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2014

# WikiLeaks, Texts, and Archaeology: The Case of the Schøyen Incantation Bowls

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# ARCHAEOLOGIES OF TEXT

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Matthew T. Rutz and Morag M. Kersel

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*Front cover:* Cuneiform tablet PF 0694 (see p. 17, Figure 2.3) with Elamite text on the obverse (top left) and on the reverse (top right) an impression of seal PFS 0093\*, inscribed with name of Cyrus of Anzan, son of Teispes (images courtesy of Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, University of Chicago); detail (bottom) from the Greek inscription on the Rosetta Stone (EA24, © Trustees of the British Museum).

*Back cover:* Excerpt from Mayan hieroglyphic inscriptions on Copan Stela 10 (see p. 37, Figure 3.2a); drawing by Nicholas P. Carter after field sketches by David Stuart (images courtesy of Nicholas P. Carter).

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## Acknowledgments

This volume grew out of a symposium hosted at Brown University on December 3–5, 2010, the purpose of which was to explore different perspectives on the interplay of archaeological and textual material from the ancient world – hence *archaeologies* of text. For the symposium we invited scholars who routinely engage with the archaeology of texts – archaeologists, classicists, epigraphers, papyrologists, philologists, Assyriologists, Egyptologists, Mayanists, ancient historians – to discuss current theoretical and practical problems that have grown out of their work on early inscriptions and archaeology, and we warmly thank all contributors and participants for their interest, energy, and thoughtful engagement with this perennially relevant, promising, and vexing topic. Our hope was that the variety and specificity of perspectives and methods under discussion would catalyze cross-disciplinary exchange as well as underscore the importance of reevaluating the well-established disciplinary practices and assumptions within our respective fields. We leave it to the reader to decide if we succeeded in our approach, even if only asymptotically.

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## WikiLeaks, Text, and Archaeology: The Case of the Schøyen Incantation Bowls

NEIL J. BRODIE AND MORAG M. KERSEL

Do ancient texts speak for themselves? Does the historical interpretation of an inscribed artifact suffer without knowledge of its archaeological context? How can the Assyriologist, papyrologist, or epigrapher ever be truly confident that the artifact under study is genuine when its complete history is unknown? These questions address the often debilitating effects of missing provenance and provenience on archaeological and textual scholarship.

Provenance is usually defined as the ownership history of an artifact, including its known archaeological findspot, while provenience is its findspot only. Thus provenance encompasses provenience, although the terms are often used synonymously and interchangeably. Archaeologists and epigraphers engaged in the debate over the publication of unprovenanced artifacts are usually at odds on the topics of missing provenience and the loss of archaeological context. They agree that textual material can carry historical information that is to some extent independent of archaeological context, though they often disagree as to what extent. Archaeologists who are interested in the antiquities trade, however, are also concerned about issues relating to the broader provenance, or ownership history, of objects once they are out of the ground. Using Aramaic incantation bowls as an example, in this chapter we explore the multivalence of inscribed artifacts and show how scholarly disagreement over the importance of provenance, including provenience, has degenerated into an ongoing, often vitriolic debate, with occasional legal consequences. We will use the release on WikiLeaks of a previously sequestered report into the provenance of a collection of incantation bowls belonging to the Norwegian collector Martin Schøyen as a point of entry into a broad-ranging discussion that touches upon the nature of historical knowledge, intellectual access, and issues of provenance and evidence.

### Provenance as Evidence

Provenance is ownership history, but often it is something less: it is a datum, recording the location of an artifact at a single point in time. Sometimes provenance is a publication, sometimes provenance comprises a named previous owner, and sometimes provenance is merely an auction sale – the auction catalogue entry is the concrete datum. Nevertheless, even limited provenance information of this sort can contribute towards a greater understanding of an artifact's recent biography – its history on the market, its authenticity, and its legal status. An irrefutable dated record of past ownership and/or legal exportation from a country of origin is believed to increase significantly the monetary and perhaps symbolic value of an artifact. There is no real consensus as to what constitutes good provenance in the antiquities marketplace – but when provenance is assured, the market responds positively, as it did with the sale of the so-called Guennol Lioness in December 2007.

In the private collection of Alistair Bradley Martin since 1948, this 5,000-year-old Mesopotamian limestone sculpture, standing only three and a quarter inches high, was bought by an anonymous British buyer at Sotheby's New York for almost \$57.2 million, a record price at the time for any sculpture sold at auction (Porada 1950; Sotheby's Antiquities, December 5, 2007, Lot 30). Jane Levine, Senior Vice President and Worldwide Director of Compliance for Sotheby's, asserted that the solid provenance for the Lioness definitely contributed to the record-breaking hammer price (Kersel 2012; Levine 2009). Unfortunately, Levine was not clear about what exactly she thought constitutes solid provenance. She might have had in mind the "1970 rule," the idea that any artifact that can be documented as having been outside of its country of origin by 1970, or legally exported since that date, should be considered as legitimately available on the market (Brodie and Renfrew 2005). Nevertheless, even though the 1948 date for the Lioness from the Martin collection satisfies the "1970 rule," it does not predate the enactment of the 1936 national ownership law in Iraq. Article 3 of Iraq's 1936 Antiquities Law states: "All antiquities in Iraq whether moveable or immovable that are now on or under the surface of the soil shall be considered to be the common property of the State," thus vesting the ownership of all antiquities found after 1936 in the State (*Republic of Iraq Antiquities Law No. 59 of 1936*). Was the Lioness illegally excavated and exported from Iraq in the period between 1936 and 1948? Quite possibly we will never know, and in any case, any Iraqi claim for recovery would probably be precluded by the lapsed interval of time. And even with a provenance (of sorts), there is still no provenience or record of archaeological context. We

do not know where the Lioness was found, or anything about the associated architecture (funerary, religious, domestic, etc.) or artifacts (other limestone sculptures, human remains, inscriptions, etc.). Is the Lioness to be regarded purely as an *objet d'art* and valued on account of its art-historical worth?

What about unprovenanced texts when their archaeological contexts are unknown? Their artistic merits are not normally regarded as anything special, but textual content can sometimes impart a different kind of value on the antiquities market. What are the implications of their lost archaeological contexts, and of their missing ownership histories? In what follows, we consider these questions by way of a peculiar episode in the life of Martin Schøyen's collection of Aramaic incantation bowls.

### **The Strange Case of University College London and a Collection of Aramaic Incantation Bowls**

In 1996 the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College London (UCL) agreed to house 654 Aramaic incantation bowls from the collection of Martin Schøyen for the purposes of study and research by Shaul Shaked of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Shaked et al. 2013). Aramaic incantation bowls date to between the fifth and eighth centuries A.D. Typically, they are hemi-spherical or flat-bottomed ceramic bowls with inscriptions written in ink on their inner surfaces, frequently but not always spiraling outward from the center (e.g., Figure 11.1). Each inscription is in some dialect of Aramaic (or in a pseudoscript) and records an incantation intended to protect the client and ward off malevolent forces. The first mention of these bowls in an archaeological context was by Austen Henry Layard, who discovered them in 1850 at Babylon and Nippur, although the British Museum had already acquired two bowls several years earlier in 1841 (Layard 1853, II: 509–526). John Punnett Peters' (1897: 182–194) report on the University of Pennsylvania expedition to Nippur remains the best documented archaeological context for the bowls. During the mission to Nippur incantation bowls were found in the structural remains of houses that were uncovered immediately below the surface. A house might contain one or more incantation bowls, alongside domestic artifacts such as grinding stones and pottery. The bowls were found placed upside down under thresholds or under the floor in room corners and were thought to have functioned as apotropaic charms (e.g., Müller-Kessler 2005: 205). At least two thousand Aramaic incantation bowls are known, but to date only a few hundred have been published, and of that number only a few were recovered from a documented archaeological context, all of which were recovered from Iraq (Brodie 2008: 46, 50–51, table 2). These issues of archaeological findspot



Figure 11.1. Aramaic incantation bowl (BM 103359, Segal 2000: 033A), ca. A.D. sixth–eighth century, top view of the bowl's interior (diameter: 14 cm, depth: 6.3 cm) © Trustees of the British Museum.

and country of origin are crucial to the following discussion of provenance and the Schøyen collection.

From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, Shaked continued his work translating and publishing the Schøyen bowls without public incident or interference, until September 2004 when a Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) television documentary on the Schøyen Collection claimed to have uncovered evidence that the Schøyen bowls had been discovered in Iraq during looting in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War (Lundén 2005; NRK 2005). Bowls were becoming increasingly common on the open market during the uneasy conditions that followed the war, and Kersel has observed personally that in the years following the 2003 invasion of Iraq a significant quantity of incantation bowls appeared on the shelves of licensed antiquities dealers in Israel (see Figures 11.2–11.3). The NRK program alleged that, before he had acquired them, Schøyen's bowls had been taken illegally out of Iraq and passed through a trade network that included stops in Amman and London.

If this account is correct, the trade of the bowls would have been in direct contravention of the August 6, 1990 United Nations Security Council Resolution 661 (UNSCR 1990), which imposed a trade embargo on all

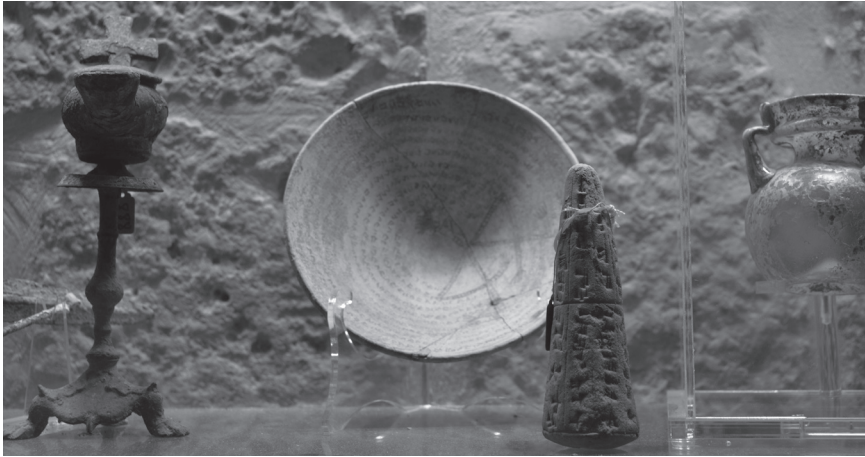


Figure 11.2. Incantation bowl for sale in Antiquities Shop, Jerusalem (photograph: M.M. Kersel).



Figure 11.3. Incantation bowl for sale in Antiquities Shop, Jerusalem (photograph: M.M. Kersel).

goods in and out of Iraq. The embargo applied to antiquities as much as to any other class of material, although between the 1990s and early 2000s a seemingly uninterrupted flow of artifacts (including incantation bowls) out of Iraq onto the international market was evident (Brodie 2006; Lawler



2001; Russell 2008: 31). The export of the bowls might also have been in contravention of Iraq's own 1936 Antiquities Law, if they were exported after that date as the NRK program claimed. However, Schøyen's representatives denied the NRK account and counter-claimed that the bowls had been out of Iraq since at least the 1960s (Lundén 2005: 6). In swift response to rumblings of protest from the academic community, UCL announced on October 10, 2004, that it had alerted the Metropolitan Police to the incantation bowls in its possession, and that it would review their provenance and rightful ownership, together with the university's future policies on the acquisition and study of unprovenanced cultural objects more generally. UCL also announced that "subject to obligations of confidence," the conclusions of the review would be published (UCL 2004).

UCL's decision to alert the police was required under United Kingdom (UK) law. Article 8(2) of the UK's Statutory Instrument 2003 no. 1519, *The Iraq (United Nations Sanctions) Order* (SI 1519), implementing UNSCR 1483, which had come into effect on June 14, 2003, reconfirmed the trade embargo on cultural objects first introduced in August 1990 by UNSCR 661, stating that:

Any person who holds or controls any item of illegally removed Iraqi cultural property must cause the transfer of that item to a constable. Any person who fails to do so shall be guilty of an offence under this Order, unless he proves that he did not know and had no reason to suppose that the item in question was illegally removed Iraqi cultural property [SI 1519 2003: Article 8(2)].

This law reflects trade sanctions first placed on Iraq by UNSCR 661 in August of 1990. Thus if the Schøyen bowls were believed to have been illegally exported from Iraq after August 1990, UCL would be obliged to transfer them "to a constable." However, UCL's 2004 announcement also said that the police had advised UCL that there was "no reason to take the matter further and has no objection to the return of the material to Mr. Schøyen."

UCL found itself in the uncomfortable position of arbitrator as regards ownership of the bowls. The simple solution would have been to return them to Schøyen, but the 2004 statement went on to say that "UCL's possession has now entered the post-2002 era when new principles and policies have emerged and attitudes have changed." The significance afforded to the 2002 date was probably because it was in that year that the British Government had acceded to the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970 UNESCO Convention). However, the 2002 adoption of the 1970 UNESCO Convention had no retroactive force in British law: because the bowls had been in the United Kingdom since 1996, its requirements as

regards the return of stolen cultural objects would not have applied to the incantation bowls, even if they could have been shown to have been taken out of Iraq illegally. But by 2004 in Britain, both the Museums Association and the British Museum had formulated acquisitions and loans policies based on principles enshrined in the 1970 UNESCO Convention that prohibited the acquisition of any object that could not be shown to have been exported from its country of origin before 1970, or exported legally after that date (the “1970 rule” mentioned above). Thus if UCL wanted to adhere to what had by 2004 become best practice in British museums and other collecting institutions (which would include UCL), it would have to consider the implications of holding material that did not meet the 1970 threshold.

The question of an original Iraqi provenience (findspot) became crucial not only to Schøyen’s claim to ownership, but also to UCL’s disposal of the bowls. If Schøyen’s incantation bowls were most probably found in Iraq, and if Schøyen could not document legal export, then UCL might decide to return them to Iraq. If, on the other hand, it could be shown that a substantial number of incantation bowls had been found in archaeological contexts outside of Iraq, then the claim of an Iraqi origin for Schøyen’s bowls would be more difficult to sustain, and the evidence would favor their return to Schøyen. The problem arising for Schøyen in this situation was that with no hard evidence of provenance, especially provenience, it would be difficult for him to counter expert opinion that all bowls with a verifiable findspot had been found in Iraq. Even if his bowls had been found outside Iraq, it would be a difficult circumstance for him to prove.

In May of 2005, UCL announced that an independent committee of inquiry had been established in March of that year (with the cooperation and consent of Schøyen) to investigate the provenance (complete object history including previous owners and archaeological findspot) of the bowls. Members of the committee included lawyer David John Freeman, Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, Colin Renfrew, and Director of the UCL Museums and Collections, Sally MacDonald. Their mission was twofold: (1) to determine (if possible) the provenance of the incantation bowls and the ethical, legal, and professional implications arising from UCL’s possession of them; and (2) to make recommendations regarding ethical policies for future acquisition and study of cultural objects by UCL and UCL staff.

In July 2006, the UCL committee submitted its report and a copy was made available to Schøyen, though at that time the findings were not made public. In March 2007, Schøyen initiated legal proceedings against UCL for return of the bowls, claiming that the “Schøyen Collection has become frustrated with the waste of time and money caused by a lengthy and

inconclusive inquiry into their provenance” (Schøyen Collection 2007a). In June 2007, a joint UCL/Schøyen Collection press release stated that after “investigation by an eminent panel of experts, and further enquiries of its own, UCL is pleased to announce that *no adverse* claims to the Schøyen Collection’s right and title have been made or intimated” (Schøyen Collection 2007b, emphasis added). The press release went on to state, “UCL has now returned the Bowls to the Schøyen Collection and has agreed to pay a sum in respect of its possession of them” (Schøyen Collection 2007b). The agreement for the payment and the return of the bowls appears to have been brokered as part of an out-of-court settlement with Schøyen, in return for which he ended legal proceedings. Not only were the bowls returned to Schøyen, UCL in effect paid a type of “rent” for keeping possession of the bowls while the question of their disposition was settled. Despite repeated appeals from various scholars, and the refusal of a *Freedom of Information Act* (FOI) request submitted by Brodie, UCL refused to release the committee of inquiry’s report, having signed a non-disclosure agreement with Schøyen.

However, in a *Science* article in October 2007 (Balter 2007) some of the report’s contents were leaked, and it was claimed that while the committee of inquiry had found nothing to suggest that Schøyen had any knowledge of the bowls’ origins or had acted dishonestly in acquiring the bowls, the committee had concluded that “on the balance of probabilities” the bowls had been removed illegally from Iraq sometime after August 1990. This finding should have prompted UCL to return the bowls to Iraq, not to Schøyen. When asked to comment on the withheld report, committee member Renfrew is quoted as saying, “UCL tried to do the right and ethical thing by setting up a committee of inquiry. Then, when threatened with a lawsuit, in my view, it gave way under pressure” (Balter 2007: 554). In response to the *Science* article and stung by the criticism that the bowls had been looted, Schøyen (Schøyen Collection 2007c) issued a statement that focused on the provenance of the bowls and denied allegations that the bowls had been looted, claiming that the material had been exported from Jordan prior to 1988 – the issue of country of origin and the incantation bowls arising once more. The *Science* article leak was a mere teaser, however, providing very few details from the approximately 100-page report. The report itself was still inaccessible – that is, until WikiLeaks.

### Enter WikiLeaks

WikiLeaks (<http://wikileaks.org/>) is a not-for-profit organization that aims to obtain and make publicly available original source material on sensitive and otherwise secret issues in order to “reveal unethical behavior by governments and corporations” (New York Times 2010). Founded in December 2006,

WikiLeaks is now regarded as one of the most famous (or infamous) “whistle-blower” websites on the Internet, having exposed internal memos about the dumping of toxic waste off the coast of Africa, the U.S. military blueprint for operations at Guantanamo Bay, and, of primary interest here, the UCL committee of inquiry report into the provenance of some 654 Incantation Bowls from the private collection of Martin Schøyen. In November 2009 the UCL inquiry committee’s report was placed in the House of Lords Library and subsequently found its way onto WikiLeaks, where it was made available for universal access.

The report confirms claims previously made by Balter (2007) in his *Science* article that

the committee did believe that, on the balance of probabilities, the bowls were removed from Iraq and that their removal was illegal under Iraqi law; that it was probable that their removal took place after August 1990, post-dating UNSCR 661; that their removal from Iraq was illegal even if they came out of Iraq before 1990, given the national Antiquities Laws of Iraq of 1924 and 1936; that UCL should, within one month from the date of publication of this report (July 2006), *return or cause the return* of the 654 incantation bowls to the Department of Antiquities of the State of Iraq [Balter 2007, emphasis in original].

Recall that in fact – and counter to the committee’s recommendation – UCL returned the bowls not to Iraq, but to Schøyen, in the out-of-court settlement in June 2007.

But our interest in the report does not end with the committee’s recommendations; we are also interested in other possible information contained in the report that might be relevant to our interest in provenance, and that might otherwise be unavailable to public investigation or scholarly research.

As an example of information suppressed with the report, we want to highlight the issue of the Jordanian export documentation. Brodie has long been in possession of information relating to this documentation. The committee found “no direct evidence that positively contradicts or impugns Mr. Schøyen’s honesty” in his account of how he acquired the bowls (Balter 2007: 554), and we are not contesting that conclusion. We do believe, however, that he may have been less than diligent in investigating the full provenance of the bowls, seemingly satisfied by the assurances of Jordanian dealer Ghassan Rihani, who was their ultimate supplier.

In testimony before the panel, Martin Schøyen and his two London antiquities dealers claimed that the bowls came from the Rihani family collection in Amman, Jordan (Freeman et al. 2006). The antiquities dealers were under the impression that the Jordanian collection was in existence

prior to 1965 – Schøyen claimed that the collection was founded around 1935. Now, 1935 is a very curious date indeed. It antedates the enactment of the Antiquities Law of 1936, No. 59 – the wide-ranging statute that legislated the discovery and possession of moveable antiquities from Iraq. As evidence, Schøyen offered the panel documents that included an export license from the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, thus providing the ownership history and legal exportation of the bowls in question: they had been in Jordan since the 1960s and were later exported legally from Jordan in the 1980s.

We believe that Rihani did supply Schøyen with copies of two documents purporting to be Jordanian export licenses – an Arabic original dated September 19, 1988 and an English translation dated October 12, 1992 (copies in Brodie's possession). These documents are potentially important, not because they validate a Jordanian findspot for the bowls (they do not), but because they should establish the date by which the bowls were out of Iraq. Unfortunately, the documents in question are ambiguous. The export license refers only to 2,000 pottery vases, not specifically to incantation bowls, and there is no way of establishing whether Schøyen's bowls were included in that number. For example, there are no photographs attached, a requirement actually stipulated on the license itself. Furthermore, although the license was granted in 1988, it constitutes permission to export, but is not a record of exportation. The actual export would appear to have taken place in 1992, the date of the English translation. Thus the export documents do not irrefutably establish a date for the export of the bowls from Jordan but do suggest that it was 1992. The bowls could have left Iraq any time before that date, and thus potentially after August 6, 1990, the date of UNSCR 661.

We believe that Rihani also provided Schøyen with a copy of a document dating to 1965 stating that Rihani had made a gift of a collection of antiquities to the Jerash and Irbid Archaeological Museum in Jordan, and, furthermore, testifying that at the time he (Rihani) owned a collection of cylinder seals, cuneiform tablets, and incantation bowls (a copy of this document is in Brodie's possession). The authenticity of this document is questionable, however, as it is written in English and not signed. Even if it is genuine, there is no necessary link between the incantation bowls mentioned in a 1965 document and those acquired by Schøyen in the 1990s. Misrepresenting the country of origin (here Jordan is listed as the country of origin) on the import/export documentation is an often-used ploy in the antiquities market to "launder" illegally excavated artifacts (for examples, see Mackenzie 2002).

Schøyen may have turned a blind eye to the issue of provenance, but he is not alone in the archaeological marketplace. In his analysis of the international trade in antiquities, criminologist Simon Mackenzie concludes:

The market interview sample displayed a high level of desire to buy unprovenanced antiquities, a perception of adverse consequences (penal and other) at or approaching nil, and a routine approach to the purchase of unprovenanced antiquities which suggested that the act had an established place in their [the collectors'] "comfort zone" of action [Mackenzie 2005: 213].

Collectors are comfortable legally, morally, and socially with purchasing undocumented artifacts without knowledge of their origin, and it is this willingness to participate in the market that ultimately supports the ongoing illegal excavation of artifacts and their eventual sale without complete object histories.

Schøyen's ongoing assertions of good provenance show that he is unwilling or unable to engage in a critical consideration of provenance and of the possible harmful consequences of his actions. He has been helped in his endeavor by UCL's refusal to publish the report. By not publishing the report, and thereby keeping secret negative evidence relating to the provenance of the bowls, UCL has made it easier for Schøyen to remain in his comfort zone. The panel of inquiry concluded that UCL and Schøyen were guilty of not showing enough curiosity about the source of the bowls. In a sense, they took a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to purchasing artifacts.

In 2009, in culmination of the second part of the committee of inquiry's mission, UCL published a new Cultural Property Policy, offering guidance on the acquisition of cultural objects and the study of cultural objects in non-UCL ownership. It advised against working with cultural objects of questionable provenance.

### Ancient Texts Speak

Schøyen seems to believe that, by acquiring unprovenanced objects, he is "rescuing" them for historical research, thereby acting in the public good and promoting scholarship. Westenholz (2010: 263), for example, describes how Schøyen's dedication to collecting texts is enmeshed with the idea that "his collection might make a difference for the writing of history." But do ancient documents speak for themselves? Does the contextual information provided by their archaeological recovery make them less or more instructive?

Mark Geller, who was at UCL's Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies when the bowls were first accepted on loan, wrote in 2005 that

Many of the sites in Iraq have Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls as surface finds, and these magic bowls date from the period of the Babylonian Talmud, ca. 400–700 CE. These bowls reveal a great deal of useful social history about the Jewish community of Babylonia in late antiquity [Geller 2005].

He went on to say that

Within the past decade, hundreds of Aramaic incantation bowls have appeared on the antiquities market, collected from archaeological sites; there is no evidence that these objects have been stolen from a museum. As such there is no identifiable owner.

Schøyen has also claimed that his bowls were “chance/surface finds” (Schøyen Collection 2007c).

The idea that the bowls are surface finds probably reflects the fact that many of them have been found on or close to the surface in the upper strata of archaeological sites. That is not to say that they are altogether without context, however, as Peters showed back in 1897 at Nippur. Even findspot co-ordinates constitute minimal context and in aggregate can reveal spatial patterning of historical significance, as data collected in England and Wales by the Portable Antiquities Scheme is beginning to show (Bland 2012: 5). And there always remains the possibility of a unique and important, though previously unknown, context for the bowls, and one that remains hidden from scholarship because of the clandestine nature of the bowls’ recovery. It is fallacious to believe that simply because all bowls so far known with a documented provenience and context were found close to the surface, then all bowls without provenance must also have been found close to the surface.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, the mystery remains – are Aramaic incantation bowls found only in Iraq, or are they also found in other modern Middle Eastern countries? Would knowledge of an archaeological findspot of these bowls outside of Iraq cause the scholarly world to rethink their meaning and historical associations? We may never know.

## Conclusion

In his contribution to the *Festschrift* honoring David Owen, Westenholz (2010: 260) asserts, “The truth is, you cannot have it both ways. An unprovenanced object... is either a relic of the past or a stolen good.” This is perhaps an inflammatory and polarizing statement to make, underestimating the complexity of object provenance, and may be the reason for the persistence of the current seemingly intractable debate. The absence of provenance does not always mean that the object is looted and/or stolen and, while an inscribed object is a material relic of the past, there is no reason why it cannot also be a stolen good. These attributions are not mutually exclusive – it is almost 30 years since Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai (1986) reminded us that objects have social lives and can take on various identities throughout their existence. And does scholarly interest in an artifact erase



its identity as a stolen good? Surely not. Epigraphers such as Westenholz (2010: 260) may regard as “facile” suggestions such as the one made by the American Schools of Oriental Research (see Gerstenblith 2014; Cherry 2014 [Chapters 12 and 13 in this volume]) that unprovenanced textual materials should only be studied after they have been returned to their rightful owner, but it seems to us to be a realistic attempt to recognize the dual nature of artifacts and reconcile conflicting claims of access and ownership in the interest of equitable scholarship.

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