The role of academics (summary)

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There are two ways in which scholars can be involved with the trade in unprovenanced artifacts – directly or indirectly. They can be involved directly when offering expertise in support of the sale of unprovenanced material. On 9 December 1999, for example, Christie’s New York sold a Roman mosaic, which was subsequently acquired by the Dallas Museum of Art. In 2012, Turkish authorities established that the mosaic had been stolen from Edessa in 1998 and the Dallas Museum agreed to return it to Turkey. The mosaic carries an inscription and the Christie’s catalogue entry had included a translation of the inscription by two academics.

Most academic involvement is indirect, however, when scholars study and publish unprovenanced artifacts in private collections. Over the past twenty years, a large number of collaborative projects have been established aimed at studying and publishing privately held objects from Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly inscribed or otherwise text-bearing objects. Although these artifacts are usually published without any information about their place of discovery or prior ownership, sometimes it is acknowledged they have been recently looted.

Archaeologists suggest two reasons why the study and publication of unprovenanced artifacts is problematical. The first is that the historical value of an unprovenanced artifact has been lessened or compromised by its loss of archaeological context – the set of material relations that enable its correct interpretation. The second is that academic publication of an unprovenanced artifact provides information and a provenance that might increase its monetary value, thereby supporting the market and providing a spur for further archaeological looting. For these reasons, some archaeological journals will not publish research papers relating to unprovenanced artifacts. Not all scholars agree with this policy. Some choose to characterize it as censorship. The most vocal opposition is from scholars who study inscribed or text-bearing artifacts. They argue that for this type of artifact most historical information is present in the text, and its interpretation is not so dependent upon knowledge of archaeological context. They also believe that their work in studying and publishing unprovenanced artifacts is in the public interest. But does that argument stand up? Is the scholarly study and publication of unprovenanced artifacts, even those bearing texts, really in the public interest? To answer that question, three other questions must be answered: Is the scholarship reliable? Is the scholarship important? Is the scholarship socially harmful? The public benefit of scholarship cannot be assessed without considering the quality of scholarship and its impact on society.
Even for inscribed artifacts, the absence of archaeological context can reduce the reliability of scholarship. Take the example of Aramaic-inscribed incantation bowls, which carry written incantations or spells intended to ward off malevolent demons. The inscriptions illuminate the popular religious or magical beliefs of the Jewish inhabitants of Sassanid Mesopotamia. Since the late 1990s, at least two large private collections of previously unknown bowls have been established and are being studied and published. One specialist in the subject has suggested that the bowls in both collections must have been found together on an unknown site in Iraq, and that without knowledge of that site the interpretations can only be partial. The specialist further suggests that the work of one scholar is suspect, designed to please the owner of the bowls. Thus the scholarship associated with unprovenanced artifacts might sometimes be reliable, but not always. Is the scholarship always important? In 1994 the British Library acquired 57 manuscript fragments from Afghanistan and announced a collaborative programme of study and publication. The manuscript fragments were announced publicly as potentially being the Dead Sea scrolls of Buddhism, but privately described as being nothing like that. So the scholarship might often be important, but is not always.

To ask whether scholarship is socially harmful is to ask whether the antiquities trade is socially harmful, and whether the study and publication of unprovenanced artifacts supports the antiquities trade. Many unprovenanced artifacts have been criminally traded, and so almost by definition the antiquities trade is socially harmful. There are the usual criminal problems of corruption and tax evasion, organised criminal or armed groups skimming tax or protection money, and sometimes people are murdered. How does study and publication support this trade? Artifact identification and description establish rarity and importance and therefore monetary value, and offer assurance about authenticity. Between 1997 and 2000, a private collection of cuneiform tablets increased in value by 1800% after scholarly study. In 2000, the scholarly identification of the Gospel of Judas increased its value by 900% virtually overnight. So, sometimes at least, scholarship does support the antiquities trade and is socially harmful.

Thus depending upon the balance of considerations, the scholarly study of unprovenanced artifacts may or may not be in the public interest. How can the issue be decided on a case by case basis? The way forward is for more information about the provenance of studied material to be made publicly available. It is not acceptable for study and publication to proceed without any consideration of provenance. Such studies are in themselves a form of censorship, preventing access to information that might allow a more informed decision to be made about the public benefit or otherwise of scholarly involvement.

This presentation has tackled the issue of scholarly involvement as one of individual choice, as one of ethics. But the issue might more simply be one of criminal wrongdoing. It has recently been opined that scholars or other professional experts who engage with unprovenanced artifacts when those artifacts are subsequently shown to have been stolen (as in the case of the
Turkish mosaic), might be committing an offence under section 328 of the 2002 Proceeds of Crime Act.