

# Introduction: The Publication and Citation of Inscriptions from the Antiquities Market and Contested Regions

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Participation in the publication of an archaeological artifact that hails from the antiquities market or from a contested region (e.g., certain parts of Cyprus or Occupied Palestine) is not the sort of thing that I would encourage. Long ago, I was attempting to settle on a dissertation topic and had all but decided that I would be working on scores of Old Hebrew bullae and seals that had surfaced on the antiquities market. I had already submitted my dissertation proposal, and signals were auspicious that the proposal would be readily accepted. However, Assyriologist Jerrold Cooper of Johns Hopkins University (the institution at which I earned my doctorate) learned of my proposed dissertation topic, and he told me that he wanted to talk with me about the topic. I thought that he would indicate to me that he believed the proposed topic was useful and that it would serve the field well. But as Professor Cooper and I walked across the quad of the Homewood Campus of Johns Hopkins University, he told me that the topic was problematic and that I needed to jettison it. I was floored. Professor Jerrold Cooper was not on my dissertation committee, but I have long held him in the highest regard. So, as he suggested, I abandoned the proposed dissertation topic. As fate would have it, Jerrold Cooper's

senses were on the mark. A number of these seals and bullae turned out to be modern forgeries. And through the years, I have had a hand in exposing a fair number of modern forgeries, including some seals, bullae, ostraca, pithoi inscriptions, and inscriptions in stone (including a few that would have been in my dissertation!). I have always been particularly grateful for Jerrold Cooper's wise counsel, as it saved me from the embarrassment of writing a dissertation that would have been plagued with tainted data from the modern period. Similarly, I have always been grateful for the sage warnings of the late Professor Joseph Naveh of Hebrew University about the presence of some very capable modern forgers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. And I shall always treasure a letter from the late Professor Frank Moore Cross of Harvard University in which he stated that he considered my (2003) article on the subject of modern forgeries to be absolutely convincing.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, I shall always be in the debt of Professors Cooper, Naveh, and Cross, as they saved me from a great deal of trouble.

So the first thing that I would say is that scholars of all ages must be careful, and junior scholars must be especially careful, as

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<sup>1</sup> Rollston 2003.

an embarrassing publication is sometimes enough to derail entirely a promising career. Caveat Eruditus. The second thing that I would state is that all who reference or publish something from the antiquities market or from a contested region must be very careful to make the provenience (or the absence thereof) very clear in all presentations and publications. After all, this is a matter of professional ethics and it is also a means of ensuring the fact that transparency is the *modus operandi*. Along those lines, many years ago, I proposed that inscriptions from the antiquities market should be marked with a symbol (e.g., the name of the inscription preceded by: “ø,” or by “non-prov”). I also suggested that references to inscriptions in lexica should also flag in the same fashion inscriptions from the market. Moreover, I suggested that in handbooks or text-collections, inscriptions from the market should be separated from inscriptions from excavations, thus, printed in two separate and distinct portions of a volume, as a matter of “truth in advertising.” Furthermore, I also suggested that no constructs about ancient society or ancient language should be based primarily on inscriptions from the market. That is, I argued that our assumptions about antiquity should be based on the best of our archaeological data (i.e., excavated inscriptions), not on compromised data, including and especially data that might have been forged in the modern period. Finally, I also proposed that we should begin to attempt to categorize inscriptions from the antiquities market, with these categories: modern forgery, probable modern forgery, possible modern forgery, probable ancient, ancient.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rollston 2004.

It should also be emphasized in this connection that, in addition to professional ethics, there is also the matter of international law as well as the strictures of learned societies. For example, the date of April 24, 1972 is of particular importance, as this is the date of entry into force of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, entered into force on August 7, 1956.<sup>4</sup> Because of these sorts of world-heritage laws, those wishing to participate in the publication of something from the antiquities market, or something from a contested region, should be particularly circumspect. After all, no member of the scholarly community should fail to be in compliance with international laws. In addition, it is worth emphasizing that during the past decade, major learned societies have made a concerted effort to be leaders in these sorts of complicated matters of ethics, law, and cultural heritage. For this reason, as of 2015, the American Schools of Oriental Research has published a document on standards and practices that are to be in place in all presentations made at ASOR events and in all of its publication-venues.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Society of Biblical Literature put in place in 2016 very similar statements on standards and practices that are to be in place for all presentations made at SBL events and for all SBL publication-venues.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the days of the “wild west” (with regard to the way the field approached artifacts from the market and from contested regions) is no more. Rather, a new era has

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<sup>3</sup> See UNESCO 1970.

<sup>4</sup> See UNESCO 1954.

<sup>5</sup> See ASOR 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See SBL 2016.

dawned in which learned societies are attempting to mandate that their memberships put into practice (at least at events and in publications of these learned societies) certain basic ethical standards and legal practices.

It is perhaps also worth emphasizing that at this time, there are certain “exceptions in place.” For example, the American Schools of Oriental Research is not willing to be the place of “first publication” or “first presentation” for an artifact from the antiquities market, but an exception is made for cuneiform inscriptions. Here is the precise language used for this exception:

“limited exception to the publication and presentation policy noted immediately above is available for cuneiform texts because a. in zones of conflict since the early-1990s, most prominently in Iraq and Syria but also elsewhere, looting of cuneiform tablets has occurred on a *truly massive scale*; b. cuneiform texts may be authenticated *more readily* than other categories of epigraphic archaeological heritage; c. the content of a cuneiform text can provide information *independent* of archaeological provenience.”<sup>7</sup>

On the one hand, I understand the desire for, and the place of, such an exception. On the other hand, I must state that I find the exception is striking because, of all of the written materials appearing on the antiquities market during the past twenty-five years, an overwhelming majority are cuneiform tablets from Iraq and Syria. Thus, the exception is large enough to drive a freight train through. And I find it ironic that a Northwest Semitic inscription, or a Greek inscription, or a Latin inscription that appears on the antiquities market is banned

from first publication or first presentation, but the massive numbers of cuneiform tablets appearing on the antiquities market are not banned from first publication or first presentation in such a venue. Ultimately, I am quite certain that this policy is not entirely in conformity with the international laws or with the spirit of the Hague Convention or UNESCO statements.

In sum, it seems to me that scholars must be very careful about working with, publishing, or referencing archaeological artifacts that have appeared on the antiquities market or those that hail from contested areas of the world. However, if someone decides that they wish to work with, publish, or reference such an artifact, I would emphasize that truth in advertising is paramount and the provenience or absence thereof must be stated front and center: there must be no exceptions to this.

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<sup>7</sup> See section II, E, 5 of ASOR 2015.

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