

# Preface: Dealing with Antiquity

## Case Studies and Methodological Considerations in the Ethical Engagement of Ancient Materials

*Lauren Morris, Amanda Bledsoe, Fabian Heil*

The Distant Worlds Journal is an online peer-reviewed journal established especially for presenting the research of early-career scholars on the ancient world. In seeking to encompass a broad range of distinct academic fields, each edition of the DWJ takes as its starting point a question or specific topic pertinent to the diverse disciplines engaged in the study of ancient cultures. In the opening edition of this journal, papers explored the question of how the meaning of an object changes throughout its “life” in the past and present. This second edition of the DWJ, “Dealing with Antiquity”, has shifted in focus to the role and responsibilities of the researcher, and has served as a platform to consider how those working in academia could deal with unprovenanced, recently surfaced ancient materials in a way that advances knowledge, as well as being ethically sound. This is a persistent issue behind the scenes of research across academic disciplines, but one that is growing ever more relevant in contemporary times.

Often the evidence we draw on in researching antiquity does not reach us in a pure and unproblematic form, and we are faced with serious ethical quandaries in the process of research. Problems might occur when excavating or studying human remains, researching archaeological material excavated under difficult political circumstances, or in using manuscripts and other archaeological materials not obtained through modern controlled excavations, thus missing crucial contextual information. This edition of the DWJ is concerned with the latter issue in particular, considering ways in which academics may study such recently surfaced, unprovenanced material in an ethical manner. How to deal with ancient epigraphic material and manuscripts – which feature the qualities of both text and artefact – has been an especially contested in this discourse, and thus serves as the principal focus of this edition.

In the opening essay of this issue, Professor Christopher Rollston reflects on the problems that arise, particularly for junior scholars, in working with unprovenanced materials, namely the possibility of incorporating modern forgeries into research and, thus, corrupting the dataset. Rollston discusses some of the recent rulings made by academic societies in regard to the publication or presentation of unprovenanced objects, and questions the compliance of these rulings with the Hague and UNESCO adjudications on cultural property.

The following two essays, each provide case studies for dealing with unprovenanced materials in their respective fields. In his article about cuneiform tablets from the archives of Dūr-Abī-ešuh, Zsombor Földi uses this case study to shed light on the difficult position created by the antiquities market for cuneiformists, but also to show

how this material may be ethically published. Földi expresses the view that cuneiformists have the responsibility to publish discovered cuneiform tablets as soon as possible. He notes, however, that this publication should not only include the contents of the text, but also deal with its provenance. Földi presents the possibility of initial publication of such tablets emerging on the contemporary antiquities market—which, as pointed out by Professor Rollston, is a matter of controversy—after extensive and transparent research into their provenances and acquisition histories.

Michael Johnson picks up with another problematic issue raised by Professor Rollston: the secondary publication of unprovenanced artifacts. In treating a previously published “Dead Sea Scroll” fragment, Johnson notes that both the American Society of Oriental Research and Society of Biblical Literature only discourage the *initial* publication of questionable artifacts, without comment on potential further publication of these materials. Johnson argues that such publication is crucial to academic discourse, as first editions may make unsubstantiated claims, often benefiting the object’s dealer or owner. Subsequent publication, therefore, is necessary for correcting these problems by exercising a greater degree of caution in assigning provenance to objects, and especially in highlighting the uncertain origins of the object. In the context of Dead Sea Scrolls research, Johnson’s discussion is

of particular relevance due to a large number of unprovenanced fragments which have flooded the antiquities market in the past decade or more.

These two pieces of meticulous scholarship demonstrate the possibility of engaging with this difficult topic even as an early career scholar. Furthermore, while these contributions make very clear that the complicated interrelations between political, economic, social and scientific interests necessitate a careful approach to unprovenanced artefacts, they also present constructive steps forwards for future work dealing with such material.

With the publication of this second edition of the *Distant Worlds Journal*, we would like to reiterate our thanks to the Munich Graduate School for Ancient Studies “Distant Worlds” for its generous support. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the members of our Advisory Board and the other scholars around the world who have acted as peer-reviewers, and to the members of the Editorial Board for their efforts in bringing this edition to final publication. We would also like to thank the Heidelberg University Library for hosting our journal. Finally we would like to thank the authors for their contributions to this volume and, especially, Professor Rollston for kindly agreeing to offer an introductory essay dealing with this controversial subject.

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