

Israeli authorities indict ossuary owner: Antiquities forgery scheme

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Criminal indictments brought in Jerusalem against four men, including the antiquities collector linked to the James ossuary, or bone box, have prompted museums and devotees of biblical archaeology to think again about the authenticity of artifacts that have turned up in recent years in Israel's antiquities market.

Indictments announced December 29 were leveled against members of a what authorities said was a sophisticated antiquities forgery ring.

The criminal indictments followed an investigation by Israeli police and the Antiquities Authority, which had long suspected four men of masterfully forging such important relics as the James ossuary, a 2,000-year-old limestone burial box bearing the Aramaic inscription, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus," that created a sensation in North America in late 2002.

At a press briefing, Shuka Dorfman, the director of the Antiquities Authority, told reporters that the activities of the ring, led by Israeli antiquities dealer and collector Oded Golan, are "the tip of the iceberg. We believe this is happening worldwide and has generated millions of dollars."

The authorities' longstanding doubts about the authenticity of the James ossuary and several other important artifacts were made public last year on Israeli television's investigative program *Uvda* (Fact). The report alleged that Golan and at least three accomplices forged fake inscriptions and markings on genuinely ancient artifacts.

Golan continues to deny all charges against him. He owns the ossuary and the Yoash stone, a tablet bearing references to the First Jewish Temple, located atop the Temple Mount—the disputed holy site that Muslims call Haram al-Sharif. Jews considered the Yoash stone important because it added credibility to their claims to the mount at a time when some Muslims, including the late Palestinian leader Yasir

Arafat, denied any Jewish connection to it.

The ossuary, which some thought could have contained the bones of James, head of the early Jerusalem church, was first described publicly at a November 2002 news conference by Hershel Shanks, editor of the *Biblical Archaeology Review* in Washington.

Contacted by the Associated Press following Golan's indictment, Shanks said, "Either this is going to be proven a horrific scandal or the greatest embarrassment to the Israel Antiquities Authority." Shanks in the past has accused the Israeli agency of trying to undermine antiquities dealers and relying on invalid tests.

The indictment listed 124 witnesses, including collectors, archaeologists, officials from Sotheby's auction house in Israel and representatives from the Brooklyn Museum and the British Museum in London. Indicted in addition to Golan were Robert Deutsch, an inscriptions expert who teaches at Haifa University; collector Shlomo Cohen; and antiquities dealer Faiz al-Amaleh, according to Associated Press. The four were free on bail, police said.

Dorfman told reporters that the forgers would often use authentic but relatively mundane artifacts, like a decanter or clay shard, and increase their value enormously by adding inscriptions. Once the words were engraved, the forgers would try to re-create a patina, or ancient grime or film, covering the etched-out letters, he said.

Many archaeologists contend that the only sure way to authenticate ancient artifacts is to find them in a supervised excavation. One U.S. archaeologist who has taken a hard line against the James ossuary, as well as other objects produced by dealers without documentation, is Eric Myers of Duke University. Asked if the indictments discredit archaeology, Myers said not at all. "It discredits unscrupulous dealers and collectors."