The Economist

Test those mysterious codices

# Mistrust, but verify

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WHENEVER discoveries are announced that could possibly be of great importance for religious history, there tend to be blazes of publicity followed by periods of mysterious silence. Such has been the fate of the lead codices, apparently found in a cave in Jordan, whose existence was publicised nearly two years ago. So last August some 38 scholars, mostly from Britain but also from as far afield as Romania and South Korea, wrote an open letter to the *Times* of London, calling on the Jordanian authorities to break their silence and investigate further a collection of objects which have variously been described as the most important find in Biblical archaeology for half a century, as clever fakes or as crude fakes. As the signatories noted, the lack of any news from Amman was "strange" given the excitement they had initially generated. When the objects came to light in 2011, Jordan laid claim to them, and serious Jordanian archaeologists said there were good initial indications of their authenticity and importance. It was widely expected that there would be an announcement about the codices at an international archaeological conference which Jordan hosted in January, but to the disappointment of many participants, no such statement was made.

As *The Economist* reported in April 2011, among the few things that can be said with certainty about these objects is that they have the appearance of ring-bound "books" with up to 15 leaves each; most are made of lead, on which some recurring sets of images and letters, in various scripts, are displayed. At least 16 letters from a paleo-Hebrew script have been identified;

other symbols remain elusive. Two British scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philip Davies and Margaret Barker, have said that if the codices are genuine, they might have belonged to an early community of Hebrew Christians who fled eastwards from Jerusalem to the Jordanian desert. If that were to be proven, it could help fill in some missing links in Jewish and Christian history. Another intriguing hypothesis was aired in the Jewish Chronicle in March 2011, quoting a London-based metallurgist: they could have belonged to early practitioners of Jewish mysticism, something like the Kabbalah.

Since then, the codices have been subjected to a torrent of denunciation and ridicule on the internet, with many bloggers arguing there is a moral duty as well as a scholarly one to expose the objects as fakes. The sceptics' certainty is undented by the fact that very little laboratory analysis of the objects has been published. Peter Thonemann, a classical scholar and historian at Oxford University, has said he was shown an image of a copper codex which was clearly a forgery, containing crude reproductions of publicly available images and Greek writing. He is no less convinced, on the basis of the other images circulated in the media, that the remaining codices are fake, given that they contain similar images. "These are moderately ingenious tourist tat," Mr Thonemann told me, taking an intermediate position between the advocates of "crude" and "sophisticated" forgery. He says he has no objection to metallurgical study but it would be a "less decisive index" of authenticity than is provided by analysis of the content of the letters and images.

One theory, aired in the *Jewish Chronicle*, drew on one of of the few pieces of metallurgical analysis whose results have been made known, a test by Peter Northover of the Department of Materials at Oxford University. After scrutinizing two lead codices, he found that the material used was consistent with the possibility of it being ancient, and that the construction of the objects appeared not to be recent. Since then however he has issued strong warnings against over-interpreting his findings, which he says were published without his permission. His conclusions, he told me, apply only to the two objects he studied. He added that "non-recent" construction might still mean as late as the 19th century; and that in theory it was possible that a small number of old codices inspired the creation of many more modern ones.

Sensibly modest as Mr Northover is, those tantalising hints suggest that the scholars were right to call on the Jordanian authorities to examine the codices more carefully (as laboratories in Jordan are well capable of doing) and share the results with the world. Even a set of 19th-century forgeries would be rather intriguing. And given their supreme confidence, the militant sceptics should surely have no problem with further scientific analysis. From their point of view, it must be a pre-ordained certainty that peer-reviewed laboratory tests in Jordan, or anywhere else, will simply confirm their rightness and give them fresh opportunities to wag their fingers at anybody who took the codices seriously. That makes it slightly puzzling that a couple of the most vociferous sceptics declared that they would have refused, if asked, to sign the letter to the Jordanian authorities asking for more information. From their perspective, perhaps, backing such a request would have implied taking the codices too seriously.

It is surely in everybody's interest that the codices be tested properly. Lead is hard to date, but when it is mixed with other materials impurities emerge, at varying paces, as surface deposits; that can provide some clues about the history of a lead object. Perhaps a cold-war sound-bite is relevant here. During disarmament talks, Ronald Reagan used to exasperate Mikhail Gorbachev by quoting at him, in slightly mispronounced Russian, the saying "*doverai no proverai*"—"trust but verify." An appropriate riposte to the codices sceptics would be a slight variation on that proverb: "mistrust, but verify". If you are as right as you think you are, you surely have nothing to lose.