CHAPTER 17

History of the “Qumran Caves” in the Iron Age in the Light of the Pottery Evidence

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Since the late ‘40s and the beginning of the ’50s of the last century, the north-eastern part of the Judean Desert has been witnessing numerous archaeological surveys and works (Table 17.1; Fig. 17.1). The main, but not the only one, goal of various expeditions sent to the Dead Sea region, was the quest for more and more scrolls. On this occasion, apart from manuscripts, many other artefacts, like pottery and the so-called small finds,1 have come to light. Their chronology range in date from the Chalcolithic to the Arab periods.

The aim of this short paper is to present, on the basis of pottery evidence, some observations concerning the use of the caves during the Iron Age II–III. The later part of the Iron Age II, roughly the 8th–7th/6th centuries BCE, corresponds with the earliest phase of the settlement at Khirbet Qumran itself, represented mainly by pottery finds2 and possibly by some architectural structures.3 Although this conference is focused on the so-called Qumran caves, we cannot exclude from our investigation caves which are more remote from the Wadi, and the ruins of Qumran itself. Methodological approach, which has been chosen, requires to perceive the “Qumran caves” in the context of many other caves which pierce the rocky escarpment of the Rift Valley west of the Dead Sea littoral, and not as an isolated geographical/cultural phenomenon.

In March 1952 the Qumran Cave Expedition (hereafter QCE) from the École Biblique et Archéologique in Jerusalem carried out a survey of about 270 sites situated to the north and south of the Qumran site.4 Of the 40 sites (almost exclusively caves or cavities), where the traces of human presence from various periods were found, only few of them yielded the finds pertaining to the Iron Age. One large bowl and one lamp came from caves GQ 27 and GQ 39 respectively.5 Fragments of two vessels dated to the Iron Age II are mentioned as coming from cave GQ 13, and a few pottery sherds, possibly dated to the same period, from cave GQ 6.6 The survey was completed in 1956, and some additional pottery fragments from the Iron Age were found in cave uQ (fragments of jars, two lamps and rounded juglet)7 and in two caves, A and B, situated near Cave GQ 8 (=3Q).8

Of the ten artificial caves carved in the marl terrace, in the very close vicinity of the settlement, only one (9Q) yielded material evidence from the Iron Age. It is a single fragment of a bowl, burnished horizontally. The bowl, dated by de Vaux to the 8th–7th centuries BCE,9 represents the same type as bowl from cave 27 mentioned above (cf. Fig. 4:1).10

In a survey conducted by Joseph Patrich at the turn of 1984 and 1985, Cave XIII/2, which also may be the very same one as that surveyed in 1952 by the QCE (=Cave 37), was investigated. The excavation yielded an interesting assemblage of objects, including pottery, as well as two burials dated to the Iron Age.11

1 See in this volume, Dennis Mizzi.
5 Roland de Vaux, “Archéologie,” in DJD 3:10, 12, Figs. 5.1, 5.3; Pl. 7.
6 De Vaux, in DJD 3:7–8.
7 De Vaux, in DJD 3:13, Cave A: “Quelques tessons du Fer II;” Cave B: “peu de tessons (.), davantage du Fer II.”
8 De Vaux, in DJD 3:31.
9 I am very grateful to prof. Joan Taylor from the King’s College London, for her help in identification of this bowl.
10 Joseph Patrich, “Hideouts in the Judean Wilderness: Jewish Revolutionaries and Christian Ascetics Sought Shelter and
During the same survey, Cave 13 has been identified to the north of Cave GQ 5 (3Q). According to the excavators, it may have been the same cave which is marked as No. 2 in the French publication. Among the discovered finds there were rim fragments of two cooking pots, one bowl and bowl base, all dated in general to the Iron Age II.12

The survey “Operation Scroll,” carried out on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority in the Northern Judean Desert,13 brought to light evidence of human presence in about 165 caves.14 Artifacts, mainly pottery, dated to the Iron Age have been found in 16 caves, of which only nine are located in the southern part of the surveyed area (regions X–XIV). Among these caves, six yielded pottery dated in general to the Iron Age; from two caves came evidence from the Iron Age II, while in the other cave the finds were assigned to the Iron Age II–III period.

Very interesting is Cave XII/49,15 which probably was excavated in the past by Roland de Vaux.16 From here comes the largest assemblage of the pottery dated to the Iron Age II–III. The following types are represented: jars, bowls, cooking pots and juglets.17 From Cave XII/56 rim fragments of two jugs dated to Iron Age are reported,18 and from Cave XII/13 rim fragment of a large bowl.19 Also three caves, X/15, XIV/55 and XIV/56, yielded fragments of Iron Age pottery; unfortunately, no details and illustrations have been published.20

Moving to the south, two sites should be mentioned. The first site is located in Wadi Murabba‘at, about 18 km south of Khirbet Qumran, where four caves were investigated by the expedition of the École Biblique et Archéologique. Caves 1, 2 and 3 contained an unspecified number of Iron Age pottery sherds. The published finds include fragments of two hole-mouth jars with two (or four?) handles, one large bowl and one juglet from Cave 2, and only one fragmentary bowl from Cave 1. Cave 3, apart from some Iron Age pottery sherds (unpublished), yielded also other small objects, which could be possibly dated to the Iron Age.21 Roland de Vaux also published a water container (decanter) which, already after excavations, was found nearby in a hole in the rock, and a very interesting seven-nozzled lamp, which in turn was purchased from Bedouins.22

The other site is the “Cave of the Pool,” which was examined in the framework of the Expedition to the Judean Desert on behalf of the Israel Exploration Society. The Iron Age pottery found in the cave is represented by fragments of a bowl, two cooking pots, lamp, three jugs (decanters) and juglet. This pottery assemblage is dated by the excavators to the late 7th century BCE.23

1 Discussion of Pottery Types

Pottery is one of the main means that we have at our disposal to investigate various topics concerning the history of the caves. However, the Iron Age material from the caves, with regard to the pottery finds, is not numerous, and the repertoire of ceramic types is quite limited. There is also no real Iron Age stratigraphy in the caves, which, in addition, were re-used and disturbed in the later periods. It means that any analysis of the caves’ chronology, history, etc., has to be based on comparative pottery research. Inevitably, we must refer to the better known and more abundant pottery assemblages, coming from other sites, particularly from Khirbet Qumran, which is the closest