

Israel building center for ancient artifacts (Update)

March 18 2014, by Daniel Estrin



In this May 10, 2013 file photo, an Israel Antiquities Authority employee works on fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Jerusalem. Israel is building a national archaeological center to store and showcase its rich collection of some two million ancient artifacts, including the world's largest collection of Dead Sea Scrolls, Israel's Antiquities Authority said Tuesday, March 18, 2014. (AP Photo/Dan Balilty, File)

Israel is building a national archaeological center to store and showcase its rich collection of some two million ancient artifacts, including the

world's largest collection of Dead Sea Scrolls, Israel's Antiquities Authority said Tuesday.

Most of Israel's state antiquities collection, currently stored in large warehouses that are closed to the public, will be moved to a new 35,000-square-meter (377,000 square foot) center—the Antiquities Authority's first public center for exhibiting its hoard of treasures that date back as far as 5,000 years. Parts of the center will be open to the public.

Israel is calling the archaeological library and archives the largest of their kind in the Middle East.

"It's dazzling...to look at 12,000 ancient glass pieces complete, or the entirety of ancient textiles, or 10,000 oil lamps," said Jacob Fisch, director of the Friends of the Antiquities Authority, a fundraising group involved in the project. "You will be able to walk through actual national treasures and look into the wealth of the archaeological heritage of the land of Israel."

The center, currently under construction in Jerusalem and scheduled to be inaugurated in 2016, will serve as a research center for Israeli archaeology and history. It will house a library of some 150,000 books, including 500 rare books, archives of maps, permits and plans of local excavations from the past century, and restoration labs with observation windows for the public to take a peek at conservation work.

The government's collection of some 15,000 Dead Sea Scroll fragments—the largest collection in the world—will also move from a small, secure government-operated facility on the Israel Museum campus to a new, state-of-the-art conservation laboratory at the center. A gallery is also being built to exhibit newly restored scrolls as they are finished being treated.

Written about 2,000 years ago, the Dead Sea Scrolls are the earliest copies of the Hebrew Bible ever found, and the oldest written evidence of the roots of Judaism and Christianity in the Holy Land. Israel considers the scrolls a national treasure.

The Israel Museum's seven Dead Sea Scrolls, among the most famous and complete scrolls in existence, will remain at the Shrine of the Book, a special gallery dedicated to the museum's scrolls.

The new archaeological center, designed by Israeli architect Moshe Safdie, is being built next to the Israel Museum and will eventually serve as the Antiquity Authority's headquarters. Some \$80 million in mostly private funding has been earmarked for the project, provided by some 30 donors from the U.S., Europe and Israel.

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Citation: Israel building center for ancient artifacts (Update) (2014, March 18) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-03-israel-center-ancient-artifacts.html>

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