Five Articles about Threatened Cultural Heritage from The Ancient Near East Today

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“The Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme”</td>
<td>John MacGinnis and Sebastien Rey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Saving Archeological Heritage in Afghanistan”</td>
<td>Hans Curvers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Pop-Up Museums Provide Hope for Libya in the Aftermath of War”</td>
<td>Will Raynolds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“Ancient Papyri Online and for Sale”</td>
<td>Brice C. Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Cuneiform Exceptionalism: An Argument for Studying and Publishing Unprovenanced Tablets”</td>
<td>Jerrold S. Cooper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One

The Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme
The Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme

By John MacGinnis and Sebastien Rey

Few countries have suffered as much damage to their archaeological heritage as Iraq. The Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme is a programme funded by the UK government and delivered through the British Museum under the direction of Jonathan Tubb, Keeper of the British Museum. The Iraq Scheme aims to offer training to archaeologists from across the whole of Iraq in order to help prepare for the challenges ahead.

The training runs in cycles consisting of two parts, 8-10 weeks theoretical and technical training in London followed by 8 weeks field training on site in Iraq. The UK based part of the training is designed to give a very wide introduction to modern archaeological methodology. An overview of cultural heritage management evaluates philosophy.
and practice on the preservation, restoration and curation of archaeological sites and historic monuments, drawing on case studies drawn from the UK, the Middle East and other parts of the world. The modules on methodology deal with a range of technical subjects such as project management, GIS systems, use of satellite imagery, surveying, geophysical remote sensing, data management, object recording, photography, digitisation, environmental sciences, material sciences, conservation and first aid.

In the fieldwork part of the programme participants implement the practical parts of their UK Training with the hands-on skills of archaeological fieldwork: surveying, photography, excavation, drawing of plans and sections, finds processing, use of databases and report writing. The training for the fieldwork component of the course takes place at two excavation projects: in the south of Iraq, at Tello, and in the north in the Darband-i Rania pass in Iraqi Kurdistan. Fieldwork at both sites commenced in
the autumn of 2016 and is expected to continue until 2019.

The Tello Ancient Girsu Project

Tello, the ancient Sumerian Girsu, is one of the earliest known cities of the world, revered in the 3rd millennium BCE as the sanctuary of the Sumerian heroic god Ningirsu. The site was extensively investigated between 1877 and 1933. This brought to light some of the most important monuments of Sumerian art and architecture, including both statuary of the Ur III king Gudea and a bridge built of baked brick – the oldest bridge discovered in the world to date. The size and complexity of the site make Tello an ideal location for delivering practical fieldwork training.
The focus of the new excavations is on the sacred district of Girsu at Tell A, the Mound of the Palace. Declassified 1960s Corona spy satellite images and modern drones are used to create digital elevation models of the temple site. This helped us to identify and then unearth extensive mudbrick walls, some ornamented with pilasters and inscribed magical cones, belonging to the four-thousand-year-old temple dedicated to Ningirsu. This temple was considered one of the most important sacred places of Mesopotamia, praised for its magnificence in many contemporary literary compositions.

More than fifteen inscribed cones were found in situ in the walls of the temple. The recording of the exact location of each cone reveals that they were laid in a complex pattern; we are currently analysing this pattern to establish whether it encodes information of magical/religious significance.
Among the unique finds was a foundation box inserted below one of the principal gates of the Eninnu sacred complex that still contained a white stone ritual tablet belonging to the ruler Gudea. Excavations under the temple also led to the discovery of two superimposed monumental platforms, the oldest of which, made of red mudbricks and
built in two steps, may be dated to the beginning of the third millennium BCE. This is an important discovery since this proto-ziggurat, a precursor to the legendary Tower of Babel, would therefore predate the earliest-known Mesopotamian stepped-terrace by a few hundred years.

In the autumn 2017 season conservation work was initiated on the Bridge of Girsu, first excavated in the 1920s, as part of the training for our Iraqi colleagues. Excavations to establish the condition and stability of this unique monument of Sumerian architecture led to the discovery of exceptionally well-preserved deposits of the prehistoric Ubaid period, including painted pottery and uninscribed cones, which will yield new information on the origins of Girsu and the birth of urban centres in Mesopotamia.

The finds from these excavations will go on display in museums in Iraq. The foundation tablet, cylinder-seals, inscribed cones, and other important objects will be displayed in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, while a column base from the Ningirsu temple will be displayed in the nearby local museum of Nasiriyah.
The Darband-i Rania Archaeological Project

The Darband-i Rania is a pass in the western Zagros Mountains lying approximately 100 km east of Erbil, at the point where, though now subsumed into Lake Dokan, the Lower Zab River flows from the Peshdar into the Rania Plain. This location now corresponds to the northeast corner of Lake Dokan, the reservoir formed following the construction of the Dokan Dam in the late 1950s. The pass commands a historic route from Mesopotamia to Iran. It is the route through which the last Achaemenid Persian king Darius III fled after being defeated by Alexander the Great at the battle of Gaugamela, fought north of Erbil, in 331 BCE.

The Darband-i Rania was selected as the site for the northern of the two training projects conducted by the Iraq Scheme as the sites involved are under threat from multiple factors – farming, gravel extraction, road building and erosion by the waters of Lake Dokan – and at the same time offer an opportunity to cast light on phases of history which have hardly been explored in the region.

Fieldwork at Qalatga Darband started with topographic mapping and a survey of

Darband-i Rania, view through the pass.
surface ceramics, analysis of which indicates that the site was primarily occupied in the early Parthian period (second-first centuries BCE). This has been followed up by excavation in multiple areas. Ground-truthing of a square feature appearing in a Corona satellite image, combined with analysis of crop marks in an aerial survey, has confirmed the presence of a large fortified building in the northern part of the site. In other areas, two different buildings have yielded evidence for the adoption of elements from Graeco-Roman architectural practice, particularly the use of terracotta roof tiles. Another major find has come with investigation of a huge stone mound at the southern end of the site. This is uncovering remains of a monumental building which, based on the presence of the smashed remains of Hellenistic statues, would appear to be a temple for the worships of Graeco-Roman deities.

Operations at the nearby site of Usu Aska, located actually in the Darband-i Rania, have confirmed the existence of a fort dated to the Assyrian period. With walls 6m thick and still standing 5 m high, it must have been a formidable installation for controlling movement through the pass. A later grave cut into the Assyrian remains contained a coin dating to the Parthian king Orodes II (c.57-38 BCE). Inscribed “King of kings, beneficent, the just, the manifest, friend of the Greeks”, this is the king in whose reign a Roman army
led by Crassus was destroyed by the Parthians at the Battle of Carrhae in 54/53 BCE. With their famous tactic of mounted archers raining arrows down on the enemy, the Parthians annihilated the Roman legions and captured their standards. Nevertheless, the incident must have sent shock-waves through the Parthian empire, and a wall across the western approach to the pass may well have been instigated as a direct reaction to the rising threat from Rome.

After nearly two centuries archaeology in Iraq continues to produce new data and surprises. The Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Scheme will help ensure that Iraqi archaeologists remain at the forefront of discovery.

John MacGinnis and Sebastien Rey are Lead Archaeologists of the Iraq Heritage Management Training Scheme.
Chapter Two

Saving Archaeological Heritage in Afghanistan
By Hans Curvers

During a crisis or conflict, interventions first focus on emergency relief. Once the ‘post-conflict stage’ is reached, the focus shifts to reconstruction. As soon as peace and stability are restored, the exit strategy starts. A straightforward linear process. Where does archaeology fit in?

In the Afghan reality, however, there is no such linear process. Afghanistan is neither a ‘post-conflict’ nor a ‘conflict’ state: it is both at the same time. In a country where tribal and personal power structures prevail, efforts are impeded not only by lack of capacity, but also by corruption and an absence of political will. Archaeology is no exception.

Over the past thirty years, Afghanistan’s archeological heritage has been severely damaged and looted; over 2800 archaeological and historical sites need protection. The illegal trafficking of cultural artifacts also constitutes an ongoing problem. UNESCO’s and ICOM’s (International Council of Museums) efforts have focused on the protection of Afghan antiquities, but the Afghan government lacks sufficient capacity to guard sites and prevent treasures from being smuggled abroad.

The Russian invasion in 1979 resulted in an exodus of archeologists and curators of the National Archeological
Institute (NAI). Between 1992 and 1994 more than 70% of the Kabul National Museum’s artifacts were looted. During the Taliban regime (1996-2001), pre-Islamic art was specifically targeted and destroyed. The most prominent example remains the destruction of the two giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan, which were blown up not only because they were pre-Islamic, but also to manifest the Taliban’s power over the Hazara Shia majority in Bamiyan. As such, the Taliban perceived and used culture as a weapon of war.

A new Antiquities Law (2004) aimed at reinstalling care and respect for Afghanistan’s Archeological Heritage, but its application and enforcement is a big challenge. Development and politics have replaced war as the immediate threats to Afghanistan’s heritage.

Good Earth image of Mes Aynak showing location of remains.

A new Antiquities Law (2004) aimed at reinstalling care and respect for Afghanistan’s Archeological Heritage, but its application and enforcement is a big challenge. Development and politics have replaced war as the immediate threats to Afghanistan’s heritage.

The situation at Mes Aynak (2009 to date) may serve as a good example of the present status of archaeological heritage in Afghanistan. A 30-year concession to start mining copper and other mineral resources threatens a unique complex of ancient mining facilities and Buddhist monasteries, presenting an apparent dilemma between development and conservation. The stakeholders in the project span the full range from the World Bank, responsible for the overall development program, to the local tribal chief tasked with solving day to day problems among the work force.

Mes Aynak is located 40 kilometers southeast of Kabul, and archaeological remains are spread out over at least six square kilometers. Discovered in 1963 by a French geologist, the site along the ancient Silk Route includes Buddhist monasteries and temples, forts, residential areas and mines, dating from at least the first century BC through the 10th century AD. Sites at Mes Aynak have revealed a unique assortment of metal, glass, and wooden objects, as well as painted murals and sculpture. Archaeological remains reveal the unique meeting of the Hellenistic, Persian, Central Asian, Tibetan, Indian and Chinese worlds, reflecting Afghanistan’s position at the center of ancient trade routes.

The presence of immense copper deposits drew people in antiquity, as well as Soviet
geologists during the 1970s. Today it is estimated that at least 5.5 million metric tons of copper worth perhaps $100 billion or more could be mined from the valley. Al Qaeda had a base in a Soviet mining tunnel, and after American forces pushed out the Taliban, looters began exploiting the site. In 2007 the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) paid $3 billion to lease the site for copper mining, which promises to provide hundreds of millions of dollars a year to the Afghan government in royalties: a clear challenge to use the resources wisely and create prosperity again.

The protection of cultural property and/or mitigation of the mining project’s impact at Mes Aynak is on the agenda of all stakeholders, at least nominally. Since 2010 the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan (DAFA) has partnered with the Ministry of Information and Culture, while World Bank funding allows the Program Management Units (implementation organizations that operate at the central, regional, and provincial levels) to engage teams of foreign archeologists to assist the national archeologists at Mes Aynak and develop plans for conservation. Approximately $10 million in project funding has been provided to date.

In 2010 DAFA provided an initial plan for excavation and conservation, so work could start. But the difficulties were many. To name just two basic examples, payment of worker salaries was haphazard and efficient security procedures for large numbers of

![Temple under excavation.](image)
workers entering the excavation were not in place; busses were checked over and over again due to a lack of coordination. Removal of land mines also continues in parts of the site.

We assume good intentions by all parties, but the reality is far removed from ‘best practices’. The World Bank sought assistance from UNESCO for DAFA to develop a comprehensive Archeological Management Plan (2013-2018), but UNESCO staff and consultants are generally unable to visit sites outside Kabul. DAFA's financial means are insufficient and its presence on site is limited. Small matters, such as the lack of fuel for vehicles, consume much effort and can bring work to a halt.

And what to do with the wealth of excavated objects, for which no space is available in the Kabul Museum, even if fragile items could be safely transported there? The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) supervised the building of a large storage facility, for which they engaged a local contractor associated with the governor of Logar province: the same man who had allowed systematic plundering of the site before the mining concession. Storage of the objects on-site may ultimately serve him best.
Alliance for the Restoration of Cultural Heritage (ARCH) International, Inc., organized an expert meeting in June 2012 to address some of these concerns. Mining engineers and archeologists expressed fears about the application of such low standards. The concerns were then integrated into a Request for Inspection and submitted to the World Bank by Afghan citizens. But in the subsequent response the World Bank management pointed out that certain concerns are not its responsibility, since a commercial contract holds the government and the mining company accountable.

Agreements are not transparent, thus parties can get away blaming others. For example, the agreement between World Bank and government clearly states that Program Management Unit is ultimately responsible for monitoring the project. But the Program Management Unit saw its environmental consultant leave and also fired its coordinating archeologist. Both consultants complained about the lack of leverage with...
other stakeholders. It seems the Program Management Unit is the perfect construction for both the World Bank and Ministry of Mines to execute their plans while escaping responsibility.

The Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) is the operator of the mining project but has had no direct input into the archeological project. Monitoring progress at the site, they constantly pressed for faster completion. But at the same time, a recently provided MCC feasibility study reveals that mining work can only start in 2016 or later. Attempts to coordinate and conserve some of the sites are still on the agenda – in theory. In the meantime, poor security conditions have reduced the Chinese presence to a skeleton crew.

Afghanistan’s National Archeological Institute archeologists did not recognize the necessity for capacity building either by the experienced Afghan archeologists of the Academy of Sciences or by the international archeologists. Indeed they tended to perceive the latter as rivals, their presence as intrusive. To increase the number of local archeologists, freshly graduated students with no field experience were mobilized.
While all these measures offered a temporary solution, they do not contribute to the development of necessary capacity.

Archeological heritage, and the threat to it, can only be understood in context. Politics and socio-economics should be included in order to attune proposals for assistance. The World Bank masterfully hides behind clauses and legal language, and Program Management Unit reports that archeological work is proceeding according to plan. In the meantime a long series of plans have been written and subsequently changed, but nobody knows which plan is being followed. Archaeologists and the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture remain silent; the former because they fear expulsion from the project if they speak up, and the latter because it is much weaker than the Ministry of Mines or the local stakeholders.

A 2013 Program Management Unit report mentions the implementation of a program of documentation and archiving and refers to a conservation schedule. However, archeologists were given less than a month to wrap up their documentation. An archeological “report” controlled by administrators does not help to implement best practices at Mes Aynak. Today a core group of foreign archeologists monitors the progress on site, apparently without time pressure but still without a coherent plan.
Agreements can serve to define responsibilities but only if their implementation has realistic chances. Meanwhile, it is fruitless to speak of ‘lessons learned’ in a system where the principal function of reports is to cover up reality. Just mentioning achievements in statistics and not allowing for peer-review is a recipe for disaster. What remains is the hope that awareness of the prevailing low standards in Afghanistan may lead to insights and improvement, one day.

Hans H. Curvers was coordinating archeologist at Mes Aynak (August 2011 – February 2012) and participated in the ARCH expert meeting in Washington DC. For the work in Afghanistan he interrupted his position as archeological heritage advisor in the reconstruction of the Beirut City Center (Lebanon).
Chapter Three

Pop Up Museums Provide Hope for Libya in the Aftermath of War
In the relative calm that prevailed in the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan revolution, young Suleiman al Magrisi traveled with his parents to the pine forest surrounding the Greco-Roman archaeological site of Cyrene, the most popular picnic spot in Libya’s Green Mountain region. “I saw a group of children wearing uniforms, and they invited me to join them in some games. It turned out that they were also from Benghazi, and the next thing I knew, they invited me to join their organization,” he recalled. This chance encounter with the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides of Libya (BSGG) changed his life.

Now a 20-year-old student of electrical engineering, al Magrisi rose through the ranks and currently leads a troop of thirty scouts, meeting with them every week for activities like campfires and lectures. With more than 20,000 members, the BSGG is the largest
civil society organization in the country. “Our programming is often focused on history. I encourage my troop to come to meetings dressed in traditional Libyan clothes rather than their uniforms to encourage a sense of pride in our rich past,” he explained. “Still, I am dealing with teenage boys, and they want more than lectures. I need to get them outside and take them to places that connect them to history directly.”

Opportunities for such field trips have become scarce in recent years. Since a spike in violence in 2014 that led to the withdrawal of most western embassies, museums around the country have been closed to the public in order to better protect their priceless displays. From the national museum in the Red Castle in Tripoli to the stunning collections at the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Sabratha, Leptis Magna and Cyrene, a wealth of artifacts attest to the nomadic peoples who once roamed North Africa in prehistory, the inception and growth of Punic and Greco-Roman cities, the flourishing of early Christianity, and the arrival and spread of Islam. For the time being, this material remains safely behind closed doors, but sensible measures taken for protection impede efforts like al Magrisi’s to foster pride in Libyan history.

To help mitigate this challenge, employees of the Libyan Department of Antiquities (DoA) and volunteers from the BSGG laid the groundwork for a series of “pop-up” museums. Inspired by workshops sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and Oberlin College featuring the work of museum exhibit designer Paul Orselli, they created temporary displays and outreach activities to ensure that young Libyans had better opportunities to learn about their history and their role in protecting it.

Currently, the employees of DoA have no regular operating budget, yet their work continues. From warding off looters and illegal encroachment to conducting damage assessments and maintenance at Libyan sites caught in the crossfire during years of conflict, the list of their pressing responsibilities is long. To make greater headway with limited resources, DoA has been seeking assistance from ordinary citizens willing to work to safeguard Libyan cultural heritage sites for the future.

Given some additional training and the chance to work directly alongside DoA archaeologists, members of the BSGG are contributing much needed volunteer support for the mission of DoA. As part of a collaborative agreement with the U.S. Department of State, the ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives has recently played a pivotal role in this work, sponsoring and supervising the implementation two jamboree-
style workshops: one in the western town of Janzour, a suburb of Tripoli, and one at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Cyrene.

During the “pop-up” activities, Scouts and Guides worked closely with DoA staff, learning more about Libyan heritage through presentations and training activities. Following the scouting philosophy of “learning by doing,” participants then worked alongside DoA staff. With support from ASOR to defray the cost of travel, lodging, and workshop equipment, the joint teams were able to meet critical needs on site.

Janzour

“When the scouts first arrived, they knew nothing about archaeology. They had never seen an archaeological site, and we had them camp right next to one,” explained Intisar al Arebi, an archaeologist who works for the Tripoli office of DoA. Thanks to the support of al Arebi and other government archaeologists like her, scouts from Tripoli, Khoms, and Sebratha gathered at the enclosed compound of the Janzour Museum for three days in March, pitching their tents next to a complex of Punic and Roman tombs dating to the 1st-4th centuries AD.
According to al Arebi, DoA staff offered the group an overview of Libyan history, explained how they uncover and study evidence about the past, and helped them understand their role in protecting archaeological sites for the future. Under DoA supervision, the group of 32 participants then carried out a small training excavation. “By the end of it, I had scouts coming up to me saying that they want to become archaeologists and join DoA. This might seem like a small thing, but it is very unusual in the Libyan context, where every kid says they want to be a doctor or an engineer. We really managed to get our message across,” al Arebi recalled with pride.

On the final day, DoA and BSGG hosted an open house to spread their joint message to a broader audience, urging the parents of the scouts and the community at large to do their parts to protect Libyan cultural heritage. “We find that speaking to kids is really the gateway into the entire family,” al Arebi reported. “The kids get excited and get their parents involved rather than the other way around. When we saw a scout leading his grandfather around the site and explaining it to him, we knew our model for outreach was working.”

**Cyrene**

Following the success in Janzour, there was a strong interest in replicating the program.
elsewhere. Fadl abd al Aziz, the former Inspector of Antiquities at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Cyrene, saw tremendous potential in using a workshop with the scouts to go beyond outreach and actually put the volunteers to work cleaning the site. Cyrene, first settled as a Greek colony in the 7th century B.C., continued to prosper under the Ptolomies and later the Romans. It continues to attract large numbers of Libyan tourists, like the Scout leader Suleiman al Magrisi and his family, who travel to the site from nearby cities in order to enjoy the ruins on a breathtaking promontory overlooking the forested hills of the Green Mountain and the Mediterranean Sea. This
region receives so much rain (and even snow) that plants grow quickly, and DoA staff struggle to stay on top of routine maintenance. Abd al Aziz believed that with supervision from DoA, the scouts could contribute significantly to the preservation of the site.

DoA launched a public exhibition in July, reinforcing a powerful message: even though Libyan sites and collections are currently under threat, there is much that can be done to protect them. With this show of support from DoA, BSGG saw an opportunity for a further “pop-up” event on the sidelines of the exhibition. Over 5 days, 52 BSGG participants from Tripoli, Benghazi, Al Beidah, and Shahat convened at Cyrene to celebrate Libyan cultural heritage and work alongside Abd al Aziz and his team of DoA archaeologists.

Abd al Hafid Jaber, one of the Scout leaders, was surprised by the unusually strong turnout: “We initially organized the event with fifteen Scouts in mind, but word of this event travelled. We actually had to cap attendance on the basis of the limited resources and turn some troops away.” Abd al Aziz prioritized site cleaning and stabilization of the area surrounding the House of Jason Magnus, a
portion of the site renowned for its in situ mosaic floors. DoA site conservation staff gave hands-on tutorials in site maintenance, and the team began carefully removing plants that had taken root on and near the mosaics.

Suleiman al Magrisi, the Scout leader from Benghazi, felt fortunate that he and his troop were among the participants. “This was a chance for me to return to the same site where my scouting experience first started and make a lasting contribution. We all worked hard, and we managed to accomplish in four days what would have normally taken the DoA team an entire month. By the end, the scouts and the government employees were working on site side by side, as though we were from the same family.”

The team also erected several small canopies, providing a space to directly...
engage the public. Every day, roughly 30 visitors came to the site to learn more about their work, and the team was also interviewed by local radio and television stations. Another civil society organization supporting local orphans was so inspired by this work that they also volunteered. DoA and BSGG are convinced that this model of cultural heritage outreach combined with active volunteer work can be successful at other sites such as Ptolemais, Leptis Magna, and Sabratha.

**How You Can Help**

While Libya remains politically fractured and volatile, DoA and BSGG plan to expand their partnership through additional similar workshops, regularly incorporating Scout volunteers to assist with ongoing site maintenance and monitoring programs. Intisar al Arebi, the DoA archaeologist, sees this collaboration as a vital way to push for cultural heritage protection nationwide at a time when government employees can be viewed with suspicion: “The employees of DoA can still travel around the country to work on these projects and mentor Scouts, and the BSGG are seen as a non-political actor in every community. Sometimes, a partner like BSGG is better able to win trust or advocate for a site, because they are not seen as being allied with a government or faction.”
Your ongoing support for ASOR helps make this kind of programming in Libya possible. Contributions to defray the volunteers’ expenses helps to keep them in the field, involving a new generation in the preservation of Libyan cultural heritage at a time when volunteer efforts can play a critical role.

In the Libyan context, a small amount of support can go a long way. One hundred twenty five dollars ($125) will enable one volunteer to participate in one of these “pop-up” activities for five days, and an entirely new iteration of the “pop-up” museum can happen at one of Libya’s other sites in need for $4,500. Thank you for considering a donation to support these activities. Click here to make a donation (and choose “Cultural Heritage Initiatives” from the drop-down menu). If you would like more information about donating to this project, please e-mail Dr. Andy Vaughn, ASOR’s Executive Director.

Will Raynolds is Project Manager for Cultural Heritage Projects at ASOR CHI.
Chapter Four

Ancient Papyri Online and for Sale
Over the last decade, we have witnessed a growing fascination with ancient papyri from Egypt. By now, most people have heard of the Gospel of Judas, published in 2006, the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife, which made headlines in 2014, or, most recently, the controversial fragment of the Gospel of Mark that is reputed to have been extracted from Egyptian mummy cartonnage. What all of these manuscripts have in common is the material upon which their texts were inscribed: papyrus. What is this material? And where are all these manuscripts coming from?

Papyrus (pl. papyri) is a tall fibrous plant that grows along the shallow banks of the Nile River. As a general rule, almost all papyri from antiquity come from Egypt, whose arid climate facilitated their preservation over time. In particular, most papyri have been found south of the Nile Delta in cities and villages along the Nile River, since the soil in northern Egypt is more humid.
The ancient Egyptians used the papyrus plant for a variety of purposes in the ancient world, including for making sandals, mummy wrappings, rope, nets, sails, and basketry, but it was predominantly a writing surface. Many thousands of non-literary (or documentary) papyri from the Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine periods have survived. Written in a variety of different languages, these documents attest to all facets of life: marriage, divorce, taxes, agriculture, banking, government, economics, death, and so on. To be sure, there are also copies of great literary masterpieces, including texts of Homer, Thucydides, Plato, Herodotus, and the Bible, just to name a handful. But these enjoyed a place predominantly among the upper echelons of society, since Egypt was generally, like most ancient societies, illiterate. Quotidian documents are more common.

Why is the Western world beginning to show such interest in ancient papyri? Over the last century, with respect to Egypt, it has generally been the great pyramids of Giza, the pharaohs, the Book of the Dead, the Nile, the desert, that have captivated the modern imagination—not scraps of papyri. Perhaps it is just the romantic notion of discovery that is so alluring. The media has certainly played a role in dramatizing certain papyrus discoveries; this is not a bad thing in itself. But global news coverage also increases the market value of such items. And this has in turn generated efforts on the part of antiquities dealers to hunt down artifacts to sell for profit.
In recent years, many papyri have surfaced on various online auction sites, such as Christie’s, Sotheby’s, Live Auctioneers, Bonhams, and the like. And they are being purchased at colossal prices. In December 2013, for example, a tiny 5th century C.E. fragment containing a small portion of text from the Gospel of Mark sold on Sotheby’s for £18,750 GBP (=around $30,000 USD). In 2012, a very fragmentary sheet from the 3rd century C.E. with portions of Paul’s epistle to the Romans sold for a whopping £301,250 GBP (=around $470,000 USD). And there are many more examples. What is most surprising, however, are the many hundreds of papyri that are being sold by private collectors on eBay. I have been keeping track of these sales, highlighting some of them on my academic blog. Examples include an early Coptic papyrus of Galatians, a Greek papyrus of the Gospel of John, a Greek papyrus of Homer, an early Coptic monastic text, among many others.

It is generally quite difficult to predict how much an ancient papyrus will sell for once it is listed on the market. Many auctions begin with an extremely low estimate and ultimately end with a very high winning bid. The reality is that there is no regulation on prices for ancient papyri. It is not like going to the auction to buy a car or a piece of sports memorabilia for which there is a steady market. Not surprisingly though, texts of a religious nature often fetch the highest prices. And there is a growing concern among scholars about how some Christian evangelists and organizations are buying and using ancient manuscripts for apologetic purposes. This entire religious subculture is in essence intensifying the efforts of antiquities dealers to procure A Christian Coptic papyrus sold on eBay
ancient papyri and other antiquities. The concern here is a legal one.

There is one overriding question concerning the acquisition of papyri and other antiquities: have they been legally exported from their source country? If the answer is yes, then some sort of documentation must accompany the sale if these items are to some day end up in public collections. Export laws vary from country to country, as do the policies of auctioneers and antiquities dealers. However, Egypt is one country that is committed to repatriating items that have been illegally smuggled out. What we often see on the market are what archaeologists call “orphans,” that is, papyri or other objects whose provenance cannot be demonstrated. As a standard practice, North American museums cannot touch orphans, since there is always a possibility that they have been looted. But private collectors can, and in such cases there needs to be some sort of measures taken in order to prevent the illegal trade of stolen antiquities. I am not so sure that online auctions like eBay are helping the situation, since the appropriate documentation of provenance is often lacking.

This is an area that needs greater public awareness. It is no longer simply an academic conversation. It is time for scholars and public intellectuals alike to be more vocal about the importance of cultural heritage, provenance, and ethical practices where papyri and other ancient artifacts are concerned.

Brice C. Jones holds a Ph.D. in religion from Concordia University. His web site is http://www.bricecjones.com.
Chapter Five

Cuneiform Exceptionalism: An Argument for Studying and Publishing Unprovenanced Tablets
I always opposed the publication of looted cuneiform tablets, until I had a sudden epiphany at the 2004 ASOR meeting in San Antonio. There, archaeologist John Russell, newly returned from Iraq, estimated that tablets were leaving Iraq at the rate of thousands per month. Doing the math, it was immediately obvious to me that in a few years, the total number of recently looted tablets would equal or exceed the number of tablets currently in museums and public collections worldwide. <IMAGE 1>

These tablets are the cultural heritage of the Iraqi people and of all humankind.
They must be conserved, studied, and published, not left to deteriorate unseen in warehouses in Switzerland or the Gulf, nor should they be hastily repatriated to an uncertain fate in the storerooms of the Iraq Museum. I will leave legal arguments about ownership to others; I am making an ethical argument.

There has been a painful divide among Mesopotamianists over the publication of unprovenanced artifacts. The most passionate antipublicationists are archeologists, and the most ardent defenders of publication are cuneiformists. This is not coincidence: Archeologists dig sites, and looting destroys sites. Cuneiformists study tablets, and looting supplies tablets. But no cuneiformist could be unmoved by the moonscape images of looted sites, and most mourn the loss of context for tablets snatched from those lunar pits and craters at Mesopotamian sites.

For archeologists and art historians, unprovenanced artifacts—seals, statuettes and the like—create serious difficulties beyond the destruction of sites and loss of context. Questions of authenticity arise that often defy solution.

This is not the case for cuneiform tablets, which, unlike unprovenanced alphabetic inscriptions, are almost never forged. In addition, the text of a tablet can provide important contextual information: date, place of origin, prosopographic (personal names), and archival data. So, the spectacular image of the Akkadian king Naram-sin and the goddess Ishtar on an unprovenanced stone mold displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “First Cities” exhibition a while back only creates problems for art historians, whereas the horde of documents from the Sealand Dynasty (mid-second millennium Babylonia) from the Schøyen Collection published in a Cornell University series solves many problems for Assyriologists.

Did publishing those tablets, and thousands of other unprovenanced tablets, help create a market for cuneiform tablets and thus encourage looting and site destruction? I have seen no well-founded answer to this question, and I can’t pretend to know what motivates the small number of serious collectors of these rectangular bits of inscribed mud. I personally find working with dealers to identify and market looted tablets reprehensible. In any case, nearly all the unprovenanced tablets being published today are off the market, in large public collections, where they are well cared for. It makes no sense to ignore them, or to stigmatise scholars who have saved them from oblivion.
It is quite possible that the number of tablets illicitly excavated since the first Gulf War in 1991 is as large as the number of all the tablets that came to light in the century and a half before 1991—perhaps 200,000. Can a scholar willfully ignore half of the evidence bearing on his subject? I can’t.

My concluding plea: conserve, study, publish, and then, if appropriate, repatriate.

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This is an adaptation of remarks made at the panel on ASOR Ethics at the November 2013 ASOR Meeting in Baltimore.

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Alex Joffe is the editor of the *Ancient Near East Today*. The publication features contributions from diverse academics, a forum featuring debates of current developments from the field, and links to news and resources. The ANE Today covers the entire Near East, and each issue presents discussions ranging from the state of biblical archaeology to archaeology after the Arab Spring.

Cynthia Rufo is ASOR’s Archivist and Website Manager.
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