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The Twelfth Dead Sea Scroll Cave Is Confirmed after Sixty Years

David E. Graves, PhD
Dead Sea Scrolls Cave #12 Identified 30 Ossuaries With the Name “Jesus” Ark of the Covenant Site to be Excavated Heavy Rains Cause Dan Wall to Fall
The Twelfth Dead Sea Scroll Cave is Confirmed After Sixty Years

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At the beginning of this year (Dec 28, 2016-January 25, 2017), I had the privilege of working on the excavation of the newly announced Dead Sea Scroll (DSS) cave number 12, with my colleagues Dr. Randall Price of Liberty University, USA and Dr. Oren Gutfeld of Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology, Israel along with his assistant Ahiad Ovadia, and several Liberty University students and volunteers. My role was registrar of finds, which involved the proper recording and processing of some 400 artifacts that were discovered in the cave. I was assisted by Eva Palmer of Liberty University and Dr. Lamar Cooper of Criswell College.

The Qumran Cave Excavation Project was part of “Operation Scroll,” a project originally launched in 1993 by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), the Israel Defense Forces, and several archaeologists and volunteers. The goal was to survey and excavate the caves in the Judean Desert along the western side of the Jordan River valley. Some 300 caves have been identified with the potential of hiding more scrolls.

Cave 53, measuring approximately 3.5 x 5 meters, is located just southwest of the Qumran plateau. Our investigation of this cave was supported by the Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria (KMAT), the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, and the IAA, as part of the new “Operation Scroll” launched by IAA Director-General, Israel Hasson, to undertake a systematic survey and excavation of the caves in the Judean Desert.

This present cave is now the 12th DSS Cave to be identified and will be designated Q12. Dead Sea Scrolls are designated with the number of the cave in which they were found, usually in front of the Q, as in 1Q1sa for the scroll of Isaiah found in Qumran cave 1 or 4Q175 (4QTest) for the Testimony scroll from Qumran cave 4. However, as Gutfeld explains “Like Cave 8, in which scroll jars but no scrolls were found, this cave will receive the designation Q12 (the Q=Qumran standing in front of the number to indicate no scrolls were found).”

Cave 53 was originally excavated in 1993 and reported in a 2002 journal article by Cohen and Yisraeli. Although the article is in Hebrew, the English summary of the article stated:

"This is one of the most exciting archaeological discoveries, and the most important in the last 60 years, in the caves of Qumran."
- Hebrew University archaeologist Oren Gutfeld

Two caves and a rock shelter were discovered south of Nahal Qumran. The entrance to Cave XII/53 spans the entire width of the cavity; two pillars for supporting the ceiling and a thin wall were built inside the cave. Four strata were discernible in the excavation, but the finds were mixed in part of the area. Stratum 1 dates to the Early Islamic period; Stratum 2 to the Early Roman period based on the pottery vessels uncovered in it; Stratum 3 to the Pottery Neolithic period; and Stratum 4, in which Byblos arrowheads were found, to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period.

Initially no connection with the DSS were made from the excavation in 2002. However, in 2006, Dr. Randall Price identified Cave 53 as a good potential candidate for containing DSS. He spent the next 10 years seeking permits to excavate the cave.

The initial read of the stratigraphy of the cave in 2002 has been confirmed by our 2017 systematic excavation. Once the top Byzantine stratum was removed, the Second Temple period pottery was evident. Next the Chalcolithic period was uncovered, as well as the Neolithic and the pre-Pottery Neolithic period—mainly pottery and flint tools, including a complete flint arrowhead, various flint blades and an complete stamp seal made of red carnelian stone.

The thorough excavation of Cave 53, with over 400 additional finds, many of them organic, included olive pits, dates, various kinds of nuts, several thin ropes, bits of decomposed mats made from palm leaves that lined the cave, and several pieces of fabric and leather. Qumran pottery along with textile material associated with storing scrolls were also found, including a small rolled leather scroll piece (7 cm, see photo above).

The leather piece was sent to the archaeological conservation laboratory at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and from there it was sent to the conservation laboratory of the IAA. The tests have indicated that the leather scroll did not have writing on it and was either from an existing scroll or being processed for writing.

Gutfeld reported “the jars were all broken and their contents removed, and the discovery towards the end of the excavation of a pair of iron pickaxe heads from the 1950’s (stored within the tunnel for later use) proves the cave was looted.”

The new designation of Q12 is due to the confirmation of the presence of DSS

A remnant of a scroll from Cave 12 at Qumran

Cloth that was used for wrapping the scrolls.
in cave 53, even though no DSS were found. Gutfeld reported:

Although at the end of the day no scroll was found, and instead we ‘only’ found a piece of parchment rolled up in a [broken] jug that was being processed for writing, the findings indicate beyond any doubt that the cave contained scrolls that were stolen. The findings include the jars in which the scrolls and their covering were hidden, a leather strap for binding the scroll, a cloth that wrapped the scrolls, tendons and pieces of skin connecting fragments, and more.6

"The important discovery of another scroll cave attests to the fact that a lot of work remains to be done in the Judean Desert and finds of huge importance are still waiting to be discovered."
Israel Hasson, Director-General of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

If the piece of orphan scroll material can be matched to one of the scrolls in existence, then the designation would change to 12Q1 for the parent scroll. There are still more tests and research to be done on the many finds that have come out of cave 53 (now Q12).

The DSS were originally discovered in 1946–57 with the last identified Scroll belonging to cave number 11, discovered in 1956. There are some 930 documents represented in the total DSS, with approximately 15,000 fragments representing 600 documents from Cave 4 alone.7

Only in the early 1950s were systematic archeological excavations conducted in Qumran by Roland de Vaux of the French school of the French Catholic Theological School in Jerusalem and Gerald Harding, then-director of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. To this day, only a small number of scroll fragments were found in the organized archeological context. Numerous fragments have since surfaced on the black market, looted by local Bedouin and sold to antiquities dealers.

Some may object that because no scrolls were found in the cave, it should not be considered a Qumran cave. However, as Mireille Belis stated in 2016, “It is axiomatic that if linen was found in a cave, then this cave must also have contained scrolls.”8 (I am indebted to Randall Price for this quote).

Quite a number of pieces of the linen that covered the scrolls as well as leather
ties were discovered in-situ. In addition, Qumran style jars were discovered in-situ, similar to the pattern of the other manuscript caves, identifying this cave a Qumran Scroll cave.

It was a great privilege to be part of this historic event and to help identify the first DSS Cave in over 60 years and to bring the total number of DSS caves to twelve. It is possible that there more DSS caves that may be identified in the future.

Professor Craig Evans of Houston Baptist University has noted:

Price thinks there may even be a thirteenth cave near the Qumran ruins. Unlike the newly discovered Cave 12, the mouth of the suspected thirteenth cave is concealed — which means there is a chance that it has not been looted. If that is the case, more texts could be discovered. If that happens, who knows what new things we might learn?9

UPDATE - In a March 8, 2017, email to David Graves and Randall Price, Oren Gutfeld reported a surprise following submission of the scroll fragments to Dr. Elisabetta Boaretto at the Weismann Institute of Science for testing:

"We took half of the samples [B499, B410] and washed with water because of salt presence. We did the FTIR and we got a very interesting surprise. The fragments are not parchment but papyrus." The cellulose will now be extracted and tested for the date. Of course some of the Dead Sea Scrolls were also written on papyrus but it was a surprise as they looked like parchment. It was also confirmed that no writing was found on the papyrus.

FOOTNOTES


5) Ibid.

6) Ibid.

