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The So-Called “Virtual Reality Tour” at the 2007 San Diego Scrolls Exhibit

“Virtual Reality,” as most people would agree, has become a popular expression in American media culture, where it is generally used to designate a priorly designed computer presentation enveloping viewers in a hall and having the purpose of inducing in them a conviction of its actual reality. Past American exhibitions of the Dead Sea Scrolls have as a rule included cinematic presentations that visitors are encouraged to contemplate before viewing the Scrolls themselves. And these also have quite invariably had the purpose of inducing audience belief in the presentations’ truthfulness, usually with the aid of musical background, imaginative drawings, and other devices.

Shows of this character are clearly designed to encourage the receptivity of those audiences to the claims being made at the actual exhibits into which they are thereafter conducted. The “reality” being promoted is, invariably, nothing more than the old *theory* — today opposed by various scholars due to an emerging preponderance of evidence — that a pious religious sect lived in the Judaeen Wilderness at the Khirbet Qumran site, wrote and/or studied the Scrolls there, and then hid them away in nearby caves when it was learned that Roman troops were coming down from Jericho to attack them.

Nevertheless, it is still somewhat strange to observe that the Virtual Reality tour sponsored by and presented at the venerable San Diego Natural History Museum — one of a considerable number of American institutions generally classified as museums of science — carried no word of caution directed to the thousands of visitors daily arriving there that the “tour” does not necessarily reflect actual reality but may be largely fictitious.

That it is in fact largely fictitious may be shown by considering the actual claims made in the course of the presentation which, focusing particularly on the identification of Kh. Qumran, continues to defend the traditional theory despite recent vigorous opposition to it by seasoned archaeologists who have carefully reexamined the site during a decade of excavations there.

We note first of all that, in the host’s introduction, the claim is made that the *“entire reconstruction is based upon archaeological fact, and takes into account all of the viable theories about the origin of the structure at Qumran.”* However, when discussing the actual archaeology of the site, the authors *omit* or *obscure* various pertinent facts which, had they acknowledged them, would grossly contradict the decidedly partisan view of Kh. Qumran that the script’s authors gradually develop. **(Here and below italics are mine unless otherwise indicated.)**

A notable example: while acknowledging Kh. Qumran was originally built as a Hasmonaean fortress, the script asserts that “later inhabitants added on to the structure” and that the expansion “*includes ... an area for scribal activity.*” This is, however, only the view of those traditional Qumranologists who still claim that a sect copied scrolls there, in whole or in part. Many scholars today oppose that view. (Examples: Golb, 1980,1995/96; Donceel and Donceel-Voute, 1994; Hirschfeld, 2004; Magen and Peleg, 2006, 2007.)

Although Father Roland de Vaux, the famous Dominican monk and archaeologist who excavated Kh. Qumran in the early 1950s, zealously asserted that Essene monks wrote and copied scrolls there, no hard evidence found at the site until today proves or seriously supports his claim. The virtual reality show in one phase projects depictions of pious monk-like individuals devotedly engaging in religious practices at Kh. Qumran, but material evidence of the presence of such figures has never been found there and, as we know today, not even one of the manuscripts found in the caves espouses celibacy. Nonetheless, as though to stimulate spiritual longings while invoking the memory of Père de Vaux, the virtual reality show also curiously projects a picture of “Jesus, James and John” at another opportune moment — despite the fact that there is no inscribed mention anywhere of such figures either within the site or among the Scrolls.

The authors of the show not only disregard all illustrations or depictions of evidence *contradicting* the theory of a site inhabited by pious sectarians, but also attempt to protect the idea of a monk-like “scriptorium” with the aid of arguments that a careful examination shows to be evasive. They claim, for example, that scholars who reject the identification “point to the fact that not even a single fragment *has ever been found in locus 30*” (i.e., the immediate area of the room in question) — whereas the actual fact is that *nowhere within Khirbet Qumran as a whole* have parchment literary scrolls or fragments thereof ever been found.

A misleading assertion is thus proffered with the apparent aim of diminishing the impact of an obvious objection; but the authors then attempt to dismiss altogether this problem of *in situ* lack of manuscript evidence by claiming that Kh. Qumran was attacked and burned by the Romans. This might matter if there were any cogent evidence of a scriptorium, but the additional “evidence” adduced consists of artifacts that neither prove nor imply usage of the locus 30 site as a scriptorium. The script speaks of a single writing stylus being found in the debris of locus 30, and points to the fact that as many as *four inkwells* were found there — hardly proving more than locus 30’s possible use as a military headquarters or office regulating whatever agricultural work (Hirschfeld, 2004) or manufacturing activity (Magen and Peleg, 2006/07) was carried out there.

The authors put forward the embarrassing argument that locus 30 “is the *only place* [in Israel] where more than two inkwells have been discovered in the same *place* [i.e., locus 30],” claiming the presence of four inkwells “supports the idea [of] ... a *place* of scribal activity.” They say nothing, however, of a dig carried out in 2003 at the most ancient sector of Shu’afat, located several kilometers northeast of (Second Temple)

Jerusalem, where archaeologists found a group of *five* inkwells “together on a floor in Area B” (Sklar-Parnes, 2005). Even given the present parlous state of traditional Qumranology, I am not aware that any supporters of that brand of scholarship have yet ventured to hypothesize the existence of any sort of scriptorium at Shu’afat.

Needless to say, the authors of the Reality tour,” while never referring to the five-inkwells discovery, make further attempts to protect the idea of a monk-like chamber for copying manuscripts by asserting that “*plaster-covered tables* were discovered in the Scriptorium” that “archaeologists suggest” were used for copying documents “*including the Scrolls.*” However, while nowhere producing any substantive evidence that *locus 30* was used for the activity of such manuscript-copying scribes, they also *disregard* the fact that the fragments of the claimed writing tables discovered in the debris of *locus 30* have been demonstrated through careful measurement and analysis — by the very archaeologists who were appointed by the Ecole Biblique, the academic home of the late Père de Vaux in Jerusalem, to carry on with the inventory and analysis of the latter’s findings — to be the fragments of *benches* having nothing to do with a claimed “scriptorium” (Donceel and Donceel-Voute, 1994, cf. particularly the reconstruction there, p. 29; nowhere acknowledged in the “Virtual Reality” show).

The script at another point projects a depiction of a “scroll shelf,” with the host stating that it is “only an artist’s rendition of *what the shelving system may have looked like* at Qumran.” What is entirely imaginary, however, is not only the artist’s depiction, but also the *idea* that there were indeed shelves on which scrolls were stored. There is no archaeological evidence of such shelves, either within Kh. Qumran or in the Scroll caves. Nevertheless, from the artist’s depiction the show segues into the baseless assertion, that “...given the *fact* that the Scrolls were carefully rolled up, placed in jars, *and hidden on shelves in the nearby caves*, ... the residents of Qumran had time to gather their treasured documents and hide them from their attackers.”

These claims, presented as “fact,” constitute yet another spurious assertion. There are of course some traditional Qumranologists who fervently *believe* that the Scrolls hidden away *in Cave 4* were stored on shelves, but they have never been able to prove even this particular claim about the one cave.

Nor has it ever been shown that all or most of the Scrolls were actually stored in jars; relatively few jars were found, and those mainly in Cave 1 located more than a kilometer north of Kh. Qumran; but the general impression gained by those who participated in the discovery of the texts was that they were indeed placed in the caves in haste. There is also a theory of Père de Vaux and most of his followers to the effect that the “Qumranites” began hiding their claimed scrolls after learning that Roman troops were coming down from Jericho to attack them. What they have never been able to explain, however, is why, in that case, the hypothesized sectarians hid scrolls in caves stretching as much as three kilometers *north* of Qumran, rather than fleeing with their texts *southward* from the site and thus further away from the troops.

A related argument cited in the show is that the clay used for the manufacture of the cave jars matches the clay found within Kh. Qumran. However, insofar as cogent evidence has emerged in recent decades pointing to the efforts of Jewish refugees from Jerusalem to hide objects precious and holy to them in the caves, there is every reason to surmise that they asked inhabitants of the Dead Sea region, when possible, for containers in which to store what they were hiding. Once again, needless to say, the arguments to this effect are not cited in the show.

None of the above efforts are consonant with the show's initial claim that (a) "the entire reconstruction is based upon archaeological fact" and (b) that it "takes into account all of the viable theories about the origin of the structure at Qumran." The show's actual wording proves the opposite. Omitting and otherwise failing to fully give the facts as they do, the authors should at least have included a frank acknowledgement that the show's salient purpose was to encourage viewers, in their thousands, to acquiesce in the believability of the original Qumran-sectarian theory, with at least a brief explanation as to what had compelled them to present such unfounded claims.

The unrelenting flow of misstatements that appear in succeeding portions of the "tour" further highlights its polemical quality. Moving on from its attempted defense of the "scriptorium" theory, it offers a description of the water system that flowed into Khirbet Qumran. The authors state that by following the water's path we should have "a better understanding of daily life at Qumran." The portion of the "tour" that follows, however, only comes down to an effort to show that traditional Qumranologists are justified in stating that a religious sect lived there and made abundant use of various parts of the water-system for ritual bathing.

Following Biblical ordinances, Jews of all descriptions in intertestamental Palestine engaged in ritual bathing — a fact that the authors of the show do not clearly acknowledge. Without any cogent proof that a zealously radical sectarian group wrote and studied manuscripts at the site, however, it is a very long stretch indeed to pin this water-system precisely on such a sect. The authors acknowledge that Kh. Qumran was built as a fortress; its architectural characteristics moreover show decidedly Hasmonaean features and a water-system clearly designed by expert architects of that period (Hirschfeld, 2004; Magen and Peleg, 2006/07). By this token, the authors should obviously have tried to explain how such a complex had come into possession of a pious and wealth-eschewing sectarian group. Despite its quite obvious intent, the authors' statement that the system at Kh. Qumran held "much less" water than that at the (far larger) fortress of Masada neither proves nor implies a sectarian habitation, for religious purposes, of the smaller site.

Instead of offering some explanation of this problem, the authors proceed to describe the various water-channels, cisterns and pools within Kh. Qumran, abruptly asserting apparently as a kind of *coup-de-grace*, that "Qumran has both small and very large... ritual immersion pools." Over the past few decades, however, this very assertion has come under close archaeological scrutiny. Solid proof of it would be essential for the

now much-weakened claim that there was a special interest in ritual immersion at the site and, *ergo*, that Essenes or some other notably baptismal group inhabited Kh. Qumran.

The views of Dr. Ronny Reich, who has made a specialty of the study of ritual baths in various locations in Israel, are quoted in the show in a way that allows the authors to imply his continuing and everlasting support of the theory of multifarious *miqva'ot* at Kh. Qumran. As indicated in the show, Reich has described several characteristic features of Palestinian *miqva'ot*, and the authors of the show do not miss a beat in stating: “All of these features are present in *many of the miqva'ot* at Qumran.”

The authors of the show jump quite readily from this description to their own final assertion (characterized as a “finding” in advance museum descriptions of the show), that after the Hasmonaean period it was indeed pietist sectarian Jews who lived at Qumran, and *none other than they who established the pottery factory there*. Unfortunately, there is not one piece of bona fide evidence at the site to support such an arbitrary effort to harmonize two distinctly opposing theories, or even their claim — which they, once again, present to the public as a fact — of “many” *miqva'ot* at this site.

In the course of the aforementioned decade-long investigation and dig within Kh. Qumran, carried out under the direction of the archaeologists Yizhak Magen and Yuval Peleg of the Israel Antiquities Authority, the latter have, *inter alia*, fully excavated and carried out precise and detailed examinations of the claimed ritual baths, reaching conclusions directly opposite to those which the authors of the show attribute to Reich (Yuval and Peleg, 2006, pp. 86 ff.). They point out that, in light of their (unprecedented) excavation of the water-holding constructions to their very bottom, most of them had no fresh-water source but were rather what rabbinical law termed *drawn water* and thus “unfit for ritual purification.” They admit only that a small number of the pools “may... have been ritual baths” — found also in many excavated Jewish sites of the intertestamental period. Their *larger* conclusion is that the site during the Herodian period (when Palestine was under Roman occupation) was turned into an industrial complex for the manufacture of pottery — and that the Scrolls themselves, as I had earlier concluded, had nothing directly to do with Kh. Qumran, but were instead brought to the region from the area of Jerusalem for hiding in the caves during the First Revolt.

While this interpretation of the site, with its current nuances, has been public knowledge and in print at least since 2006, the authors of the “tour” apparently have a problem with it. In fact, they do not mention it at all, instead stating only that these archaeologists — both highly experienced Israeli professionals — “recently suggested” that a certain feature of the water system “*allowed the inhabitants to gather enough clay to produce the pottery [found at] Qumran.*”

By using the expression “recently suggested,” the authors of the show must somehow be alluding to the meticulous and probing sixty-page study of Magen and Peleg already referred to, in which they describe their *various* findings in great detail. The writers of the show reduce those findings to a suggestion about pottery, and thus avoid acknowledging the fundamental contribution made by these archaeologists. Such

omissions in a text whose production has apparently been jointly sponsored by a serious research university and a well-established museum clearly raises substantial concerns.

The authors of the “tour” can obviously not be expected to present themselves as *exponents* of the view that Khirbet Qumran was a non-monastic establishment and that the scrolls, rather than being organically connected with the Kh. Qumran site, are instead of Jerusalem origin. In the introduction to the show, however, they clearly present themselves as *objective parties* — in consonance, that is, with any reputable science museum’s obligation to present to the public the whole truth and not the half of it. Their failure to attribute to Magen and Peleg what is demonstrably the main contribution of these archaeologists (cf. Magen and Peleg, 2006, summary, pp. 109-113) to the current debate on Qumran origins and the origin and nature of the Dead Sea Scrolls notably clashes with the authors’ original claim of objectivity.

The actual one-sidedness of the authors, moreover, directly parallels the San Diego museum’s own one-sided presentation of the Scrolls themselves. Even if, as has been suggested to me by the museum’s administration, the writing and production of the virtual reality show took place entirely at the University of California at Los Angeles, there is an undeniable connection between the rhetorical thrust of the museum’s exhibit and that of the “Virtual Reality” show. Both the one and the other frankly expend great efforts to defend the old Qumran-sectarian theory, and they do so by assertions that tend to set aside the true state of Qumranological affairs far more often than they reveal any truths about the nature either of Khirbet Qumran or of the Scrolls. (See the analysis of the curatorial misstatements, unsupportable assertions, and *faux pas* blunders in my 2007 on-line review of the San Diego exhibit catalogue.) The above-discussed statements of the authors of the “Virtual Reality” show would, at all events, not appear to be consonant with the principal purpose of a natural history museum. *

*See, e.g., the statement by the chief executive of the American Museum of Natural History in New York: “If the public doesn’t understand ... the story of the unfolding of human life, if they don’t understand other cultures, we’re going to be in deep trouble in this complex world.” She adds that each topic has to be brought out “in a way that’s accessible but doesn’t dumb it down or dilute it...” [Newsweek, 29 Oct. ’07, page E-18].

Nota bene: On the archaeological evidence for the secular nature of the Khirbet Qumran site, see most recently Y. Magen and Y. Peleg, “Back to Qumran: Ten Years of Excavation and Research, 1993-2004,” in K. Galor et al., *Qumran — The Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Archaeological Interpretations and Debates*, Leiden/Boston, 2006, pp. 55-113; and Rachel Bar-Nathan, “Qumran and the Hasmonaean and Herodian Winter Palaces of Jericho: The Implication of the Pottery Finds on the Interpretation of the Settlement at Qumran, *ibid.* pp. 263-277. Cf. the earlier findings by R. Donceel and P. Donceel-Voûte, “The Archaeology of Khirbet Qumran,” in M. Wise *et al.*, *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site*, New York 1994, pp. 1-38; and Y. Hirschfeld, *Qumran*

in Context, Peabody, MA 2004. See further J. Zangenberg, “Opening Up Our View: Khirbet Qumran in a Regional Perspective,” in D. R. Edwards (ed.), *Religion and Society in Roman Palestine: Old Questions, New Proposals*, New York/London, 2004. (Cf. also the ample bibliography cited in the above mentioned volume edited by K. Galor et al., pp. 285-297.

On the five inkwells discovered at Shu’afat, cf. D. A. Sklar-Parnes, “Jeusalem, Shu’fat/ Ramallah Road,” in *Journal. Hadashot ESI* 117 (8/5/2005).

On priestly origins of various Dead Sea Scrolls, cf. R. Eilior, *The Three Temples*, Littman Library 2004/2005.

On the topographical, literary, and palaeographical evidence for the Jerusalem origin of the Scrolls, cf. my *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*, New York 1995/1996), pp. 3 ff (strategic position of Kh. Qumran, military character of site); 51 ff (scribal, nondocumentary nature of scrolls); 56 f, 97 ff, 151 f (approx. 500 or more scribal handwritings in Scrolls); 117 ff (Copper Scroll discovery pointing to Jerusalem); 129 (claimed Roman movements from Jericho to Qumran clashing with theory of Essene movement northward to hide Scrolls); 129 ff (subsequent discovery of same types of Scrolls at Masada); 141 ff (mutually contradictory claims by Qumranologists in defense of Qumran-Essene theory); pp. 175 ff and *passim* (freeing of scrolls revealing large variety of trends in social and religious thought; p. 351 (discovery of various phylacteries in caves revealing disparate practices of wearers).

Cf. further, on some of the above topics, L. Cansdale, *Qumran and the Essenes: A Re-Evaluation of the Evidence*, (Texte und Studien zum Antike Judentum 60), Tuebingen, 1997).

Readers of French may wish to consult Bruno Bioul’s *Qumran et les manuscrits de la mer Morte — Les hypothèses, le débat* (Paris 2004), in which the author has posed, to proponents of both salient theories, various questions germane to the problem of Scroll origins, and juxtaposed the responses offered by them in appropriate order.

(Appendix on next page.)

THE SO-CALLED “VIRTUAL REALITY TOUR” — APPENDIX

The “Virtual Reality Tour” and its underlying text clearly contain elements reflecting the thought-processes of its creators during a prior planning period. However, some additional light on that process is also available in a web site article of the UCLA International Institute (by Meg Sullivan, Senior Media Relations Officer at UCLA) that appeared prior to the opening of the San Diego Scroll exhibition.

According to this article, Dr. William Schniedewind and his graduate student Robert Cargill, working as a team, arrived at the conclusion that Kh. Qumran was first a fortress and then the home of the Essenes “while building the world’s first three-dimensional computer model of the site....” The article quotes Schniedewind as saying that “Once you put all the archeological evidence into three dimensions, the solution literally jumps out at you.”* (Schniedewind is a professor at UCLA and Secretary of the Albright Institute, an affiliate of the American Schools of Oriental Research.)

In describing the well-known development of the site from an original Hasmonaean complex to the larger establishment of the Herodian period, the article describes the team as contending that the so-called dining room “was not part of the original structure.” Regarding the so-called scriptorium, the article attributes to the team the idea that “it has long been thought to be central to *the religious community*” (my italics here and below), but “the position of the room and the thickness of the walls are more consistent with an addition than an original feature of the structure.”

However, while the article gives precise measurements for both stages of the settlement, the reporter does not state whether the measurements are those of the team made by them at the Kh. Qumran site, or of others. It also refrains from stating that (a) measurements of the entire site, (b) the treatment of both of the aforesaid structures as additions of the Herodian period, and (c) a proposed depiction of the site as it looked

* There is a confusion in the article as to the problem being “solved.” At one point the reporter states that “With the judiciousness of Solomon, Cargill and Schniedewind cut the *three competing theories* down the middle, contending that none of them hold[s] together without elements from the others.” While not divulging what the enigmatic “middle” means in this case, the reporter lists these three theories as “a monastery for the scholarly and pacifist Essenes; a fortress for the...Hasmoneans; or a rich Jerusalem family’s villa that was later adapted by the Essenes....” (Note that in this formulation the views of both Hirschfeld as well as of Magen and Peleg are missing.) In an ensuing paragraph, however, Schniedewind is quoted as saying that “when *half* of the elements were taken from *each of the competing theories* and added to *each other*, the most plausible — and buildable — explanation emerged.” This implies the juxtaposition of only the first two competing theories earlier mentioned. The third listed “theory” (rich family’s villa eventually adapted by Essenes) is later in the article attributed to Father J.-B. Humbert, but that view was merely a variant of Father de Vaux’s Qumran-Essene theory and obviously expressed in order to protect the essential element in the latter’s view, at least until Humbert introduced a further confusion by stating, in 2004, that “We refuse to limit the ‘community of Qumran’ to a single, ‘unique’ site and instead emphasize that the sectarians preferred living in the surroundings of the Dead Sea....” (K. Galor et al., *Qumran: The Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 36). The UCLA institute’s complete article can be viewed at <http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=72510> All italics in this appendix are mine. (NG)

in that period, had earlier been published by the late Yizhar Hirschfeld (see pp. 89 and 113 of his 2004 book, cf. bibliography above). Working with these reconstructions, and on the basis of his own site-examination, Hirschfeld — as archaeologists Donceel and Donceel-Voute beforehand — nevertheless has seen no reason to conclude that the site was ever inhabited by a sect (viz., by a group that the Schniedewind-Cargill team call, without proof, “the religious community”). The expanded areas were, in Hirschfeld’s view, suitable for use by individuals engaging in agricultural pursuits.

Subsequently, archaeologists Magen and Peleg, on the basis of a decade of work at the same site and the complete excavation of the reservoirs, likewise drew the conclusion (cf. bibliography above) that it was never occupied by Essenes or any other radical religious sect. Their own view, based on specific findings made during the excavations, was that the site was used by its inhabitants as a pottery factory during the Herodian period. As Hirschfeld, they also present carefully drawn plans of the site, emphasizing however the results of their own excavations. Cf. particularly their statement (p. 100 of the earlier cited article) that “Qumran possessed a large plant for the production of pottery. The kilns found at the site, the pools for steeping clay, the large water reservoirs, and the large amounts of production waste ... testify to the extent of the pottery industry at the site.... All the elements of the site, including the reservoirs and the water supply system, were geared to the industry.”

The news release under discussion, without mentioning these latter developments, quotes Dr. Schniedewind of the UCLA team as saying “We felt it was of the utmost importan[ce] *to allow the archaeological remains to speak for themselves...*” However, the resulting “construction” project, which unsurprisingly ends up being a nuanced defense of the old Qumran-Essene theory, does not in any sense resemble a necessary consequence of one’s letting the archaeological remains speak for themselves.

Using ground plans that apparently do not differ greatly from Hirschfeld’s, the team has constructed a fine three-dimensional complex of structures, but one which resembles Father de Vaux’s “laura of the Essenes” only by virtue of the team’s inclusion of features previously *imagined* by de Vaux, and of which the team happens to approve. These envisioned features are then treated in such a way as to render them, to objective parties, classic examples of begging the question: e.g., the ruins of the building that Father de Vaux *theorized* was a scriptorium is depicted as *being* one, the reservoir system is treated as de Vaux’s manifold “ritual baths,” etc.

The UCLA news article further helps this effort along, speaking familiarly of Kh. Qumran’s “10 ritual baths,” asserting that a particularly large room contained eating utensils sufficient in number “to feed a religious community,” and referring to a “1,120 square-foot, two-story scriptorium” as though this identification were a demonstrated fact rather than a heady guess made in the first stages of investigation of the Kh. Qumran site in the early 1950s. The writer of the article is, however, somewhat more judicious in giving the apparent reasons for the UCLA team’s position, stating: “Like many scholars before them, Cargill and Schniedewind believe the Essenes...brought all their possessions to the [Kh. Qumran] site, including about 70 percent of the scrolls discovered in the area. They believe that the

Essenes are the Yahad group described in the remaining 30 percent of the recovered scrolls, and that they are the authors of those texts, composed at Qumran, which describe life in the Judean desert. The UCLA team theorizes that the Essenes may have anticipated an attack from Roman soldiers when they packed the scrolls in earthenware jars and hid them in caves in the hills above Qumran.”

Here one of the main problems is that not a single Dead Sea Scroll has ever been demonstrated to include passages that actually “describe life in the Judean desert.” Moreover, the other beliefs described in this paragraph are approximately the ones long maintained by many traditional Qumranologists, *viz.*: (a) that Essenes inhabited Kh. Qumran and then hid the Scrolls in anticipation of a Roman attack — a devoutly cherished view ever since Father de Vaux asserted as much; and (b) that many of the texts were written elsewhere, and only some at Kh. Qumran — a belief championed increasingly by many Qumranologists since I and others pointed out to them, more than a decade ago, that over five hundred scribes were responsible for the discovered texts. That the (claimed) Essenes *brought* seventy per-cent of the extant Dead Sea Scrolls to Kh. Qumran but actually *wrote* only the other thirty per-cent there is the purest of speculations, apparently meant to save at least some remnants of the de Vaux theory to the effect that the Scrolls as a whole were written by Essene scribes at a (claimed) monastic scriptorium supposedly located at the latter site.*

That such beliefs should be held by the two team members is not to be wondered at; the article refrains from stating whether they held them before creating the so-called “Virtual Reality” show, but to judge by earlier writings of Schniedewind, that is at all events the reasonable inference to be made. It is impossible to see in any of this the slightest evidence supporting the latter’s claim that when creating the show he felt it to be “of the utmost importance to allow the archaeological remains to speak for themselves.”

Beliefs of the kind expressed by traditional Qumranologists, including cosmetic variations inevitably cropping up amongs individual writers, do indeed continue to be held by them. Were it indeed the case that manuscript and/or archaeological discoveries have contributed any material evidence that could support Père de Vaux’s theory, the authors of the “Virtual Reality” show might at least have had a propaedeutic basis for the nature of their presentation.

* The UCLA article states that in “an influential 1996 book about Qumran, ... Norman Golb argued that the site, occupied from about 163 B.C to A.D. 73, was always a fortress.” However, I did not give such erroneous dates for the site’s occupation as here quoted; the Hasmonaean fortress was built at the earliest circa 140-130 B.C. As for subsequent occupation, I cited the bona fide archaeological evidence uncovered by Père de Vaux indicating that a *battle* at the site between Roman attackers and Jewish defenders took place during the First Revolt, the difference being that de Vaux theorized that it took place in 68 A.D, whereas I place it at approximately 72 A.D. — i.e., during the period (as described by Josephus) of the gradual Roman conquest of Judaea after the subjugation of Jerusalem. As for the attribution to me of the view that Kh. Qumran was “always” a fortress, while I did not use that term, I did treat it in my book, its paperback version, and the foreign-language editions as a fortress *during* the period in question. Thanks to the subsequent investigations of Hirschfeld, Magen and Peleg, we are now much closer to a clear understanding of its use for part of that period. However, it is quite obvious from de Vaux’s own description of the archaeological findings made by him that (as stated in my book and as de Vaux himself asserted) once the First Revolt had broken out, Jewish fighters occupying Kh. Qumran engaged there in a pitched battle with Roman forces who thereupon conquered the site, using it afterwards (as de Vaux also explained) as a military base of their own.

Relevant discoveries made subsequently, however, all militate *against* that theory. There is, for example, the evidence supplied by (a) the Copper Scroll (deciphered only in 1956) with its columns of descriptions of sequestered Temple treasures and scrolls; (b) the documented discovery of manuscripts of this kind in areas of the Judaean Wilderness *other than* the vicinity of Kh. Qumran, as e.g. the Masada scrolls discovered in the early 1960s; c) the discovery of phylactery texts, deciphered only in the mid-fifties and later, showing not a unified discipline but variegated text-preferences of the practitioners; (d) the discovery of the great number of scribes who were engaged in writing the Scrolls, made possible only following publication of most of them from the mid-1990s onward; (e) the awareness, after publication of the Copper Scroll, of the Scroll caves' locations not merely close to Kh. Qumran but rather near several wadis leading out from Jerusalem; (f) the new researches by Israeli and other archaeologists leading to their denial of a link between the Scrolls and the Kh. Qumran site; coupled with (g) statements of the contemporary historian Flavius Josephus regarding the directions of flight taken by the refugees from Jerusalem — all of this constituting just some of the material evidence pointing to the Jerusalem origin of the Scrolls and their sequestration by its inhabitants in response to the cataclysmic Roman siege of 70 A.D.

Realistically speaking, nothing discovered in the caves or at Kh. Qumran demonstrates that a pious and peace-loving sect ever inhabited that site. The present accumulation of evidence moreover shows that it was not a particular sectarian group but rather a large variety of Jerusalem's inhabitants who possessed the Scrolls and who participated in their hiding. (The news article inserts a surprisingly unnecessary political element into the discussion by describing Kh. Qumran as being in "the West Bank" rather than in the Judaean Wilderness, which is its appropriate historical designation.)

One must regret that the academic team under discussion has apparently chosen not to deal with the present configuration of facts illuminating the original discoveries of the late '40s and early '50s. From its own wording and that of the news release, the ineluctable conclusion to be drawn regarding the underlying reality of the "Virtual Reality" show is that, recognizing the anomalies now infecting the original Père de Vaux theory, the Schniedewind-Cargill team has attempted, by arguing for its *emendation*, to protect that theory's core belief.

The authors thus in their own way join many traditional Qumranologists in seeking to transmute the old and (for some years now) beleaguered theory into an article of faith by sartorial adjustments taking little account of the measure of evidence against that theory. The apparent effort of the writers to shore up the traditional belief through the rhetorical device of a media show — and one that to others might well give the impression of appealing to the gullibility of large lay audiences — cannot but have confused many neutral viewers during the San Diego exhibition. That an effort of such nature is appropriate within a university setting is not at all obvious.

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http://home.uchicago.edu/~ngolb/san_diego_virtual_reality_revised.pdf