QUMRAN NATIONAL PARK (ISRAEL)

I. The site

A. Geographic and climatic contexts

The National Park of Qumran is located on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea in the Judean Desert, 45 kms southeast of Jerusalem and 20 kms south of Jericho. The archaeological site was built on a marl plateau 36 m above the level of the Dead Sea (Fig. 1). The climatic conditions are characteristic of a desert: summers are hot and dry with high average temperatures (between 24 to 36 degrees centigrade) and scanty rainfall (88 mm annual average) mostly concentrated in winter, of a sudden and stormy character. Winters are moderate (temperatures varying between 11 to 20 degrees centigrade). Strong winds may also strike the area: northern winds in the morning, southern ones at noon, then in the afternoon a western breeze which increases temperatures and lowers humidity. Erosion resulting from the stormy character of the rain and from the winds on the soft marl terrain, the natural caves, the caves hewn in the cliffs and the archaeological site is one of the parameters to be dealt with in planning conservation intervention at the site.

B. General archaeological context

Khirbet Qumran was first visited in 1873 by the French scientist Charles Clermont-Ganneau, who discovered the ruins of Khirbet (Kh.) Qumran and the cemetery nearby. Because of the orientation of the tombs, he immediately suggested that it could not be an Islamic graveyard, and should therefore be an ancient cemetery. Several decades elapsed before scientific interest renewed, owing to the 1947’ discovery of the first ancient scrolls by Bedouin youth in a cave nearby. A joint delegation from Jordan antiquities department, the Palestine archaeological museum (the Rockfeller museum) and the Ecole Archéologique Française de Jerusalem (Ecole Biblique) undertook excavations in the cave, under the direction of Father Roland de Vaux from the Ecole Biblique, while more caves were discovered, both by Bedouin and by members of the expedition. From 1952 through 1958 the site of Kh. Qumran,
Fig. 1 – General map of the region.
the cemetery and the caves in the vicinity were thoroughly investigated, including in 1956 the area extending between Kh. Qumran and ‘Ein Feshkha, some 3 km. to the south, and in 1958 the remains of the building complex of ‘Ein Feshkha. Immediately after his excavations R. de Vaux undertook the restoration and reconstruction of the site of Kh. Qumran.

Both his interpretation of the site and his reconstruction work have prompted a broad controversy in the academic world, spurring a new generation of scholars to go back to fieldwork-checking archaeological issues at the site, studying the cemetery and undertaking systematic surveys of the caves, in order to reconsider the issue of the relation of the site of Kh. Qumran and the famous ‘Dead Sea scrolls’ discovered in some of the caves nearby.

Today, although many interpretations have been suggested by scholars, it does not seem that the site has revealed all its secrets yet. Undoubtedly, the site, its purpose and its function are among the “hottest” topics of current Israeli archaeology.

1. De Vaux’ excavations

A – The site of Khirbet Qumran:

The name Qumran is derived from the Arabic ‘Qamar’ (moon), and there is no way to know its ancient name, as it is not mentioned in any historical sources. When de Vaux arrived at the site, only heaps of stones and what seemed to be a large water installation were recognizable. The excavations exposed a large architectural complex (80 m x 100 m) and the study of the pottery shards revealed that the building had been occupied over a number of periods. De Vaux’ stratigraphic conclusions distinguish six occupational phases of unequal importance at the site. The first phase was dated by de Vaux to the Israelite period (800-700 BC) and he identified an Israelite fortress in the plan of the original rectangular building and the large round cistern built just outside its western wall (Fig. 2).

He argued that it ended in a fierce fire, probably in connection with the events marking the fall of the Judean rule in 586 BC. After a long gap, the site was reoccupied.

During this second phase (De Vaux’ period Ia; Fig. 3), most parts of the ancient building were cleaned and repaired. New areas were constructed, especially wells, water channels, water cisterns, and ritual baths (miqva’oth) (Fig. 4), and a pottery workshop. This period was dated by de Vaux to the beginning of the Hasmonean dynasty (ca. 150 BC). The third phase (De Vaux’ period Ib; Figs. 5-6) brought significant changes to the site. A large complex, concealing the Israelite fortress, was built. Its main entrance opened to the north towards a road leading to Jerusalem. The complex comprised two buildings: one to the west and one to the east. The western building mainly con-
Fig. 2 – Qumran (Israel). Plan of the Israelite Period building.

Fig. 3 – Plan of the Period Ia building.
sisted in a courtyard, two long rooms, and a developed complex of pools and cisterns, including the round cistern of the first period which was still in use.

De Vaux suggested that industrial activities might have taken place here, but did not specify any. The eastern building comprised a square tower at its north-western angle (Fig. 7), various rooms and courtyards housing industrial activities and services (pottery workshop and kiln, laundry, tools store-room), water reservoirs and cisterns (some identified as purification baths), and two particular features, immediately called by de Vaux the Scriptorium and the Refectorium. The Scriptorium was identified as the upper level of a two storey-complex of this building, which had a large room with a bench all along its four walls on its ground level. The identification was founded on the find of large fragments of a plaster furniture, believed to be the remnants of scribes’ working tables. The Refectorium was identified in a long room adjacent to a large rectangular water cistern. An annex to the so-called

Fig. 4 – Qumran (Israel). A ritual bath (miqueh).
Fig. 5 – Qumran (Israel). Plan of the Period Ib building.

Fig. 6 – Artist reconstruction of the site.
Refectorium, filled with hundreds of pottery bowls, was interpreted as the larder (Fig. 8).

Between the eastern and western buildings were opened areas for passage and service, with at the southern end a triangular courtyard, a large cistern and stables. This third period was dated by de Vaux to the second part of the 2nd century BC through 31 BC, when an earthquake destroyed the site, – that is the Hasmonean period and the beginning of the Herodian period. Very soon afterwards, the site was repaired and resettled (De Vaux'
period II; Fig. 9), with no major architectural changes, except for the construction of a new courtyard and its surrounding rooms in the northeastern wing of the eastern building. Several features were reinforced, and the tower was provided with a glacis. The water system badly damaged by the earthquake was altered. The industrial area of the eastern building fell into disuse, while a new industrial area was built in the area between the two buildings.

This fourth occupation period ended in the attack and defeat of the site by the Roman army, dated by de Vaux to the year 68 AD on the basis of Roman coins of that year found at the site. After its conquest, most of the site laid in ruins, and the Romans only cleaned and occupied the tower as a watching post controlling the area of the Dead Sea. Most of the water system was dismantled.

This fifth phase (De Vaux’ period III; Fig. 10) lasted up to the fall of Masada in 72 AD. Much later during the Jewish revolt led by Bar Kochba (132-135 AD) the site was used as a hiding place or a war room. No new buildings were erected during this last – sixth phase – occupation of the site. De Vaux’ conclusions are that the site served as a community and working center for a sect (probably Essenes) who lived in the caves nearby. Here, in
Fig. 9 – Qumran (Israel). Plan of the Period II building.

Fig. 10 – Qumran (Israel). Plan of the Period III building.
the *Scriptorium*, they copied the famous scrolls, performed their religious duties, purified their bodies in the *migvaoth*, studied the sacred texts and ate in common in the *Refectorium*. Therefore the link between the caves and the site of Kh. Qumran looked to De Vaux direct and unequivocal.

B – The caves:

The first trigger to the whole operation was the discovery of the scrolls in 1947 by Bedouin youths in a cave near the site. Concomitantly to the excavations, De Vaux and his team surveyed and cleaned many caves along the cliff, and discovered more scrolls along with artifacts, such as lamps fragments, phylacteries (*tefillin*), date pits and pottery shards. The caves of the hard stone cliff were natural caves, all located in the lower part of the cliff. Most of the pottery found there belong to a type used mostly for depositing the scrolls or to oil lamps, thereby indicating storerooms rather than dwellings. The caves in the soft marl terrace were man-made, sometimes comprising a number of rooms. More artifacts related to daily use were found there, which incited De Vaux to suggest that they were used as dwellings by the members of the sects, explaining why no specific living quarters were found at the site itself. De Vaux argued that the site was used by a community of 150 to 200 people, however very few caves of that second category were found. De Vaux explained the discrepancy by suggesting that the soft marl man-made caves had been washed away by the strong flows in rainy seasons over the centuries.

C – The cemeteries:

Clermont-Ganneau estimated that the cemetery comprised more than a thousand graves and he was the first to dig one of them. De Vaux’ team fully accepted the figure of 1000 to 1200 graves and excavated 50.

They revealed 37 skeletons of men, 9 women and 6 children. Finding women and children was rather antithetical with de Vaux’ theory that the site was a center of Essenes, described by ancient texts – Josephus Flavius, Pliny the Elder and Philo of Alexandria – as celibate, therefore he argued that there were three different cemeteries, the main one being orderly, with rows of graves following a regular pattern and a clear orientation, while the two others were irregular. He thus suggested that the regular one was for men only – that is, the members of the sect –, which very much fits the order and neatness to be expected in a monastery, while the irregular ones could be for visitors, family members, etc., and therefore comprised women and children.

Yet, the theory was quite shaken by the fact that at least one skeleton of a woman was found in the so-called orderly cemetery.

C. OTHER SCHOLARS’ SURVEYS AND EXCAVATIONS

Between 1965 and 1967 Stekholl 2, examined anew the cemetery, and reached conclusions quite different than de Vaux’.

He distinguished only one cemetery and not several ones and argued that no specific order could be defined in it. When he opened 12 more graves, more women skeletons 3 came out, bringing the ratio to 30% of all opened graves.

In the 1980’s J. Patrich 4 undertook a systematic survey of the cliffs and the caves around the site. His conclusions contradict de Vaux’ results.

He could not find any traces of permanent dwellings in the caves – neither of the marl terrace nor of the hard stone cliff; no traces of regular paths leading from the site to the caves, which would prove a daily connection between the site and the area of the cliffs; and last, he could not find any evidence of poles of the suggested tents or shacks used by the Essene members living in the vicinity of the so-called community center. The caves were indeed used for storage and geniza (repository) of sacred texts, and as hiding places during the various uprisings against the Roman rule, and also as temporary shelters for shepherds. Patrich, though, does not refute de Vaux’ theory that the site was occupied by a sect, but he lowers the number of members to 50 to 70 and suggests that they must have lived in the upper storeys of the buildings, not in the surroundings.

In the early 90’s more limited excavations were led around the site by M. Broshi and H. Eshel 5, who discovered a path leading to two caves with signs of dwellings. This could reinforce de Vaux’ theory, but the signs of occupation in the caves are not clearly of a permanent type. Another short range excavation led by I. Magen 6 at the site revealed an important concentration of date pits in the excavated area, showing that the main activity may have been agricultural. It also reconsidered the whole water system, questioning the actual number of purification baths and its importance.

D. THE VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Two main questions guide the approach to the subject: What was the nature of the site? What connection did it have with the scrolls? These two

(3) L. Bennett Elder, in her article suggests that there were women among the members of the sect, cf. bibliography.
(4) J. PATRICH, Khirbet Qumran in Light of New Archaeological Explorations in the Qumran Caves, in Methods of Investigation ..., pp. 73-95.
(6) Results not published yet, personal communication.
questions open the way to subsidiary ones such as: Who lived there? Are the surrounding areas (the cemetery, the caves, the complex of ‘Ein Feshkha) relevant to the dispute or should Khirbet Qumran be considered as an entity? Were there different communities living at the site at the different periods or was it always used by the same community for the same purpose? Three main interpretations are at the core of the academic dispute:

a) Qumran was a (or the) center of a sectarian community, called ‘Essene’ by some or the ‘Dead Sea Sect’ by others. As such it is perceived more or less as “the first monastery”.

b) Qumran was a Roman villa rustica or a Manor House as many existed in the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods in the region.

c) Qumran was a fort, controlled by Jewish settlers, resisting to the Romans in that period of trouble and upheaval in Palestine.

a) The first interpretation obviously accepts de Vaux’ views and considers Qumran as the place where the Dead Sea scrolls were copied and kept in a kind of library for the sect. The members lived in a celibate community, very insistent about purity and purification, living a very ascetic life. The whole model has been attacked as a projection of Father Roland de Vaux’ conception and personal experience of life in a monastery.

b) The publication of de Vaux’ excavations was entrusted by the Ecole Biblique to two Belgian scholars Robert Donceel And Pauline Donceel-Voûte. Their conclusions are radically opposite to de Vaux’. They interpret the site as a Roman villa rustica, whose main activity was agriculture, and which probably belonged to a rich Jerusalemite family. Another scholar, Y. Hirschfeld compared the building and its typical corner tower to many Manor houses built, on a quite similar plan, in the area of Judaea and Samaria at the same period (Hellenistic and Early Roman). Both architectural features and finds are comparable. This interpretation, as well as the third one, presents the link between the site and the caves as circumstantial: at the time of the Jewish Revolt just before Jerusalem fell, refugee groups would have brought the scrolls from the Capital city and looked for a hiding place and an adequate repository. They reached this important house and got help from its inhabitants in finding suitable caves for the scrolls. They also used jars made at the site to conceal the scrolls, this would explain the similitude of the pottery found both at the site and in the caves.

(7) R. DONCEEL and P. DONCEEL-VOUTE, The Archaeology of Khirbet Qumran, in Methods of Investigation... pp. 1-38.


340
c) Only one scholar, N. Golb, supports the interpretation of the site being a fort, although its tower does not seem strong enough to be a real defense tower, and too many entrances are found on the exterior walls. When the site was conquered by the Roman army, most Jewish defenders, men, women

(9) Cf. bibliography.
and children were killed and the survivors interred their bodies with the
agreement of the Romans. That, according to this scholar, would explain the
similitude and plainness of the graves in the cemetery.

None of these interpretations is completely satisfactory and, for vari-
ous reasons, the site may never reveal its secrets: 1. The fact that the site was
almost totally excavated by de Vaux leaves very little opportunity for a new
modern excavation; 2. The final publication of the excavations is delayed by
a controversy between the Belgian scholars and the Ecole Biblique; 3. Since
the subject involves a lot of religious and nationalistic sentiments, it is often
impossible to discriminate between “rational” and “belief”, both on Chris-
tian and Jewish sides; 4. The cemetery has never been excavated (only 4% of
the graves were dug!) and cannot be under the present circumstances, since
in Israel religious law prevents excavations of Jewish burials.

In fact, it may well be that the sole remaining elements of answer are
buried there.

II. Tourism survey

In order to better understand the site and its visitors, we have under-
taken a twofold study: the first one is an analysis of the current trends, through
examination of the statistics placed to our disposal by the National Parks
Authority; the second one is a basic survey, through “Information Sheets”
distributed to visitors. The latter study will take quite a long time, and should
be conducted for at least a whole year in order to provide reliable data.

The former study provided the following results:

Analysis of Table 1 and Table 2:

The total number of visitors in 1996 is still higher than in 1993, de-
spite the decrease trend. The decrease trend started in 1996 (both in the
number of foreign visitors and in the total number of visitors). The increase
in the number of Israeli visitors in the years 1995-1996 cannot make up for
the decrease in the number of foreign visitors, since the number of foreigners
is about twenty times higher than the number of Israeli visitors.

Analysis of Table 3:

The favorite visiting periods: for foreigners = end of winter and fall
(peak in March) for Israelis are = winter and spring (peak in April in 1995
and in December in 1996) The least attractive periods: for foreigners = sum-
mer and early winter (drop in December) – for Israelis = summer and fall
(drop in September [1995] and in July [1996]). Despite the general decrease
in the hot summer months, there is a rise in August, due to summer holidays.
Table 1 – Number of visitors 1993 through 1996.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Israelis</th>
<th>Foreigners</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>8082</td>
<td>263246</td>
<td>271328</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>7779</td>
<td>288141</td>
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<td>319130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>14268</td>
<td>294217</td>
<td>308485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Oscillations in number of visitors 1993-1996.

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreigners</td>
<td>4.04% ↓</td>
<td>6.41% ↑</td>
<td>9.45% ↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israelis</td>
<td>13.75% ↑</td>
<td>60.67% ↑</td>
<td>3.78% ↓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 – Monthly oscillations in number of visitors (Israel compared to foreigners) - 1995 and 1996.
In general the visiting periods for Israelis are related to Jewish holidays: New Year and Sukkot (fall); Hanukka (winter); Purim and Passover (spring).

The visiting periods for foreigners are not related to Christian holidays – they seem more influenced by weather conditions (avoiding hot summers) and by reductions in air fares during low season.

Analysis of Table 4 and Table 5:

Among foreigner: adults > young people – Among Israeli: adults < young people
Among foreigners: groups > individuals – Among Israeli: groups & individuals

General conclusions:

Despite the increase in Israeli visitors, the general trend is of a decrease. This is explained by the huge differential between the number of foreign visitors (ca. 290,000 per year) and the number of Israeli visitors (ca. 15,000 per year). Considering the great difference between the number of foreigners and the number of Israelis, we can conclude that the profile of the average visitor to Qumran is: an adult foreigner, visiting as part of a group. Our main target remains, therefore, the foreign visitor.

Even a change in policy will not bring an equal amount of Israeli visitors to the site.
– Some parameters seem to influence the shifts: lack of security: the decrease started right after the period of terrorist attempts in Israel (in March-April 1996, following Prime Minister Rabin’s assassination), they may therefore be linked to it; seasons (the hot summers are merciless to Western visitors, they prefer coming during the cool months); air fare (variations according to low and high seasons). Considering these conclusions, we would recommend:

1. A change in the opening hours of the site, favoring times of the day when the heat strikes less: early morning, evening, and night (especially in spring, fall and summer). Nightly visits, with special lightening on attractive spots may bring a new kind of visitors or encourage visitors to come back for a different experience.

2. During the least attractive visiting periods, a new kind of visitors should be looked for, that is, school children of every age. Through ‘packages’ and special programs including interactive games, theatrical plays, seminars and workshops, the site, its historical complexity, architectural features and desert environment could be explained to them in a playful manner.

III. Planning and development

A. Planning concept

The purpose of the planning at the Qumran National Park is on the one hand to conceive a tour route combining sensorial experience, intellectual understanding and spiritual emotion, and on the other hand to secure the architectural preservation of the site and its conservation for future generations. Sensorial experience rests mainly on the geographical background (the Desert, the Dead Sea, the Vastness); intellectual understanding depends upon knowledge about the archaeological site and the historical context; while religious emotion is linked to the caves in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were found and is triggered by the feeling of solitude and silence emanating from the site and the desert. The second purpose, securing the architectural preservation of the site, means diagnosing the diseases; finding a cure to current effects of centuries of neglect and decades of tourism; providing prophylactic treatment for the future (cf. below “Conservation approach and physical intervention”).

The leading principles are as follows:

a – The planning of the national park should be conceived as a three-year enterprise.

b – The planning must relate to all existing modern structures (the entrance area, the restaurant, the visitors’ center, etc.) in order to find integrative solutions. Likewise, “tourist attractions and special events” (such as eventual
“Essene” restaurant, “light and sound”/ laser show on the cliffs or theatrical plays) should be reckoned with in order to minimize their effect on the preservation of the site.

c – All components of the site should be presented to the public, the buildings, the cemetery and the caves, but also its wider context, environment, economy and social organization.

d – The presentation of the site should cater to a wide scope of visitors, both Israelis and foreigners, either young people or adults, coming in groups or as individuals.

e – The presentation of the site will reckon with the plurality of interpretations of its historical and archaeological. Furthermore, it should emphasize its being one of the main issues of modern biblical and archaeological studies, without shocking religious feelings, especially of Christian pilgrims groups. The religious aspect should be dealt with in the adequate area, that is, near the caves of the scrolls.

f – The presentation of the site should consider at least two routes: a short (20 mn.) and a long one (45 to 60 mn.).

g – Explanations should be provided by a leaflet, signs (located mostly in shaded stations, cf. below), and a three-dimensional model in an adequate location. The use of replicas of artifacts may also be considered at specific locations.

h – Any construction at the site will respect the quality and textures of materials used in ancient times in order to be as little intrusive as possible.

i – The route will follow the track of the water system: at times leading visitors through specific rooms, at times allowing a simple glance. A panoramic view from the top of the tower will also be considered.

j – “Rest stations” built along the route will provide shade, water and explanations. In front of one of the caves in which scrolls were found, on an isolated part of the track following the hillside, a specially designed station will offer groups of pilgrims the possibility to pray or chant psalms in a quiet and silent atmosphere. At the very end of the plateau one or two stations facing the Desert and the Dead Sea will help feeling the special atmosphere of the site.

B. Conservation approach and physical intervention

Before any direct physical intervention, the site should undergo a thorough conservation survey, detailing the various problems, their locations at the site, and the degree of urgency. Samples should be taken for laboratory analysis, in order to check the components of the materials used at the site and their reactions to various types of erosion. Since the site was partly restored in the past, the materials used in this operation should also be studied.

Survey and laboratory research should be conducted over a whole year, so that the influence of the whole range of climatic conditions could be tested too.
One of the main problems at the site is water drainage. A detailed plan is required, both dealing with the results of centuries of neglect and offering a solution for the future. Another interesting issue is that of cements: various kinds were used in the construction of the site and during its restoration. They should all be checked and mapped.

As a result of the conservation survey, limited archaeological work may be advised, in order to clarify critical issues before any physical treatment. For instance, digging and clearing the water channel running from the cliffs to the archaeological site will help understand the construction and functioning of the impressive water system and the use of hydraulic cements in ancient times. Likewise, clearing the graveyard will help planning the mode of its conservation. Furthermore, archaeological pits unnecessary for the understanding of the site and hindering visitors security should be filled.

The conservation intervention could also be used as a “tourist attraction”. Not only does it fulfill an intellectual need for understanding decay and destruction processes, but it also provides a strong educational argument for modifying people’s attitudes towards preservation of the past and transmission of cultural heritage.

Besides, the mandatory route on a raised trail adopted by the planning will serve conservation purposes. Preventing free access to archaeological areas and direct contact with floors, walls, or structures will avoid further damage by visitors and guarantee the security of the public.

Finally, instruction for routine maintenance and monitoring of the on-going conservation at the site will be provided after problems have been located and their urgency determined.

**Bibliography**

I. Historical sources


II. Published works


* University of Tel-Aviv, Israel.


