

Goliath in Jerusalem (I):

Archaeological Stories of Mandate Palestine

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The famous author Cide Hamete Benengeli complained about his narrative:

“And, as he confines and restricts himself to the narrow limits of the narrative [...] he requests that his labours may not be despised, and that credit be given him not alone for what he writes, but for what he has refrained from writing.”

Don Quixote Vol. II, Chap. 46 (translation by John Ormsby).

In “*Past Perfect? The Archaeologies of Mandate Palestine, 1917–1948*”, I limited the narrative to 666 pages – a number not planned in advance (2025, OBO 308, free access at <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-280704>). Some stories were left outside, and a few of them are presented here. They concern antiquities, gold, places and people: in short, everything.

The following abbreviations are used: ATQ – Israel Antiquities Authority Archive, Atiqot files; DAP – Department of Antiquities of Palestine; Director – Director of the DAP; FO – Foreign Office; ISA – Israel State Archive; TNA – The National Archives, Kew. Egyptian pounds (the legal tender of Palestine until 1927) and Palestinian pounds are marked by £.

1. The Secrets of Ophel

The conquest of Palestine by the British Army in WW1 released hidden dreams. Among the dreamers was Dr. Valter Juvelius (Juva) (1865–1922), a poet, translator, and keeper of the Wiborg city library (Finland). He wrote to the British vice consul at Edessa in 1919: secret Hebrew texts were hidden in the Ophel of Jerusalem! They would have to be abandoned, should a Jewish government be formed in Palestine (TNA 608/2/3, Folios 105–6). He could help find them and, as a man of science, was not seeking financial gain:

“A British Company in the name of J.M.P.F.W. Limited of London has performed some excavations at Jerusalem before the Balkan war, with the aim of reaching, with the aid of certain ancient Hebrew secret scriptures (ciphers), through a very complicated shaft (tunnel) system, the ancient Hebrew Temple-shelters (Azyls) in the interior of the Ophel Mountain. The Temple-shelters [...] ought to contain the temple archives with the invaluable foundation deeds to the scripture types, the temple treasury and the Necropolis of the Kings of Judah. [...] If the Jewish government be reestablished in Palestine the excavation work in the Ophel Mountain would be prevented for all times to come and the English capital already engaged there would be lost [...] The writings, whose discovery likely to be of an unforeseen importance to comprehend the very base of our culture and even to form our view of the universe, would remain inaccessible to the western exploration [...] [but] accessible only to the higher Jewish clergy.

I am now in possession of many particularly clear cipher solution as to a score of other secret shelters referring to various tribes of the ancient empires of Israel and Judah and also to those of Tyros [...]

The excavation rights of the shelter at Jerusalem belong to the existing British company in which I am a shareholder. As to the other shelters [...] it is my object to offer to the British Government to undertake and to control the excavations there, which work I am ready to conduct. [...]

6. I personally have no interest in the eventual pecuniary gains, it is only the science I am aiming at.

7. It is now fully evident why the archaeological researches in Palestine have given so poor real results: No written deeds, no sacred objects, nothing of real value has been so far brought forward. The reason seems to have been that everything that was considered of importance to culture and to the religious life was concealed by the various tribes of Israel and Judah in secret, specially prepared rooms deep inside the lime-stone mountains. The ingenious various shafts were blocked up during the wartime, the entrances were concealed by cement filling ingeniously like the look and colour of the surrounding blocks. [...]

I believe to have in my charge the key to most of these secret shelters [...]

8. I place at the disposal of the British Government the detailed explanation of this concern. I am also ready to demonstrate the cipher writs related above to the British Government, who, if favourable results gained, might become possessor of several hundred millions of pounds” (TNA FO608/2/3, 30.1.1919).

The Foreign Office was not impressed. An official remarked: “This man is mad as a hatter. He was partly responsible for the Monty [Montague] Parker swindle in Jerusalem” (TNA FO608/2/3, 1.5.1919). The notorious Parker expedition, before WW1, tried to dig into the Temple Mount. Valter Juvelius (Juva) persuaded Parker to do so, promising that he could decipher the Bible and find its greatest treasures. Juvelius left Jerusalem just before the scandal broke out. He claimed later that there was no intention of digging under the Temple Mount: they just wanted to find the tomb of Moses.

Soon, new excavations began (Fig. 1). The prediction that a Jewish government would prevent underground exploration near the Temple Mount has not materialized. Tunnel digging has been rampant in recent years in East Jerusalem, by the Parkers of our time.

On Juvelius’ science fiction, see D. Landau 1999, *Hakehila* 4: 13–14; M. Pesonen 2020, *YLE Uutiset*, 11.1.2020. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11603809> [Finnish]; T.R. Stewart 2020, *Valter Juvelius ja kadonneen arkin metsästys* (Valter Juvelius and the Hunt for the Lost Ark). Helsinki: Gaudeamus [Finnish].



Fig. 1. The “Jebusite Wall” (stepped stone structure). Photo: Eric Matson, 1925 (Library of Congress).

2. An Ancient Hebrew Prohibitionist Inscription

Glad tidings from the front were reported in Australia in 1919:

“A most interesting cable from the Commandant of the force in Palestine to the Military authorities in London says – “A splendid preserved mummy has been recovered from a shell damaged tomb. It is believed to be that of a gentleman who lived at least 3000 years ago. An important old Hebrew document was also discovered in the same spot. The services of a learned Rabbi were secured to translate the contents. It has reference to the use of wine in those far off days, evidently to the sorrow and shame of the community. The following is a translation: Woe to them that excel in the drinking of wine, who are expert in mixing of wines. Be it known that certain leading men in these days lost character and position through drinking of light wines. Even the priests and political leaders have fallen out of respect because they swallow much wine. Vomit and filth are found in their Chambers of Legislation and Government, all of which is woefully destructive to decency and decorum [...]

The learned Rabbi has no doubt as to the veracity of the document. His explanation is that evidently the gentleman whose remains are so well preserved was a prohibitionist, who had the strength of conviction and the courage to speak in condemnation of the light wines, which certain of the politicians of those days made and sold [...].

It is reported that certain of the Australian soldiers who have done such splendid service in Palestine are requesting that the valuable old document should be presented to New South Wales, in the hope that the Government may carefully study its contents and lesson, and so preserve themselves from the unwise policy that is now being advanced by self-interested politicians” (Australian Temperance and Prohibition World, 13.5.1919, in ISA M27/3 [Discovery of a Prohibitionist Hebrew Documents in a Palestinian Tomb]).

The British Foreign Office asked the Palestine Government to verify this news (ISA M27/3, 18.8.1920), but they were unable to confirm the account (Garstang [First Director of DAP] to Chief Secretary, 16.9.1920). The ‘translation’ betrays a modern mixing – of words, not wine.¹

3. An Apology from Storrs

The Governor of Jerusalem, Ronald Storrs (1881–1955), who jokingly called himself the “King of Jerusalem”, had a strong personality. He once insulted Pythian-Adams (1888–1967), the Keeper of the Museum (it was before the ‘Rockefeller’ Museum), during a public luncheon of the Pro-Jerusalem Society. Storrs told everyone present that Pythian-Adams was representing the DAP for that occasion only, but could not find time to come to other meetings. Pythian-Adams complained bitterly about this “somewhat ill-timed witticism”. He was working for the British School, which had almost no budget, and for the DAP on a nominal salary as keeper of museum cum supervisor cum temporary director. He had no spare time.

Storrs apologized – sort of:

“February 8th 1922.

12.55 p.m. The Governor rang up and said he was sorry that I had taken offence at his harmless remarks.

I replied that I could not accept an apology of this kind, but required one as open as the affront.

[Added in handwriting:] i.e., to be recorded in the minutes of the society.

He answered: ‘Oh, you won’t get it’ and rang off” (ATQ670/J1 [Antiquities Pro Jerusalem Society]; compare Samuel, E. 1970, *A Lifetime in Jerusalem*. Jerusalem: 51–53).

Pythian-Adams left the DAP to work with Fitzgerald at Beisan (Beth Shean), then left Palestine. Later in life he was the royal chaplain of several kings, including George V, Edward VIII, and George VI.

4. The Gold of Haj Za’alan

Not everything that glitters in archaeology is gold, but some is. According to the Antiquities Laws and the etiquette of the period, finders of antiquities who reported their discoveries were entitled to rewards, and excavation laborers who found gold antiquities were paid the market value by weight.

In 1933, four prisoners on labor service found a pot with gold coins in Lajjoun. There was no warden watching them, so they immediately divided the lot, each taking about 40 coins. The police recovered 41 coins, the earliest dated to 708 CE. Forty coins were handed to Inspector Makhoully (1894–1976), and one was kept by the Jenin police as evidence.

The prisoners said they had broken the pot on the spot, but nothing was found (ATQ461 [El-Lajjun], Makhoully to Director, 27.11.1933). Director Richmond wondered: how could prisoners manage to hide or sell so many coins while still in prison? (ATQ461, to Inspector of Police, 19.11.1933). Were some coins smuggled to Lebanon? Nothing was found to show smuggling (ATQ461, Seyrig to Richmond, 19.2.1934). Finally, Makhoully went to Jenin to collect the coin left as evidence, but it transpired that it had already been taken by another antiquities inspector (ATQ461, Makhoully, 20.4.1934).

Another time, Haj Za’alan “the Persian”, the owner of a coffee shop in Haifa, found a tomb and took some antiquities home. However, he immediately reported it to the DAP. The DAP excavated the tomb and offered a reward for the antiquities that Za’alan removed before the excava-

¹ For example, the term “light wine”; attributing a Hebrew document to an Egyptian-type burial (“splendidly preserved mummy”); and terms like “political leaders” and “chambers of legislation” (appropriate in modern Australia, not in ancient Palestine).

tion. However, Za‘alan (through his lawyer, Z. Goldstein) demanded a reward *for all the antiquities* (ATQ288a [Haifa: Haj Za‘alan Antiquities], Makhoully, 29.12.1931; Goldstein, 28.1.1932; Makhoully, 9.1.1932).

According to the lawyer, the current law (Antiquities Ordinance 1929, Article 7) did not distinguish (concerning rewards) between antiquities from excavations and those found accidentally. The government experts admitted in private that this was, indeed, the case. They advised seeking an amicable settlement, to avoid setting a precedent (ATQ288a, Chief Secretary to Director, 31.3.1932). Director Richmond decided to return all the antiquities to Za‘alan (ATQ288a, 9.4.32), but he refused to accept them:

“Suddenly he broke out shouting: ‘No, no, these are not mine; these are not the antiquities found in my land; where is the fair glass bottle decorated with a snake twisted on the neck? Where are the gold bracelets found in my property and taken by you?’” (ATQ288a, Makhoully, 11.5.1932).

Inspector Makhoully was upset (a rare occasion), but in fact, some glass pieces and four pottery lamps were missing (not gold, though). These were apparently in the museum in Jerusalem (ATQ288a, 20.5.1932). The missing items were located and returned. Makhoully refused to give them to Za‘alan in person; it was too humiliating. So he gave them to Za‘alan’s wife (ATQ288a, 1.11.1932).

5. The First Chinese Archaeologist in Palestine

In 1933/4, Wu Jinding (1901–1948) joined the Petries’ expedition to Tell El-‘Ajjul, and was therefore entitled to reduced-price rail tickets (ATQ41/6/J3, 18.9.1933). Hilda Petrie wrote to introduce Jinding to Richmond (ATQ41/6/J3, 3.4.1934; Fig. 2). Jinding was the first Chinese archaeologist to work in Palestine. In China, he excavated the Chengziya site of the Longshan culture (1930–31). He studied at the University of London, receiving his PhD in 1937.

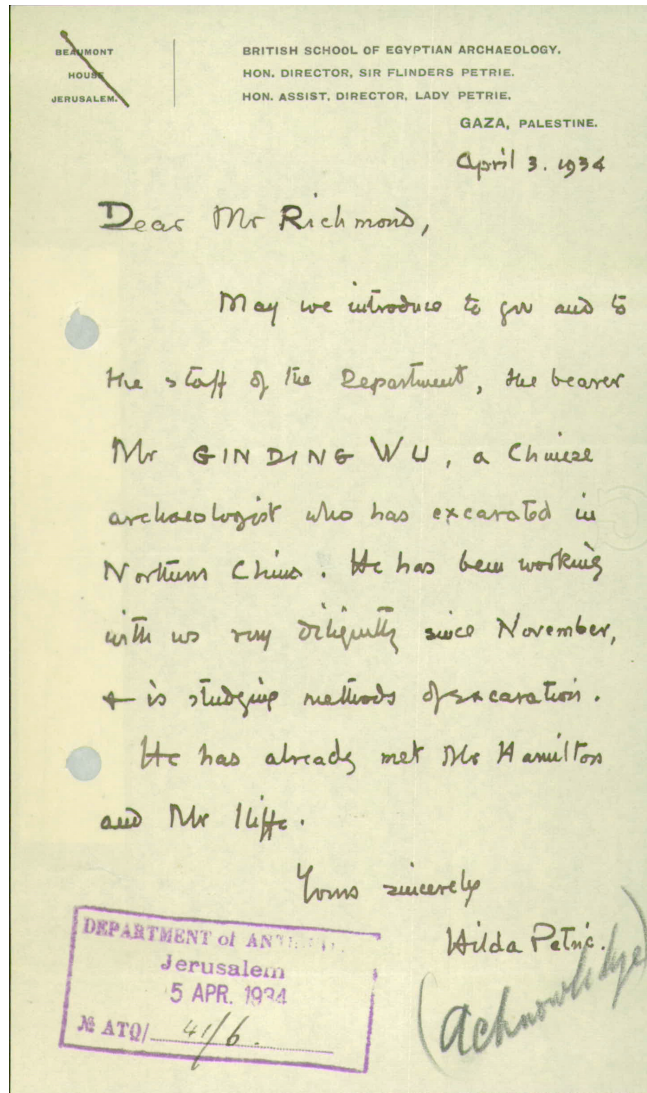


Fig. 2. Letter from Hilda Petrie to the Director of the DAP, 3.4.1934 (ATQ41/6).

6. A Tentative Translation

The American excavator William Frederic Badè (1871–1936) found an ancient tablet at Tel Beth Shemesh. Dr. George Barton came to his aid and offered a tentative reading:

“El, cut through the backbone of my stammering! I desire (that?) thou shalt remove the spring of the impediment” (Barton, *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 66/1 [1934]: 55).

7. Holy Paleolithic Man

“Mr. Neuville called and said there was a great deal of loose rock and stones to be removed from the cave at Nazareth (Kafzeh) before any archaeological layer could be reached. It would be a work of 3 or 4 days sieving this material and he asked whether he needs be there himself. I said that if he didn’t consider it necessary, he need not be there he himself” (ATQ62/6 [Archaeological Soundings, Jebel Kafzeh], Guy, 14.6.1934).

The French consul René Neuville (1899–1952) worked on prehistoric remains in Kafzeh (the Mount of Precipitation near Nazareth, identified as the place of the leap of Jesus). In 1945, the area

was undergoing registration by the Land Department. The government claimed some parcels as an antiquities site, but the Italian Custodia di Terra Santa was also interested: “it is anticipated [that it] will claim the site as a holy place”. The DAP was asked for an opinion (ATQ668 [Jabal Qafzeh], Director of Land Settlement to Director, 14.2.1945; cf. ISA M4310/36 [Dispute on Land known as Precipice]). Richmond (a Catholic himself) responded:

“The important archaeological feature of this case is a cave containing skeletal remains of Palaeolithic man. I think it is desirable that this cave [...] should be registered in the name of Government.

The remainder of the property, including the ‘Holy Place’ [*sic*] may be relinquished to the Custodia, as far as I am concerned” (ATQ668, 20.2.1945).

Kafzeh is perhaps the only site in the world where Paleolithic man and the Catholic Church live, if not together, at least side by side.

8. A Treasure at Shefa ‘Amr

The Egyptian newspaper Mokattam published news about Shfa ‘Amr (Shfar‘am) in the Galilee. It was quoted by the newspaper *Haaretz*:

“Rumours are circulated about the discovery of antiquities of importance in Shfar‘am. It is said that one of the inhabitants digging in one of the caves nearest to his house has come upon another cave containing fifteen clay and cast iron coffins. Busts were carved on the lids of the coffins with inscriptions in relief. When the man became aware that the discovery would soon become known to the villagers he sealed the mouth of the cave with cement and took to himself the rest of the antiquities. The man who revealed this has shown me a small fragment of these antiquities, shaped as small-sized barrel, coloured green with golden bands and the figure of a gold-coloured snake” (*Haaretz* 25.3.1925, Hebrew).

Inspector Makhoully was immediately dispatched to check it out. A boy directed him to the tomb in the yard of Khalil Nahli Habibi. In 1924, Khalil had found one tomb and reported it. Now he found another and did not (ATQ SRF172 [Shafa ‘Amr], Makhoully, 2.1.1924; ATQ822 [Shefa Amr illicit digging], Guy to Police, 25.4.1925). Makhoully entered the tomb through a sounding in the road and saw evidence of recent entry – a candle and soot. The DAP wanted to prosecute Khalil, who denied the allegations. A search of his and his sister’s homes turned up nothing. One Elias Khamisi promised to give information, but then claimed he knew nothing. Another informer said that Khalil had tried to sell glass vessels in Haifa, but the dealer Fuad Khayat did not corroborate this story (ATQ822, Guy to Police, 25.4.1925).

The trial went amiss: the magistrate thought that the charge was unlawful possession, despite testimony from Chief Inspector P.L.O. Guy (1885–1952) that it was failure to report the discovery of antiquities. “I offered to point out the appropriate sections of the ordinance to the Magistrate”, complained Guy, “but was assured, rather curtly by him that he knew the law” (ATQ822, Guy, 2.1.1926). Guy’s testimony was presented to the court in an Arabic translation, which was “garbled” and “inaccurate in parts”, but still showed the nature of the offense (thus Guy, ATQ822, 1.3.1926).

Apparently, Guy irritated the judge by trying to explain the law to him. The translation was perhaps garbled, but so was the original testimony of Guy. He opened by stating: “I have nothing to state in that case”, then made a long statement (ATQ822, 24.10.1925).

The DAP wanted to appeal, but it was too late. The Attorney General recommended that in future cases “the police should be advised to lay the charge before a British District Officer with Magisterial powers” (ATQ822, 20.12.1925).

9. Sleepless in Gaza

The Inspector General of the Palestine Police wrote to Robert W. Hamilton (1905–1995), the last Director of the DAP:

“It is reported [above the line, Hamilton: ‘believed’] that Napoleon in his Asiatic Campaign of 1799 slept in a room in the Gaza Police buildings which is now used as the office of the Deputy District Superintendent of Police.

2. It is proposed that a brass plaque inscribed as follows should be placed on the wall of the room in question to mark this event [...] I shall be glad to know if you have any objections.

[The suggested plaque:] ‘Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France, slept in this office for three nights during his Asiatic campaign 25th to 27th February, 1799’” (ATQ75 [Gaza, Citadel], 24.3.1936).

Michael Avi-Yonah (1904–1974) (employee of the DAP, later a professor at the Hebrew University) was asked to verify the report. He reported that there was no evidence in any work in the library of the DAP (the best archaeological library in the region) about the place where Napoleon slept on his visit to Gaza. According to Victor Guérin, he camped on Jebel el-Mountar (outside the city). In 1799, Napoleon was not yet Emperor, but commander of the Egyptian Army of the French Republic. Hamilton told the Inspector General that the DAP had no objection, but there was no evidence (ATQ75, 26.3.1936).

Apparently, the idea was shelved.

10. Football in the Pool of Hezekiah

A Jerusalem citizen called the DAP for help:

“The object of writing this is that I notice nearly every day (as living around the pool [of Hezekiah]) Armenian boys playing football in the said pool and you know quite well what damage is done to the ground of the pool by stepping over its ground with their heavy football boots” (ATQ1646 [Pool of Hezekiah], Selim Khalil Salfiti, 23.10.1926) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. The Pool of Hezekiah, late 19th century (Library of Congress, Lot 13424/053).

The DAP found no legal grounds for action:

“I have to inform you that the pool has been inspected and there is nothing interesting on the ground which could be damaged, and there is no evidence that the ground upon which the boys play football is really ancient. We have, therefore, no valid reason for intervening. I cannot advise you to write to anyone about it” (ATQ1646, Director to Mr. Salfiti, 26.11.1926).

11. Goliath in Jerusalem

Mr. Abner Yeheskeloff of Jerusalem leased for £12 annually one *dunam* of land from the government, in order to install a stone-crushing machine there for building operations. The land was located near the tombs of the judges, between the Sanhedria and Bukkharian neighborhoods, and the contract was renewed twice (ISA GL16616/1 [Harikat Bir el Koas...]) (Fig. 4).

Yeheskeloff apparently finished the work in early 1929, and officially informed the authorities (Fig. 5) that he sold the machine, with all its parts and appliances, to “Goliath Hapelishti” (Goliath the Philistine). He declared that he transferred to Goliath the rights of use of the land, so Goliath was now authorized “to draw up the contract of lease in respect of the said land with Government in his name.”

The Director of the Lands Department agreed: a lease for 1930 “can be made with Goliath Hapelishti on exactly the same lines as that made last year with Mr. Abner Yekheskeloff” (ISA GL16616/1, 13.2.1939).

The file has nothing more on this affair. Did Goliath turn up to sign a new lease?

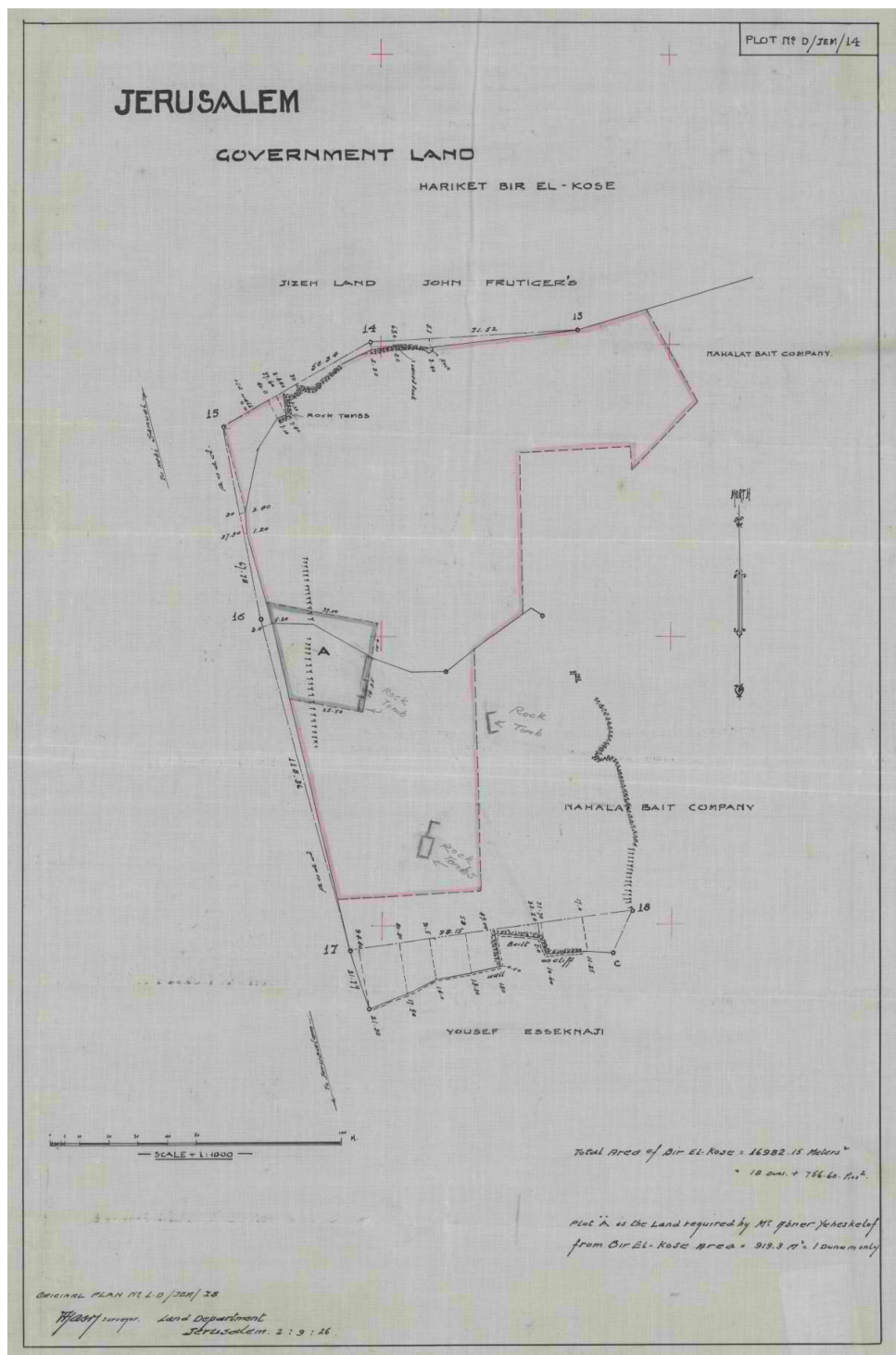


Fig. 4. Land leased by Abner Yeheskeloff in Jerusalem (ISA GL16616/1, map, 1926).

TRANSLATION.

TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

I, the undersigned, Abner Yeheskeloff of Jerusalem, hereby certify that I have sold to Mr. Goliath Hapelishti of Jerusalem, my stone-crushing machine in Sanhedria Quarter, Jerusalem, standing on my land which I leased from the Government under agreement dated 31st of October, 1928, and the machine and all its parts and appliances now belong to him.

I also declare herewith that together with the machine I transferred to him my right of using the above mentioned ground in accordance with the agreement with Government, and he is authorised to draw up the contract of lease in respect of the said land with Government in his name and for the period of lease terminating on 31st of December 1929 and for all periods in the future.

Jerusalem, 14th February, 1929.

(Sgd) Abner Yeheskeloff.

Fig. 5. Goliath replaces Yeheskeloff (ISA GL16616/1, 14.2.1929).