



Orit Shamir and Naama Sukenik

The Christmas Cave Textiles Compared to Qumran Textiles



Figure 1. The Christmas Cave. Photo: R. Porat.

Introduction

The subject of the textiles from Qumran is regrettably under-represented in the voluminous academic literature devoted to the archaeology of the site and the nearby caves. The site is one of the first in Israel where remains of textiles were found. This fact heightens the importance of the Qumran textiles, but it also calls attention to the scant knowledge about this field of study at the time of those first finds in the 1950s. The textile finds at Qumran were stored in an inappropriate facility, without careful records and documentation, and this situation continued for nearly 50 years. The publication of the relevant data has still not been completed and some of the textiles have been dispersed to a variety of locations (Bélis 2003, 207-276).

The first textiles from the site of Qumran that were subject to scientific analysis had been taken for examination even before the systematic organized excavations of de Vaux in the 1950s. These textiles were collected at Cave 1 in 1949 by de Vaux and Harding and published by Crowfoot in 1955 (Crowfoot 1955). Although this was only a preliminary publication of information about the 77 textiles that were found in Cave 1, it had great importance for the next stages of research. It appears that during the excavations, most of the textiles were stored in one of the rooms at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem where all of the Qumran finds were kept together. There were many additional textiles in the collection of the École Biblique, and scraps of other textiles traveled with the researchers to England, Jordan (the Amman



Figure 2. Linen textile, Chalcolithic period, tabby weave, No. 577053. Photo by Clara Amit, Israel Antiquities Authority.

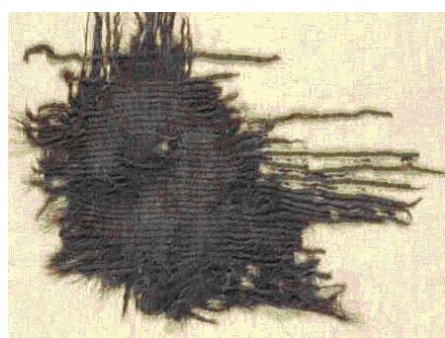


Figure 3. Goat hair textile, Roman period, No. 577006. Photo Clara Amit, Israel Antiquities Authority.



Figure 4. Wool textile decorated with red band, Roman period, probably part of a tunic, No. 577004. Photo Clara Amit, Israel Antiquities Authority.

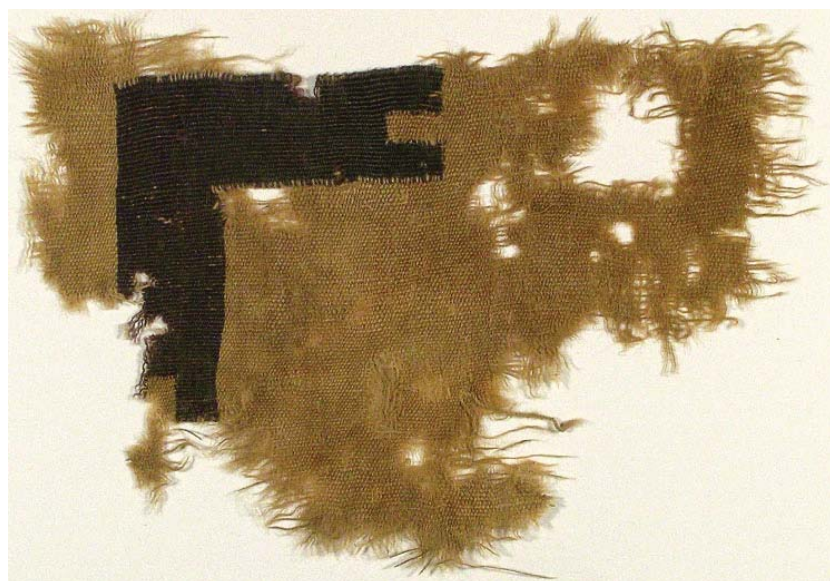


Figure 5. Wool textile, Roman period, mantle decorated with gamma-shaped pattern, No. 577000. Photo Clara Amit, Israel Antiquities Authority.



Archaeological Museum), and to various private collections throughout the world. The textiles were placed in cardboard boxes, at times without even a record of their exact provenance, and they were stored under conditions that were unsuitable for organic materials. It was only in 1998 that a preliminary classification was made of the materials at the Rockefeller Museum, by Humbert and Chambon. In the early 2000s, the various textiles were transferred from the Rockefeller Museum to the collection of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), and in 2003, Bélis published an article on another 130 textiles, mostly from Cave 8, Cave 11, and the Christmas Cave (Fig. 1), and some of unknown provenance (Bélis 2003, 277-286). The textiles were examined by Bélis before cleaning. As a historian, she emphasized such issues as the material relationship between the manuscripts and the textiles (Bélis 2003, 209, 229-41), rather than technical details. Later the textiles were cleaned by Vinitzky at the IAA for the first time, and examined and catalogued in primary report by Shamir (2006b). At present there are hundreds of textiles in the IAA collection which came from the Qumran region (Shamir 2006a, 2006b, but when the 2006b article was published we didn't know that the Christmas Cave is not part of Qumran Caves).

To summarize, the published textiles that were found in Qumran and its vicinity are as follows:

1. From the caves: Crowfoot published only the textiles from Cave 1, presented below. Bélis published textiles from Cave 8, Cave 11, and the Christmas Cave, and some of unknown provenance.
2. From Tomb 1 in the southern cemetery of Qumran: 3 minute linen remnants adhering to metal.
3. From locus 96: A few carbonized linen textiles were preserved.

The Christmas Cave Textiles

Among the textiles that were kept at the Rockefeller Museum was a large group of textiles that were unusual for Qumran. Most of them were made of wool, and some were dyed or decorated with bands or a gamma-shaped design in a broad range of colors including red, purple, black, blue and green. The marking QCC - Qumran Christmas Cave - written on these textile bags indicated their origin.

The cave was first discovered on Christmas day in 1960 by Allegro as part of the investigations he conducted in his quest for the Copper Scroll treasures. Allegro described his visit to the cave in his popular book *Search in the Desert* (Allegro 1964). In his book, Allegro discussed in detail how he found several items in the cave: a bronze coin from the Bar Kokhba period, Roman pottery sherds, and pieces of leather;

he also reported finding textiles in different colors: red, blue, and yellow. Several months after his first visit to the cave, Allegro conducted an excavation to the cave. However, this excavation was never published in a scholarly journal. The textiles were listed in a preliminary manner only and were not systematically photographed. Furthermore, although the discoveries clearly showed that the Christmas Cave served as a cave of refuge during the Bar Kokhba Revolt, the textiles were sent to the Rockefeller Museum and registered together with finds from the Qumran Caves (Porat *et al.* 2007). Bélis (2003) was the first to realise that this was a unique group and noted that the textiles in the assemblage from the Christmas Cave are different from the textiles that were found at Qumran, both in their colours and in the material they were made of. However, Bélis did not address the relative dating of the textiles with respect to the other artifacts found in the cave.

In 2007 the cave was investigated again, as part of a survey conducted by Porat, Eshel, and Frumkin. The cave is located in the bottom section of Kidron valley and doesn't belong to Qumran caves (Fig. 1). The excavators examined the numerous finds, which included sherds of clay vessels, two bronze coins, textile fragments, food remains, and metal objects. They determined that the finds in the Christmas Cave are not related to the Qumran Caves. They also concluded that the human activity in the cave began in the Chalcolithic Period, and that the cave later served as a hiding place for refugees fleeing the Romans at the end of the revolt leading to the destruction of the Temple, and again in the last stages of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in AD. 135 (Porat *et al.* 2007).

A total of 255 ancient textiles from the Christmas Cave were catalogued by Shamir (2006a), of which 184 are dated to the Roman period, 71 to the Chalcolithic period, and 5 to the Medieval period. A few are modern, including some made of cotton. The assemblage from the Roman period includes 113 wool, 63 linen, and 8 goat hair textiles.

Ben-Yehuda and Murphy (2010 - ATN 50) based their investigation on our research about these textiles, but did not pay attention to the dating of the artifacts. Textiles nos. 583019, 585786 and 58544 are from the Chalcolithic period, while no. 582812 is dated to the Roman period. None of the ropes are dated because they did not change significantly during these periods at Judean Desert.

Christmas Cave Chalcolithic Textiles

The preservation state of the Chalcolithic textiles from the Christmas Cave is relatively good: most of them are not worn (they were not used a lot), and



Figure 6. Linen hairnet, No. 577048. Photo: Clara Amit, Israel Antiquities Authority.

they were not damaged by insects. All the textiles are made of undyed, unbleached linen (Fig. 2). Their present color ranges from off-white to cream to beige to brown. No wool textiles dated to the Chalcolithic have ever been found in Israel.

The threads are s-spun, sometimes plied in a final S twist for better cohesion. This is typical for the Chalcolithic period. In some textiles the threads are very fine and delicate - in others they are crude. A few have threads of varied thickness in the same cloth. The predominant weaves are various tabby weaves. This serves to confirm that the textile crafts were already very advanced and accomplished in the 5th/4th millennium BCE.

Among the fragments are narrow, cut, band-like specimens, probably used for tying or bandages. They resemble the Chalcolithic textiles from Judea Desert caves such as the Cave of the Treasure (Bar-Adon 1961) and the Cave of the Warrior (Schick 1998).

Christmas Cave Roman Textiles

Roman textile fragments made of wool, linen and goat hair (Fig. 3) were discovered at the Christmas Cave. Some of the wool items are parts of tunics (Fig. 4) or mantles (Fig. 5). There is also a hairnet made of linen (Fig. 6). The finds at the Christmas Cave indicate a similarity in dress and patterns of decoration to the Roman world.

The Homogeneous Nature of the Qumran Textiles

The new finds from the Christmas Cave and the con-

clusion that they are not connected to Qumran make a significant contribution to the study of the Qumran textiles. It can now be determined that all of the textiles that are known from the excavations at Qumran are made of linen and no textiles of wool or any other material were found there. This is true not only for the textiles from Cave 1 examined by Crowfoot but also for all of the textiles today in the IAA collection. Textiles from Qumran Cave 8 were not brought to the IAA and so were not available to us for examination. However the material from Qumran Cave 11 was brought to the IAA from the École Biblique, and this included 58 linen textiles from the Roman period. In addition, during excavations conducted by Prof. Patrich in the 1980s, 8 textiles dated to the Roman period were found in Cave 11, all made of linen (Patrich, Arubas and Agur 1988-89).

The homogeneous nature of the Qumran textiles was manifested not only in the use of the same raw material – linen – but also by the simplicity of the textiles. As mentioned previously, the Qumran textiles were free of any colored decoration, except for those textiles that were used as scroll wrappers and featured a geometric pattern dyed in blue (Crowfoot 1955, 27-29), which is not familiar from other sites. The lack of decoration on most of the textiles is understandable due to the fact that linen does not easily absorb dye, with the exception of the blue dye.

By joining the archaeological finds, a picture emerges of a group that separated itself from the nearby Jewish population not only by physical distance but



also by its outward appearance (Magness 2002, 196; Shamir 2006b).

Qumran, undoubtedly a Jewish site, yielded only linen textiles. This is in contrast to other sites. Of approximately 2000 textiles from the Roman period discovered in Israel, 35% are linen, the other materials are sheep's wool, goat hair and camel hair.

The archeological finds, which show the eschewal of dyed wool and the simplicity of the textiles from Qumran, is compatible with the literary sources that describe the clothing of the Essenes. In his description of the Essenes, Josephus wrote: "Riches they despise...for they make a point of keeping a dry skin and always being dressed in white" (*The Jewish War*, 2.122). Also, "In their dress and deportment they resemble children under rigorous discipline.

They do not change their garments or shoes until they are torn to shreds or worn threadbare with age" (*The Jewish War*, 2.126). Philo described the collective nature of their dress: "And not only is their table in common but their clothing also" (*Hypothetica*, 11.12).

The choice of the Qumran Community to wear white clothing is discussed at length by Tigchelaar 2003.

The archeological finds indeed seem to reinforce what both Josephus and Philo wrote, that their habitual clothing was the same for everyone and it was characterized by simplicity and a lack of colored ornamentation. The Essene Sectarians - dwellers of Qumran - wore only nondyed linen garments which they considered to be pure. This is indicative of the anti-Roman culture attitude of the Sectarians, a political statement or conservative reaction against contemporary society.

orit12@israntique.org.il

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