**Conspicuous Construction: New Light on Funerary Architecture in Rural Early Roman Judea from Horvat Midras, Israel**

# Introduction

This paper examines the recently concluded excavation and documentation of a pyramidal funerary monument (or tomb marker) at Horvat Midras, a village in the Judean foothills located in the Adulam Grove Nature Reserve. Enhancing our knowledge about the monument in relation to the burial cave to its north can contribute to better understanding elites in rural Roman Judea.

The socio-economic texture of late Hellenistic and early Roman Judea (c. 200 BCE–70 CE) has long been central to archaeological and historical studies on both early Judaism and Christianity. Of particular importance is the social structure of the rural countryside, where a significant proportion of Judea’s population resided, mostly in villages, during this period (Killebrew 2010, 194). Villages in general, and Judean villages in particular, are often depicted as being more religiously and ethnically homogenous than cities; the latter are seen as significantly more diverse and economically stratified (see e.g., Killebrew 2010, 195). Agricultural land was cultivated by villagers themselves, as well as lessees, sharecroppers, or salaried laborers. The land was owned by wealthy individuals, or by small freeholders in the village. Large landholders were either members of the royal family )Hasmonean and later Herodian(, or private individuals who lived either locally or off-site (mostly in cities) and managed the land remotely (Dar 1986, 86; Pastor 1997; Harland 2002, 515; Killebrew 2010, 201).

Whether there were rural elite, and what the evidence for them might look like, has been an important topic of inquiry. For rural elites, we include both wealthy individuals living in a village along with those who lived off-site and owned land in a village—both would have exercised significant influence over a village’s socio-economic life and may have influenced its material culture and thus the archaeological record. Scholars who study rural elites draw on fragmentary and diverse possible sources for evidence. They do not necessarily agree on how to identify elite socio-economic status in the material record.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Monumental tombs have been identified as particularly promising signifiers of individual wealth (Berlin 2002; Peleg-Barkat 2012; Raviv 2013). One such burial that adds to our understanding of the rural elite is the pyramidal tomb marker at Horvat Midras, Israel, whose remains were recently fully excavated. In this paper, after a detailed review of the finds, we argue that the monument’s architectural style, location, and other attributes reflect a growing trend during the early Roman era for constructing “display tombs”—funerary architecture designed to achieve maximum visibility and project the status of the individual or family who financed the construction. Constructing a display tomb is a process that consists of series of choices, including the selection of the monument’s shape and size, its placement on top of a hill or in view of a road, and a number of other decisions intended to enhance its distinctiveness and visibility. Following a detailed description of the excavation results, we argue that the pyramid’s construction reflects an interest in establishing socio-economic distinction by a member of the newly minted elite whose wealth had increased due to their connections with the Herodian dynasty, and who had established and consolidated their power from the late first century BCE through the early first century CE. Elite status was projected onto and absorbed by individuals living and working in the village below the pyramidal monument, as well as other villages in the surrounding area, given its high visibility. As we will show, the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras clarifies how inhabitants in this region participated in trends common to funerary architecture of the early Roman East while simultaneously reflecting the influence of local Jewish customs from the preceding late Hellenistic age (i.e., the Hasmonean period).

# Rural Elites in the Late Second Temple Period

Scholarship on rural elites in late Hellenistic and early Roman Judea has tended to focus on villages in the Galilee, and has often been driven by inquiries into the background and context of the early Jesus movement (see e.g., articles in Fiensy and Strange 2015). Indeed, when active in the Galilee, Jesus famously avoided cities such as Sepphoris, directing his attention instead to village audiences. It was in the villages that the Gospels indicate his teachings included numerous references to wealth and the wealthy elite, and their effect on non-elite villagers. The scholarship on rural settings usually examines literary and archaeological evidence for villages mentioned in the Gospels, such as Cana and Capernaum (Jensen 2006:162–78; Keddie 2019; Luff 2019 cf. Keddie *forthcoming*; Reed 2000). In studies of the socioeconomic structure of rural Galilee, scholars have identified several possible indicators of individual wealth. Housing, particularly large dwellings with ornate decorations (mosaics, frescos, etc.), can identify wealthy individuals in villages (Jensen 2006:164–78; Aviam 2011:30; Luff 2019:145–58). Keddie (2019:61) is right to emphasize these elements as evidence of individual wealth that suggests income inequality with respect to non-elite populations in villages. Public buildings and synagogues can sometimes operate as material indicators of wealth (Keddie 2019, 61–62) when evidence exists that their construction was funded by individuals. That said, while inscriptions detailing private donations abound in the later Roman and Byzantine eras (Sorek 2010), there are relatively few for the early Roman period (i.e., pre-70 CE).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Other possible markers of the existence and activity of elites in rural areas are the so-called rural mansions or *villa rustica*, which served as residences for wealthy individuals who owned the surrounding agricultural land. The evidence, however, for *villae rusticae* in Roman-era Judea is much weaker than previously believed (Keddie 2019:66–69), especially as the parade example—the finds at Ramat HaNadiv (Umm el-‘Aleq)—has recently been reinterpreted as not being a *villa rustica*. It was not even primarily occupied during the early Roman era (Peleg-Barkat and Tepper 2009; Tepper and Peleg-Barkat 2014; Tepper and Peleg-Barkat 2019).[[3]](#footnote-3) Other indicators of extreme wealth in rural settings are jewelry and fine dress (Jensen 2006:176; Keddie 2019:219–21), certain luxury items such as fine oil lamps and glassware, decorated stone furniture and imported objects (Aviam 2013, 32; Luff 2019, 157–58), as well as silver coin hoards.

Funerary architecture may be the best available indicator of personal wealth, as monumental family tombs are privately financed and clearly distinguishable from common burials in pits or trenches (Keddie 2019, 223–29; Raviv and Zissu 2020, 152–53, 169–70). Because tombs were mostly cut out of bedrock (i.e., burial caves), they tend to be found in better states of preservation. As such, they are able to be studied effectively in relation to personal wealth. Wealthy elites, through privately financing these structures, could alter the visual and material character of the landscape through these monumental tombs. Constructing or carving richly decorated tomb facades or burial markers (*nefashot*) was often an avenue for social competition among elites, as we see with the tombs in the necropoleis of Jerusalem and the villages of western Samaria, where magnificent tombs stand side by side, competing for viewers’ attention (Berlin 2002; Peleg-Barkat 2012, 416–18; Raviv 2013). In addition, these projects often introduced or helped spread foreign architectural and artistic influences, which could then be absorbed by all levels of society and inspire local imitations. Building monuments for themselves also established a level of income inequality for locals in a way that was concrete, permanent, and highly visual. Whether the elites themselves inhabited or frequented a village, their burials constituted prominent symbols of their wealth and status. They reminded onlookers of their own relative poverty and surely served as a target for envy or resentment (e.g., Gospel of Matthew 23:27) even long after the person’s death.

However, our current knowledge of monumental burials in rural settings is limited, especially when compared with research on urban settings such as Jerusalem (e.g., Avigad 1954; Kloner and Zissu 2007). As Raviv and Zissu (2020, 153) rightly note, relatively few excavations or surveys, and little synthetic scholarship, has contextualized the finds with literary and historical sources. Scholars have recently begun to study rural tombs from this era. Of particular note are Raviv's (2013) and Raviv and Zissu's (2020) studies and surveys of decorated tombs dated to the late Second Temple era in western Samaria and the southern Hebron hills. They focus specifically on tombs with rock-cut facades, especially those featuring *distyle in antis* (two free standing columns between two antae) surmounted by a decorated entablature. These studies show how the funerary architecture in rural sites in Samaria and Hebron Hills generally conforms to styles known from tombs in Jerusalem at the time. Most monumental tombs in rural areas are located alongside main roads (Raviv and Zissu 2020) and are dated to the period from King Herod (37–4 BCE) to the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE). Raviv and Zissu (2020) relate these tombs to agricultural estates, positioned strategically in areas that served as buffers from the Samaritans to the north and Nabateans to the south, and as producers of wine and other products for consumption by Jerusalem’s elite (Raviv 2013; Raviv and Zissu 2020, 170). More broadly, scholars ascribe construction of these tombs to the elites who rose to prominence under the Herodian dynasty and sought to establish and publicize their new socio-economic status (Peleg-Barkat 2015, 121 ;Raviv and Zissu 2020, 170). Decorated facades surely reflect the owner’s desire to express their high socio-economic standing, as is the case for all monumental tombs, including the lavish burial markers that we argue lend themselves especially well to considerations of visibility.

The recent excavations of the pyramid structure at Horvat Midras, located about 30 km southwest of Jerusalem in the Judean foothills, contribute new information to this topic.[[4]](#footnote-4) In particular, this paper focuses on the pyramidal burial marker at the top of the hill. We show that this provides useful evidence for understanding rural elites in early Roman Judea, and that it can also enhance our understanding of monumental funerary architecture in the first century CE, including in rural areas.

While portions of the pyramidal funerary monument (*nefesh*) at Horvat Midras have long been visible above ground, much about the structure remained subject to conjecture or was simply unknown until recently. What was the original form of the monument? What are its dimensions, as well as its artistic and architectural features? Can we determine a clear date for its construction? As we will show, recent excavations have revealed answers to these questions. We place the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras within its broader context; namely, the funerary architecture of Judea and the site of Horvat Midras. We seek to understand why Horvat Midras was chosen as a burial site and why a pyramidal shape was seen as an appropriate marker for this tomb. Since the marked tomb is located in a rural area it prompts the question: why was this site chosen and who was meant to see it? Who was meant to be impressed by the grandeur of the pyramid and the wealth of the interred? Recent excavations of the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras help to address these questions, as well as contributing to understandings of monumental art and architecture, rural elites, and socio-economic issues in rural Judea during the late Second Temple era, a key era in the history of the region, as well as early Judaism and Christianity.

# The Site of Horvat Midras

Horvat Midras (**Fig. 1**; Khirbat Drousia; c. 15 km southwest of Bet Shemesh, 7 km northeast of Bet Guvrin) is a key site for reconstructing the history of rural settlement in the Judean foothills during the Roman period. The site has seen several surveys and small-scale salvage excavations. These include surveys by Guérin (1868, 370), Condor and Kitchener on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund (Conder and Kitchener 1883, 280), L. Y. Rahmani’s survey in 1958–59 (published in Rahmani 1964), Kloner and Frumkin’s survey of the underground installations (Kloner 1982), excavations of several burial caves from the Second Temple era following antiquity robberies (Kloner 1978; 1991; Dahari and Avni 1985; Dahari 1989), and more recently, the excavation of the Byzantine-period church in the northern area of the site (Ganor et al. 2011; 2012a; 2012b). The picture that emerges from these small-scale excavations and surveys is that the settlement at Horvat Midras was one of the largest and wealthiest rural sites in the Judean foothills during the early Roman period. It was also a prominent settlement during the Byzantine period. Given its potential to shed light on rural Judea during the Roman era, Horvat Midras was chosen for further excavation (**Fig. 2**). Within the framework of this research, the [name withheld] expedition headed by [name withheld] conducted two survey seasons (November–December 2015; November–December 2016) and three seasons of excavation (September 2016; July–August 2017; July–August 2018).

Settlement at the site dates to the Persian era. The site was also active into the early Hellenistic era, up to the Hasmonean conquest in the second century BCE. The site was likely re-founded during the early Roman era under the rule of Herod the Great (see below) and it then thrived through the first Jewish revolt (66–70 CE) and up to the end of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome (132–136 CE). Horvat Midras was presumed to have been resettled during the Byzantine age (4th–5th centuries CE); it was probably destroyed by the earthquake of 749 CE (Ganor, Klein et al. 2011, 121; Zissu, Kloner et al. 2016, 21–22). However, the recent excavations have revealed evidence for a cultic complex already being established at the site in the second century CE, not long after the Second Revolt. The site was settled again during the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras, and at the beginning of the Ottoman period, as evidenced by the architectural remains and rich pottery finds uncovered during the [name withheld] excavations. The site is often identified with the “Drousia” mentioned in Ottoman census records (1524–1596) and located in the Hebron district. During the Ottoman age, the site was likely a large village with its own satellite hamlets. Its inhabitants seem to have paid high taxes—three to six times more than other villages in the area.

Horvat Midras is spread over the northern slopes of a spur overlooking the wadi of Nahal Hachlil, which runs through a wide and fertile valley north of the site. Two wells at the wadi’s northern limits appear on maps from the British Mandate period. The wells have since been sealed and covered, although two large fig trees mark their approximate locations (Zissu and Kloner 2010: 231). Next to the site, from the west, along the valley that separates Ramat Avishur from the high Shephelah, runs an ancient road that connected Jerusalem to the coastal cities of Ashkelon and Gaza. The road passed through nearby Bet Guvrin and was paved during the Roman Imperial period, with milestones placed along its route. The ancient road follows more or less the line of the modern Route 38 and was one of the most important arteries in this region (Roll 1976; Roll and Dagan 1988).

The fertile land, water sources, and location along an important road promoted the growth of Horvat Midras, especially during the early Roman period (from the rise of Herod c. 37 BCE through to the end of the Second Jewish Revolt in 136 CE). During this time, it likely reached its largest size—some 120 dunams (Zissu and Kloner 2010). Zissu and Kloner (2010:239–40) have proposed that the site was re-founded by King Herod. This argument is based on identifying the site’s Arabic name of Kh. ed Druseh/Kh. Durusya (as recorded on the Survey of Western Palestine and on maps from the British Mandate period) with the “Drusias” mentioned in the second century CE by Claudius Ptolemais (*Geography* V, 6, 16; see Abel 1938: 30).[[5]](#footnote-5) According to Zissu and Kloner (2010), Herod named the new settlement Drusias in honor of Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus, the statesman and a stepson of Augustus. Zissu and Kloner’s suggestion is supported by the fact that Herod had kinship ties to the area, as the site rests on the informal border between Judea and Idumea. This region was where Herod and his family came from (Kokkinos 1998: 100–112).[[6]](#footnote-6) The proposal is further bolstered by Herod’s policy to establish and re-establish cities and settlements in honor of members of the Roman Imperial family, which demonstrated his subordination and fidelity to Roman authority (Zissu and Kloner 2010: 239; Zissu, Kloner et al. 2016: 15–16).

# The Necropolis of Horvat Midras in the Late Second Temple Period

The settlement borders at Horvat Midras during the end of the Second Temple period are well defined by the necropolis that extends the length of the slope’s upper portion and surrounds the site from the east, south, and west. Additional burial caves were quarried from the hills (Shema and Seled) northwest of the site (**Fig. 3**). To date, we know of 14 burial caves from the early Roman period. The burial caves have similar plans, including a courtyard, an anteroom, a loculi room, and an *arcosolia* room (arched recesses used as a place of entombment). Unfortunately, all of the known tombs at the site were looted long ago. The burial cave excavated by Kloner (1978: 115–119) on the western portion of the site is especially impressive. Apart from the courtyard, all other parts of the burial complex—the anteroom, *loculi* room, and *arcosolia* chamber—have been excavated. The cave was quarried into the bedrock and lined with ashlars. The anteroom was originally roofed by a dome, and a large rolling stone closed the opening that led into the *loculi* room (**Fig. 4**). In the *arcosolia* chamber, several ossuaries and pottery sherd were found that date from the first to early second centuries CE (Kloner 1978). Another burial cave from the same period excavated further north at Giv’at Seled featured lavish wall paintings (Kloner 1991).

The distribution of caves in relation to the residential area is unusual: the burial caves are quarried into the bedrock in the upper part of the slope, while the hideout complexes that were normally cut in the basements of residential structures are found along the central part of the northern slope. Seven hideout complexes have so far been identified. Next to some of the complex openings, the quarried foundations of residential structures are exposed. These appear to be dated to the late Second Temple era. While we would normally expect dwellings to be located at the top of the hill (for strategic reasons and to avoid reducing the area available for agricultural cultivation on the slopes) and burials to be cut into the slopes, at Horvat Midras the burials are found at a higher elevation than the residential areas. This arrangement may have been due to a combination of factors. First, it is possible that the settlement was originally developed at the bottom of the slope, close to the agricultural fields and wells in the Hachlil Valley. This thesis is supported by excavation find in the site’s northwestern area (Area C), at the lower part of the slope. Here in 2017, we uncovered substantial remains from the Hellenistic period, as well as pottery from the end of the Iron Age and the Persian period—that is, the site’s earliest settlements. A second factor for the site’s unusual layout may be that, due to the accessibly of fertile agricultural land in the valley of Nahal Hachlil, as well as in its tributaries to the east and west of the Horvat Midras spur, there was no need to create agricultural terraces along the hill’s slope. This meant the population could build residential houses on the slope. A third factor is that areas with exposed rock in the higher part of the spur made it easier to quarry burial caves in these areas. In addition to all of these topographic factors, there is a fourth factor; namely, that families who owned the richest burials at Horvat Midras wished to participate in the broader tendency to place burials and their markers in places that would enhance their visibility and, in turn, the status of the interred. We explore this further below.

# The Pyramidal Funerary Monument at Horvat Midras—Excavation Results

The pyramidal funerary structure sits at the top of a hill, on whose northern slope lies the site of Horvat Midras. This is the highest point of the site, some 354 m above sea level (**Fig. 5**). The structure consists of a 10 x 10 m podium built directly over the bedrock. The podium’s four facades are built of (dressed) ashlar stones. On top of the podium three courses of stone are preserved; each course is set half a meter inward in relation to the one below, giving the preserved remains the shape of a stepped pyramid. Rahmani (1964, 223–28) identified the structure as a *nefesh*. *Nefesh*—literally a “soul”—also indicates a prominent funerary monument or tomb marker (Hachlili 2005, 339). The monument had apparently been missed by the British surveyors of the Palestine Exploration Fund (Conder and Kitchener 1883, 280) and Guérin (1869, 370), who had also visited the site. In the list of mandatory sites, the monument is listed as “Migdal Zofim—Al-Muntar,” without any reference to the burial cave to its north. Rahmani was the first to make a schematic plan and section of the monument, and suggested connecting the pyramidal structure and the rock-cut burial cave to its north, whose ceiling had collapsed, leaving only the remains of an inner-most room with a vaulted ceiling and three nicely built *arcosolia* (Rahmani 1964, Fig. 12).

Rahmani proposed dating the monument and burial cave to the third century CE. He based this on the niche that exists in the eastern wall of the burial cave complex’s vaulted ceiling. He considered that this was intended for a Protome portrait of one of the interred (Rahmani 1964, 226), which were common during this period. Likewise, he notes that some of the stones in the stepped courses had a dressed surface facing inward instead of outward. Thus, he concluded that the monument’s stones were in secondary use here, as they had originally been intended for another building at the site from the Hellenistic or early Roman period (Rahmani 1964, 226–227). Recent scholarship has suggested that the structure was more likely associated with the late Second Temple–era settlement at the site (Faust and Erlich 2011, 235; Zissu *et al.* 2016, 20). In September 2016, the [Name Withheld] expedition cleared and cleaned the area surrounding the monument of vegetal growth and modern garbage, documented and mapped the area (Area D), and prepared a plan and sections, as well as a three-dimensional model using photogrammetry. The *nefesh* and burial cave were shown to be constructed with the same orientation and on the same line of symmetry—demonstrating a clear connection between the burial complex and the pyramid (**Fig. 6**).

During the second excavation season (July–August 2017), two squares were opened south of the podium. It became apparent that the original facade on the southern side was nicely preserved due to a pile of stones that had collapsed from the upper pyramid, protecting it from later looting. The aim of the excavation was to date the structure’s foundations and reconstruct its original dimensions and shape. Before the excavation, the collapsed stones around the podium were documented so that they could be used for possible restoration. They were numbered, photographed, and their locations were marked on the plan. After documenting the collapsed stones, they were moved with mechanical tools to an open flat area west of the structure. In this area we identified right-angled cuts in the bedrock and excavated channels, indicating that it had served as a quarry—probably for the stones used in constructing the monument. Once the upper level of the collapsed portion was removed it became clear that the lower portion had solidified due to the disintegration of the *nari* and soft chalk (*kirton*) stones that had rolled down from the top of the pyramid. The chalk crumbled and then, due to the pressure of the heavy stones from above (the upper portion of the collapsed section) and changing humidity and temperature over the years, solidified again, becoming as hard as cement. This made it difficult to remove the lower collapsed portion and access the foundations of the structure.[[7]](#footnote-7) We therefore reduced the excavation area to a test pit (c. 1.5 x 1.0 m) next to the western portion of the southern facade of the structure’s podium. In the test pit, we used mechanical tools to remove the solid layer, revealing the foundation course that sat atop the bedrock. Scant remains of grayish plaster covered the levelled bedrock and the bottom of the foundation course, exposing the full height of the southern facade of the podium (c. 2.3 m). The facade was built of ashlars: the foundation course was built of headers. On top of these were placed the base moldings of the podium (cyma recta profile), carved to a height of c. 15 cm from the bottom part of the lowest course podium’s southern facade. On top of this were two more ashlar courses. The upper edge of the top course was carved with crown moldings (fillet and *cavetto*) to a height of 15 cm (**Figs. 7–8**).

The third excavation season (July–August 2018) focused on areas west and east of the podium of the pyramidal funerary monument. In the west, a 2 m wide strip was excavated along the whole estimated length of the western facade, down to the bedrock. During this work, we noted that the podium’s western facade had been taken out and robbed altogether (**Fig. 9**). The looters removed the ashlars made of *nari* and exposed the pyramid’s solid core. The core was built of *nari* and lower quality *kirton* stones, which are also large and dressed, but not as neatly as those used for the facades. Notably, similar to the western facade, the entire northern facade of the podium had also been robbed, with the podium’s core currently standing at two and a half courses. A hiking trail that runs through the area prevented us from also conducting excavations on this side of the monument. The original line of the western facade could be reconstructed based on the line of the levelled bedrock and the “negatives” of the ashlar stones of the foundation course that were still discernable on top of it. Where the rock sloped northward and was lower than the elevation of the podium’s foundation, the builders had inserted a large ashlar into the natural depression, to level the area before building the podium. North of this stone, where the depression became shallow and narrow, the builders had used small stones and cement as filler. This find allowed us to reconstruct the width of the wall of the facade that was stolen (about 70 cm). Likewise, the excavation clarified that the removal of the western facade stones had begun before the structure collapsed. The same layer of solidified chalk that we identified on the southern side of the base in the 2017 season appeared here, although it was slightly shallower and more brittle on top of the levelled bedrock in front of the western facade of the structure, as the ashlar facade stones had already been removed by robbers.

Along the length of the podium’s eastern facade, which is nicely preserved, we dug two trenches: the first at the foot of the southeastern corner of the podium, and the other (c. 1.0 x 2.5 m) about 1 m south of the conjectured northeast corner of the podium (which was not excavated during this season). Similar to the southern facade, here too we encountered a layer of solidified chalk that was very difficult to excavate. In some parts the hard layer was more than a meter thick, which required mechanical tools. This slowed our progress and limited the size of the excavation area. We reached the levelled bedrock in the two trenches. In the southern trench, we exposed the southeastern corner of the podium to its full height—the only corner of the podium that was preserved and had never been looted (**Fig 10**).

# Dating the Pyramid Funerary Monument at Horvat Midras

The cutting of burial caves can be difficult to date because most have been looted over the years and they normally lack floor foundations that may hold small datable finds. Many tombs can only be dated by typological and stylistic features, matching their architecture and decorations to known parallels (Peleg-Barkat 2012, 403; Raviv and Zissu 2020, 162). Dating the monument is difficult because it was impossible to excavate the collapsed (and robbed) burial cave, and because the pyramidal funerary monument is solid and was built directly on the bedrock without any abutting floor or foundation trenches. We therefore sampled the dirt trapped between the stones that comprise the funerary monument for the purposes of an optically stimulated luminescence (OS) test, with the assistance of N. Porat from the Geological Survey of Israel (GSI).[[8]](#footnote-8) A sample was taken from the bonding material between the stones of the stepped superstructure (hoping this would provide a date for its construction), and another sample was taken from the dust that was trapped after the construction in between the neatly dressed ashlars in the southern facade of the podium. The results of the first sample provided a range of dates too broad to be of much help: from 210 BCE to 250 CE, spanning the late Hellenistic and early and middle Roman eras. The second sample, from the dust that was trapped between the tiers of the base to the time of its construction or thereafter, provided a somewhat narrower range: to the Roman period alone, from 30 to 260 CE.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Even though the indicative ceramic and numismatic finds were few, and they were not found under a sealed floor or foundation, their uniformity allows us to date the structure with reasonable confidence. On all sides of the podium there was a layer of dirt that covered the collapsed part of the structure, which included finds from the Byzantine period through the modern age. By contrast, a homogeneous assemblage was discovered on the levelled bedrock, next to the foundations of the podium, sealed under the collapse and the layer of solidified chalk. It included a few indicative pottery sherds—all of which date to the first century CE or the beginning of the second century CE, prior to the Bar Kokhba Revolt.[[10]](#footnote-10) In addition, two coins were found: one of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE; his coins remained in circulation into the first century CE) and a second minted by a procurator who served under Tiberius in 18–19 CE (**Fig. 11**).[[11]](#footnote-11) These finds allow us to conclude that the pyramid at Horvat Midras was probably built during the early Roman era and collapsed some time before the Byzantine period. Between the construction of the podium and the collapse of the upper structure, stones from the western and northern facades were looted for re-use elsewhere. The removal of the stones destabilized the structure and hastened its collapse.

It is notable that the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras is one of the burial markers in which small datable finds have been discovered. The pyramid fits within the range of rural tombs with decorated facades in western Samaria and the Hebron hills, which date to the first century BCE through first century CE (Raviv and Zissu 2020, 162–165). As such, the pyramidal monument may fit within the proposal by Raviv and Zissu 2020 that these tombs were related to elites whose rise was connected with the Herodian dynasty.

# Reconstruction of the Funerary Monument at Horvat Midras

The results of recent excavations allow us to reconstruct the plan of the Horvat Midras funerary monument and its original form. Uncovering the line of the western facade allowed us to measure the width of the southern facade, from the southeastern corner that remained intact to the line of the reconstructed southwestern corner that had been looted. Accordingly, the podium would have originally measured 10 x 10 m, with a height of 2.3 m. Before the construction of the podium, the bedrock’s surface was flattened and smoothed, and wide recessions in the bedrock were filled with cement or ashlars. The facade walls that were preserved in the south and the east are built of dressed ashlar stones of hard *nari* and were decorated with base and crown moldings. The podium’s dimensions and design are similar to the podium of the mausoleum built by Herod at Herodium (9.95 m x 9.95 m; Peleg-Barkat and Chachy 2015, 314–16), which may have influenced the *nefesh* at Horvat Midras.

Of the stepped pyramid structure that was constructed atop the podium, its three bottom steps have been preserved. The height of each step is about 0.5 m, and each one is recessed about 0.5 m from the one under it. Thus, the original measurements of the three bottom steps of the pyramid were 9 x 9 m, 8 x 8m, and 7 x 7 m, respectively. In our estimation, six more steps should be reconstructed, according to the same principle: their estimated measurements are 6 x 6 m, 5 x 5 m, 4 x 4 m, 3 x 3 m, 2 x 2 m, and 1 x 1 m. (cf. Held 2014). Therefore, the original height of the pyramid alone was about 4.5 m. Combined with the podium, the height of the entire monument was about 7 m above the levelled bedrock (**Fig. 12**).

In terms of volume, we estimate that approximately 372.5 cubic meters of building stones were used to construct the original structure. The average dimensions of most of these stones was about 0.5 x 0.7 x 1.0 m, or 0.35 cubic meters in volume. As such, we estimate that about 1,100 building stones were used to construct the monument. During the excavation, we surveyed the building stones from the collapse, other stones scattered next to the monument, and those in secondary use in a nearby later wall. Approximately 230 building stones in various states of preservation were identified around the monument. As some stones were found smashed or broken, some of the fragments likely originated from the same stone—as such, the number of distinct building stones found in the immediate vicinity was probably closer to around 200. Many stones are still missing—some had probably deteriorated or disintegrated, and at a later stage were re-solidified along the southern and eastern facades of the structure. In our estimation, about 120 cubic meters (approximately 360 blocks of stone)—about one third of the entire estimated volume of the monument—were looted. The robbery focused on the finely dressed hard *nari* stones of the western and northern facades, and the covering stones of the pyramid’s superstructure (see below regarding the sloped covering stones). The stones used for the core of the structure, made of brittle *nari* and *kirton*, were barely touched, except for a few that were integrated into a nearby wall during the Mamluk or Ottoman period.

The evidence suggests that the looting of stones from the exterior of the podium exposed the structure’s solid core to natural elements and caused the gradual dissolution of the *kirton* stones. This caused a layer of chalk to form; this then re-solidified and became as hard as cement around the structure. It is unlikely, therefore, that the builders of the pyramid had intended to leave the core’s stones exposed. The intention was not only to protect the interior stones at the level of the square podium, which was protected against environmental damage by the facade walls of finely dressed hard *nari* stones, but also to protect the stones that were used in the stepped courses atop the podium.

As such, it is likely that the pyramidal upper part of the monument was also originally covered with hard *nari* stones. Indeed, while surveying the scattered stones in the vicinity, we identified a few trapezoidal *nari* stones. We believe that these stones are the remains of the covering of the pyramid, as they bridged the gap between each of the stepped courses and created a smooth slope (for a suggested reconstruction of the arrangement of the stones, see **Fig. 13**). That is, we conclude that the pyramid was not originally a stepped structure, but rather a pyramid with smooth sides (**Fig. 14**), similar to others known pyramidal funerary monuments from Judea (see below). It is likely that more trapezoidal covering stones existed, but they were probably the first to be looted and put into secondary use, stripping the pyramid of its “armor” for protection against the elements.

# Possible Identities of the Interred

Unfortunately, we have neither epigraphic nor literary sources that identify the name of the individuals or family that were interred at the burial cave, or whose marker served the pyramidal funerary monument discussed above.[[12]](#footnote-12) While the specific name or names of the interred may elude us, examination of other decorated tomb facades and elaborate funerary monuments from early Roman Judea can suggest some ideas concerning the probable identities. Raviv and Zissu (2020) identify a number of key traits of rural lavish burial caves and funerary monuments from the period and show that most of these tombs are located in lands that lie outside the area that was under Jewish control during the early Hellenistic era, and that were conquered and annexed by the Hasmoneans (especially during the reign of John Hyrcanus I, 135/4 to 104 BCE). Specifically, they are located in areas that served as buffers between Judea and other ethnic groups (e.g., the Samaritans to the north; Idumeans to the south). These tombs were often connected with agricultural estates, and their construction likely dates from the Herodian or early Roman age. As such, Raviv and Zissu (2020) reason that these rural tombs were built by elites who gained status and possibly land during the Herodian age and climbed the socio-economic ladder due to their connections with the Herodian family (Raviv and Zissu 2020, 166–69). These elements fit well with what we know about the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras, which was located in Herod’s ancestral region of Idumea and according to Shatzman's (2013) suggestion may even have been the location of his family’s origins. Whether these elites lived at the rural site of Horvat Midras or managed their lands remotely while living in a nearby city (perhaps as members of the Jerusalem elite) cannot be determined from the available sources. It is possible that further excavation of the village will shed more light on this topic. Regardless of the burial complex owners’ usual residence, what is clear is that they made a series of conscious and intentional decisions to leave their imprint on the material landscape of Horvat Midras and chose to do so in a particular fashion; that is, by constructing a highly visible funerary monument at the top of the hill.

# Material Landscape and Visibility

Another aspect of the Horvat Midras funerary monument that is worthy of closer examination is the place of the pyramidal structure within its material landscape. Scholars have shown how ornate burials with decorated facades constitute expressions of social competition among a society’s elite (e.g., Berlin 2002; Peleg-Barkat 2012). As stated above, the pyramid and podium stand at about 7 m high on their own and were constructed on top of the hill on whose northern slope the site’s dwellings were constructed, approximately 354 m above sea level. Our study of the monument’s visibility, conducted with the help of I. Wachtel, indicates that the monument could be seen from all directions and as far as 6.25 km away (**Fig. 15**). This includes visibility from multiple points along the main road running from Jerusalem to the coast along the line of today’s Route 38, as well as other settlements nearby, such as Hurvat Itri and Khirbet Burgin. In light of this, decisions behind the construction of the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras seem to reflect an effort to maximize its visibility. That is, one’s status could be established and marked not only by constructing a richly decorated facade, which can be seen and appreciated from relatively close distances, but also by choices that reflect an interest in enhancing visibility from greater distances. One can compete in social competition not only through ornate, richly decorated facades, but also through long-range visibility of prominent markers placed on top of burial caves.

The intentional high visibility of the Horvat Midras funerary monument aligns with broader trends in the early funerary architecture of the Roman East. Lidewijde de Jong has recently surveyed and analyzed burials from early Roman Syria, from its conquest in 64 BCE to the start of the Byzantine age in 330 CE. The study includes some 517 burials from 55 different sites in Syria (de Jong 2017, 13, 18). She writes that, compared to the Hellenistic age, the early Roman era saw a significant increase in expenditure on funerary architecture, with a new and pronounced emphasis on visibility. Visibility was a key distinguishing factor between Roman and pre-Roman funerary architecture in Syria (de Jong 2017, 30, 65, 217–24). The overall goal of visibility, she writes, was achieved through a series of decisions and choices that sought to enhance the visibility of funerary architecture. There was a new emphasis on above-ground funerary architecture. Visibility was enhanced by raising the burial space (sarcophagus, mausoleum, etc.) above the surface level (using pedestals, podia, etc.), placing the structure on elevated spots in the landscape, or both (de Jong 2017, 28, 65, 219). As discussed above, the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras reached a significant height and could be seen from more than 6 km away.

Moreover, visibility was enhanced by situating a funerary monument in close proximity to the road. The monument at Horvat Midras would have been visible to those travelling along the main road, as well as minor roads in the vicinity. Notably, tombs placed along roads were often the first built or rock-cut elements that people would see when approaching a settlement—a landmark that signified one would soon arrive at the destination. Likewise, tombs were often the last monumental architecture one would see when leaving a city or village, leaving a lasting impression on visitors and reinforcing the impression they gained when they first arrived. Tombs were commonly placed along roads in most areas of the Roman Empire, including in the East. This can be seen with Roman-era tombs in Syria surveyed by de Jong (2017, 1–2, 21, 24–25, 28, 33, 66, 69, 218), as well as those in Jerusalem (Berlin 2002; Abadi and Zissu 2019).

Next, we note the placement of the Horvat Midras pyramidal tomb marker in relation to the village’s dwellings. As with other burials at the site and in the country, the burial cave and its *nefesh* were rock-cut and constructed outside the settlement’s limits, as corpses were understood to create impurities or pollution for the living (Kloner and Zissu 2007, 21). At the same time, neither the pyramidal monument nor the other burials were very far from the living population: the necropolis was close enough to establish and maintain a clear connection to the settlement. Both proximity to and distinct separation from living areas was common in the ancient world, including among the tombs in Roman Syria. Notably, there are very few burials in the remote areas of the countryside or isolated farmsteads (de Jong 2017, 21, 24–25, 28, 33, 218). Like other burials, the Horvat Midras burial cave and its pyramidal marker remain within reach and visible to the village’s inhabitants.

Next is the choice of a pyramidal shape for the burial marker, whose (original) straight lines, precise angles, and symmetry would have clearly been identified by on-lookers as a human-made structure. Moreover, the pyramid shape must have drawn on the symbolism associated with death and the afterlife, as on-lookers might recall the Egyptian Great Pyramids that were connected with creation myths (Eldarad 1994: 11) and the ascension of the dead to heaven (Fedak 1990, 35). However, examples of funerary pyramids have been found in many places apart from Egypt, such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Iran, Asia Minor, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, India, Thailand, Mexico, and Peru (Fedak 1990, 35; Held 2014). The pyramid’s popularity may be due to its structural stability, which allows for the construction of high monuments with a relatively low risk of collapse when compared to other forms. The pyramid’s popularity in Judean funerary architecture is evidenced in several markers bearing this shape that are known from the historical and archaeological record (see below), and also by the use of pyramids in decorations on other forms of material culture associated with death and burial, such as ossuaries (see the examples in Rahmani 1994: 133, 31, no. 231, plate 33; 181–183, no. 473, plate 70; Triebel 2004, 91–98) and in graffiti on the walls of burial caves (Triebel 2004: plates xxiii–xxv; Zissu 1997; 1999; 2000; Michaeli 2017: 240, Fig. 2).[[13]](#footnote-13)

The next attribute is the large size of the pyramid, which is indicative of Roman trends that saw tombs grow in size (de Jong 2017, 66). Indeed, the combined monument, pyramid and podium is similar in scale (10 m x 10 m x 4.5 m) not only to other Herodian-age funerary monuments, but also to the average dimensions of rectangular mausolea in Roman Syria (c. 11 m x 11 m x 5 m; de Jong 2017, 67).

Finally, we note intra-site and inter-tomb diversity. Horvat Midras features other burials, most notably the elaborate monumental tomb with a rolling stone enclosure that was initially surveyed and published by Kloner (1978), as well as another burial cave adorned with vegetal wall paintings (Kloner 1991). Notably, however, we know of no other pyramidal burial markers at the site. This aligns with de Jong (2017, 33, 38, 56–58), who finds that diversity and eclecticism in the architectural shapes and decorations of tombs at any one site reflects the owner’s wishes to distinguish themselves from others at the site (de Jong 2017, 69). The lack of duplicate forms indicates intentional planning, which in turn demonstrates how the local funerary architectural context influenced how a burial type was chosen. Selecting a tomb design that differed from others enhances visibility through uniqueness. This phenomenon can also be seen in funerary monuments in the Kidron for example, where each of the three funerary monuments have a different shape (Avigad 1954).[[14]](#footnote-14)

In general, the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras participates in broader trends around funerary architecture of the early Roman age, which saw increased expenditure and resources devoted to the construction of funerary architecture, and an intentional, special interest in enhancing visibility. This aligns with what scholars have called “display tombs” (Berlin 2002). This change seems to reflect more than a fashion, but is rather part of larger, structural, and societal changes, with more and more people involved in the construction of visible and decorated tombs (de Jong 2017, 30, 70–71). These trends altered the ways in which tombs functioned in society, as visible funerary markers increasingly dotted the landscape and lined the roads as one entered and exited a town or village. The importance of burial structures in the visual and material landscape should not be underestimated. When they were the objects of direct attention, they could produce admiration, and envy, and promote memorialization of the interred individuals. In addition, they also became part of the landscape and the built environment, and were visible from afar. Cemeteries were a permanent fixture in a community’s peripheral vision, setting the scene and framing the visual culture of everyday life (Chidester 2018, 13; Kaell 2016; Miller 2005, 5)

# Local Context and Visibility: Hellenistic and early Roman Palestine

Emphasis on visibility had already become significant in Judea in the mid- to late-second century BCE, during the Hasmonean period, although with far fewer examples than in the early Roman period. Monumental, above-ground tombs are mostly found in the Jerusalem area (e.g., Jason’s Tomb and Bnei Hezir Tomb of the Hasmonean period and The Tomb of Zechariah (**Fig. 16**) and the Tomb of Absalom from the early Roman period). These match many of the criteria of display tombs, such as exterior decoration and architecture, their large scale, and their visibility (Berlin 2002, 142–43; Peleg-Barkat 2012). The earliest evidence of a display tomb is the Hasmonean family tomb in Modi’in (about 25 km north of Horvat Midras). It was constructed by Simon the Hasmonean (i.e., Maccabees) c. 143 BCE (Fine 2010b, 443) and may be the earliest example of a display tomb in Judea during the Hellenistic period.[[15]](#footnote-15) It differs from the styles of most tombs that dominated the region for much of the first millennium BCE up to that point, where tombs were mostly constructed underground, with non-descript or hidden entrances (Berlin 2002, 140–41).[[16]](#footnote-16)

Simon’s tomb may have also initiated or re-instated a trend to use pyramids as burial markers that would continue through the Hellenistic era and into the Roman age. Even if there was a local precedent for a monumental tomb with a pyramid, there was no local precedent for Simon’s tomb, which integrated not only pyramids, but also columns and reliefs into a particularly tall structure. Scholars generally hold that Simon’s tomb was most likely influenced by the Mausolaea of Halicarnassus and Belevi in Asia Minor, both of which are crowned with pyramids and decorated with columns and reliefs (Berlin 2002; Fine 2010b).

In all likelihood, Simon’s structure marks the beginning of a new phenomenon, and a shift away from tombs that exhibited minimal outward display, a characteristic across most of the first millennium BCE. Scholars have suggested that the Hasmonean tomb influenced and inspired imitations, such as Jason’s Tomb in Jerusalem, and a burial cave at Umm el-‘Umdan (in the area of Modi’in) that seems to have also had a burial marker on top, although this has not survived (Onn and Weksler-Bdolah 2006).

Currently, there are no known physical remains of the Hasmonean family tomb, and therefore our only sources are literary (Berlin 2002, 143–47; Fine 2010a, 61–65).[[17]](#footnote-17) We read in 1 Maccabees 13:25–30:

25Simon sent and took the bones of his brother Jonathan, and buried him in Modi’in, the city of his ancestors. 26All Israel bewailed him with great lamentation and mourned for him many days. 27And Simon built a monument over the tomb of his father and his brothers; he made it high so that it might be seen, with polished stone at the front and back. 28He also erected seven pyramids, opposite one another, for his father and mother and four brothers. 29For the pyramids he devised an elaborate setting, erecting about them great columns, and on the columns he put suits of armor for a permanent memorial, and beside the suits of armor he carved ships, so that they could be seen by all who sail the sea. 30This is the tomb that he built in Modi’in; it remains to this day. (1 Macc 13:25–30; translation: New Revised Standard Version)

The First Book of Maccabees likely reflects the perspective of a court historian from the Hasmonaean dynasty, writing in the latter part of the second century BCE and surely drawing upon older material.[[18]](#footnote-18) Visibility is a key theme, as the author twice highlights that Simon’s monument was intended to impress and be seen, including from afar: “he made it high so that it might be seen,” (verse 27) and “so that they could be seen by all who sail the sea,” (verse 29). The text indicates (13:27) that Simon’s monument was built over a more modest, pre-existing family tomb, which likely followed the earlier era’s style of funerary architecture with minimal or no external profile, being “essentially invisible” (Berlin 2002, 143–144). This further emphasizes Simon’s intention for the new tomb to possess significant visibility. The monument marks a shift from the use and purpose of tombs as mere receptacles for the dead, to becoming an opportunity for the conspicuous display of personal or familial status (Berlin 2002, 144). The author also emphasizes the element of permanence and how the tomb was intended to become a permanent fixture on the visual and material landscapes, writing “for a permanent memorial” (verse 29) and “it remains to this day” (verse 30). It may be significant that the author, a court historian of Simon’s son Hyrcanus, pairs the construction of this highly visible memorial with a retelling of Simon’s military successes over foreign enemies. This aligns with the author’s broader efforts to substantiate the Hasmonean line’s claims to religious and political authority over Jewish society—claims that critical scholarship have shown were probably highly contested at the time (Gardner 2007; Sievers 1990)

Flavius Josephus, the first-century CE Jewish historian, drew heavily on 1 Maccabees for his history of the Hasmonean dynasty (Gafni 1989; Noam 2018). His re-telling of Simon’s construction further highlights and articulates the tomb’s visibility:

But Simon sent to the city of Basca and brought back the bones of his brother, which he buried in Modi’in, his birthplace, while all the people made great lamentation over him. And Simon also built for his father and brothers a very great monument of polished white marble, and raising it to a great and conspicuous height, made porticoes round it, and erected monolithic pillars, a wonderful thing to see. In addition to these he built for his parents and his brothers seven pyramids, one for each, so made as to excite wonder by their size and beauty; and these have been preserved to this day. Such was the zeal which we know to have been shown by Simon in burying Jonathan and build monuments to his family. Now when Jonathan died as high priest, he had been ruler of the nation for four years. These, then, were the circumstances of his death. And Simon, after being chosen high priest by the populace, in the first year of his-priesthood liberated the people from servitude… (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13:210–212; translation: Josephus 1926-1965, with modifications).

The themes of impressive visibility and permanence, as well as how these were connected to and substantiated Simon’s claims to religious and political authority, were not lost on Josephus, who emphasized them further (see our underlined portions above).[[19]](#footnote-19) While the early Hasmoneans must have faced opposition, it seems likely that Simon’s decision to build a display tomb complete with pyramids influenced others. Given its early date, it perhaps served as a template for the monumental display tombs that would follow in the late Hellenistic and early Roman eras (Berlin 2002, 144–47; Fine 2010b). That is, the phenomena of display tombs and of constructing burial markers shaped like pyramids drew on local influences (such as the Iron Age monumental burials in Jerusalem and the Tomb of the Hasmoneans). This was in addition to foreign influences that continuously affected the shape and decoration of tombs, which gradually became more elaborate as a consequence of competition for the display of status and its legitimization among elite families.[[20]](#footnote-20) In light of the abundant evidence about display tombs, Josephus’s comments—“The pious rites which it [the Torah] provides for the dead do not consist of costly obsequies or the erection of conspicuous monuments. The funeral ceremony is to be undertaken by the nearest relatives…” (Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.205)—should be read as highly apologetic and part of his broader programmatic effort to present Jews and their beliefs as humble and pious (Fine 2010b, 442–43).

# Conclusion

The excavation around the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras sheds significant light on the monument, its construction methods, and its relation to the burial cave to its north and also to the nearby quarry to its west. It also allows for the history of the monument to be reconstructed, from the choice to locate it on the summit and most visible point of the hill, to its construction, abandonment, the looting of its stones, and its collapse, followed by the gradual deterioration of its stones.

The *nefesh*, located at the top of the hill, is a monumental structure whose construction required a significant investment of planning and resources. A similar effort is evident in the quarrying and construction of the burial system for which the monument serves as a tomb marker. The vault and the arches that remain in the inner-most room of the burial complex are built from high-quality ashlars. The burial complex and *nefesh* are an impressive example of a monumental family display tomb from the end of the Second Temple era. Its location in a village within a rural region in the Judean foothills indicates that grand burial complexes existed not only in Jerusalem and other large cities, but also in these extra-urban regions. The pyramidal funerary monument and the rock-cut burial cave join a group of monumental tombs with decorated facades that are similar to the famous examples known from the necropolis of Jerusalem, in western Samaria, and western Mount Hebron (Magen 2008: 141–164; Raviv 2013: 109–142; Peleg-Barkat 2015: 73–121).

The burial marker from Horvat Midras did not stand alone as the sole example of monumental tombs in the Judean foothills. A burial cave with a rock-cut facade that incorporated a Doric frieze with undecorated metopes was revealed over 1997 and 1998 at Ramat Bet Shemesh (Peleg-Barkat 2015, 115–118). Two examples of monumental Doric friezes with decorated metopes were found in the vicinity of Horvat Midras; these most probably originate from the decorated facades of burial caves. One such frieze with blocked-out disks (reminiscent of the metopes of the Tomb of Absalom in the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem) on its metopes was found during Rahmani’s survey of Adulam’s region in 1958 and 1959 at a site *c.* 1 km to the east of Horvat Midras, called Khirbet Tsbia’a (Rahmani 1964, 223, Pl. 21:5). The frieze was found near a well-preserved *loculi* rock-cut burial cave. Another Doric frieze can be seen today broken into two fragments and reused as decoration in the facade of Khan Alcamara, a Late Ottoman period structure from the village of Ajur (near Moshav Agur), *c.* 4.5 km northwest of Horvat Midras (**Fig. 17**). The metopes in this frieze are decorated with various shapes of rosettes that are very similar to early Roman examples of such friezes, and a wreath. The wreath was a very common motif on the Doric friezes of decorated burial caves in early Roman-era Judea (Peleg-Barkat 2012, 414; 2015, 95). Therefore, it seems quite probable that this frieze also originally adorned a lavishly decorated tomb facade in a rural Jewish settlements in this area.

The burial marker at Horvat Midras, like the burial caves with decorated facades in the vicinity, was likely constructed by an elite family who rose in influence due to its connections with the Herodian family. Constructing a pyramid on top of a raised podium as a burial marker represents efforts to compete with peers and establish their social status. They did so, moreover, in the language of funerary architecture that had been established by the local Hasmonean elite and which was conversant with external architectural influences.

Above all, the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras represents an effort to achieve great visibility for the burial, in light of its height, placement on top of a hill, and the fact that it could be seen both from the village and afar, including from major roads. This study of the pyramidal *nefesh* structure at Horvat Midras adds an important element to the study of both burial customs and the distribution of pyramidal *nefesh* structures at the end of the Second Temple era. It also contributes to broader research on the socio-economic elites of rural Judea in the early Roman era.

# Figure captions

1. Horvat Midras—Location map (Drawing: T. Rogovski)

2. Horvat Midras–General plan of the site (Drawing: D. Porotski)

3. Distribution map of early Roman period burial caves from at Horvat Midras (GIS analysis: T. Rogovski)

4. The rolling stone and the facade of the *loculi* room of a nicely rock-cut and ashlar stones-faced burial cave from the early Roman period at Horvat Midras (Photo: T. Rogovski)

5. An aerial view of the pyramidal funerary monument and the opening of the collapsed burial cave to its north, looking south (Photo: T. Rogovski)

6. The plan of the pyramidal funerary monument and the arcosolia chamber of the burial cave to the north (Drawing: M. Kahn and D. Porotski)

7. The excavation pit adjacent to the southern facade of the pyramidal funerary monument (Photo: name withheld)

8. The southern facade of the pyramidal funerary monument (Drawing: D. Porotski)

9. A general view of the western side of the pyramidal funerary monument. Note the ashlar stone incorporated into the foundation of the building in the northern part of the western facade (Photo: T. Rogovski)

10. The southeastern corner of the pyramidal funerary monument (Photo: T. Rogovski)

11. A coin from the reign of Emperor Tiberius discovered on the bedrock near the foundation of the southern facade (Photo: T. Rogovski)

12. Reconstruction proposal of the original size of the pyramidal funerary monument at Horvat Midras, looking north (Drawing: M. Chernin)

13. Reconstruction of the covering stones used in the pyramid structure on top of the podium (Drawing: M. Chernin)

14. Isometric view of the pyramidal funerary monument (Drawing: D. Porotski).

15. Topographic map showing visibility of the funerary monument at Horvat Midras (GIS analysis: I. Wachtel)

16. Tomb of Zachariah in the Kidron Valley, Jerusalem (Photo: name withheld)

17a+b. Doric frieze pieces decorated with rosettes and a wreath incorporated in secondary use into a late Ottoman period structure at Ajur (Photo: name withheld)

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1. On problems identifying socio-economic status in the material record, see e.g., Bowden, Gutteridge and Machado 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The most prominent example is the Theodotus synagogue inscription in Jerusalem; see Levine 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One example of a *Villa Rustica* is “Ḥilkiah’s Palace” located in the center of the village of Khirbet el-Muraq, c. 12 km west of Hebron (Damati 1982). Five seasons of excavations were conducted at the site between 1969 and 1981 on behalf of the Staff Officer for Archaeology in Judea and Samaria, under the direction of E. Damati. The remains of a large and highly decorated villa, 42 by 37 m was uncovered with rows of rooms around a large peristyle court and an open triclinium, with a gate and atrium on the southwestern side of the structure and a bathhouse on the northern side. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dvir Raviv's work on tombs in Western Samaria constitutes another potential group of sources for monumental tombs in rural contexts. While the sites have yet to be excavated, Raviv’s surveys have shed some light on them. They are a group of five monumental burial tombs that are similar to those found in the Jerusalem area. Based on typological comparisons, Raviv dates them from the first century BCE to the middle of the first century CE. Like Horvat Midras, which sits on the boundary of Idumea and Judea, these burials are located on the boundary of Samaria and Judea. Raviv suggests the tombs are the remains of estates belonging to senior officials who received land during the Hasmonean or Herodian eras (Raviv 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an alternative explanation of the name of the site, see Shevital 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Shatzman (2013) even suggests that Herod’s family, which was from the rural rather than the urban Idumean elite, originated from Horvat Midras. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a similar example, see Porat, Chachy and Kalman 2015, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See further Porat, Avner, Tov, Holzer and Horwitz 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We thank N. Porat of the Institute of Geology for her assistance and analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We thank S. Terem, the excavation’s pottery specialist, for identifying the sherds. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. We thank Y. Fahri, the excavation’s numismatist, for identifying the coins. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See, for example, the inscription that identifies the tomb of Jason (Rahmani 1967) and the literary sources that identify the Tomb of the Kings with the House of Adiabene (Kon 1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See also the depiction on a ceramic oil lamp Sussman 1982, 56–57 no. 60, and on the stone from Jotapata/Yodefat, which Aviam 1999, 99–101 argues reflects the engraver’s morbid state of mind on the eve of the fall of Yodefat to the Romans in 67 CE. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. De Jong (2017, 69), who sees this phenomenon also in Roman Syria, interprets this as a sign of “little unity among the users of the cemeteries.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There are also scant remains of built burial structures from the Hellenistic period in several coastal sites, though their poor state of preservation makes it impossible to reconstruct their plan (Tal 2006: 231, 260, Fig. 7.19). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There may even be a local antecedent for the Hasmonean Tomb – the “Tomb of Pharaoh’s Daughter” in Jerusalem that featured a carved Egyptian cornice, which was likely topped with a pyramid that has not been preserved (Avigad 1954:18­­­–36; Ussishkin 1986: 47–62). The tomb probably dates to the eighth century BCE (Barkay 2011, 151–52). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See also France-Presse 2015; Re’em 2011; Habas 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rappaport 2004, 61 dates the composition to the middle decade of John Hyrcanus I’s reign, c. 125–115 BCE; Mendels places it at the beginning of his reign, c. 130 BCE; see Mendels and Rappaport for reviews of scholarly opinions of the date. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Indeed, this aligns with the findings by Noam 2018, 198 that Josephus generally held positive views of the earliest generation of the Hasmoneans (i.e., Matthias and his five sons, which would include Simon), and even heaped praise on them that went further than that of 1 Maccabees. See also Gordon (2019, 278) who writes how Josephus, Philo, and other writers often emphasized built environments (including statues, gardens, pyramid, and tombs) in order to inspire emotions, such as awe and wonder. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Similarly, de Jong (2017, 222) writes that in Roman Syria, we see cemeteries as new areas for competition and legitimization, providing new elites with opportunities to claim a place in the landscape and address concerns about status uncertainty. These monumental tombs announced lineage, local identity, and knowledge of imperial artistic styles. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)