

**Zeitschrift:** Cahiers d'archéologie romande  
**Herausgeber:** Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise  
**Band:** 43 (1987)  
  
**Artikel:** Roman wall-paintings in Israel  
**Autor:** Ovadiah, Asher / Michaeli, Talila  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-835461>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**



# Roman Wall-Paintings in Israel

Asher OVADIAH and Talila MICHAELI

*Parmi les sites israéliens à avoir fourni des peintures murales romaines, complexes architecturaux ou tombes, les auteurs ont choisi de présenter chronologiquement 15 ensembles caractéristiques : des palais hérodiens de Jéricho ou de Massada, de la Maison de Caïphe à Jérusalem, les faux-marbres peints et les décors architecturaux ou végétaux peuplés d'oiseaux ; des anciennes Samarie et Mampsis, les motifs de corniches, de frises, les dessins géométriques et les scènes mythologiques ; des tombes de Jérusalem et de Jéricho, les treilles chargées de grappes et d'oiseaux ; d'une tombe près d'Hébron et d'une autre d'Ascalon, les bustes, les nymphes et un flûtiste. Durant la période hérodiennne, les décors figurés sont rares, alors que les sujets se diversifient dès le II<sup>e</sup> siècle.*

Roman wall-paintings in Israel have been discovered all over the country, and are found in tombs and in various architectural complexes, such as fortresses, palaces, public buildings and wealthy private houses.

They can be detected from the Herodian period (second half of the first century B.C.E.) to the early Byzantine period. The sites have been investigated or excavated by scholars or behalf of various scientific institutes and bodies, such as The Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, etc., mainly in the course of the present century.

The best preserved samples are the ones found in underground tombs.

The wall-paintings under discussion will be presented in chronological order and are divided into two main groups: architectural complexes without ritual connotations and tombs.

## Architectural Complexes

Herod's winter palace in Jericho<sup>1</sup> was discovered in the 19th century. Large scale excavations were conducted in the site by J.L. Kelso and D.C. Baramki since 1950, and continued by E. Netzer in 1973.

Fragments of painted and moulded stucco, mainly imitating polychrome marble, remained in the lower parts of the walls.

The Herodian fortress of Masada has been explored in the course of the 19th century and surveyed by M. Avi-Yonah, N. Avigad, Y. Aharoni, S. Guttman and E. Dunayevsky in 1955. Large scale excavations were conducted by Y. Yadin from 1963-1965.

Frescoes imitating multicoloured marble incrustations were found in the lowest terrace of the northern palace<sup>2</sup>.

A private house from the Herodian period was excavated by M. Broshi in 1971-1972 on Mount Zion in Jerusalem and has been identified as The House of Caiphas.

Fragments of its wall-paintings depict birds on an illusionistic background with trees, garlands (fig. 1), architectural motifs and the like<sup>3</sup> (fig. 2).

The Herodian fortress of Herodion was excavated by V. Corbo between 1962-1967. Further excavations were conducted by G. Foerster in 1968-1969, and continued by E. Netzer since 1972.

Fragments of frescoes imitating multicoloured marble incrustations were found in the baths and among the remnants of the dwelling area ("The Villa")<sup>4</sup>.

The Herodian fortress of Cypros was excavated by E. Netzer in 1975.

<sup>1</sup> Kelso, J.L.: The Masonry and Plaster of New Testament Jericho (Tulul Abu el-'Alayiq), *AASOR* 29-30 (1949-51), 42-49; Kelso, J.L./D.C. Baramki: The Excavations of New Testament Jericho (Tulul Abu el-'Alayiq), *AASOR* 29-30 (1949-51), 1-20; Netzer, E.: Jericho, *IEJ* 23 (1973), 260; *id.*: The Hasmonean and Herodian Winter Palaces at Jericho, *IEJ* 25 (1975), 89-100; *id.*: The Winter Palaces of the Judean Kings at Jericho at the End of the Second Temple Period, *BASOR* 228 (1977), 1-13; Netzer, E./E.A. Meyers: Preliminary Report on the Joint Jericho Excavations Project, *BASOR* 228 (1977), 15-27; Singer, S.F.: The Winter Palace of Jericho, *BAR* (1977), 1, 6-17.

<sup>2</sup> Avi-Yonah, M./N. Avigad/Y. Aharoni/I. Dunayevsky/S. Guttman: The Archaeological Survey of Masada 1955-56, *IEJ* 7 (1957), 1-60; Boree, W.: Masada nach der Eroberung durch die Römer, *JPOS* 13 (1933), 140-146; Schulten, A.: Masada, die Burg des Herodes und die römischen Lager, *ZDPV* 56 (1933), 1-185; Yadin, Y.: *Masada*, London 1966; *id.*: The Excavation of Masada - 1963/64, Preliminary Report, *IEJ* 15 (1965), 1-120.

<sup>3</sup> Broshi, M.: Excavations in the House of Caiphas, Mount Zion, *Qadmoniot* V (19-20) (1972), 104-107 (Hebrew); *id.*: Excavations on Mount Zion, 1971-1972, *IEJ* 26 (1976), 81-88.

<sup>4</sup> Corbo, V.: Gebel Fureidis (Herodion), *RB* 75 (1968), 424-428; *id.*: L'Herodion di Gabel Fureidis, *LA* 13 (1963), 219-277; *id.*: L'Herodion di Gabel Fureidis, *LA* 17 (1967), 65-121; Foerster, G.: Herodium, *RB* 77 (1970), 400-401; *id.*: Herodium, *IEJ* 22 (1972), 247-249; *id.*: Recent Investigations at Lower Herodium, *Qadmoniot* VI (23-24) (1973), 107-110 (Hebrew); Rozenberg, S.: The Finds of Lower Herodium. C: Frescoes and Stucco, in: Netzer, E.: *Greater Herodium*, Jerusalem 1981 (*Qedem* 13), 71-75; Schick, C.: Der Frankenberg, *ZDPV* 3 (1880), 88-89.



Fragments of painted walls were found on the lower parts of the *tepidarium*, imitating marble in bright yellow and red colours. In the south-western part there are several rooms with fragments of red and black frescoes<sup>5</sup>.

The site of Samaria (Sebaste) was excavated by G.A. Reisner in 1908. Further excavations were conducted by J.W. Crowfoot in 1931. It is dated to the second half of the second century C.E.

Stones decorated with architectural motifs representing cornices with eggs-and-darts mouldings and friezes of palmette were found. In the area of the stadium panels of coloured frescoes have been discovered<sup>6</sup>.

The site of Mamshit, the ancient Mampsis, was mentioned and surveyed by various scholars since the 19th century. It was excavated by A. Negev in 1965-1967.

Wall-paintings were found over the supporting arches (pl. XIII, 1) and the upper parts of the walls. The paintings contain depictions of geometric patterns, male masks and mythological scenes, one of which is identified as Eros and Psyche, another with a trumpeter, a third one might indicate Leda and the Swan, and the fourth depicts a man with his shadow casted before him. On the arches naked life-size males are depicted (pl. XIII, 2), confronted with women on the opposite side. Medallions, each containing a bust of a young person, appear on the top of these arches. The wall-paintings are dated to the second-third century C.E.<sup>7</sup>.

## Tombs

A tomb identified as Jason's tomb was discovered in the Rehavia residential quarter in Jerusalem by A.P. Levinson. It was cleared and excavated by L.Y. Rahmani and M. Dothan in 1956.

Battle ships painted in characoal are depicted; one Greek inscription and some others in Aramaic appear on the walls. The tomb is dated to the end of the first

century B.C.E. or early first century C.E.<sup>8</sup>.

A Jewish tomb from the first century C.E., identified as belonging to the Goliath family, was discovered near Jericho and excavated by R. Hachlili at the late seventies.

It is a two-storey tomb, the upper room of which is painted. The decoration contains vinetrellis with grapes and birds on the northern wall (Fig. 3), an unidentified structure on the western wall and a garland. The main colours are hues of red, brown and black. The niches are decorated with large black stripes bordered by red narrow strips<sup>9</sup>.

Another Jewish tomb was discovered and excavated by A. Kloner in 1976 at Horvat Midras.

Only the lower part of the wall-paintings to the height of 15-20 cm still exists and contains fragments of grey and yellow colours. It is dated to the first century or the first half of the second century C.E.<sup>10</sup>

A tomb dated to the late second or early third century C.E. was discovered at Ben Shemen by Y. Ori and excavated by him in 1940 and 1954.

Its walls are covered with moulded and painted depictions of a frieze, approximately 0.50 m., consisting of metopes with geometric patterns in red and black colours (fig. 4). The moulded decorations consist of garlands and two fragments of portraits, found on the floor, with emphasis on the colour of eyebrows, hair, beard, nose and lips<sup>11</sup>.

A tomb in Tel-'Eitun near Hebron was discovered and excavated in 1968, dated to the late third century C.E.

The main chamber includes five *arcosolia* decorated with reliefs, graffiti and paintings. The paintings

<sup>5</sup> Netzer, E.: Cypros, *Qadmoniot* VIII (30-31) (1975), 54-61 (Hebrew); *id.*: Cypros, *MBI* 17 (1981), 33-34.

<sup>6</sup> Crowfoot, J.W.: Excavations at Samaria, 1931, *PEFQST* (1932), 8-34; *id.*: Work of the Joint Expedition to Samaria-Sebastiya, April and May 1931, *PEFQST* (1931), 139-142; Crowfoot, J.W./K.M. Kenyon/E.L. Sukenik: *Samaria-Sebaste I. The Buildings at Samaria*, London 1942, pl. LXXXIII.

<sup>7</sup> Negev, A.: Mampsis, *MBI* 19 (1901), 20-24; *id.*: Mampsis. A Report on Excavations of a Nabateo-Roman Town, *Archaeology* 24 (1971), 166-171; *id.*: Mampsis. A Town of the Eastern Negev, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte und Archäologie* 7 (1967), 67-87; *id.*: Mampsis-Mamshit, *Mada* 16 (1971/72), 155-156 (Hebrew); *id.*: Painters and Goldsmiths in the Desert, *Ba-Machane* 177 (1983), 33-40 (Hebrew); *id.*: The Staircase Tower in the Nabatean Architecture, *EI* 11 (1973), 197-207 (Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> Avigad, N.: Aramaic Inscriptions in the Tomb of Jason, *IEJ* 17 (1967), 110-111; *id.*: Jason Tomb, *'Atiqot* 4 (1964), 28-32 (Hebrew); Ben Eli, A.: Reconstruction of a Warship from a Wall-Painting in a Catacomb in Jerusalem, *Sefunim* 1 (1966), 40-42; Benoît, P.: Jason Tomb, *'Atiqot* 4 (1964), 32-38 (Hebrew); Foerster, G.: Jason's Tomb Reconsidered, *IEJ* 28 (1978), 152-156; Rachmani, L.Y.: Jason Tomb, *'Atiqot* 4 (1964), 1-31 (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> Hachlili, R.: A Jerusalem Family in Jericho, *BASOR* 230 (1978), 45-56; *id.*: A Jerusalem Family of the Second Temple Period at Jericho, *Qadmoniot* XII (46-47) (1979), 62-66 (Hebrew); *id.*: The Goliath Family in Jericho. Funerary Inscriptions from a First Century AD Jewish Monumental Tomb, *BASOR* 235 (1979), 31-36; *id.*: Tsiur Kever Monumentali Be-Yericho shel ha-Meah ha-Rishona la-Sephira, *Uma Ve-Toldoteah* I, Jerusalem 1983 (Hebrew); Hachlili, R./A. Killebrew: Goliath. A Family at Jericho in the First Century C.E., *Qadmoniot*, XIV (55-56) (1981), 118-122 (Hebrew); *id.*: Jewish Funerary Customs during the Second Temple Period in the Light of the Excavations at the Jericho Necropolis, *PEQ* (1983), 109-139; Hachlili, R./P. Smith: The Genealogy of the Goliath Family, *BASOR* 235 (1979), 67-73; Shenhav, D./D. Biegelajzen: Conservation of a Wall-Painting from a Jewish Monumental Tomb of the First Century C.E. at Jericho, *The Israeli Museum Journal* 1 (1982), 75-78.

<sup>10</sup> Kloner, A.: Horvat Midras, *Qadmoniot* IX (44) (1978), 115-118 (Hebrew).

<sup>11</sup> Reich, R.: A Decorated Roman Tomb near Ben Shemen, *'Atiqot* 8 (1982), 12-22 (Hebrew; English summary).



represent *kline* beds; the graffiti – warriors, human heads and birds, geometric design and a man on a horseback. The reliefs which are carved in the stone consist of architectural elements<sup>12</sup>.

A tomb called the "Birds Cave" was found on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem by S. Markus in 1974 and excavated by A. Kloner the same year. The tomb is dated to the late third or early fourth century C.E.

Its *arcosolia* and spandrels are covered with depictions of four vines with vinetrellis, grapes, leaves and various birds such as peacocks, etc. (fig. 5). Flowers are scattered on the walls<sup>13</sup>.

A painted tomb was discovered near kibbutz Or-ha-Ner by Y. Ori in 1922 and cleared by him in 1941. Its four walls and vault are painted.

The main pictorial scheme is on the east and west walls. The depictions are divided into parallel horizontal registers (pl. XIII, 3) containing, from bottom, marble imitations, a frieze of geometric patterns, male and female busts within medallions; on the uppermost part of the vault there is a frieze with floral motifs. The northern entrance-wall contains a Greek inscription and two torches. The southern wall contains geometric patterns.

The tomb is dated to the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth century C.E.<sup>14</sup>.

A vaulted tomb was discovered in Ascalon by M. Abo Ghorri in 1936 and unearthed by Y. Ori in 1937.

<sup>12</sup> Tsaferis, V.: A Monumental Roman Tomb on Tel-'Eitun, *'Atiqot* 8 (1982), 23-25 (Hebrew; English summary); Ussishkin, D.: Tombs from the Israeli Period in Tel-'Eitun, in: Aharoni, Y. (ed.): *Chafiroi U-Mechkarum*, Tel-Aviv 1973, 31-47, esp. 40 (Hebrew).

<sup>13</sup> Bagatti, B.: Ritrovamento di una tomba pitturata sull'Oliveto, *LA* 24 (1975), 170-187; Kloner, A.: The Birds Cave on Mount of Olives, *Qadmoniot* VIII (29) (1975), 27-30 (Hebrew).

<sup>14</sup> Tzafrir, Y.: A Painted Tomb at Or-ha-Ner, *IEJ* 18 (1968), 170-180; *id.*: A Painted Tomb from the 4th Century AD, *Qadmoniot* II (6) (1968), 27-30 (Hebrew).

The tomb is painted all over its walls and vault. The south wall represents two nymphs sitting in an idyllic open background with flowers, fruits, birds, fish, a crane and an ox (fig. 6). The ceiling is decorated with vinetrellis with beasts and birds, a bust and a Gorgon's mask, two young boys with grapes and a young flutist (Pan?). The northern entrance-wall depicts two human male figures. The tomb is dated to the fourth century C.E.<sup>15</sup>.

In the earlier period, the Herodian era (until 70 C.E.), depictions of human or even animal images are very rare. The pictorial programme consists mainly of imitations of marble incrustations, plants and birds. It seems that the reason for the avoidance of figurative motifs is based on the strict religious law, especially on the second commandment which forbids such depictions.

From the second century C.E. onwards the subjects depicted are varied, probably due to political and ideological changes in the country.

It seems that influences of the artistic centers or workshops in the neighbouring countries might be discernable in the subjects depicted, as well as in the style of the wall-paintings discovered in Israel. The anonymous artists probably copied their subjects and motifs either from a pattern book or from other artistic media. This tendency has already been observed by scholars in mosaic pavements<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Ori, Y.: A Painted Tomb near Ascalon, *QDAP* 8 (1939), 38-44.

<sup>16</sup> Ovadia, R. and A.: *Hellenistic, Roman and Early Byzantine Mosaic Pavements in Israel*, Rome 1987.

#### List of abbreviations

AASOR	The Annual of the American School of Oriental Research
BAR	Biblical Archaeology Review
BASOR	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
EI	Eretz Israel (Hebrew)
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
ILN	The Illustrated London News
JPOS	Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society
LA	Liber Annuus, Studii Biblici Franciscani
MBI	Le Monde de la Bible
PEFOS	Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement
PEQ	Palestine Exploration Quarterly
QDAP	The Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine
RB	Revue Biblique
ZDPV	Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins

Address of the authors:

Prof. Asher Ovadia, Dept. of Art History and Classical Studies, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv 69 978 Israel.

Miss Talila Michaeli, Dept. of Art History, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv 69 978 Israel.









Fig. 5. Jerusalem, Mount of Olives, The "Birds' Cave"

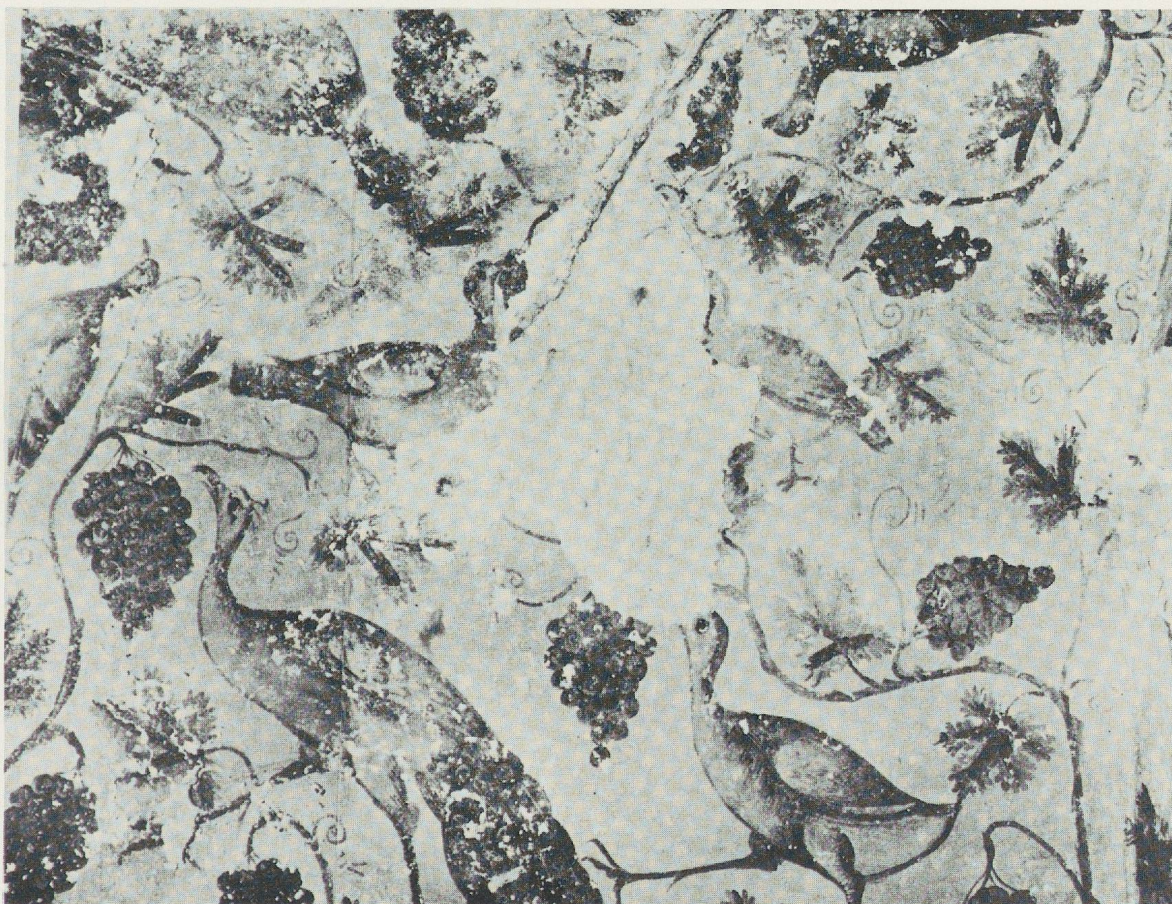






Fig. 6. Ascalon, the lunette and vault of the tomb

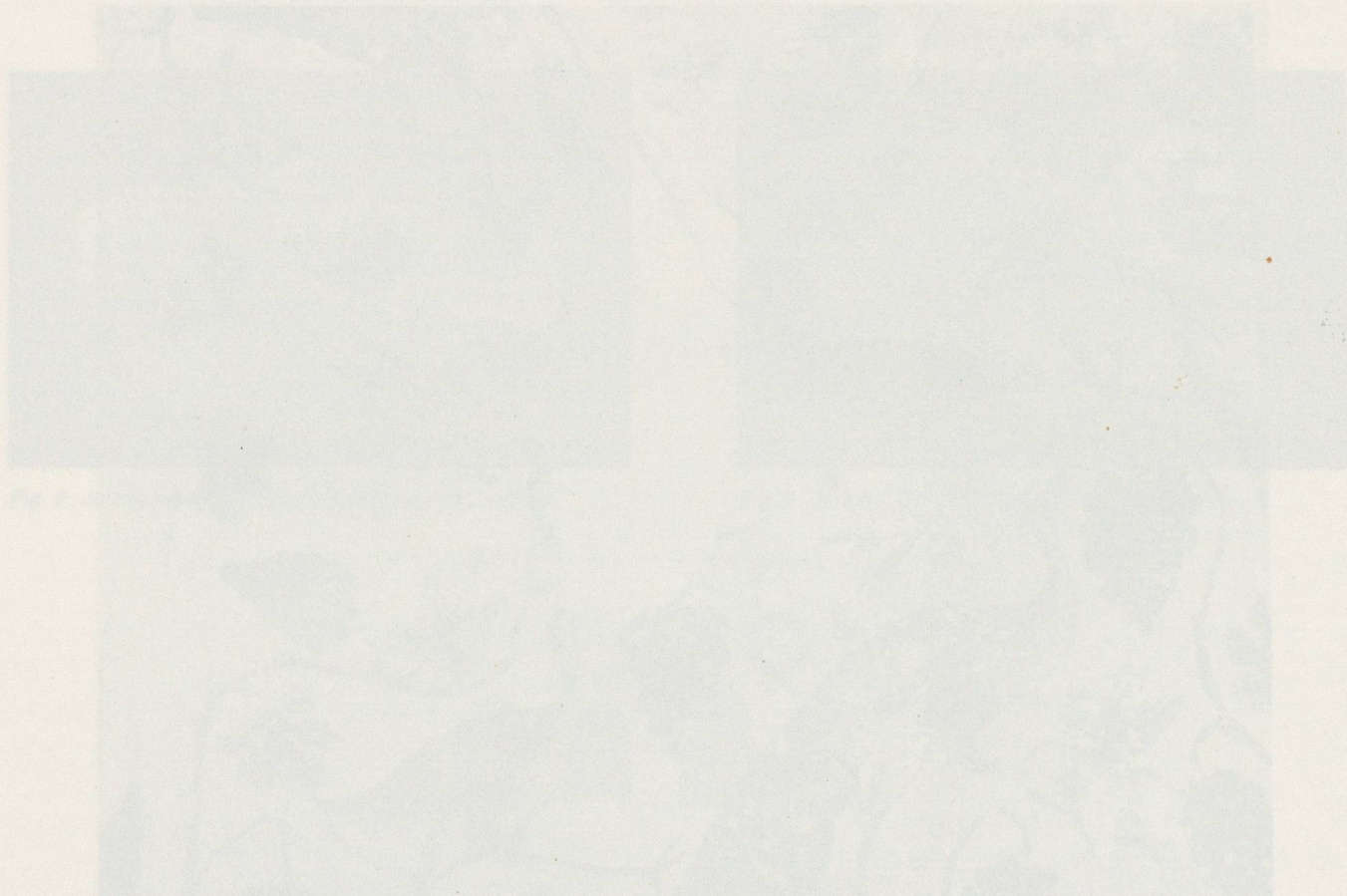


Fig. 4. San Shimon, reconstruction drawing of the lunette and vault