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# Between Beth Zacharia and Beth Zur: Second Temple Monumental Tombs and a unique 20th-century Russian Rock-Cut Church near a Roman Road at the site of Deir Sha'ar

This article aims to reapproach some of the previously known archaeological and historical data on the site of Deir Sha'ar (Beit Sha'ar), also known as the “Russian Monastery”, in the Central Hebron Hills, in the light of the new finds and discoveries made during recent surveys conducted by the authors on behalf of the Staff Officer of Archaeology, Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria (SOA). The previously known features, specifically the monumental rock-cut tombs, were suggested a new, Late Second Temple date (2nd c. BC — 1st c. AD). The earliest, a free-standing monolith tomb, bears similarity with the Kidron burial monuments, namely — the “Pharaoh’s Daughter’s tomb”. Its unique appearance and location in the landscape of the Battle of Beth Zacharia were interpreted as the possible (symbolical?) tomb of Eleazar Avaran. Additional subterranean features are published for the first time: a burial cave, possibly hewn already during the Iron Age II (ca. 8th c. BC) with evidence for further use during the Late Second Temple Period, a Jewish ritual bath (*miqveh*) from the Late Second Temple Period and a unique for the region cave church, hewn by the Russian monk Lazar Sudomoikin at the beginning of the 20th c., which’s existence was only hinted in the period accounts. In addition, the bulk of Byzantine architectural finds from Khirbet Beit Zakariya is presented, suggesting the identification of the site as the burial place of prophet Zecharia depicted on the Madaba map. Lastly, some sites in the mountainous Judea around Beth Zacharia were offered new identifications based on the Madaba map and archaeological record, including the second Beth Zur, mentioned by Eusebius, and the traditional place of the Eunuch’s baptism.

**Keywords:** Battle of Beth Zacharia, Judea, Roman roads, *miqveh*, Pharaoh’s Daughter’s Tomb, monumental tombs, Madaba Map, Byzantine Church, pilgrimage, Eunuch’s Baptism, cave church, Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, LIDAR scanning.

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To the blessed memory of MJR Shiloh Har-Even, who had fallen in the battle with a vastly outnumbering enemy, protecting the Innocent.  
"Wherefore he ran upon him courageously through the midst of the battle, slaying on the right hand and on the left, so that they were divided from him  
on both sides." (1 Macc 6: 45)

יִרְוֹן כְּגִבּוֹר בְּתוֹךְ גְּדוּדֵי הָאוֹיֵב וְחָרְבוּ אֶחְלָה בֶּשֶׁר יְמִין וְשְׂמָאל (מק' א' י', 47)

## Introduction

The site is located in the heart of Judea, in the Central Hebron Hills, ca. 400 m. west of the modern Jerusalem-Hebron highway, on a hill at the northern border of the intensively cultivated and rich-in-water Valley of Blessings (Emek Berachot) (Ref. ITM 211894/617043).

The site, surrounded by cherry and grape orchards, is frequented by tourists, mainly locals, who are attracted by its history during the Independence War (1947-1949). Ironically, its ancient history, as attested by remains dating back to the Iron Age, to the Second Temple period, and to the Late Antiquity, was generally overlooked by scholars. Even the most recent pre-war activities at the site, conducted by the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, fell into oblivion, too.

The ancient remains consist of a group of structures and underground features (cisterns, an olive press cave, and a Jewish purification bath (*miqveh*)), situated mainly at the hilltop. A portion of an ancient paved road (ca. 170 m.) runs along the western slope, where over a dozen subterranean features are found. The latter comprised of burial caves, most of which were cleared and severely remodeled during the 20th c., to the point where the surveyors erroneously identified them as completely modern elements [Kochavi, 1972. P. 45].

Prior to the discovery of the inscribed mosaic, the site drew little to no attention, and the British Survey of Western Palestine briefly mentions "walls, foundations, caves... heaps of stones" and "remains of an ancient road" [SWP, III. P. 351].

A Greek mosaic inscription bearing the name of certain Zacharia was occasionally found in 1902 (fig. 44a). Its publication in a London weekly "The Graphic" (October 25, 1902) and the suggested identification of the site as the birthplace of St. John the Baptist ("House of Zechariah", Lk 1:39-40), based on the recently published Madaba map, encouraged Archimandrite Leonid (Sentzov), Head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, to purchase the land. The religious and archaeological importance was luckily augmented by the land's strategic location, suitable for turning it into a pilgrim guesthouse. Excavations conducted shortly after uncovered the remains of a Byzantine church (and severely damaged the inscription, thus precluding its reexamination), igniting a wide debate among scholars, the majority of whom suggested readings different from the initial one and challenged the identification [Barton, 1903; Vincent, 1903; Meistermann, 1904. P. 92ff; Germer-Durand, 1908; Mader, 1918. P. 203-207; and see *CIIP*, IV, No. 3396 for the most recent reading and exhaustive bibliography].

The most detailed description of the ruins, while still under the control of The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, was left by Stelletsii, who visited the site in 1906. He mentioned a subterranean feature, accessed by a rock-cut staircase, in the immediate vicinity of the church and architectural members scattered around it [Stelletsii, 1922. P. 258-263, and cf. below, Features 15 and 24]. Shortly after, Rostovtzeff noted the "sad state of research" of the site and expressed concerns regarding the preservation of the exposed remains [Rostovtzeff, 1912. P. 265]. The site was surveyed again by Schneider, who drew a reconstructed plan of the early church, obscured at the moment of his visit in 1932 by a modern structure, and published a fragment of a marble chancel panel [Schneider, 1938. P. 97-98]. The latest known photograph of the mosaic was taken in 1935 by hieromonk Philipp, on which only the left animal can be seen<sup>1</sup> [Philipp, 1937. P. 11 and see fig. 44b]. Philipp also conducted a detailed study of the traditions pertaining to the location of the House of Zecharia and concluded that Deir Sha'ar cannot be considered as such [Philipp, 1936a; 1936b; 1937]. Bagatti was under the impression that the ruins surrounding the church belonged to a village [Bagatti, 2002. P. 52-53 (originally published in 1983)]. An important study by Ulman, based on a wide bibliography, has summarized the history of the site and published several rare, previously unknown to the wide public images [Ulman, 2014].

During the present study, the entire site, including the inaccessible parts within the military base, was systematically surveyed and documented using advanced remote sensing methods along with photography and drawing. The digital products were compared against archive data, allowing the rediscovery of the considered long-lost elements, including the ruins of the Byzantine church<sup>2</sup> (fig. 1).

1 Philipp also refers to a fragmentary inscription, unnoticed by the previous scholars, located «in the right side of the apse, behind the back of the disappeared deer»: ΠΕΡΕΩ. It was interpreted to refer to the 7th c. Persian invasion of the Holy Land [Philipp, 1937. P. 15]. However, it seems more plausible to the authors that the letters belong to a formula «ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας...», extremely common in dedicatory inscriptions.

2 The site was surveyed by the authors. Aerial photography was conducted by Y. Fleitman and O. Bejerano of the SOA. The façades were drawn by M. Kahn of the IAA. The LIDAR-based 3D modelling and all the deriving products (plans, sections, combined elevation drawings and ge positioning of the 1945 aerial photo) were prepared by Y. Shmidov of the IAA, who had also discovered Feature 24. Thanks are due to the Dov Knohl Archive of the History of Gush Ezion for the invaluable help with locating the materials and kind permission to use them in the present

The pottery collected (not presented here) suggests an occupational sequence starting ca. 8th c. BC and terminating around the 10th c. CE<sup>3</sup>, with only episodic activity occurring during the following centuries and till the arrival of the Russians.

Here is the place to say a word about Leontiy Fyodorovich Sudomoikin (15(27).06.1852 — 01.05.1932). Tonsured into monasticism with the name Lavrentiy, tonsured into the schema with the name Lazar, he was the moving power behind turning a barren hill into a welcoming house for pilgrims, drowning in the gardens. With the break of the Great War, being not far away from finishing his years-long project, he returns to Russia. The events of the 1917 revolution, followed by the Civil War, moved him to walk (!) back to the Holy Land, where he spent the rest of his life in the Russian Convent of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives [Loukianoff, 1936a, 1936b; Alekhina, 2012] (fig. 50).

### South-western slope, Upper terrace

#### *The Ancient Road*

The road, conventionally called “Roman”, appears on the SWP map, and is mentioned in most surveys. A detailed map of the Beth Zacharia area, drawn by the Benedictine Father Maurice Gisler in 1937, depicts the road coming from the north, passing by the ruins of Deir Sha’ar into the Valley of Blessings, and even specifies its suitability for vehicles (fig. 2a). The Roman date for the road was based on numerous milestones, some inscribed, bearing evidence of construction and repairs conducted during the 2nd through the 4th c. CE found along its course. Milestones numbers IV, VI, X, XI, XII, XVIII, XIX, and possibly XXI are known [Thomsen, 1917. Nos. 295–302]. Baruch suggested identifying Deir Sha’ar as the XIIIth mile station, based on its location relatively to the findspots of the abovementioned milestones [Baruch, 2000].

Today, ca. 170 m of the road can be seen on the south-western slope of the hill, and some additional portions of it and the presumed XIVth mile station were found by the authors during the survey in the Valley of Blessings.

The road to the north of the site was destroyed completely by modern activities, including those of Sudomoikin, who reportedly used its pavement in his construction activity [Stelletsii, 1922. P. 254, Fn. 2].

The visible width of the road is 2 to 3 m, and the fact that only the eastern line of curb stones can be seen suggests a width bigger than this. Most of the road is paved with packed gravel, but the area in front of Complex 2 is paved with rectangular flat flagstones (fig. 3).

#### *Feature 1 (The upper entrance to the Russian Church + corridor; Complex 1)*

A short rock-hewn stairway descending to the level of the ancient road from the rock terrace above it (figs. 4a, 23a, 25, 26). Five steps can be seen (1.35 m total height, maximal visible length of a step — ca. 1.25 m, height fluctuates between 0.20–0.30 m). Similar stairways are known from Hellenistic-Roman necropoleis in the region, and two additional (though badly weathered) stairways were found near Feature 2.

Immediately to the south of the stairway a plain rectangular opening with sunken edges was torn in the slightly smoothed rock surface. The original opening seems to have belonged to an unfinished burial cave (fig. 4a).

Early in the 20th c., the opening was widened (present measurements W ca. 0.80 m, H ca. 1.60 m). A rock-hewn corridor (L ca. 2 m) terminates with an irregular, trapezoid hall (ca. 2×2.40 m, H ca. 1.50 m high), from which a hewn spiral staircase descends to the church (Feature 11), and a straight rock-cut corridor, oriented to the north-east (L 18.40 m, H ca. 1.80 m. Figs. 4b–c, 25, 26). This corridor and the corridor of Feature 15 share the same axis, and it seems that they were supposed to meet, allowing the passage from the eastern slope to the western one, as was planned by Sudomoikin (see below, Feature 15; figs. 37, 38b). The corridor was blocked at some later point by a concrete wall, placed ca. 2.50 m from the hall, the walls of the entire enclosure (entrance passageway, hall, truncated corridor) were covered with concrete, and concrete floor was cast in it, covering the first steps of the stairway leading to the church (figs. 4c, 29b).

See Feature 11 for a discussion of the possible use of the present element.

#### *Complex 2 (features 2, 3, and 4)*

A group of three rock-cut cavities located ca. 80 m to the south of Feature 1 (figs. 5, 6). Though the features did not necessarily appear during the same phase, features 2 and 3 could well have belonged

research. The authors are thankful to Archimandrite Roman (Krassovsky), Head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem of Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, and to Fr. Roman Gulyaev for their interest in the present research, pointing at the location of Sudomoikin’s tomb and the willingness to share knowledge.

3 A survey by D. Raviv of the Bar-Ilan University, conducted parallelly to the authors’ work, produced several coins, dating to the 2nd BC — 7th CE c. The authors are grateful for allowing to mention these unpublished important data.

to a common burial complex, while Feature 4, seemingly, was left uncompleted. The foot of central feature 3 is sunken ca. 0.5 m below the level of the road, which's pavers were carefully laid along the elevated margin of the rock-cut recess in front of feature 3 — suggesting that the pavers were laid after the feature was executed.

#### *Feature 2*

At its initial phase the feature served as a cistern, as is evident from the circular mouth cut in its roof (D ca. 1 m), framed with ashlars, and from the hydraulic plaster with clear water level marks covering its walls. In addition, a segment of a rock-cut feeding channel was found in the rock above and eastern to the mouth. The cistern is bell-shaped and nearly rectangular in plan (2.75×2.84 m, H ca. 2 m).

At some later stage, most likely — in the 20th c., the mouth was sealed with a stone slab and a plain, slightly arched doorway (W 0.70 m, H 1.50 m), followed by a corridor (W 0.70 m, L 1.45 m), was torn in the southern wall of the cistern, turning it into a room and connecting it with the northern wing of the ambulatory corridor flanking Feature 3. The doorway and the corridor's walls are covered with cement. The southern and the western outer rock walls are smoothed and noticeably battered, possibly — as additional support against the pressure of the water (fig. 7).

Two eroded rock-cut staircases were found near the cistern, starting from the level of the road. The first, an ascending one, with three currently visible steps carved by the northern edge of the smoothed surface of the cistern's western rock wall leads to the roof of the cistern. The second, with at least two steps carved along the smoothed western rock wall, descends to the ca. 0.50 m deep recess in front of Feature 3 and the northern wing of the ambulatory corridor surrounding it.

A low terrace wall, with five surviving courses of flat stones, was built on the roof of the cistern. The appearance of the stones suggests their origin from the pavement of the road, some of which can still be seen in situ right in front of Features 2 and 3.

#### *Feature 3 ("The Cross Chapel", figs. 8, 9, 10)*

The feature comprises a rock-cut monumental freestanding tomb (outer L ca. 5.73 m, W 3.82 m, H 2.41 m (with the cornice)) topped by a low truncated rectangular pyramid (H ca. 0.68 m), completely hewn and separated from the surrounding rock by a "Π"- shaped ambulatory corridor (lateral wings: L 3.82 m; rear aisle: L 5.76 m). The wings are slightly tapering towards up (from W 1.07 m at the bottom to 1.36 m between the uppermost points). If the explanation for the tapering walls of Feature 2 is correct, the similar treatment of the northern outer wall of the unfinished Feature 4, being also the southern wall of the southern corridor wing, may signalize that the feature was meant to be a water installation, too.

The walls of the tomb are strictly vertical and have varying thicknesses (western — 1.40 m, northern and southern — ca. 0.75 m, eastern — ca. 0.60 m). Two symmetrically located openings were torn in the western façade. The northern opening (W 0.71 m, H 0.91 m) is a window raised ca. 0.60 m above the ground level. The southern opening is a passageway (W 0.78 m, H 1.65 m). Both openings are enframed with plain relief molding. The whole outer perimeter of the tomb, including the rear side, is decorated by a plain cornice comprised of cavetto and thick ledge (GH 0.18 m, H of ledge 0.12 m). A vertical, pilaster-like molding of nearly similar thickness (1.73×0.19 m) was carved between the openings, starting above the lower fourth of the wall. There are hardly noticeable traces of widening at its base. Above it and along its axis, in the middle of the lower part of the pyramid's western face, a parallelepipedal protrusion was sculpted — possibly an acroterium or, together with the vertical molding, meant to represent a *nefesh*, standing on a hill — or pedestal-like base (see below). The interior of the tomb is rectangular in plan (L 3.62 m, W 2.34 m); the ceiling is vaulted (maximal H ca. 2 m).

#### *The suggested date of the tomb: 2nd c. BC (see the discussion below).*

Early in the 20th c., the "acroterium", the cornice of the facade, and the vertical molding were chiseled and cemented in such a way that they now represent a large Golgotha cross (H. 2.41 m) with the upper, short crossbeam placed over the "acroterium" and the long one (1.64 m) over the cornice.

A hole was drilled near the middle of the pyramidal roof, most likely for insertion of a chimney — as suggest traces of soot, and the roof itself (only the part above the actual room) was covered with cement.

The room was enlarged by carving ca. 0.40 m from the eastern wall. This is evident from the position of the now floating eastern edge of the vault, which was originally even with the surface of the wall, as can be observed on the western side.

An iron grille was inserted into the window — possibly already by the Russians — which was completely blocked during the latest phase of use.

The surface of the walls was covered by cement (it is possible that traces of ancient plaster can still be seen today).

In the northern end of the room, a low bema (H 0.13 m) was placed. Over it, a tabletop (2.23×0.60 m) was affixed, resting on two vertical panels (0.60×0.50 m) abutting the walls. Two thick vertical panels (0.85×0.33×0.65 m) in front of, with ca. 0.50 m passage between them, completed the composition. All these elements were made from reinforced concrete. The general appearance and the modifications conducted on the Antique tomb suggest use as a chapel by the monks and the pilgrims of the Russian monastery, with the concrete, elements serving as the chancel part. Though in Russian ecclesiastical tradition, the low chancel screen was supplanted by the high iconostasis already in the 15th-century, the builders might have been inspired by the remains of the Early Byzantine church found at the top of the hill.

#### **Feature 4**

A plain rectangular opening (W 0.73 m, H u/a) leads to a short corridor (L 0.90 m) terminating with a small, rounded cavity (1.30×1.40 m, H >1.50 m). The opening and the cavity are blocked with debris, and it is hard to determine its use and date. The abovementioned slightly tapering outer western and northern rock walls may suggest an intent to create a cistern similar to Feature 2. The horizontal opening (possibly — a doorway) may originally belong to an ancient burial cave or a *miqveh* or be the result of the 20th c. activities (a monastic cell?).

#### **Feature 5 (figs 11, 12)**

The feature — an unfinished monumental tomb — is equally distant from complexes 2 and 3, located 35 m to the north and to the south of them, respectively.

The entrance is located in the middle of the finely smoothed rock façade. The opening is adorned with an odd molding in the shape of a protruding rectangle with slanted upper and lower sides, leaning on molded doorjambs in the shape of pilasters with thickening on their upper sides. This coarse decoration of the doorway might be identified as an unfinished blocked-out cornice (W 0.74 m, L 1 m, 0.40 m thick) leaning on blocked-out corbels (0.62 m high, 0.20 m wide). The ca. 1.80 m wide smoothed fields to the left and to the right of the doorway possibly testify that the initial intention was to carve the façade of the tomb with a single opening leading to the inner room. The rectangular doorway leads to the corridor (H ca 1.75, W 0.80, L 1 m), terminating with the oval, egg-shaped cavity (4×3.25 m, H 1.90 m (maximal)). The feature seems to be an uncompleted burial cave, seemingly coeval with tomb Features 5 and 7, and should be dated on this basis to the 1st c. BC — 1st c. CE.

The 20th-century alterations included covering the walls with concrete, casting a short concrete table with no additional elements, and seemingly drilling a hole in the roof for a chimney. The cave was most likely used as a cell by a monk.

#### **Complex 3 (figs. 13, 14, 15).**

##### **Feature 6 (“The Refectory”, fig. 16)**

In the initial phase, the feature served as a cistern (ca. 3×3×3 m). This is evident from the filling duct piercing its roof and from the water-tight plaster covering the walls. The duct and the walls bear distinctive flowing and level marks left by the water.

The later (most likely early 20th-century) alterations included blocking the duct with concrete, cutting an entrance in the western rock wall (facing the ancient road), and carving the north-eastern rock walls ca. 0.7 m deep to increase the room’s volume.

The plain rectangular, slightly arched opening (W 0.66 m) is connected to the corridor (L 2.23 m, H ca. 2 m), leading to the room now measuring ca. L 3.66 m, W 3 m). The western and the southern walls are straight and intersect at a nearly right angle, while the northern and the eastern walls join and form a semicircle, created by the abovementioned carving. This area is occupied by furniture cast in reinforced concrete: a semicircular ca. 0.60 m wide table, supported by four vertical plates cast above a low platform (similarly to observed in Feature 3). Four unevenly sized, ca. 0.30 m thick rectangular panels were cast in front and along the table, possibly serving as seats; the two outermost ones are larger and were possibly meant to be used by two persons each.

The room seems to have operated as a refectory capable of seating four to six persons at a time, serving the monks at the site.

##### **Feature 7 (“The Crucifixion Chapel”, figs. 17, 18)**

The feature comprises a rock-cut monumental tomb located immediately to the south of Feature 6. It closely resembles the “Cross Chapel” (Feature 3) by its main features, including the truncated pyramid top. However, the tomb was not disconnected from the surrounding rock, and the illusion of free-standing was created by short portions (ca. 0.35 m) of side walls carved to the left and to the right of the façade.

The façade of the tomb (H ca. 3 m, L 8.40 m) bears two symmetrical openings crowned by blocked-out corbelled cornices (as in features 5 and 8; northern cornice: H 0.70 m, 1.54×0.33 m; southern

cornice: H 0.73 m, 1.20×0.35). The jambs are accentuated by shallow molding extending to the bottom. The northern opening was initially carved and used as a doorway (H 1.80 m, L 1.50 m, W ca. 1 m). The southern one was used as a window during the 20th c., but it is impossible to determine, using only non-invasive methods, whether it was carved initially as a doorway and later reduced to a window (H 1.05 m, L 1.70 m, W 0.70 m). The corners of the façade are delicately chamfered, and it is topped by an “Egyptian” cornice, similar to that of Feature 3.

The façade is flanked by two doorways, leading into a “II”-shaped ambulatory tunnel encompassing the inner room of the tomb (H 1.65-1.85 m, northern and southern wings L 5 m, eastern wing L 11 m). At the present moment, it is impossible to date the tunnel, but it well could be that the initial plan was to cut around the tomb and to disconnect it from the rock, and for some reason, a roofed rock-cut passage was created instead; the doorways seem to be of later date, as the rock surface around them is somewhat brighter than the façade. The long (eastern) wing of the ambulatory is connected with the interior of the tomb by a corridor (H 1.58 m, L 2 m, W 0.66 m) carved in the southern end of its western rock wall.

The cave's interior is rectangular (H 2.55 m, 2.40×6.40 m) and barrel-vaulted. The vault is segmental (H 1 m).

*The suggested date: 1st c. BC — 1st c. CE.*

The 20th c. alterations were numerous. In the middle of the façade, between the two openings, a recessed outline of a ca. 2 m high Orthodox cross with the upper (L 0.70 m), the long (L 1.45 m), and the lower slanted (L 0.60 m) crossbeams, was carved. The central bars are 0.35 m wide. A vertical incision on the cornice above the southern opening suggests an early attempt to use the cornice as the central crossbeam, similar to the cross of Feature 3. The fields flanking the openings are flanked by two sunken silhouettes of anthropomorphic figures turned by their anticipated heads toward the cross. This composition, consisting of figures venerating the cross in the middle, reminds the Crucifixion scene, which had already become very popular in the Russian Orthodox Church by that time (Virgin Mary on the left side, St. John the Evangelist on the right). The carved recesses were, most likely, intended to receive icons depicting the Cross, the Virgin Mary, and St. John the Baptist icons. There is little doubt that the implementation of this idea belongs to the inhabitants of the Russian monastery. The northern figure bears several bullet marks, probably left after the last Russian monks fled, by someone who has found the religious images offensive.

The inner space of the tomb was divided into two rooms by a concrete wall with a doorway. The larger (northern) one was provided with concrete furniture, similar to the ones known from features 3, 5, and 6. In the northern end, a table and two vertically placed thick panels in front of it were cast. The panels differ from those in Feature 3 by additional, thinner panels added above them so as to resemble crude chairs. A short table with a single vertically placed parallelepiped in front of it — most likely a seat — was cast by the western wall. At the southern end of the smaller room a table and two thick panels of varying sizes in front of it were cast. The rock was carved to create a ca. 0.70 m deep niche to accommodate the table — which is evident from the floating edges of the vault.

Additional seemingly late rock-cutting works were observed in the ambulatory, where a 1 m-long beginning of a corridor was carved perpendicularly to the axis of the eastern wing, exactly in front of the passage leading to the southern room. A niche (ca. 0.50×0.70 m) was cut in the western wall in the northern room. It could have been used as a cupboard or for cultic purposes. Lastly, a narrow opening for a chimney was drilled through the middle of the roof.

The window was protected by an iron grille — possibly, already by the Russians — and eventually blocked, most likely during the latest phase of use.

The outer decorations suggest possible use as a chapel, but the inner division and furniture may hint the use as a monastic cell (s) and/or as a workshop (icon painting, scriptorium etc.).

*Feature 8 (figs. 19, 20)*

The feature, an unfinished monumental tomb, is located 25 m to the south of Feature 7, bordering the wall surrounding the property.

The doorway (H 1.50 m, W 0.75 m) was cut at the southern edge of the smoothed façade. It is adorned with an unfinished blocked-out cornice, similar to the cornices of features 5 and 7, but lower in its upper part. The right side of the opening was left unworked, and the left is decorated with a molded pilaster-like doorjamb, resembling the elements adorning the opening of Feature 5. The doorway leads to a corridor (L 1.25 m), terminating with a rectangular room (L 4.50 m, W 3.50 m, H 2m).

*The suggested date: 1st c. BC — 1st c. CE.*

The 20th c. alterations included covering the walls with cement and, possibly, cutting a window to the left of the doorway. This is suggested based on the window's appearance (different from the

windows in Features 3 and 7) and the lack of matching blocked-out décor around it. The window was blocked during the latest phase of use.

The feature's location at the southern border of the fenced property may suggest its possible use by the monk who was entrusted with keeping the rear gate, through which the pilgrims left and got onto the continuation of the ancient road descending to the valley and eventually merging with the modern highway [Dmitrievsky, 1909. P. 68].

#### *Stylistic analysis of Features 3, 5, 7, and 8*

Though the tombs were vastly rebuilt and reused in modern times, some intact artistic features suggest their initial dating. The burial Features 3 ("The Cross chapel"), and 7 ("The Crucifixion chapel") bear some common compositional and decorative features, such as the free — or partially freestanding rectangular monolith topped by a low pyramid, the so-called Egyptian cornice and the symmetrically located entrance and window on the façade. Similarly, looking blocked-out cornices on corbels, left at various states of completeness, were applied to features 5, 7, and 8. The tomb Feature 3 predates, seemingly, the rest of the tombs in this short list as it is the only monument completed during the initial phase, while the other tombs were left in partially finished condition. Besides, its architectural style and technical methods used, even after severe alterations, produce a more delicate and integral artistic impression. The tomb Feature 7, compared with it, looks unfinished: its ambulatory corridor was not cut to the surface level. The molded decoration of the passageway and window is more coarse. There is an impression that it was hewn as an imitation of feature 3, but it occurred at a new state of stylistic evolution, which caused the alterations and additions of new sculptural elements. The tomb of feature 8, with its rectangular interior and the symmetrically outlined entrance and window, followed the same compositional idea in the anticipated perspective. Feature 5, with its single entrance and oval interior, seemingly appeared last and was left at its initial development stage. The tombs seem to form a vast necropolis and, most probably, there were other monumental edifices in the vicinity, currently obscured or destroyed as the consequence of later activities. The following analysis will concern the architectural and decorative features of the monuments as they are the only available at the moment source for the dating of the monuments.

The general planning of the rock-hewn sepulchral monument, which is freestanding but separated from the natural rock by a narrow ambulatory corridor, evokes in memory similar mausolea of the Kidron Valley, namely, the Absalom's [Avigad, 1954. P. 91-127, Figs. 49-75; Hachlili, 2005. P. 31-33, Fig. II-3b; dated to the 1st c. CE], the Zechariah's [Avigad, 1954. P. 79-90; Barag, 2002. P. 44-45; 2003. P. 95-99; Hachlili, 2005. P. 32, Fig. II-3a; dated to the late 1st c. CE], and the so-called "Pharaoh's Daughter's" tombs [Ussishkin, 1993. P. 43-62, Ills. 28-29, and see fig. 21a]. The latter is of particular importance for the present discussion, as it bears additional common features with other Kidron monuments and with the tombs in concern, which suggest its contemporary date<sup>4</sup>. Noteworthy is the similarity in dimensions: façade L: 5.73 (Deir Sha'ar), 5.58 ("Pharaoh's Daughter's Tomb"); façade H above the threshold: 2.41 (Deir Sha'ar), ca. 2.50 ("Pharaoh's Daughter's Tomb"). Many scholars noted their outstanding artistic style based on combining the Classical order vocabulary with Egyptian features such as surmounting pyramids and "Egyptian" cornices [Hachlili, 2005. P. 29-36]. A. Segal determined such edifices not as architecture but as architectural sculpture, as they were not built but completely carved from monolith rock [Segal, 2005-2006. P. 210-211]. The low, closed from the upper side ambulatory corridor of Feature 7, resembles the system of semicircular double corridors of the so-called Prophets' Tombs in Jerusalem, dated to the 1st c. BC [Vincent, 1901] or later [Avni, Zissu, 2016. P. 29-32].

Creating a free-standing, independent monument, separated from the rock by an ambulatory corridor, either open or closed from the upper side, can also be connected to the Nabatean architectural tradition of the Roman period (1st-2nd c. CE). The famous temples in Khirbet et-Tannur [McKenzie et al., 2013. P. 56-65, Fig. 51] and Khirbet edh-Dharikh [McKenzie et al., 2013. P. 255, Fig. 411] were planned in such a way that the altar platform was surrounded by the walls of the inner temenos enclosure and by the colonnaded forecourt. This architectural idea was rooted in Egypt's Ptolemaic and Roman traditions [McKenzie, 2007. P. 121, Fig. 200].

Such an architectural trait as the pyramid occurs in several funeral monuments in the Land of Israel: the Jerusalem tombs of Bene Hēzir [Avigad, 1954. P. 37-38; Barag, 2002. P. 39-44; 2003. P. 79-95; Hachlili, 2005. P. 31, 33, Fig. II-3c; dated to the Hasmonean period, 2nd — early 1st c. BCE]; the tomb of

<sup>4</sup> The Iron Age date of this monument had been questioned already by some of the early scholars, and was systematically challenged by Loffreda, who suggested Late Hellenistic-Hasmonean date for the tomb and its being the model for the nearing monuments [Loffreda, 1973. P. 17-19]. In addition to the nearly identical decorative elements shared by the neighboring monuments and to the late burial practice evident from the sarcophagus lid found near the tomb [Ussishkin, 1993. P. 238-240, and see also Barkai, 2011. P. 54\*-56\*, who suggests a rock-cut sarcophagus inside the burial chamber], it must be stressed that the very use of paleo-Hebrew script (regardless to the inscription's possible predating the monolith tomb) does not necessarily support the high chronology, as its use during the Late Second Temple Period, including in funerary contexts, is well attested.

Zechariah in Kidron Valley, the tomb of Jason in Jerusalem [Rahmani, 1967; Rahmani, 1981/1982. P. 45-46; Hachlili, 2005. P. 32, 34-36; dated to the Hasmonean period, early 1st c. BCE]; the “Pharaoh’s Daughter’s Tomb” [Ussishkin, 1993. P. 50-54, Ills. 34-36, dated by Loffreda to the 2nd c. BC, see above footnote 4]. Built and/or rock-hewn pyramids above burial complexes are known from Maresha [Tal, 2006. P. 240; Hellenistic]; built stepped pyramids were reported from the Nabatean necropolis of Mampsis [Negev, 1971. P. 114-116, 128-129, ca. 2nd c. CE]. Pyramids are known from the rural areas, too: at Horvat Midras-Durusiya [Peleg-Barkat, Chernin, 2018; Gardner, Peleg-Barkat 2024, dated to the Early Roman period], at Umm edh-Dhiyab in Ramat Beit Shemesh [Betzer et al., 2023. P. 245-276; esp. 269, 271; Structure M1, dated to the early 2nd c. CE (?)], at Rujum el-Fahjeh in the southwestern Hebron Hills [Kochavi, 1972. P. 70, no. 189, Hellenistic-Early Roman], and at Khirbat er-Rasm [Faust, Erlich, 2011. P. 52-61, 233-241, early Roman]. Triebel dedicated a detailed study regarding the use of pyramids in Jewish funerary practices and concluded that the symbol was meant to express the (political) power of the buried and, possibly, the belief in the survival of the soul [Triebel, 2004. P. 295]. Besides the local edifices, a number of mausolea with pyramidal roofs of various proportions are known from the broader region, for example, the Hellenistic tombs in Amrith in Syria [Fedak, 1990. P. 258, Figs. 10-11], in Deir el-Medinah in Egypt [Fedak, 1990. P. 261, Fig. 15], and in Belevi mausoleum in Asia Minor [Fedak, 1990. P. 328, Fig. 101, and see also Fine, 2001. P. 3-5 for local and regional parallels]. Lastly, the seven pyramids, reportedly erected by Simon Maccabee over the tombs of his parents and brother(s) at Modi'in, need to be mentioned, too (1 Macc. 13: 25-30). However, the cement covering the roof of tomb Feature 3 and the vegetation obscuring the roof of tomb Feature 7 preclude the possibility of studying them and establishing whether they were originally shaped as a pyramid (possibly — completed to the desired height by masonry arranged above the smoothed rock surface), or a truncated pyramid/gabled, with slanted sides.

The remarkable cornice, which is comprised of a ledge and cavetto, might be referred to as an “Egyptian” cavetto cornice (Features 3 and 7). It was applied at numerous Hellenistic/Ptolemaic and Roman monuments in Petra and Egypt [McKenzie, 1990. P. 3, 17, 23, 89, 90, 157, 167-170, 182, Diag. 15 on 192, Pl. 23b, d, 37e, 185a, 211a, c, 215c; McKenzie et al. 2013. P. 117-145; Segal, 2005-2006. P. 207-208]. It was also applied at local Hellenistic-Hasmonean and Herodian architecture with minor deviations and differences in proportions, namely in the inner court of the Tombs of Patriarchs in Hebron [Vincent et al., 1923. P. 97-99, 156-159, Pl. V-VI], at the exteriors of the Zechariah’s tomb [Hachlili, 2005. P. 32-33, Fig. II-3], the “Pharaoh’s Daughter’s” tomb in Kidron Valley [Ussishkin, 1993. P. 51-52, Ills. 31-32; and fig. 21b], and the tomb in Umm el-Amud [Kloner, Zissu, 2003. P. 291-292, Fig. 308:4].

Another noticeable feature is the doorway, accompanied by a window of the same width at the main façade, located symmetrically and resembling a double entrance. This feature is rather rare. The main reason for the carving of a double entrance instead of a more traditional for the local monumental buildings triple entrance might be explained by the natural characteristics of the rock terrace, which is rather low and would not allow the creation of a triple entrance, which demands considerable height in order to be proportionally balanced. But there are also artistic roots for this feature. Among the local monuments with doubled entrances, only two tombs from the Second Temple period recently studied in the Kidron Valley tombs can be mentioned: Caves 3 and 4 [Wiegmann et al., 2023. P. 82\*-83\*, Fig. 10; 84\*-85\*, Fig. 12]. Typologically, these tombs differ from the Deir Sha'ar monuments: they are not freestanding, and they have mourning enclosures arranged before the façades with doubled entrances. Their doorways were left undecorated. It is important to note also, that the tombs were located along a road, as well as the tombs of Deir Sha'ar. Also, Jason’s tomb in Jerusalem might be mentioned as a remote parallel with its single column flanked by two antae, which creates the impression of a double entrance. According to Rahmani, this feature “has no parallel in Palestine or in any of the neighboring countries; a similar arrangement occurs once in Hellenistic Athens, in Thrasyllos Monument” [Rahmani, 1967. P. 68; Fedak, 1990. P. 480, Fig. 278]. Recent research distinguishes a number of funerary monuments, including monumental Hellenistic sarcophagi with doubled recessed false windows/doorways on their walls, for example, the free-standing Lycian (so-called “Gothic”) tomb in Antiphellos [Fedak, 1990. P. 274, Fig. 30], the heroon in Xanthos in Asia Minor [Fedak, 1990. P. 276, Fig. 33]. This type of sarcophagi imitated known tomb facades with doubled recessed entrances (for example, such a façade was arranged on a rock-cut tomb at Limyra [Brewster, 1993. Fig. 2 (dated to the 4th c. BCE)]. Funerary monuments in Charmyleion at Kos Island have two symmetrical entrances on their façades; they led to isolated from each other chambers [Fedak, 1990. P. 331, Figs. 103-105 (dated to the Hellenistic period)]. On the façade of the Roman Temple B in Hössn Sfir, the main entrance on the façade was flanked by one lateral passageway only; both led to the naos [Segal, 2013. P. 112-113, Fig. 65]. The idea of double entrances into tombs has, seemingly, ancient archetypic roots. It appears already in the Archaic period (7th-5th c. BCE) in the Etruscan tradition, for example, in Chiusa Cima [Oleson, 1976. P. 214, Fig. 16] and Banditaccia (Cerveteri) necropolises in Italy [Ricci, 1955].

Except for the monumental architecture, a group of artifacts from the local artistic heritage illustrates the idea of symmetrical entrances, namely — the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman ossuaries with their incised/relief/sunken relief style decoration. Most of them were adorned by symmetrical compositions of double rosettes or other geometrical patterns. But some ossuaries depict symbolic representations of monuments, including tombs (?) with doubled entrances. On the ossuary from Romema in Jerusalem appears the “...doubled gate surmounted by flat arches, with two single-leaved doors behind it” [Rahmani, 1993. P. 45, Fig. 102: 121, Pl. 25, no. 185, and see fig. 22a]. The doors are flanked by columns on both sides and between them. The same composition in a more plain style was also depicted on an ossuary revealed in the Second Temple period tomb at Mount Scopus [Sussman, 1992. P. 91, Fig. 3: 3]. Sometimes the ossuaries imitated, to a certain degree, the burial edifices, but they could have also become a source of “back inspiration”. This reciprocal influence might be better explained if to remember that the monumental tombs were not proper architectural edifices but architectural sculpture, and they were compared even to Pompeian wall paintings, “in which columns “float” in space, disconnected from any spatial or tectonic orientation” [Segal, 2005–2006. P. 210–211]. For example, another important artistic trait of the tomb of feature 7, namely, the beveled corners, has parallels among the decoration of ossuaries. The beveled corners of the ossuary from Abu Dis are intentionally articulated and topped by protrusions [Rahmani, 1994. P. 233, Pl. 109, no. 761]. On a number of additional ossuaries the corners are also chamfered, though this feature is not so emphasized [Rahmani, 1994. Pl. 18, no. 124; Pl. 21, no. 145; Pl. 36, no. 251; Pl. 55, no. 390; Pl. 60, no. 419]. Some ossuary boxes are decorated with cornices [Rahmani, 1994. Pl. 18, no. 24; Pl. 26, no. 194; Pl. 128, no. 847] and fluted friezes [Rahmani, 1994. Pl. 86, no. 599] at their upper edges and ashlar masonry design incised on their walls [Rahmani, 1994. Pl. 12, no. 79; Pl. 61, no. 420], with some of the lids fashioned as gabled or even pyramidal roofs [Rahmani, 1994. Pl. 25, no. 181; Pl. 63, no. 432] — so as to appear as monuments [Rahmani, 1994. Pl. 103, no. 730, and see fig. 22b]. Another feature, appearing on ossuaries, is seemingly present on tomb Feature 3. The vertical pilaster between the openings, with traces of a base (rounded or stepped?) and terminating with an acroterium, can be interpreted as *nefesh* — a monument erected above or next to a tomb, sometimes appearing as a pillar or a column mounted on a stepped base, topped with an acroterium, a pyramid, an amphora, etc. [Rahmani, 1994. P. 31–34; Pl. 49, no. 341; Pl. 59, no. 411; Pl. 70, no. 473; Pl. 72, no. 486]. The architectural motifs depicted in tombs and on ossuaries lead Goodenough to express the idea of “burial inside a mystic shrine” [Goodenough, 1953. P. 95–96, 117–118].

The plain moldings of the window and doorway of the tomb of Feature 3 have parallels in the blocked-out decoration of some Roman tombs in Petra [McKenzie, 1990. Pl. 10:a, tomb B10 (dated 34 CE); Pl. 10:c, tomb B17; Pl. 10:d, tomb E16 (dated 74 CE); Pl. 11:a, tomb E15; Pl. 13:a, tomb C8, etc.] and of Qasr il-‘Abd in ‘Iraq el-Amir [McKenzie, 2007. P. 96, Fig. 155; McKenzie, 1990. P. 77 (dated to the early 2nd c. BCE)]. The molded frames of the doorways of Features 5, 7, and 8 resemble a blocked-out cornice leaning on corbels. Such decorative elements in their completed form are applied to the Khasneh tomb in Petra [McKenzie, 1990. Pl. 86: b (dated to the early 1st c. CE)]. For the blocked-out version of the element, the 2nd century BCE monument of Qasr il-‘Abd in ‘Iraq el-Amir might be mentioned [McKenzie, 2007. P. 96, Fig. 155]. Some remote parallels were also found: the entrances to the brick-built house tombs at the necropolis in Isola Sacra near Ostia are topped by stone-carved cavetto cornices leaning on the molded jambs [Graham, 2005. P. 137, Figs. 1–2, ca. 100–250 CE]. In addition, some of the so-called “Samaritan” sarcophagi feature handles shaped like blocked-out short cornices at the lateral sides of their covers [Magen, 2008b. P. 222, Fig. 6 (date: 70–132 CE)].

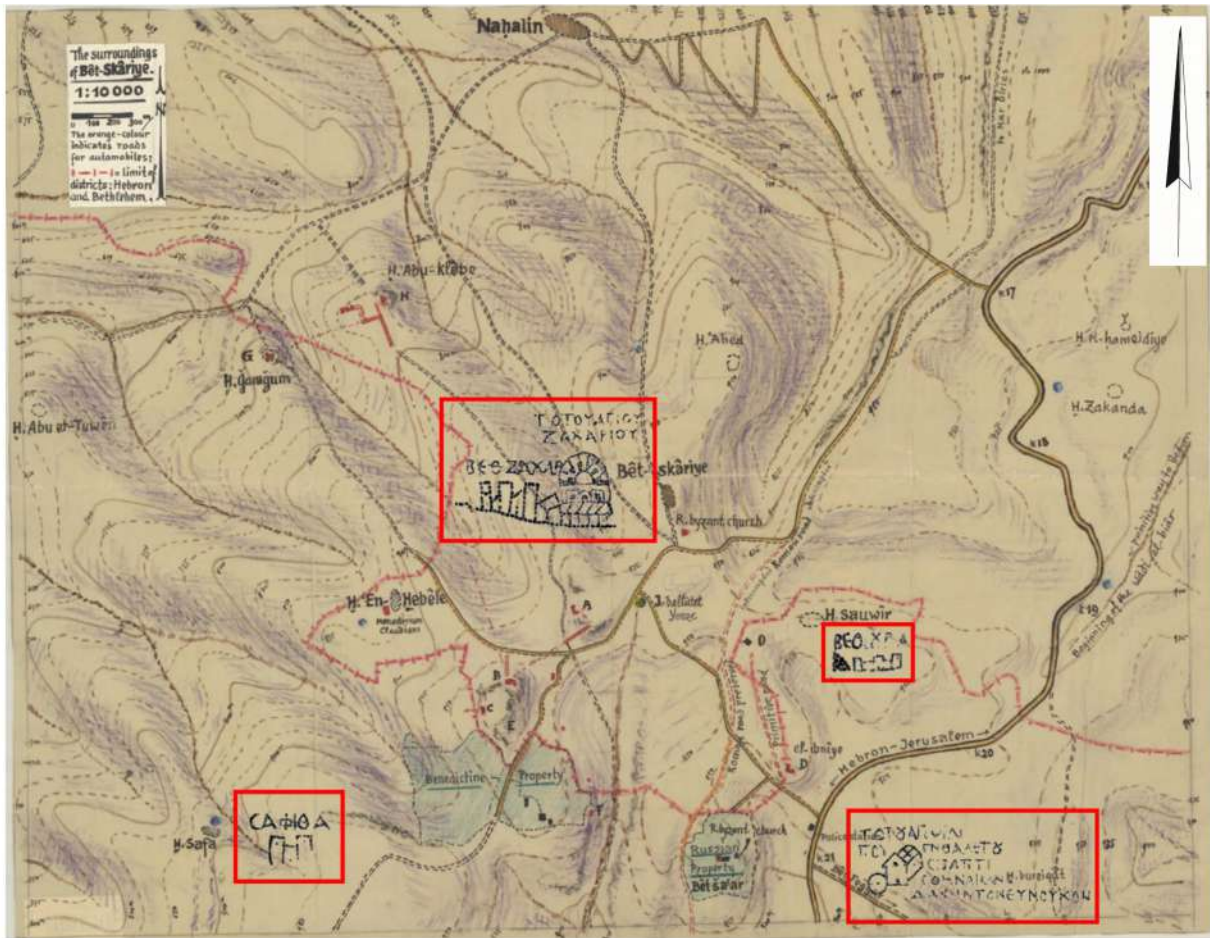
The vaulted ceiling appears already in the tombs of the First Temple period [cf. Ussishkin, 1993. P. 66–70] and becomes more common during the Late Hellenistic and Roman periods [see Loffreda, 1973. P. 25, who distinguishes between the low “archaic” vaults and the higher ones from the later periods]. Vaulted chambers are known from a handful of 1st century CE elite tombs in Jerusalem (e.g., the “Herod’s Family Tomb”, the “Nazarite Family” tomb, the “Tomb of Nicanor” [Hachlili, 2005. P. 37–43].

The interior of the tombs (nos. 3 and 7, in particular) is obscured by modern concrete, and it is unclear what arrangements were made for the interment. It is possible that an elevated bench or even a rock-cut sarcophagus could have existed near the short walls (areas now occupied with concrete furniture). Also, the remains could have been placed in an ossuary or a sarcophagus, possibly — even in the currently inaccessible (presumed) burial chamber(s) below the floor levels of Features 3 and 7.

The simplicity and a certain similarity between tomb Feature 3 and the so-called Pharaoh’s Daughter’s Tomb suggest an early date, in the Hellenistic-Hasmonean period, ca. middle 2nd c. BC. [cf. Loffreda, 1973. P. 17–19]. Furthermore, both tomb Feature 3 and the “Pharaoh’s Daughter’s tomb” served as the tuning fork for the surrounding ensembles, providing the creators of the subsequent monuments with inspiration and parallels [cf. Loffreda, 1973. P. 18]. Tomb Features 5, 7 and 8 should be dated to the 1st c. BC — 1st c. CE.



**Figure 1.** The limits of the Russian property and the Features. A 1945 aerial is used as a background (courtesy of the Spatial Catalog of the collections of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem [IL-HUJI-ARC, PS12: 6098]).

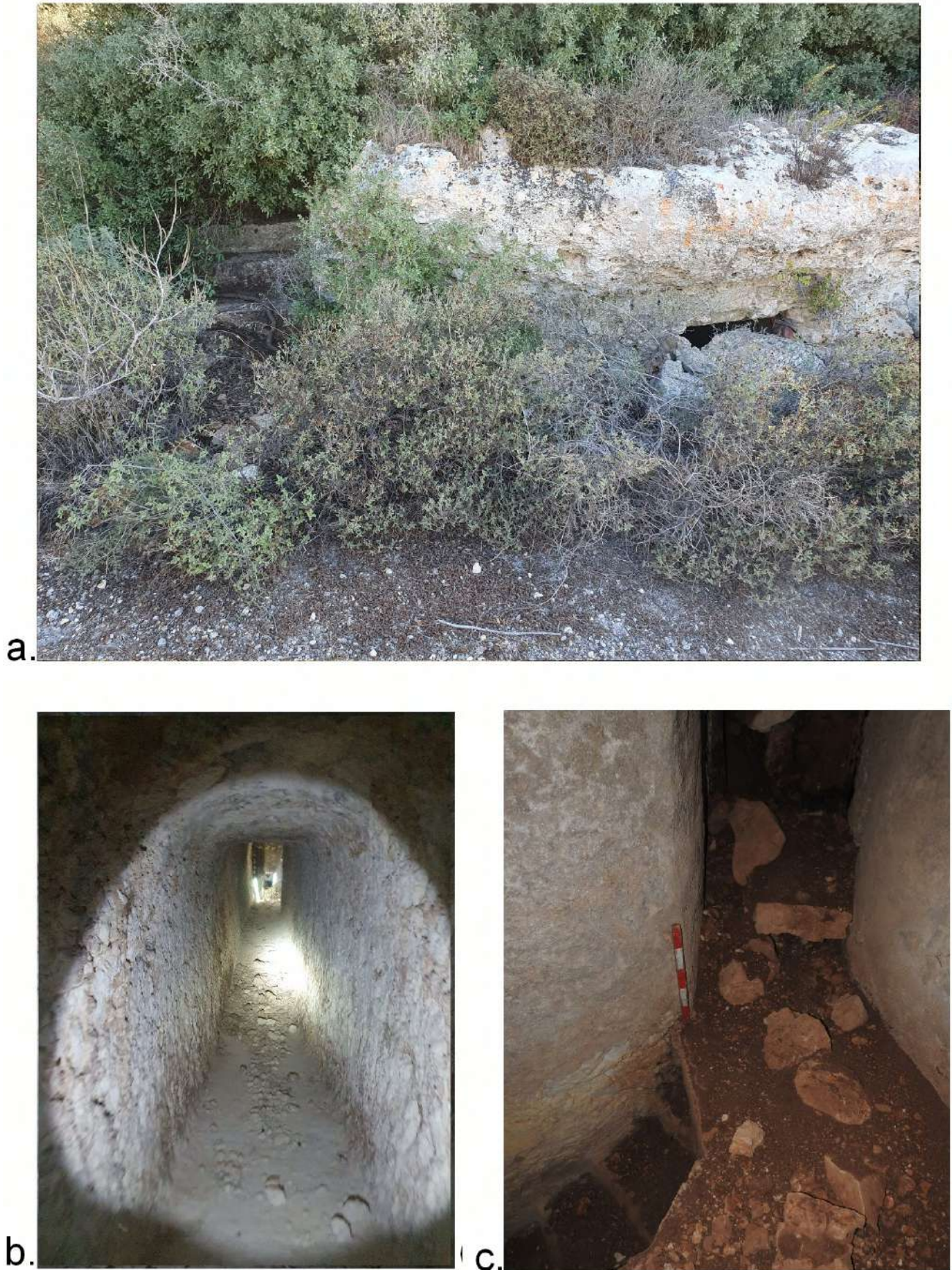


**Figure 2.** Above: the map, drawn by rev. M. Gisler in 1937, with the Madaba map icons of the identified sites added (Beit Zacharia (above), Beit Zur (middle), Safita (lower left), the Eunuch's Baptism site (lower right). The Russian property can be seen at the bottom, as well as the «Roman Road» passing by it. Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), material from the Archive of the Department of Antiquities of the Mandatory Palestine [IL-IAA-ARC, Beit Sikariya, Kh., SRF\_33(26 / 26)].

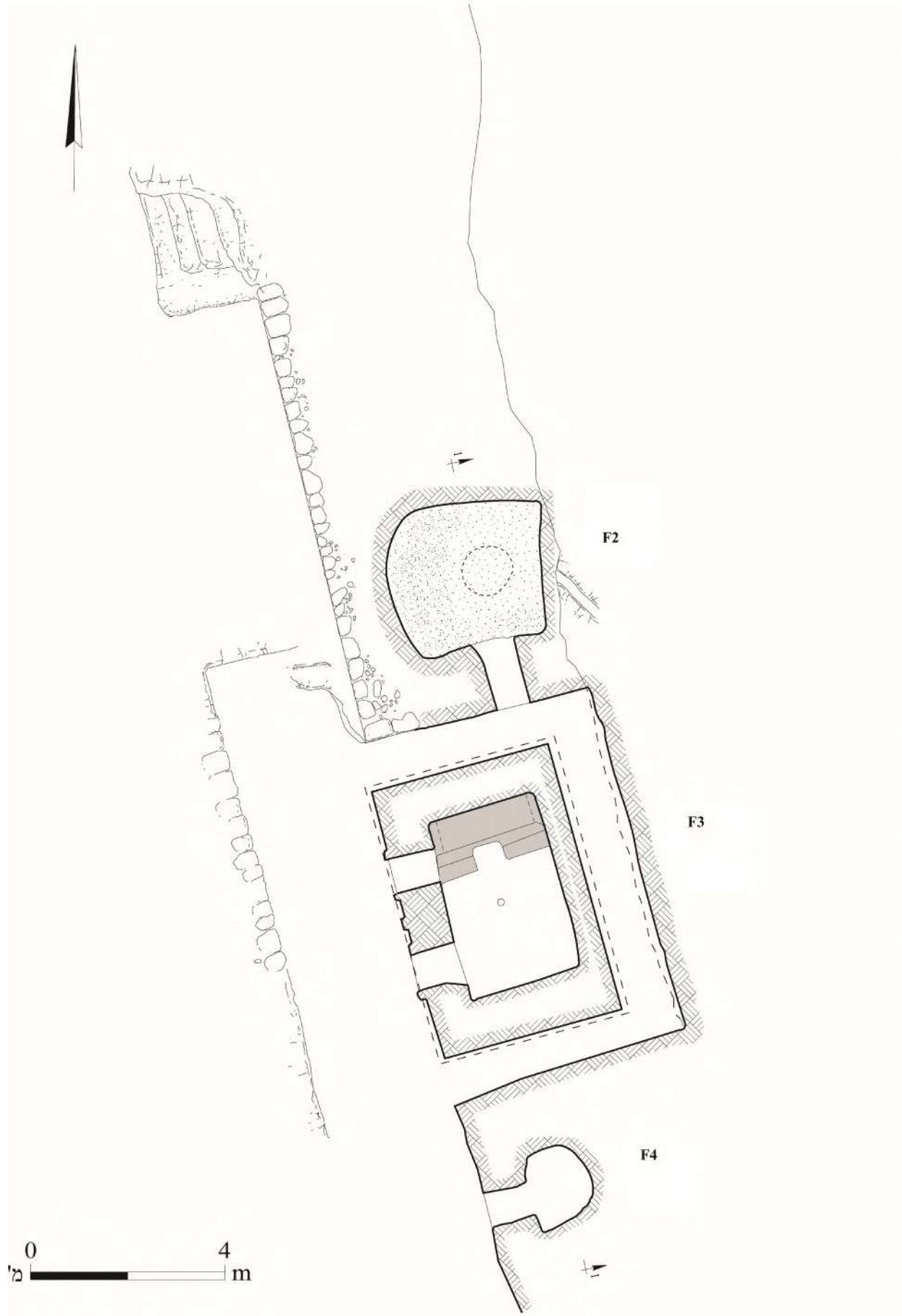
Below: The Madaba Map: mountain of Judah and the Shephelah. Marked are the four identified sites. Note the north direction. After Alliaata, 1998. P. 75.



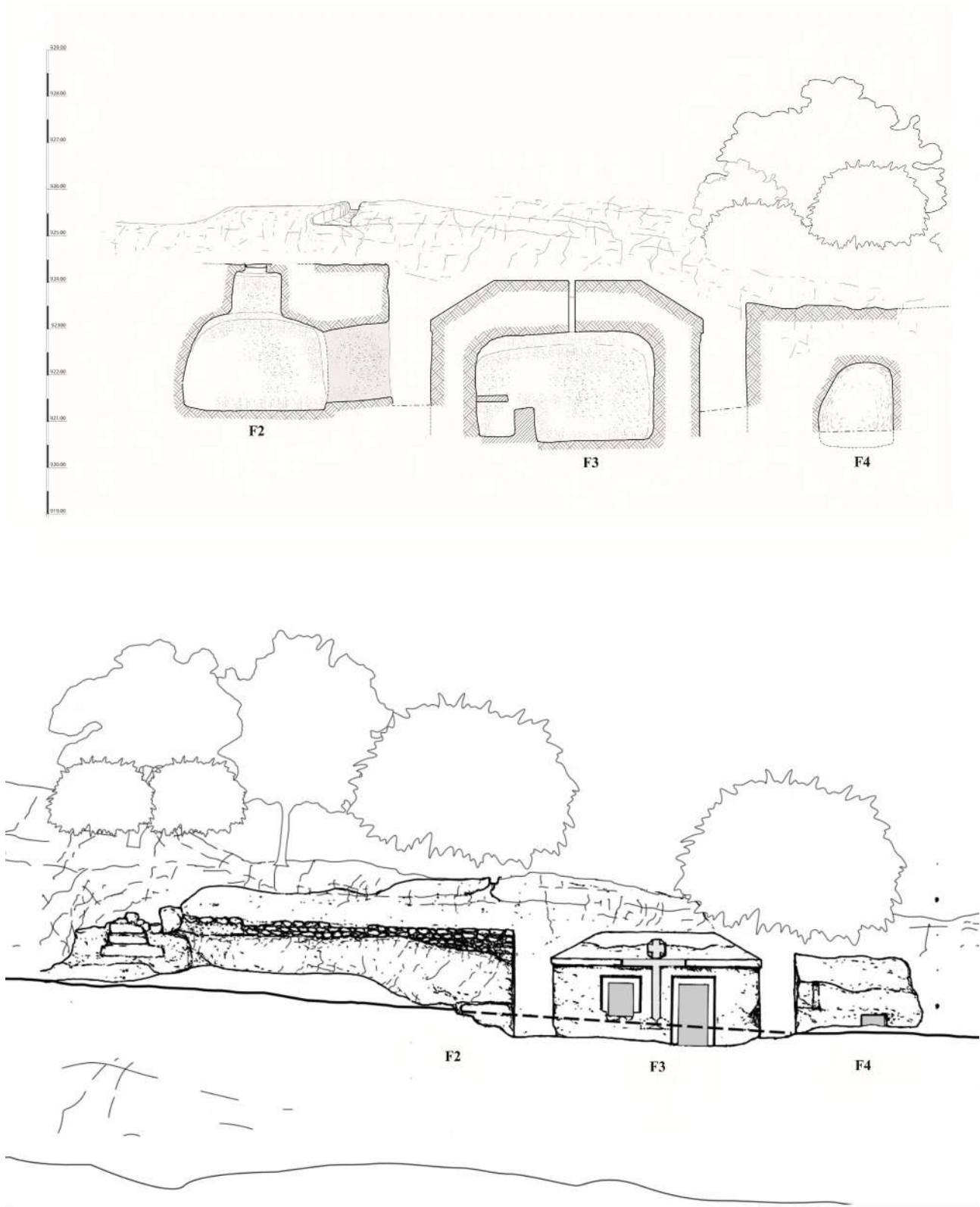
Figure 3. The ancient road near Complex 2: A. view toward the south, C. View toward the south-east; B. Rectangular pavers in front of Feature 3. Photos by: S. Tarkhanova.



**Figure 4.** Feature 1. A. Façade, note the hewn steps to the right of the entrance. B. The corridor, view toward the south-west. C. View toward the entrance (west). Note the steps leading to church Feature 11 and the concrete floor. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 5.** Complex 2: plan (F2 — «The Cistern», F3 — «The Cross Chapel», F4 — a water installation?). Plan by: Y. Shmidov.



**Figure 6.** Complex 2: section and elevation. Section by: Y. Shmidov. Elevation by: M. Kahn, processed by: Y. Shmidov.

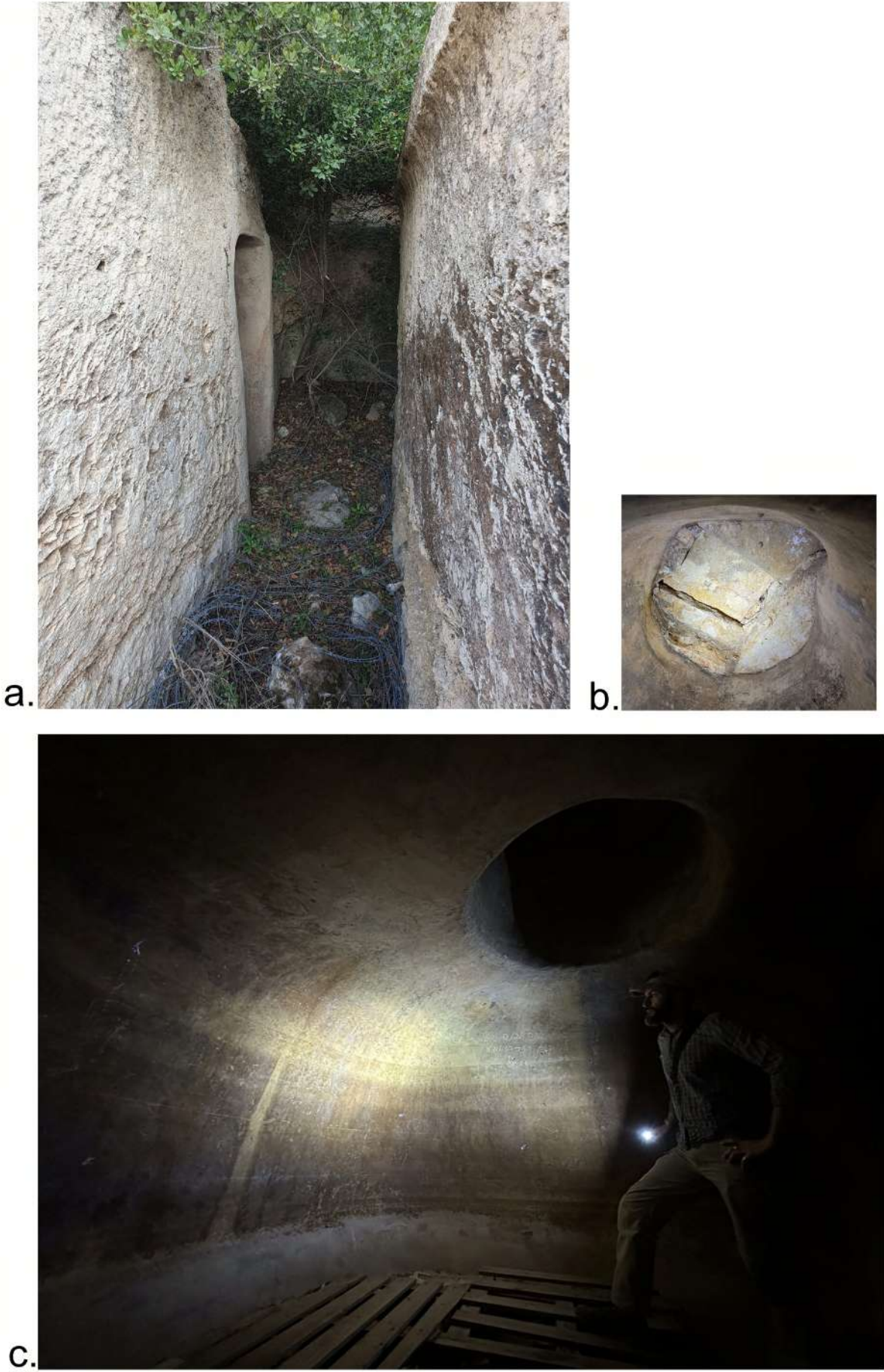


Figure 7. Complex 2, Feature 2: A. Entrance, B., C. Cistern mouth and plaster with water level marks. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 8.** Façade of Feature 3 (“The Cross chapel”). Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



a.

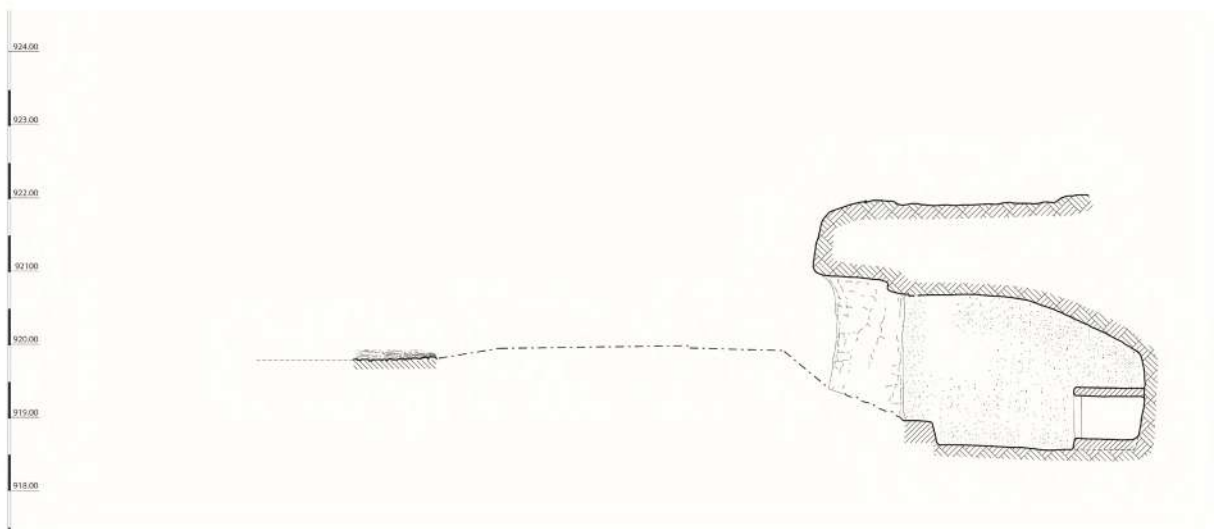
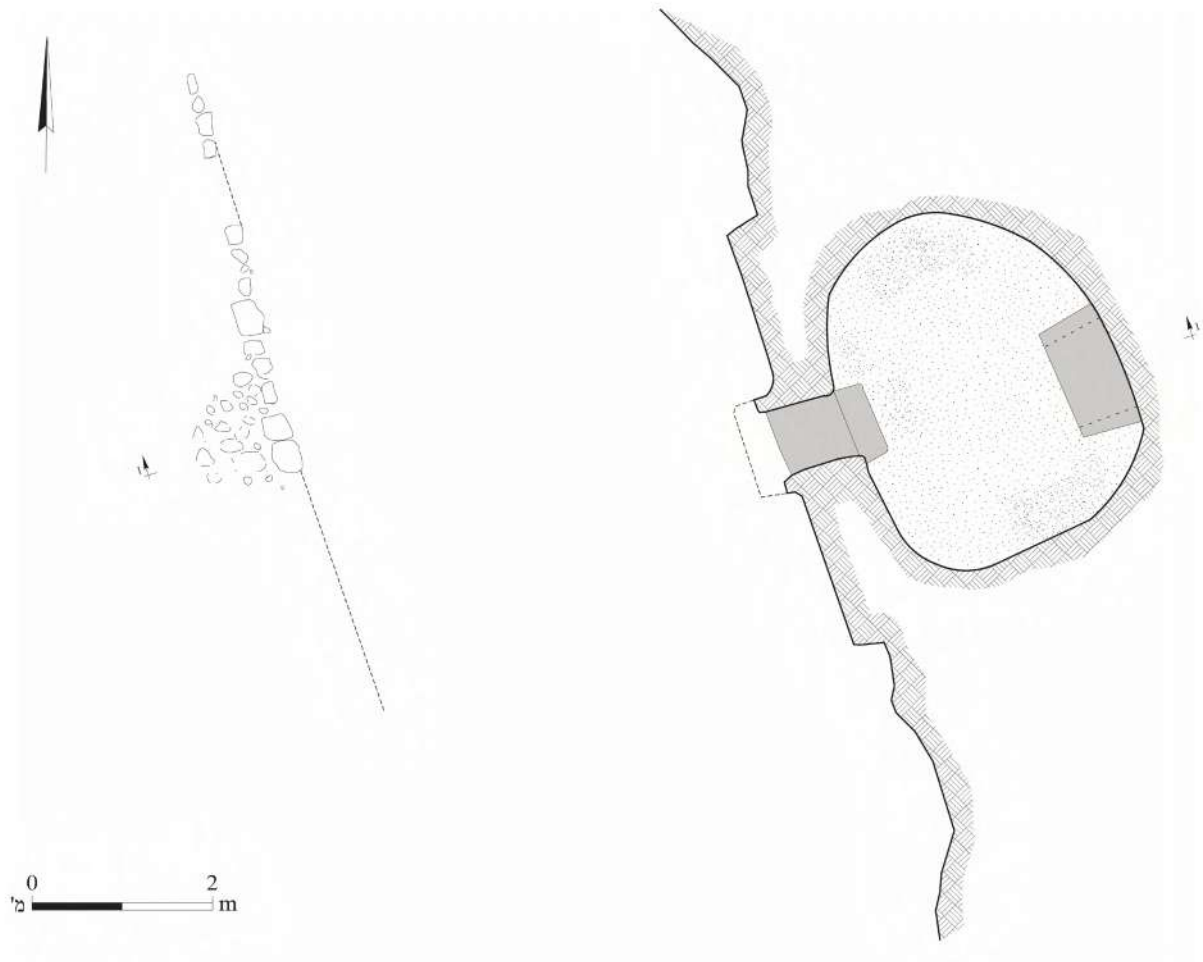


b.

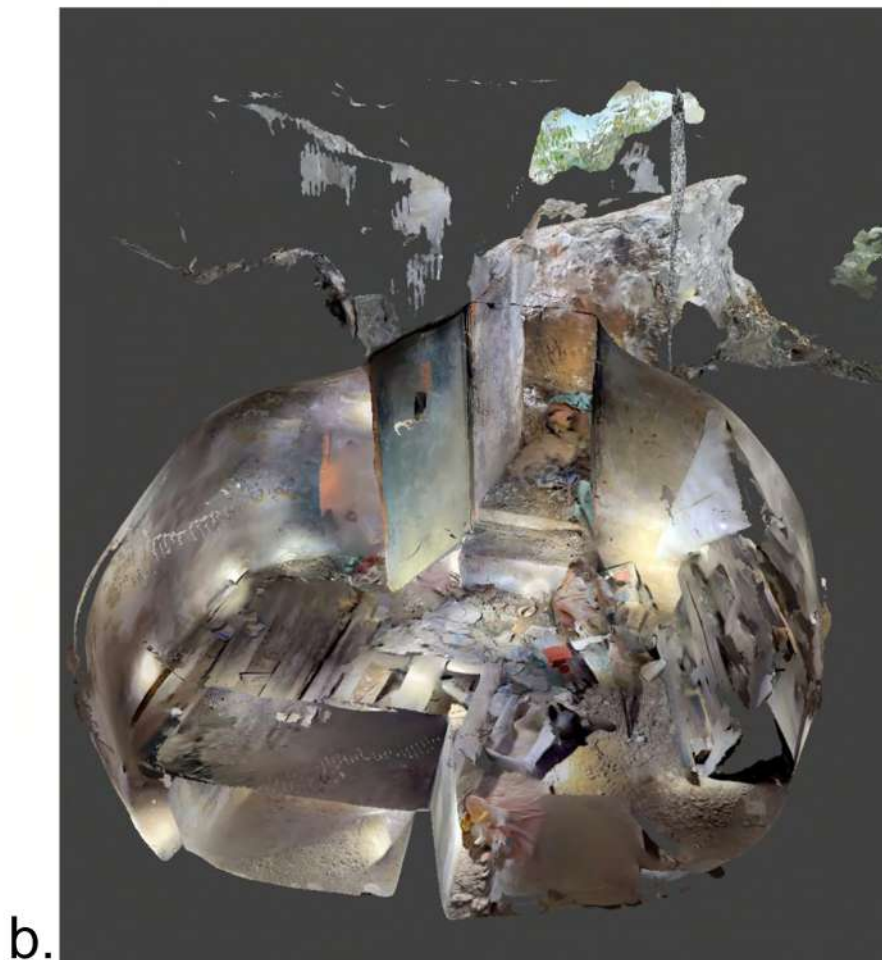
**Figure 9.** Feature 3. A. View from the southwest; B. View from above. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



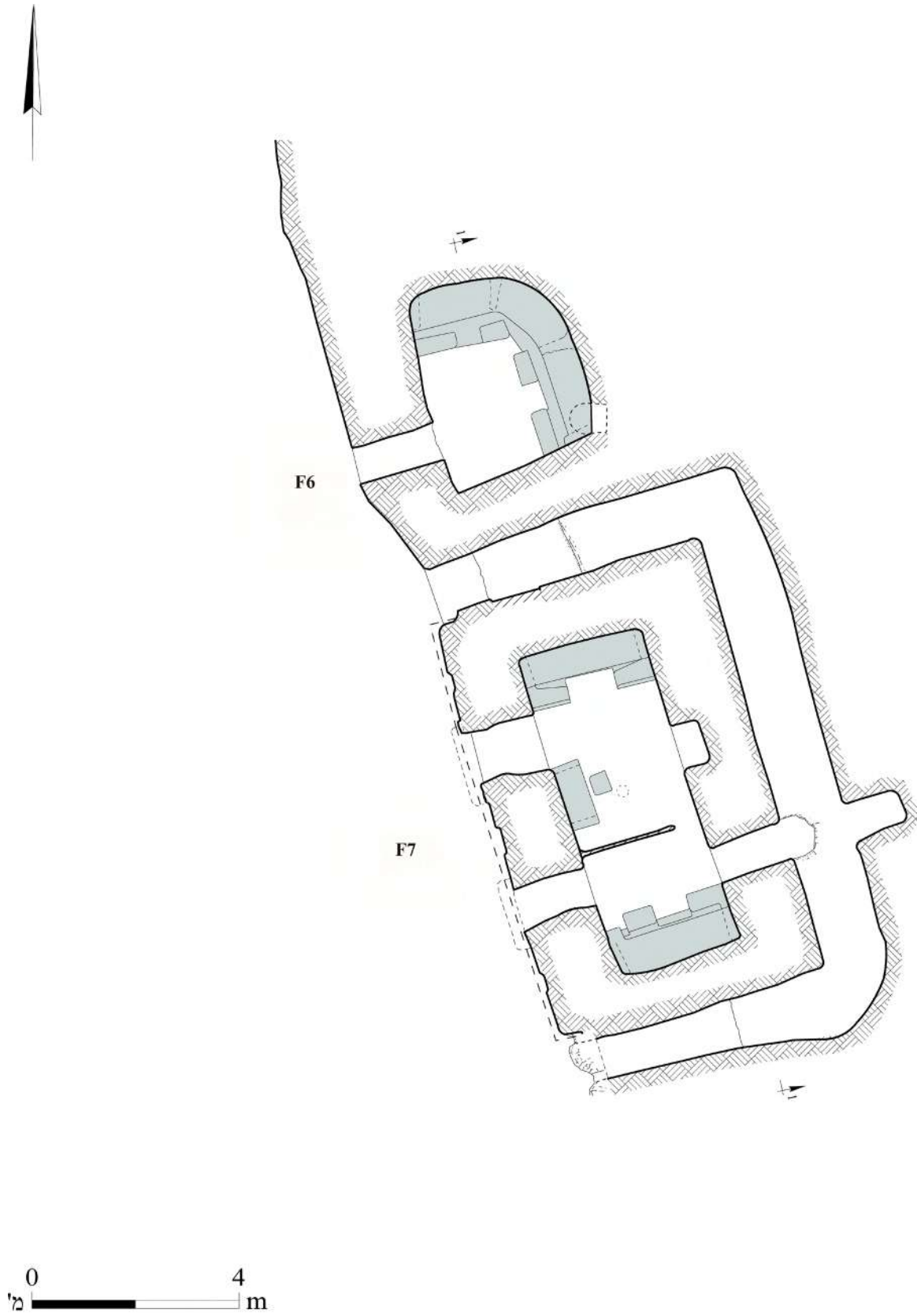
**Figure 10.** Feature 3: A. Elevation; B. 3D model of the interior. Elevation by: M. Kahn, processed by: Y. Shmidov. Model by: Y. Shmidov.



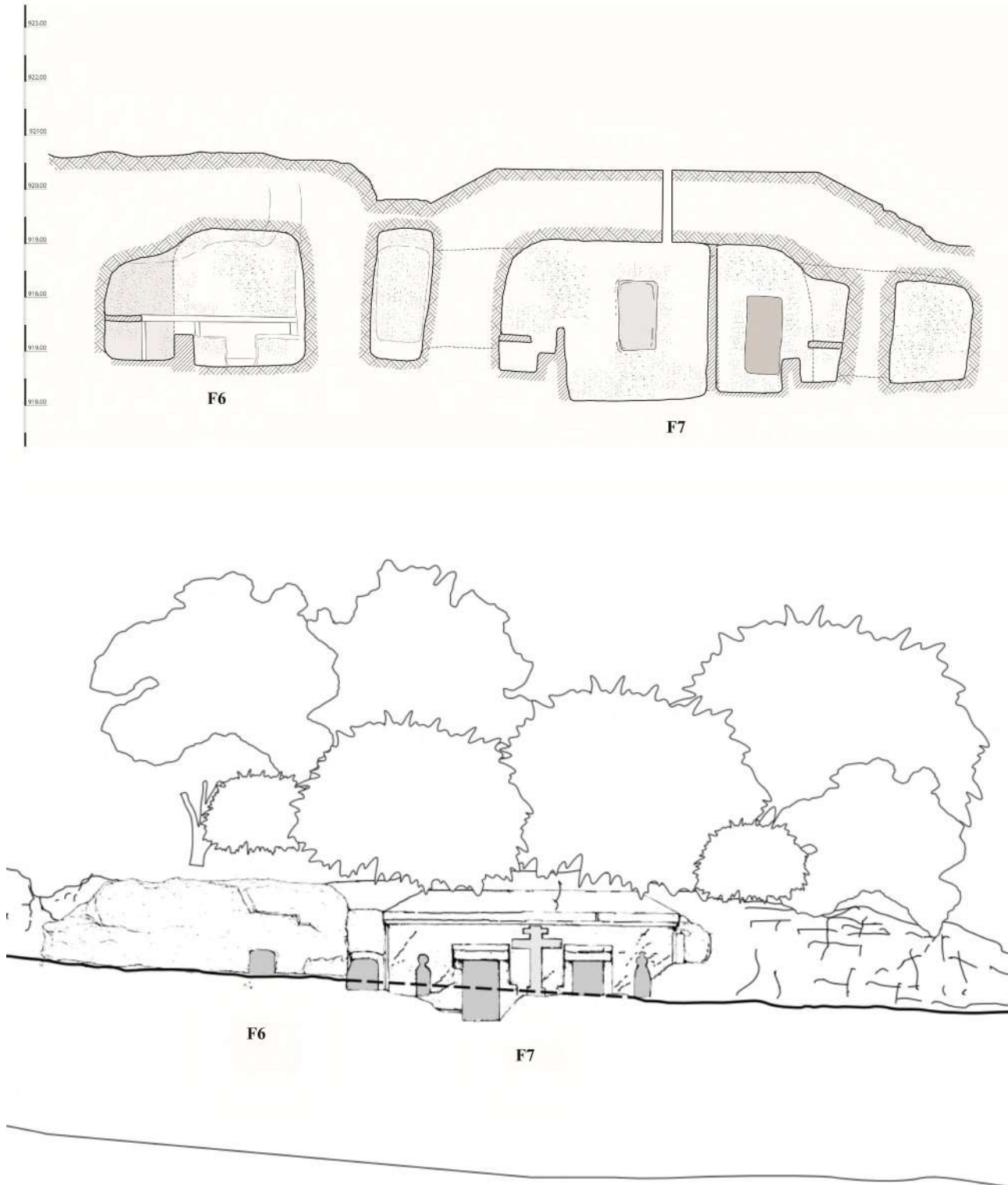
**Figure 11.** Feature 5: plan and section. Plan and section by: Y. Shmidov.



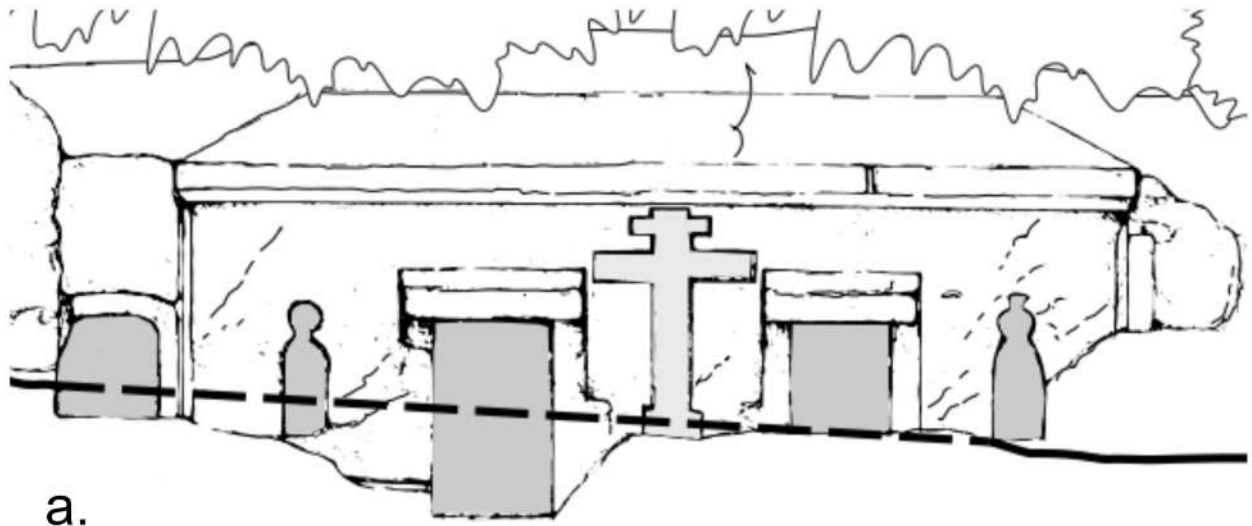
**Figure 12.** Feature 5. A. Façade, view from the south-west. B. 3D model of the interior. Photo A by: H. Shkolnik. Model by: Y. Shmidov.



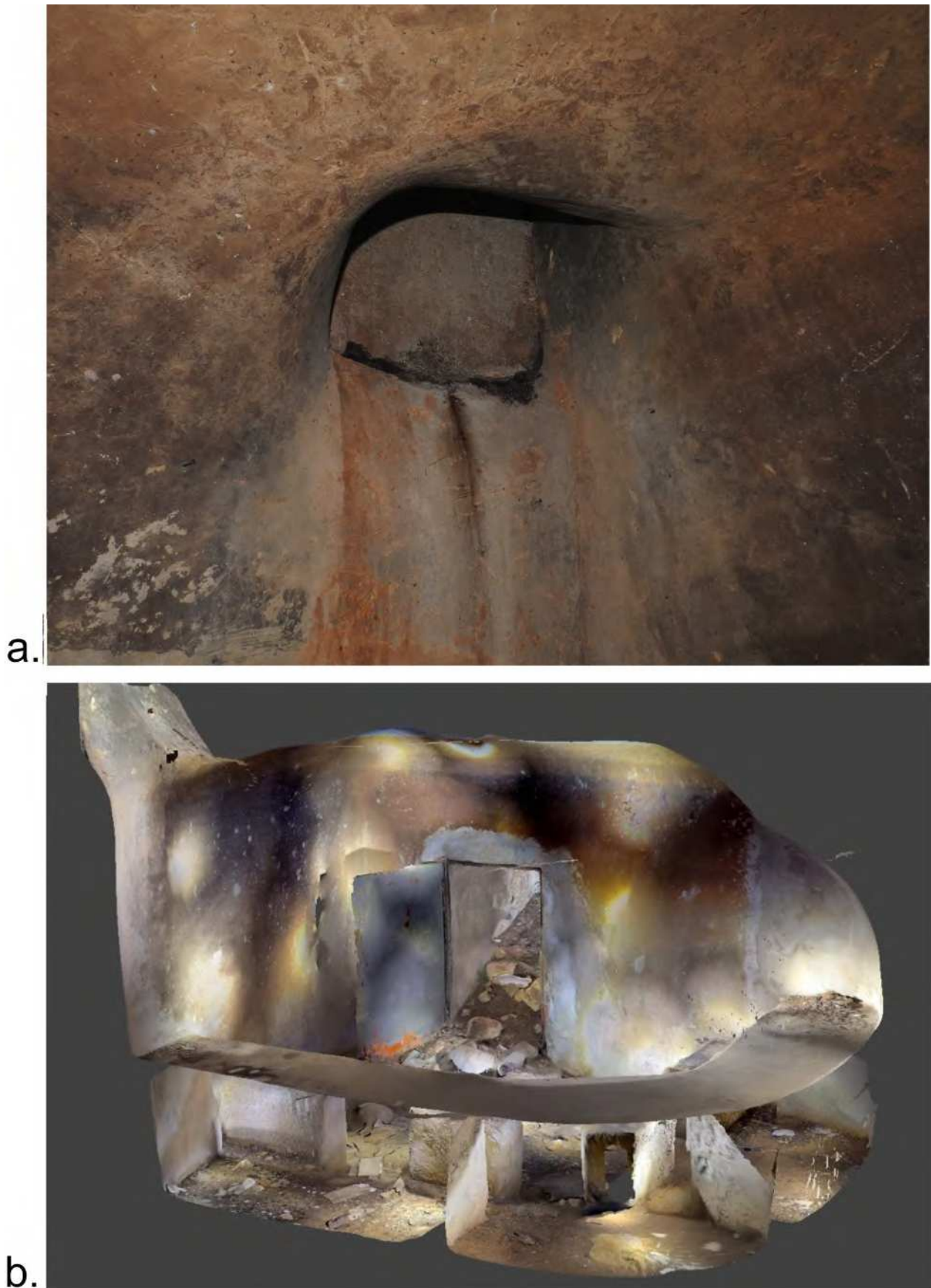
**Figure 13.** Complex 3: F6 («The Refectory»), F7 («The Crucifixion Chapel»). Plan by: Y. Shmidov.



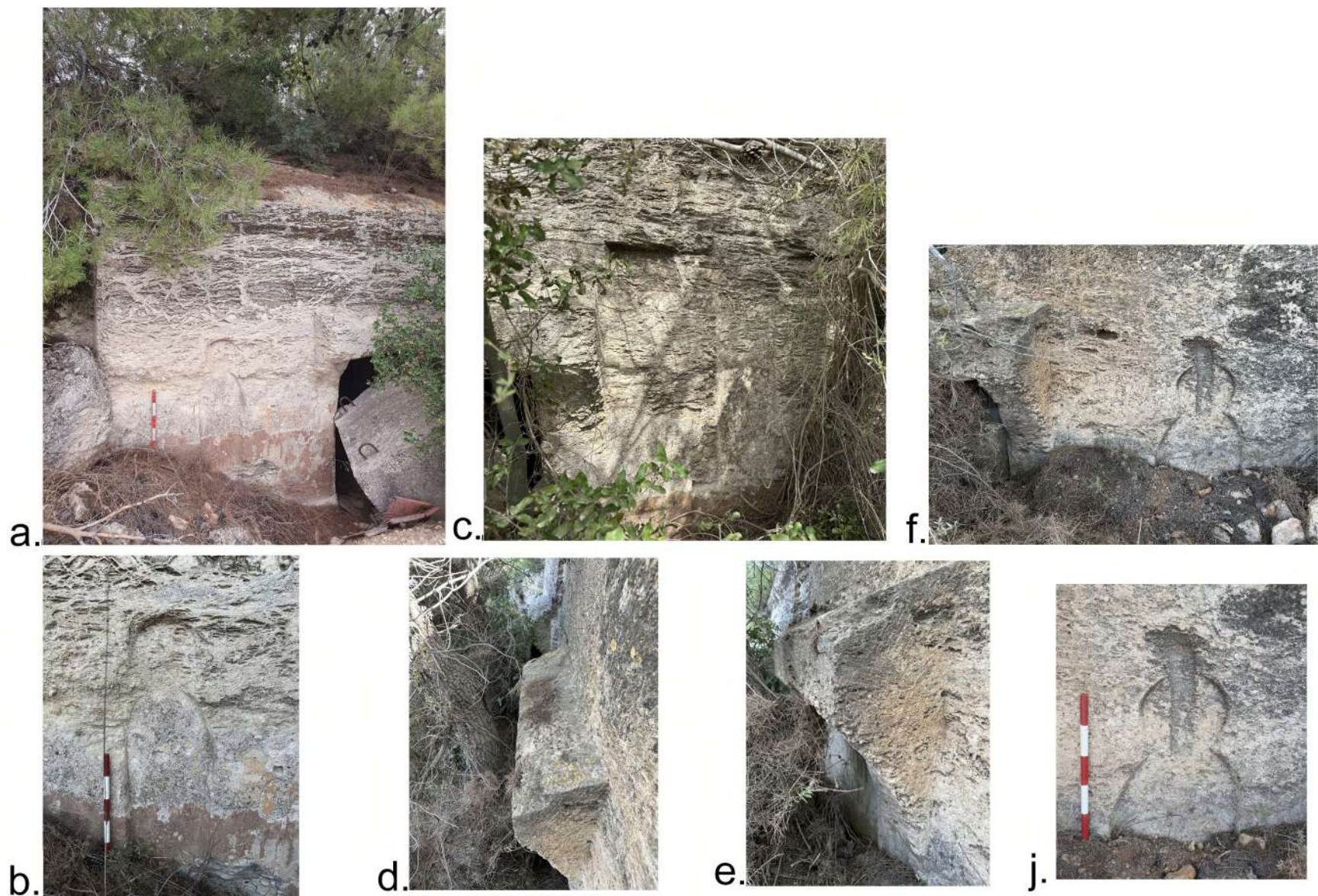
**Figure 14.** Complex 3: section and elevation. Section by: Y. Shmidov. Elevation by: M. Kahn, processed by: Y. Shmidov.



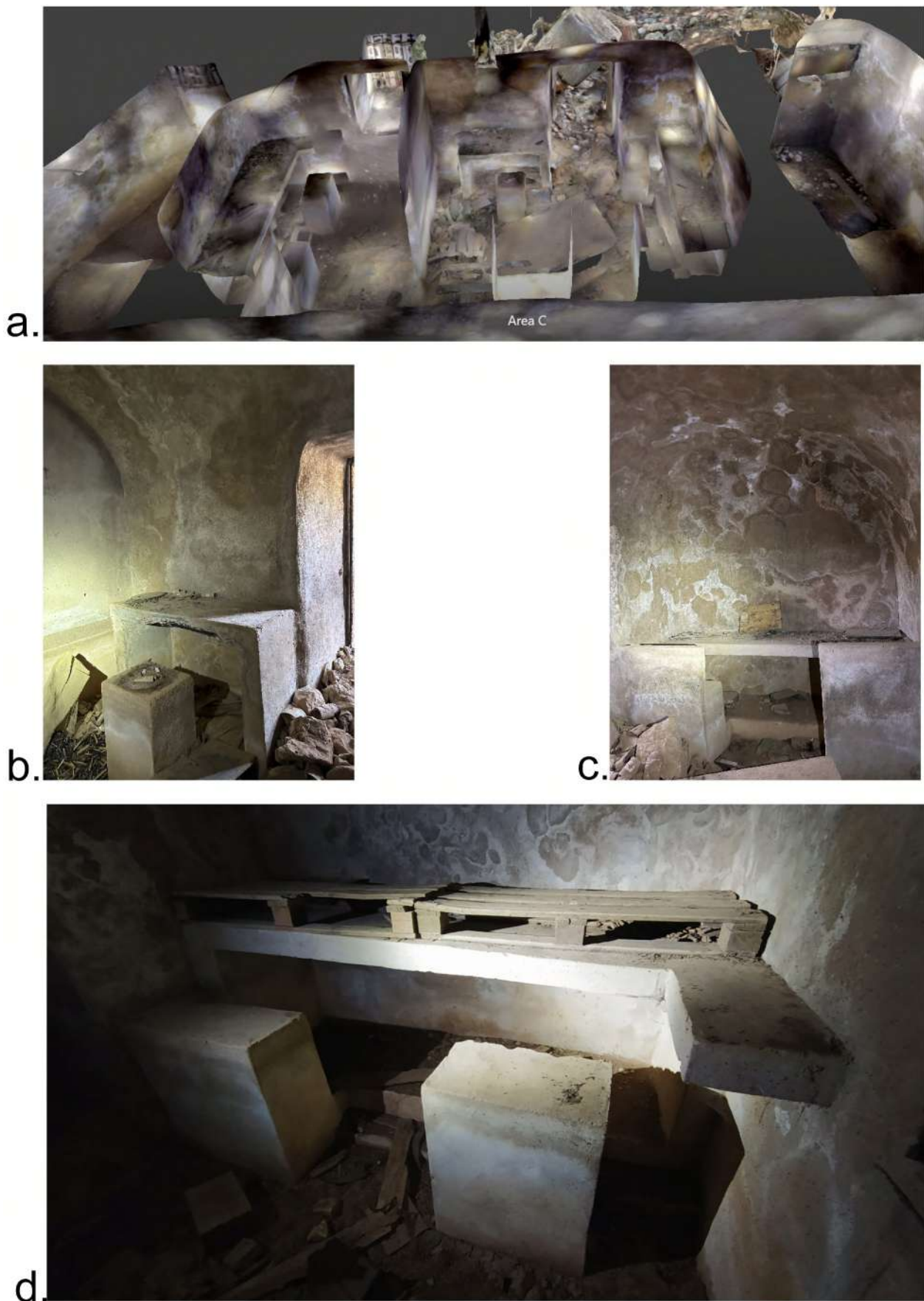
**Figure 15.** Complex 3: A. Elevation. B. F7, view from the south-west. Elevation by: M. Kahn, processed by: Y. Shmidov. Photo by: H. Shkolnik.



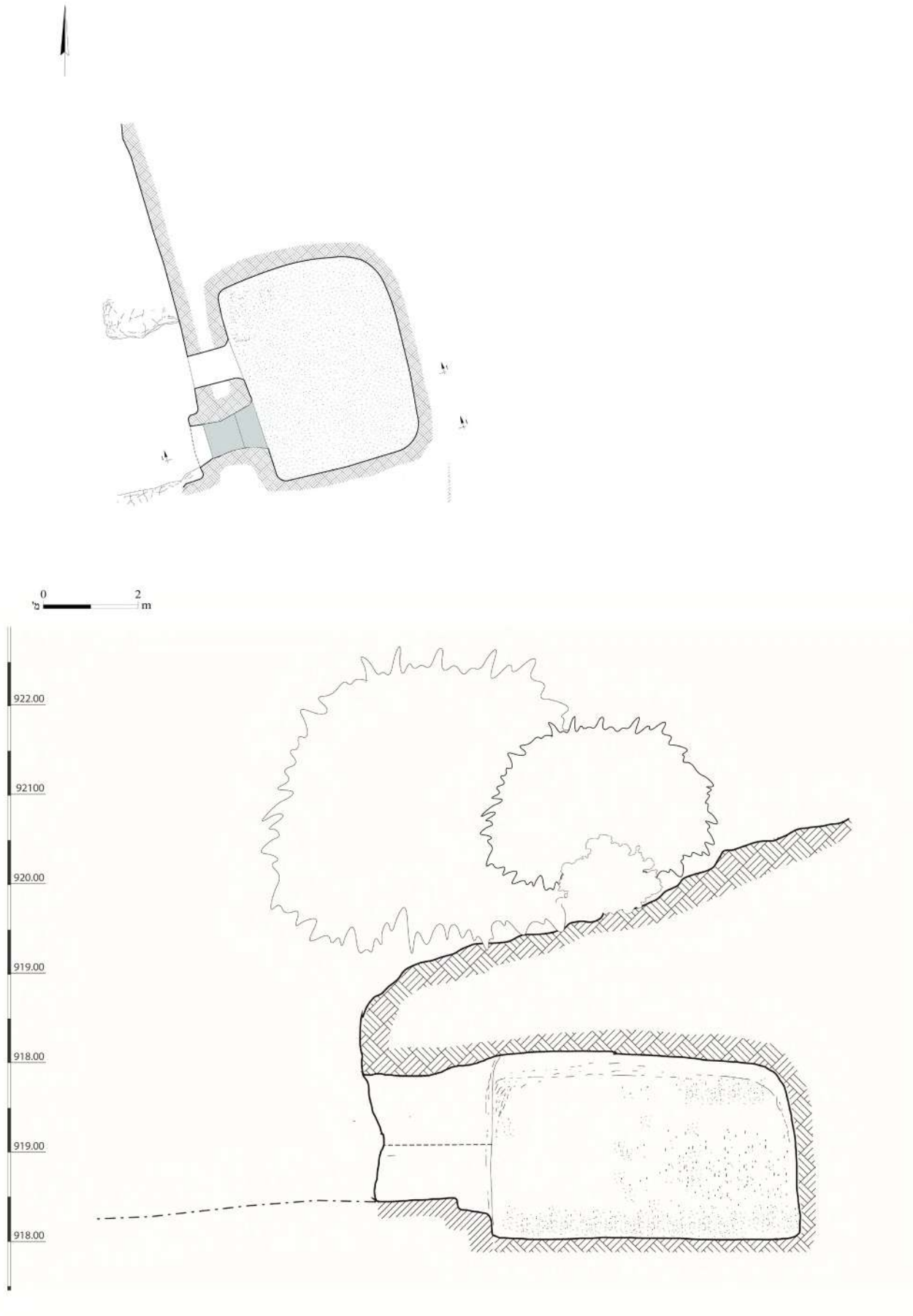
**Figure 16.** Interior of Feature 6. A. The cistern mouth B. 3D model of the interior. Photo A by: H. Shkolnik. Model by: Y. Shmidov.



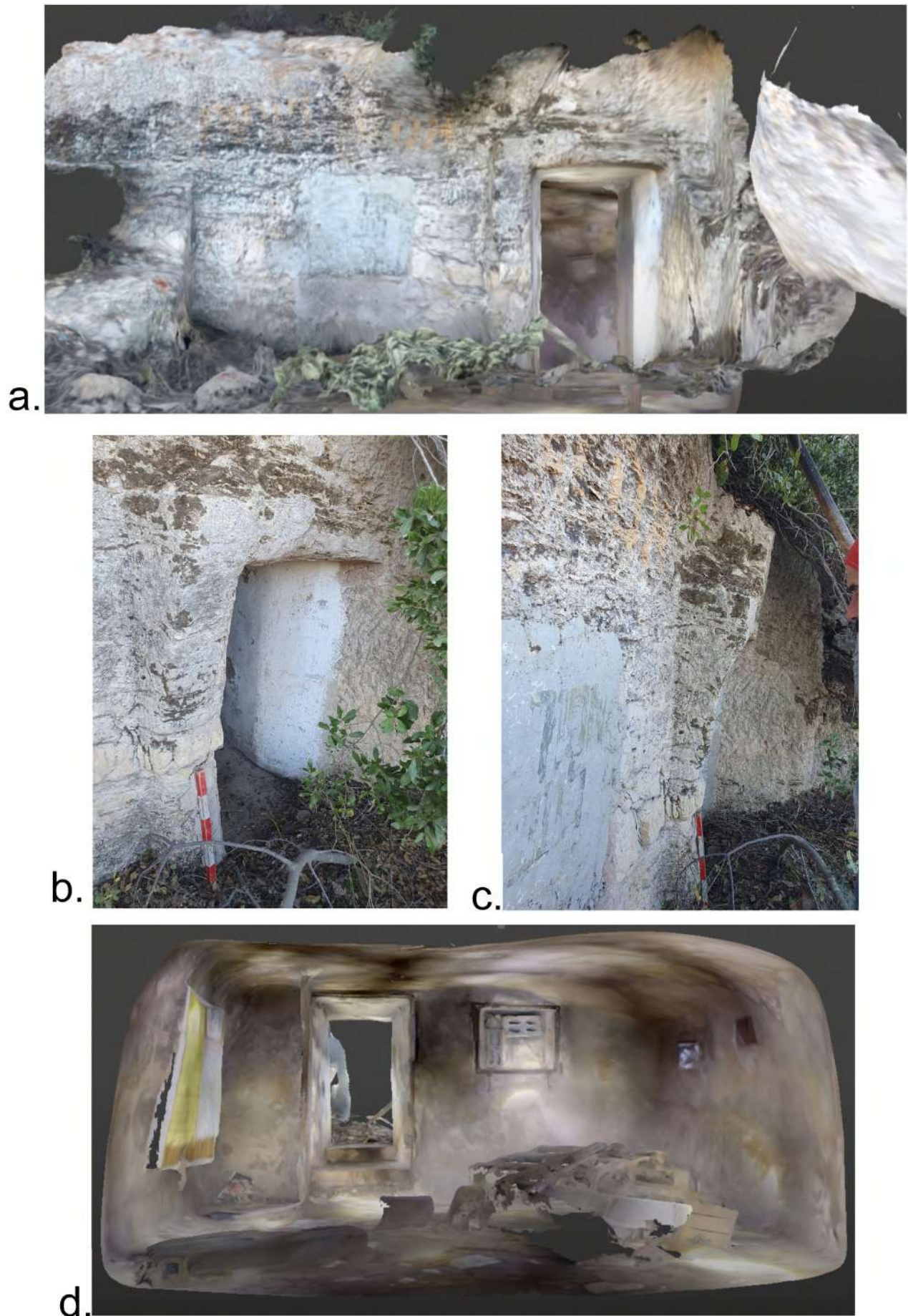
**Figure 17.** Feature 7, details of the façade. A-B. A sunken nimbate (female?) figure to the left of the entrance; C. Sunken cross in the middle of the façade; D-E. Blocked-out cornices above the entrance and the window; F-J. A sunken nimbate male (?) figure to the right of the window. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 18.** Feature 7, the interior. A. 3D model, general view toward the west; B-D. Concrete cast furniture. Model by: Y. Shmidov. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 19.** Feature 8: plan and section. Plan and section by: Y. Shmidov.



**Figure 20.** Feature 8. A. 3D model of the façade; B-C. The blocked-out cornice above the entrance and the blocked window; D. 3D model of the interior. Model by: Y. Shmidov. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 21.** The «Pharaoh's Daughter's Tomb». A. General view of the tomb, ca. 1903-1914. Image No. 13 in Russian Ecclesiastical Mission presentation album. Courtesy of The National Library of Israel Archive [IL-NLI-ARC, ARC. 4\* 1858 2.1 84].  
B. The «Egyptian cornice» [Ussishkin, 1993. P. 51, Ill. 31].



**Figure 22.** Architectural motifs on Jewish ossuaries from the Collections of the State of Israel. A. A doubled portal [Rahmani, 1993. P. 121, No. 185. Pl. 25]. B. Note the incised decoration imitating ashlar masonry, the cornice and the lid shaped like a pyramidal roof, all creating the impression of a monumental building [Rahmani, 1993. P. 227, No. 730. Pl. 103].

### South-western slope, lower terrace

Features 9–14 are located along a rock terrace right below the ancient road. They shall be presented from north to south.

#### *Feature 9 (Figs. 23, 24a, 25, 26c)*

The entrance (present W 1.25 m), torn in the smoothed sunken façade, leads to a nearly rectangular cave with rounded corners (W 3.30 m, L 2.65 m). The rock bottom is partially covered with debris, but it seems to be cut so as to create three benches arranged around a central depression (“standing pit”), suggesting the Feature’s being a single-chamber burial cave of the type widespread in Judea in the 8th through 2nd c. BCE [cf. Kloner, Zelinger, 2007; Yezerski, 2013; Abadi, 2017, and compare with burial cave Feature 16].

The 20th-century activities included clearing the ancient accumulations from the cave (as is evident from the distinctive level mark on the walls) and widening the original opening. The cave seems to have been used as a monastic cell (compare with Feature 14).

#### *Feature 10 (Figs. 23, 24b, 25, 26c)*

Immediately south of feature 9, a plain rectangular opening (W 0.75 m) leads to a Z-shaped short corridor (segments’ lengths: 1.70 m, 1.60 m, 1.45 m). Similar features were found in the cave system Feature 15, and it seems that they all were hewn in the 20th c., possibly intended to be used as minimalistic monastic cells.

#### *Feature 11 (The Russian Church) (Complex 1, Figs. 23a, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29)*

The Feature, a 20th-century cave church, with its developed interior space organization, is the ensemble’s most spectacular element. The general outlines of the cave were supposed to be symmetrical, though strictly speaking, the workers didn’t reach this architectural aim: the outer borders of the cave and the architectural elements were uneven and irregular as in any folk, vernacular architecture. Based on the totality of the architectural features, parallels, and historical data brought in the articles by Russian authors from the beginning of the 20th c., this cave system may be identified as one of the underground churches planned and partially executed by the monk Lazar Sudomoikin. For this reason, ecclesiastical terminology will be applied to its description. This church has never been systematically surveyed or published before.

The façade rock wall is straightened and sunken. The rectangular undecorated passageway (H 1.85 m, W 0.66–0.70 m), flanked by the two side room windows, leads to the inner space (conventionally called *domus*), comprised of three parallel corridors (“nave” and side “aisles”), separated by two polygonal piers of solid rock, and bordered by two “transepts”, allowing ambulatory movement around the piers. The outline of the *domus* is rectangular (ca. 14.7×10.8 m); it is oriented along the east-west axis. The complex is inclined downward, with the eastern end being ca. 0.40 m lower than the entrance area.

The rectangular (ca. 3.50×3.50 m) side rooms are accessed through short corridors intersecting with the “nave”. Narrow horizontal windows are cut near their north-western corners. The northern room is located almost symmetrically in relation to the longitudinal axis of the church, and it is isolated, while the southern one is located offset and connected with the southern “aisle” by a corridor, whose floor is 0.20–0.40 m lower than the floor level in the room. Together with the “nave” and the southern “aisle”, this corridor creates a trapezoid pier (ca. 2.80×3.50 m) and allows ambulatory movement around it. The use of the rooms is unclear. The northern could have been used as a cell, while the southern (in view of its ambulatory connection with the “nave” and the “aisle”) might have been involved in liturgical activity.

The “nave” measures: L 15 m, W 1.7 m. Northern “aisle”: L 8 m, W 1.3 m. Southern “aisle”: L 10 m, W 1.5 m. The ceilings of the “nave” and the “aisles” are flat, H ca. 1.90 m.

Two ca. 0.50 m deep recesses carved in the walls of the “nave” and a ca. 0.50 m carving in the ceiling create the illusion of a crossed vault or a dome supported by four piers (maximal H 2.40 m). The capacity of the “aisles” was augmented by rectangular “rooms” at their western ends, created by grooving in the piers. The “transepts” measure: western L 10.40 m, W 1.14 m; eastern L 10.70 m, W 1.30 m.

The apse, in the shape of an irregular, pointed semicircle, was hewn at the far eastern side of the cave (D 5.7 m, W 5.7 m, H 2.37 m). It is separated from the eastern “transept” by two rock piers, almost square in section (1.40×1.32 m), which serve as a chancel screen and create three symmetrically located entrances. Two niches were carved in its wall (a shallow arched one on the northern side and a deep rectangular niche on the southern). The central passage, facing the “nave”, is framed with grooves intended to receive the Royal Gates, and the ceiling in this doorway is marked with crosses drawn with the soot of a lit candle. Some of the crosses overlap, bringing to memory the annual practice known in the Orthodox world of marking crosses over the entrances to houses with lit candles brought from the all-night vigil of the Great Thursday (Russia) or midnight Pascha service (Greece). Additional graffiti

created using the same technique were found on the ceilings of the apse and the “aisles” (see also Feature 14).

A short (L 3 m, W 0.80 m) corridor was cut in the south-western corner of the southern “nave”, along the axis of the western “transept”. It turns to the east and terminates immediately with a dead end. This element seems to have been left unfinished, possibly being the beginning of a staircase (see below). Also, it could have been used as a minimalistic cell (compare with Features 10 and 15).

In the south-eastern corner of the southern “nave”, facing the eastern “transept”, is located the entrance to the 6.40 m high counterclockwise staircase, which ascends to the floor level of Feature 1, cutting through the rock all the way up to the upper terrace and the ancient road. The steps are covered with debris, and it is impossible to establish their dimensions and number without cleaning (Fig. 29). If the corridors of Features 1 and 15 were, indeed, supposed to meet, this presumed passage and the staircase could have possibly been used by the pilgrims staying in the structures on the hilltop, who would file into the church’s southern “aisle”. The main entrance, located at the church’s western end, could have served the clergy and the monks, who lived in the caves on the western slope. Alternatively, the corridor and the staircase could have played a role in the complex system of (stational?) liturgy practiced at the site.

The underground cultic caves were widely adopted in the Early Byzantine monastic tradition of the Holy Land. The Laura of St. Sabas in the Judean desert is most well-known for its numerous caves, natural and hewn, used as solitary cells for anchorites or as small private chapels (Patrich 1995). These ancient models of holiness have seemingly inspired the broad reuse of caves (tombs, in particular) by the Russian monks at Deir Sha’ar. However, the rock-cut tunnels and especially the church are rooted in the cultic traditions widespread in Ukraine and European Russia, where the practice of monastic underground dwelling developed through the 17th–20th c. (Gunko et al. 2017; Bertash et al. 2016; Stepkin, 2018).

**Feature 12 (A monastic cell; Complex 1. Figs. 25, 30)**

A simple rock-hewn room is found immediately to the south of the church. The smoothed and sunken rock around the window may suggest an early stage as an ancient burial cave (unfinished?). A rectangular doorway (H ca. 1.50 m, W 0.74 m) is followed by a short corridor (L 1.75 m) with a four-stepped stair descent leading to a rectangular chamber (L 2.90 m, W 1.65 m, H 2.30 m) lit through a large window (ca. 1×0.70 m). The doorway and window are symmetrically located at the northern and southern ends of the room. The plan resembles a rock-hewn room Feature 8 and the side rooms flanking the entrance to the underground church (Feature 11). The walls and the ceiling are covered with cement, on which numerous graffiti were incised and written (crosses, dates, and names in Russian and Arabic). The window was blocked entirely during the latest phase of use.

**Feature 13 (Fig. 31)**

A sunken rectangular recess, seemingly — an opening of an unfinished cave/system (H. ca. 1.20 m, W 0.90 m) — either ancient or part of the 20th-century activities.

**Feature 14 (A double-chambered burial cave. Figs. 32, 33)**

An ancient two-chambered rock-cut burial cave is closing the series of Features at the lower terrace. The cave is preceded by a roofed rectangular antechamber (2.50×4.50 m, H 2 m). The square entrance (ca. 1×1 m) is torn in the middle of the smoothed façade, adorned with a high rectangular stepped frame. The first burial chamber is square (3.50×3.50 m; H above the benches 1 to 1.25 m), with three benches arranged around the “standing pit” of unknown depth. The second chamber was hewn to the east of the first one, slightly off the longitudinal axis. It is accessed through a rectangular opening (0.45×0.75 m), adorned with a sunken frame. The room is trapezoid (2×2.25 m; H 1 m), with an even rock floor.

The two-chambered burial caves (with and without benches) are known from Jerusalem and several rural sites in the 8th–6th c. BCE Judea [Yezerski, 2013. P. 56–57]. It must be stressed that the bench-type burial caves hewn during the Iron Age cannot always easily be distinguished from those dating from the Hellenistic period, and without the complete clearing and excavation near the cave, only a broad date (ca. 8th–2nd c. BCE) can be suggested at the present stage of the research. The continuous use and the changes in burial customs are evident from a loculus (*kukh*) and the beginnings of two additional loculi hewn in the southern and northern walls of the first chamber, respectively. The loculus measures ca. 1.25×0.75 m; its opening, as well as the openings of the unfinished loculi, are adorned with a sunken frame similar to that adorning the opening of the second chamber. The transition to burial in *kuchim* occurred during the 2nd — 1st c. BCE [Kloner, Zelinger, 2007. P. 219; Abadi, 2017. P. 38], and the practice of remodeling bench-type caves was observed in several sites in the region and the immediate area of Deir Sha’ar [Batz, 2007].

At some later stage — by the Russians or before — the square opening of the first chamber was widened to ca. 0.60×0.75 m.

Early in the 20th c., the Russians cleared the cave and filled the loculus and the standing pit with rubble. The antechamber was turned into a room by closing it with a concrete wall with a 1×1.80 m doorway. Two Orthodox crosses were drawn with soot from a lit candle in the middle of the ceilings of both chambers, with the base of the cross from the first chamber oriented towards the west and the base of the one from the second — to the east. This may suggest possible use as a monastic cell.

### The northern and the eastern slopes

#### *Feature 22 (A cistern. Fig 34a)*

Initially, the Feature was an ancient bell-shaped cistern. Early in the 20th c., the rock roof was removed, the cistern walls were covered with cement, and a vaulted roof was built above it — all in order to continue its use for storing water. The vault is supported by ashlar walls with a rectangular opening in the eastern one. It is built of slabs, some of which reportedly originate from the pavement of the ancient road [Stelletsksii, 1922. P. 254, FN 2]. Today, the cistern measures ca. 2×3 m, with visible depth ca. 2 m.

#### *Feature 23 (A cistern. Fig 34b-c)*

The Feature seems to be an ancient bell-shaped cistern, similar to Feature 15, treated early in the 20th c. in the same way. However, the removal of the presumed rock roof is less obvious. The cistern is a bit larger (ca. 3×4 m, visible depth ca. 3 m). The vault is intact, with a square drawing opening protected by an iron hatch and lock. Similarly to Feature 15, the eastern support wall of the vault has a rectangular opening.

#### *Feature 24 (The Olive press cave. Figs. 35, 36)*

The Feature consists of a two-roomed hewn cave, oriented NE-SW, accessed by a doglegged staircase (now completely covered with debris). The stairway is enclosed by walls, which, most likely, have been supported some roof. The main hall is rectangular (11×4 m, H 2 m). Traces of sculpted rock above the floor level at the entrance suggest that the original entrance was narrower than the present one, or even the existence of multiple openings torn in the solid rock wall. Along the southern and the western walls, low shelves (H ca. 0.50 and 0.30 m, respectively) were left, and a series of deep niche-like cavities were cut in the northern (four) and the southern (three) walls. The westernmost niches in the northern wall have been merged into one at some later point. All the niches are oval (2.50×2, H 1.10 m on the average), except for the central one in the northern wall, which's outline is rectangular (2×1.50 m). A shallow horseshoe-shaped niche (1×0.50 m) is carved in the southern end of the western wall. An elevated platform of beaten earth and supported by a large stone retaining wall was installed on the floor in front of the entrance and next to the northern wall (2×3, H. 0.30 m). Above this floor a circular (ca. 0.50 m) incision, leading into a chimney-like cavity, was cut in the ceiling. It is possible that the "chimney", now blocked with stones and dirt, was originally open all the way to the surface. A circular depression (ca. 2 m) is hewn in the floor at the southern end of the hall, with a circular recess carved in the ceiling above its center, suggesting the identification as a rotary olive crusher.

The smaller room, located to the south of the entrance, has an "apsidal" plan (2.50×4.50, H. 1.80 m). A 1 m deep figural niche is carved in its eastern wall, suitable for installing a pressing device of the "direct screw" type.

The Feature seems to have served for oil production during the Roman-Byzantine through Early Islamic periods [cf. Taxel, 2013. P. 376–377] or later: the traditional technology remained in use in the region well into the modern era.

Early in the 20th c., the cave was cleared by the Russians, who also seem to have added a crude wall, closing the wide opening of the central niche in the southern wall and thus possibly turning it into a primitive monastic cell. The appearance of the feature partly fits Stelletsksii's description [1922. P. 260–261].

#### *Feature 15 (The Olive press cave and the rock-cut corridor. Figs. 37, 38a)*

The feature comprises an irregular hewn cave (7×8, H 3 m), oriented NE-SW, accessed from the east through a wide opening and stairway (now covered with debris). From the south, the entrance is abutted by a truncated, rounded, plastered installation. The main space has an "apsidal" appearance, with two rectangular niche-like cavities carved into its eastern rounded wall. It well could be that the plastered installation, now partly ruined by the wide entrance into the cave, was initially a similar cavity, though with a rounded plan. Another rounded cavity was carved in the northern wall. The dimensions of cavities are comparable with those of Feature 24<sup>5</sup>. A bench was carved along the western wall (W ca. 1

<sup>5</sup> In an account by N. Feldman, a defender of the Etzion Bloc in 1948, quoted by Ben-Shalom, an «incorruptible» body with pectoral cross was found in one of the niche-like cavities in a cave with a long corridor with side niches — undoubtedly, Feature 15 [Ben-Shalom, 1986. P. 138].

m, H ca. 1.30 m), with two shallow basins carved at its southern end. A rectangular depression (3.50×1.50 m) of unknown depth was carved in the floor along the bench. A rounded (ca. 1 m) opening was cut in the ceiling of the cave, near the northern corner, leading into a chimney cutting through the rock and reaching the surface.

A smaller rectangular space (ca. 4×2 m) was carved to the south of the main one, being separated from it by a rock-cut pillar with a square section. Two niches were carved into the northern and southern faces of the pillar. The eastern (narrower) passage created by the pillar is arcuated. At the bottom of the western passage, there is a rectangular niche (ca. 1×1 m) of unknown depth. A rectangular basin (1.50×1.50 m) with rounded corners was carved in the southern corner, with traces of ca. 1 m high rock wall above the floor level and ca 0.50 m presently visible depth below the floor level. A seemingly unfinished niche-like cavity was carved to the north of the basin (0.60×0.60, H 1.20 m).

The Feature seems to have served as an oil press cave equipped with a lever-and-weights type press, as suggested by the rectangular depressions in the floor, during the Roman-Byzantine period or later.

The appearance of the Feature partly fits the description by Stelletskiĭ [Stelletskiĭ, 1922. P. 260–261].

Early in the 20th c., a 28 m long corridor was hewn, following the length axis of the cave, cutting through its southern wall (W 0.80 m, H 2 m). Two z-shaped niches (segment lengths: 4/1.75/3 m; 4/2.20/2.50 m) were carved along the southern wall of the corridor, and four short niches (L 1 to 1.60 m) were cut, with equal distances, along the northern one. The former seem to be minimalistic cells (cf. Feature 10), while the latter appear to be left unfinished.

The floor of the corridor is slightly descending towards the end. The plans and the sections, created from advanced 3D models, were compared, showing that the main corridor of Feature 15 and the corridor of Feature 1 share the same axis, and their elevations were corrected in order to bring them to the same level (figs. 1, 38b). This may suggest that these corridors, the underground church (Feature 11), the monumental tombs decorated with crosses, and the burial caves converted into cells were all part of an impressive underground system planned and partly executed by the monk Lazar Sudomoikin. In his vision, the complex would have included the chapels dedicated to St. Lazarus, to the Parents of the Holy Virgin and to the Dormition of the Theotokos, and, in the “middle of the caves” — the large Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Loukianoff, who visited personally at the site, details about the plan, mentions the cells hewn for the monks “near the entrance” (to the church?), and states that “the works were nearing the end and there were only a few tens of meters left to carve in order to pierce the hill from side to side” [Loukianoff, 1936a. P. 95].

**Feature 16 (A burial cave. Fig. 39)**

The rectangular entrance (present W 1 m) leads to a nearly rectangular cave with rounded corners (L 3.25, W 2 m). The cave is filled with debris, but it seems to be a single-chamber burial cave of the type widespread in Judea in the 8th through 2nd c. BCE [cf. Kloner, Zelinger 2007; Yezerki, 2013; Abadi, 2017, and compare with burial cave Feature 9].

**Complex 4 (The main entrance, Features 17–18. Figs. 40, 41)**

At the northeastern foot of the hill, ca. 280 m from its top, the remains of the main gate can be seen (Feature 18). It can be recognized from the period photos [e. g. Knohl, 1958. Pp. 160–161; Fig. 40a–b]. The gate was built of ashlar (main constructive elements), most of which were stripped away, and fieldstones in the core. The structure was rectangular in plan (20.6×4.8 m), with the central arched passageway flanked by two side rooms, vaulted in the interior; oriented along the NW–SE axis. The façade was adorned with two pilasters flanking the gate and two windows in each room. Three crosses topped the arch above the passageway, which also bore a Russian inscription “Русская духовная миссия” (“Russian Ecclesiastical Mission”, Fig. 40b). The arch and the side rooms were demolished by the Jordanian Arab Legion during the 1948 war.

A rock-hewn cistern (Feature 18) is located immediately to the south of the southern side room, along the length axis of the gate complex (9.10×4.10, H 4.25 m). The walls are lined with large ashlar and plastered. The cistern is roofed with a barrel vault built of small stones.

While it is possible that the rock-cut cavity of the cistern was hewn in ancient times, the Feature in its present form belongs, together with the gate, to the early 20th-century phase. The cistern could have been used for irrigation of the orchards.

### The remains on the hilltop: the Early Byzantine church (Feature 19) and other remains (Features 20-21)

#### *Feature 19 (The church. Figs. 42, 43, 44)*

According to the plan published by Vincent [Vincent, 1903. P. 614], following his visit to the site on October 4, 1902, the church was a three-aisled basilica measuring 15.6×9 m<sup>6</sup>. Its eastern end was completed by the central apse and secondary (northern) aisle with apse. Both apses were semicircular from the inner side and enclosed into the common straight wall from the outer side. From the western end, a narthex was adjacent. All the floors were mosaic-paved. Vincent had noted no apse at the end of the southern aisle. When Schneider visited the site in 1938 [Schneider, 1938. P. 97-98], he noted that the basilica was tri-apsidal, but only the narthex and western wall were visible. The rest of the church was rebuilt for the needs of the Russian monastery.

Until the present survey, it was considered that the Early Byzantine church, discovered in the early 20th c., was lost in oblivion. However, the authors managed to localize its remains. After overlaying Vincent's plan over the photogrammetric image of the monumental ruined building still preserved at the hilltop, it became obvious that their outlines generally coincide (Fig. 42). Plenty of "Marseille" roof tiles are scattered at the surface around the severely damaged building, misleading the earlier surveyors, who dated the building mainly to the period of Russian activity and left it without proper scientific analysis and attention. Definitely, the building was reused and rebuilt by the Russian monks and pilgrims (as is known from written sources and from observation), but to a much lesser extent than it was considered. The impressive remains of the ancient masonry allow us to outline the plan of the almost square monumental building (15×14 m), with at least two construction phases, among which the earliest can possibly be identified as a Roman tower or fortlet. During the Early Byzantine period, it was rebuilt into a church by means of adding apses and enlarging the inner space with its further division into a nave, aisles, and narthex. The apses can't be localized currently; the southern aisle is shorter than the nave and the northern aisle, as can be seen also in the plan of Vincent. Some ashlar bear drafted margins (Roman or Byzantine). The building technique comprised two facets of large ashlar filled with fieldstones in the core. The walls are preserved mainly from three to four rows of masonry.

Additional walls can be seen near the church. Some can be dated to the Roman-Byzantine period (based on the marginal drafting), the others are seemingly late (modern?). The segments of ancient masonry are well-recognized among the ruins of modern buildings and terraces, which are attested by a certain quantity of archive photos [Knohl, 1958. P. 160-161; Ulman, 2014].

The fitting of a Byzantine church within a Roman building — a fortlet or a mile station — matches the pattern known around Judea [Magen, 2008a]. Future excavations might shed light on many other questions concerning this church, which was only amateurly excavated more than a century ago.

#### *Feature 20 (The miqveh. Figs. 45, 46)*

The feature is carved in the rock right below the eastern wall of the church. It was found by the late D. Amit and studied by H. Cohen [Cohen, 2016. P. 45]. The *miqveh* is accessed through a stepped dromos (now covered with debris), terminating with a 1×1.5 m opening. The immersion chamber measures 4.50×1.50, H 1.50 m. The southern end of the chamber terminates with a ca. 0.70 m high step and a rounded cavity (ca. 1.50×1.50 m) with a drawing opening cut at its roof. The walls of both cavities are plastered.

The installation seems to have been turned into a cistern during the Late Roman or Byzantine periods, similarly to many others in the region, by blocking the entrance with a wall and by carving a drawing opening [Reich, 2013. P. 268-270; the opening in the installation in concern may possibly belong to the early phase. Fig 46b].

It is unclear how the Feature was used during the 20th-century. The drawing opening is now blocked with masonry and the water-tight plaster had not been renewed, suggesting use other than a water installation (storage? Monastic seclusion?).

#### *Feature 21 (A cistern. Fig. 47)*

The Feature is located 15 m to the east of the church. It is a bell-shaped, rock-hewn plastered cavity (W 4.25, present H 3.40 m). The cavity was in use during the 20th-century, as is evident from a new feeding channel with ceramic pipe.

6 These measurements concerned only two aisles with apses and narthex. The southern aisle without the apse had been identified as an outer gallery and excluded from measurements, though included into the plan. The real architectural planning of the building is still questionable (two — or three-aisled basilica, two — or triapsidal, presence of doorways, windows, etc).

### **Architectural elements**

According to the Russian period accounts, a small museum with some archaeological finds (including pottery vessels from the cleared burial caves) was organized in one of the ancient church's aisles [Dmitrievsky, 1909. P. 67]. Unfortunately, their location is unknown, and the authors want to hope that the most important finds were securely relocated before the abandonment of the monastery. Stelletskii mentioned columns, marble colonnettes, and Corinthian capitals scattered at the site [Stelletskii, 1922. P. 258]. Except for one short limestone drum in secondary use, none of these details can be seen anymore. Schneider published a marble chancel screen panel fragment [Schneider, 1938. P. 98, Fig. 7]. According to the decoration, it was the right lateral side of the panel (measured 0.57×0.30 m), decorated by the traditional composition of a medallion with a certain pattern enclosed (usually a large cross), flanked by a pair of smaller crosses leaning on the ivy tendrils (*stephanostaurion*). Of this well-recognizable composition, only the molded frame, the short segment of the central medallion, and the lateral cross with ivy-leaf were preserved (fig. 44c). During our survey, a small fragment of an undecorated marble panel was revealed in the late masonry. In the Land of Israel, chancel screen plates with *stephanostaurion* composition were revealed in 30 churches<sup>7</sup>. Mostly well-preserved panels originate from the churches in Rasm esh-Shaf/Massuot Yizhaq [Yeivin, 1955. P. 14, Pl. 11:5] and Khirbet Barqa-Gan Yavneh [Habas, 2012. P. 144, Fig. 14].

### **The mosaic**

The mosaic was severely damaged shortly after its discovery and cannot be seen today. The most detailed drawing of the floor mosaic of the central apse was published by Barton [Barton, 1903]. The drawing is probably not without some fantasy, but the main artistic idea was seemingly conveyed correctly (fig. 44a). The main composition consisted of two deers/antelopes chewing the leaves of bushes. They were flanking the medallion with an ornamented cross within it. Further to the west, outside of the apse, the Greek inscription was placed. The inscription was exhaustively studied in a number of publications (see above), though the zoomorphic composition gained less attention. Such a type of decoration was comparatively rare. Parallels for animals (rams, antelopes, lambs) eating leaves from the trees, either crowns or roots might be found in the Nilotic scene in the early *diakonikon* in the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo [Talgam, 2014. P. 111, Fig. 157 (after Piccirillo, 1993. P. 135, Fig. 166)], in the hunting scene in the Kussifum church [Talgam, 2014. P. 117–119, Figs. 163–164], and in the new baptistery chapel on Mount Nebo [Piccirillo, 1993. P. 150, Fig. 167]. In the Land of Israel, only one parallel might be mentioned, deriving from the church in Maresha, though the image of only one deer is preserved there [in the center of the southern aisle, Kloner, 2014. P. 452].

### **Back to the Madaba map**

The quest of the “House of Zecharia” (Lk. 1: 39–40), ignited by the published in 1897 find of the Madaba map and fueled by the Deir Sha’ar inscription, continues the centuries-old confusion of Christian pilgrims — a confusion, continued even by the Muslims [Tal, 2014. P. 414] — between the village of Beth Zacharia (the locale of the fifth battle between the Hasmoneans and Seleucids (I Macc. 6: 32–33)), the tomb of “St. Zecharia” (either Zecharia, son of Jehoiada, a priest, killed “in the court of the House of the Lord” (2 Chr. 24: 20–21; Lk. 11: 50–51) or Zecharia, son of Berechiah, one of the Lesser Prophets (Zech. 1: 1; Mt. 23: 28–39)), and a certain house of certain Zecharia, the father of John the Baptist (Lk 1:12–17). The latter appears for the first time in the 6th c. Itinerary of Theodosius, who mentions a place five miles away from Jerusalem, “where St. Elizabeth, the mother of St. John the Baptist, lived” [Itinerary of Theodosius 35]; no additional Early Christian pilgrim accounts refer to this site. The first seems to have never been lost and can securely be identified at the site of Khirbet Beit Zakariya (خربة بيت زكريا, Ref. ITM 211749/618980), located less than 2 km. north of Deir Sha’ar [Abel, 1938. P. 284]. The recent survey of D. Raviv of the Bar-Ilan University, who kindly shared the yet unpublished data with the authors, produced positive evidence for occupation during the Maccabean revolt and, more importantly, for the battle fought near it. The sources do not always allow to distinguish between Zecharia the priest and Zecharia the prophet, but there were two distinctive areas related to them. The blood and the places of martyrdom and burial shown in Jerusalem already in the 4th c. can possibly be attributed to Zecharia, son of Jehoiada [e. g., The Bordeaux Pilgrim, 1887. P. 21; Itinerary of Theodosius 50. See also Méndez, 2022. P. 9–11 on the possible intentional conflation of the two persons]. The second “place of Zecharia” [“Zecara mahel” in Peter the Deacon’s book on the Holy Places (V7), allegedly quoting lost fragments of the 4th c. Itinerary of Egeria] was likely located within the diocese of Eleutheropolis. Sozomen (5th c.) describes the invention of the relics of “Zecharia the prophet” by a villager from Caphar-Zecharia in a garden by the road leading to the city of Bithereman/Bitheribis [Ecll. Hist. IX. 17]. It must be stressed, that despite

<sup>7</sup> Data taken from The Digital Corpus of Early Christian Churches and Monasteries in the Holy Land <https://dig.cmps-cmhl.huji.ac.il/node/12316>.

calling Zecharia the “prophet”, Sozomen specifies that he was killed by the king Jehoash — like Zecharia the priest. By the 6th c., seemingly, there already were two different sites outside Jerusalem related to the prophet Zecharia: a place 6 miles away from Eleutheropolis [Itinerary of Theodosius 17], and a site possibly located in the area of Bethlehem, along the Bethlehem-Hebron road [Itinerary of Antoninus 31–32, and see below], namely — in the village of Beth Zacharia, where an 8th c. itinerary clearly places the tomb of Zecharia the prophet [Itinerary of Willibald 24]. Willibald’s account is of particular importance since it emphasizes that the prophet buried there is not the father of St. John the Baptist.

The site in the vicinity of Eleutheropolis has not yet been satisfactorily identified. No traces of a prominent church seen on the Madaba map were found in the ruins of Tell Zakariya (Azekah, Ref. ITM 194003/623203) or in the village of Zakariya (now moshav Zekharia, Ref. ITM 194856/624160), and no Byzantine remains were found at Tell es-Safi (Zafit, Ref. ITM 185625/623395), which was suggested to be identified as Safita, shown on the Madaba map next to Beth Zacharia [TIR 99–100; Pringle, 1993. P. 204; Di Segni, 1998. P. 118; Bagatti, 2002. P. 122–125, 146]. The identification of Kh. Dhikerin (Dikhrin, Zikhrin, Ref. ITM 186914/619147) as Caphar — or Beth Zacharia is also problematic, despite the presence of some Early Christian finds, since the period sources (e. g. 6th c. Lam. R. 2: 2, 4) clearly point at a different etymology of its Aramaic name. But where should it be found then?

Antoninus’ unusual specification regarding the “ornamented church” with “many servants of God” [Itinerary of Antoninus 32] is of paramount importance since both the Madaba map and the archaeological remains at the site of Khirbet Beit Zakariya (Beth Zacharia) represent not an ordinary church. The map depicts a large and elaborate basilical structure with a rounded feature flanked with columns, generally understood by scholars as a semicircular atrium containing the tomb of the saint. Two Byzantine capitals (one can still be seen *in situ*, topping a column shaft incorporated in the late wall, fig. 48 a–c) were discovered in the ancient mosque, dedicated to the prophet Zecharia and containing his presumed burial (fig. 49c). Both capitals belong to rare types (“basket” and “bowl”), most likely originating from a Jerusalem workshop [Tarkhanova, 2022; Tarkhanova, 2023], signaling the special status of the church, which stood at or near the spot till it was replaced with a mosque<sup>8</sup>. Also, a column shaft (fig. 49b) and four Byzantine chancel posts were found incorporated in the building of the mosque and the tomb (figs. 48d; 49c). Lastly, a Late Roman or rather Early Byzantine Tuscan column base, typical for the churches in the area, was found in the fields some 100 m. to the NE of the mosque (Fig. 49a). We, therefore, suggest that these remains may belong to the St. Zecharia’s church depicted on the Madaba map next to the village of Beth Zacharia (ΒΕΘΖΑΧΑΡΑ), while the semicircular feature could well be a rotunda — a distinguishable attribute of martyria. It must be noted that even the location of the structure — at the southern edge of the site — is in line with the depiction on the map. Further support for this suggestion can be lent from the locations of additional sites depicted on the Madaba map and identified by the authors in the immediate and near vicinity of Beth Zacharia (Fig. 2).

A village called Safita (ΣΑΦΙΘΑ) is located right next to and to the south-west of Beth Zacharia, along the same mountain ridge. The authors suggest identifying it at the Palestinian village named Khirbet Safa (خربة صافا), located ca. 3 km. south-western of Beth Zacharia. The phenomenon of dropping the pre-Arabic suffixes *-it*, *-ita* is well-known in the Palestinian toponymy [Elitzur, 2004. P. 334, 339]. The surveys at the site revealed Byzantine material (contrary to the above-mentioned Tell es-Safi (Zafit)), including architectural members belonging to a church [Magen, Kagan, 2012. P. 141].

To the south-east of Beth Zacharia, in the valley, is shown another village, named Beth Zur (ΒΕΘΣΟΥΡΑ). Below the inscription and next to the icon of a village appears a feature which may possibly identify a mound or a hill, and at a short distance to the south-east from it, depicted a church with a circular feature — apparently a spring, where, according to the inscription, St. Phillip baptized the Eunuch (Acts 8, 26–38).

The identification of the biblical through Hellenistic Beth Zur, known as a fortified stronghold on the border with Idumaea from numerous mentions in the books of the Maccabees (including in the context of the battle of Beth Zacharia), with the ruins of Khirbet et-Tubeiqa (Ref. ITM 208992/610791), is widely accepted (TIR 87–88). By the Byzantine period, the site was abandoned, and the activity moved to the south-east of it: a prominent hill with Crusader through Ottoman remains seems to preserve the ancient name of the site (Burj es-Sur, Ref. ITM 209384/610520), and some Byzantine remains (not necessarily a village) are known from ‘Ein edh-Dhirweh (see below). However, according to Eusebius’ *Onomasticon*, by the 4th c. CE, there were two places in Judaea so named<sup>9</sup>: the first located at the

8 The remains of a ca. 22×35 m, east-west oriented public structure, built of large, carefully dressed ashlar, are located some 200 m farther south of the village, just near the ancient road (Ref. ITM 211779/618663). This structure is marked as «ruined Byzantine church» on Gisler’s 1937 map (fig. 49d).

9 Two places with that name («Beithsur» and «aliud Beithsur», both located within the royal domain of Hebron) are listed in a 12th c. document among the casalia belonging to the Crusader fortress of Bethgibelin [Ellenblum 1998. P. 142; Pringle, 2023. P. 5].

20th milestone from Jerusalem, with the Eunuch's spring near it, and the second — in the area of (in Hieronymus' translation 1 mile away from) Eleutheropolis (*Eus. Onom*: 104-105). And indeed, the Byzantine pilgrims' accounts, similarly to the observed above, give different distances between the sites, which may generally suggest two different places. Theodosius refers to a place distant 16 miles from Jerusalem and two miles from Mambre (Ref. ITM 210047/607157), with an additional four miles separating the latter from the Tombs of the Patriarchs (Ref. ITM 210560/603620; Itinerary of Theodosius 30-33). The overall reasonable distances between the known sites allow to point at the church and the spring of 'Ein edh-Dhirweh (Ref. ITM 209728/610412) as the place of the Eunuch's baptism, located near Eusebius' first Beth Zur [Magen, Kagan, 2012. P. 173-174]. But the Bordeaux pilgrim places Beth Zur and the spring differently, nearly halfway between Bethlehem and Hebron: 14 miles away from Bethlehem and eight miles from Mambre, while the distance mentioned between the topographical anchors of Mambre and the Tombs of the Patriarchs is correct: two miles [The Bordeaux Pilgrim, 1887. P. 27]. The projection of these distances on a modern map suggested location in the area of Beth Zacharia — in accordance with the Madaba map, as well as with the toponymical and archaeological evidence brought below.

The ruins of Khirbet Beit Sawir (خربة بيت صاویر, Ref. ITM 212548/618083) represent a large multi-period site with occupational sequence which starts in the first millennium BC (at latest) and ends in the Ottoman era; some Intermediate and Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2200-1550 BC) ruins are located several hundreds of meters to the east (Rujum es-Sabit, Ref. ITM 213609/213609). It operated during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, possibly — as a village (limited excavations at the site were conducted by the late Y. Peleg [Peleg, 2005] and recently by E. Meir (unpublished)). The current Arabic name preserves the first part of the Canaanite-Hebrew name "Beit" ("House") intact and slightly changes the meaningless for the Arab ear "Zur" (SWR) into "Sawir" — a personal name, as suggested by Palmer [Palmer, 1881. P. 397; see also Elitzur, 2004. P. 312-313 for o/u — aw transition in toponyms]. Furthermore, it could also be that the clearly theophoric name with a possible Pagan survival in it [cf. Wood, 1916a. P. 34; Wood, 1916b. P. 269-270; Korpel, 1999. P. 709-710; Agmon, 2022. P. 19] was deliberately altered by the Muslim inhabitants. This Beth Zur is located ca. 1.2 km. to the south-east of Beth Zacharia, on a hill by the valley's northern edge as shown on the Madaba map.

An unusual church with a monumental baptistry, standing above a spring "at the foot of the mountain" whose waters were literally "absorbed by the same soil in which it rises" [Hieronymus' translation of the *Eus. Onom*. P. 104-105], can be found 1.8 km. farther to the south-east of Khirbet Beit Sawir-Beth Zur, at the site of Horvat Berachot (Ref. ITM 213653/616583). The recent excavations showed traces of Christian pilgrimage activities starting in the days of Constantine the Great, with a small cave shrine with a primitive baptismal installation near the spring evolving into a magnificent pilgrim church erected in the middle of the 6th c. [Shkolnik, 2023] — possibly being the traditional site of the Eunuch's baptism.

The identifications above can be further supported by another securely identified site depicted on the map: the village of Tekoa, an important location during the Byzantine period [[⓪]EKOYE, تقوع, Ref. ITM 220001/615751, *TIR* 248; Shkolnik, 2021. P. 12-15]. The village is correctly depicted due east of the westernmost among the discussed sites (Safita), with all the sites aligned along an imaginary latitudinal line — the way they are located on the ground.

Lastly, the new identifications for the place of Zecharia and the Eunuch's spring can help in understanding and reconstructing the obviously corrupted passages in the Itinerary of Antoninus (31-32). The previous chapter (30) mentions the road from Bethlehem to Mambre, with no reference to any sites in between. The beginning of chapter 31 notifies the reader that Antoninus takes a different road on his way back to Jerusalem, namely the one passing by Eleutheropolis. He stops by a place in the mountains, where a huge pile of stones marks the traditional burial of Goliath. A pile matching the description was found at Horvat Hanot, ca. 18 north-eastern to Eleutheropolis, along the ancient road ascending to Jerusalem and mountainous Judaea [Ref. ITM 204437/624327, Shenhav, 2003. P. 269]. A site(s) related to Samson, mentioned in chapter 32, can be found to the north of Goliath's Tomb, in the area of Beth Shemesh [Taxel, 2009. P. 193-194]. From there Antoninus goes to Beth Zacharia and starts approaching Jerusalem, visiting on his way the Eunuch's spring and the place where Habakkuk fed the reapers (shown in the 16th c. source near the Mar Elias monastery north of Bethlehem, along the road to Jerusalem [Zuallart, 1587. P. 223-225]), and finishing at the site of Isiah's death near the oak of Rogel in Siloam.

The present discussion must be concluded with a remark regarding the attempts to identify the "House of Zecharia" (Lk. 1: 39-40) at the site of Deir Sha'ar or its surroundings. The abovementioned passage from the Itinerary of Theodosius (35), who places the site somewhere five miles away from Jerusalem, is of little help in the task — just like the destroyed mosaic inscription from the church of

Deir Sha'ar. However, the Greek text of the Gospel clearly speaks of an unspecified “town (in the tribe) of Judah” (πόλιν Ἰουδα), located in the “hill country” (ὄρεινὴν) and of the specific “house of Zecharia” (οἶκον Ζαχαρίου) in that town. The replacing or mixing of harmonic Greek constructions with foreign (Semitic) words in the legends of the Madaba map — prepared by and for Greek speakers — would only be justified in the case of proper names, like Beth Zacharia. On the other hand, the Early Christians, who have evidently shown little interest in the Hasmonean heritage of Beth Zacharia, could well be guided by the name in the search after the New- and Oldtestamental Zacharias, as the Jewish tradition had widely been used for “authentication” of newly invented relics and tombs [Méndez, 2022. P. 82–84]. Also, the existence of a complementary tradition, locating the House of the Priest near the Tomb of The Prophet, cannot be excluded, as well.

### Discussion and conclusions

The present research comprises the first complete and systematic study of the ancient and modern remains at the site of Deir Sha'ar.

The most impressive and unusual among the ancient remains is the group of rock-hewn monumental tombs located next to an ancient road, which includes a monolith free-standing tomb (Feature 3) and a tomb partially disconnected from the surrounding rock by ambulatory corridors (Feature 7) — both adorned with “Egyptian” cornices, pyramidal roofs and vaulted inner chambers — and two seemingly unfinished tombs with smoothed façades adorned with blocked-out corbelled cornices above the openings (Features 5 and 8). The stylistic analysis suggests dating Feature 3 to the 2nd c. BC, while Feature 7 seems to be its later copy, executed at least a century later, during the Early Roman period (1st c. BC — 1st c. CE).

The lavishly decorated “display tombs” started to appear in the 2nd c. BC near urban centers and in the vicinity of the estates owned by the governing elites, as an expression of power and wealth of the latter, often — along roads [Raviv, Zissu, 2020. P. 158–16; Gardner, Peleg-Barkat, 2024]. However, the tombs of Deir Sha'ar do not seem to belong to any of the larger settlements in the area, being ca. 2 km away from the nearest ones (Beth Zacharia, Kh. Fureidis). They do not seem as well to have served the owners of the farmstead known to the south-west of Deir Sha'ar, in view of the ordinary, if not modest, dimensions of the latter and in the absence of family-burial elements inside the tombs (benches, loculi, arcosolia). This, together with the unique for the countryside features, having parallels only in Jerusalem (rock-cut freestanding pyramidal monument), demand a different explanation. The Hasmonean date of the free-standing tomb and its location near the road running above the narrow valley, both leading to Beth Zacharia, allow to suggest, with all due caution, that the tomb may be related to the battle fought in the valley right below it in 162 BC — possibly being the (symbolic?) tomb of Eleazar, who found his death under a Seleucid war elephant (1 Macc. 6: 43–46). It must be remembered that the burial of Jonathan, killed by Tryphon in 142 BC, near the tomb of his father in Modiim, took place 20 years later and did not necessarily include the reburial of the bones of Eleazar or anyone else of his brothers, as the text merely mentions the erection by Simon of seven pyramids in honor of his parents, his four dead brothers, and, apparently, himself (1 Macc. 13: 25–30). The later tombs at the site then may belong to those who could have afforded and sought to be buried in the proximity of the famous tomb.

The Late Antique remains, namely, the central structure at the hilltop and additional remains to the east of it, demand further exploration by excavation to confirm or challenge the suggested phasing (from a Roman mile station and/or fortlet to a Byzantine church within a monastery/way station/pilgrimage site. The plan of the considered long-lost church (Feature 19) is obscured by debris, but its restoration as a three-aisled basilica seems unlikely. The excavation would also help shed light on the activities at the site before the break of the Revolts against the Romans.

While the dedication of the church at Deir Sha'ar remains under debate, a number of sites around it can securely be identified based on the Madaba map and pilgrim accounts. Safita, the second Beth Zur, and the traditional site of the Eunuch's Baptism were offered new identifications in the recent research.

The history of the Russian presence at the site remains an enigma for the major part, despite its being one of the latest acquisitions by the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem. This can be best illustrated by the recent find of the rock-hewn church (Complex 1), which has no parallels at any of the other Russian properties in the Holy Land or anywhere in the region. The church (together with the other elements of the underground complex planned and partly executed by Sudomoikin), was only briefly and generally referred to in a handful of documents and accounts, and its very existence was uncertain. There is little doubt that the site retains considerable research potential, and excavation could contribute greatly to the understanding of the daily life at the site in particular and to the young discipline of the ethnoarchaeology of Russians in the Syro-Palestinian region [Belyaev, Tchekhanovets,

2020] in general. The testimonies collected by The Dov Knohl Archive of the History of Gush Etzion contain references to a room with some religious equipment left by the Russian owners, including icons [IL-KETZ-001, 'AA 10086]. Given the emergency circumstances in which the last inhabitants and defenders were forced to leave the place, it is quite plausible to assume that some of the artifacts, including the ancient exhibits of the local museum [Dmitrievsky, 1909. P. 67], can still be found under the debris.

The chronicle of the Ezion Block campaign (November 1947 — May 1948) allows a precise reconstruction of the final battle in the Russian Monastery (May 12), but the post-1948 activities obliterated much of the historical landscape. The locations of the firing positions along the southern wall, which were pinning down the outnumbering enemy forces attacking from the south till the last moments, as well as of the trench on the western slope, used by the retreating to Kfar Ezion defenders, in which M. Silberschmidt, the commander, fell, are unknown [Knohl, 1958. P. 280–288]. The excavation at the site, therefore, could help recover essential data about the last inhabitants of the site, including the Christian family of I. Hazboun, the tenant of the Monastery, who shared the gruesome fate with 129 Jewish inhabitants and defenders slain in Kfar Ezion on May 13, 1948 [Knohl, 1958. P. 340].

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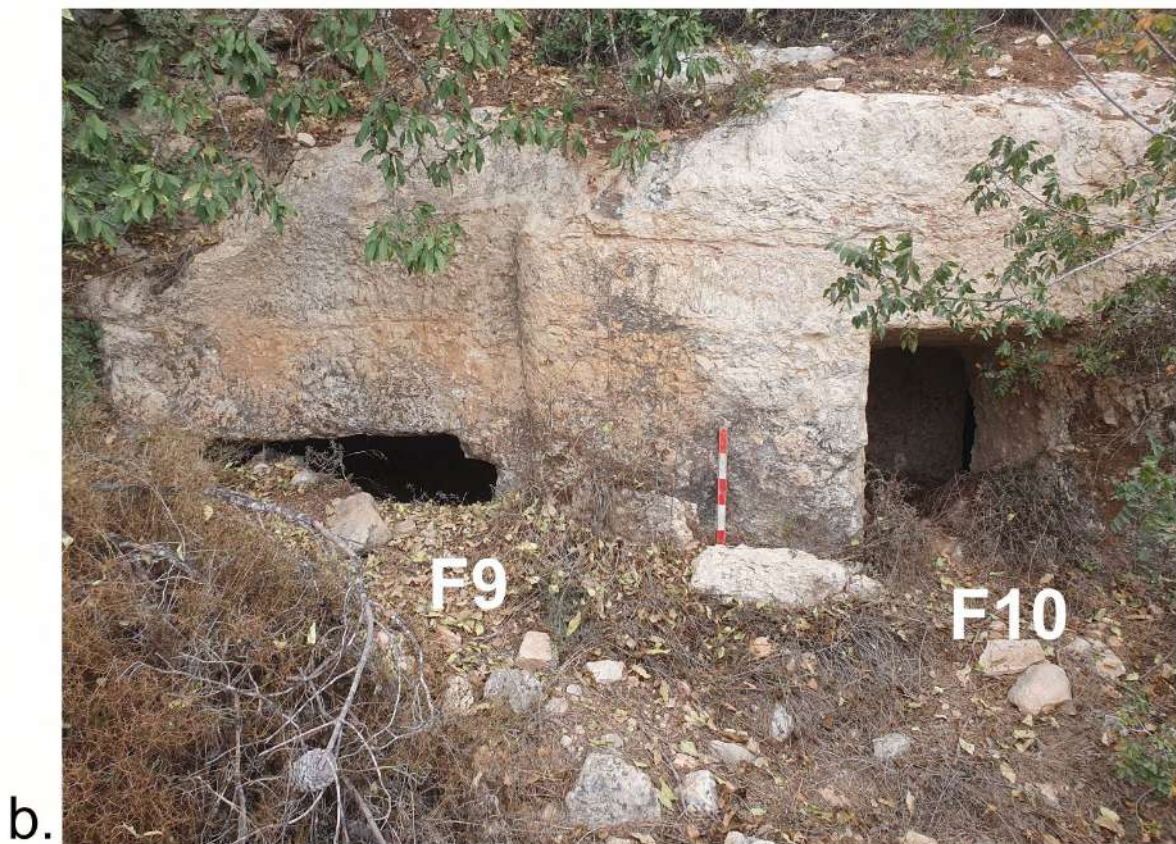
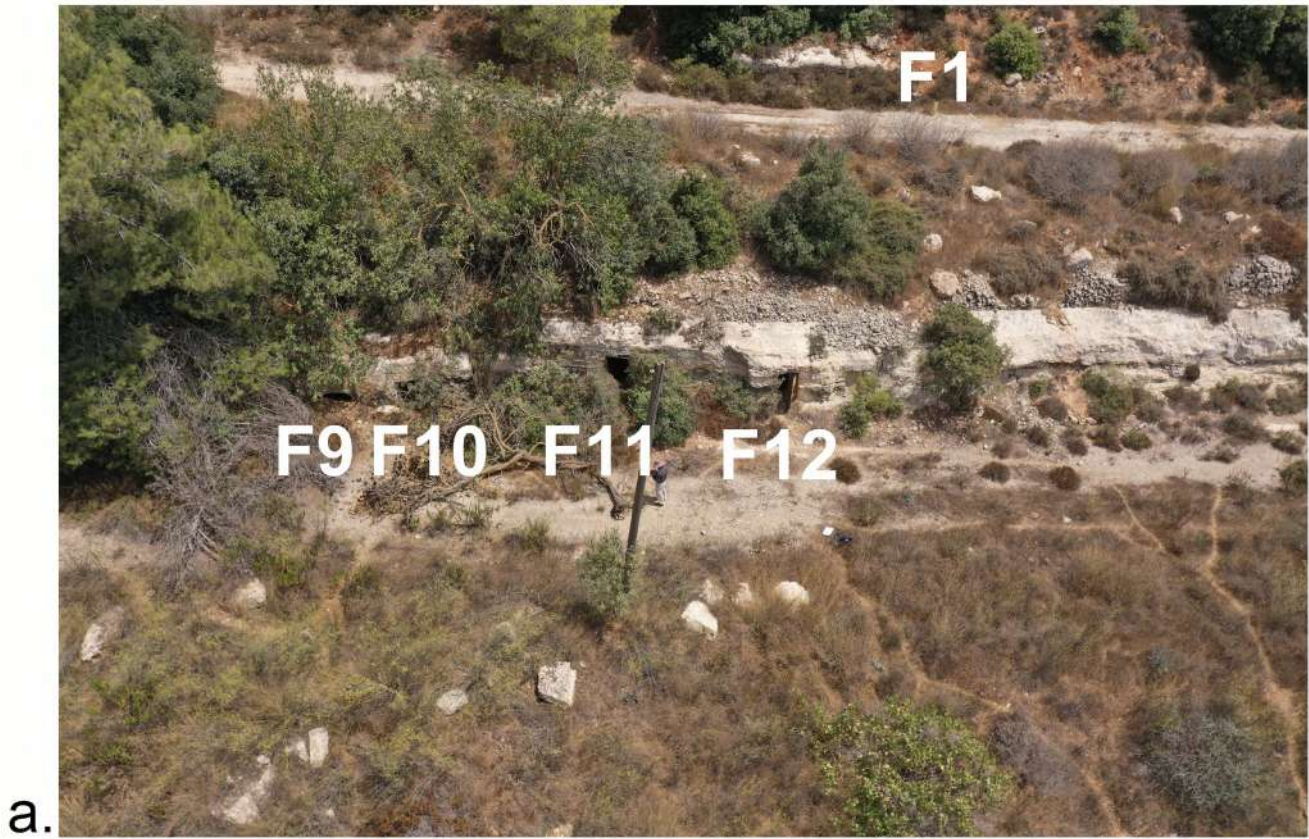
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**Figure 23.** A. General view of Features 9-12. B. The entrances to Features 9 and 10. Photos by: A. O. Bejerano, B. H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 24.** A. The interior of Feature 9. Note the rock-cut bench and the alleged «standing pit» filled with stones. B. The interior of Feature 10. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.

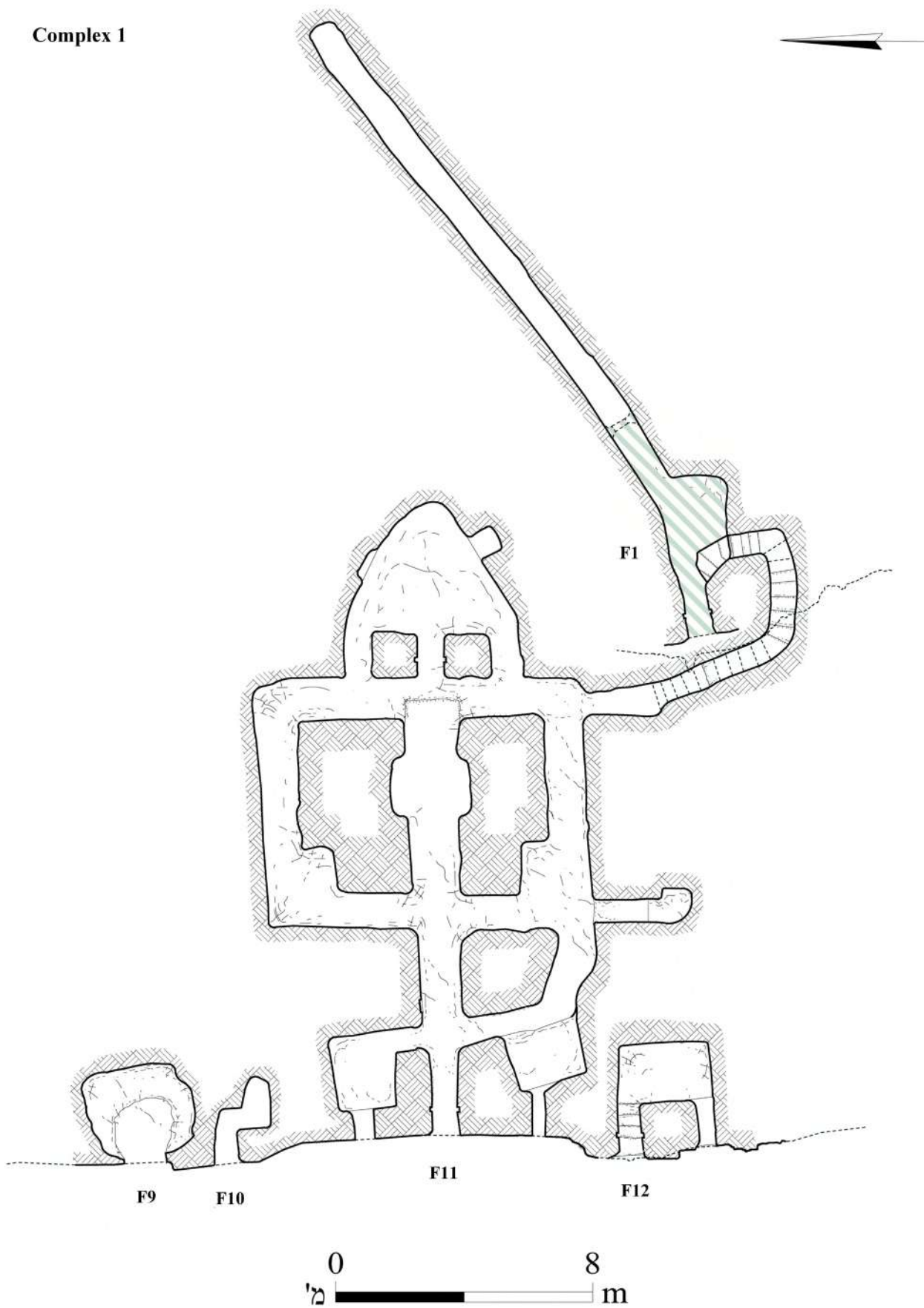
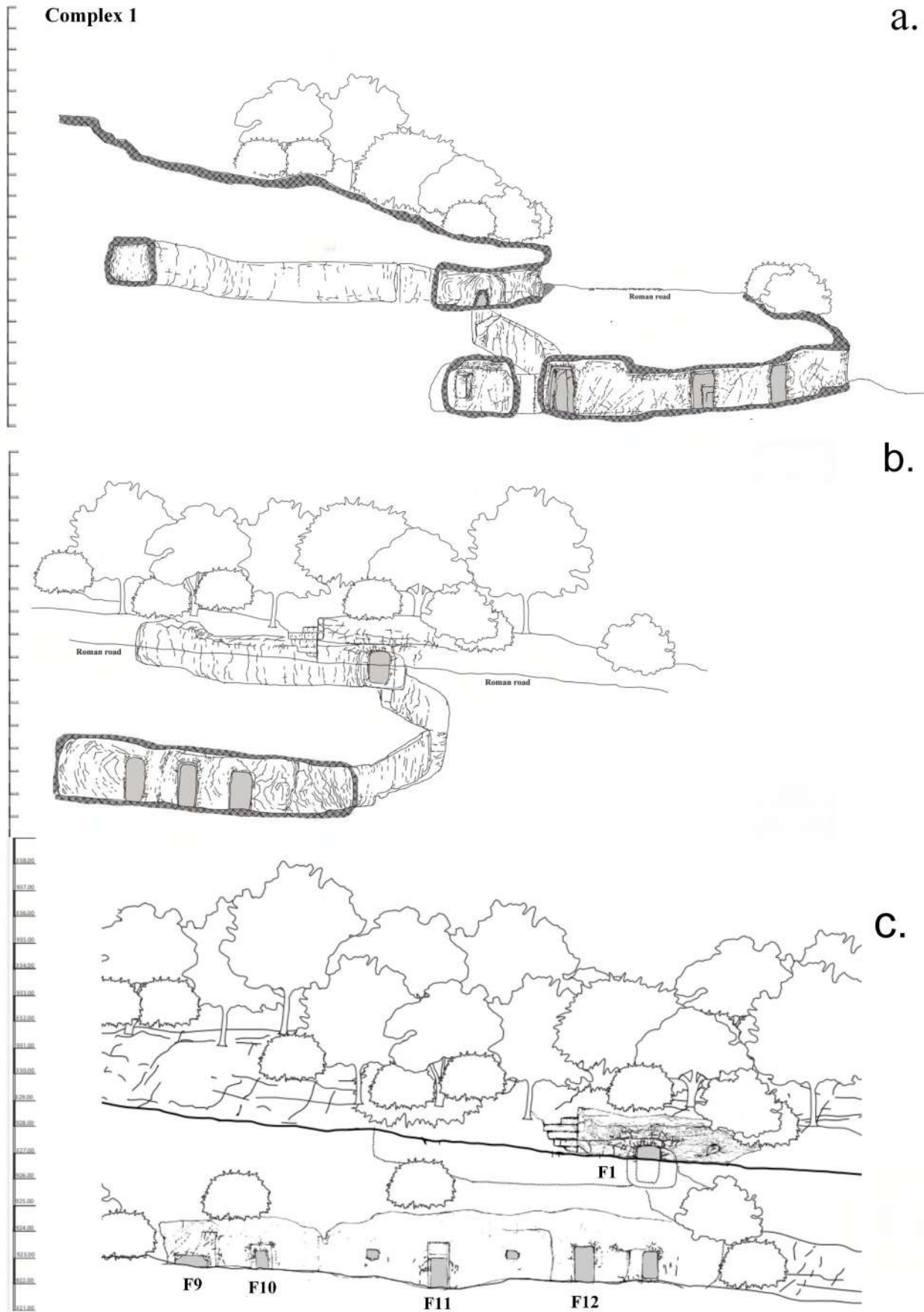


Figure 25. Plan of Features 1 and 11 (Complex 1), 9, 10 and 12. Plan by: Y. Shmidov.



**Figure 26.** A. Complex 1: section, view to the south. B. Complex 1: section, view to the east. C. Complex 1, Features 9, 10, 12: elevation. Sections by: Y. Shmidov. Elevation by: M. Kahn, processed by: Y. Shmidov.



**Figure 27.** Feature 11 («the Russian Church»). A. The «nave», view to the east. B. The «nave», view from the «Royal Gates» to the west. C-D. The «aisles». Photos by: H. Shkolnik.

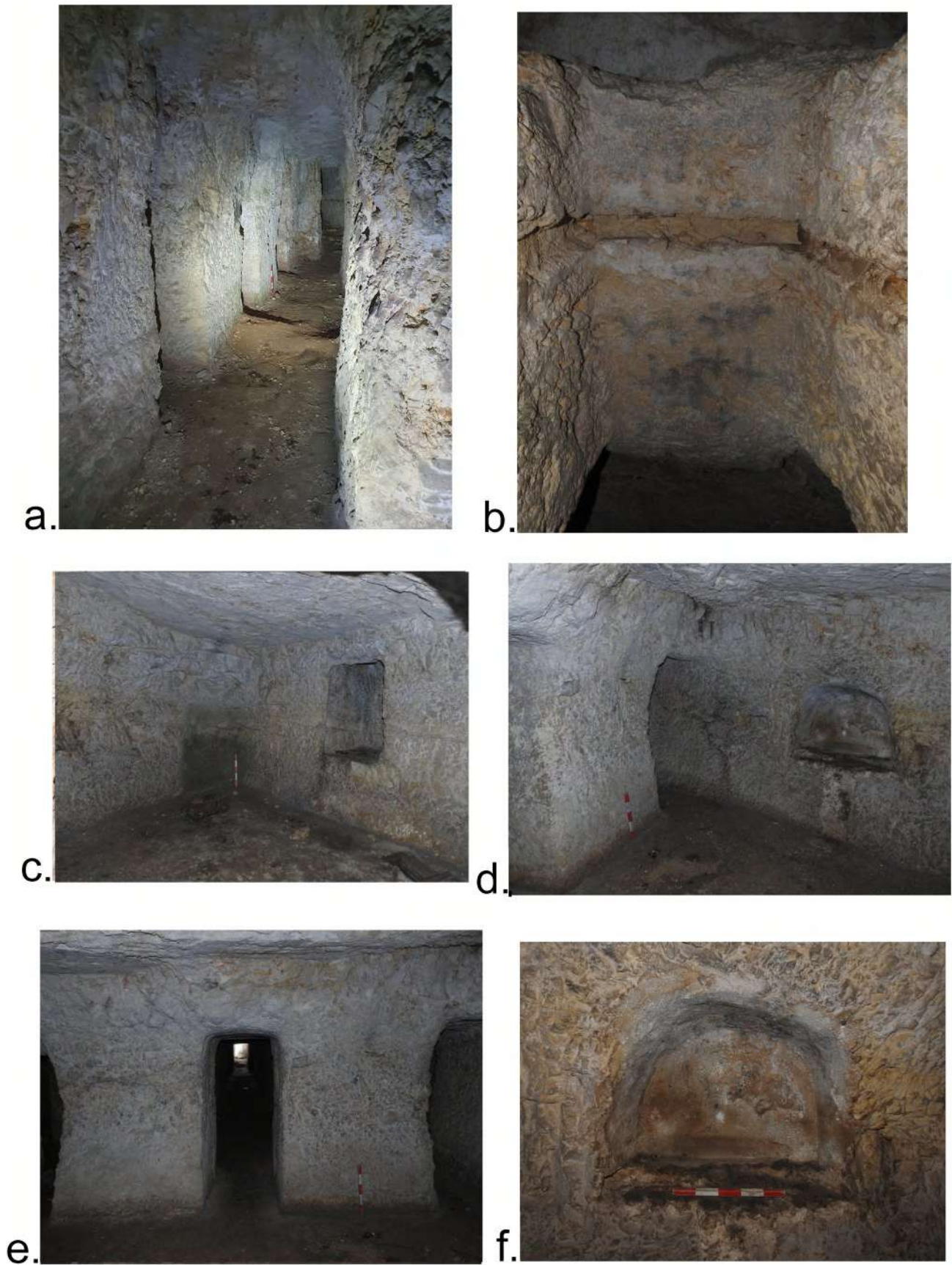


Figure 28. Feature 11: the altar part. A. The northern «transept», view to the south. Note the three entrances to the altar part; B. Groove for the Royal Gates in the central passageway; soot-drawn crosses; C-D, F. Rectangular and arched niches in the apse; E. The three entrances as seen from inside the altar part. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



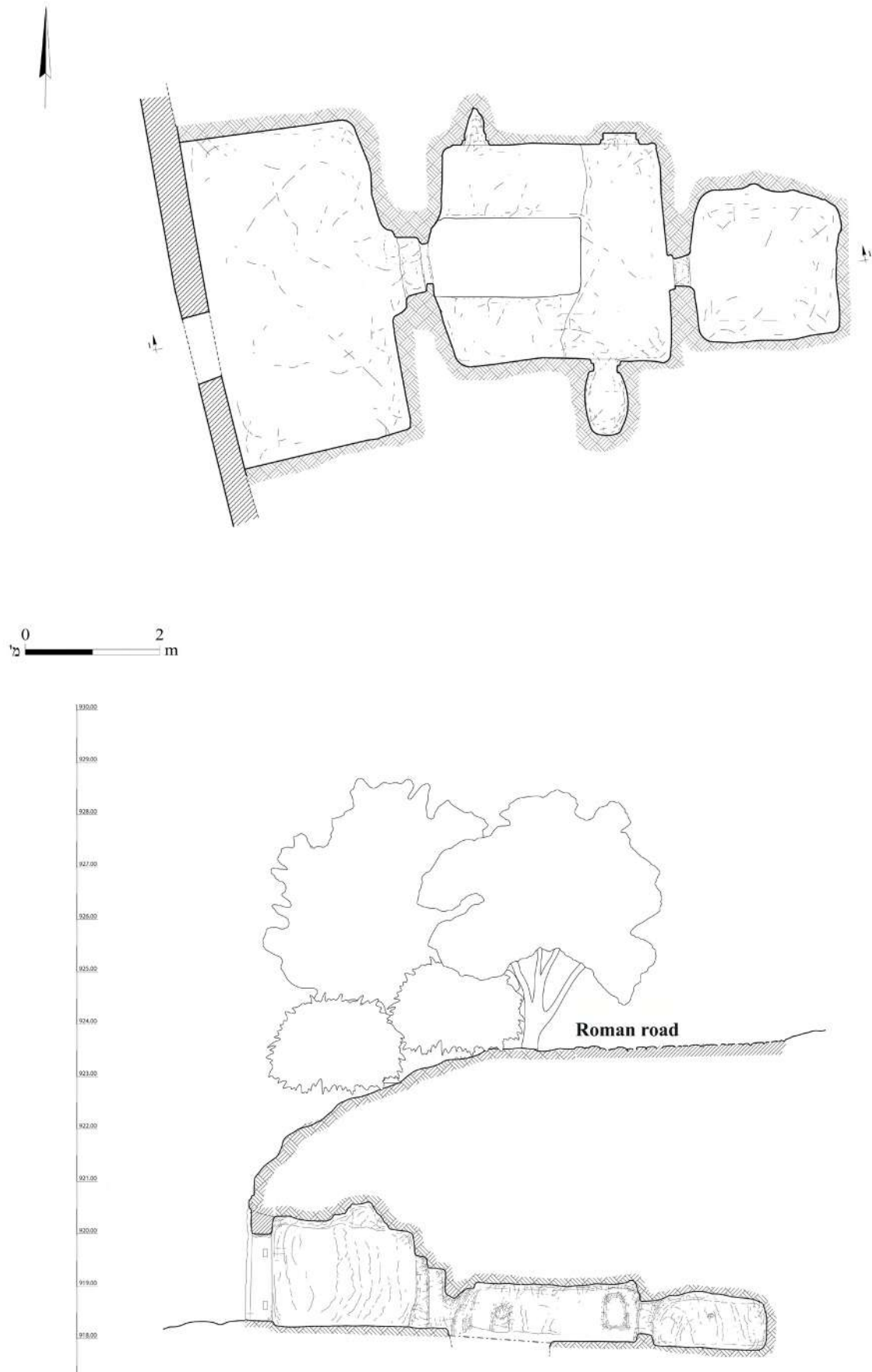
Figure 29. The spiral staircase connecting Features 1 and 11, partly blocked by the concrete floor cast in Feature 1. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



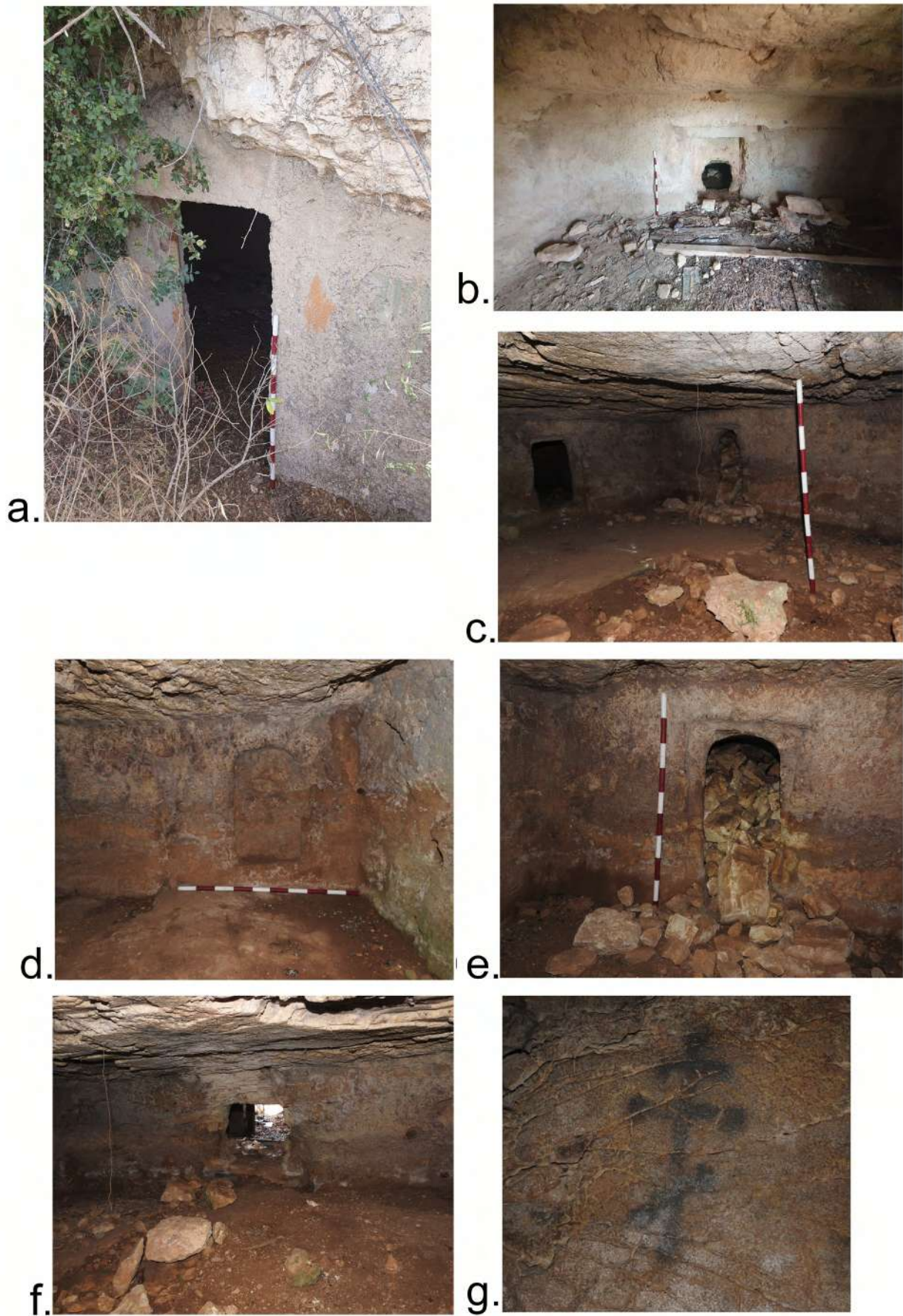
**Figure 30.** Feature 12. A. façade. B-C. The entrance and the blocked window. D. Some of the graffiti. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



Figure 31. Feature 13. Photo by: H. Shkolnik.



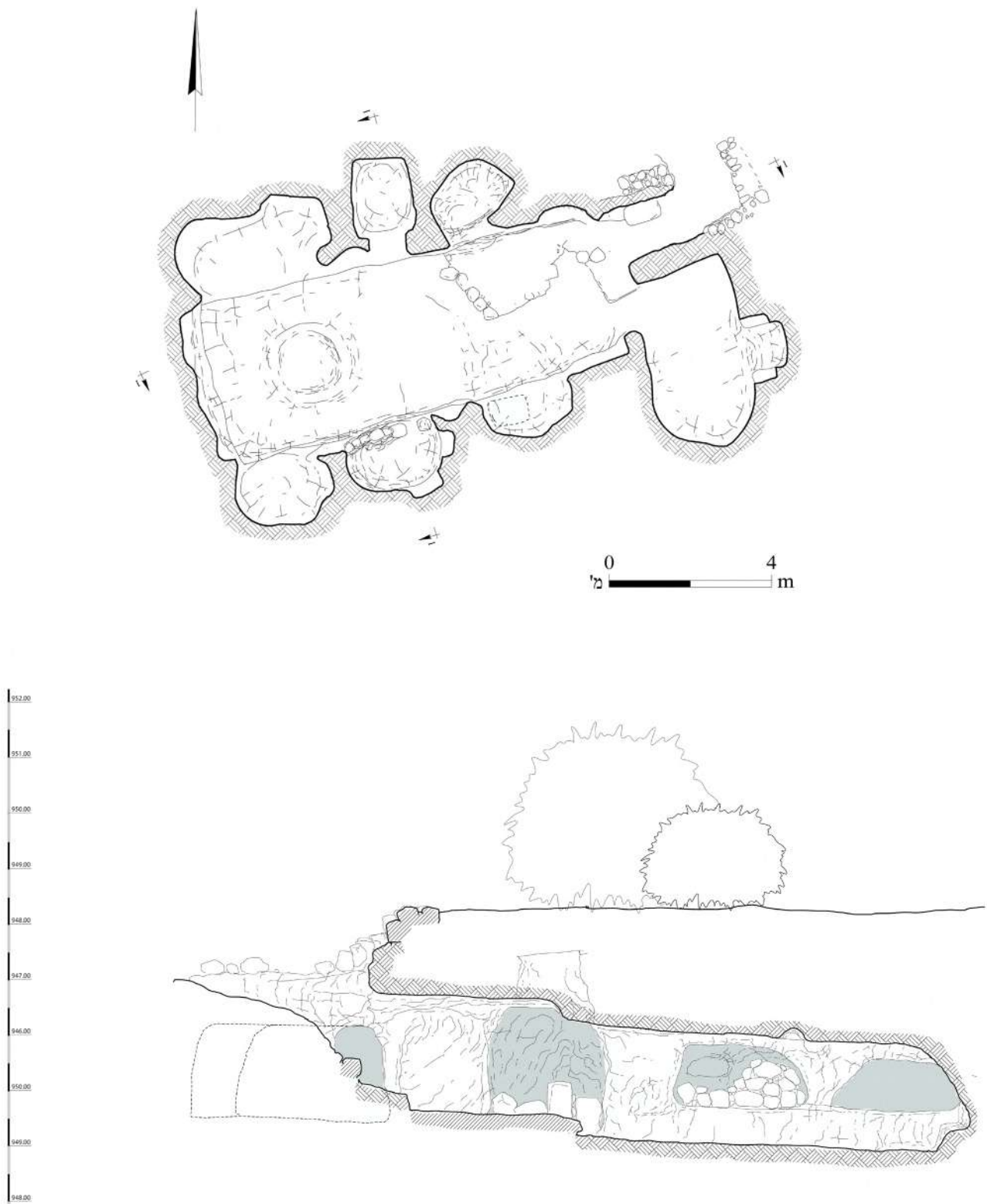
**Figure 32.** Feature 14 (a double-chambered burial cave): plan and section. Plan and section by: Y. Shmidov.



**Figure 33.** Feature 14. A. The 20th c. concrete wall with the entrance; B. The ancient façade of the tomb with recessed entrance; C. The first chamber. Note the benches and the «standing pit», filled with debris; D. The eastern unfinished loculus in the northern wall; E. The loculus in the southern wall; F. View from the second chamber toward the west; G. Soot-drawn cross on the ceiling of the first chamber. Photos by: H. Shkolnik



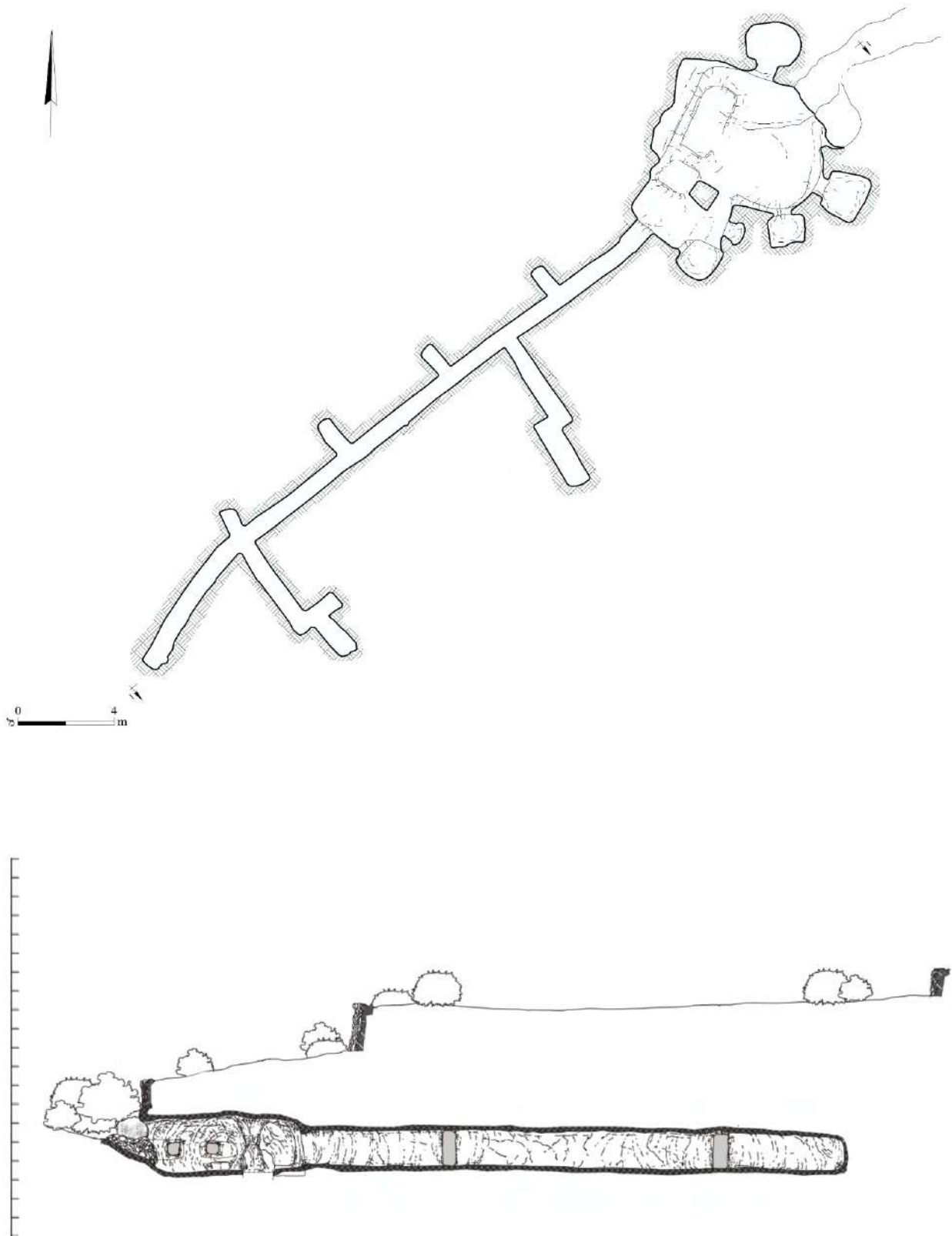
**Figure 34.** A. Feature 22 (cistern); B-C. Feature 23 (cistern). The vaulted roofings were built by Sudomoikin, reportedly — using the paving of the ancient road. Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 35.** Feature 24 (olive press cave): plan and section. Plan and section by: Y. Shmidov.



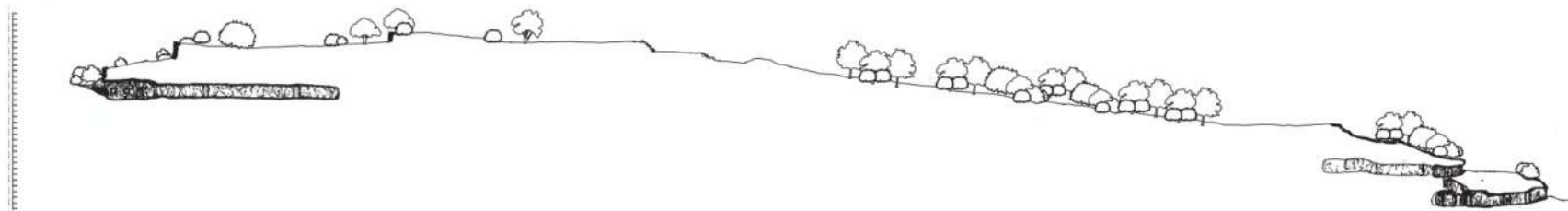
**Figure 36.** Feature 24.A. interior, view toward the west; B. The niche for the direct screw pressing installation.  
Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 37.** Feature 15 (The olive press cave with a corridor): plan and section. Plan and section by: Y. Shmidov.

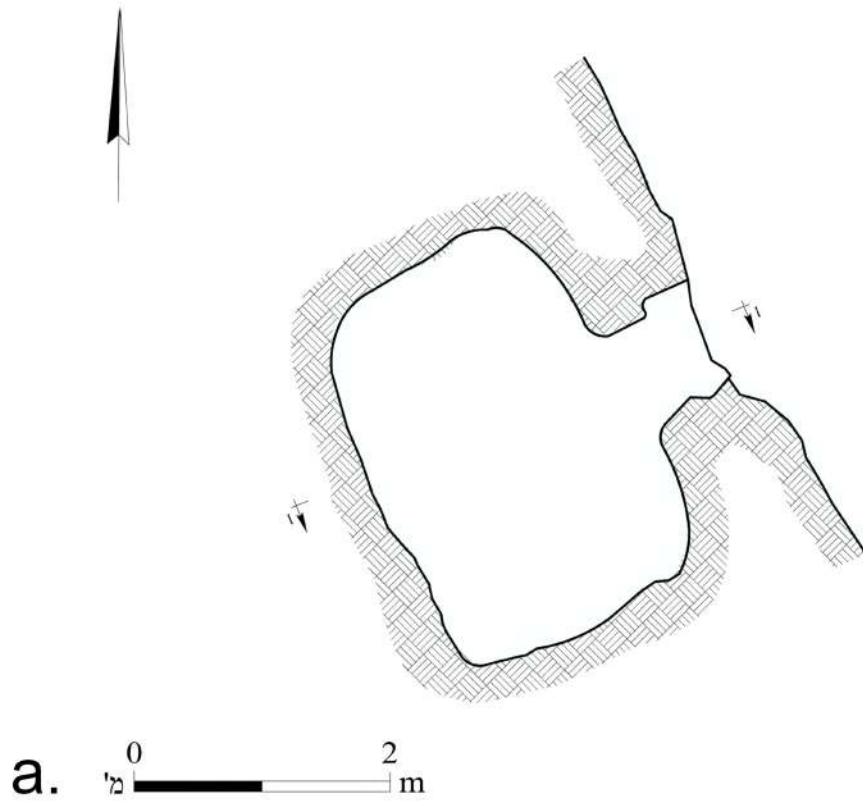


a.



b.

**Figure 38.** Feature 15. A. The interior, view to the east. B. section across Features 1 and 15. Note the matching positions of the corridors (the matching directions of the corridors can also be seen on fig. 1). Photo by: H. Shkolnik. Section by: Y. Shmidov.

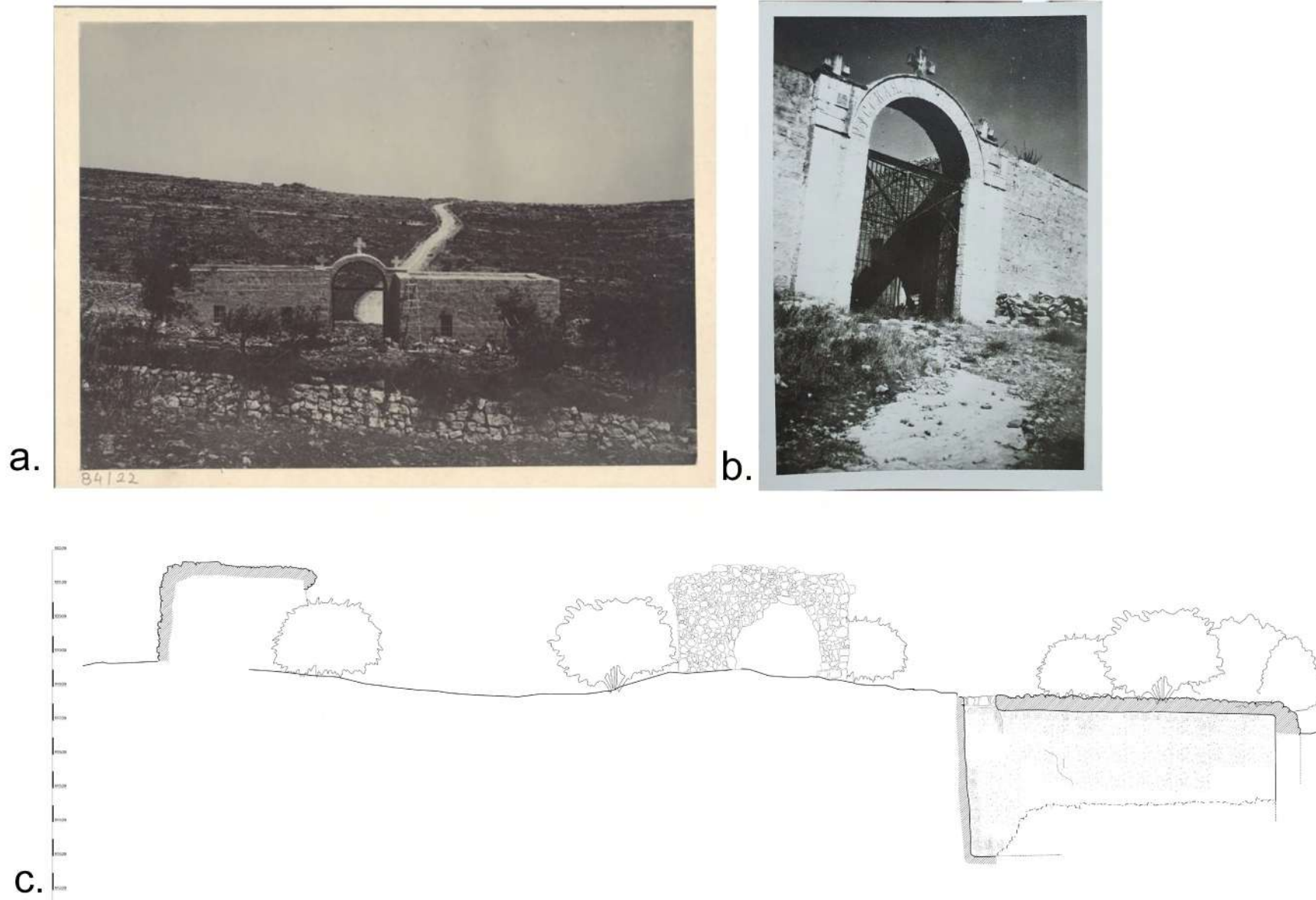


a.



b.

Figure 39. Feature 16 (single-chambered burial cave): plan and façade. Plan by: Y. Shmidov. Photo by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 40.** Complex 4 (feature 18: the main entrance, Feature 17: the water reservoir). A. The gate, view toward the west, ca. 1903-1914. Image No. 22 in Russian Ecclesiastical Mission presentation album. Courtesy of The National Library of Israel Archive [IL-NLI-ARC, ARC. 4\* 1858 2.1 84]; B. The gate as seen in 1947 [Knohl, 1958. P. 160-161]; C. Feature 17: section. Section by: Y. Shmidov.



a.

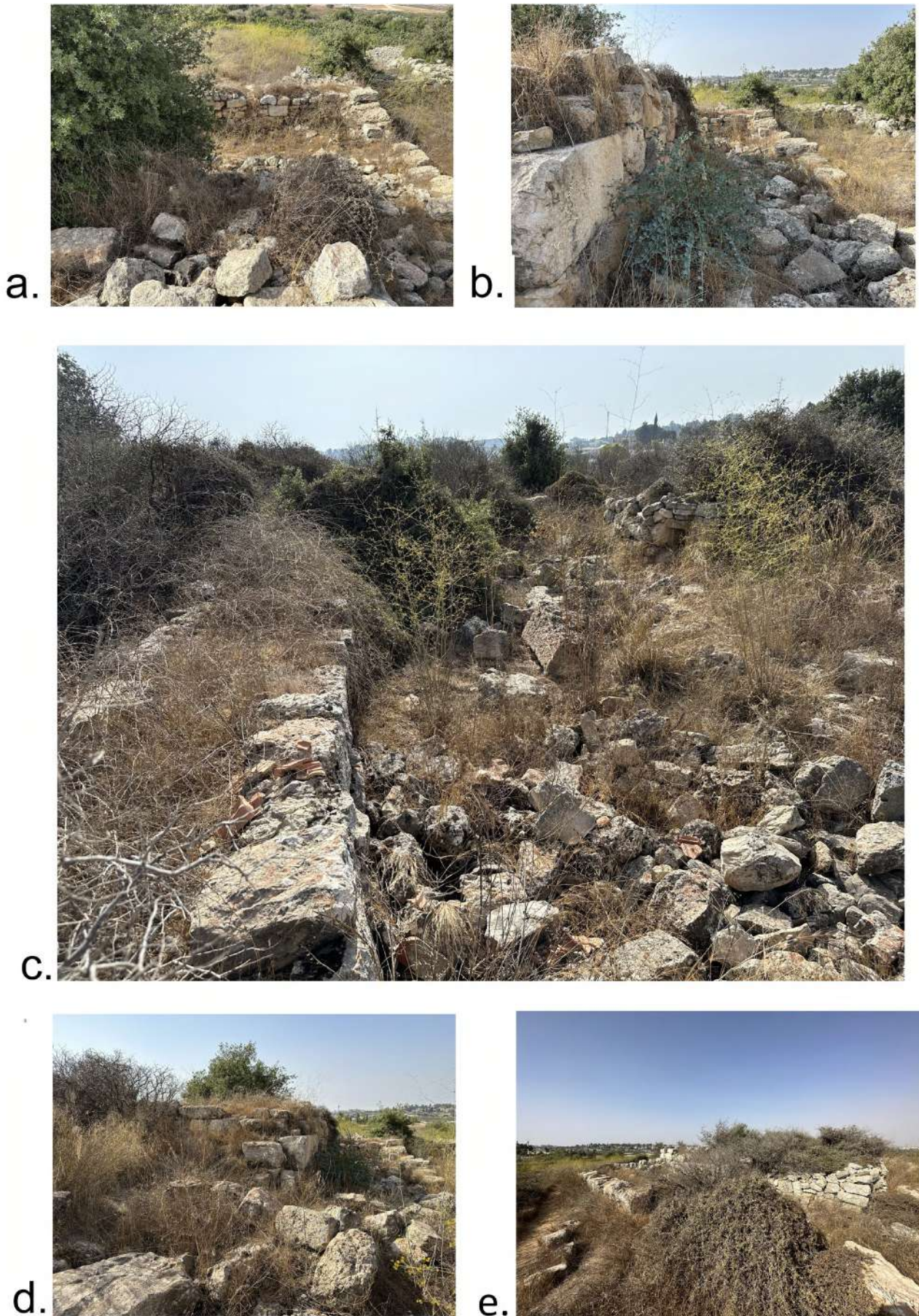


b.

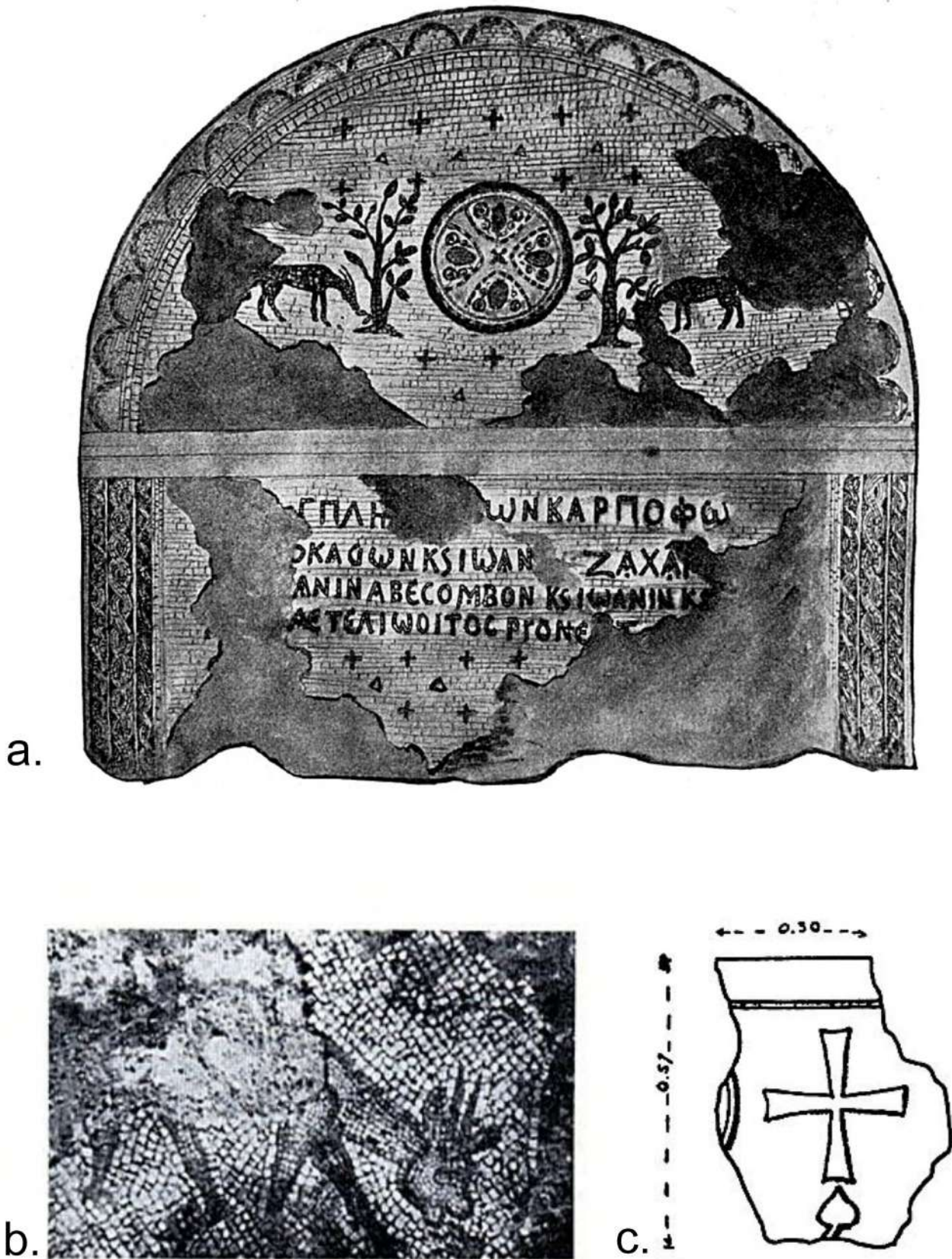
**Figure 41.** Feature 17, the gate. A. the remains of the northern room, view from the east; B. the remains of the southern room, view from the west. Photos by: S. Tarkhanova.



**Figure 42.** Feature 19 (the Byzantine Church): Vincent's plan of the Byzantine church [Vincent, 1903. P. 614] superimposed over the aerial of the ruins on the hilltop. Photo by: O. Bejerano, processed by: S. Tarkhanova.



**Figure 43.** Feature 19. A-B. View of the eastern wall from the interior and the exterior; C. The southern wall, view toward the west; D. The south-eastern corner; E. The north-western corner. Photos by: S.Tarkhanova.



**Figure 44.** A. The mosaic from the main apse of the Byzantine church [Barton, 1903. P. 42]. B. The remains of the mosaic as seen by hieromonk Philipp in 1935 [Philipp, 1937. P. 11]. C. The chancel panel fragment [Schneider, 1938. P. 98, Fig. 7].

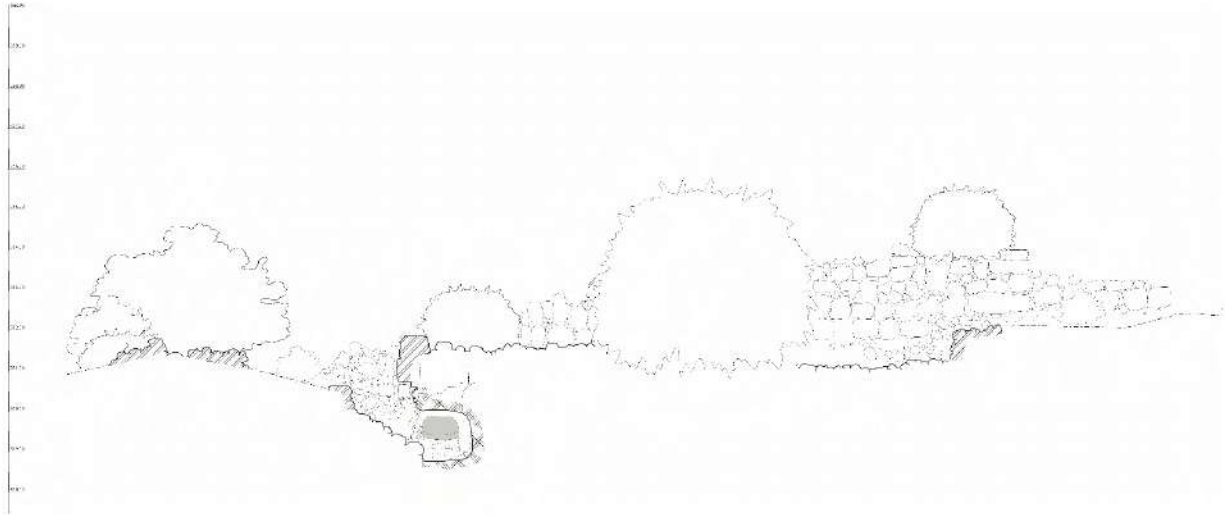
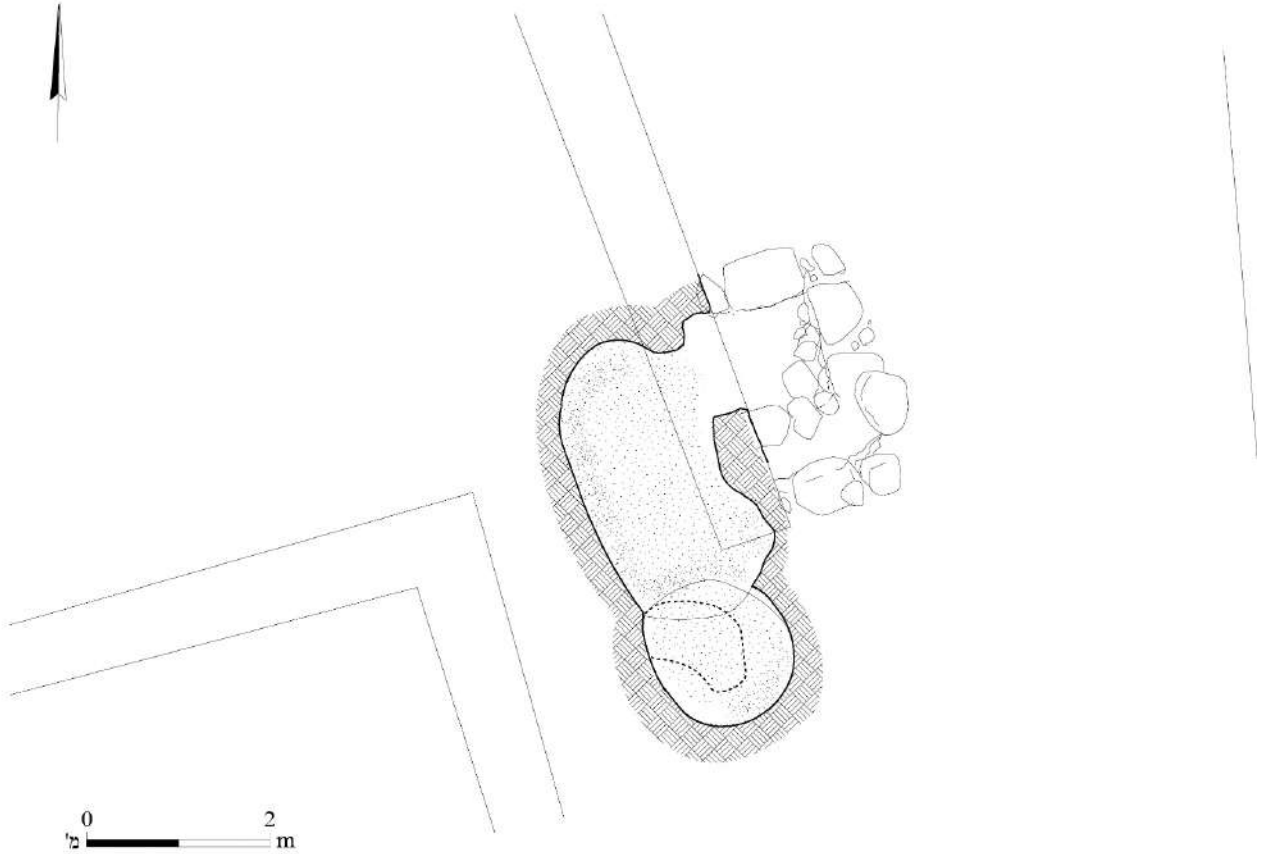
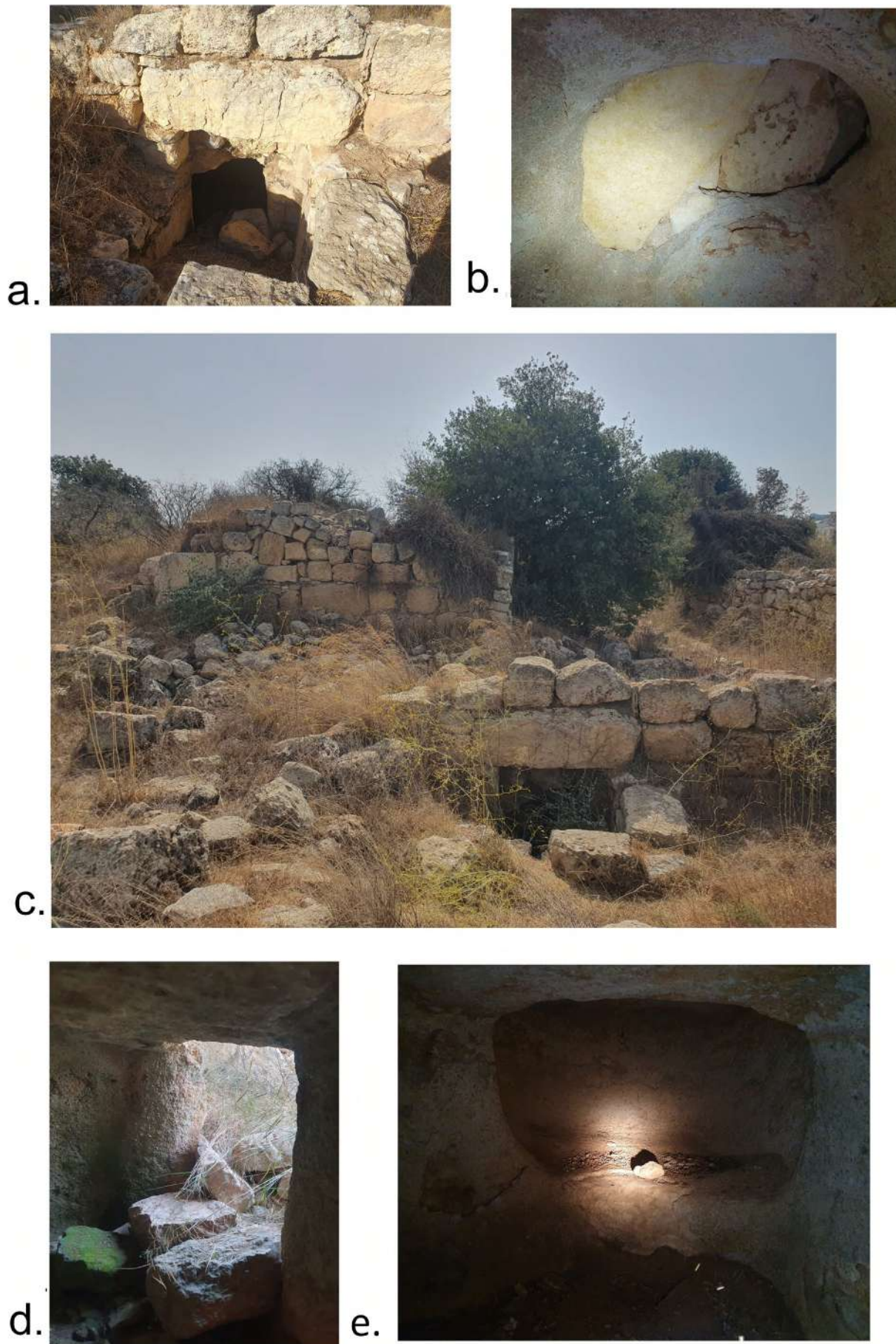
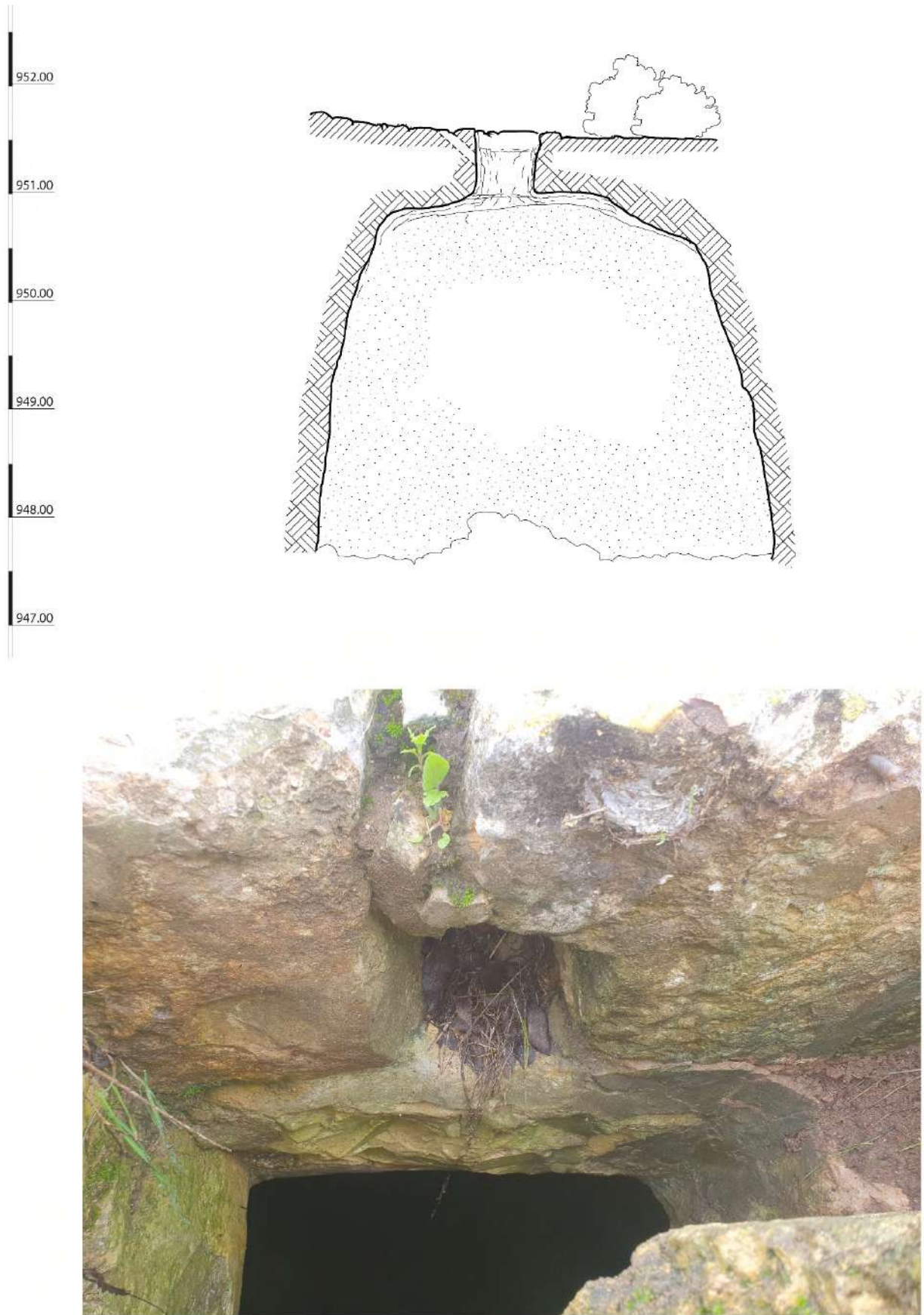


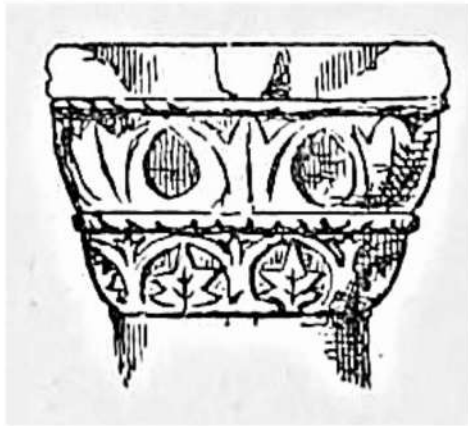
Figure 45. Feature 20 (the miqveh): plan and section. Plan and section by: Y. Shmidov.



**Figure 46.** Feature 20. A, C. The entrance; D-E. the interior; B. The blocked drawing opening in the roof.  
Photos by: H. Shkolnik.



**Figure 47.** Feature 21 (the cistern): section and detailed view toward the west of the feeding channel. Section by: Y. Shmidov.  
Photo by: H. Shkolnik.



a.



b.



d.

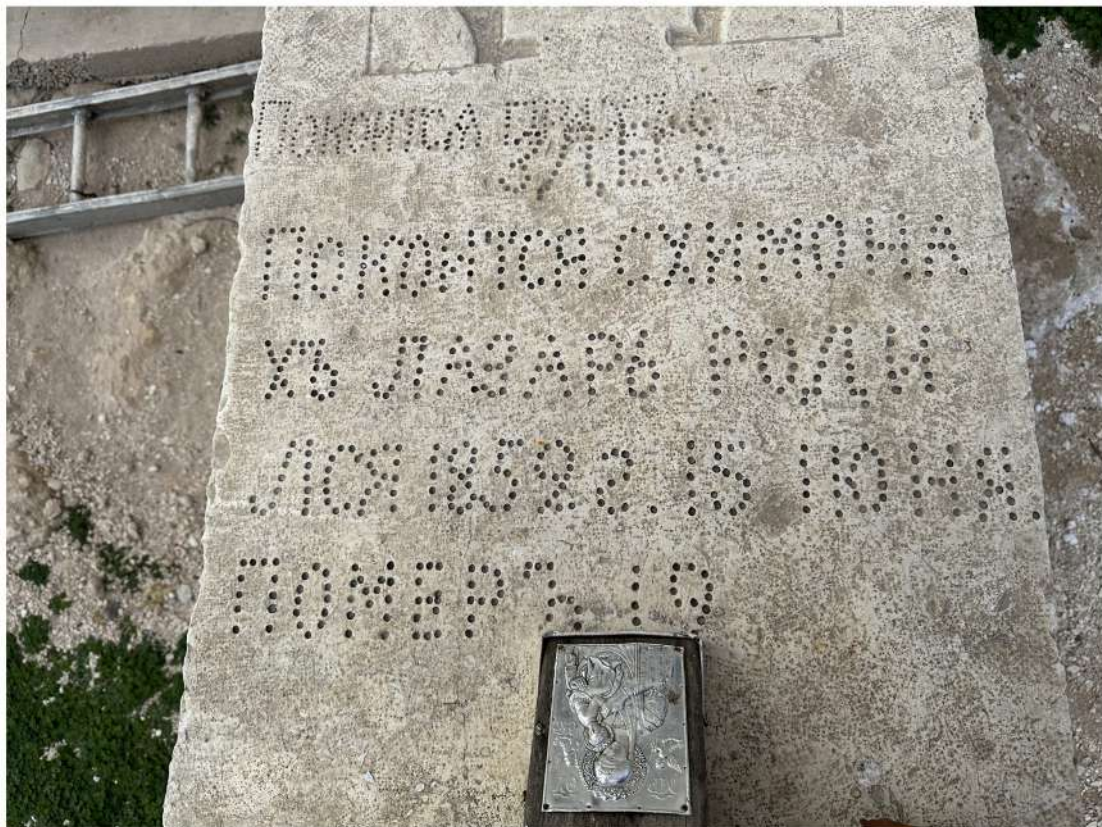


c.

**Figure 48.** Khirbet Beit Zakariya, Byzantine architectural members in the mosque dedicated to prophet Zecharia. A. A «bowl» capital [SWP III. P.108; cannot be seen today]; B. The column topped with the «basket» capital [SWP III. P.108]. C. the column with the «bowl» capital as seen today (photo by: S. Tarkhanova). C. Chancel posts (photo by: S. Tarkhanova).



**Figure 49.** A. A Tuscan base in the field NE of the mosque; B. A column shaft; C. The prophet's tomb with two chancel posts; D. The eastern wall of the monumental structure at the southern outskirts of Khirbet Beit Zakariya. Photos by: A. Margolin (A), S. Tarkhanova (B-D).



**Figure 50.** Above: Lazar Sudomoikin in Deir Shaar, ca. 1903–1914 [Alekhina, 2012. P. 118. Courtesy of the Archive of Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, published with the kind permission of Hegumen Nikon (Golovko)]. Below: the tombstone of Lazar Sudomoikin in the Russian Convent of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives, hewn, decorated with a cross and inscribed by Sudomoikin himself: «Here rests schimonk Lazar, born [in the year] 1852, on June 15, died [in the year] 19..». Photo by: S. Tarkhanova.