THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE SETTLEMENT AT QUMRAN IN THE HERODIAN PERIOD

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The chronological framework suggested by R. de Vaux for the settlement at Qumran is based almost exclusively upon the numismatic evidence, in conjunction with historical/literary considerations. De Vaux divided the settlement of the sectarian community at Qumran into three phases, which he termed "Period Ia," "Period Ib," and "Period II." These "periods" were defined on the basis of stratigraphic and architectural evidence. In approximate terms, de Vaux dated Period Ia to the third quarter of the second century BCE, Period Ib from the last quarter of the second century BCE to 31 BCE, and Period II from 4-1 BCE to 68 CE.1 This paper reexamines the evidence for the 30-plus year occupational gap postulated by de Vaux between Periods Ib and II.

According to de Vaux, the end of Period Ib was marked by an earthquake and a fire. Evidence for earthquake damage was found throughout the settlement. It is perhaps clearest in the case of one of the cisterns (locus 49), where the steps and floor were split and the eastern half had dropped. The testimony of Flavius Josephus2 enabled de Vaux to pinpoint the date of this earthquake to 31 BCE. In addition to the earthquake damage, there was evidence for a fire in the settlement. De Vaux concluded that the earthquake and fire were simultaneous, because it was the simplest solution, but he readily admitted that there was no evidence to confirm this.3

De Vaux used the numismatic evidence to support his interpretation. All ten identifiable coins of Herod the Great found at Qumran came from mixed levels, where they were associated with later coins. De Vaux noted that the Herodian coins were not dated, and cited a then recent study assigning such coins to the period after 30

2 War 1.19.370-80; Ant. 15:5.121-47.
3 de Vaux, Archaeology, 20-23.
BCE.\(^4\) Meshorer has since suggested that Herod’s undated bronze coins were minted after 37 BCE.\(^5\)

According to de Vaux, the buildings damaged by the fire and/or the earthquake were not repaired immediately. Because the water system ceased to be maintained, the site was flooded and silt accumulated up to a depth of 75 cm. It is important to note that the sediment overlay the layer of ash from the fire, indicating that the period of abandonment was subsequent to the fire (and that the two were presumably related).\(^6\) Following this period of abandonment, the site was cleared and reoccupied by the same community that had left it, as indicated by the fact that the general plan remained the same and the buildings were used for the same purposes as before. Most of the rooms were cleared out, with some debris dumped over the slopes of a ravine to the north of the site. Some of the damaged structures were strengthened, and a few were left filled with collapse and abandoned.\(^7\)

Again de Vaux relied on the numismatic evidence to date the beginning of Period II. Since only ten identifiable coins of Herod the Great were found, all from mixed contexts, he assigned them to Period II. These coins could, he reasoned, have continued in circulation after Herod’s death.\(^8\) De Vaux therefore dated the beginning of Period II to the time of Herod’s successor, Herod Archelaus. He based this dating on several considerations. First, sixteen coins of Archelaus were recovered, after which point the numismatic sequence of Period II continues without interruption to the First Revolt. Second, one of Archelaus’ coins was found in a deposit which had been cleared out of one of the buildings. The fact that the other coins in this deposit all dated to Period Ib, and did not include any coins of Herod the Great, suggested that the reoccupation of the site had been undertaken during Archelaus’ reign. Finally, there is the evidence provided by a hoard of 561 silver coins

\(^4\) Ibid., 23.
\(^6\) Cf. de Vaux, Archaeology, 23-24. It is clear from this passage and others that there is a classic stratigraphic sequence at Qumran (i.e., horizontal layers of deposition one above the other), despite a recent claim to the contrary by J.-B. Humbert, “L’espace sacré à Qumrân,” RB 101 (1994) 209.
\(^7\) De Vaux, Archaeology, 24-26.
\(^8\) Ibid., 22-23, 33-34.