We have come to the point where we’re ready to tackle the Dead Sea Scrolls, a set of writings that have gained something of a mystique. Certainly they have inspired unusual and widespread fascination. In fact, even in the Disney children’s movie, “Aladdin,” Robin Williams cracks a joke about the famous “Dead Sea Tupperware.”

The fascination seems to be more than just with the scrolls’ antiquity; plenty of artifacts more ancient than the scrolls fail to inspire much interest. I think a larger part of the fascination has to do with the peculiar nature of the group whose views are recorded in some of the scrolls. There is a sense that these are esoteric writings from a cloistered and highly religious community. And of course, that perception was enhanced by the way the scrolls were, for a long time, held close to the vest by some scholars who had them in their possession for the purposes of editing. The notion that the content of these writings, hidden in caves for nearly two centuries, remained (what appeared to be) a carefully guarded secret made them seem like mysterious texts that might have valuable information. Certainly that perception was not lost on the tabloids, which periodically published stories on the Dead Sea Scrolls to boost sales.

This report, which made the cover of the "prestigious" Weekly World News in 1991, proclaims that the Dead Sea Scrolls foretell the future, purporting that over 50 chilling predictions in them that have already come true.

According to this learned article, the thoroughly researched and documented beliefs of the Dead Sea community include the following: “That a fleet of massive, circular starships landed on Earth 2,500 years ago in 500 B.C.” The author reports that although “a description of the extraterrestrials that got off the ships was badly decayed and unreadable . . . a reference to the fact that they had enormous, bulb-shaped heads survived.”

According the article, also surviving in the scrolls is a report of what God looks like: “Though the description is sketchy, the scrolls say He has fiery green eyes, flowing brown hair and stands 9 feet tall.”

The author also discloses the scrolls’ revelation that “mankind will enjoy 10,000 consecutive years of peace before the world ends in the year 11,991. At that time life as we know it will cease to exist while the souls of the ‘chosen few’ will be reborn as life-forms on the Red Planet Mars.”

We can gain a measure of just how accurate the scroll’s predictions are by its forecast of the 1996 presidential election: “The election of America’s first female president after President George Bush serves out his second term in 1996. Described as the daughter of a slain former president, the woman in question would appear to be Caroline Kennedy.”

The article also reveals why the public was kept in the dark about these forecasts: “The passages were hidden from the public because the men who have controlled the scrolls since their discovery in 1947 decided that the information was too explosive to be revealed to the world.” Here we have a conspiracy theory that finds its life in the way the scrolls were, until last decade, kept under the control of a few scholars. And the fact that
the *Weekly World News* could expect people to be suckered into buying this article again indicates the amount of interest these writings have spurred. And, as VanderKam laments, it is typically sensationalist articles of this sort that gain a public airing.

Part of the reason I have waited until this point in the semester for us to look at these writings is that even though they do contain some unique wrinkles – although nothing as sensational as suggested in the *Weekly World News* – we have seen enough variations within Hellenistic Judaism that we will not be overly surprised by what we find here. Moreover, we’ll notice some correspondences between some key ideas in the scrolls and things we have seen elsewhere in Jewish Hellenistic Literature.

Let’s begin with an overview of the history of the finds. My purpose in reviewing what VanderKam has told you is not only to reinforce the information, but also to associate some images with the facts.

As you know, the discoveries of the late ’40’s & early ’50’s were not the first time scrolls were found in this region. The early church father Origen (185-254) reported using a Greek translation of the Psalms that had been discovered in a jar near Jericho. Eusebius (ca. 260-340), in his Ecclesiastical History, reports that a jar containing Greek and Hebrew mss had been found near Jericho in the early third century. Around 800 C.E., Timotheus I, the Nestorian patriarch of Seleucia, reported that about ten years earlier, some Jews had found Hebrew mss in a cave near Jericho. So the discoveries that began in 1947 were a continuation of what had begun in the region much earlier.

In the winter/spring of 1947 (or 1946, according to the Bedouin) one of the Bedouin who had heard the jar shatter from the rock one of them threw, slipped out early one morning and revisited the cave. The three scrolls he found that morning – in what became creatively labeled “cave I” – were: the great Isaiah scroll (1QIsa\(^a\)), the Community Rule, first labeled the “Manual of Discipline” because its contents reminded Millar Burrows of a Methodist “Discipline” manual. The third was the Pesher or commentary on Habakkuk.

On a subsequent visit, four other scrolls were discovered and removed: The shorter/ more fragmentary Isaiah scroll, 1QIsa\(^b\). The scroll of the Thanksgiving Hymns or Hodayoth. The War Scroll, which gave the blueprint for the coming final cosmic battle. And, finally, the Genesis Apocryphon, a retelling of events from the book of Genesis, and the only one of these scrolls not written in Hebrew. Instead, it was written in Aramaic.

Three of these scrolls came into the possession of Israeli scholar Eleazar Sukenik. As you know, the other four scrolls were purchased by the Metropolitan at St. Mark’s monastery for a grand total of $100, although he had every intention of profiting from the deal. Amazing, in retrospect, is this ad the Metropolitan placed in the Wall Street Journal on June 1, 1954, advertising scrolls for sale.

As you know, Yigael Yadin, the son of Eleazar Sukenik, came across the add and arranged to purchase the four scrolls for $250,000 (using funds from a prominent philanthropist), and then gave them to the state of Israel, where they were, ultimately, united with the other three scrolls from cave one in this structure, called “The Shrine of
the Book,” whose design and construction were funded by the same philanthropist who
bankrolled the purchase of the four scrolls. The building was specially designed to
maintain the appropriate temperature and humidity – approximating the atmosphere of
the caves – to prolong their preservation. The spiral dome of the building’s roof imitates
the shape of the covers found on some of the jars containing scrolls.

Needless to say, the discoveries led to exploration of caves in the region, once the
source of the scrolls had been located, which was indeed a remote area. In fact, here is a
cutaway, quasi-3D map, showing Jerusalem, Jericho and the location of Qumran. From
Jerusalem to Qumran is only around 15 miles, but it involves a drop of over 4,000 feet,
for Khirbet Qumran is located in the lower rank of cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea.
Needless to say, this is a forbidding terrain, and the caves were located in the cliffs near
Khirbet Qumran.

The chief inspector of antiquities in Jordan, G. Lankester Harding, and an
archaeologist named Father Roland de Vaux launched an excavation of cave one that ran
from February 15 to March 5 of 1949. Along with the special jars used to store the
scrolls, as well as bowls and fabric, they found fragments of around 70 manuscripts.

At the time of the exploration of cave 1, Harding and DeVaux also examined the ruins
of Qumran about 1/2 mile south of cave 1, but their initial probes led them to conclude
that it was an old Roman fort with no connection to the cave and its mss.

In 1951 Bedouin found mss in caves at Wadi Muraba‘at, about 13 miles south and west
of Qumran. We’ll talk about these manuscripts later. Meanwhile, back at the hills
surrounding Khirbet Qumran, the Bedouin discovered cave 2, which was quite close to
cave 1, as you can see here. The discoveries of cave 2 were nowhere as impressive as
those of cave 1 with only fragments from 33 mss found here. And yet, the discovery of a
second cave containing writings prompted more systematic explorations of caves in the
vicinity. In exploring 225 other orifices in mid-March of 1952, archaeologists discovered
cave 3, to the north of the first two. Cave 3 contained the unique Copper Scrolls we’ll
talk about later.

Meanwhile, Bedouin had also been busy and, in mid-summer of 1952, found scrolls in
caves at two other sites, the most important and best known of which are the caves along
Nahal Hever, just south of En Gedi.

In mid-August, much to the chagrin of the professional archaeologists, Bedouin
managed to discover a fourth cave, the closest found to the ruins, as can be seen in the
upcoming photo, on which I have circled the location of the cave. In fact, it may be that
there once existed a bridge over the gorge, enabling inhabitants of the site to access it
readily, as suggested by the fact that the original opening to this cave faced the gorge.

As you know, cave 4 yielded an impressive cache of mss, around 550 strong, although
in 80-100,000 fragments that had to be pieced together. This cave is distinctive also
because it was manmade, hewn out of the limestone and then, judging from the holes in
the walls, fitted with shelves, since these holes are at regular intervals and uniform
heights. Most likely they were used to hold the manuscripts stored here. Also found in
cave four were pieces of pottery, including two jugs and a pot, along with a lamp.
When archaeologists explored cave 4, they also discovered cave 5, while Bedouin
found cave 6. It wasn’t until 3 years later that caves 7-10 were found, none of which
yielded large quantities of scrolls
The Bedouin discovered the 11th and final cave, in January of 1956, although they
didn’t announce their discovery until February. Cave 11 is significant for giving us
copies of the Temple Scroll, psalms scrolls, and others.
So the discovery of the scrolls occurred over nearly a decade and, ironically, the major
caches of material were discovered not by professional archaeologists, but by the
Bedouin, who quickly learned that there was money to be made.
Before talking about the texts found in these caves, we need to consider the
archaeology of Khirbet Qumran, the ruins about a half mile from the first two caves and
adjacent to cave four, because some issues important in understanding the scrolls are
bound up with questions about the site and its relationship to the scrolls found in the
caves.
As I mentioned earlier, when Harding and de Vaux excavated Cave 1 at the beginning
of 1949, they concluded Khirbet Qumran had been a Roman fortress unconnected to the
caves and their mss. But, with the discovery of additional caves and mss, a second
evacation was undertaken by de Vaux in 1953, followed by digs in 1954, 1955 and
1956. Unfortunately, de Vaux’s complete excavation notes have yet to be published. In
his preliminary reports, however, de Vaux posited two principle periods of occupation of
the site, with a brief third.
De Vaux concluded that in the 8th thru 7th centuries B.C.E. (in early Iron Age) the site
hosted a settlement, perhaps a Judean army outpost, based on this cistern and remnants of
walls, which he dated to that period. The site was then abandoned until the Hellenistic
era, when its ruins served as the foundation for a new settlement that persisted, with one
hiatus, from the 2nd century B.C.E. through the 1st century C.E.
De Vaux perceived that this second settlement phase occurred in three stages. The first
he dated to around the middle of the 2nd century B.C.E. In fact, he divided this first
stage into two segments, the initial one (Ia) being a short period beginning somewhere
around 140/130 B.C.E. It saw the construction of a strategic aqueduct system that, during
the rainy season, diverted water from the nearby wadi into cisterns in the settlement.
Besides using the old Iron age cistern, the settlers dug two more. They also used the
original iron age walls as a basis for a set of buildings. De Vaux concluded that a potter’s
wheel was also installed during this period.
The second and more significant segment of this phase (Ib) began sometime during the
reign of John Hycan (135-104) and was marked by a massive building project that saw
a second story added to the buildings, as well as the construction additional structures and
the installation of miqva’oth, or ritual baths, one of which is shown here. The entire
system of cisterns and miqva’oth, fed by the miniature aqueduct leading from the wadi,
created an elaborate water system, highlighted in blue on this site map. “The system was designed so that water flowed from...the northwest corner throughout the settlement...Purification basins at various points emptied the water of its silt and dirt as it flowed through the system. Any excess spilled out at the southern side, where the system came to an end.” (Schiffmann, 42)

Also striking is the size of some facilities. Most prominent is what has been identified as a dining room, whose size you can gauge in relationship to other rooms in the compound on this map. Here is the room itself. The remains indicate that this room had its own supply of water so that the floor, which was slanted, could be washed down and the water carry away the debris. (A similar high-tech cleaning system was used in the second temple.)

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Even more important in identifying this as a dining room is the room adjacent to it, located here on the map. In this small area dubbed “the pantry” were found 708 neatly stacked bowls – at least as neatly as bowels shattered in an earthquake can be. I’ll talk more about the earthquake damage in a minute.

One of the perplexing issues surrounding Khirbet Qumran is that while the settlement was equipped with an elaborate water system and large rooms, not to mention the large number of place settings for meals, it lacks evidence of rooms sufficient to lodge the large number of people implied. As we’ll see, the number of people buried in the nearby cemetery also raises this problem, since there are too many burial plots for the number who could have reasonably lived at the site over its roughly 230 year life.

Three theories have been proposed to deal with this problem: The first is that the majority lived in the caves. This is supported by the fact that muzzuzoth have been found in the caves, including one at the entrance to cave 4, which also contained some everyday pottery and a lamp. Cave 7 also contained mezuzoth. This evidence makes it likely that some caves surrounding the site were inhabited. But it is unlikely that this would account for all who apparently lived here.

A second suggestion is that they lived in tents outside the complex. While this might seem a convenient proposal because it is easy to assert, but almost impossible to prove, an archaeologist by the name of Eshel just a few years ago explored the area surrounding the site with a large magnet, with striking results. He found a trail of sandal nails leading out from the site to an area slightly removed, suggesting a regularly used pathway. He then did compaction studies of the area at the end of the trail of nails and found the soil to be much more compacted than in other areas around the site. Both of these findings are
consistent with the theory that at least some of those visiting the site had lived in tents erected nearby.

The third suggestion is that there was a second story to some of the buildings, which provided sleeping quarters. This issue begins to get us even deeper into the interpretation of the site, however, and I want to postpone that a few minutes.

One other find worth mentioning here is the pottery found at Qumran. Analysis of the clay used suggests that the majority of the vessels were made on site. Most of them are “a smooth, hard-fired, pink, red or gray earthenware” (Magnuson, BAR 22:6, 72). Some of the vessels found at Qumran are either unique to the site or rare elsewhere, most notably the jars used for storing manuscripts in cave 1. While this type of jar is found occasionally elsewhere, it is by far most common at Qumran (ibid.). These jars, made of native clay, found both in the caves and at Qumran is what unquestionably links the caves with the ruins.

So far we’ve been talking about period Ib. One of the main reasons for dating period Ib from the late 2nd into the early 1st century B.C.E. is the numismatic evidence, the coins found. While there are only a handful of coins (12, to be precise) from the Seleucid era and one minted during the reign of John Hyrcanus, 143 were found bearing the impress of Alexander Jannaeus, who ruled between 103-76 B.C.E. [There is a nice listing of the numismatic evidence in Vanderkam]

Period Ib apparently came to an end abruptly due to tragedy. There is evidence of two types of damage to the structures. The most readily apparent is the evidence of an earthquake, such as the crack in these stairs descending into a miqveh, which rendered the miqveh unusable. In fact, as can be seen in this diagram of the site, a fault-line runs through the eastern edge of the community’s buildings, with the miqveh of the previous photo located here. A number of the rooms along this eastern side of the compound suffered damage and were rendered unusable. Josephus reports that there was an earthquake in the area in 31 B.C.E., and so de Vaux set 31 B.C.E. as the end for period Ib.

The other tragedy in evidence is a fire, deducible from the layer of ash (from the burning of the wood roofs) lying beneath the phase II remains. While most archaeologists concur that the fire was likely a secondary effect of the earthquake, some posit that this might reflect an attack by an invader, such as the Parthians around 40 B.C.E. More recently, many scholars see the fire as likely a layer of destruction later than the earthquake, with the community having repaired and reinhabited the structure after 31 until around 9-8 B.C.E., when a fire ravaged the compound. In any case, de Vaux perceived this destruction as the end of the period Ib occupation.

Phase II, in de Vaux’s estimation, did not begin immediately after the earthquake, because the next set of coins found suggests reoccupation only during the reign of Herod the Great’s son, Archelaus, who ruled from 4 B.C.E.-6 C.E.. The third period ended with the Roman capture of the site at the time of the revolt that led to the sack of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.
Evidence suggests much of the debris from the earthquake and fire of the first century B.C.E. were simply tossed outside the buildings, as well as in the ravine to the north of the compound. The water system seems to have suffered serious damage due to the earthquake, and parts of it no longer functioned. Some additional rooms were added, such as the so-called scriptorium which we’ll discuss later, perhaps to compensate for those which could no longer be used.

The fact that the same type of pottery is produced in this period as in Ib makes it likely the same group that occupied the site in period Ib inhabited it during this phase, as well.

The end of phase II is well marked, with thick carbon debris filling many of the buildings. Iron arrowheads have also been found at this level. What’s more, the numismatic evidence is quite striking. There are 83 coins from year 2 of the revolt (which began in 66 C.E.), five from year 3 (= 68), but none from year 4, which means Qumran met its end in 68 B.C.E.

Phase III was a short period of occupation by Roman troops during the rest of the campaign in Judea. Other than fortifying the tower, they made few changes to the site, leaving the majority of it in ruins.

A few coins found dated to the Bar Kochbah revolt of 132-135 C.E. suggest that the site may have been used by the rebels, but no construction or reconstruction is evidenced.

That, then, is the overview of the occupations of the site, as sketched out by de Vaux. Most of de Vaux’s conclusions about the periods of occupation continue to be accepted. Period Ia, however, is generally discarded now, since its few remains can be accounted for by placing them among the items dated to de Vaux’s period Ib. Indeed, de Vaux seems to have created Ia based on his reading of the sect’s own description of their history, as recorded on scrolls in the caves, rather than on the archaeological evidence. In fact, it might be that the second and major phase of occupation of the site began only early in the first century B.C.E., given that the vast majority of coins found are from the reign of Alexander Jannaeus, who ruled between 103-76 B.C.E. The site probably came to be settled early in the first century B.C.E., some time between 100 and 90. We must keep in mind that the movement existed before the establishment of the site. They had likely been in existence a half-century or so before they took of habitation of Khirbet Qumran.

Be that as it may, the larger discussion is over the interpretation of the site. As you’ll recall, the initial judgment of Harding and de Vaux was that the ruins were the vestiges of a former Roman fortress, a conclusion easy to understand, given the prominence of the site’s fortified tower. More recently this position has been taken up by scholars such as Norman Golb, who argues that the scrolls were brought to the caves surrounding Qumran from Jerusalem during the revolt of the late 60’s, and that the scrolls and the ruins have nothing to do with each other. Of course, he points especially to the central tower structure, with its thick, fortified walls, that stood at the corner of the complex as evidence that Qumran was a military fortress rather than a sectarian compound.
There are several problems with this hypothesis, however. On the one hand, there is evidence that several of the caves were actually occupied by people, which doesn’t fit the hypothesis that they were simply hiding spots for scrolls brought from Jerusalem. Indeed, most striking is cave four, which was actually man-made, hewn out of the rock — certainly not a hastily sought refuge for important documents. And then there is the evidence from the composition of the clay and style of the pottery found in the cave that there was a link between the caves and the compound.

As for the notion that the ruins are those of a military fortress, a fundamental problem is that the Qumran site is different from all other known fortresses of the Judean wilderness. For one thing, fortresses tended to be royal palaces and were located on mountaintops. They share a layout and architecture distinct from that of Qumran. Moreover, all of them are referred to in surviving historical records.

While there were also military outposts not connected to royal residences, they also were organized differently than Qumran. The map we’ve been using reveals a couple of significant differences. While military fortresses had one main entrance that could be easily defended, Qumran had multiple entrances. Moreover, whereas the known military fortresses of the region had large courtyards for that purpose, Qumran does not. So the fortress hypothesis has been by-and-large discarded.

Another recent proposal is that Qumran was simply a country villa. This theory has been advanced by the Belgian husband-wife team of Robert and Pauline Donceel, who were charged with the task of publishing de Vaux’s original excavation notes, although they have yet to do so and seem to have misplaced some of the evidence de Vaux gathered. Their hypothesis is that Qumran was a villa that provided a country getaway for some well-to-do Jerusalem family, especially during the winter.

A nicely developed critique of this theory, mounted by a comparison of well-known villas, is provided by Jodi Magness in the Biblical Archaeology Review. I’ll refer to her work in reviewing the “villa hypothesis.”

The Donceels’ case is based on what they regard as a surprising number of fine pottery pieces among de Vaux’s collection. But Jodi Magness points out, based on her own examination of the pottery, that the assemblage of fine wear is a relatively small percentage of the whole, and does not compare well to the assemblages from true villas, which contain great quantities of fine wear, included imported pieces, none of which were found at Qumran.

Also lacking at Qumran, but customary in villas, is a colonnaded triclinium or banquet hall. While Qumran has what appears to have been a large dining hall, it is not ornately decorated like those of the villas, with their decorative colonnades and other appointments.

Also lacking at Qumran is any sort of bathhouse or even a built-up bathtub. While the water system at the site is elaborate, showing the inhabitants had technological know-how, they did not install the typical luxurious bathing facilities of the known villas. That’s not even to mention the lack of a large swimming pool typically found in the
villas. The water system at Qumran is, instead, quite utilitarian. Similarly, Qumran lacks any of the land-scaped gardens found in the villas.

Most important, the building remains at Qumran have only sparse interior decoration. There are a few decorated arches and column drums with capitols, but they are the exceptions that prove the rule. As in the case of the fine pottery, Qumran compares poorly with the numerous lavish appointments found in the villas.

Two other features suggest a more mundane use. One is the integration of the workshops into the settlement. Whereas in the villas the workshops are isolated from the residential sites, at Qumran they are located close to any posited residences. Second, no other villa posses a juxtaposed cemetery, such as we find at Qumran.

So the theory that Qumran was a country villa likewise fails the comparison test, and is generally rejected as a likely interpretation of the site.

A third recent suggestion I want to deal with has been offered by Yizhar Hirschfeld, who suggests that Qumran was a fortified farm. Hirschfeld argues that the original (Hellenistic) building was the central square enclosed in brown. While others see the glacis surrounding the outside of the tower as a refortification of the tower following the earthquake of 31 B.C.E., Hirschfeld contends that it is part of the original construction of the compound. He also argues that there once existed a courtyard within the square, colored purple on this map, which only later became partitioned with additional walls. In order to make the comparison with fortified agricultural estates elsewhere, he must posit a central structure with a courtyard and a tower. However, Hirschfeld does not appear to be gaining many adherents to his hypothesis that there once existed a central court, or that the central square was the original element of the settlement.

The disagreement with Hirschfeld is not over the similarities of the central structure at Qumran to agricultural fortresses elsewhere. It is conceded that the builders of Qumran drew on architectural designs with which they were familiar. What becomes significant, however, are the differences between Qumran and those other sites. As with the country villas, fortified farms tended to have more ornate appointments, including a large percentage of fine pottery. Many of them had bathhouses, as well. And the presence of a large cemetery again distinguishes the site from the fortified farms. So, once again, the debate is not over what Khirbet Qumran has in common with other sites, but what distinguishes it.

This brings us to the hypothesis developed by de Vaux during his excavations of the site, that it was the center for a Jewish sect. He identified the sect as Essene, which is a question we’ll take up later.

The evidence for this interpretation remains strong. First, the miqva’oth, the ritual bathing pools, evince the Jewishness of the site. In fact, at least one miqveh (the one cracked by the earthquake) has a divided stairway, which means that the user entered on one side and exited on the other, allowing for distinct paths for the unclean and the clean.
Also distinctively Jewish are the numerous stone vessels, given that stone was adjudged a substance that could not become ritually impure. Accordingly, stone vessels were commonly used by Jews concerned with purity laws.

More idiosyncratic to Qumran is its adjacent and famed cemetery, which sports this well-cared for look. The cemetery stands 55 yards east of the compound and contains around 1100 plots marked by clusters of stones, laid out on a north/south axis in neat rows and grouped into three sections, with alleys dividing them. Each of the 26 corpses uncovered by de Vaux was laid out with its head facing to the south, and each skeleton whose gender could be determined was male. De Vaux did find one female skeleton in a grave set apart from the rest, while in a separate collection of graves farther to the east he uncovered four females and one child interred in the six graves he excavated.

De Vaux also probed two other cemeteries near Qumran, one to the north containing 12 graves, two of which de Vaux opened, finding one male and one female. The other, located to the south, contained 30 graves. Among those de Vaux excavated, he found one woman and 3 children.

While few artifacts were found with the bodies at any of these sites, the pottery fragments recovered were consistent with the pottery ware at Khirbet Qumran, leading to the conclusion that those buried in the graves were associated with the compound. The cemeteries have proved significant in the discussion of Qumran for several reasons. First, de Vaux himself noted that the large number of burial plots was disproportionate to the size of the settlement, even if one takes into account the length of time Qumran was inhabited. One possibility is that the site served as some sort of headquarters for a group, many of whose members only visited the site rather than lived there. In fact, a couple of de Vaux’s discoveries strengthen that hypothesis.

One is that some of the graves contained coffin nails, suggesting that those buried in them had been transported to the site for burial. De Vaux also discovered in a single grave two corpses whose bones were not arranged as skeletons, indicating that they had been buried at Qumran after decomposition had occurred, again suggesting they had been transported to the site for burial. That corresponds to the hypothesis that this site served as a headquarters of some sort, and it correlates with the evidence of the scrolls that those who took refuge here saw themselves alienated from the temple in Jerusalem and much of the rest of Judaism.

A second support for the “sect-headquarters” interpretation provided by the cemetery is that only male remains have been unearthed. While it has been suggested that the sect at Qumran was celibate, consistent with the witness of Josephus and Pliny that the Essenes practiced celibacy, the writings do not support that. The scroll called “The Community Rule” gives no directions about marriage or celibacy, which is remarkable if the group was celibate. Moreover, the “Rule of the Congregation” refers to women and children as part of the group, while the “Damascus Document” offers specific regulations for family life.
Nevertheless, it is apparent from the (evidently) entirely male population of the main cemetery that men were the main occupants of the site. Given the large numbers of graves, most of them likely died while visiting the compound.

Having said that, though, there are several ways to account for the presence of female and children’s corpses in the cemeteries surrounding the settlement. One possibility is that they were the wives and children of those who lived there as caretakers of the site, assuming that there would need to be a residential crew to give continuity to the operations of the compound. The women and children may have belonged to those who resided there for that purpose. On the other hand, that might be too modern of a conception of a "retreat center."

A second possibility is that they are the relations of men at the site who had come to visit their husband/father while he was there, or that they were part of the families who came to some sort of ritual gathering at the site. This possibility has been given a real boost by Eshel’s discovery of evidence that tents were pitched in an area adjacent to the site.

In any case, accounting for the presence of children’s and women’s remains at the site is not too difficult. Trying to correlate that information with other data to identify which sect this was is the greater challenge, which we will take up next week.

Another feature of the compound which has been a center of debate is what has long been called a scriptorium. As I stated earlier, the pottery evidence from the caves and the ruins link the scrolls with the compound. Many mss were doubtless brought to the site (it has been estimated that the evidence supports more than 500 different scribes as responsible for the various mss found). And yet, it is unlikely that all were brought from the outside, especially those which reflect the unique ideology of the settlement. So there had to be scribal activity somewhere in the compound. The reason this room (locus 30 on de Vaux’s drawing) was designated the site for this scribal activity was the discovery of three ink wells, two of them ceramic and one bronze. In a short 1966-67 excavation, a fourth ink well was also found. While 15 ink wells have been found throughout Israel, no more than one has been found in any one location, including in the upper city of Jerusalem. So that certainly fits the putative character of the compound as a scribal center.

The question, however, is whether this room was devoted to scribal activity. As you likely know, the ink wells were not the only artifacts discovered in this location. So also were these tables and benches, which de Vaux posited were used by the scribes for copying mss. There is a problem or two with that theory, however. As de Vaux was aware, depictions of scribes in the ANE show them sitting cross-legged, resting the scroll in their laps. And while de Vaux was able to find examples in which scribes were pictured as writing at tables or desks, in order for a scribe to use these supposed desks and benches to copy mss would require him to be in roughly this position, which seems unlikely. And so the theory that these were writing tables for copying mss has generally been rejected.
One feature of locus 30 that needs to be thrown into the mix is the evidence that it had a second story. The remains of stairs to the second floor were found, which raises the question of what level the artifacts in the ruins of this area were from. The Donceels argue that the tables and benches were from the second floor, which they suggest was a triclinium. The problem with that is that the tables are only 1.3 feet wide, while the benches were only about a foot wide, which means that reclining on them would have been not only uncomfortable, but also precarious. The fact is that we just can’t know what level the tables and benches were on, nor can we determine what they were used for. The only thing we can say is that the unusual number of ink wells found in and around locus 30 supports the supposition of scribal activity in the compound.

So what can be concluded about Khirbet Qumran, based on the archaeological evidence we have recounted, is that it was a center for a Jewish sect of some sort. The Jewishness of the group is put beyond question by the number and size of miqva’oth in the compound, as well as the presence of stone vessels.

The evidence provided by the cemeteries, with the disproportionate quantity of plots for the number of people that could have lived at the site, the evidence that only males were buried there, as well as the indications that some of the interred had been brought to the cemetery after their death and that they were buried in a specific pattern, suggests that the site served as a spot of pilgrimage in some form. Certainly the presence of only adult males in the main cemetery, with women and children buried in a separate location, is suggestive of some sort of ideological agenda.

Another indication that this served as a center for a large group rather than, say, a rural villa for a wealthy family is the pantry with its stacked dishes, and the adjacent hall, complete with access to water for washing the floor. This room is suggestive of a dining hall to be used for communal meals.

As for indications as to where those living and working at the center stayed, setting aside speculation about the use of the second story of the central structure, what seems certain, based on the discovery of mezuzoth, is that some of the caves were inhabited. Given the evidence of shared pottery between the caves and Khirbet Qumran, most archaeologists have no doubt that those who lived in the caves were associated with the compound.

Also substantiated is the use of ground adjacent to the site for the erection of tents, which again supports the notion that this site served as a sort of center for an organization.

The unique pottery found in both the caves and the compound also means that there is a connection between the scrolls found in the caves and Khirbet Qumran. In particular, it leads to the inference that at least some of the scrolls were produced in the compound. That inference is buttressed by the unusual concentration of ink wells in locus 30, suggesting that the compound housed scribal activity.
This much can be fairly well established based on the remains and their interpretation. To further identify the makeup of the group that used Khirbet Qumran we need to turn to the scrolls themselves, which we’ll do next time.