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Why Bone Boxes?
Splendor of Herodian Jerusalem reflected in burial practices

By Steven Fine

People who hear of it for the first time are always surprised: Ancient Jews practiced secondary burial, gathering into bone boxes called ossuaries the bones of their dead a year or so after death, when the flesh had desiccated and fallen off.

Ossilegium, as scholars call it today, was practiced by Jews mainly in Jerusalem and environs for about a hundred years—from just before the turn of the era until the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. (the late Second Temple period). The body was first placed on a shelf carved in a burial cave; after it decayed the bones were transferred to an ossuary. Ossilegium is also known from numerous other cultures. It was practiced, for example, in western Asia Minor, in the area around Ephesus, at about the same time as in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem ossuaries are small chests made of limestone, or, very occasionally, clay. The typical ossuary is carved from a single piece of limestone and is about

2 feet long, about 1 foot wide and a 1.5 feet high. The removable lid is either flat, gabled or rounded. The design and decoration of the ossuaries resemble those of wooden caskets discovered in Jericho and Ein Gedi, near the Dead Sea. Similar wooden caskets were undoubtedly used in Jerusalem, but because of the wetter climate these have not survived. Most of the ossuaries are unadorned. Some, however, are decorated, most commonly with geometric motifs that were designed using a straight edge or a compass and scratched into the soft limestone with an awl. Often the name of the deceased, the family relationship (mother, father, etc.) and less often, the profession, is scratched on the outside of the ossuary.

A 1994 catalogue lists 895 ossuaries in the archaeological collections of the State of Israel, but many more exist in other collections.[1]

The problem that has vexed scholars ever since these Jewish ossuaries have become known is: Why, for this short period of time, did the Jews of Israel's holiest city, Jerusalem, use ossuaries? The practice developed suddenly and just as suddenly, stopped.

According to a standard archaeological encyclopedia, "It is widely agreed … that Jewish secondary burial in ossuaries was driven by two theological beliefs: resurrection of the body, and expiation of sin via the decomposition of human flesh."[2] The theory is that the bones of an individual were segregated in an ossuary so that they would be ready for resurrection. This explanation is very difficult to accept at face value. Indeed, elements of it are just plain wrong. The relatively sudden use of ossuaries may have more to do with the development of the stone-carving industry than with these theological beliefs.

Before ossuaries came into use, the bodies of the deceased were at first laid out in caves on stone shelves or in long cavities called *loculi*. When more space was needed in the cave, the bodies were exhumed and placed in charnel piles. The earlier practice of charnel piles was discontinued and ossuary burial begun, according to one noted authority, L.Y. Rahmani, between 20 and 15 B.C.E.[3] Charnel burial can also be seen in Byzantine monasteries in the Sinai and the Judean deserts, where the bones are neatly arranged, with long bones together and skulls in pyramidal stacks. As with the early Jewish charnel piles, the bones of many individuals are intermingled.

It is true that during the first century C.E. and thereafter there was much interest in Jewish circles in the idea of resurrection of the dead. Indeed, it was the subject of a major disagreement between Pharisees and Sadducees. In a famous passage in Acts 23:6–8, Paul identifies himself as a Pharisee who believes in the resurrection of the dead:

When Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial.” And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

The Pharisaic view continued into rabbinic Judaism. According to the Mishnah, the earliest authoritative rabbinic text, “Anyone who does not believe in the resurrection of the dead does not have a place in the world to come.”[4]

We do not know how widespread the belief in bodily resurrection was in first-century Jerusalem, nor do we know how widely accepted Pharisaic norms were. Therefore, we cannot link the use of ossuaries with a belief in bodily resurrection. Some ossuaries even appear to have contained the bones of Sadducees, who by all accounts did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. For example, members of the family of Caiaphas, the Sadducean high priest who, according to gospel accounts, presided over Jesus’ trial, were apparently buried in ossuaries

(see the sidebar “The Tomb of Caiaphas”); one of the ossuaries discovered in Jerusalem just a few years ago bears an inscription “Joseph son of Caiaphas.”[a] An ossuary found in another Sadducee burial cave is inscribed “Yehohanah daughter of Yehohanan, son of Thophlos, the high priest.”[5]

There is also an archaeological reason to doubt the connection between belief in bodily resurrection and the use of ossuaries. As mentioned, it has been suggested that, unlike those in a charnel pile, the bones of an individual segregated in an ossuary will be ready for resurrection when the time comes. But the archaeological evidence suggests otherwise. Many ossuaries contain the bones of more than one individual. One of the Caiaphas ossuaries, for example, contained the bones of six individuals. Only a small number of ossuary inscriptions suggest that the box was reserved for a single individual.[6] For many others, the burial of family members together—mothers and babies, husbands and wives, fathers and sons—was noted with an inscription on the exterior of ossuaries.[7]

A corollary to the Pharisee hypothesis regarding ossuary burial is the oft-repeated hypothesis that secondary burial reflected a belief in the Pharisaic concept of the expiation of sins. That is to say, once the flesh of the deceased had disintegrated, the bones became spiritually pure. But there is no literary support for this belief during the Second Temple period. It is merely a scholarly hypothesis, not an established fact. Scholars who have made this argument have often culled from sources spread throughout late rabbinic literature and then have ingeniously woven passages together. Moreover, the argument unjustifiably assumes agreement between the Pharisees and subsequent rabbinic sages who lived centuries later and often hundreds of miles away; that is, it assumes a static attitude toward death and burial in Pharisaic and rabbinic circles without bothering to prove it. Although many practices of the Second Temple period did continue into the rabbinic age (for example, in techniques for writing holy books,

the making of tefillin [phylacteries] and the selection of scriptural passages to be read in synagogues), such continuities must be proven and not merely asserted. That has not happened here. The assertion of continuity is especially problematic because of the abrupt, almost complete halt in Jewish ossilegium after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. The practice had disappeared completely by the fourth century.[8]

A partial explanation for the use of ossuaries can be found in the economics of Second Temple period Judea. Ossuary burial started roughly when Herod the Great began his massive reconstruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. The Temple renovation in fact began in about 20 B.C.E., precisely when Rahmani dates the beginning of ossuary burial in Jerusalem—between 20 and 15 B.C.E. A major infusion of cash undoubtedly accompanied the ambitious project, expanding Jerusalem's economy and facilitating the transformation in burial practices.

A second factor, however, was just as important: the rise of a well-trained community of stone masons necessary for the construction of Herodian Jerusalem, especially the Temple, Herod's palace and the Temple Mount. The fabrication of ossuaries was predicated on the stone-carving industry. At the same time we find other stone objects becoming common—for example, stone tables and dinnerware.[b] Indeed, the rise of the stone industry has been dated to within 30 years of the first ossuaries, about 50 B.C.E. In short, ossuary burial was made possible by the development of the local stone-carving industry, which in turn was largely fueled by Jerusalem's greater prosperity after the rise of Herod the Great.

The clear relationship between the stone-carving industry required for Herod's rebuilding of the Temple and the introduction of limestone ossuaries is reflected in the frequent architectural decoration on ossuaries. Images of funerary monuments and of other monumental buildings appear on the exteriors of ossuaries, bringing important aspects of the new architectural cityscape of late Hasmonean/Herodian Jerusalem into the crypts themselves. One group of ossuaries, for example, reproduces in a schematic fashion the borders that are so typical of Herodian masonry in its depiction of an ashlar wall. Other ossuaries present images of colonnades with columns whose capitals resemble Herodian capitals, and of building facades similar to those constructed in the necropoli along the byways of Herodian Jerusalem.

When the city was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., ossuary burial practically stopped. This strongly suggests that Jewish ossuary burial was tied to the culture and prosperity of first-century Jerusalem.

Ossilegium also seems to have provided for more personalized burial within family crypts, and in some cases for individual burial. As already noted, numerous ossuaries bear the names of the individuals buried within them. While some of the deceased are referred to in simple familial terms, “mother” (*imma*), “father” (*abba*) and the like, others bear longer and well-incised epithets.[9]

This individualization follows a general pattern within the Greco-Roman world. Clearly there were Jews in first-century C.E. Jerusalem for whom the identity of each individual was important. Theological motivations or explanations for this practice also must have existed, although we do not know what they are because of the paucity of literary sources. Was ossilegium associated with the resurrection of the dead? Perhaps for some—but we cannot say this was the generally accepted meaning. There is simply no evidence to support this contention. We only know that even though individual burials were rare, ossilegium was preferred over completely anonymous charnel burial. The rise of ossuary burial and the decline of charnel burial seems to be related to developing notions of the individual’s place within society, and particularly, within the family.

This, in combination with the economic conditions described above, explains the phenomenon of Jewish ossilegium in first-century C.E. Jerusalem, based on available archaeological and literary evidence. So little evidence has survived, it seems to me that this explanation is the best we can do, at least until the next discovery!

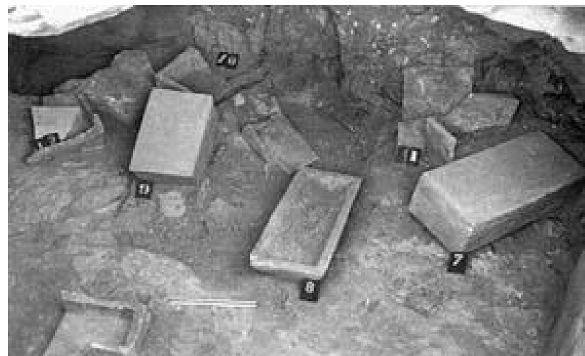
This article is based upon an article by Steven Fine entitled “A Note on Ossuary Burial and the Resurrection of the Dead in First Century Jerusalem,” Journal of Jewish Studies *51 (2000), pp. 67–76.*

The Tomb of Caiaphas

Sidebar to: Why Bone Boxes?

One cold day in November 1990 the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) in Jerusalem received what seemed to be a routine call. A construction crew working in the Jerusalem Peace Forest had uncovered an ancient burial cave. To the IAA this came as no great surprise, as that area, directly south of the Old City, had served as a huge necropolis in the late Second Temple period (30 B.C.E.–70 C.E.). Nevertheless, the IAA promptly sent archaeologist Zvi Greenhut to check out the report.

Looking down through the collapsed ceiling of the cave, Greenhut noticed four limestone ossuaries, or bone boxes, scattered about in the cave's central chamber (photo below). He knew immediately that the cave was a Jewish burial site because the custom of secondary burial, for which ossuaries were used, arose in Jerusalem only among Jews and only during the century preceding the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., as described in later literary sources.



Secondary burial occurred about a year after the deceased had been laid to rest on a rock-cut shelf or in a niche cut into a wall of a burial cave. When the flesh had decomposed, relatives of the deceased would gather the bones and redeposit them in a bone box, and then slide the box into a niche, or loculus (or in Hebrew, kokh) in the cave. The box might later be retrieved and the bones of other family members be placed within it as well.

The cave-tombs in which secondary burial occurred were often elegantly appointed both inside and out, wrought by skilled craftsmen whose services were a luxury available only to the wealthiest of Jerusalem's citizens.[c]

When Greenhut and other IAA archaeologists lowered themselves into the cave they found four loculi, cut about 6 feet deep into the rock and about 18 inches wide and high. Three of the loculi were empty because construction workers had moved from them the four ossuaries that Greenhut had first spotted from the roof. Six other ossuaries lay overturned and broken, vandalized long ago by tomb robbers. But wedged inside one of the loculi the team found two ossuaries resting, untouched, where they had been placed nearly two millennia before.
The ossuaries in the cave were attractively decorated with rosettes, geometric designs and architectural and plant motifs. Five were inscribed with the names of those whose bones were interred inside, a common practice. There was no hint of the exceptional find this cave was about to yield.

Only when the two previously untouched ossuaries were brought out from their loculus did the archaeologists begin to suspect they had found something special. On the lid of one ossuary they saw the name "Qafa," an Aramaic form of the Greek family name Caiaphas. The second, an especially ornate box (above), bore on its side the Aramaic inscription "Yehosef bar Qayafa," or "Joseph, son of Caiaphas" (below).

These two ossuaries with the same name indicate that this was the burial cave of the prominent priestly family of Caiaphas. Could the box be the repository of the high priest, who, according to the Gospels, interrogated Jesus before turning him over to the Romans?

The name Caiaphas appears in both Christian and Jewish sources, including the first-century C.E. Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (whose reference to "Joseph who was called Caiaphas of the high priesthood" uses the same variation of spelling as on the ossuaries), as well as in several rabbinic works. Certainly the

cave was appropriately located for a family of the Temple aristocracy, in the neighborhood of several other elaborate cave-tombs dated to the same period.
The ossuaries are awkwardly inscribed, obviously not by the practiced hands of professional stone workers. Perhaps a relative scratched the names on the boxes to identify their contents after they had been stowed away in their niche. The inscriptions were clearly not intended for public display.

In the embellished ossuary inscribed with the name “Yehosef bar Qayafa” were the bones of six different individuals: two infants, a child between the ages of two and five, a boy aged 13 to 18, an adult woman and a man about 60 years old. The latter, archaeologists believe, was the Caiaphas of the New Testament.
Among the hundreds of names in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, only six from the period between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E. had previously been attested by archaeological artifacts. To that short list, these ossuaries now added a seventh name. In providing the first historical confirmation of an important New Testament figure, the routine phone call of November 1990 had proved to be far from routine after all.