Second Class Relics: Forgery, Fantasy, and the Ideology of Antiquities Collecting in the Holy Land

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Second Class Relics:
Forgery, Fantasy, and the Ideology of Antiquities Collecting in the Holy Land

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We are here today to discuss the sobering topic of “The Ethics of Collecting and Communicating the Near Eastern Past.” But of course the problem goes far beyond that. Debates about the ethics of collecting, about the character and contributions of collectors, and even about the propriety of media and museum promotion of unprovenanced artifacts are contentious and emotion-provoking issues over which both sides of the argument passionately claim the moral high ground.

Unprovenanced artifacts and inscriptions are loudly and publicly heralded by some as precious treasures and condemned by others as plunderers’ loot. Antiquities collectors are reviled by some and depicted by others as potential ransomers of treasures from the past that would otherwise be lost. We hear of the deep penetration of collectors’ largess into the heart of this discipline—largess, we are told, that far outweighs their involvement in illegal antiquities trade. Many scholars take their money, but not all consciences are completely at ease. And during the last year, we have witnessed the sorry media spectacle of the James Ossuary—and it is the collecting of biblical relics (rather than prehistoric art or classical artworks) that I would like to discuss today.
The conflicts and resentments we face regarding this subject are as unpleasant as any I have seen in my 30-or-so years of participation in ASOR and Near Eastern Archaeology. Tempers are short. Emotions are high. And we may indeed be approaching a split in our discipline into two kinds of attitudes toward collecting, each existing in a different ethical world.

One of these worlds, I would suggest, is the world of Relic Worship—which is not really so surprising in our particular field of Near Eastern and biblical archaeology, since the discovery of miraculous, faith-affirming relics has had a long and prominent place in the history of the Holy Land. From at least the Byzantine period onwards, the passion for digging up, touching, venerating, owning, and celebrating artifacts directly connected to the lives of biblical figures has played a central role in shaping western attitudes about the special holiness of the Land of the Bible—and in affirming the Bible’s character as a historical text. Indeed, the possession of miracle-giving relics was so important for the prestige and political pretensions of many medieval European communities that no means were excluded to obtain them—including intentional fabrication, pious misinterpretation, and wide-scale robbing of tombs and ancient sites.

I want to speak about this phenomenon of relic worship, rather than other contemporary issues about collecting, since I believe that it sheds light on an important motivating factor in collecting that has not so far received the attention it deserves. For energizing the vast network of looters, middlemen, dealers, promoters, and pardoners who spread the cult of relics from the Holy Land, across Europe, all the way to Scandinavia was a shared, metaphysical understanding—still to be palpably perceived in modern collecting—that such relics offered their end-users a clearly defined spiritual boon. To put it most simply, touching was everything, for the relics were not
mere things or inanimate bone fragments, they offered a unique connection—that “Touch of Paradise,” as the historian Peter Brown has called it—to the eternal, unchanging heavenly realm. The bodily remains of saints and biblical figures, even the clothes that they wore and the objects they handled were seen as inseparably connected with their beatified souls.

The relic was thus promoted and prized as a direct channel of access to heaven's life-giving grace. Physical contact and prayer—physical possession—was the key. The relics, encased in impressive reliquaries and irretrievably separated from their original find spots, were certainly not archaeological artifacts as we now understand them. They were faith-energized religious tokens, valued both as “proof” of the reality of biblical history and sources of divine power themselves.

Naturally, the more highly-connected was the relic in the hierarchy of heaven, the greater its pardoning power, and the greater its pardoning power, the higher its price. In fact, these market forces proved to be its undoing. In The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer etches an acid portrait of the hypocrisy and greed of the late medieval cult of relics as he introduces us to the Pardoner—a thoroughly disreputable relic seller, who had joined the company of pilgrims on their way to atone for their sins:

There was no Pardoner of equal grace
For in his trunk he had a pillowcase,
Which he asserted was Our Lady’s veil.
He said he had a gobbet of the sail
Saint Peter had the time when
He made bold to walk the waves…
And with these relics any time he found
Some poor up-country parson to astound,
In one short day, in money down, he drew
More than the parson in a month or two…
The corruption and abuses of the relic trade was bitterly attacked by the Reformation and thoroughly reformed at the Council of Trent. But even then the hunger for miracle-producing relics endured. As a reform measure, the Council of Trent declared it should regulate the trade and valuation of the objects. “First Class” relics were henceforth only the actual physical remains of saints and biblical figures. “Second Class” relics were the objects they touched or wore. In time the possession of First Class relics was restricted to church institutions, but the market for Second Class relics—those stones, shrouds, and other mementoes so prone to forgery and misrepresentation—has, sadly, never died.

Even today, the decontextualized, isolated relic—in its present incarnation on the high end as a collector’s prize specimen or on the low end as a tourists’ souvenir—serves primarily as a vehicle for spiritual reassurance or personal satisfaction. Their attraction lies not in what they are but what they symbolize.

The now-famous James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus Ossuary, encased in its plexiglas reliquary in the Royal Ontario Museum, bid the pilgrims to step forward and silently contemplate “the first evidence of Jesus chiseled in stone.” The fact of the ossuary’s existence and the process of its disclosure had been carefully cloaked in secrecy and it was unveiled to the world with extraordinary razzamatazz. If the James Ossuary was indeed a valuable archaeological artifact and not a relic, why was its initial evaluation restricted to such a small circle? Why was there no serious academic discussion before it was put on display in a prestigious museum and featured in a national TV documentary and mass-market book?

Scholarly deliberation, I suggest, could only have dulled the drama of such a miraculous discovery. For true relics, astounding relics, are by their nature self-evidently valuable. And indeed, even now after the questions and ongoing investiga-
tions, the James Ossuary continues to be defended in particularly emotional, religious terms. A co-author of the book *The Brother of Jesus*, and one of the staunchest supporters of the authenticity of the James Ossuary, Professor Ben Witherington has even given it a voice: “The ossuary still cries out to us,” he wrote recently in *Christianity Today*, “as Jesus once said the stones of Jerusalem would do—and what it says is James, and what it says is Joseph, and best of all what it says is Jesus. The ossuary is just possibly the Word made visible."

Is this archaeology? Or is this relic worship, pure and simple? This may be a creative and legitimate style of religious devotion, but we here at this annual meeting are—or should be—in a very different mindset regarding the material study of the past. And I would suggest that mindset is the second ethical worldview on the other side of the great divide that is fighting for predominance within our discipline today. Pure and simple, it is Archaeology.

For with the Enlightenment birth of scientific investigation through empirical observation of physical evidence, ancient objects were no longer seen primarily as religious symbols, but as pieces of a great, challenging puzzle whose complex grid of regularly measured time, space, and meaning need to be neatly ordered and filled in. In the connections of artifact classes and their distribution across the landscape, archaeologists perceive down-to-earth patterns in material culture, to assemble and understand new and more progressively detailed visions of ancient societies. Archaeologists strive to put the pieces together, so context is, or should be, everything.

The careful recording of provenance is therefore not merely a desirable (and optional) quality of true archaeological evidence. Its absence fundamentally alters the intellectual significance of an ancient object. In short, without provenance, it becomes a relic to be venerated not as a clue to a surprising, unexpected new under-
standing, but as a symbolic embodiment of pre-existing beliefs. Indeed, the relic’s value lies in its intentional isolation from its original context. If they cry out to us, they do so in emotionally-loaded words and symbols that we do not discover but have been taught to recognize.

Even if the James Ossuary were authentic—and I leave that conclusion to you as you hear the presentations of some of the other speakers in this session—it adds precious little to our archaeological understanding of the Late Second Temple Period, Judean demography, or the origins of Christianity. Hundred of ossuaries and dozens of ossuary tombs from the same period have been excavated throughout Jerusalem and we understand the burial practices of the period quite well. And even if the ossuary’s problematic inscription were authentic, and its names indisputably linked to central characters in the gospels, it would tell us nothing directly about Jesus or the role of his brother James, without the aid of an exegetical bedrock of belief.

And this is really where the issue of collecting itself merges with the wider problems of our discipline. We have heard the explicit accusation in the pages of the Biblical Archaeology Review, that those who have declared the ossuary a forgery have a hidden agenda. Hershel Shanks has attacked what he considered the Israel Antiquities Authority’s hidden motives in declaring the ossuary to be a fake by asserting that IAA director Shuka Dorfman “hates antiquities collectors, antiquities dealers, the antiquities trade, and would like to put Israeli antiquities dealers out of business.” In this Dorfman is seen as a fellow traveler of those whom Mr. Shanks sees as the naïve do-gooders of the preservation movement, whose uncompromising demonization of collectors is unjust, counterproductive, and unfair.

Yet there is an essential conflict of objectives between archaeologists and collectors that cannot and should not be ignored. Collectors share with the relic
hunters of old a fixation on personal possession and the spiritual, or aesthetic, or emotional benefits that antiquities ownership brings. It is not about history or historiography, except to the extent that scholarly evaluations can help arrange their collections more methodically or raise the prestige (and monetary value) of certain items. Owning the touchably eternal is everything. It is all about the hunger for possessing and touching an imagined source of stability, order, identity, and ancient beauty, so far away and yet so real.

Now, if archaeological deposits around the world were limitless or self-regenerating, we might simply say that this modern cult of relics is a relatively harmless (if expensive) pastime and should be allowed to proceed. But archaeology’s sole source of data—undisturbed archaeological deposits—are a dramatically endangered resource all over the world. We do not have the luxury of allowing this resource to be bought and sold for private profit and personal satisfaction, if we can make any claim to be the beneficiaries of a shared heritage.

Even now at the height of the defense of the James Ossuary, we are confronted with a set of proposals by Mr. Shanks that strikes directly at the heart of what we in ASOR have done to make our position clear that “the archaeological record should be used for the benefit of all people, and not be treated as a commodity to be exploited for private enjoyment or profit” and that ASOR members “should refrain from activities that enhance the commercial value of such illicitly obtained artifacts and thus contribute indirectly to the illicit market, for example, publication, authentication, or exhibition.”

But in a direct assault on this ASOR policy, shared by many major international archaeological organizations, Mr. Shanks has offered us what I believe to be a series of outrageous amendments that are all aimed at keeping the already flourishing
antiquities market alive. He proposes, for sites already being looted, excavation under professional archaeological supervision, if necessary, funding such professional excavations by sharing the finds with outside funders. Likewise he proposes that local communities be involved in the safeguarding of ancient sites, funding the effort, if necessary, with a sharing of finds. Excuse me, but what happened to the idea of stewardship and protection. Is everything for sale?

In the last few weeks the idea of selling excavated sherds, or low-end artifacts like oil lamps and juglets has again been suggested as a way to reduce the market value of looted objects—and thus undermine the economic incentives for antiquities thievery. Sadly, market forces seem to be the only solution when antiquities are reduced to being market commodities, like diamonds or bauxite ore. This gives all the wrong messages about the value of the past—for even if it could lower the price of the low-end items, it would validate the principle of continued private ownership and justify the race for the rare, high-end items—and the even more sublime satisfaction (and emotional communion with the past-at-a-price) that their ownership brings.

Collectors are not potential ransomers but are relic consumers who lie at the end of a long supply line of middlemen, smugglers, con-men, and promoters that fuel the growing scourge of looting and convince us mistakenly that their treasures are really archaeological artifacts. It is time to speak out against the commodification and relic-ization of our precious and dwindling archaeological resources. It is time to say that in the present situation of vast and intensifying antiquities looting and illegal export, collecting, buying, selling—as well as looting—is wrong.

You say that sounds like a quixotic, hopelessly idealistic ambition that restricts individual freedom? Just look at what the environmental movement has achieved in educating the public about the looming danger to the world’s resources and endan-
gered species. There was a time when great white hunters took delight and status from their expensive collections of antlered heads, tiger skins, exotic stuffed birds, and precious pelts, but these collections—once so proudly displayed and so obviously of great satisfaction to their owners—don’t have the power to impress anymore.

The bonfires of burning ivory tusks and destroyed trophies of endangered species by customs officials around the world is an indication of the painful measures that our global society is ready to take to make the point. Poaching is far from over and looting may not be completely ended with a complete ban on antiquities trade and possession—but it will at least offer us some moral clarity in the quest to serve as custodians of a shared legacy. It is a necessary step to make a stand against the tide of markets and money and declare that there may be some things common to humanity that are simply not for sale.

Shall we in this discipline acquiesce to a continued partnership with the promoters of this powerful new cult of relics, with favors doled out to the scholars who support it in their quiet over-dinner deal making; in their lavish financial support for pet projects; and in their headline grabbing publicity campaigns? Or will we have the courage to go beyond the platitudes of “market forces” and “good collectors vs. bad collectors” and recognize that collectors have very different priorities that are ultimately incompatible with archaeological research.

This is not just a preservation struggle; it is a matter of the identity of our discipline. It is the clear choice of whether the Relic or the Artifact will define 21st century archaeology in the Near East. For the damage done by the antiquities trade and the continued toleration of collecting occurs not once but twice. It results in the destruction of sites ravaged to feed the market—and it transforms possible pieces of evidence into self-serving symbols that have little explanatory power at all.
There is no room for confusion. Whether we continue to tolerate the sale and promotion of “relics” or take the painful measures needed to eradicate their disruptive, corrupting, and ultimately destructive influence on Near Eastern Archaeology is perhaps the most important ethical question that we, both as individuals and a discipline, must have the courage to confront once and for all.