2025.12.10

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2025/12/10/stolen-somalian-meteorite-el-ali/

The £150m meteorite that vanished off the face of the earth

How a booming smuggling market led a 15-ton iron space rock to be stolen, sold by terrorists and hidden somewhere in China

Martin Fletcher

10 December 2025 4:00pm GMT

A few thousand years ago, a huge iron rock weighing 15 tons, probably created billions of years earlier in the red-hot heat of a celestial asteroid collision, crashed to Earth in eastern Africa.

More specifically, the meteorite smashed into arid scrubland near the village of El Ali in the heart of what is now the lawless state of Somalia. There – half buried in the sand – it became an object of reverence for the camel herders and other inhabitants of that remote and barren region.

Some used what they called the *Shiid-birood* (iron rock) to make or sharpen knives. Others celebrated it in songs and stories. It became a centrepiece for sacred rites. It served as a

landmark. It was rumoured to contain gold, to glow at night and to grow in size as time passed. Livestock were said to avoid it at dusk. Children played on it.

Those who live in the area “have long regarded it as a celestial gift, not just a rock”, says Dahir Jesow, the area’s representative in Somalia’s parliament. “It is a geological, historical and spiritual marvel.”

The El Ali meteorite in its original landing spot in Somalia, where it was known as Shiid-birood Credit: Global Resources

Then, in or around 2019, the reddish-brown meteorite attracted the attention of five businessmen from Mogadishu, Somalia’s capital, who set up an enterprise called the Kureym Mining and Rocks Company. Although local people had known of the rock for generations, the businessmen claimed that it had been recently discovered by opal hunters.

In February 2020, al-Shabaab, the Islamic terrorist group that is linked to al-Qaeda and controls much of rural Somalia, brought in a crane and a truck to remove the meteorite. The local Ma’awisley militia resisted. Accounts vary, but some sort of protracted battle ensued and several people were reportedly killed.

The truck took the meteorite to the town of Buq Aqable, where, according to Somali media reports, the Kureym businessmen paid al-Shabaab $264,000 for it. The truck then continued its

journey to Mogadishu, but government security forces stopped it outside the capital and confiscated its strange cargo.

The meteorite was taken to a high-security prison run by the National Intelligence and Security Agency. There it was inspected by Abdulkadir Abiikar Hussein, a Somali geologist, who found that it was approximately 2m long, 1m high and 1m wide. It weighed 15.150 metric tons, making it the ninth-largest meteorite discovered anywhere in the world and the third-biggest in Africa.

A sample was sent to Nairobi, Kenya, where XRF (X-ray fluorescence) analysis showed it was an iron meteorite, which are much rarer than stony meteorites, accounting for less than 5 per cent of all those found after being observed falling to Earth.

For reasons that remain murky, the meteorite was returned to the Kureym businessmen in late 2020. Some suspect bribery and corruption involving government officials.

That December, Nicholas Gessler, a retired archaeologist and anthropologist who had taught at North Carolina's Duke University, was contacted by a Kenyan company called Global Resources, which was representing Kureym. It wanted him to help find a buyer for the meteorite, and said Kureym's asking price was $200m (£150m in 2020).

Global Resources sent Gessler pictures and videos of the rock it had renamed "Nightfall", as well as a tiny sample weighing 19g.

Gessler, who had no idea that the meteorite had been forcibly removed from its impact site, says he was "incredibly excited" – and not just by its size. He saw immediately that it was much more than just another cosmic curiosity. It was covered in indentations and had been extensively struck and hammered.

"When I first saw pictures of it, my response was, 'Oh my God, it's had the blazes beaten out of it. It's been hammered relentlessly. The whole surface has been hammered. Why would people do that?' The obvious answer is to extract pieces of metal. And why would they do that? Because there was no smelter iron available."

Retired archaeologist Nicholas Gessler was approached to help sell the meteorite ‘Nightfall’

Prehistoric objects made of metal culled from meteorites have been found before. Most notably, they include a dagger found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, the Egyptian pharaoh who lived in the 14th century BC. But Gessler could think of only one comparable discovery of actual meteorites that had been mined for metal, and that was more than 200 years ago.

In 1819, William Parry, a Royal Navy officer, led an expedition to the Arctic in search of the North-West Passage. At Cape York, Greenland, he encountered Inuit Eskimos with knives and harpoons made from iron blades set in handles of narwhal horn.

In a diary entry dated August 13 that year, Parry wrote: “It appears… that they procure the iron of which they are made from a mass of native iron… about a day’s journey to the eastward of this place… Their only object, in coming so far from their own country, which lies to the northward, is to procure some of this iron, which they break off with great difficulty by the means of stones, and then beat out into the small plates of which the knives are made.”

Later expeditions confirmed that the Inuits had indeed created the blades by using basalt “hammer stones” to break iron flakes from three of eight large fragments of a meteorite that had crashed to Earth on Greenland’s western coast. The combined weight of those three fragments, known as Woman, Savik and Dog, was far less than that of the El Ali meteorite.

Just as Greenland’s Iron Age began with the arrival of that meteorite, so Somalia’s probably began with Shiid-birood’s, says Gessler. He calls it “the world’s most significant culturally modified meteorite; the foremost example of a tool-making industry derived from iron meteorites”.

He adds: “The world today cannot imagine living without iron, all of which is industrially smelted. The ingenuity of prehistoric peoples discovering a way to make knives and tools from meteoric iron must have been revolutionary.”

Elsewhere in North America, the Somali meteorite generated excitement for different reasons. Another small sample was sent to Chris Herd, a professor in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Alberta, in Canada. He and a colleague, Andrew Locock, quickly made the “phenomenal” discovery that the meteorite contained two minerals never previously seen on Earth.

They named one elaliite after the village where it was found, and the other elkinstantonite after Lindy Elkins-Tanton, an American planetary scientist.

Prof Chris Herd analysed a fragment of the Somali meteorite, leading to the discovery of two previously unknown terrestrial minerals Credit: John Ulan

Chi Ma, a mineralogist at the California Institute of Technology, subsequently discovered a third previously unknown mineral in Shiild-birood. He called it olsenite after Edward Olsen, a former curator at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

Every new mineral potentially contains fresh information about the formation of the solar system, says Alan Rubin, the curator of the University of California's Meteorite Museum. He adds that there is a "good chance" that yet more novel minerals still reside in the meteorite "because so little of it has been examined".

In June 2021, Gessler helped to have it classified by the Meteoritical Society, the prestigious international planetary science organisation. It was officially named the El Ali meteorite after the location where it was found. He also approached an auction house and more than half a dozen museums in the United States, Europe and China on Global Resources' behalf. He even tried to contact Elon Musk, but $200m (£150m) was a hopelessly unrealistic asking price, especially as the meteorite's recent history was so opaque.

Some museums did not answer. Some said they did not have the funds, and others that they wanted nothing to do with the meteorite. "I knew that none of them would like to put up a large amount of money for something [Somalia] would very likely want back in two, five, 10, 50 years as a national treasure," says Gessler.

He kept asking Global Resources for proper documentation pertaining to the meteorite's discovery and ownership, but it never came. "I told them nobody is going to buy it for that kind of money, because they're all afraid that Somalia is going to want to repatriate it at some point."

Eventually, in August 2021, Gessler's relationship with Global Resources came to an acrimonious end, with the latter complaining that he had made the meteorite harder to sell by alluding to the way it had been seized from El Ali in his presentation to the Meteoritical Society. "They were really p----d off," says Gessler. "They said you should have written its history in a more friendly way to increase its marketability."

Soon after that, the meteorite that was generating such global interest was on the move. A mobile phone video clip dated December 8 2022 showed it in a shipping container in Mogadishu. Another, dated May 26 2023, showed it in a shipping container in Yiwu, a city 200 miles south-west of Shanghai in China.

According to Gessler, the asking price was dropping steadily – from the initial $200m to $30m to $4.5m. He has been told through indirect contacts that the sellers are presently asking for $3.2m (£2.4m).

In theory, a huge iron meteorite such as El Ali should be easy to sell. The market for meteorites has boomed in recent years, fuelled not just by the museums and scientific institutions for

whom they offer clues to the origins of the solar system, but by an increasing number of private collectors – some of them celebrities and billionaires. The latter include Musk, the filmmaker Steven Spielberg, the actor Nicolas Cage, the illusionist Uri Geller, the cellist Yo-Yo Ma and tech titans Steve Jurvetson and Naveen Jain.

The attraction of meteorites is not hard to understand. They are the ultimate antiques. “They’re rare and they’re old – the oldest thing you can possess,” says Richard Greenwood, a meteorite specialist at the Open University. “They come from a period before planets were formed. Some come from Mars, some from the Moon. There’s always the faint possibility there might be a piece from Venus. They have a story to tell, and some are extremely beautiful.”

“They’re the nearest we can get to touching a piece of space,” adds Helen Gordon, the author of *The Meteorites: Encounters with Outer Space and Deep Time*. “They’ve become status symbols and investments.”

Pardon the pun, but mere fragments of these extraterrestrial rocks now command astronomical prices, spawning a veritable tribe of full-time meteorite hunters who travel the world in pursuit of meteorite “falls”. At high-end auctions, they can fetch several times the price of gold, especially if they are of rare provenance or of unusual scientific or historic interest.

In July, for example, a rare 25kg meteorite from Mars found in Niger, West Africa, in 2023 was sold to an unnamed buyer at Sotheby’s for $4.3m (£3.2m) – far exceeding its estimate. The following month, a large iron meteorite weighing 240kg from Namibia was sold to an unnamed American buyer for $1.7m at an auction in the Netherlands.

Prior to that, in 2022, a 1.7g fragment of the extremely rare carbonaceous chondrite meteorite that fell on Winchcombe, Gloucestershire, in 2021 fetched $12,600 at Christie’s. That was, at the time, 120 times the value of its weight in gold.

In 2017, a 10g fragment of a meteorite that struck an Alabama woman, Ann Hodges, while she was taking an afternoon nap in 1954 was auctioned for $7,500. Hodges’ is the only well-documented case of a human being struck by a meteorite.

In 1954, Ann Hodges was struck by a meteorite in her home in Sylacauga, Alabama. A fragment of the stone fetched $7,500 at auction 63 years later Credit: Jay Leviton/The Life Images Collection

The El Ali meteorite is both scientifically and historically interesting, and it is very big. “It ticks most of the boxes. I can see why people would be really interested in it,” says Gordon. The problem is its dodgy backstory.

The first issue is its contested ownership. Different countries have different laws about who “owns” these curious arrivals from space. In some, including the UK, it is the owner of the land where the meteor lands. In others, it is the state. Likewise, some countries have strict export restrictions for meteorites, others none.

In Somalia there is no clear-cut law, though its draft constitution states that “the state shall collect, protect and preserve the country’s historic objects and sites”. But nobody could plausibly claim that al-Shabaab established legal ownership of the El Ali meteorite by forcibly seizing it. Speaking to the Horn Afrik News Agency for Human Rights in June, Jesow, the local MP, called it “a cultural looting operation, not a legal trade”, and compared it to “the looting of sacred artefacts during colonial times”.

A second complication is that al-Shabaab has been designated a terrorist organisation by numerous countries and international organisations, making it illegal to support it in any way. That would include handling or buying its stolen goods.

And then there is the failure of either Global Resources or Kureym to produce the paperwork that any reputable buyer would require. “You want to sell this?” says Gessler. “Show me the paperwork. Let’s see the title. Let’s see your import permit into China. But they never provide that.”

Indeed, Gessler has done his level best to expose the meteorite’s murky recent history. Now 80, and living in Los Angeles, he has spent much of the past three years investigating its backstory – scouring the internet, searching social media, tracking down Somali news reports and talking to sources. He posts reports, videos, photographs and everything else he finds on a voluminous and exhaustive website that is free for anyone to inspect.

Since his falling out with Global Resources, he admits that preserving the El Ali meteorite has become something of an obsession – a labour of love. “I’m an anthropologist. I’ve been trained to pay respect to cultural history, to archaeological pre-history, and this is something nobody else is doing anything about. If I can help Somalia solve this problem, it seems to me like a good thing to do,” says Gessler.

To an extent, he has succeeded. No potential buyer could now claim ignorance of its dubious recent history, or that it is effectively being sold on the black market. “It’s an appalling story,” says Greenwood. “I can’t imagine any sensible, serious museum having anything to do with it.”

The Meteoritical Society advises that “collectors, curators and researchers should not acquire or study meteorites if they know that these samples were recovered or acquired illegally”.

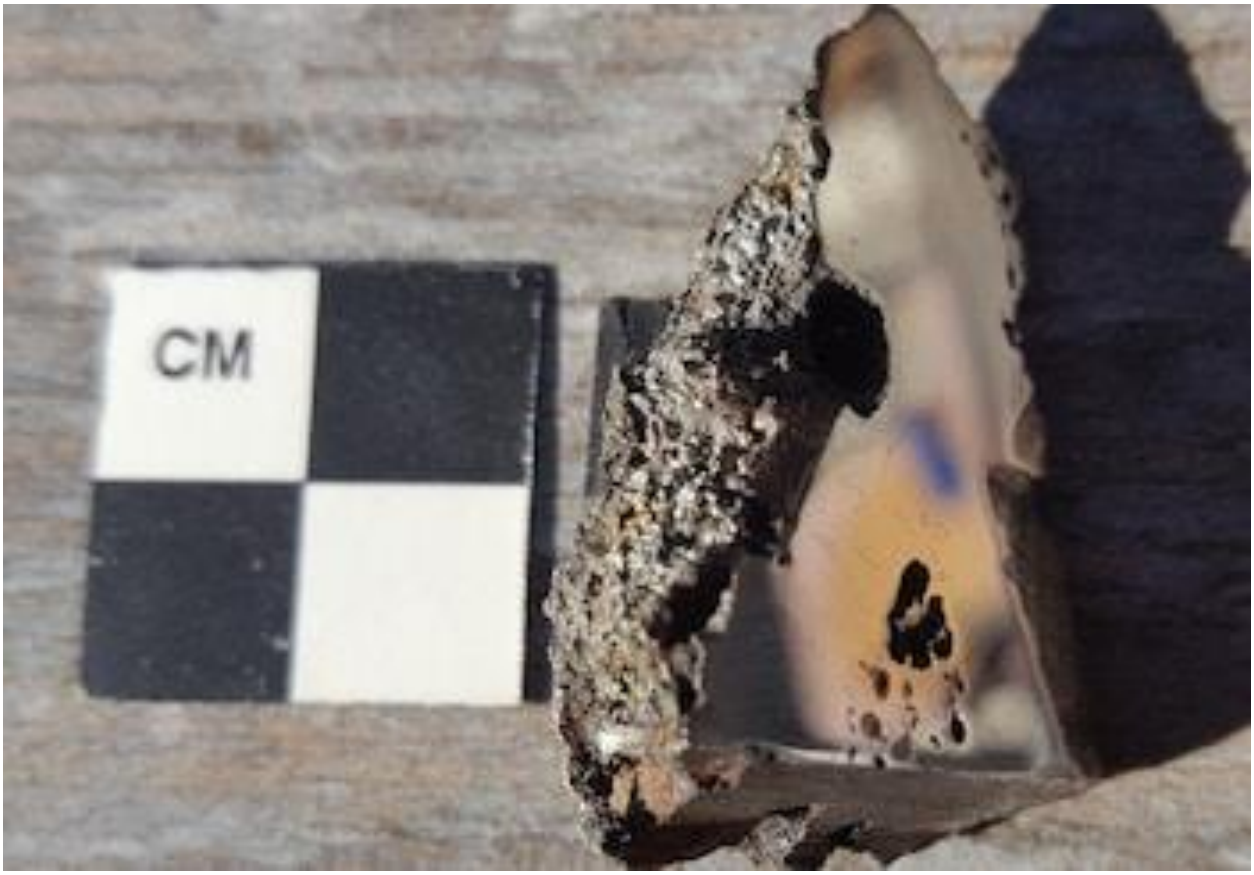
Museums would also be acutely conscious that Somalia might at some point in the future demand the meteorite’s return, just as Greece wants the Elgin Marbles back. “I would warn people about the history of museums and repatriation,” says Gessler.

Those same considerations would apply to any respectable private collector. “As an investor I would definitely not touch it with a barge pole,” says Greenwood. “They must have a moral compass, and this is just completely wrong. You’re basically just exploiting a poor country.”

Jesow adds: “Any serious museum or collector should be aware that this meteorite is stolen property. There are no legal export licences, no documentation of ownership, and no consent from the local community that owns it and was culturally attached to it. It was smuggled.”

Somali politicians want the meteorite returned to Somalia, where the National Museum finally reopened in 2020 after three decades of civil war. Gessler would like to see the massive cosmic rock and its impact site protected by Unesco as important objects of world heritage. “The heritage values of the meteorite and its impact site should not be sacrificed to the marketplace for profit,” he says.

But for now he has lost track of it. He believes the Kureym businessmen have fallen out with each other. He has been told that the meteorite has been removed from the container in Yiwu, and he can no longer be sure it is still in the city. “The location of the meteorite within China and its location is uncertain,” he says.



A fragment of the El Ali meteorite, once revered in Somalia and now at the centre of a global battle over ownership

It is possible that the El Ali meteorite has been, or could be, bought surreptitiously by some unscrupulous private collector. Gessler fears that it could suffer the same fate as the Aletai meteorite, a massive iron meteorite that was discovered in China's Xinjiang region in 1898. "It's been cut into little beads, Buddhas, skulls, pyramids, penholders – you name it," he says. Websites such as eBay offer countless baubles and trinkets hewn from fragments of Aletai.

The El Ali meteorite is undoubtedly special. To desecrate it in similar fashion "would be awful", says Greenwood, who believes that it should be put – legally – in a museum. "You could do a fantastic display and inspire people about the science of the solar system," he says.

Gordon agrees. "It would be a shame for this particular meteorite, because it's important for Somalia and should be preserved as part of their heritage."

But for now, as a recent article in *Scientific American* eloquently concluded: "The El Ali meteorite remains in limbo, very far from home. Its ultimate destination is just as uncertain as it was when it was in the asteroid belt, bouncing across the sky."