

THE NEWLY DISCOVERED ROCK-CUT TOMBS CLOSE  
TO THE JEREMIAH GROTTA NEAR JERUSALEM.

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For some years the "Battlefield" with the neighbouring ground west and north of the Jeremiah Grotto has been the property of the Dominican Order; houses have been built there, the ground examined, and a high division wall erected on the road by the side of the hill of the Jeremiah Grotto.

When the foundations of this latter were dug, some tombs were discovered in the rock which had to be more closely examined and cleared, as the line of the proposed wall was to go straight across them. Their size was so great that it seemed desirable to preserve them in their entirety, and as they subsequently turned out from their hewn crosses to be Christian tombs, the Order regarded their preservation as a duty, and proposed to build a Sanctuary for them later on. The tombs were cleared out, and the bones carefully collected and interred in a suitable place. The place itself was covered by a protecting building.

The exact position of these tombs outside of Jerusalem is as follows:—

You go northwards for 245 metres through the Damascus Gate on to the road leading to Nablous, and then turn east to the right into a small bye-way. After 40 metres you come to an old cistern, and perceive on the left side (north) a low gate which leads through the northern boundary wall of the road into a garden. Continuing for 50 metres in a northerly direction you reach the entrance of these vaults. It lies in the second bend of the above-named bye-road, where it again diverges from a north-easterly into an easterly course.

The tombs are entirely hewn out of the rock, and only in a few places, obviously at a later period, has masonry been added. Undoubtedly the tombs originally were of much greater extent, but have been destroyed by excavations carried on in the west. On closer inspection one easily recognises that their origin dates from the Jewish era, and they do not in any way differ from the Jewish rock-tombs so frequently found in Palestine, and especially in the country surrounding Jerusalem.

After their partial destruction and possibly complete desecration they were used by Christians as places of interment, and were considerably enlarged. I arrive at this from the fact that these enlargements have been carried out in a different style, and exhibit not only crosses cut into the rock, but also in high relief hewn out of the rock. The former might have been cut into the already standing wall surface; the latter could only have been added if the rock was newly manipulated or new vaults built. Also

in several places the doors have been subsequently made larger and notably higher.

The great vault with its side chambers is genuinely Jewish. It is 5·30 m. long, 4·30 m. broad, and 3·60 m. high. The walls are smooth, the ceilings horizontal, and the doors much higher than usual, being, namely, 1·80 m. The antechamber, going west, is 2·50 m. long, 2·30 m. broad, and, like the other side chambers, 2·30 m. high. It had suffered from the above-mentioned destruction, but was later restored with masonry and filled with tombs sunk into the ground. The side chambers, which lean to the west, have been preserved in their entirety, each having three stone benches for the reception of the corpses. The place for the dead was marked by a cushion-like elevation, formed out of the rock, into which a half-round hollow was hewn. The longer benches had this on both sides. Whether they were meant to serve for two corpses, or whether one could have the choice upon which side to lay the head, cannot be determined. The benches were 1 m. high, with the upper surface slightly hollowed and furnished in front with a low edge to prevent anything rolling off. Under the dividing wall and the contiguous stone benches of the side chambers there is an apartment hewn in the rock, which serves as a common grave. Towards the east there are likewise two side chambers, of which the southern, however, is only a passage to a third, and which has one sepulchre only.

In the eastern side chamber three sarcophagi have later been hewn out of the ground, and a new chamber constructed towards the east, obviously for the definite object of serving as a common grave. Of the western side chamber only the partition wall, together with the door, has preserved its original form; towards the west and south the place has been considerably enlarged, and a quantity of tombs have been hewn on an entirely different system, besides which the missing rock is replaced by masonry. At the same time the proper entrance to the vault on the south side has been restored. In three places close together, from west to east, we find in the ground in twos (in the western row in triplet), sarcophagi of an extraordinary length, the lower being 0·50 m. high, and only 0·50 m. wide, whilst the upper is 0·51 m. wide. On both walls there was therefore a broad ledge of 0·15 m. broad, upon which stone slabs could be placed so that when the lower grave was filled with corpses it could be closed up. The tombs in the western row have the greatest linear measure, viz., 2·70 m., with a depth of from 1 m. to 1·20 m. Some of the sarcophagi are rounded in a sort of apse at one end.

On the north side of the western row, as well as on the southern side of all three rows, vault-like excavations are to be found 2·50 m. long, 1·10 m. broad, and 1·90 m. high, which served as common graves; crosses are carved on most of them. On the above-mentioned ledge, in the middle division of the western row, two fragments of a sarcophagus still rest. Is the explanation of the extraordinary length of the tombs perhaps that they were primarily intended for the reception of stone or wooden coffins?

Every sarcophagus was immediately covered with stone slabs as soon

as the corpses were laid inside, and most of them are to be found existing to this day. The rock walls on the long sides (north and south) of these three rows overlap the sunken graves 1.65 m. The whole enclosure of this peculiar group of graves appears to have been restored by means of small planks or laths. On the long sides hewn in the rock there are small furrows or rabbets running horizontally, by means of which one plank after another was let into the hewn groove in the side, and then finished up sideways into the rabbet opposite, till a closely built plank covering was formed.

As the curve was only 0.20 m. broad, wooden and not stone slabs must have been used, as stone slabs of this insignificant breadth opposed to a length of 2.80 m. is inconceivable, and no remains of such are discoverable.

Whenever a burying took place, the requisite number of small beams were removed, and at the conclusion again inserted. A little staircase in the vicinity of the entrance led down from the sarcophagi to these vaults.

It is surely not by accident that the plan of these tombs, which are proved by the hewn crosses to be Christian, provides that the dead are much more closely united than is the case in Jewish tombs. Probably they wished to keep in view the idea of the close brotherhood of the Christian community.

In the rock covering of the principal chamber there is an opening which was no doubt originally intended to let in light and air, but appears at a later period to have been used for conveying the corpses through; at any rate, exactly underneath, a large number of bones are to be found. In a deepening of the ground was discovered, we were told, a small metal box, which could only be opened by force, and which contained different bones of animals, and particularly birds. I did not myself see it.

In the sunken graves, which were first restored in the Christian era and closed with stone slabs, a plate was found bearing in Greek letters the word "Ephthemos."

In the vicinity of this grave chamber several hewn stones and broken shafts of columns were found, one of which was 4.30 m. long and 0.90 m. in diameter, and another shorter one 1.10 m. in diameter. Possibly further exploration of this and other remarkable wall remains at this place will yield still correcter conclusions.