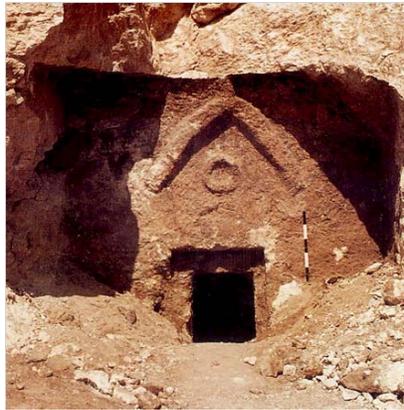


## The Tomb of Jesus and Family? Second Thoughts

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The new interpretation of the Talpiot Tomb in Jerusalem that has been put forth by Simcha Jacobovici and James Cameron is very doubtful. The tomb was uncovered by a construction crew in 1980 and before Yosef Gat, Amos Kloner, and colleagues could excavate it properly it was looted and vandalized. In the tomb were ten ossuaries (or bone boxes), some damaged, six with inscriptions. Some seventeen skeletons were in the ossuaries and another eighteen or so were lying on niches (or shelves) or scattered about on the floor. Many of the bones were broken or crushed into powder. Coins, pottery, and other artifacts were apparently stolen by looters.



Among the inscriptions on the ossuaries, we find the following names:

*Jesus(?), son of Joseph*

*Mariamne Mara*

*Maria*

*Matia*

*Judah, son of Jesus*

*Joseh*

Jacobovici and Cameron think most, if not all of these names belong to people in the New Testament. *Jesus* (or Yeshua‘) refers to Jesus of Nazareth. *Mariamne Mara* refers to Mary Magdalene, *Maria* refers to Mary the mother of Jesus, *Matia* refers to Matthew, *Joseh* refers to Jesus’ brother Joses, and *Judah, son of Jesus* (who may not be mentioned in the New Testament)—some suggest—may be the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” mentioned in the Gospel of John. They also wonder if the James Ossuary, which is of

uncertain provenance, originally came from the Talpiot Tomb. The James Ossuary has an inscription, which reads: “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” If the James Ossuary is added to the other ossuaries of the Talpiot Tomb, then the statistic chances that it is indeed the family tomb of Jesus are increased. So go the claims and the argument. Are they convincing?

There are several problems with this radical and new interpretation of the Talpiot Tomb. *First*, the name *Jesus* in the “Jesus(?), son of Joseph” inscription is far from certain. Some experts think it is actually a different name. Kloner, followed by Rahmani, reads “Yeshua’(?).” They are unsure of the reading. They tentatively suggest Yeshua’ because the name Yeshua’ occurs in a second ossuary inscription. If the first name is not Yeshua’ (or Jesus), then the new theory collapses. The facsimile of this inscription below indicates why epigraphers find the first name (or word) uncertain. I can make out the last two words בר יהוסף (*bar Yehoseph*, “son of Jehosef [or Joseph]”), but I am not too sure about “שוע” (*Yeshua’*, “Jesus”) in the scribbles at the beginning (i.e., at the right) of the inscription.

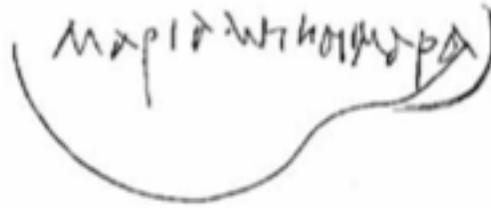


Here is a photo of the inscription:



There is another point that needs to be raised. People buried in and around Jerusalem, who were from away, are often named as “so and so, of such and such a place.” In the case of Jesus, buried in Jerusalem, we should expect to read “Jesus, of Nazareth”; and in the case of Mary Magdalene, we should expect to read “Mary, of Magdala.” The several names in the Talpiot Tomb are of people who were from Jerusalem.

*Secondly*, almost no one agrees that the name *Mariamne* refers to Mary Magdalene, or that *Mara* (Μάρρα) means “Lady” or “Master,” as though it were a title of honor. It is, rather, an abbreviation of Martha, both forms of which—the longer and the shorter—are attested in other inscriptions. Given that the Greek form of *Mariamne* (Μαριαμῆνου) is in the genitive case (of the diminutive form Μαριαμῆνον), the inscription could be interpreted “*Mariamne’s* (daughter) *Mara* (or Martha).” Kloner and Rahmani translate: “[Ossuary] of *Mariamne*, (who is also called) *Mara*.” Here is a facsimile of the inscription:



Or: MAPIAMHNOY MAPA

Appeals to a 13<sup>th</sup> century ms of the 4<sup>th</sup> century *Acts of Philip* for evidence that the first century Mary Magdalene may have been called Mariamne strike me as far-fetched and utterly unconvincing.

*Thirdly*, the reading *Joseh*, said to agree with the name of Jesus' brother given in Mark 6:3; 15:40, 47 (Ἰωσήφ), is also problematic. The spelling יְהוֹשֻׁעַ probably should be vocalized *Josah*. If so, we have yet another inconsistency with attempts to identify these names with the known names of members of Jesus' family. The name *Jose* (or *Joses* in Greek) in Hebrew is normally written יוֹסֵף (see the examples in Ilan, 159–60).

*Fourthly*, the James Ossuary was in circulation in the 1970s, before the Talpiot Tomb was discovered. It is therefore highly unlikely that it was originally from this tomb. Indeed, Joe Zias, who assisted Amos Kloner in 1980, has recently stated that the tenth ossuary (the supposed “missing ossuary”) was not stored with the other nine because it was plain—no artwork and no inscription. Dr. Zias emphatically states that the James Ossuary most certainly *was not* the tenth ossuary; it is not from the Talpiot Tomb. In any case, it is hard to see how an ossuary with such an intriguing inscription could be overlooked or go missing by Kloner and Gat.

*Fifthly*, the DNA taken from bone fragments in the “Jesus(?), son of Joseph” ossuary and the “Mariamne” ossuary proves very little. Tests show that the man and the woman were not related by blood (and therefore were not brother and sister). It is not warranted to infer from this that they must have been married. Moreover, ossuaries often contained more than one skeleton in them (and there were some three dozen skeletons in the Talpiot Tomb), so there is some question whether the tested bone fragments actually match the names inscribed on the ossuaries. At the very least, clarification is needed on this point.

*Sixthly*, the names, “Jesus,” “Mary,” “Judah,” and “Joseph” were very common among Jews of the New Testament era. The presence of these names—even in one multi-generation tomb—means very little. Here an objection to the statistics may be registered. The assertion that the odds are 600 to one that the Talpiot Tomb is the Tomb of Jesus and his family is based on the assumption that Jesus' tomb is indeed one of the 1000 tombs that have been discovered in and around Jerusalem. Of course, this is what we do not know. It is probable that the family tomb was in Galilee, not Jerusalem. These statistics have little probative value.

And finally, there are no Christian markings or inscriptions in the Talpiot Tomb. Moreover, there is no indication that this tomb was ever venerated or visited by pilgrims

(e.g., in contrast to the “House of Peter” in Capernaum). Absence of such evidence argues against identifying the Talpiot Tomb as the Tomb of the Family of Jesus. In the documentary much is made over the chevron (or upside down V), beneath which appears a circle. It is suggested that this is an early Jewish Christian symbol. However, this design appears to reflect the circles (probably handles) that appear on the ends of several ossuaries. Many of these ossuaries have gabled lids. When viewed from the end one sees a chevron above a circle (see Rahmani, nos. 251, 408, 473, 596, 597 especially; there are other examples).

It might also be added that surely Jesus’ family and followers—given the remarkable circumstances of the Christian movement, its continuing growth, and the bold claims about Jesus—would not inscribe Jesus’ ossuary simply as “Jesus, son of Joseph.” We would expect “Messiah” or the Aramaic “Lord,” or “Son of God.”

All of these factors taken together make the theory proposed by Jacobovici and Cameron very doubtful. For these reasons and others, recognized historians and archaeologists do not think that the Talpiot Tomb is the Tomb of the Family of Jesus and that Jesus himself was buried there. In my view, it is a most unlikely theory and will not be embraced by competent archaeologists and scholars.

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