

Working on Unprovenanced Coptic Manuscripts

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Abstract

In the last few years, some researchers have expressed concerns about the publication of antiquities whose previous owners cannot be determined—they stress the importance of both the archaeological findspot (“provenience”) and the chain of ownership (“provenance”). The present article focuses on a specific category of antiquities, i.e., Coptic manuscripts, and it addresses the possible implications of the 2022 “IACS Resolution on the Ethical Handling of Cultural Heritage”. Firstly, after defining a few terms and outlining the debate, the article presents the differences between two types of Coptic manuscripts, i.e., literary and documentary. Secondly, it addresses the criteria that allow provenience to be traced back even if the exact findspot is unknown. Thirdly, the article lists the details one can retrieve even without knowing provenience. The article ends with suggestions on how to pursue the debate on the handling of unprovenanced objects.

Keywords: archaeology, codicology, Coptic, Egyptology, ethics, manuscripts

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في السنوات القليلة الماضية، أعرب بعض الباحثين عن مخاوفهم بشأن نشر الآثار التي لا يمكن تحديد المالكين السابقين لها؛ مؤكدين أهمية أمرين: مصدر الأثر؛ أي الموقع الأثري الدقيق حيث تم العثور على الأثر (“provenience”)، وسلسلة الملكية للأثر (“provenance”). تركز هذه المقالة على فئة محددة من الآثار؛ هي المخطوطات القبطية، وتتناول الآثار المحتملة لقرار IACS لعام 2022؛ وهو المتعلق بالتعامل الأخلاقي مع التراث الثقافي. أولاً، بعد تحديد بعض المصطلحات، ووضع إطار عام للجدل المطروح، تعرض المقالة للاختلافات بين نوعين من المخطوطات القبطية: الأدبية والوثائقية. ثانياً، تتناول المقالة المعايير التي تسمح بتتبع مصدر الأثر، حتى لو كان الموقع الدقيق للاكتشاف مجهولاً. ثالثاً، تسرد المقالة التفاصيل التي يمكن للمرء استخلاصها، حتى من دون معرفة مصدر الأثر. وتنتهي المقالة بمقترحات حول كيفية متابعة النقاش حول التعامل مع ما هو غير مثبت على نحو قطعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الآثار، علم المخطوطات، القبطية، علم المصريات، الأخلاق، المخطوطات

1. Introduction

The present article corresponds to about two years of reflections and research on unprovenanced Coptic manuscripts. In 2022, I participated in the twelfth International Congress of Coptic Studies, held at the Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium, and organized by the International Association for Coptic Studies or IACS. At that congress, I attended a session devoted to the consideration of a resolution titled “IACS Resolution on the Ethical Handling of Cultural Heritage” (henceforth referred to as “IACS Resolution”). Among others, the IACS Resolution recommended that scholars avoid publishing

objects “whose provenance cannot be confirmed to be in accordance with law and international conventions” [1]. The idea of refusing to publish certain objects seemed very radical to me, and I feared that a substantial amount of information about ancient Egypt could be lost forever. I continued thinking about this after the July 2022 Congress and the adoption of the IACS Resolution in August 2022. I also spoke on the said issue at several scholarly meetings including the SEAS conference “Materials and Technology: Working with Ancient Egyptian Artefacts in the Field and in Museums”.

An in-depth reassessment of the IACS Resolution, including both its content and the circumstances which enabled its adoption, would certainly be worthwhile, and I do not exclude conducting it in the future. However, that discussion is not appropriate here, as it goes beyond both the purpose of this article and the scope of the SEAS journal (which publishes research on archaeology and science).

Before diving in, I believe it is important to define a few key terms.

2. Definitions

The term *Coptic* originally means “Egyptian” and was given by the Arabs to the inhabitants of Egypt. Nowadays, this term refers either to an ethnic/religious community, the Coptic people, or to a language, Coptic, which is the last stage of ancient Egyptian and was used as a spoken language until the Ottoman era (on the emergence of the Coptic language, see [2]). In this article, the term is primarily used in a linguistic sense, not in a religious or ethnic sense. Unless stated otherwise, the expression “Coptic manuscripts” should be understood as “manuscripts written in Coptic”, not as “manuscripts produced by Copts”, i.e., regardless of language (the Copts also produced manuscripts in Arabic).

The word *manuscript* can be used to refer to any supple writing support—papyrus, parchment, or paper, but not ceramic or stone—on which a text was written by hand.

The term *unprovenienced* requires a much deeper discussion. In fact, it is necessary to define four terms here: *provenance*, *provenience*, *unprovenanced*, and *unprovenienced*. The first two, *provenance* and *provenience*, seem at first glance to be

linked to the idea of “where an object comes from”, and these terms have sometimes been used interchangeably. Here, I will refer to several usages and clarify which one I use in the present article.

Some archaeologists use both *provenance* and *provenience* and give them two different meanings. Neil J. Brodie and Morag M. Kersel [3] distinguish them as follows: “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.” Thus, according to this usage, *provenance* refers to the chain of ownership linked to an antiquity. An example could be as follows:

“Bought by Mr. A on the antiquities market in Egypt in 1902, sold to Mrs. B in London in 1905, donated to Museum C in 1965.”

And here is an example of *provenience* as defined by N. J. Brodie and M. M. Kersel [4]:

“Discovered at the Monastery of Apa X (city of Y), Room Z.”

The *provenance/provenience* distinction is also evoked in an article by N. J. Brodie and Blythe Bowman Proulx [5]. The archaeologist K. Kris Hirst [6] also endorsed it.

Other scholars reacted with skepticism to this distinction. Elizabeth Marlowe [7] noted that the term *provenience* had been understood by many as a variant of *provenance*. Mònica Bouso [8] chose to “always use the term “provenance” to indicate the archaeological context of an object (...).” Lastly, Patty Gerstenblith [9] uses both *provenance* and *provenience* but

states that the latter “is often used to indicate the history of an antiquity back to its archaeological origin.” Thus, her usage differs from that of N. J. Brodie and M. M. Kersel.

Having set forth the problem of inconsistency in the usage of these two terms, I would now like to say which usage I adopt. I especially want to differentiate the one I adopt *for the present article* and the one I think would be better in the long run.

In general, I find it better to use one term for the chain of ownership and another term for the archaeological findspot. Although both are linked, they should not be confused with each other. Some objects which can be found on the antiquities market are confirmed to have been acquired legally, i.e., their provenance as defined by N. J. Brodie and M. M. Kersel is not undocumented, but it does not mean that one knows their exact place of discovery in Egypt. The reverse case, i.e., with the findspot being known but the chain of ownership being obscure, also happens even if it may be rarer. In the late eighteenth century, the cardinal Stefano Borgia started to acquire Coptic manuscripts of unknown origin. Later on, the French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero discovered that they came from the White Monastery in Sohag [10]. Thus, while the chain of ownership is poorly documented, the findspot is known with exactitude.

I agree with E. Marlowe that, should one use *provenance* and *provenience* with two different meanings, there is a major risk of confusion. I should mention two other disadvantages. Firstly, while it is not uncommon for a language to have two very similar words with different meanings (e.g., “meteor” and “meteorite”, “ball” and

“balloon”), the problem is more serious when both words are technical terms whose meaning is generally unknown to outsiders. There is a major risk of specialists being misunderstood. Secondly, I believe that the terminological debate has been very Anglo- and US-centered or, at least, has ignored how scholars using languages other than English would be impacted. Some languages that are still widely used in Egyptological publications, e.g., French and German, have only one equivalent for both *provenance* and *provenience*: the Germans use “Provenienz” and the French “provenance”. Should all other languages be changed to fit with the usage of English-speaking researchers? I am not sure this is realistic. That is why, in the long term, I suggest that one uses words stemming from the Latin verb *provenire* about the chain of ownership and different terms for the archaeological findspot. Thus, one would talk about *provenance* and *origin*, *Provenienz* and *Herkunft*, *provenance* and *origine*, *provenience* and *пъвод*, *провенанс* and *місце походження*, etc.

However, I do not have the pretension to believe that my article can, in and of itself, immediately impose a new usage. For the moment, I will keep using the *provenance/provenience* distinction. The researchers who react to this article will tell which usage they find the best.

Let us move to the two other terms, *unprovenanced* and *unprovenienced*. Intuitively, one can interpret them as indicating a lack of information about, respectively, *provenance* and *provenience*. For the latter, *unprovenienced*, it is not hard to give a definition: “whose findspot is unknown”. The findspot can be known, unknown, or approximately known, e.g., if

one knows the Egyptian nome or district but not the exact city or village.

For *unprovenanced*, the situation is different. Unlike a findspot, a chain of ownership comprises many elements which may or may not be known. The provenance may be known entirely, almost entirely, very partially, or not at all. One should add to this the legal factor: does the provenance imply that the object was acquired in accordance with local laws and international conventions? Besides, there have been attempts to falsify provenance in order to dissimulate the legal status of some objects (e.g., see [11]). Overall, given the sheer number of possible cases, I believe it is wise to use terms with a more specific meaning, i.e., “stolen”, “illegally exported”, or “undocumented” (i.e., whose legality cannot be established by means of relevant documents), rather than the generic “unprovenanced”.

3. Useless Artifacts?

As stated above, I shall not provide here a thorough assessment of the vices and virtues of the IACS Resolution or other resolutions of the same type. However, one may highlight two arguments that have been invoked in favor of such resolutions. In a 2009 article, N. J. Brodie explained: “There are two arguments made against study and publication of unprovenanced artefacts, although both are disputed. The first is that the historical value of an unprovenanced artefact has been lessened by the loss of contextual information caused by the unscientific and unrecorded methods of its excavation. The second is that the academic publication of an unprovenanced artefact provides information and a provenance that might increase its monetary value, thus indirectly

supporting the market and provoking further looking” (quoted from [12]).

In the frame of this article, I shall consider the first argument by taking the example of Coptic manuscripts, the type of Egyptian artifacts I am most familiar with. The question I will ask is: “What would be the consequences of refusing to publish, present, and study *unprovenanced* Coptic manuscripts?” While this question is not the only important one, it is undoubtedly relevant to the debate at hand. If the lack of archaeological context makes unprovenanced Coptic manuscripts almost useless for research, it may be argued that not much is lost by those who refuse to publish them. By contrast, if the information these manuscripts provide is substantial, one may conclude that the refusal to publish them harms research to a degree one can scarcely accept.

4. Literary versus Documentary Manuscripts

In the following, I will present the techniques and means used to retrace the provenience of a manuscript. Then, I will address the details one can obtain even without knowing the provenience. Lastly, I will make a few suggestions. However, I should start by drawing the readers’ attention to a very important distinction.

Within Coptic manuscripts, one usually distinguishes literary manuscripts from documentary manuscripts. The former contain literary works in prose or in poetry. Most of the time, Coptic literary works are religious works, e.g., homilies or martyrdoms (at present, a systematic history of Coptic literature is still wanting; for brief overviews, see [13, 14]). The latter, documentary manuscripts, contain texts

written for a practical purpose, e.g., contracts.

Documentary manuscripts are generally unique artifacts, in the sense that they are produced according to certain codified rules but are not copies of one another. By contrast, in the case of literary manuscripts, each of them belongs to what is usually called a “manuscript tradition”: since all manuscripts degrade after some time, new copies of literary works are regularly made so that they can survive from generation to generation. Thus, a literary work can be preserved thanks to several copies. In practice, though, scholars of Coptic literature are less fortunate than, say, scholars of Latin or Greek literature. Many Coptic works are known thanks to only one manuscript, and some of them are only incompletely preserved. This includes major works and even parts of the Coptic Bible, e.g., the Book of Ecclesiastes (see [15]). As a result, the discovery of new Coptic literary manuscripts can result in significant breakthroughs.

5. Criteria to Determine Provenience

Even when the exact provenience of a manuscript is unknown, the area of origin can often be surmised. Provenience is not the same as dating: some technologies or criteria inform us about the age of a manuscript but not about its origin (e.g., C14 or paleography). However, knowledge about the dating is relevant for determining the provenience, insofar as some monastic sites were only active at a certain era (for more details about paleography and other dating criteria, see [16]).

One of the decisive criteria for assessing provenience is the dialect. Traditionally, Coptologists used to distinguish between

five or six dialects. Walter E. Crum’s dictionary [17] distinguishes between Sahidic (S), Bohairic (B), Fayyumic (F), Akhmimic (A), and what was then called Subakhmimic (A²) but is now generally known as Lycopolitan (L). A sixth dialect, Mesokemic (M), was subsequently described and characterized by Paul E. Kahle ([18]; on this dialect, see [19]).

Nowadays, specialists of Coptic dialects tend to adhere to what may be described as the “Kasser-Funk” consensus (see e.g., [20, 21, 22]). This consensus offers a much more subtle and hierarchized view of Coptic dialects, with three major dialectal regions (southern, middle, and northern) being recognized along with the six dialects or dialectal groups, as well as many subdialects or varieties (e.g., F4 or F5). In this article, in order not to confuse the uninitiated reader, I shall stick to the six dialects mentioned above.

Sahidic and Bohairic are the two main; they were used, respectively, in Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. The other dialectal groups are associated with more specific geographical areas: Fayyumic with the Fayyum, Mesokemic with the Oxyrhynchus area, and Akhmimic and Lycopolitan with the southernmost part of Egypt.

Codicology is also an important factor, as each scriptorium had its own scribal habits and practices. The scriptorium of Touton (in the Fayyum) produced manuscripts whose features are quite recognizable (see [23]; see also [24]). Very recently, the German Coptologist Theresa Kohl was able to confirm, thanks to codicological features, that a fragment she intended to publish came from Touton [25].

In some cases, it is even possible to identify the scribe who copied the manuscript (see [26]).

Last but not least, the content of the text can provide relevant information. In 2017, a special issue of the *Journal of Coptic Studies* (“Coptica Barcinonensia”) featured literary and documentary papyri which had been examined at the 2014 *International Seminar in Coptic Papyrology* (in Barcelona). One of these papyri is a document written partly in Greek and partly in Coptic. It provides a list of persons followed each by an amount of money. One of the persons mentioned is George, a carpenter, from the Great Reed Bed. The Great Reed Bed was a toponym not far from the monastery of Bawit, and therefore, it is clear that the papyrus comes from the Bawit area (see [27]).

Regarding dialect, codicology, and content, the first anonymous reviewer raised an interesting question: can these criteria be faked? In theory, they can. In practice, though, the forger would have to pay attention to many criteria at the same time—perhaps so many that only a few specialists, mastering all relevant areas of Coptology, might conceivably create an undetectable forgery. But even if such forgery could be created, is it likely to be?

The author of a “perfect forgery” would be a very competent scholar; since these individuals are rare (because Coptologists in general are rare), the risk of being caught is great enough to be dissuasive. In addition, the forgery would need to bring something which authentic papyri or parchments do not: scholars wanting to advance their careers can succeed much faster by publishing authentic manuscripts than by producing forgeries similar to true items. Thus, the forgery would

exist for nonscholarly reasons, e.g., egocentrism or the promotion of a personal agenda. This could happen, e.g., if an unscrupulous scholar produces a fragment which could be seen as radically changing our view of early Christianity.

However, any such forgery would be met with careful attention from other specialists. With the implications being enormous, a higher level of evidence would be demanded, making the forgery easier to spot. For instance, some would carefully compare the forgery with other artifacts of the same type (see, e.g., [28]). In conclusion, while I do not regard “realistic” forgeries as impossible, I do not believe that they are likely to emerge. (a) Forgeries made by incompetent forgers are easily detected. (b) Realistic forgeries would have a reason to exist, i.e., they would have to be potentially groundbreaking in at least one regard, and the considerable attention surrounding them would make their detection very likely, perhaps even inevitable. (c) Realistic but boring forgeries can be created but, given the amount of unpublished Coptic manuscripts, they do not really have a reason to exist.

6. Benefits of Studying Unprovenanced Coptic Manuscripts

One may now turn to the next question: what are the benefits of studying unprovenanced Coptic manuscripts, including those that are more or less completely unprovenanced?

Let us start with the documents. By studying hundreds of documents of the same type, one can retrieve much information, even without knowledge of the provenance. One can learn about the dating systems in Late Antique Egypt, the language

of legal documents (see, e.g., [29]), and the legal system in general. As for the economy, one can estimate wheat prices and how they changed over time, which may indicate when food shortages, famines, and epidemics took place (see [30]). When it comes to social history, the letters that Egyptians wrote to officials or to their close relatives allow us to answer countless research questions.

Religious history also benefits from such documents. For instance, by assessing the percentage of Christian names in documentary texts, one can better understand how quickly Christianity became the majority religion in Egypt.

One may also mention education and literacy: some documents indicate that a person wrote for another person who was unable to write. The frequency of such mentions is relevant for estimating the degree of literacy among Egyptians or at least within certain segments of the population, e.g., the Egyptian monks. Additionally, school exercises can tell us how the monks learned to read and write (for a concise and recent overview of monastic literacy and education, see [31]).

Lastly, documents that are unprovenanced but datable can tell us how the usage of the Coptic language evolved over time. According to Jean-Luc Fournet, before 550, the only documents written in Coptic are accounts and private letters, that is, documents without any legal value (see [32]).

When it comes to literary manuscripts, it goes without saying that there is no history of Coptic literature without a sufficient number of manuscripts. Even without knowing where literary manuscripts were copied, one can learn much about the literary genres, the style, and the rhetorical

strategies that were most favored by Coptic writers.

Now that I have discussed these advantages, I am tempted to ask whether the proponents of the IACS Resolution are prepared to forego these benefits. I shall give a very concrete example.

Among literary manuscripts, it must be said that manuscripts of the Coptic Bible have a very special status. For the Coptic community, no book or literary corpus is more important than the Coptic Bible. As noted above, some biblical books, e.g., Ecclesiastes, are only partially preserved in Coptic. Suppose that you are a specialist of Coptic manuscripts and that a complete manuscript of Ecclesiastes in Sahidic Coptic unexpectedly becomes available to you. This manuscript contains passages that may not have been preserved anywhere else. You have a chance to take photographs of all pages, transcribe and translate the manuscript, and eventually publish it. Last but not least, there is no need to give money to anyone. Granted, you might have some reluctance insofar as you do not know with certainty how or when the manuscript was acquired. However, should you go so far as to refuse to work on it? If you do so, you have to accept the risk that some passages of the Coptic Bible will be lost forever. Can you live with that?

7. Conclusion: A Few Suggestions

While I do not support the IACS Resolution, I believe the arguments of its proponents should be heard and debated on the basis of their merits. The discussion will likely continue in the coming years and perhaps into the coming decades, and not all colleagues who admit the benefits of

studying undocumented objects will automatically reject the IACS Resolution. Malcolm Choat, who favored the IACS Resolution, wrote nonetheless: “Unprovenanced artefacts (...) can sometimes provide valuable information about the ancient world. The discourse that they tell us nothing, which has escaped from academic thought bubbles into popular culture, is both false and unfortunate” (quoted from [33]).

To conclude this article, I would like to make a few suggestions about how to address this issue.

Suggestion 1: Precise language matters. The more accurate the terms we use, the better we predict the implications of the proposals we approve or disapprove. The terms *provenance*, *provenience*, *unprovenanced*, and *unprovenienced* are an obvious example.

Suggestion 2: Agreements often start with the easiest steps. In future debates, Coptologists of all tendencies may find it useful to start by finding points of agreement. This is vital for establishing mutual trust and, then, facilitating negotiations on the most difficult topics. They may soon realize that, in spite of their differences, researchers tend to agree on the most important topics, e.g., the need to preserve ancient artifacts and to counteract criminal activities.

Of course, while I find it better to be benevolent and assume good faith until proven otherwise, one cannot reach an agreement with everyone, and sometimes one simply should not try. At the end of her book *Stolen Fragments*, Roberta Maza makes unrestrained declarations about scholars who publish undocumented artifacts: “I do regret that our taxes and stu-

dents’ fees pay your salaries. Your sense of entitlement is remarkable: but one day, which I hope will come soon, you will be held accountable for your actions” [34]. Obviously, it is futile to negotiate with anyone having this mindset.

Suggestion 3: Understand causality. Many readers of the present journal are natural scientists and know how hard it is to establish a cause-effect relationship beyond reasonable doubt. Sometimes, a researcher’s intuition may suggest that A causes B, but this does not mean that the causality is certain. Before adopting a measure and especially before forbidding something that is perceived as harmful, I think it is very important to assess the evidence and provide grounds for believing that it is harmful.

One example: the second argument quoted by N. J. Brodie and invoked against the publication of undocumented objects is that publication may increase market prices and, therefore, fuel the illegal trafficking of such objects (see Section 3). However, how strong is the evidence? N. J. Brodie [35] wrote that, with respect to manuscripts, price formation may largely depend on prepublication expertise and identification, whereas “subsequent publication of unprovenanced material in the academic literature may have little further effect on price and thus the trade.” For its part, the 2006 statement of the Biblical Archaeology Society claims in its paragraph 6: “The opposition to the publication of unprovenanced antiquities is supposedly based on the view that their publication encourages looting. Yet it is almost universally recognized that this prohibition on publication has had little or no effect on looting” (quoted from [36]). I believe it is worth conducting serious studies to settle this issue. Invoking

anecdotal evidence, e.g., one, two, or three objects whose price soared after publication (as does R. Mazza, see [37]), is insufficient and unscientific, as these objects may not be representative of undocumented artifacts in general.

Suggestion 4: Ask whether your colleagues will be adversely affected. In particular, Coptologists working in one area should always ask themselves whether the adoption of a measure will adversely affect colleagues in *another area* of Coptology. If some colleagues, say, specialists of Coptic textiles, work on artifacts that are without known provenance in 90% of cases, should they be deprived of most of their research material?

According to James Cuno [38], reservations about scholars publishing undocumented antiquities, or museums acquiring such antiquities, have primarily come from archaeologists. It may be that they are especially aware of the archaeologists' problems, e.g., the relationship between objects and their archaeological findspot, but do not necessarily grasp the importance of such objects for other scholars. For instance, how many archaeologists can list the potential benefits of studying unprovenanced Coptic manuscripts?

Suggestion 5: Consider the problem as a whole. The illegal trafficking of antiquities is what social scientists usually call a wicked problem: one can combat it, mitigate it, but never end it once and for all; corruption and, more generally, crime are other examples of "wicked problems". To address such problems, one has to consider many solutions and ask for each of them: does the end justify the means? We all agree that crime should be reduced as much as possible, but it does not mean

that all measures to reduce crime are warranted. The same applies to the looting of antiquities.

Suggestion 6: Know your motives and your colleagues' too. While this may seem obvious, I encourage all researchers to question their own motivations. If a scholar wants to publish a manuscript in order to bring new knowledge, that is a legitimate reason. If the main goal is to add a line to a CV, think about it twice: the motivations and the inner drive generally impact the quality of publications.

I also encourage this journal's readers to reflect upon the motivations of those who argue for or against the publication of some objects. More specifically, I encourage everyone to see human nature as it is: in the world of research, like in most spheres of human activity, one meets people who are benevolent, hard-working, and driven by passion and are willing to make great personal sacrifices for the common good. Others, who do not have the same selflessness, care a great deal about their reputation and the power they can exert over others, hence, the risk that they manipulate just causes in their favor. A recent book by Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke [39] explores the social and moral implications of *grandstanding*, i.e., the adoption of a moral stance not because of its merits but so that it may give a good image of the person who defends it.

Do I extrapolate without evidence? I do not think so. In the case of policies adopted by the Archaeological Institute of America, this motivation was clearly acknowledged by Naomi Norman, the Editor-in-Chief of the *American Journal of Archaeology*: "It is equally clear that neither the editors of the *Journal* (...) nor the

members of the AIA Council in 1970 or 1973 (...) believed that they would bring an end to the problem. Nevertheless, the resolutions and the publication policy do cast a bright spotlight on the problem and *take an unequivocal stand* against the illegal export and exchange of ancient artifacts and the destruction of the archaeological record that such trade causes” (quoted from [40], emphasis added). Thus, “taking a stand” played a major role—but how courageous is it to take a stand against criminals?

Perhaps most people have been tempted to grandstand at some time or another. Unfortunately, what is good for the image of a researcher or group of researchers is not always good for research in general.

Conflicts of Interest

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