Golgotha and the Jerusalem Quarry Complex: A Comprehensive Archaeological Reconstruction of the First-Century Crucifixion Landscape

Otangelo Grasso, *written with the support and assistance of AI tools.*
Independent researcher, Aracaju, SE, Brazil
email: otangelograsso@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0005-6942-0593
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Abstract

Archaeological investigations beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre have fundamentally transformed our understanding of Golgotha's first-century topography. This study synthesizes stratigraphic excavation data, lithological analysis, precision elevation surveys, and spatial archaeology to reconstruct the physical environment of Christianity's most venerated site as it existed circa 30–33 CE. The evidence demonstrates that Golgotha was not a freestanding hill but a residual limestone spur within an extensive Iron Age quarry subsequently repurposed as a terraced garden-cemetery. Through integrated analysis of bedrock geology, extraction technology, paleobotanical remains, and urban morphology, we present a spatially constrained three-dimensional reconstruction of this landscape. This model resolves longstanding debates regarding the site's authenticity and clarifies the precise spatial relationships described in the Gospel narratives. The excavation work of Virgilio Corbo in the 1960s–1970s established crucial geological and stratigraphic data that subsequent researchers have built upon and refined.[1]

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Context and Objectives

For centuries, Western art has portrayed Golgotha as an isolated, domed hill—a powerful symbol detached from archaeological reality. Modern excavations beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre have unveiled a starkly different landscape: a multi-tiered quarry complex carved into the region's characteristic limestone, featuring sheer extraction scarps, rock-cut tombs, and tangible evidence of first-century horticulture.[2] These discoveries rest on multiple excavation campaigns conducted between 1960 and 2024, each contributing essential data to our current understanding. This study aims to synthesize the full archaeological record. Our objectives are threefold: (1) to characterize the geological substrate and quarrying technologies that defined the site's morphology; (2) to reconstruct the vertical and horizontal organization of the quarry landscape using integrated elevation data and excavation reports; and (3) to contextualize this physical setting within the urban geography of Herodian Jerusalem, illustrating how topography, burial customs, and Roman execution practice converged at this specific location.

1.2 Historical Context: A Century of Archaeological Investigation

The archaeological investigation of the Holy Sepulchre is inseparable from the site's complex custodial history. Controlled by six Christian communities (Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic,

Armenian Apostolic, Coptic, Ethiopian, and Syrian Orthodox), access to subsurface areas has been restricted and often granted only during necessary restoration work. This has resulted in an archaeological record built through episodic campaigns rather than systematic, comprehensive excavation.

1.3 Photographic Evidence and Site Documentation

The visual documentation presented in this study (Figs. 1–6) derives from multiple archaeological campaigns spanning 1960–2024. Recent excavations conducted by Sapienza University of Rome (2022–2024) have provided unprecedented access to stratigraphic sequences beneath the basilica floors, revealing quarry surfaces, garden horizons, and successive architectural phases.[13] These investigations, combined with earlier work by Corbo (1960s–1980s), Kenyon (1967), Wagner-Lux (1970–1974), and Broshi-Barkay (1975–1976), enable comprehensive topographic reconstruction.[5] The accompanying images document the quarry morphology (Fig. 1), urban spatial relationships (Figs. 2, 4, 5 and 6), the rock-cut tomb and terraced landscape (Fig. 3), and comparative planimetric evidence from excavation reports (Fig. 2).

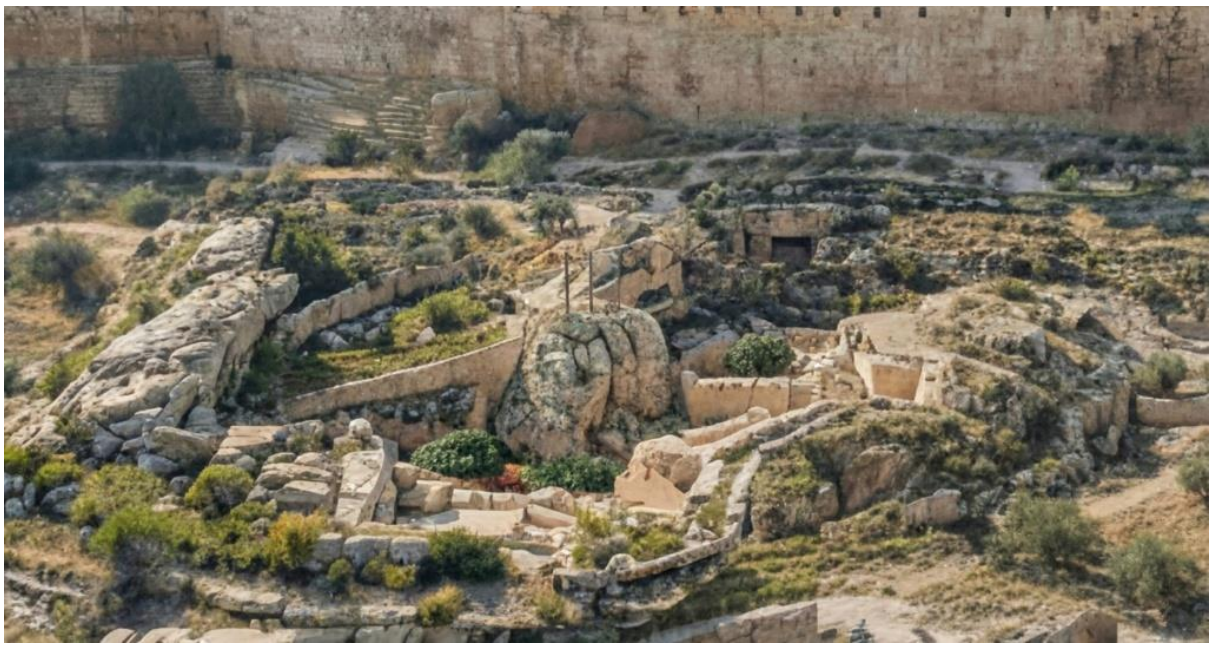


Figure 1. Wide-angle view of the abandoned limestone quarry traditionally associated with Golgotha. The image shows steep vertical extraction faces, stepped quarry benches, and a rock-cut tomb entrance located at the intermediate bench level (approximately 753 m above sea level). The preserved quarry morphology illustrates the transformation of an Iron Age industrial extraction zone into a first-century garden-cemetery. The spatial relationship between the quarry faces and the tomb entrance corresponds closely with archaeological evidence documented beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. :copyright: Otangelo Grasso.

2. Chronicle of Excavations: 1960–2024

2.1 Early Twentieth-Century Observations (Pre-1960)

Before systematic excavation, architectural historians and archaeologists made important observations during repair work. Charles Wilson (1865), Conrad Schick (1880s), and L.-H. Vincent (1920s–1930s) documented visible quarry features, noting the exposed bedrock and

vertical scarps within accessible areas of the church. However, these were surface observations; the critical stratigraphic sequences remained buried beneath centuries of construction debris, fill, and paving.

2.2 The Corbo Campaigns (1960–1981): Establishing the Stratigraphic Framework

Between 1960 and 1981, Father Virgilio Corbo of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum directed extensive excavations beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.[3] These campaigns provided systematic documentation of the site's subsurface archaeology during major restoration projects.



This photograph captures Padre Virgilio Corbo during archaeological fieldwork, likely at one of his major excavation sites in the Holy Land. The Franciscan archaeologist spent decades uncovering biblical history, most famously discovering Peter's house in Capernaum and working extensively at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Corbo's work occurred in three major phases:

Phase I (1960–1963): Initial Investigations

During restoration work necessitated by structural concerns, Corbo gained access to previously sealed areas beneath the basilica floor. His initial trenches revealed:
• Intact quarry faces with tool marks and extraction scars
• Stratigraphic sequences extending from Iron Age quarrying through Roman, Byzantine, and medieval periods
• Evidence supporting the interpretation of Golgotha as a quarry remnant

Phase II (1970–1974): Expanded Access

During comprehensive restoration following damage from the 1808 fire and 1927 earthquake, Corbo excavated:
• The Chapel of St. Helena and surrounding areas, exposing sections of quarry floor
• Areas beneath the Rotunda, documenting spatial relationships between Golgotha and the tomb area
• Multiple test trenches establishing the extent and depth of the quarry hollow

Phase III (1975–1981): Synthesis and Publication

Corbo devoted his final years to analyzing and publishing his findings in the three-volume work *Il Santo Sepolcro di Gerusalemme* (1981–1982).[3] This comprehensive publication included:
• Detailed stratigraphic sections and elevation profiles
• Documentation of the bedrock geology
• Reconstruction of the pre-Constantinian landscape
• Analysis of the Constantinian construction techniques

Corbo's Principal Contributions:

1. **Bedrock Geology:** Corbo systematically documented the *meleke* limestone formation and demonstrated that the site sat within an ancient quarry. He identified extraction surfaces, measured vertical relief, and traced quarry boundaries.
2. **Elevation Data:** His leveling surveys established critical elevation differences: Golgotha summit at 758.3 m, the tomb bench at 753.2 m, and the lower quarry floor at 743.7 m. These measurements form the basis for topographic reconstruction.
3. **Chronological Sequence:** Through ceramic analysis and stratigraphic correlation, Corbo documented that the quarry was abandoned before the first century CE and had been converted to garden and cemetery use.
4. **Constantinian Modifications:** Corbo documented how Constantine's architects modified the natural topography, cutting away connecting bedrock to isolate both Golgotha and the tomb as freestanding monuments.

Corbo's excavations opened large areas of subsurface bedrock that are now permanently inaccessible, making his documentation essential for subsequent research. His publications provided comprehensive archaeological data supporting the traditional site identification.

2.3 The Broshi-Barkay Campaign (1975–1976): The Chapel of St. Vartan

Working contemporaneously with Corbo's later phases, Israeli archaeologists Magen Broshi and Gabriel Barkay conducted focused excavations in the Chapel of St. Vartan, located in the Armenian section of the complex.[4] Their work:
• Exposed Iron Age quarry faces with clearly visible tool marks
• Documented the technology of ancient stone extraction
• Provided chronological data for the quarrying phases
• Extended documentation of the quarry area

The Broshi-Barkay findings provided independent confirmation of the quarry chronology and extended the documented extraction zone.

2.4 Parallel Investigations: Kenyon and Wagner-Lux (1967–1974)

While Corbo worked within the Holy Sepulchre proper, other archaeologists investigated adjacent areas:
• **Kathleen Kenyon (1967):** Excavated in the nearby Muristan quarter, documenting the extramural character of the area in the first century and providing evidence that the Second Wall ran east of the Holy Sepulchre site.
• **Ute Wagner-Lux (1970–1974):** Directed excavations beneath the nearby Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, uncovering additional quarry features and first-century tomb complexes that extended the documented cemetery zone.[5]

These investigations provided crucial urban context, demonstrating that the entire western area of first-century Jerusalem was characterized by abandoned quarries repurposed as gardens and cemeteries.

2.5 The Gibson-Taylor Synthesis (1994): Integrating the Evidence

In 1994, Shimon Gibson and Joan E. Taylor published their landmark synthesis *Beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem*.[1] This work integrated:
• Corbo's excavation data and stratigraphic sequences
• The Broshi-Barkay findings from St. Vartan
• Kenyon's and Wagner-Lux's contextual evidence
• New topographic analysis and spatial reconstruction

Gibson and Taylor's contribution was primarily synthetic and interpretive—they integrated disparate excavation campaigns into a coherent narrative and made Italian-language publications accessible to the English-speaking scholarly world. Their reinterpretation of Corbo's stratigraphic data, combined with contextual evidence from adjacent sites, established the current scholarly consensus on the site's first-century character.

2.6 Recent Investigations (2022–2024): Sapienza University Campaigns

The most recent excavations, directed by Francesca Romana Stasolla of Sapienza University of Rome, have provided important new evidence:[2]
• **Geoarchaeological Sampling:** Systematic soil analysis from sealed first-century contexts has revealed botanical remains (*Vitis vinifera*, *Olea europaea*) confirming the Gospel account of a garden.[6]
• **Extended Stratigraphic Sequences:** New excavation areas have exposed additional quarry surfaces and garden terraces, expanding the documented extent of the first-century landscape.
• **High-Resolution Documentation:** Modern photogrammetric and 3D scanning techniques have created detailed digital models of the exposed bedrock, preserving excavated surfaces for future study.

These recent findings have refined and expanded understanding of the site's environmental context, adding paleobotanical resolution to the stratigraphic framework established by earlier excavations.

2.7 Summary: Cumulative Archaeological Understanding

The archaeological investigation of Golgotha represents a cumulative, multigenerational effort:

• **Corbo (1960–1981)** provided extensive stratigraphic documentation and topographic data from now-inaccessible areas.
• **Broshi-Barkay (1975–1976)** contributed independent chronological confirmation and technological detail.
• **Gibson-Taylor (1994)** synthesized and reinterpreted the accumulated evidence.
• **Stasolla et al. (2022–2024)** have added environmental and botanical evidence.

Each phase of research has built upon previous work, progressively refining our understanding of the first-century landscape while maintaining consistent interpretation of the site's fundamental character as a quarry-garden-cemetery complex.

3. Geological Framework

3.1 Bedrock Lithology

Geological observations documented during multiple excavation campaigns have established that the substrate consists of Turonian *meleke* formation limestone, a fine-grained, biogenic stone deposited in the Late Cretaceous (93.9–89.8 Ma). *Meleke* (Arabic for "royal") is characterized by its homogeneous pale cream to white color, uniform texture, and workability—soft when freshly quarried (Mohs 3–4) but hardening upon exposure (Mohs 4–5).[7] Petrographic analysis reveals a micritic matrix rich in coccolithophore plates and planktonic foraminifera, indicative of deposition on a shallow marine shelf. This lithology possessed ideal properties for monumental construction: it was easily extracted and shaped yet gained durability through surface recrystallization. The formation typically occurs in beds 0.5–2.0 meters thick, separated by thin marl partings that provided natural planes for block detachment, making it the preferred building stone for Herodian projects, including the Temple platform.[8]

3.2 Structural Geology and Joint Systems

The *meleke* formation at Golgotha exhibits systematic jointing oriented NNE-SSW and WNW-ESE, reflecting regional tectonic stresses from the Dead Sea Transform system. These orthogonal joint sets, typically spaced 1–3 meters apart, created natural planes of weakness that ancient quarrymen exploited. Vertical joints allowed for the definition of block perimeters, while horizontal bedding planes enabled the removal of large, prismatic ashlars with minimal effort. Excavations have exposed quarry faces displaying clear evidence of this systematic extraction: vertical severance channels, horizontal wedge slots, and residual pillars left to support the overburden during phased operations.[3] Documentation of tool marks and extraction scars has allowed researchers to reconstruct the precise quarrying technology employed.

4. Quarrying Technology and Chronology

4.1 Extraction Methodology

Archaeological evidence documented by Corbo and Broshi-Barkay attests to sophisticated quarrying techniques consistent with Iron Age through Roman-period practice.[4] The process followed a defined sequence:
1. **Perimeter Definition:** Narrow trenches (15–25 cm wide) were cut along natural joint planes to isolate a block.
2. **Bedding Plane Separation:** Horizontal slots were carved beneath the block; wooden wedges were inserted, hydrated, and expanded to fracture the stone along its natural bed.
3. **Block Removal:** The freed block was levered out using wooden beams inserted into prepared sockets.
4. **Surface Finishing:** Quarry faces were left with characteristic parallel chisel grooves (0.5–1.0 cm spacing) and rectangular wedge slots (8–12 cm long).

This technology is preserved throughout excavated areas, where vertical extraction faces show the progression of quarry work.

4.2 Phasing and Chronological Sequence

Stratigraphic analysis and ceramic typology confirm the following chronology:

Phase I (9th–8th centuries BCE): Primary quarrying phase, associated with First Temple period monumental construction. This activity created the site's fundamental topography.
Phase II (7th–6th centuries BCE): Continued, more selective extraction from accessible faces.
Phase III (Hellenistic–Early Roman, 2nd century BCE–1st century CE): Industrial abandonment and transformation into a garden-cemetery complex.
Phase IV (Late 1st century BCE–early 1st century CE): Active use as a cultivated garden and burial ground, with new tombs cut into quarry benches.

Fill layers associated with soil accumulation and gardening contain abundant late Hasmonean and early Herodian pottery (1st century BCE–early 1st century CE), confirming the landscape's condition at the time of the Gospel events.[1]

5. Topographic Reconstruction

5.1 Elevation Data and Vertical Organization

Precision elevation surveys define three distinct topographic tiers:
• **Level 1 (Golgotha summit):** 758.3 m above sea level
• **Level 2 (Tomb bench):** 753.2 m above sea level
• **Level 3 (Lower quarry floor):** 743.7 m above sea level

This creates a stepped relief with clear vertical relationships: Golgotha-to-tomb bench represents a 5.1 m difference, tomb bench-to-lower floor shows 9.5 m difference, yielding total system relief of 14.6 m. This three-tiered configuration has been confirmed by multiple independent surveys and forms the basis for topographic reconstruction.[3] This configuration is documented in contour maps and ground-level views throughout the excavation areas (Fig. 2).[1,2]

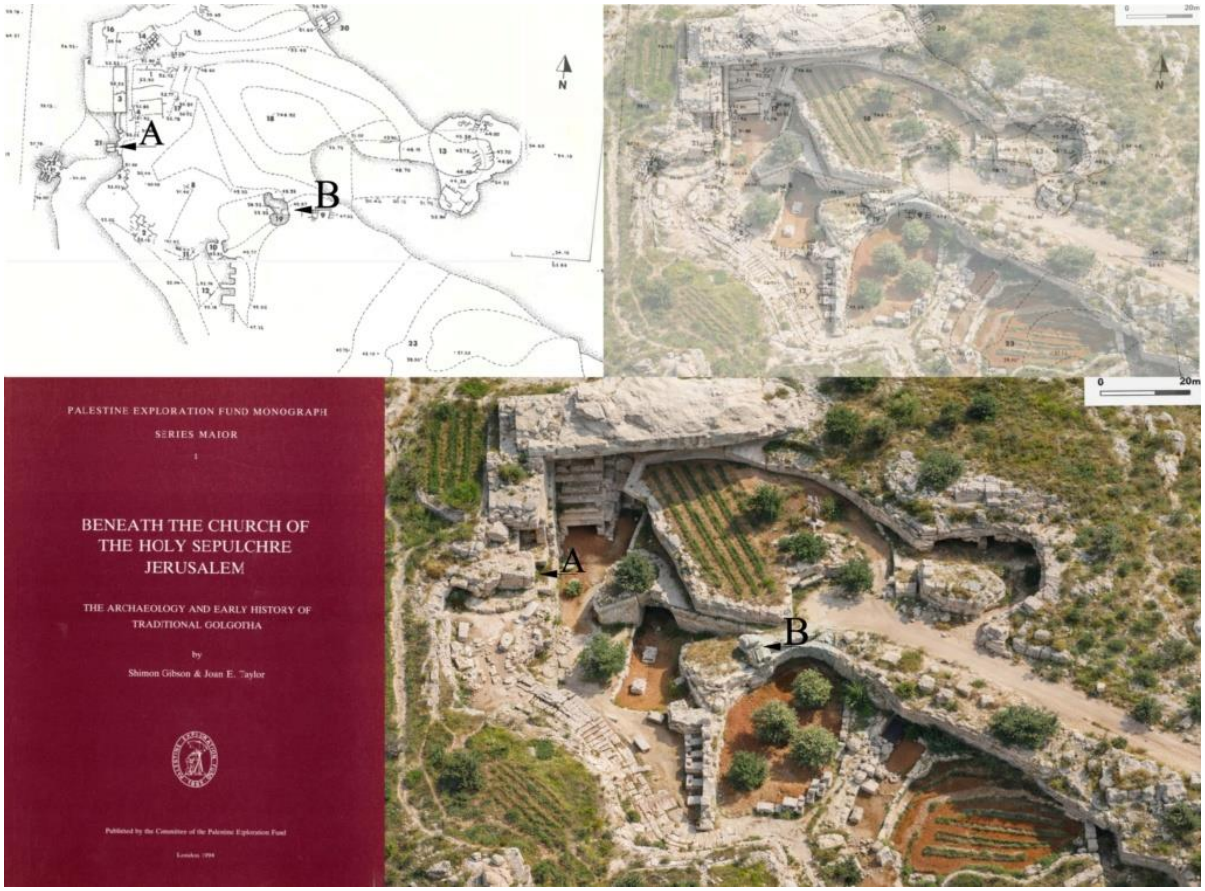


Figure 2. A: Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, B: Golgotha. Correlation between excavation plan beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and surface quarry topography. Composite image combining the published excavation plan beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with an aerial view of the exposed quarry landscape. The overlay demonstrates the spatial continuity between subsurface archaeological features and visible quarry benches, terraces, and residual bedrock, confirming the stepped vertical organization of Golgotha, the tomb bench, and the lower quarry floor. :copyright: Otangelo Grasso.

5.2 Planimetric Organization

In plan view, the quarry hollow forms an irregular polygon roughly 80–100 meters east-west by 60–80 meters north-south. The Golgotha spur projects into this hollow from the south-southeast as an unquarried promontory, bounded by steep extraction faces. Its summit platform measures approximately 10–12 meters in diameter—sufficient space for multiple crucifixions, consistent with Gospel accounts (Luke 23:32–33). The intermediate bench (Level 2) forms a relatively level platform 2–4 meters wide, wrapping around the quarry's northern and western margins. This bench hosted rock-cut tombs, including the one traditionally identified with Jesus' burial (Fig. 1). This morphology is typical of quarry sites: flat surfaces created by removing lower stone courses while leaving upper beds intact for access and stability.[9]

6. Garden and Horticultural Evidence

6.1 Archaeological Confirmation

Recent geoarchaeological sampling by the Sapienza team has yielded direct evidence of first-century cultivation. Soil samples from sealed, early Roman contexts contain *Vitis vinifera* (grape) seeds and pollen, *Olea europaea* (olive) pollen and charred wood fragments, and cereal grass phytoliths indicating ground cover.[6] This assemblage points to viticulture and olive cultivation—high-value arboriculture typical of elite gardens in Roman Palestine. The presence of these remains in documented stratigraphic contexts confirms the quarry hollow functioned as a garden in the first century CE, directly corroborating John 19:41.[10]

6.2 Garden Layout and Features

Excavations have revealed curved stone retaining walls defining narrow agricultural terraces 2–4 meters wide. These followed the contours of the quarry benches, maximizing arable space. Soil accumulation depths of 0.5–1.5 meters provided adequate substrate for deep-rooted plants. The integration of tombs and gardens aligns with elite Herodian-period practice: wealthy families developed commemorative garden-cemeteries on marginal land. Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, described as new and rock-cut (Matthew 27:60), fits this pattern—a recently completed burial in a garden developed on abandoned quarry land.[1]

7. Rock-Cut Tomb Typology and Spatial Distribution

7.1 Tomb Architecture

Tombs documented on the quarry benches exhibit features standard for elite Jewish burial in the late Second Temple period: *kokhim* (loculi) as horizontal burial shafts radiating from a central chamber, *arcosolia* as arched niches with bench-tombs beneath, and rolling-stone closures—stone discs designed to roll in carved tracks to seal tomb entrances. The tomb traditionally associated with Joseph of Arimathea displays typical characteristics: an entrance at bench level carved into the vertical quarry face, leading to an interior chamber approximately 2–3 meters square.[3]

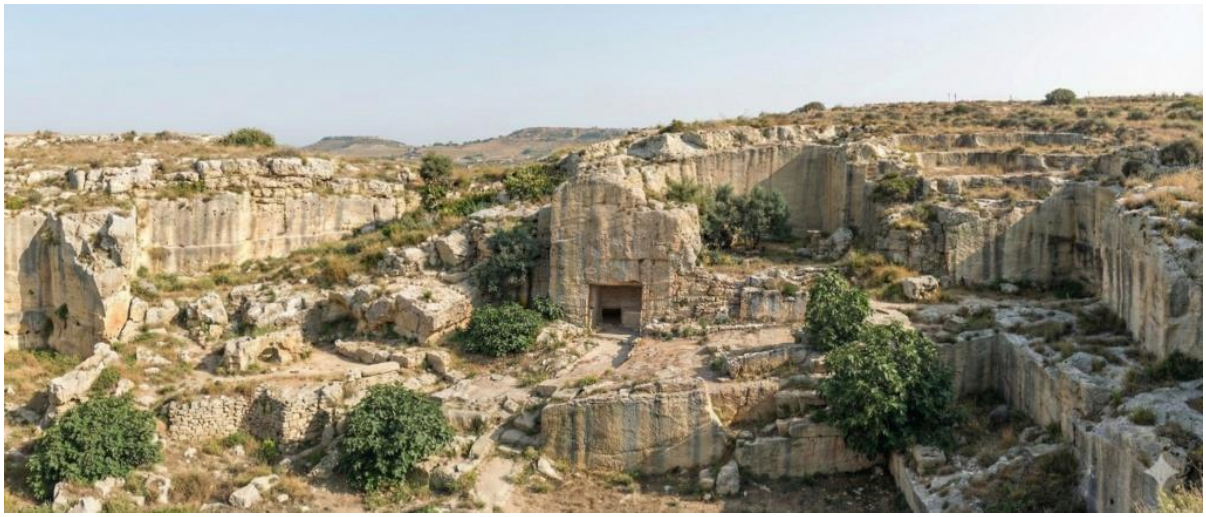


Figure 3. Rock-cut tomb in the Golgotha quarry (traditional tomb of Joseph of Arimathea). Ground-level view of a rock-cut tomb carved into the vertical quarry face at the intermediate

bench level within the Golgotha quarry. The entrance, elevation, and surrounding quarry morphology are consistent with elite late Second Temple-period burial practices and correspond to the Gospel description of a newly cut tomb situated in a nearby garden. :copyright: Otangelo Grasso.

7.2 Spatial Relationship: Golgotha and the Tomb

The measured 5.1-meter elevation difference between Golgotha (758.3 m) and the tomb bench (753.2 m) defines a critical spatial relationship. This vertical separation provides visual distinction—the execution site rises prominently above the burial garden—while maintaining immediate physical proximity. The sites are approximately 50–100 meters apart, a distance traversable in 2–3 minutes (Figs. 3, 4). This configuration aligns with Gospel testimony, which describes the tomb as "nearby" (John 19:42) yet distinct. The body could be taken down from the cross and carried to the tomb in a brief procession, consistent with the time constraints imposed by the approaching Sabbath (John 19:42).[9]

8. Urban Context and Legal-Ritual Geography

8.1 Position Relative to City Walls

Reconstruction of Jerusalem's first-century fortifications, informed by excavations within and adjacent to the Holy Sepulchre, places Golgotha just outside the "Second Wall." The quarry lies 50–80 meters west of the Gennath Gate, extramural yet adjacent to roads running along the wall's exterior (Figs. 2, 4). This location satisfies both Jewish law (requiring executions outside the camp/city, Leviticus 24:14; Numbers 15:35) and Roman practice (favoring visible locations near roads for maximum deterrent effect), as referenced in Hebrews 13:12.[1]

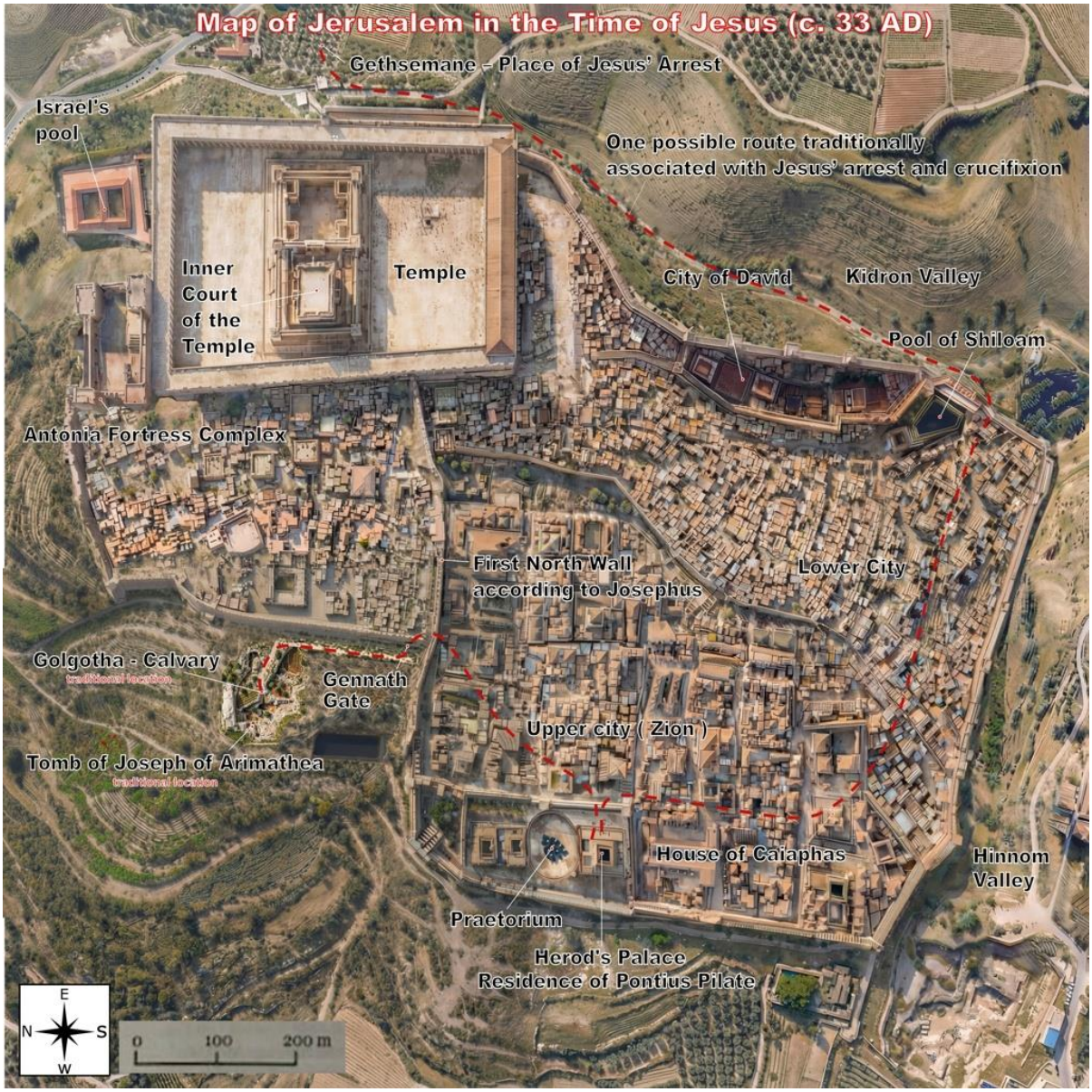


Figure 4. Reconstructed panoramic view of first-century Jerusalem from the southwest. The Second Wall, the Gennath Gate, Golgotha, and the Herodian Temple complex are clearly visible. A dashed line indicates the traditionally reconstructed route running along the exterior of the city wall. This image illustrates Golgotha's extramural position while emphasizing its proximity to major traffic corridors, consistent with Roman execution practices and Gospel descriptions of passers-by. :copyright: Otangelo Grasso.

8.2 Visibility and Public Access

The quarry's topography created an effective setting for public execution. Golgotha's prominence, rising 5–10 meters above the road and quarry floor, ensured victims were visible from multiple vantage points—the city walls, the road, and the distant Temple platform. Matthew 27:39 and Mark 15:29 describe "those who passed by" deriding the crucified. The road running along the exterior of the Second Wall provided this stream of passers-by entering or exiting the Gennath Gate.[9]

8.3 Proximity to the Temple

The measured distance from Golgotha to the Temple's western wall is approximately 300–400 meters—a five-minute walk (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Golgotha quarry complex with the Herodian Temple Mount in the background. Aerial reconstruction viewed from the southwest showing the Golgotha quarry complex in the foreground and the Herodian Temple Mount dominating the background. The image highlights the close spatial and visual relationship between the execution site and the Temple precinct, illustrating the measured distance of approximately 300–400 meters and reinforcing the topographic and symbolic proximity described in the Gospel narratives. :copyright: Otangelo Grasso.



Figure 6. Panoramic aerial reconstruction of Jerusalem in the late Second Temple period (early 1st century CE). High-altitude aerial reconstruction of Jerusalem viewed from the southwest, showing the Herodian Temple complex dominating the city's northeastern sector, enclosed by the city walls and surrounded by dense urban fabric. The image illustrates the broader topographic and urban setting in which Golgotha was situated, highlighting the spatial relationship between the Temple Mount, the western city walls, and the extramural zones traditionally associated with quarrying, burial, and execution sites. This macro-scale perspective provides essential urban context for understanding Golgotha's legal, ritual, and visual positioning within first-century Jerusalem. :copyright: Otangelo Grasso.

This proximity is both topographically verifiable and theologically resonant. The spatial sequence—Temple sanctuary, city wall, Golgotha—creates a gradient from sacred center to profane periphery while maintaining a direct visual and physical connection.[1]

9. Synthesis: The First-Century Landscape

9.1 Integrated Reconstruction

Synthesizing the cumulative evidence from multiple excavation campaigns yields the following reconstruction of Golgotha circa 30–33 CE:

Bedrock and Quarry: An irregular quarry hollow carved into *meleke* limestone, with extraction faces 5–15 meters high surrounding a central, unquarried spur (Golgotha). Primary industrial use dated to the Iron Age.

Garden Transformation: By the first century CE, soil accumulation and deliberate terracing had converted quarry benches into cultivable plots. Olive trees and grapevines grew in terraced beds defined by low stone walls, with botanical remains confirming horticultural use.

Tomb Complex: Elite rock-cut tombs were carved into the vertical quarry faces at bench level (753 m), opening directly onto the garden terraces. These included the "new tomb" of Joseph of Arimathea.

Execution Site: The residual limestone spur (Golgotha, 758 m) provided a prominent, elevated platform for crucifixion, ensuring maximum visibility.

Urban Integration: The complex lay immediately west of the Gennath Gate, extramural yet intimately connected to the city's traffic and sightlines, with the Temple Mount visible some 300–400 meters to the east.[3,1]

9.2 Reconciling Gospel Topography

This reconstruction coherently aligns Gospel topographical details: "outside the gate" yet "near the city" indicates immediately extramural yet adjacent positioning; "beside the road" confirms adjacency to the main western road; "garden with new tomb" describes rock-cut tombs opening onto cultivated terraces; rapid movement from cross to tomb represents a brief walk across the quarry bench; and public visibility demonstrates the elevated platform ensured exposure to passers-by.

10. Constantinian Modifications and Archaeological Preservation

10.1 Fourth-Century Transformation

Documentation of the Constantinian construction phases (324–335 CE) reveals how Constantine's architects monumentalized the site but radically altered its appearance. The Golgotha spur was isolated by cutting away connecting bedrock, becoming the encased "Rock of Calvary." The selected tomb was similarly freed, becoming a free-standing aedicule within the Rotunda. These modifications preserved the essential spatial relationship: Golgotha remained elevated above the tomb locale, maintaining the original topographic hierarchy.[3]

10.2 Archaeological Legacy

Excavations beneath the basilica have penetrated to pre-Constantinian levels, confirming pristine quarry surfaces and extraction scars, first-century fill layers with diagnostic ceramics, horticultural soil deposits with botanical evidence, pre-Constantinian rock-cut tomb architecture, and the preserved spatial relationship between the execution and burial sites. The convergence of evidence from multiple independent excavation areas creates a robust dataset that strongly supports the traditional identification.[2,1]

11. Comparative Analysis: Golgotha and Alternative Sites

11.1 Archaeological Criteria

A viable candidate for Golgotha must satisfy six key criteria: (1) an extramural location relative to first-century walls; (2) proximity to a major road; (3) topography suitable for a visible public execution; (4) association with a quarry or rock outcrop; (5) adjacent first-century rock-cut tombs; and (6) evidence of contemporary garden or agricultural activity.

11.2 Evaluation of the Holy Sepulchre Site

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre site satisfies all six criteria based on documented archaeological evidence.[1]

11.3 Alternative Proposals

Alternative sites, most notably Gordon's Calvary/Garden Tomb, fail to meet several criteria. While extramural, there is no confirmed evidence of first-century garden use. The prominent tomb there is typologically Iron Age, not late Second Temple period. The area lacks the clear "execution platform" topography documented at the Holy Sepulchre and has not been subject to the same comprehensive archaeological investigation. Current evidence favors the authenticity of the Holy Sepulchre tradition.[11]

12. Implications and Future Research

12.1 Historical Implications

The archaeological investigations demonstrate that early Christian tradition accurately preserved the memory of Golgotha's specific location and character. The remarkable

convergence of fourth-century patristic testimony with modern archaeological evidence validates the site's continuous identification. Systematic excavations have transformed what had been essentially a matter of faith and tradition into a scientifically documented historical landscape.[9]

12.2 Methodological Implications

The Golgotha case study exemplifies the power of interdisciplinary synthesis—integrating geology, archaeology, precise topography, and textual analysis—to reconstruct ancient landscapes. The approach combining rigorous stratigraphic excavation with architectural analysis and historical contextualization sets the standard for holy site archaeology. Three-dimensional spatial modeling proves essential for understanding functional and symbolic relationships.

12.3 Future Research Directions

Promising avenues for future work include geophysical survey using ground-penetrating radar to map subsurface quarry features in inaccessible areas, 3D digital preservation through high-resolution photogrammetry to document deteriorating rock surfaces, expanded environmental analysis through further geoarchaeological sampling to refine understanding of the garden's composition and extent, and comparative urban study analyzing Golgotha within the broader pattern of Jerusalem's peri-urban quarry, garden, and cemetery zones.[12]

13. Conclusions

Archaeological science has transformed Golgotha from a locus of faith-based memory into a documented historical landscape. Multiple generations of excavation have provided the stratigraphic, topographic, and geological framework necessary for understanding this site. The site beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is not merely *associated* with early Christian belief; it is a physically coherent environment whose features align with the requisite details of the Gospel accounts. Golgotha was not a solitary "green hill" but a reclaimed industrial space on Jerusalem's margins—a scarred limestone spur within an abandoned quarry, repurposed as a garden-cemetery. Here, within sight of the Temple where sacrificial rites were performed, on stone originally quarried for its walls, Roman execution intersected with Jewish burial custom. The crucifixion of Jesus occurred at a specific place whose topography, geology, and urban context are now archaeologically established. This convergence of evidence—from bedrock formation and quarry morphology to elevation data, botanical remains, tomb architecture, and urban positioning—anchors Golgotha firmly in the realm of historical geography. After centuries of artistic interpretation, we can now perceive Golgotha as it was: a pale rock prominence rising above a terraced garden, outside the city gate yet visually tied to the Holy of Holies—a place of death that became the foundational coordinates of the Christian faith. This understanding exists because of decades of dedicated archaeological work that has revealed the ancient landscape buried beneath centuries of construction and veneration.[3,1]

Acknowledgments

This synthesis is built upon decades of meticulous archaeological work beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We acknowledge the foundational contributions of Father Virgilio Corbo, OFM, whose systematic excavations (1960–1981) and comprehensive publications provided essential stratigraphic and topographic data from areas now permanently inaccessible. We are

equally grateful for the subsequent contributions of M. Broshi and G. Barkay (Chapel of St. Vartan excavations), S. Gibson and J.E. Taylor (synthetic analysis and international dissemination), K. Kenyon and U. Wagner-Lux (urban contextual studies), and F.R. Stasolla and the Sapienza University team (recent geoarchaeological investigations). Each generation of researchers has refined and expanded our understanding of this complex landscape. We express gratitude to the custodial communities of the Holy Sepulchre basilica for their cooperation in facilitating ongoing scholarly access to this sacred site.

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5. Vieweger, D. & Gibson, S. (eds.) (2016). *The Archaeology and History of the Church of the Redeemer and the Muristan in Jerusalem*. Archaeopress. Link. (Multi-author volume synthesizing decades of excavation data from the Holy Sepulchre vicinity, providing urban context.)

6. Sapienza University IRIS Repository (2024). Archaeopalynological evidence from the Holy Sepulcher area. Link. (Paleobotanical analysis documenting first-century cultivation, including *Vitis vinifera* and *Olea europaea* remains from sealed contexts.)

7. Gill, D. (2019). Appendix 1: Bedrock Geology and Building Stones in the Western Wall Plaza Excavations and the Jerusalem Area. In Weksler-Bdolah, S. & Onn, A., *Western Wall Plaza Excavations Volume I* (IAA Reports 63), pp. 209-249. Link. (Comprehensive petrographic and geological analysis of Jerusalem's limestone formations, including detailed characterization of *meleke* formation properties.)

8. MDPI (2025). The Lithic Journey of Jerusalem Stone: New Evidence. *Heritage* 8(11). Link. (Recent study examining Jerusalem limestone quarrying technology and the use of *meleke* formation in Herodian-period monumental construction.)

9. Taylor, J.E. (1998). Golgotha: A Reconsideration of the Evidence for the Sites of Jesus' Crucifixion and Burial. *New Testament Studies* 44: 180-203. Link. (Critical reassessment of archaeological and textual evidence, establishing the quarry bench morphology and tomb distribution patterns.)

10. Archaeology Magazine (2025). Ancient garden found at Jesus Christ's burial site. Link. (Popular summary of recent geoarchaeological findings confirming horticultural activity in the quarry hollow during the early first century CE.)

11. Barkay, G. (1986). The Garden Tomb - Was Jesus buried here? *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12(2): 40-53, 56-57. Link. (Critical evaluation of the Garden Tomb/Gordon's Calvary proposal, demonstrating typological and chronological problems with the alternative identification.)

12. Avni, G. (2010). Archaeological Involvement in Jerusalem's Holy Places. *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*. Link. (Discussion of methodological approaches and future research directions for Jerusalem's contested sacred sites.)

13. Israel Antiquities Authority (2024). Jerusalem, Church of the Holy Sepulchre. *Hadashot Arkheologiyot*. Link. (Official excavation report documenting stratigraphic sequences and material culture finds from recent campaigns beneath the Holy Sepulchre complex.)

Additional Reading:

14. Piccirillo, M. (1984). Virgilio C. Corbo (1918-1991): Ricordo di uno scavatore in Terra Santa. *Liber Annuus* 34: 9-24. (Biographical tribute documenting Corbo's archaeological career and contributions to Holy Land archaeology.)

15. Corbo, V.C. (1969). L'Anastasis costantiniana e il Santo Sepolcro. *Liber Annuus* 19: 65-144. (Preliminary report on excavations documenting the Constantinian construction and its relationship to the pre-existing topography.)