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LATE CHALCOLITHIC AND EARLY BRONZE AGE I REMAINS AT NESHER-RAMLA QUARRY

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Dedicated to my parents
Drs. Irina and Oleg Avrutis

CONTENTS

2.2. DWELLING CAVE F-370

Only the lowest part of this natural karstic cave has been preserved, up to a height of 0.6 to 0.8 m. It is oval in shape and measures 4.6 x 4.1 m (Locus R81; Fig. 2.2). The rich ceramic and lithic assemblages deriving from the deposits in the cave clearly date the occupation to the LC period (Chapters 3 and 6; Pls. 3.1, 3.2, 6.1). There are no indications of burial activities here, and the cave was used for domestic purposes only. Anticipating discussion of the chipped stone tools in Chapter 6, it may be pointed out that the LC flint assemblage from this cave indicates limited, on-site production of flint tools.

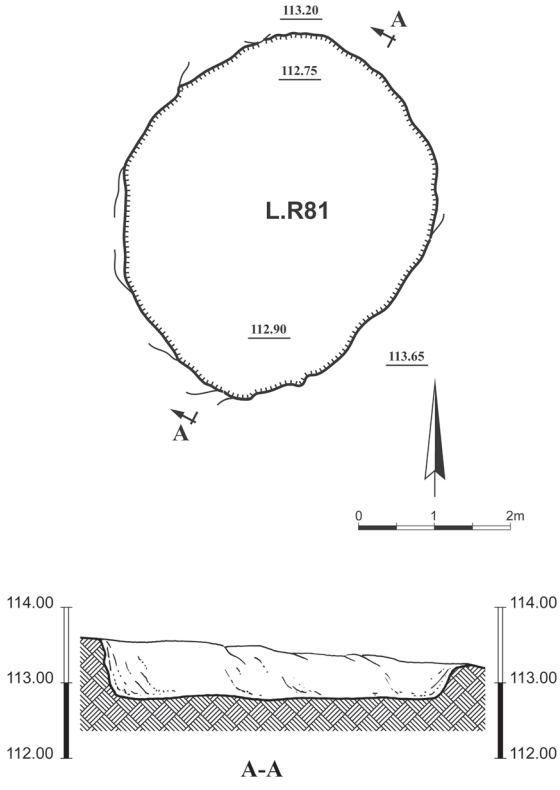

Fig. 2.2.
Plan and cross-section of dwelling Cave F-370.

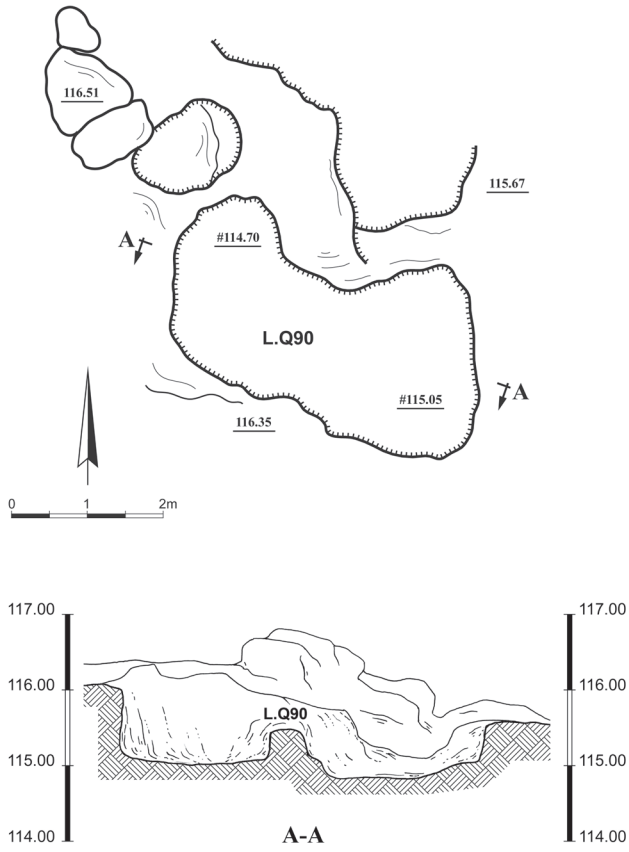

Fig. 2.3.
Plan and cross-section of dwelling Cave F-352.

2.3. DWELLING CAVE F-352

Only the lowest part of this natural, karstic cave has been preserved. It is of amorphous shape, measuring ca. 4.1 x 2.3 m. (Locus Q90; Fig. 2.3). An artificial ledge in the middle of the cave seems to divide the space in an east and west part.

Based on the homogeneous ceramic and lithic assemblages collected from the cave (Chapters 3 and 6; Pls. 3.3, 3.4, 6.2), its use is dated to the LC period. Any indication of burial activities inside the cave is lacking. In view of the large quantity of kraters and holemouth jars found in it, this space may perhaps be interpreted as a store room for domestic food produce.

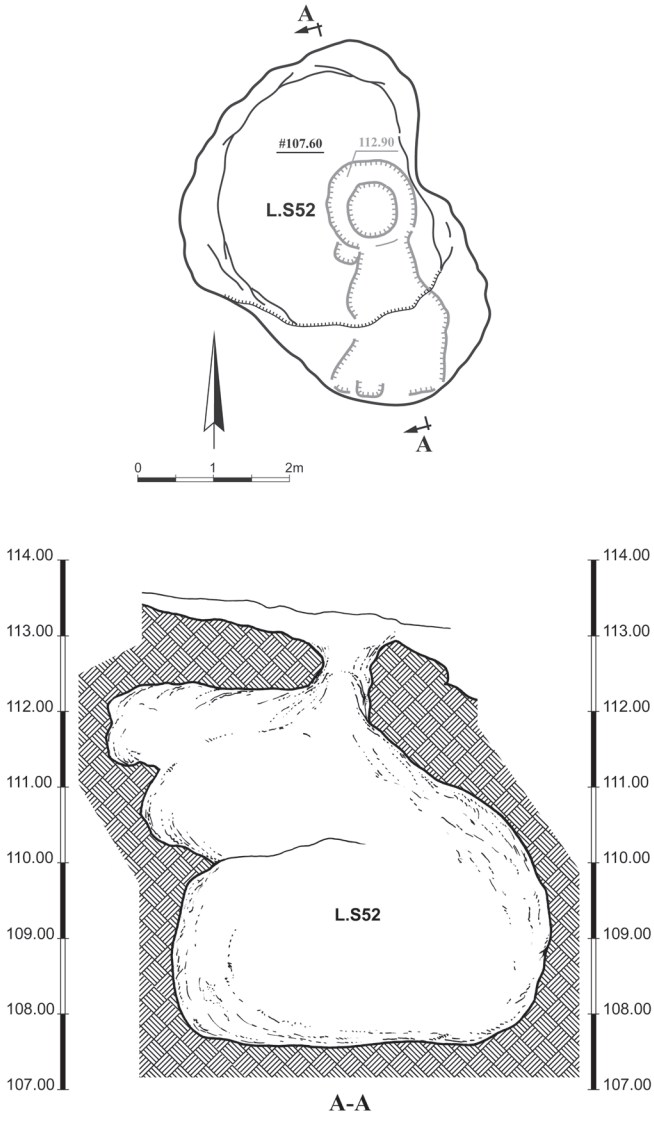

Fig. 2.4.
Plan and cross-section of Cave F-398.

2.4. BELL-SHAPED PIT F-398

This bell-shaped cavity was artificially adapted to human need (Fig. 2.4). It was made accessible via a vertical shaft hewn through its ceiling. Its maximum depth is ca. 4.5 m.

The inner space of the cave was void of any lithic or osteological finds. The only ceramic materials found are a few non-diagnostic bodysherds of a single, closed vessel (not illustrated), possibly dating to the LC period. Such a date is corroborated by the very location of this pit within the cluster of LC burial and dwelling caves on the main hill (cf. Fig. 2.1), making an association with them likely.

Bell-shaped cavities or pits are a well-known feature of the LC period. Like Cave F-398, these pits are usually of considerable depth and difficult to access, suggesting storage spaces, rather than domestic dwelling features.

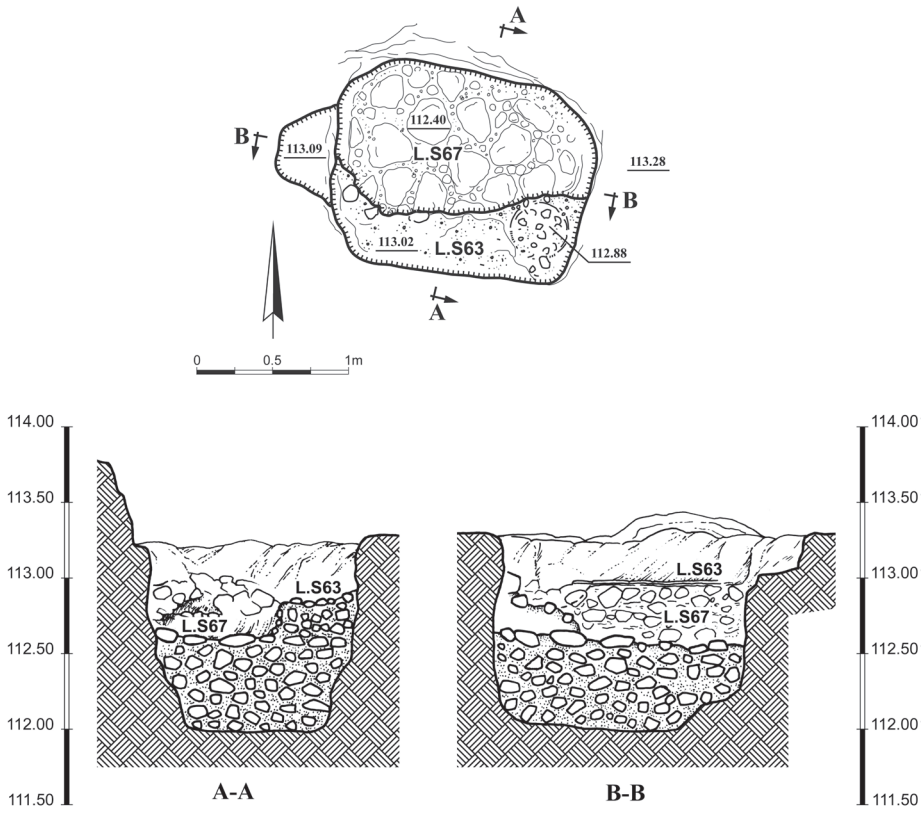

Fig. 2.5.
Plan and cross-sections of the burial chamber in Cave F-410.

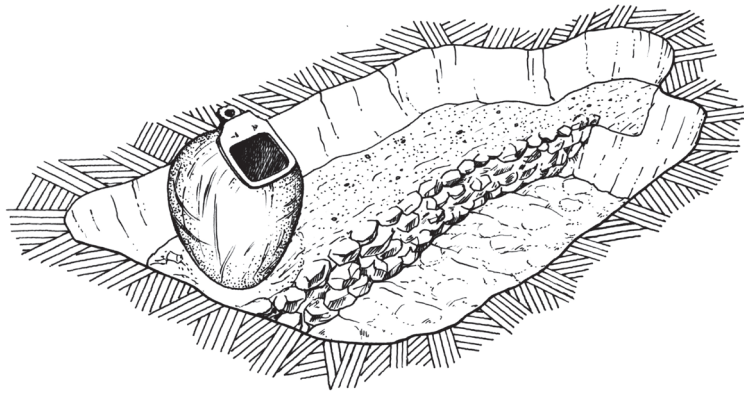

Fig. 2.6.
Isometric reconstruction of the burial chamber in Cave F-410.

2.5. BURIAL CHAMBER CAVE F-410

In the middle of this karstic, amorphous and poorly preserved cave, measuring ca. 4 x 6 m, a rectangular installation had been hewn into the cave's bedrock floor (Fig. 2.5). It measures 1.67 x 1.25 m. A single, hewn step, situated in the west of the cave, lead into the chamber. The installation was found backfilled with stones, level with the cave's floor (Locus S67).

A stone-built shelf or bench (Locus S63) is located in the southern part of this chamber. Traces of white plaster, 2-3 cm thick, were observed on its crown. Its composition is similar to the floor plaster of burial Cave F-314 (see below, p. 21). At the eastern extreme of the bench (in the southwest corner of the chamber) a round depression had been created. In this depression stood a single ossuary (Pl. 3.5:1). The bone container was found in situ, and complete. Surprisingly, no human bones were found in it. Its funerary character, however, is obvious (Fig. 2.6). The ceramic, groundstone and lithic assemblages associated with this burial clearly indicate a phase within the LC period (Pls. 3.5; 5.1:1, 3; 6.3).

2.6. BURIAL CAVE F-355

This relatively large, natural cave measures 8 x 5.5 m, with a maximum height of 4.6 m. The deposits found in the cave indicate two distinct periods of occupation, both for burial purposes, namely the LC and late EB I periods.

2.6.1. The LC remains

The LC burial was placed on a plastered floor overlaying a foundation of small and medium-sized stones (Locus T86). In the east part of the cave two stone-built retaining walls (W. T84 and W. T85; Figs. 2.7 and 2.8) enclosed an orthostat or stela, facing northwest. The northern wall (W. T84), found in a relatively poor state of preservation, is 1.9 m long and 0.4-0.5 m wide. The eastern wall (W. T85) is curving conform the cave's inner contour. It is 3.8 m long and 0.7-0.8 m wide. The orthostat, measuring 86.5 x 38.5-44.5 x 23-27 cm was supported by a floor foundation (Locus T86) of small-sized stones (Figs. 2.9 and 2.10). Notably, it was found broken. Its upper part was laying horizontally on the floor, while its lower part had been built into wall W. T85 (Fig. 2.11). Underneath the orthostat, a horncore

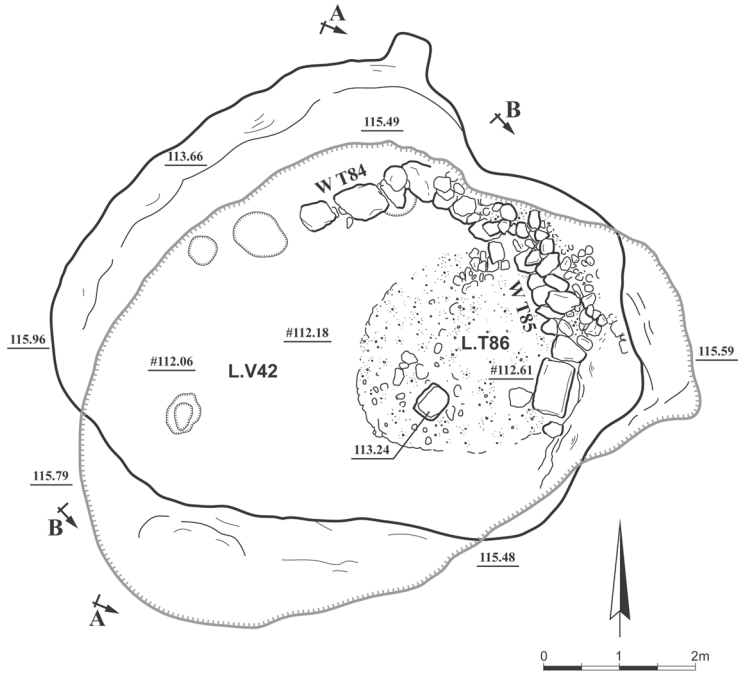

Fig. 2.7.
Plan of burial Cave F-355, LC phase.

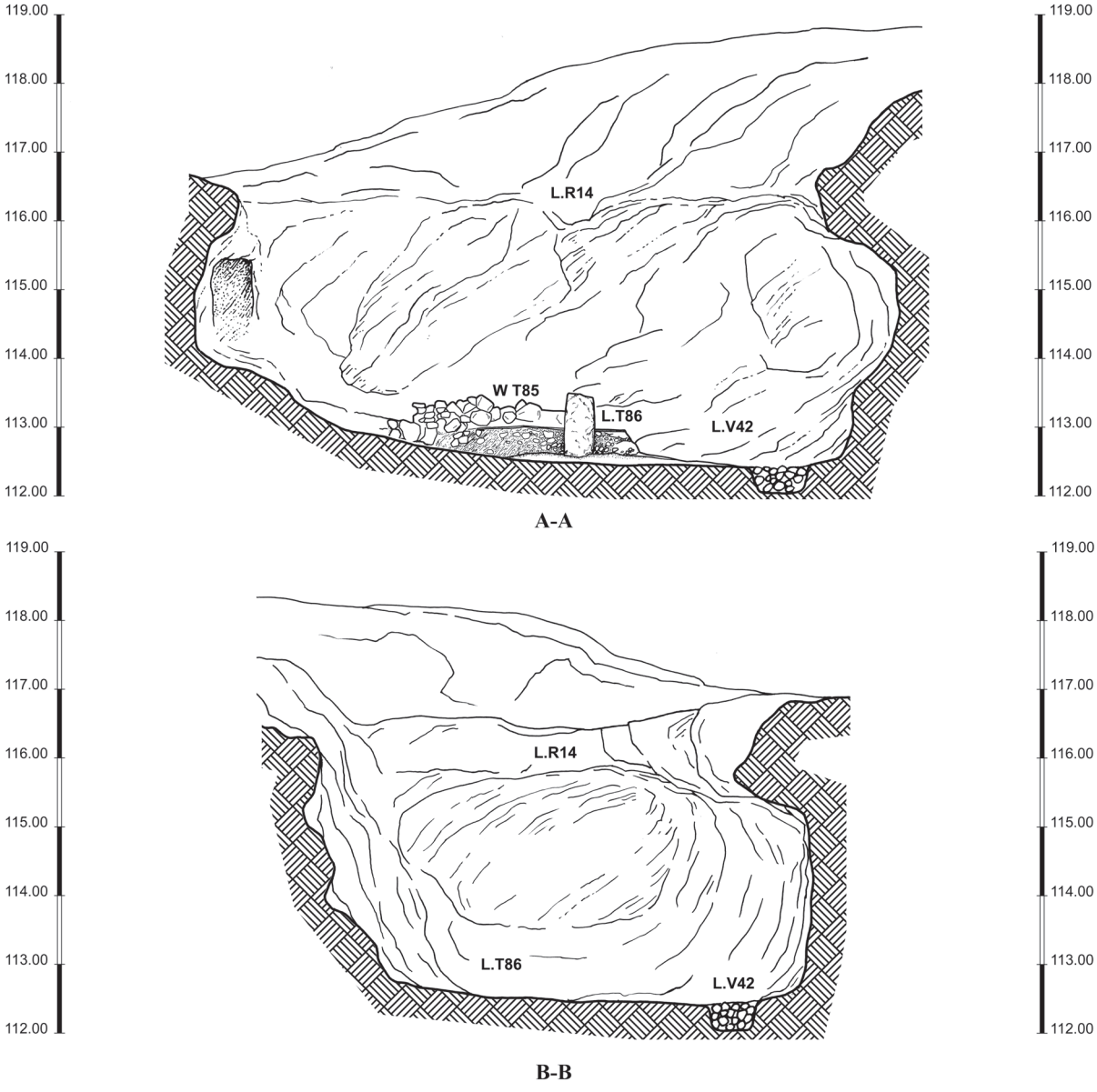

Fig. 2.8.
Cross-sections of burial Cave F-355.

of an adult male mountain gazelle was found (Chapter 11, Fig. 11.2). It had been deposited there intentionally, clearly evidencing a kind of ritual foundation deposit.

No segments of this man-made floor were encountered in the west part of the cave (Locus V42), although fragments of a ceramic ossuary, human bones and associated funerary gifts were found there on bedrock level. Several shallow, natural depressions in the lower reaches of the cave were filled with small and medium-sized stones. There were no other finds.

In the east part of the cave evidence was found for primary disposition of the dead. Most of the human bones were found in disarray, but bones still in articulation were recorded next to wall W. T85. Notably one of the interments from the LC burial phase in this part of the cave was found resting in

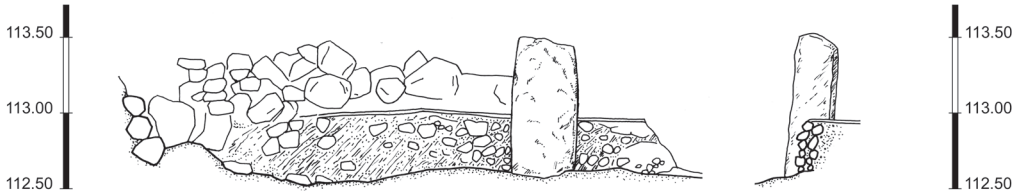

Fig. 2.9.
Cross-section with details of orthostat and floor in burial Cave F-355, Locus T86.

Fig. 2.10.
Burial Cave F-355. Orthostat and floor Locus T86 (view from west).

Fig. 2.11.
Burial Cave F-355. Orthostat in wall W. T85 (view from west).

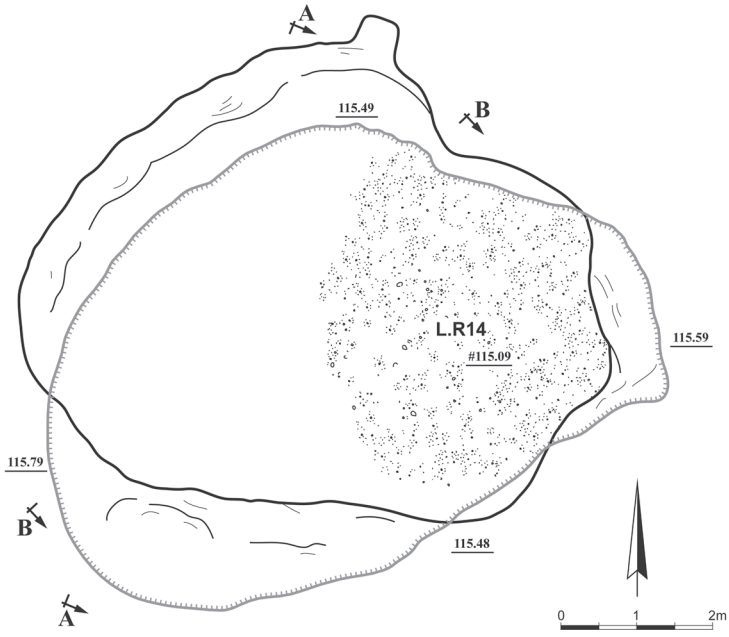

Fig. 2.12.
Plan of burial Cave F-355, late EB I phase.

primary position, perpendicular to the standing orthostat, the skull touching its western (rear) side (Chapter 10).

The burial deposits yielded rich ceramic, groundstone and lithic assemblages clearly dating from the LC period (Pls. 3.6-3.9; 5.1:2, 4, 5, 7; 5.2:3-5; 5.3:1, 2, 6; 6.4:4-7), to be presented further below (Chapters 3, 5 and 6).

The presence of retaining walls within LC burial caves is known from other contemporary sites, e.g., the "grotto" cave in Azor (Perrot and Ladiray 1980: Figs 8-9).

2.6.2. The late EB I remains

Evidence for re-use of the cave during the late EB I, once more for human burial purposes, was found concentrated in its central and east parts (Fig. 2.12). The interments were disposed off separately, in primary position. Besides human and animal bones, these burials yielded mainly ceramic artifacts dating to late EB I (Fig. 4.1; Pls. 4.1-4.6).

The remains of eighty-three human individuals were retrieved from both LC and late EB I contexts in the cave, including 50 adults and 33 children (Chapter 10). Distinction between the LC and late EB I interments was not possible because of the involvement of the burial society "Atra Kadisha", which took the osteological material away for immediate reburial, thus precluding any examination of the bones.

In the period intermediate between the LC and late EB I burial phases, the cave had accommodated a hyaena's den, as indicated by the

Fig. 2.17.
Cave F-565, LC phase (view from west).

Fig. 2.18.
Cave F-565, oval-shaped hewn installation Locus 10586 (view from southeast).

Fig. 2.19.
Cave F-565, rock-cut, bell-shaped storage pit Locus 10461 (silo) (view from south).

modified to human need, it was in use during the LC period for domestic purposes, and converted into a burial ground during the late EB I period. Later on, the cave had filled up with soil and stone debris of the collapsed roof. Walls were constructed on top of it during the Late Byzantine period.

Being situated on the north slope of the hill, the cave has been a virtual catch basin for rainwater for over four thousand years. This explains the worn condition of the artifacts and osteological material retrieved from it.

2.9.1. The LC remains

The cave exhibits two main features (Fig. 2.17). At the northwest extreme, there is an oval-shaped, rock-cut installation (Locus 10586, Fig. 2.18). Its measures 1.02 x 0.47 x 0.8 m. In the northeast part an additional cavity or pit was hewn to the depth of 3.5 m (Locus 10461). This feature is bell-shaped (3.5 m in diameter at its base) and straight-walled with shallow recesses on its eastern and western edges (Fig. 2.19). On its floor a thin layer (~ 5 cm) of earth mixed with organic material was exposed. Examination of a soil sample taken from it revealed the presence of pollen[1]. After two extractions, only a handful of grains (n=12) was found, too small a number to enable any meaningful discussion. The pollen include *Quercus calliprinos* (Kermes oak), and types belonging to the *Poaceae* (grasses), *Apiaceae* (carrot family), and *Chenopodiaceae* (goosefoot family) families. Although these types are still present in the area today, the excavators are confident that no contamination of the samples by recent pollen could have taken place, since the sampled layer had been sealed intentionally during the late EB I period by a 3.5 m thick stony backfill. This rock-cut pit, therefore, is believed to have functioned as a storage facility (silo).

The very fragmentary ceramic evidence of these deposits was retrieved from the west part of the cave which had not been reused in later periods (Locus 10531). This limited assemblage indicates a date within the LC period (Chapter 3, Pl. 3.15:1-4).

Underground bell-shaped silos of varying dimensions which, depending on local environment, were either dug-out or rock-cut, are widely known in the region (e.g., Horbat Beter – Dothan 1959: Figs. 4, 5; Bir Safadi – Commenge-Pellerin 1990: Figs. 4, 6).

2.9.2. The late EB I remains

At a later stage, the cave was reused and adapted for burial purposes. The LC silo (Locus 10461) and oval-shaped installation (Locus 10586) were intentionally backfilled with field stones level with the cave's floor. Along the northern edge of the cave a retaining wall was added (W. 10456; Fig. 2.20).

Only two individuals were buried here, each placed on a separate pavement built of large, flat

Fig. 2.20.
Plan of Cave F-565, late EB I phase.

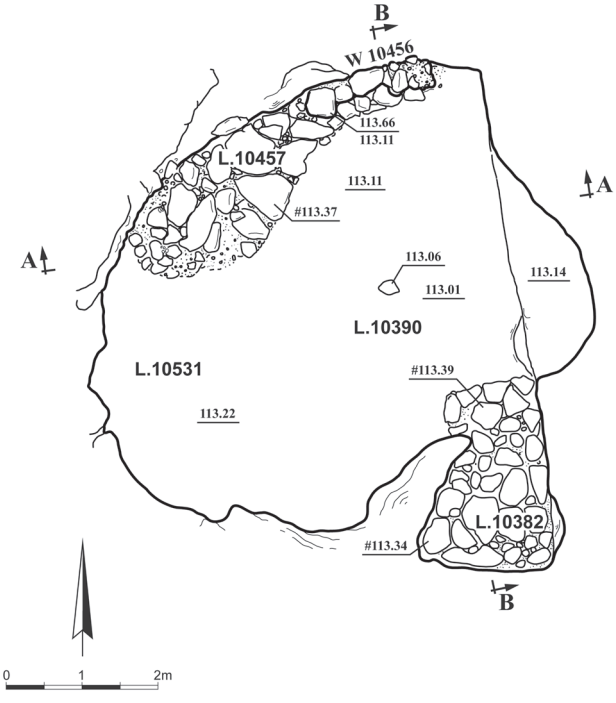

Fig. 2.21.
Stone pavement Locus 10457 and retaining wall W. 10456 (view from southeast).

stone slabs, situated at opposite sides of the cave (Loci 10382 and 10457, Fig. 2.21). They were obviously buried in primary position, even though the exact arrangement could not be established due to the bad preservation conditions prevailing in the cave.

The extremely rich funerary assemblages associated with these two individuals contains 197 ceramic vessels, 7 flint tools, an alabaster macehead, as well as beads and pendants from various kinds of material (chapters 4, 5, 7, 8, Pls. 4.7-4.13, 5.4, 7.1, 8.1). The high amount of funerary gifts most probably reflects the high social status of the deceased within their community.

The phenomenon of disposal of the dead on stone pavements is well recorded for the late EB I period, mainly at sites in the north part of the country (e.g., 'En Esur – Yannai 1996: Pl. 1; Qiryat Haroshet – Salmon 2008:14*-15*, Figs. 9, 10; Horbat Zelef – Covello-Paran 2011:4-5, Plan 2; Asherat – Smithline 2001: Plan 2; Gadot – Greenberg 2001: Plans 1, 2), but occasionally also in tombs in the south (Azor – Ben-Tor 1975: Fig. 1).

2.10. BURIAL CAVE F-314

Cave F-314 is a natural, karstic cave carved out in local limestone, and modified minimally by man to accommodate several human burials (Locus P16; Fig. 2.22). It is relatively small, consisting of an oval-shaped, single space measuring about 3.5 x 2.5 m. It was accessed via a shaft, the preserved lower part of which was excavated in the northwest part of the cave.

Building activities during the Byzantine period[2] seem to be foremost responsible for the collapse of its roof, further aggravated by the detrimental affects of prevailing wet conditions on the cave's natural lime walls. Despite these unfavorable conditions, the data retrieved from it

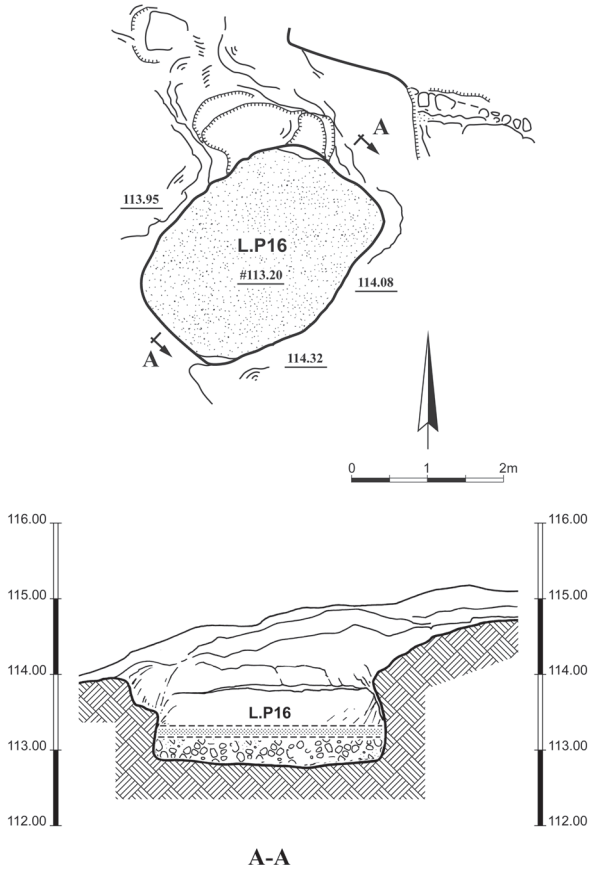

Fig. 2.22.
Plan and cross-section of burial Cave F-314.

is sufficient to reconstruct a clear picture of the final burial arrangements.

Eleven human burials were found resting on a layer of plaster applied over a beaten-earth layer (Locus P14) overlying a fill of stones and soil approximately 0.5 m thick. The earth and stone accumulation, deposited directly on the cave's hewn floor, was void of any finds. The plaster was sampled and kindly examined by A. Tsatskin[3] who characterized it as a mud-lime plaster.

The eleven individuals, three adults and eight children (Chapter 10), were arranged in four groups, one in each of the four extremes of the cave. Each adult was interred separately, in primary position. The children were concentrated in the east part of the chamber. Each adult individual was accompanied by a single storage jar and one additional pottery vessel found in situ. As mentioned above, the artifacts were found in extremely poor condition, but at least three vessels could be identified as storage jars. A fourth vessel was in very fragmentary condition, although a surviving pierced lug handle indicates it to have been a closed vessel (chapter 3, Pl. 3.16:3). All pottery finds in the cave date to the LC period.

2.11. BURIALS IN BELL-SHAPED PIT F-257

This is the most complex feature at the site. There are four different burial phases from four different

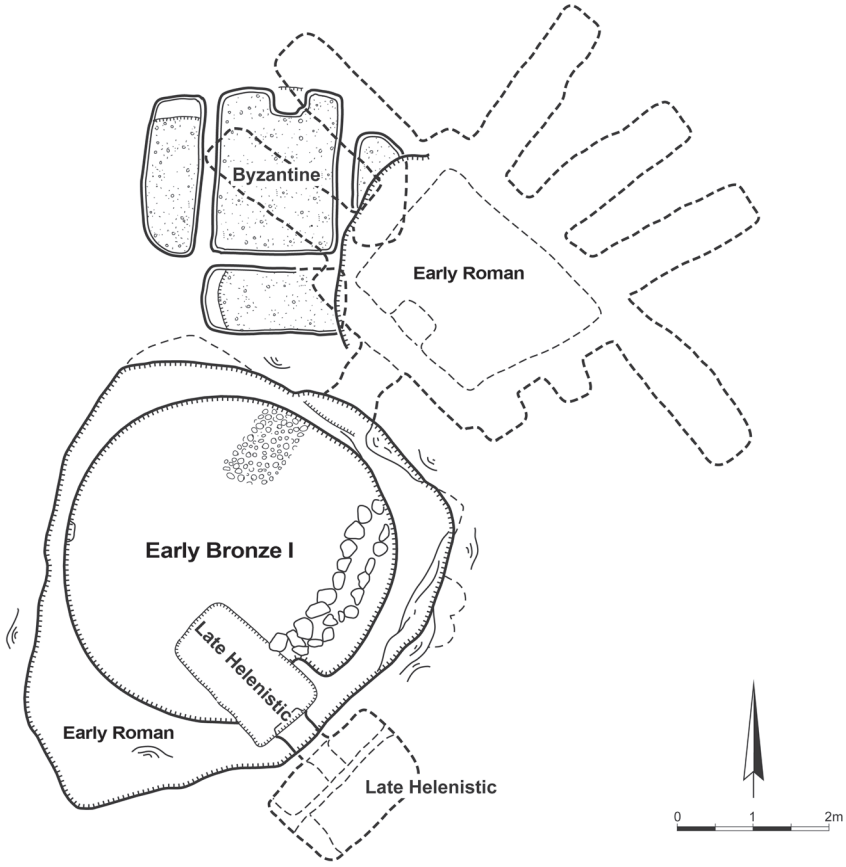

Fig. 2.23.
Plan indicating burial spaces of different periods in Cave F-257.