

Ancient Copper Scroll: Wild Goose Chase or Golden Ticket?

By Dr. Risa Levitt Kohn and Jessica Holmes Chatigny

The Copper Scroll is one of archeology's most intriguing and mysterious documents. Found alongside some 900 other documents known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Copper Scroll has a story fit to be an Indiana Jones movie. While other Dead Sea Scrolls are biblical in nature, or describe the life of the community at Khirbet Qumran, the Copper Scroll describes in detail the glorious treasure—estimated in 1960 to be worth more than \$1,000,000 U.S.—and where that treasure might be found. The text cites 64 locations where over 100 tons of gold and silver, in addition to scrolls and priestly items, were supposedly hidden.

One catch: nothing has been found yet. Why?

The Dead Sea Scrolls are of invaluable literary, historical, and religious significance, yet the Copper Scroll holds as much literary value as a laundry list. The document is composed of 64 “bullets,” each pointing to a location where the treasure might be found. Unfortunately for treasure hunters (and archeologists), many of these specific locations no longer exist: “In the gutter which is in the bottom of the tank...”; “In the cavity of the Old House of Tribute, in the Chain Platform: sixty-five bars of gold.”

The language of the Copper Scroll has been difficult to decipher. While the scroll is written in a form of ancient Hebrew—a language that scholars are familiar with—some words are unknown. Many ancient Hebrew texts are religious documents, and have shaped scholars knowledge of the language. However, the Copper Scroll is decidedly unreligious and contains never-before-seen vocabulary.

Also, the condition of the scroll when found and the rough process of its “unrolling” prevent a perfect reading. The Copper Scroll was discovered in 1952 on an expedition sponsored by the Jordan Department of Antiquities. (Ironically, most of the other scrolls were discovered by Bedouin goat herders, many of whom were looking for treasure.) When discovered, the scroll was in two parts: evidently the thin copper sheet snapped into two sections when it was being rolled up by its composers. After 2000 years in a cave, the metal was badly oxidized and terribly fragile—too brittle to unwind. After five years of debate, scholars decided to open the scroll by cutting the scroll lengthwise, creating crescent-shaped pieces.

Some insist that the treasure could never have been in Qumran. The community was too small. They point to the Second Temple in Jerusalem—the only organization that could command that amount of money (anywhere between 58 and 174 tons of precious metal).

Finally, some say the treasure never existed. That the Copper Scroll is a continuation of a Jewish folkloric tradition that describes how treasures from the First Temple were hidden. Some say that the treasure is too large to be anything but imaginary.

The Copper Scroll, with all its intrigue, ends in an appropriately mysterious manner. Item 64 states, “In a pit adjoining on the north, in a hole opening northward, and buried at its mouth: a copy of this document, with an explanation and their measurements, and an inventory of each

and every thing.” It seems as if this is the greatest of the treasures listed: a promise of a document with more complete information!

While facsimiles of the Copper Scroll have been displayed at other institutions, the San Diego Natural History Museum in cooperation with Jordanian Department of Antiquities will debut a section of the Copper Scroll in the *Dead Sea Scrolls* exhibition (opens June 29, 2007). This marks the first time this scroll has been on view for the public outside of Jordan.

For more information about the exhibition, lectures, and the Dead Sea Scrolls visit www.sdscrolls.org.