Graffiti of Sailing Vessels from the Hellenistic and Roman Periods in Jerusalem and the Judean Foothills, Israel

Boaz Zissu

***

The Judean Foothills, a hilly area that stretches eastward for some 30–40 km from the Mediterranean Coast, contains thousands of artificial cavities and chambers hewn out of the chalky bedrock. Throughout history, these underground cavities served the local residents as agricultural installations, quarries, water cisterns, underground stables, *columbaria* tombs and storage facilities for agricultural products. Many of them were hewn out during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In many cases it is difficult to identify their exact chronology and the ethnic identity of their owners.

Many underground facilities in the Judean Foothills were connected by narrow tunnels or burrows that are passable only on all fours and incorporated into hiding systems that were prepared under residents’ homes in the Jewish villages that existed in the region until the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136 CE).

In the planned lecture, we present graffiti of boats, incised on doorposts or lintels of tombs and chambers, some incorporated into underground complexes from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The complexes are located under contemporary Jewish villages. The paper will compare these less known cases to graffiti of sailing vessels from Jerusalem: St. Vartan’s chapel in the Church of Holy Sepulcher, Jason’s Tomb and a ritual immersion bath recently uncovered in the area of Talpiyot.

Pictorial graffiti are especially interesting because of their informal, private and often unplanned character. Graffiti mirror the inner feelings, beliefs and emotions of people, being free from the imperatives of organized codes of art. Therefore, they may reveal to some degree their creators' cognitive world.

We will discuss the purpose of the graffiti of sailing vessels and their archaeological context – the underground chambers and complexes; we will also try to date the graffiti and consider their symbolic significance.