

# VIRTUALLY GONE! THE INTERNET MARKET IN ANTIQUITIES

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## INTRODUCTION

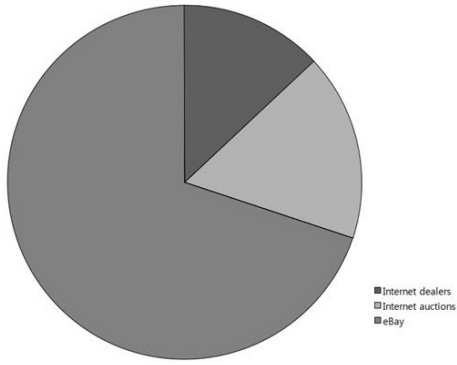
Since the establishment of eBay in 1995, online sales of antiquities and other cultural objects have escalated progressively, both in monetary value and material volume BARKER 2000; BRUHNS

2000; CHIPPINDALE AND GILL 2001; FAY 2011; LIDDINGTON 2002. The means by which sales can be conducted online have similarly diversified and multiplied. By 2016, the Internet market had grown to comprise a baffling disorder of websites and web portals offering for sale cultural objects from every country in the world BRODIE 2014; 2015. Most objects were being sold without any reliable documentation of provenance **OWNERSHIP HISTORY** or verifiable evidence of find spot, and had likely been obtained through illegal and undocumented excavation or stolen from museum or other institutional collections, before being traded in contravention of national and international laws. The Internet offers easy market access for a much larger number of customers than was previously the case, and cultural objects sold on the Internet are generally of poorer quality than those that have been traditionally traded. With more people buying more material, the expanding Internet market is believed to have caused an upsurge in the extent and intensity of looting of cultural sites and trafficking of cultural objects.

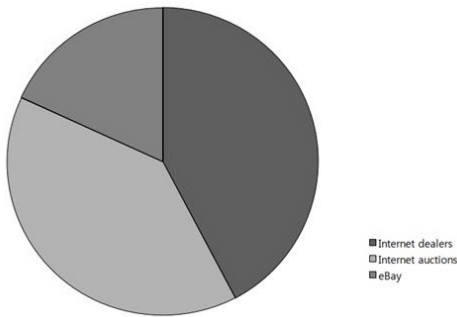
## STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION OF THE INTERNET MARKET

Overall, the Internet has caused a shift in the nature of the antiquities market, from a low-volume, high-value trading model towards more of a high-volume, low-value one. Traditional merchants

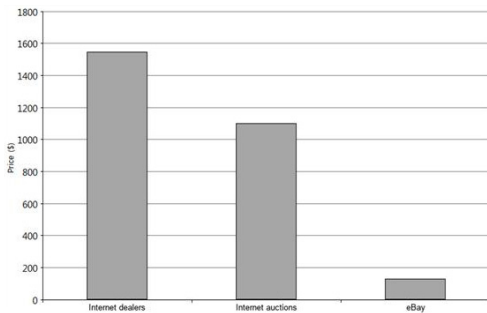
who maintain physical galleries in expensive locations such as New York, London or Geneva have been joined by Internet-only traders who can maintain large inventories in low-cost locations, thus making it financially viable to trade in lower-value and poorer-quality material. The Internet market caters to antiquities collectors across a broad spectrum of monetary means, offering wealthy collectors the chance to negotiate a “price on request” for an outstanding example of Roman art, while at the same time allowing collectors of embarrassingly more modest means to pay out only a few dollars for an Egyptian shabti figure or an Ecuadorian spindle whorl. Alongside the continuing existence of eBay, which offers a platform enabling private transactions through auction, a broad range of companies selling directly to the public have established themselves, including those selling from virtual “galleries” [TERMED HERE INTERNET DEALERS](#), and those offering material for online auction [TERMED INTERNET AUCTIONEERS](#). Internet malls or marketplaces have also been developed, gathering together on one website links to a range of traders or “members”, all offering related types of material. The Trocadero marketplace, for example, links to the inventories of dealers in art and antiques, including antiquities [HTTP://WWW.TROCADERO.COM/](http://www.trocadero.com/). Potential customers visiting the Trocadero website can search or browse according to material or vendor. In March 2017, there were more than 15 dealers on Trocadero offering for sale 3393 European and Middle Eastern antiquities. Some of the antiquities looked obviously fake, and more besides were probably fake, but many if not most looked genuine. The prices asked totaled approximately \$2,530,450. Alongside these European and Middle Eastern antiquities, there were large numbers from Asia, the Americas and Africa. Vcoins offers a similar service for coin dealers, including those who sell ancient coins [HTTPS://WWW.VCOINS.COM/](https://www.vcoins.com/). In March 2017, there were 136 dealers on VCoins offering for sale 74,193 ancient coins. The prices asked totaled approximately \$7,048,335. Many of the listed dealers also sold antiquities. Marketplace sites such as Invaluable [HTTP://WWW.INVALUABLE.CO.UK/](http://www.invaluable.co.uk/) and LiveAuctioneers [HTTPS://NEWLIVEAUCTIONEERS.COM/](https://newliveauctioneers.com/) offer a parallel aggregating service to Internet auctioneers. Thus dealers can sell objects on the Internet through their own websites, through Trocadero or a similar marketplace, or on eBay. Similarly, Internet auctioneers can sell objects through their own websites or through an auction marketplace. Not wishing to miss out on a developing commercial bonanza, in 2011 Christie’s established its own on-line platform, and in October 2016, held its



Market shares according to material volume



Market shares according to monetary value



Mean price (\$) per lot sold

first electronic antiquities sale. In 2015, Sotheby's commenced live streaming some auctions on eBay, though does not yet seem to have gone down that route for antiquities.

There are no reliable statistics describing the material volume or monetary value of the Internet market in its entirety, though some are available for Precolumbian antiquities. Between 2011 and 2013, on average, it is estimated that between 8000 and 16,000 objects were sold annually with a total value of between \$3,600,000 and \$7,200,000. Figures 1-3 show a proportional breakdown of the total figures according to Internet dealers, Internet auctioneers and eBay. eBay is the major market player in terms of material volume, offering and selling large quantities of generally small, low-priced objects, though financially it accounts for less business than the Internet dealers and auctioneers. The key indicator for assessing damage to archaeological and cultural heritage is material volume – the number of looted objects in circulation. The high number

of objects being traded shows how damaging the Internet market can be when compared to the smaller, more traditional, physical market.

## COMPANY REBRANDING

Before the advent of Internet trading, dealers and auctioneers maintained physical premises to sell material – the gallery or the salesroom. The investment in physical location was also an investment in reputation. For a company such as Sotheby's, its name alone was considered to be a guarantee of commercial propriety. Or at least, the potential customer liked to think so. Sotheby's was caught out in 1997 when an investigative journalist exposed improper practice at the company's London branch and it decided in consequence to close its London Antiquities department [WATSON 1997](#). Nevertheless, the fact remains that established companies trade on their reputations, and so to some extent the threat of reputational harm encourages them to conform to some self-imposed standard of business practice, even if it is only to refrain from risky sales of overtly illicit material. For companies trading only on the Internet, however, the reputational constraint does not apply. It is easy for a company caught trading stolen material or otherwise engaging in business malpractice to rebrand itself and continue operating under a new name. In February 2007, for example, Eftis Paraskevaides, proprietor of BidAncient, was banned from eBay for engaging in shill bidding [BERRY 2007](#). Later that same year, in September 2007, he helped establish a new company trading under the name ArtAncient.

Two examples of this rebranding occurred during the aftermath of Operation Mummy's Curse, an investigation by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE](#) into the activities of two US-based Internet dealers [MUELLER 2016](#). ICE established that between October 2008 and November 2009, Moussa Khouli imported a range of Ancient Egyptian objects into the US through New York for sale to a US collector. ICE went on to discover that between 2006 and 2011 he had imported 20 shipments of cultural objects from Dubai, including material originating in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen and possibly Iran [ST. HILAIRE 2011A](#). In April 2012 Khouli pled guilty to charges of smuggling Egyptian cultural property and making false customs declarations, and was sentenced to six months' home confinement, one year's probation, and up to 200 hours of community service [ST. HILAIRE 2012A](#). At the time of his arrest, Khouli was proprietor of the Internet company Windsor Antiquities, which he had established in 1995 in New York. While his trial was ongoing, in 2011 he established Palmyra Heritage, and after serving his sentence continued Internet trading under the new name, free of any connotations of former malpractice. In November 2016 he was offering for sale a Palmyran head from Syria with what appeared to be a forged Israeli export licence [ARCA 2016](#).

Khouli was acting in concert with another dealer Salem Alshdaifat. At the time of his

arrest, Alshdaifat was trading online as Holyland Numismatics. As part of the Mummy’s Curse investigation, in March 2010, ICE agents searched his home computer records where they found evidence of trading in coins from Libya, Jordan and Egypt<sup>ST. HILAIRE 2011B</sup>. In December 2010, he was stopped by customs in Detroit Airport on his way home from Jordan in possession of Byzantine coins, with paperwork stating they were from Syria. In 2012 Alshdaifat pled guilty to aiding Khouli and was fined \$1000<sup>ST. HILAIRE 2012B</sup>, but in 2011 he had already commenced Internet trading as Athena Numismatics. In February 2017 he was offering 1313 coins for sale, including 69 Greek coins said to be from “Syria and Phoenicia”.

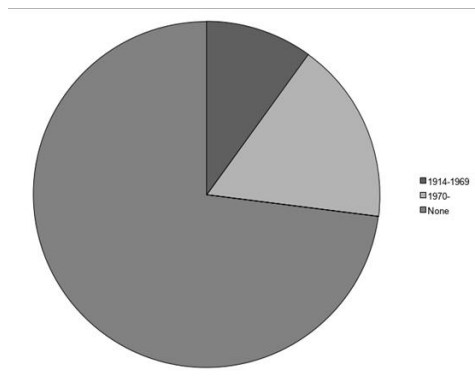
**PROVENANCE**

The provision of provenance-related information for objects sold on the Internet is minimal. Figures 4 and 5 show provenance statistics for Precolumbian material sold on the

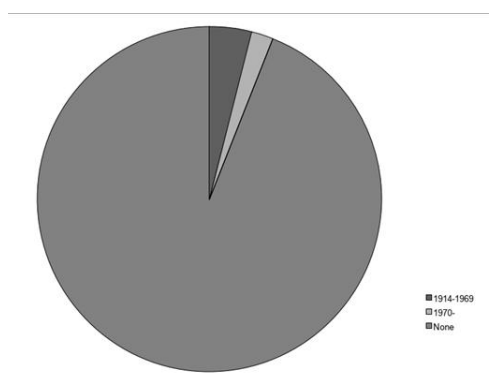
Internet between 2011 and 2013. Most lots were offered and sold with no verifiable provenance.

In 2006, UNESCO, INTERPOL and ICOM issued a joint statement concerning provenance to be posted on any website offering antiquities for sale<sup>UNESCO 2016</sup>. It reads:

With regard to cultural objects proposed for sale, and before buying them, buyers are advised to: i) check and request a verification of the licit provenance of the object, including documents providing evidence of legal export (and possibly import) of the object likely to have been imported; ii) request evidence of the seller’s legal title. In case of doubt, check primarily with the national authorities of the country of origin and INTERPOL, and possibly with UNESCO or ICOM.



Internet dealers and auctions. Earliest verifiable provenance of lots sold



eBay. Earliest verifiable provenance of lots sold

This statement has been ignored by Internet traders who are normally not forthcoming about issues of provenance. When traders do offer advice on what might constitute acceptable provenance, or on national and international laws, it is usually inaccurate. Such advice commonly asserts the importance of 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 as a threshold for demarcating acceptable provenance, suggesting that material out of its country of origin before 1970 is legally on the market. Artemis Gallery, for example, which offers material for direct sale as well as by auction, states that:

While there are indeed a number of laws governing the sale and purchase of items of cultural patrimony (antiquities), as long as an item has been legally imported into the United States, it's legal to sell and purchase. Laws vary on the required date of importation, but a good general rule of thumb is that the item should have been exported from its home country prior to 1970, when most laws and the UNESCO Treaty on Items of Cultural Patrimony were signed. Artemis Gallery abides by all international laws and treaties with regard to the sale of its items (<http://www.artemisgallery.com/how-to-buy>).

That interpretation of the 1970 UNESCO Convention is incorrect. The legality or otherwise of export is determined by national legislation, not the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Helios Gallery is even less specific:

Provenance adds value to an antiquity, and the day when unprovenanced antiquities become un-tradable is rapidly approaching. Unprovenanced objects are generally cheaper, but this is because they will always have a lower market value and most reputable dealers and auctioneers will not buy or sell them. Many countries already ban the importation of unprovenanced antiquities: it makes ethical as well as financial sense to ensure you avoid smuggled goods in your collection (<http://www.heliosgallery.com/noframes/collecting.php>).

Even on websites stating the importance of 1970 as a threshold date, the majority of lots offered and sold have no dated provenance and thus nothing to guide a customer in search of pre-1970 material. Figures 4 and 5 show how most objects are sold with a provenance that fails to date back to before 1970.

In theory, eBay regulates the sale of antiquities through rules published in its policy statements about prohibited and restricted items. eBay's rules for cultural objects are broadly in line with the 2006 ICOM/INTERPOL/UNESCO recommendations. These rules are aimed at potential sellers, but could also alert buyers to what might constitute a genuine object and

legitimate purchase. Unfortunately, the rules are not immediately visible to a potential customer and seem to be largely ignored. EBay does not monitor its own sales for regulatory compliance, and depends upon outside monitoring for regulatory enforcement. Egypt, for example, actively monitors eBay and other Internet sites for stolen material, and from September 2013 to May 2014 discovered an estimated 450 stolen antiquities sold online <sup>TREW 2014</sup>.

In those unusual cases when some documentary evidence of provenance is offered, it can be incomplete, uncertain, misleading, or even openly counterfeit. It is hardly ever reliable and comprehensive. In February 2015, for example, Aphrodite Antiquities, which maintains physical gallery space in Manhattan, offered for sale on eBay what it was calling an “Ancient Stone Relief Stele of a Man” – what appeared to be, in reality, a funerary relief from Palmyra in Syria. The provenance provided was “Ex. European art market; Early American private collection, 1960’s”. Aphrodite also provided an image of a US import document, stating that a piece had arrived in the US from Lebanon in 2006. How the information on this document could be reconciled with the provenance provided of an “Early American private collection” was not explained. In any event, there was no information on the import document connecting it to the relief, which meant it was offering the appearance but not the reality of provenance.

In January 2017, Phoenix Ancient Art, an up-market company with physical galleries in Geneva and New York, was offering for sale on its website two previously unpublished Palmyran funerary reliefs, one depicting a noblewoman and child, the other a woman with her mother. Each relief had the provenance “Ex-private collection, Lebanon, collected in the 1960’s”, though nothing was offered to verify this Lebanese provenance. Unusually, for one piece, however, the noblewoman and child, Phoenix did make available pdfs of some relevant provenance documents. But the earliest verified date of the relief’s presence outside Syria was 1997, and nothing was offered to support its presence in Lebanon in the 1960s.

## **FAKES**

The Internet market is widely believed to be badly infiltrated with forged antiquities <sup>STANISH 2009</sup>. Without the grounding evidence of a full and verifiable provenance, providing the documented history of an object from the place of its discovery to the time of its sale, it is a relatively easy exercise to pass off a fake object as genuine. Customers must be more concerned about the authenticity of the material they are buying than they are about its provenance,

however, as most Internet traders offer some sort of guarantee of authenticity, seemingly guaranteeing the authenticity of objects sold and offering the customer some protection against fraud. Internet dealer Edgar L. Owen, for example, warrants that:

All illustrations are of the actual items offered. The authenticity of all pieces is fully guaranteed for as long as you own them. Any item shown otherwise may be returned unaltered for a full refund. A Certificate of Authenticity with printed color image is available for an additional \$10 fee (<http://www.edgarlowen.com/placeorder.shtml>).

In more limited fashion, Internet dealer Medusa Ancient Art states that:

If you are not satisfied with your purchase, for any reason, we will refund you in full within 10 days of the purchase date or an exchange within 30 days of the purchase date (<https://medusa-art.com/our-guarantee>).

In reality, guarantees such as these are badly misleading. They offer a money refund if a purchased object is shown to be fake. As this would entail the customer paying for expert opinion or scientific analysis, a simple refund of purchase price would still cause the customer to suffer a monetary loss. There is no incentive for a customer to pay for the necessary examination, and therefore little legal or financial risk to a trader knowingly or unknowingly selling fakes.

Some companies are blatant in adopting a policy of “buyer beware”, offering no guarantees whatsoever as regards provenance and authenticity. TimeLine Auctions, for example, states that:

TimeLine does not make or give any guarantee, warranty or representation or undertake any duty of care in relation to the description, illustrations or photographs of any Lot, including condition, quality, provenance, authenticity, background, style, period, age, origin, value and estimated selling price. TimeLine undertakes no obligation to examine, investigate or carry out any tests either in sufficient depth or at all to establish the accuracy or otherwise of any description or opinions given by TimeLine whether in the catalogue or elsewhere (<https://timelineauctions.com/terms-and-conditions/>).



## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Internet trading is not restricted to eBay and the retail websites of dealers and auctioneers. Increasingly, social media is being used to advertise material for sale and to arrange deals. Alshdaifat, for example, maintains a Facebook page, and he is not alone [DAFTARI 2015; GUNHAN 2017](#). Youtube and Instagram are also being used to advertise material. It is increasingly being reported that WhatsApp or other means of electronic messaging are being used to arrange deals [GIGLIO AND AL-AWAD 2015](#). When on 16 May 2015, US Special Forces raided the Syrian compound of Abu Sayyaf, the head of Daesh's administrative section for the supervision of excavation and trade of cultural objects, they discovered images of stolen cultural objects in the WhatsApp folder of his cellphone [USA 2016: 12-13](#). Internet discussion forums might also be used for such purposes. It is noticeable that discussions of objects on social media sites are often in a non-European language, which usually in the Middle East is Arabic or Turkish. It is possible to hypothesize a schematic trading hierarchy, whereby social media is being used by traffickers close to source to arrange ongoing trade and transport, while the more mainstream dealer and auction sites present the retail face of the trafficking, offering material for sale to customers in Europe and North America.

## **TRAFFICKING OUT OF SYRIA**

By 2016, the civil war in Syria that had started in 2011 was in its sixth year. During that time, archaeological and other cultural sites including museums had been destructively looted of their saleable antiquities and other cultural objects. It is widely believed that many of the looted objects were moved illegally out of Syria for sale in Europe and North America, though by the end of 2016 there had been few if any reliable reports of [POST-2011](#) trafficked Syrian objects appearing for sale there. There had been many seizures of Syrian objects in the neighboring "transit" countries of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, but nothing comparable in the "market" countries of Western Europe and North America. Suspicions were raised that traffickers were warehousing material until such time as the trading environment became more conducive for onwards sale. But expectations as to what types of object might be looted and trafficked have been conditioned by what is known of material moved out of Syria before 2011, and might not apply to the post-2011 situation.

Several examples of large, culturally and monetarily valuable pieces that had left Syria illegally were recovered in the 1990s and 2000s. But these objects were moved out of Syria at a time of relative stability, and there is evidence of regime connivance that would have provided the necessary transport and allowed border controls and other legal obstacles to be bypassed. These objects were also trafficked for sale before the widespread establishment of the Internet market. Since 2011, because of the ongoing conflict this type of condoned or tolerated trade of large objects will have become increasingly untenable. Media reports from the border area of southern Turkey show instead the trafficking of coins, jewelry and other small objects that can be easily concealed and transported before being offered for sale on the Internet. Most of the cultural objects recovered from the possession of Abu Sayyaf were coins from Syria and Iraq, together with electronic images of gold coins and jewelry. Thus it is likely that the pattern of illegal trade out of Syria post-2011 has shifted from small quantities of large, high-value objects to larger quantities of predominantly smaller, lower-value objects, a shift enabled by the widespread availability of the Internet and the Internet market. The illegal excavation of large numbers of small, relatively low-value objects would be more damaging to archaeological sites than the illegal excavation of fewer, larger, high-value objects, and would still in aggregate generate appreciable profits for those involved in trafficking.

But although it is reasonably easy to demonstrate the Internet sale in Europe and North America of small objects that might have been found in Syria, it is harder to identify objects that were without doubt found in Syria, and not in a neighboring country. The boundaries of ancient cultures often spread across the borders of several modern countries. Similarly, without provenance, it not possible to establish a date of export, and determine whether the export was legal or illegal. In London. For example, TimeLine Auctions <https://www.timelineauctions.com/> conducts several online auctions of antiquities and ancient coins each year. The 24 to 27 May 2016 auction included many small unprovenanced antiquities originally found in Iraq, Syria or a neighboring country. As usual, it was not possible to make specific determinations - to determine which objects were from Syria and which were from Iraq. Nor was it possible to ascertain any dates of export. Thus the objects could be bought and sold without any secure belief of theft or illegal trade. Suspicion, maybe, but not belief. It seemed obvious though that many of the objects offered in the category Western Asiatic antiquities would have been found in Syria or Iraq, and probably a good proportion too of those in Byzantine and Islamic. Altogether in these three categories, 399 lots were offered and 191 lots **48 PERCENT** were sold. Each lot could comprise one or more objects. The total sales revenue **INCLUDING BUYER'S PREMIUM** was \$137,282, with a mean price of \$719 per lot, a high price of \$12,760 and a low price of \$9. TimeLine charges a

buyer's premium of 24 per cent and a seller's commission of 18 per cent, so that from the total of \$137,282, the company would have taken \$46,499. No matter what the geographical and chronological origins of the objects offered, the sale shows that there is a clear financial incentive to trade in small, low-value objects.

### 1) Roman Provincial Tetradrachms

One possible solution to the problem of identifying country of origin is to look at coins from known mints, though even then it must be borne in mind that coins could travel a long way from their place of production. An example is provided by Roman Provincial silver tetradrachms minted in the town of Emesa **MODERN HOMS** during the reigns of emperors Caracalla and Macrinus **AD 198 TO AD 218**. By June 2012, 112 of these tetradrachms were known in public and private collections. A further 116 had been identified for sale on the market, with on average about 17 new tetradrachms appearing on the market each year **NURPETLIAN 2013**. Since June 2012, a further 91 examples have appeared on the market, or on average 23 new tetradrachms per year. The lowest priced tetradrachm sold for \$33 and the highest priced for a surprising \$3250, with a mean price of \$263. Although the tetradrachms were minted in Emesa, they enjoyed a wide circulation, and there have been documented finds on sites throughout Syria, including 13 at Dura Europos, known to have been heavily looted between 2011 and 2014, as well as some in Israel and Palestine. Thus the examples arriving on the market after 2012 would most likely have come from somewhere in Syria, though a possible origin in Israel and Palestine where the looting and trafficking of ancient coins has also been a problem cannot be excluded. Nevertheless, the data do suggest the increasing arrival on the market of small objects moved out of Syria post-2011 that are being sold openly on the Internet and going largely unrecognized – or at least unreported. It adds credence to the idea that other small objects of Syrian origin have been arriving on the market and sold in plain view on the Internet.

### 2) Tell Halaf figurines

Tell Halaf terracotta figurines were produced from the seventh through to sixth centuries BC in what is today the territory of Iraq and Syria and immediately adjacent areas of neighbouring countries. They take their name from the archaeological site of Tell Halaf in NE Syria where they were first discovered. They appear on ICOM's Emergency Red List of Syrian Cultural Objects at Risk. Between 27 November 2015 and 17 February 2016, eight eBay sellers between them sold

60 Tel Halaf figurines for the total sum of \$8783. The highest priced figurine sold for \$1037, the lowest for \$17. The average price was \$147. Seven of the sellers were based in the UK, all in England. One seller, selling only one figurine, was based in the USA. Examining the sales statistics for one seller only, it is possible to gauge the profitability for him of eBay trade. Over a one-month period in late 2016 he sold 32 objects for the total price \$1463, or an average price \$46 each. The previous year he sold 1426 objects, which, assuming an average price of \$46 each, would have provided a projected annual income of \$65,482. Not all the objects he sold were from Syria, though many might have been. Questions have been asked about the authenticity of Halaf figurines and the appearance of fake figurines on eBay would not be a surprise. As long ago as 2005, the on-line collectors' community was aware of large numbers of Halaf figurines being sold on eBay, and believed that many if not most of them were fake. Nevertheless, fake or genuine, fraud or theft, at least one law will have been broken on a figurine's journey to eBay. Yet like the Roman tetradrachms, the figurines are being sold openly with knowing or unknowing impunity. There is no need to postulate large storage warehouses to explain the apparent absence on the market of material trafficked out of Syria post-2011. The Internet market is brimming over with material likely to have been trafficked, but it comprises small, low-value objects, not the large, high-value objects of the pre-2011 years that continue to fashion material expectations of what the market should look like.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Internet market is large, complex, and probably highly destructive. The high-volume trade of small, low-value objects is hard to tackle. It is most likely dispersed, involving a large number of people, and only loosely organized. It is probably able to survive the occasional removal of participating criminals. The small amounts of money involved in individual transactions diminish the apparent seriousness of crimes and reduce the public interest requirement for committing adequate resources to their investigation and prosecution. There appears to be widespread indifference on the part of customers to issues of provenance, who are seemingly unaware of the possible illicit or fraudulent sources of material up for sale, or do not care. Traders do nothing to raise customer awareness of the problems involved, offering dubious guarantees of authenticity and misleading advice about good provenance. They seem intent on reassuring customers about their participation in a market largely comprised of illicit and fake material

rather than alerting them to the legal and material risks and consequences of their participation.

This concluding summary of the Internet market reads like bad news, and it is. The good news, however, is that the Internet market is visible. It is open to monitoring and investigation. Government or professional bodies or other independent organizations with the necessary authority and expertise should be prepared to monitor Internet market sites regularly to identify and work towards the recovery of stolen and trafficked objects. Due to Egyptian monitoring, for example, eBay has removed hundreds of stolen antiquities from sale <sup>MASHBERG 2014</sup>. In Korea, the Overseas Korean Heritage Foundation monitors more than 4000 on-line auction houses, which are gathered on several marketplace platforms. It identifies between 20 and 200 Korean objects every week and notifies relevant national museums and police agencies. Since the monitoring program began in 2014, seven objects have been recovered. Successful monitoring projects of this type could be replicated in other countries, but would need material support. Thus one reason the Internet market is out of control is because the financial and human resources necessary to bring it under control are not being made available.

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