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A Modern Cult of Relics

3 Yishay St.  
Abu Tor  
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock St.  
Hanover, New Hampshire, USA

Dear Peter,

If you want to buy a piece of history, Israel is the place to come. The 61 licensed antiquities shops, conveniently located at hotels and tourist centers throughout the country, offer genuine archaeological artifacts to suit every pocketbook. For about \$30, you can buy a clay oil lamp from the time of King David or a small bronze coin from the time of Jesus; ancient jewelry, painted pottery vessels, and marble statues are considerably more. Some come impressively mounted on olive-wood display stands; others are neatly encased in Plexiglas. But whatever their price and packaging, antiquities are among the most popular souvenirs. They offer visitors to Israel an often irresistible opportunity to take home a tangible token of the biblical past.

This situation presents a sharp contrast with that of other countries of the region, where archaeological remains are no less plentiful. Greece, in its longstanding campaign to regain possession of the Elgin Marbles from the British Museum, has made the prohibition of antiquities sale and export part of its patriotic policy. Turkey, with its baggage searches of tourists leaving the country and its ominous warning signs at all archaeological sites, has gone even further in its enforcement measures. And Egypt, long plundered by western visitors in search of pharaonic knick-knacks, is now making an attempt to stop the outward flow of relics, even if that decision comes a hundred years too late.

In recent decades, the issue of private antiquities dealing and export has become a matter of concern to archaeologists all over the world. As early as 1970, in response to reports of widespread illicit digging for saleable artifacts and the resultant destruction of archaeological sites in many countries, the members of UNESCO drafted and adopted an international convention aimed at discouraging the profitable trade in cultural property. That struggle is a difficult one and has achieved something less than total success. But the larger ethical issue at stake has at least been made clear in many archaeological circles: to condone largescale trade in antiquities obtained from questionable or unknown sources is to condone the unrestricted plunder of the world's cultural heritage.

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The State of Israel faces an uncomfortable dilemma with regard to

Neil Silberman is an Institute Fellow studying the political and cultural impact of current archaeological research in the Middle East.

private antiquities dealing-- not only because the sale of ancient artifacts to tourists brings in substantial foreign exchange revenues every year. The image of the rebirth of a modern nation in an ancient land is an important, symbolic expression of Israel's identity and reason for existence, and every time an ancient artifact is bought or presented to a foreign visitor, that message is succinctly conveyed. And this is not just a matter for run-of-the-mill tourists; the romantic juxtaposition of past and present is encouraged even at the highest levels of government. Margaret Thatcher, here on an official visit last May, was clearly touched to receive a Bronze Age Canaanite scimitar from the Speaker of the Knesset and an Iron Age Israelite oil jar from Prime Minister Peres.

No one was too concerned at the time where those diplomatic gifts had come from, but the chances are they had come a long way. Purchased from licensed antiquities dealers, they had probably passed through the hands of several middlemen-- each time rising in value-- since the time of their discovery by some anonymous peasant who had the luck to stumble upon an ancient tomb cave. And since several hundred such tombs throughout the country are opened and plundered every year to feed the antiquities market, it's not hard to understand why a number of Israeli archaeologists have embarked on an outspoken campaign to change the country's antiquities law.

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The Emperor Constantine is really the guilty party; from the time that he recognized Christianity as an accepted religion in the Roman Empire in the early 4th century AD, the small province of Palaestina became the "Holy Land" for an enormous mass of faithful and all its ancient remains were imbued with a corresponding holiness. The Jews had, of course, for centuries held a special devotion to the country, but it was manifested in their recitation of national history and in their custom of pilgrimage. For the Christians, history and pilgrimage continued to be important, but they were now overlaid with a devotion to tangible relics as well.

Bones of saints, garments and shrouds of New Testament figures, even the cross on which Jesus was crucified were discovered, bought and sold, and highly prized for their spiritual and healing power. By the end of the 4th century, the export or "translation" of relics from the Holy Land had reached enormous proportions. Bones, stones, and ancient linen became objects of devotion in churches and wealthy homes throughout Europe. And pieces of the most precious relic of all-- the True Cross-- were carried as far afield as Italy, North Africa, Asia Minor, and Gaul.

To a large extent, this international market in relics was encouraged by church officials, for it became an important source of revenue for the monastic and religious establishments in the Holy Land. There was also a wider political significance, for the popularity of the cult of relics reinforced the prestige and influence of Palestine in the theological controversies that became matters of state in the Byzantine Empire. But the scale of export eventually created a problem; the rel-

ics of the Holy Land were not an easily renewable resource. Even the True Cross itself, long a dependable source of sacred splinters, was beginning to lose substance by the beginning of the 5th century. Since a halt to all export-- and the power it brought-- was unthinkable, the bishop of Jerusalem wisely proclaimed a miracle: the True Cross, he reported to the faithful, had the wondrous capacity of regenerating itself.

Whatever the historical comparison between the Byzantine cult of relics and the modern antiquities market, no one is talking about miraculous regeneration in Israel these days. For the staff members of the Department of Antiquities concerned with the protection of archaeological sites, the damage has long passed the point of crisis. Whole districts-- particularly on the West Bank-- have been ravaged. Caves, settlement sites, and cemeteries have been systematically plundered for the saleable artifacts they can yield.

Additional funds have recently been made available to the Department of Antiquities for an ambitious enforcement campaign. Intensive patrols of archaeological sites have resulted in the arrest of many antiquities robbers, though the risks in this cat-and-mouse game are becoming increasingly high. Violence is always a danger when a group of illicit diggers is cornered in an underground tomb in the middle of the night. Picks and shovels can easily become weapons when someone's livelihood is at stake.

During the last two years, with the heightened involvement of the Department of Antiquities in the attempt to prevent illegal excavation, its officers have learned a great deal about the mechanics of the modern antiquities trade. In some areas, the activity is well-coordinated, with local middlemen, aware of which types of artifacts are currently popular, hiring gangs of laborers to attack specific sites. The trail then leads to the big cities-- sometimes in vans filled with ancient pottery, as the Department of Antiquities has discovered-- where the loot is delivered to the antiquities shops.

The licensed antiquities dealers in this country are, at least legally, prohibited from obtaining new merchandise from such illicit sources; only those objects already in private collections are permitted for sale. The dealers are required to maintain a detailed inventory of their merchandise, with a record of the source from which each item was obtained. But it's easy enough to falsify the record and merely claim that the newly obtained antiquities have been in private hands for decades. Since there is no detailed list of private collections in the country, previous ownership is next to impossible to disprove.

That's why even the most dedicated officers of the Department of Antiquities know that they are dealing with only the symptoms of a much larger problem in their arrest and occasional conviction of antiquities thieves. As long as a guest at the Tel Aviv Hilton, or even a transit passenger browsing in the duty-free shop in the airport can buy an ancient souvenir of his or her trip to Israel, the free flow of money resulting from such purchases will continue to help destroy the country's archaeological heritage.

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The members of the governing body of archaeological activity in Israel, the Archaeological Council, has been placed in a difficult position by some of their colleagues. A growing number of archaeologists are now demanding that the country's antiquities shops be closed. But the Archaeological Council, legally empowered to advise the Minister of Education on archaeological policy, has been hesitant to act on this matter. Its 26 members, drawn from universities, museums, and public institutions, represent a wide spectrum of interests, not all of which are, strictly speaking, scholarly.

Some of the interests are personal: a number of the members of the Council have been helped in their careers by being given permission to publish especially important artifacts from private collections. Other interests are professional: the representatives of Israel's museums are naturally interested in encouraging the continued donation of ancient objects from private benefactors. Over the years, therefore, a cosy if quiet relationship has been developed between the collectors and dealers and the archaeological establishment. Many illicitly excavated artifacts have been made available for study and/or exhibition with little or no investigation of their source. And the Archaeological Council has repeatedly vetoed any proposed changes to the antiquities law.

Last spring, the force of public opinion finally upset this arrangement. The controversy surrounding the Israel Museum's purchase of the Dayan Collection provided a springboard for action. As I wrote at the time, a group of young Israeli archaeologists organized and led a public campaign to protest the official legitimization of "relicology," as they called it-- so clearly typified by the late defense minister's questionable financial dealing with antiquities and his own clearly illegal artifact-hunting digs.

Their boycott and picketing of the gala opening of the Dayan Collection received wide media attention, but their crusade against antiquities dealing in Israel didn't stop there. In the following months, they succeeded in convincing a majority of their colleagues that great harm was being done to the ancient remains of the country by the sheer scale of the antiquities trade. They circulated petitions, lobbied politicians, and finally achieved through the force of peer pressure what mere moralizing had never done. This summer, when the Archaeological Council held its meeting, a resolution was passed recommending that the sale and export of antiquities from Israel be banned.

With that vote, the legislative machinery was set in motion. Taking his cue from the Archaeological Council, the Minister of Education instructed his legal counsel to begin drafting a new law. Hearings were scheduled in the Knesset, the younger archaeologists savored their triumph, and the future of the country's antiquities dealers looked bleak. Unfortunately, the would-be reformers failed to realize that there was more to the issue than just archaeological preservation. The sale and export of antiquities has a definite social function in

modern Israel. And it was on that principal that their opponents soon mounted a counterattack.

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The preliminary hearing of the Knesset Education Committee on the new legislation was something of a disaster, at least from the reformers' point of view. First, representatives of the Department of Antiquities and the Association of Archaeologists in Israel presented their by-now familiar litany of reports of destroyed sites and fears for the future of the country's ancient heritage. But after they had finished, the committee members heard an equally emotional plea. One of the senior curators of the Israel Museum expressed his belief that a ban on antiquities trading would, itself, do considerable damage. As long as the antiquities shops were subject to government supervision, he argued, there was at least the possibility that archaeologists would be aware of new discoveries.

What about the Dead Sea Scrolls? They, too, were purchased from illegal diggers. Was it wrong to make every effort to obtain them for the museum and the scholarly world? Antiquities trading is a fact of life, the curator contended, that is impossible to eradicate, even in countries with draconian antiquities laws. If the shops in Israel were to be closed by legal order, he warned, the trading would merely continue underground.

In the weeks that followed the hearing, several prominent public figures proclaimed their strong opposition to any change in the antiquities law. The vote on the Archaeological Council had not been unanimous, and three of the Council's most well-known members-- Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek, Haifa industrialist Reuben Hecht, and former Supreme Court judge Haim Etzioni (all of them private antiquities collectors)-- lent the full weight of their prestige to the maintenance of the archaeological status quo.

Mayor Kollek, in particular, has never been known to back off from a political fistfight, and in his position as chairman of the board of directors of the Israel Museum, he has always viewed the archaeological reformers with disdain. Last spring, at the opening of the Dayan Collection, he characterized their protests as "the yapping of small dogs." Now the threat was more serious, and he went on the attack. In a recent published interview, he put forth a counter-proposal with something for everyone; his latest idea is that instead of prohibiting antiquities dealing, the State of Israel should become an antiquities dealer itself.

By placing on sale the thousands of duplicate pottery vessels in its storerooms, the Department of Antiquities could, Kollek believes, achieve three valuable objectives at once. The massive influx of artifacts on the world market would, according to the mayor, stimulate international interest in the archaeology of Israel, lower the market prices to the point that much of the present robbing would be unprofitable, and provide a new source of funding for the preservation and

protection of archaeological remains. This proposal obviously raises some troubling ethical issues, since it's questionable if government employees have the right to dispose of national cultural property, much less determine its going price. But it has also been rightly recognized as a tactical maneuver by many political observers, for Kollek has, at the same time, taken a more direct approach to heading off any change in the antiquities laws.

His personal intervention with his old friend Yitzhak Navon, the Minister of Education, has resulted in the sudden suspension of the legislative process. The ministry counsel has been instructed to stop, at least for the time being, the drafting of the new antiquities regulations. And with the support of Hecht, Etzioni, and virtually all of the country's museum curators, Kollek has called for a new meeting of the Archaeological Council, to reconsider the previous vote.

The issue is still far from settled and the future of the antiquities trade in Israel is unclear. For despite the continuing pressure of the archaeological reformers, the sale and veneration of relics remains a part of the modern Israeli scene. And as the current controversy has shown, what's really at stake is a dispute over the past's proper role in the present: whether antiquities should be viewed as a precious, finite resource, or whether, like the bones, shrouds, and True Cross of the Byzantine period, their usefulness lies in how widely they are dispersed.

Best Regards,

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