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# New findings about secretive sect that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls

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QUMRAN, West Bank (AP) -- They were cleanliness freaks, who bathed frequently. They lived in desert caves, which they dug from a mixture of limestone, clay and sand -- a sophisticated method of first century B.C. climate control.



(CNN/file)

The caves of these secretive scholar-monks helped preserve their great achievement, the Dead Sea Scrolls, according to recent discoveries about the day-to-day life of the Essenes, an extreme breakaway Jewish sect.

Findings include a contract written on a pottery shard, discovered last year. In it, an initiate turned over his orchard and a slave to the community known as "Yahad," (Hebrew for "together"), which was part-monastery and part modern-day kibbutz, where money and property is pooled.

"This was an acceptance form for a new member," said Janet Amitai, an archaeologist who is organizing an international gathering of scroll scholars at the Israel Museum on July 20-25.

"A cult is a cult, 2,000 years ago and today," she said.

## Conference to mark 50th anniversary of first scroll discovery

The conference, marking the 50th anniversary of the finding of the first scroll by a Bedouin Arab in 1947, will provide a

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forum for new theories and confirmation of old ones concerning one of the most significant archaeological discoveries this century.

In all, 800 manuscripts were discovered in 11 caves between 1947 and 1956. They total nearly 130,000 words, but scholars have yet to assemble thousands of scraps.



Adolpho Roitman, director of the section of the museum where scrolls are exhibited, on Sunday showed reporters a soup bowl-size stone disk with concentric circles and a hole in the middle.

It was discovered in the 1950s but only recently identified as a sun dial used by the Essenes. The sect's calendar was different than that of the mainstream priests in charge of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

"It was very significant because we discovered in Qumran many calendrical manuscripts," Roitman said. "Now, we have the hardware not just the software."

Archaeologists also found caves showing signs of human habitation within easy walking distance of the community center, where members of the secretive sect ate meals and took ritual baths.

### **Confirming location of the commune**

Magen Broshi, who discovered the caves last year, said they confirmed that "Yahad" was based at Qumran, which some scholars had doubted.

The man-made caves were the best way to survive in the intense desert heat because the marl exuded moisture and provided a cool refuge from the wind and sand.

"The Qumranites were not primitive, not troglodytes. They were very sophisticated because they discovered that it (cave-living) was the best solution in the harsh climate of Dead Sea prior to the discovery of air conditioning," Broshi said.

Using metal detectors, his expedition uncovered a network of paths leading to the Judean hills overlooking Qumran. The trail was marked by hundreds of nails that had fallen from commune members' sandals and dated by coins from the Hasmonean era in the first century B.C. The community survived until July of A.D. 68 when it was destroyed by

Roman soldiers.

### **An extreme fundamentalist group**

"This was a center of very extreme fundamentalist Jews of this time," said archaeologist Avner Goren of the Albright Center in Jerusalem.

The sect lived in the desert, slept in caves and adhered with rigorous discipline to the words of the Torah, shunning religious law and interpretation laid down by the Temple priests.

At the same time, it amassed significant wealth by pooling the resources of their members and ate meat at least once a day — a luxury in this ancient period, Goren said.

Speaking to reporters at the site Sunday, Goren said the commune members were fastidious; they bathed frequently and carried around trenching tools and cloaks to cover themselves when they defecated in the rocky plains.

### **An all-male society?**

Experts believe the number of sect members ranged from 100 to 200, but disagree over whether it was an all-male society.

Goren said skeletons of women and children had been uncovered near the site recently, indicating some of the members may have been women.

Broshi disputed this interpretation, however, saying the remains were on the fringe of the burial site and the bones were in heaps, indicating they had been brought from a distance and had not lived at Qumran.

"There were no women," he said. "This is the first monastic community in the Western world."

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