THE QUMRAN CEMETERY: 150 YEARS OF RESEARCH

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Introduction

Any satisfactory interpretation of the site of Khirbet Qumran must take into account the large cemetery just east of it. Indeed, just by virtue of the physical proximity of the ruins and the cemetery, as by their lay-outs which are mutually adapted one to the other, the relationship between the two demands an explanation.1 But an accurate assessment of the whole can only be attained when each part has first been properly understood. While for many years, scholars were dependent solely upon Father Roland de Vaux’s excavations from the forties and fifties, in recent years there have been several new excavations, in the site itself as well as in the cemetery, which can now be used to complement our knowledge about Khirbet Qumran. And most recently, new anthropological studies on de Vaux’ excavations have just been published.2 The present paper will focus on the cemetery, first by summarizing the results of all the work conducted in the cemetery, including that of the past five years, and second by offering some tentative conclusions as to the nature of the burials within it.

History of Research

Though others had visited the site of Khirbet Qumran before him,3 Ferdinand de Saulcy is apparently the first to have noticed the cemetery during his

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1 For a list of articles expounding various theories regarding the relationship (or lack thereof) between Khirbet Qumran, the cemetery, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, see S.G. Sheridan, “Scholars, Soldiers, Craftsman, Elites?: Analysis of French Collection of Human Remains from Qumran,” DSD 9 (2002) 200 n. 4.
3 For a survey of the early explorations of Khirbet Qumran, see J.E. Taylor,
trip around the Dead Sea in 1851. In a few years later, in 1855, the first grave was excavated by Henry Poole, although the description of the tomb does not fit anything we know about the other tombs in the cemetery, nor did he find any skeletal remains in it. He was succeeded in 1873 by Charles Clermont-Ganneau who also excavated a single tomb. In his publication, which includes a plan of the cemetery and of the excavated tomb, Clermont-Ganneau noted that the cemetery, which he estimated contained about one thousand tombs, could not be Muslim, since the graves were oriented north-south as opposed to the usual east-west orientation of Muslim burials in Palestine (see Fig. 1). Unfortunately, there is no information as to where these two excavated tombs are located. After the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls in 1947, when de Vaux excavated the site, he also surveyed the cemetery and dug up a sampling of its tombs from various areas. It is reported that de Vaux required any volunteer wanting to join his excavations to first count the tombs in the cemetery, and it is likely that these surveys were the basis for his estimation that the cemetery

“In Khirbet Qumran in the Nineteenth Century and the Name of the Site,” PEQ 134 (2002) 144–64.
4 In the publication of his trip, de Saulcy does not mention seeing the cemetery (see Voyage autour de la Mer Morte et dans les terres bibliques exécuté de décembre 1850 à 1851. Atlas [Paris: Gide et Baudry, 1853]), but it is clear that he communicated its existence to others who subsequently sought to explore the cemetery themselves (see C. Clermont-Ganneau, “The Jerusalem Researches: Letters from Clermont-Ganneau. III,” PEFQS [1874] 43).
5 For this reason, it is not counted as a genuine tomb in this study; see H. Poole, “Report of a Journey in Palestine,” Journal of the Royal Geographical Society 26 (1856) 69; and Taylor, “Khirbet Qumran,” 150.