

MARESHAH & BETH GUVRIN

Mareshah. Mareshah was a city within the allotment given to the tribe of Judah (Josh. 15:44), about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. It is listed as one of the fortified cities that Rehoboam built early in the period of the Divided Kingdom (2 Chron. 11:5-12). A few years later, near Mareshah in the Valley of Zephathah, a great battle ensued; the Lord fought for Asa and Judah, giving them the victory over the enemy's army (2 Chron. 14:8-15). Micah 1:15 predicted Mareshah's destruction, which probably occurred in 701 B.C. at the hands of the Assyrian king Sennacherib. The king reported that his army laid siege to 46 fortified cities in Judah before besieging Jerusalem (*ANET*, 288). If the city was rebuilt in the seventh century B.C., it probably would have been destroyed by the Babylonians prior to Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C.



Tel Mareshah

Much later, during the Hellenistic period, Mareshah (Marissa) became the capital of the Idumeans. It was conquered by the Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus in the second century B.C., when he forced the Idumeans to convert to Judaism (Josephus *Antiquities* 13.9.1). When the Parthians destroyed the city in 40 B.C. (Josephus *Wars* 1.13.9), the population moved two miles north to Beth Guvrin.

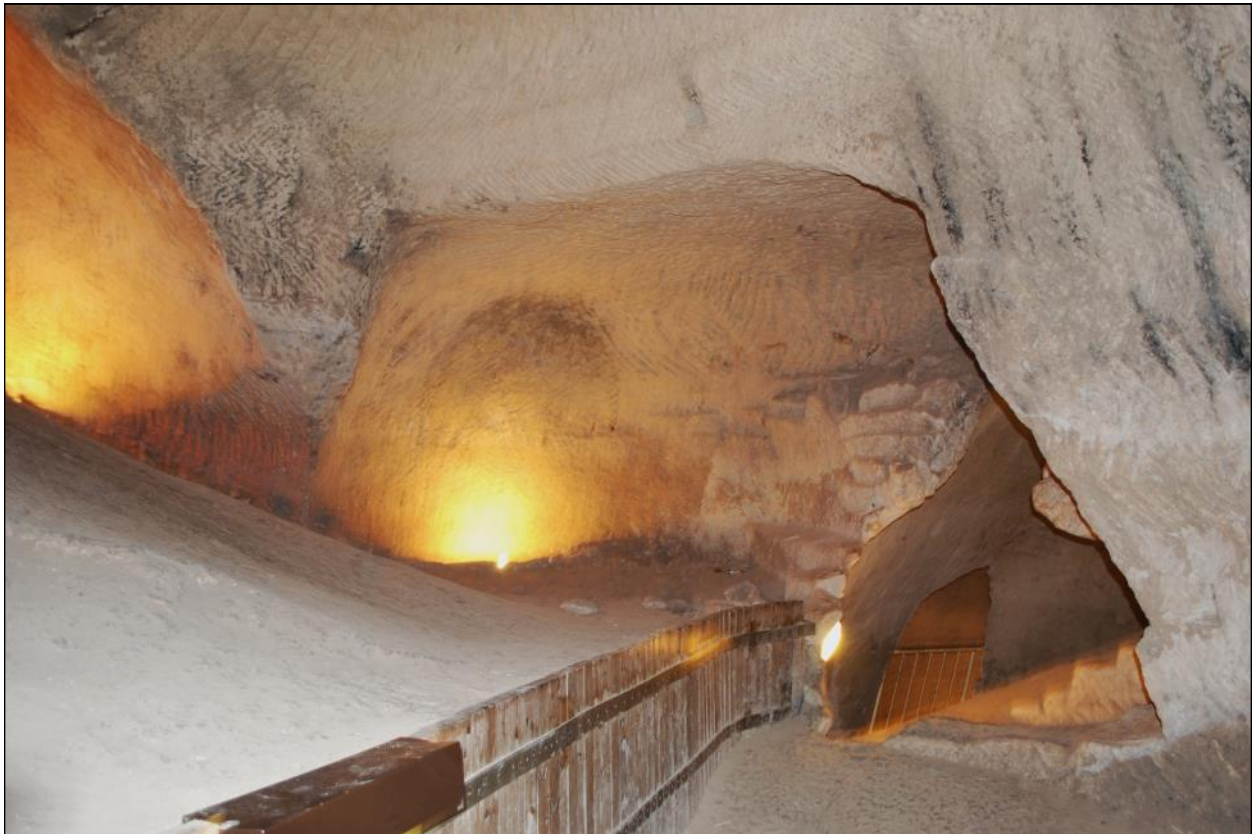


Excavations in 1992 – 1993 revealed an urban section including residential and shopping areas, dating to the 3rd – 2nd centuries BCE (the Hellenistic period). Each of the residential houses had a central yard surrounded by rooms, and a second storey. The residents quarried cisterns under the houses of the lower city. These cisterns were used for various purposes: water halls, baths, columbaria, oil presses, storage places, etc. Each cistern or cistern-complex had its own staircase descending from the house above. The connection between them, enabling access from one cistern to another without having to ascend to ground level, is a result of functional changes made in later periods.





Stairs Leading from the House to the Cistern Below



Beth Guvrin. Beth Guvrin had been a suburb of Mareshah, but in the Roman period it eventually became the prominent living center. The city thrived until the time of the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132-135). Then, about A.D. 200, the Roman emperor Septimus Severus turned Beth Guvrin into a major administrative center, and the city became known as Eleutheropolis, meaning “City of the Free.” The oval-shaped amphitheater, which seated 3,500 spectators, dates to this period and was utilized for gladiator and animal contests.



The Amphitheater

In earlier times, Beth Guvrin had been controlled by the Sidonians. The Tomb of the Sidonian dates back to the Hellenistic period. It was beautifully decorated, having animals, birds, plants, and other items painted on the tomb’s interior. The tomb was used by a leader of the settlement, Apollophanes, and his family members. Within the tomb, there are several burial niches carved in both sides of the chamber.

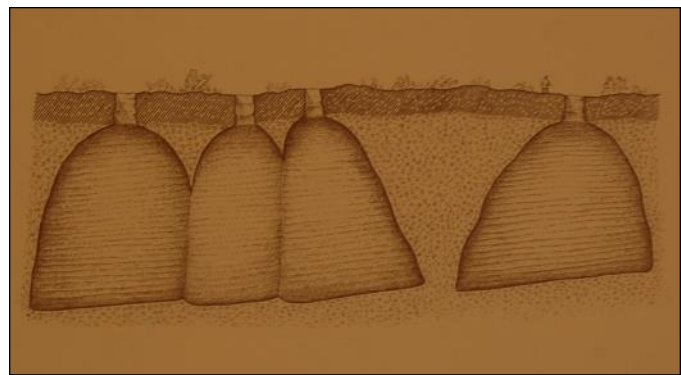
Approximately 800 bell-shaped caves can be found in this area. They resulted from ancient chalk quarrying, dating from about the sixth to the tenth centuries A.D. Since the rock in this area was soft, people would mine it to produce mortar and plaster. For the opening of the caves, a small hole (3.5 feet in diameter) was bored in the hard *nari* surface. After penetrating the surface, the workmen would gradually dig wider as they descended, leaving a hollow space in the shape of a bell.



A Side Entrance to the Bell Caves



Outside the Bell Caves



Drawing of the Bell Caves



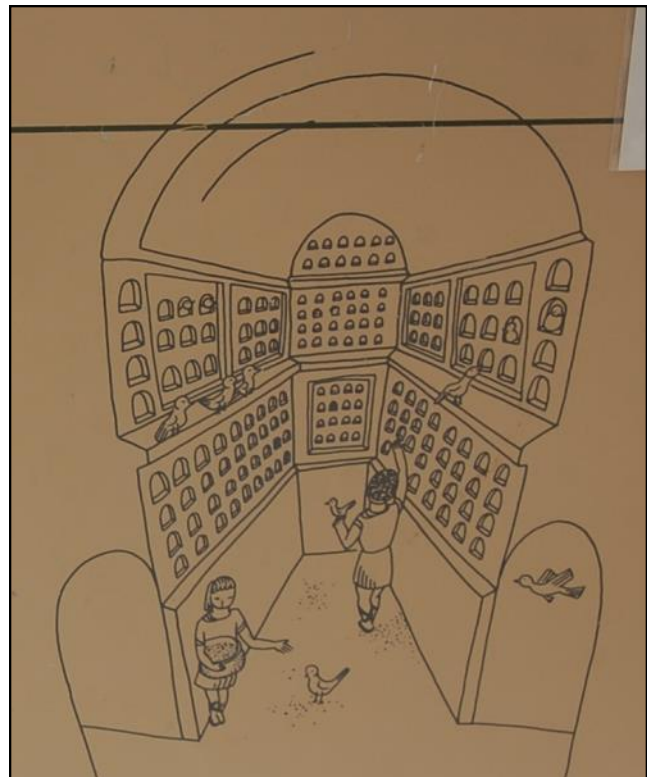




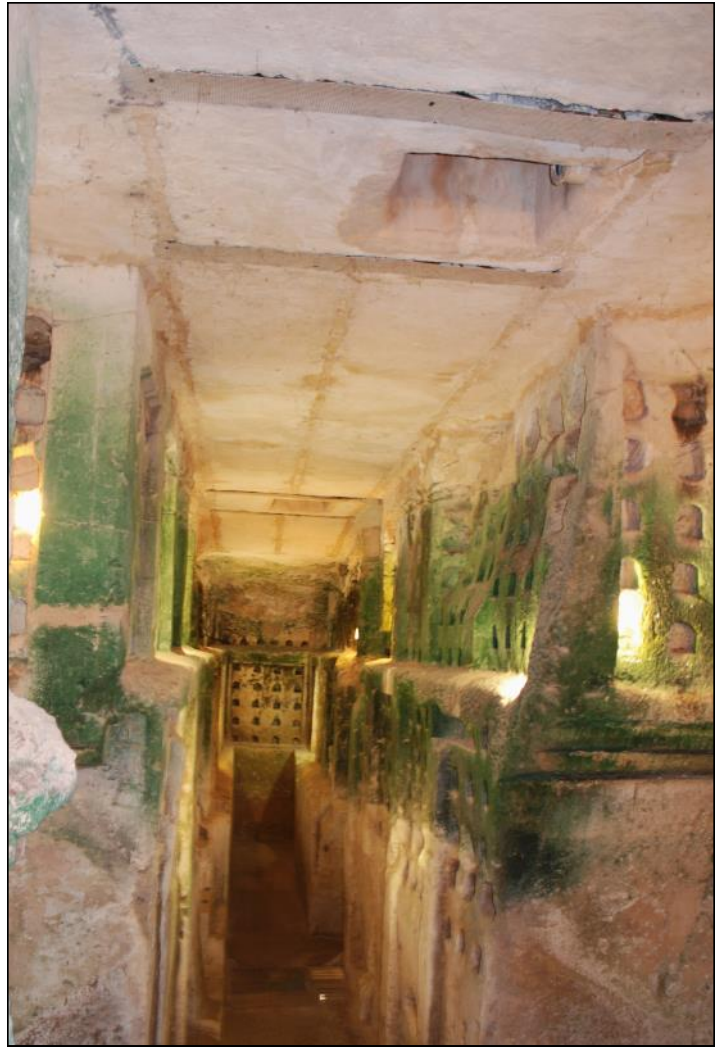
Other areas of interest include the Columbarium (c. 200 B.C.), a cave with hundreds of niches in which pigeons were raised. Their meat was used for food, their feathers for down, and their dung for fertilizer. The Columbarium was constructed in the shape of a double cross about 100 feet in length.

Another cavern features an olive press that was turned by a donkey (stage 1) and an olive press using stone weights as leverage (stage 2).

A final site is a church building from the time of the Crusaders (12th century A.D.). (For a schematic of Mareshah/Beth Guvrin, see Murphy-O'Connor, 215.)



Drawing of the Columbarium





Underground Olive Oil Press (Stage 1, Below)





Underground Olive Oil Press (Stage 2, Below)





Crusader Church Building