A Different Tomb in Lower Galilee

The site of Sde Amudim in the lower Galilee, and more particularly its ancient synagogue, are well known to researchers. Excavation of the site in 1979 by I. L. Levine (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) and others, led them to believe that it was what remained of a relatively large Jewish village that existed for a period of about 700 years, from ca. 300 BCE until the late 4th century CE. The synagogue may testify to the relatively good economic status of this village; its remains include elaborately ornamented heart-shaped columns with matching column bases, and other stone-carved artefacts. In my opinion, the most prominent witness of the village's economic standard is a large, heavy lintel with two lions inscribed on it. The site is located about two hundred meters east of a highway, within easy view of passersby.

With all the information that we already have about this site, it's only logical to wonder where the people who lived here for so many generations were buried. Levine's article focused on the synagogue, but Jews never buried their deceased in close proximity of synagogues or any other residential areas in general. Halakhic rule teaches us that burials took place at a distance of 50 Ama (50 feet) from the village/town/city boundaries. Therefore the cemetery or tombs must be relatively far from the synagogue. I visited the site a few times in the past, searching its boundaries in ever increasing circles, but found no traces of burials whatsoever. The surface of the low hill on which the village was built, as well as the adjacent slopes consist of basalt; there is no point in looking for tombs in such terrain. In late January, 2011, however, I visited the site again. Keeping in mind the fact that according to Jewish burial law, cemeteries should be on the east side of the living area (there are exceptions, due to terrain conditions), I expanded my search eastward, looking for exposed limestone concentrations.



Photo 5 - Facility

About 500 meters east of the village remains, I found large, exposed limestone rock beds. Scanning them was amazing, revealing many facilities cut into the bedrock (photos 5, 6). I found various sized pits, some of them very large, some interconnected by underground tunnels. Several lost their ceiling due to erosion, while others remain intact. One still shows a distinct "bell" shape. Almost every plot of exposed limestone rock is carved, a good example of which is a large room floor, entirely carved out of the bedrock. The area in general is covered with a thin layer of local brown soil, including the location of these archaeological treasures. A few rectangular carved rocks were apparently used as door frames; some of them still carry niches where may have been hinges and locks. A few artefacts may have been part of industrial facilities; some carved into the rock, others scattered, broken, all over the area.



Photo 6 - Facility

In the centre of all this, there are two rock-cut, narrow rectangular graves (photo 7 shows one of them). This find is rather puzzling; if this residential - industrial zone was Jewish, then how can we account for the presence of graves so close to areas and facilities that we may assume to have been used on a regular base? It contradicts the Halakhic rule of 50 Ama: both the grave in photo 7 and the nearby grave are adjacent to a facility, and whether a facility or a residential structure, it is too close to the graves to allow for the idea that Jews used it. On the other hand, Jews did not usually carve graves in exposed rock beds. Thus, even if we are dealing with a lapse of time, it will be hard to connect these finds to Jewish presence.



Photo 7 - Grave

Anyway, the goal was tombs. The search lasted more than two hours, but as fruitful as it was, no tombs were found. It should be noted that carving a tomb is easier when the limestone-rock is on a slope. The steeper the incline, the easier the job becomes. With this in mind, I tried to find inclined limestone-rocks, but there were none. Even underneath the thorny bushes, the search remained fruitless. The bed-rock in this area is almost entirely horizontal and without slopes, so there was no point in looking for tombs here any further.



Photo 1 – Vertical pit & entrance

This is a good story, however, and there is a happy and unexpected end after all; I almost fell into a tomb! Whoever made it started the operation by simply cutting almost vertically into a large, flat limestone-rock (photo 1). This must have been an extremely hard job, much more so than an “average” tomb-carving. So, unlike the multitude of tombs that I have seen in my career, this one is to be entered vertically. The closing block was missing, and the cavity was open when I found it; the tomb has therefore undoubtedly been penetrated, and possibly ransacked, in the past. Inside, I came upon a large pile of some white material that was in the middle, almost up to the bottom of the opening (photo 2). The pile had a "direction": a moderate "ridge," stretching from the opening to the back wall. Looking from the outside, it's clear that the material is lying on a layer of local brown soil, brought in by rain. Chronologically, then, the white material is later than the brown soil.



Photo 2 - back-wall right corner, carving marks, plaster and white pile



Photo 3 – Ceiling & plaster right



Photo 4 – Ceiling & plaster left



Photo 8 – Small niche

Entering the tomb (henceforth: the G-tomb; G for Galilee) was hard; I had to crawl backwards, legs first. Once inside, I registered a series of irregular items:

1. The G-tomb ceiling and walls are plastered. The plaster is peeled off in a few spots, but it's obvious that the tomb was entirely plastered in the past.

2. The ceiling is well preserved and arch-shaped from end to end. Slight carving marks show beneath the plaster layer (photos 2, 3, 4).

3. Adjacent to the entrance, on the right side, there is a small burial niche (photo 8).



Photo 9 – Right wall & niches



Photo 10 – Middle niche



Photo 11 – Right niche

4. The burial niches on the right wall are average in size; but they are NOT on the same level (photo 9). The one on the far right is positioned highest, approximately at the same level of the small niche adjacent to the entrance (photo 11). The middle one is on a lower level (photo 10) and the left one is at the lowest point. A layer of brown soil covers the niches' bottoms, and the bottom of the small one near the entrance. The lowest positioned niche on the left side is almost completely covered with the white stuff, which prevented me from looking inside it.

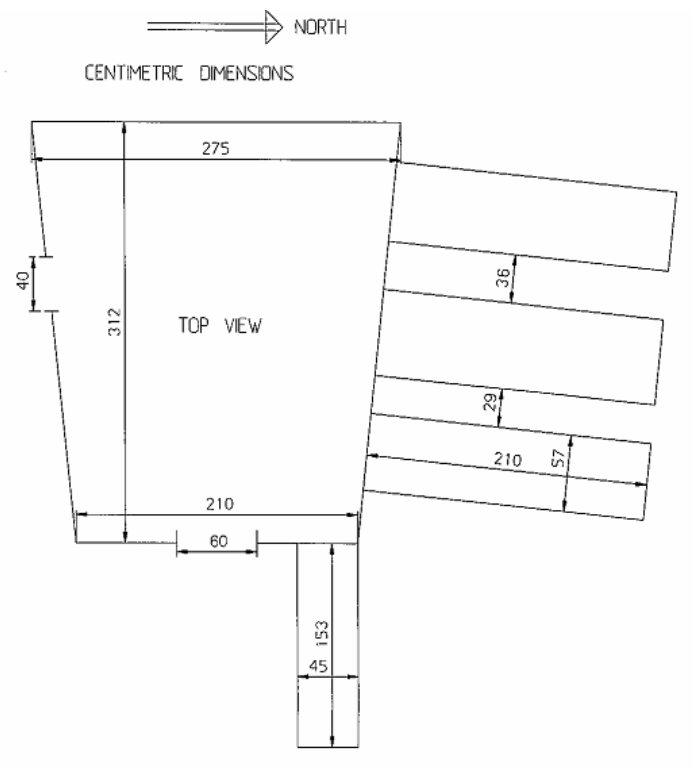
5. There is a large crack in the back part of the left hand wall, which is not man-made; it shows a few sharp rocks-tips. These rocks seem to be a different, harder material, comparing to the rest of the tomb. The builders may have decided not to cut further in because of this obstacle, or even found they were unable to proceed any further. The white pile covers the rest of the left wall, so whether or not there are niches on the left side remains to be seen.

6. The white material covers large parts of the back wall (photo 2); therefore, at this point we don't know whether or not it has niches. Still it is arch-shaped, parallel to the ceiling. In one point, a large piece of plaster is gone, exposing clear, large carving-marks.

7. A few porcupines' quills were scattered around, on the white pile.

The first six points make the G-tomb quite unique. To the best of my knowledge, Jewish tombs were not customarily plastered. This does not mean that there are no plastered tombs in Palestine; Kloner excavated a beautiful plastered tomb in Maresha (the "Sidonians' tomb") of which the plastered walls are covered with a variety of paintings. It is assumed that the builders plastered the tomb to allow for painting. This assumption might also be applied to the G-tomb; yet in this case it's not a Jewish tomb. If the G-tomb were owned by gentiles, then we may assume it's very old; as old, even, as the Hellenistic period (330-160/70 BCE). On the other hand, gentiles might have used it even much later. If this is the case, then the G-tomb may teach us about gentiles' burial practices in the Galilee, but we still cannot determine its accurate dating.

Rich Jews were allowed to paint their walls during the second half of the 3rd century CE (*J. Talmud Avoda Zara*, 3:3, 42d). This applied only to building walls, however, never to those of tombs; this is supported by the physical finds, at least when we discuss the Galilee.



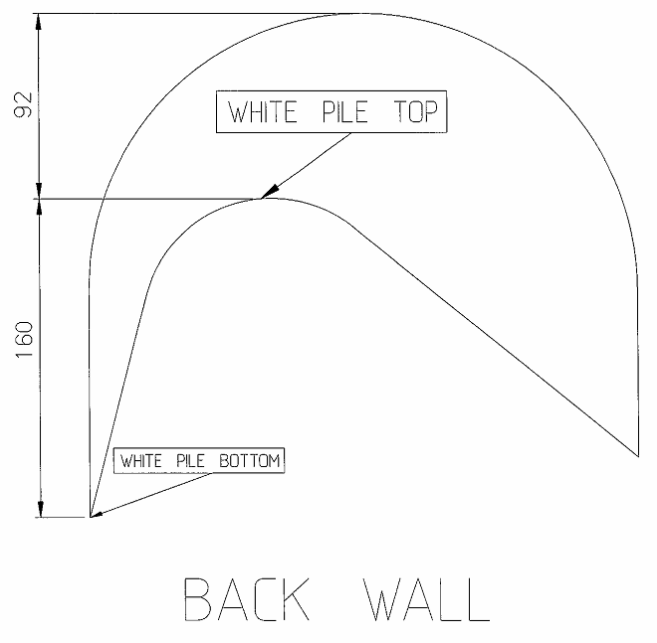
G-Tomb 1

The arch-shaped ceiling is another interesting component: in many Jewish tombs there is a "lobby"; its ceiling is flat, while the burial niches' ceilings are arch shaped. This is true even in single-spaced tombs: generally, even smaller tombs present a separation between the main space and the burial niches. When there is not enough space, temporary burial niches are cut into the rock, and the eternal burial took place in the back room. In these cases, the temporary burial niches are designed in an arch form that reminds of arcosolia. Yet the ceiling of the "lobby" is flat. When we look at the G-tomb structure, there is only one burial space, and it's entirely arch-shaped, from bottom to ceiling. The size of the tomb was probably the reason that its owner had to find solutions for both the preliminary and secondary burials; this solution is based on exceptions:

A. The niche on the right side of the entrance is much smaller, compared to the other niches in the G-tomb. Probably this one was meant for temporary burial; its length matches the average size of people of the period. Temporary burials generally took place in a shallow depression, carved in the tomb floor, or on shelves, carved in a tomb wall. If the owners could not use the left wall for some reason (most reasonably - geological issues), then they had a much smaller space at their disposal. This was probably the reason for carving the small niche on the right side of the entrance.

B. The niches carved into the right wall were meant for secondary, eternal burials, probably in ossuaries. They are much larger, in all dimensions, than the one adjacent to the entrance.

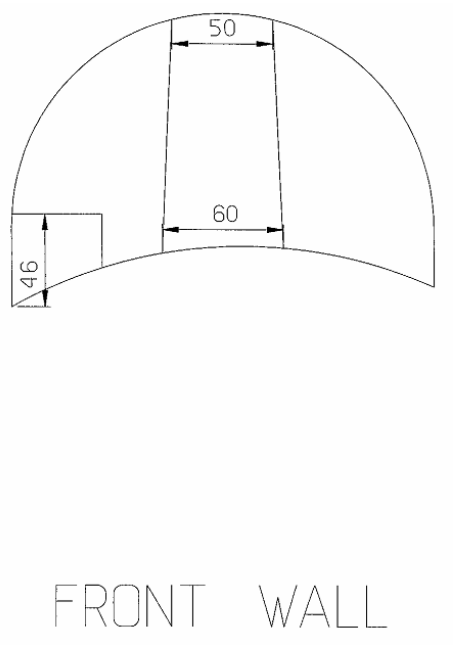
C. For the figurative aspect, the owner designed the entire tomb as one big arcosolium.



G-Tomb 2

Now we can address the most prominent exception: the fact that the three niches on the right wall are not on the same level. There is a considerable difference in level between the higher and the middle one, and between the middle and the lower one. This suggests that the G-tomb might be graded; stairs may lead from the entrance bottom level down to the tomb. The white pile, however, covers most of the lower inner structure and space; therefore I suspect that it covers the stairs (or their remains). If there are no stairs, the lowest niche couldn't possibly be used, unless those responsible for placing ossuaries into the G-tomb niches were highly skilled acrobats.

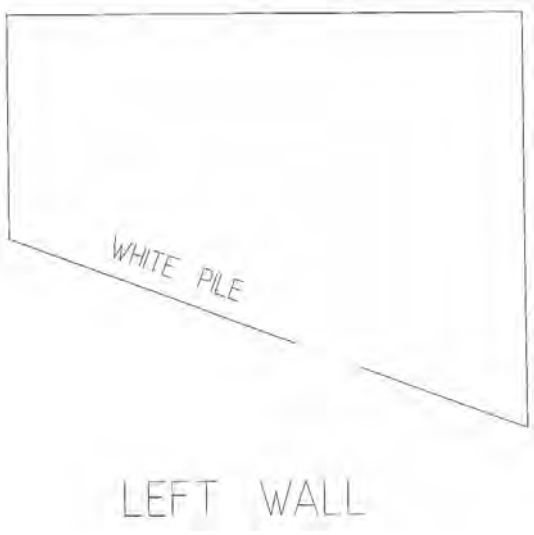
At this point, it is impossible to determine beyond reasonable doubt the ethnic "identity" of the G-tomb. One possibility may be that Jews carved it on a relatively remote limestone rock bed many years after the last gentile dwelled there. Yet, if this is indeed the case, then we have to explain the plaster that covers most of the G-tomb walls and ceiling, and that indubitably used to cover them entirely before age and erosion caused it to peel off here and there.



G-Tomb 3

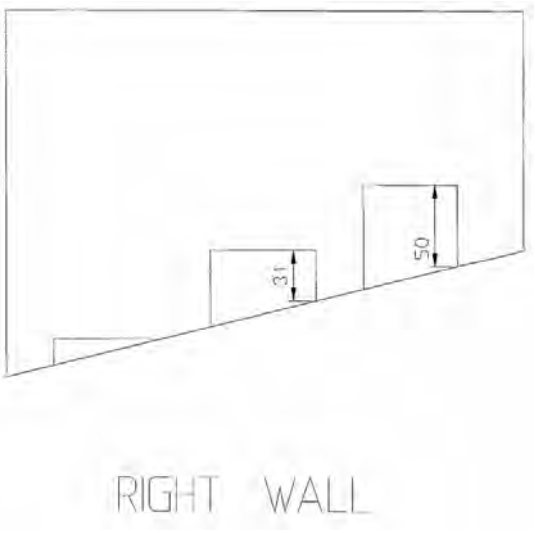
All the previous assumptions, however, do not account for the presence of the pile of white material, the general texture of which is a well grinded chalky limestone. It's recent, and its presence in the G-tomb doesn't make sense. I estimate its weight to be between 1-1.5 tons; bringing it inside the cave must have been a hard manual job; only one with a very good reason would work that hard. I had to consult people I trust, and an idea was born: it might be the result or a part of a modern crime; perhaps someone buried a corpse there, under the white pile. Early in March, 2011, I went to the local police station. Five minutes later I was in a police car with the local investigating officer and three other police officers. On our way over to the site, they called the district investigations officer, Major Nabil Daher, who met us near the synagogue. We walked to the G-tomb, and the local officer jumped in immediately. His immediate observation was that "this white stuff doesn't belong here." After him, Major Daher entered the tomb. He confirmed the local officer's statement: the pile does not belong here, and something may be hidden underneath it. They exited the tomb, called the Tiberias police station and asked them to send the criminal analysis team. Before leaving, the first police team asked me to stay and wait for the second; I agreed, and in less than an hour the new team appeared: one criminal analysis man,

escorted by 3 regular police officers. At this point, the police called the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA). Immediately, a verbal war broke out; the IAA district supervisor didn't show up, but he used his cell phone to threaten the policemen and myself not to touch a thing. The criminal analysis man, however, jumped in and started digging into the white pile. It took him only a few moments to discover that the white material covers a pile of stones. His colleagues and he saw this as further proof of the criminal theory. The IAA man almost went mad on the phone; he begged us again not to touch anything, and added that an archaeologist was on the way.



G-Tomb 4

Half an hour later Dr. Dina Avshalom-Gorni, the IAA district archaeologist, arrived. She entered the tomb and without scruple issued a quick verdict: the tomb is Jewish, and the white pile was accumulated by porcupines. She also stated that the tomb's ceiling had collapsed, thus explaining the pile of stones underneath the white material. I argued that of everything visible inside the tomb, nothing was less disputable than the fact that the ceiling was generally intact, but to no avail; she insisted that the ceiling had collapsed. After only a few minutes she released the police team, stating that the pile of white material was made by porcupines, and that the stones underneath it originated from the tomb ceiling, which had "collapsed." The porcupines' theory was backed by a local National Parks and Wild Life Authority man, but when I asked him about the stones beneath the white pile and reminded him that he saw the ceiling and its conditions, he agreed that the ceiling is intact and there is no immediate explanation for the stone pile. But he was firmly confident about the porcupines, and I couldn't argue with him on the issue. I knew nothing about the cute animals, and we did find a few quills inside. Yet the man went further and claimed that the porcupines probably dug the niches or inside the niches. To this I replied: "Assuming that you are right; then who introduced the brown soil layer to the niches? Do you think this happened AFTER the porcupines finished their building effort?" A question to which he had no answer.



G-Tomb 5

I had to study porcupines quickly – and I did. I turned to scientific-zoological sources, Wikipedia, anything that could provide the required information. Yet my gut feeling told me it was not enough. The next Sunday, I returned to the police station to make a statement. Major Daher met me there, and we discussed the events; he insisted that I quote him as clearly saying "The ceiling is intact", which I did, of course. Later on, I found a porcupine expert, Mr. Amir Balaban of the National Parks Authority. I asked him a few questions, and his answers teach us the following:

1. Porcupines might choose an existing tomb/cave for their home. If the opening is large enough for humans to enter it, however, they will discard it. At most, they will enter it while surveying their territory.

2. Finding a few quills is not an indication; if porcupines dwell in a certain spot, you will find many quills. Moreover, porcupines may enter and even have head-to-head fights in a tomb or cave; but that still doesn't mean they live in it.

3. The fact that no porcupine burrows were found in the tomb is indicative and decisive, of course.

4. Regardless of point 3, porcupines tend to avoid digging into rocks, including limestone; they prefer to dig in the soil gaps between rocks.

5. While digging, porcupines scatter the debris around the opening; a 1.5 meters high pile is simply beyond their capacity and against their own interest since it would be blocking their own burrow.

So the porcupine theory seems to be out of the way for good, and the ceiling is still there, intact and plastered for the most part. The white limestone-soil pile remains a mystery, which should not be addressed by archaeologists or historians. Yet experts in both disciplines would indubitably be very helpful in addressing the other questions that have arisen by and in the G-tomb.

On Saturday, March 19, 2011, I went there again to complete the set of photos needed for this article. When I climbed the hill back to my car, I met a man of the Israeli Roads and Public Works Department (Maatz); he was measuring and recording the area adjacent to the nearby highway. He told me that the department is preparing to enlarge the highway, and the IAA will conduct salvation excavations in a narrow strip along the east side of the highway. I looked at his map and understood that once again they will NOT reach the G-tomb and the "industrial zone" around it.

In order to stress the uniqueness of the G-tomb, we can compare it to other Galilean tombs:



Photo 12 – Khanania Tomb facade



Photo 13 – Meiron Tomb facade



Photo 14 – Habonim Tomb Slab & rolling stone

1. The fact that the tomb builders had to start it with a vertical shaft (photo 1), compared to other tombs' openings (photos 12 – 17; Habonim tomb is not Galilean, yet it remains faithful to the "classic" plan of starting a tomb into an inclining rock).



Photo 15 - Merot facade



Photo 16 – Merot niche facade



Photo 17 - RYBL tomb, Zippori

2. The G-tomb ceiling appears in photos 3, 4. It is almost completely intact. We can compare it with the Dalton and Merot tomb ceilings (photos 18, 19, 20, 21). Obviously, there is a visible difference between the status of "collapsed" and "intact"; even when we discuss this both in partial terms.



Photo 18 – Dalton Tomb



Photo 19 – Dalton Tomb



Photo 20 – Merot Tomb



Photo 21 - Merot Tomb

3. The plaster; again, photos 3, 4, show the G-tomb plaster clearly enough. In comparison, see photos 23 – 25; although modern believers light fires inside them and paint them white or light blue, the ceilings and walls are not plastered. Photo 24 shows a temporary burial niche and clear carving marks, but no plaster. The ceiling of this tomb's main chamber is painted light blue. Photo 25, the fish tomb, shows that the ceiling of this tomb is blackened with a heavy layer of soot. When we scratch it, bare rock is exposed. It is the same with the large Hillel tomb, photo 22.



Photo 22 – Hillel Tomb



Photo 25 – Fish Tomb

4. Except for the G-tomb, all the other tombs have one clear component in common: the niches are all on the same level in each tomb respectively.



Photo 23 – Kisma Tomb



Photo 24 – Kisma Tomb

The G-tomb is undoubtedly unique; it is plastered, its niches are not on one level, its opening was not carved into an inclining rock. These elements call for further professional study by archaeologists and historians, and in this case, zoologists and forensic experts might be of great assistance.

Note: the front wall plan is an inside-out aspect.

I wish to thank engineer Moshe Segev (B.Sc) for the G-tomb plans and Mordi Shaposhnik for transportation.

Eldad Keynan