

SALVAGE EXCAVATIONS
AT NESHER-RAMLAM QUARRY (2008–9 EXCAVATIONS)
Volume II

SHLOMO KOL-YA'AKOV

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PREFACE

Shlomo Kol-Ya'akov

The current publication is the third in the monograph series on the site of El-Hirbe.¹ This third monograph presents the results of the excavations at the site from 2008 to 2009. The site is today located within the confines of the quarry of Neshar Israel Cement Enterprises Ltd., in the industrial zone of the city of Ramle. The excavation is a direct continuation of excavations at the site from 2006 to 2007 (Kol-Ya'akov 2010). The monograph focuses on findings from the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. The finds from the proto-historic periods were published separately by V. Avrutis (2012).

The El-Hirbe excavation was a salvage excavation that stemmed from the need for the Neshar-Ramle quarries to continue its operations. The excavations continued throughout the year with a professional staff and large contingent of workers. This publication includes chapters discussing the main excavation areas, the architecture, unique phenomena as well as chapters focusing on the various small finds. Specific chapters are devoted to the ritual baths, hiding complexes and the bathhouse. Another chapter focuses on the many cemeteries from

various periods discovered at the site. The chapters include an analysis of the layout of the site and the settlement, a description of the built and hewn remains, the various installations and a description of the small finds discovered in them, a typological discussion and finally, the central phases in the life of the settlement and their dating.

Individual chapters are also devoted to analyses of the ceramic finds, the numismatic finds, glass, metal, stone and bone. In addition to the description of the artifacts, discussion includes analysis of the character, dating and importance of the findings in context. A separate chapter is devoted to the physical anthropology of the varied burials at the site.

Finally, the volume presents a summary of the conclusions and ideas raised in the various chapters and presents the history of El-Hirbe (the Neshar-Ramle quarries) as understood in light of the current state of excavations at the site. It should be noted that excavation at the site, and at some of the excavation areas discussed in this volume, has not ended, thus some of the conclusions are not final.

¹ For the previous volumes: Kol-Ya'akov 2010 which dealt with the various excavation areas and finds from the 2006–2007 excavation seasons, and Avrutis 2012, which dealt with the graves and finds of the Late Chalcolithic period and the Early Bronze Age I.

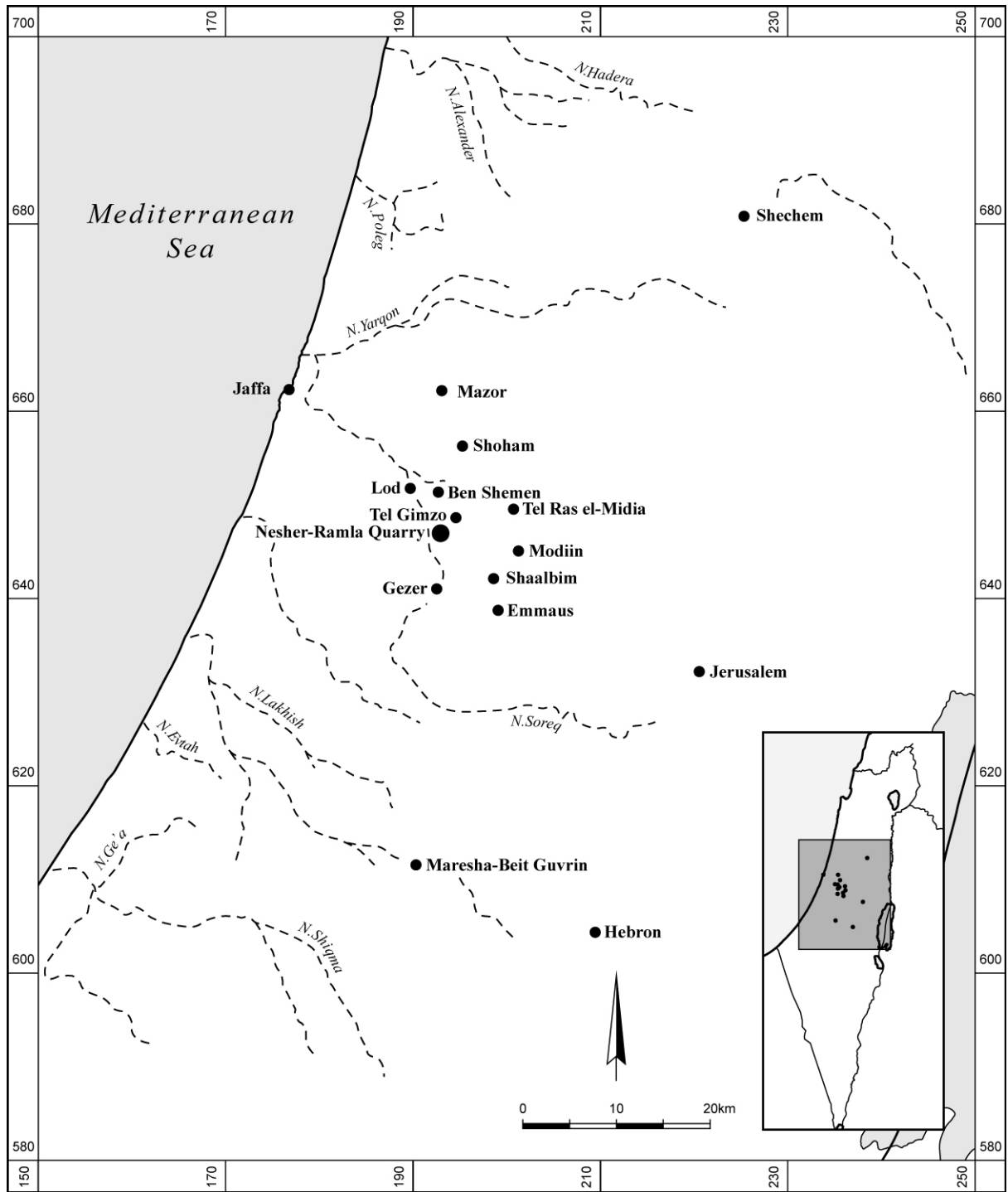


Fig. 1.1

El-Hirbe (Nesher-Ramla Quarry). General Location Map. Circle — Key Sites from Hellenistic to Early Islamic Periods.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Shlomo Kol-Ya'akov

The archaeological site known as El-Hirbe, on the grounds of the Nesher cement factory in the industrial zone of the city of Ramle (coordinates 192850–646200/193750–646850 ITM) is located in the Lod Lowlands, c. 5 km southeast of the cities of Ramle and Lod (Figs. 1.1, 1.2).

The site extends over hills of an altitude of 110–125 m above sea level. The area is rocky and covered with vegetation (shrubs and a few trees). Even before excavation, exposed *nari* rock surfaces protruded in a number of places; human activity was discerned in those areas, such as rock-cuttings and entrances to underground installations. These hills consist of a layer of hard limestone (*nari*) of varying thickness, covered with a layer of clayey soil. Underneath the *nari* is a very soft layer of Senonian chalk (Avrutis 2010:7; Kol-Ya'akov 2012:1). Because of the softness of this layer, local inhabitants in antiquity were able to hew many underground spaces for various needs. In most places the archaeological layer on the rock surface was no more than 0.7–1.0 m high; thus, in most cases no more than one or two courses of walls were preserved.

The excavation areas are bounded on the south and the east by the Nesher quarries, and on the north by a valley through which an unpaved road now passes. The site was greatly damaged at the time by Nesher's quarrying over the past decades. But after the quarry was expanded, it was decided to conduct salvage excavations, the first of which took place in the 1990s. These excavations focused mainly on two areas of the site: the eastern hill and the western hill.

HISTORY OF THE RESEARCH

Salvage excavations at the site began in 1996 on the eastern hill, by a Hebrew University expedition

led by Yizhar Hirschfeld and Yigal Shapira (Kol-Ya'akov 2010; Shapira 1999). The excavation revealed the outlying areas of the settlement, including agricultural industrial installations and a cemetery dated to the end of the Second Temple period and the Byzantine period. In 2000–2001, the excavation of the cemetery was completed, revealing a number of additional tombs from the Early Roman period as well as from the Byzantine period. A burial cave from the Early Bronze Age I was also excavated. The excavation was carried out by the Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology, directed by Shlomo Kol-Ya'akov.

From 1997 to 2003, salvage excavations were conducted on the western hill of the Nesher-Ramle quarries, by an expedition from the Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology, directed by Shlomo Kol-Ya'akov (2003, with Dalit Weinblatt-

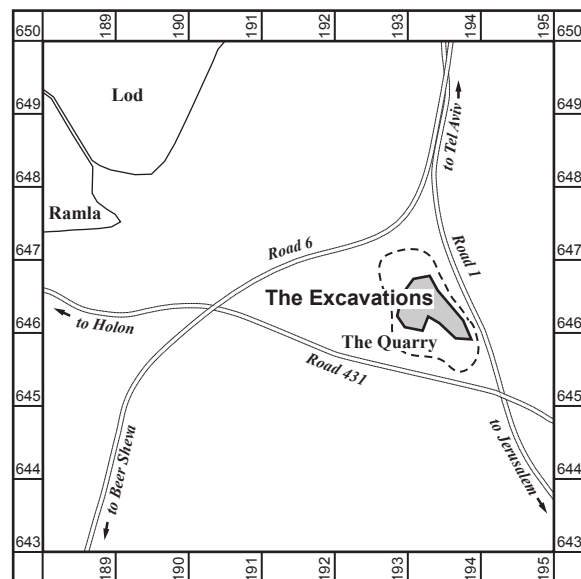


Fig. 1.2. El-Hirbe (Nesher-Ramle Quarry). Location Map.

CHAPTER 2

RITUAL BATHS (*MIQVA'OT*)

Alexander Melamed

During the 2008–2009 excavation season six ritual baths (*miqva'ot*) were excavated at the site. One was found in Area H, three in Area J, one in Area M, the easternmost area so far in which ritual baths have been found; and one in Area P, the westernmost area in which ritual baths have been found (Fig. 1.3). The ritual baths range from fairly well preserved to well preserved. In many cases, the rock ceiling of the installation was found intact, while the immersion chamber was full of silt that had penetrated through the opening.

AREA H

Ritual bath F-326 (Fig. 2.1)

This ritual bath is situated in the western part of Area H. It is the smallest of the ritual baths discovered so far. It lies on a north–south axis, but access to the external steps (L.P50) was from the west, perpendicular to the long axis (Fig. 2.2). The top step measured c. 0.7 m wide and c. 1.7 m long. It was blocked by a later wall built of fieldstones (the wall was exposed in the IAA excavation and has not yet been published). Four steps, hewn from north to south, perpendicular to the upper step, leads to the entrance to the immersion chamber (Fig. 2.3, Section A-A). The staircase is c. 1 m wide and its maximum depth at the entrance to the immersion chamber measured c. 2.2 m. The steps and the sides of the staircase are rock-hewn and coated with plaster.

The doorway to the immersion chamber is c. 0.7 m wide and c. 1.7 m high (Fig. 2.3, Section B-B). The immersion chamber (L.P53) is rounded, measuring c. 2 m from north to south and c. 2.7 m from east to west. A single step spans the entire width of the chamber, descending 0.5 m and

creating a kind of rounded immersion pool (Fig. 2.4). The maximum height of the chamber's ceiling is c. 2.5 m. The interior of the ritual bath was coated with hydraulic plaster.

The interior of the ritual bath was filled with layers of silt, which contained fragments of vessels from the Roman period (Pl. 1:1–14) and the Byzantine period (Pl. 2–3). The fragments from the Roman period, including cooking pots, storage jars, jugs, juglets and stone measuring cups, were dated from the first century BCE to the first century CE (in this volume, Ch. 6.2). Based on the ceramic finds in the silt, Ritual Bath F-326 probably went out of use during the first century CE.

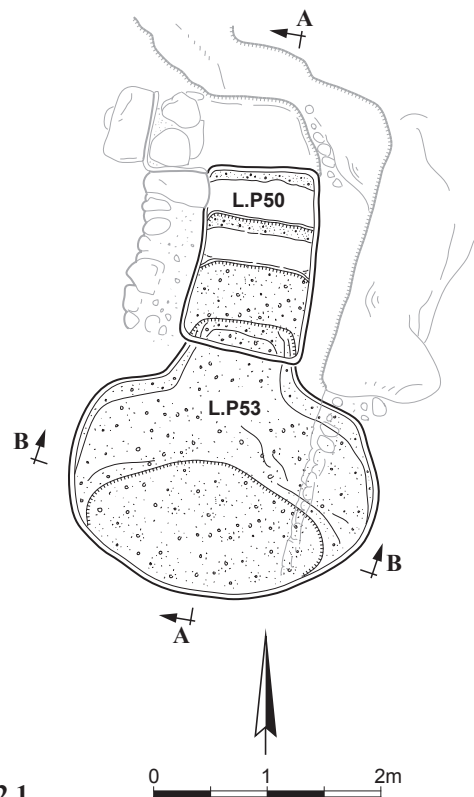


Fig. 2.1
F-326, plan of the ritual bath.



Fig. 2.2
Photo F-326, external staircase to the ritual bath, looking west.

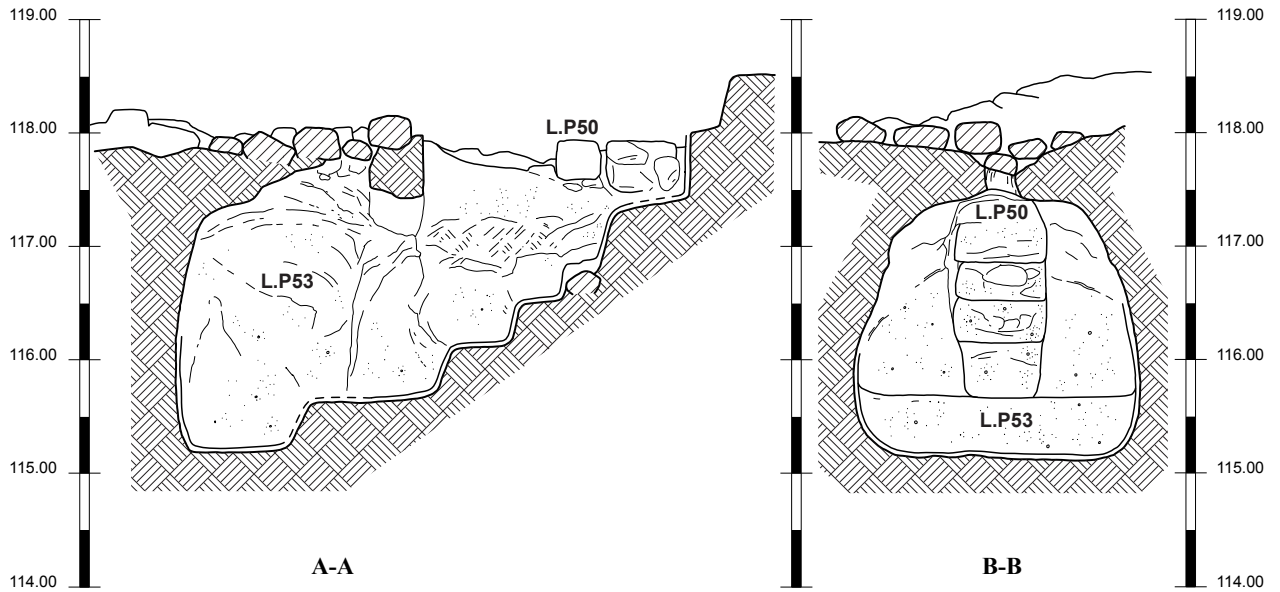


Fig. 2.3
F-326, Section A-A, looking west; Section B-B, looking north.



Fig. 2.4
Photo F-326. Immersion chamber of the ritual bath, looking south.

AREA J

Ritual bath F-331 (Fig. 2.5)

The immersion chamber of Ritual Bath F-331 is accessed by an external staircase (L.Q27) c. 1.6 m wide, with a maximum depth of c. 2.5 m from the surface. The external staircase consists of seven steps (Fig. 2.6, Section A-A). Six were hewn along the entire width of the chamber. The seventh and lowest was a built step, only c. 1 m wide. Gray hydraulic plaster was preserved on some of the steps and the sides of the external staircase. On the western side of the staircase, on a line parallel to the third and fourth steps, a foundation channel was hewn for a wall in the Byzantine period.

A heap of ashlar was found on the external staircase, which had destroyed some of the hewn steps. This heap of fallen stones apparently resulted from the collapse of some superstructure in the immediate vicinity of the ritual bath. When

the superstructure collapsed, the ashlar probably rolled down the steps of the ritual bath, damaging the southern side of the staircase. The damage created a breach in the southern side of the steps into Cistern F-332.

The entrance to the immersion chamber is situated on the western side of the external staircase. The doorway measured 0.65 m wide and 1.7 m high. The long axis of the immersion chamber is east to west — perpendicular to the long axis of the external steps. The immersion chamber is rectangular, with rounded corners, measuring c. 3.7 m long from east to west and 3.2 m wide from north to south. Inside the immersion chamber five steps were hewn descending from east to west (Fig. 2.6, Section B-B): one step at the entrance, the same width as the entrance; two spanning the entire width of the ritual bath; and two smaller steps, c. 0.5 m, abutting the southern side of the chamber (Fig. 2.7). The ceiling in the immersion

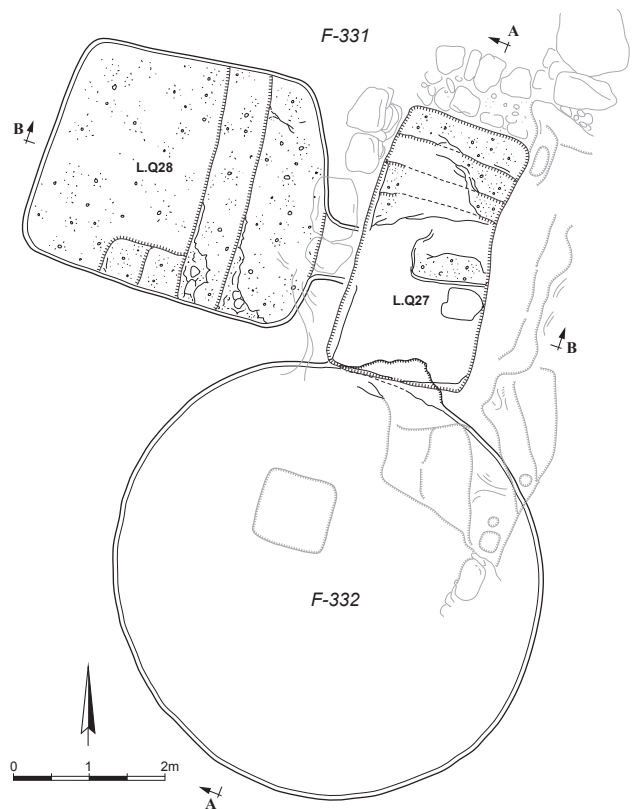


Fig. 2.5
F-331, plan of the ritual bath.



Fig. 2.7

Photo F-331. Immersion chamber of the ritual bath. Looking southeast.

chamber is c. 2.7 m high. The staircase and the walls were coated with gray hydraulic plaster.

Fragments of pottery vessels from the Byzantine period only were found in the layer of silt on the steps in the immersion chamber (Pl. 4:1–15). The complete lack of pottery from the Roman period may attest that the ritual bath was in use and continually maintained until the sudden and complete cessation of activity around the installation during the Second Temple period. The plan of the ritual bath, with the external staircase hewn perpendicular to the immersion chamber, is familiar from Ritual Baths F-267 and F-287, uncovered at the site during previous seasons (Melamed 2010: 82–83). Based on this parallel, we propose that Ritual Bath F-331 went out of use during the first century CE.

Ritual Bath F-345 (Fig. 2.8)

This ritual bath is situated at the northern end of Area J, south of Cistern F-346. Due to poor

preservation of the area it cannot be determined whether an external staircase or entrance corridor led to it. Only the immersion chamber is preserved (L.Q68), without a ceiling (Fig. 2.9). The entrance to the immersion chamber is from the north. It is a rounded chamber, measuring c. 4.3 m long from north to south and c. 3.9 m from east to west. Five hewn steps descended into the chamber from north to south (Fig. 10, Section A-A). The top step is c. 2.6 m wide and the second and third steps are the same width as the chamber. The fourth and fifth steps abutted the eastern and western walls of the chamber; the western step measured c. 0.9 m wide and the eastern step — c. 0.4 m wide (Fig. 2.11, Section B-B). The steps and walls were coated with gray hydraulic plaster. The plaster is preserved on the walls of the immersion chamber to a height of c. 1 m near the top step and c. 2.5 m at the bottom.

In the western wall of Ritual Bath F-345 a breach was found into the immersion chamber of adjacent Ritual Bath F-358 (see below).