



Stone Ossuaries in the Hecht Museum Collection and the Issue of Ossuaries Use for Burial

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The first part of the article¹ is devoted to the publication of four stone ossuaries in the Hecht Museum collection, thereby joining them to the rich and varied assemblage of stone ossuaries that have been published up to now². The second part of the article relates to the use of stone ossuaries for burial purposes toward the end of the Second Temple period³. I present an argument with regard to this issue that has not been advanced to this day: the custom of burial in ossuaries bears a relationship to the Jewish ritual laws (*halacha*) of uncleanness and purity similar to the affinity between these laws and stone vessels.



Four Ossuaries in the Hecht Museum Collection

The stone ossuaries are made of soft lime-stone (chalk). According to the museum records they were acquired by Dr. Hecht in Jerusalem.

1 H-1372 (fig. 1)

Description: Ossuary with four low feet and vaulted lid.

Size: L. 62.5 cm. (at base 60 cm.); W. 25 cm. (at base 23 cm.); H. 32 cm.

Decoration: Two vertical zigzag lines divide the front into two metopes in zigzag frames, each containing a six-petalled rosette within a zigzag circle. Each rosette is surrounded by three incised circles and a wedge-patterned circle. Similar decorations with slight variations are common on ossuaries in Jerusalem⁴.

2 H-1373 (fig. 2)

Description: Ossuary with four low feet; flat lid, painted orange.

Size: L. 64 cm. (at base 61 cm.); W. 25.5 cm. (at base 23 cm.); H. 31 cm.

1 The article was first published in Hebrew, see GURI-RIMON 2011.

2 See in particular RAHMANI 1994.

3 I wish to thank Asher M. Goldstein who translated the Hebrew version of the second part of this article.

4 RAHMANI 1994, nos. 22. 203. 214 and 249; SHADMI 1996, nos. 23. 27. 32. The ossuary was published in HACHLILI 1988, 12 no. 1.



Fig. 1:
Ossuary H-1372,
Hecht Collection



Fig. 2:
Ossuary H-1373,
Hecht Collection

Decoration: Two vertical zigzag lines, enclosing a row of truncated triangles, divide the front into two symmetrical metopes, each containing a sixteen-petalled rosette within concentric zigzag circles. Single zigzag lines at top and bottom and double zigzag lines at both sides enclose the metopes. Rahmani proposed to identify the truncated triangles with the scales of the palm trunk⁵. Multi-petalled rosettes are recorded on ossuaries in Jerusalem⁶.

3 H-2713 (fig. 3, a-e)

Description: Ossuary with four low feet; chisel marks cover all sides on exterior and interior.

Size: L. 41 cm (at base 37 cm); W. 22.5 cm (at base 19.5 cm); H. 23 cm.

Decoration: The main decorative element is the zigzag line between two lines or within two circles. The front is divided into a ›triglyph‹ between two metopes. In the ›triglyph‹ there are two small five-petalled rosettes, their petals with zigzag lines. Each rosette is set

5 RAHMANI 1994, 49. For other ossuaries with the palm-trunk pattern see RAHMANI 1994, nos. 242. 246. 360.

6 RAHMANI 1994, nos. 118. 181–182.

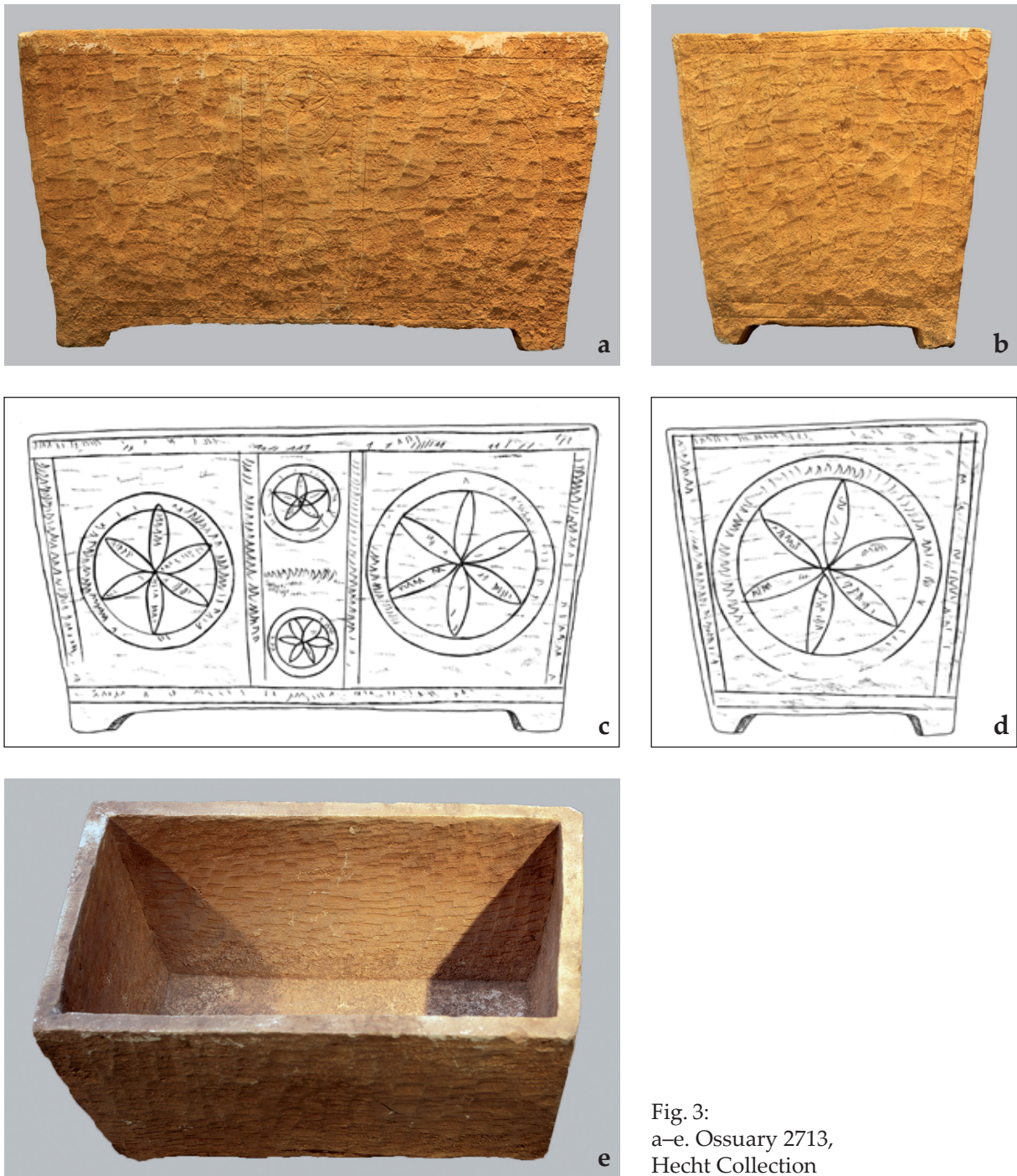


Fig. 3:
a–e. Ossuary 2713,
Hecht Collection

inside concentric zigzag circles, and a zigzag line separates the two rosettes. The metopes contain each a slightly larger six-petalled rosette, the petals with zigzag lines. Concentric zigzag circles enclose the rosettes. A zigzag frame borders the ossuary on all sides. A six-petalled rosette decorates the narrow side of the ossuary, set within a double circle and an outer frame, petals, circle and frame with zigzag patterns.

Chisel marks covering the surface of ossuaries occur in Jerusalem and surroundings⁷. The decorative arrangement of the rosettes and the same use of zigzag circles and frames is found on an ossuary from Jerusalem⁸.

⁷ RAHMANI 1994, 10. 55. 81. 178.

⁸ RAHMANI 1994, no. 178.



Fig. 4:
Ossuary H-3468,
Hecht Collection

4 H-3468 (fig. 4)

Description: Ossuary with four low feet; vaulted lid, painted orange; a rim in form of a narrow shelf carved on the inner long sides.

Size: L. 52.5 cm. (at base 48 cm.); W. 27.5 cm. (at base 25 cm.); H. 33 cm.

Decoration: Two six-petalled rosettes, each inside two concentric line circles, decorate the front. At the top and the lateral sides the frame consists of two wavy lines, and at the bottom there is a single wavy line. The motif of two rosettes side by side occurs frequently⁹.

The Relationship between Burial in Ossuaries and Laws of Ritual Uncleaness and Purity

Jewish society's faithful preoccupation, at times to the point of exaggeration, with the laws of ritual cleanness and uncleanness toward the end of the Second Temple period is well reflected in the Tractate Toharot of the Babylonian Talmud, in particular in regard to the laws of the impurity of a dead person. This hyperbolic exactitude had already earned the criticism of the Sages as these examples attest:

»SIMILARLY ... A ZAB MUST NOT DINE, [etc.]. It was taught, R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: Come and see how far purity has spread in Israel! For we did not learn, A clean man must not eat with an unclean woman, but A ZAB MUST NOT DINE TOGETHER WITH A ZABAH, AS IT MAY LEAD To SIN.« (*BT Shabbat 13a*; also *Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 8b*).

And this:

»"Once an accident," etc. The rabbis taught: It once happened two priests were running, and were on a par. When they came to the top, one outstripped the other by four ells; he took a knife and stuck it into the other one's breast. R. Zadok stood on the staircase of the porch, and said: Brethren of Israel, hear! It is written: "If there be found a slain person in the land . . . shall take a heifer." For whom shall we bring the heifer? For the city, or for the Temple? The whole people began to weep.

⁹ RAHMANI 1994, nos. 123. 225. 267. 499. 819. 847.; SHADMI 1996, nos. 6. 13.

Then the father of the young man arrived, and found him yet agonizing. He said: "May he [the dead] be an atonement for your sins; and as he shows yet signs of life, the knife has not become unclean [since he still lived]." We may infer from this, that the defilement of the knife was considered by them as a yet greater misfortune than bloodshed.« (*BT Yoma 23a*)

Still another source testifies to the centrality of these laws in Jewish society toward the end of the Second Temple period:

»... R. Isaac, the Smith, said: [This means,] the yoke of Sennacherib shall be destroyed on account of the oil of Hezekiah, which burnt in the synagogues and schools. What did he do? — He planted a sword by the door of the schoolhouse and proclaimed, 'He who will not study the Torah will be pierced with the sword.' Search was made from Dan unto Beer Sheba, and no ignoramus was found; from Gabbath unto Antipris, and no boy or girl, man or woman was found who was not thoroughly versed in the laws of cleanness and uncleanness. And concerning that generation it is said, and it shall come to pass in that day, that a man shall nourish a young cow, and two sheep.... « (*BT Sanhedrin 94b*)¹⁰.

The archaeological finds from this period that were exposed in excavations in Jerusalem and its environs, which I shall describe below, accord with what may be inferred from the sources. These finds, however, testify not only to the scrupulousness in observing laws of purity and uncleanness but also to the practical ways with which the individual and Jewish society as a whole coped with these pedantic laws.

Multiplicity of purity ritual baths

Avigad and Reich emphasize the multiplicity of ritual baths in the upper city of Jerusalem¹¹. Reich cites the large quantity of ritual baths for purity purposes dating to the end of the Second Temple period that were discovered throughout Israel: more than 300 are known, of which 150 are in Jerusalem alone. This density of ritual baths in relation to area, according to the archaeologist, even exceeds that of the ritual baths uncovered at Qumran¹², whose inhabitants were especially strict in their observance of laws of purity and uncleanness¹³. Regev, in relating to the many ritual baths uncovered in Mazar's excavations west of the Temple Mount, argues that they testify to hyper-purity, or »removal of impurities,« in the words of the Sages, because

10 Sanhedrin, translated into English, with notes, glossary and indices, chapters i–vi by Jacob Shachter, chapters vii–xi by H. Freedman, under the editorship of Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein. Rabbi Yitzhak Napkha, who belonged to the second and third generations of Amoraim in Israel, projects onto the time of King Hezekiah a reality from the closing days of the Second Temple period. The Gemorah expounds on the oil that was lit in synagogues and study halls of Hezekiah, king of Judea, who returned to the people its strength and health through enforcing Torah study. In so doing, Hezekiah brought about unusual accomplishments in spreading the Torah, and especially in making the laws of Impurity and Cleanness widespread. On identifying Antipars with Antipatris, which is at the source of the Yarkon River, see the interpretation in STEINSALTZ 1982, 417.

11 AVIGAD 1983, 139–143.

12 REICH 2000.

13 BAUMGARTEN 1997, 98.



Fig. 5: Stone Vessels from the Hecht Museum Collection (photo Noa Sheizef).



Fig. 6: Selected Stone Vessels from Excavations of the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem (GEVA 2010, 209 pl. XIII, 1. Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society).

people immersed themselves even though they were already ritually clean¹⁴. Kloner and Zissu report ritual baths in the vicinity of some of the burial caves in the periphery of Jerusalem, so that the counting of clean days would begin immediately after leaving the impure area¹⁵. It is interesting to note that the archaeological finds also testify to the fact that alongside the vigilant maintenance of the obligation to immerse themselves, the residents of the upper city of Jerusalem found a way to enjoy the advantages of the warm bathhouse without contradicting the laws of purity and impurity that they were very careful to keep¹⁶.

The Use of Stone Vessels¹⁷ which are not susceptible to ritual uncleanness

Bearing testimony to the scrupulous adherence to the laws of cleanness and uncleanness are the many stone vessels that have been uncovered (fig. 5). Most researchers adopted Magen's outlook, that the motive for manufacturing stone tools is the halachic rule (*Mishna, Ohalot 5, 5; BT Shabbat 58a; BT Minachot 69b*) that stone vessels do not absorb impurity, and thus they have priority over vessels fashioned from other materials (fig. 6)¹⁸. The stone vessel finds, which are quite impressive, include a variety of utensils, among them mugs, bowls, basins, tables, large containers (*kalal*), and stoppers. The diversified vessel assemblage testifies to the fact that despite their being stone vessels and, therefore, heavier and significantly more liquid-absorbent than pottery, they were in everyday use. This was an expression, on the one

14 REGEV 2005. The author argues that the ritual baths in the area of the Temple Mount were not meant for purification from ritual uncleanness of those who ascended to the Temple, because according to Jewish law (*halacha*), those making this pilgrimage who were required to immerse themselves were obligated, in addition, to wait a period of time that depended on the type of impurity from which they were being cleaned, a day or week, until their entrance to the Temple was permitted. In other words, a person who immersed him/herself in a ritual bath (*mikve*) for ritual purification from uncleanness could not enter the Temple Mount immediately after immersion; thus the location of these ritual baths is irrelevant for this person's purposes. In Regev's opinion, the ritual baths served those who had already arrived in Jerusalem in a ritually clean condition, but for the sake of enhancing the commandments, they immersed themselves once again, despite the fact that they were ritually clean.

15 KLONER – ZISSU 2007, 44.

16 REICH 1989, 208–209.

17 The assemblages of stone vessels from the end of the Second Temple period are well recognized, and their typology, geographical distribution, the chronological issue of their appearance and disappearance, and also technological aspects have all been discussed at length; see CAHILL 1992; MAGEN 2002; GEVA 2010; AMIT 2010. The last author offers a new and updated discussion on the various aspects of this phenomenon based on archaeological finds in recent years; there is also an added bibliography.

18 MAGEN 1976, 1984, 1994, and especially 2002; see also AVIGAD 1983, 183; AMIT ET AL. 2001; GEVA 2010.

Fig. 7:
The stoppers from the Burnt House,
Jerusalem (GEVA 2010, 172 photo 5.5).
Courtesy of the Israel Exploration
Society.



hand, of scrupulous adherence but, on the other hand, of a practical and efficient solution that enabled coping with the severity of the ritual laws of impurity and purity.

Protecting clay vessels from being ritually unclean

Another example of a way of coping with the ritual laws may be seen in the manufacture of stoppers and lids made of stone. According to the *halacha*, pottery becomes unclean from its atmosphere – that is, from what is inside it – and in that event, it cannot be purified in a ritual bath and must be shattered; its shattering is its purification (*Mishna, Kelim 2, 1*). The *halacha* teaches, though, that a pottery vessel may be protected from ritual impurity if it is tightly closed: »and earthenware utensils fitted with tightly fitting covers remain clean« (*Mishna, Toharot 7, 5*). In this spirit, the Rambam (Maimonides) wrote in his Mishne Torah: pottery in the tent of a deceased becomes unclean, for the impurity enters into its atmosphere; and if it is tightly encompassed by a cover, it and whatever is within are clean as was elaborated in the Torah, for no uncleanness enters it except through its opening (*Mishne Torah, Laws of Impurity of a Dead Person ch. 6, 4*). The number of stoppers in the stone vessel assemblage is noticeably large. These stoppers are suitable for closing up goblets, cruses, jugs, and so forth; in other words, vessels that are containers and therefore susceptible to impurity. There is no need to stop up simple earthenware vessels – pottery utensils that are not containers – since they are not susceptible to ritual uncleanness (*Tosefta, Hulin 1, 12; Mishne Torah, Laws of Vessels 1, 9*).

A significant proportion of the stoppers have an encircling recess or ring (**fig. 7**)¹⁹. This recess, in my opinion, allows tightening of the stopper onto the vessel with the aid of a thread that is coiled in the depression and that goes around the neck or the handle of the vessel (**fig. 8**). The recess, which is typical of many of the stoppers, allows, in my opinion, an interpretation of the term *tzamid ptil* as an expression describing the stopper that is intended to protect a pottery vessel from being susceptible to ritual impurity: it is the function of the stopper to be a »lid cover«; that is, to be well attached by means of a twisted rope. This interpretation, which is based on characteristics of stone stoppers discovered in excavations, accords with Rashi's interpretation of Book of Numbers (*Bamidbar*) 19, 15: »... therefore, if the cover that forms its lid is not well joined to it by a perfect contact, it [the vessel] becomes unclean....« The interpretation of the term »the lid is joined« differs from the accepted reading, presented by Magen²⁰, among others, according to which *ptil* is a covering on a vessel while *tzamid* is the material that seals the opening of the vessel and finishes the lid. The Mishna mentions a selection of materials for sealing (*Mishna, Kelim 10, 2*).

19 See for example, CAHILL 1992, 249 fig. 17, 1–7; MAGEN 2002, 74–77 pl. 10; GEVA 2010, 172–173. 198 pl. 5. 11, 1–7)

20 MAGEN 2002, 140.



Fig. 8: Suggested interpretations of the expression *Tzamid P'til*: a. stone stopper tightened onto an earthenware cruse by a string wound around the circumferential indentation or rung of the stopper and tied to the handle and neck of the vessel; b. The cruse and the stopper that is removed from its opening – to demonstrate the ease of use in accordance with this interpretation. Cruse and stopper from the Temple Mount excavations by Prof. Benjamin Mazar.

The many stone stoppers that were uncovered in the excavations, in addition to those made of other material and that apparently were not preserved, testify, too, to the care with which the ritual law was kept, as well as to the ability of the Jewish society to create a practical and effective solution that enabled coping with the pedantic law. There is no doubt that earthenware vessels were widespread among the utensils in daily use, and the protection of their openings from susceptibility to uncleanness, which would have obligated their being broken, constituted a vital solution for every Jewish household toward the end of the Second Temple period. The relatively large amount of finds of stone stoppers is evidence of their preference over stoppers made of other material, not only because they were fashioned from a raw material that was available and easy to process, but also and principally because those who were scrupulous in keeping the laws of ritual impurity preferred the former precisely because they were made of stone and so were considered as not being susceptible to ritual impurity. For the same reason, these people apparently preferred stone tables, sundials, stone weights, and other items made of stone²¹.

21 See, for example, a stone oven, which is not susceptible to uncleanness: *Mishnah, Kelim* 5, 11; also see Kehati's interpretation of »a bath-house bench« – ספסלין במרחץ (*Kelim* 22,10): There are those who give the interpretation that the legs alone are impure and the bench itself clean, for stone vessels have no ritual uncleanness. In *Mishna Kelim* 8, 12, weights are numbered among the items that are susceptible to impurity only when considered vessels. In light of this *halacha*, one may understand the reality of many stone weights discovered in the excavations in Jerusalem (REICH 2006).

Burial in stone ossuaries

The question remains: Can stone ossuaries which have been discovered in burial caves and in which the bones of the deceased were collected²² about a year after the original burial be viewed as the manifestation of a practical and effective solution through which the individual and the society coped with the stringency of the laws relating to the severest of impurities, the ritual uncleanness of a dead person, the ›prototype impurity‹ that defiles²³?

An accepted opinion among researchers is that the Jewish artisans who worked with stone and created stone vessels were also those who manufactured the stone ossuaries and apparently also in those same manufacturing centers; this supposition is based on their complete similarity of manufacturing methods, decoration, and raw material²⁴. The researchers also point to the similarity of the two phenomena in regard to geographical dispersion and chronology – the time of their appearance and their disappearance. Following Rahmani²⁵ and Magen²⁶, it became customary to explain the two phenomena by the affinity to Jewish religious law, *halacha*: the phenomenon of stone vessels and its affinity to the laws of impurity and purity; and that of burial in ossuaries, and its affinity to Jewish law formulated toward the end of the Second Temple period in regard to the resurrection of the dead at the end of days; this being a physical resurrection of the individual, the person's bones had therefore to be preserved. However, none of the researchers connected the custom of burying in ossuaries with the laws of purity and uncleanness; none saw in these religious laws the reason for manufacturing and using these ossuaries. Rahmani even sharpens the difference between the two groups, invalidating with this assertion any possibility of connecting the ossuary burial custom with the laws of purity and impurity: »The Jerusalem stone cutters in this period faithfully processed the local soft chalkstone, preparing various household vessels, from containers of various sizes to table tops. It may be assumed that the great request for stone vessels stemmed from the laws of impurity and purity, but it was not because of this that the craftsmen were requested to prepare stone vessels for burying the bones of the dead, for these, like the entire gravesite, were in any event ritually unclean. Like the skill of these cutters in creating stone vessels, suppliers made them for customers who sought durable and cheap vessels for permanently storing the bones of their dear ones«²⁷. Magen, too, did not see any connection with the ritual laws that brought about the manufacture of stone vessels. In his opinion, there were two motivations for using ossuaries: the need to reduce the number of burials in burial caves in order to enable new burials; and, following Rahmani, the need to preserve the deceased person's bones in order to enable a physical resurrection at the end of days²⁸.

Cahill, in the framework of her comprehensive research on the finds of stone vessels in the City of David²⁹, raised a number of questions about the prevailing opinion among researchers as to the affinity of stone vessels to Jewish ritual law. In her opinion, the fact that

22 On the collection of bones, see *Jerusalem Talmud*, *Tractate Moed Katan* 5a; also *Tractate Semachot* 12, 9: »And this is what Abba told me when he was dying: 'My son, first bury me in the valley, and finally collect my bones and give them over into an ossuary.'«

23 The deceased imparts impurity when being borne, when touched, and in a tent. In other words, one who touches the deceased or any part of the body or someone who carries it even though he may not actually be touching it, or anyone inside the same tent as the dead person – all are unclean for seven days and require the sprinkling of the ashes of a red heifer on the third day and on the fourth day of his impurity. Therefore, the impurity of the dead is called the impurity of the seven (KEHATI 1970, 273).

24 CAHILL 1992, 32–137; RAHMANI 1994, 53–55; MAGEN 2002, 132–135.

25 RAHMANI 1994, 53–55.

26 See in particular MAGEN 2002, 138–147.

27 RAHMANI 1994, 30.

28 MAGEN 2002, 136–137.

29 CAHILL 1992.

the two phenomena, use of stone vessels and burial in ossuaries, occur especially in Jerusalem and adjacent to the Temple does indeed hint of their affinity to Jewish law. However, she is of the opinion that the nature of this law and the cause of these phenomena are still not understood. She continues to raise questions: if the advantage of stone vessels lies in their not being susceptible to ritual impurity because of the material from which they are made, is it possible to relate this quality to ossuaries, which are also made of the same raw material but are intended to be placed in graves, where uncleanness is all prevailing? How may one explain finding stone vessels together with glass and earthenware vessels, which are susceptible to impurity, in the assemblages discovered in graves? In effect, in the light of the full similarity of the two phenomena in regard to their distribution, chronology, and technology and, at the same time, of the lack of similarity as to causes of these phenomena, Cahill casts doubt on the explanation of the affinity of stone vessels to religious laws of uncleanness and purity³⁰.

To me, as well, it seems unreasonable that the two phenomena would be identical in all the aspects cited above. However, for the most meaningful aspect, the factor or motive for the phenomenon, there is no similarity. This reality led me to search for an answer in another direction: to try to investigate whether the custom of burial in stone ossuaries can be related to the laws of impurity and purity. It is true, of course, that the deceased is the prototype of ritual impurity and the burial cave does ritually defile one; but perhaps there is an attempt in the use of stone ossuaries to restrict and limit the impurity, thereby connecting this phenomenon, too, with the laws of ritual uncleanness and purity. Is not the stone ossuary a practical and effective solution assisting the individual and Jewish society in coping with the very strict, pedantic laws of the impurity of the deceased? A study of the works of the Sages, in particular the *Mishna* and its commentaries dealing with the laws on the impurity of the deceased, shows that situations do exist in which it is possible to limit and restrict ritual impurity. Some of these situations may, in my opinion, be understood by linking them to the use of stone ossuaries, which are distinguished by qualities relevant to the laws describing situations in which the harm caused by the uncleanness of the deceased is limited. My suggestion, detailed below, does not contradict Rahmani's interpretation of the motivation for the custom of collecting the bones and preserving them. I am only offering an explanation of the fact that they were collected into stone ossuaries precisely because of the special characteristics of these containers.

A stone ossuary is a chest, the volume of which is very limited considering its purpose: storage of the bones of a deceased person. Rahmani points to the relationship between the dimensions of the ossuary and the dimensions of the thigh bone, the pelvis, and the skull of the one buried in it³¹. It is clear that the volume of the chest allows storage of the bones of a dead person only with utmost crowding³².

Furthermore, in many cases, the ossuary contains the bones of two and even more buried persons³³. It seems to me that the especially narrow dimensions of the ossuaries may be understood by their affinity to ritual law of »broken impurity,« the spread of which uncleanness is limited: it rises and also breaks through below, but it does not spread over its environs. Impurity, by contrast, does spread over its surroundings when there is a hollow space in the grave that is larger than one by one cubit (*tefah*): (*Ohalot 7a*)³⁴. The *Rambam* summarizes these laws quite clearly (*Mishne Torah, Laws of the Impurity of the Dead ch. 7: 9 [4]–11 [5]*).

30 CAHILL 1992, 232–233.

31 RAHMANI 1994, 6. 33.

32 The external dimensions of the ossuary for burying an adult were 42–65 cm. in length, 23–28 cm. in width, and 30–39 cm. high. The thickness of its walls in most cases was 3 cm. Ossuaries whose dimensions were larger were intended for the joint burial of two family members (RAHMANI 1994, 6).

33 KLONER – ZISSU 2007, 111.

34 A *tefah* is the size of a tightly closed fist or 4 fingers. Its length dimension has various interpretations, ranging between 7 and 10 cm.



There is no doubt that such a situation is more convenient for those burying their dead or for those visiting graves in a burial cave, which owing to the use of such a container exposes them less to the harm of ritual impurity. The use of stone ossuaries can provide an answer, too, to a situation in which one has to go into a burial cave or to a situation of clearing out graves³⁵. Because the uncleanness is broken within the stone ossuary, then the spread of the impurity is lessened in the process of moving the deceased by being limited to moving upward and downward, but not sidewise. Thus, the air space inside has an advantage for those who transfer the buried bodies to the new cave. The series of caves in the Jerusalem area contained vegetable gardens, fences, olive presses, and wine presses; in other words, a flourishing agricultural periphery³⁶. There is no doubt that the laws of impurity in this environment constituted a problem whose damage it was worthwhile to restrict.

The following religious law (*halacha*), quoted from the *Mishna*, may be related to the situation of moving the deceased by means of an ossuary whether within the burial cave or outside it. Among other things, the *Mishna* details situations in which the damage of uncleanness is limited; it describes a situation in which the casket may be grasped without one's being susceptible to impurity.

»If a tomb is wide below and narrow at the top and a corpse is in it, one that touches below is clean but above is unclean; if it is wide above and narrow at the bottom, one that touches it anywhere is unclean. If is equally broad above and below, one that touches it anywhere is unclean, according to the view of R. Eliezer. But R. Joshua says, [one who touches it] more than one cubit beneath is clean, but less than a cubit above is unclean. If it were made in the form of a chest, whatsoever touches it anywhere becomes unclean; if it is in the form of a case, whatsoever touches it anywhere, save at the place where it opens, remains clean.« (*Mishna, Ohalot 9, 14 [15]*)

The foregoing *Mishna* also shows that the tomb or chest is made like a small cupboard or clothes closet whose covering envelops the walls³⁷. In other words, when the cover is removed vis-à-vis the walls the chest conveys uncleanness. However, if the lid is only a covering over the opening – something that is typical of ossuary covers that have been uncovered in excavations – then the impurity in such a situation affects only someone who touches the area of the opening, and whoever comes into contact with any of the other sides of the chest is not susceptible to uncleanness. It is in this context that one may read the *Rambam* in the *Mishne Torah* and its explicators, according to whom a coffin made of stone offers an advantage, for it defiles only those who touch its opening (*Mishne Torah ch. 6, 12–13*). And there is Ravad's commentary on the *Rambam*³⁸. The *Toharat Yisrael* commentary on the *Rambam* says: But the chest is the cover of the dead person and [the corpse] does not roll or knock, and is not a closed

35 On clearing out graves in Jerusalem, see KLONER – ZISSU 2007, 106–107; MAGEN 2002, 143–144. On clearing out graves in the sources, see for example the *Rambam, Mishne Torah, Laws of the Unclean Dead 8, 7*: the grave that is found, it is permissible to clear out; and if it is, its place is impure, and it is forbidden to derive benefit from it until it has been examined as will be explained. And the grave of a well-known person, it is forbidden to clear it out; and if it is, its place is clean, and it is permitted to derive benefit from it. A grave that causes damage to many is to be cleared out; its place is impure and no benefit may be derived. And therefore (*Tosefta, Baba Batra 1, 7*) a grave that surrounds the city whether in all four directions or in three directions or two directions, in contrast to one that is more than fifty ama distant on any side, does not have to be vacated, but is to be cleared out if less than that; all the graves are to be cleared out, except for that of the king and that of the grave of the prophet.. Rabbi Akiva says, even the grave of the king and that of the prophet are to be cleared out.

36 KLONER – ZISSU 2007, 34–35.

37 KEHATI 1970, 357.

38 Ravad (also known by the abbreviation RABad) mentions the »*Arukh*,« where גלוסקוס – gluskos is interpreted as chest.

grave; the body does not impart impurity in a stone chest, but whoever makes a tent over it against uncleanness.

The stone sarcophagus, which is not especially heavy, may be transferred relatively easily from place to place if held from the bottom. The short legs of most sarcophagi enable placing one's hands at the bottom of the sarcophagus quite easily; as quoted above (*Mishna, Ohalot* 9, 14 [15]), grasping the bottom of the case from the height of a cubit or less prevents susceptibility to uncleanness. The possibility of carrying the sarcophagus on one's shoulder receives testimony in *Tractate Semachot* of the Jerusalem Talmud in the context of a discussion of the laws of mourning. One learns from the text that the body of a baby was carried in a sarcophagus (*Semachot*, ch. 3; *Halacha* 1, 3–7), similarly in the Babylonian Talmud (*BT Moed Katan* 24b).

To sum, it seems to me that the hyper-caution of the Jewish society in Judea toward the end of the Second Temple period in regard to laws of impurity and cleanness was due to the practical and efficient solution that reduced the damage of the impurity of the dead. It was a solution that benefited the individual whether he or she belonged to the rank and file, the common folk, or to the upper classes. Kloner and Zissu argue that the archaeological finds testify to the custom of collecting bones and the use of ossuaries that was prevalent among all sectors and was not just the legacy of one exceptional group³⁹. This solution was manifested in the practice of collecting the deceased person's bones into an ossuary made of stone, whose volume was very restricted and which had a cover that lay over the opening and did not slope down and touch its walls; furthermore, the material of which the ossuary was made enabled limiting the damage of the impurity of the dead, which is the prototype of ritual uncleanness.

With the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE, the influence of the laws of purity and uncleanness on everyday Jewish life, both that of the individual and that of the society, diminished. In the absence of the Temple and the consequent abolishing of sacrifices; the ashes of the red heifer, which were necessary for purification of the uncleanness of the dead, were depleted. Despite the permutations that were generated in the Jewish world, the archaeological finds⁴⁰ and the sources in the literature of the Sages testify to the fact that in the days of the Tannaim⁴¹ too, i.e., in the late Roman period, the use of stone vessels and ossuaries continued in the Galilee and in the rural Jewish settlements in Judea. After a while, though, things changed: stone vessels and ossuaries are not revealed in the archaeological assemblages after the 3rd century CE, which is in accordance with the picture that emerges from the literature of the Sages. As is known, there is only *Mishna* but no *Gemarah* to the *Toharot* Order, the 6th in the Babylonian Talmud, except for the *Tractate of Niddah*, which deals with family purity, a subject that is au courant at all times and in every place; in the Jerusalem Talmud, only three chapters of the *Tractate of Niddah* have been preserved⁴².

In the course of the foregoing discussion, I have tried to present my opinion that the two phenomena, that of stone vessels and that of stone ossuaries, are identical from the aspect of

39 Kloner – Zissu 2007, 113, see also note 8 for the authors' estimate of the quantity of ossuaries and their distribution in the Jerusalem necropolises.

40 See Amit 2010 and the additional bibliography there for new, updated conclusions based on up-to-date archaeological information in the context of the continued use of stone vessels in the Galilee and in the rural settlement in Judea after the destruction of the Temple, as well as in the 2nd and 3rd centuries and even perhaps in the early 4th century; on the termination of the practice of burial in ossuaries and on the continuation of the custom of collecting bones into stone ossuaries in Judea and the Galilee after the destruction see Rahmani 1994, 24–25; see also Kloner – Zissu 2007, 113–114 on the continuation of the custom until the 3rd or early 4th centuries.

41 See testimony in the following sources for the continued strict adherence to laws of purity at the time of the Tannaim: Raban Gamliel: *Mishna, Yadayim* 3, 1; *Tosefta Kelim, Baba Metzia* 11, 2; *Kelim, Baba Batra* 2, 4; *BT Niddah* 6b; Raban Shimon ben-Gamliel: *Tosefta, Para* 12, 12; Rabbi Yehuda the Prince: *BT Niddah* 6a–b.

42 My sincere thanks go to Dr. Gabriel S. Breuer, Shaarei Zedek Medical Center, Jerusalem, who kindly agreed to read the manuscript and made helpful comments.



their affinity to Jewish religious law (*halacha*)—that is, the laws of uncleanness and purity—and, therefore, to offer a position according to which there is complete similarity between all aspects of these two phenomena. I am hopeful that this idea, which has been presented only concisely and which has accompanied me since I was curator of the exhibition ›Purity broke out in Israel‹ [a phrase taken from *BT Shabbat 3a*]—Stone Vessels in the Late Second Temple Period at the Hecht Museum in 1994, will arouse interest and in its wake lead to additional research and studies of this fascinating subject.

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