

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NAS-14
A Man and his Land

3 Yishay St.
Abu Tor
Jerusalem, Israel
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Dear Peter,

For all the angry condemnations and self-serving excuses I've heard this week, I was beginning to think that the opening of the Dayan Collection at the Israel Museum was the most important archaeological event to happen here for the last fifteen years at least. Last night, more than a thousand objects ranging in date from the Neolithic period (c. 7500-4500 BC) to the Byzantine period (4th- 7th centuries AD) were opened to public viewing during an evening of lectures and ceremonies. And while nobody questioned the objects' immense archaeological value, many questioned the way they had come to their display cases from the ground.

The demonstrators standing outside the entrance to the museum held placards that succinctly stated their objections. THE DAYAN COLLECTION IS "HOT" read one of them. ARCHAEOLOGY, NOT RELICOLGY! and CRIME PAYS! read two more. One of the three dozen or so young archaeologists involved in the protest handed out mimeographed copies of the passage from the antiquities law that forbids private excavations and unlicensed sale of ancient artifacts, and which empowers the Department of Antiquities to confiscate illegally obtained antiquities.

Some of the arriving guests dutifully accepted the mimeographed handouts, but few showed any sympathy with the cause. Moshe Dayan, former chief-of-staff, defense and foreign minister-- the man with the black eyepatch who was for a time a symbol of the State of Israel-- is a figure even in death who arouses strong emotions. In this case, the emotions center on his love for collecting archaeological objects, a love so deep that he organized his own, clearly illegal artifact hunting digs. Fifteen years ago, a public outcry had been raised about that activity. And now, with the validation that the museum exhibition gave his collection, the outcry was being raised again.

The guest of honor at the opening was Dayan's widow, Rachel. Arriving in a limosine at the main gate of the museum, elegantly coiffed and jeweled, she glanced toward the demonstrators with obvious disdain. Her feelings were apparently shared by some of the museum curators. Dr. Yaakov Meshorer nervously watched from inside the entrance as TV camera crews illuminated the protesters' placards. His assistant, Dr. Rivka

Merhav, shook her head in simmering anger. Those archaeological trouble-makers, it seemed, were trying to spoil their party.

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Historically speaking, it's difficult to determine precisely when Moshe Dayan first became interested in archaeology, if that is what his passion for collecting can be called. In a recent interview, his first wife, Ruth, recalled that it had come in the context of family outings in the early 1950's, when Dayan first experienced the pleasure of digging at archaeological sites and miraculously discovering ancient pottery.

Even then, of course, the activity was illegal, but Dayan was one of many such archaeological amateurs. Archaeology in Israel had already become something of a public ritual-- not only an academic activity, but also a tangible means of communion between the people and the land. But few archaeology buffs in Israel had the resources and influence that Dayan possessed. As chief-of-staff, he could mobilize military equipment and personnel to help him in his hobby. And selecting sites carefully, with the discernment of an experienced excavator, he gradually filled his suburban Tel Aviv home with his vast collection of antiquities.

Through the years, Dayan's archaeological passion, like so many of his other personal excesses, was overlooked by his political allies and loudly condemned by his political foes. And with a larger-than-life figure like Dayan, the sometimes exaggerated tales of his archaeological adventures became a part of the legend of the man. In 1956, so one story goes, Dayan commissioned a military helicopter to remove a massive granite stele from the ancient Egyptian temple of Serabit al-Khadem in Sinai. At other sites, it was reported, he didn't hesitate to use army bulldozers to speed the work along. The most famous story of all certainly wasn't legend. During his "excavations" in the burial caves at Azor near Tel Aviv, the underground chamber in which he was working suddenly collapsed, nearly killing the then chief-of-staff.

A fear for Dayan's personal safety was not the prime objection to his digging. There seemed sometimes to be lucrative business deals involved. Despite his innocent protestations of an unsullied love for the country's ancient heritage-- which he described at length in his book Living with the Bible-- a number of Dayan's pieces, some of which were specially autographed and designated as coming from his personal collection, began to filter onto the international antiquities market.

The biggest uproar, if it can be called that, came in 1971 with the publication of a series of articles exposing Dayan's unauthorized and unlicensed antiquities dealings and the refusal of the authorities to make any attempt to stop them. The articles were written by the popular novelist and political gadfly Dan Ben-Amotz, who with his acid wit and flair for self-promotion, submitted a complaint to the Tel Aviv police to investigate Dayan's dealings and, if necessary, confiscate his loot. But the police refused to do anything, and Dayan went on with his digs. "I think morals are all right," Dayan was reported to have said in response to the articles, "but what I can't stand are the people who have to preach them all the time."

At the time of Dayan's death in 1982, his collection was enormous, occupying a specially-built storeroom and restoration workshop attached to his home. Some of the larger pieces-- architectural fragments, ancient millstones, and clay storejars-- were impressively displayed in his outdoor "archaeological garden." Yet perhaps the most impressive aspect of Dayan's archaeological career was the final disposition of his treasure. Despite his constant assurances that, in the end, his collection would be given to the Israel Museum, his will did not mention any such gift. The collection was, instead, placed on public sale and purchased for the museum by a wealthy patron, with the sale proceeds of a million dollars going to Mrs. Rachel Dayan. So under these circumstances of insult added to years of archaeological injury, it's easy to understand why some people were upset on the evening of the gala opening of "The Dayan Collection: A Man and his Land."

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I'll have to admit that although I'd heard all about the extent of Dayan's archaeological collection, when I entered the exhibition hall I was astounded by the quantity and beauty of the objects. Carefully arranged on dramatically lit platforms and glass cases were dozens of complete bowls, jugs, juglets, storejars, incense stands, plates, dishes, stone mortars, goblets, and chalices in a dazzling variety of shapes, colors, and textures-- presented with the calculated impressiveness of chic housewares store.

Other, less pleasant metaphors came to mind as I wandered past the display cases of the delicate figurines of gods, goddesses, animals, and monsters; alabaster, bronze, glass, and faience vessels; rare house-shaped burial containers of the Chalcolithic period; finely carved limestone busts; and huge, grotesque clay mummy cases. Was this a police display of the loot of a gang of antiquities burglars? No. It was the work of one man. My amazement must have been evident, for an archaeologist who had chosen to ignore the protest and join the celebration approached me and smiled slyly. "You know," he told me quietly, "there were plenty of items that never got to this display."

The small protest outside had clearly not dampened the attendance; the hundreds of invited guests filled the auditorium of the museum to listen to a lecture by Professor Trude Dothan of the Hebrew University on her excavations at the site of Deir el-Balah, from which-- before her excavations-- Dayan had obtained his 22 mummy cases. Outside the auditorium the overflow crowd watched the lecture on closed-circuit TV, while others milled around the objects themselves, and yet others gravitated toward the tables where glossy "Dayan Collection" catalogues and posters were being sold.

Dr. Martin Weyl, the director of the Israel Museum, stood nearby in high spirits. Chatting with friends and patrons, he seemed gratified by the turnout and untroubled by second thoughts. "I think the controversy is wonderful," he told me with the self-assurance of an off-Broadway impresario on opening night. "Outside, the younger generation is questioning the moral standards of their elders. That's how culture matures and develops. It's my goal to provoke discussion like this."

"But don't you think this exhibit condones illegal activity?" Weyl shook his head, almost puzzled by my question. "Not at all. My job is to collect and exhibit. The Department of Antiquities gave permission for the sale of the collection. It's not my job to enforce the antiquities laws."

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After the lecture had ended, the crowd thronged into an open courtyard to hear welcoming speeches by Weyl and Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek, himself a collector, who noted pugnaciously that he wanted "to thank the people who have made such a fuss about this exhibit for stimulating interest and attendance tonight." Rachel Dayan, still radiant, greeted friends and admirers. And even Yael Dayan, the often outspoken and critical daughter of the country's greatest antiquities collector had to admit that, despite the controversy, she found the event to be "touching."

By 9:30, the exhibit halls were almost deserted and the protesters outside had disappeared into the cold darkness of the Jerusalem night. A few guests still lingered, perhaps for different reasons-- to continue to gaze at the treasures or to continue to be seen. Among them was Dan Ben-Amotz, the writer who had caused the uproar with the publication of his articles about Dayan's antiquities robbing fifteen years ago. Now heavier, greyer, and even more cynical, Ben-Amotz was himself a relic, an historical figure unsure of what his historical significance is. He was at the exhibit to write a newspaper story about his impressions in the present and in retrospect, but he admitted that the right angle for such a story was difficult to find.

"When I wrote those stories," he told me, "I thought Dayan's antiquities robbing was a dangerous trend. If he was above the law, then every public official, from the Prime Minister to a postal clerk might expect special treatment, according to his rank. But it didn't happen. Sure, some army officers and politicians started collecting, influenced by Dayan's example. But that's a problem of archaeology, not society, and to tell you the truth, it doesn't interest me that much."

"But there was one good thing that came out of those articles," Ben-Amotz added, placing the responsibility for that, too, on Dayan. "I was mysteriously dropped from the army roster and I haven't had to serve a single day of reserve duty since then." The image of Moshe Dayan, still larger than life in death, continues to grow and to gain unexpected facets, especially on a night like this. A Man and his Land. Or, as one of the now vanished placards had read, A Man and his Booty. Moshe Dayan would have smiled. Even laughed.

Best Regards,

Neil

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