

# **The Past Sold**

## **Case Studies in the Movement of Archaeological Objects**



# Objects on the Move: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

by Morag M. Kersel and Fiona Greenland

Archaeological artifacts are always moving – out of excavation sites, across geopolitical borders, into museums and private collections. This movement can be positive or negative, authorized or unauthorized, legal or illegal. Mechanisms for the legal movement of cultural heritage include long-term loan programs, regulated market trade, and gifts from countries of origin to individuals or organizations in other nations. Such arrangements have the potential to benefit all parties, enabling preservation, study, and public display. By contrast, illegal movement involves clandestine excavations, unauthorized border crossings, object laundering, and controversial acquisition by cultural institutions and private individuals without a true accounting of the objects' provenance. Artifacts extracted through these methods are divorced from their past and often decontextualized.

The Neubauer Collegium research project "The Past for Sale: New Approaches to the Study of Archaeological Looting" assesses the impact of such movement on archaeological landscapes and considers how to safeguard archaeological sites, museums, and monuments from demand-driven looting. How and why do institutions and individuals move artifacts? What are the competing claims on owning, studying, and interpreting them? By calling attention to the way such artifacts are transported and displayed, *The Past Sold: Case Studies in the Movement of Archaeological Objects* adds new dimension and a visual vocabulary to the "Past for Sale" project.

## To Move or Not to Move

There are long-standing debates about who decides which antiquities should move and why, who owns artifacts, and how their trajectories should be regulated. *The Past Sold* fosters a new conversation by bringing together innovative case studies that highlight advantages and challenges of artifact movement. "Positive" movement, which brings pedagogical and research benefits, is illustrated by a distribution of Early Bronze Age



Map: Josh Tullisiak

(3600–2000 BCE) tomb groups from Bab adh-Dhra', Jordan. "Negative" movement is shown by the systematic looting of archaeological sites in the context of the Syrian war, and commonplace, market-driven looting at Fifa, an Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) cemetery along the Dead Sea Plain in Jordan. We can think of these, in shorthand, as the good, the bad, and the ugly. Each of these cases is the subject of a focused project headed by "Past for Sale" researchers. Artifacts and archival documents from the "Follow the Pots" project illustrate how buried objects make their way from graves in Jordan to the collections of the Oriental Institute and the McCormick Theological Seminary. Maps and market records help the "Modeling the Antiquities Trade in Iraq and Syria (MANTIS)" project establish trajectories and monetary values of archaeological artifacts looted from war-torn Syria. Finally, drone flyovers at Fifa led by the "Landscapes of the Dead" project are providing data on an "ugly" landscape that is changing in response to demand for Early Bronze Age vessels. *The Past Sold* offers creative thinking about the positive and negative movement of antiquities, pushing the dialogue beyond the entrenched positions of "to move or not to move."

## The Good

Along the Dead Sea Plain in Jordan, thousands of people are buried in cist graves, shaft tombs, and charnel houses (buildings where dead bodies or bones are placed) at the Early Bronze Age sites of Bab adh-Dhra' and Fifa. Since the early 1950s, Bab adh-Dhra' has been the target of looters seeking ceramic vessels, which are highly desired for purchase by pilgrims to the Holy Land. In response to ongoing looting at the site, Paul Lapp, director of the W. F. Albright Institute, mounted a salvage expedition to Bab adh-Dhra' in the mid-1960s. The Lapp excavations focused on the area most heavily looted – the cemetery. During the Early Bronze Age, individuals were buried with a distinct set of grave goods. Bowls made of basalt, carnelian beads, ceramic vessels, flint tools, lambis shell bracelets, limestone mace-heads, and the odd copper ring or bracelet accompanied the dead in their final resting places. Thousands of pots were recovered during the 1965 and 1967 field seasons, all of which required basic conservation, storage, and eventual analyses and publication. Lapp died in 1970, leaving his widow, Nancy, to undertake the publication of his earlier investigations and leaving the pots in storage.

David McCreery, an archaeologist based in Amman, outlined in a letter to Edward Campbell, representative of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), an assessment of the stored pottery, suggesting that the documentation of the collection was inadequate, the artifacts were at risk, and some of the pots were missing. The precarious situation was compounded in 1975, when new excavations at Bab adh-Dhra' recovered thousands of additional pots, resulting in a storage quagmire: what to do with the uncured and unexamined pots Lapp left behind?

In 1977, the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and ASOR, the excavation sponsors, came up with a pioneering solution. They devised a plan whereby tomb groups from the original Lapp excavations would be sold to ASOR member institutions for the purposes of display and education (10–18). This satisfied the demand for teaching materials and freed up scarce storage space, while helping the government of Jordan increase



interest in Jordanian archaeology and encourage cooperative archaeological efforts between the United States and Jordan. The artifacts became ambassadors.

For as little as \$100, institutional members of ASOR could purchase tomb groups from shaft tombs and charnel houses at Bab adh-Dhra'. Twenty-four institutions, including small seminaries and liberal-arts colleges in Australia, Canada, and the United States, successfully bid to receive tomb groups. A total of 1,186 pots and ten basalt bowls were distributed, generating almost \$14,000 in income (\$51,824 adjusted for inflation), which was used for publications and further excavation at Bab adh-Dhra' and other ASOR initiatives. In 1978 the Oriental Institute paid \$2,343 (\$8,625 adjusted) for 202 artifacts from two tomb groups, A 44 and A 72 NW. Just up the street from the Oriental Institute, the McCormick Theological Seminary received tomb group A 65 W, consisting of fifteen vessels, at a cost of \$272 (\$993 adjusted).

The movement of tomb groups to educational institutions guaranteed that Jordanian archaeological material was readily available for study and public viewing, curated and stored in safe facilities. Today, you can have coffee with the McCormick Theological Seminary tomb group in a glass-topped table in the student lounge. The Oriental Institute tomb groups are available for viewing upon request. The controlled distribution of tomb groups allowed Jordanian officials to decide how and where the country's cultural heritage was publicly curated. Responsible pedagogical access to this material, with the participation of the Jordanian government, has added to the production of archaeological knowledge in a way that benefits everyone.

## **The Bad**

The Syrian civil war has created conditions ripe for widespread, systematic exploitation of artifacts (34–50). International market interests, a general breakdown in border controls, and competition among insurgent groups for revenue streams all play their part. The loss to scientific knowledge is considerable. More tragic is the loss of human life and community identity. Cultural destruction in the Syrian war has involved direct violence

to men, women, and children; destruction of monuments, mosques, churches, and other culturally significant sites; and the liquidation of material culture for profit.

How much are insurgents earning from the looting and sale of artifacts? This is a difficult question to answer because it asks us to make guesses about what came out of the ground, when, and by whom, and what it might fetch in a complex transaction chain. The “MANTIS” project combines archaeological and economic data to build an inductive approach. The archaeological data include detailed observations of objects excavated at a representative sample of sites spanning the Early Bronze Age to the Islamic period. The research team also gathers data from observable market activity, separating categories of artifacts collected from auction catalogs and public galleries. Combining these data sets, researchers match excavated objects with the same object categories sold on the market. Using a statistical technique called imputation, they generate a range of reasonable prices for objects that may have come directly from the ground. The project is an important stepping stone toward rigorous interdisciplinary research on the movement of artifacts.

## **The Ugly**

At times the movement of archaeological objects is illegal, involving clandestine excavations, unauthorized border crossings, laundering, and eventual acquisition by individuals and institutions that may not be aware of the objects’ histories. The result of this negative, or “ugly,” movement is not only what it creates (artifacts divorced from their past) but also what it leaves behind (cratered landscapes). Antiquities are being mined from sites to satisfy the constant demand for artifacts from the Holy Land (21–33). Tourists and pilgrims alike want a memento to take home, and what better reminder of a trip than a ceramic vessel from the time of the patriarchs? Sadly, demand for these items has ravaged landscapes at sites like Bab adh-Dhra’ and Fifa. The “Landscapes of the Dead” research project is using unpiloted aerial vehicles (drones) to study change over time due in part to archaeological site looting (19–20). To document the extent of looting at Fifa, researchers are flying

camera-equipped drones over the site each year for five years. Through high-resolution digital elevation models, orthomosaics, and 3D images, they can identify new looting episodes and other changes to the site. The team is also working with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and the Petra National Trust to implement outreach and protection programs to save this landscape from further depredation. While looting at Fife has taken a very heavy toll on the site, the project has revealed a significant number of undamaged tombs. The combination of aerial survey, archival research, and ethnographic interviews with looters, dealers, collectors, and locals, as well as pedestrian surveys of the site, is enabling the team to consider programs to protect tombs that remain at risk.

Ultimately, the “Past for Sale” research team seeks collaborative solutions: mutually beneficial partnerships aimed at ending the pillage of archaeological sites and the illegal sale of artifacts.

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20-33

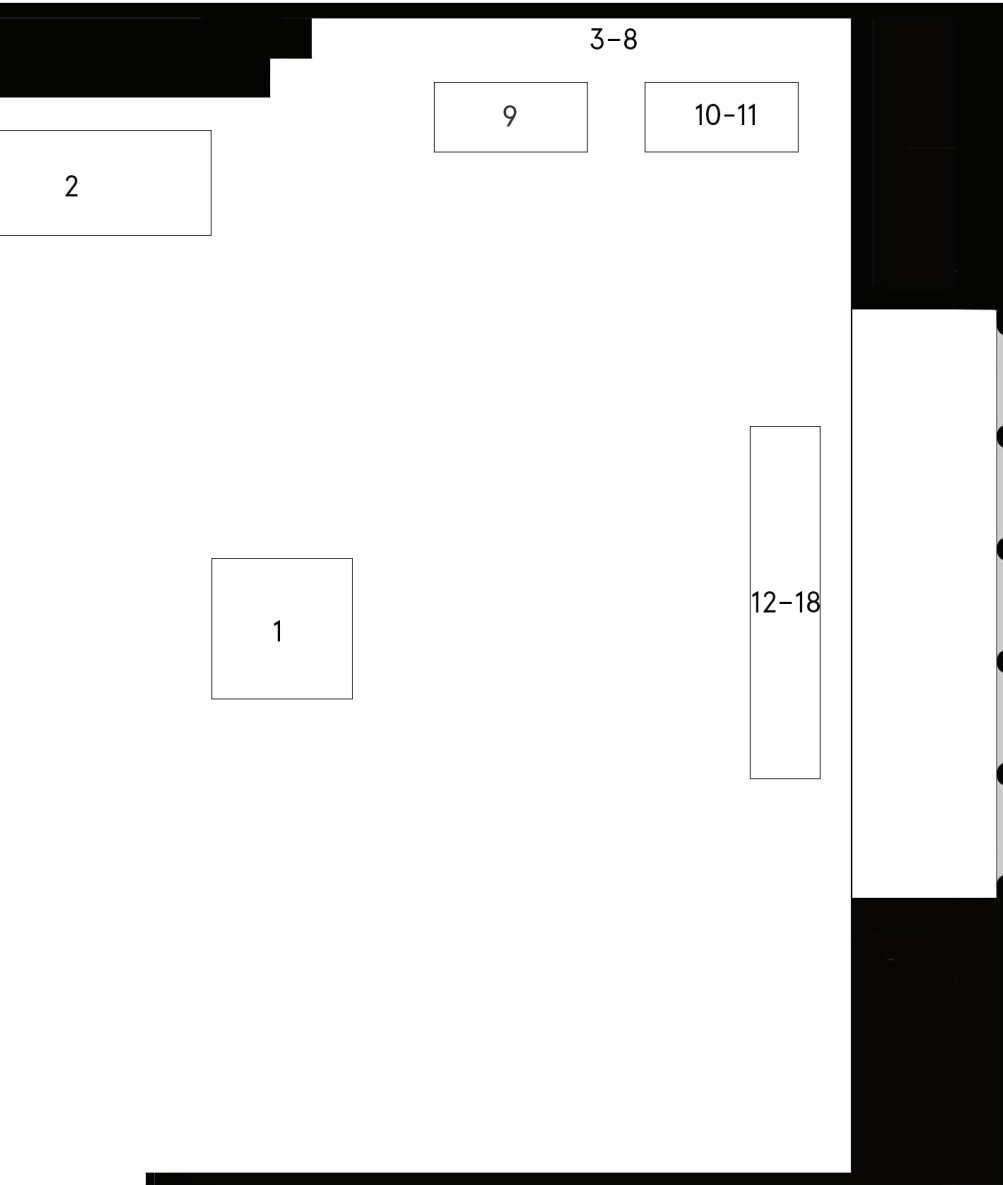
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## Checklist of the Exhibition

**1** The McCormick Theological Seminary tomb group, A 65 W, is from a chamber in a shaft tomb that contained five skulls (four adults and one subadult) and some long bones and an intrusive articulated skeleton from a later period in the Early Bronze Age (3600–2000 BCE). The tomb group consists of fifteen vessels purchased at a cost of \$272 (\$993 adjusted for inflation). It is usually on public display—alongside a photograph of the original excavator—in a coffee table vitrine located in the seminary's student lounge. Courtesy of the McCormick Theological Seminary.

**2** The Oriental Institute's two Bab adh-Dhra' tomb groups, charnel house A 44 and shaft tomb A 72 NW. In different episodes during the Early Bronze Age, individuals were buried with the typical mortuary toolkit of basalt bowls, carnelian beads, lambis shell bracelets, limestone mace-heads, and ceramic vessels. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute.

**3** R. Thomas Schaub, Views of Bab adh-Dhra', 1965.

**4** R. Thomas Schaub, Excavated grave goods from Early Bronze Age tombs from the site of Bab adh-Dhra', ca. 1965–67. These groups were part of the ASOR Ad Hoc/Jordanian Department of Antiquities distribution.

**5** R. Thomas Schaub, Excavated tombs, some with in situ human remains and associated grave goods at the Early Bronze Age site of Bab adh-Dhra', ca. 1965–67.

**6** R. Thomas Schaub, Field sketch of Jack Lee, excavator at the Early Bronze Age site of Bab adh-Dhra', ca. 1965–67.

[3–6 courtesy of the Expedition to the Dead Sea Plain project.]

**7–8** Aerial views of the Early Bronze Age (3600–2000 BCE) site of Bab adh-Dhra', Jordan. Charnel houses visible. The Arab Potash Company town and the Dead Sea are visible to the south. Images: Austin C. Hill, courtesy of the Landscapes of the Dead project.

**9** Original excavator notebooks and ceramic registration logs for the Bab adh-Dhra' excavations in 1965 and 1967.

**10** Sales receipts from various tomb group purchases from the 1978 ASOR Ad Hoc/Jordanian Department of Antiquities legal distribution.

**11** Original list of educational institutions receiving tomb groups from the ASOR Ad Hoc/Jordanian Department of Antiquities distribution.

**12** Letter from Nancy Lapp to Ted Campbell of the McCormick Theological Seminary regarding the tentative distribution of tomb groups, February 16, 1978.

[9–12 courtesy of the Expedition to the Dead Sea Plain project.]

**13** Letter detailing the purchase of tomb group A 72 NW by the Oriental Institute, ca. February 1978.

**14** Price list of the Bab adh-Dhra' tomb groups, including A 65 W (now at the McCormick Theological Seminary) and A 44 and A 72 NW (now at the Oriental Institute).

**15** Letter from J. A. (Tony) Brinkman of the Oriental Institute regarding the legal purchase of antiquities, January 19, 1978.

**16** Letter from Larry Stager to J. A. (Tony) Brinkman regarding the Bab adh-Dhra' tomb group distribution, January 24, 1978.

**17** Handwritten note by an Oriental Institute staff member regarding three objects from the Bab adh-Dhra' tomb group distribution, ca. April 1978.

**18** Original labels for Oriental Institute tomb group vessels.

[13–18 courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.]

**19** Video footage of the looted landscape at the Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) cemetery site of Fifa, Jordan, shot from fixed-wing and DJI Phantom drones. Visible from the air are over

3,700 looters' holes, a later Iron Age fort, the Dead Sea, and the rectangular area of archaeological excavation carried out by Mohammed Najjar of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities.

**20** Aerial view of the Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) site of Fifa, Jordan.

**21** A cross-section of a looted Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) cist tomb at Fifa, Jordan.

**22** A typical looter's toolkit at the Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) site of Fifa, Jordan.

**23** Human remains discarded by looters at the Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) site of Fifa, Jordan.

**24** Discarded broken ceramic vessels at the Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) site of Fifa, Jordan.

**25** Discarded broken ceramic vessel at the Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) site of Fifa, Jordan.

**26** Three vessels confiscated from looters from the Early Bronze Age IA (3600–3200 BCE) site of Fifa, Jordan.

[19–26: Austin C. Hill, courtesy of the Landscapes of the Dead project.]

**27** Inventory registration numbers on artifacts in an antiquities shop licensed by the Israel Antiquities Authority. Image: Mary Pelletier, courtesy of Middle East Eye.

**28–33** Artifacts for sale in antiquities shops licensed by the Israel Antiquities Authority. Images: Morag M. Kersel, courtesy of the Follow the Pots project.

**34–39** Satellite images of (L–R) Mari, Apamea, and Dura Europos, each showing evidence of looting prior to the outbreak of war (Spring 2011) and during the conflict (2015 into early 2017). Although these sites and others across Syria were looted in the years leading up to the war, conflict-era looting is characterized

by rapid and intense activity. Satellite images are an important source of information for looting research because they offer time-lapse data and visual evidence that is not always observable from the ground.

**40** Excavation map of Dura Europos (Syria) from Yale excavation, with satellite image of looters' pits superimposed.

[34–40: Anthony Lauricella for the CAMEL Lab at the Oriental Institute.]

**41** Entry sign at the archaeological site of Dura Europos (Syria). Once a thriving multicultural city known for its stunning synagogue paintings, Dura suffered extensive looting during the Syrian war. Image: Early Church History.

**42** A Syrian government soldier walks near what's left of the Temple of Baalshamin, March 27, 2016. Syrian forces retook the city days before, but damage had already been done by ISIS. Photo posted on CNN.com.

**43** A man in an ISIS uniform smashes a portrait bust from Palmyra in front of a crowd, July 2015. Published in *Dabiq* magazine, volume 7.

**44** Excavation permit issued by the Islamic State Department of Precious Resources ("Diwan al-Rikaz"). Image: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, Jihadology Blog.

Translation (by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi):

Islamic State

Diwan al-Rikaz

Date: 28/8/1436 AH [June 15, 2015] Case no. 13

To the brothers in Wilayat Halab

The brother Mahmoud Sari ibn Muhammad has been permitted to excavate and search for antiquities and gold north of the town of al-Bab. And God is the guarantor of success.

Islamic State

Wilayat Homs: Abu al-Layth al-Furati

Wilayat Halab: Abu Omar al-Falastini

**45** Screenshot from an online sale of a rare coin from the ancient city of Apamea (Syria), no provenance given.

**46** Recovered artifacts on display at the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, July 15, 2015. Image: Reuters/Thaier Al-Sudani.

**47** Third and second millennium BCE ceramic pots recovered by the Iraqi government from an ISIS leader's house in Mosul. Image: Iraqi Government Handout, January 2017.

**48** Cell phone photo showing artifacts presumed to have been illegally excavated from Iraq or Syria.

**49** Jewelry thought to have been removed illegally from Syrian sites.

**50** Slide show of images relevant to the MANTIS project. These images include preparations in the Ma'arra Mosaic Museum to protect antiquities from wartime damage, sites deliberately damaged by ISIS, and artifacts offered for sale and suspected of having been illegally excavated.



This publication accompanies the exhibition *The Past Sold: Case Studies in the Movement of Archaeological Artifacts*, on view at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society April 3 – May 13, 2017.

Guest curators: Morag M. Kersel and Fiona Greenland

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Cover: Discarded complete ceramic vessel at the Early Bronze Age IA mortuary site of Fifa, Jordan. Image: Austin C. Hill, courtesy of the Landscapes of the Dead project.



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