

Cylinder Seal Sales at Sotheby's and Christie's (1985–2013)

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Abstract

In 2003, the major auction houses ended sales of unprovenanced cylinder seals and cuneiform tablets, a move that at the time was interpreted as being in response to public anger over the looting of Iraqi museums and archaeological sites, and the associated restrictions placed on trade by UNSCR 1483. Ten years on from those events, these original conclusions do not appear so secure, though they cannot be discounted. This article will look at five analyses to examine those conclusions, and demonstrate that there is a relationship between auction sales and their wider material and commercial contexts, but it is not a straightforward one.

Keywords: cylinder seals, Christie's, Sotheby's, provenance, auction houses

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In 2006, one of the present authors published a paper showing that the London auction houses of Christie's and Bonhams had stopped selling unprovenanced cylinder seals soon after the 2003 Coalition invasion of Iraq (Brodie 2006: 215-217). He later demonstrated that Sotheby's New York had done likewise and that the apparent ending of sales extended to include cuneiform tablets (Brodie 2008: 64-66). The timing of these sales endings suggested they had been made in response to the invasion of Iraq, which had precipitated the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad and archaeological sites throughout the country. There was at the time extensive critical media coverage of this looting and of the associated trafficking of Iraqi antiquities and other cultural objects. In May 2003, Article 7 of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1483 reaffirmed trade sanctions on Iraqi cultural objects first imposed by UNSCR 661 in August 1990 after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. So the sudden disappearance of unprovenanced cylinder seals and cuneiform tablets from auction sales was easily understood as reflecting a conscious decision by auction houses to stop selling material from Iraq, perhaps motivated by a desire to guard their reputations against negative publicity, or even to protect themselves from any possibility of legal action under UNSCR 1483 should any Iraqi object offered for sale be shown to have been looted.

This expression of auction house policy intervention was unexpected. The conjecture prompting the analyses published in 2006 had been that the active looting of archaeological sites in Iraq should result in more material from Iraq entering the market, which should in turn cause more to be sold at auction. Thus auction sales could be taken as passive and proxy measures of the severity of looting and trafficking. Cylinder seals were chosen as a marker artifact for Iraq to test the hypothesis, but the results of the analyses were equivocal (Brodie 2006: 216-218). There was some suggestion of increased numbers being offered for sale, but nothing conclusive. Once the results were in, however, the observation that auction houses might be actively reacting to public disapproval or hardening laws was interesting as it suggested a different diagnostic applicability for long-term auction sales data. It suggested that auction sales might be used to measure the impact or effectiveness of different strategies or mechanisms of regulatory control.

By 2014, it was clear that some auction houses had resumed accepting consignments of cylinder seals and offering them for sale. By that time, a better understanding of auction house business practices was also beginning to cast doubt on the conclusion drawn in 2006 that the auction houses had stopped cylinder seal sales in response to negative media reporting and more stringent legislation. If that conclusion was indeed mistaken, it would also call into question the idea that auction sales might be used to measure the impact and effectiveness of statutory or other strategies aimed at regulatory control. Thus after some discussion, the authors decided the time was right

to revisit the subject, extending data analysis through to the end of 2013, and introducing a graded system of measuring provenance.

Methodology

Two data sets were collected for analysis: the total number of lots and the total number of cylinder seal lots offered annually at the London antiquities sales of Christie's and the New York antiquities sales of Sotheby's, both from 1985 to 2013, together with associated information about provenance and price. The basic unit of analysis was the auction lot. Lots comprising books, paintings and Islamic antiquities were not counted. For cylinder seals, most lots comprised a single cylinder seal, though some comprised two or more. An occasional lot mixed cylinder seals in with other types of object. Such lots were counted as "cylinder seal" lots if the first object mentioned in the catalogue listing was a cylinder seal, or if the majority of objects in the lot were cylinder seals. The number of lots offered each year and the prices of sold lots were tabulated and summed as annual totals for both antiquities and cylinder seals. Two different measures of average price were used. The first was the straightforward annual median price for all sold lots, providing an estimate of market value. The second measure was annual mean price per lot offered (and not, as would be more usual, mean price per lot sold). This second measure was intentionally designed to assess profitability for the auction house of sales by including the cost of lots that failed to sell.

The data were subject to five separate analyses. First, changes in the volume and profitability of antiquities sales at the two auction houses were examined to provide a broad commercial context for the following analyses of cylinder seal sales. Second and third, for each auction house in turn, starting with Sotheby's, changes through time in the volume, profitability and provenances of cylinder seal sales were examined, and discussed in relation to the broader commercial context previously established. Next, as something of a digression, the data sets were used to consider the relationship between provenance and price, which is sometimes seen to be an expression of market autoregulation (Brodie 2014). Finally, the number and provenance of Syrian cylinder seal lots offered for sale was examined to consider whether any conclusions might be drawn about the market in relation to the looting occurring in Syria.

Provenance

Provenances provided in auction catalogues are always incomplete. They hardly ever provide a full accounting of the ownership and sales history of an object from the circumstances of its initial discovery to the occasion of its auction. Most often, they provide only a single date. Less often, they provide

one or two references, at best, to previous owners. The purpose of this incomplete provenance information is to establish a date by which an object was out of its country of origin, so that the legal and ethical propriety of its sale can be assessed, or to show off a particularly noteworthy past owner. So when provenance is discussed here, or when objects are described as “provenanced,” it should be understood the provenance in question is incomplete and usually minimal.

Each lot was allocated to one of four provenance classes, with discriminating date thresholds decided by changes in international law. The provenance classes adopted were as follows:

Up to 1969 (pre-1970). Lots demonstrably out of their country of origin before the 1970 date of the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which increasingly is being used by museums and museum organizations as a threshold for acceptable acquisition.

1970-1989. Lots demonstrably out of their country of origin between the 1970 date of the UNESCO Convention and the 1990 date of UNSCR 661, which first imposed trade sanctions on Iraqi cultural objects.

1990 onwards (post-1989). Lots demonstrably out of their country of origin after the 1990 date of UNSCR 661.

Nothing. Lots with no provenance.

The cylinder seal analyses published in 2006 and 2008 had used a simple measure of provenance. Any indication of previous ownership, even just a date, was enough to describe a seal as provenanced. Unprovenanced seals were those with no indication whatsoever. For the purposes of the present study, however, a more robust methodology was required, and provenance was assessed as verifiable provenance. “Verifiable provenance” means that the earliest date of provenance of a lot was determined either from the conjunction of a previous owner’s name and date of ownership, or from a publication date. In theory, this information would provide a potential customer with the wherewithal to verify independently the facts being offered about provenance, something that would not be possible with some of the more common but limited “provenance” descriptions to be found in auction catalogues, such as “property of a gentleman.” Nevertheless, verification is not always easy. The Surena Collection of cylinder seals, for example, offered for sale at Christie’s New York in June 2001, though not included in the main statistical analyses presented here, is a case in point. The introductory text for the catalogue stated that the collection had been assembled over the preceding 30 years and had incorporated seals from the well-

known Erlenmeyer and Marcopoli collections. But of the 144 lots offered for sale in the catalogue, only 16 had an individual verifiable provenance, and all 16 had been bought at auction during the 1990s. Of those 16 lots, only two (lots 426 and 498) were further attributed to the Erlenmeyer Collection, and one (lot 471) to the Marcopoli Collection. Thus although the easily verifiable dates of previous auctions would have placed most of the Surena seals in the post-1989 provenance class, the introductory text gave the entire collection a verifiable provenance of 1970-1989, albeit a provenance that was nevertheless difficult to verify. An investigation conducted by US customs into the provenance of the Surena seals at the time of their import into the USA for the Christie’s sale, for example, was unable to determine any date of export from Iraq. Thus, even leaving aside the problem of falsified provenances, the concept of “verifiable provenance” might understandably be regarded as problematical, and perhaps even disingenuous, suggesting a reliability which is, in truth, questionable.

There are two justifications for using “verifiable provenance” as a measure of provenance. The first is that it enables statistical analyses of the type presented here. If the more robust concept of “published provenance” had been used, the small number of lots accompanied by a published provenance would have prevented any meaningful breakdown of the data into different provenance classes. The second justification is that it introduces the “benefit of doubt,” in that given the context of enquiry, concerned with illegal and possibly criminal conduct, the acceptance of “verifiable provenance” as a true statement of provenance when it might on occasion be false is likely to miss evidence of fraudulent malpractice rather than to impute such action in error. In effect, it produces false negatives rather than false positives. Thus any conclusions about practice or malpractice drawn from the study of verifiable provenances should be considered reliable.

Syrian Cylinder Seals

The analyses published in 2006 and 2008 had used cylinder seals as marker artifacts for Iraq, understanding that not all cylinder seals appearing on the market would have been found in Iraq, but reasoning nonetheless that the majority would have been. No effort was made, for example, to exclude what were described as “Syrian” seals from analysis. By 2014, however, it was deemed possible that auction houses might have continued to sell demonstrably Syrian seals to the exclusion of Iraqi seals. It was also the case that since 2011 Syrian archaeological sites were being looted with a destructive intensity not seen since Iraq ten years earlier. Thus it seemed necessary for analytical purposes to distinguish between Syrian seals and other seals, still believed most likely to have been found in Iraq. But more than that, the Syrian seals themselves had potential utility as marker artifacts for Syria, for use investigating the same set

of questions relating to market volume and regulatory control that had prompted the original and repeat analyses with regard to Iraq.

Neither of the present authors can assess cylinder seals stylistically or assign them to the correct cultural or geographical milieu of their production. The authors were dependent for stylistic identifications upon the presence and reliability of descriptions offered in auction catalogues. Although cylinder seals are mainly found within the area of modern Iraq, the region that roughly corresponds to the modern country of Syria produced distinctive styles of cylinder seal from the early second millennium BC onwards. These so-called Syrian cylinder seals display local iconographies incorporating Egyptian, Anatolian and Aegean imagery and stylistic features. They exhibit regional distinctions, and are also differentiated chronologically, into "Old Syrian" and "Classic Syrian" (with further period sub-divisions). Cylinder seals described as Syrian have regularly been offered for sale by both Christie's in London and Sotheby's in New York. In their catalogues, seals identified as Syrian are almost exclusively described only as "Syrian," without a chronological marker. The absence of a chronological marker suggests that the term "Syrian" in the catalogues is used more as a geographical than cultural identifier. Seals of other cultural styles found in the area that corresponds to modern Syria are also offered for sale. The Mitanni empire, for example, which controlled parts of what is now Syria from the early sixteenth to the mid-fourteenth century BC, produced seals that are divided stylistically into "Mitannian" and "Syro-Mitannian;" where these appeared in sales catalogues, they were tabulated as Syrian. The catalogue descriptions of cylinder seals are often focused on the physical appearance of the object: they are frequently described only as "cylinder seals," with a description of the materials used and the scene depicted, but without any indication of the geographical origin, age or stylistic attributes of the object. It is therefore possible that some seals listed simply as "cylinder seals" are in fact "Syrian cylinder seals" and could be identified as such by experts. They could not be recognized as Syrian by the present authors, however, and so the statistics presented might underrepresent the presence of Syrian seals.

Analysis One: Auction House Antiquities Sales

Auction houses are in business to make a profit, and must balance many considerations when choosing what consignments to accept and offer for auction. A primary consideration is likelihood of sale. An auction house devotes time and resources to the presentation of every lot offered for sale, and takes its profit by charging a buyer's premium and seller's commission on every lot sold. Thus if a lot fails to sell, it represents a real loss for the auction house, because the costs associated with the lot's presentation and auction are not recovered. Then there is the issue of time. The time

available for an auction is limited, and restricts the number of lots able to be auctioned. The physical and human limitations of the auction house mean that sales cannot increase in size indefinitely to accommodate increasing quantities of material. Ideally, in such circumstances, an auction house would maximize profit by selling as many high-quality, high-value objects as possible in the limited time available. But there are also countervailing considerations. Supply and demand, as realized through the number and financial wherewithal and taste of buyers and sellers, must also be taken into account. The availability of expensive objects is dependent upon the existence of sellers willing to part with them. Furthermore, it is pointless offering expensive objects of a type no one is willing or able to purchase. Sometimes an auction house may be forced to accept poorer quality material from a long established consignor in order to keep business, or as part of a larger consignment of more expensive objects. Thus an auction house is an active commercial agent. What ultimately appears for auction is the outcome of several decisions made in view of likely market conditions aimed at maximizing sales revenue while minimizing costs.

Consider, for example, a hypothetical (or maybe not so hypothetical) situation whereby the quantity of cylinder seals reaching the market is increasing because of the growing incidence of looting at source. If the cylinder seals are selling well, and for a good price, an auction house might decide to accept more cylinder seals for sale. But if the increased supply is driving down desirability and price, an auction house might be more selective, choosing to accept only the better quality and thus more expensive seals. And the cylinder seals do not exist in a material vacuum. Similar decisions will need to be made about other categories of object that might be sold in the same auction. In the limited time available, for example, would it be more profitable for the auction house to sell a lot of cylinder seals or a lot of Greek vases? What are their relative availabilities? Which one would be the most likely to sell, and which would command the higher price? Thus any attempt such as the present one to derive meaning from the auction sales of a single type of object must pay close attention to the material contexts of the market in which the sales took place, and the commercial response of the auction house concerned to those contexts.

The original analyses of cylinder seal sales in 2006 took no account of their broader material and commercial contexts, concluding, perhaps naively, that the ending of cylinder seal sales was in direct response to the very obvious damage being caused by the well-documented theft and looting of archaeological sites inside Iraq. Perhaps that conclusion was at the time and continues to be the correct one, but a nagging doubt persists that other considerations were playing a larger role than previously suspected. For Sotheby's in particular, it is known that since 2002 the company has endeavored

successfully to move upmarket across all categories by selling fewer but better quality and thus more expensive objects (Thompson 2008: 100). This commercial strategy is evident in the antiquities sales data. Figure 1 shows how the number of lots offered annually in antiquities sales by Sotheby's New York started to decline perhaps as early as 1999. While it was common during the 1990s for Sotheby's to offer something between 600 and 900 lots annually, by the 2010s that number was down to between 100 and 200 lots. At the same time, the mean price per lot offered was increasing.³ Sotheby's was moving closer to the ideal model of small sales of expensive objects. Figure 2 presents the equivalent data for Christie's London. There is some suggestion of declining numbers and rising prices, but not so marked as for Sotheby's. So through the 1990s, Christie's was offering between 600 to 900 lots annually, whereas by the 2010s, the number was down to between 300 and 700 lots. Still, the number of lots being offered by Christie's in 2012 and 2013 was more than double that being offered by Sotheby's. Figure 3 shows that when Christie's prices are converted to US dollars, there has been a real separation from Sotheby's in terms of mean price and thus profitability per lot offered since the early 2000s, and by the 2010s Sotheby's was clearly the market leader in terms of quality and price. These data provide a basic commercial context for the cylinder seals analyses that follow. Any interpretation of the cylinder seals data must be made with respect to this commercial context.

Analysis Two: Cylinder Seal Sales at Sotheby's New York

Figure 4 shows the number of cylinder seal lots offered annually at Sotheby's New York from 1985 to 2013, and the mean price per lot offered. Sotheby's offered no cylinder seals in 2003, one lot in 2004,⁴ and then nothing up to the end of 2013. Given the frequent presence of seals in sales before 2003, Sotheby's does seem to have decided in 2003 to stop accepting consignments of cylinder seals, and adhered to that decision at least until the end of 2013. From what is known of the company's developing business model, however, it is premature to attribute that decision to concerns about looting and trafficking. After 2003, Sotheby's move upmarket began

to gather pace with increasingly smaller sales of higher-quality and more expensive objects. Figure 5 shows how the profitability of cylinder seal sales when compared to that of overall sales began to decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It would have made good financial sense for Sotheby's in the mid-2000s to stop accepting consignments of cylinder seals and to focus instead on more profitable types of material.

Support for this suggestion is forthcoming from the provenance statistics. Figure 6 shows the provenance of lots offered at Sotheby's from 1985 through to the end of 2013. The pre-1970 provenances of the 1991 sale of the Ada Small Moore Collection and the 1998 sales of the Erlenmeyer Collection stand out,⁵ and other lots with a pre-1970 provenance were also offered. These data show that there is no shortage of seals in circulation with a pre-1970 provenance. There would seem to be no legal or ethical obstacles preventing Sotheby's from accepting consignments of such well-provenanced material, but it has not been happening. The fact that it has not been happening supports the idea that Sotheby's decision to stop selling cylinder seals was not necessarily or primarily related to issues of looting and trafficking, but had more to do with the company's move upmarket and the poor profitability of cylinder seals when compared to other types of material.⁶

Analysis Three: Cylinder Seal Sales at Christie's London

Figure 7 shows the number of cylinder seal lots offered annually at Christie's, from 1985 to 2013, and the mean price per lot offered. It is immediately apparent that the pattern is more confused than the one for Sotheby's. Although the number of lots offered dropped off sharply after 2003 and remained low through to 2008, from 2009 onwards, consignments of cylinder seals were regularly accepted by Christie's and in gradually increasing numbers. Figure 5 shows that the relative profitability of cylinder seal lots never dropped as low for Christie's as it did for Sotheby's. From 1997 to 2002, when it was in the range 6-35 percent for Sotheby's, it was 4-75 percent for Christie's.

Figure 8 shows the provenance information provided for lots offered at Christie's from 1980 to 2014. Clearly, the number of lots being offered with no verifiable provenance dropped sharply after 2008 (see also Table 1), indicating a greater concern on the part of Christie's to relay information

3 The 2007 price "spike" is due to the sale on 7 June of a Late Hellenistic/Early Roman Imperial bronze statue of Artemis and the Stag for 28,600,000 USD (lot 41) and on 5 December of the Elamite "Guennol Lioness" for 57,161,000 USD. The 2010 price "spike" is due to the sale on 7 December of a Roman Imperial bust of Antinous for 23,826,500 USD.

4 The single lot in 2004, of eight seals with a post-1989 provenance, was from the Charles Pankow Collection. The major part of the Charles Pankow collection comprised Egyptian antiquities and was sold at Sotheby's as a single owner sale the day before the cylinder seals, with 158 out of 163 lots selling for a total 6,961,290 USD, or a mean price per lot offered of 42,707 USD. Thus the consignment of seals may have been accepted as part of the larger and highly profitable agreement to sell the Egyptian material. It is a good example of how an auction house might agree to sell what appear to be poorer quality or lower priced lots as part of a larger and more profitable consignment.

5 The Ada Small Moore collection of cylinder seals was well known, having been assembled in the early twentieth century, on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for 35 years, and mostly published in 1940. The Erlenmeyer Collection was also well known though less well published, and said in the catalogue to have been assembled in the 1960s.

6 It is possible to speculate that the failure of cylinder seals to keep up in price was due to increased quantities appearing on the market due to the upsurge of looting in Iraq, but that cannot be confirmed from the data at hand.

about ownership histories⁷. Most of the lots offered after 2008 (37 out of 55) were offered with a provenance dating back to between 1970 and 1989. Only one lot was offered with a post-1989 provenance⁸, and nine were offered with no provenance. On the face of it, that might suggest that Christie's was trying to restrict sales to material shown to have been outside Iraq by the 1990 date of UNSCR 661, but a closer look shows that 27 out of the 37 lots with a provenance dating back to between 1970 and 1989 were from the Surena Collection. The predominance of seals from a single consignor might have biased the data. The provenance of the Surena Collection and difficulties with its verification have already been discussed in relation to the 2001 sale at Christie's New York. None of the lots sold at Christie's London had been offered in the 2001 Christie's New York sale.

By 2015, it was known publicly that Christie's was using different date thresholds for what it considered to be acceptable provenance when accepting antiquities consignments, depending upon the likely country of origin of the antiquity being consigned. Before accepting an object for sale, Christie's required documentary evidence that it was out of its country of origin before a specified date. The date was that of a Memorandum of Understanding with the USA, agreed under the 1983 Cultural Property Implementation Act⁹, the start of a conflict, or 2000, whichever was most appropriate (Cobden 2016). This implies that Christie's did not recognize other relevant laws or international conventions, such as for example UNSCR 661 or 1483, or the 1970 date of the UNESCO Convention. The provenances of cylinder seal lots offered since 2008 seem to be broadly in accord with this policy. Remembering that the definition of provenance being used here is verifiable provenance, of the eight sold lots recorded as unprovenanced, seven had dates only placing them in European collections in the 1970s and 1980s, with no names were provided. If those dates were all true, then all but one of the lots (sold in 2009) would have left Iraq before the 1991 date of the Gulf War. So if a decision to stop selling cylinder seals and other objects of Iraqi origin had been made in 2003, it looks to have been modified by 2008, perhaps because it was about that time the policy relating to acceptable provenance that was known publicly by 2015 was first introduced. Thus if Christie's did stop selling cylinder seals in 2003 because of concerns about looting in Iraq, or at least concern about negative publicity and legal intimidation,

the bar was short-lived. It remains possible, however, that the events of 2003 occasioned deeper reflection within Christie's about the hazards of offering unprovenanced objects for sale, nourishing internal dialogue about what an appropriate policy might look like, and shaping what was ultimately implemented at an unknown date and subsequently revealed in 2015.

Analysis Four: Provenance and Price

It is sometimes claimed that price responds positively to a provenance that reaches back a long time, and particularly one that stretches back to before the 1970 date of the UNESCO Convention. The data presented in Table 1 seem to confirm the claim. The median price of all lots sold at Christie's during the period 2008 to 2013 is highest for those with a provenance that can be traced back to before 1970, and lowest for those with no provenance. This ranking is in line with observations made by Hanson (2011: 124) about the price differential of provenanced and unprovenanced cylinder seals offered for sale on-line. Various reasons have been suggested as to why a long provenance should provide a price premium (Brodie 2014). One is that a long provenance assures legitimacy, particularly one stretching back to before 1970 that renders an object acceptable for museum acquisition, so that customer preference will force the market to respond positively with higher prices – a process of autoregulation. A second possible reason is that a long provenance might act as a “quality filter,” in that only good quality objects are likely to have been kept and collected over a prolonged period of time, and are therefore worth more when they come to auction. A third possibility is that the provenance itself might be of value, in that an object provides material association with the prestige or historical interest of an earlier owner. Looking more closely at the eight lots sold with a pre-1970 provenance, four had a provenance that could be traced back to 1896 as part of the Charterhouse Collection,¹⁰ while the remaining four had provenances dating back only as far as the 1960s. The median price of the four Charterhouse lots was 7,219 GBP, while the median price of the remaining four lots was 1,317 GBP, lower than that of the eight sold lots with no provenance. In this case at least, it looks to be the prestige of the Charterhouse name itself that was pushing up prices, not concern over the 1970 date threshold that would signal acceptability as a museum acquisition.

Table 1. Provenance and price of cylinder seal lots offered and sold at Christie's London since 2008. (All prices in GBP, standardized to 2005 value).

7 More research will be necessary to determine whether this increase in provenance information was specific to cylinder seals and perhaps other objects of suspected Iraqi origin, or whether it was general for all types of object.

8 April 2009, lot 102, with a verifiable provenance of 2004, but with 1999 offered as a date of previous ownership though without an owner's name.

9 For sales in New York. It is not known whether the date of a memorandum of understanding was considered significant for sales in London.

10 The Charterhouse Collection of antiquities belonged to Charterhouse, a long-established English school. It was sold at Sotheby's London in 2002.

<i>Provenance</i>	<i>Lots offered</i>	<i>Lots sold</i>	<i>Percentage lots sold</i>	<i>Median price</i>
Up to 1969	8	8	100	4,091
1970-1989	37	32	86	2,981
1990 onwards	1	1		
Nothing	9	8	89	1,538

It is also informative to look at the sales statistics for three large collections of cylinder seals sold during the study period: the 1991 Sotheby's New York sale of the Ada Small Moore Collection, the 1998 Sotheby's New York sales of the Erlenmeyer Collection, and the 2001 Christie's New York sale of the Surena Collection (Table 2). As expected, the Ada Small Moore Collection, with its well-documented provenance dating back to at least the 1930s, performed best, with a median price of 5,506 USD. Surprisingly though, by comparison, the Erlenmeyer Collection performed somewhat poorly, with a median price of only 1,406 USD. Nearly all lots offered from the Ada Small Moore and Erlenmeyer collections sold, though a much smaller percentage of the Surena Collection sold, perhaps because of the difficulties facing attempts to verify its 1970-1989 provenance, shorter than either the Ada Small Moore or the Erlenmeyer provenances. Yet despite its shorter and perhaps problematical provenance, the median price per lot sold for the Surena Collection was closer to that of the Ada Small Moore Collection than that of the Erlenmeyer Collection, and it was enough to make the Surena sale more profitable for Christie's than the Erlenmeyer sale had been for Sotheby's. Perhaps these results show that although there were customer doubts over the provenance of the Surena Collection, provenance notwithstanding there were some exceptional seals on offer that sold for high prices. These results confirm that while there is a positive relationship between provenance and price, it is not a straightforward one, it is not an inevitable one, it may be overridden by considerations of object quality, and the name and prestige of previous owners might exert more influence upon price than concerns of ethical propriety structured around the 1970 date of the UNESCO Convention.

Table 2. The sale statistics of three major collections of cylinder seals. (All prices in USD, standardized to 2005 value).

<i>Sale</i>	<i>Lots offered</i>	<i>Lots sold</i>	<i>Percentage lots sold</i>	<i>Median price (lots sold)</i>	<i>Mean price (lots offered)</i>
Ada Small Moore	140	140	100	5,506	15,779
Erlenmeyer (June)	63	59	94	966	1,820

Erlenmeyer (December)	38	37	97	1,606	1,564
Erlenmeyer (Total)	101	96	95	1,406	1,813
Surena	144	99	69	4,136	11,395

Analysis Five: Syrian Cylinder Seals

Between 1985 and 2013, Christie's in London and Sotheby's in New York between them offered for sale a total of 129 cylinder seal lots possibly or certainly from the region of modern Syria. Of those 129 lots, 86 percent were sold. Of the Syrian cylinder seal lots sold by Sotheby's, 77 percent had a verifiable pre-1970 provenance, all from one of two sales of large and old collections of cylinder seals, namely the 1991 sale of the Ada Small Moore Collection and the 1998 sale of the Erlenmeyer Collection. Of the remaining 23 percent, only one lot, sold in 1993, had a verifiable provenance of 1970-1989, having formed part of the Bergamini collection of seals published in 1988. The remainder had no verifiable provenance at all. Here again, it is possible that the verifiable pre-1970 provenances were included in the listing of a lot because of the prestige associated with any previous owners. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the absence of verifiable provenance did not preclude the sale of a lot.

Not a single lot offered by Christie's prior to 2004 had a verifiable provenance. Since the beginning of 2004, only three lots with a possible or certain origin in modern Syria have been offered for sale by Christie's, all with a provenance dating back to between 1970-1989. It was hypothesized at the beginning of the study that cylinder seals appearing for auction since 2003 might have been predominantly or exclusively Syrian, either because the auction houses were making a conscious decision to avoid material from Iraq, or because after 2011 looting in Syria came to supplant looting in Iraq as a possible source of supply to the market and Syrian seals were becoming more generally available. There is no evidence in the Christie's data to support either of those scenarios (Figure 9). Furthermore, the proportion of Syrian seals being offered from 2011 onwards was not radically different from that of preceding decades. Only two were offered, both from the Surena collection with a pre-conflict provenance, and neither was sold.

The enormous increase in looting across Syria since 2011 indicates that there is a market for ancient Syrian objects: looting is an arduous and dangerous task made worthwhile primarily by financial gain, and therefore the purpose of the looters must be finding objects from which to generate profit through sale. However, since 2011, unprovenanced Syrian cylinder seals such as might be expected to have been found by looters have not been offered for sale at auction in greater numbers than before. It is therefore plausible that they are

being made available for sale on the wider market away from public scrutiny. It certainly takes only a few minutes to find cylinder seals for sale on the Internet. If looted and trafficked Syrian seals are being offered for sale outside the auction houses to avoid the public gaze, it further brings into question the utility of auction house sales for measuring market volume or the effectiveness of various means of regulatory control.

Conclusion

In 2003, the major auction houses ended sales of unprovenanced cylinder seals and cuneiform tablets, a move that at the time was interpreted as being in response to public anger over the looting of Iraqi museums and archaeological sites, and the associated restrictions placed on trade by UNSCR 1483. Ten years on from those events, these original conclusions do not appear so secure, though they cannot be discounted. There is a strong suggestion that Sotheby's might have stopped selling cylinder seals because of its developing strategy of selling only good quality, expensive objects, and cylinder seals just could not command the prices required. Christie's did markedly reduce the number of seals it was offering for several years, but started increasing them again in 2009, though possibly subject to satisfying a "pre-conflict" provenance threshold. There is a relationship between auction sales and their wider material and commercial contexts, but it is not a straightforward one. Auction sales do not offer a clear window onto the broader antiquities trade. If they offer a window at all, it is a distorting one, and care must be taken when interpreting what is seen.

Figures

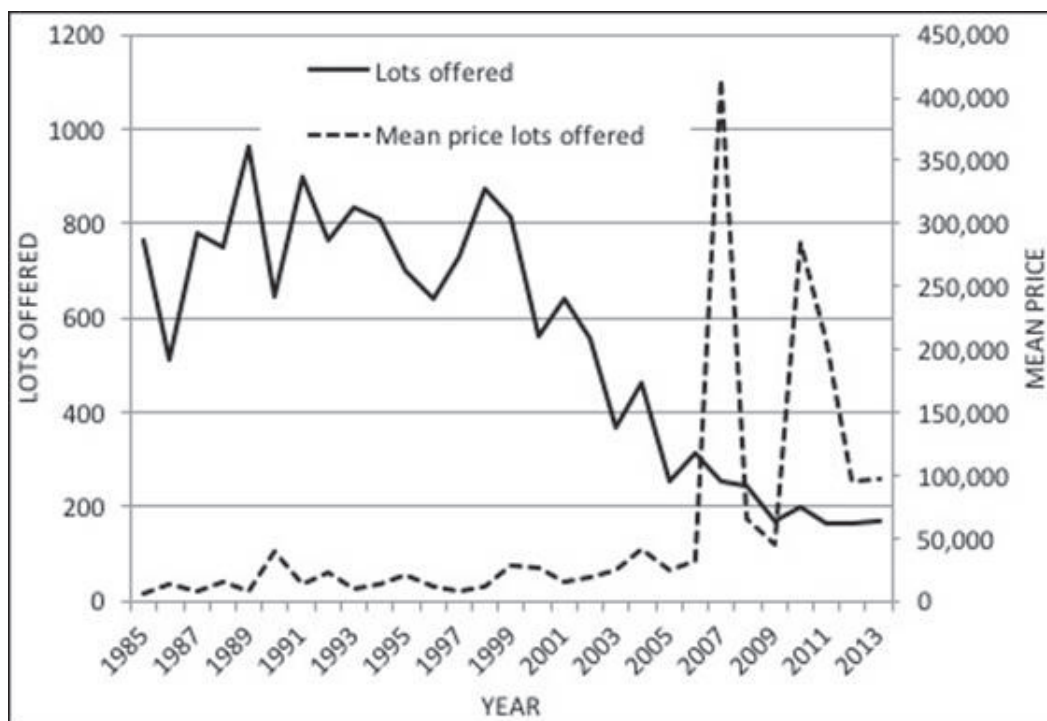


Figure 1: Sotheby's New York. Total antiquities sales 1985-2013. (All prices in USD, standardized to 2005 value).

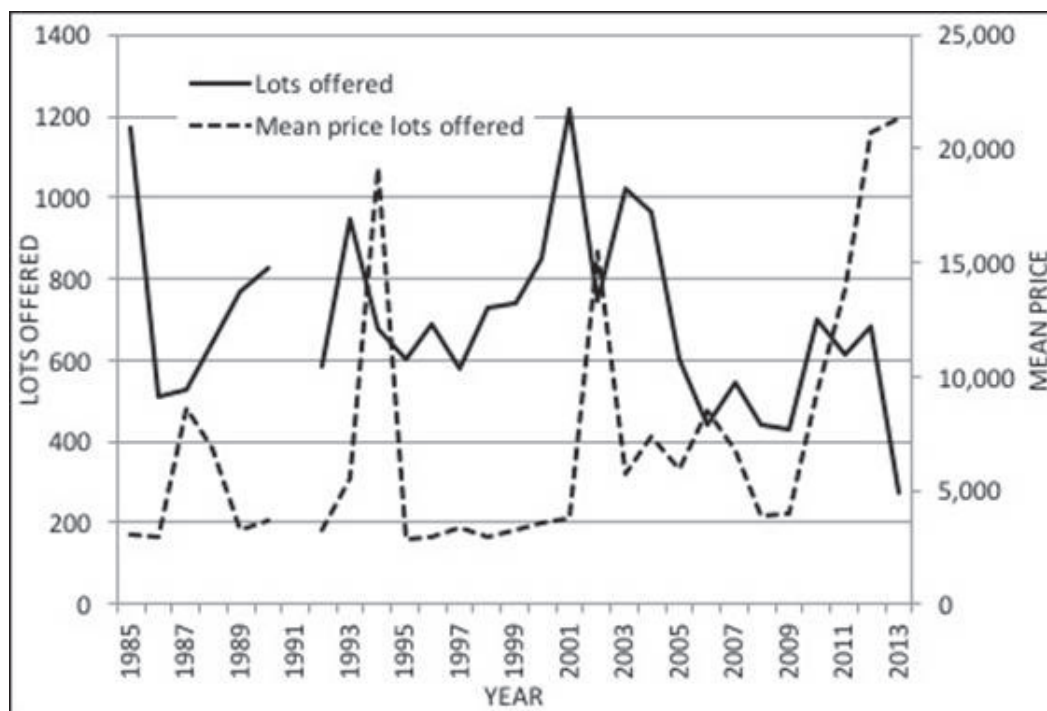


Figure 2: Christie's London. Total antiquities sales 1985-2013, no data for 1991. (All prices in GBP, standardized to 2005 value).

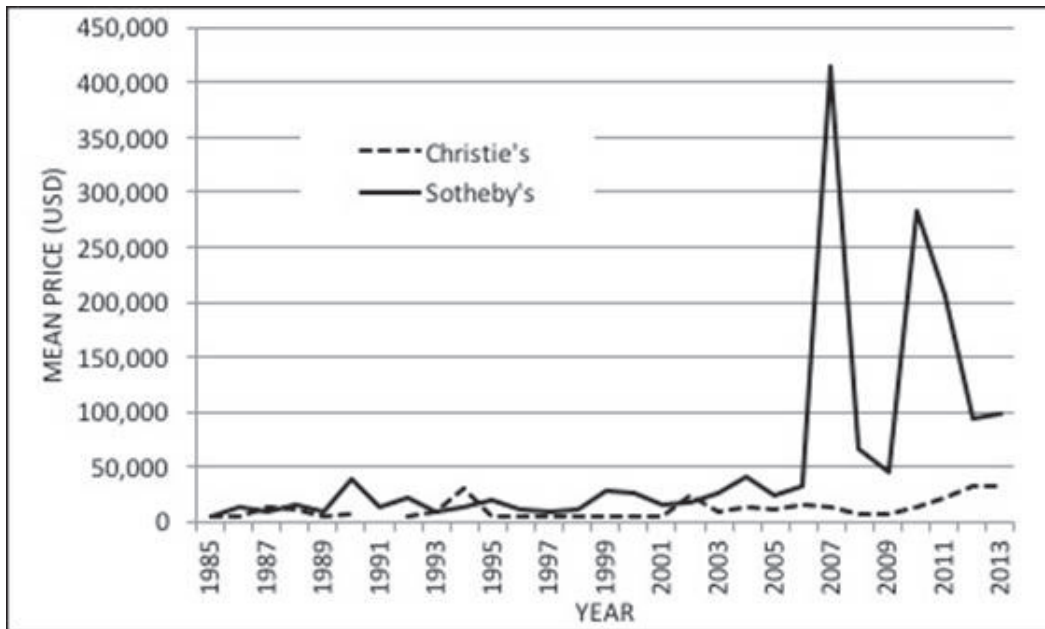


Figure 3: A comparison of annual mean price per lot offered for Sotheby's New York and Christie's London. (All prices expressed as USD, and standardized at 2005 values).

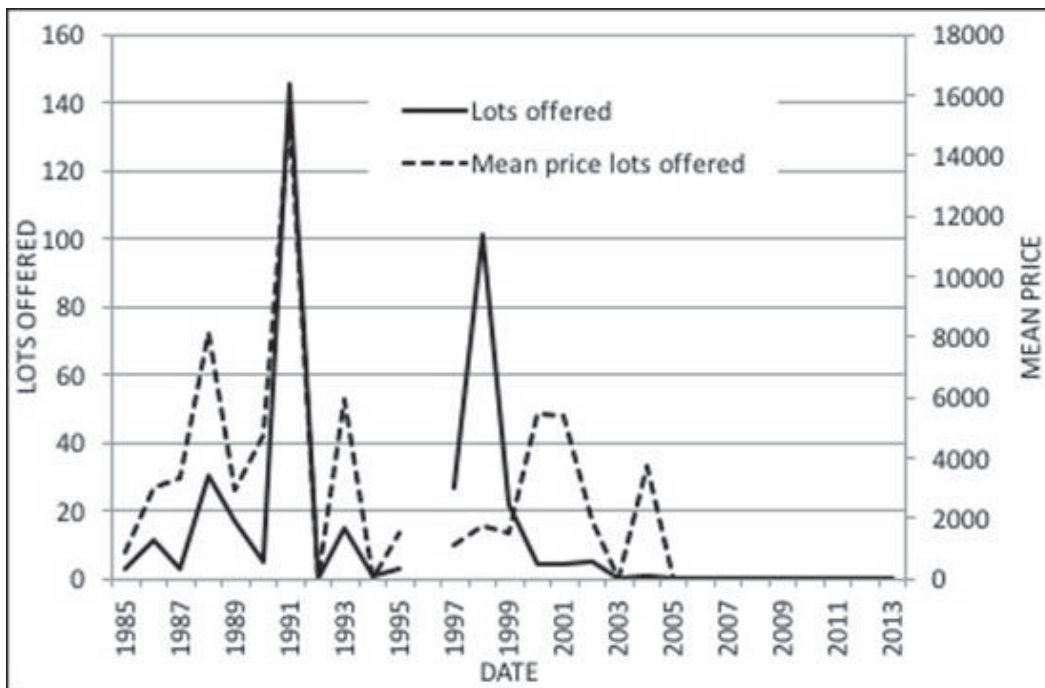


Figure 4: Sotheby's New York. Cylinder seal sales 1985-2013, no data for 1996. (All prices in USD, standardized to 2005 value).

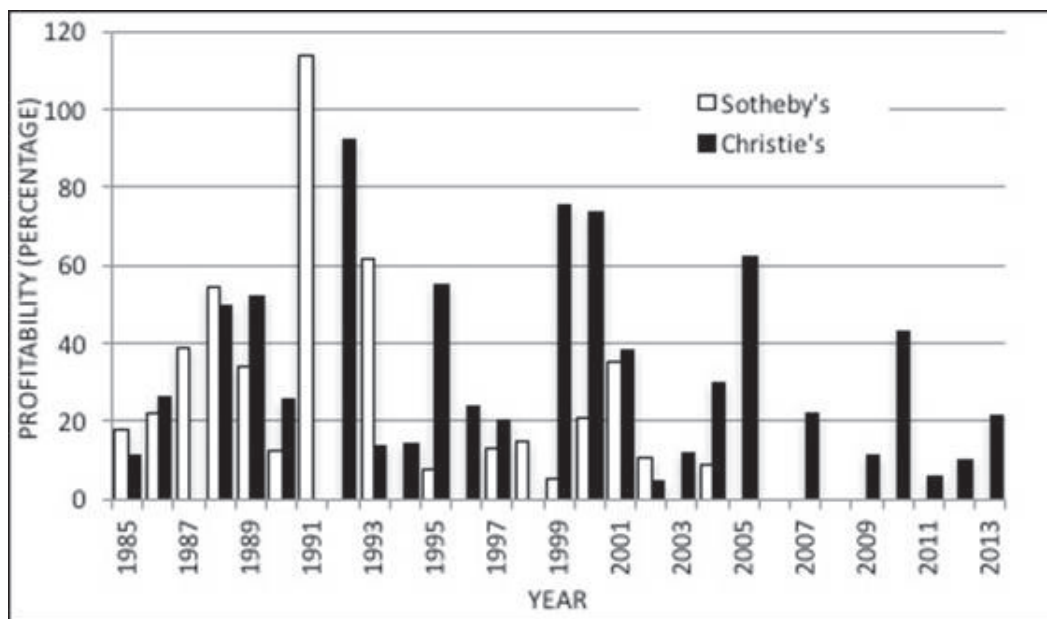


Figure 5: Profitability of cylinder seal sales, measured as the mean price per lot offered of cylinder seal sales expressed as a percentage of the mean price per lot offered of all antiquities sales (including cylinder seals). Christie's: no data for 1991; Sotheby's: no data for 1996.

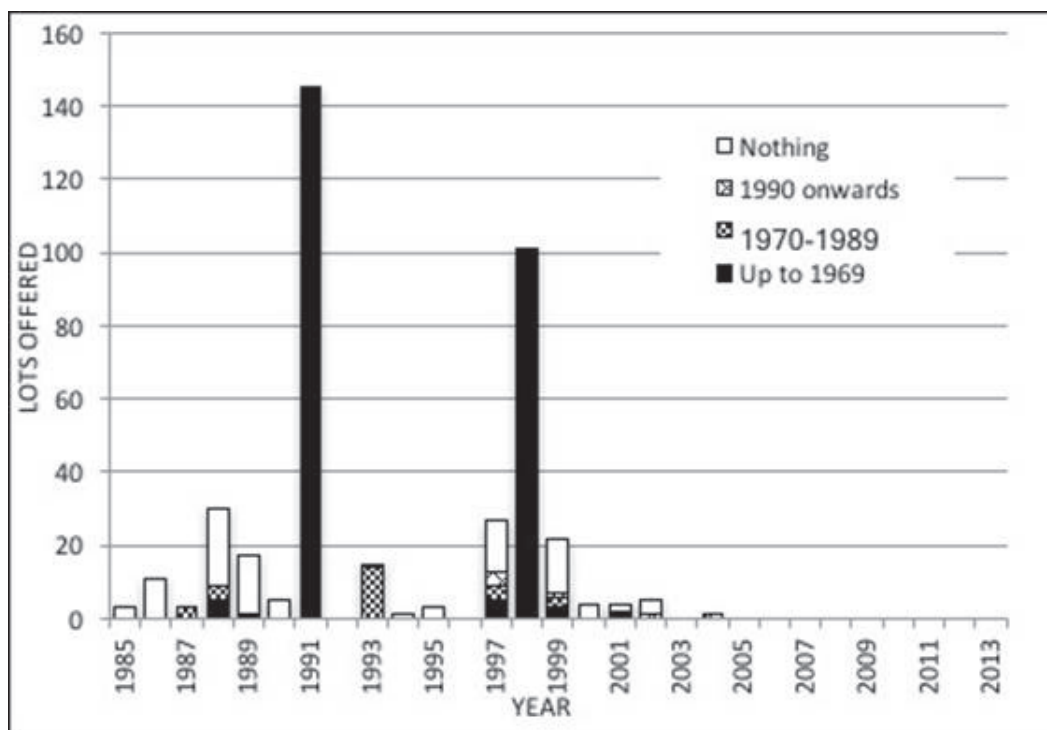


Figure 6: Provenances of cylinder seal lots offered for sale at Sotheby's New York (1985-2013, no data for 1996).

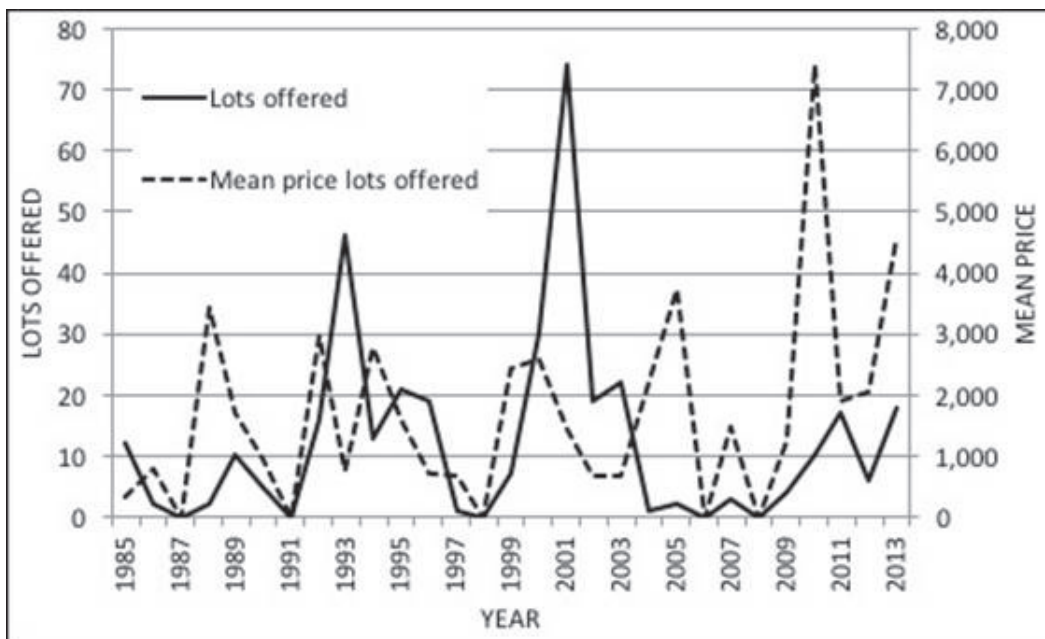


Figure 7: Christie's London. Cylinder seal sales 1985-2013, no data for 1991. (All prices in GBP, standardized to 2005 values).

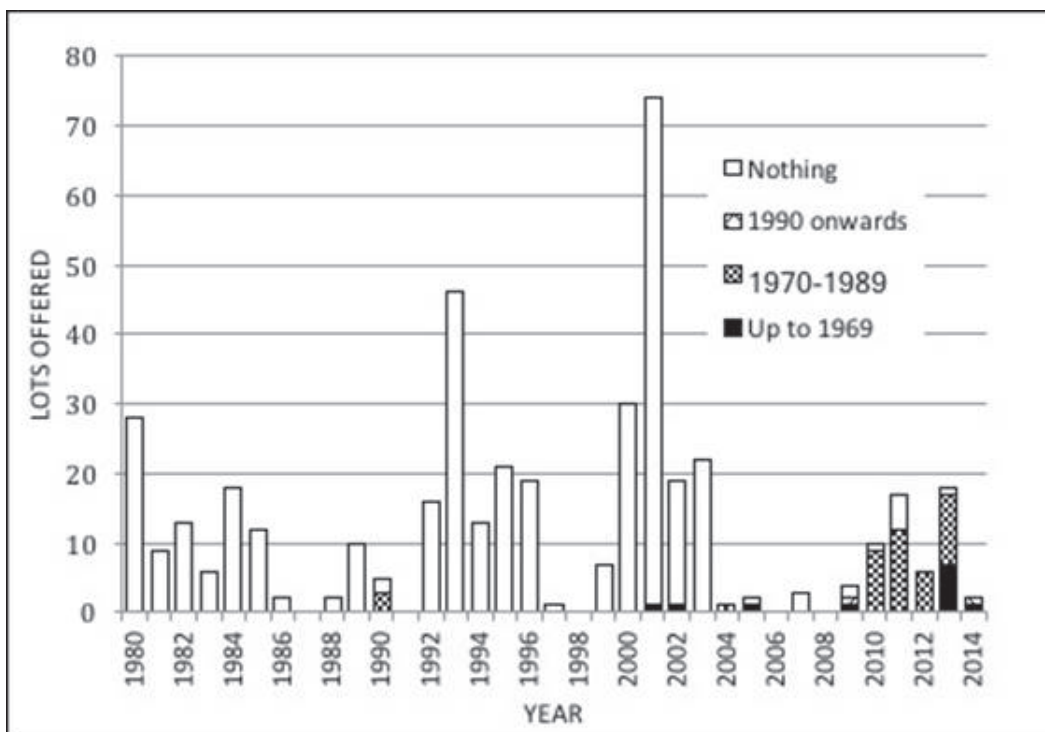


Figure 8: Provenances of cylinder seal lots offered for sale at Christie's London (1980-2013, no data for 1991).

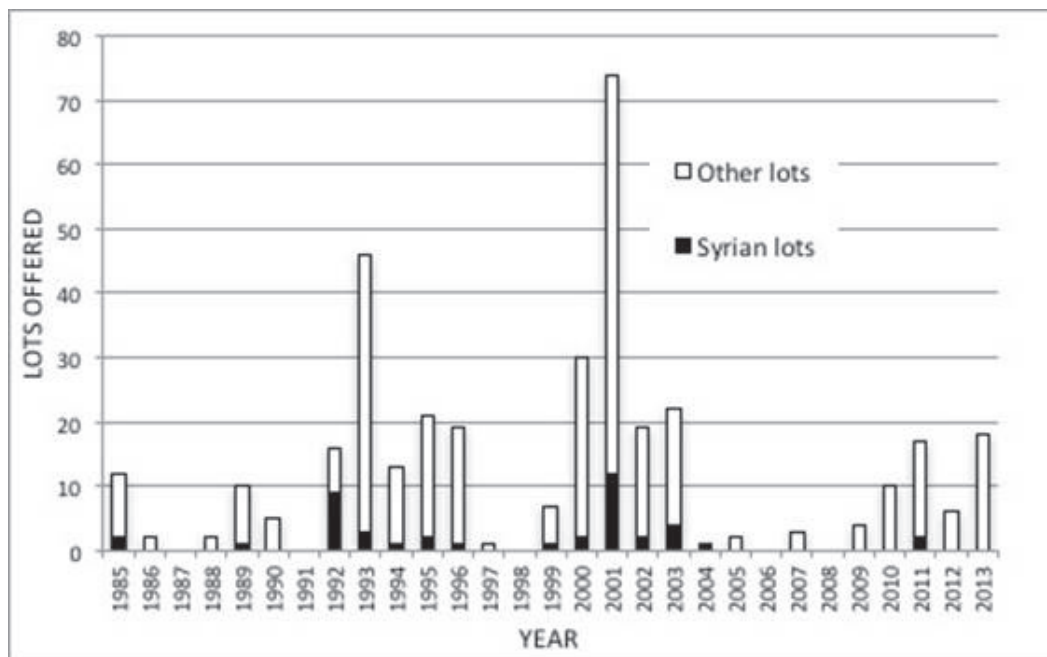


Figure 9: Christie's London. Syrian cylinder seal sales 1980-2013, no data for 1991. (All prices in GBP, standardized to 2005 values).

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