

ELIJAH'S CAVE ON
MOUNT CARMEL
AND ITS INSCRIPTIONS

Asher Ovadiah and Rosario Pierri

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Cover image (Fig. 53): An aedicula with a relief of the defaced image of the god Ba'al Carmel,
on the west wall of the Cave (Photo: Micha Pan)

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Preface

The task of cleaning, revealing and deciphering the inscriptions in Elijah's Cave was made possible thanks to the aid of various institutions and people who assisted in the work. The former Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums (now the IAA) and the Association of Archaeological Survey in Israel, which initiated the project and assisted in the difficult task. I am grateful to the late Professor Avraham Biran, head of the former Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, who entrusted me with this important undertaking. I am deeply indebted to Mr Raphael Floresheim, surveyor for the Archaeological Survey of Israel Association, who spent many long and tedious hours with me in the heat of the cave, preparing its plan and sections, as well as the precise detailed diagrams recording the location of the inscriptions on the walls of the Cave and numbering them consecutively. I would also like to thank Mr Micha Pan and Mr Garo Nalbandian, Jerusalem, who photographed most of the inscriptions published here, unless otherwise stated. I am grateful too to the late Mr Ya'akov Olami, Haifa, engineer and head of

the northern branch of the Archaeological Survey and to the late Dr Moshe Prausnitz, archaeologist for the coastal district in the former Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, who assisted me during all the stages of work in the Cave. My sincere thanks also to the late Fr Elias Friedman of the Stella Maris Carmelite Monastery on Mount Carmel, Haifa, with whom, while collecting and preparing the material for publication, I exchanged ideas in fruitful talks and in extensive correspondence. I wish to convey my thanks for their kind assistance to Mrs Rimma Tulenkov and Mr Leonid Rankov, librarians of the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, where I spent a long period of time using the rich collection of its library. My gratitude to Ms Naomi Paz, Tel Aviv University, for her linguistic editing. Finally, I want to express my appreciation for the considerable help given me by Ruth, my wife, who stood by me during the long, difficult and tiring field work in the Cave's average temperature of 40 degrees centigrade.

Asher Ovadiah

Introduction

The north-west ridge of Mount Carmel consists for the most part of exposed rock, dropping precipitously down to the sea. Elijah's Cave is located on the slope of the cliff, at the foot of the promontory of Mount Carmel, at a height of approx. 40m above sea level on the western outskirts of Haifa (map ref. NIG 1974/7483; OIG 1474/2483) (**Figs. 1-4**). According to tradition, this is the Cave where the Prophet Elijah stayed as he was preparing to battle the prophets of Ba'al during the reign of Ahab, King of Israel, in the 9th century BCE. The Cave is also known by its Arabic name, el-Khatser or el-Khader (the Green One),¹ or the "School of the Prophets".

In 1949, the staff of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums² and a number of local Haifa residents noticed inscriptions engraved on the walls of Elijah's Cave, covered with a thick layer of lime and soot. The team of The Archaeological Survey of Israel, northern region, surveyed the Cave and confirmed the importance of the inscriptions.³ The Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums launched a project to clean the inscriptions, funded with the assistance of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The investigation of Elijah's Cave with the intention of uncovering, deciphering and studying the inscriptions was carried out by Asher Ovadiah in June-October 1966.⁴ An attempt was made at the time to elucidate the purpose of the Cave in the Hellenistic, Roman and early Byzantine periods.

The Cave and the engraved inscriptions had not been previously researched in a systematic and thorough

manner. It had, however, aroused the attention of pilgrims, travellers, visitors and scholars, who had visited the site for generations, probably even earlier than the Roman period and certainly later. In later generations, from the beginning of the 12th century onwards (according to extant literary and historical sources), visitors/pilgrims described Elijah's Cave briefly and concisely and, if the inscriptions caught their eye, they copied some of them.

The *onomasticon* consists of Greek names, as well as Latin and Semitic ones in Greek transliteration or transcription. Some Greek and Latin names were adopted by Jews and were in use among them. Some of the inscriptions are fragmentary or incomplete. Accordingly, an attempt has been made to restore them, either on the basis of the syntax or of the *prefix/suffix* of the proper names, in order to decipher and understand them. In addition, Hebrew inscriptions were revealed, consisting of masculine and feminine Jewish personal names, most probably of Jews from Acre/Acco⁵ who visited the Cave in the 18th and 19th centuries and perhaps even earlier. Despite the difficulties, the research was highly stimulating and intellectually challenging.⁶

In order to examine the frequency and dissemination of the discussed proper names, a comprehensive comparative study was carried out with names featuring in Antiquity and Late Antiquity.

¹ Press 1952: 507-508, s.vv: 'Carmel', 'The Carmel', 'Mount Carmel'.

² Amiran, R. and Landau, Y. (see the archives of the Department of Antiquities and Museums [now the IAA]).

³ See the archives of The Archaeological Survey of Israel, IAA.

⁴ See Ovadiah 1966: 284-285; Ovadiah 1969: 99-101.

⁵ See Buckingham 1821: 120-121; see also below, nn. 85, 305. For the testimony of Giambattista di S. Alessio (lived on Mount Carmel during the years 1765-1774), that the grotto also contained Hebrew inscriptions, see below, p. 12 and n. 82.

⁶ The present book is a revised and expanded version of two articles, which appeared in 2012 in the following publications: Ovadiah and Pierri 2012: 29-76; Ovadiah and Pierri 2012: 203-282.

Chapter I

Plan, Ornamentation and Surroundings

Elijah's Cave, having the shape of a parallelogram with no right-angled corners, is oriented south-southwest to north-northeast and facing the sea. Its dimensions are: 14.50m long, 8.70m wide and 4.50-5m high (Figs. 8-11). The ceiling of the Cave is rough, with pieces of the soft limestone rock having crumbled over the years. It appears primarily to have been a natural cave, and over the course of time to have been elaborated, enlarged and adapted for religious purposes. Its walls had been smoothly finished, rendering the Cave suitable for use.⁷ These alterations were carried out in ancient times, as evidenced by the inscriptions engraved on the walls. A detailed inspection revealed that the natural cave floor sloped down from the opening in the north towards the south, according to the rock stratification. This is indicated by: (a) the fracture existing in its west wall that slopes southwards from the Cave opening; and (b) the rough and irregular cuts on the sides of the wall below the fracture. It can therefore be assumed that, as the Cave was enlarged and improved, the level of the natural cave floor was lowered by approx. 50cm.⁸ The natural entrance to the Cave is on its north side; the opening is large and irregular, 3.50m high and approx. 4m wide. Over time, the eastern half of this entrance became blocked, as a result of buildings being placed alongside it or abutting onto it. Thus, the width of the Cave's entrance was halved (to approx. 2m wide) and it has remained like this to the present day. This change to the original entrance has led the present opening to be located on the western half of the north wall of the Cave (Figs. 6-8a). The inner northern side of the opening has a wall 2m long to the west and 4.20m to the east.⁹

A rock-hewn bench extends along the base of almost the entire length of the eastern section of the north wall (4m). The bench is 50cm high and 70cm deep. Its eastern half

is divided into two steps, the lower one 30cm deep and the upper one 40cm deep (Figs. 8, 8a). Along the base of almost the entire length of the west wall of the Cave was another rock-hewn bench, starting 1.50m from its north-west corner; it extended 12m and ended approx. 60cm before the south-western corner, where it joined the western "table" (both no longer extant). The "table" was built in stone facing, rectangular in shape and measuring 0.60 x 2.20m, with a height of approx. 1m (Figs. 8, 8a). The eastern "table" (also no longer extant) was built in the same way, almost rectangular, measuring 0.70-1 x 2m, with a height of approx. 1m. It should be noted that the two "tables" do not feature in two photographs taken in 1893 and 1910 (Figs. 9, 10), and therefore were added later, sometime in the course of the 20th century. It seems that they were built for offerings to be placed on them (later, lit candles were placed on them in honour of the Prophet Elijah). Along the base of the entire length of the south wall of the Cave another bench,¹⁰ hewn out of the rock, is discernible.

The inscriptions on the east and west walls of the Cave are in a reasonable height from the rock-hewn floor level (Figs. 19, 19a, 19b, 19c). The accessibility of the inscriptions means that they could have been easily engraved and read. In some cases, however, the inscriptions are only accessible when standing on a ladder. The highest inscriptions are approx. 3.10m (No. 76 on the west wall) and 2.90m (No. 148 on the east wall), while the lowest ones on both walls are 40-50cm above floor level. The marked density of the inscriptions placed at average human height is due to the ease with which this height could be reached by the engravers; this often has resulted in inscriptions being superimposed on earlier ones.

The surface of the south wall does not have a smooth finish, and there is evidence that the soft rock has crumbled away. A semicircular niche was hewn in the rock in this wall; its top is carved as a conch, not well preserved, with a radius of 50cm and height of 42cm. Above the conch there is a plastered rectangular recess (ca. 70cm high and ca. 50cm deep), which is an integral part of the semicircular niche (Figs. 8, 8a, 14-16b).¹¹ The measurements of the niche are as follows: height - 2.50m from the top of the rectangular recess and 2.32m from the top of the conch to its floor, width - 1.18m and depth - 1.05m. The semicircular niche is surrounded on its three sides by a double frame (the inner frame is 9cm wide and

⁷ Guérin (1875 [1969]: 273) and Meistermann (1923: 435) also held the view that the Cave was primarily natural: "Si elle était d'abord naturelle, elle a été ensuite agrandie et régularisée par la main de l'homme;" "An artificial regularity has been given to its shape, and its walls are covered with a coating upon which innumerable pilgrims – Greek, Latin, Arabian, etc. – have cut their names and invocations" (Guérin and Meistermann, respectively). This is contrary to the opinion that the Cave is an artificial one (see Friedman 1979: 139, 145).

⁸ Trial archaeological excavations were conducted inside Elijah's Cave as part of its conservation and the development of the surrounding area by Haifa Municipality, the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The excavation was led by A. Zemer and A. Ziegelman in January 1983 (License No. 1193). During the excavation, a 50cm-deep fill was revealed under the modern floor level that contained a mixture of pottery finds dating from the Middle Bronze Age to the late Islamic period, as well as a coin from the 4th century CE (my thanks are due to A. Zemer, who was kind enough to give me this valuable information in writing and in person). On removing the fill, the excavators exposed the Cave's natural rock floor, which can still be seen today along the walls. The difference between the rock-hewn floor level and the present floor is 32-48cm.

⁹ Cf. Friedman 1979: 140.

¹⁰ Cf. Friedman 1979: 142.

¹¹ For the opinion that the semicircular niche has two stages of carving, a) the original rectangular recess, perfectly regular in shape, to house a cult statue (idol), and b) the superimposed niche, far from being regularly prepared, to be used as a *mihrab*, see Friedman 1979: 142.

the outer one 8cm wide). The outer frame juts out a few more centimetres than the inner one, forming a double stepped frame. On both sides of the frame are the remains of carved motifs within vertical, flat panels (31cm wide), forming another decorative frame. The eastern panels are better preserved than the western ones, but there is every indication that the decoration would have been the same on both sides. The decorative motifs are only preserved on the upper panels. The panels are separated by carved horizontal bands (2-3cm wide). The upper panel depicts a scale motif, forming a continuous geometric pattern. The lower panel depicts a vessel (perhaps a *kylix*), 31cm high, rendered two-dimensionally (Figs. 14, 17). The vessel has three tall feet bound together in the middle by a ring or ribbon. Two of the feet are shown in side view, in an inward-leaning spiral, and the third foot, which can be seen between them, is shown frontally, in an unsuccessful attempt to render perspective. Towards the top of the feet, beneath the body of the amphora, two round stylized "buttons" are depicted. The deep, concave outline of the amphora has spiral-shaped forms on the two upper sides (possibly spiral shaped handles). The body of the vessel is depicted in a flat, stylized manner and has ten vertical ribs represented by bold incisions. In the third panel, the scale motif is repeated, but the design has not survived here in its entirety. We may assume that below this last panel were additional ones, probably further carved and with decorative motifs similar to those described above, but they have now been completely destroyed. Of the western panels, only the top and second one are preserved, depicting the scale motif and the ribs of the body of another similar vessel. Some features, like the spirally curved feet, the round "buttons",¹² the ribbing on the body, the rim and the spiral handles shown on the eastern vessel, suggest that it depicts a metal vessel. In other words, the craftsman envisaged a metal vessel when copying it onto the Cave wall. The vessel (or perhaps the *kylix*) is remarkable for its shape and particularly because of the three legs bound together, the round "buttons" and the form of the body (Figs. 14, 17). To date, we have no comparative examples with which to compare and/or date it. The scale motif is used very commonly in different artistic media,¹³ as well as in mosaic floors from the Hellenistic,¹⁴ Roman¹⁵ and early Byzantine periods (including early Byzantine-period mosaics in Israel).¹⁶ This motif in Elijah's Cave can be attributed to the 1st-3rd centuries CE, based on circumstantial and epigraphic evidence.

Approximately 65cm above the double frame of the semicircular niche an architectural motif of dentils, very common in Greek and Roman architecture,¹⁷ is carved. The motif is divided into two groups of four dentils each, with

an interval of 30cm between the groups. In the interval, and in the area between the dentils and the double frame, the rock is rough and shows signs of wear, suggesting that there may once have been some kind of relief decoration here. To the side of the dentils two rectangular depressions hewn in the rock have survived (approx. 15 x 10 x 15cm), but they do not symmetrically match the semicircular niche. They may be later additions used to hold a beam to hang a curtain above the semicircular niche.

In addition to the decorative frames, there are two concave depressions, one on each side, hewn vertically in the rock (today partially covered with plaster) measuring 0.44 x 3m (Fig. 18). They may both have been intended to hold a decorative pillar of stucco, wood or stone.¹⁸

There is no doubt that the semicircular niche with the decorative frames around it fulfilled some purpose in the Cave, most probably the placement of the cult statue (idol) of the god Ba'al Carmel, identified with Zeus/Jupiter, in the Roman period.¹⁹ The general impression, however, based mainly on archaeological considerations, and historical and epigraphic evidence (see below), is that the decorative motifs are consistent with the Roman Imperial period.

Above each of the "tables" mentioned above, a square depressed area can be identified hewn in the rock. These depressions probably contained various decorations that have not survived. Today, the two depressions are for the most part eroded and covered with plaster and soot.

A worked-relief band, with a central groove running its entire length, forms a decorative border around the top of the south, east and west walls, reaching almost their entire length. The band is covered with soot and is virtually indistinguishable. The decorative elements inside the Cave suggest a willingness and desire to beautify its interior and to emphasize artistic and aesthetic aspects. The main focus of decoration is on its south wall.

At a distance of 4.30m from the north-east end of the east wall lies an opening leading to a small rectangular room, so-called the smaller or secondary grotto, attributed to the cell and oratory of the Prophet Elijah (Figs. 8, 8a, 12). It is hewn into the rock and its floor is ca. 45cm higher than the main floor of the Cave. It measures 3.40m long, 3m wide and 2.50m high. The opening, which is 3.50m wide and 2.70m high, had three steps hewn in the rock, 90cm wide (nowadays the steps have a stone facing and are longer – ca. 3.50m); the original steps were approx. 6m (nowadays are ca. 4.30m) from the north-eastern corner of the east wall of the Cave. The north and east walls of this room were fitted with rock-hewn benches (no longer extant). The dimensions of the northern bench were: 2.30m long, 85cm deep and ca. 90cm high. The dimensions of the eastern

¹² See the two points shown beneath the border, on the sides of cups, depicted on two coins from the First Revolt (66-70 CE) (Meshorer 1966: 113, Pl. XIX [148-150]).

¹³ Cf. Ovadiah 1980: 154-157.

¹⁴ Cf. Ovadiah 1980: 154.

¹⁵ Cf. Ovadiah 1980: 154.

¹⁶ Cf. Ovadiah and Ovadiah 1987: 206 (J3 – Imbrication [Scale Pattern]).

¹⁷ Robertson 1969: 47-48, 159, 383; MacDonald 1986: Ills. 80, 97, 135, 153, 159, 195, 196 (on pp. 85, 98, 150, 169, 186, 240, 242).

¹⁸ See the rock-hewn niches topped with conches at Paneas/Banias, flanked by false pillars giving them the appearance of a temple façade (*aedicula*) (Ovadiah and Turnheim 2011: Pls. IIIa, IVb, V).

¹⁹ At Gebal/Byblos there is a cave with a similar niche flanked with side pillars, with cornices in its upper part and a conch (see Renan 1864: 204, Pl. XXVIII).

bench were: 3m long, 80cm deep and ca. 50cm high. The two benches formed an L-shape. The south wall features a rectangular niche (not featuring in the above-mentioned photograph taken in 1893 [Fig. 9]), hewn in the rock, lined with construction stones and currently used to house Torah scrolls.²⁰ Many legends and stories are connected with this secondary grotto, though attested to only from the time of the return of the Carmelites to Mount Carmel in 1631.

According to the belief of modern-day visitors/pilgrims, and probably also in the past, the Cave has the power to heal and save those who sleep in it for at least one night, especially the mentally ill or barren women (Fig. 13). It is

not inconceivable that this reflects an ancient tradition. In front of the Cave is a rectangular paved courtyard, which visitors/pilgrims use on weekdays and at festivals (Fig. 5). At a distance of 2.50m from the north-west corner of the Cave is a rock-hewn cistern. The opening is square (1 x 1m) and 6m deep. The cistern was designed to store rainwater, which flowed into it from the mountain slope via a hewn channel, whose remains have been revealed close by. Elijah's Cave is today surrounded by buildings that have adjoined it at different periods and there is no trace of the complexes mentioned in various literary/historical sources (see below).

²⁰ Cf. Kopp 1929: 35-36; Friedman 1979: 140-142.