

Have Pillaged Iraqi Artifacts Ended Up in a Museum in Israel?

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With ISIS carrying out rampages through archaeologically sensitive areas of Iraq, a pertinent question to ask now is what group's cultural heritage in the Middle East is being preserved, and whose is being destroyed.

Over the past couple of weeks shocking reports have surfaced concerning mass destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage at two locations—the museum in Mosul and the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud, located in northern Iraq. Both incidents were perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State. The one at the Mosul museum was recorded on [video](#).

But destruction with sledge hammers, bonfires, and heavy equipment isn't the only threat to priceless objects thousands of years old. Artifacts are also being illegally excavated and pilfered on a massive scale. An enormous black market in stolen antiquities in fact has arisen in the last four years since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, and the general rule of thumb seems to be if it's small enough to be carted off, take it and sell it on the black market; if it's too large to move, then smash it to pieces. This is what we've seen repeatedly in Syria and Iraq since ISIS took over large swaths of both countries.

By the way, the trade in looted antiquities seems to be quite lucrative, with some of these items fetching in the [hundreds of thousands](#) of dollars, while the total black market trade has been estimated at roughly [\\$7 billion](#) per year.

This is not just Iraq's cultural heritage that is at stake, of course; it's all of humanity's. If we think of human history collectively as a lepidopteron, drifting lazily from the flower of the Neolithic past, into the age of proto-writing, and finally early recorded history, then Syria, Iraq and the Fertile Crescent stand out perhaps unique among regions of the earth. This is where human civilization got started, and the looting and destruction of these antiquities is a loss to all of us.

Interestingly, an exhibition entitled "By the Rivers of Babylon" has now opened at a museum in Israel, and among its exhibits are a large number of ancient Babylonian cuneiform tablets—110 of them altogether. These tablets belong to a London-based Israeli collector by the name of David Sofer, but a controversy has sprung up, since there seems to be some question about the provenance, or origin, of the artifacts.

The tablets are said to be some 2,500 years old and reportedly shed light on the biblical Israelites during their exile in Babylon (in what is, of course, today Iraq). Sofer claims he purchased the tablets in the 1990s from a person who supposedly obtained them through public auction some 20 years previous. However, he reportedly has refused to name the

person he bought them from.

The rise of ISIS has made it extremely perilous for archaeologists to continue to work in Iraq and Syria, and most expeditions have in fact come to a halt. But in Israel these days things are a bit different.

Unhindered by ISIS marauders, the Israeli Antiquities Authority has undertaken archaeological excavations in numerous areas of the country, including [one begun last year](#) in the occupied West Bank, where the objective is to recover artifacts dating back to the King David era. Finds of this nature would, by some views at any rate, help validate Israel's "3000-year-old land claim," as it's been called, and thus you won't be surprised to learn that this isn't the only such archaeological dig going on—not by a long shot.

In fact, you can go to the website of the [Israeli Antiquities Authority](#), where no less than 19 separate excavations are listed as currently active for the year 2015.

So what to make of it all? That's a good question. All I can really say is that it seems enormous efforts are being expended to recover and safeguard Jewish cultural heritage—this, ironically, as everyone else's cultural heritage in the Middle East is being looted and destroyed.

At any rate, here is an article recently published about the museum exhibition in Israel featuring the artifacts in Sofer's possession.

Museum Embroiled in Looting Row

[New Historian](#)

A new exhibition in Jerusalem is causing heated debate.

The exhibition, 'By The Rivers of Babylon', at the Bible Lands Museum, displays some spectacular examples of ancient Babylonian tablets. On show for the first time, the 2,500-year-old clay tablets written in cuneiform present artefacts from an important time in the Middle East.

Experts note that the collection of 110 clay tablets provides the earliest written evidence of the Biblical exile of the Judeans in the area of modern-day Iraq. As such, the Babylonian tablets provide fresh insight into a formative period of early Judaism.

Filip Vukosavovic, a curator for the exhibition, says the tablets complete a 2,500-year puzzle. Many Judeans returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonians allowed them to in 539 BCE, but some remained in the area to build a Jewish community that lasted for two millennia.

"The descendants of those Jews only returned to Israel in the 1950s," Vukosavovic said. As a result, the tablets provide a unique insight into a little known period of Jewish history.

Controversy has surrounded the exhibition however, as the tablets are the product of a modern, shadowy process. The recently chaotic climate in Iraq and Syria has led to the rampant theft of the area's archaeological heritage. Widespread looting has led to the international antiquities markets being stocked with cuneiform tablets.

Many museums have promised not to exhibit artefacts that may have been looted, as part of an effort to discourage the illicit trade in antiquities. Cuneiform inscriptions, however, are a notable exception to this. Since 2004, cuneiform artefacts with no record of where or how they were unearthed have been allowed to be transported, in order to be examined by scholars. This is done on the condition that Iraqi authorities give their consent, and that the tablets are eventually returned to Iraq.

Some argue that these precious objects, some of which are the earliest examples of writing in the world, could be forever lost if they are not looked after by conservators.

“We are not interested in anything that is illegally acquired or sneaked out,” said Amanda Weiss, director of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem. “But it is the role of a museum to protect these pieces,” she added. “It’s what we are here for.”

It has been claimed that the Islamic State extremist group and other militants are part-funding their campaigns through the illegal trafficking of historic artefacts. Trafficking and looting have, however, been going on for a long time. Archaeologists were first alerted to the problem during the first Gulf War, when Western antiquities markets were flooded with cuneiform artefacts.

London-based collector David Sofer, who owns the cuneiform collection currently exhibited in the Bible Lands Museum, has denied his artefacts were trafficked. He said he had bought the tablets legally in the United States in the 1990s; and the tablets had previously been obtained from public auctions in the 1970s.

The exhibition at the Bible Lands Museum allows the public to see some remarkable artefacts and to learn more about an important part of Jewish history. What must not be overlooked, however, is the damage which can be caused by illicitly-obtained artefacts.

A little bit more on the Bible Lands Museum and Sofer’s collection of cuneiform tablets can be found [here](#). The article focuses especially on a symposium entitled “Jerusalem in Babylonia” held at the museum in early February, asserting that the tablets provide “new insights into the social and economic life of the Judeans...in their own community of Al Yahudu (Jewtown) and their interrelationships with and assimilation to their West Semitic and Babylonian neighbors.”

Another article on the museum display is [here](#) and includes the following (emphasis added):

Sofer said a few tablets from the collection were displayed in a New York museum and a Los Angeles museum in 2013, and their import and export in the U.S. was properly reported to U.S. authorities. He would not name the two museums, or the person who sold them to him.

“These things would be lost, and wouldn’t be recognized for what they are” if he hadn’t bought them, Sofer said.

As common as cuneiform tablets are, few have been as celebrated as those on display in Jerusalem.

More on David Sofer (or someone from Israel going by the same name, at any rate) can be found [here](#) in an L.A. Times article from 1991. It seems he and a fellow Israeli, Nahum Vaskevitch, were implicated in insider trading in 1987. While the Sofer named in the article appears to have reached a settlement in his own case, Vaskevitch went on to be named in a 45-count indictment accusing him of conspiracy and violation of US insider trading laws from 1984-87.

A [New York Times article](#) on Sofer from 1987 includes a quote describing him as “a financial wizard, a genius manipulator with brilliant ideas in everything financial,” and reports that he made his fortune through the Jordan Exploration and Investment Company. The company engaged in oil development in the Sinai in the 1970s, yet the same article goes on to also mention investments in real estate in Israel, “including interests in such choice property as the Dizengoff Center shopping mall in Tel Aviv and the Ben Yehuda arcade in Jerusalem, as well as in hotels and other interests.”

Two additional articles, both from 2008—one [here](#) in YNet and the another [here](#) in Haaretz—describe a controversy which arose over a Sofer-owned property, a highly prized piece of Jerusalem real estate known as the Villa Salameh. The rightful owners of this property were a Palestinian Christian, Constantine Salameh, and his family, who completed construction on the villa in 1935.

But in 1948 the family left Israel and the property was seized by the new Israeli state under the so-called Absentee Property Law. The government of Belgium also entered the picture, leasing the property for its consulate in Jerusalem. But instead of paying rent to the Israelis, the Belgians made a decision apparently based upon conscience and sent their rent payments directly to the Salameh family, who by this time were living in Egypt.

However, in 1983 Sofer (or, again, someone by that name) acquired the property for a fraction of its worth and sued the Belgian government for full payment of rent. The case was decided in an Israeli court. Fortunately the Salameh family had some political clout and was able to negotiate a settlement awarding them \$700,000 as compensation for their lost property—a small fraction of its total value.

“The man (Salameh) sought to appeal his status as an absentee and a discussion began about his case,” said former Israeli Justice Minister Moshe Nissim. “We reached the conclusion that instead of being in a situation in which all the property would be registered in his name, it would be worth the state’s while to purchase Salameh’s vast property – which already then was worth millions of dollars – for a pittance.”

Quite an interesting story, to be sure, but what does it have to do with the theft of archaeological artifacts going on today? Maybe nothing. Maybe a lot.

There has of course been abundant evidence of Israeli support for terrorist rebels in Syria (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), for instance) and it has been noted that neither ISIS nor Al-Nusra have launched attacks against Israel, even though the latter, in particular, seems to be active in the Golan Heights very close to Israel’s border.

And not only do Israel and Al-Nusra not attack each other, but Israel has even transported wounded terrorists across the border for medical treatment in Israel.



Most people seem to be of the opinion that the Jewish state's motivation in all this is its desire for regime change in Syria, but are there perhaps are a few lesser-discussed fringe benefits as well?

Back in May of 2003, after the fall of Baghdad and the looting of Iraq's national museum, a large trove of Jewish communal documents, Torah fragments as well as public records dating back several centuries, were discovered in a flooded basement and taken to the United States for restoration and safeguarding. Iraqis were given assurances that the collection would be returned to them at a later date.

Eventually the summer of 2014 was set as the target date for when the restored documents would be handed back over, but this got sidetracked in [late 2013](#) when a [campaign was launched](#) to have the entire collection remain in the US...or possibly transferred to Israel.

It is, after all, *Jewish* heritage, so the argument went, and since there aren't many Jews left in Iraq today, why on earth should the collection go back there?

Initially the position of US officials was that America would honor its commitment and return the collection to Iraq. But then in the summer of 2014, ISIS took over large parts of the country, including the city of Mosul, and in September it was announced that highlights of the archive, rather than going back to Iraq, would be taken upon a [tour of US cities](#).

The plot thickened further in January of 2015 when it was reported that [one of the artifacts](#), a 200-year-old Torah scroll, had not actually been taken to the US at all, but rather instead had been deposited at the Israeli Embassy in Jordan—and from there it made its way into Israel.



Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman holds the Torah scroll that was spirited out of Iraq by US forces in May of 2003.

Reportedly the scroll is now housed in a synagogue attached to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and a ceremonial "Torah inauguration" is said to have been held on January 22.

By all accounts the text of the scroll had been copied onto a deer skin parchment using concentrated pomegranate juice as ink. Supposedly the use of deer skin was unusual, as

most of the Torah scrolls at the time in question were comprised of cow parchment.

In any event, the disposition of the scroll, and its ending up in Israel, have prompted accusations of [collaboration](#) on the theft of Iraqi heritage by the US and Israel.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Iraqi Jewish archive purportedly remains in “safe hands” in the US.

Alas, the same cannot be said of Iraq’s, or humanity’s, “non-Jewish” heritage, as it were, the destruction of which continues at an alarming pace. The attacks upon the Mosul Museum and the ancient city of Nimrud, as well as the earlier ransacking and burning of documents at the [Mosul library](#)—these and other incidents like them exact a dreadful toll. They are, in essence, “taking us back to the dark ages,” as an [Iraqi official](#) recently described it.

And it doesn’t seem to be letting up.

Just within the past several days news has surfaced of destruction at two more sites, [Khorsabad](#), located 12 miles northeast of Mosul, and [Hatra](#), also in the general vicinity of Mosul though 68 miles to the southwest. Iraq’s Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities has confirmed reports of ISIS attacks at both sites, though the extent of the damage is unclear at this time.

Deliberate destruction of cultural heritage by belligerent parties in war is of course not unprecedented. But clearly it is now being carried by ISIS to levels heretofore unseen.

“They are killing the diversity of this region,” says [Hélène Sader](#), an archaeologist at the American University of Beirut. “This is ethnic cleansing. You throw the people out, erase their history, and you can claim they were never there.”

Protection of cultural property is covered under several international treaties, including the [1954 Hague Convention](#), though [many critics](#) are now saying that the laws are not tough enough and need to be strengthened considerably.

With growing public outrage at the destruction now occurring in Iraq, chances are probably good we will see some toughening of international law on the matter. But the question is whether or not individual nations can muster the political will to adopt rigid enforcement of any new measures should they pass—and [part of the problem](#) in *that* regard seems to be complicity on the part of certain museums and auction houses, if not in the black market trade itself, at least insofar as knowingly accepting unprovenanced artifacts.

As long as someone is making a profit or benefiting in some way, and as long as the geopolitical interests of certain powerful nations are served by continuing the conflict in the Middle East, the looting and destruction are not likely to let up anytime soon.

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