

JEWISH OSSUARIES AND SECONDARY BURIAL: THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR EARLY CHRISTIANITY

by PAU FIGUERAS

During the final hundred years of the Second Temple period, Jewish burial customs underwent an important change. The bodies of the deceased were first buried in niches opened out of the walls of the rock-cut chambers; then, once the flesh had completely decayed, the bones were carefully gathered together and placed in stone receptacles, known today as ossuaries. Such artifacts, many of them decorated with simple carvings and painted in red or ochre, have been found in the tombs around Jerusalem, either in the course of properly conducted excavations or by anonymous tomb robbers. Their location within the tomb varies: some are placed on the benches around a central pit in the first room, others inside the niches, while still others are under *arcosolia* hewn in the walls.

This curious custom, which obviously involved handling the bones, has been regarded by some scholars as improperly attributed to Orthodox Jews of the Pharasaic school, for which reason it has been reinterpreted as a Jewish-Christian practice.¹ Yet both archeology and rabbinical literature, respectively, leave no room for doubt that *ossilegium*, the gathering of bones, was once a typical Jewish form of interment. This fact has recently been studied and discussed in doctoral

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1. E. Testa, *Il simbolismo dei giudeo-cristiani* (Gerusalemme, 1962); B. Bagatti, "Scoperta di un cimitero giudeo-cristiano al 'Dominus Flevit,'" *Liber Annuus Studium Biblicum Franciscanum* 3 (1952-53), pp. 148-184.

dissertations and field reports,² after earlier scholarship had left several points open to further research.³ Not all relevant details are known even today. In addition, the practice involves certain ideological questions which are still a matter of guess-work. None of the sources informs us of the reasons that brought Jews to accept such a custom, nor of the cause of its disappearance a few generations later. Opinions are likewise divided as to the origin and meaning of the ornaments which decorate many hundreds of ossuaries. Both of these questions — Jewish secondary burial and the meaning of ossuary decoration — are here presented to the student of early Christianity, for whom they may be of interest going beyond the fields of pure archeology and art history. This change in Jewish funerary practices may have corresponded to a change in ideas pertaining to life after death, resurrection, and the need for final atonement. We are dealing here with a transitional era, with a Judaism that gave birth to Christianity. We shall attempt to draw all of these elements together in order to arrive at a comprehensive picture, to see things objectively, in their own context, and without feelings of school prestige.

I. Jewish Ossilegium in Rabbinic Literature

The Sages of Israel used the term *liqqut 'azamot* to refer to the gathering of human bones for reinterment. This became a commonly accepted idiom, like *b'rit milah*, *qiddush ha-shem*, etc.; but it was in fact applied indiscriminately to three different kinds of bone-gathering: 1) that of *met mizvah*, or of the burials of the bones of a criminal who had not deserved a proper interment (M. Sanhedrin 6:5–6; TJ, *ibid.*; Tosefta Sanh. 8:9); 2) the gathering and burial of human bones occasionally found outside tombs (Gen. Rabba 79:2 [*Miqez*], ed. Friedmann, II: 820); 3) the practice of secondary burial proper, as attested by archaeological finds, which we shall discuss in these pages. This was widely practiced towards the end of the period of the Second Temple, until its destruction in 70 C.E., and is repeatedly mentioned in the Mishnah (Pes. 8:8; M.K. 1:5), in the Talmud (TJ, *ibid.*; TB, Sanh. 47b), and especially in the small Talmudic treatise on mourning rites, euphemistically referred to as *Semaḥot* (“Celebrations” — 12:1, 3, 4, 6–9; 13:1). From these texts, it becomes clear that *liqqut 'azamot* at a certain time became a normal and accepted practice within the most pious circles in Jerusalem.

2. E.M. Meyers, *Jewish Ossuaries: Reburial and Rebirth. Secondary Burials in their Ancient Near Eastern Setting* (Rome, 1971); P. Figueras, *Decorated Jewish Ossuaries* (Leiden, 1983); L.Y. Rahmani, “Jewish Rock-Cut Tombs in Jerusalem,” *Atiqot* (English Series) 3 (1961), pp. 93–120; R. Hachlili and A. Killebrew, “Jewish Funerary Customs during the Second Temple Period, in the Light of the Excavations at the Jericho Necropolis,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 115 (1983), pp. 109–132.

3. E.L. Sukenik, *Jüdische Gräber um Christi Geburt* (Jerusalem, 1931); *idem.*, “The Earliest Records of Christianity,” *American Journal of Archeology* 51 (1947), pp. 351–365; R.E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 v. (New York, 1953–68).

One of the texts quoted is very illustrative: “This is what societies [i.e., of pious men, *havurot*] used to do in Jerusalem. Some went to a mourner’s house, others to a wedding; some to a circumcision, some to an ossilegium. To a mourner’s house or to a wedding? The wedding takes precedence. To a circumcision or an ossilegium? The circumcision takes precedence...” (Semahot 12:5). Thus, though mentioned at the end of the list, ossilegium was considered a normal act of piety that a *haver* was supposed to attend.

As for the actual performance of ossilegium — which entailed removing and gathering the bones of a previous interment, placing them in a receptacle in an ordered way, and subsequent reinterment — the references in the literature may be fully understood only with the assistance of archeological evidence, and vice versa. With regard to the former, the ideological reasons for the practice are referred to clearly enough to make it clear that the practice is related to religious beliefs. The first point needing clarification relates to the time the ceremony took place. The texts explicitly state that “bones are not collected until the flesh has wasted away” (Semahot 12:7). This is reported as the opinion of Rabbi Akiba, though no dissenting opinions are offered. Actually, there were other reasons than the purely physical for such a statement. The same rabbi taught that sinners are punished in Gehinnom following their death for a certain period in order to atone for their sins — a process said to last for twelve months (TB, Kidd. 31b). It may be that, in the minds of those pious people who practiced ossilegium, a connection existed between this period of atonement and the time elapsed between death and the final or secondary burial, after which, as it is also stated, the deceased “rested from judgment” (TJ, M.K. 1:5). The Talmud explicitly states that “the decay of the flesh is also necessary for forgiveness” (TB, Sanh. 47b), adding that “this follows what the tanna teaches: ‘When the flesh was completely decomposed, the bones were gathered and buried in their proper place’ (M. Sanh. 6:6).” Despite such texts, scholars refuse to accept that “in all their (rabbinical) discussions of burial practices... (anything) suggests that they were performed in order to atone for the deceased or aid him after his death.”⁴ In any event, a period of twelve months after death was sufficient both for decay of the flesh and forgiveness of sins by punishment in Gehinnom, at least in the case of a sinner. It is therefore logical to assume a similar period of twelve months for the normal ossilegium.

A second point requiring clarification concerns the identity of the person who actually did the job, an issue that may be connected with the legality of the act itself. When hearing of ossilegium among Jews for the first time, one almost

4. Thus S. Safrai in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Assen-Amsterdam, 1976), II: 784, who also quotes G. Allon and L. Ginsburg.

instinctively reacts by thinking that such a practice involves a contradiction. How can such an action fit into the purity laws of Judaism, in which all contact with bones is prohibited by reason of their transmission of ritual uncleanness (M. 'Eduyot 6:2; Ohalot 2:3). Nevertheless, ossilegium was not only allowed, but was treated as an almost essential filial obligation of the pious son. This does not mean, however, that he had to perform the job himself. Other people, perhaps professionals, were available: "If a man... caused the bones of his dead to be gathered together, he may, after he has immersed himself, eat of the Hallowed things..." (M. Pesahim 8:8). This seems a more precise formulation of actual practice than that of R. Meir: "A man may gather together the bones of his father or his mother (during the Intermediate Days of the Festival) as this is an occasion for rejoicing for him..." (M. Moed Qatan 1:5). This second text, important as it is for the religious significance of ossilegium, does not specify who actually performed the task of collecting the bones. The actual performance of this act is briefly but explicitly described in another passage: "R. Eleazar ben Zadok said, 'Thus spoke my father at the time of his death: "My son, bury me first in a fosse (*maḥamorot*). In the course of time, collect my bones and put them in a chest;⁵ but do not gather them with your own hands.'" And thus did I attend him: Johanan entered, collected the bones, and spread a sheet over them. I then came in, rent my clothes for them, and sprinkled dry herbs over them. Just as he attended his father, so I attended him' (Semahot 12:9)." The requirement that the act be performed indirectly, through the good offices of another person, does not seem related to the fear of contracting impurity, but to the respect due to the parents' remains (see Sem. 12:7). Impurity was clearly contracted by the very fact of entering the tomb, so that all those engaged in the burial had to purify themselves following the ritual. This refutes the argument that would see ossilegium as non-Jewish because it would necessarily entail the contraction of uncleanness.⁶

Neither texts nor archeology establish clear and permanent rules as to the exact manner in which the bones were gathered from the spot where they had previously been interred. The texts do not speak of niches (*kokhim*), but of fosses (*maḥamorot*). This latter term is of uncertain meaning, and has been translated as valleys(?), but in the present context may possibly refer to the central pit found in the center of the first chamber in many tombs of the period. The fact that some texts mention the sheets that were once used for the gathering of bones inside the tomb (Sem. 12:8, 9) makes it obvious that the use of ossuaries was only the final

5. Hebrew (א)גלוסקמה, from the Greek *glossokomon*, originally "a case for the mouthpiece or reed of a flute" and, generally, "a case, casket, or container" for anything (see in NT the term "money-box," John 12:6; 13:29).

6. See Testa, *op. cit.*, pp. 447–448.

stage in the development of a custom that might be of far greater antiquity than is usually thought. We read that “ossilegium of two corpses may take place at the same time, as long as the bones of the one are put at one end of the sheet and those of the other at the other end of the sheet. So Rabbi Johanan ben Nuri” (Sem. 12:7). Against this opinion, which certainly reflects a long-standing practice, Rabbi Akiba recommended another, wiser *halakhah* also current before his own time. “In the course of time, the sheet will waste away; in the course of time, the bones will intermingle. Let them rather be gathered and placed in ossuaries” (Sem. 12:7).⁷ Simple as they are, R. Akiba’s words may offer the best explanation of the introduction of the use of ossuaries in Jewish tombs, although they do not answer the main question: namely, why bones were removed from their initial place of interment — an action that, with no apparent justification, caused legal impurity, imposed an extra burden on the resources of a poor family, and complicated, rather than simplified, the use and reuse of the family grave.⁸ Akiba’s answer confronts the halakhic aspect of the issue, exactly as does Ben Nuri’s, but only with regard to the strict separation of the corpses, no matter how important other considerations might also be.

The texts leave no room for the smallest doubt as to the religious meaning of such a practice. It is clear from them that, if it did not itself effect atonement, it was at least a sign that the deceased had achieved it; the day following ossilegium of the parents, indeed, a man “was glad” because “his forbears rested from judgment” (TJ, Moed Qatan 1:5).

II. Archeological Evidence

The need to understand archeological discoveries has revived the interest of scholars in the texts concerning ossilegium. Hundreds, if not thousands, of stone ossuaries have been discovered in the Jewish tombs around Jerusalem, sold to foreign collectors, used as decorative objects in the gardens of monasteries and schools, displayed in museums and private collections, and stored in impressive numbers in the underground rooms of the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem.⁹ Research has recently been done on the typological evolution of Jewish tombs.¹⁰

7. Hebrew text בִּירוֹיָן, probably for בְּאֵרוֹיָן (as in TJ Moed Qatan 1:5), to be understood either as “in cedar-boxes” (Rahmani, *loc. cit.*, p. 102, n. 48) or better, “in (cinerary) urns” (Meyers, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–61).

8. It is wrong to assume, with some early scholars, that secondary burial in ossuaries was introduced into Judaism for practical reasons. See below for a short summary of the facts related to tomb evolution in Judaism during the Second Temple period.

9. A detailed “catalogue raisonné” of this important collection is now being prepared for immediate publication by Dr. L.Y. Rahmani.

10. We recommend consultation of the various publications by R. Hachlili concerning her excavations in the Jericho necropolis (see above, n. 2), as well as the unpublished dissertation by A. Kloner, *The Necropolis of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period* [Heb.] (Jerusalem, 1980).

It is almost certain that the sudden appearance of ossuaries was an important factor in this evolution. We shall list here some of the points deserving of our attention.

1. During an early stage, following the normal custom of the First Temple period, a small vault or pit was hewn in a corner of one of the rooms, designed to contain the intermingled bones that had been removed from the niches to allow for their reuse for new interments.¹¹ These are considered as charnel-houses or ossuaries.
2. As noted above, the central pit in the first chamber of many tombs was sometimes used in order to expose corpses to hasten their decomposition, corresponding to what was stated in the texts about *maḥamorot*.¹²
3. There are instances of a small vault, too small to be used as an extra niche for a new body, hewn into the wall of a chamber or even into one of the sides of a niche, containing the bones of secondary burials.¹³ Such vaults may be seen as a transitional stage between the earlier ossuaries and the later ossuaries, although it is nearly impossible to establish an exact chronology for these different final repositories.
4. In many cases, a low, wide bench runs along the walls of the tomb chambers. Some of these benches are known to have served as decomposition places, but more often, and probably at a later stage, they were used for the storage of ossuaries.
5. Some tombs in Jerusalem have no niches at all, but only sarcophagi (Herod's family Tomb), sarcophagi and ossuaries (on Mount Scopus), or ossuaries alone (The Valley of Kidron). Such depositories of ossuaries indicate that corpses were occasionally transferred to another tomb for secondary burial.¹⁴
6. The niches, originally designed to contain entire corpses within their coffins, not infrequently are found to contain the bones of secondary burials, either inside ossuaries or outside them (perhaps the bones had been gathered together only in

11. See G. Barkai, A. Mazar and A. Kloner, "The Northern Cemetery of Jerusalem in First Temple Times" (Heb.), *Qadmoniot* 8 (1975), pp. 71–76; B. Bagatti–J.F. Milik, *Gli scavi del "Dominus Flevit."* I. *La necropoli del periodo romano* (Gerusalemme, 1958); L.Y. Rahmani, "Jason's Tomb," *Israel Exploration Journal* 17 (1967), pp. 61–100.

12. Another interpretation, however, suggests that the central pit is intended to facilitate the work of the tomb excavators and/or the standing position for ritual prayers inside the tomb.

13. Description and illustration of one of such repositories, fortunately untouched, was given by the present writer in "Una toma jueva a la Muntanya de les Oliveres," *Bulletti del Centre Excursionista de Terrassa* 131 (1968), pp. 187–190.

14. Transportation of corpses from far away to Jerusalem is attested to by some inscriptions on ossuaries as well as by Rabbinic literature (e.g., M Nazir 9:3).

the sheets mentioned in Sem. 12:8, 9). There are instances of a single tomb containing two kinds of secondary burials, without ossuaries in the niche and in ossuaries outside the niches (Wadi Yasul).

7. Numismatic evidence from the recently excavated Jewish necropolis of Herodian Jericho point to the date 10 C.E. for the earliest use of ossuaries in that area.

The least one can say about purely archeological data is that the introduction of ossuaries actually complicated the use and reuse of a tomb, rather than simplifying it. We can also state that the literary sources and archeology complement one another as far as confirming the de facto practice of gathering of bones in ossuaries is concerned. However, the examination of the contents of these ossuaries, that has sometimes been seriously undertaken by professionals, is in some instances puzzling. Many of them contain more than one skeleton, or portions of two, so that the preservation of the individual body stressed in the texts was not always observed. In some cases, there are even animal bones mixed with human remains. For a Christian researcher, it is interesting to recall that an ossuary found on Mt. Scopus in 1968 contained the bones of a man who had been crucified, a big iron nail still piercing the two feet together, with his name, Johanan, inscribed on the ossuary. This is the first time that archeological evidence for the performance of a crucifixion had been found, and is important as a proof for the way it was carried out. The crucified person was not only attached to the cross with ropes, as was often supposed, but nailed directly to the cross, with his two feet nailed together from the side, rather than from the front.¹⁶

Ossuaries have provided a long list of personal names in the inscriptions in Aramaic, Hebrew or Greek, appearing on different parts of the ossuaries. Many of these names are identical with those in the books of the New Testament, and there are some striking instances of similarity, such as Martha, Nathanael, Simon Thaddaeus, Simon bar Yonah(?), John-Mary, Simon-Alexander from Cyrene, Matthew the Levite(?), and even Jesus bar Joseph. It would be naive to rely upon these and other similarities as an argument for the Christianity of all Jewish ossuaries, as has been suggested. Onomastic correspondence between ossuary inscriptions and New Testament names may better be understood as purely casual, both groups belonging to the same chronological and regional context. That Jewish-Christians from the Jerusalem area might have practiced secondary burial is natural, but this has nothing to do with the origins and extent of such a

15. See Hachlili-Killebrew, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

16. V. Tzaferis, "Jewish Tombs at and near Giv'at ha-Mivtar, Jerusalem," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970), pp. 18–32; N. Haas, "Anthropological Observations on the Skeleton Remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar," *ibid.*, pp. 38–59.

practice. In fact, some of the names on ossuaries are accompanied by historical indications refuting such a claim. Thus, the inscription: “bones of those (the relatives) of Nicanor from Alexandria who made the gates (of the Temple).” Shall we believe that the relatives of that man, whom we know from other Jewish sources as well, became Christian? Indications accompanying names are relatively rare. Some of these tell us the profession or position of the person buried (priest, Levite, scribe, teacher, artisan, etc.); others point to their family ties with those who cared for the burial (our father Dostos, our mother Martha); while yet a third group are geographical indications (Judah son of Judah from Bethel, Ammia from Beth-Shean, Maria daughter of Alexandria from Capua).

In some cases, the name is followed by the word *proselyte*, in either Hebrew or Greek. Some scholars interpret this as referring to conversion from Judaism to Christianity. But again, the general context of such inscriptions makes such a supposition unfounded, even in those cases in which the word *proselyte* follows a Jewish name (Figure 1).¹⁷ Advocates of the Jewish-Christian theory were



Fig. 1. Inscription of the Proselyte Judah son of Laganion (St. Anne, Jerusalem).

17. Testa, *op. cit.*, p. 52. Actually, we find a similar indication in the Talmud: “Judah the Ammonite, proselyte” (TB, Barakhot 28a).

influenced by the fact that crosses and other signs that would be typically Christian in another context occasionally appear on ossuaries. Our position here is that not only prudence, but scholarly objectivity, should restrain us from forcing a Christian interpretation where a Jewish one is acceptable. This is not an a priori position, as we *know*, from the texts quoted above, that secondary burial and the use of ossuaries were the norm among Palestinian Jews during this period. Most of the small crosses appearing on one side of both lid and box, as well as other signs, such as Greek and Hebrew characters or the like, are practical indications for the proper position of the lid on the box.¹⁸ The large charcoal crosses drawn on the large faces and lid of an ossuary, such as those found by Professor Sukenik at Talpiot,¹⁹ may also be interpreted as non-Christian, as during the first century the cross was not yet accepted as a Christian symbol. On the other hand, a cross, either upright or in the form of an *X*, may represent the Hebrew letter *taw*, known in Judaism as a symbol of divine protection and salvation at least since the time of Ezekiel.²⁰ When borrowed by Christianity, the motif of the cross already bore a great deal of religious symbolism, which in its immediate context was purely biblical and Jewish. It would thus be methodologically incorrect to deny the Jewishness of a cross when found in a totally Jewish context. The same is true of other graffiti on ossuaries, such as those displaying a fish-like form. One of these goes together with the grecised name *KLODIS* (Claudius), another frames the Hebrew name *YESHUA* (Jesus).²¹ There are enough Jewish texts illustrating the symbolic meaning of fish as one of final salvation and resurrection²² that one may avoid the temptation of seeing the presence of the Christian *ichthys* on an ossuary. Finally, we must mention the curious graffito formed by the monogram of the two Greek characters *chi* and *rho*. For chronological reasons, this cannot be the Constantinian *chrismon*, and other meanings, such as *characteon* or *charasmenos* — i.e., sealed — have been suggested.²³

III. Decorative Elements and their Meaning

Not all ossuaries were decorated, which means that in those cases in which

18. See an illustration of this in L.Y. Rahmani, "Ancient Jerusalem's Funerary Customs and Tombs. Part Four," *Biblical Archeologist* 15 (1982), p. 112, figure.

19. Sukenik, "The Earliest Records," (*op. cit.*, n. 3).

20. Ezek. 9:4; IV Ezra 2:23; Assump. Moses 11:6, 8; Apoc. Moses 43:1; cf. Rev. 7:1-7.

21. Figueras, *op. cit.*, p. 21 and pl. 6, nos. 102 and 402.

22. In the Jewish tradition, Jonah's rescue by the fish became one of the classical examples of God's power of salvation (M Ta'anit 2:4; TJ Berakhot 9:13a.42; Gen. Rabba 91, 57d, etc.), as well as of a personal resurrection (Pirquey de-Rabbi Eliezer 10; Midrash Tehillim 110b [Ps. 26:7]; see Matt. 12:40). The saving role of Leviathan, which is a "pure fish" (Lev. R. 22, 121c, 41; Sifrei Lev. 11:9, 204a, 7) is expressed in the description of the eschatological and Messianic meal (Targum Yerushalmi to Gen. 1:21; Targum to Cant. 8:2; TB Bava Batra 75a; etc.).

23. P. Colella, "Les abreviations et XP," *Revue Biblique* 80 (1973), pp. 547-558.

decoration was present it must have had an aesthetic purpose, a sign of care and esteem towards the deceased relative on the part of those who bought or ordered such an expensive ossuary. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to ask whether or not the elements of this decoration were chosen, or at least used, with the intention of conveying something beyond the mere feeling of beauty. This is legitimate when we are dealing with an object employed for a religious act, as was the case in that of secondary burial, and also because it is both traditional and universal to decorate coffins and tombs with motifs related to the happiness that is wished for the dead. At the same time, we must attempt to avoid exaggeration, such as seeking a hidden or symbolic meaning in every detail of decoration, as has been the position of the advocates of the Jewish-Christian theory, as well as that of E.R. Goodenough.²⁴ Before presenting our criticism of these extreme positions, we wish to offer a brief description of the motifs which integrate the ornamentation of ossuaries.

These motifs may be divided into three main groups: plants, architectonic elements, and pure geometric forms. The first group includes all kinds of vegetal and floral forms, from the typical six-petalled rosette (Fig. 2) to a Menorah-like tree. Small palmettes are very common, usually appearing as the central motif between the almost compulsory symmetric pair of rosettes. The stylised flower or rosette is a very old decorative element that had been used in Mesopotamia to represent a star, which also appears on Greek vases of an early date, and is a

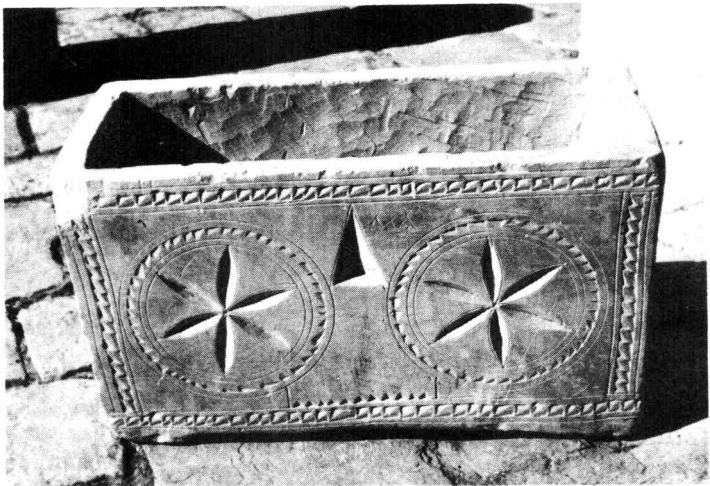


Fig. 2. Six-petalled rosettes flanking stylised central motif (Russian Monastery on the Mt. of Olives, Jerusalem).

24. In his above-mentioned work on Jewish symbolism (*op. cit.*, n. 3), especially vol. IV.

common decorative element on Etruscan and Roman sarcophagi. Plants can either decorate the steps or the base on which a column stands, form continuous patterns as a rim around the decorated panel (Fig. 3), or fill each of the four angles of the same rim. A tree is also very common as central motif, and sometimes appears also on the lid, its form varying significantly from one school to another. The palm-form is the most frequent, but there are others that look like a stylised Jewish Menorah.²⁵ In rare cases, round fruit and even grapes are also represented.

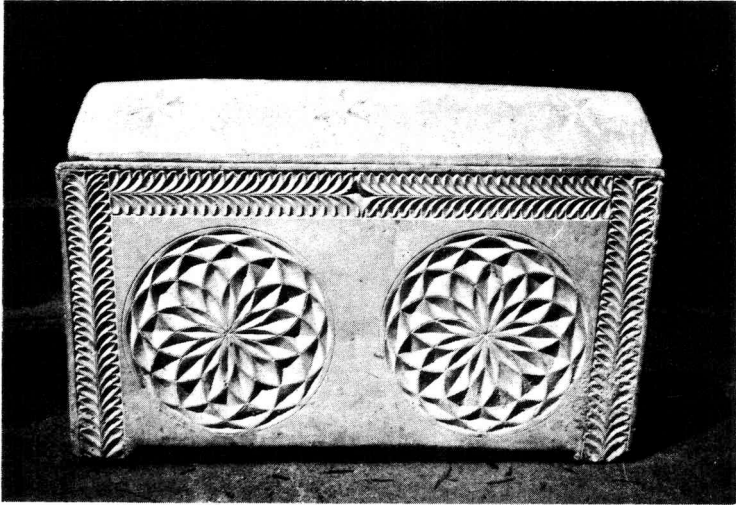


Fig. 3. Plant motif in the rim and developed symmetrical rosettes (Armenian Convent, Jerusalem).

The second group, architectonic elements, appear almost exclusively as the central motif. These include a double or single portal, a gateway, a pair of columns, one column capped with a triangular or a round form, a square monument or stele on steps, etc. In several instances, the entire panel is decorated with the representation of a wall built with ashlar, while in one rare instance we find two hut-like structures in place of the usual two rosettes.

The third group includes many kinds of geometric forms appearing in any spot of the decorated panel, such as small dotted circles, two round discs instead of

25. We disagree with Rahmani, who interpretes as a Jewish Menorah the designs of some of these trees; see his "Depictions of Menorot on Ossuaries" (Heb.), *Qadmoniot* 13 (1980), pp. 114–117. We disagree, not only because none of such trees has more than five branches, but because sometimes there are not one, but two trees, as in our n. 380 (*op. cit.*, pl. 14). On the other hand, similar trees, with seven branches and seven "roots" in exactly the same style, are also reproduced in symmetrical pairs (e.g., our n. 561, pl. 11).

rosettes, checkers and meanders forming rims, the frequent zig-zag fillings of two or three parallel lines of the frames and of rosettes, etc.

In addition to these three groups of elements, several ossuaries display the representation of a vase, either as the central motif between two rosettes or alone (Fig. 4). Other forms include a dagger that replaces what should have been a stylized plant or flower, two Greek crosses inside a circle replacing the normal rosettes, and the probable representation of a rock-cut tomb with its *nefesh* or monument.



Fig. 4. The vase motif (Armenian Convent, Jerusalem).

Many hundreds of ossuaries have been examined by different scholars, and practically all the different ornamental motifs are known to all of them. Nevertheless, sharp differences of opinion exist regarding their interpretation, as noted above. We shall summarize three of these views: one from the school of the *realists*, and two from the schools of the *symbolists*. The first view is that of L.Y. Rahmani who, impressed by the similarity between some of the architectonic representations on ossuaries and the remains of monumental Jewish tombs from the Hellenistic and Roman period in Jerusalem, reached the conclusion that *all* ossuary ornamentation originated in the imitation of similar decorations on the

tombs, of the tombs themselves, and of the general atmosphere of Jewish cemeteries. Even flowers and trees are represented on ossuaries because they existed around the tombs(!). He therefore denies the need and the right to look for any symbolic interpretation of the ossuary motifs.²⁶

A second opinion is that of the late Prof. E. Goodenough who, in his monumental work on Jewish symbolism,²⁷ studied a large number of ossuaries. He was convinced that the Jews of the period borrowed many pagan symbols from the surrounding Hellenistic culture, and that they used them with the same or similar meaning in such religious sites as graves and synagogues. In his view, *all* the decorative elements on ossuaries must be understood as symbols, the very fact of their repetition proving that they were so intended. In his analysis of specific motifs, there is an absence of systematization, chronological rigor and attention to the archeological context. These failures led him to propose certain interpretations that are logical only to himself. We would particularly criticize as methodologically wrong his lack of reference to and comparison with symbols used by contemporary Jews in their religious literature. Indeed, he himself feels that one is left too much to one's own conjecture regarding the symbolic language used by Jewish artists: "This language I can only in part hope eventually to decipher, especially when it is on the ossuaries reduced so closely to a code."²⁸ Why not turn then to the more explicit use of symbols made by contemporary Jews in their writings when they dealt with such subjects as the Netherworld, life after death, Paradise, and so on? He could have done so better than anybody else, given his excellent knowledge of Jewish and related literature, thereby avoiding the high degree of subjectivity that characterises his explanations.

A third position in the debate is that taken by the Franciscan school of Jerusalem, which also claims a fixed and exact symbolism for the smallest detail of the ossuary ornaments. Here, however, the interpretation is always related to the doctrines of the Jewish-Christians, with whom Frs. Testa and Bagatti link the use of ossuaries in general, as noted above. They overwhelm us with literary references, although it is hard to find a chronological, geographical or historical relationship between them and the Jewish ossuaries. There is no substantive reason to relate such odd doctrines as those of the Gnostic *pleroma*, *ogdoad*, etc., or purely doctrinal beliefs about God, the Trinity, Christ, the Angels, or even the Constitution of the Church(!) to the ornaments of an ossuary. Anachronistic

26. His views are extensively developed in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Decoration on Jewish Ossuaries as Representation of Jerusalem's Tombs* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem, 1977), and summarized in several articles, such as the one mentioned above, n. 18.

27. Above, n. 3 and 24.

28. Vol. IV: p. 20.

quotations from much later Church Fathers make the literary basis for such interpretations suspect. The number of petals in a rosette is linked by Testa to various beliefs pertaining to numbers (3, 4+4, 6 6+1, 8+8, 12, 13, 24), so that one nearly forgets that we are dealing with the details of two symmetrical, highly-stylised floral forms decorating an ossuary. The latter was an object made for the purpose of containing, in the darkness of a rock-cut tomb, the bones of a dead person who had been brought to his final rest, not as visual aids to be used by doubtful theologians to facilitate teaching of their complicated doctrines. We must accept Testa and Bagatti's use of literary sources for a correct interpretation of the ossuary decoration as methodologically sound, but we must regret their lack of rigorous attention to context. In our opinion, one must first of all show a respect for the actual context (be it chronological, archeological, historical, geographical, ethnical or religious) in which these ornaments are found to have been used. Secondly, the presence of signs that could, in other contexts, be interpreted as known Christian symbols must not lead us to search for a Christian or Jewish-Christian explanation of all the other motifs, which can be perfectly well understood as purely Jewish. Again, each possible Christian symbol found in a Jewish context must be carefully studied to avoid misinterpretation.

After some years of research into the matter, we have reached the conclusion that it is possible to arrive at a more reasonable understanding of ossuary decoration, outside of the extreme positions mentioned above. Our point of departure is that one must consider Jewish ossuaries as strictly Jewish. Thus, when seeking an understanding of their ornaments, we must consider them first of all as a normal expression of contemporary Jewish art, that is, as originating in the Greco-Roman culture of the Land of Israel during the Herodian period, with its well-known Oriental features and tendencies.²⁹ Most of the ornaments on ossuaries belong to an artistic *lingua franca* used also by other peoples of the East, such as the Nabateans and Parthians. The style of this art, which often could be called craftsmanship, includes such characteristics as symmetry, stylization, *horror vacui*, pattern-following, and, among Jews, a total absence of human or animal figuration. Thus far, nothing forces us to seek a meaning transcending the purely decorative. But the fact that such decoration is in our case a receptacle used for secondary and final burial, an act of highly charged religious value, does not allow us to ignore its probable transcendent meaning. We maintain that it is absurd and methodologically wrong to deny *a priori* such transcendent meaning simply because each motif can be explained as purely decorative in other contexts, such as in objects of daily use. On the other hand, it is likewise wrong to

29. See M. Avi-Yonah, *Oriental Art in Roman Palestine* (Rome, 1961).

apply to each detail or to any single element of the ossuary decoration a symbolism that the same element certainly held in other contexts. There is an intermediate way of understanding the meaning of the ornaments, provided that we not forget their primary purpose. Even if they are not necessary, they are part of a ceremony which ensures, or at least represents, the final rest of a beloved relative — and this final rest, mentioned as we have seen in the texts related to ossilegium, was certainly not imagined in the abstract. It was rather imagined under the figures of the tree of life, or a fertile garden, an everlasting plantation; the deceased were described shining like stars in the firmament, drinking in happiness the drink of immortality, entering the gates of heaven, the eternal home, the gates of the palaces of the seventh heaven, etc. Innumerable images and symbols were used by poetic and apocalyptic writers to convey the happiness and everlasting rest promised to those pious Jews who shared faith in immortality or in final resurrection. Thorough research into contemporary literary descriptions of afterlife has convinced us that all those vases, trees, plants, flowers and architectonic elements representing sumptuous entrances decorating the ossuaries did relate to the happy afterlife that people wished for their dead. Ornamental motifs having their counterpart in contemporary Jewish literature related to such themes as death, life, and life after death are evocative of that wish. To see in the architectonic elements on ossuaries merely a physical imitation of funerary monuments of the time is to forget that these very monuments were themselves a representation of an eternal house into which the dead had entered forever. On the other hand, to see hidden symbolism in each and every element is also unjustified, because the artistic language of a decoration that repeats itself hundreds of times could not be so mysterious, and had to be understood by the people who used it. Finally, we must be aware of the fact that there is nothing peculiar in the existence of this kind of symbolism in Judaism, as a similar kind of symbolic language was common among many other peoples of the time, and continues to be so even today. We plead for a general evocative role of the decoration on ossuaries, not for a detailed and determined symbolic reading of each of its motifs.

IV. Conclusions

The practice of secondary burial by the most religious circles during the period immediately preceding the fall of the Second Temple, especially in Jerusalem, is an historical fact established both by Rabbinical texts and by archeological research. Its significance for Christianity is obvious in the historical and ideological context in which it developed, corresponding to that of the first generation of Christians. We do not know whether some of the latter were buried in this way, but it should not surprise us if such were the case. The Jewish-Christians shared their faith in personal resurrection and a happy after-life with the Pharisees, who seem to have been more devoted to the practice of ossilegium than any other contemporary sect in Judaism. The Qumran sect neither practiced

secondary burial nor held the hope for an individual resurrection.³⁰ The Saducees, who denied resurrection, also do not seem to have practiced ossilegium, for none of their sumptuous tombs in Jerusalem has yielded any ossuaries.

The Jewish ossuaries, with their large number of artistic motifs, are among the best preserved artifacts of the period. Had the Jewish-Christians expressed themselves artistically, their style would not have been much different. Their symbolic language was certainly similar, their patterns identical. But we cannot attribute to them alone what was surely common to a much larger circle. Besides, as the late Prof. Avi-Yonah used to remark, if all the tombs containing ossuaries belonged to the Jewish-Christians, where are the tombs of the non-Christian Jews? The link between secondary burial and the belief in individual resurrection is not established by any source, but may be the best explanation for the appearance of individual gathering of bones in Jewish tombs. Another question however remains: when and why did the Jews abandon this practice? Around Jerusalem, secondary burials are non-existent following the Jewish revolt under Bar-Kokhba, when Hadrian forbade Jewish and Jewish-Christians alike to live in Aelia Capitolina. Ossilegium was no longer generally practiced, so far as we know, in the major centers of Judaism — Yavneh, Sephoris and Tiberias. No ossuaries appear in the important necropolis of Beth-She'arim, though secondary burials in niches were found there. These probably belonged to Jews from the Diaspora, whose remains were transported to the Land of Israel for burial. Sporadic evidence of late ossuaries have been found, particular in the villages of southern Judea, such as Rimmon, north of Beersheba, which could be as late as the sixth century. By that time, however, Christians had been long venerating the relics of martyrs and saints, and reliquaries are to be found in most of the churches of the period. These stone boxes containing holy bones are similar, although smaller, to the Jewish ossuaries of the first century, and even more similar to the late ossuaries, some of which also have angle-horned lids, and even two compartments in the interior of the box, like most of the contemporary reliquaries.³¹ Is there any historical relation between Jewish and Christian ossilegium? Nobody can confirm this with certainty. However, two passages from the liturgical hymns attributed to the Jewish poet Yannai, who lived in Palestine in the sixth century C.E., specifically condemn “those who in the future will gather bones” and “those who will buy a gathering of bones.”³² The context of

30. For the cemetery of Qumran, see R. de Vaux, *Revue Biblique* 60 (1953), pp. 53–103; 61 (1964), pp. 200–207; 63 (1956), pp. 569–602; S.H. Stekoll, “Preliminary Excavation Report in the Qumran Cemetery,” *Revue de Qumran* 6 (1968), pp. 323–336.

31. Thanks are due to Mr. Peter Fabian, who kindly called our attention to these unpublished discoveries.

32. A. Murtonen, *Materials for a non-Massoretic Hebrew Grammar* (Helsinki, 1958), I: p. 104 and ק"ג.

these two passages is clearly anti-Christian, and probably anti-Jewish-Christian. These passages seem to have been unknown or overlooked by all earlier students of Jewish secondary burial. We find them most important, as they apply the ancient Mishnaic expression for ossilegium, *liqqut 'azamot*, to the abhorred Christian veneration of relics. Could this be the missing link between the two similar practices? We must not, however, forget that no particular interest was shown on the part of Christians to the remains of their dead prior to the latter half of the second century, as this appears for the first time in the *Acta Policarpi*, written far from Palestine, and not in a Jewish-, but in a Gentile-Christian community.

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