

CHAPTER TEN

THE DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION OF THE KHIRBET QAZONE CEMETERY
AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE RELATIVE TO QUMRAN

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The Discovery of the Khirbet Qazone Cemetery

In 1996 and 1997, a rescue excavation was mounted at a previously unregistered cemetery site locally known as Khirbet Qazone, near the village of Mazra'a at the southeastern end of the Dead Sea (figs. 10.1 and 10.2). Over 3,500 looted burials were recorded but of these, only twenty-three undisturbed shaft graves were excavated by archaeologists.¹

Each of these graves had a single burial and there was no evidence of re-internment. Most of the graves were dug more than 1.5 m into the soft Lisan sediments, undercut to the east, and covered by adobe brick slabs in what can best be described as *arcosolia* (fig. 10.3). At least two graves were constructed of stone cists. Men, women, and children alike were laid to rest on their backs with their heads placed towards the south end of the grave.

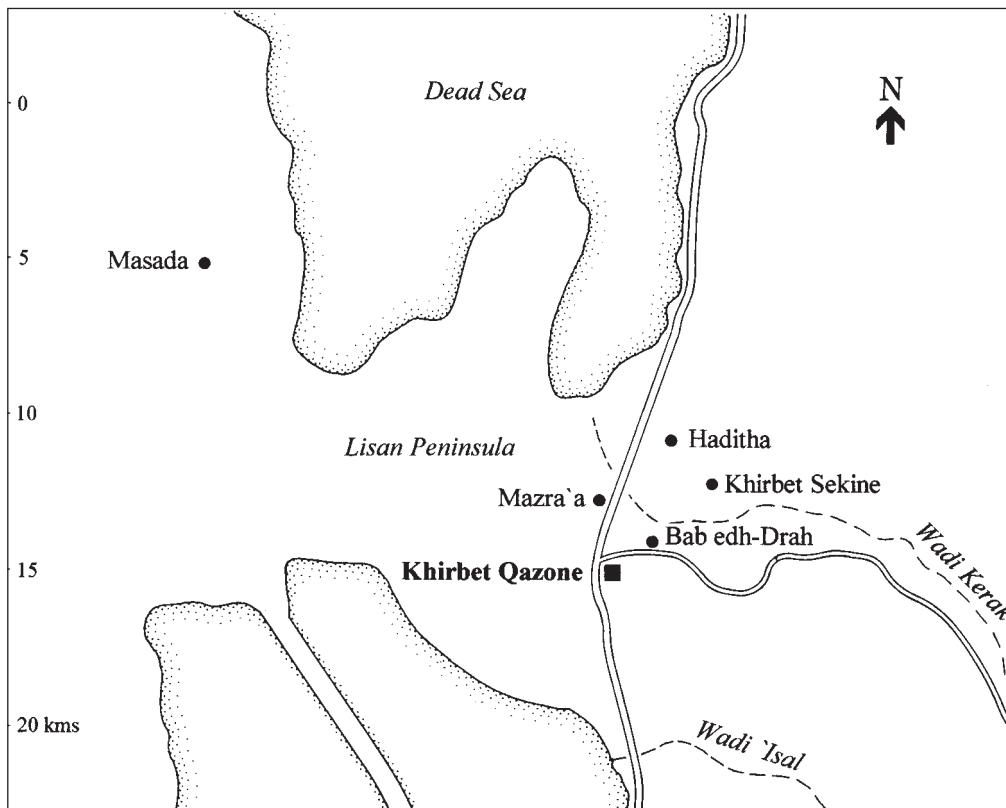


Fig. 10.1. Location map of Khirbet Qazone. (by J. M. Farrant)

¹ K.D. Politis, "Rescue Excavations in the Nabataean Cemetery at Khirbat Qazone 1996-1997." *ADAJ* 42 (1998): 611-4.



Fig. 10.2. Aerial view of Khirbet Qazone from the north with Mazra'a in the foreground and the Dead Sea in the background. (photo: author)

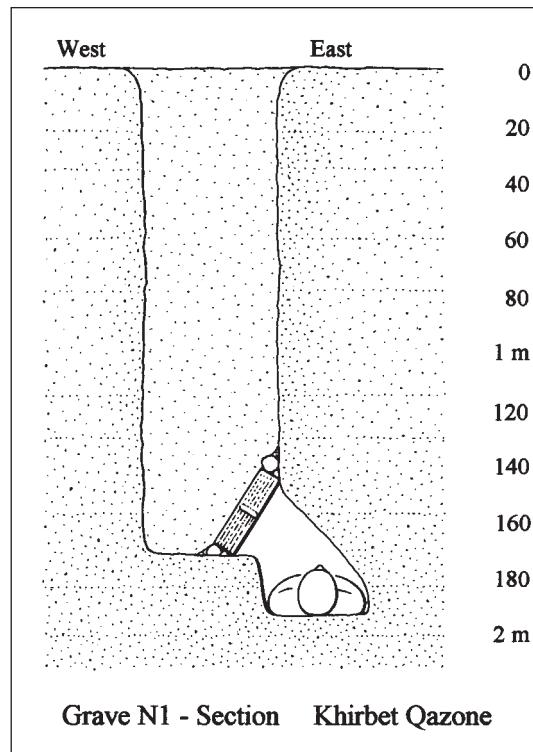


Fig. 10.3. Section of the shaft grave N1 at Khirbet Qazone, which was characteristically undercut to the east and covered by adobe brick slabs. (by J.M. Farrant after C. Pickersgill)

The arid conditions of the soil into which the burial shafts at Khirbet Qazone were cut and the nearly airtight construction of the arcosolium desiccated many of the bodies, resulting in the survival of skin, hair, and even internal organs. Some of these bodies were wrapped in leather and textile material (fig. 10.4). The leather hides were specifically made into shrouds, which were stitched together, decorated, and sometimes painted in red. The textiles, on the other hand, consisted mostly of reused Graeco-Roman-style mantles and tunics. One of the best-preserved bodies from Khirbet Qazone, which was confiscated from an antiquities dealer in 1997, is now at Yarmuk University in Irbid, Jordan.² The “mummy,” as it is erroneously named, is actually the body of an adult male wrapped in the remnants of three or four textile layers, at least one of which has been identified as a Roman-period tunic.

Although local tomb-robbers claimed to have found jewellery, glass vessels, small wooden boxes,

and inscribed papyri in the graves at Khirbet Qazone, only a few of the burials which were legally excavated contained such grave goods. Adornments found include iron bracelets; copper and silver torcs and earrings; gold earrings and bracelets; beads; and a very worn scarab. A wooden staff, a pair of sandals, and a laurel wreath were discovered in the grave of an adult male. All of these objects relate to the late Roman period.

From surface collections made at Khirbet Qazone, more metalwork was found together with pottery and glass fragments belonging to the first to early third centuries C.E. Broken ceramic Nabataean painted bowls, plates, and drinking vessels scattered around the cemetery may be interpreted as remnants of funerary meals, a common Nabataean religious practice.³ Other pottery finds include a spouted filter jug of cream-coloured ware that may be a second-century C.E. Mesopotamian import, as well as several pieces of eastern terra sigillata. No evidence of domestic storage jars was found.

² K.D. Politis, “Rescuing Khirbet Qazone: The Struggle to Save a Unique Nabataean Cemetery.” *Minerva* 13 (2002): 27.

³ J.F. Healey, “Death in the West Semitic Texts: Ugarit

and Nabataea.” In: *Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East*. Oxbow Monograph 51 (Edited by S. Campbell and A. Green; Oxford: Oxbow Books), 188–91.



Fig. 10.4. Burial A1 from Khirbet Qazone with textiles wrapped around the body. (photo. T. Springett)

Four “Dushara” *betyls* and/or *nefesh* stelae (fig. 10.5) recovered from looted tombs are similar to ones found at Petra.⁴ Such aniconical depictions of deities are characteristic of the Nabataean religion.⁵ One funerary stele was inscribed in Greek, AYCENH H KALH [*Afseni*, the pretty girl] (fig. 10.6). The use of the Greek language during the first to third centuries C.E. in Nabataea was not unusual as it was the lingua franca of the eastern Roman Empire. One of two (privately owned) papyri inscribed in Greek, which were found by tomb-robbers at Khirbet Qazone, is signed with a Nabataean name and refers to land-ownership.⁶ No evidence of Aramaic or Hebrew texts or symbols which would indicate the presence of Jews was found at the site.

Perhaps the most exciting finds at Khirbet Qazone were the unusually well preserved textiles, many of which are virtually complete. At least fifty-

seven identifiable textile garments have now been recovered from the site, dating between the first and early third centuries C.E.⁷ Most are characteristic sleeveless Roman tunics with a purple-colored stripe running down the garments from either side of the neck opening or rectangular Greek mantles decorated with four symmetrically-placed colored motifs, usually gamma-shaped. Similar textiles have been found at the Cave of Letters in the Judaean Desert and at Dura Europos on the Euphrates River. Wall paintings in the synagogue at Dura Europos depict such garments, as do the painted portraits of Graeco-Egyptian men and women found at Fayyum in Egypt. As exciting and rare as these finds may be, they do not characterize a specific ethnic group nor can they be attributed to a particular religious affiliation; they simply reflect the popular clothing styles of the period.

⁴ F. Zayadine, “Recent Excavations at Petra (1979–81).” *ADAJ* 26 (1982): 366, pl. CXXI.1.

⁵ J.F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 136 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 185–9.

⁶ J. Gascou, “Unités administratives locales et fonctionnaires romaines: Les données des nouveaux papyrus du Moyen Euphrate et d’Arabie: La pétition de Bostra (P. Bostra 1; 29 mai 260).” In: *Lokale Autonomie und römische Ordnungsmacht*

in den kaiserzeitlichen Provinzen vom 1. bis 3. Jahrhundert. Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Kolloquien 42 (Edited by W. Eck; Munich: Oldenbourg), 61–73.

⁷ H. Granger-Taylor, “The Textiles from Khirbet Qazone (Jordan).” In: *Archéologie des textiles des origines au Ve siècle. Actes du colloque de Lattes, Octobre 1999*. Instrumentum 14 (Edited by D. Cardon and M. Feugère (Montagnac: Éditions Monique Mergoil, 2000), 151, pl. 2, figs. 4 and 9.



Fig. 10.5. “Dushara” *betyl/nefest* stele (reg. no. KQ 2) from Khirbet Qazone. (photo: T. Springett)

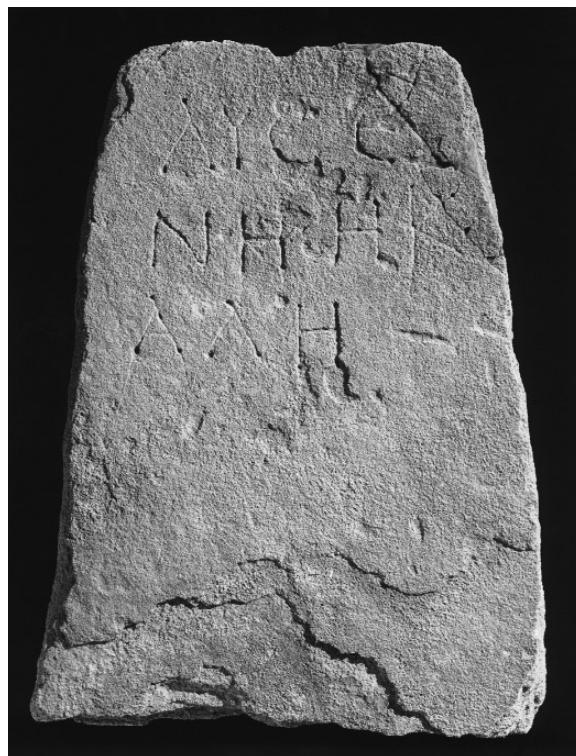


Fig. 10.6. Funerary stele (reg. no. KQ 5) inscribed in Greek from Khirbet Qazone. (photo: T. Springett)

Khirbet Qazone in Context

The importance of Khirbet Qazone is understandable considering its proximity to Masada, which is about 16 km to its west, across the Lisan peninsula. The remnants of the medieval Islamic town of Mazra'a are located immediately to the north of the Khirbet Qazone cemetery, by the Wadi Kerak (figs. 1, 2). Various first to third century C.E. pottery sherds have been found there, which may indicate the location of the Nabatean settlement associated with the cemetery. Further north, at 'Ain Sekine and at Haditha, two more settlement sites with adjacent cemeteries can be found.⁸ These can now be identified as the two communities associated with the harbour of Mahoza/Maoza (Haditha, which lies nearest to the Dead Sea) and Mazra'a (Khirbet Qazone/Mazra'a) in the Zo'ara region, as mentioned in the Babatha papyri from the Cave of Letters.⁹

The ancient writers Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Josephus described Nabataean communities as living by the Dead Sea. They flourished by trading in the rich natural resources of the area, such as bitumen, salt, balsam, dates, and sulphur.¹⁰ Considering that there was no ancient road running along the southeastern section of the Dead Sea shore, a port would have been essential for such trade. No port facility (such as that of Callirrhoe/'Ain ez-Zara' on the northeastern shore) has yet been discovered. This is probably because it has been buried by eroding wadi sediments, compounded by the receding Dead Sea shoreline. There is no doubt, though, on the basis of historical sources as well as archaeological finds, that there were close communications across the waters of the Dead Sea by boats during the first to third centuries C.E. The depiction of two such vessels laden with goods on the sixth century mosaic floor-map at Madaba graphically provides good

evidence of this trade link. In this context, the people of Khirbet Qazone would have participated in the greater Dead Sea community, reflecting various common traits and habits.

Khirbet Qazone and Its Relationship to Qumran

The question of Khirbet Qazone's similarity with Qumran is crucial in interpreting the nature of the communities, or community, which lived there. Considering the infamous status of the established and much-studied site of Qumran, it is not surprising that scholars would be keen to fit the new discoveries at Khirbet Qazone into this context.

The controversy focuses on the deep shaft graves with single in arcosolia-sealed burials, once thought to be exclusively characteristic of graves at Qumran.¹¹ This burial type was originally attributed to adult males belonging to the Jewish Essene sect, but recent investigations have revealed a more complicated scenario; some of the skeletons unearthed at Qumran were revealed to be of women and children.¹² Furthermore, the complex at Qumran is more typical of a large Roman-period manor house or farmstead rather than religious buildings or simple dwellings inhabited by ascetic Essenes.¹³ Similar 'Qumran-type' burials found at Beit Safafa near Jerusalem have also been attributed to Jews.¹⁴ But, since "most of the graves had no small finds," there was no other evidence to assign ethnicity or a specific religion to them. However, the lack of grave goods cannot be used as negative evidence as only forty-one burials were excavated by archaeologists.

The survey and excavation of Khirbet Qazone has revealed over 3,500 "Qumran-type" burials that are similarly dated, but here the majority belong to ordinary women and children, largely characterised as Nabataean.¹⁵ Similar burials,

⁸ K.D. Politis and H. Granger-Taylor, "Nabataeans on the Dead Sea Littoral." In: *Petra Rediscovered: Lost City of the Nabataean Kingdom* (Edited by G. Markoe; New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the Cincinnati Art Museum, 2003), 110–12 [111].

⁹ G.W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 76–89.

¹⁰ See Joseph Patrich in this volume; see also J. Zangenberg, "Opening Up Our View: Khirbet Qumran in a Regional Perspective." In: *Religion and Society in Roman Palestine: Old Problems and New Approaches* (Edited by D.R. Edwards; New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 170–87.

¹¹ H. Shanks, "Who Lies Here? Jordan Tombs Match Those at Qumran." *BAR* 25/5 (1999): 130–6; J. Zangenberg, "The 'Final Farewell': A Necessary Paradigm Shift in the Interpretation of the Qumran Cemetery." *QC* 8 (1999): 213–8.

¹² Y. Hirschfeld, "Early Roman Manor Houses in Judaea and the Site of Khirbet Qumran." *JNES* 57 (1998): 161–89.

¹³ Hirschfeld 1998: 187–9.

¹⁴ B. Zissu, "'Qumran Type' Graves in Jerusalem: Archaeological Evidence of an Essene Community?" *DSD* 5 (1998): 158–71.

¹⁵ Politis 1998: 611–4.

opened by tomb robbers, have also been found at the cemetery adjacent to the 'Ain Sekine settlement site (mentioned above) and further south, at Feifa.¹⁶ So, what conclusions can be drawn from the "Qumran-type" burials in general and the site of Qumran in particular?

First, single shaft burials are not only very common at Petra and elsewhere in Nabataea, but can also be found at sites west of the Dead Sea, such as 'Ain el-Ghuweir and Hiam es-Sagha.¹⁷ Second, the variety of burial types in Qumran, as well as at Beit Safafa, argues against one single "Qumran-type" burial at these "Jewish-Essene" sites. Clearly, shaft burials can neither be attributed to any particular ethnic group nor be used to identify a specific religious practice.

What can be more realistically asserted, is the widespread use of deep shaft graves during the first to third centuries C.E. in the Dead Sea area and its environs. There were other cultural affinities between the Dead Sea communities, such as language (Aramaic together with Greek were the lin-

guae francae of the area), dress, architecture, and luxury items. The Babatha archives tell us of the peaceful coexistence between Jews and Nabataeans in the area. Recent archaeological excavations at 'En Gedi and 'Ain Feshkha on the western shores of the Dead Sea have verified historical sources attesting to a thriving balsam industry shared by these two groups.¹⁸ Certainly, trade of this and other commodities would have led to various intercommunal influences, among which, apparently, were shaft burials. Even intermarriage between the two groups at the highest level was acceptable. A good example of this is King Herod the Great, whose father was Jewish and mother was Nabataean.

The question of to whom the shaft burial-type should be attributed is significant in terms of identity. It is not immediately apparent that they belong to Essenes or even Jews, for that matter.¹⁹ In fact, they are not exclusive to any ethnic or religious group. Therefore, shaft burials should be viewed as a feature of the multicultural society prevalent in the Dead Sea area during later Roman Empire.

¹⁶ See Politis and Granger-Taylor 2003, 110.

¹⁷ Shanks 1999: 76; Zissu 1998.

¹⁸ See Yizhar Hirschfeld and Joseph Patrich in this volume.

¹⁹ Zangenberg 1999: 214.
