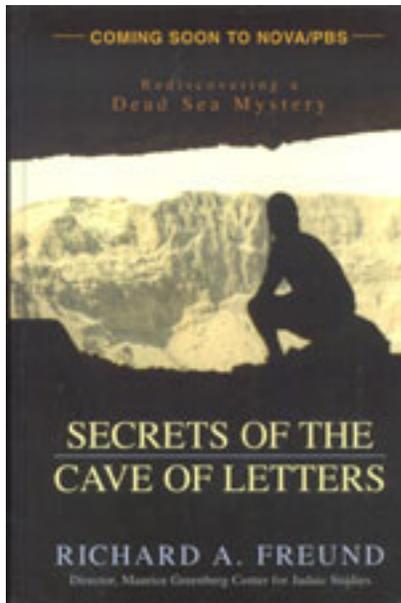


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**Freund, Richard A.**

***Secrets of the Cave of Letters: Rediscovering a Dead Sea Mystery***

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When and by whom was the Cave of Letters of Nahal Hever in the Judean Desert inhabited? It was this issue that motivated the return of an archeological expedition to the cave in 2000–2001, the account of whose excavations is told in this book. This cave became famous when the letters of Bar Kokhba, leader of the Jewish rebellion against Rome during 132–135 C.E., and the documents of Babatha, one of the refugees who stayed there during the rebellion, were discovered there by Yigael Yadin in 1960–61 (*IEJ* 11–12 [1961–62]). Yadin's conclusion was that this cave was inhabited only during the Chalcolithic era (4500–3200 B.C.E.) and later, during the period of the Bar Kokhba rebellion.

Richard Freund cast doubt upon this hypothesis in light of a remarkable discovery made at Bethsaida, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee: a bronze incense shovel bearing a strong resemblance to an incense shovel found by Yadin's expedition to the Cave of Letters in 1960. Both Yadin and the members of Bethsaida expedition were aware that this incense shovel was of the same type as those found in the Roman temples of Pompeii and Herculaneum from the first century C.E. Nevertheless, Yadin identified the incense shovel, among other bronze artifacts found in a treasure trove at the Cave of Letters, as part of the booty from a Roman outpost that had been brought to the cave in the second-

century C.E. The Bethsaida expedition, however, suggested that the bronze artifacts hoard might have been hidden in the cave during the first century C.E. The hypothesis of a first-century inhabitation of the cave was supported by a recollection of Baruch Safrai, a member of the first expedition to the Cave of Letters conducted by Yohanan Aharoni in 1953, of a skeleton of a man, dressed as an Essene, lying under the Bar Kokhba layer.

The issue raised by Freund, and the story of the excavation and hypothesis of the 2000–2001 expedition, are recounted here not as a report of scholarly research but in a popular fashion. He writes: “This book is intended for the non-specialist in archeology and history, and is not intended to be in place of the more common, academic tome that we are working to produce in the coming years” (17). The story told here is indeed a thrilling one; I shall report here its main points and conclude with some critical comments.

As heavy layers of boulders and debris from the roof of the cave had collapsed prior to Bar Kokhba’s time, it was impossible to undertake an archeological excavation of these underneath layers without suitable equipment. Assisted by the modern geological techniques of Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), Magnetometry, and Electrical Resistivity Tomography (ERT) (71–72, 76–79), the 2000–2001 expedition examined the stratigraphy of the cave and the origins of the cave and its geological and habitational history that could be discovered (ch. 2). This modern equipment indicated where the different archeological strata began and ended and also revealed pockets of anomalies in the rock strata where artifacts might be buried. A fiberscope, commonly used to search for survivors and bodies buried in buildings destroyed by earthquakes, was a perfect tool for searching for artifacts in the roof debris that accumulated beneath the floor of the cave and helped the expedition to pinpoint the excavation choices (77). Interesting conclusions concerning the geological formation of the Cave of Letters during the Syrian-African tectonic rift fifty million years ago, and the periodical seismic earthquakes that caused changes in the formation of the cave, are told on pages 77–79.

The goal of the 2000–2001 expedition was not only to locate the different archeological strata where evidence of habitation from earlier periods are to be found but also to figure out how life was conducted in the cave: how air circulated, how water and food might have been brought in, how fires and cooking might have been done, and so forth. The general physical environment of the cave might have been helpful for understanding how long people could survive there, especially refugees who found shelter in the cave, escaping from their enemies, or besieged by them. Caves as shelter for refugees is a well-known phenomenon in the history of the land of Israel, and in the case of the Cave of Letters and the Cave of Horrors situated across Nahal Hever there were Roman camps above these caves that besieged the refugees (86–92).

In order to solve the riddle as to when the cave was inhabited during the course of history and by whom, it is necessary to examine the artifacts and human skeletons found in different locations within the cave and to compare their characteristics with those of other similar objects. These include coins, textile, pottery, metal artifacts and others, written documents such as letters and scrolls, and so on. Although such examinations were performed by earlier expeditions to the Cave of Letters, the members of the 2000–2001 expedition reexamined them, using new information unknown to the former expeditions. The most definitive evidence for an earlier layer of use of the Cave of Letters concerns the treasure trove of bronze artifacts found in the cave. This treasure was found in a niche in Hall A of the cave, near its north entrance, buried some six feet beneath the floor of the cave, under a latrine used by refugees from the Bar Kokhba rebellion. According to Yadin's report (*IEJ* 11 [1961]), a fragmented scroll including the text of a unique version of Ps 15 and shards from a limestone ritual cup were found there, close to the bronze artifacts. Freund found that these data conformed to the information found in item 27 of the *Copper Scroll* from Cave 3 of Qumran (= col. VI, lines 1–5; plates 58–59 in M. Baillet, J. T. Milik, and R. de Vaux, eds., *Les 'petites grottes' de Qumran* [DJD 3; Oxford, 1962], 290–91). According to this text, "In the cave of the column of two openings, facing east at the northern opening is buried at three cubits a *receptacle*. In it (there) is one scroll, underneath (are) 42 measures of treasure" (Freund's translation, 167). The description of the treasure and its location match the findings in the Cave of Letters, as noted by the geoscientists of the 2000–2001 expedition. They found the distinguishing feature of the Cave of Letters to be a natural shaft of stone beneath its two openings (167, cf. 78). Thus, the "Cave of the Column" referred to in the *Copper Scroll* is probably the Cave of Letters.

However, in order to date the treasure found at the northern opening of the cave, one needs to know the date of the *Copper Scroll*, which is itself subject to scholarly controversy. Freund suggests its date on the basis of the location where it was stored in Qumran Cave 3, namely, near its entrance, above the debris of an earthquake, possibly that of 115 C.E., separate from the other scrolls that had been stored inside this cave beneath the debris. His conclusion is that the *Copper Scroll*, listing places where treasure hoards from the Second Temple were stored, must have been written after 70 C.E., after the treasures of artifacts had been safely stored in many of the caves and fortresses mentioned in it. He suggests that the hoard was stored in the Cave of Letters during a period of danger to its treasure, possibly during the rebellion against Trajan (115–117 C.E.), identified in rabbinic literature as the War of Quietos (178–79). If Freund's suggestion is correct, the hoard of bronze artifacts may be from the first century C.E., and its location, six feet beneath the Bar Kokhba stratum, may be evidence for the use of the Cave of Letters prior to the Bar Kokhba rebellion.

Freund does not accept Yadin's suggestion that a Thetis and Achilles motif appears on a large *patera* found in this hoard, clearly a pagan sign, and proves that the bronze artifacts hoard belonged to a Roman outpost in Ein Gedi. Freund claims that this artifact further attests to his suggested dating of the hoard to the first century C.E., as it is repeated in other *paterae* from such first-century sites as Pompeii and Herculaneum and is even found on a panel at the base of the menorah from the temple of Jerusalem shown on the Arch of Titus in Rome.

He found additional evidences for his hypothesis as well. The 2000–2001 expedition found more coins in the cave than did Yadin's expedition. Among these were a Zealot coin from the second year of the first Jewish revolt against Rome (68 C.E.); a silver tetradrachma Vespasian coin from the year 70/71 C.E., struck at Tyre; a Nabatean kingdom coin; and the Emperor Trajan coin. Freund suggests that at least two of these may be indicative of usage of the cave by refugees of the First Jewish Revolt. For other evidences for the inhabitation of the cave during the first century C.E., Freund uses a Herodian lamp, the short version of Ps 15, and radiocarbon dating of some artifacts found in the cave. Some of these are doubtful, as I shall explain further on.

In light of the aforementioned conclusions, Freund raises an interesting issue regarding the burial of the skeletons found in the cave. Most of them were gathered into baskets, where the skulls were separated from the bones of the bodies. Yadin suggested that “[A]ll appear to have been deposited at one time, after having been gathered and put into baskets or wrapped in mats—for lack of ossuaries” (*The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* [Jerusalem, 1963], 1:32). Freund asks, Who gathered the bones and skulls of the dead into the baskets? Were they the people who entered the cave after Bar Kokhba's revolt or perhaps the refugees of Bar Kokhba's time who gathered the bones of former refugees who died in the cave? This issue is as yet unresolved.

The issue raised by Freund, and his hypothesis that the Cave of Letters was inhabited prior to the Bar Kokhba rebellion, are told in a thrilling manner. However, his claims need to be examined by specialists in archaeology. Freund himself suggests various explanations to account for the findings in the cave. He is conscious, for example, of the possibility that the Zealot coin might have been brought to the cave by a refugee from the Bar Kokhba revolt as a memorial object and that the Roman coins that were struck prior to Bar Kokhba's time might have still been in use in his time. His conclusion that the absence of the Davidic superscription at the top of the column and of the opening phrase of verse 3 in the short version of Ps 15 indicates that it is an ancient version is not proven. The preservation of the Davidic superscription of Ps 16 in this fragment proves that the psalms copied in this fragmented scroll are not necessarily of an ancient version. The absence of the opening phrase in verse 3 may be a case of *parablepsis* triggered by

*homoioarkton* of the negative word אֵין (“not”), as verse 2 has three positive verbal phrases parallel to those of verse 3 (see W. C. Bouzard, “The Date of the Psalms Scroll from the Cave of Letters (5/6 HevPs) Reconsidered,” *DSD* 10 [2003]: 324). Freund’s tendency to regress the age of artifacts in the Cave of Letters to the earliest possible dates given by carbon-14 dating may be speculative (226–30) and should be reexamined by experts in this method of dating ancient objects. On the other hand, his suggestion for future examinations of archaeological stratigraphy, artifacts, and bones by elaborate technologies and equipment is useful for drawing conclusions from future archeological excavations.