

Museum: Centuries old Torah not burned in Rio blaze

September 5 2018, by Peter Prengaman And Marcelo Silva De Sousa



This combination of two undated handout photos provided by Brazil's National Museum shows the skull of Luzia Woman, left, and a reconstruction of Luzia, right, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Discovered during an excavation in 1975 outside of the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, Luzia's fossilized remains sat in storage for two decades. In the mid-1990s, tests by scientists determined it was the oldest fossil in the Americas. It was given the name "Luzia," homage to "Lucy," the famous 3.2-million-year-old remains found in Africa. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)

Brazil's National Museum said Wednesday that centuries-old Torah scrolls, considered to be some of Judaism's oldest documents, had been moved before a massive fire ravaged the place and gutted much of the largest collections of national history artifacts in Latin America.

Questions about the fate of the scrolls had swirled since Sunday night's blaze at the museum, which used to be the home of Brazil's royal family. Amid an ongoing investigation and unable to access much of the now destroyed museum, officials have been reluctant to give any account of how specific artifacts fared in the fire or disclose information on other material that may have been in other locations.

"The Torah is being kept in a safe place," according to a museum statement sent to The Associated Press on Wednesday, adding it had been removed nearly two years ago. The statement did not say where it had been transferred.

A spokesman at the Israeli Embassy in the capital Brasilia said it didn't have more information on the Torah, Judaism's holy book.

Brazilian scholars have said the scrolls originated in Yemen and possibly date back to the 13th century.

The museum's website says the nine scrolls, written in Hebrew, were acquired in the early 19th century by the country's last monarch, Dom Pedro II. The website, which had apparently not been updated, also said the scrolls were not part of an exhibit, but rather kept in a safe in the director's office.



Museum security guard Felipe Farias Silva shows the page of a book he found across the street from Brazil's National Museum, which he believes belongs to the institution in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Tuesday, Sept. 4, 2018. Flames tore through the museum Sunday night, and officials have said much of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might be lost. (AP Photo/Silvia Izquierdo)

Avraham Beuthner, from the Jewish organization Beit Lubavitch in Rio de Janeiro, told the AP that university officials told him the Torah was being housed at a university library near the museum. The museum is part of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Beuthner said he had been fielding calls from Jews in Israel and several Latin American countries since the fire inquiring about the scrolls.

"Thank God it's safe," he said, adding that university officials had

promised to soon allow Jewish community leaders to see where the Torah is being held.

The good news came as museum officials said they feared as much as 90 percent of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might have been lost in the fire. Aerial photos of the main building showed only heaps of rubble and ashes in the parts of the building where the roof collapsed.



The National Museum, seen from above, stands gutted after an overnight fire in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Monday, Sept. 3, 2018. A huge fire engulfed Brazil's 200-year-old museum, lighting up the night sky with towering flames as firefighters and museum workers raced to save historical relics from the blaze. (AP Photo/Mario Lobao)

Firefighters on Tuesday "found fragments of bones in a room where the museum kept many items, including skulls," said Cristiana Serejo, the museum's deputy director. "We still have to collect them and take them

to the lab to know exactly what they are."

In its collection of about 20 million items, one of the most prized possessions is a skull called Luzia, which is among the oldest fossils ever found in the Americas.

Serejo told reporters Wednesday that several countries, including France and Germany, had offered help with recovery efforts and some rebuilding. She said that researchers could get into the museum as soon as next week, but it will depend on how fast federal police could finish their investigation.

"We are in line to get in there," she said.



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows a mummified head produced by the Jivaro of the Ecuadorian Amazon, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. The famous heads shrunk by the so-called "people of the waterfall" were prepared in complex rituals and had a deep spiritual significance. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)

With the cause of the fire still under investigation, the disaster has led to a series of recriminations amid accusations that successive governments haven't sufficiently funded the museum, and it has raised concerns that other institutions might be at risk. Officials have said it was well known

that the building was vulnerable to fire and in need of extensive repair.

On Wednesday, state firefighting officials said in a statement the museum didn't have certification that it was up to code—another indication of negligence.

"It's the responsibility of building administrators to comply with the laws," the statement read.

A UNESCO group of specialists in recovery and reconstruction are expected to arrive in Brazil next week, according Maria Edileuza Fontele Reis, the organization's ambassador in Brazil.

The group "has experience working with pieces of national heritage in areas of war, such as in Iraq, and areas impacted by fire," Fontele Reis told the AP in a phone interview.



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows a representation of the Egyptian dwarf god Bes, circa 350 A.C., at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Bes the patron of childbirth was present in Egyptian homes, both rich and poor. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows wooden armor originating from Vancouver, British Columbia, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows an a speciman of the *Macrodonia cervicornis* beetle, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. The long-horned beetle, an endangered species, can exceed 6 inches in length. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows a miniature Inca tunic worn by a silver or gold idol that served as an offering in sacrificial events, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. This type of garment was used exclusively in festivities known as *capacochas*, in which children were sacrificed. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows a green stone frog pendant originating from Obidos, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. These common frogs have long been considered powerful amulets against all kinds of evil. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows a nocturnal bird known as the giant potoo, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. These birds choose a trunk that resembles their body and spend the whole day absolutely still so that they go unnoticed by the daytime predators. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows a priestess/princess Takushit statue dating to 730 B.C., at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Flames tore through the museum Sunday night, Sept. 2, 2018, and officials have said much of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might be lost. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows an ancient Egyptian gold leaf funeral mask dating to 304 B.C., at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Flames tore through the museum Sunday night, Sept. 2, 2018, and officials have said much of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might be lost. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows an Egyptian mummified cat, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Flames tore through the museum Sunday night, Sept. 2, 2018, and officials have said much of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might be lost. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows an Owyhee cloak and necklace, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. The necklace was given to Dom Pedro I by the Sandwich Islands King Tamehameha II, in 1824, and the cloak from someone else in the traveling party. Owyhee is an early spelling of Hawaii. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows wooden masks from the Aweti, Waura and Mehinaku indigenous groups, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Flames tore through the museum Sunday night, Sept. 2, 2018, and officials have said much of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might be lost. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows a rare zoomorphic sculpture, probably in phyllite or shale, produced by Amazonian ceramic artisans, at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. The two circular and parallel holes in the center of the piece are recurrent in the stone idols found in Trombetas River region. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Riotur shows the Egyptian section at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Flames tore through the museum Sunday night, and officials have said much of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might be lost. (Alexandre Macieira/Riotur via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Riotur shows the main building of the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The palace in Quinta da Boa Vista, where the Brazilian royal family lived before the beginning of the Brazilian Republic, was the home of Latin America's biggest museum archive. Flames tore through the museum Sunday, Sept. 2, 2018, night, and officials have said much of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might be lost. (Alexandre Macieira/Riotur via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows a Yoruba Gelede mask at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Geledee - a female secret society of the Yoruba-Nago community that is spread over Benin, Nigeria and Togo. This mask was added to the museum collection in an exchange with the Berlin Museum in 1928. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)



This undated handout photo provided by Brazil's National Museum shows one of the Tikuna masks designed by Jean-Baptiste Debret, during the French Artistic Mission (1816-1831), at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Flames tore through the museum Sunday night, Sept. 2, 2018, and officials have said much of Latin America's largest collection of treasures might be lost. (Museu Nacional Brasil via AP)

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