

# Interpreting the Qumran Site

**A**s the saying goes: "One sees what one wants to see." It must be admitted that the Qumran site defies an exact interpretation!

By Jean-Baptiste Humbert, The French Biblical and Archaeological School in Jerusalem (EBAF).  
Translated by Claude Grenache, A.A.

Father de Vaux loved to tell the story of the famous "Stables of Solomon" at Megiddo. The excavator was showing his site to visitors. The first one was a Jesuit, and he saw a temple. The second was a high-level magistrate, and he suggested that the site was an administrative center. The third one was a soldier, and he was sure it was a barracks. As the saying goes: "One sees what one wants to see." It must be admitted that the Qumran site defies an exact interpretation, but there are some very specific characteristics that would seem to make its function irrefutable.

The five or six priests who formed the heart of the excavation team naturally modeled the installation that they found on a monastery, with its monastic customs and well-organized workshops. The excavators described a community center in light of ancient texts that mention the Jewish Essene sect and this synthesis of history and archaeology has prevailed, despite some naïveté.

Anyone who wants to understand Qumran must consider both the ruins and the manuscripts. But the connection between these two is uncertain. The site is modest, without any architectural homogeneity, poorly constructed, and badly restored. On the other hand, the manuscripts are exemplars of the highest intellectual level of the period. The living space is restricted, and it is hard to see how the two hundred or so inhabitants could live there. But the water reserves are large, and so are the numbers of vessels. The chronology poses other problems: the dates of the beginning and end of the settlement are very uncertain. The two revolts of 68 and 135, put down by the Romans, provoked a series of identical events. Nothing more was needed to bring into question the idea that the site and the scrolls were entirely Essene in nature.

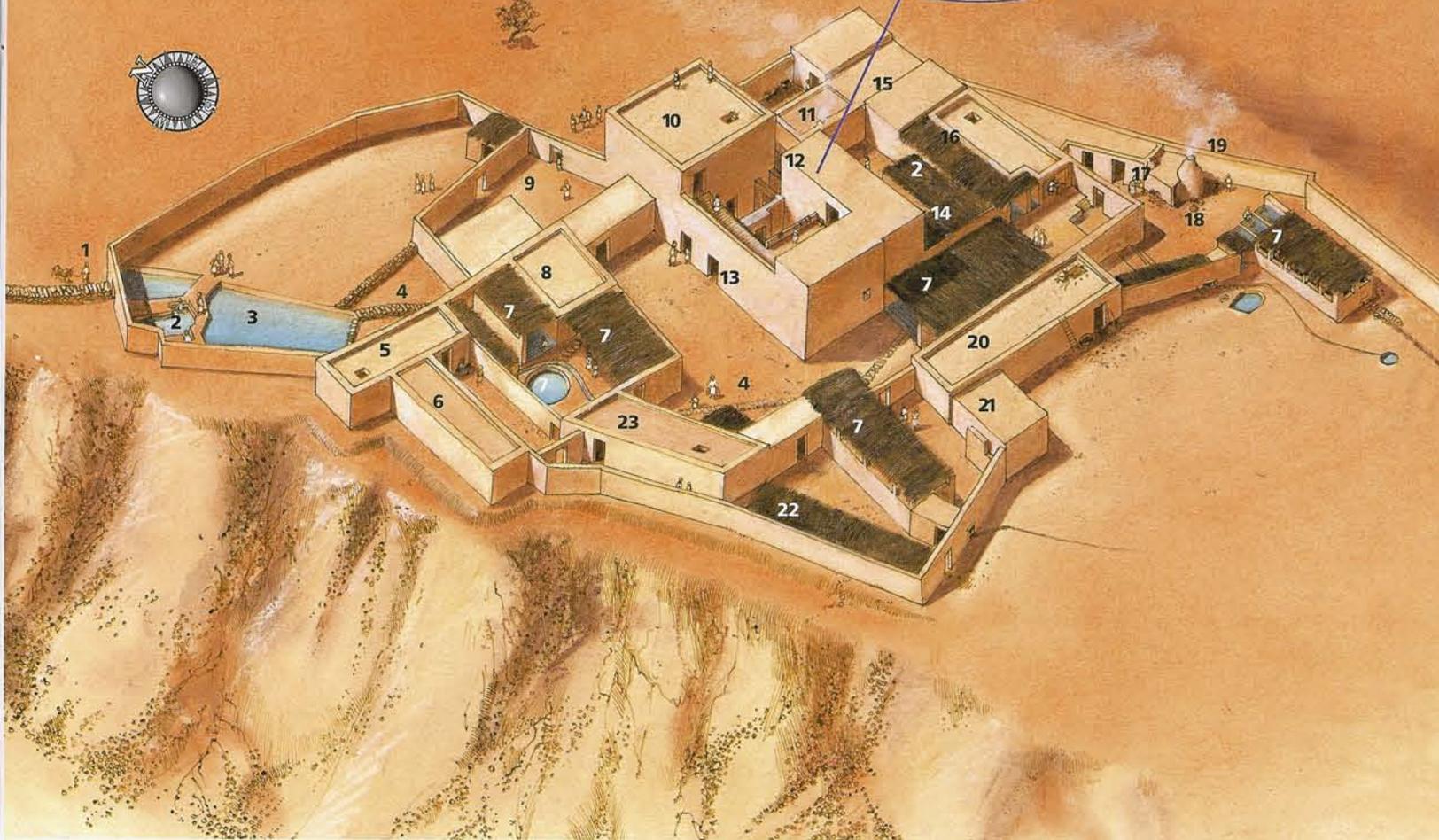
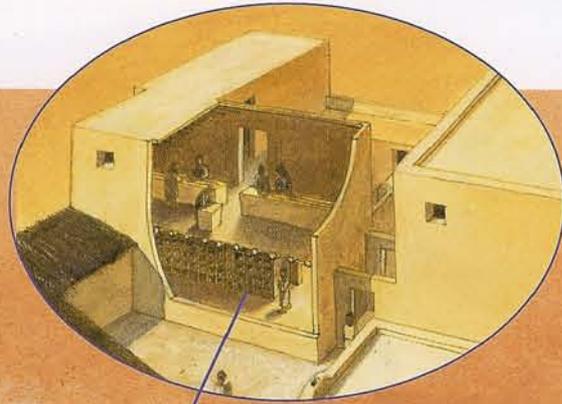
The group of learned Qumranologists was divided. Some of them remained faithful to the interpretation of the excava-

tors. Some adhered to the traditional thesis while agreeing to certain amendments. Professor H. Stegemann described Qumran as a publishing house where manuscripts were produced. A. Lemaire favored the possibility of a school, a center of Essene scholarship. E. M. Cook installed a great ritual bath there, given the quantity of water reserves. Here, we propose an Essene ritual center on the shores of the Dead Sea. Others do not consider the proximity of the manuscripts to be terribly significant, and each one looks at it in his or her own way.

Norman Golb sees a small fortress fiercely defended by the Zealots, the sworn enemies of the Romans; but the wall of the enclosure is not defensive, and the recovery of ten arrowheads do not a battle make. P. Donceel-Voûte sees a *villa rustica* of people of status with a factory making perfumed ointments, but the vials are missing. She sees a *triclinium*, the dining hall for the upper classes, but the seating is problematic at best. S. Shapiro finds a papyrus factory, but the plant is nowhere to be found. Finally, Qumran could be a commercial center: R. Donceel sees in the site a post for the exportation of Phoenician glass en route to Arabia. A. Crown and L. Lansdale see without the slightest doubt a lucrative port on the Dead Sea. But the roads go in another direction.

These scholars who, with their various theories, throw the ball from one court to the other with great volleys of erudition, impatience, or arrogance, all stand in line with those who know that truth requires humility. If these uncertainties remain, it is because Qumran is not the sum of everything Essene, and because there is no correspondence between the evidence of the ruins and the texts. In the meantime, oblivious to the agreements and disagreements of the scholars, the lords of tourism defile the mystery of the high place, selling trinkets and soap, shamelessly profiting from what the Essenes in their high-mindedness had forbidden.

# The Scriptorium



*This plan shows a possible interpretation of the interior of the scriptorium. Plastered elements were found on a base of unbaked bricks (covered with charred wood and debris from wall plaster) where they appear to have fallen from the floor above. Perhaps there were tables for preparing manuscripts. On the first floor is a windowless room: perhaps for the storage of the archives? The three inkwells found here support the hypothesis that this area was a scriptorium.*

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|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Aqueduct          | 12. Scriptorium      |
| 2. Ritual bath       | 13. Meeting hall     |
| 3. Decantation pool  | 14. Dyers' quarter   |
| 4. Main canal        | 15. Latrines         |
| 5. Artisans' quarter | 16. Laundry          |
| 6. Storerooms        | 17. Pottery kilns    |
| 7. Cisterns          | 18. Potters' quarter |
| 8. Workshops         | 19. Enclosure wall   |
| 9. Main entrance     | 20. Refectory        |
| 10. Massive tower    | 21. Pantry           |
| 11. Kitchen          | 22. Stables          |
|                      | 23. Millers' quarter |

*The Khirbeh, also called "the ruin," is a square structure flanked by buildings and an important cemetery. A massive tower is in the northwest corner.*

Z. Radovan / Jerusalem



# Plan of the aerial view

## 1. Aqueduct

Large flat stones bordered and covered a canal bringing water from the gorge to the settlement.

## 2. Ritual bath

The *miqveh* (pl. *miqvaot*) served for purification.

## 3. Decantation pool

There were several, designed to filter the water coming from the dam.

## 23. Millers' quarter

The finds (a millstone and oven) in these rooms led to this interpretation. The base of the mill in locus 100 (west of the canal) leaves no doubt.

## 22. Stables

According to Fr. Coüasnon, architect and draughtsman of the plans during the excavations, this long hall against the rampart housed stalls for the asses.

## 19. Enclosure Wall

It separates the world of the living from the cemetery to the east.

## 20. Refectory

A circular pavement faces the opening to the pantry. Is this the trace of a table with a middle leg? The vessels with wine and water jars would have been placed there.

## 21. Pantry

In the southeast corner, an abundant store of vessels (bowls and plates) was found, having fallen from shelves that were not preserved.

## 4. Main canal

Coated with a waterproof layer and covered with flagstones, it fed the cisterns and the ritual baths.

## 7. Cisterns

The walls were coated, and a roof probably protected the water from evaporation and dirt.

## 5. Artisans' quarter

Rooms with compartments (workshops, storerooms). The door opens onto a room where the Tyrian coin hordes were found.

## 6. Storerooms

Of the two long rooms, the one to the right was probably a courtyard originally and later transformed into a covered room.

## 8. Workshops

An oven was discovered in one of these.

## 9. Main entrance

The road from the north along the shore ended here.

## 10. Massive tower

A circular staircase in the southwest corner served both levels. It rests against rooms, perhaps for storage (ground and first floors).

## 11. Kitchen

On the inside are three ovens against the walls.

## 12. Scriptorium

It was on the second floor.

## 13. Meeting hall

A plastered bench 10 cm high is still visible; it ran all around the room.

## 14. Dyers' quarter

One of the rooms of this sector contained small tubs.

## 15. latrines (?)

A combination of a pottery tube and holding jar may indicate a rest room.

## 16. Laundry

The laundry was still in use after the cistern was abandoned.

## 17. Pottery Kilns

The large pottery kiln was later converted to a lime storage bin.

## 18. Potters' quarter

The kilns, the base of the tower, the little basins to the east of the canal and the filtering tank for the clay to the west are clearly visible.

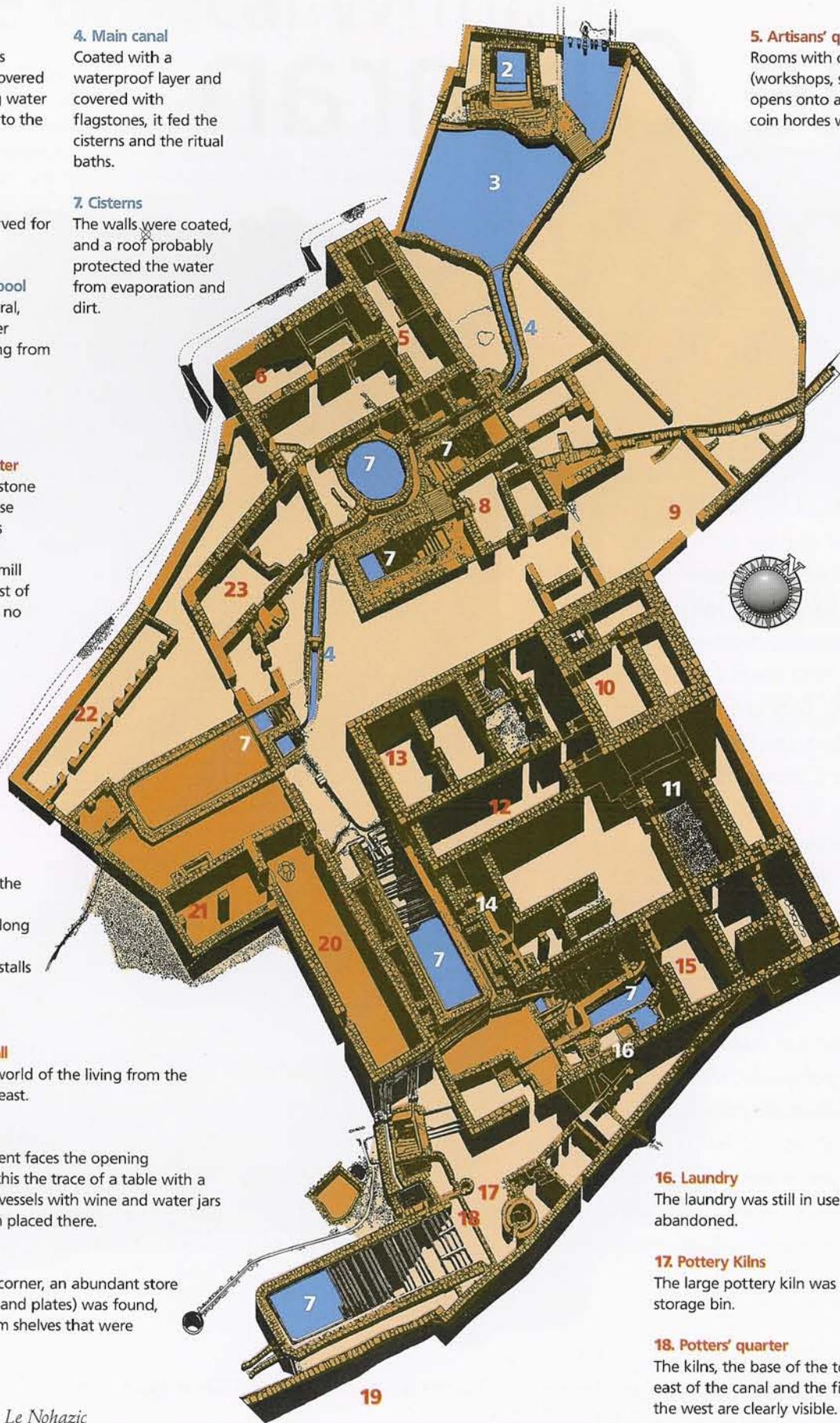


Illustration by G. Le Nohazic