The Unpublished Textiles from the Qumran Caves

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The so-called “Qumran textiles” are far from being limited in number to the seventy-five cloths and fragments that were presented by Grace Crowfoot in DJD 1. At the time, Crowfoot was very ill and she was also in the process of completing another study on the textiles, found at Murabba’at.

As a result of her illness, only the preliminary report on the Qumran findings was published. Crowfoot had also intended to undertake a comparison between the two sets of textiles, but unfortunately she died in 1957, leaving this work unfinished: her final report was then completed by her daughter, Elisabeth. In 1995, we resumed work on the textile collection that was stored at EBAF, and we added several hundred more fragments to the corpus that has already been registered.

My primary objective in this article is to provide a synopsis of the “Qumran textiles” that have so far been identified. This is no easy task, as the original collection has been dispersed, to the benefit of various museums and private collections. I will also attempt to answer the following questions that are closely linked with the “history of the caves” and which provide the topic of this conference: 1) What is so particular about the Qumran textiles? Why was flax (linen) the only material to have been used; and what was the purpose of these textiles if they are too small to have been used as garments? Some textiles were clearly used as jar covers, while others were used as manuscript wrappers, hence the conveniently-shaped “cigar-like” scrolls. Other fragments appear to be too large to have been used as jar covers, although it also unlikely that they were used as “scroll wrappers.” 2) Could these textiles that have been studied recently and stored in Amman, enhance our knowledge concerning this deposit? Can they help us to determine whether this vast concealment of manuscripts, jars and artefacts was the result of a project to store over the long-term and preserve them—so thoroughly prepared and completed as they appear to be? Or do these textiles give us an indication, as Jean-Baptiste Humbert has suggested, that a hasty, emergency scenario took place?

1 The Unpublished Collection from the École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem (EBAF) / Rockefeller Museum

1.1 The Rockefeller Vault

In the summer of 1995, when I asked Joseph Zias, the curator of the Rockefeller Collection, to examine the Qumran textiles, he mentioned that the contents of drawer had not been checked for twenty-seven years. Moreover, the drawer had been incorrectly labelled “Aïn Feshkha,” despite the fact that Roland de Vaux had not found any organic remains in Feshkha. Before de Vaux had made the connection between the khirbeh and the scrolls, the first cave he discovered was given several names, such as “the Cave of the Hebrew Manuscripts,” the “Cave near the Jordan Valley” and the “Cave near Feshkha.” In other words, the ruins nearby were considered less important, at least at first, although it became quite clear early in de Vaux’s work that these could not be ignored. It was also understood that an initial survey of the minor linen fragments found by de Vaux (these were never studied by Crowfoot) needed to be published. The site from which they had been removed also needed to be established. I filled any gaps in information wherever possible and was thus able to record the fragments. I will not go into further detail here on this, as I have already given a description of these fragments in one of the chapters contained in the Volume II of the final publication on Qumran.

4 See Joan E. Taylor, The Essenes, the Scrolls and the Dead Sea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 272 on the so-called “quick hiding scenario,” as favoured among scholars.
5 Except for a hoard of coins covered by the fossilized remains of linen. See Bélis, “Des textiles: Catalogue et commentaires.”
Several fragments of these textiles were found still covered in dried mud and debris. They also contained visible traces of the context in which they were discovered. I also found remains of fauna, flora and several parasites in the folds or on the surface of the fragments. These were set aside and examined systematically, in order to progress with the investigation about the context. Inside the folds of one particular cloth was a parasite, which thrives only on lice that live on human beings. This provided evidence that the fragment had originally been worn as a garment.

The tow labelled 3Q indicates that raw flax was a valuable material, as demonstrated by the fact that they were found hidden among other precious goods. It is possible that the material was intended to be spun after being recovered from the cave, which would also indicate that this may have been a refugee deposit.