Khirbet Qumran

Khirbet Qumran: The Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls Found by a Palestinian Shepherd

Khirbet Qumran is an archaeological site on the north-western shore of the **Dead Sea**, about 15 km south of **Jericho**, surrounded by caves that became world-famous after a Palestinian shepherd of the Ta'amra clan found the **Dead Sea Scrolls** there in 1947, one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the 20th century. The Jordanian Department of Antiquities excavated the site with the French École Biblique in Jerusalem between 1951 and 1956, uncovering a building complex, an advanced water system and a large cemetery dating from the 2nd century BCE to 68 CE. The scrolls were kept in the Palestine Archaeological Museum (Rockefeller Museum) in Jerusalem until the occupation authorities seized them after the 1967 war. This guide covers the site's history, the story of the scrolls and its situation under occupation.

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Quick facts

Khirbet Qumran at a glance

Arabic name	خربة قمران
Location	North-western shore of the Dead Sea, about 15 km south of Jericho
Period	2nd century BCE to 68 CE
Scrolls discovered	1947, by a shepherd of the Ta'amra clan
Excavations	1951–1956, Jordanian Department of Antiquities and the École Biblique
Features	Building complex, pools and cisterns, dining hall, large cemetery, caves
Scrolls	About 1,000 manuscripts from tens of thousands of fragments
Scrolls before 1967	Palestine Archaeological Museum (Rockefeller), Jerusalem
Scrolls today	Seized by the occupation and moved to West Jerusalem
Current status	Under occupation control in Area C

Location

Khirbet Qumran stands on a limestone terrace between the cliffs and the north-western shore of the Dead Sea, about 15 km south of Jericho, near Ain al-Feshkha, on the lands of the Jericho and Jordan Valley governorate, occupied since 1967. Natural and man-made caves dot the surrounding cliffs, where the scrolls were preserved for nearly two thousand years.

Discovery of the scrolls

In 1947 the Palestinian shepherd **Muhammad al-Dhib** of the Bedouin **Ta'amra** clan, searching for a stray goat, came upon a cave near Ain al-Feshkha containing pottery jars holding leather scrolls. Seven main scrolls came out of the first cave and were sold through an antiquities dealer in Bethlehem and Jerusalem; the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Jerusalem bought four and smuggled them to the United States in 1948, and the Hebrew University bought three. The search then moved to neighbouring caves, and thousands of fragments were found in eleven caves.

The Jordanian excavations

After the West Bank came under Jordanian administration, the Jordanian government assigned an Arab Army officer to locate and protect the caves, and the **Jordanian Department of Antiquities** surveyed the caves and excavated the khirbet in cooperation with the **French Biblical and Archaeological School (École Biblique) in Jerusalem** and the American School of Oriental Research, in seasons between 1951 and 1956. In 1952 the Jordanian Council of Ministers allocated 15,000 dinars to buy the fragments found, and Jordan's total spending on their purchase reached about 33,473 dinars. They were kept in the **Palestine Archaeological Museum** in Jerusalem, whose management passed to the Jordanian government, and an international team studied and published them between 1953 and 1967.

The site's features

The excavations uncovered a large building complex with communal facilities, a large dining hall, a room believed to have been used for writing and copying, and an **advanced water system** of channels, pools and cisterns collecting floodwater from the neighbouring wadi, as well as a pottery workshop and a **large cemetery** of more than a thousand graves. Sources attribute the site to an ascetic religious community living in seclusion away from the cities, which many scholars identify as the Essenes, while others propose different interpretations of the site's function. The site was abandoned and destroyed around 68 CE during the Roman war.

The scrolls and their contents

The Dead Sea Scrolls comprise about a thousand manuscripts from tens of thousands of fragments, most on leather and some on papyrus, among them the **"Copper Scroll"**. They date from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE and include copies of books of the Bible, the oldest known, non-canonical writings, and texts specific to the community that lived at Qumran, such as rules, commentaries and prayers, including "The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness" and the "Damascus Document". Most were written in Hebrew, some in Aramaic, the language of the region at the time, and a few in Greek.

The seizure of the scrolls in 1967

After the occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank in June 1967, the occupation authorities seized the **Palestine Archaeological Museum** and the Qumran scrolls it held; the museum was then directed by the Jerusalem historian Aref al-Aref. They also confiscated a scroll held by the Bethlehem antiquities dealer. Work on the scrolls stopped until 1990, when an Israeli-led team published them, and in 2000 the scrolls were moved to West Jerusalem. Jordanian and Palestinian researchers argue that this violates the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and later

conventions, which forbid an occupying power from removing cultural property from occupied territory, and Jordan and Palestine call for their return.

The site today (2026)

Khirbet Qumran lies in Area C of the occupied West Bank, under full Israeli control, and the occupation authorities run it as a tourist site presented to visitors stripped of its Palestinian context, while Palestinians are denied the management and use of their heritage in the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley. The site remains a witness to the richness of Palestinian history, and to a discovery that began with a Palestinian shepherd and ended with the occupation's confiscation of what was found.

Frequently asked questions

Where is Khirbet Qumran?

On the north-western shore of the Dead Sea, about 15 km south of Jericho, near Ain al-Feshkha.

Who discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls?

The Palestinian shepherd Muhammad al-Dhib of the Ta'amra clan, in 1947, while searching for a stray goat.

Who excavated Khirbet Qumran?

The Jordanian Department of Antiquities in cooperation with the French École Biblique in Jerusalem, between 1951 and 1956.

What period do the scrolls date from?

From the 2nd century BCE to 68 CE, mostly from the 1st century.

Where are the scrolls today?

They were in the Palestine Archaeological Museum (Rockefeller) in Jerusalem until the occupation authorities seized them after the 1967 war and moved them to West Jerusalem in 2000.

Conclusion

On the shores of the Dead Sea, in the caves of Qumran, scrolls more than two thousand years old lay preserved until a Palestinian shepherd found them, revealing to the world a chapter in the history of this land. But the site and its scrolls have become hostages of the occupation, and recovering looted Palestinian heritage remains part of the Palestinians' struggle for their land and their memory.

Sources

- Palestine 48 – Jericho
- Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities – Virtual Museum: Khirbet Qumran
- Jordanian Department of Antiquities – Study on the Dead Sea Scrolls and Jordan's role

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