Introduction: The Market for Jewish Antiquities

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Readers of the Journal of Ancient Judaism (JAJ) may be surprised by the topic of this special issue. Why the antiquities trade? Why papers whose research focus is not on the Persian or Hellenistic or Early Roman periods, but the last 200 years?

We believe that attention to this topic is both timely and needed. News headlines about Museum of the Bible's collection of antiquities, and forgeries of supposed Dead Sea Scroll fragments and the so-called Gospel of Jesus's Wife, have drawn attention to the trade in biblical antiquities today. But how does it actually work? And what was it like in the past? With few exceptions – notably including Morag Kerseil's previous work on the contemporary trade – prior research has been limited and has tended to focus on individual figures, usually “manuscript hunters” from Europe and America. With this special issue, we hope to help change this focus. The issue deals not just with noted manuscript collectors but with the trade as a system. The different articles look at low-level buyers – who make up the majority of buyers in the trade – as well as dealers, finders, forgers, and more.

In our view, scholars of ancient Judaism and related disciplines pay too little attention to the role of the antiquities trade and how it shapes our field, either in its formative years or today. Traditionally, scholars working with ancient manuscripts have relied heavily on the antiquities market to access new research material. This means that a considerable extent of their manuscripts have uncertain provenance and unsubstantiated pedigrees.

This special issue is an outgrowth of the research project “The Lying Pen of Scribes: Manuscript Forgeries, Digital Imaging, and Critical Provenance Research” (administered by the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway.
and funded by the Research Council of Norway). Årstein Justnes is the project manager, and Michael Press is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow on this project. The main focus of the project is the Dead Sea Scrolls and different approaches to studying them, including critical provenance research. Press’s research, however, has extended this provenance research back in time, to the antiquities trade in 19th-century Palestine.

These research interests led us to put together an online conference hosted by the University of Agder in March 2022, “The Market for Biblical Antiquities, 1852–2022.” The conference allowed us to look at the entire history of the trade, as well as to provide a historical context for provenance research on the Scrolls. After an invitation from the editors of JAJ – who believe, as we do, that scholars of ancient Judaism should be interested in these matters – we decided to adapt some of the presentations from the conference (along with some new ones) to create a special issue of the journal.

Together, the articles touch on some of the key points that are relevant for scholars of ancient Judaism dealing with unprovenanced material. They highlight the role of the antiquities trade, both in the 21st century: Årstein Justnes and Ludvik A. Kjeldsberg, Morag Kersel, Jonathan Klawans, and in the formative years of the 19th century: Michael Press, Rebecca Jefferson. They include some of the key sets of texts for understanding ancient Judaism, notably the Dead Sea Scrolls (Justnes and Kjeldsberg) and the Cairo Genizah (Jefferson). Press’s article likewise discusses a number of relevant inscriptions and other artifacts acquired or published by Charles Clermont-Ganneau that helped to define the early history of the field. Klawans’s, Kersel’s, and Justnes’s and Kjeldsberg’s articles all provide lessons for studying manuscripts and other artifacts appearing on the market today – from putatively significant manuscripts and fragments to ordinary coins. Press, Klawans, and Justnes and Kjeldsberg each highlight, in different ways, the important role that academics play in this trade.

The topics covered in this issue are far from exhaustive. For instance, the 20th century is overlooked by chance, though it too was characterized by a large number of unprovenanced manuscripts and artifacts still studied today. Other groups of manuscripts and other types of artifacts also merit discussion. We hope that, in the future, further research by our contributors and others will address some of the gaps. And we hope that the current contributions, written by scholars from a variety of fields, will make all of us think more carefully about where the items we study come from, and why this matters.

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1 For details about the project, see https://prosjektbanken.forskningsradet.no/en/project/FORISS/275293.
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