

THE EARLY DAYS

Burial Customs in Jerusalem

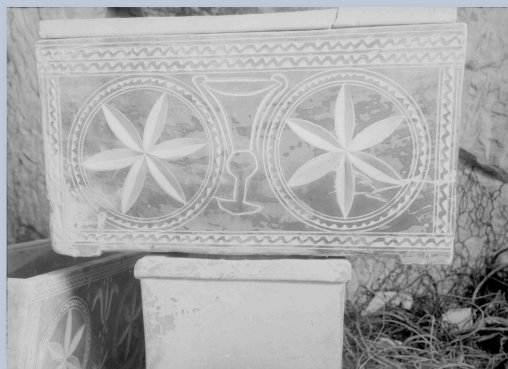


Inside of a burial cave on Mount Scopus.

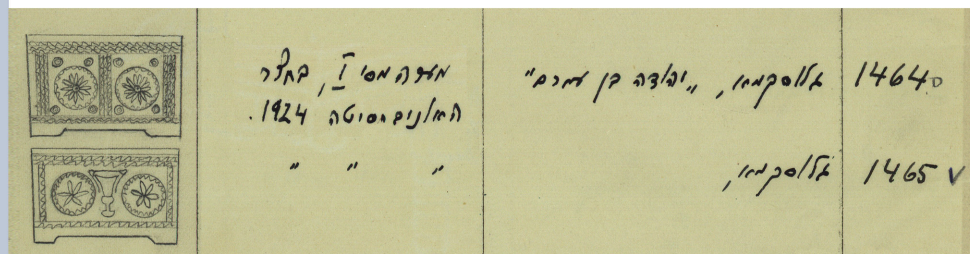
About a thousand burial caves from the Second Temple period were discovered around Jerusalem, and in them thousands of soft limestone rectangular boxes—ossuaries—that were used for secondary burials. Exploration of burial caves in the Jerusalem area and documentation of the ossuaries discovered in them became one of the main subjects of research in those years.

The burial complexes from this period usually contain an outer courtyard, a façade (sometimes engraved), and a burial chamber with carved niches in which the deceased were placed. In the first century BCE, ossuaries became a popular means of interment whereby the bones of the deceased were placed in secondary burial about a year after their death. Burial customs around Jerusalem correspond with the prohibition against burial inside the city known from Jewish sources.

About half of the ossuaries that were discovered are decorated with carvings and engravings. The most popular decorative patterns are the rosette, floral motifs, and geometric patterns. Figural images of humans and animals were not found among these patterns. Some of the ossuaries were incised with inscriptions mentioning the name of the deceased and at times also his occupation, title, and familial origin. They were written in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic – languages used by the Jews in the Second Temple period.



Ossuaries inside a burial cave, Mount Scopus.



In 1924, a burial cave was discovered in the course of excavating the foundations of a new building in the courtyard of the University on Mount Scopus. Upon completion of the excavations, the University administration decided to open the cave and its finds to the public.

Two limestone ossuaries decorated with rosette patterns, from a burial cave in the courtyard of the Hebrew University, 1st c. BCE–1st c. CE (from the Collections' inventory; drawing by Nahman Avigad)