

January 27, 2026

To: Royal Ontario Museum

Re: On the Erasure of “Palestine” in Artifact Labels – A Call for Ethical and Scholarly Integrity

Dear ROM Leadership,

We are writing on behalf of the Anti-Racism Program of the CJPME Foundation (ARPCF) to express deep concern over the reported revisions of artifact labels in your Near East collection—specifically, the removal or dilution of “Palestine” as a geographic designation. These changes, which appear to coincide with pressure from advocacy groups, raise serious questions about historical integrity, curatorial independence, and the ethical obligations of public institutions.

While we recognize that museum labeling is a complex task, especially when bridging ancient and modern geographies, the revision of “Palestine” into vague regional descriptors—such as “Eastern Mediterranean coast”—risks not only historical inaccuracy but also cultural erasure. If these changes are undertaken in response to political campaigns, even indirectly, they mark a troubling precedent. Curatorial decisions must remain anchored in rigorous scholarship and a duty to the public—not shaped by ideologically motivated pressure.

The term Palestine is not an anachronism nor a modern invention. It has deep historical roots in ancient texts, imperial geography, and archaeological records. Herodotus, writing in the 5th century BCE, referred to the region between Phoenicia and Egypt as "Palaistinê." During the Roman period, the province of Syria Palaestina was formally established in 135 CE—well documented in Roman administrative records and contemporary historical accounts. These names reflected geographic designations used by empires, travelers, and historians—not political movements. Treating “Palestine” as a controversial or “corrected” term imposes modern political debates onto ancient contexts, undermines historical nuance, and causes tangible harm to the Canadian Palestinian community by legitimizing historical erasure.

We are also concerned about the broader implications of these revisions, particularly during a time when Palestinian identity is under assault globally. When institutions tasked with public education minimize or erase Palestinian history—even unintentionally—they contribute to a pattern of symbolic violence that mirrors physical displacement. Museums shape cultural legitimacy. When they retreat from historical clarity, they send a message that certain identities are provisional, questionable, or negotiable.

The ROM has publicly committed to addressing its colonial legacies and to advancing equity in curatorial practice. This commitment must be tested in moments of controversy, not set aside. We therefore urge the ROM to:

- Publicly affirm that curatorial decisions are not shaped by political lobbying, directly or indirectly, and that revisions are grounded in historical evidence and ethical curatorship;
- Reinstate and protect the use of “Palestine” where historically appropriate in artifact labeling, particularly for the Roman and Byzantine periods;
- Acknowledge the harm of cultural erasure, especially in the context of ongoing violence and displacement;
- Engage publicly with scholars of the region—including archaeologists, historians, and curators who work from a decolonial and anti-racist framework.

Public trust in institutions like the ROM depends on a demonstrated commitment to truth-telling, accountability, and intellectual independence. We hope you will affirm these values unequivocally.

Sincerely,

Jamila Ewais
CJPME Foundation