

Daily Life at Qumran



According to the authors, the Qumran site housed a monastery. In their opinion, the archaeological discoveries and the writings of Pliny the Elder are sufficient evidence of this; the manuscripts are not necessary to reach this conclusion. It was here that the first monastic community of the Western world lived.

By Magen Broshi (Israel Museum) and Hanan Eshel (Bar-Ilan University).
Translation by Claude Grenache, A.A.

As Father Roland de Vaux interpreted it, the presence of ten ritual baths (*miqva'ot*) on the site indicated the religious nature of the complex. The common kitchen, the refectory, and the mill are also related to this. We will not bring up here the theories about Qumran being a fortress, an inn, or a balm factory. Instead, we will adhere to the theory of the monastery, and we will devote ourselves to the places where the inhabitants lived.

There are different types of dwellings at Qumran: two above ground (the community center and the nearby encampments) and two underground (caves in the rocky cliff and artificial caves built into the marl terraces).

A Religious Community

No living quarters were found in the community center. It is possible, however, that two second-story rooms (which did not survive but most likely did exist) served as a dormitory. Hartmut Stegemann estimates the size of these rooms to be about ninety square meters. He suggests that they could accommodate some forty people. We are convinced, however, that they could not have had more than half that number, i.e., twenty persons. A space where each person has no more than four square meters is already too tight.

But who were these people who resided here in such a small group? Were they aged or invalid? Or were they the leaders and the administrators of the community?

Roland de Vaux had suggested that part of the community lived in huts or tents. But our recent excavations have brought forth only evidence of a kind of campground located on a plateau near the community center at about 200 meters to the north. A network of roads (observed for the first time

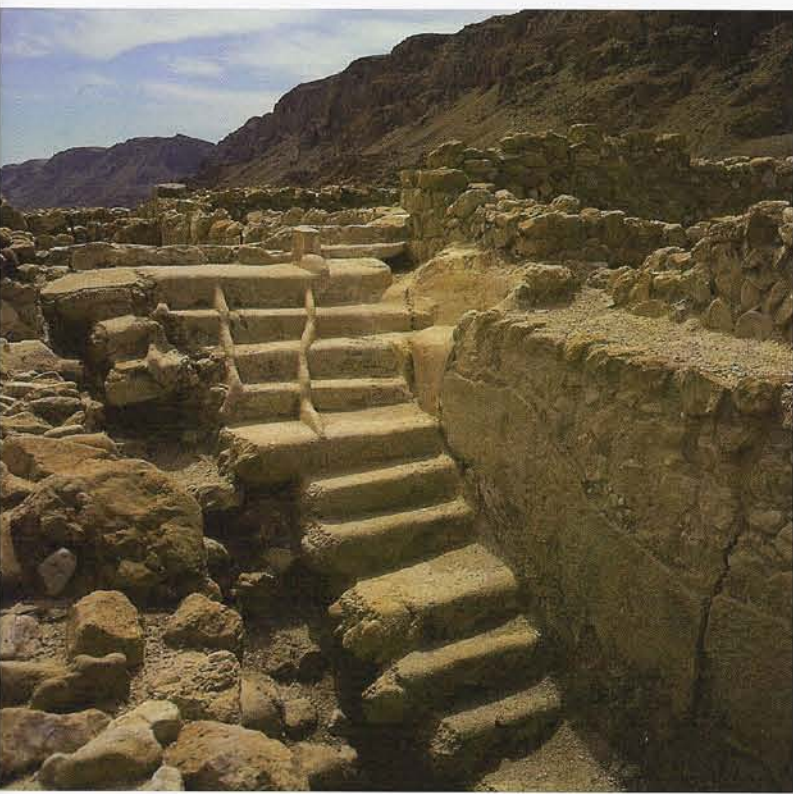
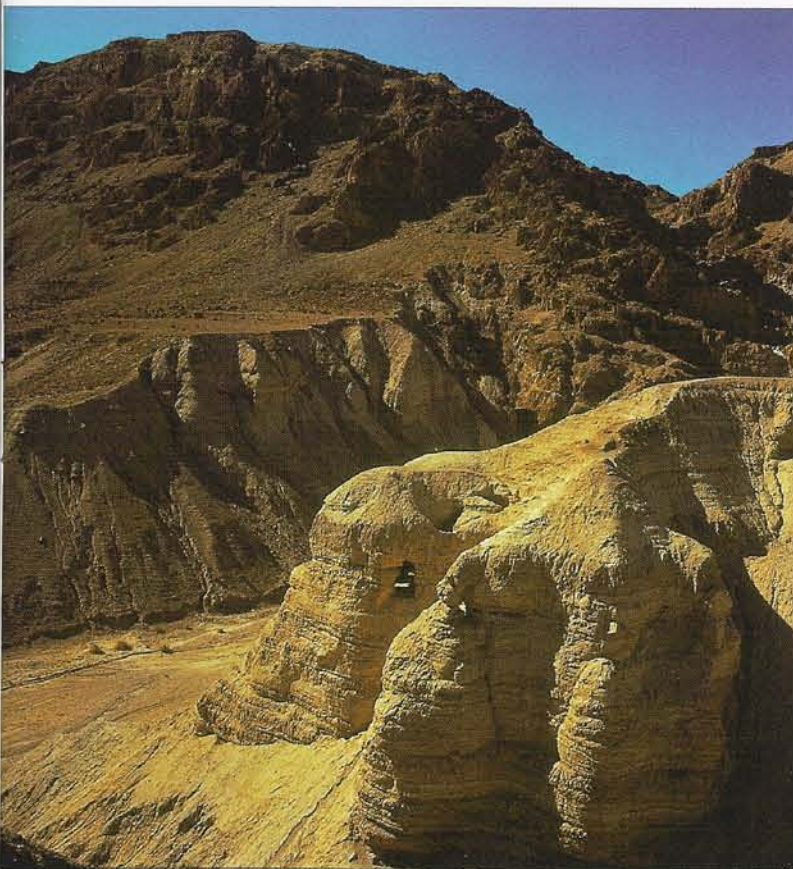
by Eshel in 1994) strewn with sandal nails drew our attention to this zone as well as to the artificial caves more to the north. If there were constructions here, not a single vestige exists. Human presence is indicated by pottery, sometimes intact—bowls and goblets characteristic of Qumran's Period II. Coins collected here date to the second century CE. Their small number, however, does not permit us to draw any definite conclusions. It is possible that the encampment lasted only a short while and was inhabited only by war refugees. The kinds of ceramics, all dating to the same period, render this hypothesis quite plausible.

The Caves in the Limestone Cliff

In 1952, de Vaux and his team explored a narrow strip of land about four km north of Qumran. Approximately 270 caves, cracks, crevices, and little nooks were examined; forty revealed traces of occupancy, while only twenty-six had "Qumran" pottery. A new survey of this same sector, led by Joseph Patrich in 1984 and 1985, found only seventeen sites with archaeological evidence.

Patrich, like de Vaux before him, recognized that the majority of these caves were not used regularly for living quarters. Most of them were too small to house hermits, and the largest probably were not used for prolonged habitation. Only one cave, 37, the largest of those found south of Qumran, has a well-constructed terrace and shows signs of a planned occupancy. But it could not have been used regularly by one or more members of the community because it is accessible

Bowl with ring base, dating to the Roman period (first century CE), excavations at Khirbet Qumran.



(Top) Cave 4, carved out of the marl cliff that dominates the wadi. The caves seen above gave access to them.

(Above) The stairway of the large cistern to the southeast of the main building was damaged by an earthquake, most probably between Period I (152–8/4 BCE) and Period II (8/4 BCE) of the occupation of the site.

only by a very difficult climb, and the distance separating it from the community center (one km) exceeds the limit imposed for the Sabbath. Stegemann drew our attention to this point: the *halakhah* of Qumran does not allow one to circulate on the Sabbath day more than 1,000 cubits (about 500 m) beyond one's habitat. Almost all of these caves are located beyond this legal distance, and Caves 1, 2, 3, and 11 go two or three times beyond the limit. They could not have been used for regular living space but rather for temporary stays, hideouts, and storage space.

The thin layer of lacustrine (lake) sediments (known geologically as the Lisan Formation) around Qumran is pierced with a number of natural cavities that can become livable houses with a minimum of effort—the marl terrace can be cut easily.

After the discovery of Cave 4, the richest in manuscripts, we discovered five more in a meticulous exploration of the steep slopes to the southeast of the community center. All had suffered from erosion to such a degree that some had entirely disappeared. Often there is nothing left but a staircase leading to a phantom cave. Seismic activity, erosion, and the frailty of the marl explain their disappearance. Pottery, remains of food, mats, and various cooking utensils prove that these caves were inhabited. At least one of them (8Q) was probably used as a workshop; and a *mezuzah*—that passage from the Torah affixed to the door of a Jewish home—would lead us to think that it served as a dwelling.

A Community of 150 to 200 members

It is not surprising that the Qumran community adopted this cave-dwelling habitation. Given the temperature, which often rises to more than 104 degrees F. (40° C.) during the summer, the marl caverns, with the evaporation of humidity in the walls, offered a naturally “air conditioned” shelter.

During our excavations (December 1996–February 1997), we explored seven caves in the marl plateau northwest of the community center. This zone—never explored by the de Vaux team—was illegitimately excavated by the Bedouin. Because of the fragile ceilings and the collapse of the large blocks, we could only reach the floor of two of them. In the first, 280 potsherds from various vessels were discovered—jars, pitchers, several types of plates, lamps with double spouts characteristic of the first century CE. The second one yielded 119 sherds, all coming for the most part from one jar and one plate. It is very likely that a large quantity of pottery was taken away during the clandestine excavations, which would explain why we could not reconstruct the puzzle. More than likely, with more expeditions, we will discover new “residential” caves.

A study of the data gathered during the excavations by de Vaux, and from our own campaign, indicates that most members of the community resided in caves. Some perhaps lived in the community center and others in huts or tents, but the majority were cave dwellers. Given the severe climate in the area of the Dead Sea, adopting an underground mode of life seems like a good solution. Most specialists estimate the Qumran community numbered around 150–200 people.