

New Perspectives on the Ancient World

Modern perceptions, ancient representations

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Dom Pedro II Visits Antique Shop in Jerusalem: A controversy around Moabite antique pieces and the ‘Shapira Affair’

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Introduction

Late in the afternoon on December 4, 1876, the most important personality of Imperial Brazil, the wise and charismatic Emperor D. Pedro II (Rio de Janeiro 1825 - Paris 1891) strolls through Jerusalem’s Old City. Upon visiting a typical antique shop, His Majesty takes a small notebook and enters the following record:

‘So, out of curiosity, I visited the bric-à-bric shop of the famous Safira, whose face does not strike one as that of a reliable man, and seemed to me to be a Schliemann without fanaticism, not very serious. He showed me his latest Moabite antique pieces, which looked like clay objects recently made by uncivilized people. He gave me photos of the little clay monsters. Before dinner, I took a Turkish Bath, not however as well applied as in Damascus...’¹

From these words by the Emperor of Brazil, there arise a few questions that need to be considered carefully, such as:

1. Who was Mr. Safira, mentioned by Brazil’s second emperor?
2. Why, according to D. Pedro II, did Safira not seem ‘a reliable man’?
3. What were those Moabite Antique pieces mentioned by the monarch?
4. What kind of photos of the ‘little monsters’ would the Brazilian sovereign have received?
5. What finally happened to Safira and his archeological pieces?

Those and other topics related to that short excerpt recorded by D. Pedro II in his ‘Journey Diary’ will be the subject of this present article. ‘Safira’ is the collector named Wilhelm Moses Shapira (1830-1884)

Over 120 years ago, on March 9, 1884, at the Bloementhal Hotel, in Amsterdam, Holland, a desperate man committed suicide with a shot in the head. He felt persecuted, the victim of injustice, and not understood by others, or perhaps he suspected that finally his secret had been disclosed. That man, whose main goal was to get rich illegally by selling works of art, was called Wilhelm Moses Shapira (Ilan 1983).

The Emperor D. Pedro II was not mistaken, for indeed ‘Safira did not seem a reliable man’. I believe that the monarch’s comparison between Shapira and Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890), at that time regarded as a model of integrity and authenticity, could not have been more accurate. For many, Schliemann was a highly trusted archeologist. He was the first to visit ancient Greece in 1859. He dedicated his life to excavations on the Hissarlik Hill (Asia Minor), where he believed he found Homer’s Troy. He also excavated Micenas, discovering the ‘Lions’ Gate’ and the archeological complex known as ‘Circle of Royal Tombs’. Some of the most widespread works by Heinrich Schliemann were certainly in the Library of Pedro II; after all, he was the most prestigious archeologist of that age and a contemporary to the Emperor.² However, how did the polemical ‘Shapira Affair’ start?

In July 1883, Moses Shapira brought to London a special manuscript of the Book of Deuteronomy (Devarim). The text included changes to the massoretic version, a fact that prompted suspicion among the London specialists as well as specialists from other countries. For weeks, magazines and newspapers published extensive reports featuring excerpts from the manuscript, feverishly discussing the piece’s authenticity. Soon thereafter, the manuscript was exhibited to the public in the British Museum, where it was viewed by William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898), Victorian England’s Prime Minister.

Moses Shapira was a convert to Judaism who had settled in Jerusalem. He traded old books and sacred objects,

¹ Pedro II, Diary of the Trip to Palestine by the Emperor of Brazil. MIP (Petropolis Imperial Museum), Diaries 18-19, file 37, doc. 1057, unnumbered pages. Critical and Modern Edition, in: Faingold 1999, 143.

² Schliemann’s major works, ‘Mykenae’ (1877) and ‘Ílios, Stadt und Land der Trojaner’ (1881), were written in German and translated into other languages. About the German archeologist, see: Thompson 1964.

was familiar with the Jews' sacred literature, and visited Jewish communities in faraway places, purchasing Torah scrolls and phylacteries that were improper for usage. Tourists who visited his shop in Jerusalem's Old City were impressed by his cultural background and the great enthusiasm with which he explained details about every piece in his collection.

A young member of the highly reputed 'Palestine Exploration Fund', the archeologist Charles F. Tyrwhitt-Drake (1846-1874), who traveled through the Holy Land in the early 1870s, once stated:

'In my research on the writing on manuscript rolls, I was helped by Shapira, a German Jew, a great expert on the Talmud and Jewish folklore, currently a member of the Protestant Community in Jerusalem' (Ilan 1983, 9)

Considering the above-mentioned text, it is clear that Tyrwhitt-Drake visited Shapira's antique shop. There, he examined Hebrew manuscripts from the Tzana region, all of which had been put together in scrolls with red tones.

The trade of 'moabite ceramics'

The help offered by Moses Shapira to Drake was of great importance, since it allowed for the usage of that information to form a consolidated opinion upon the conclusion of the debate surrounding the authenticity of the Moabite ceramics (Fig. 1). Those ceramics caused special interest not only among specialists but also among the public in general. We believe that D. Pedro II visited Shapira's shop at the precise moment when a great collection of pieces of ceramics was on exhibit. The collection consisted of hundreds of pieces with inscriptions in ancient Hebrew. It was exactly what our Second Emperor wanted because he was thirsty for knowledge, having learned how to read Hebrew by 1876 from systematic teaching by three masters: the Jewish-Swedish diplomat Leonhard Akerblom (1830-1896) and the German pastors Ferdinand Koch (1871) and Karl Henning (1874-1886).³

That set of ceramics was called Moabite ceramics by Moses Shapira himself, since it originated from the Moab Hills, close to the Dead Sea. We do not know who sculpted the Moabite ceramics, and, naturally, for such an educated individual such as D. Pedro II, the creators of those ceramics must have been 'people who were uncivilized'. The Moabite ceramics showed some resemblance to the inscriptions on the famous Moabite stone, a huge rock discovered a few years earlier and considered the world's

³ Regarding the Emperor D. Pedro II's studies of Hebrew, see: Notebooks of Hebrew Studies (Liber Genesis I-II et Liber Psalmorum) at the Imperial Museum, and Faingold 2000; Costa, 1925; Haramati 1990, 17-18. Regarding the Brazilian monarch's translations, see: Translation made [by D. Pedro II] of the four chapters of the Book of Ruth (Hebrew into Latin) IHGB (Brazilian Historical and Geographic Institute), can 311, file 44; and a brief article published in the Brazilian Press, Feder 1944.

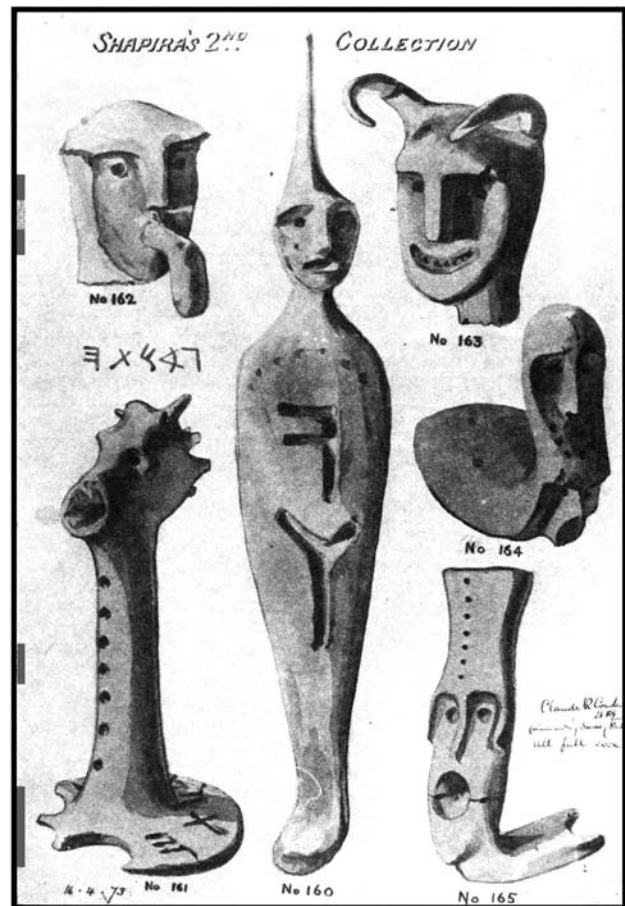


Fig. 1. Monstregos (Little monsters) – Pieces of Moabite ceramic from Shapira Collection, published in Ilan 1983, 10 (hebrew).

oldest stone with Semitic characters. On it, there were hundreds of sentences related to Mesha, king of Moab, and among them, one that allows for the reconstruction of the battle between the Moabite and Israelite People.⁴

At the time when those archeological pieces appeared, around 1868, they caused a singular commotion. On them were drawings of living beings, such as birds, a serpent and a scorpion, animals with horns, a goat with the head of a cow, and also pieces and objects with holes. Those inscriptions (never before seen) were the same in shapes and characteristics: twenty-three letters which were constantly repeated were identified, fifteen of which were part of the Phoenician Alphabet. Obviously, it was very difficult to decipher them. How was it possible, however, that no one had been able to find that kind of writing in the past?

Shapira did not hesitate and authorized Captain Claude Regnier Conder (1848-1910), a member of the Palestine Exploration Fund, to draw hundreds of pieces. The industrious Conder carefully checked the pieces' authenticity, and the British Museum verified and purchased

⁴ Papers relating to Shapira's Forged Manuscript of Deuteronomy. British Museum, Add. 41294 [A document cited in all scientific researches], and compare with: Ilan 1983; Rabinowicz 1956-1957.

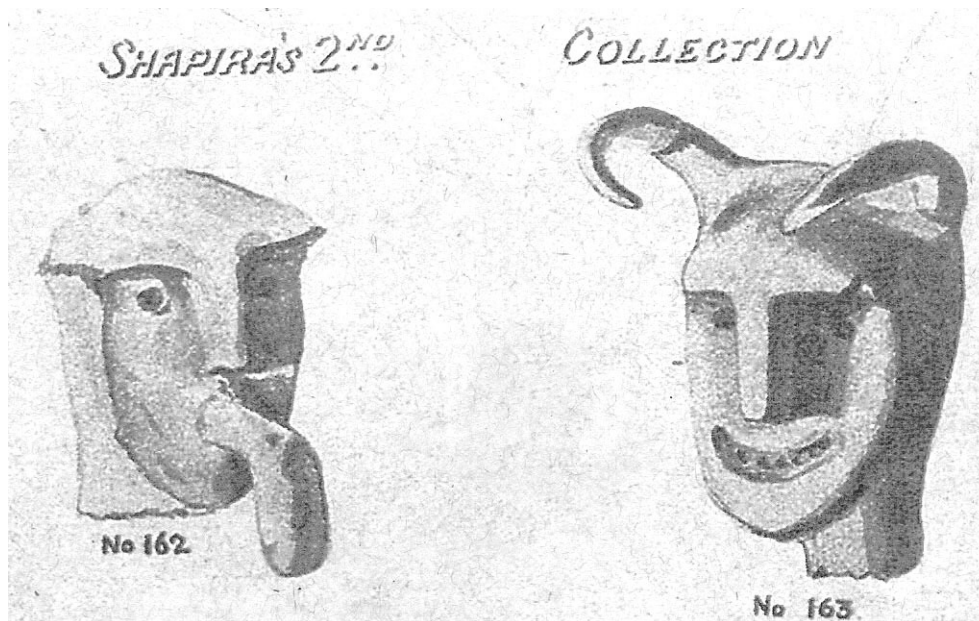


Fig. 2. Detail of pieces 162 and 163 (Moabite Ceramic) from the Shapira Collection, published in Ilan 1983, 10 (hebrew).

hundreds of those. Shapira prepared more pieces and assembled them in a second collection. There were some improprieties in those objects, such as grains of salt stuck to the pieces, but Shapira always found an explanation, claiming that those rare pieces were permanently in direct contact with the salt of the Dead Sea (Conder 1892).

The pieces seemed new, as if recently manufactured, but Shapira also had a ready justification for that. He stated that they had been found in the ruins in a state of almost decomposition, and thus it was necessary to dry them in an oven for better preservation. Both Tyrwhitt-Drake and Chaplin, both experts on the matter, noticed that some objects were extremely similar to each other, as if an 'assembly line process' had been used, a very common phenomenon in factories.

Misgivings began to spread throughout England. Meanwhile, Moses Shapira claimed that those objects had been known before and that some had been totally ground down and sent by the caravans of camels to a cement plant in Beirut. In Dibon (Dhiban), the Bedouins found whole pieces of clay, and when this piece of news reached Shapira's ears, he began to purchase those by means of an Arab emissary. After four months, accompanied by a German cleric named Weser and one Dinsberg, Mr. Shapira decided to pay a surprise archeological visit to find antique pieces. He would thus put an end to the many doubts that existed in relation to his pieces, and, naturally, in relation to his moral and commercial integrity.

Shapira, Weser and Dinsberg met with Ali Diab, a sheik from the Aduan Bedouin tribe who lived on the Eastern banks of the Jordan River, and from whom Moses Shapira had already purchased several antique pieces. The Bedouin took them to the sites of El-Aléh, Cheshbon, and Dibon. Excavating there, they discovered more objects similar to

those already found. In Dibon, Sheik Ali Diab showed them a niche of stone where there was an image of the goddess Ashtoret with horns on her head. Beside the niche, close to a hill were Phoenician inscriptions. In Medeba, another site in that area, stones with illustrations of the moon and the sun were found. That expedition yielded 30 or 40 objects, all of which were copied by Claude R. Conder, who enthusiastically told the Palestine Exploration Fund in London: 'One day, you will thank me for this discovery' (Conder 1873/74)

In Germany, experts who had followed the story of the archeological excavations began to believe in the authenticity of the pieces gathered in the discoveries (Fig. 2). Moses Shapira came to be regarded as the Prussian Government's official agent for archeological matters. The Emperor of Prussia himself purchased pieces traded by Shapira. To reply to the doubts expressed by the British, Shapira went along with Chaplin to the Moab desert, and there he obtained some of the 'little monsters' mentioned in the Bible. He found a little monster, black, one meter tall, with horns and a Pharaoh-type beard. On that sculpture was a Phoenician inscription of 7-10 lines painted in several colors throughout.

The French researcher Clermont-Ganneau

In early 1874, the young archeologist and expert on Eastern matters named Charles Clermont-Ganneau (1846-1923) came to Jerusalem. In 1867, he served as a French consul to Ottoman Palestine, being later appointed vice-consul in Jafa, a seaport town in the heart of the Holy Land (Allegro 1965; Ilan 1983, 10-11).

In 1868, Ganneau was involved in deciphering the *Stella of Mesha* (9 BC), broken by wild Bedouins who wanted to make profits from the piece. At that same time, the French archeologist hired draughtsmen and a spy named Salim Al-

Kari, who completed three lines of that Mesha inscription. Obviously, Ganneau was thankful and saved Al-Kari's lines.

Upon publication of the photos and the arrival of the collection of objects in Germany, German experts began to suspect strongly that the whole affair regarding Wilhelm Moses Shapira was nothing but a fraud, a hoax of grand proportions. Suddenly, Clermont-Ganneau traveled to Berlin to see the collection, continued on to Jerusalem, and, putting together a truly detective-like operation, concluded that the complementary texts made by the spy Salim Al-Kari were neither authentic nor truthful. The French archeologist's report (officially accepted by the German consulate) disclosed many forgeries and disclosed the fact that the very material used to make those pieces was the same used in the process of making clay in and around Jerusalem in the 19th Century (Barlett 1855; Faingold 1999, 33-34).

It must be stated that Charles Clermont did not blame Moses Shapira; instead, he blamed the spy Salim Al-Kari. The archeologist showed that the manuscript that Salim had in his hands was the same as the three-line inscription that Salim himself had copied in the *Stella of Mesha*. In other words, Ganneau stated that the Bedouins had cheated the German archeologists and scholars. In April 1874, Prof. K. Schlottmann, one of the main German researchers, wrote a consistent article against Clermont-Ganneau, entitled 'Chauvinism in Archeology,' where he claimed that the anti-German position was based on intentions of revenge by the French against the Germans (Allegrò 1965; Zeitlin 1956/57).

For years, the controversies between the French and Germans continued, and only in 1878, and the debate came to an end, when another delegation led by Manhaussen, the German consul, traveled to Moab in search of the ceramic, and discovered that they had indeed been cheated by the Bedouins. In face of the *Manhaussen Report*, Salim Al-Kari fled to Alexandria and Moses Shapira maintained his stance that there had been no fraud.

Finally, in 1878, Shapira recognized that the *Manhaussen Report* was accurate when it mentioned forgery and fraud, but not before stating that 'one must be able to distinguish the several types of fraud, and not all is fraud'. The museums of Berlin, Stuttgart and Basel quickly realized they had been cheated and that the objects they had purchased had no commercial value.

That unfortunate episode disclosed by Clermont Ganneau did not give Shapira the reputation of forger, but he was regarded as responsible for spreading archeological forgeries. In the eyes of the world, he came out as a gullible man who had also been a victim of the Bedouins' cheating (Ilan 1983, 11).

While Shapira came to London with scrolls of ancient manuscripts (discovered on the banks of the Jordan River),

and the buzz was going on around the *Moabite Ceramics*, he chose to put off for six years his major scientific discovery: the Book of Deuteronomy featuring versions that differed from the massoretic text.

At the end of his career, Clermont Ganneau taught and researched Archeology along with Ernest Renan, a renowned expert on Eastern matters and professor at the recently founded *Collège de France* in Paris. His works, all of which focused on the archeological findings in the Holy Land, were extensive. Among them, we shall mention only the following: *La Palestine inconnue, 1876*; *Les frauds archéologiques en Palestine, 1885*, and *Archéological recherches em Palestine, 2 vols, 1896-1899* (Faingold 1999, 148; Saba 1976).

Shapira and the book of Deuteronomy

On May 9, 1883, Moses Shapira wrote a letter from Jerusalem to Prof. Hermann Strack. In the letter, he claimed to have in his hands a narrow but long scroll, all in sheep skin, featuring excerpts from the Book of Deuteronomy, Biblical excerpts differing from the massoretic version, that is, the oldest copy of the Old Testament. In that letter, as in many others sent by Moses Shapira to scholars, he demonstrated thorough knowledge of Biblical versions, comparing and pointing out textual differences, as well as displaying an uncommon level of erudition (Allegrò 1965, 46 and 89).

Shapira took that manuscript of the Book of Deuteronomy to Leipzig in Germany, and many scholars certified its authenticity. Later, he traveled to London and introduced the manuscript to the Palestine Exploration Fund, telling members Claude R. Conder and Walter Besant (1836-1901) how the manuscript came into his hands. The whole incident began in 1878, when a Bedouin sheik approached Shapira and told him that a group of Bedouins had come across pieces of a manuscript covered with pieces of cloth near the Arnon Valley (Wadi Mujib). The Bedouins thought that they were amulets without any value and disposed of them. One of the Bedouins who were there took up the pieces of manuscript. Shapira offered the sheik a reward for taking him to the Bedouin who had taken the manuscripts. Moses Shapira met the Bedouin and bought the manuscripts. The Bedouin then disappeared, and Shapira never saw him again.

There is another version told by Shapira: he had purchased the manuscripts from a deserter of the Turkish army who was camping around the Dead Sea. Almost no one paid attention to that version.

In the manuscript of the Book of Deuteronomy, the same letters that had been seen in the *Stella of Mesha* appeared. After each word, a dot had been added, and there were incomplete spaces where certain basic Biblical sections were missing. For example, in the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 33, the 'blessing of Moses' (Birkat Moshé) should



Fig. 3. Caricature – Dr. Ginsburg catching the collector Moses Shapira. This caricature was published in Punch's Fancy Portraits No. 152 and reproduced in Ilan 1983, 11 (Hebrew).

have been included, but instead it appears in a version that is completely different from the one found in the massoretic text. Any other comparison among the texts of the Book of Deuteronomy (chapters 5 and 6 onward) will disclose significant textual changes.

The manuscript scroll of the Book of Deuteronomy was exhibited in the British Museum in London, causing a stir among the public and prompting controversies among experts in Biblical interpretation.

Wilhelm Moses Shapira, satisfied with the repercussion of his archeological piece, asked the Directors of the British Museum for the 'small amount' (sic) of One Million Pounds Sterling for the manuscript! (Saba 1976, 22).

The return of Clermont-Ganneau

Throughout the Nineteenth Century, European interest in archeological excavations in the Holy Land grew rapidly. There was a competition between England and France. The Germans did not fall behind, either. While the Old Continent discussed the high price of the Book of Deuteronomy, that piece was examined and thoroughly investigated by experts on the subject. Moses Shapira, from his hotel in London, corresponded with scholars to convince them of the piece's authenticity. Prof. Christian David Ginsburg (1831-1914) from the British Museum, a converted Jew, copied entire sections of the manuscripts that are currently displayed in that

famous London Museum (Fig. 3).⁵

However, even when most scholars considered the manuscript to be authentic and legitimate, Charles Clermont-Ganneau came from Paris to put an end to that 'dream' and stated firmly, in the 'Athenaeum' newspaper, that the so-called Book of Deuteronomy was also a forgery. His version to tear down the other scholars' theories was simple: the manuscript was written in *lapidary writing* (a form of writing that was common in stone sculptures such as the Stella of Mesha), and not in the scroll-manuscript writing (common in pieces written on sheep or gazelle skin).

Other researchers argued that the manuscript was written on thin and very narrow scrolls and that Shapira had cut the edges of the Biblical manuscript to make it look thousands of years old, even writing nonexistent sections. Naturally, the wide repercussion in the press about an eventual forgery of the scroll-manuscript led the British Museum to abandon entirely any intention of buying that piece.⁶

Shapira did not give up and began visiting the most important museums in Europe with the intention of finding a buyer for the manuscript of the Book of Deuteronomy. Nevertheless, nobody was willing to gamble on such a controversial piece. Disconsolate and without any further wish to visit any museum, Wilhelm Moses Shapira traveled to Rotterdam and committed suicide gunshot.

Sixty-three years later, in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the caves of Qumran, also in the vicinity of the Moab Hills. Those manuscripts, currently displayed in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, were extremely important for the study of the first years of Christianity. That discovery occasioned endless debates in several academic circles, mainly in Europe, the USA and Israel. However, even if, in those manuscripts, there were versions that differed from the massoretic text, no scholar or collector questioned the authenticity of the Qumran scrolls.⁷

In 1947, the affair involving Shapira was brought up in the academic circles. Some American scientists, such as the renowned Prof. Menahem Mansoor from the University of Wisconsin, even stated that, if the *Qumran Manuscripts* were authentic, there was no reason to believe that those of Shapira were forgeries. This was also the opinion of John Marco Allegro (1923-1988), a professor from the Universities of Manchester and Oxford and an expert on the *Qumran Manuscripts*, who wrote an entire book on Shapira. Nevertheless, it must be stated that most scholars have refused to accept Moses Shapira's innocence.

The manuscripts that had been in Shapira's hands

⁵ For Ch. D. Ginsburg, see Allegro 1965, 33, 37, 43, 56, 62 and 85 and compare with Mansoor 1958.

⁶ For the British Museum's giving up the purchase of the manuscript for One Million Pounds Sterling, see Ilan 1983, 11; Saba 1976, 22.

⁷ The bibliography on the Dead Sea Scrolls (the Qumran manuscripts) is extensive. See a synthesis and textual analysis in Zeitlin 1956/57, 196-211.

disappeared in 1884. A few years after his tragic death, they were sold for only 10 guineas (approximately 21 Pounds Sterling) to an antiquarian whose house was burned down in 1887.

What about the rich archeological material that caused such intense disagreement among experts? Would it have been lost irretrievably? This is truly an enigma of history. Who knows, maybe someday, new archeological evidence will cast some light and further details on the polemical 'Shapira Affair.'

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