

The urban limits of Roman and Byzantine Jerusalem: a view from the necropoleis

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The city of Jerusalem witnessed several historical, cultural and religious transformations between the 1st and 7th c.¹ Destroyed by the Roman legions in 70, it became the Roman colony of Aelia Capitolina in 132/135, created atop the ruins of the Hellenistic and Early Roman city. Two centuries later, the pagan city was transformed into a Christian city that flourished during the late-antique (Byzantine) period as a major religious center and the main Christian pilgrimage destination in the Holy Land. The Early Islamic conquest in 638 began a new era for this disputed city, which by the mediaeval period had become a typical Middle Eastern town. Many excavations have illuminated these dramatic transformations, in the process generating a jigsaw puzzle of fragmentary structural remains that relate to city walls, public and religious monuments and open spaces, private dwellings, streets and alleys, water storage installations, and so forth.²

From early days a significant part of the archaeological research has concerned the necropoleis and urban burial sites.³ What was the relationship between city and necropoleis during this period? How were Jerusalem's urban transformations of late antiquity reflected in the necropoleis? Can the study of the necropoleis contribute to knowledge of Jerusalem's urban development? This paper intends to use the topographical location, chronological sequence, spatial distribution and internal organization of the necropoleis to shed light on the urban limits of Jerusalem from the creation of Aelia Capitolina to the Early Islamic city.

The necropoleis of late antiquity: typology, spatial distribution and organizational patterns

Tombs and burial caves are among the most common finds in Roman and Byzantine Jerusalem. However, most of the ancient cemeteries have not been explored systematically and are mainly known from occasional discoveries of tombs in the course of modern construction. The massive expansion and development of the modern city has produced thousands of excavated burial sites, permitting the reconstruction of the layout of the urban necropoleis in different periods. But while the Early Roman necropoleis are relatively well documented and studied,⁴ little attention was given to the vast late-antique necropoleis which included hundreds of tombs and

1 All dates refer to the present era unless otherwise indicated.

2 Between 1853 and 2004 more than 1700 excavations, ranging from large-scale long-running projects to small probes and rescue excavations, have been conducted in and around the Old City. The main study of the history and archaeology of Jerusalem in late antiquity is still the monumental work of Vincent and Abel (1914-26). For recent summary and synthesis of finds see Geva 1993; Tsafirir and Safrai 1999; for comprehensive surveys see Bieberstein and Bloedhorn 1994; Kloner 2000-3. For the main finds related to the 1st c. B.C.-1st c. A.D., see Avigad 1980, 64-202; Ben-Dov 1982, 57-184; Geva 1993, 717-57. The layout of the period of Aelia Capitolina (2nd-3rd c.) is less clear and the archaeological evidence scant (Geva 1993, 757-67; Tsafirir 1999a; Eliav 2003). The 4th-7th c. saw the glory of Christian Jerusalem with dozens of churches and monasteries constructed and the urban area being extended beyond the walls (Vincent and Abel 1914-26; Geva 1993, 768-85; Tsafirir 1999b).

3 The very first archaeological research in Jerusalem was conducted at a burial site: Felicien de-Saulcy's excavations at the "Tombs of the Kings" (de Saulcy 1865).

4 The Jewish necropoleis of the Early Roman period were extensively studied by C. Clermont-Ganneau (1896, 1899, 1903), C. Schick (1886, 1895, 1897, 1898), L. H. Vincent (1899, 1900) and R. A. S. Macalister (1900a, 1900b, 1901, 1902a). Starting in the 1930s, E. L. Sukenik and N. Avigad excavated and studied several burial caves on the hills around the Old City (Avigad 1956, 1967). In the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of family burial tombs were discovered. The finds were recently summarized by Kloner and Zissu (2003), who provide a corpus of more than one thousand tombs and burial caves which reflect the stratification of Jewish society in the 1st c. B.C. to 1st c. A.D.