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A Villa and a Hiding Underground Compound from the Late Second Temple Period in the Judean Lowlands

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Horvat Duwayma (Arabic:Khirbet ed-Duwayma) is situated on a slope near a hilltop (elevation 390 m above sea level) in the southern Judean Shephelah, approximately 7 km southeast of Tel Lachish and adjacent to the modern settlement of Amatziya. The hilltop rises about 60 m above a nearby tributary of Nahal Lachish. Excavations were conducted at the site in 2010–2011 and again in 2014 in preparation for the establishment of a new settlement for evacuees from Gush Katif. These excavations revealed remains dating from the Early Bronze Age through the Late Ottoman and British Mandate periods. Remains of a villa dating to the Early Roman period were discovered on the hilltop. The villa included bathing facilities, a pool, domestic spaces, and a mikveh (ritual bath). A cistern approximately fifty meters in length was found beneath the villa, within which several openings led to a concealment complex. The presence of a large structure combined with an underground concealment complex is a known phenomenon, identified at several sites from this period in the Judean Shephelah. The discovery of this estate villa and its associated concealment system expands our understanding of the upper class in Idumea between the two revolts, and sheds light on the preparations made prior to the Second Revolt, as well as its characteristics and regional distribution.

Introduction

Between 2010 and 2014, three seasons of salvage excavations were conducted north of Moshav Amatzia (Fig. 1), prior to the construction of the settlement of Karmei Katif. The settlement was established on the ruins of the Late Ottoman village al-Dawayima. It lies on a gently sloping limestone hill in the southern Judean Shephelah, on the southern bank of Nahal Lachish, at the boundary of the Negev loess plains, approximately 7 km southeast of Tel Lachish. The hilltop (390 m above sea level) rises about 60 m above the channel of Nahal Lachish.

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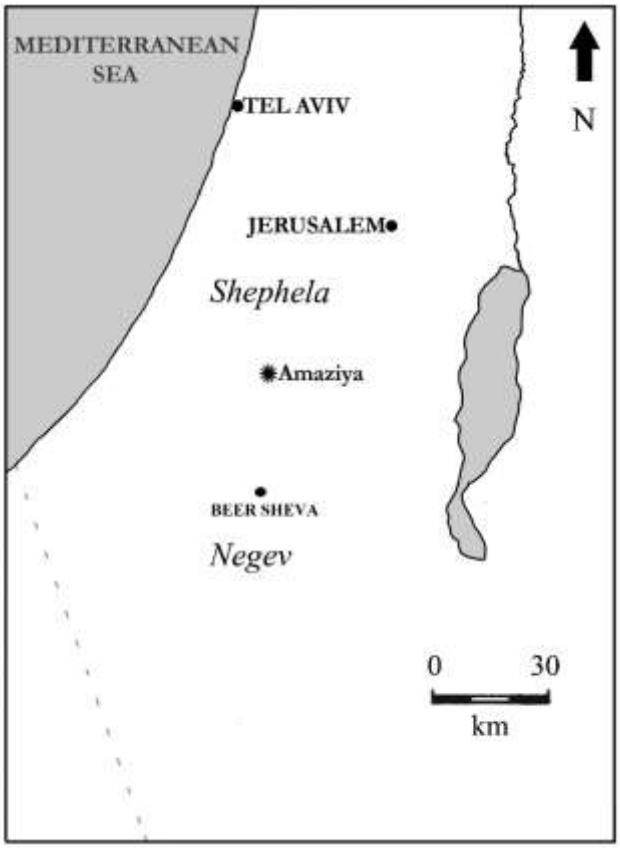
Figure 1. Location Map



During the 19th century and the early 20th century CE, various travelers visited the site and described the village of al-Dawayima and the ancient remains found there. The first survey was conducted in the 1830s by Edward Robinson and Eli Smith, who provided only a brief description of the village, noted that it lay along the road from Beit Guvrin to Be'er Sheva, and mentioned a sheikh's tomb located on the western part of the hill (Robinson and Smith, 1867).

In 1863, Victor Guérin visited the site (Guérin, 1868) and recorded that the village had 900 inhabitants. He observed that the houses were constructed from very coarse stones, incorporating dressed stones that likely originated from earlier structures. Guérin also documented a columbarium cave on the northwestern slope of the settlement.

Toward the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Claude Conder and Horatio Kitchener (Conder and Kitchener, 1883), followed by Félix Abel (Abel, 1938), visited the site. They described the settlement and its surroundings in general terms but did not address the ancient remains.

In the 1980s, Yehuda Dagan conducted a survey at the site (Dagan, 2007), identifying pottery dating from the Chalcolithic period through Iron Age II and up to the Ottoman period. In 2006–2007, Emil Alajem carried out a development survey in the area (Alajem and Gendler, 2012), during which he identified a columbarium, an

olive press, dwelling caves, remains of both ancient and modern structures, and water cisterns, as well as pottery and flint assemblages dating to the Early Bronze Age.

The salvage excavations conducted in 2010–2011 covered an area of approximately 4 dunams, while those conducted in 2014 covered about 1.2 dunams. Six excavation areas (A–F) were opened, mainly across the hilltop and its slopes, revealing remains from the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age II, Persian, Late Hellenistic, Early Roman, Byzantine, Late Ottoman, and British Mandate periods. The present discussion focuses on the results of the excavation of a villa from the Second Temple period uncovered in Area D.

The aim of this article, in addition to presenting the results of the excavation at the site, is to portray the lives of the Jewish population in a rural area under Roman rule. It examines daily life under Roman occupation, alongside preparations for a possible revolt, and finally the consequences of that revolt, which ultimately led to the destruction of the villa.

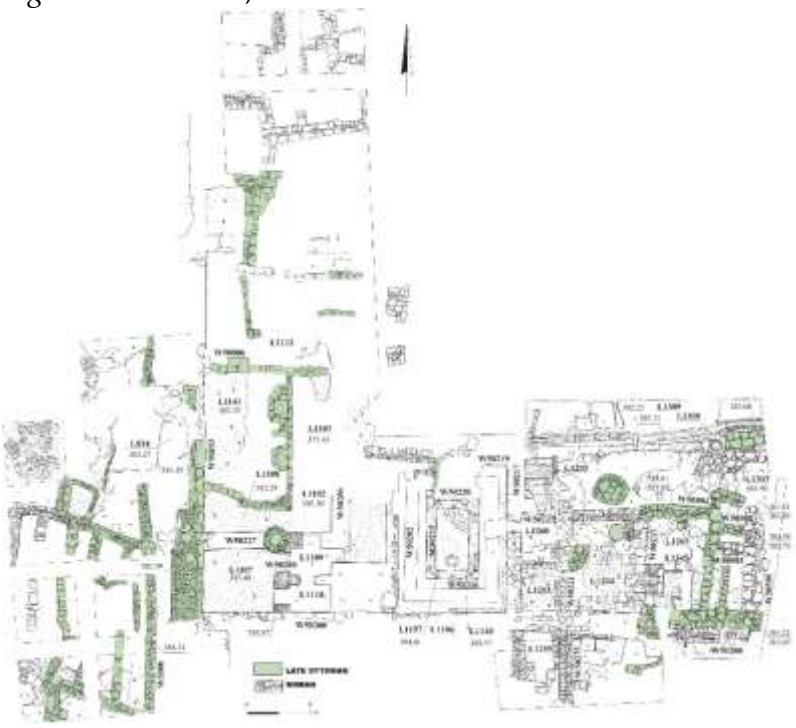
The Excavations

In Area D, located on the hilltop, a villa measuring 35 × 43 m was uncovered and dated to the late Second Temple period (late 1st century BCE to early 2nd century CE: Figure 2). The villa's location provided extensive views over the surrounding region and control over the roads leading to the hill from the directions of Beit Guvrin and Jerusalem.

The villa consisted of four wings:

a **central wing**, containing a rectangular courtyard with a pool at its center;
a **western wing**, used for residential purposes;
an **eastern wing**, containing a bathhouse;
a **northern wing**, poorly preserved, which likely served as the entrance to the structure.

Figure 2. The Villa, Plan



It is estimated that all surviving parts of the villa were excavated—approximately three-quarters of its original extent. The villa's original size was probably around 1,400 square meters. However, large portions of the structure were almost entirely destroyed during the construction of the late Ottoman village of al-Dawayima. As a result, preservation is poor, and most of the exposed walls survived to a height of only one or two courses. In some cases, later cisterns were cut into the villa's walls, while in others, Ottoman-period inhabitants reused the Roman-period floors.

The villa was bounded by thick walls on the south, west, and east. These walls were only partially preserved, with the western wall (W50203) showing the best preservation. Walls W50200 and W50203 were partly hewn into bedrock and partly constructed from chalk stones and large flint stones; their inner faces were coated with light gray plaster. Wall W50247, an eastern continuation of W50200, was a double-faced wall built of chalk stones with a core of small stones; its outer face was plastered and decorated with a herringbone (fishbone) pattern, and reinforced with an additional layer of small stones and soil.

Wall W50501, built directly on bedrock, was also a double-faced wall constructed partly of fieldstones and partly of roughly dressed chalk stones. Its inner face was coated with three layers of plaster, the outermost decorated with a herringbone pattern. In some sections, natural depressions in the bedrock served as foundation trenches for this wall. It likely originally formed a corner with the now-lost northern wall of the villa.

To the north of the villa, along the presumed line of the missing northern wall, a drainage channel (L1308) was uncovered (18 m long, about 0.3 m wide and 0.3–

0.4 m deep), sloping from west to east. The channel was cut into bedrock, lined with rectangular stone slabs, and covered with chalk stones whose undersides were smoothed by chiseling. The stones were bonded with grayish plaster and coated with gray plaster. The channel likely continued along the northern wall and thus marks its original course. It probably drained into a cistern east of the excavation area and into another cistern (L1323) whose opening was found north of the pool in the central courtyard. This latter cistern was part of a hiding complex discovered north of the villa (Area C; not yet published).

The Central Wing

The central wing formed the architectural and functional core of the villa and was dominated by a carefully planned rectangular courtyard measuring 6.2 × 8.6 m, aligned along a north–south axis (Figure 3). This orientation, typical of well-designed Roman-period residences, may have been intended to optimize light, airflow, and spatial organization. The courtyard was enclosed on all four sides by walls (W50200, W50202, W50217, W50219), constructed of medium-sized, well-dressed chalk stones. These stones were carefully arranged and finished, reflecting a relatively high standard of construction. The inner faces of the walls were coated with light gray plaster, likely both for aesthetic purposes and to protect the masonry. Despite later disturbances, the walls survived to a maximum height of two courses, allowing a partial reconstruction of the original layout.

Figure 3. The Villa, Aerial Photo

At the heart of the courtyard lay a rectangular pool (L1157; 2.0 × 3.9 m; approximately 1.5 m deep; Fig. 4), which served as both a functional and decorative

element. The pool was enclosed by four solid walls, each approximately 0.5 m thick, which were fully preserved and coated with high-quality white plaster to ensure water retention and a clean appearance. The pool's design reflects a combination of utility and display, characteristic of elite rural residences.

Figure 4. The Pool at the Central Courtyard

Evidence for the architectural embellishment of the pool comes from imprints preserved at the tops of the surrounding walls, indicating the former presence of six column bases (each about 0.45 m in diameter). These columns likely supported a light superstructure, perhaps a pergola or partial roof—and were arranged symmetrically: four at the corners of the pool and two centered along its longer sides. This arrangement would have created a visually striking focal point within the courtyard, possibly providing shade and enhancing the aesthetic quality of the space.

Access to the pool was provided by four semicircular steps set into its northeastern corner, descending to the plastered floor. The curved design of the steps suggests careful planning and attention to comfort and visual harmony. Near the southern wall of the pool, a repair (L1196) was identified in the floor, indicating maintenance activity during the period of use. Beneath this repair, the opening of an earlier installation—a cistern measuring 1.9 × 3.8 m—was revealed. This earlier cistern had been intentionally decommissioned and incorporated into the later construction of the pool, illustrating a sequence of architectural modifications.

The cistern itself was partially plastered and covered by a vaulted ceiling, demonstrating a sophisticated approach to water storage. Five evenly spaced steps descended from south to north into the cistern, leading to a rock-cut basin resembling

a small bathtub. This feature may have been used for drawing water or possibly for specific domestic or ritual purposes, although its exact function remains uncertain.

Encircling the pool within the courtyard was a mosaic frame (L1148; approximately 30 sq m;), which added a decorative and prestigious element to the space. The mosaic featured a meander (Greek key) pattern rendered in black and red tesserae set against a white background. This geometric motif was widely used during the Herodian period and reflects broader artistic trends in the Roman world. Comparable examples are known from sites such as Caesarea Maritima, the western palace at Masada, and villas in the region of Corinth, suggesting cultural and aesthetic connections across the eastern Mediterranean (Turnheim and Asher Ovadiah, 1999).

Along the edges of walls W50200 and W50217, areas of plaster repair were observed surrounding the mosaic, indicating phases of maintenance or renovation. Beneath these repairs, a poorly preserved clay pipe was uncovered, likely part of a water management system associated with the courtyard or pool.

The Western Wing

The western wing appears to have served primarily residential and representational functions and consisted of five rooms (2–6), arranged in a coherent internal layout. The northwestern room (Room 2) was only partially preserved: its walls had not survived, and only segments of its light gray plaster floor (L1112) remained. The presence of a pier reused in secondary context at the southern end of the room suggests the former position of the missing southern wall (W50006), allowing a partial reconstruction of the room's original boundaries.

A doorway in this reconstructed wall led southward into the main hall (Room 3), a substantial space measuring approximately 8 × 10 m. This room likely functioned as a reception hall (*triclinium*), where guests would have been entertained and meals served in a formal setting. The walls of the hall (W50006, W50203, W50206, W50227) were preserved to a height of one course and were plastered on both sides, indicating their importance within the structure. The western wall, in particular, shows evidence of reuse during the Ottoman period, reflecting the long history of occupation at the site.

Although the hall suffered significant damage, likely due to later construction activities—traces of its original decoration survive. The floor itself was not preserved, but the discovery of black-and-white tesserae in its eastern part suggests that it was originally paved with a mosaic, reinforcing its role as a prestigious space within the villa.

South of the main hall lay a passage-like room (Room 4; 2.5 × 5.0 m), whose walls and floor were coated with light gray plaster. This room likely functioned as a transitional space, facilitating movement between different parts of the wing. An opening in its western wall led to another enclosed room (Room 5; 4.0 × 4.5 m), which may have served as a private chamber or auxiliary space.

From the northeastern corner of Room 4 extended a rectangular corridor (Room 6; 2 × 6 m), bounded by walls to the east and west. This corridor connected the western wing directly to the central courtyard, illustrating the integration of private and semi-public spaces within the villa's design.

The Eastern Wing

The eastern wing housed a bathhouse complex, incorporating all the essential elements of a Roman bathing facility and reflecting a high level of technological sophistication. The presence of such a bathhouse is a strong indicator of the villa's elite status and the adoption of Roman cultural practices (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The bathhouse after restauration works

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Access to the bathhouse was provided from the central courtyard through a doorway leading into an antechamber (Room 7; 2.0 × 2.5 m). This space likely

served as a transitional area where bathers prepared before entering the heated rooms. It may originally have been paved with a fine mosaic floor, although no clear remains of such decoration were preserved.

To the north of the antechamber was a small, plastered pool (Room 8; 1.8 × 2.5 m), accessed by four steps descending into it. This pool may have functioned as a cold bath (*frigidarium*) or as part of the bathing sequence.

South of the antechamber lay the hot room (*caldarium*; Room 9; 2.5 × 3.2 m), which is among the best-preserved elements of the villa. Its floor consisted of square ceramic tiles supported by a hypocaust system—an underfloor heating installation typical of Roman baths. The hypocaust space contained numerous fragments of fired bricks and ceramic pipes, as well as some bricks preserved in their original positions, providing valuable evidence for the construction and operation of the heating system.

The hypocaust was heated by a furnace (Room 10; 1.2 × 2.0 m), located immediately south of the hot room. Built of fired bricks and preserved to a height of three to four courses, the furnace would have generated hot air that circulated beneath the floor and within the walls, heating the room above.

The eastern wall of the caldarium was partly hewn into the natural bedrock and partly constructed of chalk stones, reflecting a practical adaptation to the terrain. A doorway in this wall led into another room (Room 11; 4.0 × 4.5 m), which also contained a hypocaust system. The passage connecting the two rooms was lined with fired bricks, indicating exposure to high temperatures.

Although the furnace associated with this second hypocaust did not survive, a feeding channel (L1245) was uncovered to the east of Room 11. This channel, constructed of fired bricks and preserved to a height of approximately nine courses, likely connected the furnace to the hypocaust system. Its construction in several phases suggests ongoing modifications or repairs during the period of use.

During the Ottoman period, this channel was blocked by a later wall (W50237), which also caused significant damage to a small adjacent bathtub (L1265; 0.5 × 0.6 m) located to the north. Due to its fragmentary preservation, the precise function and relationship of this bathtub to the bathhouse complex remain uncertain.

The Northern Wing

The northern wing is the least well-preserved part of the villa. It was almost entirely destroyed during the construction of Ottoman-period buildings belonging to the village of al-Dawayima. The basements and foundations of these later structures penetrated deeply into the earlier remains, in some cases reaching down to the bedrock and obliterating the original architecture.

Despite this extensive destruction, it is likely that the northern wing originally contained the main entrance to the villa, oriented toward the north. This entrance would have provided access from the surrounding landscape and roads into the

central courtyard and the rest of the complex. However, no architectural remains of this entrance have survived, and its reconstruction is based solely on the overall layout of the villa and comparative examples.

The Finds

Pottery vessels, metal objects, and glass items dating to the Late Ottoman period and the British Mandate period were discovered on the floors of the villa and in accumulations above them (not illustrated). These finds originated from the houses of the Arab village of al-Dawayima.

From the Roman period—the period to which the villa itself is dated—only a small quantity of pottery was recovered. All of these finds were collected from above the villa's floors, and since the floors were not removed during the excavation, no pottery originating from sealed loci was found.

The Roman-period pottery discovered in the villa dates from the early 1st century CE until the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135 CE), and it establishes this time range as the period during which the structure was in use. However, since the pottery was collected from above the floors, it represents only the final phase of occupation of the villa and does not provide evidence for the date of its construction.

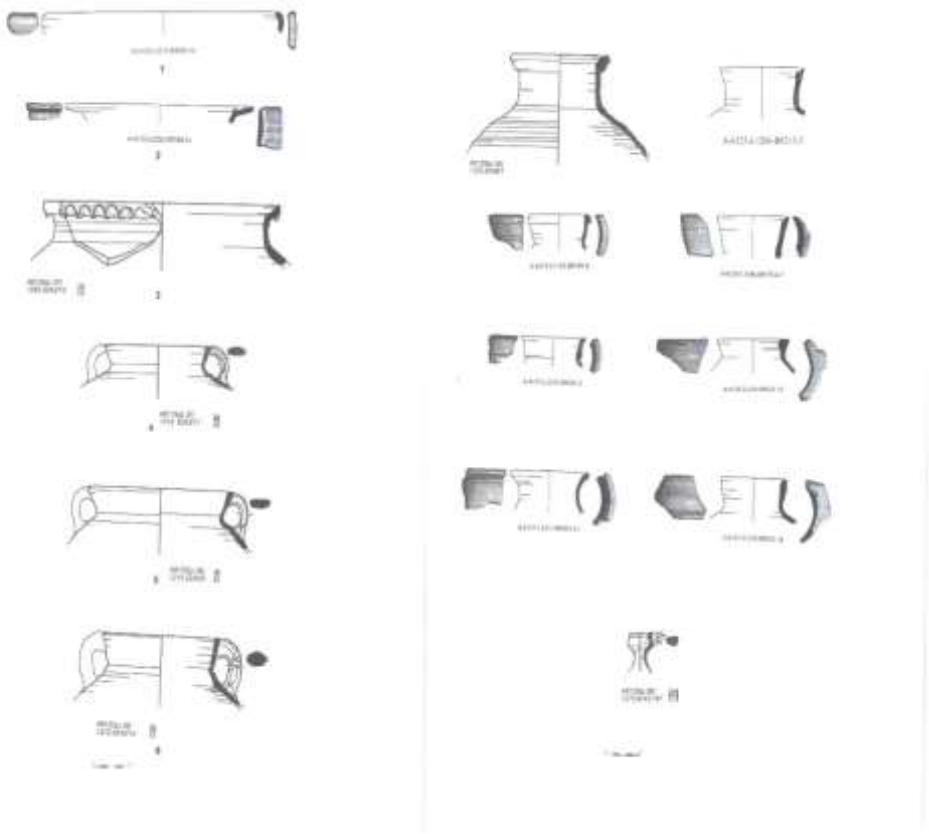
The villa's walls and floors were also disturbed during the Ottoman period, when foundations for new buildings were dug and water cisterns were hewn into the earlier structure. Some of the villa's floors were even reused during this later period, and the layers above them were cleared of earlier finds. As a result, the dating of the villa is not certain and relies primarily on architectural and stylistic considerations. The limited finds from the Second Temple period that remained *in situ* were discovered only on floors that had not been disturbed during the Ottoman period.

The assemblage of Roman-period pottery from the villa includes:

Shallow bowls and deep bowls; kraters, juglets and numerous cooking pots of three different types (Figures. 6-7)

Storage jars form the main component of the assemblage, with eight types or subtypes identified (Figure 7).

Figures 6-7. Pottery Plates



The pottery vessels are all of local production, similar to assemblages found in the Jerusalem region and the Judean Desert (De Vincenz, 2007; Magness, 2009; Tchekhanovets, 2013), as well as at Masada and Ein Gedi. It is reasonable to assume that the owners of this impressive villa also possessed imported vessels, but none were found during the excavation. These may have been removed from the structure by its inhabitants or possibly taken by the Roman army during the suppression of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

A workshop and service area (Area C), ca. 300 sq. m. in size, was uncovered a few meters north of the villa and it may have operated as part of the villa complex. Area C was only partially excavated, and it was found to contain pits, storage silos and several rock-carved installations of different types. The ceramic, stone and numismatic assemblage from this area dates from the early first century AD to the Bar Kochba rebellion against the Romans (132-135 AD). The personnel working in Area C may have very well been the same workers who hewed the concealed rooms and escape tunnels in Area A in preparation for the revolt against the Romans (Figures 8 -9). A hoard of seventy-seven silver drachmae and tetradrachmae was discovered hidden inside a cooking pot in Cave 69 in Area A (Figure10). The coins in the hoard date from the reign of Nero (54-68 AD) to reign of Hadrian (117-138 AD).

The date of the hoard is consistent with that of the mosaic floor and the Early Roman pottery assemblage uncovered in the villa. The presence of several limestone vessels and coins of the Bar Kochba Revolt (133-134 AD), together with the presence of a ritual bath inside the villa, strongly suggest that the inhabitants of the site were of Jewish origin. A similar villa, or palace as it is called by its excavator, was revealed some five km. to the northeast of Amatzia (Damati, 1983). That building is similarly dated from the first century AD to the reign of Hadrian (117-138 AD). Both buildings provide a glimpse of the rural life of wealthy families in the region in that period, a lifestyle which enabled them to manage estates with large numbers of servants and workmen. This came to an end with the outbreak of hostilities during the Bar Kochba Revolt and it's suppression by the Romans.

Figure 8. Escape Tunnel, Photo

Figure 9. Section of a Escape Tunnel

Figure 10. The Hoard of Silver Coins

Discussion and Conclusion

The villa uncovered at Karmei Katif occupies a location of clear strategic and economic significance. It was constructed at a junction of routes that traversed the Judean Shephelah from as early as the mid–4th millennium BCE through to the mid–20th century CE. This continuity highlights the long-term importance of the region as a corridor connecting the coastal plain, the Judean highlands, and the Negev. The villa's elevated position on a hilltop afforded it commanding views over the surrounding landscape, particularly the network of roads running through the valley below. Such a vantage point would have enabled both supervision of movement and control over agricultural lands and communication routes, suggesting that the choice of location was deliberate and carefully considered.

The broader region gained particular historical importance during the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Archaeological evidence from the site strongly reflects this context. The extensive systems of underground hiding complexes uncovered in Areas A and D indicate organized preparation for conflict or refuge, a phenomenon widely documented in Judea during this revolt. These complexes are also mentioned in historical sources such as the account of Cassius Dio (*Roman History* LXIX:12.3), which describes the use of subterranean networks by the rebels.

Additional finds reinforce the interpretation of the site's population during this period. Chalkstone vessels—commonly associated with Jewish purity practices—alongside coins dated to 133–134 CE found in Area C north of the villa, and a ritual bath (*miqveh*) discovered in Area F adjacent to the villa, all point to a population of Jewish origin. Together, these elements situate the villa within the socio-cultural and historical framework of Jewish rural life in Judea during the late Second Temple period and its aftermath.

The structure excavated in Area D has been identified as a **rural villa (*villa rustica*)**, a type of estate complex well known throughout the Roman world. Such villas typically consisted of a residential core—often large, architecturally sophisticated, and richly appointed—designed to reflect the wealth, status, and cultural aspirations of its owners (Marzano, 2004). The presence of features such as a central courtyard with a decorative pool, mosaic pavements, a bathhouse equipped with a hypocaust system, reception halls, and multiple residential rooms indicates that this villa belonged to a prosperous household that adopted elements of Roman architectural and cultural traditions.

At the same time, the villa was not merely a residence but the center of an agricultural estate (*fundus*), surrounded by cultivated lands (*ager*). Its location suggests integration into a productive rural landscape, where agricultural output would have formed the economic basis of the estate (Applebaum, 1989; Percival, 1988). Villas of this kind typically functioned as administrative and residential hubs overseeing farming activities carried out by a labor force that may have included both slaves and hired workers.

In the broader context of the Roman Empire, rural villas were commonly situated in proximity to urban centers, maintaining economic and social ties with nearby towns. In this case, the Karmei Katif villa may have been linked to Eleutheropolis (modern Beit Guvrin), a significant urban center in the region. Such a relationship would have facilitated the exchange of goods, services, and cultural influences, embedding the villa within regional economic networks.

It is noteworthy that in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire—and particularly in the Land of Israel—relatively few rural villas from the Early Roman period have been identified, in contrast to the hundreds documented in the western provinces. This discrepancy has long been recognized in scholarship and may reflect differences in settlement patterns, land ownership structures, or levels of Romanization. The Karmei Katif villa thus constitutes an important addition to the limited corpus of such sites in the region.

Comparative material further illuminates the significance of this villa. A similar structure, known as "Hilkiah's Palace," was excavated approximately 5 km northeast of Karmei Katif. Although somewhat smaller (30 × 37 m), it shares key architectural features, including a rectangular layout ם a peristyle courtyard, and is likewise dated to the 1st century CE. Despite the presence of coins from the reign of Emperor Hadrian, the excavator attributed its destruction to Roman military activity under Vespasian in 68 CE, illustrating the vulnerability of such estates during periods of conflict.

Another comparable site at Arkan el-Khala, located about 1 km northeast of Beit Guvrin, presents a more modest example of a rural villa. Measuring 20 × 30 m, it underwent two phases of construction (Hirschfeld and Birger-Calderon, 1991). The earlier phase (1st–early 2nd century CE), contemporary with the Karmei Katif villa, consisted of a relatively simple arrangement of rooms סביב a courtyard. In a later phase (2nd–early 3rd century CE), the complex was expanded to include service installations such as a paved kitchen and plastered pools, possibly forming part of a bathhouse. This evolution reflects changing needs and perhaps increasing prosperity or adaptation over time.

Taken together, these three sites—Karmei Katif, "Hilkiah's Palace," and Arkan el-Khala—provide valuable insight into the rural lifestyle of affluent families in the Judean Shephelah during the Early Roman period. They illustrate a mode of life characterized by the management of agricultural estates, the use of substantial architectural investment to express status, and the integration of Roman cultural elements into local contexts.

Additional parallels can be drawn from other regions. A villa discovered at Ramat Hanadiv, which included a *miqveh* and was identified as belonging to a Jewish owner, was destroyed during the First Jewish–Roman War and subsequently abandoned for several centuries until the Byzantine period. This pattern of destruction and abandonment echoes the historical disruptions experienced across Judea.

Similarly, excavations at Phasaelis in the Jordan Valley revealed a wealthy residence from the Second Temple period that included a bathhouse and a large pool. The design of the pool—featuring plastered walls, semicircular steps, and surrounding columns—

closely parallels the pool uncovered at Karmei Katif, suggesting shared architectural traditions and possibly common cultural influences.

Another comparable example comes from Tel Goded, where excavations revealed structures that may represent parts of a Roman villa complex. One building contained a central courtyard with a rectangular plastered pool, complete with semicircular steps and column bases arranged in a pattern similar to that observed at Karmei Katif. These parallels strengthen the identification of the Karmei Katif structure as part of a broader architectural and cultural phenomenon.

Ultimately, the villa uncovered in the present excavation appears to have gone out of use during the upheavals associated with the Bar Kokhba Revolt and its suppression by Roman forces. The most compelling evidence for this conclusion is the complete absence of finds dating later than the mid–2nd century CE. No material remains from subsequent Roman or Byzantine occupation phases were identified within the villa itself, suggesting a relatively abrupt abandonment. Later activity at the site is represented only by remains from the Late Ottoman period and the British Mandate, which overlaid and, in many cases, damaged the earlier structure.

In sum, the Karmei Katif villa offers a rare and valuable glimpse into rural elite life in the Judean Shephelah during the late Second Temple and Early Roman periods. It reflects the intersection of local traditions and Roman influence, the economic foundations of agricultural estates, and the profound impact of historical events—particularly the Bar Kokhba Revolt—on settlement continuity in the region.

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