Chapter 2

The “Tombs of the Prophets” on the Mount of Olives
A Re-Examination

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The ramified rock-cut underground complex on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, known as the “Tombs of the Prophets,” is unique among the catacombs of Jerusalem. Its architecture is unusual, and the dating of its use is not sufficiently clear. The complex consists of a series of underground corridors forming a crescent around a round central hall. The plastered walls of the corridors contain elongated burial niches (loculi) with burial troughs cut in each floor. Numerous inscriptions, mostly in Greek, were carved into the plaster.

According to medieval traditions, the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are buried in this underground complex (Vilnai 1967, 150–54). References to the site by travelers and scholars are found starting in the seventeenth century (e.g., Cotovicus 1619, 263; Dapper 1677, 521). In the nineteenth century, several detailed descriptions were written and plans of the cave were drawn (see, e.g., Warren and Conder 1884, 403–4; Schick 1893 [see Fig. 2.1]; Vincent 1901 [see Fig. 2.2a–b]). Charles Clermont-Ganneau, who visited the site several times in 1870 and 1874, carried out the first detailed study of the cave. He surveyed the complex thoroughly, copying some of the inscriptions from the plaster of the corridor walls (Clermont-Ganneau 1899, 345–80).

The plan of the catacomb includes a round, central hall from which three corridors fan out, reaching two semicircular passages. The outer passage abuts a small Second Temple-period burial cave (Kloner and Zissu 2007, 208). The walls of the entire complex were plastered, and Greek inscriptions, dated to the fourth or fifth century CE, were carved in the plaster. In his detailed discussion of the cave and its inscriptions, Clermont-Ganneau dated the entire complex to the Byzantine period and suggested that this was a polyandron (πολυάνδριον), a common burial ground for strangers, probably Christian pilgrims who died while in Jerusalem and were buried there (1899, 376–80).

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Father Louis-Hugues Vincent, who surveyed the “Tombs of the Prophets” in the early twentieth century, also dated the complex to the Byzantine period, but mentioned the possibility that it was originally created during the Second Temple period (1901). Conrad Schick asserted that the complex originated in the Second Temple period, but was not completed and was later reused in the Byzantine period (1893, 131). Amos Kloner suggested that the cave was originally created in the Second Temple period as part of the Jerusalem necropolis and that it may be a “borrowed tomb”—a public burial ground for non-locals (1980, 27). He, too, noted that in the Byzantine period the complex was reused for the burial of Christian pilgrims who were not residents of Jerusalem (Kloner and Zissu 2007, 207–8). Joseph Patrich (1994, 206–9) also believed that the complex was originally created in the Second Temple period as a public Jewish burial place, perhaps for the use of Jewish pilgrims. All scholars noticed the outstanding shape and size of this underground complex, and the fact that there is no parallel in the extensive finds of burial caves within the Jerusalem necropolis.

A re-examination of the “Tombs of the Prophets” was conducted by the authors in 1996. The underground complex was accurately surveyed (Fig. 2.3) in an effort to add more details to the plans previously drawn by Schick (Fig. 2.1; 1893) and Vincent (Fig. 2.2a–b; 1901). The underground complex, which measures $29 \times 22.5$ m, can be divided into several parts and is discussed below.

The Entrance Hall

The hall is entered via a staircase, partly rock-cut and partly built of rectangular stones, descending from its northern side. The staircase is 1.8 m wide at the top and 1.3 m wide at the bottom. It ends at an opening about 1.5 m above the floor of the round entrance hall. From the opening, built stairs descend further to the level of the floor, ending 2.8 m inside the hall (Fig. 2.4). This segment is made of dressed limestone blocks, some of them in secondary use. A slab of stone in secondary use serves as a banister; it may have previously been part of a door made of dressed stone. A small rectangular opening ($0.8 \times 0.45$ m), surrounded by a sunken frame, was cut in the western side of the staircase. Such openings usually lead into burial caves, but this opening leads into a tiny, unfinished cavity.

The hall itself ($A$) is a rock-cut, rounded cavity, 9 m high, with a diameter of 7.8 m. There is a hole in the ceiling, perhaps evidence of an earlier stage.

1 All letters enclosed in parentheses refer to areas marked on Fig. 2.3.