

Interpreting Khirbet Qumran:

Arguments and Observations

David Cort

1-83

Relative to other excavations, there is generally little argument about those conducted at Khirbet Qumran. This is because Roland de Vaux's excavation and analysis are considered to be of such high calibre that there is little room for argument. However, arguments do remain, particularly regarding the occupation and abandonment of the site during its history, and regarding the function of several important rooms. It is these questions we will now address.

all this doesn't seem as minor as you imply in the first sentence.

I. Occupation and Abandonment

De Vaux offers a detailed dating and description of the five periods of Khirbet Qumran's occupation. ^① He reasons, and his view is generally accepted, that between periods Ib and II was a period of abandonment of some thirty years. ^② J.T. Milik contests this conclusion. Milik claims that on the basis of paleographic and numismatic evidence we must conclude that Qumran was still inhabited between the two periods. ^③ From paleography, Milik argues that documents are known from Qumran which are written in Herodian script, although he admits they are much less frequent. ^④ He thus implies that scribes were at work during Herod's reign. ^⑤ This is not very conclusive since period Ib does not end until 31 BC. From the coin evidence, he notes that coins have also been found from Herod's reign. ^⑥ De Vaux has dealt with these coins, ^⑦ pointing out that they were found within mixed layers alongside later coins, and that they

than what - than documents in other scripts, or from other periods. I'm not sure one necessarily implies the other.

are undated. ⁽⁷⁾ These data, then, are inconclusive.

Archeological evidence seems to support the abandonment theory. Major earthquake damage remained unrepaired until the beginning of period II, including major damage to a cistern, loc. 48/9. ⁽⁸⁾ As de Vaux points out, if people had remained "...they would at least have put the water system in working order, for it was this that made life there possible." ⁽⁹⁾ It is true that if only a small group remained one less cistern would not have been a problem. However, it is not likely they would have allowed 75 cm. of mud to build up in their settlement, the result of water system overflows. ⁽¹⁰⁾ And the water system clearly was repaired at the beginning of period II. ⁽¹¹⁾

Milik's only solid evidence for an intercum occupation is the coin evidence, which de Vaux rejects, and which seems inconclusive. His other evidence - paleography and archeology - assume an occupation and then improve "a diminution in Essene activity"; and, "a slightly reduced number of inhabitants". ⁽¹²⁾ Archeology clearly suggests an abandonment at a certain date followed by a restoration some time later. The burden of proof rests on Milik to demonstrate occupation during this time, and it seems to this writer that he has failed to come up with the evidence.

The dating of this abandonment, marking the close of period Ib, is another debated topic. A fire and an earthquake are involved, but the question is which

came first, and what was the interval between them. De Vaux originally advanced the separation theory,⁽¹³⁾ which says that the fire preceded the earthquake by some interval. This was then picked up by others, including Milik. In the meantime de Vaux changed his mind, and now claims that the earthquake caused the fire. The reasons he gives are that the presence of four Antigonus coins at Qumran indicate the site must have been occupied during his reign - "when the Parthians had left".⁽¹⁴⁾ He writes that the "insurrections which were resisted by Herod and Antigonus... do not seem to have affected the actual area of Qumran itself."⁽¹⁵⁾

De Vaux's arguments here are weak. The fire shows signs of a "deliberate and systematic burning",⁽¹⁶⁾ and it seems likely that it was Herod in his mop up work along the Dead Sea coast⁽¹⁷⁾ who brought an end to the Qumran community.⁽¹⁸⁾ De Vaux's simultaneous theory, to which "none of the archeological evidence runs counter"⁽¹⁹⁾ fails to satisfy a crucial question: why would an earthquake and fire force the abandonment of the settlement for nearly thirty years?⁽²⁰⁾

de Vaux. the fire + earthquake may have been natural + simultaneous, ~~but~~ ^{and wholesale} the damage combined with political + religious pressures may have convinced the community that it wasn't worth immediately rebuilding

II. Room Function

De Vaux's identification of the Qumran scriptorium is well supported and accepted, but because of the challenge this view poses to some traditional theories it has received opposition. The foremost critic is G. R.

Driver, who contends that the scriptorium is actually a refectory. ⁽²¹⁾ He claims that the tables are dining room furniture, since scribes are not known to have used tables to write on until the second century CE. ⁽²²⁾ In answer to this, de Vaux presents evidence indicating ^{that} scribes sometimes did use tables to write on. ⁽²³⁾ Driver's criticism of the scriptorium as a "myth" is simply an attempt to preserve the traditional view of scribal evolution; he presents no archeological data. De Vaux's view, on the other hand, has strong archeological support in the two inkwells which were found in this room. ⁽²⁴⁾ Furthermore, the identification of the refectory is above question, based on the water conduit and sloping floor, which helped in cleaning. ⁽²⁵⁾ There is no reason the community would have needed more than one refectory, whereas ^{it} they clearly would have needed a room for writing scrolls.

Others have taken a different approach to preserve the traditional view of scribal writing. Metzger accepts de Vaux's designation of the room as a scriptorium, but postulated that scribes sat on the tables with their feet supported by the benches. ⁽²⁶⁾ Against this, de Vaux says that the tables could not support the weight of the scribes, and that they narrow toward the base precisely so that scribes could put their legs up under them. ⁽²⁷⁾

Also found in the scriptorium, besides the inkwells and tables, was a "plastered platform or small table which was rimmed and had two shallow cavities on its

surface." (28) De Vaux hypothesizes that this was used for purifying acts, ^{substantive? this seems to be a method of an ineligious term - convenient for but an object he ~~didn't~~ couldn't make sense of} although we tend to agree with Davies, that "the object does not seem ideally designed for this purpose." (30) He offers the alternative possibilities of using the wells to clean pens or to prepare skins for writing. At any rate, the object seems much more appropriate to a scriptorium than to a refectory, and therefore serves as another piece of evidence against Driver.

Another room with an intriguing function is loc. 4, which de Vaux has termed "a kind of a council chamber." (31) In period Ib this room had benches running along three walls, with two doors in the southern wall opening into another room (loc. 1 and 2). During period II this ^{second} room was divided in half, and the door between loc. 1 and loc. 4 was blocked off. (32) The unusual thing about loc. 4 is the plastered basin sunk in the wall with a hole going through to the outside - almost like a car's gas tank. This feature persuades de Vaux that the room was used for closed sessions, so that water could be given to the participants without disturbing them. (33)

There is an interesting problem posed by this room which none of the scholars seem to have noted. The room suggests inequality: on one hand, some members are excluded, relegated to water fetching; on the other hand, there does not seem to be enough space in the room for all members to participate. This goes against the principle of equal participation found in the Community

Rule.⁽³⁴⁾ Even initiated, although they do not participate in the community meal, participate in the community meeting.⁽³⁵⁾ Perhaps those transgressors of the Law of Moses (1QS VIII), who were excluded both from the meal and from the council, would fetch water on the outside as part of their penance. A more likely explanation is that this room was not in fact used by the whole community, in a manner of equal participation, but by the "Community Council" or by "cell groups" which Milik postulates.⁽³⁶⁾ Or perhaps there was less equality in practice at Qumran than is testified to by the Community Rule.
I wouldn't disregard this possibility, given the strict hierarchy practiced at Qumran

Another possibility is that the rooms of loc. 1, 2 and 4 were used together for meetings. This way there would have been enough space for all the members, and we could thus account for the deliberate connection between the rooms, such as the large windows between loc. 4 and loc. 2,⁽³⁷⁾ and the two doors of period Ib. In fact a connection such as this, which at the same time preserves a separation, would seem to suggest the basic hierarchical distinction made between "Sons of Aaron" and the laity.⁽³⁸⁾ This would also help explain a feature of loc. 2 which neither de Vaux nor any other scholar seems to have commented on: the large circle of stones in the middle of the floor with a path leading to the doorway of the larger room (loc. 4). If the smaller room were for the "Sons of Aaron" it is easy to understand why these stones, which make a stage similar to the lectern base in the refectory, would be placed here. However,

all these suggestions are very tentative, and the most we can say is that more study needs to be directed toward the role of assembly rooms at Qumran.

good - it would be interesting if you could follow your theory up.

Conclusions

Identifying the end of 1b with an attack by Herod on the community could tell us something about the community's character and its relationship with Herod. It is not unlikely that those who resisted the Roman Army ⁽³⁹⁾ and who awaited the final battle described in the War Rule, would have resisted this Idumean who wanted to be king of Israel. It is also interesting that Qumran was reoccupied immediately after Herod's death.

The testimony of the Qumran scriptorium, that scribes were sitting on benches and writing on tables perhaps as early as the first century BC, forces us to rethink our current theories of scribal evolution. And a comparison of the "council chamber" with the descriptions found in the Community Rule could give us a better understanding of the Qumran community's social structure.

good
(A)

I may be wrong, but I think that the magotic "we" is being replaced by "I" in modern scholarship. Its certainly less awkward than the use of "we", or "this author"

Notes

1. R. de Vaux, Archeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls (Oxford University Press 1973), pp. 1-45
2. *ibid*, pp. 33-6. Based on coin evidence, de Vaux concludes that Khirbet Qumran was reoccupied during the reign of Herod Archelaus, BC 4-1. De Vaux's end date for period Ib is much debated, and we will deal with this later.
3. J.T. Milik, Ten Years of Discovery in the Judean Desert (SCM Press 1959) p. 53
4. *ibid*, p. 54
5. See Milik, p. 55. "The series of bronze coins, which starts with Hyrcanus I, continues uninterrupted until the first Jewish revolt."
6. In his discussion of the dating of the fire at the end of period Ib.
7. De Vaux, pp. 22-3. He says that the Herodian coin typology, which would place these coins after 30 BC, is "no more than probable."
8. The damage is definitely major, as one can still see today, with a fissure up to one meter wide running down the middle of the cistern.
9. De Vaux, p. 24
10. *ibid*, p. 23
11. *ibid*, p. 27
12. Milik, p. 54
13. See de Vaux, pp. 21-2
14. De Vaux, p. 22. It is hard to see what de Vaux

means by this, since the Parthians were in Palestine well after the beginning of Antigonos' reign, as his supporters. See E.M. Smallwood, The Jews Under Roman Rule (Leiden 1976), pp. 56-7.

15. De Vaux, p. 22. He cites Josephus Ant. XIV. XV. 394-412; 448-50.

16. P. Davies, Cities of the Biblical World: Qumran (Lutterworth Press 1982) p. 56. Cf. Milik, p. 52.

17. See Smallwood, p. 57

18. Cf. Davies, p. 56

19. De Vaux, p. 22

20. See Davies, p. 54

21. G.R. Driver, "Myths of Qumran", The Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society, VI, (1966-8), (Dead Sea Scroll Studies, 1969), (1969), 23-7. Cited in de Vaux, p. 29.

22. Davies, p. 44

23. De Vaux, pp. 30-1

24. ibid, pp. 29-30

25. ibid, p. 11

26. B. Metzger, "The Furniture of the Scriptorium at Qumran", Revue de Qumran, I. 4 (1959), 509-15. Cited in de Vaux, p. 30.

27. De Vaux, p. 30

28. Davies, p. 44. Also see de Vaux, plate XXII b

29. De Vaux, p. 31

30. Davies, p. 46

31. De Vaux, p. 11

32. ibid, pp. 10, 26. Cf. Davies, pp. 43, 57.

33. De Vaux, pp. 10-11

34. Although there is a definite hierarchy, there is also an emphasis on every member's participation. "They shall eat in common and pray in common and deliberate in common." 1QS VI, from G. Vermes, The Dead Sea Scrolls in English (Penguin 1975), p. 81.

35. Vermes, p. 31. Cf. 1QS VI (Vermes, p. 81): "Should any man wish to speak to the congregation, yet not be in a position to question the Council of the Community...."

36. Milik, pp. 100, 101

37. The eastern window is large enough for a man to step through, being about one meter high and 75 centimeters across. The western window only goes through at the top, the bottom forming a sort of shelf in loc. 2.

38. Milik, p. 99

39. Davies, p. 60