“QUMRAN TYPE” GRAVES IN JERUSALEM: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF AN ESSENE COMMUNITY?

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In a salvage excavation\(^1\) performed by the Israel Antiquities Authority in Beit Safafa (southern Jerusalem), fifty graves from the Second Temple Period were discovered, of which forty-one were excavated.

Description of the Graves

The graves that were discovered constitute part of a large graveyard which was severely damaged by development activities (see fig. 1). Many graves were razed by mechanical tools prior to the commencement of archeological work on the site, while others have not yet been uncovered.

The graveyard extended to the south of the Repha‘im Valley, on a broad terrace located on the northern slope of a ridge facing west (see fig. 2).\(^2\) The graves are hewn in extremely close proximity to one

\(^1\) The salvage excavation (license number 2429-96) was carried out in February 1996, on the planned course of Road Number 4, under the direction of the author together with Haim Moyal. Participants included Naser Sanduka (site manager), Raz Nicolescu and Vadim Esman (surveyors) Nili and Abraham Graicer (photography), Dan Amir (logistics) and Avshalom Dadush, Asael Lavie, and Yoram Frumkin. We were also aided by Yael Gurin-Rosen (glass), Gideon Avni, Jon Seligman, Debby Tor and Gideon Solimany. I wish to thank Dr. Hanan Eshel for his comments on the manuscript. The full publication of this excavation is forthcoming in Atiqot. For a short, preliminary report, see B. Zissu and H. Moyal “Jerusalem, Beit Safafa (West),” Hadashot Arkheologiyot (Archaeological News) 106 (1996) 142-43 (Hebrew).

\(^2\) The graves were located at reference point 16855/12805, between Beit Safafa and Sharafat. It should be noted that at a distance of circa 300 m from the cemetery under discussion, Amit surveyed a hewn ritual bath (mikveh) dating from the second temple period, as well as other rock cut installations. See D. Amit, “Ritual Baths (Mikva‘ot) from the Second Temple Period in the Hebron Mountains,” Judea and Samaria Research Studies, Proceedings of the 3rd Annual Meeting—1993 (eds Z.H. Erlich and Y. Eshel; Kedumim: Ariel, 1993), 161-62, fig. 1 (Hebrew, English Summary).
Fig. 1: A general overview of the dig area (to the west) after the damage wrought by machinery.

Fig. 2: Aerial view of the excavation area. Note the course of the planned road, in the lower part of the photo; the arrow marks the graveyard area.