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Contents

English Section

Hebrew Section

PART ONE: EPIGRAPHY, KINGDOM AND ECONOMY IN THE HIGHLANDS

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The Meiron Valley Cave Survey and the Use of Karstic Caves for Refuge in the Roman Period

Yinon Shivtiel and Mechael Osband

Abstract

This article presents the findings from four natural caves in the area of the Meiron ridge, where hundreds of natural caves were first surveyed. In three caves Roman period pottery was discovered and a fourth cave yielded, among other finds, a bronze bowl. The historical, archaeological and methodological significance of the caves and finds are discussed. This is the first archaeological evidence for the use of natural karstic caves that have no signs of preparation or long-term human habitation during the Roman period in this region. Caves of this type were likely intended for use for short periods of time only or for times of emergency and have thus been defined as 'refuge caves'. We suggest that these caves are the first archaeological evidence for the use of refuge caves in the Galilee during times of danger in the Roman period.

For over forty years, subterranean rock-cut caves throughout the Land of Israel, that are attributed to Jews and attest to a method of hiding during the Roman period, have been identified, surveyed, and in some cases excavated (e.g. Kloner & Tepper 1987; Zissu 2001; Shivtiel 2014). These caves, which have been classified into three main types (see below), are located mainly in areas with high concentrations of Jewish settlements, and most likely functioned as places of refuge from the Romans in times of tension and danger, especially during rebellions.

Beginning in 2016 and continuing through 2018, naturally formed karst caves, in the area between the ruins of the old village of Ein Zeitim and the modern Meiron junction, in the Upper Galilee (henceforth, the Meiron Valley), were surveyed by

the Israel Cave Research Center (fig. 1). This was an area of Jewish settlement in the Roman period (Frankel et al. 2001, 110–116, 151–153). To date, 136 natural karstic caves have been surveyed. Roman-period pottery was discovered in three of the caves and a fourth yielded a tin-bronze bowl. This is the first archaeological evidence for the use of these natural, unworked karstic caves by the local population in the Galilee during the Roman period. The finds and their historical, archaeological and methodological significance are presented and discussed below.[1]

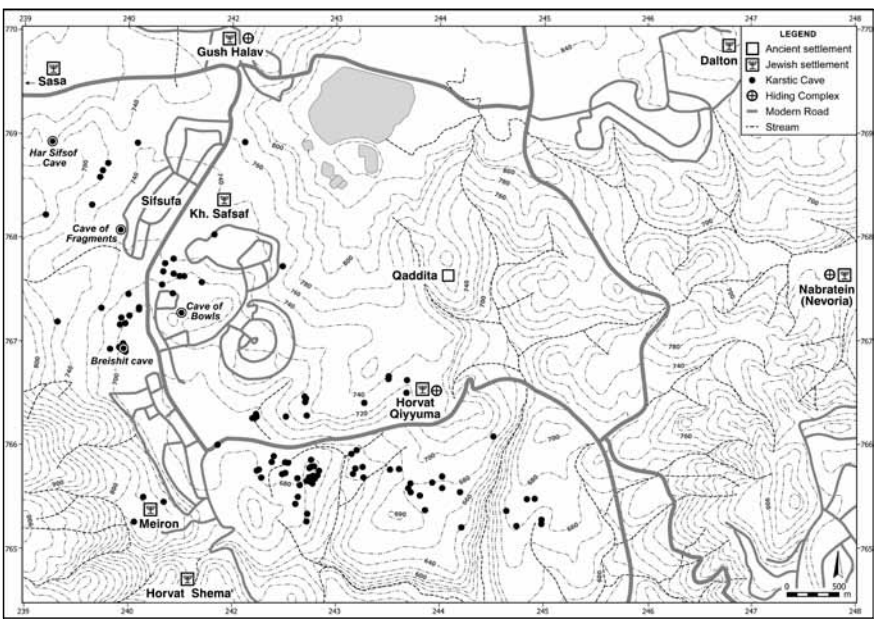

Fig. 1: Map of the survey region

Background and Research Questions

The recent discoveries of Roman-period pottery in natural underground cavities in the Upper Galilee provide evidence of a type of refuge cave used by the local population that has not been recognized previously in this region (see below for discussion of cave types).[2] This type in the Meiron valley is spread out among many caves that are located on the slopes and the valley, where the limestone rocks provide a natural camouflage for the entrances. The movement inside these natural

1 The finds presented in this paper were recovered under the Israel Antiquities Authority survey license S-769/2017, along with Aaron Greener, the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa. We thank him for his help in the survey. We also thank Uri Davidovich for his helpful comments on this paper.

2 For the difference between Refuge Caves and Cliff Shelters see Shivtiel 2016, 176.

subterranean cavities is difficult and requires great effort. Similar subterranean natural caves documented in Judea, Benjamin and Samaria were used at the time of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (e.g. Te'omim and 'Abud caves; Zissu et al. 2009, 405–411; 2017, 164–165).

The Caves Survey

Karstic caves in the region of the Meiron junction, and specifically toward the foothills and valleys surrounding the Meiron mountains, were surveyed by Vladamir Boslov and Yuri Lisovets of the Israel Cave Research Center, beginning in 2016. Notably, over 350 caves in the Peqi'in mountain range, directly west of the survey area delineated above, have also been surveyed and have yielded no evidence of human activity from the Roman period. The region consists mainly of dolomite rock found in the Cenomanian Sakhnin Formation (*Zefat Map*) with hundreds of subterranean karst-formed cavities. In all of the 136 caves, the discovery was followed by a recorded speleological survey and documentation, including photography, location coordinates with portable GPS, cave descriptions and, in selected cases, cave sketches. The majority of these caves exhibit no traces of human activity.

In 20 caves, there were small quantities of ceramic body sherds near the entrance but none were found inside, and the finds are probably related to activity that took place near and outside the caves. Four caves yielded evidence of human activity (see fig. 1), three from the Roman period (the Cave of Bowls, the Cave of Fragments, the Breishit Cave) and one from the Chalcolithic period (the Sifsof Cave).[3]

Ancient settlements with remains from the Roman period and later, at Sifsufa, Meiron, Horvat Shema, Gush Halav and Qiyuma, have been surveyed and excavated in the area of the caves (Meyers et al. 1981; 1990; Frankel et al. 2001, sites 304, 305, 308, 311, 348). All the caves discussed below are at within ca. 3 km of a Roman period settlement. The immediate area around the caves was not settled in the Roman period and was probably agricultural land, belonging to some of the aforementioned settlements at that time.[4]

3 The caves were named by the first surveyors, Vladimir Boslov and Yuri Lisovets.

4 There is no evidence of a main Roman road directly near the caves.

The Cave of Bowls

The cave is located northeast of the Meiron junction. It is a natural cave on three levels (fig. 2). The entrance to the cave (60x70 cm) is in the middle of a field of

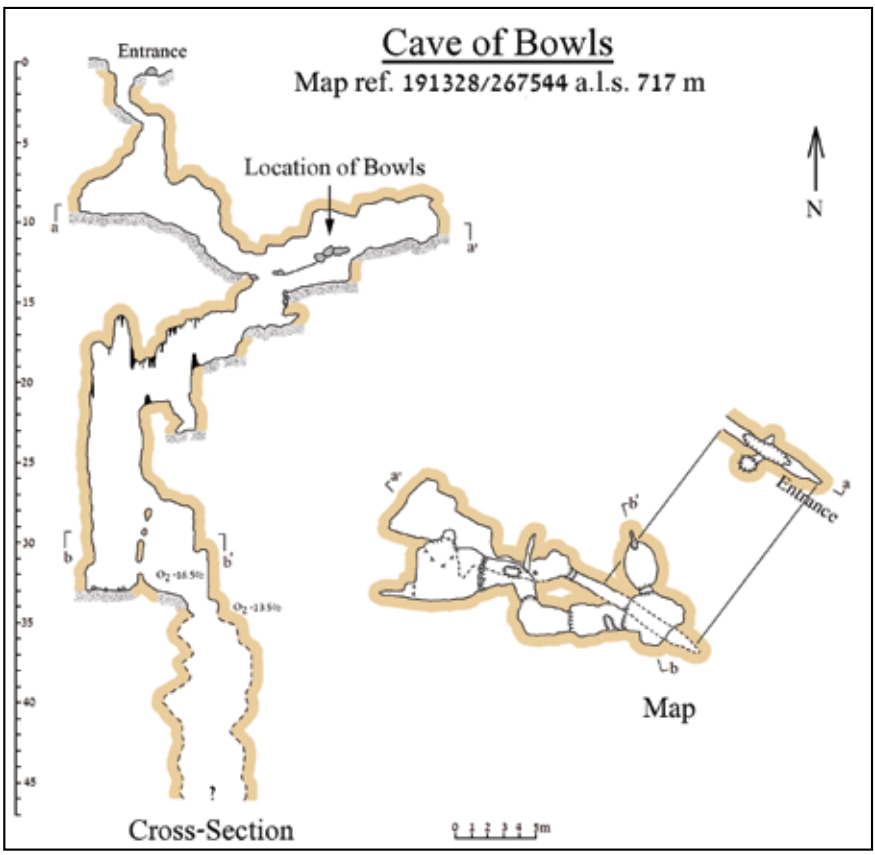

Fig. 2: Map of the Cave of Bowls (Drawing: B. Langford & L. Platsak)

large boulders. After a descent of two meters from the entrance, negotiated with some difficulty, a short slope was reached at the end of which is a steep vertical crack (1.5x8 m), which required a rope to descend to the first cavity (4x12 m; 2.5 m high). On the northern side of the cavity two cooking vessels were found (fig. 3), and fragments of a third vessel found further inside the cavity. One vessel, a cooking bowl with a double grooved rim and two handles (diameter 22 cm), was found completely intact. The second vessel was a casserole with ledge rim, carinated shoulder and two handles, that was nearly whole (diameter 23 cm), missing only a small section of the rim and below it. The third was the same type as the second and consisted of a connecting rim and body fragment. The three vessels (fig. 4; for

description and parallels see Appendix A) all date to the Roman period and are typical of Galilean cookware from the second–fourth centuries CE (Adan-Bayewitz 2003, 16–18, forms 1B and 3B). Five additional body sherds of the same cookware fabric as these cooking vessels were also found. These come from at least two additional vessels, one of which is a closed vessel such as a cooking pot. The form and fabric of the vessels are common in the Galilee, with the nearby site of Kefar Hananya being the main producer of such vessels in this region (Adan-Bayewitz 1993; 2008). The pottery showed no burn marks or signs of having been used. Additional lower levels, at a depth of four meters, that could be accessed only by rope, were difficult to explore because of the lack of oxygen already felt in the downward shaft.[5]

Fig. 3: Casserole and cooking bowl from the Cave of Bowls

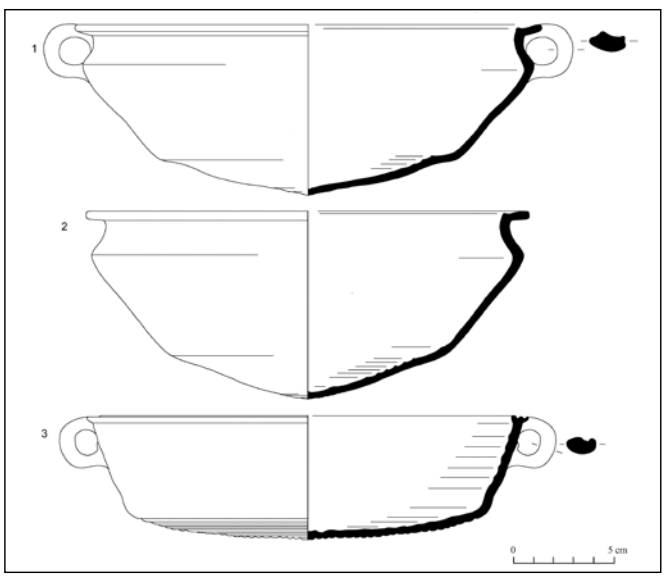

Fig 4: Pottery from the Cave of Bowls (Drawing: A. Iemolin, Zinman Institute of Archiology)

5 A lack of oxygen was also common in other caves in the survey area.

The Cave of Fragments

This cave is located between large boulders near the fence of the modern settlement of Sifsufa (fig. 5). The opening is 50x50 cm. There is a vertical descent of three meters

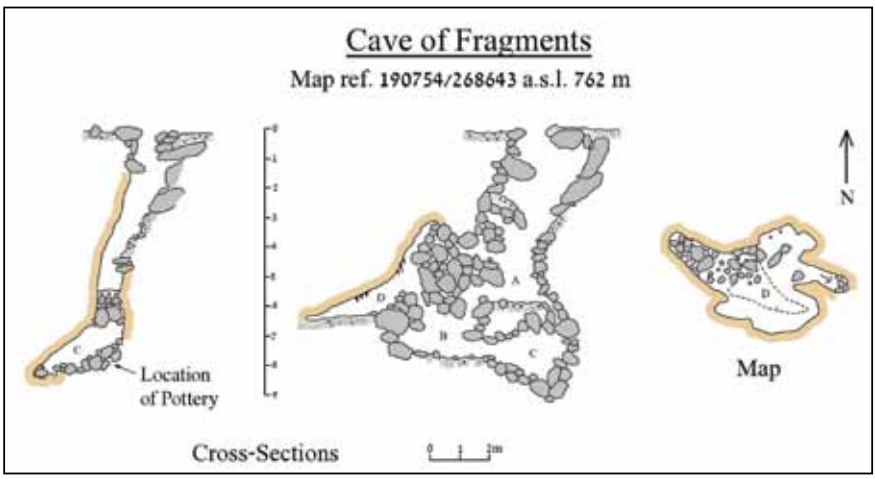

Fig. 5: Map of the Cave of Fragments (Drawing: S. Orlev & Y. Zissu)

inside a karstic crevice (fig. 6). On a shelf below the opening, the handle of a cooking pot/bowl was found. Below this descent is an additional drop between large boulders, for a depth of about four meters, leading straight to a small cavity which was blocked by small collapsed stones. Beyond the collapse, an additional cavity was found, which requires a descent of three meters down a rock slope. The cave is divided into four cavities. Pottery fragments, including the rims of a cooking bowl and a casserole, were found on the southern side (fig. 7; for description and parallels see Appendix A). The base of another vessel, that was probably a cooking bowl, was also found. These were of the same typological forms as those of the pottery from the Cave of Bowls. This pottery also showed no burn marks or signs of having been used.

fig 6: A narrow path at the Cave of Fragments

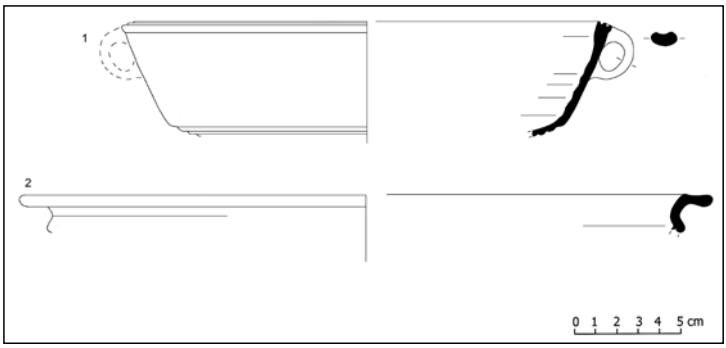

Fig. 7: Pottery from the Cave of Fragments (Drawing: A. Iermolin, Zinman Institute of Archaeology)

The Breishit Cave

This cave is located on the slopes of Mt. Meiron to the east. The entrance is 0.4x0.6 m. The opening is narrow and difficult to enter (fig. 8). The descent is into a

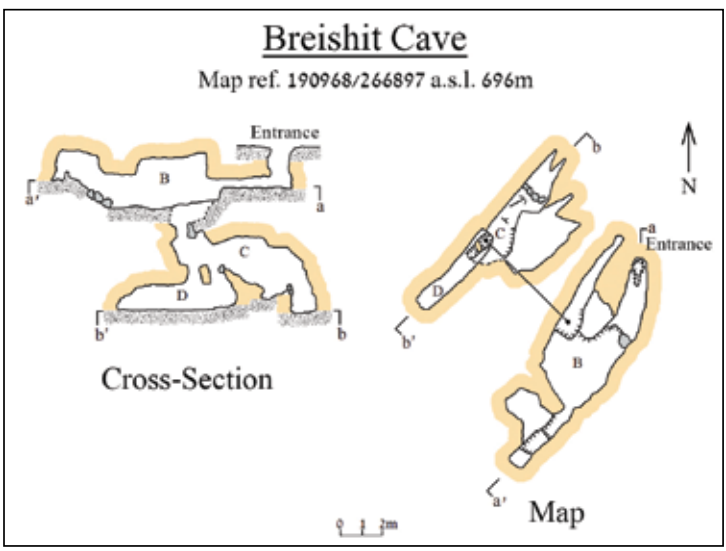

Fig. 8: Map of the Breishit Cave (Drawing: B. Langford & L. Platsak)

narrow vertical crack to a depth of two meters (fig. 9), from where there is a narrow vertical tunnel of about two meters, leading into a cavity of 3x10 m with a height of 5 m. Potsherds were discovered in this space. This cavity has a narrow twisted descent to a depth of six meters into an additional

Fig. 9: A narrow path at the Breishit Cave

cavity, measuring 0.6x4.0 m. The additional cavity descends further into a small space, in the center of which is a circular shaft with two rectangular stones on its sides. The shaft descends to a depth of about two meters, where several additional potsherds were found (fig. 10; for description and parallels see Appendix A). Two rims and one handle were recovered. One cooking-pot rim could be dated to the Early Roman period, from the mid-first–mid-second centuries CE (Adan-Bayewitz 2003, 15–16, form 4A).

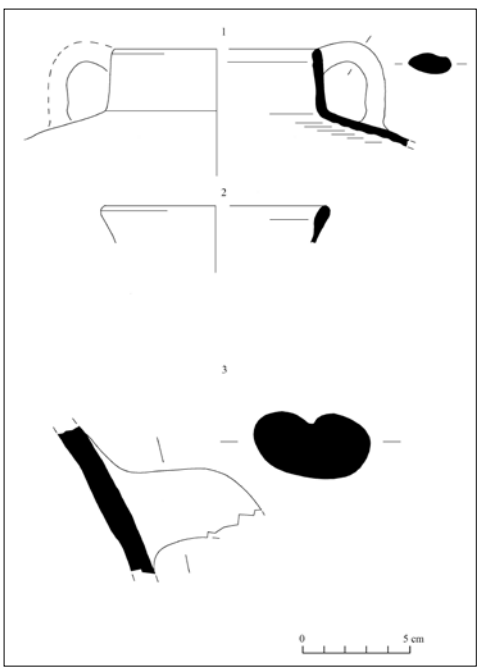

Fig. 10: Pottery from the Breishit Cave (Drawing: A. Iermolin, Zinman Institute of Archaeology)

The Sifsof Cave

The cave is located 3 km north of the modern-day village of Sifsufa. The cave can be entered by a narrow slit, where entry and exit are subject to numerous technical difficulties. Immediately after squeezing into the slot, a narrow bedrock shelf is reached at a depth of 10 m from the bottom. This cave contains remains from the Chalcolithic period.[6] A metal bowl with handles was found inside (fig. 11). The bowl is 31 cm in diameter and 5 cm deep, weighing 862 g, with an upturned rim and iron handles. It was examined by Naama Yahalom-Mack at the Institute of Earth Sciences of the Hebrew University, using a Bruker (Tracer III-V) pXRF (courtesy of

6 The cave is being investigated by Uri Davidovich, Micka Ullman and other colleagues.

Fig. 11: The metal bowl from the Sifsof Cave (Photo: A. Gracier)

Yigal Erel). The results showed that the bowl was made of tin-bronze. However, the exact date of this item has not yet been determined. Typologically similar bowls are found in the Roman period but are also known from as late as the Mamluk period.[7]

Summary of the Finds from the Caves

Pottery from the Roman period was found in a surface survey inside three of the 136 caves surveyed. All of these were natural karstic caves with difficult access. In all of the caves the ceramic finds came from inner cavities and could not have been washed inside, but must have been purposely placed in them. In two of the caves, the Cave of Bowls and the Cave of Fragments, the same pottery types were found. These types range chronologically between the second–fourth centuries and are most common in the second–third centuries CE (Adan-Bayewitz 2003,16–18; Loffreda 2008, 205–208; Balouka 2013, 28, 32–33). These forms are common in the Galilee and in settlements near the surveyed caves such as Shema, Meiron, Sasa, and Gush Halav (Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 216–218). The small quantity of finds in these caves does not allow for a more precise dating. The metal bowl from the Sifsof Cave may also date to the Roman period but, as noted above, it remains uncertain.

7 For a similar Early Roman bowl from Pompeii, see Oettel 1991, 47 (Cat. nos. 19), Pl. 18.2. With thanks to Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom for bringing this to our attention. We would like to thank Uri Davidovich, Micka Ullman and Ido Wachtel for their help and permission to publish the bowl.

Discussion

The caves described above raise interesting related archaeological and historical questions concerning their function, the origin of the people who used them, and whether they can be connected to any known historical events from the Roman period.

Hundreds of subterranean caves have been surveyed and documented in the Galilee (Shivtiel 2014). Similar caves were found in Judea, many of which included archaeological evidence for their use at the time of the First Jewish Revolt and the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (e.g. Kloner & Zissu 2003; 2014; Eshel & Porat 2009; Mor 2016, 217–249). Recently, similar subterranean caves have also been documented in Benjamin and Samaria (e.g. Raviv et al. 2015).

These caves can be divided into three main types:

1. **Hiding complexes:** Subterranean hewn cavities found mainly beneath or in close proximity to sites that were settled in the Roman period. In many cases they contain intricate systems of rooms and tunnels (Kloner & Tepper 1987; Shivtiel 2014, 104–223). This method of defence and survival, by digging tunnels and burrows for the inhabitants to hide in, required suitable geological conditions, namely mainly soft limestone of the local chalk known as *kirton* (Shivtiel & Frumkin 2014, 78). The burrows, which had few entrances and exits, were designed for underground concealment for a limited period and offered the possibility of temporary escape. Close to 70 of these have been found in the Galilee (Shivtiel 2016, 176). Hundreds more have been discovered in the Judean foothills. Nearly all are in relatively close proximity to ancient Jewish settlements (Zissu 2001, 369). Archaeological evidence from some of these complexes dates their use primarily to the Roman period, especially to the first and second centuries CE at the time of the First Jewish Revolt and the Bar-Kokhba Revolt. The distinctly defensive use of these hiding complexes necessitated the camouflage of entrances and exits, such as entry via cisterns. In some cases, cisterns, ritual baths, and other installations were hewn inside them (e.g. Tepper 1987, 46–48; Shivtiel 2014, 222–223).

2. **Cliff shelters:** Natural caves formed by karstic processes, which in many cases contain hewn installations, found mainly in the Galilean cliffs, used as temporary safe havens (Shivtiel 2014, 13–17). Josephus relates to the use of such caves in the Galilee at time of the First Jewish Revolt (*Jewish War 2*, 569–574). These were found in close proximity to Jewish settlements and, most noticeably (but not exclusively), near those in which there were no hiding complexes.

3. **Refuge Caves:** Natural karst-formed caves, located mainly in steep places, especially in the Judean Desert, in the Land of Benjamin, and more recently found in other regions. Jews from various places fled from the Roman authorities

to these caves in times of distress and danger. Numerous archaeological findings have been discovered, indicating that many of these caves were used during the Roman period, especially during the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (e.g. Eshel & Amit 1998; Eshel & Porat 2009). In the Galilee, only hiding complexes and cliff shelters have been documented (Shivtiel 2014). Refuge caves from the Galilee have not been previously reported or published.

The underground cavities in the Galilee that have been investigated until now can be classified into two main types of caves: Cliff Shelters and Hiding Complexes. The four caves presented above are of a different type and are here called refuge caves. The 136 surveyed caves in the region of the Meiron valley are not suitable for long-term habitation, including the three caves that yielded pottery from the Roman period. First and foremost, access to them is very difficult since most can only be entered with the use of ropes. Notably, there were no signs of hewing and no preparations were made for habitation, not even minor preparations, such as cutting niches for lamps. This differs from the cliff shelters, which are also located in hard limestone in natural caves, but underwent preparation, such as installing niches for lamps, cisterns, ritual baths, loops for ropes, etc. (Shivtiel 2014, 55–87). In addition, the cave floors are muddy, they are damp inside, and all the cavities are full of smooth slippery rocks.

The pottery seems to have been placed purposely in the inner cavities.This is best explained as being placed there in a time of danger. The Jewish settlements nearby, like many settlements in the Galilee, are the most likely origin for these curated artifacts. In our view, the people who left the vessels were from one of the Jewish villages nearby, most likely from Kh. Safsaf or Meiron, which are in relatively close proximity to the caves. The same types of pottery are common in these settlements. In addition, in many of these communities, unlike other Jewish settlements in the Galilee, there were no hiding complexes or cliff shelters nearby, with the exception of Gush Halav, Qiyoma and Nabratein (Shivtiel 2014, 112–113, 121–124).[8]

The karst caves presented here differ from hiding complexes and cliff shelters in that there are no signs of prolonged maintenance and the finds inside are mainly related to a time of imminent danger. The limited use of three, and possibly four, from among 136 caves may indicate that in this part of the country there was no widespread hostile activity against the Jewish population, unlike elsewhere in the Galilee, where hundreds of caves used for hiding have been found. Another possibility is that the available caves in the area were unable to provide security

8 Note that geological structure of the Meiron valley makes hewing hiding complexes difficult.

for those in hiding, due to a lack of oxygen or conditions that were too harsh for refugee life. A third possibility is that more caves were used as refuge caves, but additional evidence has not been found, due to the limits of the survey. Further exploration and excavations may reveal a more intense use of the caves in the area.

It is difficult to connect the use of these caves to any single recognizable historical event and there is always the possibility that they are connected to an event unknown to us from the historical literature. Historical sources do relate to the use of caves in the Galilee in times of tension between the Romans and the Jews (e.g. at the time of Herod and during the First Jewish Revolt; Shivtiel 2016, 180–188). The pottery from the Breishit Cave may be connected to one of these events.[9]

The pottery forms found in the Cave of Bowls and the Cave of Fragments are typologically similar and probably date to the same time period. They clearly post-date the first Jewish Revolt in the Galilee (ca. 67 CE), as these forms are not found in well-dated sites dating to, or close to, the time of the First Jewish Revolt (e.g. Tel Anafa, Gamla and Iotopata; Adan-Bayewitz 2003, 15–16). These pottery forms are common beginning in the second century CE (ibid., 16–17), but they also continue into the 4th century.[10] In our opinion, the natural karstic caves would only be used when there was actual danger. While one cannot rule out the possibility that the life-threatening event for the use of these caves is connected to the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, to date the archaeological evidence for this event in the Galilee is inconclusive.[11]

9 There is evidence of a Jewish presence in the Upper Galilee beginning with the end of the Hellenistic period. See Frankel et al. 2001, 110.

10 In the mid-third and fourth centuries CE there are other 'Kefar Hananya' forms that are more common in the Galilee. While clearly more pottery, or other additional evidence, is needed to make a more definitive chronological assessment, the absence of these forms, such as cooking-bowl forms 1C, 1D and especially 1E (which is disproportionately common in the Galilee in the Roman period; Leibner 2009, 53, 82; 2014, 396), suggests a date for the Cave of Bowls and the Cave of Fragments between the beginning of the second century and no later than the mid-third century CE.

11 Aharon Oppenheimer (1977) dealt with literary sources of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt in the Galilee. Zeev Safrai (1981, 21) claimed that the revolt was a significant event in the Galilee, but not to the extent of which it was in Judah. Yuval Shahar (2003) claimed that hiding complexes in the Galilee were from this time. Mordechai Aviam (2004, 123–132) attributed Galilean hiding complexes to Jewish use at the time of the First Jewish Revolt, and to the second century onwards. Menahem Mor argued recently that hiding complexes in the Galilee cannot be connected to the Bar-Kokhba Revolt and that there is little evidence of this revolt in the Galilee (Mor 2016, 165–168). Nevertheless, burnt contexts from the time of Hadrian at Wadi Ḥamam, that may be connected to the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (Leibner & Bijovsky 2013; Leibner 2015, 350–353), and the finds from the hiding complex at 'Enot Sho'im, which were dated to the second–third centuries CE (Leibner et al. 2015), leave the debate open.

Conclusions

Unlike their Judean counterparts, many of the Galilean villages, where hiding complexes were found, continued to be settled after the first and second centuries CE, and in many cases into the Byzantine period and later.[12] This raises the possibility of longer periods of use or at least maintenance for potential use of the hiding complexes and cliff shelters by the local population. It has therefore been difficult, without excavation, to define the timeframe in which they were used. In addition, while hiding complexes and cliff shelters have been found in areas of Jewish settlements, only one hiding complex has been found in the survey area presented in this study, at Horvat Qiyoma (Shivtiel 2014: 121; see note 7 above).

The finds presented above are too few to allow for any significant historical conclusions and without more intensive surveying and archaeological excavations of additional caves the suggestions made here remain tentative. However, they should not be considered a mere archaeological curiosity since these unhewn refuge caves evidently served a function that was similar to that of the hiding complexes and cliff shelters in times of great danger and tension in the Roman period.

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Appendix A: Pottery from the Caves (see above figs. 4, 7, 10)

Figure	Type	Description	Parallels	Date
4:1	Casserole	Red (2.5YR 5/8) with a few white and black grits	Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 3B, 119–124; Balouka 2013, OCP1b, 28	early 2nd–early/mid 4th century CE
4:2	Casserole	Red (2.5YR 4/8) with a few white and black grits	Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 3B, 119–124; Balouka 2013, OCP1b, 28	early 2nd–early/mid 4th century CE
4:3	Cooking Bowl	Red (2.5YR 5/8) with a few white and black grits	Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 1B, 91–97; Balouka 2013, GB1b, 32–33	early 2nd–early/mid 4th century CE.
7:1	Cooking Bowl	Red (2.5YR 5/8) with a few white and black grits	Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 1B, 91–97; Balouka 2013, GB1b, 32–33	early 2nd–early/mid 4th century CE
7:2	Casserole	Red (2.5YR 5/8) with a few white and black grits	Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 3B, 119–124; Balouka 2013, OCP1b, 28	early 2nd–early/mid 4th century CE
10:1	Cooking pot	Red (2.5YR 5/8) with a few white and black grits	Adan-Bayewitz 1993, 4A, 124–126; Balouka 2013: CP2, 21	mid 1st century BCE–early/mid 2nd century CE
10:2	Cooking pot?	Red (2.5YR 5/6) with many small white and a few small black grits, small rim	-	-
10:3	Handle, Possibly GCW	Light red (2.5YR 6/4) with some large white grits and some small white and black grits	Frankel et al. 2001, 61–62; Leibner 2009, 22	Mainly Hellenistic

PART TWO: STUDIES IN THE GROUND'S DEPTH

PART THREE: ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANCIENT REALITY IN MOUNT EPHRAIM AND ENVIRONS

List of Authors

Evegeny Aharonovich	Staff Officer Unit of Archaeology in Judea and Samaria
Prof. Shmuel Aḥituv	Department of Bible, Archaeology & Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
Prof. Zohar Amar	The Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, Bar-Ilan University
Prof. Shimon Dar	The Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, Bar-Ilan University
Prof. Amos Frumkin	Cave Research Center, The Fredy & Nadine Herrmann Institute of Earth Science, The Hebrew University
Prof. Yossi Garfinkel	Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University
Prof. Shimon Gibson	Department of History, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Gideon Goldenberg	Antiquities Theft Prevention Unit, Israel Antiquities Authority
Ilan Hadad	Antiquities Theft Prevention Unit, Israel Antiquities Authority
Binyamin Har-Even	Staff Officer Unit of Archaeology in Judea and Samaria
Dr. Eitan Klein	Antiquities Theft Prevention Unit, Israel Antiquities Authority; Department of Land of Israel Studies, Ashkelon Academic College
Boaz Langford	Cave Research Center, The Fredy & Nadine Herrmann Institute of Earth Science, The Hebrew University
Prof. Aren M. Maeir	Institute of Archaeology, The Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, Bar-Ilan University
Dr. Mechael Osband	The Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa; Department of Land of Israel Studies, Ohalo College
Dr. Orit Peleg-Barkat	Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University
Dr. Dvir Raviv	Institute of Archaeology, The Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, Bar-Ilan University

Tal Rogovski	Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University
Prof. Zeev Safrai	The Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, Bar-Ilan University
Dr. Avi Sasson	Department of Land of Israel Studies, Ashkelon Academic College
Amichay Schwartz	Israel Heritage Department, Ariel University
Dr. Boyd Seevers	Department of Biblical & Theological Studies, University of Northwestern, St. Paul
Prof. Itzick Shai	Institute of Archaeology, The Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, Ariel University
Prof. Abraham O. Shemesh	Israel Heritage Department, Ariel University
Dr. Yinon Shivtiel	Zefat Academic College; Cave Research Center
Aharon Tavger	Institute of Archaeology, Israel Heritage Department, Ariel University
Dr. Shulamit Terem	Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University
Prof. Boaz Zissu	Institute of Archaeology, The Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, Bar-Ilan University