VANDALISED AND LOOTED, ROCK-CUT TOMBS OF THE ROMAN AND BYZANTINE PERIODS: A CASE STUDY FROM SAFFA VILLAGE, RAMALLAH PROVINCE

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A total of 119 rock-cut burial caves of the Roman and Byzantine periods were surveyed in the study area, all of which had been subjected to robbing at some point in the recent past. This tomb raiding in the Saffa region has resulted in severe damage to a large number of rock-cut tombs, the desecration of several hundred ancient burials, and in the extraction of thousands of funerary objects from their original context. This study depends mainly on interviews with several of the raiders of these tombs and on a field survey carried out by the author in February and March 2011. The main aim of this study is to address three questions: What are the present and future challenges facing the tombs of the Roman and Byzantine periods in the study area? Could an ethnographical study help us to expand our understanding of the looting history of these burial caves and the kinds of looted objects that were found there? What can such an ethnographical study add to our understanding of the past?

Keywords: Roman and Byzantine tombs, looting, Ramallah, cultural heritage

I. BACKGROUND

Saffa lies ∼16 km west of Ramallah and 22 km northwest of Jerusalem (Fig. 1a). The village, situated on several hills and the plain between them covers a total area of about 1,400 hectares and lies at an average elevation of 350 m. Saffa village and its environs include 22 archaeological sites that date from the Middle Bronze Age through the Ottoman period (Fig. 1b) (Al-Houdalieh 2010a, 174). Half of these sites were surveyed by Finkelstein and Magen (1993) and Finkelstein *et al.* (1997), while the rest were first identified and surveyed by the author in the course of his fieldwork in the region over the past decade. Of these twenty-two archaeological sites, eight were expropriated by the Israeli authorities in 2005 for the construction of the "Separation Wall" along the western edge of the village, leaving no access to these places from the West Bank. Therefore, this study focuses on the vandalised burial caves of the Roman and Byzantine periods in the other 14 archaeological sites of the study area.

In the course of my archaeological fieldwork projects in Saffa village and its environs over the past decade (Al-Houdalieh 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010a, 2010b), I have observed a large number of vandalised rock-cut burial caves and surveyed a few of them, especially those located in the historic core of the village. The results of some of this earlier work—particularly my interviews with 45 tomb raiders and field visits to 30 different historic and archaeological sites located in western Ramallah province (carried out between December 2010 and February 2011 (Al-Houdalieh 2014)—encouraged me to conduct a pilot project concerning the vandalised, rock-cut burial caves of the Roman and Byzantine periods.

I chose the Saffa region for this study for two main reasons. Firstly, I have free access to the entire area since all of the inhabitants of the village know me from my previous fieldwork (I happen to be a native of Saffa village). Secondly, I have direct access to the majority of

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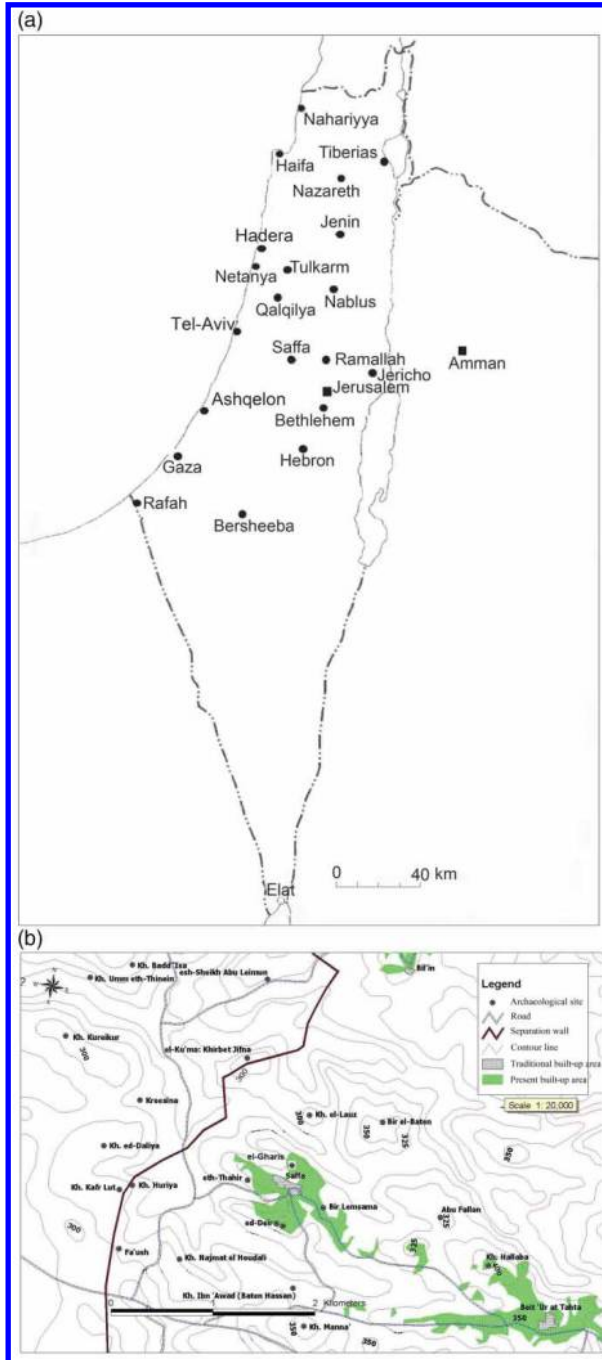
Fig. 1.   (a) The location of Saffa village. Drawing by Mr. I. Iqtait. (b) Distribution of the archaeological sites in the Saffa region (Source: Mr Muhammad Jaradat, Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities).

the antiquities hunters of the village, since they have participated in previous investigations of mine.

The importance of the present work derives from the following five points: (1) it highlights the importance that an ethnographic study can have for many archaeologists and anthropologists, as an adjunct to their other research projects; (2) it documents, in part, the evolution of these archaeological sites over time, by shedding light on the modern patterns of land use where these tombs are located, the tombs' history of being vandalised, the destruction of many of them, and the reshaping and reuse of several others for other purposes in modern times; (3) it demonstrates the destructive impact which illegal excavations have on archaeological heritage resources; (4) it systemically documents the layout and architecture of the vandalised Roman and Byzantine tombs located in the Saffa region. These tombs are suffering from serious damage and thus, without intervention, a large number of them will surely disappear forever in the near future; lastly, (5) it presents the diversity of the tomb types from the Roman and Byzantine periods in the study area.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The methods employed for this research project included interviews with tomb raiders from among the residents of Saffa village. The information given by the interviewees is cross-checked with that given by others who are part of the same looting gangs; a field survey of the study area, statistical analysis of the results of this study; and finally, a comparative study of the other ancient tombs in the Levant. The interviews were carried out by the author in February and March 2011, and the total number of informants was sixteen; of these nine were regarded as primary informants, while the rest were secondary informants. All of them are tomb raiders from Saffa, males between the ages of 33 and 65 years; thirteen of them self-report that they have completely stopped antiquities hunting as the result of several awareness campaigns carried out in the village by the author and other cultural heritage practitioners, while the other three are still occasionally vandalising archaeological resources to search for valuable objects. The interviews with the primary informants were carried out in the field in a conversational style so as to create positive interaction between the researcher and interviewees and in order to acquire a better understanding of the tombs' architecture, looting history, and the types and total numbers of the hunted objects taken from each tomb. By contrast, the interviews with the secondary informants were carried out in their homes in a direct questioning style, based on the information provided by the primary informants. The main aim of interviewing this category of informants was to check the validity of the information already provided by the primary informants. As a result of all the interviews, I determined that the error rate of all the specific details given approximately 6%.

The primary interviewees were asked a standard set of questions and their responses were written down on the questionnaire sheet by the author on the spot. The questions asked were (1) What are the internal layout and dimensions of this tomb (asked regarding the now inaccessible, backfilled tombs)? (2) When was this tomb first looted, and was it later *re*-worked, either by the same looting gang or another one? (3) Did you or others find archaeological objects in this burial tomb? If so, what kinds of material were found, in what quantities, and to whom were these objects sold? (4) How did you or the others handle the human skeletal remains found in this tomb? (5) How many times did you excavate (i.e., illegally), and what was the total number of persons in your looting gang? (6) Why did you participate in looting ancient tombs or other archaeological features?

The fieldwork team consisted of twenty-one persons, including three as a core team (the author, a draftsman, and one of my archaeology students), two workers, and the rest were tomb raiders (i.e., the sixteen informants). Three of the primary informants accompanied us for six

working days, while the other six joined us for the entire duration of the fieldwork (twenty-three working days). The surface area of the archaeological sites under study was divided into 10-m-wide rectangular strips using landmarks including trees, terraces, building remains and rocks, and each zone was assigned a letter: A, B, C, etc. Then, by means of a walkover of each surveyed archaeological site within the study area we tried to document any visible rock-cut tomb. As part of the field survey of each site, all of the tombs that were identified were mapped and photographed, and the present physical condition and visible details of each tomb were recorded on an individual sheet specifying: (a) the identification and location: site name, survey zone, and tomb number; (b) door opening: orientation, dimensions, and location in the façade; (c) cup-marks or carved ornamentation: description and location, e.g. on the façade; on the tomb's roof, or on adjacent surfaces or structures; (d) tomb chambers: number, dimensions, traces of carving tools (and type), number of burial niches and/or floor graves; (e) *loculi* (tunnel-like niches cut perpendicularly into the walls): number, dimensions, orientation, and height above the chamber floor; (f) *arcosolia* (arched, shelf-like niches hewn along the chamber walls): number, dimensions, orientation, and height above the chamber floor; (g) individual pit-graves (on the surface outside): dimensions and orientation; and (g) current physical conditions (as found): was the tomb open or sealed, was it found cleared or partially backfilled, and has it survived intact or been altered in order to be used for other purposes?

We entered all the tombs that were left essentially uncovered and open, sometimes after removing minimal backfilled rubble, soil accumulation, rubbish, or vegetative overgrowth from the excavated trench. Furthermore, part of our strategy in the field was to check the validity of the information provided by the tomb raiders in the interviews regarding the location, size, internal physical details, and condition of the tombs, especially those which were more inaccessible due to their entrances being intentionally backfilled with soil and rubble. For this purpose, we dug narrow trenches into the disturbed deposits against the façades of 20% of these backfilled tombs, enabling us to slip down into them in order to check first-hand their physical details and compare them with the information given in the interviews.

At the beginning of all meetings with the informants, I provided sufficient explanation such that each interviewee could make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in this research project. I described the potential benefits of their participation in this study for the researcher and the local society. I also made the informants aware of how their responses would be used. Finally, I guaranteed all informants that any personal identifying information would be kept confidential.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

Below I will present the results of both the ethnographic study and the field survey of the fourteen archaeological sites in Saffa village and its environs. The importance of the first section of these results derives from its presentation of the history of plundering the heritage resources in the study area, including tombs; the process of organising the looting gangs; the main causes of the plundering of heritage resources by locals; the behaviour of the looters regarding human skeletal remains encountered in the ancient tombs; and the total number of hunted archaeological objects extracted from the vandalised rock-cut tombs of the Roman and Byzantine periods. As for the second section, its main value lies in a detailed typology, classification, and description of the vandalised rock-cut tombs of the Roman and Byzantine period in the same study area.

3.1 The ethnographic study

Palestine's cultural heritage resources are facing several serious challenges which stem from both internal and external factors, include poverty, a lack of awareness, poor law enforcement, ongoing local and regional political crises, an ever growing demand for heritage objects via the illegal antiquities market, and, consequently, the phenomenon of looting itself (Al-Houdalieh 2010c, 33). The plundering of heritage resources in the Palestinian National Territories (PNT) is largely carried out by Palestinians who have close working relationships with Israeli antiquities middlemen and traders. The archaeological objects are almost exclusively smuggled into Israeli cities, which serve as local market and way-station for export into the worldwide antiquities market (Ganor 2003; Kersel 2006).

Seven of the primary informants for our study were professional antiquities looters with well-developed fieldwork experience, while the other two were amateurs with a much lower level of experience. Two of the informants first started digging in Saffa village and its environs in the late 1970s, as part of a professional looting gang from the Hebron area (for further information, see Al-Houdalieh 2006b, 106). The integration of the two informants into this looting gang was, according to the informants themselves, to provide the members of this gang with social acceptance, to live, and operate in the village, since at that time all of Saffa's inhabitants were locally born and everyone knew each other. After participating in plundering heritage resources for two years, the two informants established their own gang to dig for their own profit. Five other informants started their looting activities at the end of the 1980s at the same time as the outbreak of the first Palestinian uprising (*intifada*), and the other two informants began their plundering activities at the beginning of the 2000s.

The primary informants for this study worked in gangs. Each gang consisted of five to seven persons from the same extended family and their friends from other local families, all seeking to exploit for their own profit any available heritage resources in search of valuable objects. Almost all of the informants reported changing the membership of their gangs repeatedly over time, either partially or totally. The four main reasons behind this change in personnel were a lack of confidence between the head of the looting gang and the other members; some members' lack of seriousness about the work; some members' non-compliance with the days and hours they were expected to work; and, consequently, the dissatisfaction with the share they received from the money realised from the sold objects. In this regard, the monetary proceeds from the objects were usually divided equally among the members of each looting gang (however, the owner of a metal detector, for example, received a double share). In several cases, though, the looting teams would find themselves embroiled in a dispute: If one or more members of the gang failed to participate in the digging for several hours, or for a full day or more, while the others continued the work without interruption, how should the head of the gang later divide the cash proceeds to the members of his gang? Should he give all of them the same share, or should he calculate each one's actual working hours and pay them accordingly? In many such situations when some of the looters were not satisfied with their share they would withdraw in order to establish their own gangs.

The informants indicate that from the 1970s up to the end of the 1980s, the antiquities looters were using only traditional excavation equipment, i.e., hand tools. They then introduced the use of metal detectors in their search for valuable objects, and in the 1990s a great number of the antiquities hunters began using bulldozers to expose large sections of archaeological sites, especially features like rock-cut tombs. Many of the antiquities hunters, especially those we might term "professionals", possess a remarkable level of field experience in locating the buried rock-cut tombs. They look for clues like dressed rock surfaces, cup-marks hewn into the bedrock, and trees flourishing in rocky spots with (seemingly) minimal soil deposits. The looters have in many cases destroyed such trees using bulldozers in order to reach the

holes through which the roots of the trees extend into subterranean spaces such as burial chambers and cisterns. In such cases, the looters made a verbal agreement with the landowner before they began excavating on his property and cutting down the trees. The landowner usually received a certain amount of money as compensation, plus a fair share of the proceeds from the finds, even if he did not participate in the plundering activities.

Before the beginning of the 1970s, according to the informants, the inhabitants of Saffa had no idea about the monetary value of the archaeological objects they encountered. One informant, age 59, told me the following story:

This incident occurred in May 1967, one month before the Israelis occupied our village [along with the rest of the West Bank]. My uncle, 17 years old at that time, was herding the sheep and goats of the extended family. He slipped down into an ancient, abandoned cistern in order to catch birds nestled in the cistern, after fastening a rope around its circular cap-stone. The cistern was half-full with soil deposits and stones. After awhile, he noticed a large hole in the upper shoulder of the cistern, and he went through it to find several chambers connected with each other by tunnels. In the first chamber, which is close to the cistern, he found several pottery jars arranged in a certain way close to the chamber's walls, plus a large number of pottery oil lamps fixed in niches carved into the walls of the chamber. At the end, before leaving the spot, he smashed the jars with his big stick and took a certain number of the oil lamps—in order to throw them at the herd instead of stones. I [i.e., the informant] entered the same structure in 1981, finding a large number of smashed pottery vessels but also 45 complete pottery vessels, including oil lamps, bottles and bowls.

All of the primary interviewees (nine persons) attributed their participation in looting ancient tombs to the lack of a permanent job which might allow them to maintain their financial responsibility for their immediate families, which range in size between four and eight. The majority of the informants (seven persons) ascribed their participation in plundering the ancient tombs to a lack of awareness about the value and importance of cultural heritage resources, for both their own Palestinian identity and the enrichment of humankind. Most of the interviewees (six persons) ascribed their looting activities to inadequate enforcement of the current antiquities laws in the PNT, and to the growing demand for heritage objects on the Israeli and global antiquities markets. A few of the interviewees (three persons) attribute their activities in looting ancient tombs to their desire for quick albeit illegal monetary gain. According to the information provided by the interviewees for this study, the tombs' looters consider all archaeological sites and features, even if they dated to the pre-Islamic periods, as a fundamental part of their own national heritage. This means, then, that their participation in plundering ancient tombs did not derive from religious or even ethnic reasons (in contrast, e.g., to the Taliban's destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan [Afghanistan]; for more information on this, see Bernbeck 2010).

None of the primary informants paid special regard to human skeletal remains encountered in these surveyed tombs. The bones found in their original graves were simply removed and dumped randomly in several spots either inside or outside the vandalised tombs. Based on the author's personal observations and information provided by the informants, none of the human skeletal remains were reburied as such, either in their original graves or in other places. According to the results of our discussions with the informants, I believe that dealing with the encountered human remains in such a manner stems from a lack of awareness of the land's legacy and the associated moral and ethical values. The problem of the abuse of graves in the PNT has not gained even minimal notice among the relevant local governmental institutions (chiefly the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the Ministry of *Awqaf* and Religious Affairs), in academic publications, in the media, political parties, or within civil society generally. Several foreign countries, however, have introduced various acts of legislation protecting graves, laws, or statements of guiding principles, including

TABLE 1:   Classification of the looted objects from the surveyed rock-cut tombs

Object	Oil lamps	Coins	Metallic ornaments				Pottery jars, bowls and cooking pots	Glass beads	Others
			Earring	Finger ring	Necklace	Anklet			
Number	2.720	2.290	280	110	50	70	105	320	100

Australia (Meara 2007, 25–7, 32–43, 81–86), Canada (Blair 2005), England (Sutherland and Holst 2005, 15–19), and the United States (Ferguson 1996, 63–64; Seidemann 2005, 84–87; Bruning 2006, 501, 513–17). Furthermore, some institutions and organisations have embodied in their code of ethics principles or statements dealing with human skeletal remains, such as the Society for American Archaeology, the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland, the International Council of Museums, the World Archaeological Congress, and the United Nations and UNESCO.

Based on information provided by the interviewees, of the 119 vandalised tombs surveyed in the Saffa region approximately 25% were plundered before the outbreak of the first Palestinian *intifada* in December 1987 (but *not* before the end of the 1970s); 45% were plundered from 1988 until the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in September 1993; and the remaining 30% were plundered between October 1993 and February 2011. Interestingly, the majority of the tombs vandalised before the first *intifada* have actually been re-entered in more recent times by other looting gangs, mostly in search of coins, jewellery, etc.—and armed with the now ubiquitous metal detectors. Finally, the estimated total number of the extracted funerary objects from these 119 surveyed rock-cut tombs is approximately 6000 (for a breakdown into object types, see Table 1).

3.2 Location and typology of the looted tombs

All of the surveyed archaeological sites and the burial grounds are located on the summits of hills, with steep slopes descending in all directions. Two-thirds of them lie within agricultural areas planted with olive trees, while the rest are in open areas usually used for grazing animals. For the past two decades, the majority of the farmers have customarily ploughed their parcels of land—including these archaeological sites—with the use of tractors, which penetrate the earth to a depth of between 25 and 45 cm. This deep ploughing has often caused the destruction of architectural remains and the displacement of exposed cultural deposits down-slope, the latter aided by erosion from the runoff of seasonal rainfall.

The number of the vandalised, rock-cut tombs of the Roman and Byzantine periods surveyed in the Saffa region totalled 119, distributed among the 14 sites as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2:   The distribution of the surveyed rock-cut tombs

The site	Saffa village	Kh. el-Lauz	Bir el-Baten	eth-Thahir	Kh. Huriya	ed-Dair	Najmat el-Houdali
Number	16	26	20	11	8	8	7
The site	Kh. Hallaba	Fa'ush/ Kh. er-Ras	Bir Lemsama	Kh. es-Suana/ Kh. Manna'	el-Gharis	Abu Fallan	
Number	7	4	4	4	3	2	

TABLE 3: The typology of the surveyed rock-cut tombs

Type	Subterranean tomb chambers with *loculi* (Figs. 2 and 3)	Subterranean burial chambers with *arcosolia* (Figs. 4 and 5)	Subterranean burial chambers with pit-graves	Individual pit-graves on the surface	Unfinished subterranean burial chambers
Number	36	50	7	16	10

At only one surveyed site, Khirbet ibn 'Awad/Khirbet Baten Hassan, was no vandalised tomb observed. In addition, at the above-mentioned archaeological sites we documented soil disturbances at ninety other spots in front of vertical, obviously manmade rock-cuttings. According to the statements of the primary informants who accompanied us in surveying Saffa and its environs, and supported by our field observations, these rock-cuts are parts of ancient stone quarries or winepresses, or they represent an initial construction phase of rock-hewn tombs which were never completed.

The surveyed rock-cut tombs break down according to their layout and design as specified in Table 3.

Of the 119 rock-cut tombs, 80 exist as part of larger cemeteries, while the rest are isolated installations. Approximately two-thirds of the documented tombs are located outside the boundaries of the ancient residential areas, whereas the rest are located inside the once-inhabited sites. It is worth noting that we identified in several archaeological sites many subterranean burial chambers with *loculi* and others with *arcosolia* nestled adjacent to each other.

The doorways of 72 of the 103 surveyed subterranean burial chambers were left partially or totally visible by the looters, while the rest were completely covered by backfilling. Based on the field observations, eyewitnesses, and information provided by the primary interviewees, the orientation of these doorways breaks down as follows; see Table 4.

All of these doorways were situated in the centre of the façade, their size is 68 cm high × 53 cm wide on average, and their sills are 70 cm higher on average than the floors of the burial chambers. The doorways of the subterranean burial chambers with *loculi* are either simple elongated openings, only rarely having any added decoration, or surrounded externally by one to three carved, recessed frames 15 cm wide and 12 cm deep on average along their tops and two sides (Fig. 6a and b). By contrast, the doorways of the burial chambers with *arcosolia* were simple and plain (Fig. 6c). All doorways of the chambers with *loculi* were originally blocked with stone slabs 0.25 m thick on average and were sealed in place (within the innermost frame) with earthen mortar. The doorways of the *arcosolia* chambers were sometimes sealed with the same slab-and-mortar arrangement, but more often with wheel-like large stones (~0.76 m in diameter and 0.30 m thick on average) set in a deep rock-hewn channel where they could be rolled aside and wedged in place with small stones.

The subterranean burial chambers with *loculi* (Figs. 2 and 3) consist of two spaces, external and internal, separated by a rock-cut wall 0.50 m thick on average. The external space, which

TABLE 4: The orientation of the doorways of the surveyed subterranean burial chambers

Direction	North	South	East	West
Number	41	21	11	30

served as an open forecourt, is a well-levelled depression fronting the façade, with dimensions very similar to those of the chamber inside; its floor surface is level with the bottom of the doorway but has a 2–5% downward slope toward its outer edge, i.e., the side opposite the entrance, so as to conduct rainwater away from the tomb. The internal space, the burial chamber, is rectangular in plan and its floor level is usually considerably lower than the court-yard outside, the transition achieved via a single step, either cut from the bedrock or consisting of a large flat stone. The chamber consists of a single rock-hewn room measuring 3 m × 2.8 m × 1.6 m high on average; it has three to seven *loculi* all of nearly the same shape but often having different measurements, ranging between 1.5 to 2 m long × 0.50 to 0.70 m wide × 0.70 to 0.90 m high. The floors of the *loculi* are at the same level as the main floor level of the chamber; sometimes *loculi* are accessed via a small pit hewn into the chamber floor (see Fig. 2). According to the informants, when first found each of these *loculi* contained the skeletal remains of a single person with the feet oriented towards the mouth of the niche, and each *loculus* was sealed with a large, well-shaped stone slab. The chambers of this type also usually included a square depression hewn into the floor, measuring on average 0.80 m × 0.80 m × 0.70 m deep; these depressions or pits (again, according to the informants) were found covered over with stone slabs and full of disarticulated human bones and associated funerary objects. In addition, a few chambers of this burial type include rock-cut niches located 0.70 m on average above the floor level, in the wall opposite the entrance, and measur-ing 0.50 m × 0.6 m × 0.15 m deep (see Fig. 3).

Based on our architectural documentation, on a comparison study of many other tombs discovered in the Levant, and on information provided by the tomb raiders, the subterranean burial chambers with *loculi* can mostly be dated to the early Roman imperial period. They resemble many other tombs unearthed in Palestine and Jordan, such as at Heshbon (Water-house 1973, 115–123; Kritzeck and Nitowski 1980, 80); Jerusalem (Magness 2005, 127–28; Murphy-O'Connor 2008, 137; 2010, 85–90); Modi'in, Jericho and Beth She'arim (Williams 1994, 171–72); Wadi edh-Dhahab, Madaba-Ma'in (Piccirillo 1996, 406–07); Petra (Wenning 1990, 145–47; Blackburn 2010, 38); Yasileh (Cooper 2000, 33); Pella (Smith and McNicoll 1992, 124–33); and Ya'amun (Egan, Bilai, and Zamora 2000, 580–81).

The subterranean burial chambers with *arcosolia* consist of two main spaces, external and internal, with a rock-cut wall of 0.45 m average thickness in-between (Figs. 4 and 5). Here, however, the external space consists of a relatively narrow, unroofed staircase approximately 2 m long × 0.85 m wide, with three to five rock-hewn steps leading down to the entrance. The internal space, the burial chamber, is square in plan and, once again, lies considerably lower than the doorway level, the transition achieved, again, via a single step, either cut from the bedrock or consisting of a large flat stone. The rock-hewn chamber measures 2.4 m × 2.4 m × 1.5 m high on average, and carved into its walls are three to five arched, shelf-like niches all of nearly the same shape and measurements (1.75 m wide × 0.60 m deep and 1.1 m high at the centre, on average). Narrow grooves carved along the upper edges of the trough-like graves, along with the numerous flat, heavy stone fragments found scattered on the chamber floors, indicate that the individual burial places inside these *arcosolia* were covered with slabs. The floor of each chamber of this type included a square pit or depression approxi-mately 0.75 m × 0.75 m × 0.65 m deep on average. These pits were, once again, (according to the informants) found covered with stone slabs and included the skeletal remains of several individuals, along with their associated funerary objects. Several chambers of this type include well-cut, almost square holes (0.30 m × 0.30 m × 0.35 m high, on average) carved in their walls at various levels above the chamber floor.

These documented subterranean burial chambers with *arcosolia* can be dated to the Byzantine period, and these also resemble many other tombs unearthed in Palestine and Jordan, such as at Ya'amun (Egan, Bilai, and Zamora 2000, 580–81); Khirbet el-Lauz
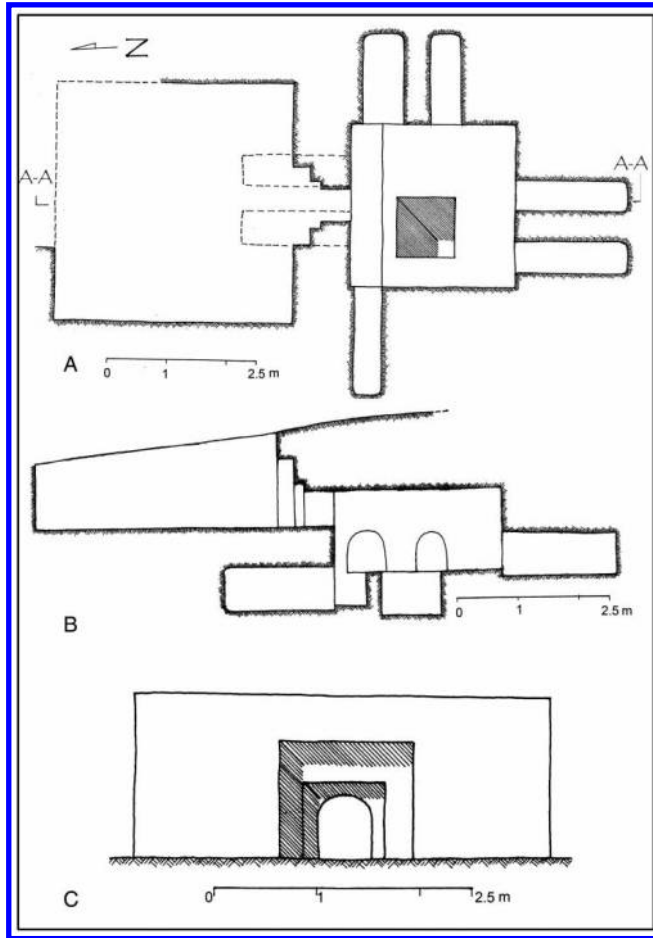
Fig. 2. Plan and sections of a subterranean rock-cut burial chamber with *loculi* in Khirbet el-Lauz. Drawing by I. Iqtait.

(Al-Houdalieh 2009, 343–46); Khirbet Jurish (Weiss, Zissu, and Solimany 2004, fig. 136.5); Ramun (Taha 1998, 336); Jerusalem (Avni and Greenberg 1996, 25–27; Murphy-O'Connor 2008, 137); En Rani (Barshad 2000, 20); Tel el-Ful (Baruch 2000, 62–64); and Khirbet Dubla (Olami, Sender, and Oren 2004, 76).

For the subterranean burial chambers with pit-graves, the top-plan is similar to that of the *loculi* type; however, instead of the wall niches they feature three to five graves hewn into the floor, all of them nearly in the same shape and measurements (2 m × 0.75 m × 0.80 m). This category of tombs can be dated to the Roman period, resembling other Levantine tombs discovered in Ya'amun (Egan, Bilai, and Zamora 2000, 580–81).

Finally, the individual pit-graves in open air are cut down into the bedrock surface (Fig. 6d), all having nearly the same shape and measurements of ~1.85 m × 0.70 m × 1.45 m deep. Their sides are well trimmed and the majority of them have grooves cut along the upper edges of the long sides to support the covering stabs; the internal surfaces of these graves were coated with a plaster layer consisting of lime, grog, and tiny rounded stones.
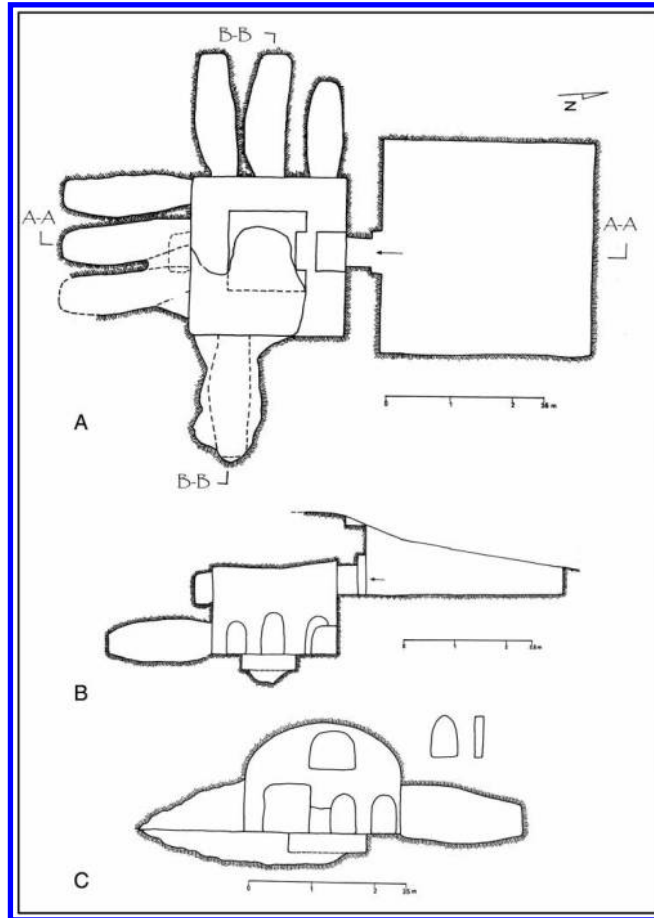
Fig. 3.   Plan and sections of a subterranean rock-cut burial chamber with *loculi* in Khirbet el-Lauz.
Drawing by I. Iqtait.

The category of tombs can be dated to the Roman and Byzantine periods, resembling many
other such installations unearthed in the region, such as at Heshbon (Waterhouse 1973, 123–25);
Wadi Ramm (Perry and Jones 2008, 96); Ya'amun (Egan, Bilai, and Zamora 2000, 580–81);
Wadi Abu Khasharif (Al-Salameen and Falahat 2009, 94–95); Bir Madhkur (Perry 2007,
83–86); Umm Al-Jimal (De Vries 1995, 432); Humayma (Schick 1995, 328–30); and Khirbet
edh-Dharih (Villeneuve and al-Muhaisen 1991, 509).

    The majority of the subterranean burial chambers have sides which are quite vertical.
However, in a few cases we noticed that the walls slanted slightly inward towards the top.
We also noted that the visible marks of the hewing tools in the *loculi* burial chambers and
those with pit-graves were different from those seen in the *arcosolia*-type chambers and the pit-
graves in open air. The chisels and picks used in constructing the rock-cut tombs, according to
the visible marks of the hewing tools, break down as follows; see Table 5.

    Based on all the visible tool marks, I believe that the widest tool marks (2.8–4 cm) rep-
resent the use of metal hand-axes in constructing and finishing several tombs, while all the

TABLE 5: The classification of the chisels and picks used in constructing the rock-cut tombs

Tomb type	Chambers with *loculi* or pit-graves		Chambers with *arcosolia* and the individual pit graves on the surface		
Tool type	Sharp narrow	Sharp wide	Sharp narrow	Sharp wide	Sharp wider
Tool width	4–7 mm	8–13 mm	5–6 mm (rarely)	1.1–1.5 cm	2.8–4 cm

rest of the marks indicate that various chisels were employed in carving and finishing the majority of the tombs.

It is noteworthy that the upper surfaces of the natural bedrock, both on top of the tomb chambers and in the immediate vicinity, have never been shaped or levelled. We did, however, notice the presence of cup-marks of various sizes close to several tombs. These hewn
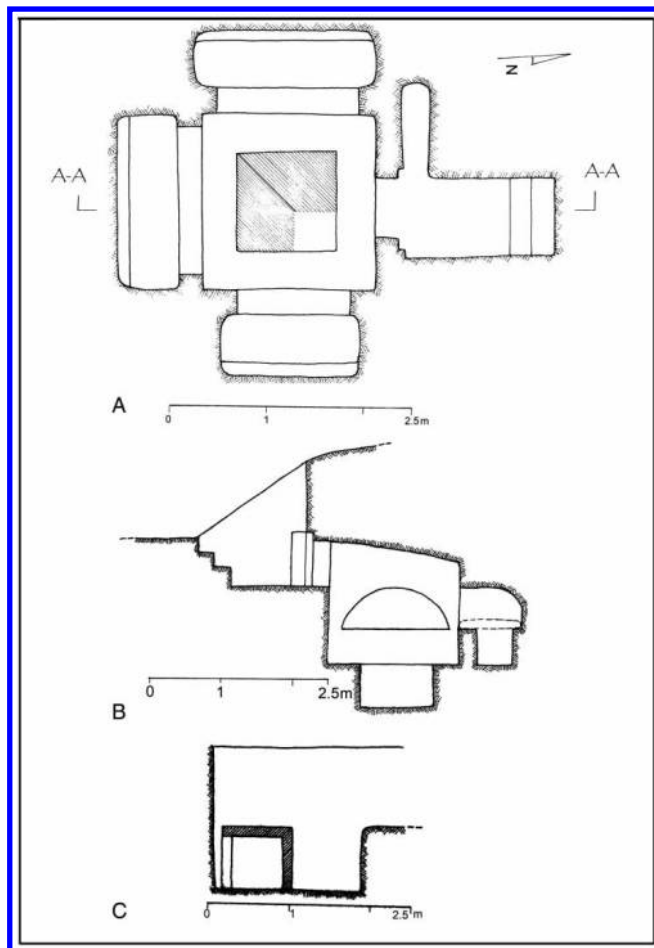

Fig. 4. Plan and sections of a subterranean rock-cut burial chamber with *arcosolia* in Khirbet el-Lauz. Drawing by I. Iqtait.
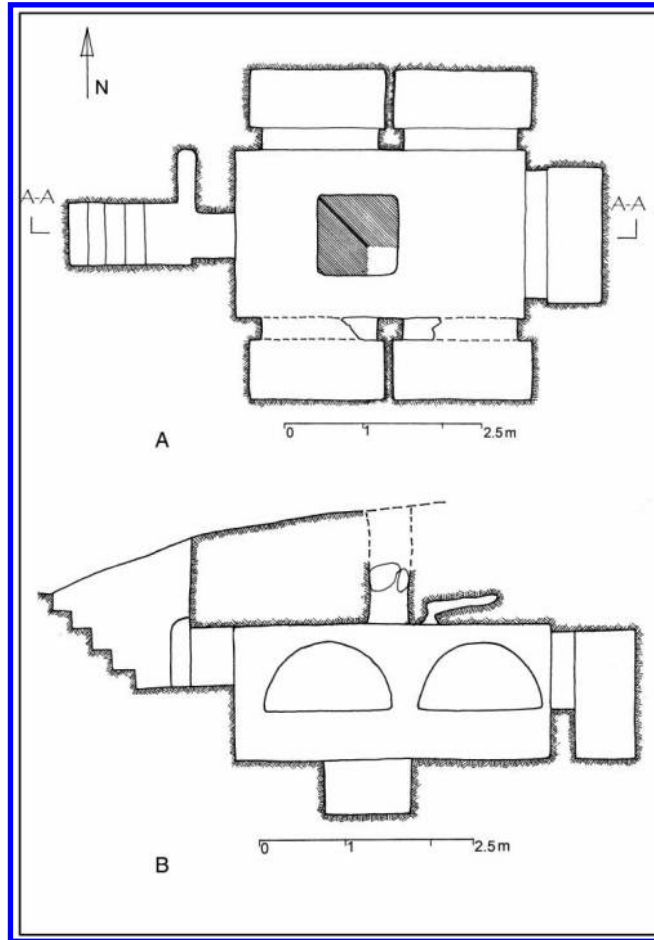
Fig. 5.   Plan and sections of a subterranean rock-cut burial chamber with *arcosolia* in Khirbet Bir el-Baten. Drawing by I. Iqtait.

depressions can be classified into two categories: small cup-shaped cuts (7–11 cm in diameter and 7–10 cm in depth) and larger bowl-shaped cuts (40–55 cm in diameter and 25–35 cm in depth). Most of the bowl-shaped basins are surrounded by a somewhat larger square frame, indicating that they were covered with fitted stone slabs (Fig. 6e). In one case, we documented several of the cup-marks and a rock-cut channel about 12 cm wide and 11 cm deep arranged around the upper edge of the external space (forecourt) of a *loculi*-style tomb (Fig. 6f). It is believed that the channel functioned to direct winter rains away from the tomb's forecourt and entrance, and the cup-shaped holes were used to hold vertical wooden poles which supported the roof of an arbour. For more information about cup-marks, their shapes and function, see Worrell (1921/22), Ahlström (1978), and Al-Houdalieh (2010a, 192–94).

The current physical condition of the documented tombs was recorded. The majority were found to have deteriorated to various degrees. Inside, all of them include now-disturbed soil deposits of varying thickness (Fig. 6g–i) associated with rubble, smashed stone slabs, plastic material, and the remains of candles. Only very few do not include any of human skeletal

Fig. 6.   (a) Doorway of a subterranean rock-cut burial chamber with *loculi* at Khirbet el-Lauz.
(b) Doorway of a subterranean rock-cut burial chamber with *loculi* at Khirbet el-Lauz. (c) Doorway of a
subterranean rock-cut burial chamber with *arcosolia* at Khirbet el-Lauz. (d) An individual ground grave at
Khirbet el-Lauz. (e) A large bowl-shaped, rock-cut feature at Khirbet el-Lauz. (f) Several small,
cup-shaped holes and a rock-cut channel at Najmat el-Houdali. (g) Interior of a burial chamber at
eth-Thahir, showing minimal floor deposits of soil. (h) Interior of a burial cave at Najmat el-Houdali,
showing deep soil deposits. (i) Interior of a burial cave at Bir el-Baten, showing minimal soil deposits
(Photos: The author).

remains at all. The walls and entrances of approximately 30% of the documented tombs were
partially destroyed. Seven of the chambers had been reused as kilns, perhaps during the Late
Ottoman period, to produce charcoal; two tombs had been used as rubbish dumps; three
others were reused as cisterns to collect rain water, after re-carving the walls and floors to
enlarge the space, sealing the original entrance, and carving a round opening in the ceiling.
Finally, the roots of olive trees had penetrated several tombs and caused a certain amount
of damage to their roofs and walls.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study suggest that an ethnographic study of tomb raiders carried out in con-
junction with a field survey of the vandalised tombs can be of great assistance to the researcher.
Conducting interviews with the local people, especially the seasoned, 'professional' tomb
raiders, provides the researcher with significant and detailed information of many kinds,

including the exact location of the vandalised tombs; the previous appearance of features which have now been buried, demolished, or altered and reused; the modern looting history of the vandalised tombs; the types and descriptions of the removed archaeological objects; and, finally, the estimated number of archaeological objects extracted from each place. Indeed, without the information provided by the raider-interviewees, it would have been impossible for me to identify the location of approximately 30% of the 119 surveyed tombs, since they had been backfilled, destroyed, modified, reused for other purposes, or simply hidden by vege-tative overgrowth. Based on this experience, I make the case I have advanced before (Al-Houdalieh 2010a, 207–08), encouraging all archaeologists and anthropologists to conduct ethnographic studies of the local populace living on or adjacent to archaeological sites, after first building a bridge of trust between the researchers, the local people generally, and the specific interviewees.

This study also indicates that a large number of the Roman and Byzantine period rock-cut tombs located in the Saffa region have been severely vandalised and looted over the past few decades. Furthermore, all of the human skeletal remains encountered by the tomb raiders were disturbed and have been scattered over a wide area, both inside and outside the tombs. As for the extracted material culture objects, all were sold to licensed Arab or Israeli dealers based in Jerusalem or other major cities in Israel. The main driving forces behind the looting of Roman and Byzantine tombs in Saffa and its environs are indeed numerous, including poverty, lack of awareness, inadequacy of the enforcement of antiquities laws in the PNA, and a growing demand on the illegal antiquities market for archaeological objects.

Each of the documented subterranean burial chambers in the Saffa area represents a col-lective family grave usually spanning many generations. The size, top-plan, number of graves, and final finishing of these tombs reflect the socio-economic, religious, and political status of the deceased. It is believed that the surveyed tombs of our study area—lacking any specific indication of being distinguished burials, such as carved ornamentation, drawings, fresco, stone sarcophagi, or unique funerary objects—represent the middle classes of the societies that settled at Saffa and the other archaeological sites in its environs. The presence of a square depression cut into the floor of the majority of the surveyed chambers indicates that secondary burial (the gathering and depositing of bones) was a widespread ancient practice in the study area. It is assumed that the burial practices observed in the majority of these tombs consisted of two main phases: (1) A deceased was laid in a burial place until the corpse was completely decomposed, and then (2) the bones were moved, together with the funerary objects, to be deposited in the square depression in order to make room for future interments, since constructing a new rock-hewn tomb complex undoubtedly required signifi-cant time and resources.

Based on the results of this study, we can conclude that the inhabitants of the Saffa region during the Roman period buried their dead in subterranean burial chambers with *loculi*, in sub-terranean burial chambers with pit-graves, and in individual (surface) pit-graves. By contrast, the people of the same region during the Byzantine period buried their deceased in chambers featuring *arcosolia*, as well as in the individual pit-graves open to air. Furthermore, this study indicates that the subterranean burial chambers of the Roman period differed from those of the Byzantine period as to their shape, size, top-plan, and total number of graves: The top-plan of the subterranean burial chamber of the Roman period is slightly rectangular in shape, measuring 3 m × 2.8 m × 1.6 m high on average, and it contains three to seven *loculi*, or pit-graves all of the same general shape but ranging in size between 1.5 to 2 m long × 0.50 to 0.70 m wide × 0.70 to 0.90 m high. By contrast, the top-plan of the Byzantine-period burial chambers is square, measuring 2.4 m × 2.4 m × 1.5 m high on average, and the chamber walls featured three to five arched niches of nearly the same shape and measurements (1.75 m long × 0.60 m wide and 1.1 m high, on average).

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