

Mystery surrounds artifact's history

Ossuary is said to be linked to Jesus Christ

Judith Sudilovsky/CNS

JERUSALEM (CNS) — Biblical scholars said they were interested in the ossuary linked to the brother of Jesus, but cautioned against the possibility of fraud.

The limestone ossuary, a container for the bones of the dead, surfaced in the collection of an antiquities owner, with little known about the item's history. It is inscribed with "Jacob (Ya'akov) son of Joseph (Yosef), brother of Jesus (Yeshua)." Jacob is the Hebrew version of James.

Dominican Father Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, a biblical archaeologist at Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem, said that, while the researcher who studied the ossuary was a respected expert, up to 60 percent of the artifacts found in the illegal antiquities market are fake.

"Every bit of evidence is exciting. ... If it is authentic, the only significance is that it is the earliest dated reference to Joseph, James and Jesus that we have," said Father Murphy-O'Connor. "The only important thing is that date — the inscription

doesn't tell us anything we don't already know."

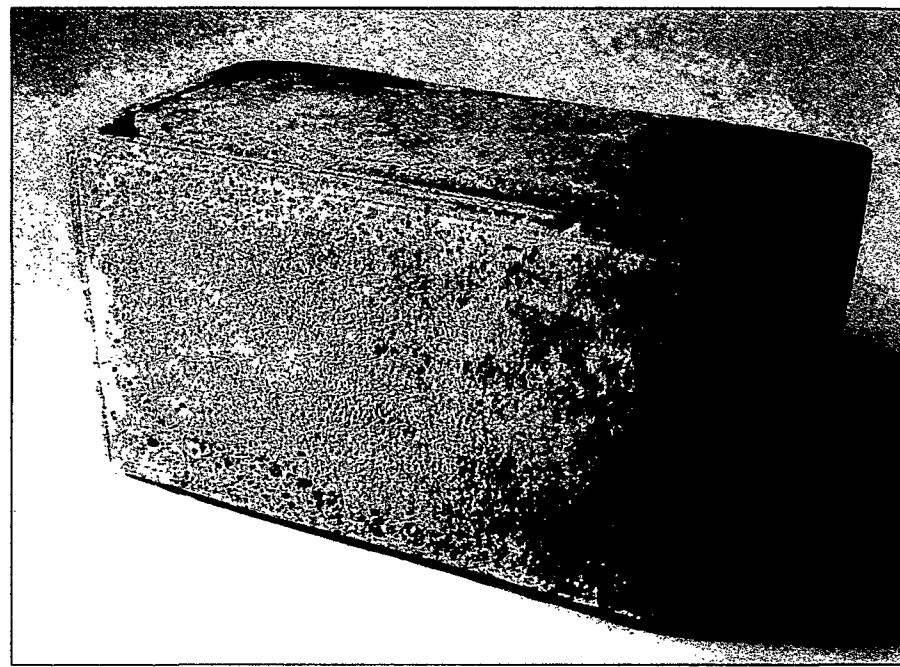
James Vanderkam, professor of Hebrew Scriptures at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, said that while a skillful fraud was possible it was likely that the inscription could have been done on a piece of limestone that dated to the first century.

"We don't know exactly where it comes from. Supposedly it was removed from a cave by someone who was not an archaeologist, so we lack context. It would have been nice to have that," he said.

He said that if the ossuary were authentic it would be a "nice find" but "not earthshaking."

Vanderkam said many believe that at the time "brother" was used to mean more than a sibling, an idea that arose as Catholics were developing the teaching of "the perpetual virginity of Mary."

Andre Lemaire, a French inscription scholar and former student and visiting professor at Ecole Biblique, concluded that the inscription found on the ancient burial box quite likely refers to the apostle James, mentioned in the New Testament as a brother of Jesus who became leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem after the crucifixion.



CNS/courtesy Biblical Archaeology Society

A French inscription scholar believes the writing found on this ancient burial box likely refers to James, brother of Jesus. The words in Aramaic read, "Jacob (Ya'akov) son of Joseph (Yosef) brother of Jesus (Yeshua)."

Lemaire, a researcher at the Sorbonne in Paris, was permitted to study and photograph the ossuary, which surfaced recently in a private collection in Jerusalem.

It is likely that the ossuary was found in or near Jerusalem, Lemaire said.

But since the ossuary came from an antiquities market replete with stolen artifacts and not from a legal excavation, little is known about its history, where and when it was found, how was it excavated, who were its former owners or what has

happened to the bones that once were inside.

The unadorned ossuary stands about 20 inches long, 10 inches wide and 12 inches high, with the 7.5-inch-long, .33-inch-high inscription appearing along one side of the box.

The use of the ossuary was a common Jewish burial practice from the first century B.C. to about 70 A.D. At the time of Jesus and James, it was common among Jews to conduct two burials. A corpse would be laid out in a burial cave until the flesh decayed. Then the bones would be placed in an ossuary and reburied.

Lemaire said the cursive style used on three of the letters narrows the date of this particular ossuary even further to the last decades before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the exact period when James would have died.

Noting that the names James (Jacob), Joseph and Jesus were fairly common Jewish names at the time, and using various methods of calculations, Lemaire estimated that there were probably some 20 people who could be called "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" in Jerusalem at that time.

In addition to being inspected by Lemaire, the inscription was analyzed by the Geological Survey of Israel, which determined that the patina — a thin layer that forms on stone over a period of time — does not contain modern elements and adheres firmly to the stone. The patina has a cauliflower shape, which is known to develop in a cave environment, the report noted.

Contributing to this story was Willy Thorn.

Obituaries

Sister Mary Adele Mariana; teacher, nurse's aide

Sister of St. Joseph Mary Adele Mariana, who celebrated her 70th jubilee this year, died Sept. 11, 2002, at the age of 87.

Born in Geneva, she spent her first 10 years of teaching at St. Anthony's in Elmira. Following other assignments, she was a founding member of St. Ann's School in Rochester. Her last teaching assignment was at St. Michael's in Penn Yan.

Subsequent to her teaching career, Sister Mariana trained at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester as a nurse's aide. She served in that capacity at the motherhouse infirmary for 17 years. She later served as infirmary receptionist.

Sister Mariana is survived by nieces and nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews, and her sisters

in the congregation. Her funeral liturgy was celebrated in the motherhouse chapel on Sept. 14 by Father Donald Curtiss, assisted by Msgr. Emmett Murphy and Father Bruce Ammering.

Contributions in her memory may be made to the St. Joseph's Convent Infirmary, 4095-East Ave., Rochester, NY 14618.

Brother Sebastian; veteran of WWII

Benedictine Brother Sebastian (Jack L. Maher) of Mount Saviour Monastery in Pine City, N.Y., died Sept. 29, 2002, at the age of 84.

Brother Sebastian served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He was wounded in action in Algiers. Following his recuperation, he volunteered to be part of the Normandy Invasion of Europe, during which he was again wounded, losing his right eye. Following his military service,

he worked in the New Jersey Department of Veterans' Service and in the Attorney General's office.

In 1963 Brother Sebastian entered the monastery at Mount Saviour and became a regular oblate in 1967. He was in charge of the monastery's business office until his retirement.

A funeral Mass was celebrated Oct. 2 followed by burial in the monastery cemetery.

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