

A photograph of an ancient, cracked clay bowl, likely a Mesopotamian artifact. The interior of the bowl is covered in dense cuneiform script. In the center of the bowl, there is a circular diagram with several intersecting lines forming a star-like pattern. The bowl is set against a background of reddish-brown soil or sand.

VARIANT SCHOLARSHIP

Ancient Texts in Modern Contexts

EDITED BY

NEIL BRODIE, MORAG M. KERSEL
& JOSEPHINE MUNCH RASMUSSEN



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Variant scholarship: ancient texts in modern contexts

Neil Brodie, Morag M. Kersel and
Josephine Munch Rasmussen

This book contains chapters based on papers first presented at the workshop Academic Consumption of Illicit Antiquities held at the University of Agder (Norway) and online from 24 to 26 March 2021, together with two specially commissioned additional chapters. Although the subject of the workshop was the academy and its involvement in the antiquities trade, most of the papers presented were concerned with the scholarly study of ancient or medieval manuscripts or other text-bearing or associated objects. Contributions across a range of disciplines provided the variant scholarship of the book's title, and the focus on text-bearing objects furnished the workshop with an unexpected coherence and clarity on the methodological, theoretical and ethical issues facing scholars when working with ancient texts in modern contexts. Since the nineteenth century at least, many if not most text-bearing objects coming to scholarly attention have been obtained from the market or through colonial expropriation. The consequent problems of questionable authenticity and the impact of evolutionist, imperialist, orientalist, and Biblical agenda upon scholarly research are well understood and are explored further in Section 2 of this volume. But as Section 1 will demonstrate, textual scholarship has become more problematic over recent decades, partly because of the increased flow of illegally acquired and unprovenanced text-bearing objects onto the market and entering private collections, but also because it is now recognised how scholarly engagement and research are intimately entwined with this market and might be helping reproduce nineteenth-century-style enactments of patronage and expropriation. Thus, modern-day ethical reflection on textual scholarship cannot escape engaging with the potential hazards of post-colonial and neo-colonial chauvinism.

Things seem to be getting worse, not better. While the University of Agder conference was in gestation and later while this book was in preparation, some highly publicized controversies highlighted the pitfalls and uncertainties of scholarly collaborations with private collectors. On 2 March 2020, University of Oxford academic Dirk Obbink was arrested and subsequently released 'under investigation' (Heslop 2020). Obbink's trouble started on 4 February 2013, when he sold several papyrus fragments to Steve Green, CEO

of Hobby Lobby, a U.S. retail craft empire. The Green family also funds the Museum of the Bible (MOTB) in Washington D.C., which opened in 2017 (Moss and Baden 2017). The consignment sold to Green included a fragment tentatively dated to the first century CE bearing text from the Gospel of Mark. If correct, this dating would have constituted an unexpectedly early rendering of the gospel, making it of unprecedented importance for New Testament scholarship (Sabar 2020). At the time of the sale, Obbink was regarded as one of the world's foremost papyrologists. Obbink and his fellow Oxford scholar Daniela Colomo (2018) published the Mark fragment in April 2018 (though with a late-second- to early-third-century CE date) as *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 5345* (P.Oxy. 5345) in the Egypt Exploration Society (EES) volume *Oxyrhynchus Papyri Volume LXXXIII*. Soon after publication, the EES (2018) asserted that it was the lawful owner of P.Oxy. 5345, which had been excavated by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, most likely in 1903 at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. The EES claimed to have no knowledge of its sale.¹ Obbink had been a general editor of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* monograph series until August 2016, when the EES did not reappoint him due to concerns about his activities in marketing ancient texts. In June 2019 the EES banned him from any further access to the collection (EES 2019). Presumably by 2019, Hobby Lobby had donated or loaned the papyrus fragments to the MOTB. A collaborative investigation between the EES and the MOTB subsequently identified at least 34 fragments that had allegedly been stolen by Obbink from the EES and sold directly to Hobby Lobby. The MOTB returned the papyrus fragments to the EES (Hobby Lobby 2021: 7; EES 2021). Oxford University suspended Obbink from duties in October 2019 (Heslop 2020) and after his March 2020 arrest quietly fired him in February 2021 (Kenney 2021). In June 2021, Hobby Lobby (2021) sued Obbink alleging fraud and breach of contract in connection with papyrus fragments bought through seven purchases between February 2010 and February 2013 for approximately \$7,095,100. In the suit Hobby Lobby claimed the purchase price with interest and costs as relief. Obbink had previously denied allegations of wrongdoing (Nongbri 2019), but on 30 November 2021, a default judgment was made against him in favour of Hobby Lobby after he failed to answer the complaint.

In an unconnected case in March 2020, the book publisher Brill took the highly unusual step of retracting a publication (Brill 2020). *Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments in the Museum Collection* (Tov *et al.* 2016) had published 13 pieces of what at the time were thought to be fragments of Dead Sea Scrolls in the collection of the MOTB. Since 2002, more than 75 previously unknown and likely forged fragments of Dead Sea Scrolls have appeared on the antiquities market and been bought by private and institutional collectors, including Hobby Lobby (Justnes and Rasmussen 2017; 2019). Most have been sourced to Bethlehem dealer William Kando though passed through the hands of various intermediaries. Kando's father Khalil Iskander had marketed the original Dead Sea Scrolls during the 1940s. The new fragments were considered suspicious by some scholars because an abnormally high proportion carried Biblical texts.

1 The EES collection of *Oxyrhynchus papyri* is curated at the University of Oxford's Sackler Library, where Obbink had easy access. It comprises more than 500,000 papyri fragments dating from the third century BCE to the seventh century CE bearing texts written in Greek, hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic Egyptian, Coptic, and several other ancient languages. Most of the papyri were excavated between 1896 and 1907 for the EES by Grenfell and Hunt from the site of Oxyrhynchus (Bahnsa) in Egypt (<https://www.ees.ac.uk/papyri>; accessed 20 May 2022).

Furthermore, they shared a clumsy handwriting, and nothing was revealed about their original contexts, circumstances of their recovery or ownership histories, except for the information Khalil Iskander had passed along to William Kando. Other scholars, however, were convinced of their authenticity, with the Kando connection offering a reassuring but ultimately non-existent corroboration. Scientific analyses subsequently showed many of the MOTB fragments to be fake (see the comprehensive report by Loll 2019), and the entire corpus is now generally discredited as comprising ‘post-2002 Dead Sea Scrolls-like’ fragments. Doubt now extends to Dead Sea Scrolls-like fragments in other collections, including those in the Schøyen Collection (See Justnes in this volume).

On 24 August 2021, officers of the Norwegian police Økokrim unit working with the Ministry of Culture raided premises belonging to collector Martin Schøyen and at the request of the Iraqi authorities seized 83 cuneiform tablets and other cuneiform-inscribed objects on suspicion of illegal export from Iraq after 1990 (Glørstad 2022; Lunde and Kleivan 2021). The police were also under orders to seize 656 magic (incantation) bowls, but found only one – 654 were suspected to be in a London property of Schøyen and the whereabouts of the other one remained unknown (Glørstad 2022: 1, note 2). The Schøyen Collection of text-bearing materials was assembled from the 1970s onwards (Schøyen n.d.), with ‘extensive, but opaque collaboration with experts, politicians, and public servants’ (Prescott and Rasmussen 2020: 69), but since the 1990s it has been dogged by controversy. In 2007 and 2008, it was forced to return to Afghanistan 65 fragments of Buddhist texts that were believed to have been stolen from the Kabul National Museum (Prescott and Rasmussen 2020: 80), euphemistically describing the return as a ‘donation’ (Schøyen 2008). In September 2022, the seized material was returned to Schøyen after the limitation period had lapsed (Kleivan 2022).

Theft, fraud and a police raid. These vignettes look more like episodes from a soap opera than a description of state-of-the-art scholarship. And they by no means exhaust the scandalous accounting. We have included these case studies in the introduction for the sake of completeness, to complement other cases described and discussed by contributors to this volume. The same cast of characters will appear, joined by others – the scholars, collectors and institutions comprising what Matthew Bogdanos (2005) characterized as a ‘cozy cabal of academics, dealers, and collectors’, snarled up together in other controversies.

The contributions to this volume are grouped into two sections. The chapters in Section 1 are broadly concerned with recently stolen, looted and illicitly- or illegally-traded objects. To pass these objects off into commerce or for them to be accepted by the academy it is necessary to suppress or obscure both their provenance (their collecting or ownership history from time and place of discovery) and their provenience (their archaeological context). The damaging consequences of this practice are now well known. It encourages the looting of archaeological sites and landscapes, it enables the validation of fakes, and it erodes the sovereignty, cultural self-determination and cultural identities of communities and countries around the world. It also means that contexts of discovery and extraction are undocumented, which constrains interpretation and introduces scholarly bias and distortion. When accepting to study and publish such unprovenanced objects, and thus choosing to engage in what Ricardo Elia (1993) once described as a ‘seductive but troubling work’, scholars stand accused of supporting and legitimising collections and thus ultimately the market and the damage it causes. Scholars reply that by studying such material they

are reacting to circumstances beyond their control, saving what they can from the ravages of the market in a disinterested fashion and with no commercial intent or impact. Thus the detrimental commercial consequences (loss of knowledge related to associated find spots and increased economic value) of scholarly engagement with unprovenanced objects have posed ethical quandaries about how to weigh the public benefits of knowledge production against the public harms of looting, theft and illicit trade. The asymmetrical distribution of benefits and harms results in more affluent countries, or at least privileged classes, profiting, while the harms are visited upon poorer countries and communities, who suffer most from the consequences of looting and theft. In response to these unsettling synergies between scholarship and the market, most professional membership organisations have now made impassioned pleas for greater transparency by scholars, editors and publishers when publishing unprovenanced materials and have introduced policies prohibiting or constraining their first publication. Nevertheless, outside the ambit of professional organisations, as chapters in this volume demonstrate, many publishers remain willing to publish artifacts from the marketplace with little or no context. It is not hard to publish a scholarly study of an unprovenanced text-bearing object, even a suspect one.

Section 1 opens with Nils Korsvoll's study of sixth- to eighth-century CE Aramaic magic (incantation) bowls from Iraq, using concepts derived from 'laboratory studies' to show how the construction or purification of scholarly knowledge proceeds in the absence of any information drawn from archaeological contexts. Next, Årstein Justnes takes a closer look at the shifting provenances that have been attached to the post-2002 Dead Sea Scrolls-like fragments and asks for more rigorous engagement with the problems of deficient public provenance. Roberta Mazza uses case studies describing the first-century CE Artemidorus papyrus and the new second- or early-third-century CE Sappho papyri fragments, all from Egypt. She discusses the problematic use of cartonnage for disguising and creating provenance, and the material uncertainties and ethical issues that papyrologists must face as a consequence. Mazza also describes the eBay trade of papyrus fragments, which Rick Bonnie follows with a forensic investigation into a Finnish collection of manuscript fragments largely acquired through eBay. Leaving the Internet market behind, Neil Brodie uncovers the provenance of a privately traded group of First Sealand Dynasty cuneiform tablets from Iraq and, in so doing, exposes the pivotal contribution of Assyriologists to market pricing and in the formation of large private collections. Michael Press examines the academic 'consumption' of Palmyrene objects from Syria, asking whether the shocking looting and destruction at Palmyra committed by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has helped to legitimise, in an academic sense, the study and publication of Palmyrene objects looted at other times and by other actors. All the contributors to Section 1 mention publication policies, but the final two chapters discuss them in greater detail. Patty Gerstenblith starts by describing the development of policies aimed at preventing first publication of unprovenanced or insufficiently provenanced objects and accommodations such as the '1970 standard' and the 'cuneiform exception'. Morag Kersel follows through by using the example of the fake Gospel of Jesus's Wife papyrus fragment to explore the application of publication policies, with a welcome consideration of the issue of publications subsequent to the first one.

The scandals and examples of egregious malpractice that are described in this introduction and in the chapters of Section 1 might be considered as comprising ‘zones of turbulence’ (Braudel 1981: 24), with privileged actors taking advantage of circumstance to conduct ‘their affairs in a very individual way’. But circumstance is contingent upon the longer-term sociocultural, political, and economic ‘perspective of the world’ (Braudel 1984), and it is this perspective that is explored in Section 2. Contributors draw upon reflexive modes of interpretation developed by feminist and post-colonial scholars to critique Western expropriation and reception of ancient and medieval texts and the impact of orientalism and imperialism upon modern-day scholarship and historiography. Whereas in Section 1 provenance is treated as a regrettable absence, in Section 2 provenance or more accurately object biography is centre stage. The ‘transformative power of ownership’ (Feigenbaum and Reist 2012: 1) is not something to be ignored. Authors also argue for an understanding that the manuscript or text-bearing object itself is a context for the texts it carries, and its materiality is a rich source of historical evidence.

Section 2 starts with Christa Wirth and Josephine Rasmussen’s argument that provenance-related information can gather around authentic or inauthentic objects as ‘thin data’ or ‘thick data’, and it is data ‘thickness’ that should determine a subject of enquiry, not the authenticity or otherwise of an object. A forgery is an authentic historical document, and may have a rich context for studies of the recent past and the present. They go on to describe how thick data can be used for exposing the colonial and gendered nature of nineteenth-century collecting and scholarship, and continuities through to the present day. Conversely, they lament the present tendency highlighted in Section 1 of suppressing and obscuring provenance, leaving only thin data for future research. Liv Ingeborg Lied’s chapter provides a rich analysis of the ethical and methodological issues facing scholars who study Jewish writings of the Hellenistic and early-Roman period. These writings, passed down by Christian copyists on manuscripts, were either lost or deposited during the middle ages to be recovered archaeologically or have been preserved by copying through to the present day. Traditional scholarship has ignored or overlooked evidence of copying, annotations, and physical traces on manuscripts, evidence of what Lied terms ‘practices of care’. Lied emphasises the implications of neglecting the communities responsible for the preservation and curation of the texts in question. Rachel Yuen-Collingridge in her following study of the nineteenth-century forgeries of Constantine Simonides also considers ‘cultures of copying’ and how in an extreme manifestation forgers might copy what is imagined to be lost, creating simulacra of the world as wished for, not curating the world as it really was. Next, in her study of the thirteenth-century CE illuminated Zeytun Gospels of Armenia and their dispersal during the early-twentieth-century Armenian genocide, Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh states clearly and forcefully that provenance can be genocide. She considers how tangible cultural creations that have survived destruction during war or genocide – ‘survivor objects’ – are important for commemoration and the survival and recuperation of afflicted communities and can act to resist narratives of denial. We have chosen to end the book with Raha Raffi’s forward-looking chapter on the digitizing of Arab-language manuscripts, reifying problems of disconnection between text and object described by Lied in her chapter. While digitization is important for the survival of texts threatened by human or natural action, without concomitant measures to ensure the survival of their origin communities, digitization might come to mean extraction and can be used to reinforce

inherited orientalist approaches or propagandist narratives. Looking back at Watenpaugh's chapter, Rafii seems to be warning of the possible future existence of digital survivor objects.

In choosing where to publish this book, we were mindful of Lied's admonition that most contributors are presenting upon 'someone else's manuscripts'. We chose Sidestone Press for its offer to produce an open-access e-book that, Internet and political barriers permitting, we hope will be available free to interested readers around the world.

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