

Who Were the Essenes?

What social archaeology tells us about the Essenes of Qumran

Biblical Archaeology Society Staff April 27, 2024



In a recent study about the Essenes of Qumran, archaeologist Eyal Regev used the tools of social archaeology to answer the question, “Who were the Essenes?” (credit: Zev Radovan/www.biblelandpictures.com)

A 2013 study sought to determine, by sophisticated methods, whether Khirbet Qumran was home to a Qumran community of sectarian Jews, [the Essenes of Qumran](#). The study by Eyal Regev of Bar-Ilan University examines the architectural plan of Qumran and applies so-called “access analysis” to map the site’s spatial organization in order to uncover the social ideology of the Essenes of Qumran. Regev characterizes this approach to studying [the Qumran community](#) as social archaeology, “now an established field of research which uses archaeological records to reconstruct the belief system and social organization of past societies.” By physically dividing up and demarcating spaces—walls, doorways and entrances that are used on an everyday basis—the architecture thereby classifies and controls the movement of people and the spaces they inhabit. Studying these spaces can help archaeologists answer the question “Who were the Essenes?”

In a detailed analysis of the physical spaces of the Qumran community, Regev finds the occupied area is divided into different space segments, “each connected to a controlling central passage with minimal connections between segments.” The spaces within segments are also “minimally connected.” Access to most spaces is therefore “limited, and several boundaries must be crossed to reach most spaces from any starting point on the site.”

The large rooms (such as the dining room and the so-called scriptorium) used by the Essenes of Qumran “were not easily accessible and were out of view of casual entrants.” This, says Regev, means that “social encounters between the inhabitants were quite uncommon.” From such analyses, Regev concludes that the spaces of the Qumran community reflect “an ethos of social segregation, not only between the inhabitants themselves, but, more importantly, between the inhabitants and the outside world.”

The organization of space at Qumran thus “[reflects sectarian organization and ideology](#).” Moreover, all this is consistent with the ideology of the famous Community Rule, one of the original intact scrolls. While this does not prove that the sectarian Qumran community was Essene, together with much other evidence, both from the architecture and the finds from the excavation, the Essene identification, says Regev, is “extremely plausible.”

A View from the Caves

Who put the scrolls in there?

By [Sidnie White Crawford](#) [Biblical Archeology Review](#) > [September/October 2011](#)

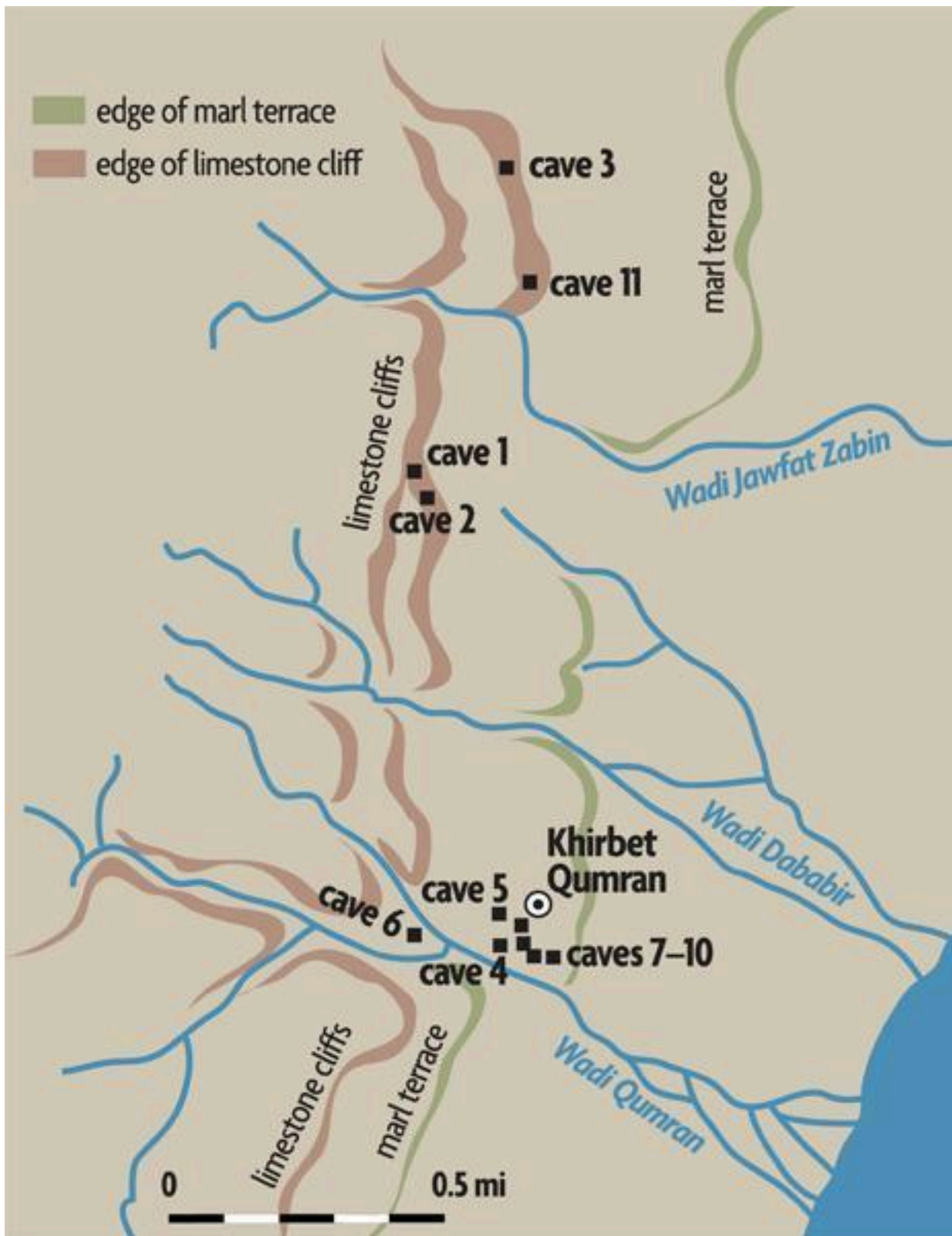
The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 11 caves in the Judean Desert near a site known as Khirbet Qumran, or the ruins of Qumran. Père Roland de Vaux of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française, who excavated the site in the 1950s, concluded that Qumran was a Jewish sectarian settlement, most probably Essene (the other two main Jewish movements in the Greco-Roman period being Pharisees and Sadducees). The Essenes from Qumran, who owned the scrolls, hid them in the caves during the Great Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–73 C.E.), he said, because the settlement was threatened by an advancing Roman legion, which indeed destroyed the site in 68 C.E.

This is still the most common view espoused by scholars, championed especially by the American archaeologist Jodi Magness, Magen Broshi, former curator of the Shrine of the Book where the major intact scrolls are housed, and the late Israeli archaeologist and scroll scholar Hanan Eshel.

A significant number of scholars, however, oppose this so-called Essene-Qumran hypothesis. Theirs is not exactly a competing position, but an opposing position, perhaps more accurately described as an anti-de Vaux position. They all agree that Qumran was not a sectarian settlement and that the manuscripts found in the caves are not related to Qumran. But they differ widely as to the nature of the remains at Qumran. Belgian scholars Robert Donceel and Pauline Donceel-Voûte argue that Qumran was a “villa rustica” with wealthy inhabitants.¹ Norman Golb of the University of Chicago argues that Qumran was a Hasmonean/Herodian fortress and that the scrolls were part of the Jerusalem Temple library, hidden in the caves before the Roman siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.² Israeli archaeologists Yitzhak Magen and Yuval Peleg contend that Qumran was at first a fortress and then became an important pottery production center; the scrolls, meanwhile, were hidden by fleeing refugees during the Great Jewish Revolt, according to them.³ For Australian scholars Alan Crown (who died recently) and Lena Cansdale, Qumran was a caravanserai or, as they put it, a “commercial entrepot.”⁴ Israeli archaeologist Yizhar Hirschfeld (who also recently died) held that Qumran was a rural estate complex; the scrolls were brought for concealment in the caves from some public library, probably in Jerusalem.⁵ What we may characterize as the “anti-de Vaux” interpretations are united by the way that they reinterpret the archaeological data from the site. What they do not do, or at best do only superficially, is take into account the archaeological data from the caves. That is what I want to do here.

In 1952, after the Bedouin had discovered Cave 1 with its seven intact scrolls and Cave 2 with some additional scroll fragments, both of which were in the limestone cliffs, the scholars decided to mount their own survey of these cliffs overlooking Qumran. In a race with the Bedouin, the archaeologists discovered Cave 3, which yielded fragments of 14 leather scroll manuscripts, as well as pottery (and the famous Copper Scroll, which is separate from the other scrolls). Almost all of the attention aroused by this cave survey has focused on Cave 3. But the scholarly team also made soundings in 270 other caves in a 6-mile section of the cliffs, with Qumran approximately in the middle. Two hundred and thirty of these caves had nothing in them, but 40 contained pottery and other objects. Some were as old as the Chalcolithic period (4500–3300 B.C.E.), some as late as the modern period, but 26 contained remains from the Greco-Roman period similar to the finds from the caves in the limestone cliffs that had contained scrolls or scroll fragments. In the 1980s, Joseph Patrich, now of the Hebrew University, conducted several surveys in the limestone cliffs; he, too, found no new scrolls, but he did confirm the earlier survey regarding the pottery.⁶ In the 1990s, Broshi and Eshel excavated two caves (C and F) 650 feet north of Qumran, and also discovered pottery sherds in the limestone caves identical with that found in Qumran itself.⁷





The caves themselves fall into two groups. The first group (Caves 1, 2, 3, 6 and 11) are naturally formed caves in the high, rugged limestone cliffs in the littoral behind Qumran. The second group (Caves 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 10) are manmade caves carved into the soft sandstone marl on which Qumran sits; for all practical purposes they are part of the site.





We will not undertake an extended pottery analysis here; a few remarks will suffice. In Cave 1, the initial Bedouin discovery, a jar was found containing two intact scrolls each wrapped in linen. The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^a) was discovered in the same jar without a wrapping. The jar in which these scrolls were found is a tall storage jar, hole-mouthed, with a cylindrical body, a well-marked (carinated) shoulder and a flat base. It was fitted with a bowl-shaped lid. This type of jar has now become known as a “scroll jar.” A number of other empty “scroll jars” lined a wall of Cave 1. This cave also yielded sherds from at least 50 other cylindrical jars and their bowl-shaped lids.

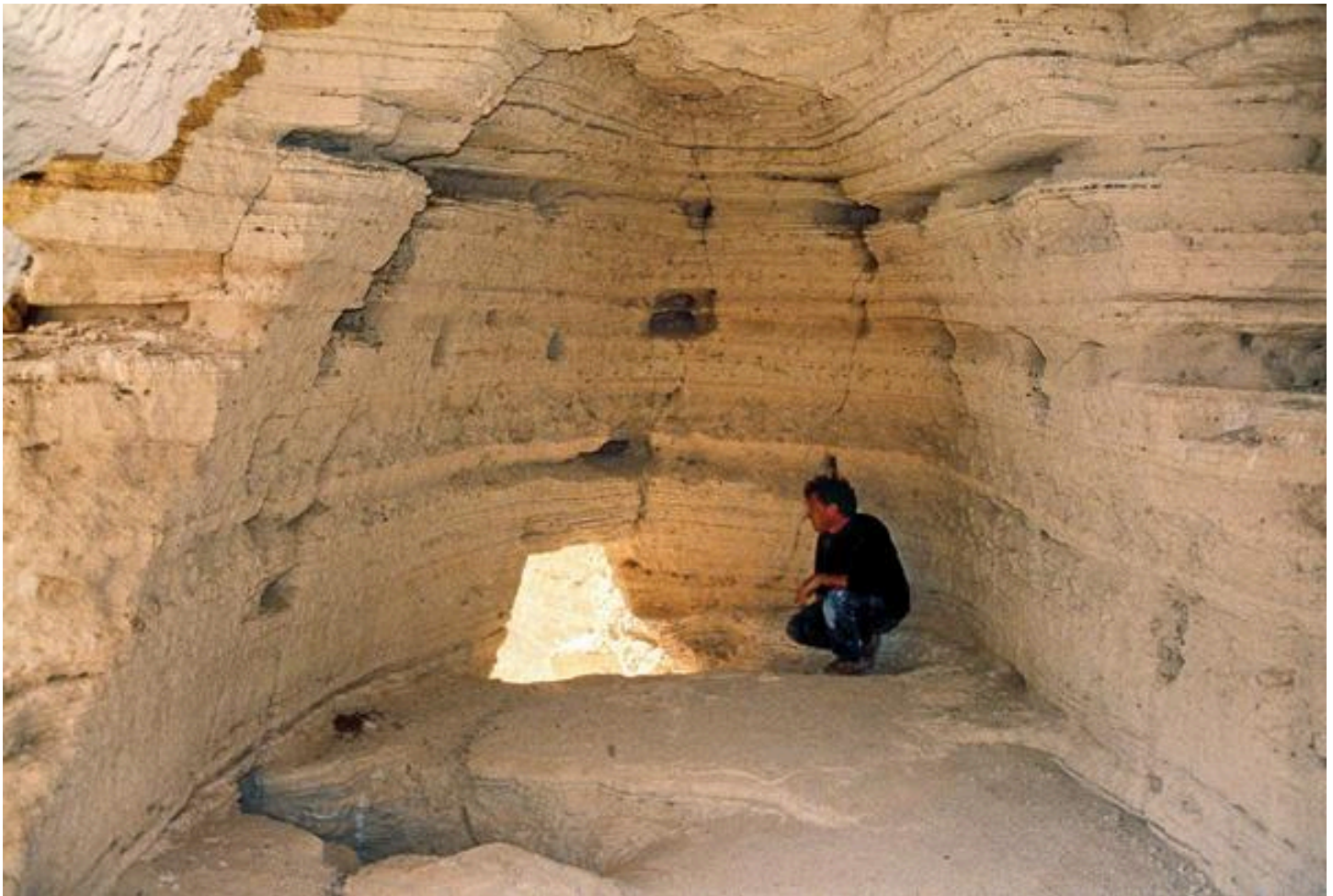
In Cave 2, six similar jars and one lid were found. From Cave 3 came sherds of 35 cylindrical jars and more than 20 lids. A “scroll jar” was also found in Cave 6 and in Cave 11. Again and again the 1952 scholars’ survey recovered storage jars (cylindrical and ovoid) and bowl-shaped lids.

This same kind of pottery was found at Qumran itself. The conclusion is inescapable: The same types of pottery were in use in the limestone cliffs as in Qumran itself.

The limestone cliffs were not lived in, but they were used by the inhabitants of the area. That only a few of these caves contained scrolls indicates that their primary purpose was *not* the storage of scrolls, but something else. They were not suitable for long-term occupancy because they are small, not well ventilated nor well lit, with uneven floors and ceilings.

The situation is different, however, for the second group of caves in the marl terrace on which Qumran sits. They are bright and airy with beautiful views of the Dead Sea and the rose-red mountains beyond. They have level floors and storage niches. Unlike the caves in the limestone cliffs, they *were* created by humans to be lived in.

The most famous of the Qumran caves is Cave 4, which was discovered by the Bedouin in 1952 under the very noses of the archaeologists excavating the structure above. As de Vaux recognized, Cave 4 was created as a dwelling space. In addition to fragments of storage jars, other finds in the cave included cooking and serving vessels. Cave 4 is best known, however, for its thousands of scroll fragments. When the archaeologists followed the Bedouin into Cave 4, they found that the scroll fragments went right down to the floor. Eventually more than 10,000 scroll fragments coming from more than 500 manuscripts were recovered from Cave 4.



Harvard's Frank Cross, who made preliminary identifications of the excavated scroll fragments, reports, "I was struck with the fact that the relatively small quantity of fragments from the deepest levels of the cave nevertheless represented a fair cross section of the whole deposit in the cave, which suggests ... that deterioration of the manuscripts must have begun even before time sealed the manuscripts in the stratified soil, and that the manuscripts may have been in great disorder when originally abandoned in the cave. The paucity of [pottery] sherds in the cave certainly indicates that the scrolls of Cave 4 were not left stored away in jars."⁴ In other words, the scrolls were placed in the cave in haste, and all at once! The space was not originally intended as a storage space for scrolls (a "genizah"), but was, as de Vaux hypothesized, originally carved out as a dwelling space.

An exploration of the marl terrace followed the discovery of Cave 4. Caves 5 and 10 were located in the southwest spur; Caves 7–9 were found on the southern spur. All are artificial caves, well lit and well ventilated, and clearly created for residence. Pottery fragments, all of the same period and type, including lamps, bowls and cooking vessels, were recovered in all the caves in the marl terrace.

Cave 8 gave unique evidence that it was intended to be lived in: Near the entrance was a *mezuzah*, the little container of sacred script that Jews then (and still) affixed to the doorposts of their houses. As the Bible states, "You shall ... write [these words] on the doorposts [*mezzuzot*] of your house and on your gates" (*Deuteronomy 6:9*).



In addition, Cave 8 contained more than 100 leather tabs used for fastening scrolls when rolled up. Whoever lived in Cave 8 probably manufactured the scroll fasteners; that may have been his job. Whether intended for new scrolls or for their repair, these leather tabs are evidence of something larger than a private scroll collection. There must have been scrolls nearby on which the fasteners were meant to be used.



Moreover, as Broshi and Eshel point out, all the caves in the marl terrace lie within the Sabbath limit of 1,000 cubits (about 1,500 ft) from Qumran.⁵ The term “Sabbath limit” refers to the distance from home a Jew may walk on the Sabbath day. The very propinquity of these caves in the marl terrace to the site strongly suggests a connection between the scrolls and Qumran.

Broshi and Eshel also discovered an “intricate network of trails” leading from Qumran to both the marl caves and the caves in the limestone cliffs. Staircases were cut into the marl leading to the caves.⁶ While today these marl caves are difficult to access, at the time of the Qumran settlement there would have been easy traffic between the site and the marl caves, and at least occasional traffic to the limestone caves.

All of these facts argue against the notion that the scrolls were abandoned in caves by fleeing Jerusalemites, who were simply looking for a remote hiding place.

And, as de Vaux pointed out, “The pottery from the caves is identical with that of the Khirbeh [Qumran].”⁷ Since de Vaux’s time, this observation has only been reinforced.⁸



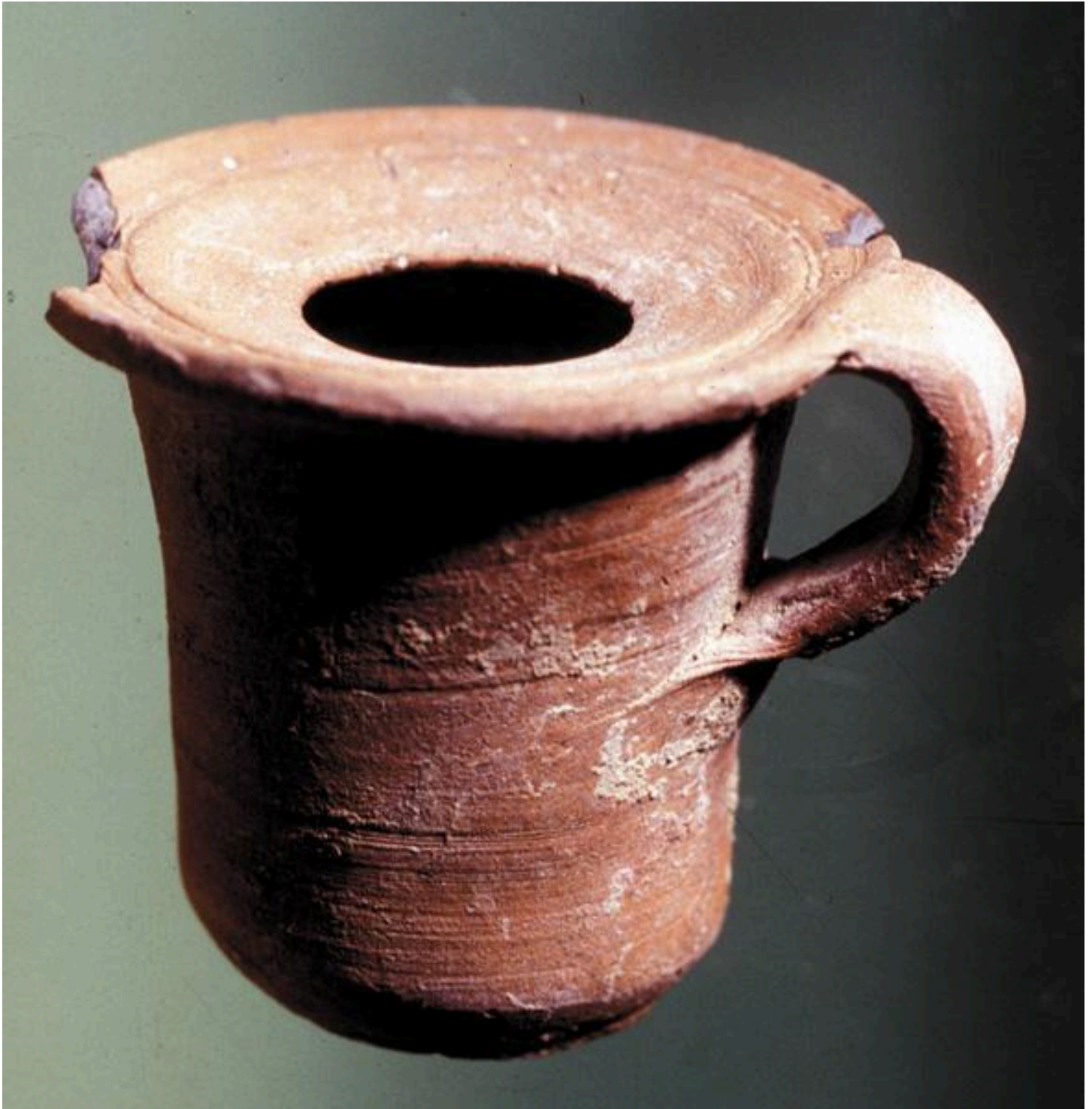
One thing that is frequently cited as casting doubt on the connection between the scrolls and the site is that, although thousands of scroll fragments have been found in the caves, not a single scroll fragment has been found at Qumran itself. Scroll fragments have been found in Caves 1, 2, 3, 6 and 11 in the limestone cliffs. (Cave 1 was the site of the original Bedouin discovery of seven intact scrolls; the Bedouin also discovered the famous intact Temple Scroll in Cave 11.) In the caves in the marl terrace, in addition to the hoard of fragments from Cave 4, scroll fragments were also found in Caves 5, 7 (all in Greek), 8 and 9. (The only inscription from Cave 10 was written on a piece of pottery, or an ostrakon.)

Why wasn't a scrap of papyrus or animal hide ready to be inscribed or a tiny fragment of an inscribed scroll found at Qumran itself?

The answer lies in the fiery end of habitation at Qumran. After a brief settlement in about 800 B.C.E., Qumran was not resettled until the late second century B.C.E. Habitation then continued without interruption (except for a brief period following an earthquake and a fire⁹) until it was destroyed by a second fire in the mid-to-late first century C.E.,¹⁰ most probably as a result of the Roman conquest. The fire that consumed Qumran at this time consumed all the organic material at the site. As de Vaux states, "The end of the Period II is marked by a violent destruction ... [A]ll the rooms of the southwest and northwest were filled with debris from the collapse of the ceilings and superstructures ... [A]lmost everywhere a layer of a powdery black substance gives evidence of the

burning of the roofs.”¹¹ In these circumstances, we should not expect to find scraps of parchment or papyrus in the ruins.

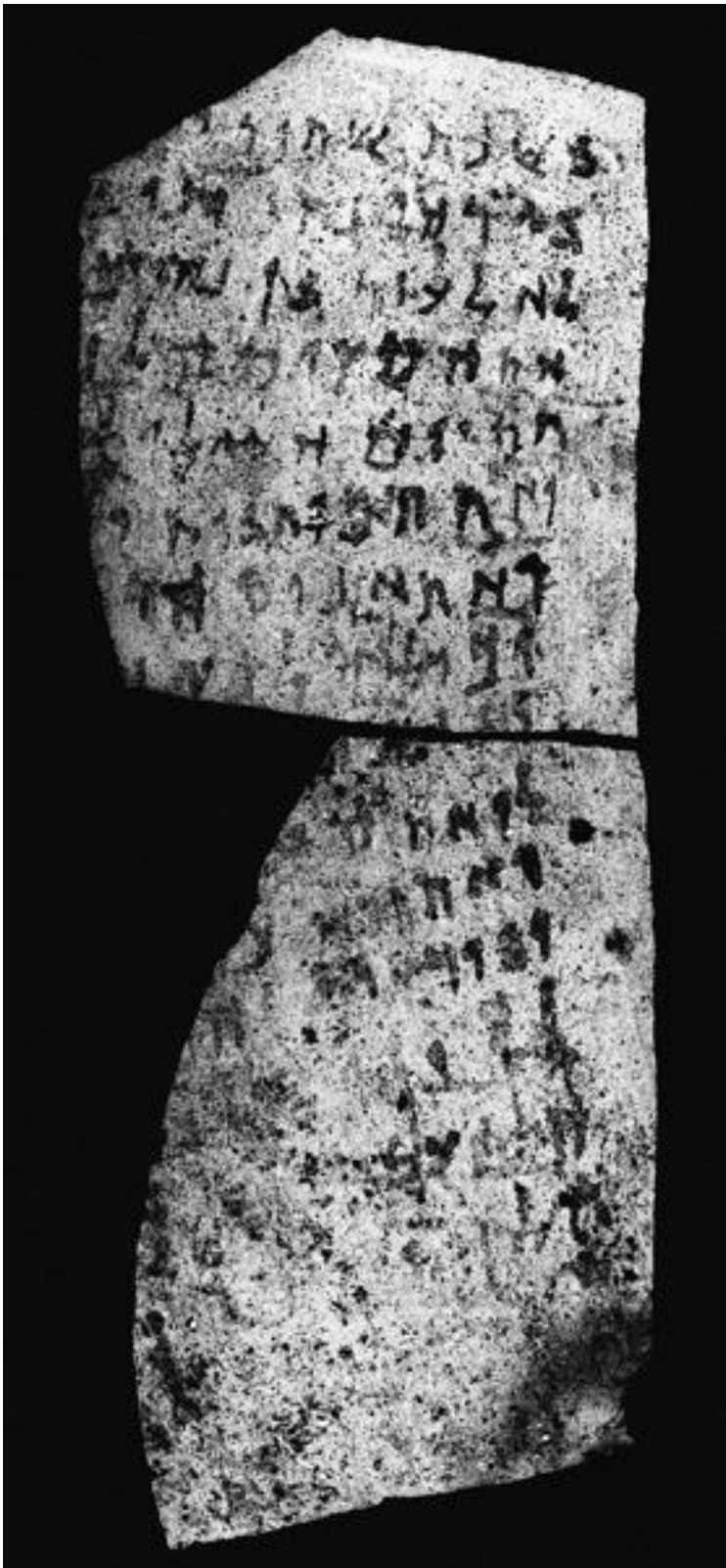
Moreover, significant evidence for scribal activity has been found at the site, including three inkwells excavated by de Vaux. As many as six inkwells may have come from the site.¹² This many inkwells at a small site is unparalleled in Israel.



Associated with the Qumran inkwells were plastered benches and tables, which de Vaux believed were writing desks, though their actual function is disputed.¹² It does not really matter what the function of the tables was, since we know by the presence of the inkwells at the site that some writing occurred. De Vaux also discovered

an ostrakon inscribed with a complete alphabet, which he plausibly identified as the work of a “pupil scribe.”¹³ In a 1996 survey, James F. Strange uncovered an inscribed ostrakon that appears to be some kind of deed.¹⁴ All this is evidence of writing at Qumran.





The evidence seems clear that the scrolls and the settlement at Qumran were related. What can we learn from the kinds of scrolls in the various caves?

We have seen that the caves in the marl terrace near the site were meant to be lived in. With the exception of Cave 4 (we'll come to that in a moment), none of these caves contained large collections. What was in the marl caves seems to be meant for private use of the residents. Thus, Cave 8 contained two Biblical manuscripts and a hymn or prayer scroll. Cave 5 contained seven Biblical manuscripts, fragments of three sectarian manuscripts

(i.e., reflecting a theology different from common Judaism) and some unidentifiable manuscripts. Cave 7 contained only Greek manuscripts. The few manuscript fragments from Caves 9 and 10 could not be identified. These small collections are not the remnants of a larger library hidden by refugees fleeing from Jerusalem, but were used by the individual inhabitants of the cave for study or private devotion.

The caves in the limestone cliffs (Caves 1, 2, 3, 6 and 11), on the other hand, were not meant to be lived in. Hence, their contents were not meant for the private reflections of the inhabitants. In addition to scrolls that could be identified with any group of Jews (e.g., scrolls of Biblical books and the Apocrypha), they also contained distinctly sectarian compositions belonging to a specific group of Jews with specific and often unique legal, theological and historical interests not shared by the wider Judaism of the period.¹⁵



There is another peculiarity of the manuscripts from the caves in the limestone cliffs: Many of them advocate or assume a solar calendar rather than the standard lunar Jewish calendar.¹⁶ These scrolls would hardly have come from the Jerusalem Temple.

Finally, we come to the Cave 4 fragments, the largest collection that ties all the other manuscripts to itself and to each other. The scroll fragments were deposited on the entire floor of Cave 4; they seem to have been deposited all at once, with no apparent order, and they were covered with a layer of marl that had sealed them in antiquity.¹⁷ The scrolls in Cave 4 include virtually every category of scroll in the entire Qumran collection.¹⁸ And the Cave 4 fragments cover the entire time range of the collection, beginning in the mid-third century B.C.E. and continuing to the mid-first century C.E. (The various scrolls found in the 11 caves have been dated paleographically, that is, by the shape and form of the letters, a method that has now been confirmed by carbon-14 tests).

The handwriting of individual scribes also links the Cave 4 fragments with the other caves. For example, according to the analysis of noted paleographer Ada Yardeni, the same hand that wrote some Cave 4 fragments also penned some manuscripts found in Cave 1 (in the limestone cliffs).¹⁹

All this ties the scrolls from the 11 caves into a common collection or corpus. And the sectarian nature of some of the scrolls and the favoring of the solar calendar tell us that the collection did not come from the two principal groups of Second Temple Jews (Pharisees and Sadducees), nor from the Jerusalem Temple.

What was not found in the scrolls is equally important—nothing that can be described as Pharasaic and very, very few historical texts or personal, legal or business documents. This contrasts sharply with the caves found in the major valleys south of Qumran such as Nahal Hever and Wadi Murabba‘at. We know that the property in these caves belonged to refugees fleeing from the conflicts of the first and second centuries C.E. The vast majority of these documents are deeds of sale, leases, loans, marriage contracts and the like, including the famous Babatha archive.^h None of these kinds of documents was found in the Qumran caves, as would be the case if they had been deposited by fleeing refugees.

Where, then, did the Qumran collection—essentially a single collection—come from?

As noted earlier, some of the scrolls have been dated paleographically prior to the late second century B.C.E., when the sectarian community was founded at Qumran. These could not have been written at Qumran. But very few of the scrolls are older than the sectarian settlement at Qumran. They were presumably brought to the site with the earliest residents. The latest date of the scrolls is clear: None is later than the destruction of Qumran around the time of the Great Jewish Revolt against Rome.

All these facts create a strong chain of evidence that it was the sectarian inhabitants of Qumran who owned the scroll collection and who hid them, first in the relatively inaccessible caves in the limestone cliffs, but then finally and quickly in the large, conveniently located space of nearby Cave 4.

Why did they do this? There is no direct evidence to answer that question, but the destruction layer at Qumran, along with the Roman arrowheads found in the debris, point to a threat to the settlement by a Roman legion on its way to Jerusalem during the Great Jewish Revolt.

