



**Archaeology and Text: A Journal for
the Integration of Material Culture
with Written Documents in the Ancient
Mediterranean and Near East**

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*Archaeology and Text: A Journal for the Integration of Material Culture
with Written Documents in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East*

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Table of Contents

Divination Texts of Maresha – Archeology and Texts	
Esther Eshel, Bar Ilan University, Ian Stern, Archaeological Seminars Institute	7
Toward an “Archaeology of Halakhah”: Prospects and Pitfalls of Reading Early Jewish Ritual Law into the Ancient Material Record	
Yonatan Adler, Ariel University	27
Purity Observance among Diaspora Jews in the Roman World	
Jodi Magness, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	39
Visual Models in Archaeology and Harmonization of Archaeological and Literary Data	
Catalin Pavel, Kennesaw State University	67
Reading Between the Lines: Jewish Mortuary Practices in Text and Archaeology	
Karen B. Stern, City University of New York, Brooklyn College	95
Complex Purity: Between Continuity and Diversity in Ancient Judaism	
Yair Furstenberg, Ben Gurion University of the Negev	115

Editorial Statement

The study of the human past has conventionally been divided between two distinct academic disciplines depending upon the kind of evidence under investigation: “history”, with its focus on written records, and “archaeology”, which analyzes the remains of material culture. This new annual publication, *Archaeology and Text: A Journal for the Integration of Material Culture with Written Documents in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East*, aims to bridge this disciplinary divide by providing an international forum for scholarly discussions which integrate the studies of material culture with written documents. Interdisciplinary by nature, the journal offers a platform for professional historians and archaeologists alike to critically investigate points of confluence and divergence between the textual and the artifactual.

We seek contributions from scholars working in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Contributions with a theoretical or methodological focus on the interface between archaeology and text are especially encouraged. By publishing all of its articles online, the *Archaeology and Text* seeks to disseminate its published papers immediately after peer-review and editorial processes have been completed, providing timely publication and convenient access.

In providing a forum, we will publish reviews of recent publications which deal with the issue of archaeology and text. When appropriate, each volume will include a short overview of recent conferences which have treated this topic as well.

Recent Conferences focused on the Issue of Archaeology and Texts

Archaeology and Text: Toward Establishing a Meaningful Dialogue between Written Sources and Material Finds

Conference held on Sunday May 10 - Monday May 11, 2015. Sponsored by Ariel University and the Israel Ministry of Science, Technology, and Space. Conference was organized into several small sessions. Papers ranged from those dealing with the issue of archaeology and texts in the Near East to those focusing on this issue in Mediterranean Studies. Topics ranged from the application of textual material to singular sites – Text and Archaeology: the Case of Tel Rehov in the 10-9th Centuries BCE, A. Mazar – to more theoretical contributions – Purity and Purification in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Mikva'ot of Qumran: the Convergence of Archaeology and Text, L. Schiffman.

Textual Archaeology of Ancient Near East: Are We Doing it Wrong?

Conference held on Thursday December 10 – Sunday December 13, 2015. Sponsored by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge University. Conference was subdivided into various sessions with invited responses. Topics focused on issues pertaining to the Near East with a few inclusions of cases dealing with the Bronze Age Aegean. Papers ranged from those treating the issues of the uses of archaeology and texts in broad areas in the Near East, such as Assyriology – Of Haematite and Apricots: Matching up the Mesopotamian World, N. Postgate – to contributions touching upon landscape – Satellite Remote Sensing, Archaeological Survey, and Historical Geography in Northern Mesopotamia, J. Casana – the analysis of texts in ancient Mayan studies – Histories of Decline and Fall: Archaeology, Epigraphy, and the Maya Collapse, N. Carter.

The Conference is being published by the McDonald Institute, with its organizer, Y. Heffron as the editor.

Reading Between the Lines: Jewish Mortuary Practices in Text and Archaeology

Karen B. Stern, City University of New York, Brooklyn
College

Abstract:

Discussions of corpse contact impurity in biblical, as well as Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic texts, have shaped scholarly assumptions that ancient Jews generally avoided spaces associated with the dead. While rabbinic writings repeatedly consider suitable responses to death, including procedures for corpse treatment, funerals, and mourning, few ancient texts discuss activities Jews once conducted at graveside to commemorate the dead through time. Even if rabbinic texts do not explicitly document the practice, however, analyses of neglected archaeological data from Levantine and European burial caves, including textual and pictorial graffiti, reveal that some ancient Jews did spend time close to the dead by performing multiple activities of mortuary commemoration around tombs. Hundreds of examples of graffiti discovered in Roman Palestine and in the catacombs of Rome, Malta, and North Africa, this paper suggests, offer rare and tangible evidence, in situ, for how some Jews and their neighbors systematically and diachronically visited and elaborated the interiors of cemeteries after the completion of activities surrounding burial and interment. While excavators and historians commonly use rabbinic texts as frameworks to interpret the contemporaneous archaeological record, this paper thus advocates an opposite approach – the independent and contextual evaluation of artifacts – to facilitate a rereading of ancient rabbinic writings concerning ancient Jewish mortuary practices.

Introduction

Meager literary and archaeological evidence attests to ancient Jewish commemorative practices, defined here as activities associated with visiting, maintaining, and adorning graves and cemeteries through time. While several rabbinic texts delineate proper methods of constructing cemeteries, preparing and interring corpses, conducting

funerals and burials, and mourning for the deceased, few passages detail activities considered appropriate for diachronic remembrance of the dead.¹ The archaeological record largely remains equally opaque. Disruptions to the stratigraphy of most burial sites associated with ancient Jews curtail the meaningful examination of mortuary objects, including oil lamps, small jars, and food containers, whose evaluation otherwise might shed greater light on Jewish acts of commemoration for the dead, during funerals and in the years that followed them.

This paper suggests that, despite the apparent lacunae in ancient Jewish texts, attention to some of the most neglected features of the archaeological record, including ancient textual and pictorial graffiti, offer unexpected insights into Jewish acts of commemoration in late antiquity. Hundreds of examples of mortuary graffiti, discovered throughout the Mediterranean, offer rare, tangible, and geographically variable evidence, *in situ*, that Jews, just like many of their neighbors, commonly, systematically, and serially elaborated the entrances and interiors of ancient cemeteries during their visits. I argue that related examples of writing and decoration are best interpreted as vestiges of ancient Jewish mortuary and commemorative behaviors. Analysis of these types of activities, by extension, offers a distinct opportunity to rethink traditional readings of archaeological and literary evidence for activities Jews conducted, following the deaths of their loved ones, throughout the ancient Mediterranean.

To situate the following discussion of Jewish commemorative activities, I first offer a general summary of the state of the evidence for mortuary behaviors of ancient Jews, which, to this point, has largely relied on statements embedded in Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic texts and on interpretations of several features of the archaeological record.² Next, I review some examples of mortuary graffiti, which, when read in distinct ways, document varied behaviors of commemoration, which Jews and their neighbors once conducted diachronically and serially inside cemeteries of Roman and Byzantine Palestine, Malta, Italy, and North Africa. Finally, I assess how the examination of some of these textual and pictorial graffiti differently illuminates received readings of selected rabbinic texts that allude to mortuary behaviors of Jewish populations in late antiquity.

¹ On the architecture of burial caves and cemeteries see *b. B. Bat.* 101a; *m. 'Ohal.* 15:8; *y. B. Bat.* 15c; *b. Ketub.* 111a; on preparing and interring corpses, see text below; among other texts on mourning see discussion below and *b. Sanh.* 47a; *y. Qat.* 3:5; *y. Mo'ed Ber.* 3:1.

² Summary of mortuary practices associated with ancient Jews in Rebillard 2009:25-26; and Zlotnick 1966; see also modes of interpretation in Park 2000 and Davies 1999: 110-121.

Scholarship that underlies this overview is expansive and diverse and crosses several disciplinary boundaries in the study of texts, textuality, art, archaeology, and anthropology of art. Numerous and increasingly sophisticated studies consider the nuanced relationships between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic corpora, which record correspondingly varied prescriptions for mortuary practices.³ Likewise, ongoing and fervent debates, proffered by Shaye Cohen, Stuart Miller, Tessa Rajak, Hayim Lapin, Lee Levine, Ze'ev Weiss, and Leonard Rutgers, among several others, variously interpret mortuary archaeology and inscriptions from Roman Judea and Palestine, as well as from Italy, Malta, and North Africa, to consider the broader demographic and cultural contexts of associated burial communities.⁴ Scholarly disputes about the identities and characteristics of Palestinian and diaspora Jews in late antiquity, let alone concerning the differences between Jewish communities associated with the production of rabbinic texts (such as the Mishnah, Tosefta, and the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds), and those who lived outside of the orbit of rabbinic literary culture, remain significant and ongoing.⁵ The following analysis draws from such studies and presupposes their methodological complexities, which necessarily underlie any responsible and synthetic consideration of evidence for ancient Jewish populations of diverse chronological, geographic, and cultural contexts.⁶

Anthropological approaches to literacy, writing, and art similarly shape the following analyses of activities of textual and pictorial production, which the application of graffiti necessarily entails. Traditionally, when epigraphers and art historians analyze ancient graffiti (whether from Rome, Pompeii, or elsewhere), they have paid disproportionate attention to their lexical and pictographic contents.⁷ Recent advances in landscape theory and spatial mapping, which owe to the insights of scholars, such as Christopher Tilley and Alix Barbet, however, draw additional attention to the significance of the precise locations and spatiality of graffiti for their improved interpretation.⁸ In tandem,

³ Edited volumes, which consider the diverse interpretations of the Mishnah in Roman Palestine and Babylonia (in the Talmud Yerushalmi and Talmud Bavli, respectively) include the works of Schäfer (ed.) 2000, 2001, 2002, and Nikolsky and Ilan 2014.

⁴ Bibliography that relates to these regional studies remains vast and includes: Mazar 1973; Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974; Avigad and Mazar 1993; Avigad 1976, Avigad 1959 (Hebrew); Magness 2010; Kloner 1994 (Hebrew); Cohen 1981-82; Lapin 1999, 2011: 311-346; Miller 2004; Levine 2005; Rosenfeld 2010. Synthetic approaches are also considered within Rajak 2002a; Weiss 1992.

⁵ Treatments of diaspora populations include those of Noy 1993; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004; Rutgers 1992, 1995, 1998, 2000; Stern 2008; Buhagiar 1986; Gwynn and Bangaert 2010.

⁶ Langner 2001; Maayan-Fanar 2009; Hachlili 2005.

⁷ One useful demonstration of these methods is the exemplary; collection of Langner 2001.

⁸ For examples of such approaches, see Tilley 2004; and Barbet 2012.

Alfred Gell's anthropological approaches to art, which emphasize art (and writing) as an *activity*, as opposed to traditional scholarly considerations of art and writing as *products* of action, encourages corresponding readings of mortuary graffiti as vestiges of ancient behaviors of picture- and text-making.⁹ When regarded accordingly, graffiti—here defined as hand-drawn and non-monumental textual and pictorial markings—therefore embed critical and rare information about the uses of the places they once adorned—in this case—mortuary spaces. These approaches thus inspire new considerations of understudied aspects of ancient Jewish life.

Literary Sources on Commemoration: Rabbinic and Otherwise

Rabbinic writings, edited in the third through seventh centuries C.E. in Roman Palestine and Babylonia, have traditionally offered frameworks for broader discussions of ancient Jewish mortuary behaviors. Relevant texts that dominate related scholarship, however, remain more ambiguous and less prescriptive than one might hope for reconstructing activities associated with visiting and remembering the dead at graveside. This surprises when one pauses to think about it, because so many passages of the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmuds describe activities and procedures relating to death, preparation and disposal of the dead, and mourning.¹⁰

Several texts, for example, outline regulations for funerals, which should occur as quickly as possible after an individual's decease (*b. Mo'ed Qat.* 2a). A funeral might incorporate multiple phases, whereby mourners, musicians, and eulogizers would accompany processions to transport corpses to a cemetery (*m. Ketub.* 4:4; *b. Ketub.* 46b; *b. B. Bat.* 11b). Burial and, perhaps, the lighting of lamps or incense, could follow graveside. Ostentatious decoration of corpses and tombs is discouraged (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 11a). And while acceptable mourning customs included circumscribed acts of prayer and visitation of graves following funerals (*m. Mo'ed Qat.* 1:6; *m. B. Bat.* 6:8; *y. Ber.* 3:1), protracted acts of grieving and recurring visits to cemeteries are generally discouraged.¹¹

One might consider at least four basic explanations for the early rabbis' implicit discouragement—or, to be more precise—lack of advocacy—of ongoing visits to cemeteries, the repetition of which might continue indefinitely beyond the mandated periods of mourning for a loved one. Lack of attention to commemorative activities

⁹ Overview of these methods in Gell 1998: 8-10.

¹⁰ See broader discussion in Avery-Peck and Neusner 1999; Tzuberi 2014; Zlotnick 1966.

¹¹ For unusual mourning conditions and procedures, see Zlotnick 1966; also Balberg 2014: 88.

in rabbinic texts, foremost, could relate directly to the absence of preliminary biblical consideration of cognate topics. Rabbis used biblical texts as subjects of their commentaries; lack of biblical treatments might account for the corresponding absence of rabbinic discussions of mortuary commemoration.

A second explanation for a lack of rabbinic advocacy for grave visitation may relate to broader understandings of corpse impurity (*tum'at met*). Several texts consider how *tum'ah* (impurity or defilement) can result from direct and indirect physical contact with corpses. Rabbis describe physical contact with the appurtenances of graves and pieces of corpses to be sources of *tum'ah*, which priests (e.g., *m. 'Erub.* 3:1; *y. Ber.* 3:1; *t. Hor.* 2:1), and Nazirites (e.g., *m. 'Ohal.* 2:1; *m. 'Ohal.* 18:14; *y. Naz.* 3:5), should particularly avoid.¹² In this respect, Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis maintain and expand the attitudes expressed in biblical discussions of similar topics.¹³ Additional rabbinic texts similarly expand upon biblical treatments (*Num* 19:10-19), to consider how corpses and their parts could be polluting for all individuals, not just those of exceptional status or conditions (such as priests or Nazirites). As corpse-impurity is considered one of a first-order (*m. 'Ohal* 1:1-2), even indirect human contact, facilitated by touching certain types of implements or architectural features, which have themselves contacted corpses or corpse-parts, can render people unclean (*m. 'Ohal.* 1:2-5, 2:1-3; *y. Ber.* 3:1). Lack of protracted discussions of graveside commemorative activities in rabbinic texts thus might relate to this perceived risk of impurity-contagion, amplified by the presence of multiple corpses in a cemetery (*m. 'Ohal.* 2:6).¹⁴

Supplementary theories concerning the absence of rabbinic discussions about visits to cemeteries remain more speculative. One possibility, which we might classify as psychological, or, perhaps, sociological, might relate to the rabbis' understandings that excessive attention to the dead is bad; protracted grief could disrupt the lives of individuals and society at large.¹⁵

One final explanation might consider the silence in rabbinic texts to reflect reality. Perhaps activities to commemorate the dead were rarely undertaken in Roman Palestine or Babylonia, and, for this reason, did not merit any discussion at all in

¹² On broader discussions of corpse pollution and death, see summary in Magness 2012: 159.

¹³ Broader discussion of the distinctiveness of biblical notions of corpse pollution and interpretations in rabbinic texts considered in Balberg 2014: 32-33; 88, 202 n.2.

¹⁴ Relationships between the architectural design of cemeteries and visitors' susceptibility to contagion is discussed in *m. 'Ohal.* 15:8.

¹⁵ This sense may be implied in the discussion of mourning procedures in *m. Mo'ed Qat.* 1:5; sociology of modern Jewish mourning is treated in Kears 1989; for references in the Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud, see Rubin 2008.

rabbinic writings. This might seem like the most logical explanation of all. One could be forgiven, in any case, for concluding that few Jews in late antiquity (whether or not they participated in the culture of the early rabbis), spent significant amounts of time in cemeteries to visit graves of their friends and loved ones after the completion of funerals.

Archaeological Evidence and Related Interpolations

Various features of the archaeological record, however, challenge arguments, *ex silencio*, that Jews in late antiquity avoided activities of posthumous commemoration inside cemeteries. Recurring discoveries of certain genres of storage vessels in ancient cemeteries associated with Jews poses a first challenge. Such finds include unguentaria (small and narrow-mouthed ceramic or glass containers for the storage of precious liquids and spices), found in cemeteries where Jews were buried in Palestine, Italy, and North Africa. Consistent presences of these tiny containers in ancient necropolises might attest to a practice associated with funerals or subsequent visits to tombs, whereby mourners brought small containers of spices, perfumes, or oils to sprinkle their contents around graves. Some rabbinic texts allude to the conduct of related activities at funerals.¹⁶ Discoveries of larger and fragmentary ceramic containers (which, originally, may have stored grain, oil, or food) inside catacombs and group tombs associated with Jewish populations might, likewise, suggest the conduct of complementary practices, including activities of feasting, for or with the dead, that may have also taken place inside mortuary contexts.¹⁷ Despite the relative ubiquity of these types of ceramic finds in cemeteries of Jewish use throughout the Mediterranean, lack of reliable stratigraphy inhibits related conclusions. Most ancient cemeteries associated with Jews have been so badly pillaged and corrupted by centuries of reuse, exploration, theft, and amateur excavation, that the original contents and placements of these glass and ceramic jars are entirely unknown and therefore obscure.¹⁸ Ultimately, it remains unclear whether these vessels were originally buried *with* the dead, or whether they were used, by the living, during funerals, or for commemorating the dead through time.

¹⁶ For broader discussion of the uses of perfumes and associated containers (unguentaria) in rabbinic and archaeological sources, see Green 2008, 2011:61. See also consideration of commemoration in Roman and Christian contexts in Rebillard 2009:140-175.

¹⁷ This practice is known in pagan contexts and critiqued by some Christian writers, including Tertullian (*De Idolatria* 16.4-5). Discussion of artifacts associated with feasting practices in Jewish contexts is found in Stern 2008: 290-292; in Roman and Christian contexts, see Denzey Lewis 2011; Jensen 2008:142.

¹⁸ Berlin 2002; Stern 2008: 291.

One might ask, then, whether any additional clues have been discovered *in situ*, which could more definitively attest to ancient Jewish acts of commemorating the dead? An affirmative answer to this question, I suggest, relates to recurring carvings of mortuary graffiti, which are preserved *in situ* and, as such, document activities ancient Jews once conducted to commemorate their deceased in their original spatial contexts.

Scholars of early Judaism overlook most of the graffiti found in ancient burial caves, partly because archaeologists either omitted mention of them, or dismissed their value for discussion. In response to recurring discoveries of ancient mortuary graffiti throughout the vast Beit Shearim necropolis of Roman Palestine, for example, archaeologist Binyamin Mazar remarked that "...some of the drawings and graffiti as well as inscriptions painted or incised by the relatives of the deceased or by visitors, lack any preplanned order and are carelessly executed..."¹⁹ But closer examination reveals that graffiti from Beit Shearim, such as those Mazar once denigrated, were neither carelessly, nor randomly applied. Their locations and contexts, as I argue elsewhere, follow distinct and precise spatial patterns, as do similar examples found in burial caves elsewhere in Roman and Byzantine Palestine and in Rome, Malta, and North Africa. While few of these graffiti were discovered in sealed archaeological contexts, they share enough linguistic, iconographic, semantic, and spatial similarities to attest to their antiquity. And each of these graffiti were fixed to immovable features, such as walls, ceilings, and upon tombs, which preserves information about the original spatial and temporal contexts of their application.

The necropolis of Beit Shearim, located roughly 20 km southeast of modern Haifa in Israel, retains some of the highest concentrations of graffiti of all known mortuary sites, connected to Jewish populations, throughout the Mediterranean. The cemetery was used for hundreds of years (roughly from the late second through sixth centuries C.E.) and its ancient importance relates to its scale and demography.²⁰ Its excavated portion (roughly one-third of its original expanse) contains hundreds of burials, which makes the complex the largest known regional necropolis of its period. Without explicit signs of pagan or Christian presence, moreover, it served as a type of destination cemetery for Jews from regions that stretched from coastal and inland Syria to ancient Yemen (Himyar).²¹ Attraction to the cemetery may have related to the fame of some of the rabbis, who were buried inside.²²

¹⁹ Mazar 1973:136; cf. Rachmani 1994: 20.

²⁰ Weiss 2010 discusses dating and demography of the necropolis.

²¹ Discussion of these points in Rajak 2002a; Robin 2004.

²² Extensive discussions of these points in Rajak 2002b; Weiss 2010.

Lexical contents and locations of ancient graffiti from the site are surprisingly diverse. These include texts written in Greek and Aramaic, which sometimes include well wishes for the dead. Two better-known examples of this type are preserved along the side wall and ceiling of the northernmost entrance to the largest burial cave from the complex, commonly designated as catacomb 20. Scratched in large letters, the first of these wishes the dead in Greek: “Good luck on your resurrection! (εὐτῆχος τῆ ὑμῶν ἀναστάσις!)” Another message, also in Greek and carved roughly one meter away from the other text, pronounces: “Take heart/courage pious parents, no one is immortal!” (Θάρσιτε πατέρες ὄσιοι οὐδὶς ἀθάνατος!)²³

Certain aspects of these writings are conventional for the cemetery. Most epitaphs from Beit Shearim, for example, are similarly carved in the Greek language and scripts, rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic.²⁴ Likewise, a belief in some form of resurrection, which the first text describes (and the second text may imply), is echoed in other epitaphs found in the caves nearby, as well as in many contemporaneous rabbinic texts.²⁵ Other features of these writings, however, are more noteworthy. First, the texts are entirely anonymous. Second, their locations are distinctive. Carved around a cave entrance, meters away from the closest burial space, they do not function as epitaphs, which commonly name the dead, who are interred in associated tombs.²⁶ Rather, they serve different functions: as general public service messages for those who entered the cave. Their target audiences might include living mourners, who visited the catacombs, but they particularly address all of the dead, who were brought to their final resting places in the spaces beyond.

Other textual graffiti appear around entryways to other catacombs in the necropolis and around doors to inner rooms filled with graves and burial beds (*arcosolia*). These include examples from opposite sides of an interior doorway cut into catacomb 12—just meters to the left of the outer entrance to the cave. The meanings of the texts carved into opposing walls of the passageway remain obscure, but, as restored, may

²³ Full texts read as: εὐτῆχος τῆ οὐμῶν <υ> ἀναστάσις, in Avigad 1976: 95; fig. 42; Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974: 180; no. 194, fig. 20; Θάρσιτε πατέρες ὄσιοι οὐδὶς ἀθάνατος; Avigad 1976: 95, fig. 41; Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974: 179; no. 193, fig. 19. Sigmas are lunate.

²⁴ Consideration of related points in Lapin 1999.

²⁵ For more extensive consideration of discussion of resurrection or afterlife in ancient Jewish contexts, see Park 2000:150-163; Setzer 2004; Davies 1999:110-124; Lieberman 1965; compare also Avigad 1976: 101.

²⁶ Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974: no. 136, also nos. 57, 127, 187, 193. In certain respects, the sentiments are locally conventional; several epitaphs throughout the Beit Shearim cemetery contain messages to comfort the deceased through reminding them, posthumously, that no one is immortal.

replicate the same words in Hebrew scripts on the east doorjamb (י[ט]עא) as in Greek scripts (ΑΕΚΣΟ ΕΦ) on the west side of the doorframe (figures 1, 2).²⁷ Other types of anonymous writings appear elsewhere: carved alphabet lists have been discovered throughout Beit Shearim and inside multiple burial caves found farther south in the Judean Shefelah (lowlands), including burial caves of Horvat Egoz, Horvat Eitun, and Horvat Lavnin.²⁸ Sometimes these alphabet texts (so-called abecedaries) appear in retrograde, but they appear most frequently, whether in Greek or Hebrew letters, around entrances and doorways to burial chambers. In this way, they replicate the positions of the textual graffiti discovered throughout Beit Shearim.²⁹

Entryways were also popular places to draw pictures of animals, people, and objects associated with mortuary contexts. Animal drawings recur throughout Beit Shearim and in other regional burial caves dating from the Hellenistic through late Roman periods. Those at Beit Shearim include birds, such as eagles (figure 3) and quadrupeds, as well as ships, which appear in tomb vestibules and between arcosolium burials in Beit Shearim (figure 4). Similar motifs



Figure 1. Greek inscription from east side of doorway, room 2, Catacomb 12, Beit Shearim.

Photo: Ezra Gabbay



Figure 2. Hebrew inscription and menorah drawings from west side of doorway, room 2, Catacomb 12, Beit Shearim. Photo: Ezra Gabbay.

²⁷ Editors translate the Greek text as “ ‘[May] I attain [happiness]’; Schwabe and Lifshitz 1974:121-3, no. 133, fig. 5; also discussion in Avigad 1976: 22, fig. 7. One menorah is carved on the east doorjamb, while several menorahs are carved on the west jamb.

²⁸ Consideration of textual graffiti in Zissu and Adawi 2014.

²⁹ See discussion of retrograde inscribed writing in Naveh 1988.

appear in a monumental tomb in Jerusalem and in several caves of the Shefelah.³⁰ Regardless of the precise reasons for drawing ships in regional burial caves, the custom is not limited to the eastern Mediterranean: nautical images are commonly applied in graffiti and monumental decoration farther west in Jewish and non-Jewish contexts elsewhere in Rome and Malta, as I discuss additionally below.

Graffiti that resemble Egyptian obelisks—tapering vertical pillars with pyramidal tops—also appear in mortuary contexts in the Levant. Architectural monuments in Jerusalem and elsewhere in ancient Syria, from the Hellenistic through Roman periods, replicate the basic shapes of obelisks and flattened

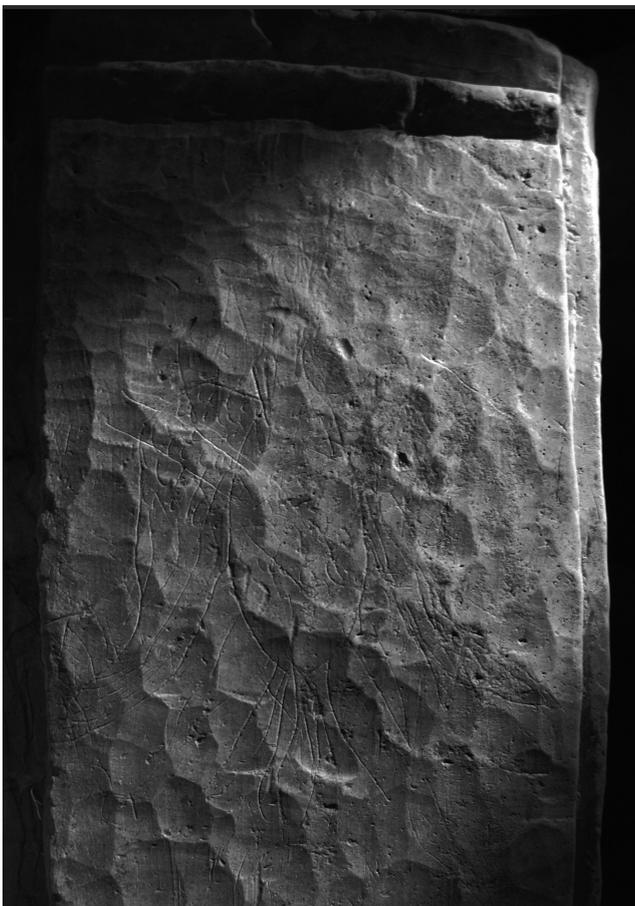


Figure 3. Image of eagle or vulture from northwest doorway, room 1, Catacomb 12, Beit Shearim. Photo: Ezra Gabbay.

pyramids; these served as burial monuments, which occasionally symbolized the souls of the deceased.³¹ Pictorial graffiti, whose contours mimic the appearances of these built monuments, are consistently scratched in graffiti at entrances to burial caves in Beit Shearim and in cave vestibules farther south in the Shefelah; those in the Shefelah bear

³⁰ Graffiti of animals are carved into caves of the Shefelah (Zissu 1996, 1999). Ship graffiti are found in several catacombs at Beit Shearim in catacomb 1 and in Mugharet el Jehennem. At Beit Shearim, the highest concentration of ship drawings appears in catacomb 25; these examples remain unpublished. Charcoal drawings of ships are similarly found inside the vestibule of a first-century complex, commonly called Jason's tomb, on Alfasi Street in the Rechavia neighborhood of Jerusalem; images in Rachmani 1967. Reasons for the consistent presence of ships in Levantine mortuary contexts remain speculative, though traditions that link ships and death appear in texts and archaeological contexts associated with both Jews and their neighbors throughout the Greco-Roman world. See also text of 1 Macc. 1.13, 27-29 and Stern: forthcoming.

³¹ Scholars often describe these as "nefašot" in the Near East (singular: nefeš); see Mouton 1997. The word 'nefeš' can mean soul, but, in some inscriptions, can also designate the tomb itself.

little association with Jewish populations.³² These images may serve to symbolize and reinforce the mortuary aspect of the surrounding caves.

Select types of graffiti also appear inside and around burial caves farther west in Italy (Rome and Venosa), as well as in Malta and North Africa. Many of the examples, more readily associated with Jewish populations, include pictures,



Figure 4. Ship graffiti south wall of Catacomb 25, Beit Shearim. Photo: Ezra Gabbay.

such as symbols of seven-branched candelabra and appurtenances associated with the Jerusalem Temple, which had been destroyed centuries earlier (70 C.E.).³³ In North Africa, menorah shapes and flowers, which suffer from erosion, were carved deeply outside entrances to the subterranean cemetery at Gammarth, in the outer precincts of late ancient Carthage.³⁴ In Rome, throughout the Jewish catacombs beneath Mussolini's Villa Torlonia, several menorah images were carved into the drying plaster that sealed the entrances to individual tombs. Ships were also carved in similar ways.³⁵ Still other types of graffiti are also carved around tombs in Maltese catacombs, such as those of Sts. Agatha and Paul; these include images of menorot, ships, and abbreviated Greek texts.³⁶

Acts of carving mortuary graffiti might have served particular and distinctive functions in these diaspora contexts: perhaps inscribers carved them to differentiate the tombs of the Jewish dead from those of their pagan or Christian neighbors, to

³² Unpublished images of these appear in catacombs 20 and 6 at Beit Shearim; *nefeš* images are also found in vestibules of burial caves from the Judean Shefelah, such as those reproduced in Zissu 1999b and 2001 (Horvat Egoz, Horvat Lavnin); the latter caves bear no apparent association with Jewish populations; cf. Hachlili 1981; Kloner 1985. *Nefeš* images also appear on ossuaries and are represented in Herodian tomb architecture; for the latter, see Peleg-Barkat 2012; Avigad 1950-1951:106.

³³ Hachlili 1998, 2001.

³⁴ These images remain unpublished; I recorded them in a visit to the Gammarth catacombs in fall 2003. It remains unclear whether the images are still preserved, as they remain unprotected *in situ*.

³⁵ Graffiti in the Jewish catacombs from Rome, particularly in the Torlonia catacomb, remain poorly published and largely inaccessible to this point.

³⁶ Discussion of Maltese Jewish and Christian burials in Buhagiar 1986.

represent a collective connection with Jerusalem and its destroyed temple, and/or to exhibit, iconographically, a common mode of religious and cultural identification. Carving graffiti-ships might also have reflected continuities in the commemorative activities of pan-Mediterranean pagans, Christians and Jews. Lack of publication of many examples of mortuary graffiti from the Roman west, however, impedes their more definitive comparison with eastern Mediterranean cognates.

Conclusion

What, if anything, can consideration of mortuary graffiti tell us that we might otherwise not know about ancient Jewish commemorative behaviors? First, on the most basic level, it tells us that, in late antiquity, some Jews throughout the Mediterranean visited, inscribed, and decorated tombs, as a form of commemorative practice. Recurrences of sentiments and iconography throughout several of these graffiti suggest that there were common “tropes” of written and visual expression—particularly in burial contexts. Carving graffiti into stone or into wet plaster was a practice consistently enacted by Jewish and neighboring populations in mortuary contexts in different areas of the Mediterranean.

When did visitors apply these graffiti to cemetery walls? Perhaps some of them drew and wrote them during funerals or festivals. But some examples, such as figure 3 above, required more extensive amounts of time to implement—either due to their position in a cave or to the intricacy of their designs. It is likely that more elaborate texts or images took more time to carve than would be permitted by the moments surrounding burial. They were more likely applied during cemetery visits, conducted in the months or years that followed.

Associated activities, moreover, were quite varied. Some textual graffiti from mortuary contexts, for example, might reflect efforts of their artists and inscribers to communicate with the deceased in some way. Other markings might have served different functions — to protect or beautify graves, or to signify the presence of the dead. And the care taken to create many of the more elaborate texts and images suggests that, despite rabbinic discouragements against spending time in places that might facilitate corpse contact, some Jews, like their neighbors, spent protracted periods in the caves to create their works of writing and art. Graffiti thus reflect practices, otherwise unknown in textual sources, whereby Jews consistently used acts of writing and drawing as a means to commemorate the dead.

These observations, in turn, might inspire expanded readings of certain rabbinic texts, whose contents are rarely noted in discussions of Jewish mortuary customs. For example, several texts of the Mishnah and Talmud describe individuals' acts of marking the spaces of the dead. These discussions, which employ the same verb, (לְצַיֵּן) often are adjacent to discussions of impurity, more generally (cf. *m. Nid.* 7:3). In some cases, the acts of marking may entail the piling of lime upon a grave to accelerate decomposition or to help passersby avoid unintended contact with it (*m. Ma'as* Š. 5:1). Marking tombs is consistently described as a type of public service in this way (*m. Šeqal.* 1:1). But other descriptions of this activity of "tomb marking" recur elsewhere. One passage from Bava Metzia, for example, describes how Resh Lakish used to mark off [burial] caves of the rabbis (*b. B. Meš.* 85b), while another, from Bava Batra, specifically states that a Rabbi Bana'ah adorned the tombs of the righteous dead (*b. B. Bat.* 58a). The former texts are from Roman Palestine, while the latter ones, redacted in Babylonia, are embedded in broader discussions of the strange and mystical visions that concern the spirits of the dead. But perhaps the archaeological record—in the form of graffiti—might inspire slightly different readings of these passages than traditional interpretations have permitted. Perhaps, by marking tombs, Resh Lakish and Rabbi Bana'ah, among others, were performing otherwise unrecognized activities, which some of Palestinian, Maltese, Italian and North African Jewish peers would have found to be entirely conventional. Perhaps their acts of "marking" graves included those of writing or drawing— either to warn their contemporaries not to accidentally trespass on corpses or associated appurtenances, or in complement, as a means to care for, venerate, remember, or communicated with the esteemed dead.

Excavators and historians commonly use rabbinic texts as frameworks to interpret the contemporaneous archaeological record, but this consideration of graffiti facilitates a distinct possibility; a means to demonstrate how archaeology can sometimes inspire new readings of rabbinic texts, to supplement, expand, and thereby transform current hypotheses about the activities associated with Jewish life and death in the second to sixth centuries C.E.

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