



Boaz Zissu and Amos Kloner

The Archaeology of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome (The Bar Kokhba Revolt) – Some New Insights

The Second Jewish revolt against Rome, commonly known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt, was one of the most disastrous events in the history of the Jewish people. The Jewish War of 66-70 CE ended with the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem and with major casualties, but the Jewish rural areas of Judea survived the disaster. Two generations afterwards a new revolt started. The exact causes of this revolt remain an unresolved issue. Two years before the beginning of the uprising, Hadrian founded on the ruins of Jerusalem a Roman-pagan city called Aelia Capitolina. This event may have hastened the outbreak of hostilities. Little is known about the actual course of events during the revolt. The effects of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135/6 CE) were catastrophic. The Judean countryside was devastated, hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed or sold into slavery and exiled. The building of Jerusalem as the Roman-pagan city of Aelia Capitolina continued; even the name of Judea was changed by the Romans to Syria Palaestina, thus obliterating the connection between the Jewish people and their land¹.

While the Jewish War was described in great detail by an eye-witness – Flavius Josephus, the Bar Kokhba Revolt lacks a contemporary, detailed chronicle. The scholars of this period are compelled to rely on the abbreviation of Cassius Dio's short account (*Roman History* 69, 12–14), few references in the classical sources and some legendary descriptions transmitted in the rabbinic literature. Therefore, much of the scholars' knowledge of the period is based on archaeological, numismatic, epigraphic and papyrological material².

The following paper is aimed at giving an overview of some of the most important archaeological and numismatic findings from the time of this revolt, made in the last years: the hiding complexes and the coins of the revolt, and the contribution of new archaeological surveys and excavations to the understanding of the character and geographical extent of the revolt. The abundant archaeological material now available enables a reexamination of the scanty, fragmentary and sometimes legendary historical references concerning the period and allows for a better understanding of them.

¹ ESHEL 2006; see also ECK 1999.

² COTTON 1999.



Fig. 1 - Climbing to the Cave of Letters, refuge cave in Nahal Hever, Judean Desert (photo by ZISSU 2001).



Fig. 2 - Cliff and entrances to the refuge caves in Wadi Murraba'at, Judean Desert (photo by ZISSU 2002).

Caves and hiding complexes

One of the fascinating settlement-related aspects of the Bar Kokhba Revolt is the extensive use of underground cavities and installations as hiding complexes, escape routes, and places of refuge. We should distinguish between two main groups of caves: refuge caves and hiding complexes.

The refuge caves are found mainly in the Judean Desert, in the precipitous cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley. These caves are basically large natural caves (with few man-made alterations) located in almost inaccessible vertical cliffs, remote from any settlements. The best known refuge caves are the Cave of the Letters in Nahal Hever and the caves in Wadi Murabba'at, which produced a wealth of written documents from the time of the revolt (figs. 1, 2). Many others are scattered in cliffs, mostly between Jericho in the north and En Gedi in the south. Artifacts found in the refuge caves include bronze and silver coins, some of which were overstruck by the Bar Kokhba administration, assemblages of weapons and other metal artifacts, pottery, glass, stone objects, textiles and other organic finds, food remains, wood and bone objects as well as documents written in Greek and Aramaic on papyrus and fragments of Biblical scrolls. This wealth of finds make it evident that they served as places of refuge for people from the Judean mountains and the Jordan Valley when they fled for their lives at the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt³.

The identification of hiding complexes has been a breakthrough in research on the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The existence of these artificially cut systems has been corroborated by their discovery in more than one hundred thirty archaeological sites in Judea⁴.

Most of the hiding complexes were rock-cut underneath the ancient settlements. They are found mainly in the Judean Shephelah (or Foothills, located west of the Jerusalem and Hebron mountains), and also in the Jerusalem and Hebron mountains, the Beth El mountains and the Galilee.

Throughout ancient Israel, and especially in the Judean Shephelah, rock-cut underground chambers were created as part of the economic and physical infrastructure of towns, villages and farms. The hewing technique in the soft limestone typical to this region was refined in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods,

³ ESHEL, AMIT 1998.

⁴ KLONER, ZISSU 2003a.

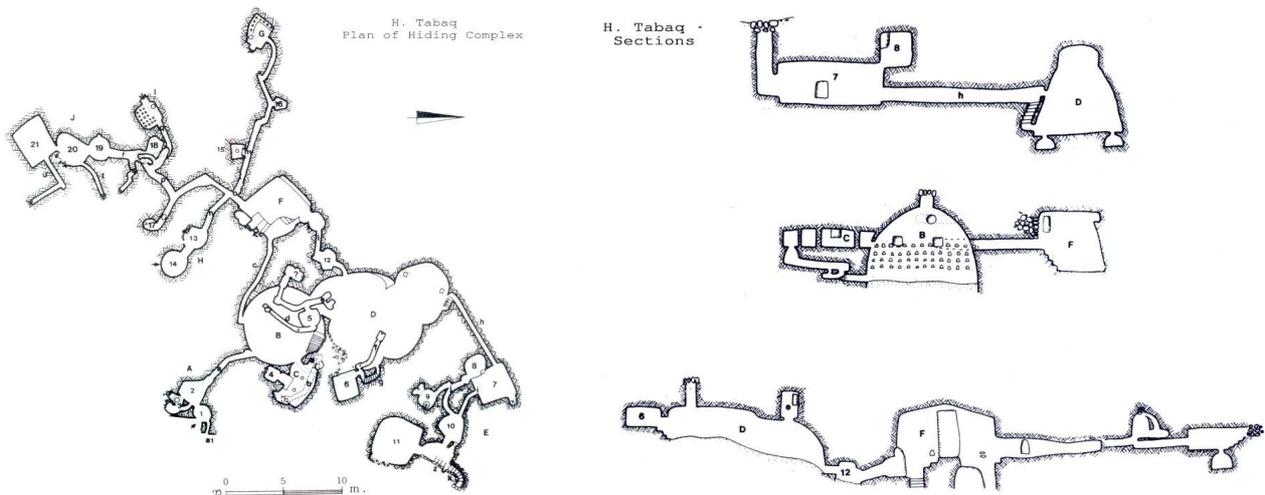


Fig. 3 - (3a.) Plan and section (3b) of public hiding complex at H. Tabaq; the complex includes earlier underground facilities, as limestone quarries, a columbarium, a cistern, storage chambers and typical burrows on different levels (drawing by Yair Tzoran).

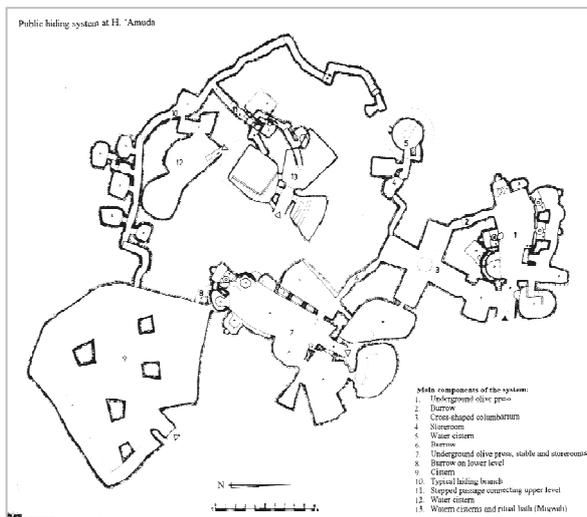


Fig. 4 - Public hiding system at H. 'Amuda; This complex contains earlier facilities as and underground olive press, stables, columbaria, storerooms, ritual baths, cisterns, and a limestone stone quarry. These were interconnected by a network of burrows on several levels (drawing by Giora Solar).

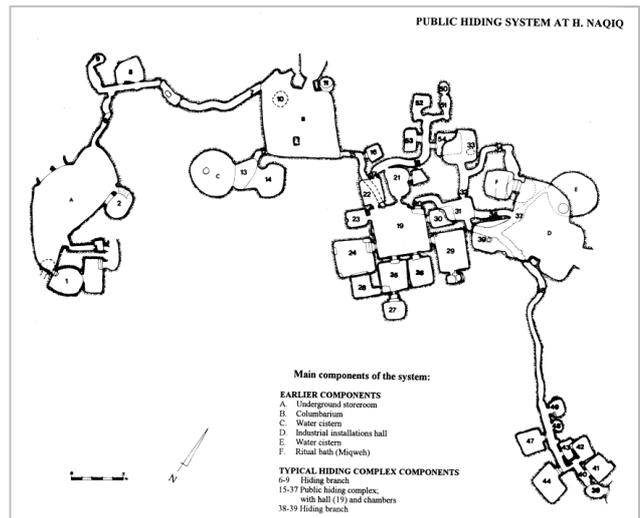


Fig. 5 - Plan of public hiding complex at H. Naqiq. Most of the components of this complex were originally hewn for hiding purposes (surveyed by Yigal Tepper and Yuval Shahr).

and the results can be seen in their full magnificence at the Hellenistic city of Marissa (Maresha)⁵. In many Classical period sites throughout the Judean Shephelah, as Horvat 'Ethri (see Appendix A), these man-made underground facilities fell into disuse when they were linked to form ramified underground complexes designated as "Hiding Complexes" (figs. 3, 4, 5).

According to most scholars, the account by the Roman historian Cassius Dio - in his *Roman History* (69, 12–14; trans. E. Cary), which was preserved in the eleventh-century abstract by the Byzantine monk Xiphillinus - is a fairly comprehensive and reliable overview of the revolt from a Roman perspective⁶.

⁵ KLONER 2003.

⁶ ECK 1999.



Fig. 6 - A typical burrow rock-cut in hiding complex at H. Burgin (photo by B. Zissu).

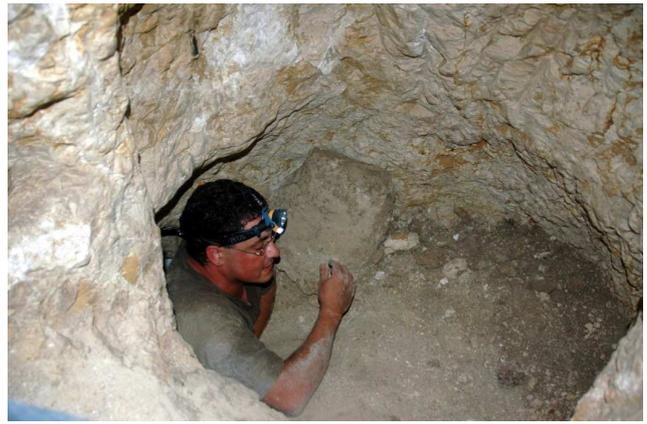


Fig. 7 - Burrow that changes its level at H. Beth Shana, exposing the head of the intruder. (photo by Amit Dagan).



Fig. 8 - Vertical shaft along burrow at H. Beth Shana, aimed at exposing an intruder (photo by B. Zissu).

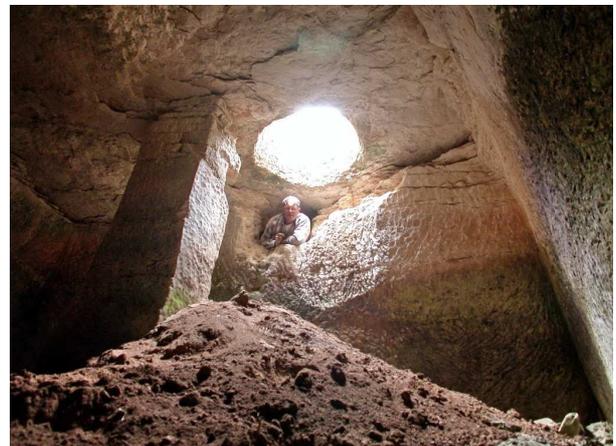


Fig. 9 - Water cistern at H. Tannim. The original entrance to the cistern, apparently hewn during the first century C.E., was blocked. A burrow cuts the upper part of one of its walls, and the cistern was used for collecting water secretly (photo by Ory Ainy).

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

"To be sure, they [the Jews] did not dare try conclusions with the Romans in the open field, but they occupied the advantageous positions in the country and strengthened them with mines and walls, in order that they might have places of refuge whenever they should be hard pressed, and might meet together unobserved under ground; and they pierced these subterranean passages from above at intervals to let in air and light".

Dio's account is consistent with the archaeological discoveries, especially with the "Hiding Complexes" phenomenon. Certain rock-cut features of the hideout complexes (as narrow tunnels – "burrows" (fig. 6), vertical shafts (figs. 7, 8), locking and blocking devices) constitute distinguishing marks of their function, and enable the identification of the phenomenon.

The burrows link external chambers used previously as cisterns (fig. 9), limestone quarries (fig. 10), ritual immersion baths, olive presses, storerooms and granaries, stables and rooms for raising animals, *columbaria* (fig. 11a,b), and so on; connecting them made the chambers unusable for their previous function and purposely impaired the local way of life and economy. The burrows are low, narrow and can only be



Fig. 10 - Large karstic hall at 'Abud - a recently discovered refuge cave located in north-western Judea. Photo by B. Zissu.

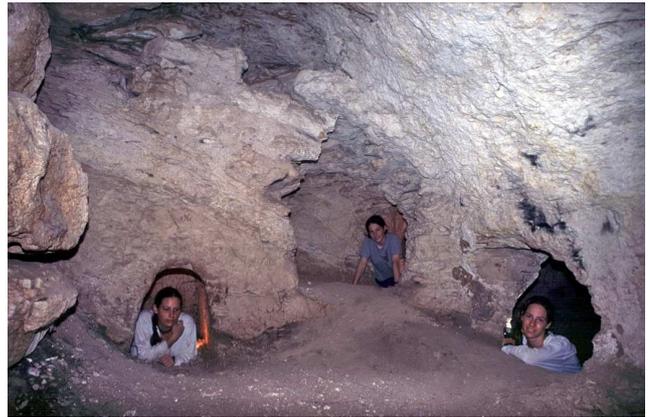


Fig. 12 - Typical burrows cut through earlier underground facility, converting it into a burrows-junction in Complex XV at H. 'Ethri (photo by Avram Graicer).



Fig. 11 - Columbarium chamber at H. Tabaq. (11a) The original entrance to this facility, hewn during the Second Temple period, was blocked. Burrows cut two of its walls, and the columbarium turned into an underground shelter during the Bar Kokhba revolt. (11b) Burrow cuts wall of columbarium at H. Tabaq (see also fig. 5 above). The original entrance was blocked (photos by B. Zissu).

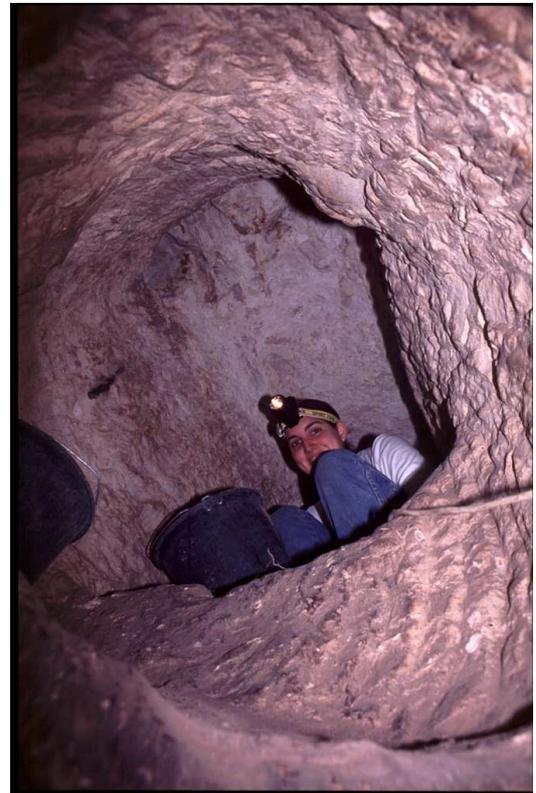


Fig. 13 - Shaft cut into floor of room, leading to Complex XIV at H. 'Ethri (photo by Avram Graicer).

traversed by walking on all fours, sliding on the knees, or crawling (fig. 12). The burrows bend from time to time at diverse angles and in some cases the level of the floor changes (fig. 13). Small side chambers were hewn in the walls of the burrows for various purposes.

Shafts were cut out in the complexes for use as entrances or exits. The shafts had locks

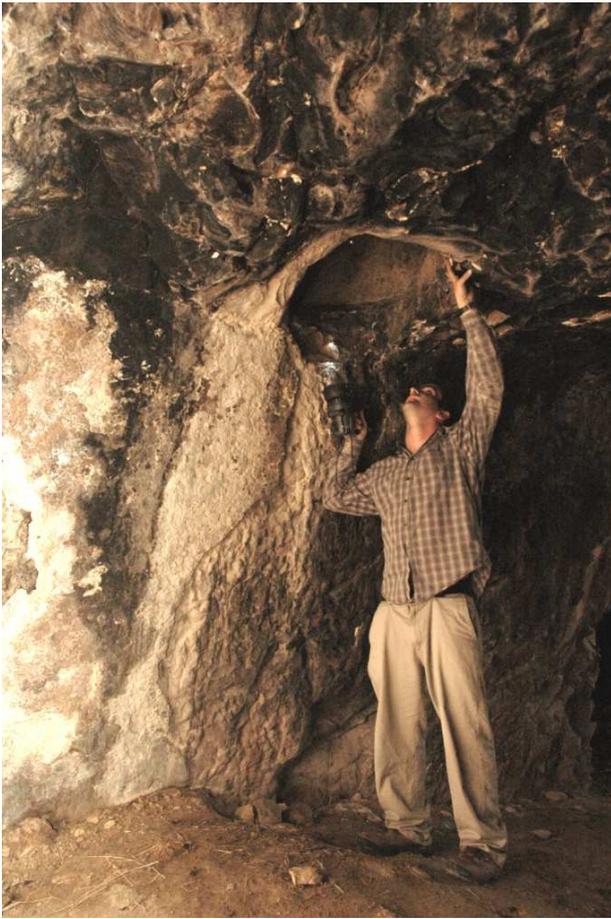


Fig. 14 - Shaft, cut in the ceiling of earlier, Herodian water reservoir at Ras Tumeim. The shaft enabled concealed access to the water (photo by B. Zissu).

and their entrances were camouflaged - usually inside a room or courtyard of a house in the above-ground settlement. Shafts connecting burrows whose floors were at different levels were hewn vertically from the top down.

The entrances to rooms and burrows were closed, blocked, or cut off with various kinds of devices, such as a stone slab the same size as the burrow, a large round stone the size of the average opening, beams, and bars. The people hiding would lock the entrance behind them from the inside.

To prepare a hideout and light lamps inside, one needed ventilation. Vertical shafts were hewn in the ceilings of the rooms for the removal of rubble from the hewing; once the complex was completed, they served as air vents and were camouflaged on the surface.

A regular supply of water was vital. Many hiding complexes incorporated earlier cisterns (fig. 14). A burrow opened into the upper portion of the cistern a few meters above its floor so that water could be stored up to that point; thus the people hiding in the complex had a steady supply of water that could be drawn clandestinely.

Most hiding complexes were prepared before and during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. We should not assume that all Judean complexes were hewn in the midst of the revolt; some were apparently cut earlier in preparation for it. Few Judean systems - mainly small, unsophisticated ones - are dated to the time preceding the Jewish War against Rome (66-70

CE) and they clearly were in use during this war.

This archaeological phenomenon was widely studied by Amos Kloner, Yigal Tepper, Yuval Shahar and Boaz Zissu⁷. These studies explored the significance, scope, and importance of the phenomenon and its historical connection with the Bar Kokhba Revolt⁸. The conclusions regarding the function, dating, and distribution of the hideouts were a breakthrough in the understanding of the revolt.

A map of hiding complexes in Judea, also showing the distribution of contemporaneous Jewish farms, estates and villages⁹ and compared with the distribution map of coins minted by Bar Kokhba's administration and found in controlled archaeological explorations¹⁰, can give us some indication on the geographical extent of the revolt (fig. 15). An examination of the archaeological data¹¹ supports Dio's quantitative report (although the report may be exaggerated) of the large scale destruction of Judean countryside during the suppression of the revolt:

⁷ KLONER 1983a; 1983b; see also KLONER, TEPPER 1987; ZISSU 2001; KLONER, ZISSU 2003a, 2003b; KLONER *ET AL.* 2008.

⁸ It seems that the hideouts reached their peak of sophistication during the Bar Kokhba Revolt; This claim is supported by the archaeological context and stratigraphic connection of underground shafts and chambers to above-ground houses and courtyards. Various artifacts discovered in the complexes, such as 25 coins found in controlled excavations within the underground complexes and a lead weight issued by the Bar Kokhba administration (KLONER 1990), as well as potsherds, fragments of glass, and oil-lamps.

⁹ ZISSU 2001.

¹⁰ ZISSU, ESHEL 2002; see also BIJOVSKY 2004.

¹¹ ESHEL 2006, 111-122.

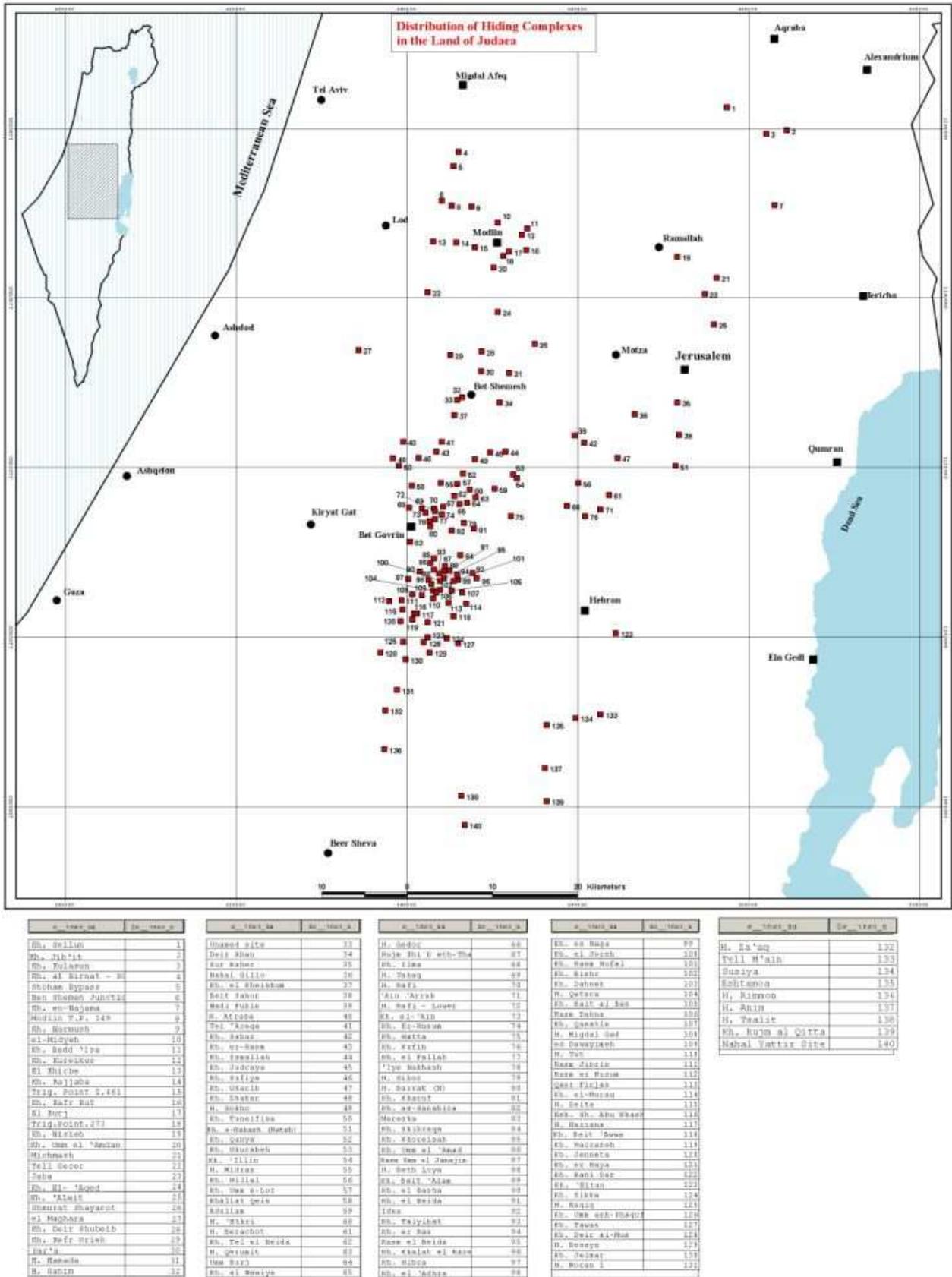


Fig. 15 - Distribution map of hiding complexes in Judaea (prepared by L. Barda, IAA).

"Very few of them [the Jews] in fact survived. Fifty of their most important outposts and nine-hundred and eighty-five of their most famous villages were razed to the ground. Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out. Thus nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate [...]".

Because the presence of hiding complexes in Judea is consistent with and corroborates Cassius Dio's account, they can reasonably be related to the events of the Bar Kokhba revolt. The Roman historian's description should not be interpreted as an exaggeration meant to excuse the difficulty the Romans had in suppressing the revolt. The hideouts are substantial evidence of preparations for a revolt or for actions during the revolt, so that clandestine activity could be carried out when necessary.

The architectural uniformity among many of the complexes seems to be evidence of orders from above, planning, and implementation in one short period of time, as a result of the military conception of the Bar Kokhba's revolt leadership. Perhaps preparing the hideouts was part of the civilian population's role in getting ready for revolt, subversive activity, and hiding in various stages of the war. Creating the hiding complexes was a sophisticated way of overcoming the difficulty of a head-on clash with the Roman legions. The complexes were intended to serve as hideouts for weeks or even months and as bases for the rebels. Food, weapons, and other supplies could be stored there secretly.

The small, narrow, winding burrows were meant to make it difficult for the enemy to infiltrate and advance in the underground maze. The burrows could be blocked and locked easily and efficiently, and parts of the complex could be cut off from the outside. An individual Roman soldier bearing weapons and an oil-lamp would have a hard time advancing on all fours or dragging himself along the ground in an unfamiliar burrow or moving through the vertical shafts, and he would be in an inferior, vulnerable position compared with the rebel lying in ambush for him. The shafts were designed to hinder or even stop movement along the burrows by changing the floor level, and they could easily be stopped up with rocks. Therefore an enemy would have to fight one on one, losing the advantage of the trained military unit formed with frontal combat in mind.

Most of the hiding complexes were discovered underneath Jewish localities from the late Second Temple period and the time between the revolts, as Horvat Tabaq¹² or Horvat 'Ethri (figs. 16, 17; see Appendix A). These rural localities – mostly farms and estates, villages, and fortified sites were scattered throughout the land, not necessarily controlling main roads. These sites were identified and dated by means of distinctly "ethnic indicators": Jewish archaeological finds such as ritual baths¹³, stone vessels¹⁴, stone ossuaries¹⁵, Judean ("southern") lamps, coins from the Jewish War and Bar Kokhba Revolt, and certain *ostraca*.

¹² SAGIV, ZISSU 1998; see also SAGIV ET AL. 1998; SAGIV ET AL. 2002.

¹³ In the late part of the Second Temple period (second century B.C.E.-first century C.E.), the Jewish laws of ritual purity were strongly emphasized, and permanent ritual purification facilities were created. From the study of the written sources and from an examination of the archaeological data, we can reach the conclusion that the observance of ritual purity had an important part in the daily schedule of Jews of all social classes during this period. The Jew was aware of ritual purity issues during his daily routine, while growing his crops, preparing his food, on holidays and religious festivals, especially during pilgrimage to the Holy City of Jerusalem, and most of all while entering the Temple. The high level of ritual observance is represented by this common rock-cut relic – the ritual immersion bath which exemplifies its centrality within the Jewish society of the Second Temple period. The details of these baths are provided in the Mishnaic tractate Mikva'oth. Ritual baths were an essential component of urban and rural Jewish homes during the Second Temple period and even during the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods. The first author's PhD dissertation described approximately 220 ritual baths at about 130 sites in Judaea and Benjamin (ZISSU 2001).

¹⁴ The stone vessels are made of white chalk, by lathe-turning, hand-carving, or both. According to rabbinic law, stone vessels can never become impure (M Kelim 10:1; M Betzah 2:9; M Parah 3:1); consequently, they are always fit for use, unlike pottery, which must be broken if it becomes impure. My PhD thesis updated the map of the geographical distribution of stone vessels in Judaea; these vessels were found at more than 100 sites (ZISSU 2001).

¹⁵ Ossuaries are small, covered boxes made of soft limestone and sometimes painted or decorated with carved or incised designs. The ossuaries, usually found in rock-cut family tombs, used by extended Jewish families which practiced double burial: primary burial of bodies and a secondary collection of bones remains. The secondary burial - or mass collection of bones into niches located within the ancestral tomb was a long established custom, performed until the end of the Second Temple period, and even afterwards. By the last third of the first century B.C.E. the practice of individual bones collection into ossuaries (secondary burial) started to be practiced by



Fig. 18 - (right) Undated denarius of the Bar Kokhba revolt, attributed to 134-135 CE. Obv: Bunch of grapes with small leaf; inscr.: שמע(ון) = Shim[on]; Rev: Two trumpets; inscr.: ל[חרות] = For the freedom of Jerusalem; AR, 3.39 gr, 19 mm; axis 0.6; L. 2109; b. 2393. (photo by B. Zissu).



Fig. 19 - (left) Denarius of the second year of the Bar Kokhba revolt (133-134 CE). Obv: Three letters inscr. in wreath: שמע = Shim[on]; Rev: Flagon with handle; on r. lulav; inscr. שבלחר ישר(ר)אל = Year two of the freedom of Israel; AR, 3.18 gr, 20.5 mm; axis 12; L. 4207; b. 8439. (photo by B. Zissu)

against Rome: from Antipatris in the northwest; eastward via Nahal Shilo, the toparchy of Aqraba, and the Alexandrion fortress (Sartaba); then south along the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea and west to the area of Arad, Aro'er, and the Beersheba valley. The line of settlements in the west extends to the fringes of the Judean Shephelah where it meets the Coastal Plain. So far no hiding complexes with typical burrows have been discovered in non-Jewish localities.

Before new archaeological explorations in Judea had provided a wealth of finds from the time of the Bar Kokhba war, coins were one of the few tangible pieces of evidence from that

period. Bar Kokhba's coins were overstruck on already existing coins, which depicted the Roman emperors and various pagan symbols. The former design was obliterated and then overstruck with Bar Kokhba's symbols and slogans, which clearly convey Bar Kokhba's message and express his national objectives. Most of the coins mention Israel and Jerusalem. Among their symbols the Temple and its holy vessels are featured prominently (figs. 18, 19). The inscriptions, in Paleo-Hebrew letters: "Year one of the redemption of Israel", "Year two of the freedom of Israel" and "For the freedom of Jerusalem" express the desire for a quick recapture of Jerusalem from the Romans, the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of its cult.

The distribution of coins minted by the Bar Kokhba administration is one of the most important archaeological means for determining the extent of the area controlled by the rebels. Unfortunately, most Bar Kokhba coins already published were recorded in numismatic collections and their provenance is unclear¹⁶. For this reason the publication of every single find of known provenance is significant. In a pioneering study Dan Barag presented data regarding the geographical distribution of Bar Kokhba coins discovered in controlled archaeological excavations and surveys¹⁷. Further studies presented archaeological and geographical data on additional coins discovered in controlled archaeological operations¹⁸. The new studies

¹⁶ MILDENBERG 1984; see also MESHORER 2001, 135-165.

¹⁷ BARAG 1980.

¹⁸ ZISSU, ESHEL 2002; see also BIJOVSKY 2004, 248-251; MILDENBERG 1984, 49-88.

showed that the geographical distribution of these coins corresponds to the map of the hiding complexes, thus offering a solution to the question of the extent of the revolt. It appears that the revolt affected at least the area of Judea proper, excluding the city of Jerusalem, which was most probably not captured by the rebels (fig. 15).

Motti Aviam and Yuval Shahar studied the hideout complexes discovered in 23 Galilee localities. Nineteen of these are in the Lower Galilee, including a few near Roman roads. Four were found in the Upper Galilee¹⁹. Shahar pointed out the typological similarity between the complexes in the Galilee and those in Judea, which ostensibly suggests preparations for the Bar Kokhba Revolt. However, the few published archaeological finds from Galilee complexes have not been dated to the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Based on these data, Shahar suggested that the Jews of the Galilee intended to revolt just like the Judeans. Nevertheless, the Galilee does not seem to have been included in the Bar Kokhba administration, as indicated by the total absence of Bar Kokhba coins in the Galilee. In Shahar's opinion, the difference between Judea and the Galilee was that the center of the revolt was in Judea. After all, the motive for the war, as expressed in the war slogan "For the freedom of Jerusalem," directed the rebels' offensive toward Judea and Jerusalem.

Appendix A: Horvat 'Ethri, a Judean Village from the Early Roman Period in Context

The excavations at Horvat 'Ethri, illustrate the layout of a typical rural site of the period (fig. 16). The site is located in the Judaeen Shephelah, south of the Elah Valley, on an elongated ridge, which affords a commanding vantage point over the area. The village was founded at the end of the Persian period (fourth century B.C.E.) and existed to the early Byzantine period (fourth century C.E.) - about 800 years²⁰.

The village, comprising several courtyard houses grouped together, was at its largest in the first century CE, covering an area of c. 12 dunams. Based on finds of at least four ritual baths (*miqwa'ot*), stone vessels, pottery types, oil lamps and the numismatic assemblage, its inhabitants were most likely Jewish. The village was damaged and abandoned for a short time during the Jewish War against the Romans (66-70 C.E.) and later re-inhabited by a Jewish population in the interval between the Jewish revolts against the Romans. The most outstanding structure of the village during this period is a public building which included a rectangular vestibule opening onto a courtyard enclosing a large ritual bath. The vestibule opens into a rectangular - broad-house - hall (c. 13 x 7.5 meters) with a row of three pillars in its center. It appears that the building served as the village synagogue between the two Jewish revolts against the Romans. The village took an active role in the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 C.E.) and was violently destroyed and burned, as evidenced by the excavation finds, including a burnt layer that was uncovered on the floors of the rooms in the center of the site (units N6, N4). One of the ritual baths (No. XI) was re-used as a mass burial, and contained the skulls and bones of at least 12 individuals apparently slaughtered during the defeat of the settlement during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Cut marks were observed on a neck vertebra, indicating that at least one individual was beheaded by a sword blow. The human bones were mixed with ashes, pieces of charred wood and well dated finds: coins, fragments of pottery, glass vessels (some were deformed due to the fire), oil-lamps and stone vessels.

An underground complex of winding burrows, rooms and passages leading to concealed water cisterns were hewn in advance and served the residents during the Bar Kokhba revolt. The ruins of the Jewish village were partially resettled during the Late Roman period by a gentile population, and existed for 150 years without significant changes in the architecture of the earlier buildings. This settlement was finally abandoned in the fifth century C.E. and only a few herdsmen and nomads stopped at the site.

¹⁹ SHACHAR 2003; see also AVIAM 2004.

²⁰ ZISSU 2007.

The village—κώμη—was a common form of settlement in Judea. Until recently, the physical form and architecture of Second Temple period villages in Judea proper was mostly unknown²¹. Recently, remains of two other sufficiently preserved villages have been uncovered at Qiryat Sefer²² and at Kh. Umm el-'Amdan²³, both located in the northern Judean Shephelah. An analysis of the physical layout and environs of these villages (as well as other less preserved exemplars) have pointed to several common features: The villages occupy an area of 1–1.5 hectares. The architectural units were planned, with square rooms grouped around courtyards. The exterior walls of the buildings form a continuous, wall-like line. In the center of the village is a large public plaza containing sometimes a rock-cut ritual bath and cistern(s). Several other cisterns and ritual immersion baths were hewn in the courtyards. Residential quarters are separated by alleys. The three villages have a public building, identified as a synagogue. Construction is mostly modest, and based on local available materials. Only few architectural elements, as doors and windows frames and external corners were carefully crafted. The floors were made of compressed earth or dressed bedrock. There are no architectural ornamentations, and no interior decoration as mosaic floors, stucco mouldings and painted walls. Industrial caves (e.g., olive presses), storage caves, cisterns, and so on were hewn in the bedrock.

Boaz Zissu and Amos Kloner

Bar-Ilan University, Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology
Ramat Gan, Israel, 52900

E-mails: bzissu@gmail.com; klonera@mail.biu.ac.il

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²¹ HIRSCHFELD, 1997; see also: HIRSCHFELD 1998; ZISSU 2001.

²² MAGEN ET AL. 2004, 25–32.

²³ ONN ET AL. 2002.

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