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An Underground Rock-Cut Shrine
near Amatsya, Judean Foothills, Israel

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NURIT SHTOBER-ZISU

ABSTRACT:

This article presents our documentation of a previously unidentified subterranean complex located near Amatsya, Israel. The study revolves primarily around an examination of the architecture, decorations, and letters carved on the walls of an underground rock-cut hall. The layout of the hall bears a striking resemblance to sacred architecture prevalent in the region since the Middle Bronze Age, while its decorative elements are linked to earlier artistic traditions dating back to the Iron Age, as well as the aniconic characteristics found in Idumean, Canaanite, Phoenician and Nabatean art of the Persian and Hellenistic periods. According to paleographic analysis, the Aramaic lapidary inscriptions, which possibly mention two deities, El and Adon, are tentatively dated to the 5th-4th centuries BCE.

Our main thesis is that this hall functioned as a private shrine, possibly a funerary shrine adjacent to a rock-cut burial complex. We propose that both the shrine and the adjacent tomb were utilized by an Idumean landowner, showcasing influences from Phoenician / Canaanite iconographic traditions.

Consequently, the site assumes significant importance, as it offers novel insights into the field of study by presenting, for the first time, a relatively well-preserved underground Idumean shrine from the Persian and Hellenistic periods. These finds contribute to a deeper understanding of the religious and cultural practices of the Idumeans during that specific era.

REZUMAT: UN SANCTUAR RUPESTRU SUBTERAN LÂNGĂ AMATSYA, DEALURILE IUDEEI, ISRAEL

Acest articol prezintă documentarea unui complex subteran anterior necunoscut, situat în apropierea localității Amatsya, Israel. Studiul se concentrează în principal asupra examinării arhitecturii, decorațiunilor și inscripțiilor gravate pe pereții unei săli subterane săpate în stâncă. Configurația sălii seamănă în mod remarcabil cu arhitectura sacră răspândită în regiune începând din Epoca Bronzului Mijlociu, în timp ce elementele decorative sunt legate de tradițiile artistice mai vechi ce datează din Epoca Fierului, precum și de caracteristicile aniconice găsite în arta Idumeană, Canaanită, Feniciană și Nabateană din perioadele Persană și Elenă. Conform analizei paleografice, inscripțiile lapidare aramaice, care pot menționa două divinități, El și Adon, sunt datate orientativ în secolele V-IV î.Hr.

Ipoteza noastră principală este că această sală a funcționat ca un sanctuar privat, posibil ca un sanctuar funerar adiacent unui complex de morminte săpate în stâncă. Propunem că atât sanctuarul cât și mormântul adiacent au fost utilizate de un proprietar Idumean, prezentând influențe din tradițiile iconografice Feniciene / Canaanite.

Prin urmare, situl capătă o importanță semnificativă, deoarece oferă în premieră perspective noi în domeniul de studiu, prezentând pentru prima dată un sanctuar Idumean subteran relativ bine păstrat din perioadele Persane și Elene. Aceste descoperiri contribuie la o aprofundare a practicilor religioase și culturale ale Idumeanilor în acea perioadă specifică.

KEYWORDS: Artificial cavities, underground architecture, sacred architecture, Idumean art and religion, Idumean, Canaanite, Phoenician and Nabatean iconography, Persian and Hellenistic periods, Aramaic lapidary script.

CUVINTE CHEIE: Cavități artificiale, arhitectură subterană, arhitectură sacră, artă și religie Idumeeană, iconografie Idumeană, Canaanită, Feniciană și Nabateană, perioade persane și elenistice, scriere lapidară aramaică.

Introduction

Khirbet ed-Dawaimeh (SWP) or ed-Dawayima (M) (hereafter: KeD) is located at map refs. ITM 1917/6050, WGS 84 ref. 31.53767 north and 34.9126 east, about 0.5 km north of Moshav Amatsya, 6 km south of Tel Maresha, and 8 km southeast of Lachish. The area of ruins extends over 30 hectares, or 75 acres (Figs. 1 and 2).

The site overlooks the Nahal Lachish streambed and the 'Trough Valley', which separates the Judean Foothills from the Hebron Mountains, and provides a panoramic view of the foothills and the western slopes of the Hebron Mountains. The hilltop, rising to an elevation of 390 m above sea level, is about 60 m higher than the surrounding streambed. The site is located at a junction of ancient roads, including the Roman road that connected the Hebron Mountains to the ancient city of Bet Govrin – Eleutheropolis.[1]

Figure 1. Map showing the locations of sites mentioned in the article (1934 British Mandate Map, 1:20000; N. Shtober-Zisu).

Figure 2. Aerial view to the west, showing Amatsya, KeD, and nearby sites (B. Zissu and N. Shtober-Zisu).

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[1]   Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994, 118.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, various travelers visited KeD and described the Arab village. This village had obliterated a significant portion of the underlying ancient site and utilized its building materials and subterranean chambers and complexes.
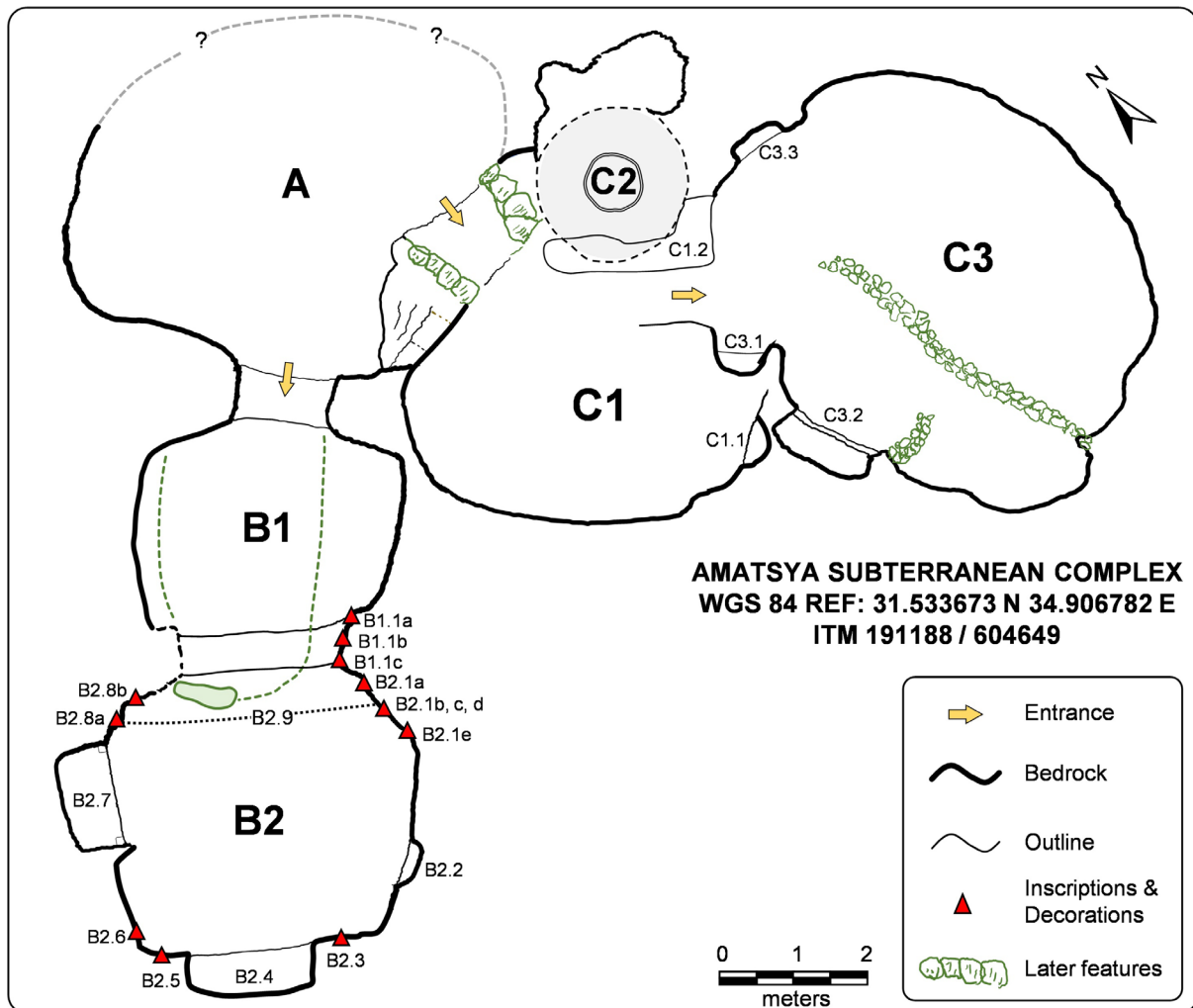

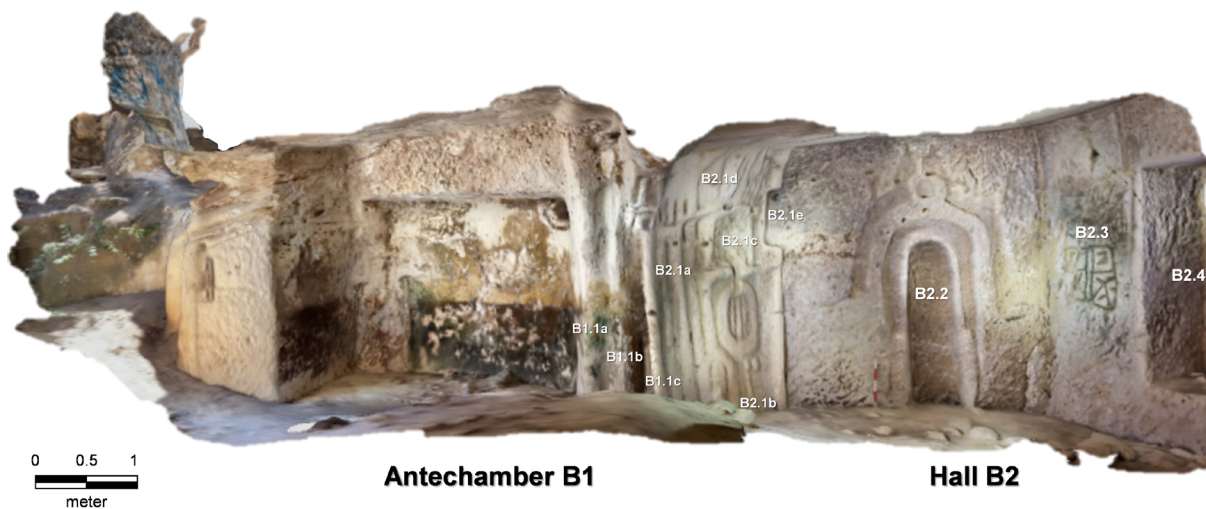*Figure 3a: Plan of the subterranean complex (B. Zissu and N. Shtober-Zisu).*

Figure 3b: Photogrammetric section through SC B1-B2, looking east (B. Zissu and N. Shtober-Zisu).

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In 1838, Edward Robinson and Eli Smith provided some details about the village, noting its location on the road from Bet Govrin to Beersheba.[2]

In 1863, Victor Guérin described the hill's topography and mentioned Roman milestones at its foot. He described the houses as crudely constructed, some incorporating earlier ashlars, and mentioned the presence of rock-cut cisterns, wine presses, silos, and an underground columbarium.[3]

The SWP (Survey of Western Palestine) explorers Claude R. Conder and Herbert H. Kitchener,[4] and later Felix Abel,[5] visited KeD in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They provided some details about the site and its surroundings but did not address the ancient remains.

In the 1980s, Yehuda Dagan surveyed the site on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority.[6] Dagan reported finds from the Chalcolithic and Iron Ages and the Persian, Hellenistic, Byzantine, Roman, Early Islamic, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods.

In recent years, a series of archaeological excavations and surveys have been conducted at KeD in order to facilitate the development of the new town of Karmei Katif. These excavations revealed archaeological remains from the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age II, Persian period, Late Hellenistic period, Early Roman period, Byzantine period, Ottoman period, and British Mandate era. Among the finds were the remains of an estate from the late Early and Middle Roman periods, including a triclinium, a bathhouse, and ritual baths. Below them, a large water reservoir was exposed, incorporating a hiding complex from the Bar Kokhba revolt.[7]

Description of the Subterranean Complex

This article presents and discusses for the first time a rock-cut subterranean complex discovered on the eastern slope of a hill, approximately 500 m west of KeD (at map ref. ITM 191188/604649, WGS 84 ref. 31.533673 north and 34.906782 east).[8]

The entrance to the rock-cut subterranean complex faces northeast (Figs. 3a, 3b). The complex consists of six interconnected cavities, carved out of the Eocene chalk of the Tsor'a Formation, Maresha Member. This soft, compact, and homogenous chalk is protected from erosion by a surface crust, locally termed as *nari*. The crust is made up of hard, fissured lime crust and has a tendency to collapse relatively easily. The stonemasons who cut the subterranean complex were aware of this instability. When hewing a cave, they usually attempted to cut through the fissured crust to reach the soft but stable chalk layer.[9]

The complex was entered through an unroofed oval cavity (approx. 5 x 3.5 m) denoted A (Fig. 4). The precise nature of this cavity's original condition remains uncertain. In particular, we do not know whether it was originally roofed and subsequently experienced a collapse or whether the deteriorating bedrock ceiling was intentionally removed, transforming the cavity into an open courtyard.

The southern wall of Cavity A features a monumental rectangular entrance (Fig. 5a) with a recessed frame. This doorway (width 1.2 m; height 1.9 m), with two doorposts (each 0.7 m wide), serves as an entrance to Hall B, which consists of two successive chambers referred to as B1 and B2 (Figs. 3a, 3b).

B1, a rectangular room measuring approximately 3.2 x 2.9 m, served as an antechamber. There was a monumental entrance in the southern wall, approximately 1.8 m wide, leading from B1 into B2 (Fig. 5b). The entrance was framed by two jambs and a lintel. Only the eastern jamb has been preserved, but it enables the reconstruction of the destroyed western jamb. Evidently, the western one resembled its eastern counterpart.

The eastern jamb features three engaged columns adorned with relief carvings (B1.1a, b, and c). The innermost column (B1.1c) is crowned by a capital that provided support for a double-framed lintel. This column also signifies

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[2]   Robinson and Smith 1841, 401-402.

[3]   Guérin 1869, 342-343.

[4]   Conder and Kitchener 1883, 258.

[5]   Abel 1938, 90.

[6]   Dagan 2006, 224-229.

[7]   Abel (1933, 261) suggested that KeD was biblical Basekath (Joshua 15:39; 2 Kings 22:1), but this identification is not generally accepted. For a summary of the main finds, see Varga et al. 2017; Lifshits and Varga 2020; Erickson-Gini et al. 2021; Klein et al. 2021.

[8]   The subterranean complex was found by Tal Tutka and Yair Tsoran, who reported their discovery to the authors. The site was documented and studied with the participation of Tal Tutka, Yair Tsoran, Esther Melet-Rakow, Atara Cohen, Gital Simkovic and Yotham Zissu. Assistance was provided by the Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University. This article was prepared with the generous support of the Jeselsohn Epigraphic Center for Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University and was edited by Deborah Stern.

[9]   Kloner 2003, 3–5.

Figure 4: Cavity A, looking south (B. Zissu).

the transition from B1 to B2. Consequently, the subsequent decorations, although physically connected to B1.1c, will be designated B.2.1a, b, and so forth.

During the Ottoman period, the original layout of B1 underwent some alterations when it was repurposed for storage. The western wall was deepened by approximately 70 centimeters, resulting in the destruction of the western jamb and its accompanying column and decorations. In the center of the room, a platform was constructed out of stone and mud. Additionally, portions of the interior surfaces of the eastern and western walls were coated with mud plaster and painted white.

B2 is the trapezoidal main chamber measuring approximately 2.85 x 3.8 x 3.5 x 3 m (Figs. 6-13). The focal point in B2 seems to have been its southern wall, opposite the entrance. This wall features a rectangular niche (B2.4; measuring 1.75 m high, 1.7 m wide, and 0.5 m deep). The niche is surrounded by a frame and a finely dressed lintel. To the left side of this niche, a rectangular frame (B.2.3) divided into four registers bears inscribed letters in the Aramaic lapidary script. On the right side of the niche, an oval frame (B2.5) was carved. It was adorned with what appears to be a monogram consisting of Aramaic letters.

Moving to the western wall of B1, a tall, deep carved niche (B2.7; measuring 2.1 m high, 1.3 m wide, and 0.7 m deep) adorns the wall. Its left side protrudes from the wall's surface (approx. 0.3 m) and is embellished with a recessed frame. Carved to the left of niche B2.7 is a circular frame (B2.6) decorated with a monogram composed of Aramaic letters.

The inscribed frames will be discussed further below.

The section of the wall between niche B2.7 and the door jamb is adorned with two attached reliefs (B2.8a, B2.8b) representing columns or perhaps incense stands and constituting an impressive decorative feature (see below).

On the eastern wall is a shallow, arched niche surrounded by a decorative double frame (B2.2). Adjacent to B2.2 on the left side is a composite decorative scheme carved in relief (B2.1), which will be described in detail.

The ceiling of B2 is predominantly flat, with the notable exception of a decorative beam that runs parallel to the entrance lintel (B2.9). This embellishment serves to connect B2.1 and B2.8. Carved in relief, it protrudes from the underside of the ceiling, adding visual interest (visible in Fig. 7).

Figure 5a: Entrance to SC B1-B2, looking south (B. Zissu).

Figure 5b: View to the south from B1 through the monumental entrance to B2 (B. Zissu).

Figure 6: B2, looking west (B. Zissu).

Figure 7: View to the north from B2 to B1 (B. Zissu).

Decorations: B1

As mentioned earlier, the eastern jamb of the wide passage from B1 to B2 was adorned with three engaged columns embellished with relief carvings (B1.1a, b, and c; Fig. 3b). Although these columns appear to be bundled together, their capitals indicate that they were meant to represent three independent columns.

Starting from the left, the first column (B1.1a) has a rounded stem with a tapering upper section and is surmounted by a square capital. The second column (B1.1b) features a trapezoidal capital, and the stem beneath it is wider and apparently fluted. These two columns show signs of wear and their details are not clearly discernible.

The innermost column (B1.1c) boasts a rounded stem and is crowned with a fluted capital that provided support for a double-framed lintel. Below this capital is a row of downturned petals encircling the stem (for further discussion of this motif, refer to B2.8a). As previously explained, this column marks the transition from B1 to B2.

Hence, the subsequent decorations, despite being physically connected to B1.1c, will be identified as B.2.1a, b, and so forth.

Decorations: B2

The Composite Decorative Scheme of B2.1 (Figs. 8-9)

The description of the decorative scheme will be presented from left to right. Adjacent to B1.1c is B2.1a, featuring two bundled columns with round shafts. These columns share a capital, which includes a grooved portion resting on a rectangular element.

B2.1a serves as the left-hand frame of the decorative scheme, while B2.1e serves as the right-hand frame. Between them are five distinct features that will be described from bottom to top.

B2.1b is the lowest panel. It consists of a schematic human (female?) figure without hands facing an arched niche.[10] Within the niche is a pillar-like element (possibly a figurine or *maṣṣebah*; see below) with a rounded top. Two

Figure 8: B2, looking northeast at decorations B2.1 and B2.2 (B. Zissu).

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[10] For a monumental schematic human figure without hands, carved on the wall of a hall within SC 89 at Maresha, see Erlich 2009, 21, Fig. 22.

pillars emerge from the upper part of the arched niche. The right-hand pillar bends at a 90-degree angle, forming a ledge that serves as the base for B2.1c. The left-hand pillar terminates at the point where the right-hand pillar bends. Adjacent to the schematic human figure, on its left, a round knob-shaped feature was carved, accompanied by a crescent-shaped depression in the frame of the niche, perhaps representing the sun and moon, respectively.

A thick ring or disk was carved above the head of the schematic human figure. Three standing stones, pillars, or perhaps *maṣṣeboth*[11] were carved inside the ring, serving as a "baetyl" ('home of the god').[12] A small channel connects B2.1b and B2.1c. All elements are rendered in high relief.

B2.1c features two schematic columns standing on the ledge and providing support for a cornice. Positioned between these columns is a sunken panel. Regrettably, the precise depiction within this panel has been intentionally chiseled out, leaving it empty. However, on the left side of the left-hand column, a schematic cruciform figure resembling a herm was carved.[13] Similar schematic figures are interpreted as aniconic representations of deities.[14] It appears that the iconoclasts overlooked this figure, resulting in its survival.

B2.1d, which occupies the uppermost panel, was carved in high relief atop the cornice of B2.1c. Regrettably, it appears worn out or deliberately modified. This section appears to depict a fairly grotesque scene involving human, animal, or mythical figures or perhaps very schematic letters.

B2.1e serves as the right-hand frame of the composite scheme. Originally representing a decorative incense burner - known in Greek as a *thymiaterion*,[15] it features a rounded shaft and an upper body with a square section. Atop this section, a tiny, decorative altar was carved. In antiquity, the square upper part of the body was modified to function as an actual cuboid altar. A portion of the square section was removed, and a small, rounded, bowl-shaped depression was carved within it, converting it into a cuboid incense burner. Therefore B2.1e served both functional and aesthetic purposes.

Cuboid altars, employed for burning incense, have been identified in Idumean cultic assemblages dating back to the Persian and Hellenistic periods.[16] A notable discovery includes 213 cuboid altars made of chalk found in

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[11]   In Biblical literature, stone pillars known as *maṣṣeboth* served as markers or memorials for significant events, tombs, or locations. Uzi Avner's studies have revealed that these standing stones date as far back as the Natufian culture (11th millennium BCE) and as late as the Early Islamic period (Avner 1999-2000 and parallels cited there). Arav et al. (2016) conducted a study on two intricate *maṣṣeboth* sites located in the southern Negev desert, and these sites were meticulously documented using LIDAR technology.

Notably, a significant number of *maṣṣeboth* are found at Nabataean and Phoenician sites and sanctuaries, where they have clear cultic connotations. Avner's research indicates that Nabataean *maṣṣeboth* were associated with deities and were believed to contain the power and spirit of the gods. Another category of these stones represented ancestors. Furthermore, Avner has documented standing stones arranged in groups of three in the Negev and Sinai deserts. Avner also discussed baetyls at Petra arranged in groups of three. Notably, one group is set within a square niche, while another is placed within an arched niche. These sets of three *maṣṣeboth* and baetyls appear to symbolize the Nabataean triad (Avner 1999-2000, 117-119, Figs. 18-30). The concept of a triad is also found in other ancient religious practices and signifies the interconnectedness and importance of the three elements or entities represented (Erickson-Gini 2015).

[12]   Baetyls, pillars, and sacred trees held great significance within Phoenician cult and religious practices. The baetyls, in the form of a monolithic dressed stone shaped like a cone or tapering pillar, set within a niche or a shrine, likely represented the dwelling place of deities. They were erected in Phoenician temples and open-air precincts, either individually or in groups of two or three, manifesting the divine presence and acting as focal points for religious veneration (Moscati 1988, 313: stelae with three baetyls from Constantine; 318: stelae with three baetyls from Nora). Another example is a worship scene on a Phoenician stele dedicated to Baal Hammon, discovered in a 3rd-century BCE cultic context at Lilibaeum in Sicily (Morstadt 2008, Taf 22, Ste 6), a group of three pillars set on a plinth are represented. These pillars seemingly represent a triad of deities, serving as a divine symbol in the ancient Phoenician culture. Evidence of baetyls is substantiated by literary sources, iconography, and archaeological findings (Edrey 2019, 148-151 and lit. cit. there).

[13]   A similar cruciform figure, perhaps a representation of the Idumean God Qos on a monumental scale, was carved on the wall of an underground hall in SC 51 at Maresha (Erlich 2009, 22, Fig. 23). Erlich interpreted these monumental figures as schematic herms and discussed them and additional chalk and terracotta herms found at Maresha (Erlich 2009: 22-23).

[14]   A schematic figure on a cruciform stele was found at the temple of Eshmun in Sidon (Stucky 1993, 23, Pl. 14, no. 53). Schematic cruciform figures appear on Punic stelae (Moscati and Uberti 1981, Pl. CXXV, no. 791; Pl. CLVIII, no. 894; Moscati 1988, 322; for additional parallels, see Doak 2015). Erlich (2009, 22-23) emphasized that the herms discovered at Maresha and in its vicinity differ significantly from the semi-anthropomorphic herms seen in Greek art and the Phoenician and Punic Tanit symbol. However, the Maresha herms do share a common trait with the aforementioned symbols, namely, the abstraction and minimization of the anthropomorphic element. The inhabitants of Maresha and Idumea adopted a Greek-inspired form that deviated from the typical Greek iconographic system and suited the local anthropomorphic trait.

[15]   Morstadt 2008.

[16]   O'Dwyer Shea (1983) has provided a comprehensive overview of these items and their contextual significance. Additionally, the discoveries from the favissa at 'En Hazeva (Ben-Arieh 2011, 161-163) show that these items may have originated during the late Iron Age, with their design remaining consistent over time.

Figure 9a: B2.1, looking northeast (B. Zissu).

Figure 9b: Details of B2.1c and B2.1d (B. Zissu).

a favissa at the 'Solar Temple' in Lachish,[17] with additional findings at Beersheba,[18] Maresha[19] and the recently discovered cultic assemblage at Horbat 'Amuda.[20] These altars were utilized in both private and public cults and might indicate an increase in incense trade from South Arabia.[21]

The Arched Niche: B2.2 (Figs. 8, 10)

In the center of the eastern wall, towards the right side of B2.1, a shallow, arched niche (0.5 m wide, 1.6 m high from the debris covering the floor, and 0.25 m deep) was carved awkwardly. This niche is surrounded by a double decorative frame.

The inner decorative frame consists of two short columns that serve as supports for a thin, arched frame executed in relief.

The outer arch, crudely carved in high relief, is wider. It rests on two horizontal supports that extend from its base to both the right and left sides. The distinct relief effect was accomplished by carving two parallel sunken grooves, which accentuate the form of the arch. Furthermore, on the shoulders of the external sunken frame, two Y-shaped designs were incised with a pointed instrument, creating an upward pattern.

The whole arched niche resembles a schematic anthropomorphic silhouette, surmounted by a crudely carved disk possibly representing the head. Atop the head, an element shaped like a crescent or horns emerges. The additional

Figure 10: Detail of the top of B2.2 (B. Zissu).

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[17] Stern 1982, 185.
[18] Stern 1973, 52-53.
[19] For miniature cuboid altars from SC 169 at Maresha, see Stern 2019, 96, fig. 4,7, 23, 26, 41, 45.
[20] Haber et al. 2022, 238-239.
[21] The understanding of the ritual purpose of cuboid altars was further strengthened by the uncovering of an altar inscribed with the Aramaic word לבונתא ("incense") from Lachish, as well as the finding of other inscribed altars at sites in South Arabia (see discussions by Szanton 2014, 65; Hassell 2002, 157–192).

Y-shaped designs on the shoulders may also suggest schematic horns. Pirhiya Beck has proposed that these horns might signify a bull, perhaps representing the Edomite/Idumean god Qos in the role of a weather deity.[22] Due to the highly schematic nature of the entire representation, various alternative interpretations are plausible.

Erlich extensively discussed this aniconic tendency in the local Idumean art, characterized by abstraction and minimization of anthropomorphic elements.[23]

B2.8 (Fig. 7)

B2.8a, a column or incense burner (or stand),[24] features a tall stem that extends from the floor to the ceiling (2.35 m high). The lower portion of the stem is plain, whereas the higher portion is adorned with a coiled or climbing serpent motif.[25]

The serpent is crowned by a row of downturned petals that encircle the stem. The upper half of the stem is unadorned and culminates in a capital embellished with a row of triangles(?). Stands and vessels decorated with rows of downturned leaves or petals have been discovered at various sites in the Levant and date back to the 10th to 6th centuries BCE.[26]

B2.8b, on the other hand, another column or incense burner, is considerably thicker and also carved in relief. Its lower section is shaped like an Egyptian papyrus-bundle column and is topped by a necking in the form of a horizontal ring. This necking is further surmounted by a fluted section, potentially featuring 'windows.' Above this section is another necking, and the subsequent section is adorned with 'windows' reminiscent of those commonly found in incense burners (e.g., burners from the Edomite temple at 'En Ḥaṣeva).[27] Finally, this section is crowned by a double necking and a crudely carved square capital.

The Inscribed Frames

B.2.3 (Figs. 11a, 11b, 11c)

A nearly rectangular frame measuring 47 x 47 x 52 x 45 cm is divided by two parallel vertical lines and two horizontal lines into four registers. The frame and parallel lines are features common in seals and seal stamps of this period.[28]

Each register bears inscribed letters in the Aramaic lapidary script. An oblique natural fissure in the chalky bedrock starts high above the frame and intersects both left-hand registers diagonally. The fissure in the upper left-hand register was used as the right-hand border of the letter. When identifying the letter in the lower left-hand register, the existence of the oblique fissure should be taken into account, and it should be disregarded as an additional letter or part of plural letters. The following options are proposed for reading the letters in the rectangular frame:

Option A: Reading the engraved letters while considering the enlarged fissure an integral part of the letter design:

Zayin, peh

Aleph, lamed, vav

פ ז

א ל ו

Option B: Reading the letters while disregarding the presence of the fissure:

Zayin, peh

Aleph, lamed

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[22]   Beck 1995.
[23]   Erlich 2009, 22-23.
[24]   Both B2.8a and B2.8b can be interpreted as *thymiateria*; their parallels have been extensively discussed in Morstadt 2008.
[25]   In various ancient cultures, serpent symbolism is imbued with a dualistic nature, representing a multitude of opposites such as life vs. death, nature vs. culture, and creation vs. destruction (see literature cited in Rodríguez Pérez 2021). The serpent is also associated with the deity Asherah (Edrey 2019, 142-143 and lit. cit. there).
[26]   Similar decorative elements can be observed on the stone balustrade from Ramat Rahel, a basalt column from Tel Dan, and pottery incense stands from the temples at 'Arad, Qadesh Barnea, 'En Ḥaṣeva, and Tel 'Amal, as well as the scepter head from Tel Moza and a bronze incense stand from a tomb in Shechem (Stern 2001, 510-511). Additionally, a comparable stand is seen in the Assyrian relief illustrating the conquest of Lachish, where a soldier is depicted carrying an incense stand as a spoil of war (see discussion and literature cited in Greenhut 2009, 149; Cohen and Yisrael 1995; Ben-Arieh 2011; Morstadt 2008).
[27]   See Cohen and Yisrael 1995, 102-114.
[28]   Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011.

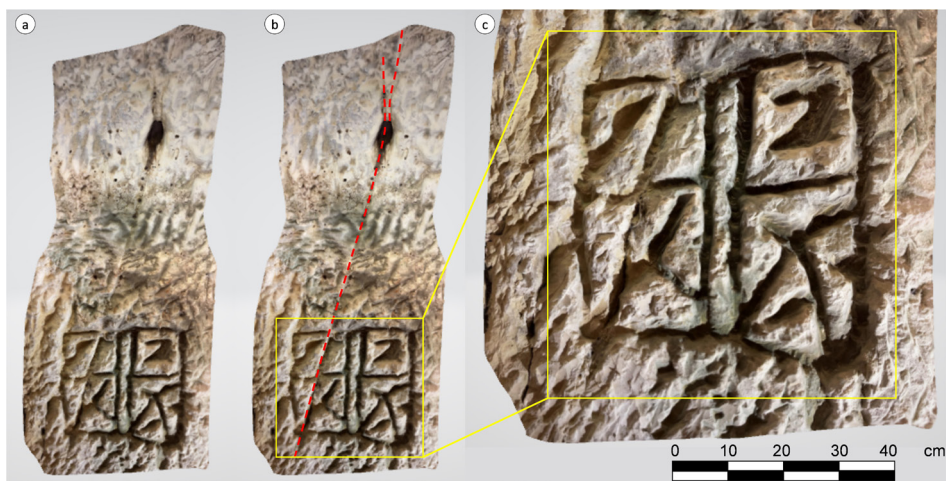*Figure 11a: B2.3 (B. Zissu).*

Figure 11b: Composite image of B2.3 showing fissure (B. Zissu and N. Shtober-Zisu).
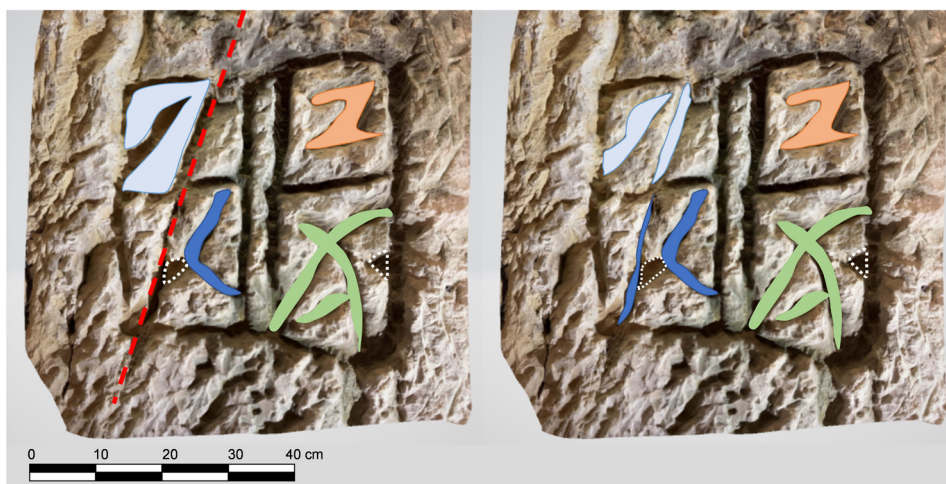

Figure 11c: Composite image of B2.3 showing possible readings (B. Zissu and N. Shtober-Zisu).

פ ז
ל א

Option C: Reading the letters while considering the presence of the fissure in the upper left corner as part of a letter. The authors are inclined towards this reading, which also holds significant meaning: ל א זי - "That (belongs to the) El (deity)":

Zayin, yod
Aleph, lamed
י ז
ל א

We considered taking into account that the first letter in the lower register on the right is not an *aleph* (in mirror writing) but a distorted *mem* (מ), but finally decided against this possibility.

B2.5 (Figs. 12a, 12b)

B2.5, a crudely carved oval frame, is adorned with what seems to be a monogram consisting of three Aramaic letters. The carving is crude and imprecise and was apparently done by an unskilled craftsman, unlike the monogram B2.6 (below).

When reading the letters, we had difficulty deciding whether to consider the recessed (sunken) surfaces or the protruding ones. The following letters are obtained from right to left:

Aleph (recessed)
Dalet or *resh* or *khaf (*protruding surface)
Peh or *nun* (recessed surfaces)

Therefore, we suggest six options:

אדפ   אדנ
ארפ   ארנ
אכפ   אכנ

However, when attempting to propose a tempting reading—such as אד(ו)ן (*adon*, meaning "lord,"/"master" and also the name of the deity "Adon(is)") or various personal names—we must be cautious and consider that there are additional options. It is essential to take into account the strange possibility that the craftsman may have arranged the letters from left to right, which could lead to alternative interpretations.

We should not discount another possibility, namely, that the last letter on the left is not the sunken form, but rather the protruding form located to its left. In this case, this letter may be a somewhat rotated and distorted 'ain. Perhaps the desire to present the letters within a circular frame and to give the frame an aesthetic shape reminiscent of an emblem, seal, or monogram dictated the design of the last letter on the left, which was therefore rotated and slightly reduced in relation to the two letters to its right.[29]

(A monogram is a design or symbol formed by combining two or more letters, typically initials, into a single artistic entity. It is often used as a personal or institutional signature. Monograms can be found in various forms, such as overlapping, interwoven, or stylized letter combinations.)

B2.6 (Figs. 13a, 13b)

B2.6 is a circular frame bearing a carefully carved monogram composed of Aramaic letters. There are four or five letters, all protruding, reading as follows from right to left:

'Ain, lamed; *shin* lying on its side; or *aleph*
Dalet or *resh* or *khaf*
Peh or *nun* (some forms of *dalet* or *resh* are also possible)
Lamed (or a frame on the left edge)

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[29]   Round and oval seals are common (Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011); for a round Edomite bronze seal from Qitmit, see Beit-Arieh 1996.

Figure 12a: B2.5 (B. Zissu).
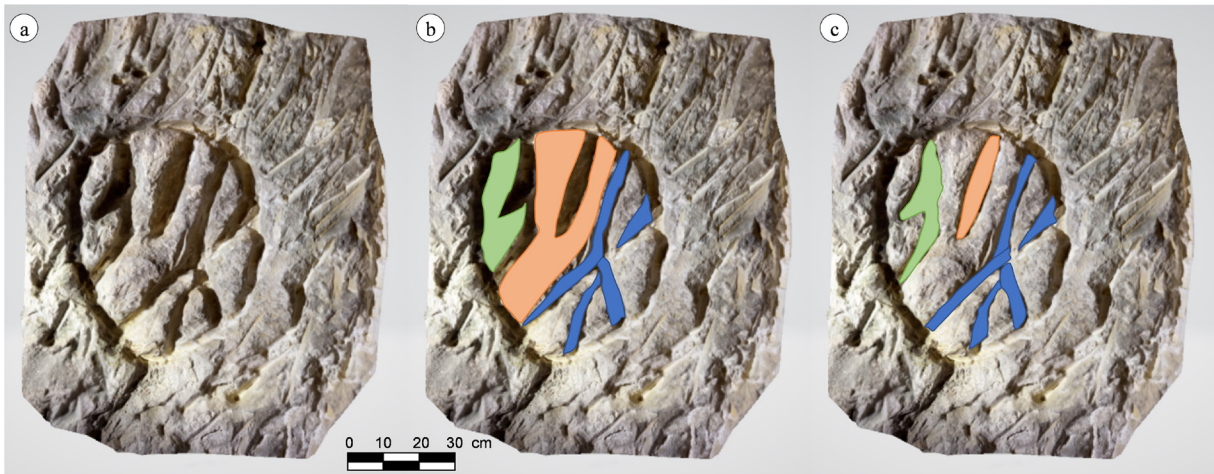
Figure 12b: Composite image of B2.5 showing possible readings (B. Zissu and N. Shtober-Zisu).

Various arrangements of these letters create a multitude of combinations. The following table shows 36 possible combinations:

עלכן	עלרן	עלדן	עלכפ	עלרפ	עלדפ	עלכנל	עלרנל	עלדנל	עלכפל	עלרפל	עלדפל
שכן	שרן	שדן	שכפ	שרפ	שדפ	שכנל	שרנל	שדנל	שכפל	שרפל	שדפל
אכן	ארן	אדן	אכפ	ארפ	אדפ	אכנל	ארנל	אדנל	אכפל	ארפל	אדפל

For stylistic reasons, including the carver's desire to present the letters within a circular frame in an aesthetic shape reminiscent of a seal or monogram, the first letters on the right and left were rotated and reduced in relation to the two letters in the center of the frame.
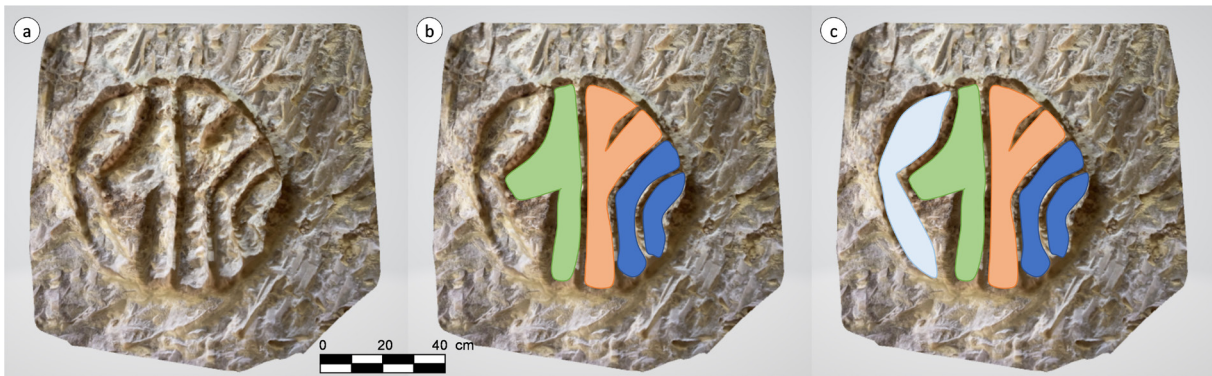
Figure 13a: B2.6 (B. Zissu).

Figure 13b: Composite image of B2.6 showing possible readings (B. Zissu and N. Shtober-Zisu).

The inscription was produced by precise carving and removing parts from the surface in order to obtain stylized, protruding letters. In other words, while reading, we focused on the raised forms and not on the recesses surrounding them.

In summary: It is tempting to suggest a variety of readings, to recognize various names, and, of course, to identify the word *El* (god/deity)[30] or perhaps the Aramaic words 'zi el' - זי אל – and read 'That (belongs to the) El (deity)' in B2.3 or *ad(o)n* (Lord/deity) in B2.5 and B2.6 and propose it as an explicit reference to the Canaanite/Phoenician divinity, known only by the Greek form Adonis.[31] However, we should keep in mind that we are dealing with

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[30]   The word '*El*' אל means 'god' or 'deity.' This term can function both as a general, generic term for divine beings and as the name of the chief deity in the Canaanite/Phoenician pantheon. *El* was often associated with wisdom, guidance, and authority, seen as the father of the gods and creator of the universe. *El*'s prominence varied throughout different periods and regions (Moscati 1973, 57; Edrey 2019, 141-142; Clifford, 1990).

[31]   Our understanding of the Canaanite/Phoenician deity Adonis of the pre-classical era is extremely limited. Even his Semitic name, which we only know in its Greek form with a clear Semitic origin as 'adon,'(lord/master) remains elusive to us (Edrey 2019, 146; Moscati 1973, 58; Clifford 1990, 57). Therefore, our proposed reading 'Adon' אד(ו)ן is alluring, as it not only

isolated letters enclosed in frames. Due to the nature of the engraving, the quality of the chalky bedrock, and the identical form of some letters in the Aramaic lapidary script, the authors refrain from proposing further readings and interpretations for the various combinations at this stage of the research.

Epigraphy and Paleography: The Aramaic Lapidary Script

The Aramaic lapidary script was commonly employed for official purposes during the Persian and Early Hellenistic periods. Notably, this script was utilized across a vast geographic region, spanning from Asia Minor in the north to Egypt in the south and Afghanistan in the east.

In his study of the Aramaic script, Joseph Naveh distinguished between two types of Aramaic script used during the Persian period: lapidary and cursive. Naveh discussed six short lapidary inscriptions (dated by him to the 5th-4th centuries BCE), six dated inscriptions, and 13 longer but undated ones.[32] According to Naveh, this script preserved the older "independent lapidary form" of *aleph*, *zayin*, and *yod*.[33]

A significant contribution was made through the publication of the epigraphic assemblage found in the sacred Samaritan precinct on Mount Gerizim. This assemblage consisted of various inscriptions in the Aramaic lapidary script, further enriching our understanding of the site's historical significance.[34] Although these inscriptions were generally dated to the Hellenistic period (3rd-2nd centuries BCE), their chronology could not be determined precisely. In a later publication Magen noted that they might date from the Hellenistic period, but they might even be from the earliest period (5th and 4th centuries BCE).[35]

Jan Dušek challenged the typology and chronology of the scripts found at Mount Gerizim. He proposed changing the term "lapidary" to "monumental" script and the term "proto-Jewish" to "cursive." Dušek conducted a detailed study of this corpus, considered the historical background, and argued that the monumental Aramaic script found at Mount Gerizim should be dated to the first half of the 2nd century BCE.[36]

Subsequent research was undertaken by André Lemaire, who examined the assemblage of Aramaic inscriptions from the post-Iron Age era.[37] Lemaire presented tables with the script used in these inscriptions and provided detailed descriptions of each letter and its development. He suggested distinguishing between two periods: the Neo-Babylonian (c. 587-539 BCE) and the Persian and Hellenistic (c. 539-305 BCE).

In the most recent contribution to this topic, Esti Eshel directed her attention to specific inscriptions that align with Naveh's concept of "new forms alongside older forms." Embracing this definition, Eshel demonstrated that the proposed dating by scholars for significant Aramaic lapidary inscriptions encompasses a considerable span of time. Furthermore, the Aramaic lapidary script incorporates archaizing forms of the letters *aleph*, *zayin*, and *yod*.[38]

Numerous additional challenges confront scholars dealing with the Aramaic lapidary script. The script includes identical forms of certain letters and diverse engraving styles ranging from careless to careful and square to round. Moreover, the influence of other writing systems on the craftsman, coupled with occasional unfamiliarity with Aramaic, led to the appearance of bizarre shapes in the inscriptions.[39]

Certain letters in our inscription, such as *dalet, resh,* and *khaf*(?), suffer from crude carving, rendering them less valuable for paleographic analysis. We will discuss the paleography of three letters: *aleph, zayin*, and *lamed*.

Aleph: This letter is formed by two oblique bars crossing each other to form an X, with a shorter bar descending obliquely inwards from the lower-right bar. This letter was carved in mirror writing. Mirror writing, where the characters are reversed as if seen in a mirror, was particularly prevalent in the engraving of seals for obvious technical reasons. The choice of mirror writing might be the result of an inexperienced scribe or another reason, as explained by Eshel et al. in the recent discussion of a potsherd inscribed in Aramaic lapidary script using mirror

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provides a rare glimpse of the original Semitic name of the deity, known in Greek sources as Adonis, but also potentially identifies one of the deities venerated in this specific location.

[32] Naveh 1976, 51-58.
[33] Naveh 1976, 53.
[34] Magen, Misgav and Tsfania 2004, 36-41 and fig. 17.
[35] Magen 2008, 227.
[36] Dušek 2012, 37 and 60.
[37] Lemaire 2014; 2015.
[38] Eshel 2023.
[39] Dušek 2013; Lemaire 2014, 241-244.

writing.[40] Parallels for this *aleph* in the Aramaic lapidary script can be found, for example, in the inscription from Mt. Gerizim;[41] the bilingual inscription from Sardis,[42] and the inscription from Bahadrili.[43]

Zayin: Two horizontal strokes, one upper and one lower, connected by an oblique downstroke, form the shape of a Z. Parallels for this *zayin* have been found at Taima (inscr. I, II)[44] and Mt. Gerizim.[45]

Lamed: This letter is formed by two oblique lines connected by a slightly rounded elbow, like a slanted L, opening to the right.[46]

Based on the available paleographical data, we tentatively suggest dating the letters to the 5th or 4th century BCE.

Cavities C1, C2, C3 (Figs. 3a, 14-19)

The upper section of the eastern wall in Cavity A was constructed in response to the unstable *nari* bedrock. Within this wall, on the eastern side, there is an opening built of field stones (in a later period) that offers access to a series of three interconnected cavities, labeled C1, C2, and C3. These cavities were hewn into the bedrock on three distinct levels and measure approximately 9.5 m long, 6.2 m wide, and 4 m high.

Cavity C1 has an oval shape, with a maximum length of 4.7 m along its east-west axis and a height of approximately 2.1 m. A niche was carved into its southern wall. On a ledge (C1.2) near the southern side of C1, there is a raised step. A circular opening in the floor of this step, measuring around 0.75 m in diameter, leads to a bottle-shaped cavity (C2). This cavity has a maximum diameter of 1.8 m and a depth of 1.65 m.

Figure 14: C1, looking northwest towards built entrance (B. Zissu).

[40]   Eshel et al. 2022.
[41]   Magen, Misgav and Tsfania 2004, 37, Fig. 17, nos. VII, VIII; Dušek 2012, 26, 31, Fig. 5.
[42]   Torrey 1918, 186, fig. 1; Woudhuizen 2005.
[43]   Dupont-Sommer 1961, 20.
[44]   Lemaire 2014, 242, Fig. 2.
[45]   Magen, Misgav and Tsfania 2004, 37; Fig. 17.
[46]   For similar letters, see various examples in Lemaire 2014, 242-243, Figs. 3, 4, and an example from Mt. Gerizim in Magen, Misgav and Tsfania 2004, 37, fig. 17, V, VIII.

Figure 15: C1, looking south towards C2, ledge C1.2, and the entrance to C3 (B. Zissu).

Figure 16: Later wall built of stones and mud in C3, looking west (B. Zissu).

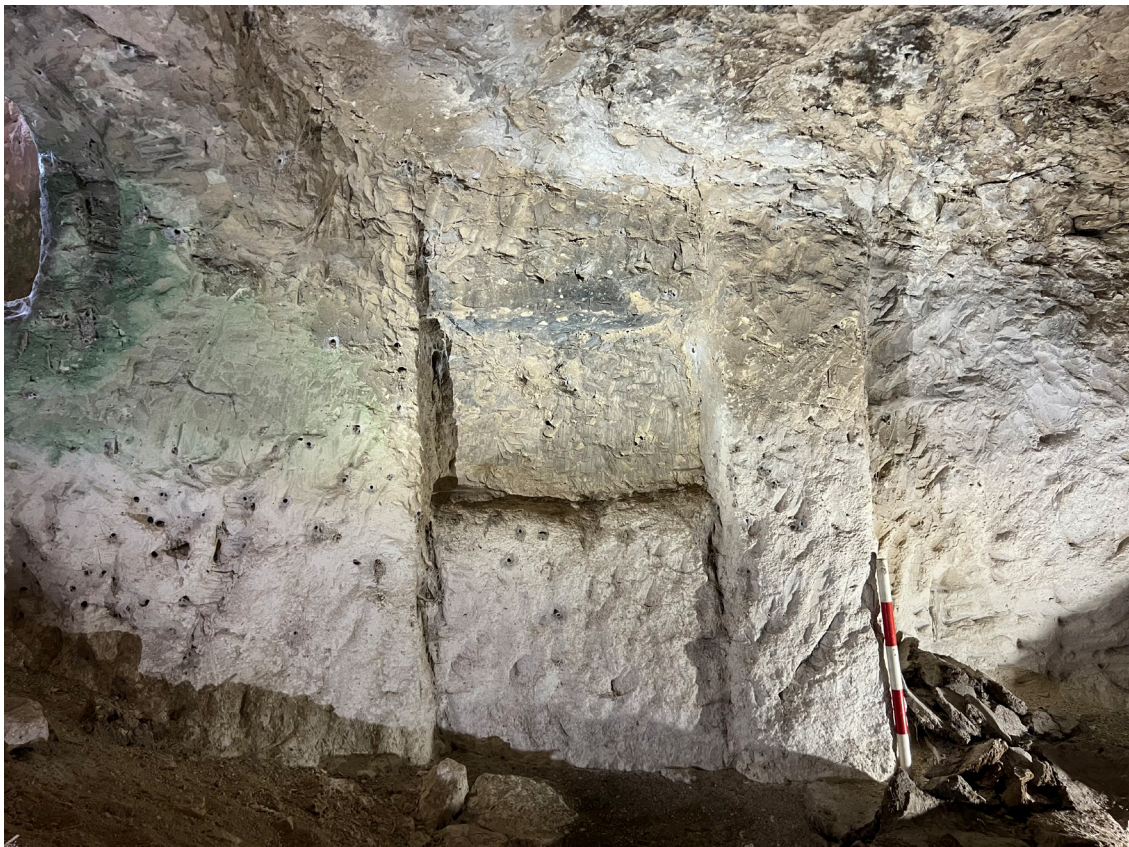*Figure 17: C3, looking west, with niches C3.2 and C3.3 and entrance to C3 (B. Zissu).*

Figure 18: Niche C3.3, looking west (B. Zissu).

Figure 19: View from C3, looking northeast towards C3.2 (B. Zissu).

An elongated opening in the eastern side of C1 descends into C3. Technically, C3 is later than C1. The layout of C3 is oval, with a maximum length of 5.8 m (along the north-south axis), a width of 4.6 m, and a maximum height of 2.65 m. Three niches were carved in the walls of C3. Niche C3.1 was carved beside the passage into C3 and may be a vestige of a lower level of C1. Niche C3.2 is trough-shaped, and niche C3.3 was carved nicely with polished edges. The inner space of C3 is divided into one half and two quarters by two partition walls built of stones and mud and coated with mud plaster. These walls, as well as the built opening and some other features, belong to the latest phase, apparently in the Ottoman period.

Determining the original purpose and date of cavities C1, C2, and C3 presents a challenge, as the last phase of use made changes and cleared out all artifacts. The overall layout and some architectural details suggest the possibility that they were carved and served as a burial complex during the Middle Bronze Age II.[47] Similar caves with characteristics from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age are known in this region.[48] However, C2 stands out for its features resembling a "bottle-shaped" silo, a common type of storage cavity, also known as a "Gibe'on pit," that was carved and used from the Iron Age to the Roman period, with some later examples as well.[49] In a burial context, such a cavity might have been used as a collecting pit for bones, a feature known from Iron Age II tombs.

Chronology

It seems that the subterranean system evolved in several chronological stages. We can suggest the following chronological scheme:

Phase 1: A shaft carved in the eastern part of Cavity A gave access to Complex C. During this phase, possibly dated to the Middle Bronze Age II, Cavity C1 served as a rock-cut tomb. It was possibly reused for burial during

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[47]   For parallels, see e.g.: Tomb 218 at Lachish, Tufnell 1953, 203-207; Various tombs in western Galilee, Getzov and Nagar 2002; Various tombs at Gibeon, Pritchard 1963, for plans see Figs. 2-5.

[48]   Klein and Shai 2016.

[49]   Raviv 2011.

the Late Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and perhaps also the Persian period. Technically, C1 was carved first, followed by C2 and C3. C2 was used for storage or bone collection in one of the later burial phases.

Phase II: Shaft A was enlarged and a sunken oval courtyard was created. Hewing into deeper layers provided access to better-quality chalk. A monumental opening gave access to Antechamber B1 and Hall B2, which may have functioned as a funerary shrine, serving the owners of rock-cut burial complex C1-C2-C3. The plan and decorations of B1 and B2 may be dated to as early as Iron Age II. The paleography of the inscriptions, on the other hand, takes us to the Persian period, perhaps to the 5th-4th centuries BCE.

Phase III: During the Ottoman period, the entire underground complex was cleared out and repurposed and underwent some architectural changes. It was used by the owner of the surrounding orchard for dwelling and storage.

Subterranean Complex B1-B2 (hereafter SC B1-B2), a central topic of our discussion, raises several intriguing questions: (1) What was its purpose? (2) When was it hewn and decorated? (3) What is the meaning of the decorations on its walls, and what is their background? (4) Do the decorations, geographical location, and layout hint at the identity of Hall B' owners?

We will attempt to answer these questions in the following pages.

Discussion

Idumea: The Historical and Geographical Framework

The Edomites, a Semitic people, resided in the region of Biblical Edom southeast of the Dead Sea during the 1st millennium BCE. Following the fall of Jerusalem and Judah in 586 BCE, they seized the opportunity presented by the power vacuum to expand their territory, occupying part of southern Judah. Consequently, during the Persian period, they settled in this region, which became known as Idumea. The name "Idumeans" originates from the Greek *Idumaios*, a term used in ancient Greek sources to refer to these people after their migration into southern Judah.[50]

The geographical extent of Idumea varied in different historical periods. During the Persian and Hellenistic eras, Idumea was an administrative unit in southern Judah. The term did not refer to the area of Biblical Edom but rather encompassed the Judean Hills and Foothills. The exact borders of this administrative unit are still unclear, but in general, it encompassed the Elah Valley to the north, extended south towards Keilah and then southeast of Beth-Zur, and continued eastward, traversing the Judean Desert south of En Gedi, along the shores of the Dead Sea. To the east, the border probably followed the Rift Valley south of En Gedi. On the western side, the border may have been marked by the locations of Tel Zafit, Tel Erani, Tel el-Hesi and Tel Jemmeh. The southern frontier of Idumea extended as far as the Beersheba valley.[51]

The site under discussion is undeniably situated within this region. We propose that the Arabic name "ed-Dawaimeh" or "ed-Dawayima" might preserve the name of a significant location in Idumea known by this name in antiquity. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that ancient sources do not specifically mention a city by the name of Idumea. Instead, they refer to two major Idumean cities: Maresha and Adora.[52]

The extant written sources and archaeological data confirm that under Ptolemaic rule, an administrative province called Idumea existed in southern Judea, and the Idumeans were the dominant ethnic group.[53] The earliest literary evidence for the existence of this administrative unit is found in Diodorus Siculus, who describes the siege of the Nabateans by the army of Antigonus I in 312 BCE. Idumea is also mentioned in the Zenon Papyri (nos. 59006 and 59015, dated to 258-259 BCE).[54] During the Hellenistic period this administrative unit had economic and political significance until it was conquered by John Hyrcanus at the end of the 2nd century BCE.[55]

Our knowledge of the Idumean religion during the Persian and Early Hellenistic periods is limited due to the scarcity of direct sources specifically focused on the religious beliefs and practices of the Idumeans. However,

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[50]   Lemaire 2006, 418-419; Levin 2015; Hensel 2022; Tal 2019, 403-40.
[51]   Lemaire 1990; Kloner and Stern 2007.
[52]   Kasher 1988, 45-46.
[53]   Levin 2022; The published Idumean ostraca, totaling approximately 1,100, include names that offer valuable insights into the region's population. If we consider names with identifiable theophorics as potential references for ethnicity, it becomes evident that the area was inhabited by a diverse and mixed population. The distribution of names indicates a roughly equal presence of Edomite and Arab names, each accounting for about 30 percent. Additionally, Western Semitics represent approximately 25 percent, while Judahites make up around 10 percent, and Phoenician names account for roughly 5 percent of the recorded names. See also: Tal 2016.
[54]   Kasher 1988, 20-23.
[55]   Kasher 1988; Kloner and Stern 2007; Levin 2022.

some information can be inferred from references in historical sources, archaeological finds, and comparisons with neighboring cultures.[56] The limited evidence available suggests that their religious beliefs and practices would have been influenced by a combination of ancient Semitic traditions, local Canaanite religious customs, and potentially some aspects of Greek culture during the Hellenistic period.

Next we will delve into our proposition that the part of the site under consideration, referred to as SC B1-B2, was carved out as a private shrine—possibly a funerary shrine adjacent to a rock-cut burial complex. We believe it was used by an Idumean landowner during the Persian and Hellenistic periods. As a result, SC B1-B2 is exceptionally significant, as it introduces, for the first time, what appears to be a relatively well-preserved Idumean shrine.

The Identification of SC B1-B2 as an Underground (Funerary?) Shrine

First let's examine the archaeological criteria for identifying religious structures.

Religious buildings are comprehensive complexes characterized by architectural designs and archaeological assemblages that reflect religious activities. The location of a structure within the site and its contextual relationship, the dimensions of the building, its architectural design, internal spatial arrangement, construction methods, architectural ornamentation, and, notably, religious symbols, as well as the assemblage of religious objects found in connection with them, collectively contribute to defining a structure as a religious building.[57]

The plan: As mentioned earlier, SC B1-B2 is characterized by an antechamber that leads through a wide entrance, flanked by two decorated columns, into a hall. Within this hall, a niche is prominently positioned in the wall opposite the entrance.

In our view, the basic plan of SC B1-B2 draws its architectural inspiration from traditional religious structures dating back to the second millennium BCE in Canaan and northern Syria. Amihai Mazar has extensively analyzed the characteristics of Levantine temple architecture during the Middle Bronze Age IIB-C.[58] Notably, he highlighted the common features found in several monumental rectangular temples, which typically consisted of a main hall housing a niche that served as the revered 'Holy of Holies'; this niche was located opposite the entrance. In certain instances, these temples included an antechamber in front of the main hall. Additionally, some temples had two projections (referred to as *antae*) either beside or in front of a spacious entrance hall. These distinctive elements reflect the prevailing architectural trends of the era and provide insights into religious practices and cultural expressions.[59]

Mazar evaluated the architectural significance of these temple prototypes as follows: 'These monumental, symmetrical temples may be regarded as the essential temple type of West Semitic civilization, where the main gods of the local pantheon—such as Hadad, Ishtar, Shamash, Dagan, and Reshef—were worshiped. It is no wonder that this type of temple continued to be in use also during the Late Bronze Age, and was eventually the major source of the design of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.'[60]

The decorations: As demonstrated above, the ornamental scheme of SC B1-B2 originates in a very wide repertoire of Canaanite, Phoenician, Nabatean, Edomite, and Idumean influences. The diverse blend and influences characterize the Levant during the Persian period.[61]

As we have shown, the shrine under discussion adheres to ancient Levantine architectural traditions in both its plan and decorations. Comparing the layout of the hall to plans of religious structures from the Levant during the Bronze and Iron Ages reveals that the hall abided by an architectural tradition that originated in the Middle Bronze Age and continued into the Iron Age. It is reasonable to assume that this tradition also continued during the Persian and Early Hellenistic periods, but unfortunately, we do not have enough examples to fully support this assumption.[62]

As mentioned earlier, the site in question is located in Idumea, where the Idumeans were the predominant ethnic group during the Persian and Hellenistic periods. However, there were also significant populations of Arabs, Phoenicians, Judahites, Nabateans and other ethnic groups. The Idumeans had a predominantly aniconic representation of deities. This means that their depictions of gods and goddesses did not incorporate realistic or detailed features. Instead, they were schematic figures that lacked recognizable details. The aniconic decorations

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[56]   Lemaire 2001.
[57]   E.g., Renfrew 1985, 11-26; Insoll 2005.
[58]   Mazar 1992a, 161-168.
[59]   Greener 2019.
[60]   Mazar 1992b, 212.
[61]   Stern 2001.
[62]   See the rectangular plan of the early Hellenistic phase at Horbat Amuda and the parallels discussed in that context; Haber et al. 2022.

on the walls of the hall apparently drew inspiration from a common Canaanite-Phoenician-Nabatean-Edomite-Idumean source.

The most significant case study for understanding the identity and material culture of the Idumeans is Maresha.[63] Aniconic representations can be seen in various archaeological finds at Maresha. The most notable examples are the monumental cruciform carvings on the walls of underground halls in Subterranean Complexes 51 and 89 (see above). These carvings, dating back to the third or even second century BCE, predate the Nabatean aniconic art. Furthermore, small statuettes made of local chalk that depict schematic human figures without intricate details have been discovered at Maresha. It is possible that these figurines, along with the aforementioned reliefs, represent the Idumean deity Qos.[64]

In addition to the aniconic representations, Maresha has yielded hundreds of terracotta figurines from both the Persian and the Hellenistic periods. Some of these figurines depict gods and goddesses of Greek origin, indicating the process of Hellenization. Significantly, however, these figurines also reflect local popular beliefs and practices. Among these figurines, a group known as "pillar figurines" stands out. These exhibit a pillar-shaped body, sometimes with one or two human faces, and lack detailed features. These figurines are believed to have served a religious or votive purpose in the context of local beliefs and rituals. These figurines, resembling the schematic herms, stelae, and *maṣṣeboth* discussed above, may also have connections to the Idumean aniconic tradition. However, it is essential to consider the shared Canaanite/Phoenician origins that find expression in these decorations.[65]

Erlich discussed this characteristic trend in the local art of Idumea: abstraction and the minimization of the anthropomorphic element. She stressed that this trend is also noticeable among the Nabateans, as evidenced by their depictions of baetyls, stelae and aniconic deities.[66] Significantly, the Nabateans demonstrated a clear preference for minimizing the anthropomorphic elements in their representations of gods.[67] Considering the close proximity and historical association between the Nabateans and Idumeans,[68] it is quite reasonable to anticipate such similarities between their religious practices and iconography.

In conclusion, the decorations discussed on the walls of SC B1-B2 align with the distinct local Idumean trait of not portraying gods in human form, and with the shared artistic expression of the region, which was not marked by anthropocentric themes.

Another important piece of archaeological evidence shedding light on the Idumean cult is the presence of cuboid altars. Among these, our cuboid incense burner, B2.1e, holds remarkable significance. It transcends mere decoration, serving as a functional and essential element of "sacred furniture," prominently positioned within the cultic setting. As mentioned earlier, these altars, designed for burning incense, have been unearthed in Idumean cultic assemblages across private and public contexts, dating back to the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

Conclusions

To sum up, this article presents documentation of a previously unidentified subterranean complex located near Amatsya. The study revolves primarily around an examination of the architecture, decorations, and inscriptions in Aramaic lapidary script discovered on the walls of an underground hall referred to as SC B1-B2. The layout of the hall bears resemblance to sacred architecture prevalent in the region since the Middle Bronze Age, while its decorative elements are linked to earlier artistic traditions dating back to the Iron Age, as well as the aniconic characteristics found in Idumean, Canaanite, Phoenician and Nabatean art of the Persian and Hellenistic periods. According to paleographic analysis, the Aramaic lapidary inscriptions, which possibly mention two deities, *El* and *Adon*, are tentatively dated to the 5th-4th centuries BCE and might have been associated with the original period of use.

Alternatively, however, they might represent a later addition to an already existing underground chamber.

Our main thesis is that this hall functioned as a private shrine, possibly a funerary shrine adjacent to a rock-cut burial complex. We propose that both the shrine and the adjacent tomb were utilized by an Idumean landowner, showcasing influences from Phoenician / Canaanite iconographic traditions.

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[63] The excavations conducted at Hellenistic Maresha, under the direction of Frederic J. Bliss and Robert A.S. Macalister (1902), Amos Kloner (2003), and Ian Stern (2022), have revealed a diverse material culture that reflects a combination of generic Levantine traits, including pig avoidance, secondary burials, circumcision, and aniconic art. Alongside these characteristics, distinct Judean influences are evident, represented by the presence of ritual bathing facilities and punctured vessels, indicating a probable adherence to purity laws akin to those documented in neighboring Judea (Stern 2022).

[64] Kloner 2003; Erlich and Kloner 2008; Erlich 2009; Kloner and Zissu 2013.

[65] Erlich and Kloner 2008, 43-46.

[66] Erlich 2009, 22-23.

[67] Patrich 1990.

[68] Kasher 1988, 10.

Consequently, SC B1-B2 assumes significant importance, as it offers novel insights into the field of study by presenting, for the first time, a relatively well-preserved underground Idumean shrine from the Persian and Hellenistic periods. These finds contribute to a deeper understanding of the religious and cultural practices of the Idumeans during that specific era.

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