Digital transit ports for the illicit trade in antiquities: the case of the 'Afghan Genizah'

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Abstract

In this article, we present the idea of a digital transit port, an online space that illicit cultural objects pass through in digital format while on a pathway to public legitimization. These virtual transit ports connect virtual illicit and illegally trafficked cultural objects with virtual consumers under the aegis of promoting access and preservation, while simultaneously normalizing the presence of these objects in market and academic spaces. Digital transit ports, then, make virtual versions of illicit cultural objects openly consumable, much like physical transit ports launder physical cultural objects. They may also legitimize use of the physical objects, infringing on legislative efforts at curbing the illicit trade. To explore the idea of the digital transit port, we will consider the case of the so-called 'Afghan Genizah' collection, a disarticulated group of historical documents from northern Afghanistan that have appeared on the international market most likely after being looted and trafficked illicitly outside their country of origin.

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1 Introduction

Decades of research into the illicit trade in cultural objects has shown the important role that certain intermediary locations play in the smuggling process. These so-called 'transit ports' are places that looted, stolen, or otherwise dubious cultural objects pass through on their way to their ultimate market, usually as part of the 'laundering' process. Within a model of the trafficking of cultural objects which sees benefit in dividing the process into the stages of 'source', 'transit', and 'market', transit ports provide the middle link in the chain, allowing smuggled objects to transition from one reality to another (see Brodie *et al.*, 2019).

Characterized as places where customs or regulatory oversight for the movement of cultural objects is limited or lax, transit ports serve many functions for both smugglers and consumers. Transit ports place physical distance between the object, their geographic provenience,[1] and the location of the initial theft. They interrupt what would otherwise be direct connections between source-end suppliers and market-end buyers and consumers. They become the setting of fabricated origin stories and false provenances, i.e. ownership

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histories. They provide illicit objects with new paperwork, creating the appearance of legitimacy. All told, transit ports 'clean' tainted cultural objects so that they can be openly consumed by changing the objects' apparent status. Transit ports make looted and trafficked objects appear 'buyable' in an often passive and indirect way. They facilitate the illicit trade in cultural objects without being specifically designed to do so. In other words, transit ports are exploited for a defined purpose by people who transport illicit cultural objects. Yet, the concept of the transit port in existing research on the topic is inherently physical. They are real places that real objects visit briefly before ending up in the physical possession of a buyer (see the model laid out in Kersel, 2006, 2007, in which transits are theorized and studied as physical places, and case-studies of the role of transit countries in the illicit trade such as, for instance, Thomas, 2014). The idea of a digital space serving this function has not yet been explored.

Significant research has shown that over the past few decades, online marketplaces and social networking sites have had a significant impact on the nature of the trade in antiquities, including the movement and sale of illicit cultural objects (see Brodie, 2014, 2015, 2017; Huffer and Graham, 2017; Altaweel, 2019; Dundler, 2019; Greenland *et al.*, 2019, Graham *et al.*, 2020). The focus of most of these studies has been on the role that these marketplaces play as a platform for sales, how suitable these sites are for detection of illicit trade, and the formulation and maintenance of online communities that directly support illicit activities. What has received less attention is the digital lives of the illicit cultural objects themselves and the role that virtual locations beyond sale- and communication platforms play in the transformation of looted and trafficked cultural heritage into objects of market and academic consumption.

In this article, we present the idea of a *digital transit port*, an online space that illicit cultural objects pass through in digital format while on a pathway to public legitimization. These virtual transit ports connect virtual illicit and illegally trafficked cultural objects with virtual consumers under the aegis of promoting access and preservation, while simultaneously normalizing the presence of these objects in both market and academic spaces. While physical transit ports launder physical cultural objects, digital transit ports make virtual versions of illicit cultural objects openly consumable. They may also legitimize use of the physical objects, infringing on legislative efforts to curb the illicit trade. Moreover, the digital transfer allows a selected audience to circumvent limitations to the import of cultural objects and exploit the legal situation of transit countries where restrictions are laxer and where the digitization of illicit cultural goods may take place. Circumventing strict laws and regulations are exactly what physical transit ports are used for within the antiquities smuggling process, and digital transit ports serve a similar function.

Recent research has pointed to the materiality of the infrastructures sustaining the life of digital objects (Geismar, 2018) and to the experiences and affect created by interacting with digital objects such as photos (Graham *et al.*, 2020). We contend that the legitimization of illicitly trafficked cultural objects occurring in digital spaces, through a variety of activities besides sales and purchases, is also underpinned by material conditions. For this reason, here we define consumers as a broad category of users, including collectors, professional and amateur researchers, and investors in the private and the public sector whose use of undocumented cultural objects also through digital replicas contributes to the normalization of those object's use and circulation.

To explore the idea of the digital transit port, we will consider the case of the so-called 'Afghan Genizah', a disarticulated group of historical documents from northern Afghanistan that have appeared on the international market most likely after being trafficked illicitly outside their country of origin, as we explain below. More precisely, we will look at a group of documents now kept in the National Library of Israel (NLI) and that have been digitized for inclusion in an online portal called 'Ktiv'.[2] We compare the connective function that 'Ktiv' serves, allowing consumers to access digital versions of unprovenanced documents while providing distance from illicit origins. The platform 'Ktiv' is a good case-study because it is cutting-edge, it connects a wide network of libraries and research projects, and, unlike other portals, it allows access to recently acquired unprovenanced objects. Digital portals like 'Ktiv' function differently from other archival spaces by serving as a mediator between a physical object trafficked from a conflict zone and a virtual object preserved and 'saved' in

digital format. As a possible virtual transit port, and just like physical transit ports, the portal's role is as transformative as it is connective: it is a digital space where digital illicit cultural objects gain the appearance of respectability.

We conclude by considering how the process of digitization of illicit cultural objects may promote commercialization, endanger further sensitive objects, hurt communities, and generally run counter to the goals of preservation, access, critical scholarship, and civic engagement that are foundational to Digital Humanities as an academic field (see Dobson, 2019; Risam, 2019; Kim and Koh, 2021). While these concerns are prevalent in some disciplines that work with cultural objects, they are considered fringe in others. A historian accessing the digital copy of a manuscript housed in a digital repository funded by a legitimate research council may not stop to consider how their actions might support what has been described as transnational organized crime (see Chappell and Polk, 2011; Mackenzie, 2011; Campbell, 2013; Mackenzie and Davis, 2014; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2020). Yet these are exactly the issues that individual scholars, journals, professional societies, and funders must consider when evaluating the real-world impact of their academic work. Digital transit ports exist because they are supported by academia and academia needs to know what it is supporting.

2 'Transit' and the Transnational Illicit Trade in Cultural Objects

The illicit trade in cultural objects is often modelled in a series of phases that pieces move through, connecting the point of their initial discovery to a point of consumption usually outside their country of origin (Mackenzie, 2002; Kersel 2006, 2007; Campbell, 2013; Brodie *et al.*, 2019; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2019). Dividing the transition of illicit cultural objects from source (where the object was found), transit (what intermediary locations it passed through), and market (where it was ultimately consumed) serves a number of purposes, particularly around characterizing the type of criminal actors involved and developing appropriate and properly contextualized regulatory and social responses. However, there are no clear-cut divisions between these three phases. The trafficking of cultural objects is perhaps best seen as a series of often ad hoc criminal actors and networks (Sargent *et al.*, 2020) that interface in contact zones where boundaries are blurred and suspect antiquities are effectively laundered for public consumption (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2019). While it may be hard to distinguish where 'source' ends and 'transit' begins or where 'transit' ends and 'market' begins in a cultural objects smuggling case, the concept of transit remains as a connective phase, linking source to market, and thus, at times, linking elite white-collar dealers and collectors of cultural objects to people and groups that can easily be characterized as serious criminal actors (Mackenzie and Davis, 2014).

The transit phase has two clear functions. First, transit moves cultural objects from their point of origin, which is often but not always a lower income country, to their point of consumption, which is often but not always a high income country, mitigating the reality that source-end antiquities 'suppliers' are unlikely to ever come in direct contact with elite market-end antiquities consumers.[3] Secondly, transit can serve to 'launder' an illicit cultural object, making it consumable, again, for elite buyers who wish to openly consume and publicly display the antiquities that they purchase. The market for illicit cultural objects stands in stark contrast to that of most other illicit commodities in this regard. While illicitly trafficked drugs, arms, or people tend to enter into equally illicit market consumption situations, illicit cultural objects are sold at public auction or legitimate gallery storefronts for open display in, among other places, our most respected museums. The transit phase serves to create physical and documentary distance between the object and the initial act of looting or theft, obscuring its illicit origins.

Much of the refinement of the idea of the transit phase as structurally significant to the illicit movement of cultural objects comes from the work of Prott and O'Keefe (1989).[4] Using the term 'transit state', they defined these as 'countries which have flourishing trades servicing' the movement of cultural objects because of the particulars of local law and policy and/or countries that are 'used as a kind of pipeline' for cultural objects and are 'known as appropriate places for buyers to look for, and sellers to dispose of' certain cultural objects (Prott and O'Keefe, 1989, p. 531).

They differentiated transit states from what they called importing states by positioning the transit locations as having a connective quality centered on movement and transfer.

Although the terms 'transit state' or 'transit country' are still commonly used in discussion of the illicit movement of cultural objects, the term 'transit port' has entered this discourse as essentially equivalent to 'transit state' but without possible limitations of thinking on a country level.[5] Transit ports, then, have been defined as locations that facilitate the social functions of transit described above (Alder and Polk 2002; Kersel, 2006; Nordstrom, 2007; Casey, 2017; Mackenzie and Yates, 2016; Smith, 2019). They are the physical in-between points that an illicit cultural object passes through to get, physically, from point of theft to point of final sale. These are also places where the cultural objects collect new background stories, false histories, fake or misleading paperwork, and other things that allow market-end buyers to mitigate their own risk and consume the antiquities 'guilt-free' (Mackenzie, 2014). As such, cultural objects may pass through seemingly illogical geographic routes through multiple transit ports located far from both source and ultimate market. These routes often relate to the perceived laxness in customs, border security, or government oversight in certain locations. They may also relate to the story that can be constructed by traffickers and dealers around the location, for officials at certain transit ports may be quick to issue legitimate-looking export documentation, or it might be that the objects can be falsely portrayed as coming from an 'old collection' within the transit port.[6]

Traffickers may work their way up to their destination market by moving illicit cultural objects through transit ports of increasing amounts of oversight and regulation and, thus, decreasing suspicion. This is especially relevant in smuggling cases that involve countries that have been embroiled in recent conflicts, such as Afghanistan; customs agents in antiquities market countries such as the USA or the UK will approach a crate that is marked as coming from Afghanistan much differently than they would a crate that is marked as coming from Hong Kong. All told, transit ports make illicit antiquities consumable: they expose consumers to cultural objects that they would be unable to access through their usual social circles while simultaneously obscuring the objects' dubious pasts.

Prior research into the function of transit ports defines them as, ultimately, physical locations. They are freeports, airports, warehouses, or premises of antiquities brokers located in third or fourth countries. We believe that digital spaces can serve many of the same functions of physical transit ports, allowing illicit cultural objects to transition from a questionable source to be consumed publicly by a 'market', like in the case of the so-called 'Afghan Genizah'.

3 The Creation and Digitization of the 'Afghan Genizah'

In the early 1990s and into the 2000s, several hundred fragments of manuscripts from Afghanistan—handwritten items, including both literary and documentary texts, written on parchment, paper, and other materials—emerged on the international art market. They entered important art collections including the Khalili Collections (see Sims-Williams, 1997; Naveh and Shaked, 2012) and the Schøyen Collection (see Prescott and Munch Rasmussen, 2020). Ancient written documents from Afghanistan have been known in art-market and academic circles for decades, but they have recently become the center of much excitement, with the appearance of new research and publications as well as digitization projects, as we discuss below. They thus offer an interesting case for studying academia's role in facilitating the creation of new forms of cultural objects transit.

Unlike artifacts that have emerged during regular archaeological excavations in Afghanistan, such as those conducted by the Italian ISMEO or by the Herat-Projects mission (see, for example, Filigenzi and Giunta, 2009; Franke, 2015), the manuscripts discussed in this paper are distinct for their lack of provenance. This means that the complete details of the objects' movements and ownership chains from the moment of finding to their current locations are unknown. On the other hand, something is known about their geographic provenience. The origin of many of those fragments has been traced to the regions of Bamiyan, Ghur, Rob, and Balkh, in northern

Afghanistan (see Huseini, 2021). This is considered the most likely origin for the fragments from Afghanistan acquired in the Khalili Collections in the 1990s and early 2000s, as mentioned, for instance, by Sims-Williams (1997) and (2000) and by Khan (2014); and for those acquired in the National Library of Israel in the 2010s, as mentioned, for instance, by Haim (2019) and Azad (2021). Moreover, as we discuss below, it is very likely that their transferal abroad has occurred within the last thirty years and can therefore be understood within contemporary legal frameworks. While unprovenanced manuscripts from Afghanistan circulated in previous decades (e.g., Scarcia, 1963), all the available accounts suggest that the group in question may be connected to Afghanistan's protracted instability during and after the 1990s civil war, when they 'mysteriously' (Finkelman and Haim, 2017) appeared on the international art market. Further below we will discuss in more detail the relationship between the portion of Afghanistan fragments recently digitized and made available on 'Ktiv' and the illicit trade in antiquities from Afghanistan.

Since the early 1990s, the fragments under discussion have been scattered in various collections. Many fragments ended in private hands. A large corpus was acquired in the prestigious N.D. Khalili's Collections, based in London.[7] Other fragments were purchased by Hirayama Ikuo and entered the Silk Road Museum.[8] In the same period, Norwegian collector Martin Schøyen also acquired manuscripts from northern Afghanistan on the London market (Prescott and Munch Rasmussen, 2020). At least 250 fragments from northern Afghanistan were bought by the National Library of Israel in the 2010s with the support of private donors.[9] While the connection between these various collections has not been proven, it is worth briefly mentioning these corpora of documents together because there is some evidence that they originated in the same places in northern Afghanistan and appeared on the international market in the same period. This is suggested by both published and informally transmitted accounts regarding the objects' acquisition in London, discussed below. Several experts consider such corpora to be related. For example, Huseini (2021) appears to consider the fragments from Afghanistan held in London, West Jerusalem, and Kabul to be related at least to some extent, and mentions that these have appeared on the art market since the 1990s. Sims-Williams (2012) studied together Bactrian fragments from northern Afghanistan that are now in various countries, establishing a connection between the Khalili Collections and other collections. Moreover, those collections are academically related in that they have been analyzed by the same groups of scholars. For example, Shaul Shaked was involved in the acquisition and study of documents from northern Afghanistan now in the Khalili Collections, the Schøyen Collection, and the NLI (see Harris, 2012; Naveh and Shaked, 2012).

Since their appearance on the art market the fragments have been studied in specially curated volumes, articles, and PhD dissertations, and they were presented at prestigious academic conferences, increasingly in recent years.[10] Studies of these materials include Naveh and Shaked (2012); Khan (2014); Sims-Williams (2000) and (2012); Azad and Firoozbakhsh (2020); and Haim (2019) and (2019b). Overall, the documents have provided scholars with new sources about the historical regions of Khurasan and Bactria, about which little material evidence was previously available. They are written in many languages and scripts, and they concern various communities that existed at the crossroads of Hellenistic, Islamicate, and Persianate cultures, laying at the fringes of major empires and at the center of historiographical nodes: the Silk Road, Jewish history in the Middle East, late antiquity, and other topics of historical and modern political relevance. In particular, the manuscripts from northern Afghanistan purchased by the NLI date from the 11th to the 13th centuries CE, at the time of the Ghaznavid and the Ghuri rulers (see Haim, 2019; on the historical context, see Rasikh, 2020).

According to NLI curator Yoel Finkelman, initially the art market did not pay much attention to these manuscripts. When the price increased, few research institutions could afford to purchase them (Finkelman and Haim, 2017).[11] However, this situation changed in the 2000s. Following the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the public destruction of cultural heritage in Bamiyan, and the subsequent development of 'rescue narratives' surrounding the export of cultural objects from Afghanistan like other conflict zones (Rico 2017a; Munch Rasmussen and Justnes, 2020; Hardy, 2021), the fragments grew in popularity.

These developments were accompanied by substantial and institutional changes in the research agendas in the field of Middle East studies, including a growing emphasis on non-Muslim religious groups and non-Arabic texts (see Shami and Miller-Idriss, 2016; Keskin, 2018). Meanwhile, with the emergence of projects for the digital preservation and musealization of cultural heritage, new opportunities have arisen for academics to engage with unprovenanced and privately held artifacts.

Both the Nour Foundation of N.D. Khalili and the NLI have promoted scholarship on the unprovenanced Afghanistan manuscripts and have supported their digitization. Selected items in the Khalili Collections are shown in high resolution on Google Arts & Culture.[12] At the time we write, however, the placement of the NLI collection on 'Ktiv' is the largest and most relevant digitization project.[13] About 220 fragments have been digitized since 2017 and can be found on 'Ktiv' under the label 'Afghanistan Genizah'. Information about these fragments as well as those in the Khalili Collections can be found also on other academic websites, such as the website of the prestigious Princeton Geniza Lab.[14]

The objects labelled 'Afghan Genizah' are now physically stored in West Jerusalem. However, their digitization and publication on 'Ktiv' have allowed scholars also outside Israel to do research on those artifacts without needing to physically access them. Digitization has boosted academic interest in the manuscripts. The 'Invisible East' at the University of Oxford is an important project with research programs largely based on the unprovenanced manuscripts from northern Afghanistan. It brings together two projects: 'Persian in Documents',' funded by the UK's Art & Humanities Research Council (started in 2018), and 'Going Local in the Perso-Islamic Lands: Afghan Geniza, Islamisation and Language in the pre-Mongol Islamic East', funded by the European Research Council (started in 2020).[15] This and other projects contribute to disseminating use of the unprovenanced Afghanistan manuscripts internationally through digital tools. Namely, they do so by using the digital images on 'Ktiv' for research and publications, by replicating the same images on different platforms (such as blogs, social media, and the websites of academic partners), by sharing on their own websites the metadata made available by the NLI (which does not include information about the manuscripts' provenance), and finally, by creating additional information on new databases.

The fragments have also received attention from the wider public thanks to successful communication campaigns and public scholarship initiatives. For instance, several Afghanistan documents currently in the NLI were exhibited at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Peterburg in 2019 and 2020 alongside artifacts in the Museum's collection.[16] The acquisition by the NLI has received significant media attention, with coverage by networks like *FoxNews*, *CBS News*, and *RT Network*, and by journals including the *New York Times*, *Haaretz*, *the HuffPost*, and the *Jerusalem Post* (see Press, 2016). This interest is partly due to the manuscripts' relevance for the history of Jewish communities in the Middle East and Central Asia, an important feature which, however, has received more visibility in the media than other components of the corpus acquired by the NLI, such as its inclusion of Islamic legal texts, Quranic fragments, and administrative documents.

The misnomer 'Afghan Genizah', first heard on television in 2011, probably helped to communicate the corpus' significance by conveniently forging a parallel between the Afghanistan fragments and the better-known 'Cairo Genizah'.[17] The Cairo Genizah is an important corpus of ca. 400,000 fragments once stored inside a synagogue of Cairo, where they were discarded over time. The Cairo Genizah has been studied since the nineteenth century and is relatively famous also outside academia (see Hoffman and Cole, 2011). By 'genizah' scholars refer to the ancient 'counter-archival' practice observed by Jewish communities of 'consigning worn-out texts in Hebrew script not to outright destruction but to a slow decay in dignified limbo, usually in a storage chamber or cemetery' annexed to a synagogue (Rustow, 2020, pp. 1–2). Unlike the Cairo Genizah, the Afghanistan documents now in West Jerusalem are not a historical genizah because they cannot be traced back to such a storage chamber. Little is known about the documents' discovery, as we discuss further below, and there is no indication that they were found together inside or near a synagogue. Only some documents in this corpus appear to be related to each other and might therefore be studied as dossiers (for an overview, see Haim, 2019 and 2017). The majority, however, appear

to originate in various locations in Afghanistan and refer to various individuals, periods, and religious groups. Overall, the documents are a corpus only because they came to constitute a collection in the NLI, and not because it is documentable that they historically belonged together.

Historians have often acknowledged this incongruence in passing (e.g., Haim, 2019, p. 70). Nonetheless, many have kept using the misnomer for convenience.

In evoking the image of old Hebrew papers amassed inside a synagogue, this term practically suggests a false history for the unprovenanced Afghanistan fragments. One might understand that they had a similar story as the Cairo documents found in the Ben Ezra synagogue, instead of being illicitly sold on the market in recent years. But while the parallel between those two corpora is misleading, given their different features and histories, it describes real institutional links between collectors, foundations, and scholars.

Expertise on the Cairo Genizah and experience with digitizing that corpus have already facilitated the study of the fragments from Afghanistan and will probably keep promoting their inclusion into advanced Digital Humanities projects (on the Genizah and the Digital Humanities, see Goldberg, 2017; Goldberg and Krakowski, 2019). 'Ktiv' is the result of partnership between the NLI and the Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society, based in Canada, a leading institution for the study of the Cairo Genizah materials. The portal is meant to provide centralized access to Hebrew manuscripts worldwide, though it includes many items also in other languages.[18] The digitization of the Afghanistan fragments draws on experience from the 'Friedberg Genizah Project', one of the most technologically advanced projects to date for the study of manuscripts, centered on the Cairo Genizah. Collaboration between scholars based at universities in Israel, North America, and Europe doing research on either or both corpora of texts—the Cairo Genizah and the unprovenanced Afghanistan fragments—show clearly that such scholarly exchanges extend beyond traditional publishing and into Digital Humanities projects. One development in the field of Genizah studies that seems key in this regard is a new focus on data integration. Based on interoperability, cultural preservation experts have been devising solutions to allow networks of co-operating institutions such as museums or archives to share information on the same objects, instead of simply replicating the same data from one platform to another (see Punzalan, 2014; Marcondes, 2015). Recently, Genizah scholars have also started exploring this function with the goal of creating shared repositories interoperable across websites (Goldberg, 2017).

The digitization of unprovenanced Afghanistan manuscripts in 'Ktiv', thus, takes place within a broader framework of academic and financial investment in such historical artifacts and regions. The ongoing interest of experts, from curators to historians, has been a key in creating a larger audience and an expanded market for those objects. Academic research confirms the social value of the manuscripts, increasing their monetary value on the market (Brodie, 2016; Prescott and Rasmussen, 2020). Moreover, digitization ensures expert access. This has created a feedback loop of sorts: the illicit export of artifacts from Afghanistan might have been incentivized by the interest of scholars, while their digitization has created further academic opportunities. By emphasizing the importance of these manuscripts, renowned academics, research institutions, and funding bodies have contributed to engineering new modes of dispersal by which the objects may be used outside their country of origin, reaching a wider international public.

4 The 'Afghan Genizah' and the illicit trade in antiquities

The digitization of the Afghanistan manuscripts and placement on 'Ktiv' is related to the illicit trade in antiquities from Afghanistan. The project, in fact, differs from other digitization efforts in that its target is a group of recently purchased unprovenanced antiquities, whose acquisition and use raise serious ethical concerns. Scholars working with the Afghanistan manuscripts in the NLI have often noted in passing that the fragments are unprovenanced, though this is mostly done without problematizing this information. While experts appear to agree on the items' geographic origin, this was determined by clues contained in the documents themselves, such as linguistic features and placenames (Haim, 2019; Azad, 2021; Benfey,

2020 and similarly, regarding the fragments in the Khalili Collections, Naveh and Shaked, 2012; Khan, 2014), and not because there is written record of where and when the items were found. At the same time, we have come across many informally transmitted accounts pointing to the objects' finding and sale on the market in recent decades. Indeed, some scholars have already raised concerns about use of this collection.[19]

The manuscripts purchased by the NLI are accompanied by many accounts of their 'discovery' (Press, 2016). Some of these are clearly false or implausible, such as a story involving a family of foxes (on this genre, see Mroczek, 2018).[20] Others resemble previously fabricated 'rescue narratives' concerning the Taliban (see Munch Rasmussen and Justnes, 2020; Hardy, 2021a). Many of these stories emphasize the discovery's 'mystique' in ways that excite consumers instead of exposing concerns about the concrete possibility that the objects in question were found through illicit excavations in a conflict zone. The use of mystifying words does not apply only to social media and television coverage of these findings, but also to some publications by experts. For instance, Finkelman and Haim (2017) describe the appearance of the manuscripts as 'mysterious'. The word 'mystery' was used by Finkelman also in the catalogue of the Hermitage exhibition (Pritula, 2019, p. 21). Likewise, the appearance on the market of the Afghanistan fragments bought by Khalili has been associated with a sense of 'thrill' and 'excitement' (Sims-Williams, 1997; Korn, 2015).

The NLI has provided generic reports about the collection's origins on its website and in interviews to the press (e.g., Harris, 2012). A report from 2013 seems to suggest that the objects were offered to the library for purchase in the early 2010s and that 'the news' of their finding was recent and 'backed up by numerous photographs'.[21] In the report it is mentioned that the objects had 'left Afghanistan and reached antiquaries in different countries'. A second notice from 2016, published on the NLI's website following the purchase of additional documents, mentions generically the 'discovery' of the 'Afghan Genizah', saying that the library 'procured a portion of this rare treasure' thanks to the financial support of external partners.[22] These reports do not indicate that the manuscripts were the product of either permitted archaeological activity or legal export and do not mention the ownership chain. Moreover, there is no evidence that the manuscripts were found in a single spot rather than several locations.

The information provided by the NLI and by experts often mentions the intermediary role of dealers. Writing for the *Jewish Review of Books*, NLI curator Yoel Finkelman and expert Ofir Haim explain that the manuscripts were known for about thirty years before the NLI acquired the whole collection from dealer Lenny Wolfe (Finkelman and Haim, 2017). Wolfe is a well-known figure in the sector and his name has been frequently associated with this purchase (e.g., Hasson, 2016).[23] Significantly, some accounts connect the deal to London: dealer Menashe Goldelman, who was reportedly arrested in 2014 in connection to smuggling antiquities from Russia (Hasson, 2014), might have acted as a broker for facilitating the sale of Afghanistan fragments in London; while Shaul Shaked, a Professor at Hebrew University who has studied unprovenanced Afghanistan artifacts also in the Khalili Collections and in the Schøyen collection, might have seen some of the fragments in London before these were acquired for the NLI (Harris, 2012; Hasson, 2014). Shaked himself mentioned that he had personally seen Aramaic documents from northern Afghanistan in the hands of London dealers before he brought them to Khalili's attention (Naveh and Shaked, 2012).

In contrast to the murkiness characterizing the story of the manuscripts now outside Afghanistan, there is more information about a portion of documents which remained inside the country. About 100 fragments from among those dug up illicitly in the early 1990s in Ghur were recovered, published (Khwaja and Saqi, 2010), and later donated to the National Library of Afghanistan thanks to the efforts of local librarians and scholars, particularly Mirza Khwaja Muhammad, Nabi Saqi, and Jawan Shir Rasikh. It is known when, where, and how these fragments were found and gathered before being brought to the National Library in Kabul; in general, the connection of this portion of documents to illicit excavations has not been either concealed or excused by scholars who have studied them (see Huseini, 2021).[24]

Concerns about the illicit origins of the so-called 'Afghan Genizah' in the NLI are therefore concrete. It is likely that the items forming this collection are the

product of irregular excavations, unauthorized export, and transnational trafficking. Both the mention of thirty years and that of London are significant details in the story of how the NLI acquired the manuscripts, because they are consistent with what is known about the illicit trade of antiquities from Afghanistan (see Feroozi *et al.*, 2004; Aikins, 2021). The known story of the documents from Ghur donated to the National Library of Afghanistan gives us an idea of how similar artifacts may have been found. Decades of conflict have affected gravely Afghanistan's people and cultural heritage, and the violence continues as we write. Besides dramatic episodes such as the looting of the National Museum in Kabul and the damage inflicted in Bamiyan in the early 2000s, the country has seen widespread loss in areas of historical significance (see Warikoo, 2002; Feroozi *et al.*, 2004; Huseini, 2012; Gascoigne *et al.*, 2013). It is known that some ancient manuscripts from northern Afghanistan bought by Schøyen in the 1990s came from the looted National Museum of Kabul (see Lunden, 2005) and it is impossible to exclude that this happened also for other unprovenanced artifacts sold in London in the same period. Several studies have pointed out the connection between the civil war, looting, and the illicit export of cultural objects throughout the 1990s (see Ansari, 2002; Feroozi *et al.*, 2004). The illicit trade in antiquities has been associated with armed conflict and criminal activities in Afghanistan also in the 2000s (Peters, 2010; Campbell, 2013). Remote assessment analyses show us that looting in Bamiyan, Ghur, and Balkh—the same regions with which the 'Afghan Genizah' materials are usually associated—increased during the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s (Hammer *et al.*, 2017). Cultural institutions in northern Afghanistan have been severely damaged by armed conflict, such as the Museum of Islamic and Pre-Islamic Art and its library in Ghazni, whose destruction in 2014 was documented by Ajmal Yar (Hardy, 2014). The export of cultural objects from northern Afghanistan must therefore be read with the grain of what is known about the transnational illicit trade in antiquities and contextualized within experiences of violence by Afghanistan's populations.

Returning to the digitization of these documents, important questions about the physical and virtual transferability of illicit cultural objects must be raised. In this case, the story of how exactly and from where the fragments reached Israel—whether directly from Afghanistan or via intermediary countries—remains unclear. Questions about the collection's physical transfer arise considering Afghanistan's national laws regulating the protection of its cultural heritage and the realization of archaeological projects on its territory, including laws on export (see Afghanistan's Law on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Properties from the years 1958, 1980, and 2004; and ratification or acceptance of UNESCO Conventions in the years 1979, 2005, and 2017).[25] It is, however, to questions about the *digital* transfer of historical documents that we wish to turn.

5 'Digital Transit' and 'Digital Transit Ports'

For a digital space to serve as a 'digital transit port' for illicit cultural objects, and not merely as a repository of digital copies, it would have to provide traffickers and consumers with the equivalent outcomes as physical transit ports. The digital transit port would have to: (i) distance cultural objects from their source locations and illicit origins; (ii) connect consumers to illicit cultural objects; and (iii) legitimize illicit cultural objects by giving them the appearance of respectability. In other words, the digital transit port would have to transform the illicit cultural objects that pass through it into something that is openly consumable by elite and white-collar actors in high-income countries, where consumption is not limited to financial purchase, but also research and other intellectual use. To evaluate this possibility, let us return to the example of 'Ktiv' and the undocumented manuscripts from Afghanistan that pass through it.

5.1 The digital transit port distances cultural objects from their source locations and illicit origins

The objects on 'Ktiv' are presented in a clean, clear, digital space surrounded by the instruments of digital research and the trappings of academia: rulers, color control patches, and the ability to inspect all sides of the piece from multiple angles and different levels of contrast. The overwhelming impression, almost an

assertion, is that the objects exist (and have always existed) within a socially acceptable museum or archival space. The objects' display does not provide information either on the origins of the manuscripts nor on the pathways that they took to their current physical or digital location. The presentation provides no hint of looting or trafficking, conflict or destruction, theft or loss. In most cases, even the word 'Afghanistan' is only linked to a manuscript in reference to 'shelf marks' rather than through acknowledgement that the piece originated in Afghanistan.

In this way, 'Ktiv' facilitates the distancing of these objects both from Afghanistan and from the possibility of illicit origins by failing to acknowledge either. The fact that the manuscripts are digitized creates a further sense of separation between a physical object that might have been looted in Afghanistan and the ultimate consumer of the piece. The digitization process can be used to effectively abstract the image from its real counterpart, and the object from its real source. A physical object must be 'explained' somehow, at least to most expert consumers: it has to come from 'somewhere', and consumers must be provided with sufficient support towards accepting the object's legitimacy. A digital object, however, can be accessed and experienced without having to confront the stark tangibility of a physical undocumented cultural object. It is telling that, in contrast to the many cases of forged ownership chains and stories that have been attached to physical objects in museum and private collections (one example being the Aramaic incantation bowls from Iraq in the Schøyen collection, as mentioned by Prescott and Munch Rasmussen, 2020), neither accurate nor forged provenance information is given in the metadata accompanying the images in the 'Afghan Genizah'. The digitization process may be even more effective in distancing cultural objects from their illicit origins than physical transit ports.

5.2 It connects consumers to illicit cultural objects

The sleek and professional user interface of 'Ktiv' connects the digital versions of these manuscripts to experts, scholars, enthusiasts, and anyone else who has access to the platform. It is incredibly easy for many who would not normally encounter documents from Afghanistan to find and access them via the digital portal within seconds. The portal serves as a mediator between the elite white-collar consumer and the darker origins of the manuscript, described above, and in this sense it is similar to physical transit ports. This function is enhanced by the connection of different repositories including both documented and unprovenanced artifacts. For example, as the Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society and the NLI work at making digitized collections connected across websites and institutions, they might facilitate the integrated use of corpora like, on the one hand, the Genizah documents moved to Cambridge in the 1890s and, on the other hand, the Afghanistan manuscripts sold on the London art market in the 2000s.[26] Projects aimed at interoperability are key in this respect. The application of interoperability to digitized material culture is already affecting the ownership and accessibility status of digital artifacts (Punzalan, 2014; Marcondes, 2015). This feature also highlights the capacity of digital platforms to move cultural objects on an international scale, creating transnationally shared virtual collections out of nationally located physical ones, and facilitating access to unprovenanced artifacts.

Moreover, the digital transit allows third countries to invest public resources on cultural objects in cases in which the same goods may not physically reach those countries without posing legal issues. As an example, at the time of writing, in principle it would not be possible for unprovenanced artifacts excavated in Afghanistan within the last thirty years to be brought either into the European Union or into the UK without meeting specific legal requirements. Such requirements also affect research institutions.[27] On the other hand, publicly funded research can take place normally if the 'import' of cultural objects is not physical but virtual.[28] In other words, the funding, the resources, the staff, and the research outcome based on work on illicit cultural objects may be located inside those countries even when the source materials may not. Instead, the items can be hosted as digital data on websites and catalogues; digital images may be either copied on various platforms or shared across interoperable websites, without the material object having moved. This type of virtual acquisition, even if it differs from instances of actual purchase, creates the possibility for research on problematic materials to be housed at public institutions, borrowed by public

universities, and funded through public bodies without breaching the law.

As such, 'Ktiv' and similar platforms can be seen less as neutral repositories and more as spaces that undocumented objects may pass through on their way to international consumers, in a process of transfer, transition, and transit. The people who consume the digital objects on 'Ktiv' do so in a way that allows them to mitigate the usual financial, legal, and social risks of engaging with undocumented cultural objects and to do so openly and publicly.

5.3 It legitimizes illicit cultural objects by giving them the appearance of respectability

The 'Ktiv' portal is hosted by the National Library of Israel, with each digital object borrowing the legitimacy of that institution. The inclusion of digital objects on the site implies that a respectable cultural entity with both institutional and scholarly backing considers them to be acceptable and useable. The 'Afghan Genizah' objects also borrow on the respectability of the possessor institutions of other manuscripts housed within the platform (e.g., Yale University) and from manuscript collections that have licit, less opaque, or simply better-known origins (e.g., the Genizah fragments in Cambridge University Library). Indeed, undocumented manuscripts within the portal are not distinguished in search results in any way from manuscripts with extensive documentation and demonstrably legal origins, creating a false equivalence between the two. This mirrors the function of physical transit ports, which are used to provide illicit cultural objects with the same appearance as licit cultural objects so that consumers cannot differentiate. Inclusion on the digital portal becomes the equivalent of, or an addition to, the legitimizing 'paperwork' that cultural objects gain by passing through physical transit ports.

The 'Ktiv' portal transforms the undocumented manuscripts that pass through it into digital objects that are openly consumable by elite actors, who are mostly based in higher income countries. They can open the website and access manuscripts with opaque origins in locations that have experienced both conflict and significant recent looting of cultural property. The digitization process thus transforms a difficult cultural object into a neutralized digital artifact. The portal as a digital transit port transfers those objects to international consumers who then can use them for various purposes, including in academic publications, and who may not otherwise access the objects. This facilitates the export and import of virtual versions of illicit cultural objects over countless international borders without the need for moving the physical objects.

6 Digital Preservation of Illicit Cultural Objects

Together with accessibility and education, preservation goals are central to many digitization projects sponsored by educational and research institutions, such as museums and libraries, in which artifacts are replicated as digital representations (see, for example, Stewart, 2018). Digitization can ensure the preservation of an object's attributed cultural value and memory, so long as the digital copy is also preserved over time. It can help preserve information when the objects become inaccessible. It can protect fragile objects, such as manuscripts, by providing advanced tools for manipulating the items without touching them (see VanSnick and Ntanos, 2018). Civil society can wield digitization to advocate for the protection of endangered cultural objects and, more broadly, of endangered local, linguistic, or national heritages (see, among others, Kominko, 2015; Odartey-Wellington, 2018; Ammouri, 2021).

However, these various aspects of digital preservation are only effective if they rest on principles of ethical use and access. Instead, when digital preservation is not accompanied by responsible handling of individual artifacts and collective heritages, it can become an instrument to conceal and forget harmful illicit acts, such as unauthorized excavations, looting, and trafficking, and it may even inspire more destruction. We contend that the digitization of illicit cultural objects contributes to harming local communities and their heritages instead of protecting them. Digitization projects that facilitate the transformation of looted, stolen, or illicitly trafficked antiquities into openly consumable cultural objects can be seen to hinder preservation efforts.

The so-called 'Afghan Genizah' well exemplifies these problems. First, the digitization of these materials is peculiar (though not unique) because it concerns artifacts acquired recently and directly on the market. Unlike many other digitization projects, such as those carried out by the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library in Palestine and elsewhere, the manuscripts in question were moved abroad and sold before their placement online. They are not connected to any recorded collection in their country of origin. As discussed above, what is known about the formation of the 'Afghan Genizah' leads us to the art market in London and West Jerusalem, and not to legitimate preservation programs in Afghanistan. It seems that no local actors among those invested in protecting Afghanistan's cultural heritage on the ground were involved in either the acquisition or the digitization project, be it legitimate international organizations, libraries, museums, or archeological institutes in the country. While other digitization projects try to precede the risk of destruction by creating 'digital surrogates' (e.g., Schmidtke, 2019) that may replace the originals in case of loss, here the digitization was *preceded by* destructive acts and afforded by illicit activities which made the unprovenanced manuscripts available on the international market. There is therefore no link between the placement of those materials on 'Ktiv' and concrete efforts at protecting the artifacts from destruction in their original place.

Moreover, the digitization of unprovenanced documents contradicts preservation efforts because it encourages the dispersion of endangered cultural heritages. Many scholars and activists have been leveraging the potential of Digital Humanities to *redress* dispersion. This may be done by enhancing engagement with local collections, which thanks to digital tools can become better known and accessible; one successful example is the digitization of the Khalidi Library's manuscript collection.[29] It might also be done by supporting the repatriation of exported items to their country of origin, to be accompanied by digital copies that users abroad may also access. But digitization can also be a pretext for institutions in destination countries to avoid dealing with the restitution of physical artifacts (Geismar, 2008; Bond, 2018). The Afghanistan fragments in the NLI are a case in point, as their digitization was possible only because of the objects' removal from their communities and original contexts. At the same time, 'Ktiv' facilitates the objects' transfer across borders by making their digital replicas consumable by international audiences. Both materially and digitally, the act of placing and sharing those materials online does not hinder, but rather profits from, the dispersal of Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

That such fragments may have various origins (e.g., hypothetically, digs, private collections, museums), that they may have been found through violent or criminal acts, and that they were dispersed in many collections is not visible from their misrepresentation in 'Ktiv' as one coherent 'genizah'. Not everything ended up in Israel; other undocumented artifacts from northern Afghanistan were moved to other countries, as mentioned above. Some fragments which are now stored in various places might have been found together.[30]

In principle, digital tools can bring together scattered cultural objects as reconstructed digital images. Through digitization, it is possible to create meta-collections of shared data, somehow transcending national borders, so that researchers and visitors may view and manipulate the fragments as if they were, in fact, 'reunited' (Punzalan, 2014). Platforms such as the Friedberg Genizah Project, the NLI's main partner for 'Ktiv', already offer tools for re-joining fragments from various collections.[31] However, in this way digitization may easily end up concealing the dispersal of a corpus which in reality remains fragmented. This seems especially problematic for cultural objects which are both dispersed and unprovenanced, and about which the suspicion persists that they were looted or stolen. When such objects are made digitally movable and sharable as 'reunited' collections, one may easily forget that doing the same would be all but impossible, and in some cases illegal, for the real objects.

Finally, digitization is an obstacle to preservation whenever it obfuscates the violent contexts in which the artifacts were initially found, notably in the case of armed conflict (Um, 2020) and forcefully when the digital platform functions also as a digital transit port for making illicit cultural objects accessible to international audiences across borders. By giving respectability, desirability, and visibility to such objects, these digitization projects may even increase the

market price of similar artifacts and thus encourage further illicit and criminal acts.

The 'Afghan Genizah' digitization project, thus, can be seen as unrelated from preservation efforts regarding Afghanistan's cultural heritage. One might even say that had those objects been protected no digitized 'Afghan Genizah' would exist.

7 Digital Preservation and the Question of Access

If the digitization of illicit cultural objects hinders the physical preservation of endangered cultural heritages, it is doubtful that it may advance the preservation of historical memory and knowledge production, either. One might object, in favor of studying the unprovenanced fragments from Afghanistan, even knowing that they are undocumented, that digital projects such as 'Ktiv' promote the manuscripts' access worldwide, thus benefiting the international academic community as well as the communities from whom the objects were subtracted. This is questionable on several levels.

First, we maintain that it is questionable that the historical information we can gather from illicit cultural objects is significant enough to justify the harmful impact of their use and legitimization. This is a view shared by some scholars, but strongly denied by others (see Brodie, 2011 for a more in-depth treatment of this debate). Whatever one's stance is on this issue, ultimately unprovenanced items are decontextualized items; the historical information they might still provide is limited by this fact, and it is often distorted by their removal and trafficking (see Marlowe's (2013) concept of 'shakey ground'; see also Mazza, 2021). In addition, there are concerns about the increasing appearance of forged artifacts on the market (Burleigh, 2008; Justnes and Munch Rasmussen, 2019; Gornall, 2020). Indeed, some have expressed surprise about the exceptionally good preservation of the Afghanistan documents purchased by the NLI, which one expert called 'unbelievable' (Azad, 2021).[32] Regardless of the experts' final verdict on the question of authenticity, the doubt only exists because the manuscripts are unprovenanced.

Secondly, the ability of digitization projects to reach global audiences is easily overestimated (see Rico, 2017; Fiormonte, 2021). Functionally working as a transit port, the digital platform prioritizes consumption in destination countries, where the objects were brought, and not those from which the objects were taken. Thus, the digital recycling of trafficked cultural property can work for the exclusion of local communities and scholars in the country of origin. Even digitization has physical locations: the location of the artifacts, of the specialized staff digitizing them, of the funding bodies covering the costs, of the countries in which websites are registered, and so on. As Geismar (2018) powerfully reminds us, digital objects are not immaterial. Regarding scholarship on the so-called 'Afghan Genizah', there are very visible threads of collaboration between Israel, North America, and Europe—the same places where those objects became marketable and were purchased. Currently, the inclusion of research institutions in Afghanistan is little, at best. While data regarding the manuscripts may be found on various websites of institutions located in Israel, North America, and Europe, some of these may not be accessed worldwide due to filtering, infrastructural issues, or political factors (see Fiormonte, 2017). Like access to the physical collection in the NLI, access to 'Ktiv' is not guaranteed for anyone anywhere.

For the time being, the collaboration afforded by this digitization project remains somewhat limited to collectors, consumers, and scholars in wealthier destination countries. It is unclear how the placement of those items on 'Ktiv' may concretely benefit either scholars in Afghanistan or people living in the regions of Ghur, Bamiyan, or Balkh. As the financial and logistic burdens of Digital Humanities projects are unevenly distributed, so is access. This is a broader problem of scholarship on dispersed heritages, but one that becomes even more pressing in the face of possibly stolen, looted, or illicitly trafficked objects. In these respects, the digitization of illicit cultural objects may be seen to run counter the fundamental aspiration of the Digital Humanities as a space for promoting inclusivity (see Terras, 2013) and for practicing civic engagement, as described, for instance, by Risam (2019).

8 Conclusion

Using the example of the fragments from northern Afghanistan recently purchased by the State of Israel and digitized by the NLI, we have argued that

alongside physical transit ports digital platforms can also serve as intermediary transit spaces in the illicit trade of antiquities. We believe that the concept of digital transit will prove helpful in at least two respects. First, it can help us theorize and oppose the rise of a variety of new methods for moving illicit cultural objects via the internet and through digital tools, including digital replicas. The digital transit port distances illicit cultural objects from their real origins, it coats them with respectability and desirability, and it makes them more easily accessible by international, mostly white-collar elite audiences in destination countries. Academic institutions and experts are directly involved in this process in that they contribute to creating new modes of digital consumption for illicit cultural objects and to expanding their marketability, in ways that may not only legitimize the objects' presence in scholarship and public discourse, but also help circumvent limitations to use of the physical objects. Secondly, the concept of digital transit can help us reflect critically on the role that Digital Humanities scholarship might have in condoning or even facilitating cultural heritage loss and dispersal, instead of fostering preservation and access. Like other criticalities brought about by digital musealization and preservation, the link between digitization and the illicit trade in antiquities from conflict zones reminds us to stay vigilant about digital scholarship's real impact on, and relationship to, living communities. Ultimately, the same objections that stand for the handling and curation of physical collections of illicit cultural objects must stand also for their digital curation.

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Notes

1 We use the term provenience to mean location of origin, in other words, the object's find spot. We use the term provenance to mean the object's post discovery ownership and possession history.
2 https://web.nli.org.il/sites/nlis/en/manuscript.
3 E.g., the type of person who can spend several million USD on an ancient Cambodian statue at a New York auction house does not 'run in the same circles' as the former Khmer Rouge child soldier turned antiquities looter that Davis and Mackenzie (2014) interviewed on the Thai/Cambodia border.
4 A complete discussion of the foundational research into the role of transit locations for the movement of illicitly transported cultural objects is outside the scope of this article. The reader is referred to Prott and O'Keefe (1989), particularly chapter 5, for a thorough discussion of this idea.
5 Such as situations where only a special economic zone within a state, such as a free-trade zone, serve this transit function for the movement of cultural objects and not the entire state.
6 For example, antiquities stolen from the archaeological site of Sipán in Peru were routed via London on the way to their ultimate market destination of California. This was because they could then be imported into the United States as the 'personal effects' of the deceased British father of one of the co-conspirators. The father had traveled in South America in the 1920s and, in London, the traffickers wrapped the illicit cultural objects in British newspapers, placed in a footlocker, and covered them with the father's old raincoat (Kirkpatrick, 1992).
7 https://www.nasserdkhalili.com/. On the Khalili Collections, see also Blair and Bloom (1995).
8 http://www.silkroad-museum.jp/english/. On this collection, see also Hirayama (2003).
9 https://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/library/news/Acquisitions/Pages/Afghan-Genizah.aspx.
10 A list of volumes based on the Afghanistan documents in the Khalili Collections is available at: https://www.khalilicollections.org/publications. Conferences at which those objects were presented include a 2019 workshop at the Free University of Berlin: https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/islamwiss/Termine/AG-Berlin-Workshop-Prog-Short-Web-version.pdf.
11 Doing so would be an ethical violation, and in some situations, a legal violation as well, but that is a discussion beyond the scope of this article.
12 https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/provincial-life-under-artaxerxes-alexander-the-great/kAKiItGUBhz3KQ.
13 https://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLIS/en/ManuScript/.
14 https://genizalab.princeton.edu/pgp-database/corpus#.
15 See https://invisibleeast.web.ox.ac.uk/home#/; and https://erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/erc-funded-projects/results?search_api_views_fulltext=geniza&f%5B0%5D=call_year%3A2019(accessed 14 August 2022).
16 https://hermitagefoundation.com/geniza-from-the-national-library-of-israel/.
17 The first time the label was used was apparently on Israeli Channel 2: https://youtu.be/Ws50HLHgPnQ.
18 See http://pr.genizah.org/About-History.aspx; https://web.nli.org.il/sites/nlis/en/manuscript/Pages/manuscripts_about.aspx; 'Ktiv' is primarily a platform for studying Hebrew manuscripts. The 'Afghan Genizah' is distinct in this respect. Most of the Afghanistan fragments acquired by the NLI, and ca. 80% of the digitized ones, are written in Farsi.
19 Criticism has been raised at academic meetings, on blogs, and on social media by a few scholars including Jawan Shir Rasikh, Michael Press, Allison Gascoigne, and Cecilia Palombo.
20 The story concerning foxes was reported on Israel's Channel 2 in 2011 (see f. 17) and then replicated elsewhere, such as on the journal *Haaretz* and on the online magazine *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* in 2013. See, respectively: https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-afghan-docs-lift-veil-on-ancient-jewish-past-1.5287537; https://digital.kenyon.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=perejournal.
21 As far as we can tell, these photographs have not appeared or have not been made public.
22 https://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/library/news/Acquisitions/Pages/Afghan-Genizah.aspx; https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/judaism/jewish-people-treasures/afghan-genizah.
23 For example, in occasion of an online talk at the Scottish Jewish Archives Center with the title 'One Man's Forgery is Another Man's Antiquity' (11 April 2021), Wolfe was introduced to the public as the person 'appointed by the Israel Antiquities Authorities to acquire the remainder [of the Afghanistan manuscripts now in the NLI].' See https://www.jewishglasgow.org/event/scottish-jewish-archives-centre-speaker-event-lenny-wolfe-6pm/.
24 The authors thank Reza Huseini and Jawan Shir Rasikh for sharing their knowledge about this portion of

documents and providing materials about them. On the history of Ghur, see Rasikh (2020); Huseini (2021).

25 https://en.unesco.org/cultnatlaws/list; http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/List-State-members-electoral-group-EN-Final-2020.pdf.

26 On this partnership, see the media announcements: https://web.nli.org.il/sites/nli/english/library/news/pages/nli-fjms-agreement.aspx; https://www.timesofisrael.com/documentary-unravels-history-and-digital-future-of-mysterious-cairo-geniza/; https://thecjn.ca/news/canada/library-israel-partners-canadian-group-preserve-jewish-texts/.

27 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv : OJ.L_.2019.151.01.0001.01.ENG; https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protection-of-cultural-property-in-the-event-of-armed-conflict.

28 As already noticed by Argyropoulos *et al.* (2011), the European Commission has published a guidebook on ethical research in which there is no mention of research with stolen, looted, or dubious cultural objects: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/68d86ebd-332f-46c0-8474-49fd93ba098f. On the other hand, EU laws tackle the import, export, and acquisition of such objects, as mentioned above.

29 See the announcement: https://hmml.org/stories/hmml-completes-cataloging-of-khalidi-library-manuscript-collection/.

30 Researchers familiar with the documents have pointed out connections across the collections. These will need more study to be ascertained. For instance, Haim (2019) noticed that it is possible that the fragments from Bamiyan discussed by V. Minorsky in the 1940s, and which to Minorsky's knowledge were returned to Kabul by the French Archaeological Mission, might be related to some of the fragments recently purchased by the NLI.

31 See the FGP website: http://pr.genizah.org/TheResearchPlatform_New.aspx.

32 Although Azad deems these items to be authentic, like other experts do, during a public lecture she mentioned that 'of course, we have been wondering' whether they might be forged (Azad, 2021). Forged antiquities might be sold together with unprovenanced authentic objects. For instance, this has been ascertained for the Schøyen collection (Prescott and Munch Rasmussen, 2020). Some scholars we have talked to suspect that a few unprovenanced documents from Afghanistan in the Khalili Collections are fake.