Qumran Cave 4: Its Archaeology and its Manuscript Collection

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Qumran Cave 4 has been described as the mother lode of the Judean Desert caves, and as the hub of the Qumran manuscript collection. Situated a stone’s throw from the buildings of Qumran, on the southern spur of the western marl plateau, its mere location argues for a connection with the Qumran settlement. Added to that are the many connections between the Cave 4 manuscript collection and the manuscript collections in the other ten Qumran caves. This article will investigate the archaeology of Cave 4, followed by a glimpse at the nature of its collection. By bringing together these two types of evidence, a plausible reconstruction of the function of Cave 4 in the late Second Temple period can be obtained.

The Archaeology of Cave 4

Cave 4 is actually two caves adjacent to one another, 4a and 4b, hollowed out from the marl plateau situated immediately to the west of the plateau on which the building remains of Qumran are located. It was first opened by Bedouin tribesmen in 1952. Because the Bedouin did not distinguish fragments from 4a and 4b, but instead mixed them together, the two caves were collectively designated “Cave 4Q.” The Bedouin who removed fragments from these caves claimed that most of them originated in 4a, with almost none from 4b; these claims were borne out by the fragments found by the archaeologists, most of which also came from 4a. Thus de Vaux deemed 4a the more important of the two.

* It gives me great pleasure to offer this essay in honour of my distinguished friend and colleague George J. Brooke. George and I first met as fellows of the Annenberg Institute for Jewish Studies in Philadelphia in the fall of 1992, and have maintained a close friendship since then. The seeds of this article were planted during a lecture I gave at Manchester University in the fall of 2012, which was followed by a most pleasant weekend in Chester at the home of George and his wife Jane.


2 Because the Bedouin did not distinguish fragments from 4a and 4b, but instead mixed them together, the two caves were collectively designated “Cave 4Q.”
Harding discovered the location of the cave and removed the clandestine diggers. De Vaux then undertook the excavation of the cave in September of 1952. A preliminary report of the findings, written by de Vaux, was published posthumously in DJD 6. The final report has yet to be published. According to de Vaux’s report, the archaeologists explored for themselves the lower layers of the cave and one small concealed chamber (probably de Vaux’s “obscure nook”; see below). The Bedouin had dug their own entrance, and the archaeologists now discovered the original entrance. Although by the time the archaeologists entered the cave, the Bedouin had already removed at least a meter of debris containing manuscript fragments, de Vaux and his workers collected nearly 1000 fragments from perhaps 100 manuscripts.3

Cave 4a’s principal chamber (Chamber 1) had an east-west orientation; it was 8 m in length and a maximum of 3.25 m in width, with a maximum height of 3 m. It is open to the east (toward the settlement) by a window that overlooks the ravine that separates Caves 4–5 and 10 from the south end of the marl plateau on which the ruins of Qumran sit. In front of this window an oblong trench was dug, 1 m long and 65 cm deep. Chamber 1 also had small niches hollowed out of its walls above floor height. According to de Vaux, “almost all” of the recovered documents and pottery came from this chamber.4

In the centre of the south wall of Chamber 1, a second chamber (Chamber 2) was dug toward the south. It sits at a higher level than Chamber 1. Its ceiling and most of its walls have eroded away. At the time of its discovery it did not contain any documents or pottery.

A third chamber was dug at a southwest angle from the main chamber, at a lower level. It was not more than 2 m in height, 2 m long and 2.5 m in width.

Between Chambers 2 and 3 an “obscure nook”5 was dug out from the south wall, which was accessed by an irregular descent cut into the floor of Chamber 1. It was sunk 1.3 m below the floor, and was 1.45 m in height. According to de Vaux, it contained much debris that had slid down from Chamber 1, in addition to a small jug.

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3 This information, and all of the following information unless noted, is taken from Roland de Vaux, “Archéologie,” in Qumrân Grotte 4.II, DJD 6 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 3–22. See also Józef T. Milik, Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea, SBT 26 (Chatham: Allenson, 1959) and Frank M. Cross, The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961). Milik was present at the excavation of Cave 4, and Cross was the first to examine its excavated fragments.
