As U.N. Ignores Jewish Ties to Holy Site, Israel Produces Ancient Evidence

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/27/world/middleeast/israel-unesco-holy-site.html?_r=1>

The timing was surely good for [Israel](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/israel/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), whether or not it was coincidental.

As [Unesco](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/united_nations_educational_scientific_and_cultural_organization/index.html?inline=nyt-org), the United Nations cultural organization, approved a resolution on Wednesday that ignored a Jewish connection to an ancient, hotly contested holy site in Jerusalem, the Israel Antiquities Authority produced a rare papyrus fragment from the seventh century B.C., written in ancient Hebrew, that mentions Jerusalem by name.

Archaeologists interpreted the two lines of text on the papyrus as a concise shipping document reading, “From the king’s maidservant, from Na’arat, jars of wine, to Jerusalem.”

The antiquities authority, an independent government body, said it was the earliest known source aside from the Bible to mention Jerusalem in Hebrew, and added in a statement that the other place mentioned, Na’arat, appeared in the biblical book of Joshua (16:7). The authority noted that Jerusalem was the capital of the Kingdom of Judah at the time, known as the First Temple period.

In an Indiana Jones-like twist, the unusually preserved fragment had been plundered from a cave in the Judean Desert by a band of antiquities robbers, the antiquities authority said. It was retrieved several years ago by what the authority described as “a complex operation.”

The authority’s spokeswoman, Yoli Shwartz, denied that the publicizing of the fragment at a news conference here had anything to do with Israel’s diplomatic campaign against Unesco, calling the timing “completely coincidental.”

The unveiling of the document had long been planned around an annual archaeology conference scheduled for Thursday at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where preliminary research findings were to be presented, Ms. Shwartz said.

Israeli politicians nonetheless seized the opportunity to underline what they have called the “absurdity” of recent Unesco resolutions condemning Israeli actions in and around the East Jerusalem holy site revered by Muslims as Al Aqsa Mosque, or the Noble Sanctuary, and by Jews as the Temple Mount, the location of their two ancient temples. The Unesco resolutions have referred to the site solely in its Muslim context.

“The discovery of the papyrus on which the name of our capital, Jerusalem, is written is further tangible evidence that Jerusalem was and will remain the eternal capital of the Jewish people,” Miri Regev, Israel’s minister of culture and sports, said in a statement.

“The Temple Mount, the very heart of Jerusalem and Israel, will remain the holiest place for the Jewish people, even if Unesco ratifies the false and unfortunate decision another 10 times,” she said.

Ms. Regev was responding to the approval by Unesco’s [World Heritage](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/united_nations_educational_scientific_and_cultural_organization/world_heritage_sites/index.html?inline=nyt-org) Committee on Wednesday of a resolution on the status of conservation of Jerusalem’s Old City. As in other recent resolutions, Unesco referred to the holy site only by its Arabic name.

Israel and its allies accused Unesco of denying Judaism’s deep historical ties to the site. The United States denounced the resolution as “inflammatory.”

After [the committee’s vote](http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israel-races-to-thwart-consensus-approval-for-UNESCOs-Jerusalem-resolution-470883) in Paris, Unesco’s third in two weeks, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was summoning Israel’s ambassador to Unesco home for consultations.

Mr. Netanyahu said of the papyrus fragment, “Here is a letter from the past to Unesco.”

“It is from over 2,700 years ago — Jerusalem,” he added. “In neither Arabic, Aramaic, Greek nor Latin — in Hebrew.”

Israel’s latest battle with Unesco began on Oct. 13, when the organization’s executive board approved a contentious resolution concerning Old City sites that had been promoted by Arab nations, with [Palestinian](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/p/palestinians/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) encouragement. Versions of the resolution have been confirmed twice since, although some foreign officials, including Unesco’s director general, Irina Bokova, have condemned it.

In a [statement](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/statement_by_the_director_general_of_unesco_on_the_old_city-1/#.WBDfrTLMzfY) on Oct. 14, Ms. Bokova said: “The heritage of Jerusalem is indivisible, and each of its communities has a right to the explicit recognition of their history and relationship with the city. To deny, conceal or erase any of the Jewish, Christian or Muslim traditions undermines the integrity of the site and runs counter to the reasons that justified its inscription on the Unesco World Heritage List.”

Protests aside, Mr. Netanyahu presented the vote by the World Heritage Committee as a diplomatic success for Israel because the resolution was not adopted by consensus, unanimously. Instead, in a secret ballot, 11 of the 21 countries on the committee either opposed the motion, abstained or were absent. The remaining 10 voted in favor.

The Palestinians also claimed victory. “Through an orchestrated campaign, Israel has been using archaeological claims and distortion of facts as a way to legitimize the annexation of occupied East Jerusalem,” Saeb Erekat, the secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said in a statement.

The resolution, Mr. Erekat said, called for respecting the status quo at religious sites, including the East Jerusalem compound, which he said “continues to be threatened” by the “provocative actions of the Israeli government and extremist Jewish groups.”

Back in the more rarefied world of archaeology, experts pointed to other important attributes of the papyrus fragment, whose age was determined by a paleographic examination of the letters and a radiocarbon analysis, according to the antiquities authority.

Eitan Klein, deputy director of the authority’s Antiquities Robbery Prevention Unit, said the document provided evidence of an organized administration in the Kingdom of Judah and of the centrality of Jerusalem as the kingdom’s economic capital.

Prof. Shmuel Ahituv, a biblical scholar, said it also highlighted “the unusual status of a woman” in the administration of the kingdom.

The dry climate of the Judean Desert helped preserve the papyrus. “The rarity of the finds and their importance are the reason why the antiquities robbers risk their lives coming to dig in the caves in the desert cliffs,” said Amir Ganor, the director of the anti-theft unit.

Dr. Ganor [told Haaretz](http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/science/1.3103820) that his unit had received a tip in 2012 that “something good” had come out of the desert and that it was in the hands of a gang of antiquities thieves from the southern West Bank. He said employees had managed to seize the fragment as it was being sold to an Israeli antiquities dealer, who was not identified.

Although the experts said they were convinced of the document’s authenticity, they have been unable to pinpoint the location where it was unearthed.