**Oded Golan and the James Ossuary.** Joan Austin

*I was intrigued by James Ossuary and the fact that at the time of the writing of our textbook no verdict had been reached in the case involving Oded Golan. So, I prowled around the internet and found that the verdict was handed down in 2012. The following is excerpts from Wikipedia on the topic.*

Golan was accused by the [Israel Antiquities Authority](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_Antiquities_Authority) (IAA) of involvement in the forgery of one half of the [James Ossuary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Ossuary) inscription. Golan denied any involvement in forgery, and argued that he purchased the item from licensed antiquities dealers in 1976 and 1999 respectively, and to the best of his understanding, the inscriptions are ancient.[[](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oded_Golan#cite_note-7)

Four other defendants were indicted along with Golan, including two of the largest antiquities dealers in Israel. **In 2012, the court acquitted Golan of all charges of forgery and fraud, but convicted of illegal trading in antiquities.** In late 2013, the Supreme Court ordered the State to return to Golan the James Ossuary and hundreds of other items that had been confiscated by the IAA “for the purpose of investigation.

**In a trial that lasted almost eight years (2004-2012),** the District Court of Jerusalem heard testimony relating to the authenticity of the inscriptions on the James Ossuary from over 50 experts from a wide range of fields, who examined the inscriptions and submitted dozens of scientific reports, and 70 other witnesses including antiquities dealers and well-known collectors. Trial transcripts covered over 12,000 pages, and the court ruling was 438 pages long.

Professor Wolfgang Krumbein, an international expert in patina and geo-biology, of the University of Oldenburg in Germany, as well as a team from the Israel Geological Survey specializing in archaeometry and electronic microscopy, and other experts in stone, paleontology, isotopic tests and engraving technologies identified a strong bio-film of natural patina that had developed inside the letter grooves of the inscriptions by microorganism (bacteria and fungus) in a slow, gradual process over hundreds of years, implying that the inscriptions were engraved many generations ago, and are most probably several thousand years old

In his ruling, the judge wrote that the claim that the experts representing the IAA failed to notice the natural patina film or that no such film exists, is clearly unreasonable and cannot be accepted.

In the detailed ruling regarding the James Ossuary, the court adopted the scientific opinions of experts in archaeometry, geology, bio-geology, and patina, who confirmed the presence of natural patina or biological origin deep inside the letter grooves of the inscription, which had developed over centuries. The court also noted that IAA experts testified that they had with certainty identified natural patina inside these same words, and determined that it was a fact that authentic patina was found in the second half of the James Ossuary inscription, the part of the inscription that had been suspected of being forged.

The epigraphy and syntax of the Ossuary inscription were found to be completely consistent with the first century AD, according to experts in this field, whose assessment the court accepted. In its ruling, the court quoted Dr. Ada Yardeni, expert in Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who testified that she was absolutely convinced that the inscription is entirely ancient and that if the item was found to be a forgery, she would leave her profession.

Professor Krumbein stated in his report that the methods and instruments that the IAA used to examine the artifacts were unfit to make such allegations and that tests in a modern lab have proven the authenticity of the James Ossuary inscription and that it was not engraved in modern times.

The judge was also "particularly scathing about tests carried out by the Israel police forensics laboratory that he said had probably contaminated the ossuary, making it impossible to carry out further scientific tests on the inscription".

**On March 14, 2012, the trial concluded with Golan's acquittal of the forgery charges but convicted of illegal trading in antiquities. The judge said this acquittal "does not mean that the inscription on the ossuary is authentic or that it was written 2,000 years ago".**

## Trial Aftermath

The IAA announced that they accept the court’s ruling. The State accepted the main decision of the District Court and did not appeal against the judgment. After the judgment, the State moved to confiscate the James Ossuary for the State Treasury, arguing that this item may well be of enormous historic, religious and archeological significance and therefore should not remain in private hands. The District Court and the Supreme Court denied this motion and ordered the State to return to Golan all the antiquities that had been taken from him. The James Ossuary, as well as hundreds of other antiquities, were returned to Golan in late 2013. The James Ossuary inscription is currently included in the scientific corpus of all known ossuary inscriptions found in Israel.

*Some of my own thoughts…*

*The fact that the inscription was found to be ancient does not mean that it is authentic. The Judge expressed this quite clearly. It may be a forgery that was perpetrated 2,000 years ago. This was not uncommon. Imagine finding an ossuary in, say 100 BC and thinking that it would acquire value IF it did contain bones related to Jesus. Pull out your chisel and it’s done.*

*Apparently it was customary to discard the bones found in such ossuaries so the box was empty. Imagine if the bones had been in the box. With DNA testing, might we have found something amazing about Jesus? Or not. DNA has revolutionized archeology and the study of history. Remember the woman who claimed to be Anastasia, the daughter of Tsar Nicholas II? Years after her death they compared DNA taken from a strand of her hair, with that of Prince Philip, who was related to the Anastasia’s mother. It was found that that there was no match and that she was a fraud. Native Americans have used DNA testing to reclaim the bodies of ancient Indian remains from museums on the grounds that the bodies are those of their ancestors.*

*Final thought: this story demonstrates how archeology is not a boring study of stuff belonging to people who lived a long time ago. It isn’t usually as exciting as the adventures of Indiana Jones, but often the findings have religious and political importance and can be very controversial. This is particularly true in Israel, there are artifacts galore and many amateur collectors, such as Oded Golan, who was an engineer by profession, not an archeologist. Archeological data is often used to demonstrate that Israel is indeed the land of the Old Testament and hence the homeland of the Jewish people.*