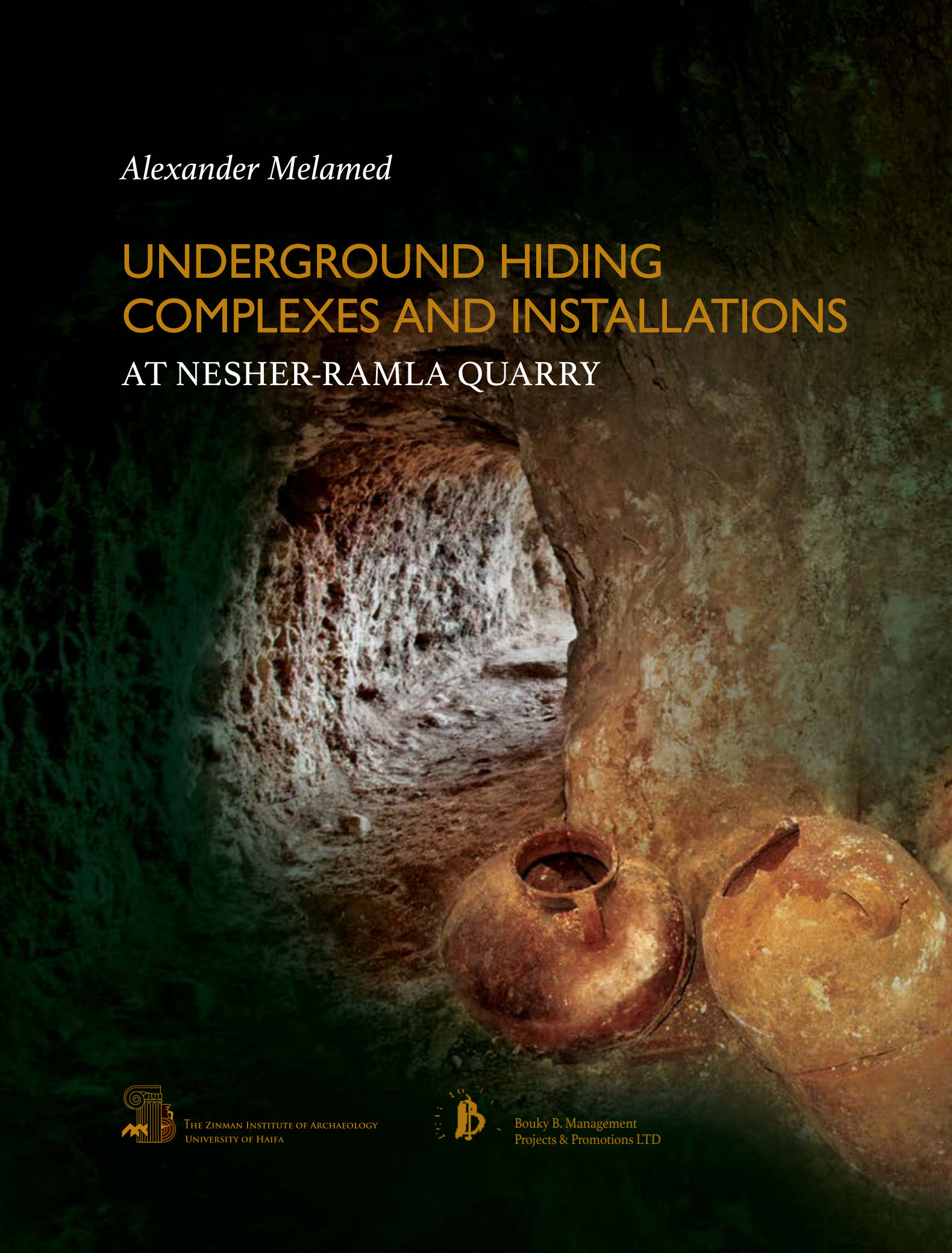
*Alexander Melamed*

# UNDERGROUND HIDING COMPLEXES AND INSTALLATIONS

## AT NESHER-RAMLA QUARRY



The Zinman Institute of Archaeology
University of Haifa

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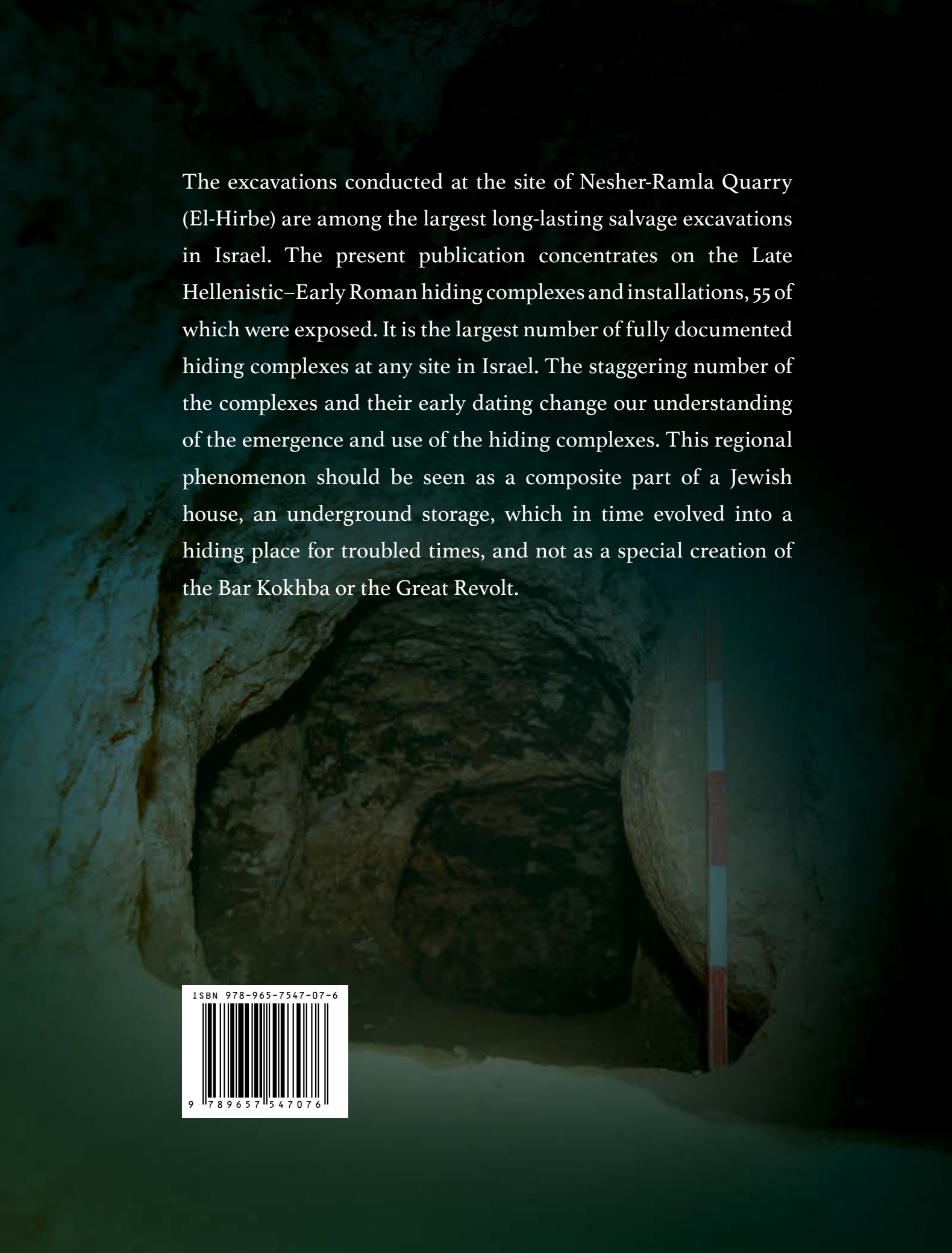
The excavations conducted at the site of Nesher-Ramla Quarry (El-Hirbe) are among the largest long-lasting salvage excavations in Israel. The present publication concentrates on the Late Hellenistic–Early Roman hiding complexes and installations, 55 of which were exposed. It is the largest number of fully documented hiding complexes at any site in Israel. The staggering number of the complexes and their early dating change our understanding of the emergence and use of the hiding complexes. This regional phenomenon should be seen as a composite part of a Jewish house, an underground storage, which in time evolved into a hiding place for troubled times, and not as a special creation of the Bar Kokhba or the Great Revolt.



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ALEXANDER MELAMED

# UNDERGROUND HIDING COMPLEXES AND INSTALLATIONS AT NESHER-RAMLA QUARRY

*With contributions by*

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# PREFACE

The site of Nesher-Ramla Quarry (El-Hirbe) is located in the north-west of the Judean Foothills (Shephelah). The works conducted at the site for almost two decades are among the largest long-lasting salvage excavations in Israel. The present publication concentrates on the Late Hellenistic–Early Roman hiding complexes and installations, 55 of which were exposed. It is the largest number of fully documented hiding complexes at any site in Israel. The staggering number of the complexes and their early dating change our understanding of the emergence and use of the hiding complexes. This regional phenomenon should be seen as a composite part of a Jewish house, an underground storage, which in time evolved into a hiding place for troubled times, and not as a special creation of the Bar Kokhba or the Great Revolt.

The author wishes to thank the head of the expedition, Shlomo Kol-Yaʿakov, and all members of the field staff for their participation in the excavations. Thanks are due to Viatcheslav Pirsky and Sergey Alon (Plans and Sections), Tomer Appelbaum (Photography: field), Anna Hayat (Photography: coins) and Tal Rogovski (Photography: pottery and small finds) for their contribution to the present publication.

Special thanks are due to Bouky Boaz, the logistical and administrative director of the expedition. The author is grateful to the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, the University of Haifa, for the academic patronage. A debt of gratitude is owed to the Nesher Israel Cement Enterprises Ltd. for financing this long-term excavation project and for providing much of the technological assistance in the field.

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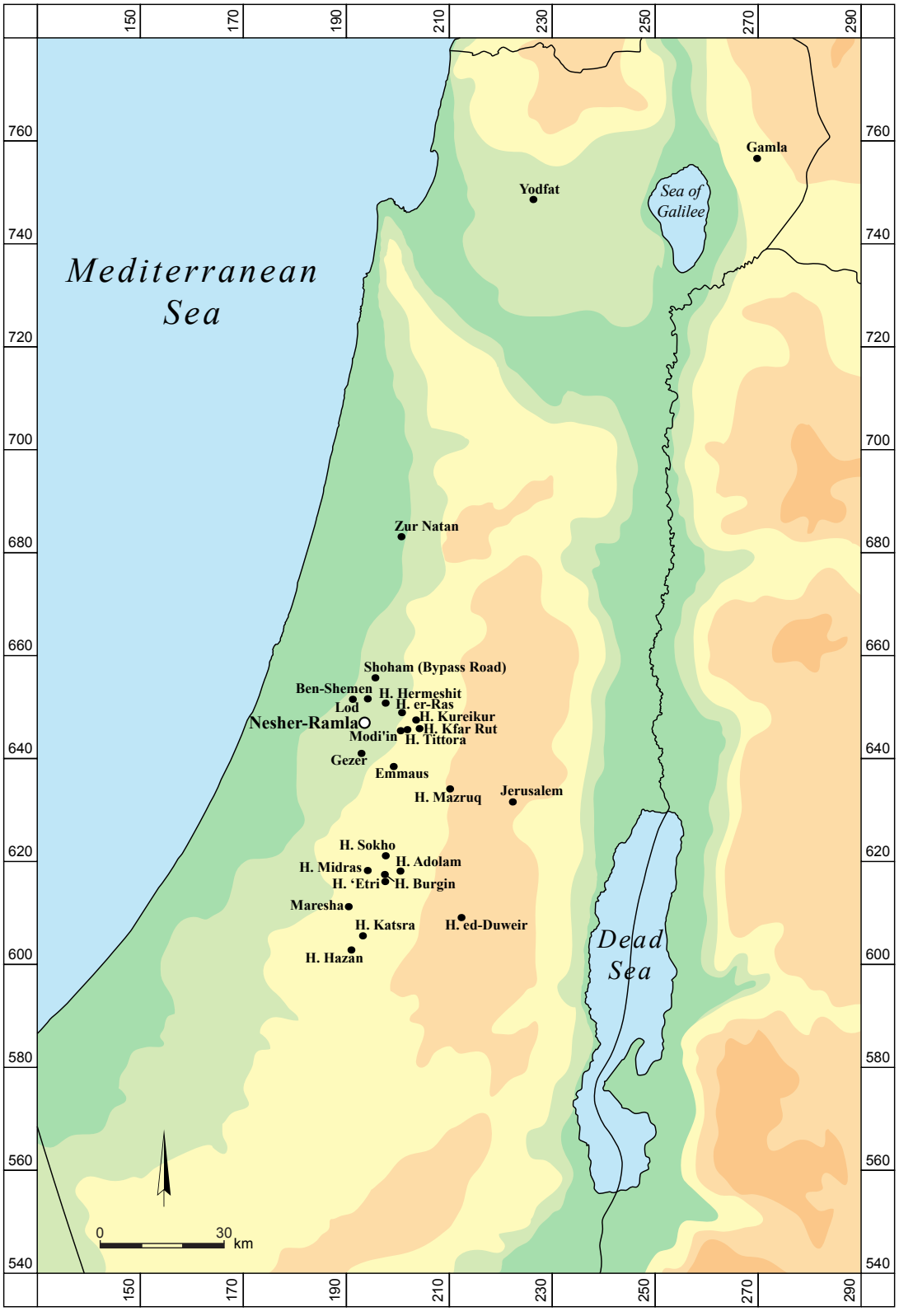


**Fig. 1.1** General location map of the sites mentioned in the text.

CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

*Alexander Melamed*

## 1.1 GEOGRAPHICAL AND GEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SITE

The site of Nesher-Ramla Quarry (El-Hirbe) is located in the north-west of the Judean Foothills (Shephelah), about 5 km east of Ramla, 5 km south-east of Lod and about 6 km north of Tel Gezer (Fig. 1.1). It lies in the area of operation of the Nesher-Ramla Cement Factory quarry (New Israel Grid [NIG]: 646760/193222), hence its name. The site is enclosed by Ayalon River in the west, road no. 1 in the east-north-east, and road no. 431 in the south (Fig. 1.2). During the Roman period, a major road passed next to the site, leading from Lod-Diospolis, through Emmaus, to Jerusalem (Roll 1976: 39). The site extends over two hills, 110–125 m above sea level, overlooking the coastal plain in the west, Tel Gimzo in the north-east, Tel Gezer and the Judean Foothills in the south.

The geological composition of the Nesher-Ramla Quarry site includes a 4–5 m deep layer of hard Nāri rock (calcrete) and up to 40 m deep layer of soft limestone from Menuha Formation. The hills are partially covered by alluvial soil (Harsit) of varied depth. On the northern slopes, and especially on the western slopes (bordering Ayalon River), the depth of the soil reaches 5–6 m (for the geology details see Mor 2012).

## 1.2 HISTORY OF THE SITE

Salvage excavations of the Nesher-Ramla Quarry begun in mid-1990s as a result of fast developing quarrying. Various bodies were responsible for the excavations at first (Avrutis 2012: 4, Table 1.1), but since 2006 all major excavations were conducted under the direction of Shlomo Kol-Ya'akov, under the academic auspices of the

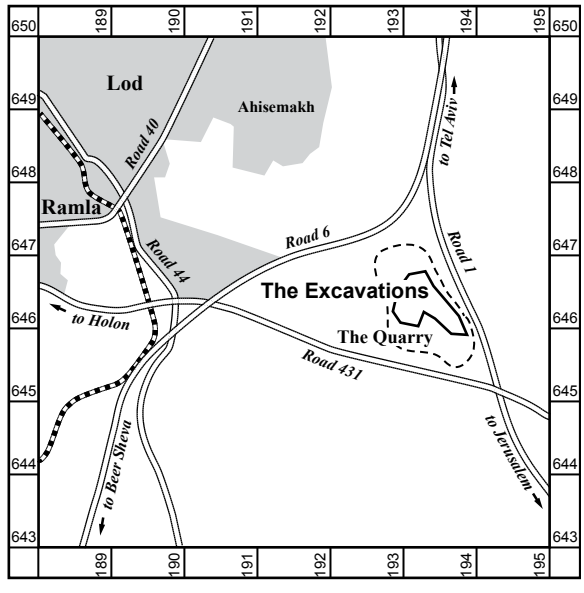


**Fig. 1.2.**
Nesher-Ramla Quarry – location map.

Zinman Institute of Archeology, University of Haifa.[1]

The large-scale excavations revealed that human activity at the site begun in the Middle Paleolithic and was related to the Mousterian culture (Zaidner et al. 2014). During the Late Chalcolithic period, the settlement at the site included residential and burial areas on the surface together with natural caves adapted to various activities. Tombs of Early Bronze I period were discovered as well (Avrutis 2012).

After a long settlement gap, human activity resumed during the Persian period. Assigned to this period were a necropolis on the western slopes of the western hill and several agricultural installations (Avrutis 2015). The remains from the Late Hellenistic period are also mainly burial complexes (Kol-Ya'akov 2010; 2018). Without any significant remains of the settlement proper, it is not possible to tell if during these two periods the site was inhabited continuously or periodically.

The settlement reached its peak in the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods. To these periods assigned are numerous water cisterns, olive presses, winepresses (Avrutis 2015), quarries, ritual baths (Melamed 2010a, 2018a),[2] *kokhim* tombs (Kol-Ya'akov 2010: 99–119; 2018: 79–114) and hiding complexes (Melamed 2010b, 2018b, this volume). The remains are mainly underground installations, since the surface settlement was almost entirely destroyed by the Byzantine-period pronounced activity at the site. In the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods, the site was inhabited by Jews, as evident by the large number of ritual baths (*miqvaot*), the distinct burial custom of the *kokhim* tombs, and finds such as stone "measuring cups." This Jewish settlement was part of the rural-agricultural hinterland of the city of Lod-Diospolis (Zelinger 2009).

The Jewish settlement was probably damaged during the Great Revolt. In the period between the rebellions, the settlement continued to exist on a smaller scale, as evident from the ceramic and numismatic finds. Throughout the excavation, not a single coin of Bar Kokhba was found, which indicates that the settlement probably ceased before the break of the Bar Kokhba Revolt or shortly after the revolt broke out.

After a gap in the second and third centuries CE, the settlement at the site resumed in the fourth century. In the sixth and seventh centuries (Late Byzantine and Early Islamic periods) the settlement reached its peak once again. Assigned to these periods are agricultural installations, water cisterns, kilns, residential quarters, two churches (Kol-Ya'akov in prep., Zelinger and Di Segni 2006), a bathhouse (Avrutis 2018) and many burial installations of various types (Kol-Ya'akov 2010, 2018).

The Christian settlement was probably destroyed in the earthquake of 749 CE. There is no evidence of any significant human activity at the site from the mid-eighth century until the Mamluk period. The Mamluk period remains, excavated in recent years, will be published in the future.

Despite years of excavations and a wealth of finds that they yielded, the historical name of the Nesher-Ramla Quarry site remains unknown. The modern name "El-Hirbe" (meaning "the ruin" in Arabic) indicates that the remains of the site were familiar to the residents of the region; however, the site received no attention until the 1990s, possibly due to scarcity of noticeable architecture on the surface.

1 It should be noted that parallel to the main excavations, two other excavation projects were conducted at the site: large excavations conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority under the direction of H.Torga (2008–2009); and excavations of an open-air Middle Paleolithic site, directed by Y.Zaidner, under the academic auspices of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa (2010–2011).

2 The ritual baths excavated between 2010 and 2018 will be published in the framework of a separate monograph: A.Melamed (in prep.), *Ritual Baths (Miqva'ot) at Nesher-Ramla Quarry*, Haifa.

## 1.3 RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Excavations at Nesher-Ramla Quarry exposed a rich and diverse activity underneath the surface of the ground. Hundreds of different underground installations dating to the various periods represented at the site were discovered and excavated. The present publication concentrates on the hiding complexes, dozens of which were exposed. A hiding complex is an underground installation hewn into the rock, which is supposed to be hidden and is intended to hide goods (e. g. agricultural produce) and/or people. An access to the installation is usually arranged through a vertical entry shaft that penetrates from the surface. A hiding complex consists of chambers and connection tunnels. Occasionally, locking devices are installed, e. g. rolling stones, designed to block a passage in the tunnels. Some of the hiding complexes are connected to water cisterns or other underground facilities.

It should be emphasized that not all underground installations defined in this monograph as "hiding complexes" were initially hewn for the purpose of hiding humans. About a quarter of the underground complexes were simple and small. They must have been used as underground storage facilities, possibly hidden. In some cases, these facilities were interconnected by tunnels and passages and/or developed over time into elaborate hiding complexes (see Chapter 5).

Systematic research of the hiding complexes in the Judean Foothills began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. David Alon, Amos Kloner, Yigal Tepper, and Shlomo Gudowitz were among the pioneer researchers. By the mid-80s, more than 200 hiding complexes were surveyed and mapped at about 100 sites in the Judean Foothills and Judean Hills. In 1987 Kloner and Tepper published an important monograph — "Hiding Complexes in the Judean Shephelah" (in Hebrew). The book gathered all the up-to-date knowledge about the hiding systems. For the first time the phenomenon of hiding complexes was defined, and the history of research was extensively reviewed; dozens of hiding complexes from dozens of different sites in the Judean Foothills were described, and conclusions about the dating and functioning of the complexes were drawn. Over the past three decades more than 150 hiding complexes from approximately 40 sites in the Judean Foothills were added to the corpus (Kloner and Zissu 2015). It is important to note that the vast majority of the complexes were surveyed and mapped but not excavated. The conclusions about the dating and functioning of the complexes remain largely unchanged for over 30 years.

The current volume publishes 33 hiding complexes excavated at Nesher-Ramla Quarry from 2010 to 2015. They add to a substantial number of complexes excavated previously and published: nine hiding complexes excavated between 2006–2007 (Melamed 2010b) and thirteen hiding complexes excavated between 2008–2009 (Melamed 2018b). Out of the total of 55 complexes, 52 were excavated in the western hill and three in the eastern hill in Area R (Fig. 1.3).[3] Several other hiding complexes are under ongoing excavations and it is expected that additional ones remain to be found in yet unexplored areas of the site. In addition to detailed description of the 33 previously unpublished complexes, the current monograph brings together the data on all the 55 fully researched complexes (see the summary table in the end of Chapter 5). Therefore, the first objective of the publication is to present to the research community the vast and varied findings of the Nesher-Ramla Quarry hiding complexes.

The complete excavation of all the complexes produced many portable finds, mainly

3 This area was named during the excavations the "eastern hill," as opposed to the "western hill," where most of the excavation was concentrated. The distance between the two hills is about 0.7 km by air line. Due to the quarry's development plan, only a small part of the eastern hill was excavated. In our opinion, two neighboring rural settlements stood on the two hills. The village on the western hill was excavated in its entirety, while the village on the eastern hill was excavated at this point only at its margins — Area R.

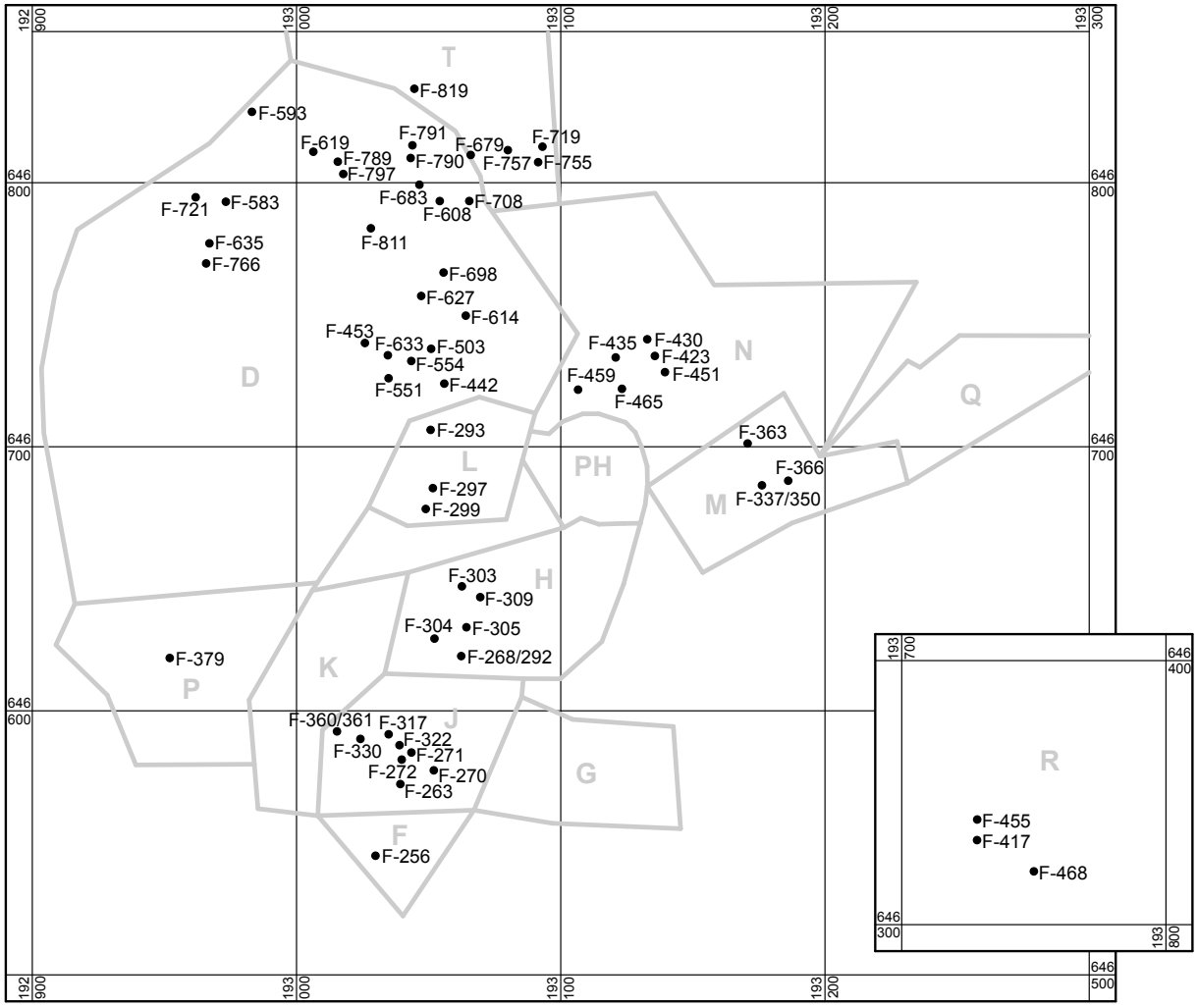


**Fig. 1.3**
Nesher-Ramla Quarry – the excavation areas and the distribution of the hiding complexes.

ceramic and numismatic, which are a basis for reconsideration of the existing interpretation of the phenomenon of hiding complexes in the Judean Foothills. Therefore, the second objective of the current monograph is to reexamine the dating of the phenomenon and the function of the hiding complexes.

Nesher-Ramla Quarry is probably the richest site in Israel in terms of the number of hiding complexes discovered and excavated. Such a large number of hiding complexes in one rural settlement can be surprising, yet one should keep in mind that, unlike most sites in Israel, Nesher-Ramla Quarry is excavated in its entirety (due to the ongoing quarrying), this probably being the reason for the discovery of so many hiding complexes.

As mentioned above, almost no remains of the Jewish settlement survived on the surface, and it is impossible to reconstruct the ground facilities or houses that were associated with the hiding complexes. All the hiding complexes of Nesher-Ramla Quarry were excavated as independent features (hereafter, feature = F), whose architectural description constitutes Chapter 2. The features are ordered by their

numbers. Within each feature, there is an internal division into loci (hereafter, locus = L). Usually, each locus number refers to a separate architectural element within the feature, such as a tunnel, chamber, shaft etc. Due to changes in registration methods over the years, the locus number can consist of only numbers (e. g. L.10439) or letter and numbers (e. g. L.S78). Each text description is accompanied by a plan of the complex and its sections.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus respectively on the ceramic and numismatic finds, both accompanied by tables and figures. Chapter 3, devoted to ceramics, orders the material by feature number. Chapter 4, devoted to coins, presents the material in chronological order from earliest to latest. Chapter 5 discusses the typology and dating of the Nesher-Ramla Quarry hiding complexes. Chapter 6 explores the contribution of the Nesher-Ramla Quarry hiding complexes to the study of the hiding complexes phenomenon in the Judean Foothills.

CHAPTER 2

# DESCRIPTION OF THE HIDING COMPLEXES AND INSTALLATIONS

*Alexander Melamed*

The present chapter describes the remains of 33 hiding complexes excavated between 2010 and 2015. The list is organized according to the number of the feature. The text is accompanied by plans and sections for each feature. In many cases, the hiding complexes are connected to other underground installations, such as ritual baths, water cisterns, etc.; those are not described here, but will be published in the future as separate monographs. Pottery and/or coins discovered in the hiding complexes are mentioned briefly after the architectural description, with references to chapters that describe them in detail.

## 2.1 HIDING COMPLEX F-417 (FIG. 2.1)

F-417 is located in Area R, at the eastern side of the Nesher-Ramla Quarry, c. 10 m north-west of ritual bath F-466. A rectangular entrance shaft with rounded corners (L.S78) leads into the hiding complex. It measures 0.6 × 0.8 m and is 1.8 m deep. To facilitate climbing, recesses were hewn in the northern and eastern walls of the shaft. At the bottom of the shaft, tunnel L.S79 in entered, leading east-north-east (Fig. 2.2). Its width is 0.7–0.9 m and its height 0.8 m. After c. 3.7 m, the tunnel turns north at right angle. After another 2 m, in the floor of the tunnel there is a rectangular cut (L.Y41) that descends to the depth of 1 m. It leads into a bell-shaped chamber, L.Y42, at a lower level (Fig. 2.3). The diameter of this chamber is 2–2.2 m and its height 1.7 m. At the point of the entrance to chamber L.Y42, tunnel L.S79 turns at right angle to east-north-east and connects with another tunnel, LY43, which is 3.7 m long.

The eastern end of tunnel L.Y43 is blind. About 0.8 m before the endpoint, there begins another tunnel, L.Y44. It leads south-east and is 0.9 m wide, 1.1 m high and 4 m long. At the beginning of the tunnel, there is a narrow opening in its ceiling, probably caused by a natural collapse (Fig. 2.4). Close to its end, tunnel L.Y44 is crossed by additional tunnel, L.Y45, which extends to the east for c. 1 m. Both tunnels are blind, and their quarrying seems unfinished. L.S79, L.Y43 and L.Y44 are fragments of one tunnel system of 14 m total length.

A passage is hewn below entrance shaft L.S78, leading into bell-shaped chamber L.S95, located south-west below the entrance shaft (Figs 2.2, 2.5). The chamber is 1.8 m high and 2 m in diameter. In the southern part of the chamber, below its ceiling, another opening

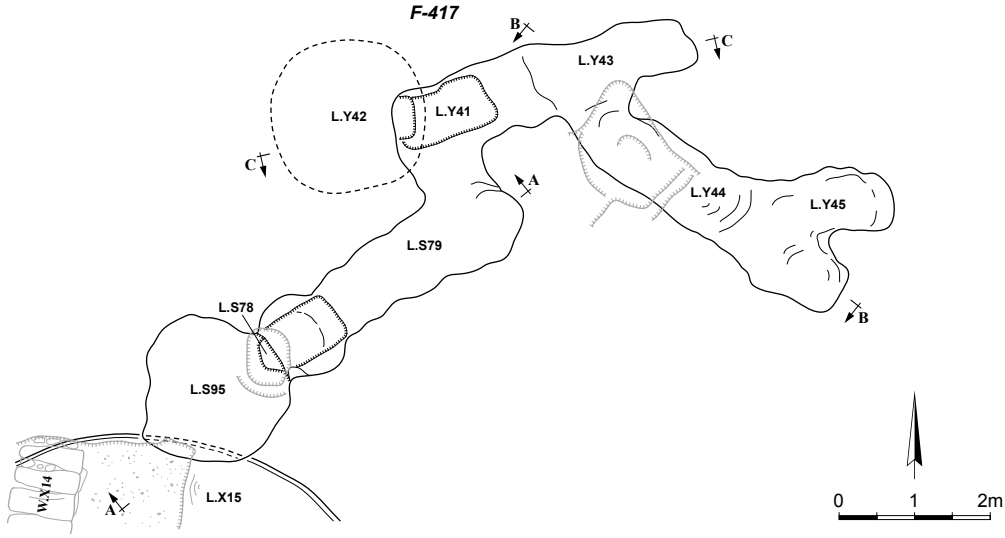


**Fig. 2.1** F-417, plan of hiding complex.

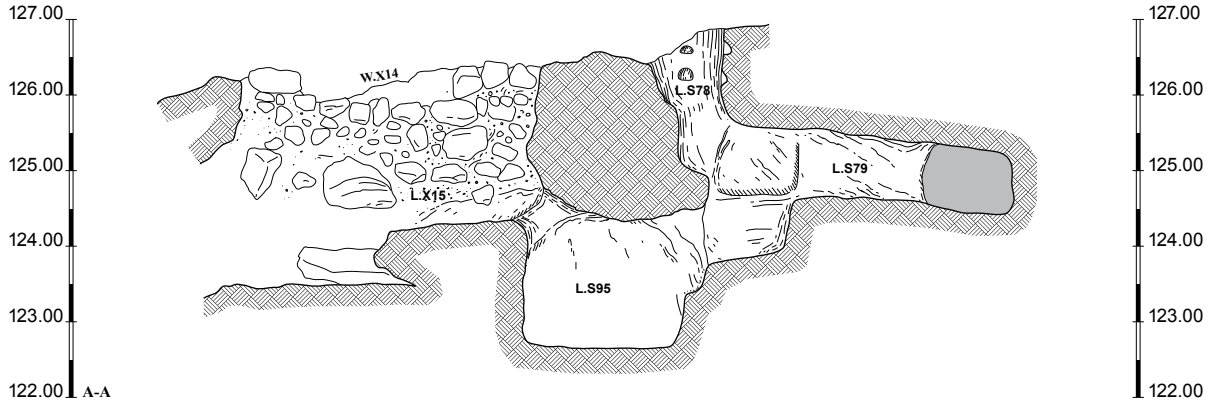


**Fig. 2.2** F-417, section A-A, looking north-west.

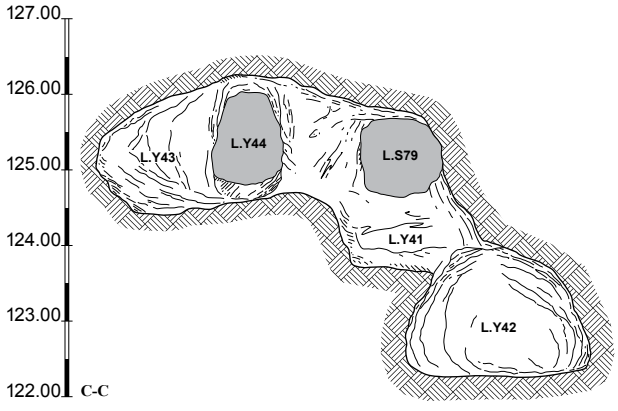


**Fig. 2.3** F-417, section C-C, looking south-west.

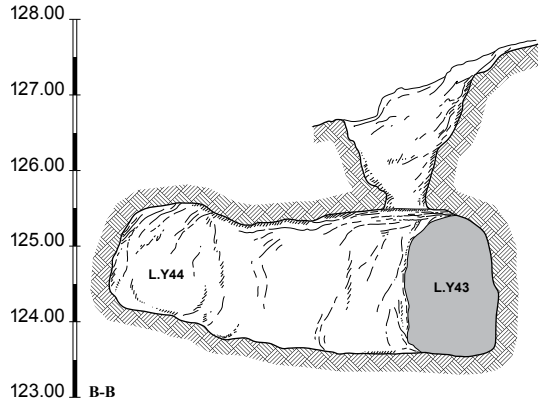


**Fig. 2.4** F-417, section B-B, looking south-east.

**Fig. 2.5** F-417, entrance shaft L.S78 (above) and chamber L.S95 (below), looking south-west.

leads into an open installation (L.X15) with remains of gray plaster. The installation is preserved to a maximum depth of c. 2.5 m. There is a bedding of variously sized fieldstones in its western part, with a row of stones (W.X14) above it. The stones are probably foundations of a superstructure that was not preserved. The original purpose of installation L.X15 is unclear. Taking into consideration the plaster that was preserved on its walls and floor, it might have been a water cistern or an underground storage installation. When hiding complex F-417 was hewn, the installation had already gone out of use and foundations of W.X14 were built into it.

Numerous ceramic and numismatic finds were discovered in the tunnels and chambers of hiding complex F-417, dating exclusively to the Hellenistic and the Early Roman periods. The pottery finds included a large quantity of fragments of bowls, cooking pots, storage jars, jugs and flasks (Ch. 3, Pl. 1). A large quantity of fragments of imported Hellenistic vessels was found in the fill of pit L.X15 (Ch. 3, Pl. 2). Two coins of Ptolemy III were found in tunnel L.S79, a coin of Alexander Jannaeus found in chamber L.S95, a coin of Mattathias Antigonus and a coin of Roman procurator (under Augustus) found at the bottom of the entrance shaft (Ch. 4, Nos 1–2, 54, 71, 79).

## 2.2 HIDING COMPLEX F-430 (FIG. 2.6)

F-430 is located in the northern part of Area N, north of hiding complex F-423 and water cistern F-436. A rectangular entrance shaft with rounded corners (L.U10) leads into the hiding complex, its dimensions 0.5 × 0.8 m. The shaft becomes rounder and wider toward the bottom, where its dimensions are 0.8 × 0.95 m. Recesses are hewn in its walls to facilitate climbing. The shaft descends to a depth of c. 2 m and enters chamber L.X78, located below and east of the entrance shaft. L.X78 is circular, c. 2.7 m in diameter. In its eastern part, below the entrance shaft, its height is only 0.6 m, and in the western part it widens to c. 1 m. Beneath the entrance shaft, a rectangular cut in the floor of L.X78, 0.4 m deep, leads into a circular chamber L.U11 (Fig. 2.7). L.U11 has a diameter of c. 2 m and is 1.7 m deep.

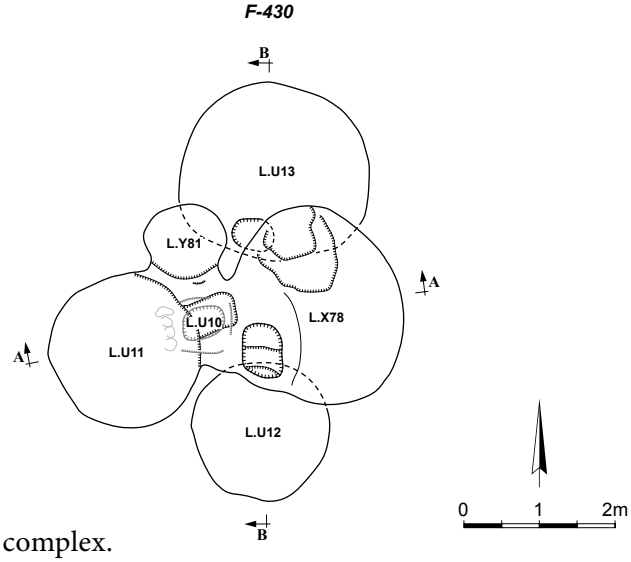


**Fig. 2.6** F-430, plan of hiding complex.

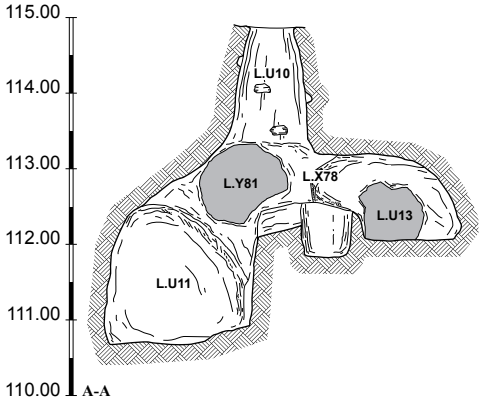


**Fig. 2.7** F-430, section A-A, looking north.

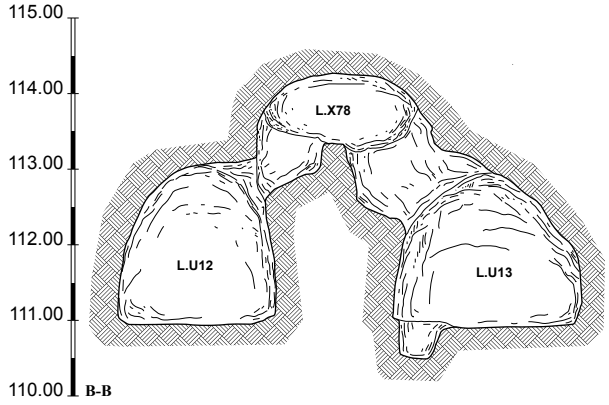


**Fig. 2.8** F-430, section B-B, looking west.

In the southern part of the floor of L.X78, there is a 0.6 m wide cut that leads into chamber L.U12 at a lower level. L.U12 is bell-shaped, 1.8 m in diameter and 2 m high. The descent from L.X78 is at the height of the ceiling. The diameter of the passage is 0.5 m. In the northern part of the floor of L.X78, there is another cut that leads into another bell-shaped chamber (L.U13), located at a lower level (Fig. 2.8). L.U13 has a diameter of 2.6 m, and its maximum height is 2 m. In its floor, next to its southern wall, there is a round cut, c. 0.5 m in diameter and depth.

North of the entrance shaft L.U10, a small additional chamber (L.Y81) is hewn at the floor level of L.X78. L.Y81 is c. 1.2 m in diameter and 1 m in height.

The pottery finds recovered from hiding complex F-430 include a complete bowl from L.U13 and fragments of cooking pots and storage jars found in the chambers of the complex (Ch. 3, Pl. 3). The pottery assemblage dates to the first century BCE and the first century CE. Three coins of Alexander Jannaeus were found in L.U10 and L.U11, and three additional coins

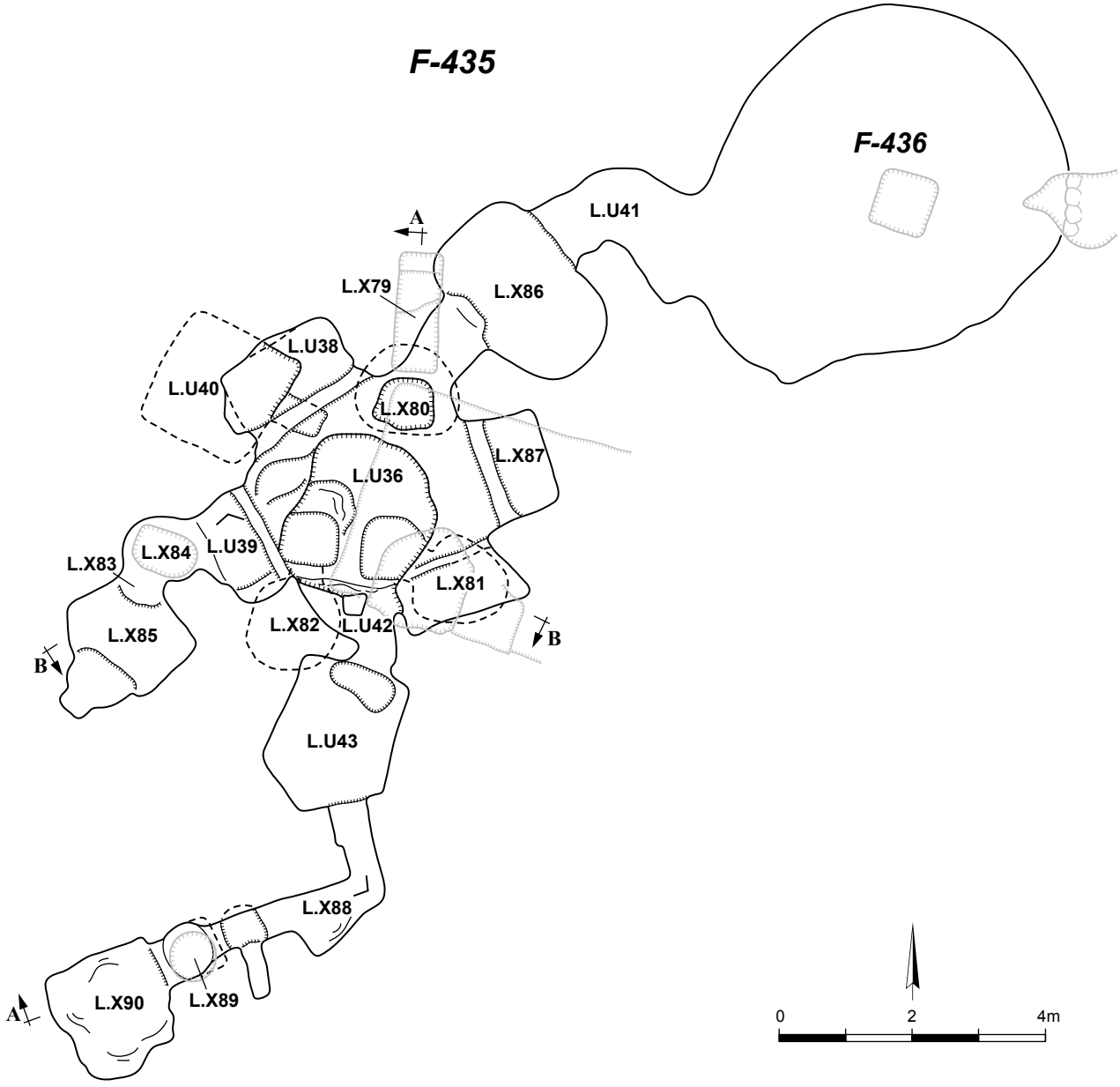


**Fig. 2.9** F-435, plan of hiding complex.

from L.U11: a coin of Roman procurator (under Tiberius), a coin of Trajan (Ch. 4, Nos 31, 36, 50, 80, 87) and an Early Islamic coin.

### 2.3 HIDING COMPLEX F-435 (FIG. 2.9)

F-435 is located in Area N, below the north-west corner of Byzantine-period winepress F-424 (Avrutis 2015: 28–34). The central part of the hiding complex was destroyed by a Byzantine-period burial cave. The burial cave consisted of a staircase (L.X79), a central space (L.U36) and four burial troughs (L.U38, L.U39, L.X87 and another trough in the southeast).

Two entry shafts, the southern and the northern, lead into the hiding complex. The

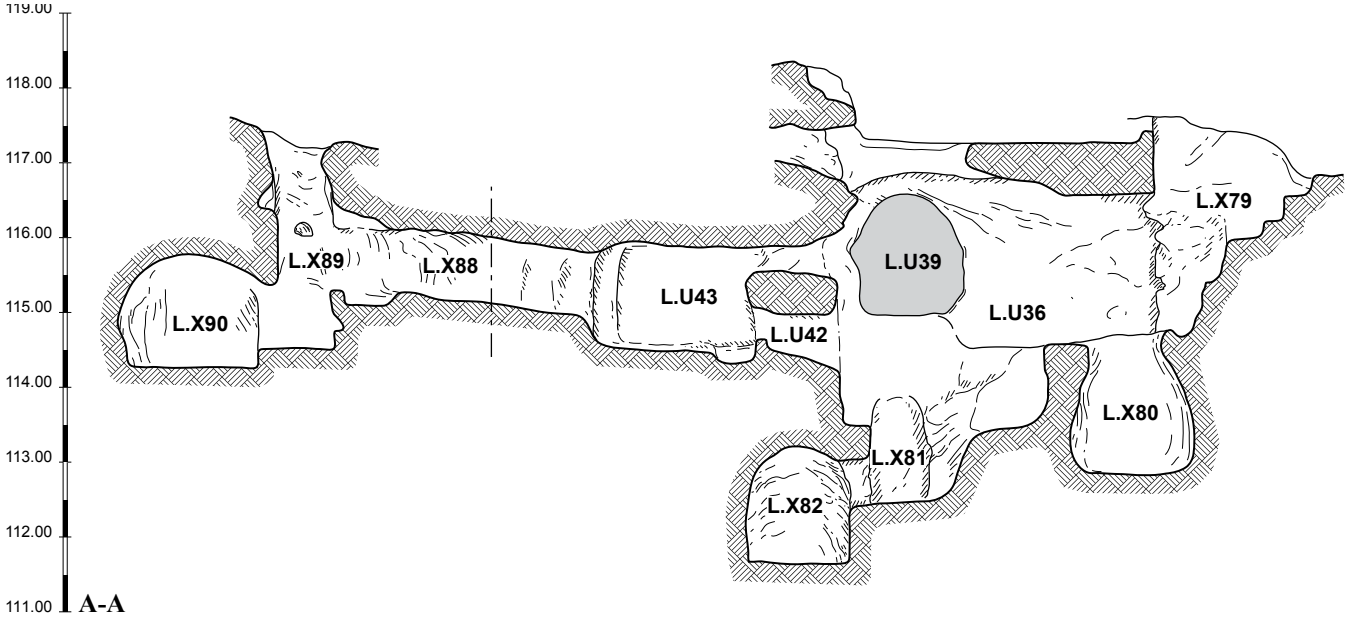


**Fig. 2.10** F-435, section A-A, looking west.

**Fig. 2.11** F-435, the central section of the hiding complex, looking south.