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Papyri, Collectors and the Antiquities Market: a Survey and Some questions

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1. The new Sappho and the Green Collection (slide 1)

At the beginning of February this year, Oxford papyrologist Dirk Obbink announced the discovery of new poems of Sappho, transmitted on papyrus fragments, in the hands of an anonymous private owner, based in London. A media campaign was promptly organized around the discovery: a blog was started (**slide 2**), articles were published in the main newspapers, TV networks and websites reported the news, and Obbink distributed a pre-print of the forthcoming edition article online.

Due to my interest in papyri, I posted a link on my Facebook account, briefly commenting on the fact that such papyrus fragments were in the hands of a private collector, and then started reading the pre-print article with attention. My Facebook post was noticed by an American colleague and friend, the archaeologist and art historian Francesca Tronchin. We started a conversation about acquisition circumstances and publishing policy issues that was joined by other colleagues. The debate over the discovery soon became hot in the blogosphere and elsewhere. In the meanwhile, Obbink pulled the article out of the public domain, and never answered the direct questions about ‘provenance’ that were posed in the New Sappho blog (**slides 3-4**).

In particular, three pieces of information given in the pre-print article and in two other following articles for general audiences attracted my attention. First of all, the fragments were said to come from mummy panel cartonnage (**slide 5**): in other words, the papyrus roll on which the poems were originally written was discarded in antiquity and then re-used later for fabricating the covering parts of a mummy. Second, carbon dating analysis and palaeographical considerations suggested that the original papyrus roll dated to the beginning of the third century CE. Third, the London fragments matched with others marked as P.GC. inv 105 in the pre-print article. These three pieces of information puzzled me, because they opened further questions in addition to that of private ownership and source of provenance (**slide 6**):

1. Who dismantled the cartonnage and how?
2. According to current scholarship on recycling papyri for fabricating mummy cartonnage, the practice ended in the early first century AD. Therefore, the

Sappho cartonnage panels were challenging our knowledge on the topic, but nothing was said on this point by the author of such a discovery. Why?

3. What did P.GC. inv 105 mean? And how did fragments from the same roll eventually end up in cartonnage panels in different collections?

While the London owner of what is nowadays known as P. Sapph. Obbink has remained anonymous so far, after some research, mainly through the web, I discovered that behind the previously unknown abbreviation P.GC. there was a huge American collection, not only of papyri, but also of other objects related to the history of the Bible: the Green collection/Museum of the Bible of the American millionaire and Christian fundamentalist David Green and his family, proprietors of the Hobby Lobby Corporation based in Oklahoma City (**slide 7**).¹

I have constantly reported on what I was discovering about this collection and the methods followed by scholars collaborating with it in my blog (<http://facesandvoices.wordpress.com>). Although details on this story are very entertaining, and made me regret having chosen academia instead of filmmaking, in view of time restrictions I have decided today to present wider questions on the papyri market and the role of scholars within it in the light of what has emerged about the Green Collection's history, and a wider survey of recent acquisitions of papyri by private and public collections.

A first issue I'd like to bring to your attention relates to **the size and nature of the market of papyri and other antiquities, in particular mummy masks and panels, from Egypt**. The Green family was able to purchase about 40,000 objects, ranging from Sumerian tablets to modern Bibles, in three years: from 2009 to 2012. At present, they own a collection of about 1,000 papyri, mostly of documentary nature (i.e. everyday writing of people living in Egypt in the Graeco-Roman period). The man behind the Green Collection's purchases is Dr Scott Carroll, the director of the Green Collection and right-hand man of Steve Green from 2009 to 2012 (**slide 8**). Before arriving at the Green house, Scott Carroll had created another collection of a Biblical nature: the Van Kampen Collection sponsored by Robert Van Kampen, a Christian fundamentalist millionaire (this has 5,000 papyri). Where did Scott Carroll

¹ The Sappho fragments from both collections have been published in the meanwhile: S. Burris, J. Fish, D. Obbink, "New Fragments of Book 1 of Sappho," *ZPE* 189 (2014) 1-28; D. Obbink, "Two Poems by Sappho," *ZPE* 189 (2014) 32-49. Nothing is said on their acquisition circumstances. A separate article on the restoration of the papyrus is announced by Obbink in a footnote of his article (2, p. 32).

find first 5,000 papyri and then other 1,000 in such a brief period of time and in the context, in theory, of a strictly regulated antiquities market? Is it possible that in the past decade there were at least 6,000 papyri which, having legally left Egypt before 1972 (the year of the enforcement of the UNESCO convention), were sold by their owners? In fact there have been cases of such papyri sold at auction in recent years, and some of them are now in the Green Collection among others, but these are few and cannot account for the above-mentioned huge numbers.

From where the papyri (and other objects) come from, remains undisclosed to us because the Green Collection/Museum of the Bible has not released any detail, even when asked. The choice of not being transparent on acquisition circumstances is bad, not only for the general audience that is denied access to basic information, but also for collections, both private and public, because it casts doubts on the licit nature of such transactions. The flourishing of an illegal market of antiquities, including manuscripts, from Egypt is a well-known phenomenon, which has intensified in recent years because of the political instability following the Arab Spring.² Besides this, as in many other commercial sectors, the web has boosted the antiquities market too, and papyri, mummy panels and masks are frequently sold on e-Bay and other websites (**slides 9-10**). When I visited the exhibition *Verbum Domini II* organized by the Green collection in Vatican City last April, I recognized that one of the papyri on display (GC.MS.000462, Coptic papyrus with lines of Galatians 2) had in fact been put on sale on e-Bay in 2012 by a much discussed Turkish account, MixAntik (**slides 11 and 12**).³ I asked the current director of the Green Collection, David Trobisch, about the piece via email: he denied that the Green Collection had bought it on e-Bay, saying that it was acquired “through a trusted dealer that we have done business with over many years”. It is clear then, that there are only two possible explanations about what has happened with this papyrus: the first is that the Green collection has

² E.g. most recently the “Emergency Red List of Egyptian Cultural Objects at Risk” compiled by ICOM and available at http://icom.museum/uploads/tx_hpoindexbdd/120521_ERLE_EN-Pages.pdf, and the on-going campaign for the subscription of a bilateral agreement between Egypt and the U.S. restricting Egyptian imports in the US, on which see T. Mashberg, “Egypt Asks U.S. to Impose Sharp Curbs on Importing of Antiquities”, The International New York Times, 14 March 2014 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/15/arts/design/egypt-asks-us-to-impose-sharp-curbs-on-importing-of-antiquities.html>).

³ On this papyrus see <http://thequaternion.blogspot.ca/2012/10/a-coptic-new-testament-papyrus-fragment.html> by B. Jones and following posts of denouncing the situation by D.L. King (<http://phdiva.blogspot.ca/2012/12/the-tale-of-very-dodgy-papyri.html>)

purchased it without paying enough attention to the legal documents accompanying the item from this ‘trusted dealer’. As for the second, I leave it to you to guess.

2. Buying papyri on the antiquities market: Collections’ behaviours and policies (slide 13)

The Green and Van Kampen collections are not the only ones to have purchased papyri recently. I am in the process of making a systematic survey of purchases post-1951 (the year of the issue of the Egyptian law n. 215 on the protection of antiquities), but in the meanwhile I have made some unsystematic searches. I present here two significant examples relating to university collections in order to show how institutions and scholars, individually and as members of professional associations, are still struggling with ethical questions when dealing with papyri and other objects coming from the antiquities market.

Case 1 (slide 14). In 1996 the Beinecke Library of Yale University purchased a box of papyri containing, among others, a codex with poems of Palladas that has been recently published in a volume of the American Studies in Papyrology series: K. Wilson, *New Epigrams of Palladas: A Fragmentary Papyrus Codex (P.CtYBR inv.4000)*, Ann Arbor 2013.

The online catalogue of the Beinecke Library does not give any detail on the acquisition circumstances of the codex, while the editor of the Palladas codex adds only few details. He explains that the box was purchased from the Gallery Nefer, the Zurich gallery of Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos,⁴ and states (n. 1, p. 1): “There is no discernible coherence to the items that comprise this acquisition, and it is likely they were thrown together, from a variety of sources, by an earlier collector or dealer. The box of fragments was said to have come from a recently (in 1996) deceased collector of Egyptian artifacts who formed the collection in the 1950s and 60s in Geneva.” Now, is the quality and quantity of information given here enough for the audience to

⁴ Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos has been condemned by an Italian court in relation to illicit export of antiquities in 2002 and has been also involved in the Gospel of Judas affair. See “Getty Museum Returns to Italy 2005-2007” published in *Cultural Heritage Resource*, 27 July 2009 (<https://www.stanford.edu/group/chr/drupal/ref/getty-museum-returns-to-italy-2005-2007>); on the Gospel of Judas vicissitudes cf. H. Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington D.C. 2006) and J.M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas. The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and his Gospel* (San Francisco 2007), both to be read with N. Brodie, “The lost, found, lost again and found again Gospel of Judas,” *Culture Without Context. The Newsletter of the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre* 19 (2006) 17-27.

be assured that the acquisition circumstances of the codex and the other pieces was licit, especially when a dealer with a story of legal prosecutions such as Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos is involved?

This case opens also questions about the enforcement of scholarly associations' policies. In fact, the American Studies in Papyrology series is sponsored by the American Society of Papyrologists, the members of which adopted a resolution on the illicit trade of papyri in 2007.⁵ This forbids members of the Society from participating directly and indirectly in the buying or selling of antiquities exported from Egypt after 24 April 1972: in section 2, it also seeks to prevent them from acting in a way to add significant value to objects from illegal excavations or ones exported from Egypt after 1972, and to exclude the publishing of such material under the Society's auspices "unless the author, or curator includes a frank and thorough discussion of the provenance of every item." In the case of the Yale codex, the reader is only given the information that it was purchased in 1996 (i.e. after 1972), with very few and vague details on the acquisition history, which seems at odds with the above-mentioned publishing rules.

Case 2 (slide 15). Efforts to give details on the acquisition circumstances of papyri purchased after 1972 are sometimes made. The Università del Salento, for example, has a Museo Papirologico in Lecce with a collection of more than 350 papyri, purchased from 1990 to 2009 on the antiquities market. The Museum's website reports a detailed description of the nature of the collection, giving even the names of the dealers from whom papyri were acquired: Michael Fackelmann (Vienna), Serop Simonian (Hamburg), Charles Ede (London) and Gian Baldo Baldi (La Spezia). In this case, there is a commendable effort to give information to the public. Nonetheless question marks remain, because direct access to documents with which the papyri probably came to Lecce is not included in any form.

In other words, what seems to emerge from these two cases, and others I came across, is the lack of a firm policy regarding the reliability of the document dossiers that papyri and other antiquities must come with when purchased. Moreover, they are rarely accessible to the public.

⁵ <http://tebtunis.berkeley.edu/ASPresolution.pdf>.

(slide 16) 3. “We’ve never been post-colonial”: Scholars, research and the antiquities market

The cases I have briefly presented here open a wide range of questions. As I have explained at the beginning, one of the points that attracted my attention when the Sappho papyrus was presented to the public was its provenance from mummy cartonnage: the dismantling of mummy masks and panels to retrieve papyri is a vexed question as it implies a judgement on what comes first, texts or artefacts? The later discovery of the so-called “Palmolive Indiana Jones,”⁶ whose enterprises started under Scott Carroll’s direction of the Green Collection, with the assistance of established papyrologists from Baylor and Oxford Universities, and are now continuing in that Collection and elsewhere are a red light inviting us to consider not only the ethical issues at stake but also gaps in current legislation. This last allows owners of antiquities *legally* acquired to dispose of their objects as they wish, even to destroy them as in the case of the above-mentioned “Palmolive Indiana Jones.”⁷

(slide 17) In 2001 the Western world was horrified by the Taliban’s destructions of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, a gesture dictated by religious among other motivations. Western papyrologists, scholars and pseudo-scholars are destroying mummy masks and panels for reasons that are in fact not dissimilar: the Green family, Scott Carroll, and Josh McDowell declare on their websites, through interviews and YouTube videos, that their search for papyri from mummy cartonnage is dictated by the wish to retrieve biblical manuscripts, and through them the word of God **(slide 18-19)** (I have already explained elsewhere⁸ that so far there are no New Testament papyri coming from that source: where does all this focus on mummy cartonnage come from then? Is this just rhetoric? And if so, what kind of reality lies behind it?); University papyrologists collaborating with them are moved sometimes by the same

⁶ Scott Carroll (<http://facesandvoices.wordpress.com/2014/05/02/papyri-retrieved-from-mummy-cartonnage-a-video/>) and the Christian apologist Josh McDowell, who has admitted in public the use of this soap for the dismantling of mummy masks (<http://bricejones.weebly.com/blog/the-first-century-gospel-of-mark-josh-mcdowell-and-mummy-masks-what-they-all-have-in-common> published on 4 May 2014).

⁷ I underline ‘legally’ because in case these antiquities are proved to have been illegally acquired, the legal owners (e.g. the Egyptian government) can bring dealers and collections to court and ask for compensation.

⁸ See <http://facesandvoices.wordpress.com/2014/05/13/new-testament-papyri-from-mummy-cartonnage-accounts-dont-balance/>

desire, and more often by a wider, cultural attitude according to which Sappho, Homer and written culture in general is more valuable than any other material evidence (**slide 20**). They even dare to impose this attitude onto others, since they, like the Taliban, are destroying world heritage patrimony in the name of their own cultural values.⁹

To sum up: We are still acting as though living in the colonial, Victorian past, or to rephrase the title of a famous book of Bruno Latour “we’ve never been post-colonial”, which makes me unhappy, and on so many levels.

⁹ Cf. B. Latour, “What is Iconoclasm, or Is There a World beyond the Image Wars?” in *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (2010, originally published in 2002), on the archaeology of hatred and fanaticism.