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The Discovery of a New Dead Sea Scroll Cave at Qumran

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During the month of January 2017, excavation was conducted in a cave south of Qumran by Dr. Oren Gutfeld (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and Dr. Randall Price (Liberty University). The excavation determined from the discovery of scroll jars and textile remains that Cave 53 was a scroll cave that renewed the possibility of further discovery of scroll remains in other caves based on thorough excavation and sifting.

History of the Site

The cave was first identified in 1993 during the two-month project known as “Caves in the Northern Judean Desert”(Operation Scroll, organized and carried out by the Israel Antiquities Authority under the late Amir Drori and by the Unit of the Staff Officer of Archaeology of the Civil Administration in Judea and Samaria under Dr. Yitzhak Magen and assisted by Hanania Hizmi. In this report it is listed in region XII under the number 53. During the Operation Scroll survey, Yigael Yisraeli and Amir Ganor conducted an exploratory excavation of the front area of the cave on the right and left. Four strata were revealed: Stratum 1 (Early Islamic period), Stratum 2 (Early Roman period), Stratum 3 (Pottery Neolithic period), and Stratum 4 (Pre-Pottery Neolithic period). Finds included Neolithic pottery and Byblos arrowheads and Roman-era sherds of a cooking pot, bowl, and jars.¹ In 2010 Dr. Price, then director of excavations on the Qumran Plateau, and Yacov Kalman, Field Supervisor, Herodium, re-surveyed the cave and based on the presence of Second Temple period remains (including a woven mat) argued for a complete excavation of the site. In 2016 Dr. Gutfeld received a permit for excavation and with Dr. Price co-directed the new excavation with assistance by Mr. Ahiad Ovadia (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), an expert in Neolithic period remains.

Description of the Cave

Cave 53 is a fault cave located in the limestone cliffs of the Rift Valley. Its opening in the lower cave (main chamber) faces north with a full view of the Qumran Plateau, situated a few hundred meters distant. Its entrance, which spans the entire width of the cavity, has a low ceiling and a thin wall supported by two man-made pillars (עמודים). Worked sections are found on each side of the lower cave interior with the remains of what was identified in the 1993 survey as an enclosure wall. There was partial roof collapse of parts of the lower cave ceiling

¹ *Atiqot* 41, Part 1 (2002), 208-11 (Hebrew); Part 2, 185 (English summary)

with several boulders at the front of the courtyard of the cave and at the rear of the entrance area. The entire entrance area was filled to a depth of approximately 1.5 m with soil and rock chips fallen from the ceiling. The sides of the cave had several large rocks positioned against walls and covered by debris. At the back of the lower cave is a 12m tunnel that follows an elongated plan. Initial observation of the tunnel was that the ceiling was blackened from the use of fire and it was filled with an undisturbed layer of rock chips broken from the ceiling to a depth of .5m covering some larger fallen stones and soil deposits.



Exterior of Cave 53 located .5km south of Qumran



Interior of Cave 53 showing one of the supporting pillars

Excavation of the Lower Cave (Main Chamber)

The lower cave had an accumulation of collapsed stones and rock chips fallen from the ceiling due to earthquake activity with soil deposited between layers. Excavation began with a thorough sifting of the 1993 dump site in front of the cave (from the exploratory trench excavation. In this debris were found bones, charcoal, worked flint, organic matter, several Roman period store jar sherds and a Neolithic obsidian blade (imported from Anatolia). Excavation of the topsoil within the cave front (between the pillars) produced bones and several pottery sherds. Continued excavation in a burnt layer revealed the remains of a *tabun* with significant amounts of charcoal, plant material and pieces of fabric and textile. Here, too, were several layers of woven mats, probably used as temporary sleeping mats. Because the mats were found in layers (different strata), it was conjectured that the mats represent use over time. Charcoal deposits between the mats may imply that they burned old mats to prevent tick or lice infestation.



Lower cave before excavation



Mats from lower cave made of palm fronds

In the lowest stratum (Stratum 4) was found pre-pottery Neolithic and Wadi Rabba ware pottery sherds, including parts of a holemouth jar and Chalcolithic or early Bronze carnelian stamp seal with an incised triangular design. On the northeast side an earth-fill under the burnt-layer was a fireplace with small stones above it (like a stone oven pit) and flint tools, including a large flint blade, likely Canaanite. Below this was found Wadi Rabba painted body sherds. The layer under the fireplace yielded three intact Neolithic flint arrowheads of different sizes. At the cave wall on the east side was found a .5cm Byblos arrowhead (Neolithic). Some of this wall had been excavated in 1993. However, this excavation left much of the area undisturbed, including three large stones between this wall and that on the northwest side. Excavation in the fill to the east of the cave wall revealed a flint arrowhead and some Wadi Rabba pottery. In the fill west of the cave wall was found a stone pavement abutting this wall and the other cave walls (but not extending into the northern chamber).



Canaanite blade, Neolithic arrowheads



Early Bronze stamp seal



Wadi Rabba pottery

A cut-niche was discovered on the southern part of the lower cave after the the removal of one of the large stones set against the wall. On this niche (or shelf) were the remains of a large jar and within the jar was a rolled-up fragment of parchment (papyrus?). It contained no visible writing after cleaning, but awaits multi-spectral imaging to determine there is any trace of a text. It appears the large stone was placed against this wall to conceal the niche with the jar (similar to that for the Copper Scroll in Cave 3). To the far right of this jar was another niche containing jar remains as well to the right of this deposit additional pottery fragments retrieved from a wall cavity behind large fallen stones. Additional pottery was found on a small shelf cut in the wall on the southwest side close to the entrance to the tunnel. Excavation at the back of the lower cave on the west side leading to the entrance to the tunnel yielded organic material and some textile between the stones. In the central part of the cave, the layer down to bedrock yielded on pieces of flint. The removal of soil between the stones on the northwest side and northeast side uncovered some flint and pottery.



Scroll jar in situ on niche



Scroll fragment from inside jar



Niche after jar fragments removed

Excavation of the Upper Cave (Tunnel)

Initially only one small girl (Christy Connell) was able to crawl over the large stones blocking 15m passage to the rear of the cave. The cleaning of the surface yielded bones, organic material, and some pottery and probing the edges of the walls of the cave at the rear of the tunnel uncovered a large body portion of a store jar. Excavation in the tunnel revealed a mix of early Roman and Chalcolithic pottery and a worked stone incised with lines (perhaps for accounting purposes). Continuing in the earth fill below the surface of mixed rock, soil and some pottery revealed more pottery sherds. The compact layer beneath this included bones, but also pieces of parchment or leather and fragments of a basket, braided ropes and textile (linen wrappings).



Incised Chalcolithic stone



Parchment



Linen wrapping, fabric, woven rope

Below this rock debris in the cave wall of the tunnel was a rock-cut niche with the remains of store jars. These were in a sealed context indicating they had not been disturbed from Second Temple times. From the back of the tunnel came a large accumulation of olive pits, some date pits, an acorn, and a partial nut shell. These imported items evidence a human presence in the tunnel at some period, perhaps during the cutting of the niches for the deposition of the scrolls.



Randall Price excavating tunnel niche



Jar fragments from wall niches

Here, too, was found two iron tools (two types of picks). The first impression was that they were Bedouin robber's tools from the 1950's, however, in the soil between stones the area where picks were found a braided piece of rope was discovered in the sifting. This may aid in the preliminary dating by some experts of these tools to the Second Temple period. If this

dating is correct, the intentional placement of these tools in a natural niche may indicate they were being stored for later use in expanding the niches for additional scroll deposits.



Finding of iron tools in back of tunnel



Second Temple period Iron picks

The Pottery from Cave 53

The pottery has only been partially examined by Yehuda Rapuano (IAA). This initial examination suggested a date in the Qumran Period IB based on the lack of ridging (or ribbing) and longer jar handles, a trait of late Hellenistic period (2nd-1st BCE). Also, the incurving rim bowl is like that included by de Vaux in his Period IB assemblage. The jars have not been cleaned so that residue attached to some pieces can be tested and samples can be taken for petrography. For this reason, we are unable to state at this time how many store jars and what type of store jars were present in the cave. However, one observation may be made. It might have been expected that these jars would be later in date if they were stored toward the end of the Qumran settlement (68 CE). However, the early date of the jars at the initial time of scroll production, may suggest that the jars were put in place in this cave and left there as storage receptacles. In this way, once the burden of transporting the jars to the cave site was done, the contents of the jars could be easily removed and returned without further effort in jar transport. It may be for this reason that the use stick that was found could be interpreted as a device for scroll removal (see below).



Store jars in upper cave niches



Store jar sherds in basket for registration

The Textiles from Cave 53

The sifting of soil and debris from the excavation of the niches and that surrounding the pottery fragments produced several samples of linen textiles and pieces of braided rope and woven ties that are known to have been associated with the storage of scroll material. Mireille B elis has reported from a personal communication from Naama Sukenik and Orit Shamir that the linen used for these wrappings came from fine quality garments that were sometimes bleached.² Our excavation revealed in the sifting a piece of white woven fabric, such as that described for the inhabitants of Qumran, but most of the samples we obtained were of this fine quality linen. B elis also observes that “the mere presence of textiles, together with jars and manuscripts, bears de facto witness to a ‘slow-hiding scenario’ of the scrolls, a process that took place over an extended period of time and was completed in different phases.”³



Linen textile used to wrap scrolls



Woven fabric perhaps used for packing scroll jars

The Scroll Jars of Cave 53

The fragments of pottery vessels were found together *in situ* within rock-cut niches in the sides of the conglomerate walls of the tunnel and in niches (or shelves) cut into the walls and within crevices behind large fallen stones in the lower cave. Because these niches were completely buried beneath the accumulation of rock chips fallen from the ceiling of the tunnel or concealed behind placed stones in the lower cave, it appears that these represent restorable jars. The dating of the pottery has been given as second-century BCE-first-century BCE, the time of scroll production, the Qumran 1B period (103-31 BCE). The placement of stones to conceal the niches was also observed in one of the only other archaeological excavations of an

² Mireille B elis, “The Unpublished Textiles from the Qumran Caves” in *The Caves of Qumran: Proceedings of the International Conference, Lugano 2014*, ed. Marcello Fidanzio (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 134.

³ *Ibid*, 136.

undisturbed cave, Cave 3Q, where on March 20, 1952 the Copper Scroll (3Q15) was found on a “natural shelf” in the back of a small side cave that had been blocked by a boulder.⁴



Excavation of niches in upper cave



Excavation of niches in lower cave

In one of the niches containing pottery, a stick (approximately 46 cm) was found embedded in the jar fragments. According to Bélis, a wooden stick was found in the contents of Jar GQ39-2 in the Amman Museum.⁵ The other contents of the jar were linen cloths, palm fibers, elements of a piece of string, leather and a possible piece of papyrus. All of these items were also found in sifting the debris association with the broken jars recovered from the niches. It is conjectured that the stick may have been used to pack the jars.

What Happened to the Scrolls?

Our initial theory, gained from the experience of longtime and frequent activity in the caves by the local Bedouin was to suspect that they had entered the cave and taken the scrolls from the jars. The discovery of iron tools hidden in a crevice at the rear of the cave tunnel were thought to be evidence of recent looting. Marcello Fidanzio, who visited the site during excavation, published his theory, based on the *'Atiqot* report of Cave 53 of early Islamic finds, that it had been robbed during the early Islamic period.⁶ However, the debris filling the tunnel would have concealed the niches containing the jars from later visitors to the cave. As this debris appeared undisturbed, as did the large stones covering the shelves where jars were found in the lower cave, it does not appear that the scrolls were looted in the past. The dating of the iron tools discovered in the rear of the tunnel to the Second Temple period strongly suggests that the contents of the jars were removed at this time, possibly by members of the Qumran Community before or during the flight from the Roman invasion that burned the Qumran

⁴ Hershel Shanks, *The Copper Scroll and the Search for the Temple Treasure* (Washington D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2007), 10.

⁵ Mireille Bélis, “The Unpublished Textiles from the Qumran Caves” in *The Caves of Qumran: Proceedings of the International Conference, Lugano 2014*, ed. Marcello Fidanzio (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 127.

⁶ Marcello Fidanzio, “New Discoveries in Cave XII / 53 (12?) in Qumran,” *Revue de Qumran* 29(1) [109], 139-144.

settlement in 68 CE. Cave GQ29 (Timothy's Cave) serves as an example in which empty store jars (both broken and unbroken) were found inside the cave with jar lids placed in a pile. The intact jars were still neatly arranged, giving Milik, who first saw this scene, the impression that "someone had respectfully emptied the jars and preserved the lids, and this had been done a very long time ago ... a respect for contents as much as for the receptacles (as indicated in the Talmud)."⁷ Therefore, it is more likely that those who cared for the scrolls, than Bedouin looters, would have left the jars in this respectful condition. It would also follow, that those who retrieved them, whether occasionally or in a time of crisis, would have left the heavy jars in place and transported only the scrolls. Perhaps the long stick found with the pottery in Cave 53 is evidence of a tool for holding the packing away from the sides of the jars for easier removal of the scrolls.⁸ In the case of Cave 53, the earthquake activity that resulted in the large amount of rock debris from the ceiling would have also caused the damage to the jars *in situ*.

Evaluation of Cave 53 as a Scroll Cave

When the report of the discovery of Cave 53 was first announced in February of 2017, some were skeptical of designating it as a "scroll cave." Robert Cargill questioned this designation on the absence of scroll fragments.⁹ However, Pnina Shor pointed out after her onsite tour of the cave that an undisturbed cave entrance coupled with the remains of store jars and their wrappings, and even some parchment and papyrus fragments, was indicative of a scroll cave.¹⁰ Even without the fragments, Mireille B elis already concluded that "it is axiomatic that if linen was found in a cave, then this cave must also have contained scrolls."¹¹ This can also be concluded from the absence of other Second Temple period remains, especially coins, which is a unique characteristic of scroll caves in the vicinity of Qumran.¹²

Cave 53 as a Special Type of Scroll Cave

For caves in the Qumran area, "it is debated whether the archaeological evidence indicates

⁷ Weston W. Fields, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Full History*. Vol. 1: 1947-1960 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 136-37.

⁸ For a description of how the scrolls were placed in the jars see Stephan Pfann, Kelei Dema': Tithe Jars, Scroll Jars and Cookie Jars," *Copper Scroll Studies*. eds. George J. Brooke and Philip R. Davies. JSPSup 40 (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, Ltd., 2002), 173. For a photograph of Jar GQ39-2 showing the linen packaging inside the jar see B elis, 126-27.

⁹ Robert Cargill, "Dig Notes," *BAR* 43:5 (September/October 2017).

¹⁰ Remarks recorded by videographer Casey Olson in an onsite interview in Cave 53 with Pnina Shor, January, 2017.

¹¹ B elis, 136.

¹² Mladen Popovi , "When and Why Were the Caves Near Qumran and in the Judean Desert Used?" in *The Caves of Qumran: Proceedings of the International Conference, Lugano 2014*, ed. Marcello Fidanzio (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 181.

habitation in terms of temporary refuge or long-term dwelling.”¹³ Harmut Stegemann proposed a theory that the jars, such as those from Cave 1, that held scrolls well-wrapped in linen and deposited in a secretive manner were of a special type that held master manuscripts. He stated that this method of storing the scrolls was used with less than a hundred scrolls.¹⁴ While his theory has been discounted,¹⁵ his observation concerning the unique storage of the scrolls in this manner is significant. At least fifty jars were once stored in Cave 1, based on the jars and fragments and covers recovered from excavation. Other caves at the site of Qumran yielded scroll fragments that had not been stored in this manner. For this reason, the discovery of Cave 53 with its rock-cut niches holding the remains of store jars *in situ* as well as remains of the linen wrappings and ties for the scrolls and traces of other pottery vessels (such as found in Cave 1) may distinguish it as a special type of cave by comparison with Cave 1. As such, this cave may represent one of the Qumran caves designed for the safekeeping of manuscripts.¹⁶

Conclusion

Cave 53 can now be classified as a minor Manuscript cave containing Qumran-type jars and linen wrappings. Whether it should have the designation 12Q (with manuscripts) or Q12 (without manuscripts) or another number will be decided on the basis of the identification of the papyrus fragments found in the cave as scroll fragments, although the presence of papyrus (even without text) can make a case for this being designated Cave 12Q. In addition, Cave 53 is among a cluster of caves in the same vicinity and it is possible that it and they belong to the same classification of “orderly” caves that was recognized in the north. Cave 53 has provided evidence for the first time in a controlled archaeological excavation of the way the jars were deposited within the caves and makes an argument for more thorough excavation in not only caves identified in the 1993 IAA survey, but also for a return to previously explored/excavated caves in which remains may have been overlooked.¹⁷

¹³ Joseph Patrich, “Khirbet Qumran in Light of New Archaeological Explorations in the Qumran Caves,” in *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects* (ANYAS 722; ed. M.O. Wise, et. al.; New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1994), 73-95; Magen Broshi and Hanan Eshel, “Residential Caves at Qumran,” *DSD* 6 (1999): 328-48.

¹⁴ Harmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 61.

¹⁵ Florentino García Martínez, “Reconsidering the Cave 1 Texts Sixty Years After Their Discovery: An Overview in *Qumran Cave 1 Revisited: Texts from Cave 1 Sixty Years after Their Discovery: Proceedings of the Sixth Meeting of the IOQS in Ljubljana*, eds. Daniel Falk, Sarianna Metso, Donald Parry, Eibert Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 4-7.

¹⁶ Mladen Popović, “When and Why Were the Caves Near Qumran and in the Judean Desert Used?”, 183.

¹⁷ This was demonstrated in March 2017 with the new excavation in Cave 11 by Dr. Dan Bahat and Marcello Findanzio, assisted by Dr. Oren Gutfeld, in which potsherds and textiles were recovered.

Map of Cave 53 with Find Spots of the Store Jars

