To publish or not to publish?
A multidisciplinary approach to the politics, ethics and economics of antiquities

The publication of ancient objects without any information on their archaeological provenance and acquisition circumstances in academic journals, and their presentation at conferences or display in exhibitions has been discussed and criticized. Although official positions against this practice have been taken by some academic associations and journals, in recent years academics have assisted in an increasing number of cases where the acquisition circumstance and/or the ownership of papyri, inscriptions and other antiquities from public and private collections, published in academic contexts was questioned, and in some cases even proven, as illicit. This situation undermines academic work under different perspectives: it supports directly or indirectly looting and illicit trafficking of antiquities, and threatens the credibility of some disciplines.

The political instability of regions invested by wars and conflicts has caused an increasing of looting and illegal exports of antiquities from countries like Iraq, Egypt and Syria among others. Many issues are at stake, including a clear and shared definition of what ‘clear acquisition circumstances’ mean in the context of a very complex international legal panorama. What kinds of documents prove that the archaeological provenance and acquisition circumstances of an ancient artifact are legal? Does the statement of a scholar, a curator or a museum representative suffice to make an ancient object ‘clear’?

Opinions on how to deal with ancient objects with unclear archaeological provenance and acquisition circumstances could be broadly divided into two opposite parties among scholars. One side is against any type of study and publication, the other thinks it better to publish these objects for the purpose of knowledge and scholarship. The situation is complicated further by the media, who, similarly to academics, struggle in deciding between the right of information, sensationalism and ethical issues. The pressure on academics to appear in the media for impact aims related to the research assessment exercise has escalated a trend that has much older roots.

In the light of this general context and the coexistence of apparently irreconcilable positions, we are convinced that an open, in-depth discussion and a
closer collaboration among experts dealing with ancient objects from different perspectives are needed. The scope of this seminar is to open a conversation with the aim of offering practical advice on how to improve study and publication policies, and to raise public awareness on legal and ethic implications connected with the study of ancient objects.

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