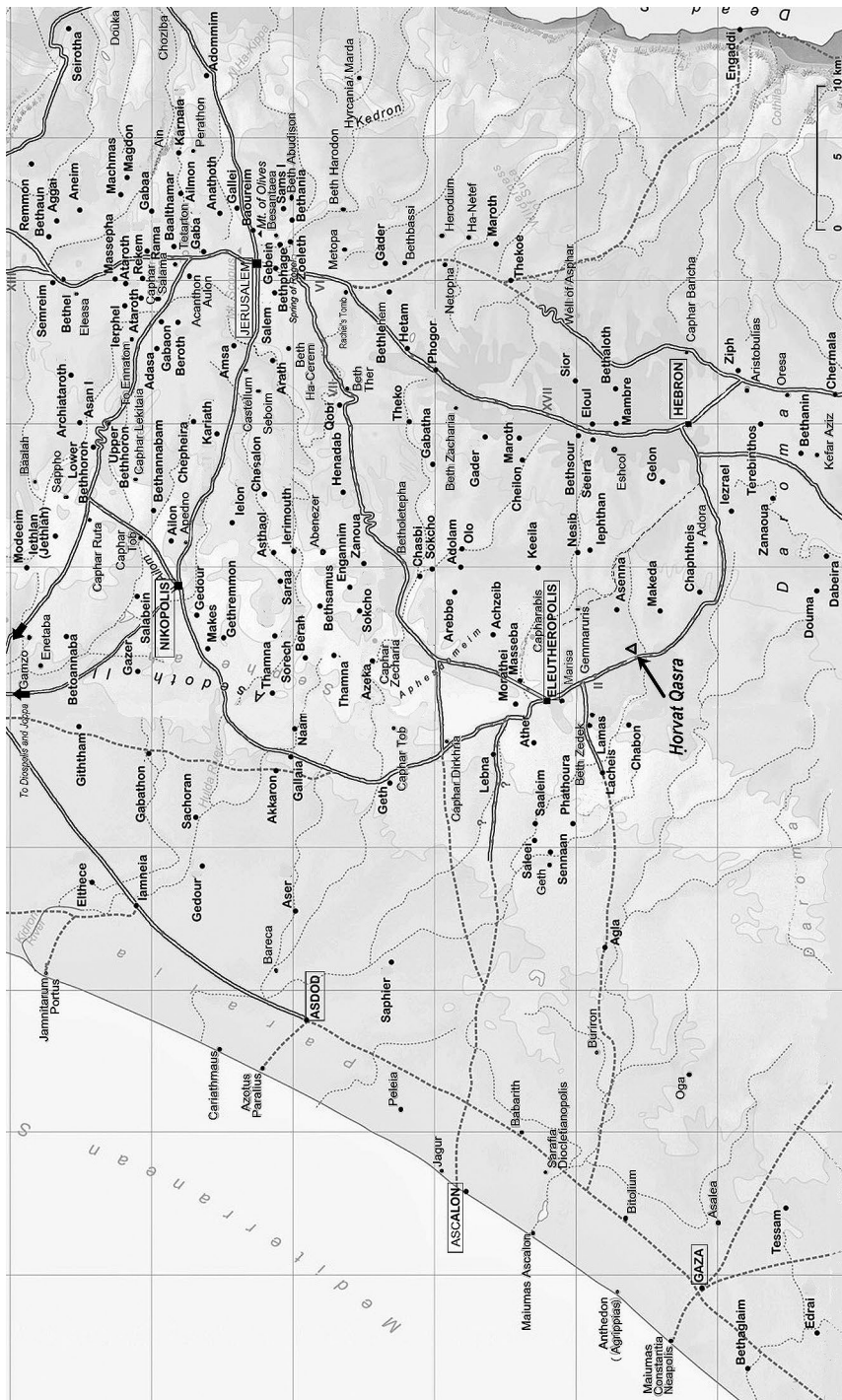


Figure 5. Roads of Byzantine Palestine. Illustration by J.E. Taylor, after Freeman-Grenville, Chapman III, and Taylor 2003: Maps 6-7.

Khirbet Umm er-Ramamin, *Onom.* 88.17–18), Anaea (Ḥorvat ‘Anim, Khirbet Ghuwein et-Tahta or el-Gharbiyya, *Onom.* 26.8–9), Eshtemo‘a (es-Samu, *Onom.* 86.29), Iethan (Yutta, *Onom.* 108.8), Thella or Thalcha (Ḥorvat Tillah, Khirbet Khuweifa, *Onom.* 98.26), and Chermela (Carmel; Khirbet Kirmil, *Onom.* 92.19–22). Eusebius also identified that (Jewish-) Christians existed in the Daromas at another Anaea (Khirbet Ghuwein el-Fauqa or esh-Sharqiyya), ‘near the first,’ lying to the east of it, ‘which now happens to be entirely made up of Christians,’ (*Onom.* 26.13–14). They were also at Iethira (*Onom.* 108.1–4; 110.18, cf. 88.3; Taylor 1993: 62). From Anaea came a young man, Peter also known as Absalom (a Jewish name), who was martyred in Caesarea (Euseb., *Mart. Pal.* 10.1–2; see Taylor 1993: 50 map. 2).

This area appears to have been quite thick with settlements in the late Roman and Byzantine periods. In the near vicinity at Ḥorvat Beit Loya or Khirbet Beit Lehi there is another Byzantine church (Patrich and Tsafirir 1993), with various rock-cut underground cavities (Gutfeld and Ecker 2012) and tombs, initially explored by R. A. S. Macalister (1901). The site is located at 31.563611 and 34.828036, just 2.6 km due north of Ḥorvat Qasra, and 5.5 km southeast of Beth Guvrin.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

The site of Ḥorvat Qasra extends over 7.5 acres on a hilltop overlooking the nearby agricultural areas and the ancient road passing through the Lachish valley (see **Figure 3**). Its remains have been briefly listed in the survey of Amatzia published by Dagan (2006: 240–241, no. 326). The following examination updates the results of the excavations of Kloner (Kloner 1990) and Zissu and Kloner (Zissu and Kloner 2019; Kloner, Zissu and Graicer 2015), before proceeding to evaluate the most recent works. The various components of the site will be listed and placed in their wider regional context.

3.1. Fortified Manor House

On the top of the hill are ruins of a fortified manor house, likely dating initially from the Hellenistic period. This consists of a central building (c. 20 × 20 m) with built-up areas and Early Roman courtyards. In places the walls survive to a height of five courses. A well-built fortified tower stands at the northern edge of the architectural complex. Its foundations are protected on the outside by a sloping wall built of large stones (**Figures 6–7**). 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. It provided protection against siege machinery (Lawrence 1979: 277).

This structure has been defined as a fortress (Dagan 2006: 240). However, Dagan already noted two cruciform columbaria, two bell-shaped cisterns, and



Figure 6: The fortified manor house at Horvat Qasra. Photograph by B. Zissu.



Figure 7: Tower with sloping wall, looking south. Photograph by B. Zissu.

another smaller, 4 × 4 m building to the southwest (326.1), as well as a lime kiln on the southern slope (326.2), a further rock-hewn bell-shaped cistern (326.4), agricultural terraces (326.5), and another lime kiln north of the settlement (326.6). Collectively, these features suggest that the structure was built as a rural manor house at the centre of agricultural production (Dagan 2006: 240–41).

Ancient settlements having similar features have been recorded elsewhere in Judaea — at Rujum Hamiri, Rujum ed-Deir, Khirbet al-Qasr, Nahal Eshtamoa, Rujum al-Qasr, Rujum Abu Hilal, Khirbet Qumran, 'Ofarim, Khirbet Canaan, Ḥorvat Tsalit and 'Aroer (Zissu 2002: 260–62). These sites control their immediate surroundings and access roads. Scholars have differed in their interpretations as to their purpose: 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 function and exact chronology (Zissu 2002: 255–61; Taylor 2012: 254–56), but their strategic positioning close to roads may be a significant factor. In the case under discussion, the proximity of rock-cut features such as the hiding complex, two columbaria and, especially, the monumental tomb complex, support the identification of the site as a fortified manor house of the Hellenistic period. Surveys of the ruin have noted pottery dating to the Early Roman (1st century CE), Late Roman (3–4th centuries CE), Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (5–8th centuries CE; Dagan 2006: 240).

3.2. The Hiding Complex

A rock-cut hiding complex was discovered under the central building, accessed from the central courtyard (**Figure 8**). During the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods three underground cavities hewn out of rock (A, B, C), served the residents of the building. Each had its own stepped corridor and entrance and functioned independently. Cavity A is a storage hall (2 × 3.2 m) at the centre of the building. A1 is a water storage installation and A2 apparently functioned as a ritual immersion bath. Cavities B and C lie outside the building on the slope south of the settlement and originally served as limestone quarries for the extraction of building material. At a later stage A, B and C were connected by narrow, low, winding tunnels, converting them into a hiding complex, while some square chambers (as D, F, H, K) were hewn in the walls of the tunnels, apparently for hiding and storage. Unfortunately, an absence of datable archaeological material makes it difficult to establish the date of these modifications on internal evidence alone.

The Ḥorvat Qasra complex, however, has similar characteristics in common with other hiding complexes found in the Judaeian Foothills that were created in the 2nd century CE during the Bar Kokhba Revolt, when the Jews of Judaea rebelled against Roman rule and established independent enclaves. Approximately

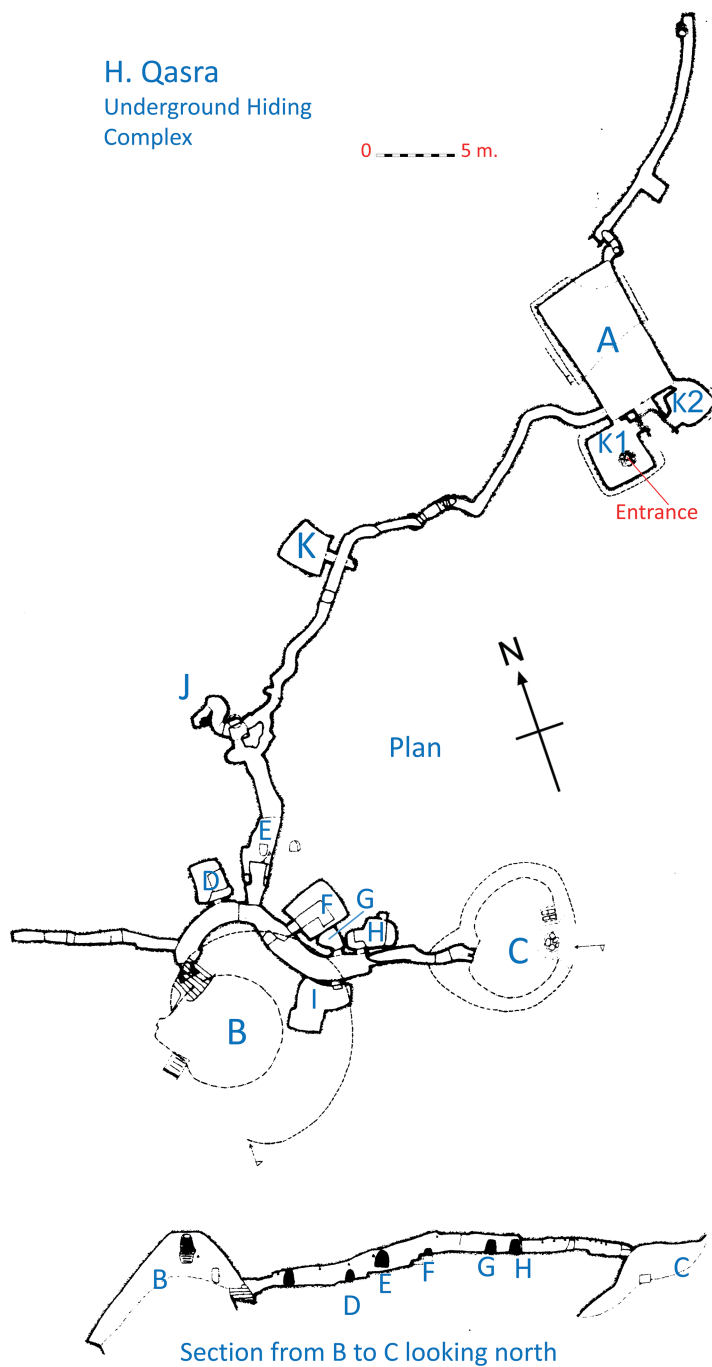


Figure 8. Plan and sections of the underground hiding complex. Illustration by A. Kloner.

440 subterranean hiding settlement-complexes have been found at 252 sites in the Judaeen Foothills, Hebron Mountains and Bethel region, with archaeological evidence indicating Jewish presence in Judaeen settlements at this time.

These types of 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 tunnels. Passage through these low tunnels requires one to kneel down, crawl and sometimes even to creep. They 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 require one to kneel down in order to enter. Underground chambers, storerooms, halls and tunnels 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. These tunnels were accessed via shafts carved into the floors and courtyards of houses. The shafts were most probably blocked with stone slabs that could be camouflaged. Some underground systems had escape openings located outside the settled area (Kloner and Zissu 2003; 2009; Zissu and Kloner 2014; Klein *et al.* 2021).

Based on the architectural and typological parallels from other Judaeen sites, we suggest that the Ḥorvat Qasra hiding complex also served the residents of the settlement during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. As preparations for this, pre-existing underground installations beneath the buildings of the fortified manor house/estate were modified to create a hiding place for local residents by blocking the original entrances, and creating low, narrow tunnels to connect the various chambers. This revolt is little documented in the literary record (though see Dio Cass., *Hist. rom.* 69.14; Tert., *Adv. Jud.* 13; Justin, *Dial.* 16; Justin *Apol.* 1.77; Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 4.6; Midrash Lamentations Rabbah 2.2), and therefore archaeological data has played a major part in understanding what took place, and the extent of Jewish resistance (Eck 1999; 2007; Kloner and Zissu 2003; Eshel and Zissu 2019). Archaeological evidence also confirms the catastrophic consequences of the Roman suppression of the revolt, as indicated by the literary sources (Raviv and Ben David 2021).

3.3. Columbaria and Additional Rock-Cut Cavities

As noted, additional rock-cut cavities were carved into the soft limestone chalk of the slopes surrounding the architectural complex: underground limestone quarries (now partly collapsed), lime kilns, three bell-shaped water cisterns, and in fact *two* cross-shaped columbaria installations (or dovecotes), one lying 10 m east of the building and the other lying 100 m to the south (**Figure 9**). The former had a 1.4 m wide opening in the ceiling and an entrance in the south, while the latter had an opening of 1.3 × 1.4 m in the centre, and 415 niches (Dagan 2006: 240).

The cross-shaped design of these columbaria is an indication that they were originally hewn to serve specifically as dovecotes. The cross-shaped layout was



Figure 9. Columbarium no. 2, looking east. Photograph by B. Zissu.

chosen by ancient masons who possessed the knowledge of the optimal width for the arms of the cross to guarantee the stability and longevity of the structure, eliminating the necessity for supplementary support. This stands in contrast to the prevailing trend among underground columbaria installations to improvise by adapting an existing space, hewn for some other use.

Pigeon-raising dates back as far as the 3rd century BCE, flourishing during the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. Hundreds of rock-cut, underground columbaria have been discovered in Israel, with most of them located in the Judean foothills, where they reached a peak of technological sophistication (Tepper 1986). This large number may be due to the ease of hewing the soft limestone. They have survived owing to the structures' durability, even when subjected to secondary use in later periods. Above-ground built columbaria did not generally survive, however, and archaeological excavations in Israel have uncovered only few of these (Zissu 1995; Hirschfeld and Tepper 2006; Ramsay *et al.* 2016).

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 (Tepper 1986). A great deal of research has been devoted to ascertaining the purpose of these columbaria, and numerous explanations have been offered. Today, most researchers tend to agree that these structures served for the production of both meat and fertiliser (Tepper 1986; Zissu and Rokach

1999; Kloner 2003); the latter would have been used on the agricultural terraces surrounding the site.

3.4. A Rock-Cut Jewish Burial Complex and Forecourt

In 1981 a monumental burial complex situated on the southern outskirts of the ancient site was broken into and looted, and the site was vandalised. After the looting, it was excavated by Amos Kloner in 1982 and again in 1984–1985. While a report was published, it concentrated on the inner parts of the complex, in the chapel itself (Kloner 1990; Zissu and Kloner 2019: 128–29). His findings from the soundings in the courtyard and other parts of the exterior are presented here for the first time.

Two periods of use were observed: an initial phase from the 1st and 2nd centuries CE in which there was a Jewish tomb complex with monumental entrance and forecourt and a second phase dating to the Byzantine–Abbasid periods when this was a Christian complex, and the tomb was turned into a cave chapel.

In the first phase the tomb was hewn out of the rock and used for burial — apparently serving the Jewish residents of the site, whose elite social status is indicated by the sizeable dimensions and features of this tomb. Unevenness of the rock cutting makes it possible that the site was originally dug out for stone quarrying, and then subsequently turned to use for burials. The tomb complex as a whole consisted of a monumental entrance forecourt, sunk into the slope of the hill, leading into a roofed vestibule via a possibly Doric decorated façade on its north side. We assume that the façade was supported by a *distylos in antis* architectural feature, with two columns providing three entrances. Some fragments found by the new IAA excavation, such as a frieze with plain metopes and triglyphs (e.g. The Associated Press 2022; Shimshon-Paran 2023) hint that a Doric-style frieze surmounted the original facade. Such Doric friezes decorate façades of monumental Early Roman tombs in Jerusalem, Western Samaria and the Southern Hebron Hills (e.g. Peleg-Barkat 2012). Additional architectural features decorated with a branch bearing three pomegranates and acanthus leaves perhaps belonged to the same decorative scheme (Shimshon-Paran 2023). Kloner uncovered various architectural details as well (**Figure 10**).

Remains of an arch visible on the central and western side of the exterior northern wall of the entrance vestibule (**Figure 11**) indicated that a barrel vault surmounted the top, providing the roof. This would then have run the entire 15 m width. Photographs released of the new IAA excavations also show remains of this barrel vaulting on the eastern side (Kahana 2022). These photographs also show the full extent of the fine Second Temple ashlar running along the width of the tomb entranceway, and the typical door features of frame moulding in the jambs and extended lintel, carved in relief.



Figure 10. Architectural element found by A. Kloner in the courtyard. Photograph by B. Zissu.



Figure 11. Barrel vaulting on the western side of the façade. Photograph by B. Zissu.

The entrance to the tomb complex lies some 125 m south of the fortified manor house and such proximity indicates that the tomb complex can be understood to have served the inhabitants of this building (**Figure 12**). Kloner determined that the doorway to the tomb complex was blocked with a rolling stone built between

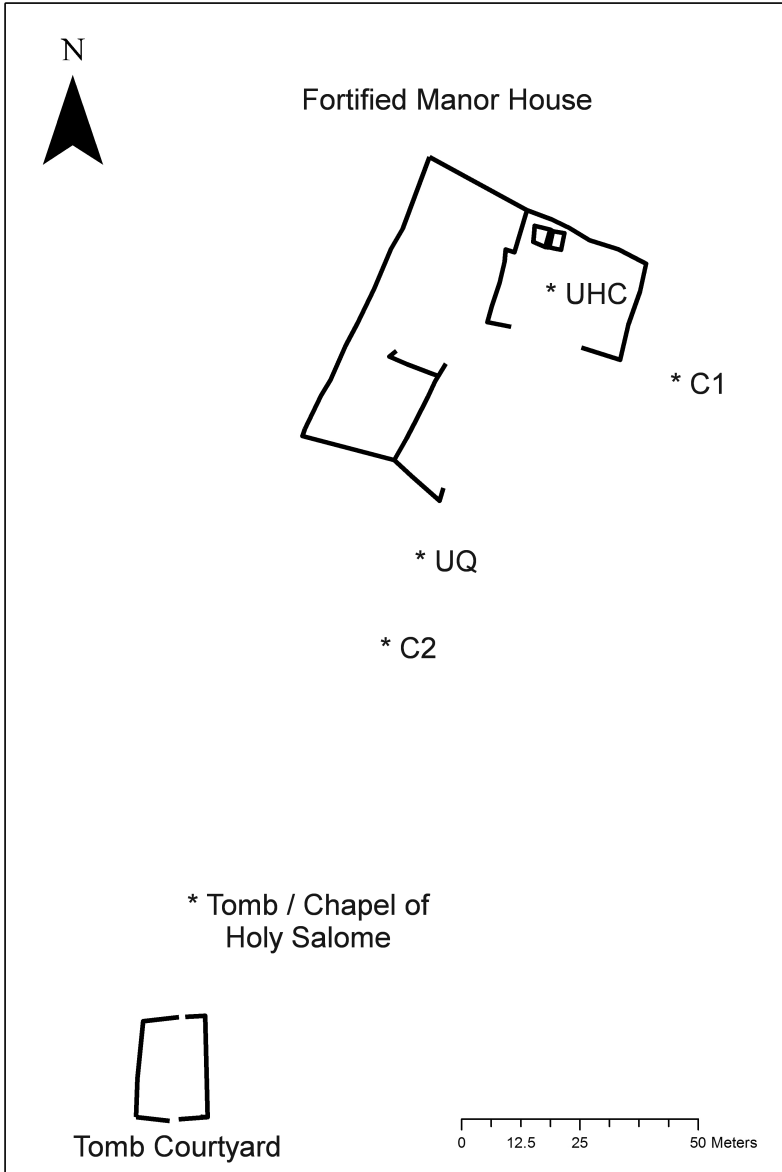


Figure 12. Plan of the fortified manor house and tomb courtyard. Illustration by A. Kloner and B. Zissu.

the northern wall of the vestibule and cliff wall facing, and led down steps into a rectangular antechamber (I), with openings into three of its walls (**Figures 13–14**). This led to three inner chambers (II–IV). Rooms II and III contained seven arched *kokhim* (elongated burial niches, see **Figures 15–16**) while Room IV, which underwent extensive alterations in the later phase, appears to have initially served for storage of ossuaries. Finds from the first period of use included fragments of four red-painted ossuaries decorated in carved geometric patterns, 1st and 2nd century CE oil lamps, and a limestone ‘measuring cup’ of a similar date.

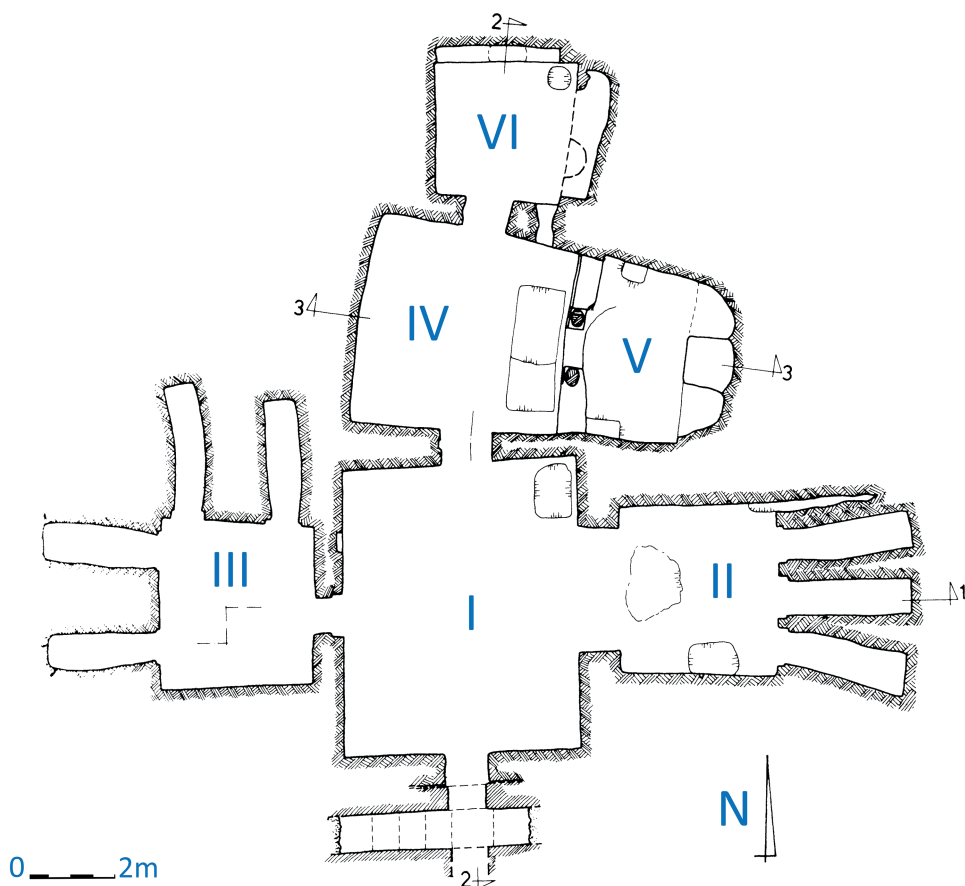
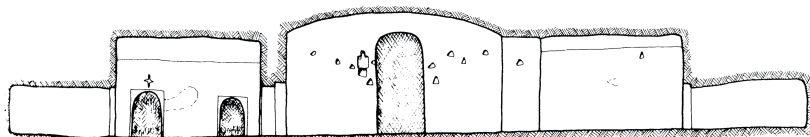
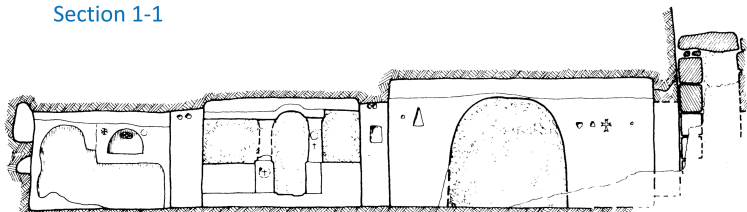


Figure 13. Plan of the tomb/chapel. Illustration by A. Kloner, courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

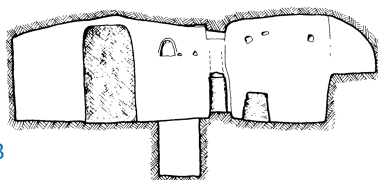
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Section 1-1



Section 2-2



Section 3-3

Figure 14. Sections of the tomb/chapel. Illustration by A. Kloner, courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.



Figure 15. View inside the tomb, looking from Room I (the antechamber) to Room II. Photograph by B. Zissu.

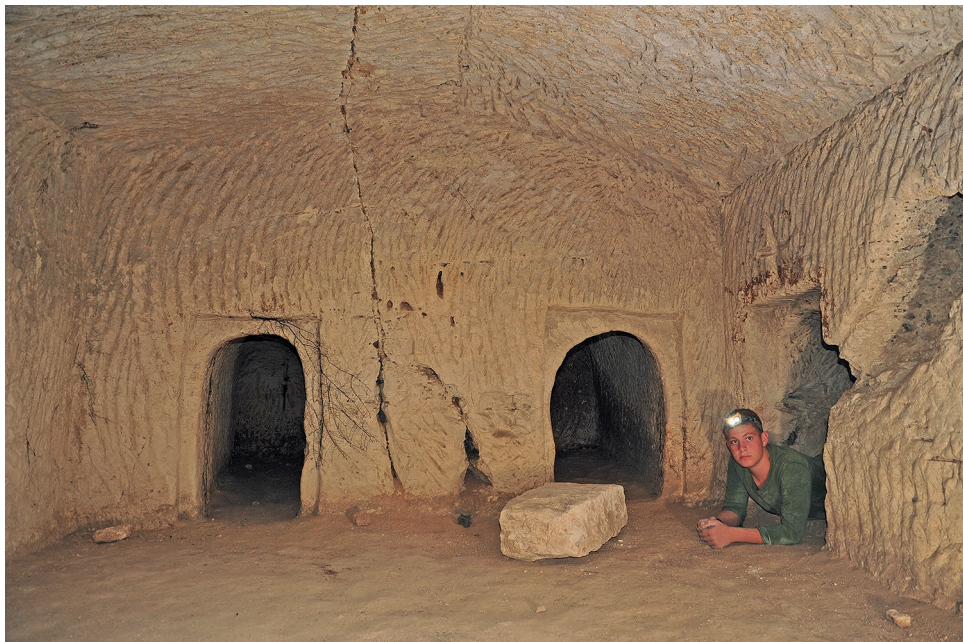


Figure 16. View inside the tomb, looking from the antechamber to Room III. Photograph by B. Zissu.

3.5. The Chapel of Holy Salome and The Christian Monastic Complex

In the second phase — the Byzantine period (from the 5th century CE) — the Second Temple period courtyard was converted into a Christian cave-chapel (see below), the forecourt enlarged by further hewing, and the rock-cut walls around the edges further covered with ashlar, though some of these appear to have been repairs, since the line between the original Second Temple and later Byzantine ashlar facing seems to be uneven. The large space thus created measured at least 15×23 metres.

From Kloner's excavations it was possible to distinguish two parts of a Christian complex built into the former tomb forecourt: a large area in the south and a smaller one in the north, the latter roughly corresponding to the area of the previous tomb vestibule. The southern boundary of the complex was a substantial wall, *c.* 1.2 m wide (**Figure 17**).

The large area can now be seen to comprise a central courtyard with rooms around the outside, entered through a single large door in its southern wall. It is possible that the large lintel decorated with a rosette in its centre (**Figure 18**), found by Kloner nearby, belonged to this door. A water cistern was cut in the floor of the eastern area. Its mouth was covered with a large stone, and crosses were incised in the plaster covering its walls. The recent excavations of the Christian



Figure 17. Southern wall of the monastic complex, before the recent IAA excavations. Photograph by B. Zissu.



Figure 18. Lintel with six-petalled rosette found by the A. Kloner expedition. Photograph by B. Zissu.

complex uncovered a monolithic cross-shaped baptismal font. This implies that one part of the Christian building was used as a baptistery.

As reported, the recent IAA excavations discovered five rooms along the western wall (Steinmeyer 2023; Shimshon-Paran 2023). Four of these were paved with white tesserae. The mosaic pavement was laid against the foundation of an earlier wall, parallel to the western wall. This earlier wall may be dated to the initial phase in the Byzantine period. The recent excavations have also uncovered equivalent rooms running the length of the eastern wall, meaning that both sides of the enclosure had rooms and the central space served as a courtyard.

In total, this layout strongly suggests a small *coenobium* monastery. Such monasteries could be established beside a memorial church to commemorate the memory of a holy person. As defined especially in the work of Yizhar Hirschfeld (1992), monasteries could be of many sizes and have diverse layouts, but the small ones are characterised by being roughly square, surrounded by a strong outer wall, and they are invariably arranged around an inner courtyard (Hirschfeld, 1992: 16, 33, 45–46). Examples include the Monastery of Gabriel (Qasr er-Rawabi), Khirbet el-Quneitra, Khirbet et-Tina, Castellion, the Monastery of Severianus and el-Qasr. Such criteria for identifying monastic complexes has enabled the definitive identification of Khirbet es-Suyyagh (Phase II) in the borderlands of the Judaeen Foothills as a rural monastery (Taxel 2008: 62–63; 2009: 24–68; 200–209). In this case identifying features include a thick wall with main and subsidiary gates, two inner courtyards, living quarters (cells), a tower (found mainly in Judaeen desert monasteries), and a church complex. There was also an adjacent complex comprising a dining room and kitchen and agricultural installations, including two wine presses, outside the monastery. The average number of monks living together in such monasteries is estimated to be about 20 (Taxel 2009: 202).

Jacob Ashkenazi and Mordechai Aviam (2012: 273–74) have noted that researchers have hesitated to identify rural monasteries. However, greater awareness of elements that constitute monasteries can lead to some re-evaluations of previously excavated structures. For example, a ruin on Tel ‘Afar (Tell al-Akhdar) on the Via Maris south of Caesarea was initially identified as a Byzantine villa (Porath 1988), but excavations revealed a perimeter wall, a cluster of rooms/cells and industrial installations suggestive of a monastery (Peilstöcker 2009), and now indeed the ‘villa’ has been re-interpreted as a basilical church serving this monastic complex (Barkai, Ratzlaff and Taxel 2023: 159–60). Ashkenazi and Aviam (2012) identify six key features that can aid archaeologists in making this identification:

1. The site is no larger than 1.25 acres.
2. The plan of the complex is nearly rectangular, with a surrounding wall.
3. There is a chapel or church.

4. There is a complex of rooms (mainly for monks' cells) around a central courtyard or along an alley.
5. Remains of agricultural installations (wine or oil presses) are present.
6. The pottery dates to the Byzantine period.

In the case of Ḥorvat Qasra all these criteria are present. The site is quite compact and four-sided, with an exterior wall, mainly comprised by the ashlar-faced cliffs, but with a thick wall on the south. There is a chapel, and a complex of rooms around a central courtyard. These rooms were windowless, and thus particularly suitable as monks' cells. We think it extremely unlikely then that such rooms should be interpreted as 'shops,' as suggested in the IAA media releases (Steinmeyer 2023).

It is not clear what agricultural installations may appear, but the Byzantine date of the earliest pottery was noted in Kloner's excavations. Kloner's soundings uncovered an assemblage of nine complete oil lamps and several additional fragments (**Figure 19**). All lamps are mould-made and pear-shaped, with a high tongue handle and pear-shaped base. The body is decorated with vegetal motifs in schematic medallions or within a set of arches. The filling hole is surrounded by a double ridge that forms a deep narrow channel connected with a broad channel,



Figure 19. Oil lamps found in the excavations by A. Kloner. Photograph by B. Zissu.

often decorated, that stretches along the nozzle towards the wick-hole. Similar lamps were found at Beth She 'an and at many other sites in the region, and are dated to the 8th–9th centuries CE (for a detailed discussion and parallels see Hadad 1997: 174–78 [Type 3]; Hadad 2002: 95–106 [Type 37]). Hundreds of similar oil lamps and fragments thereof were found in the renewed IAA excavations (Steinmeyer 2023; Shimshon-Paran 2023). This demonstrates a continuing Christian occupation of the monastery and veneration of the cave chapel over many centuries, until the Abbasid period (on this phenomenon see Patrich 2011).

Monasteries associated with holy sites can overlap in purpose with small rural monasteries that were centred on agricultural production, mainly olive oil and wine (Hirschfeld 1997: 64–65; Taxel 2008; Aviam and Ashkenazi 2014: 560). The complex at Horvat Qasra is contained within the prior cutting of the southern hill of the site and is not apparently directly related to a village, and investigations in its immediate vicinity have already uncovered agricultural or industrial installations with survey notes indicating Byzantine and early Islamic pottery (see above). Precise analysis and identification of particular rooms within this complex and its full contextualisation using landscape archaeology praxis within the region must be left to the most recent excavators, but the likelihood of this being a monastic complex seems to us to be extremely high.

In the northern area of the enclosure, where the vestibule of the Second Temple tomb was located, there was a space which became the *narthex* (entrance) of the cave chapel. We suggest that in the initial Byzantine phase (5th century), a wall with six piers and five openings in between gave access from the southern area of the complex to the *narthex*. The southern face of the piers had decorative pilasters on moulded bases, some of which survived. The piers may have held up what remained of the barrel-vaulted roof structure.

From photographs of the new excavations made available online by the IAA, one can see that the *narthex* was paved with stone slabs, which may be original to the Second Temple phase. In a later phase when additional rooms were built along the western and the eastern side of the courtyard, it appears that two of the five openings located between the piers were blocked, additional parts were filled in and a large wall was created, similar in thickness to the southern wall of the complex. In this phase three doorways led into the *narthex* area, but in the east and west the doorways served only two rooms respectively. The main entry was in the centre.

The interior tomb complex was converted into a subterranean chapel. Within this complex, Rooms I–III retained their original form of an antechamber and burial place, which suggests that the tomb itself was important in terms of the memory attached to this location. There was a modification to the door with new stones resting above it, replacing a feature of the Second Temple. These were visible where the 1982 entry was made into the underground area (see **Figure 20**),

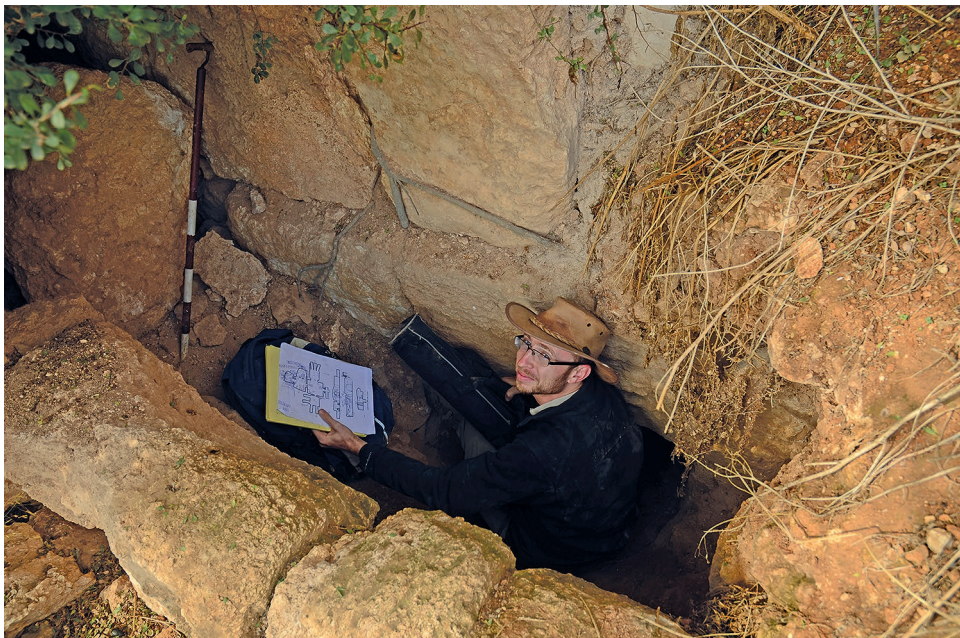


Figure 20. View of the tomb entrance after Kloner's excavations. In the foreground are large stones lying above the Byzantine entrance to the tomb/chapel complex; in the background lies the curving wall of the Second Temple barrel vault. Photograph by B. Zissu.

between the sloping vault and the original door. It appears that these Byzantine stones have been removed in the course of the IAA excavations.

Modifications to the interior included 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, the creation of several niches for lamps, and the carving of a cross over *kokh* no. 6. Rooms IV and V constituted the centre of the chapel in terms of its liturgical use and veneration. The entrance from Room I to Room IV was remodelled as an archway (**Figure 21**), adorned with Greek inscriptions underneath the arch (Di Segni and Patrich, 1990), as well as Arabic and Christian Palestinian Aramaic graffiti on the doorpost. These inscriptions indicate that the chapel was dedicated to the memory of Holy/Saint Salome, as discussed further below.

Room IV was also adorned with various graffiti and inscriptions, including further mentions of 'Holy Salome,' and was further modified by the hewing of a cist tomb in the floor (2.6×1 m, with a depth of *c.* 1.2 m) and the addition of an adjoining apsed chancel (V) to the east (**Figure 22**). The entrance to the chancel was flanked by rock-cut columns, only one of which on the south survives *in situ*,



Figure 21. Archway between Room I (antechamber) and Room IV. Photograph by B. Zissu.



Figure 22. View inside the chapel, showing the chancel screen with two pillars, looking from Room IV to Room V. Photograph by B. Zissu.

and a chancel screen; these too bore inscriptions in Greek and Arabic, as well as crosses and other graffiti.

A stone ledge at the centre of the apse within this chancel area (V) served as an altar, and two similar slabs along the south and north walls were apparently used as benches for clergy. Inscriptions in Greek and Arabic were carved in the apse, and the remaining walls of the chancel also bore inscriptions in Greek, Arabic and Christian Palestinian Aramaic. The cist tomb in Room IV would have had a flat roof aligned with the floor, since it lies directly in front of the central entrance to the chancel area, requiring those entering this zone to walk over it. Its form parallels cist tombs found within monastic compounds of the Judaean desert (Hirschfeld 1992: 130–43). The Monastery of Gabriel at Qasr er-Rawabi included cist graves in the central room (Hirschfeld 1992: 45). Such tombs were used for the founders of *coenobia* or other esteemed persons.

At the far northern end of the complex is what appears to be a place of veneration (Room VI). This room 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 centre of the apse an encircled cross was carved in relief (now much destroyed), and was flanked by two smaller encircled crosses, equal-armed and flaring towards the circle (**Figure 23**). The three similar crosses were all painted red, as is common in



Figure 23. View inside the chapel, with detail of the red-painted encircled cross and other equal-armed crosses in Room VI. Photograph by B. Zissu.

Christian tombs, monastic cells and venerated spaces from the 5th century onwards (Taylor 1993: 185–86, fig. 16). 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 (**Figure 24**) was probably used at least in part to accommodate oil lamps, as testified by the thick layer of soot on the wall above. The upper niche was also used for lamps, creating a focus, very likely on relics lying below it. This area would have been ablaze with light. At a later phase, a deep recess was cut into the northern part of the east wall, likely also for lamps and sacred artefacts. Additional Greek inscriptions and graffiti were incised in the walls of this chamber.



Figure 24. View inside the chapel, showing the western and northern walls with niches in Room VI. Photograph by B. Zissu.

Finds from the subterranean Chapel of Holy Salome include ceramic fragments of Byzantine date. The abandonment of the monastery and chapel likely followed destruction. An earthquake clearly buried a store of newly-made lamps beneath collapse. In the mid 8th century there were a series of destructive earthquakes (Kallner-Amiran 1950–1951: 226; Russell 1985: 39; Karcz 2004: 778–87) but the most likely one to have wrecked major damage was that of 748 CE. Recorded in Theophanes' *Chronographia* (c. 810–815 CE) it is stated that 'a great earthquake occurred in Palestine ... to such an extent that many innumerable and countless people perished in its power, and churches and monasteries collapsed, and all

around the greatest of holy places were deserted cities' (quoted in Russell 1985: 47; Niebuhr 1839: 651).

3.6. Inscriptions in The Chapel of Holy Salome

The walls of the cave chapel are covered with inscriptions in Greek, Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Arabic (see Di Segni and Patrich 1990; Drori 1990; Naveh 1990; CII/P IV/1), all local languages. There are also deeply-cut cross designs and staurograms, some painted red, clearly indicating a Christian use, and dozens of lightly inscribed cross markings. Sometimes, the inscriptions appear densely concentrated, featuring overlapping scripts that render them either indecipherable or difficult to read. However, the collection comprises over 30 separate pieces of legible or semi-legible writing.

As a result of the difficulties of reading, only the most readable of these inscriptions have thus far been published. The full range has been documented by students on field trips from the Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University, under the direction of the second co-author, Boaz Zissu, and the late Amos Kloner. With the first co-author, work continues on the reading, translating and interpretation of the inscriptions, which will be published elsewhere. However, it may be noted here that many follow a standard pattern of calls to the Lord for remembrance and mercy, typical of Christian appeals to saints and to the divine, along with names. All the names are male, which would be consistent with these being written by monks. Inscriptions are located densely behind the chancel screen, in the chancel area used by clergy.

Notably, several inscriptions are addressed directly to 'Saint/Holy Salome,' *Hagia Salome*, ΑΓΙΑ ΣΑΛΩΜΗ (Di Segni and Patrich 1990: nos. 2A, 2B, 3, 5; CII/P IV/1: 1267–70, nos. 3792–94, and 1272–74, nos. 3797–98). On the underside of an arch between the two chambers I and IV is an inscription within a *tabula ansata* reading: ΑΓΙΑ ΣΑΛΩΜΗ ΕΛΕΗΣΟΝ ΖΑΧΑΡΙΑΝ Υ[ΙΟΝ] ΚΥΡΙΑΛΛΟΥ ΑΜΗΝ, 'Saint Salome, have mercy on Zacharias, [s]on of Cyrillos. Amen (Di Segni and Patrich 1990: no. 2A; CII/P IV/1: no. 3792; **Figure 25**).' This seems to ask the saint for intercession, and possibly healing. The adjective ἅγιος is used widely in early Christianity, particularly for saints. It is found as an adjective attached also to a member of the clergy, an ascetic or to a martyr (Lampe 1961: 18–19).

The sentiment is replicated in another inscription just above the *tabula*, which reads in another hand ΚΥΡΙΑ [ΕΛΕΗΣΟΝ ΖΑΧΑΡΙΑΝ] ΤΟΥ ΑΔΕΛΦΟΣ [ΚΥΡ] ΙΑΛΛΟΣ], 'Lady, [have mercy on Zacharias] of the brother [Cyr]illos' 2B/3793). This inscription was read by Di Segni and Patrich (1990: 31, 143) as ΚΥΡΙΑ [ΕΛΕΗΣΟΝ] ΤΟΝ ΑΔΕΛΦΟΣ [ΚΥΡ]ΙΑΛΛΟΣ], 'O Lord [have mercy upon] brother Cyril,' denoting an appeal to Christ as Lord (masculine), but the final

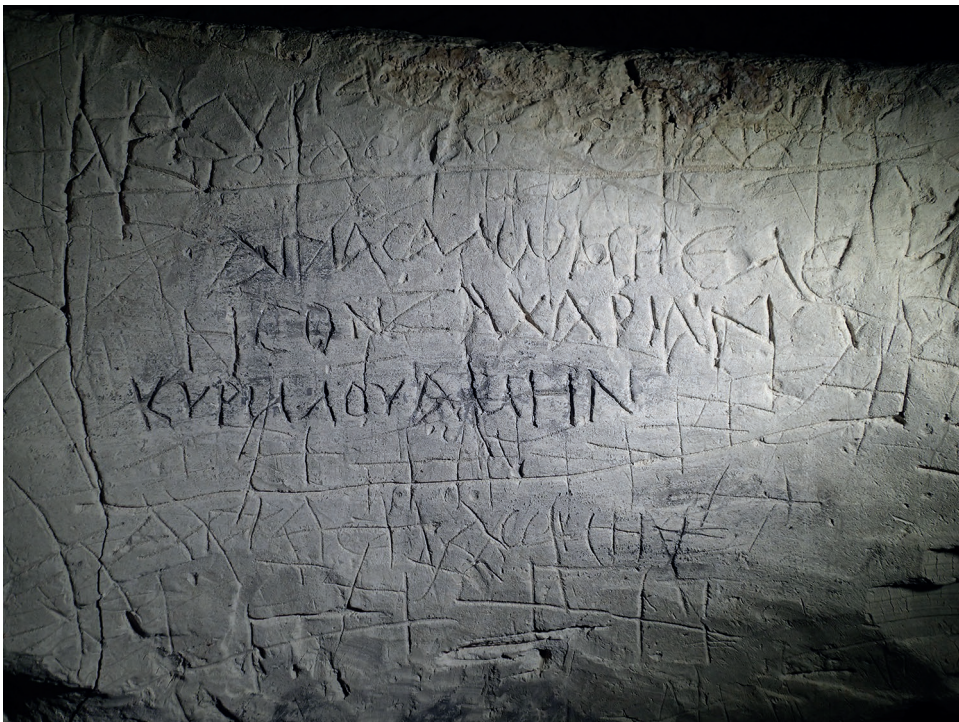


Figure 25. Greek inscriptions inside an arch between Rooms I and IV testify to Holy Salome, venerated and directly addressed in prayer. Inside the *tabula ansata*, the inscription reads ‘Saint Salome, have mercy on Zacharias, of Cyrillos. Amen.’ Above it, another reads: ‘Lady, have mercy on [Zacharias], of the brother [Cyr]illos,’ and below: ‘Holy Salome.’ Photograph by B. Zissu.

letter of the first word is *alpha*, not *epsilon*, and thus it should read ‘Lady.’² The available space requires the insertion of the name of Zacharias found in 2A, and the final letter of the definite article is *upsilon*, not *nun*. Both readings require an ungrammatical formulation which does not continue the case of the definite object, but incorrect grammar is not unusual in graffiti, and the genitive rather than accusative case relates well to 2A, which suggests Zacharias is the son of ‘brother Cyril.’ To address Salome as ‘Lady’ clearly indicates she is a saint. Underneath the *tabula* there are the words ΑΓΙΑ ΣΑΛΩΜΗ surrounded and overlaid with many crosses. In another inscription (Di Segni and Patrich 1990: no. 3a; CII/P IV/1: no. 3794) there is mention of a ΙΕΡΟΝΤΙΣ, *hierontis*, a word otherwise not known but possibly suggesting a ‘holy place’ (ἱερόν).

One may note here also that referring to ‘brother Cyrillos’ is typical of monastic terminology, as those who lived together in *coenobia* referred to each other as ‘brothers,’ overseen by a ‘father’ (abbot). In this case Zacharias is the

son of a man who had perhaps become a monk later in life. In another inscription (Di Segni and Patrich 1990: no. 4; CII/P IV/1: 1271–72, no. 3796), there is an identification of someone named Agapis (or Agapēs) who is the ‘deacon of Saint Salome,’ which appears to give the name of the chapel and monastery. Monastic language is also used in an unpublished inscription (we now term Greek 13) from the chancel area, in reference to ‘Pantos your holy one,’ since people could refer to an abbot of a monastery in this way (CII/P IV/1: 1453, no. 3896; **Figure 26**). This inscription reads in total: Κ[ΥΡΗ]Ε ΕΛΕΗΣΟΝ ΤΟΝ ΔΟΥΛΟΝ ΣΟΥ ΟΠΥΜΕΝΟΝ ΚΕ ΗΟΣΗΦ Τ[Ο]Υ ΔΗΚΕΟΥ ΚΕ ΠΑΝΤΟΝ ΤΟΝ ΑΓΗΟΝ ΣΟΥ: ‘Lord, have mercy on your servant Opumenos and Joseph [son] of Dikaios and Pantos your holy one.’

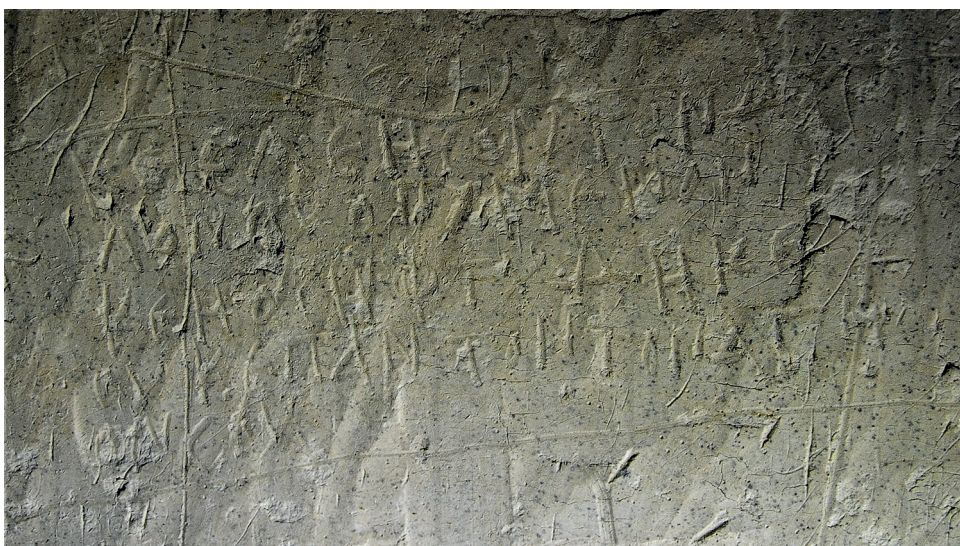


Figure 26. Previously unpublished inscription (Greek 13) from the chancel area. Photograph by B. Zissu.

Given the use of lamps in the recesses of the walls, it is likely that monks came down here to venerate the place where Saint Salome’s remains were believed to lie, in line with practices common in the Christian cult of the saints. Relics of saints were thought to be able to effect cures, and saints were believed to be able to intercede for the faithful (Wilson [ed.] 1984). Hence, they could be appealed to directly in prayer, as today.

That there were venerated remains makes sense of the layout of the chapel, in which there is a liturgical space divided into a chancel on the eastern side (Room V), a central ‘nave’ space (IV), and a *martyrium* in the north (VI) (see **Figure 13**).

The bones of Salome would have lain in a receptacle on the elongated niche within Room VI, where many lamps were burning.

Early Byzantine sources afford numerous accounts of *inventiones*, which refer to miraculous revelations of tombs of biblical figures or Christian saints. This phenomenon was not confined solely to the Holy Land; its occurrences are also documented across the Christianised Roman Empire. While in various regions of the Empire, *inventiones* were predominantly associated with Christian martyrs, in the Holy Land, the emphasis leaned toward biblical figures. It appears that only tombs possessing unmistakable antiquity could be confidently linked to personages known from the Scriptures. Typically, these were tombs or other rock-hewn structures dating back to the Second Temple era, and occasionally even to the Iron Age (Di Segni 2007). These tombs were subsequently reconfigured and integrated into commemorative churches. Sometimes, these memorial churches were closely connected to a monastic compound, for example at the Georgian monastery at Bir el-Qut and at Khirbet el-Haniya/Horvat Hani (Di Segni 2007: 391; Dahari 2003). As such, the Chapel of Holy Salome and accompanying monastery would fit within this known rubric of miraculous discoveries leading to the establishment of a memorial site with associated monastery. It is very likely that there was at least one ossuary with the name ‘Salome’ in the Second Temple tomb. A large number of women in the 1st century were called either Mary or Salome; from her study of inscribed names Tal Ilan determined that 46.5% of females were called Maria/Mariam (Mary), Salome or Shelamzion (1995: 55; 2002: 9, 249–53).

It was common for pilgrims to visit sacred sites within or in association with monasteries (Aviam and Ashkenazi 2014: 568–73). The pilgrim nun Egeria, who visited Palestine between 381 and 385 CE, mentions monasteries or anchorite cells associated with holy sites (e.g. *Itin.* 3.4; 5.10; 16.3; 23.4) and she was often shown the sites by monks (see Wilkinson 1981: 22–26, e.g. *Itin.* 3.1–5.12; 10.9–11.4). A monastic life at a sacred site could mean providing food and lodging for pilgrims: in his *Life of Peter the Iberian* (66), John Rufus describes how monks in 5th-century Jerusalem ‘were receiving and refreshing pilgrims and the poor who were coming from everywhere to worship at the holy places’ (Horn and Phenix 2008: 97). Such pilgrims would be housed in hospices (*xenodocheia*) and fed in dining halls. One such possible *xenodocheion*, including a bath-house and an olive oil factory, has been found in the village of Khirbet Zikhrin (Fischer 1989: 1792–96; and for these in Syria see Tchalenko 1953: 19–28). Others have been identified in Horvat Hani (Dahari 2003; Taxel 2008: 59) and Khirbet es-Suyyagh (Taxel 2008: 62–63; 2009: 24–68, 200–209).

However, we cannot assume that this was necessarily a pilgrimage site, at least one that drew pilgrims from far afield. It was not on a pilgrim route (see above) and is not mentioned in any surviving pilgrim account. The language of the inscriptions are the local languages of the area through the centuries (Greek,

Aramaic and Arabic), and there are no foreign languages present. There is not the range of languages evidenced in graffiti of pilgrim sites such as Nazareth, for example (see Bagatti 1969: 127–28, 148–69, 197–200; Taylor 1993: 258–64), which includes Armenian and Georgian (see Tchekhanovets 2018: 41–200), and likely Latin, as well as male and female names. Given the behaviour of pilgrims in writing not only their own names but those of their loved ones (e.g., the Piacenza Pilgrim wrote the name of his parents in Cana: *Itin.* 4:5) the entirely male names found in the corpus of inscriptions in the chapel is quite striking, as is the location of the many of the inscriptions behind the chancel screen, in the chancel itself (also called the *hierateion*, ‘sanctuary,’ so Procop., *Aed.* 1.4.13), which was reserved for clergy. This is not an area pilgrims had access to.

As Gideon Avni notes, the Arabic in use in the cave demonstrates the ‘penetration of the Arabic language into the Christian communities of Palestine’ (Avni 2014: 252). The Arabic language is distinctive in having local Aramaisms such as the use of ‘bar’ rather than ‘bin’ on a number of readable inscriptions (Mina Monier pers. comm.). This also speaks against the inscriptions being scratched by pilgrims from far away. Therefore, while members of this monastic community may well have welcomed the wider regional community of Christians to the site, and certainly other monks, the venerated remains could have had more to do with their own life of piety.

The Chapel of Saint Salome and the associated monastery are then best understood within the wider study of Palestinian monasticism (see Chitty 1966; Binns 1994; Hirschfeld 1992; Horn and Phenix 2008: xlvi–liii; Taxel 2008; Ashkenazi and Aviam 2012; Aviam and Ashkenazi 2014; Hay 1996). It is also an interesting site to consider in terms of the important period of cultural change in Palestine from the 5th to 8th centuries (Kennedy 1989; Taxel 2013; Avni 2011; 2014).

4. THE IDENTITY OF SALOME

After the recent IAA excavations, press releases announced their further discoveries at the site once venerated as the tomb of ‘Jesus’ midwife’ Salome (e.g. Associated Press 2022; Yoder 2022; Steinmeyer 2023). This identification goes back to the original publication following the discovery of the chapel. Kloner asked the epigraphist Leah Di Segni and Joseph Patrich to examine the inscriptions and identify the Salome of the site. In their opinion, the most likely identification for this Salome was a woman found in an apocryphal work: the *Protevangelium of James* (Ehrman and Pleše 2011: 31–71; Zervos 2019/2022) dating from the later 2nd century.

In this tale the focus is on the holiness of Mary the mother of Jesus, and her perpetual virginity. It tells of Jesus’ birth in a cave outside Bethlehem, and includes an episode involving a midwife named Salome (*Prot. Jas.* 18–19), but Salome does

not *deliver* the baby Jesus. Instead, Salome arrives from Jerusalem after the birth. Another unnamed ‘Hebrew’ midwife, fetched by Joseph, is first on the scene, but she herself does not deliver Jesus. In early Christianity, Jesus’ birth was believed to be miraculous in that there were no attendants. The Christian scholar Jerome stated (*Against Helvidius* 10 [8a]): ‘There was no midwife present; women’s attendance did not intervene. She (Mary) wrapped him in swaddling clothes with her own hands. She herself was both mother and midwife.’

In the *Protevangelium*, when Salome arrives, the first midwife testifies to Mary still being a virgin, but Salome doubts this. Salome examines Mary, and finds that her hand is then struck with pain and dried up. Horrified, she appeals to God. An angel tells her to touch the baby Jesus and she will be cured. The miracle happens, and she praises God. She is therefore the first of many people to be healed by Jesus. But such people are not esteemed as saints.

This story was re-told in numerous different translations and versions (see Trautman 1983; Terian 2008), and is represented also in early Christian art, with a reclining Mary and kneeling Salome painfully holding up her enlarged, withered hand (see Van Loon 2006). While saints are shown with haloes, other figures are not; the best Salome the doubting midwife gets in early Christian art is a square halo, showing her as a significant (but not holy) figure, in a painting from Chapel LI in the Monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit. As Gertrud Van Loon has noted, in her detailed examination of the square *nimbus*, Salome ‘is not a saint in her own right’ (2006: 99).

At the same time that Salome is depicted in art with her withered hand (from the 5th–6th centuries), Christian artists also involved midwives in the adoration scene, with magi and shepherds and angels. This continued on for many centuries; there is a 10th-century ivory now in the British Museum (accession no. 1885,0804.4), where a single midwife is shown bathing the baby Jesus. The bath of baby Jesus continued on as a subject through the centuries in the art of Orthodox churches and in icons, until it was eventually considered inappropriate, being unbiblical. So, in a 12th-century fresco in the ‘Dark Church’ at Goreme, Cappadocia, the older seated midwife is named Emea (from Greek *hē maia*, meaning ‘the midwife’) and her younger assistant is named Salome. This image has often accompanied news reports of the IAA excavations (e.g. Yoder 2022). But neither Emea nor her assistant Salome are indicated as saints in this art, any more than the shepherds in the same scene. Iconographically, the two midwives balance the shepherds as female and male worshippers of the newborn infant.

The Salome venerated in the Horvat Qasra cave chapel was hailed as a saint, but the doubting midwife was not, and therefore we must look to different identities. There was of course the ‘Salome’ who danced for Herod Antipas, in the story of the death of John the Baptist (see Kraemer 2006). Though only referred to as the daughter of Herodias in the Gospels (Mark 6:14–29; Matt 14:1–12), she was later

identified as Salome on the basis of Josephus (*AJ* 18.137). However, she was never a saint; quite the opposite.

Then there was Salome who was a companion to the holy family in Egypt, as mentioned in a 6th-century work known as *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* (8; Ehrman and Pleše 2011: 157–93). She comes with them, but she is not identified specifically as Jesus' midwife, or nurse (because Mary breastfeeds Jesus herself). In the *Vision of Theophilus*, attributed to a Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria (384–412 CE), though likely coming from the 6th century, the holy family, including Salome, stops at numerous sites in Egypt, and she is mentioned several times (Mingana 1931).

Salome the companion appears also in another work from Egypt, likely written in Greek or Coptic but surviving only in Arabic manuscripts (Garshuni, written in Syriac characters), and dated perhaps to the 6th century. Published by Alphonse Mingana as 'A New Life of John the Baptist' (Mingana 1927: 438–91), it tells of how when John's mother Elizabeth died, the seven-year-old Jesus asks his mother to 'call Salome and let us take her with us,' so they go via a miraculous cloud to deceased Elizabeth in the wilderness, where Jesus then commands his mother and Salome to wash the body. They weep over Elizabeth, and are then taken by cloud to Nazareth (Mingana 1927: 449). Salome here just appears as someone with the Holy Family in Egypt, subject to the child Jesus' command, but she ends up in Nazareth.

It is likely that the companion Salome derives from the modification of the doubting midwife story. In this modified story, as told in the so-called *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, there is just one single midwife, named Salome, who does not doubt Mary's virginity (Bauckham 1991: 250–51; 2002: 231):

And she (Salome) saw the Virgin, her face bright from the Holy Spirit. She ran and came outside, and cried out with a loud voice to all the borders of Bethlehem, Come, and see this great wonder! A virgin has born a child, and has not known a man, being a virgin. And through the great wonder she believed in him, that he was the Son of God. And she did not cease following the Virgin and the Saviour until he was crucified, and rose from the dead and went up to the heavens' (transl. based on Robinson 1896: 197).

However, yet again, this midwife-companion Salome was not known as a saint in the Byzantine period, and therefore it is unlikely she should be identified with the Salome venerated at Horvat Qasra.

There is another tradition that held Salome to be Jesus' older (half-) sister, simply called a 'sister' in the ancient world. This sister Salome is attested by the 4th-century scholar Epiphanius, a converted Jew who founded a monastery in his home town of Besanduk, somewhere (still unidentified) also near Eleutheropolis

(see Sozom., *Hist. eccl.* 6.32). He even identifies his source as scriptural, possibly referring to Mark 6:3, but here only the names of Jesus' brothers are in the texts we know, the names being James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. However, the crowd questioning Jesus in Nazareth do ask: 'Aren't his sisters here with us?' Epiphanius affirms that they were daughters of Joseph by his first wife (*Pan.* 78.8.1, 78.9.6; cf. *Anacoratus* 60.1, where they are Anna and Salome).³

In a pseudonymous letter purportedly from Clement of Alexandria to Theodorus, quoting a 'Secret Gospel of Mark,' which is actually a product of late antique Palestinian monasticism (Smith and Landau 2023, cf. Bauckham 1991: 268–75; 2002: 247–54), there is an additional section after Mark 10:46, deriving from John 11 (the raising of Lazarus): 'Then he came into Jericho. And the sister of the young man whom Jesus loved was there with his mother and Salome, but Jesus would not receive them.' This recalls Mark 4:31–35, when the mother of Jesus came to him in Capernaum, along with his brothers and sisters, and stands outside his house asking for him, but it also recalls the companion Salome traditions.

Nevertheless, when Salome is truly identified as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, her identity is biblical, not apocryphal. She could be identified as the mother of the apostles James and John, sons of Zebedee (Matt 27:56, and see 20:20), but at core she was one of the myrrh-bearing women, the *Myrrhophores*, as she is found in icons to this day. Salome is identified in the Gospel of Mark as one of the women who dutifully came to the tomb where Jesus was laid, with perfumed oil, in order to complete the burial rituals for the dead (Mark 16:1–2). Salome is also listed as one of Jesus' many female disciples who followed and served him in Galilee, who came with him to Jerusalem, and stayed to witness his crucifixion (Mark 15:40–41).

Salome the disciple was widely remembered, in diverse ways (Bauckham 1991; 2002: 234–37; Bond and Taylor 2021: 37–43). From what is said by the anti-Christian writer Celsus, writing c. 170 CE, she was known as a teacher: there were 'Marcellians, so called from Marcellina, and Harpocratians from Salome, and others who derive their name from Mariamme, and others again from Martha' (Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.62). Mary (Magdalene) and Salome appear together as foremost female disciples of Jesus in literature of the 2nd–4th centuries that spans both mainstream and heterodox types of Christianity, from the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *(First) Apocalypse of James*, the *Pistis Sophia*, the Manichaean *Psalms of Heracleides*, the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, and other works. In an orthodox Syrian work titled the *Testament of Our Lord* (1.16), from the early 4th century, she appears with other women disciples asking questions of Jesus after he is raised. In the influential 4th-century *Apostolic Constitutions* (3.6), another work from Syria, she is listed among the women 'with us' (i.e. the male apostles), a group who include 'the Mother of our Lord and his sisters.'

Epiphanius himself — refuting a sect who worshipped Mary the mother and promoted female priesthood — retorts that ‘God did not agree to this being done with Salome, or with Mary herself’ (*Pan.* 79.7.3). It seems he thought of this Salome as different from the sister, but it is not absolutely clear. At any rate, it implies that there was a memory of Salome as highly esteemed. Epiphanius knew the *Protevangelium* (*Pan.* 79.5.4–5, 7.1), but, in comparing Salome with Mary the mother of Jesus, he simply cannot be referring only to the doubting midwife, but rather someone who was linked with Mary in terms of honour. He goes on to mention other women at the cross.

To clinch this identification of Saint Salome’s veneration in Palestine, there is the Church Calendar of a 10th-century Georgian monk, Ioane Zosime, preserved in Saint Catherine’s monastery, Sinai. Ioane spent his life in Mar Saba monastery in Palestine. His calendar is based on 5th–7th century calendars from Palestine, and he lists 25 April as a commemoration for: ‘Mark the Evangelist, and commemoration of the holy mothers, Mary the Mother of God and Mary Magdalene and Mary of Jacob and *Salomea* and Ioanna and the sisters of Lazarus’ (Aleksidze 2021). Thus, Salome was one of the ‘holy mothers,’ and a saint. It is therefore absolutely clear that it was the *Myrrhophore* Salome who was venerated in Palestine by monks in the period the chapel of Holy Salome in Ḥorvat Qasra was used. No mention is made in the calendar of the doubting (or believing) midwife Salome who was, as noted, not a saint.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This examination provides for the first time a holistic view of the archaeology of Ḥorvat Qasra as comprising multiple sites, with two important phases: firstly, the Hellenistic–Second Temple fortified estate and tomb complex and, secondly, the Byzantine–Abbasid cave-chapel of Salome and monastic complex. In identifying the Salome venerated here, we emphasise the importance of working carefully with texts in order to make precise identifications of archaeological material, especially when there are ramifications in terms of contemporary religious sensibilities. While we hope both the identity of Salome and the archaeological evidence is made clearer from our examination, it must be said that, in terms of actual materiality, the woman whose bones were venerated in the niche of Room VI at Ḥorvat Qasra was most likely one of the Jewish residents of the fortified manor house on top of the hill, whose name was Salome, if the (presumed) ossuary defining her did hold her own bones. Whether by some curious circumstance the disciple Salome did eventually end up here will never be known. Whatever the case, Jewish Salome had a remarkable afterlife.

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Notes

- 1 Abel (1933: 261) suggested that Dawaimah was biblical Basekath (Josh 15:39; 2 Kgs 22:1; Euseb., *Onom.* 50.14, 56.25), but this identification is not generally supported.
- 2 In CII/P IV/1: 1269, however, the reading of Κόρτα is not entirely excluded.
- 3 This first wife is elsewhere actually recorded as being called Salome too, according to Anastasius of Sinai (*Quast.* 153; *Patrologia Graeca* 89.812), who claims to quote Epiphanius.

ABBREVIATIONS

CII/P IV/1. Ameling, W., Cotton, H. M., Eck, W., Ecker, A., Isaac, B., Kushnir-Stein, A., Misgav, H., Price, J., Weiß, P., and Yardeni, A., 2018. 'CXXXII. H. Qazra.' Pp. 1265–81 in *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae: Volume IV, Iudaea/Idumaea: Part 2* (Berlin).

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