
Khirbet Qumran is one of the best known and certainly most disputed archaeological sites in the ancient Mediterranean, visited by thousands of tourists every year and covered by numerous books and articles. The book by Robert R. Cargill is based on the author’s 2008 UCLA dissertation. In it, the author pursues two goals. The first is “the development of a methodology for the reconstruction of archaeological remains in virtual reality, and a means by which to test competing proposed reconstructions in a real-time environment.” The second aim is “to present an examination of the site of Qumran using this new digital methodology” (xxi). What came out sometimes indeed reads like “a highly technical book,” as the author says himself, but one that is worthwhile reading thanks to its often detailed archaeological argumentation and its seventy illustrations (produced by the author and Jennifer Dillon). Although these printed illustrations are very helpful, visiting the accompanying website www.virtualqumran.com is highly recommended.

Let me start with methodological matters. According to Cargill, digital modeling is ideal to visualize available archaeological data and it allows one to take account of varying archaeological interpretations through “data switches” (4–6; 78–79). This, indeed, is an advantage. In “Theory, Methodology, and Justification of Digital Modeling” (51–83) Cargill deepens this point and discusses shortcomings of traditional 2D-reconstructions, which often conceal uncertainties, instead of making them evident and displaying alternatives. Visual modeling, however, avoids that. While this method “in and of itself does not prove or disprove a particular reconstruction” (99), it allows one to “test competing archaeological interpretations of specific loci” (98). Chapter Four (“Building the Digital Model”; 85–100) informs us that “data switches” were installed for dating schemes, the cemetery, caves and landscape plus artifacts in order to make sure that “architectural remains were interpreted in their appropriate context” (85). The only problem is that alternative models—though often intensively discussed in the text—are practically not visualized in the book or on the related website (accessed by me in November and December 2012). Instead, Cargill presents the readers only with the visualized results of his own analysis, which in fact limits the reader’s ability to test the models that the author chose not to follow.

I do of course understand that a thesis must offer more than just a documentation of differing models on an equal level; it has to make a point, discuss, criticize and improve upon previous positions and in that way bring research forward. Cargill does both: he positions himself in the academic landscape of Qumran
studies quite early and he comes up with his own model that he builds up in many
detailed discussions and presents to the readers with the help of virtual modeling.
Regarding the first point: Cargill knows that visualizations are not neutral.
They depend on the data that were entered into the computer program and the
direction of one’s research. In the end, he concludes that the input of archaeolo-
gists is necessary to come to plausible visualizations: “While the process of deter-
moving a most likely reconstruction is based upon the quantitative analysis of a
number of fixed points and variables, the process is still subject to the judgment
of trained professionals examining the date” and does not “replace” archaeology
(99). Visualizations are tools and shaped by informed expert input and sound
discussion. In that respect, the chapter on the “History of Scholarship at
Qumran” (19–49) offers a useful, though sometimes short, summary of explora-
tions at Qumran and nicely paves Cargill’s ground. His own position, the second
point, is clear in the “Introduction” (1–17): “Second Temple period Qumran was
established as a Hasmonean fortress, abandoned, and reoccupied by Jews who
were ultimately responsible for much of the corpus of literature collectively known
as the Dead Sea Scrolls, either due to collection or composition” (17). After briefly
addressing “expected criticisms” and rejecting the idea that the scrolls came from
Jerusalem (7–14), Cargill bases his views on the idea that the scrolls and the
inhabitants of the site belong together. This, of course, has immediate conse-
quences throughout the book. The analysis of locus 30, the so-called scription is
especially symptomatic. In addition to referring to de Vaux’s interpretation of the
famous plaster fragments from the upper storey as writing benches and to the
common assumption that at least some writing was practiced at Qumran, Cargill
ultimately solves the problem by pointing to the rich assemblage of scrolls found
near the settlement, apparently implying that at least some of them were written
by inhabitants of the site, which means in l. 30—quod erat demonstrandum (119–
20)? Given all the uncertainty of de Vaux’s documentation and the stratigraphy
of the debris in l. 30, I think this position does not take enough account of the
things we do not know, and I would love to see visualizations of the alternative
hypotheses Cargill ultimately rejects.
The main part of the book covers the major elements of the Qumran building
complex: Chapter Five discusses “The Main Building” (101–24), originally a two-
storey fortress with a tower and storage rooms (including l. 4, which according to
Cargill is neither a synagogue nor a library; 111–12). Much in Cargill’s interpreta-
tions of major building elements is instructive and full of helpful detail (see e.g.,
the discussion of the one-storey dining hall [l. 77] and the “pantry” [l. 86, 87 and
89]; pp. 123–24). In the equally instructive analysis of “The Water System” in
Chapter Six (125–42), Cargill—among other observations—discusses the large
number of stepped pools that are usually taken as prime evidence for the sectarian
character of Qumran’s inhabitants and rightly distinguishes different functions: