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Letter to the Editor

An ode to El Ali

Oh meteorite, El Ali by name,
Of massive weight and ancient fame,
The eighth or ninth largest on this Earth,
With evidence of human worth.

Since times of old, it's been in use,
An artifact of great repute,
Found in Somalia, now for sale,
Who'll buy it? Who'll prevail?

Shall it be sliced for baubles, small,
To market souvenirs for all?
Or shall it be conserved with care,
For world heritage, beyond compare?

Let's seek a buyer wise and just,
To keep it whole, for future trust,
And for Somalia, might we pray,
To have it back, some future day.

FIGURE 1. El Ali Photomerge Video 6. El Ali in Mogadishu on April 24, 2021. A detailed composite of 16 video frames showing multiple concave facets. Note the numerous indications of cultural modification: the built-up ridges and linear deformations, precursors of the removal of metal by cold forging. Courtesy of Nicholas Gessler. (Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com)

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FIGURE 2. The 3-ton Cape York "Woman" at the AMNH. Note the similar features historically documented as cultural alteration. Courtesy of American Museum of Natural History. (Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com)

Here is the prose from which chatGPT composed the sonnet:

> The El Ali meteorite is of world natural and cultural heritage significance. Not only does it weigh 15,150 kilograms, making it the 8th or 9th largest meteorite on Earth, but as a human artifact it displays evidence of intensive, extensive and prolonged use by peoples since prehistoric times. Although it was found in Somalia it has been exported to China where it is presently for sale. We should be concerned about who buys it. On the one hand a buyer may intend to cut it into slices and baubles such as beads, rings, bracelets, skulls and pyramids, marketed as souvenirs. On the other hand, a buyer may intend to conserve, study, and curate it for the benefit of the peoples of the world. We should do our best to find a buyer who will keep the meteorite intact, a buyer who will care for it for the purpose of world natural and cultural heritage conservation. The stone has been exported and its current asking price is $4,000,000. Are there any individuals, museums, corporations or other institutions willing to step up and purchase it for this purpose? Are there any who might be willing to sell or give it back to the people of Somalia?

El Ali's sloping multifaceted sides (Figure 1) are the result of cold forging, the reshaping of the meteorite by building up ridges of metal, which were then broken off to provide workable meteoric iron. Its smoothly hammered crown served as an anvil on which implements such as knives and points were fashioned. These are cultural analogs of the Cape York "Woman" meteorite (Figure 2). Both were surrounded by piles of hammerstones, and like the "Woman," El Ali may also have been widely traded. El Ali may well earn the distinction of being among the world's premier examples of a culturally modified and mined meteorite.

We are grateful to the many stakeholders who supported our characterization of El Ali for publication in the Meteoritical Bulletin. Although none of our current research team have had the opportunity to study it in person, those of us in Somalia are planning fieldwork at the impact site to better understand its natural and cultural heritage values: combing through

FIGURE 3. El Ali Photomerge Video 3. El Ali in situ in Hiiraan, two views. Note the anvil-like crown, multifaceted surfaces, and surrounding stones. Courtesy of Abdul Abiikar Hussein. (Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com)

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archival records of travelers' accounts, conducting ethnohistoric interviews, searching for archeological artifacts like hammerstones among the thousands of nearby rocks (Figure 3), and mapping the site and possible strewn field. Those of us in North America are planning further radiometric and mineralogical analyses, mapping the settlement patterns around the site using satellite imagery, and visually reconstructing El Ali by forensic photogrammetry from 9 videos and 20 still images (https://people.duke.edu/~ng46/El-Ali/). We expect to present our findings at the 2023 Meteoritical Society Conference.

Meteorites have a strong connection to the land on which they are found, the fundamental nomenclature of meteorites reflects this. Many countries consider meteorites to be cultural property. Many Somalis feel strongly about El Ali in this regard, but the meteorite's acquisition and subsequent history leave its status in limbo.

The Somali government may wish to buy it back. The UNESCO's World Heritage Program could assist a conservation effort with encouragement from its Somali representatives. The Getty Center, the Getty Villa, and Elon Musk have each made heritage donations many times that size. In the 2021 Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report, in North America there were 20 million high-net-worth individuals (HNWI) with $1 to $5 million, and 95,000 ultra-high-net-worth individuals (UHNWI) with over $50 million.

Shall we "find a buyer, wise and just?"

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