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A GRAFFITO DEPICTING A HORSEMAN FROM THE JUDAEAN FOOTHILLS

BOAZ ZISSU

During a short survey at Khorvat Zichri, a graffito of horse and rider was discovered in one of the caves¹. Kh. Zichri is located in the Judaeen foothills (PG. 1384/1212) near Luzit village. The built section of the site stretches over an area of approximately 3.5 acres, at the northernmost point of a range of low hills, at a height of approximately 710 feet above sea level. The cave is located at 13835/12125 near the underground refuge² in the northern part of the ruins.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CAVE

The cave is hewn into the soft limestone typical of the region and is composed of three interconnected chambers (see Fig. 1). A flight of steps carved along the length of one side, including the remains of a stepped stair-rail, leads from the opening to the floor of Chamber A of the cave (measuring approximately 4.8×5.8 m.). The steps are destroyed and appear to have been intentionally put out of use.

Chamber A has a rectangular irregular plan, approximately $4.8 \times 4.7 \times 5.8 \times 4.8$ m. above the surface of the rubble. Due to the rubble covering the floor it is impossible to determine the floor measurements. This chamber is in vertical section trapezoidal, and 8 m. high. On the walls are signs of carvings, 'columbarium' niches, and circles carved with the aid of a compass. To the side of the lowest step there is a carved rectangular basis (0.4×0.3 m.). A wide, high passage (approx 1.2×4 m.) leads into Chamber B (see Fig. 2). On both sides of the passage are asymmetrical pillars. The western pillar is rectangular at the bottom and curved at the top. Chamber B is rectangular (3.6×2.7 m.). It is evident that most of the chamber was carved with great precision.

At the southernmost tip of Chamber B a hewn horizontal shaft, with niches for climbing, reaches to the surface. The height of the shaft is approximately 4 m. from the rubble covering its floor, and its diameter approximately 1.1 m. The shaft cuts into the wall of Chamber B and was hewn in a later period. The carving of this shaft is crude, very different from the handsome carving typical of Chambers A and B of the cave.

On the western wall of Chamber B there is a rectangular niche (approximately 0.5×0.6 m.). Both the wall and the niche were damaged by the collapse of a large block of limestone. On the western wall, at a height of approximately 4 m. above the surface of the rubble and 0.2 m. under the chamber ceiling, there is a carved square niche (approximately 0.5×0.5 m. with an approximate depth of 0.3 m.). Next to this is the graffito of a horse, rider and foal (Figs. 3 and 4) to be described in the following.

An irregular-shaped opening, broken into the eastern side of Chamber A, leads to the 'bell cave' C. The ground plan of this cave is kidney-shaped (measuring approximately 7.8 m. in width and 9.5 m. in length). It is evident from the signs of stone-carving on the walls and floor and from a number of ashlar stones whose removal was not completed, that the bell cave served as a quarry.

It is clear that this cave is of a later period than Chambers A and B described above. The people quarrying Cave C were aware of the ancient chambers and, on making progress westwards, endeavoured not to break into the neighbouring chamber. This mode of quarrying created the kidney shape of the cave.

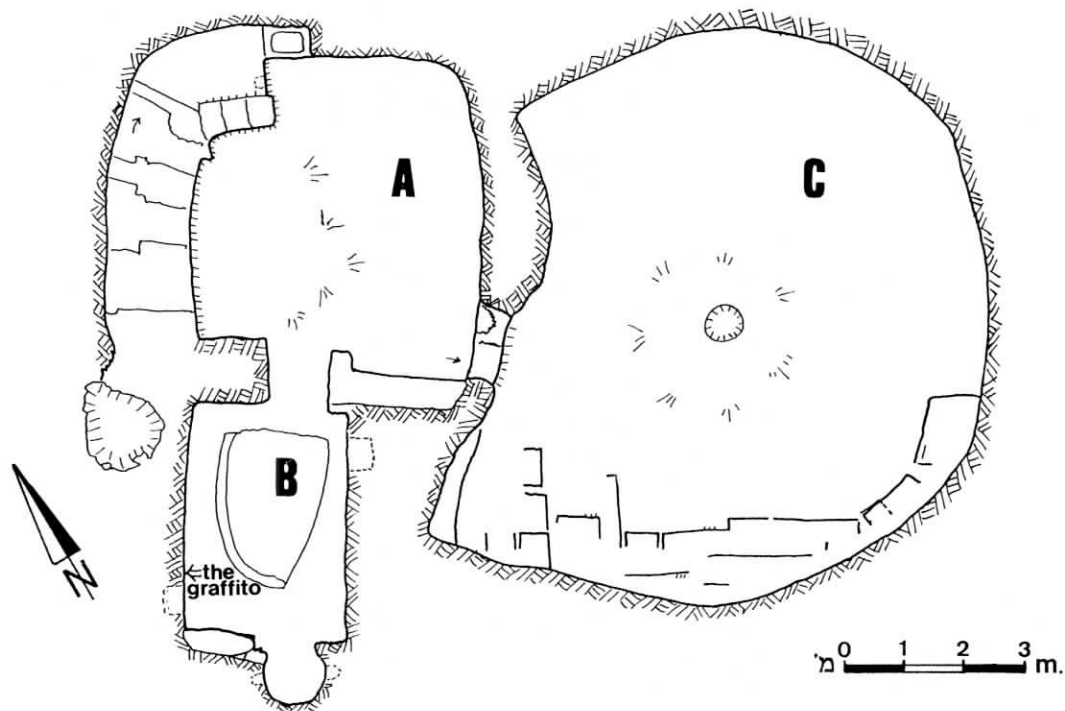


Fig. 1. Plan of the cave.

THE GROUP OF CARVED FIGURES

The group is carved on the western wall of Chamber B, at a distance of approximately 0.2 m. below the ceiling. Today the group stands at a height of approximately 3.8 m. above the rubble covering the floor (see Figs. 3 and 4).

The figures include a rider schematically depicted in profile. The rider is holding a sharp object (sword ?) in his left hand and horse-reins in his right. On the breast of the rider is an X-shaped carving. The man is riding a horse, also schematically depicted in profile. Above the horse's head is another horse, similar to the other in all its details, only of much smaller size. It is not clear whether the artist intended to depict a foal or to depict a horse at a distance and therefore in the correct perspective. All the figures face beyond the square niche and appear to be in motion. Two lines, one diagonal and the other curved, are carved under the group. It is possible that these lines depict the ground at the foot of the figures, but they may have additional significance.³

Avi-Yonah (1942, 127-30) discusses at length depictions of riders in the local folk-art of the Roman period. In his view, the figure of the horseman on a horse symbolizes the 'Saviour God' (Theos Sozon), the god of fertility common to eastern cultures, under different names, from the beginning of the first millennium B.C. to the end of the second century A.D. Depictions of warriors riding horses were extremely common in eastern art during the Roman period (Avi-Yonah 1942, 127-30; Hopkins 1936, 1-30). Especially renowned is the graffito of the Persian horseman discovered at Dura Europos (Baur, Rostovtzeff and Bellinger 1933, pl. II.2).

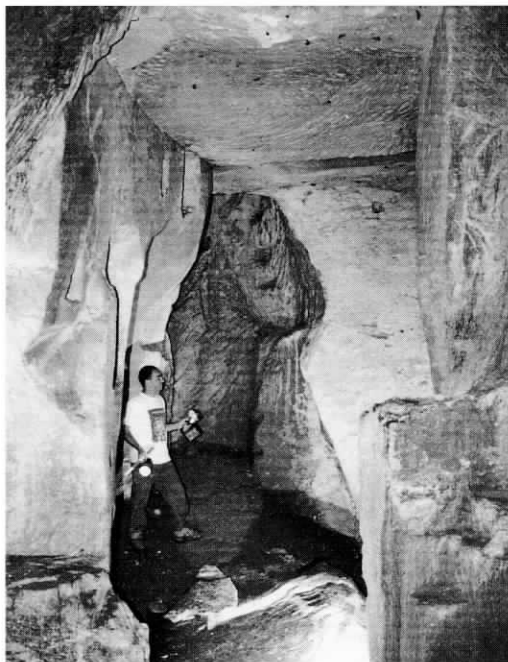


Fig. 2. The high passage leading to Chamber B, and Chamber B, looking south.

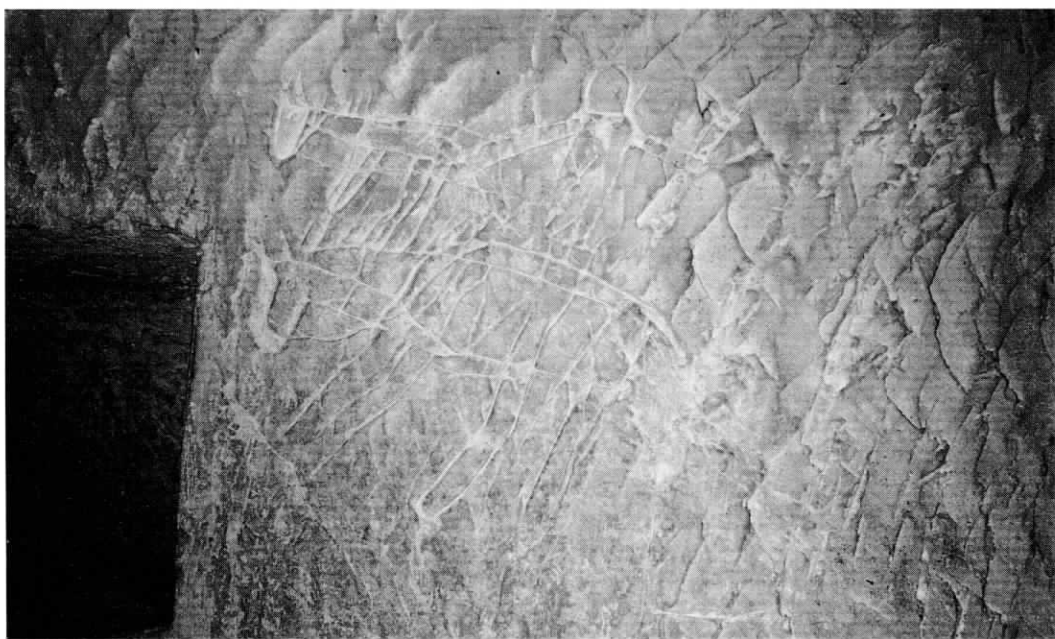


Fig. 3. The niche on the western wall of chamber B; next to it, the graffiti.

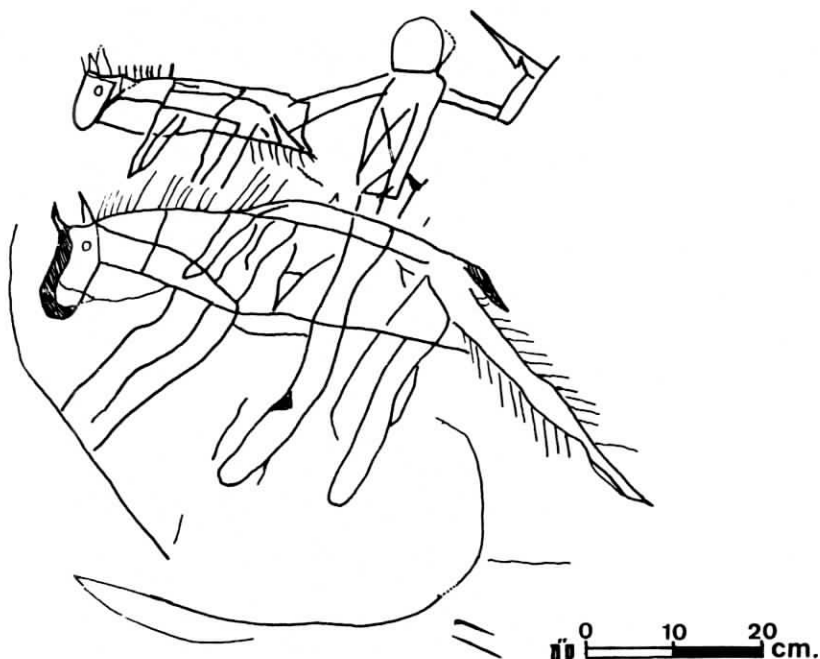


Fig. 4. The graffito.

The relief of a warrior on horseback waving a short sword above his head was discovered in burial complex 1 at Beth Shearim (Mazar 1973, 98–100, pl. xv.2). In the same complex the graffito of a person leading a horse after him was also discovered (Mazar 1973, pl. xiv.2) as well as a drawing of a (winged?) figure riding what could be a horse (Mazar 1973, 80.2). Mazar dated the reliefs to the third and fourth centuries A.D. Graffiti of gladiators and of an armed warrior on horseback were discovered in the third century A.D. burial cave at Tel Eitun in the Judean foothills (Tzaferis 1982, 22–25, pl. 3.1). Although there are similarities between these graffiti, there is no evidence that the cave under discussion here served for burial. Among the findings in the cisterns at Beth Natif were also images of a warrior on horseback depicted in profile (Baramki 1936, pl. iv). Beth Natif and Tel Eitun are located in the Judean foothills not far from the cave under discussion.

DATING OF THE CAVE AND GRAFFITO

At this stage it is impossible to be sure about the purpose of the cave and the carved figures. The inaccessible location of the graffito near the carved chamber ceiling and at a distance from the cave's floor supports the possibility that the figures were carved during the quarrying of Chamber B of the cave.

1. In our opinion, Chambers A and B, handsomely carved, comprise a single unit. The flight of steps hewn along the side of Chamber A, the remains of the stair-rail and the entrance are similar to those of the Maresha water-cisterns of the Hellenistic period (Bliss and Macalister 1902, 204–08, pls. 99, 101).
2. The vertical shaft located at the southern end of Chamber B appears to be a late addition to the chamber. It is possible that the elimination of the entrance steps to Chamber A and the

addition of the vertical entrance shaft, which served as a hidden entrance to the cave, were carried out during a time of trouble in an endeavour to turn the location into an improvised refuge cave. The use of ancient chambers for refuge was very common in such complexes (Kloner 1987a, 329–32), most of which are dated to the Bar Kochba revolt (A.D. 132–135).⁴

3. In addition, examination of the stratigraphic relation between the different parts of the cave demonstrates that the bell cave C is of a later period than Chamber A (see above). The phenomenon of bell caves in the Judean Shephelah is dated to the end of the Byzantine and the early Islamic period (seventh and eighth centuries A.D.).⁵

According to the above considerations, on the one hand, it is possible that the graffito was carved during the process of quarrying Chambers A and B in the Hellenistic period. On the other hand, all the parallels discussed above are dated to the late Roman period. Only an archeological dig can provide more of the information necessary for dating the cave and the graffito discovered in it.

NOTES

¹ The cave was examined by the author on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority with the help of Ory Ainy, Yechezkel Dangur, Ayala Graicer, Ezra Hadad and Debby Dangur. My thanks to all of them. The descent into the cave is only possible by means of a rope. The passage is extremely slippery and dangerous.

² In Kh. Zichri there is a large underground refuge next to the cave described here. No physical link between the two caves has been found (Tepper and Shahar 1987, 107–12). Tepper and Shahar also identified the site with Zichri/Zachrin/Zachariah mentioned in the talmudic legend of the destruction of the Temple. This identification is not accepted by scholars (Safrai 1980, 324–35).

³ David Alon examined the graffito and suggested that it depicts ploughing by a pair of different animals.

According to David Amit, the curved line at the figures' feet may depict a plough.

⁴ See Kloner 1987b, pp. 361–65. There is no agreement among scholars concerning the dating of all underground refuges to the period of the Bar Kochba revolt.

⁵ Ben-Arieh (1962) dates the bell caves to the Roman, Byzantine and the early Islamic periods. Dagan (1982), in a detailed discussion, concludes that the majority of bell-shaped caves in the Judean foothills may be dated to the early Islamic period. The newest research points to the same conclusion (Kloner and Frumkin 1989, 135–44; Frumkin and Kloner 1989, 146–49).

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