



Caves of Maresha and Bet Guvrin – a World Heritage Site

The caves of Maresha and Bet Guvrin were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014 at UNESCO's 38th annual meeting in Doha, Qatar.

The caves now join a prestigious list of some 1,000 sites worldwide, including the Pyramids of Egypt, the Acropolis of Athens, India's Taj Mahal, the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador, the Canadian Rockies and the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras.

The caves were inscribed based on Criterion V of the World Heritage Convention, by which they exhibit "an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, which is representative of a culture, or human interaction with the environment."

The ancient cities of Maresha (eighth–first centuries BCE) and Bet Guvrin (first–tenth centuries CE) are located near the crossroad of the trade routes connecting Mesopotamia and Egypt and they attest to the variety of cultures in the region and their continuous development over almost 2,000 years. The caves, which are located beneath and nearby these cities, have universal significance due to:

- The length of time over which they were hewn and used, from the period of the Judean monarchy to the Early Muslim period (8th century BCE–10th century CE).
- Various cultural groups that recognized the special characteristics of the soft chalk and knew how to take advantage of it to produce building materials and create caves for various uses.
- The variety of uses to which the caves were put: stone quarries; cisterns; olive oil presses; baths and purification installations; columbaria (dovecotes); wells; hiding places; rituals; stables; storage; burial; and water tunnels.
- The number of caves and their density: approximately 500 caves containing some 3,500 rooms, extending over about 3,000 dunams (about 741 acres; 300 hectares).

The caves that were inscribed are located with Bet Guvrin-Maresha National Park. This area encompasses all the elements found in the thousands of caves that are scattered throughout the Land of the Caves and Hiding Places in the Judean lowlands. UNESCO's inscription of the site as a World Heritage Site requires the state to protect it so that it remains in prime condition as part of global human heritage, for our generation and those to come. Within the national park these cultural assets can best be protected.

The following bodies participated in the preparation of the proposal to UNESCO: Israel Nature and Parks Authority; Israel National Commission for UNESCO; Israel Government Tourist Corporation; Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Yoav and Lachish regional councils; Bar-Ilan University; Archaeological Seminars, Israel Antiquities Authority; Cave Research Center.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Israel as of 2014 are: Masada; the Old City of Acre; the White City of Tel Aviv; the biblical tells of Megiddo, Hazor and Beer Sheva; the Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev: Avdat, Mamshit, Shivta and Haluza; the Baha'i Shrines in Haifa and Acre; sites of human development on Mount Carmel: Nahal Me'arot.

northern of the two, an inscription was found mentioning Apollophanes son of Sesmaios, the leader of the Sidonian community in Maresha. The inscription, as well as the cave's paintings, shed light on the art, mythology and ethnic affiliations of those interred in the cave (Idumeans, Sidonians and Greeks). They also reveal their family relationships and burial customs. The Apollophanes inscription clearly identifies Tel Maresha with biblical Maresha.

In the southern cave (9), the "Cave of the Musicians," paintings have been reconstructed that depict musicians of the period. All the paintings in the caves are reconstructions.

St. Anne's Church (10)

The church is located on the path between parking lots C and D. This very large church (52 x 56 m) was built during the Byzantine period. In the Crusader period the church was restored on a smaller scale. The church was named after Anne, the mother of Mary, mother of Jesus. The Arab inhabitants of Bet Jibrin preserved the name as "Sandahanna." In Arabic, Tel Maresha was named Tell Sandahanna, after the church.



Parking Lot D

The Bell Caves (11)

The Bell Caves, which are within the city limits of Bet Guvrin, were apparently hewn during the Byzantine and Early Muslim periods. The caves were used mainly as quarries and provided building material for cities on the coastal plain and for Bet Guvrin itself. The 10th-century Arab traveler Al Muqaddasi wrote of Bet Guvrin: "It is a land of richness and plenty, and in it are many marble quarries..."



Parking Lot E

(North of the gas station on the other side of road 35)

The Roman Amphitheater (12)

A Roman amphitheater was a public structure for sports competitions and spectacles like fights between gladiators or against wild animals. A theater, on the other hand, was used mainly for plays. Other than the differing purpose, these two structures clearly differ in form. The theater is semi-circular, while the amphitheater is round or elliptical with the seating area completely encircling a round arena.

Bet Guvrin has the only Roman amphitheater in Israel that is open to the public. It had 3,500 seats built around the arena, with spaces beneath the area to hold the wild animals.



The Crusader Fortress (13)

The Crusader fortress is located east of and adjacent to the amphitheater. Remains of a basilical church, built in 1136 by King Fouk d'Anjou of Jerusalem, were found in the fortress. The church, which was built in the Romanesque style, served the people living in and around the fortress. The church was adorned with Roman and Byzantine stone bases, columns and capitals that had been taken from the remains of ancient Bet Guvrin.



The Bathhouse (14)

The remains of a large Roman-era bathhouse – covering over 4,000 sq m – were discovered beneath the fortress. Like every Roman bathhouse, it included bathing pools, tepid, hot and cold rooms, saunas, open areas and toilets.

A staircase at the end of a wooden path with railings leads to a row of large, impressive vaults, built of finely dressed ashlar. The vaults were the foundation on which the bathhouse was built.

The History of Maresha

Maresha was fortified by King Rehoboam of Judah following the campaign to the region of the Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak: "And Rehoboam...built cities for defense in Judah...Gath, and Mareshah, and Ziph" (2 Chron. 11:5–8). Shortly thereafter, in the early 9th century BCE, Shishak's son sent an army to Judah under the command of his general Zerah the Ethiopian. However, King Asa of Judah defeated him near Maresha.

During the Persian period, after the destruction of the First Temple, Idumeans who came from the Negev settled in southern Judah and the region became known as Idumea. In the 4th century BCE, Sidonians and Greeks joined them, bringing Hellenistic culture to the region. Hellenistic Maresha was a cosmopolitan center and an economic magnet and was also home to a few Egyptians and Jews. Some of the Jews were descendants of the local population from the time before the destruction of the First Temple and others came there from coastal plain cities.

The Hellenistic period saw the construction of Lower Maresha; many caves were also hewn during this time. Historical sources and excavations reveal that in 113/12 BCE the Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus conquered Idumea and forcibly converted its inhabitants. Hyrcanus also laid waste to the city.

Maresha was eventually reinhabited, but its glory days were past and it remained a small settlement. It was completely destroyed in 40 BCE in a military campaign by the Parthians, who controlled Western Asia beyond the Euphrates River and who were the enemies of Rome.

The History of Bet Guvrin

Following the destruction of Maresha, Bet Guvrin became the region's most important city. The name Bet Guvrin first appears in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, who reported that the Romans, led by Vespasian, conquered Bet Guvrin in 68 CE.

In 200 CE, Emperor Septimius Severus granted Bet Guvrin the status of a city and changed its name to Eleutheropolis ("city of the freedmen"). The city controlled the area between the coastal plain and the Dead Sea and between Bet Shemesh and the Be'er Sheva Valley.

Bet Guvrin became an important junction; five roads, along which milestones have been found, led to the city. Besides dwellings, the city boasted an amphitheater and other public structures. There are no springs at Bet Guvrin, but during the Roman period two aqueducts channeled flowing water to the city from springs in the Judean Mountains.

Slowly but surely the city's Jewish population was renewed. In the 3rd and 4th centuries CE the city is mentioned in the Talmud and the Midrash. Renowned sages lived there, including Rabbi Yonatan and Rabbi Yehuda Ben-Ya'akov. Additional evidence of the growing Jewish population in the region comes from the remains of a large Jewish cemetery and a synagogue inscription.

During the Byzantine period Bet Guvrin became an important Christian center and churches were built there. The Early Arab period saw most of the Bell Caves hewn and during the Crusader period a small fortified city existed here. The Church of St. Anne was restored at that time, during which small farming villages surrounded the city.

The Arab village of Bet Jibrin stood here until Israel's War of Independence in 1948. In June of that year, the Egyptian army took over the British police station built here at the beginning of World War II. The area was taken by the Israel Defense Forces on October 27, 1948. Kibbutz Bet Guvrin was founded in May 1949.

Archaeological Research

Archaeological research began at Bet Guvrin as early as 1900 when P.G. Bliss and A.S. Macalister headed an expedition sponsored by the Palestine Exploration Fund. In 1902, J.P. Peters and H. Thiersch excavated the two Sidonian burial caves. In the 1960s and 1970s the site was surveyed by the geographer Y. Ben-Arieh and archeologists E. Oren, Y. Dagan, A. Kloner and others. Since 1989 the Israel Antiquities Authority has been excavating the site under Prof. A. Kloner and M. Cohen.

Rules of Behavior at Bet Guvrin-Maresha National Park

Please follow these rules:

- Use marked trails only. Danger: There are open pits in the area.
- Rappelling and cliff-climbing are prohibited.
- Do not roll or throw stones.
- Do not climb walls or enter buildings or caves marked as out of bounds.
- Be careful not to slip in the mud in winter and spring.
- Wear suitable clothing, including walking shoes and a hat.
- Avoid snakebites and scorpion stings.
- Visitors are allowed in the park only during opening hours.
- Do not harm flora, fauna or inanimate objects.
- Do not carve on the walls.
- Keep the area clean.
- Make fires only in authorized places.
- Visit at your own risk.

Guided tours and activities, including lamp-light tours for groups, may be arranged in advance by calling 08-6811020.

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Publication of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority

Welcome to Bet Guvrin-Maresha National Park

Bet Guvrin-Maresha National Park is located in the heart of the Judean lowlands, a region of low hills, 250–350 m above sea level. The hills are covered with Mediterranean woodland mainly used for grazing, while the fertile soil that has collected in the valleys has been cultivated since ancient times.

Within the national park, which covers about 5,000 dunams (1,250 acres), is the biblical city of Maresha. During the Roman period Maresha was abandoned and the settlement moved to nearby Bet Guvrin. At that time, Bet Guvrin straddled an important junction on the road from Lod and Ashkelon to Hebron and Jerusalem.

The national park is famed for the numerous and fascinating caves dug by its ancient inhabitants. These caves served many purposes – as quarries, cisterns, storerooms, dovecotes, tombs, storage chambers for produce and shelters for farm animals.

Hewn caves are a common phenomenon in the lowlands because the rocks that make up the region are soft, light-colored chalk that is easy to quarry. In many places the chalk is covered with a harder crust, known as nari, some 1.5–3.0 m thick.



Touring Routes

Highlights (about 2.5 hours,
by vehicle and on foot)

From parking lot A, walk to the agricultural complex and installations (1) and the Columbarium Cave (3). Then drive to parking lot B to visit the Maze Cave (Cave System 7). Drive on to parking lot C to visit the Sidonian Cave (8). From there, drive to parking lot D to visit the Bell Caves (11). Drive on to parking lot E and visit the Roman Amphitheater (12).

See It All (3–4 hours on foot)

From parking lot A, set out for a walking tour about 1.5 km long. Begin at the Columbarium Cave (3) and walk to the Sidonian Cave (8). From there, start back to your vehicle or continue another 2 km on foot to the Church of St. Anne (10) and the Bell Caves (11) and about another 1 km to the Roman Amphitheater (12).

Handicapped- and Stroller-Accessible Route

The accessible sites are: the agricultural installations complex (1), the visitor service center (near the Sidonian Caves), the Bell Caves (11) and the Roman Amphitheater (12).

Sites in the Park

★ Recommended

Parking Lot A

★ Agricultural installation complex (1)

Ancient equipment for processing agricultural products has been reconstructed here. The model olive-oil press represents dozens of industrial installations to produce oil that operated in this region in antiquity. A typical oil press included a crushing stone and two or three beams to which weights were attached to press the oil from the crushed olives. The beam was also called a *bad* in Hebrew, which gave the press its Hebrew name, *beit bad* (“beam house”).

Olive cultivation and oil production were very important to the ancient lowlands. Thousands of dunams of olive groves surrounded Bet Guvrin. The olives were harvested in the fall, which was “high season” for the oil presses, which worked continuously for about three months. One round of the initial olive-crushing took about 30 minutes, but pressing the oil took a few hours.

Olive oil had many uses in ancient times – as illumination, in cooking, as a foodstuff and to preserve food, in rituals, as body oil and a cosmetic. After the oil was pressed out, the waste was used as a fuel and as bonding material in construction.

A winepress and threshing floor have also been reconstructed here. Wheat was separated from chaff using animal power at the threshing floor and grapes were trampled at the winepress to produce juice that fermented into wine.

The “Polish Cave” (2)

This is a cistern hewn in the Hellenistic period. In the middle is a block of stone, part of a pillar that supported the ceiling. At some point, niches to raise doves were carved into the cistern walls. During World War II, Polish soldiers from General Wladislaw Anders’ army – which was loyal to the Polish government in exile in London – visited this cave. They carved the figure 1943 (the year of their visit) into the pillar, along with an inscription: “Warsaw, Poland” and an eagle, the symbol of the Polish army.

★ The Columbarium Cave (3)

A columbarium is an installation to raise doves. The word comes from the Latin *colomba*, which means dove. The walls of this cave feature high-quality design and are carefully carved with over 2,000 niches.

The raising of doves was very common in the Judean lowlands during the Hellenistic period. Doves were apparently used intensively – their meat and eggs as food and their droppings as fertilizer. Doves were also sacrificed in rituals. After the raising of doves as a prosperous industry ceased in the 3rd century BCE, other purposes were found for this cave, like many others at Maresha. In Maresha alone, some 85 columbarium caves have been discovered, with tens of thousands of niches.



The “Bathtub Cave” (4)

This is a small cave that was used as a sitz bath. The cave consists of a staircase and two small chambers, one of which was sunken. A seat was carved in the lower chamber. Water poured over the bather, who sat in the sunken room, through feeder channels and spouts hewn into the walls. The person pouring the water would have been unable to see the bather, thus preserving the bather’s modesty.

The bathtub was used during the Hellenistic period. This method of bathing may have conformed to ritual purification rites of the inhabitants of Maresha, who were of Idumean origin. More than 20 rock-hewn installations that served as bathtubs have been found at Maresha.

The Oil Press Cave (5)

This is one of 22 underground oil presses discovered in Hellenistic Maresha. Most of them have one crushing installation; two or three feature press beams.



Parking Lot B

Tel Maresha

Tel Maresha rises to 357 m above sea level, with the upper city, or acropolis, about 30 m above the lower city. The appearance of the steep, terraced-looking slopes of the upper city is due to the remains of walls that surrounded the city for 800 years, from the Israelite period to the end of the Hellenistic period (9th–1st centuries BCE). Square corner towers were integrated into the city wall; the remains of one of these can be seen in the northwestern corner of the tell. The top of the tell affords an impressive view of the national park and its surroundings.

Dwelling (the Villa) (6)

This house, which has been partially reconstructed, was used as a dwelling and for commerce in the Hellenistic period. The ground floor, with rooms arranged around a small central courtyard, extends over 150 sq m. A staircase led to a second story. The walls of the house were preserved to 1.5 m above the floor and were plastered to protect the soft chalk rock from weathering. The reconstruction team left some of the stones in the rebuilt wall exposed.

A hoard of 25 coins was found under the floor of one of the rooms. The latest coin was minted in 113 BCE, and the house was probably destroyed around that year, during the conquest of Maresha by John Hyrcannus I.



Cisterns found under the dwelling stored rainwater channeled from nearby alleyways, the roof and the courtyard. The water flowed to the cisterns by means of a clay pipe and channels. A rock-hewn staircase and bannister descends to the cistern. Beyond the broken wall of one of the cisterns is a large quarry with pillars supporting the ceiling. A passage now links the quarry to the cisterns of the neighboring house.

★ The Maze Cave (7)

The Maze Cave reveals dwellings and underground systems from the Hellenistic period. The houses are not currently open to visitors; archaeologists have covered them with soil until a way is found to display them without damaging them.

The staircase of the northern dwelling descends into the cave to a bathing chamber. From there, you can continue to the columbarium and to a large cistern. Passage continues to cisterns in which Hellenistic-period clay jugs, jars and bowls were discovered. In the last chamber, under the fourth house, is a reconstructed oil press. Unlike today, during the time of Hellenistic Maresha the walls of the underground room had no breaches and no passage linking them.

Parking Lot C

★ The Sidonian Caves (8, 9)

During the Hellenistic period the people of Maresha commonly buried their dead in caves with niches. Two of these caves are seen here. Many of the niches are decorated with gables (a triangular architectural element common on temple facades). In the Apollonophanes Cave (8), the

