

Where Virtual Reality Meets Ancient History



Beginning in June, the San Diego Museum of Natural History will host the largest and most comprehensive exhibit ever mounted on the Dead Sea Scrolls, including a virtual model developed by UCLA scholars that reveals the community that produced some of the most important historical treasures of the Middle East.



Images created by the Qumran Visualization Project in UCLA's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures.

Prepare for a stroll through an ancient world. A highlight of the mammoth exhibit on the Dead Sea Scrolls at the San Diego Natural History Museum is a virtual recreation designed by UCLA scholars of Qumran, the community believed to be the origin of the scrolls about 2,000 years ago.

In “Ancient Qumran: A Virtual Reality Tour,” visitors will be able to explore the archeological site as it originally appeared. In an immersive virtual experience in the Museum’s giant-screen theater, visitors can view the city from outside its walls, on the grounds and “walking” through fully-furnished rooms.

“This project gives visitors the opportunity to see and touch an ancient city,” said William Schniedewind, professor of near eastern languages and cultures and director of the Qumran Visualization Project. “To be able to go into a building digitally and explore it as it actually existed helps everyone appreciate the ancient world and understand what that world was like.”

Most scholars believe the scrolls were prepared by a group that broke away from mainstream Judaism to live a communal life at Qumran. When the Romans invaded Qumran around

68 CE, the community hid their manuscripts in the nearby caves on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea in what is now Israel.

The scrolls were discovered between 1947 and 1956. Among them are some 230 biblical manuscripts dating from 250 BCE to 68 CE that represent nearly every book in the Hebrew Bible. Thousands of fragments were discovered and pieced together into more than 900 separate documents—thus becoming some of the greatest archaeological treasures of the Middle East.

Bringing new life to such formidable historical milestones “creates fascinating experiences for visitors, as well as major benefits for archaeologists,” said Robert Cargill, chief architect and designer of the Qumran Visualization Project, and a Ph.D. student at UCLA. “By seeing an archaeological site recreated in 3-D, we can develop a whole host of questions about ancient civilizations that were never asked before.”

On display at the San Diego Natural History Museum from June 29 through December 31, the Dead Sea Scrolls Exhibition includes the virtual tour of Qumran, 12,000 square feet of displays, and 27 of the scrolls—10 of which are being exhibited for the first time.