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There is no Looting in this Country. Gatekeepers and the Quest for Qualitative Data

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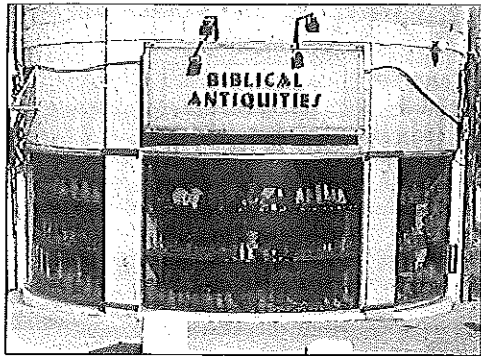


There is No Looting in this Country

Gatekeepers and the Quest for Qualitative Data

MORAG M KERSEL
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"There is no looting in this country" were the first words from my interviewee, a government employee. The next words—"I am not sure why we are meeting"—left me wondering why I was there. I thought I was meeting with a representative of the anti-looting unit to discuss government initiatives to protect archaeological sites from plunder. If there was no looting in that country then my research question was moot. This individual fit John Barnes' (*Who Should Know What?* 1980) classic definition of a gatekeeper: "certain persons or institutions linked to a research situation to allow or deny the researcher access to sources of information." By no means my first, or last, exchange with a gatekeeper, this was the first time that I encountered an outright denial regarding looting; the object of my inquiry.

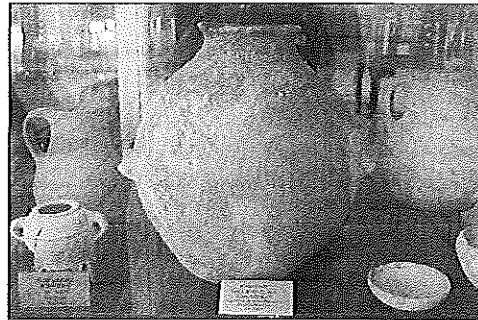


Biblical antiquities. Photo courtesy Morag M Kersel

While investigating the impact of the demand for artifacts on the archaeological landscape of Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories, I encounter gatekeepers. In my attempt to introduce solid qualitative data to the protracted debate concerning whether or not legal markets serve as potential deterrents to the illicit trafficking in archaeological material, many aspects of this fieldwork are dependent on the interactions between the interviewer (me) and the stakeholders with competing claims to the market in ancient antiquities. Often these exchanges are influenced, orchestrated, thwarted, or facilitated by gatekeepers, individuals and institutions who could affect my fieldwork.

Gatekeeping is about controlling access—access to

information, data, people, sites and knowledge. Gaining access to the various stakeholders in the antiquities trade is based on credibility—personal, intellectual, professional. My own credibility lies in my role as an archaeologist in the region for over fifteen years, one familiar with the landscape, the legal history of the trade, government employees, and many other archaeologists. Before even venturing into the field there I encountered institutional gatekeepers—at the level of the university.

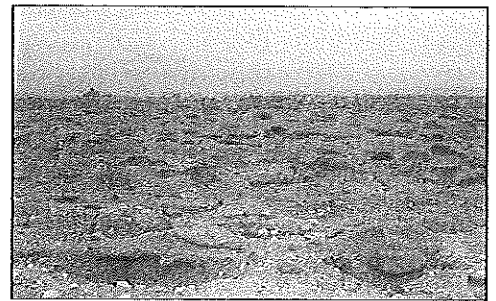


Antiquities for sale in Jerusalem. Photo courtesy Morag M Kersel

For this research I applied for (and received) IRB approval from no less than four institutions; each IRB committee had its own specific queries and gatekeeping challenges, despite national guidelines on IRB protocols. Although I take no names or identifiers, make no audio recordings, and rely mainly on handwritten notes, the exchange between two individuals is not anonymous. Interviewees convey sensitive information about illegal aspects of the trade in antiquities and written consent from participants is not always feasible, and may act as a deterrent to future participation. From the outset this element of consent was acknowledged and was incorporated into the research methodology. The issue of written consent (or lack thereof) was a sticking point for two of the IRB committees reviewing my research protocol. These review boards had to be convinced that the research was ethical despite the lack of signed consent.

Individual gatekeepers may play an even greater role in the success and/or failure of research. Frequently there is a strict hierarchy in the movement of archaeological artifacts from the ground to the consumer. Looters (Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian or Bedouin) typically sell their finds to middlemen, who then cross

national and international borders to sell the material to licensed dealers in Israel. Middlemen and Bedouin tribal elders often must be consulted in making requests for interviews—at times access is granted and at others it is withheld, something I could never predict.



Looted landscape. Photo courtesy Morag M Kersel

Cultivating relationships with the dealers and the collectors is a more protracted process. This is unsurprising because dealers who speak with me risk the perception that they are colluding with the enemy—the archaeologists (anti-trade advocates). Starting with some of the better-known dealers (or the main gatekeepers), I worked from there. Once a few interviews with key informants were completed in the dealing community, word spread (the gatekeeper gave consent) and rarely would I walk through Jerusalem's Old City without someone asking me if I was going to interview them today.

Predicated on the participation and contribution of the public, local, national and even international associations can make the research possible or impossible. Researcher-participant relationships are sometimes vexed by the power of institutions and individuals as gatekeepers. For my research into the effects of looting on the archaeological landscape surmounting gatekeeper obstacles has become a key to gaining information that might be used in future cultural heritage protection policy formation.

Morag M Kersel is an assistant professor in the department of anthropology at DePaul University and affiliated faculty with the Center for Art, Museum and Cultural Heritage Law, DePaul College of Law. She is the contributing editor of Ethical Currents, the AN column of the AAA Committee on Ethics. She can be contacted at mkersel@depaul.edu.