

A photograph of an ancient, cracked clay bowl, likely a Mesopotamian artifact, filled with cuneiform script. The bowl is set against a background of reddish-brown earth. In the center of the bowl's interior, there is a circular diagram with several intersecting lines forming a star-like pattern. The bowl is cracked, with a prominent crack running across the middle. The overall scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting an archaeological excavation site.

# VARIANT SCHOLARSHIP

*Ancient Texts in Modern Contexts*

EDITED BY

NEIL BRODIE, MORAG M. KERSEL  
& JOSEPHINE MUNCH RASMUSSEN



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Published by Sidestone Press, Leiden  
[www.sidestone.com](http://www.sidestone.com)

Imprint: Sidestone Press Academics  
This book has been peer-reviewed. For more information see  
[www.sidestone.com](http://www.sidestone.com)

Lay-out & cover design: Sidestone Press  
Photograph cover: Example of an Aramaic magic bowl. Courtesy of the  
Penn Museum, object number B9012, image number 228557.

ISBN 978-94-6427-045-7 (softcover)  
ISBN 978-94-6427-046-4 (hardcover)  
ISBN 978-94-6427-047-1 (PDF e-book)

# Contents

<b>Notes on contributors</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Variant scholarship: ancient texts in modern contexts</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Neil Brodie, Morag M. Kersel and Josephine Munch Rasmussen</i>	
<b>PART ONE: ANCIENT TEXTS</b>	
<b>Disciplinary pitfalls: how good philology can mask bad provenance</b>	<b>23</b>
<i>Nils H. Korsvoll</i>	
<b>Provenance and the Dead Sea Scrolls: five examples</b>	<b>41</b>
<i>Årstein Justnes</i>	
<b>Performing papyrology: cartonnage, discovery and provenance</b>	<b>59</b>
<i>Roberta Mazza</i>	
<b>The Ilves Collection: a Finnish manuscript collector and the academic facilitators</b>	<b>79</b>
<i>Rick Bonnie</i>	
<b>Noxious scholarship? The study and publication of First Sealand Dynasty cuneiform tablets</b>	<b>95</b>
<i>Neil Brodie</i>	
<b>Consuming Palmyra</b>	<b>113</b>
<i>Michael Press</i>	
<b>Ethical guidelines for publishing ancient texts</b>	<b>135</b>
<i>Patty Gerstenblith</i>	
<b>The trouble with texts</b>	<b>153</b>
<i>Morag M. Kersel</i>	
<b>PART TWO: MODERN CONTEXTS</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>The value of forgeries for historical research</b>	<b>169</b>
<i>Christa Wirth and Josephine M. Rasmussen</i>	
<b>Someone else's manuscripts: the ethics of textual scholarship</b>	<b>189</b>
<i>Liv Ingeborg Lied</i>	

<b>Between representation and the real: the forgeries of Constantine Simonides</b>	<b>203</b>
<i>Rachel Yuen-Collingridge</i>	
<b>Provenance: genocide. The transfer of Armenian sacred objects to art collections</b>	<b>219</b>
<i>Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh</i>	
<b>Digitizing manuscripts and the politics of extraction</b>	<b>235</b>
<i>Raha Rafii</i>	

# Noxious scholarship? The study and publication of First Sealand Dynasty cuneiform tablets

Neil Brodie

## Abstract

During the early twenty-first century thousands of illicitly-traded cuneiform tablets from Iraq have been studied and published by scholars specialising in the study of cuneiform writing, who call themselves Assyriologists. This chapter investigates how formal and informal communications among Assyriologists might have been fundamental to the acquisition and ongoing trade of a group of First Sealand Dynasty cuneiform tablets. It examines the possible commercial consequences of this scholarly engagement with illicitly-traded cuneiform tablets and considers whether in consequence Assyriological scholarship could be subject to Debra Satz's moral condemnation of 'noxious'.

*Keywords: Iraq, cuneiform, Gilgamesh, First Sealand Dynasty, illicit trade, scholarship*

## Introduction

During the 1990s and early 2000s, tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets looted from archaeological sites in Iraq were acquired by private collections in Europe and North America (Brodie 2020; 2021; Molina 2020). Many of these tablets have since been published without Iraqi permission or Iraqi participation by scholars specialising in the study of cuneiform writing, who call themselves cuneiformists or Assyriologists (Brodie 2008a; 2008b; 2011; 2016; 2020; 2021; Sheikh 2021; Taha 2020). Some of these scholars have recognised that their study material is tainted by looting and illicit trade but have defended their actions by arguing that publication is in the public interest, often characterising publication as an 'obligation' or 'responsibility' (Brodie 2021: 109-110). The same scholars reject accusations that their work has a commercial impact and might help to create or facilitate the market in cuneiform tablets, thereby bearing some responsibility for encouraging the looting in Iraq. They have argued instead that they are acting retrospectively in a detached or disinterested fashion to extract what historical information the looted tablets can provide

once they have come to rest in a private collection – the well-known ‘rescue argument’ (Omland 2006: 233-237; and see Wirth and Rasmussen in this volume for a discussion of the history of the concept). The blame for looting and illicit trade lies elsewhere.

From the starting point of information contained in some recently released court documents relating to the so-called Gilgamesh Dream Tablet, this chapter examines the possible commercial consequences of scholarly engagement with illicitly-traded cuneiform tablets. It investigates how formal and informal communications among Assyriologists might have been fundamental to the acquisition and ongoing trade of a group of First Sealand Dynasty cuneiform tablets and considers whether in consequence Assyriological scholarship could be subject to Debra Satz’s moral condemnation of ‘noxious’ – an example of harmful commercial practice. The first part of the chapter presents what evidence is ascertainable from the court documents and other published sources about the biographies of the tablets concerned. The second part uses this evidence to conduct an in-depth examination of Assyriological involvement with the market in cuneiform tablets.

### **The Gilgamesh Dream Tablet**

The Gilgamesh Dream Tablet (GDT) is a large fragment of cuneiform tablet whose text records part of the Epic of Gilgamesh (Gerstenblith 2022: 64-68). In September 2019, U.S. law enforcement agents seized the GDT from the possession of the Museum of the Bible (MOTB) in Washington D.C. On 18 May 2020, the U.S. Attorney’s Office of the Eastern District of New York filed a civil action to forfeit the tablet, alleging it had originated in Iraq and entered the United States in contravention of U.S. law (USA 2021a). On 26 July 2021, the U.S. District Court of the Eastern District of New York ordered that the GDT should be forfeit and on 23 September 2021 it was returned to the possession of Iraq (USA 2021b; 2021c; 2021d). The MOTB’s associated corporation Hobby Lobby had paid \$1,674,000 for the GDT through a private sale brokered by Christie’s auction house in London, and on the same day as the U.S. Attorney announced its civil forfeiture action in May 2020, Hobby Lobby sued Christie’s and the GDT’s previous owner Joseph David Hackmey to recover the tablet’s purchase price together with associated interest, fees and costs, alleging breach of warranty and fraud (Hobby Lobby 2021a). On 29 November 2021, a settlement agreement was reached though no details have been made public (Hobby Lobby 2021b).

The U.S. Attorney’s forfeiture complaint claims that in March or April 2003, after first viewing the material in London in 2001, an unnamed U.S. ‘Antiquities Dealer’ returned there and bought a group of cuneiform tablets from a family member of the deceased Jordanian dealer Ghassan Rihani. The Antiquities Dealer was accompanied by what the complaint terms a ‘Cuneiform Expert’. They recognised that although the tablets were unreadable because of heavy salt encrustations, they did not bear ordinary administrative texts but were instead ‘potentially of a literary nature’ (USA 2021a: 7). The Antiquities Dealer paid \$50,350 for the tablets, including what would become known as the GDT, along with some other objects. They arranged shipment to the Cuneiform Expert’s California address in the United States, describing the material for customs as ‘inscribed clay fragments over 100 years old’ and failing to declare them as Iraqi antiquities. Once the tablets were in the United States, the Cuneiform Expert cleaned them to remove the salt encrustations and stabilised them by baking and was then able to recognise text from the Epic of Gilgamesh on one of them. In March 2005, the Cuneiform Expert shipped the



... the stars of the heavens [collected together], a piece of the sky fell to me ...	Sharpe 2007: 51
The stars of the sky grew distinct (?), a lump of sky-rock fell down before me.	George 2007: 65
The stars of the heavens [collected together], a boulder of the sky fell by me.	Christie's 2014: 18.

Table 1. Variant translations of GDT obverse, column 1, lines 8-9.

GDT from California to Princeton New Jersey for study and publication by Assyriologist Andrew George, who is an expert on the Epic of Gilgamesh (George 2003) and who was at the time Professor of Babylonian at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and visiting professor at Princeton University (USA 2021a: 8).

In February 2007, the Antiquities Dealer sold the GDT accompanied by a preliminary translation prepared by the Cuneiform Expert to two unnamed buyers for \$50,000. To accompany the sale, when requested, the Antiquities Dealer supplied as provenance a letter stating falsely that the tablet had been purchased in 1981 as part of lot 1503 at a Butterfield and Butterfield auction in San Francisco (USA 2021a: 6-7). The Butterfield and Butterfield catalogue described the lot as comprising a 'box of miscellaneous bronze fragments' – there was no mention of a cuneiform tablet. The Antiquities Dealer's letter further claimed falsely that the tablet had been deaccessioned from a small museum.

George's translation of the GDT text was published in 2007. He stated that he had studied it first hand in 2005 and that the then owner of the tablet, presumably the Antiquities Dealer, wished to remain anonymous (George 2007: 59). George also noted that the tablet had been offered for sale by the Pasadena-based company Michael Sharpe Rare and Antiquarian Books in a catalogue issued on 4 September 2007. Sharpe's catalogue priced the GDT at \$450,000, dated it to c. 1400 BC, and stated that it had been 'professionally conserved according to established archival standards' (Sharpe 2007: 51). The relationship between the two buyers who purchased the GDT from the Antiquities Dealer and Sharpe has not been made public. Sharpe's catalogue noted that the tablet's text was to be published by George and offered some preliminary textual analysis by the California-based independent Assyriologist Renee Kovacs, together with a couple of lines of translation. The translation was not from George's publication so presumably was the work of Kovacs or the Cuneiform Expert (Table 1). Sharpe's catalogue entry also appears to say that a copy of George's translation and 'authentication and a clear provenance' provided by Kovacs would be included with the sale (Sharpe 2007: 51). This close association of Kovacs with the GDT and its text together with her California residence have given rise to speculation that she was the Cuneiform Expert mentioned in the U.S. Attorney's complaint, though that remains to be confirmed (Gerstenblith 2022: 64).

By late 2013, the GDT was in the possession of Tel Aviv resident Hackmey, who in December that year approached the London office of Christie's auction house to discuss selling it (Hobby Lobby 2021a: 6). He had purchased the tablet from a presently unknown person who had in turn bought it from Sharpe for an undisclosed price (Hobby Lobby 2021a: 6). In December 2013, Christie's contacted the Antiquities Dealer who had purchased the tablet from the Rihani family member to ask about its provenance, only to receive a phone call in reply warning that the Butterfield's provenance would 'not hold up to scrutiny at public auction' (USA 2021a: 10). Christie's then contacted Hobby Lobby about

a possible private sale and in March 2014 a representative of Hobby Lobby viewed the tablet in London. Christie's provided Hobby Lobby with a specially-prepared illustrated sale catalogue, which included the following provenance information:

*PROVENANCE:*

*Butterfield and Butterfield, San Francisco, 20 August, 1981, lot 1503.  
with Michael Sharpe Rare and Antiquarian Books, Pasadena, California.*

*PUBLISHED:*

*A.R. George, "The civilizing of Ea-Enkidu: an unusual tablet of the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic", Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale, vol. 101, 2007, pp.59–80 (Christie's 2014: 8).*

The catalogue also included a translation of the GDT's text and discussed George's published findings. Although Christie's was aware of the identity of the Antiquities Dealer and of the Antiquities Dealer's previous possession of the GDT, those facts were not included in the provenance. In July 2014, Hackmey provided Christie's with a declaration that the GDT had been imported into the United Kingdom on 17 March 2009 (USA 2021a: 10-11). Christie's also supplied Hobby Lobby with copies of the Butterfield and Butterfield and Michael Sharpe catalogues (Hobby Lobby 2021a: 9).

By 15 July 2014, Christie's had shipped the GDT to New York and agreed with Hobby Lobby a sale price of \$1,674,000 (USA 2021a: 11). Around 22 July 2014, Hobby Lobby asked Christie's to amend the supplied invoice to include the tablet's approximate date of production and Iraq as its country of origin. In response, on 24 July Christie's e-mailed Hobby Lobby the revised invoice, stating that:

*Here is the revised invoice for the Gilgamesh tablet, stating its place of creation and date.*

*Regarding earlier provenance:*

*We can safely say it left Iraq before 1981 as that is the date it was sold in a Butterfield's auction in San Francisco. The person who bought it in the Butterfields sale told us it was part of lot 1503 and that it was heavily encrusted with salts and unreadable. [He or She] also mentioned that at the time, it was said to have been de-accessioned from a small museum, and so in all likelihood it was in the US well before 1981. Unfortunately Butterfields no longer have their consignor records so we could not corroborate this further. It was subsequently with Michael Sharp[e] (USA 2021a: 12-13).*

After receiving this communication, Hobby Lobby finalised purchase of the GDT and on 30 July paid Christie's \$1,674,000 (Hobby Lobby 2021a: 9). To avoid New York sales tax, in September 2014, Christie's flew the tablet from New York to Oklahoma City for delivery to Hobby Lobby (USA 2021a: 11; Hobby Lobby 2021a: 10). After the purchase, Hobby Lobby transferred the GDT to the MOTB for display at the museum's opening in November 2017 (Hobby Lobby 2021a: 10). At no point was Hackmey's name disclosed to Hobby Lobby as the seller.

## First Sealand Dynasty cuneiform tablets

George attributed the GDT to the First Sealand Dynasty and dated it to the sixteenth century BC, at the very beginning of the Middle Babylonian period (George 2007: 63). The First Sealand Dynasty ruled over southern Iraq from the eighteenth through to the fifteenth century BC (Boivan 2018). Until recently, it was poorly known historically or archaeologically, although that has now changed. The Schøyen Collection acquired 474 administrative tablets attributable to the First Sealand Dynasty kings Pešgaldarameš and Ayadaragalama sometime before 1999 (though their exact date of acquisition has not been made public). They were studied in the United Kingdom by Stephanie Dalley at the University of Oxford between 1999 and 2006 and published in 2009 (Dalley 2009). They are unprovenanced and alleged by some scholars to have been looted (Boivan 2018: 13; 2021; van de Mieroop 2019). There are an associated 32 tablets presumed to be from the same site in the collection of the Belgian *Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire* that have yet to be published (Boivan 2018: 10, note 14; Dalley 2009: 1; George 2013: 129). The find spot of the Schøyen and *Musées Royaux* tablets remains unknown (Dalley 2009: 1-4).<sup>1</sup>

In his publication of the GDT, George noted that:

*The tablet was reported to be part of a group of unpublished tablets that included omen and liturgical compositions, some mentioning Pešgaldaramaš (peš-gal-dàra-meš) and Ayadaragalamma (a-a-dàra-galam-ma), kings of the First Sealand Dynasty, and to share with them aspects of physical appearance and ductus. I was able to confirm this report from photographs of the tablets in question (George 2007: 63).*

So, someone, presumably the Cuneiform Expert or Kovacs (who, as noted above, are assumed to be the same person), had reported to George that the GDT had been (or was at the time still) part of a group including omen and liturgical tablets attributable to the First Sealand Dynasty and had supplied photographs of them. In 2013, as part of a larger study of omen texts in the Schøyen Collection, George published 10 omen tablets of the First Sealand Dynasty from an anonymous private collection (George 2013: 129-228, tablet nos 22-29, 31-32). He acknowledged Kovacs for her help in facilitating his study (George 2013: xi). He stated that the 10 tablets were part of a larger group of 18 tablets, which included the GDT published by himself in 2007 and characterized as a group by physical appearance, content and a previously-removed salt encrustation (George 2013: 129-130). They were similar in appearance to the Sealand tablets in the Schøyen Collection (George 2013: 131). The integrity of these 18 tablets as a group including the GDT has since been confirmed by other scholars (Boivan 2018: 11; Gabbay 2014: 148). George had already made available photographs of 17 of the tablets (excluding the GDT) on the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI) database in August 2012 and provided CDLI numbers in his 2013 publication (George 2013: 131). Four of the unpublished tablets listed by George in 2013 have been published since then by other scholars (Table 2).

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1 A further group of 68 First Sealand Dynasty tablets and fragments was discovered through scientific excavation at the site of Tell Khaibur between 2013 and 2015 (Campbell *et al.* 2017), and so would have been unknown for reference or comparison in 2003 when the Antiquities Dealer purchased the GDT or in 2005 while George was preparing his 2007 publication. Tell Khaibur is 'almost certainly' not the source of the Schøyen tablets as it shows no evidence of looting (Campbell *et al.* 2017: 30).

CDLI number	CDLI collection reference	Publication
P431300	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431301	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431302	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431303	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431304	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431305	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431306	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431307	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431308	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431309	Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	George 2013
P431311	Private: anonymous, unlocated	Gabbay and Boivin 2018
P431312	Private: anonymous, unlocated	Gabbay 2014
P431313	Private: anonymous, unlocated	
P431314	Private: anonymous, unlocated	
P431315	Private: anonymous, unlocated	Veldhuis 2017
P431316	Private: anonymous, unlocated	Krebernick and Wasserman 2020
P431317	Private: anonymous, unlocated	

Table 2. Tablets associated with the GDT according to George (2013: 129-130).

In her publication of the Schøyen Collection First Sealand Dynasty tablets, Dalley thanked Kovacs for her help (Dalley 2009: ix). Kovacs was associated with the Schøyen Collection until 2005, at which time she passed over responsibility for arranging publication of the Collection's cuneiform tablets to George (George 2009: xi). George had first visited the Collection's owner Martin Schøyen in 2001 (George 2009: xi). Thus, by the time of the purchase and initial assessment of the GDT and associated tablets in 2003 or immediately thereafter, Kovacs was well placed through her association with Schøyen to be familiar with the First Sealand Dynasty tablets in his possession, and to use that knowledge to understand better the significance of the material on offer in London and to communicate news of the acquisition to George.

In the introduction to his 2013 publication, George stated that his study had proceeded from 2005 to 2012 and he acknowledged the hospitality in the United States of Assyriologist David Owen (who was at the time Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Cornell University) and Kovacs. He also stated that:

*Images of most of the tablets in the anonymous collection were made at the Rosen Seminar, Cornell University, and are published here by generous leave of David I. Owen, Curator of the Tablet Collections (George 2013: xi).*

Thus, when publishing the 10 tablets in 2013, although George stated that they were with an anonymous private collector he acknowledged he was publishing with the permission of Cornell University's Owen. By 2020, the tablets were listed on the CDLI database as the property of the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Cornell University (Table 2).

Website date	Number of objects
December 2009	c. 6,500
October 2011	c. 9,000
November 2015	c. 10,000

Table 3. Increasing size of the CUNES Collection through time as stated on its website. (Information acquired from versions of the CUNES website available on the Wayback Machine at [https://web.archive.org/web/\\*](https://web.archive.org/web/*) / <http://cuneiform.library.cornell.edu/>. Accessed 30 March 2022).

## The CUNES Collection

The cuneiform collection of the Jonathan and Jeannette Rosen Ancient Near Eastern Studies Seminar (the CUNES Collection) in Cornell University's Department of Near Eastern Studies under the curatorship of Owen was established in 1999 by a donation of 1,500 cuneiform-inscribed objects from the collector Jonathan Rosen. Many had been in the possession of Rosen since at least 1997 (D'Arcy 2003; Owen 2007: vii). Cornell's acceptance of the tablets was dependent upon Rosen's assurance of legal acquisition (Gottlieb and Meier 2003). Rosen also financed the creation of research and technical support positions (Owen 2007: viii). The CUNES Collection continued to grow in size after its establishment, as recorded through time on its website (Table 3). In 2020, the CDLI database recorded 10,435 CUNES cuneiform objects, the overwhelming majority comprising clay tablets. It had been reported to hold approximately 10,000 objects by 2013 (Felch 2013), so it must have been approaching its final size sometime between 2011 and 2013. A 2001 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) investigation into a donation of 1,679 tablets to Cornell revealed that they had been valued at less than \$50,000 for import into the United States, but enabled a deduction from the donor's taxable income of \$900,000 (Brodie 2016: 129; Studevent-Hickman 2018: 212-213). The gradual increase in size of the CUNES Collection from the date of its establishment through to at least 2013 is evidence that Rosen continued to loan or donate material over a prolonged period of 14 years or more (Owen 2019). Thus, if a private collector did loan or donate the First Sealand Dynasty omen tablets published by George in 2013 to the CUNES Collection, in all probability that collector would have been Rosen.

In June 2019, the CUNES Collection was closed permanently (Owen 2019). The closure announcement stated that 'in the 20 years the cuneiform tablet collection was at Cornell, it was studied by dozens of scholars and has led to over 3 dozen books and articles, with more in press' (Cornell 2019). On 4 August 2021, Cornell University announced the return of cuneiform tablets to Iraq, though failed to say how many (Cornell 2021). News reports suggested that only 5,381 out of the CUNES holding of approximately 10,000 tablets were returned (Arraf 2021). The remainder were returned to Rosen (Owen 2019). Whether or not the 10 First Sealand Dynasty omen tablets published by George in 2013 were returned to Iraq is unknown.

The seven tablets referenced but not published by George in 2013 are listed on the CDLI database as 'Private: anonymous, unlocated', suggesting they are not and never have been in the possession of the CUNES Collection. There are, however, still hints of an association. Uri Gabbay noted in 2014 that two photographs of P431312 had been reproduced from

the CDLI with the permission of Owen and that George had initiated contact with the tablet's owner (Gabbay 2014: 148, note 11). Gabbay and Odette Boivin acknowledged the collector and George for supplying photographs of P431311 and the CUNES Collection for permission to publish several others (Gabbay and Boivin 2018: 22-23, author's note). If the CUNES Collection was holding copyrighted images it suggests a strong relationship with the owner. So, both Owen and George must have known the identity of the tablet's owner, which the evidence suggests was Rosen. Whether or not it was Rosen, the 'unlocated' provenance entry on the CDLI is incorrect. It should read 'withheld'.

## Ghassan Rihani

From the evidence to hand, the group of 18 tablets itemised by George in 2013 is the one including the GDT bought by the Antiquities Dealer from a Rihani family member in 2003. Ghassan Rihani was a Jordanian citizen and resident who is believed to have been centrally involved in the illicit trade of Iraqi antiquities through the 1990s and who died in 2001 (Gottlieb and Meier 2003). An investigation conducted into Rihani's activities in the mid-1990s by London's Metropolitan Police found evidence to suggest that he was marketing material from Iraq supplied by Arshad Yasin, a brother-in-law of Saddam Hussein and officer in Saddam's personal guard.<sup>2</sup> Yasin is believed to have organised much of the looting in south Iraq during the 1990s, until forced to desist by Saddam (Garen 2004: 30; Sandler 2004). The police investigation's findings were corroborated by the research of TV producer David Hebditch who obtained informant testimony that through the 1990s the large-scale looting of archaeological sites in south Iraq was organized by senior Ba'ath Party members in collaboration with Rihani (Freeman *et al.* 2005: 19). Rihani has also been implicated in smuggling antiquities from Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority through Switzerland, where he maintained storage facilities in the Geneva Freeport (New York 2021: 98-104).

From 1994 onwards, Rihani is known directly or indirectly through several U.K. dealers to have supplied the Schøyen Collection with 656 Aramaic incantation bowls and an undetermined number of cuneiform tablets from Iraq (Freeman *et al.* 2005: 19-23; Glørstad 2022; and see Korsvoll in this volume). Schøyen is in possession of a Jordanian export licence issued to Rihani and dated to September 1988 which authorizes the transfer of 2,050 antiquities from Jordan to his daughter who was at the time resident in London, though without supporting documentation and images it has been considered ambiguous and in any case cannot legitimise the export of material from Iraq (Freeman *et al.* 2005: 12-18). But given the Schøyen Collection's documented first- or second-hand dealings with Rihani and the facts that (1) the Antiquities Dealer bought the GDT and other First Sealand Dynasty tablets from Rihani, and (2) Dalley has suggested that there might be other tablets in the Schøyen Collection from the same deposit as those published by George in 2013 (Dalley 2020: 23), it seems more than likely that Rihani would also have been the ultimate source of the Sealand tablets in the Schøyen Collection, though that remains to be established.

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2 Information supplied by Richard Ellis who was at the time an officer in the Art and Antiques Squad of the Metropolitan Police.

## The Christie's catalogue

The Christie's (2014) catalogue prepared for Hobby Lobby offers a convenient place to start investigating the possible financial and commercial implications of Assyriological engagement with cuneiform tablets. It contains a translation and description of the GDT's contents together with a discussion of its historical significance. The Christie's catalogue text draws extensively upon George's (2007) paper, though the translation reproduced there is not the one published by George in 2007, and in fact from the evidence of two lines bears some similarity to the one published in the Sharpe catalogue and previously suggested here to be the work of Kovacs or the Cuneiform Expert (Table 1). Thus, whoever wrote the catalogue's text did not simply reproduce what George had published in 2007, but either prepared their own translation or had access to a translation prepared by another scholar, perhaps the one referenced in the Sharpe catalogue. Christie's has not disclosed authorship of the GDT catalogue, though following normal auction house practice for preparing private sales catalogues it was probably written by a commissioned expert (e.g. Mackenzie *et al.* 2019: 82) or at the very least utilised the results of outside scholarship (Sampson 2020).

Although the author of the Christie's catalogue did not use George's (2007) translation, they were clearly familiar with the content of his paper, where, to repeat, he had stated that 'The tablet was reported to be part of a group of unpublished tablets that included omen and liturgical compositions' (George 2007: 63). So, George had already established in print in 2007 (and repeated in 2013) that the GDT had been acquired as part of a larger group of cuneiform tablets, and an Assyriological 'expert' should have been aware of that fact. Yet the author of the Christie's catalogue's text seemingly acquiesced in its publication in 2014 of the fabricated Butterfield and Butterfield provenance (unless the provenance was added after the author had submitted the text). Any competent Assyriologist should have known by then that the Butterfield provenance was wrong.<sup>3</sup>

## The financial worth of Assyriological scholarship

The early transactions involving the GDT were uncommonly low priced. The Rihani family member sold it as part of a larger group of objects for \$50,350, and then four years later in 2007 the Antiquities Dealer sold the GDT alone for \$50,000. Yet later that same year it was offered for sale by Sharpe for \$450,000, which if it sold for that sum would have rapidly realized a \$400,000 profit. In 2014, Christie's brokered the sale to Hobby Lobby for \$1,674,000. Looking at the evidence of price appreciation from 2007 onwards, neither the Rihani family member nor the Antiquities Dealer seem to have profited from the full value of the objects being transacted. For the Rihani family member, the reasons might have been personal. Rihani's daughter in London specified on the 1988 export licence was probably the family member identified by the U.S. attorney as present in London in 2001 and 2003. By 2015, she was back in Amman registering what were said to be the 10,000 antiquities remaining in her family's possession with the Jordanian authorities to regularize their ownership (Lister 2015). Perhaps after Ghassan Rihani's death his family had stopped

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3 The Butterfield and Butterfield provenance was not made public until the U.S. Attorney's complaint in 2020. It did not appear in the Michael Sharpe catalogue and the Christie's catalogue was not intended for general circulation. There is no indication that George was ever aware of it.

acquiring new material but were open to selling anything they had inherited at bargain prices, including the GDT and its associated tablets.

Why the Antiquities Dealer sold the GDT for \$50,000 in 2007 when it looks to have been resold the same year with an asking price of \$450,000 is not so immediately obvious. In fact, given that the Antiquities Dealer was benefiting from the assistance and advice of the Cuneiform Expert and less directly from the scholarly work of George, it seems an act of gross commercial negligence to have undervalued the GDT by such a significant margin. But perhaps international events had intruded upon his financial calculations or expectations. The U.S. Attorney's forfeiture complaint alleges that the Antiquities Dealer bought the tablets in March or April 2003 and then shipped them to the United States. It does not date the shipment, though presumably it occurred soon after purchase. On 20 March 2003, the U.S.-led Coalition invaded Iraq, and during fighting in Baghdad from 10-12 April the National Museum was badly looted (Bogdanos 2005a; 2005b; Brodie 2006). It soon became clear that archaeological sites throughout south Iraq were also being badly plundered (Stone 2008). There was widespread media outcry and the United Nations responded. Thirteen years earlier, in the wake of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, on 6 August 1990 United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 661 had placed trade sanctions on Iraq, which were acknowledged but generally ignored by the major auction houses (Brodie 2008a: 42-43). Unprovenanced though likely illicitly-traded Iraqi objects were sold openly through public auction in London and New York. But that insouciant attitude to UNSCR 661 did not survive the events of spring 2003. After the March Coalition invasion and the April break-in of the National Museum, on 22 May 2003 UNSCR 1483 lifted general sanctions on trade goods but because of concerns about looting, left them in place for cultural objects, prohibiting the trade of any Iraqi objects that had left Iraq after 6 August 1990, the date of UNSCR 661. UNSCR 1483 was recognised in U.K. law in June 2003 and in U.S. law in late 2004 (Gerstenblith 2006: 328-332). Perhaps alarmed by the sudden threat of reputational harm and even legal action for continuing to trade in looted Iraqi objects, in late 2003 the auction houses do seem to have taken belated notice of UNSCR 661's 6 August 1990 sanctions threshold. The major antiquities auctions in London and New York stopped offering Iraqi cuneiform tablets altogether, and when Christie's in London did start offering Iraqi antiquities again after 2008, they were usually accompanied by a provenance that would place them outside of Iraq by 1990 (Brodie 2008a; 2008b; Brodie and Manivet 2017: 7-8).

Thus, when buying the GDT and its associated tablets in March or April 2003, the Antiquities Dealer might have been encouraged by the then lax commercial attitude regarding UNSCR 661 to believe that he would be able to sell them on without difficulty for a healthy profit. In the event, however, he was left holding the material in what had suddenly become an unexpectedly and unprecedentedly hostile trading environment. Perhaps he adopted the safe option of selling cheap to people willing to shoulder the risk of trading in looted Iraqi material or naïve enough not to understand the dangers involved. It is notable that the tablet was sold in 2007 through Sharpe's low-profile and non-specialist Pasadena dealership and not through one of the major London or New York auction houses, as would normally be expected. The ruse, if indeed it was a ruse, was successful. The Sharpe catalogue advertised the GDT as a 'Manuscript in cuneiform. Mesopotamia, c. 1400 BC' and correctly described it as carrying text from the Epic of Gilgamesh, stating that:



*... the tablet is of the utmost rarity: Only thirty total fragments of Gilgamesh are recorded from the Old and Middle Babylonian period (i.e. 1800 to 1000 BC). No tablet predates 1800 BC and most are far smaller than this example; according to our research, this is in fact the largest and most important Sumerian clay tablet to come to the market in the last fifty years (Sharpe 2007: 51).*

Yet despite its advertised rarity and importance, the sale of the GDT passed unnoticed by scholars and journalists who were at time alert for the appearance of looted Iraqi antiquities on the international market.

Even allowing for a cautious market in the middle 2000s, however, the GDT nearly quadrupled in price between 2007 and 2014. The Christie's (2014) catalogue offers the clue. It was titled *The Dream Tablet: Relating Part of the Epic of Gilgamesh*, thus introducing the GDT to the world as the 'Gilgamesh Dream Tablet', presumably as a marketing device to increase its price. The Assyriologists involved in cleaning, translating and publishing its text had transformed the GDT from a salt-encrusted tablet of uncertain interest and significance to a valuable commodity, and the financial worth of their work can be assessed from the more than 3,000 per cent mark-up in price between its purchase in 2003 and sale in 2014.

As already described, the fate of the other 17 tablets bought along with the GDT in 2003 is uncertain, though in 2020 at least 10 were recorded on the CDLI as in the possession of the CUNES Collection. In 2013, George stated that when he was studying them that they were still in the possession of an anonymous private collection (George 2013: xx). So, presumably, if as argued here Rosen did donate them to the CUNES Collection, it would have been after George had completed his study and the results of his study would have been available to Rosen and to any appraiser valuing the tablets. Resorting to some hypothetical arithmetic, and using the prices declared in 2001 for the donation investigated by the DHS, 10 tablets with a purchase price of \$30 each (\$300 in total) and an appraised value of \$536 each would have enabled a deduction from the Rosen's taxable income of \$5,360. The tax-deduction would have been due at least in part to the prior scholarly assessments of rarity and significance.

## **The market impact of Assyriological scholarship**

Over the long term, it is an inescapable fact that Assyriology as a discipline has enabled a market in cuneiform tablets by creating the categories and hierarchies that allow structured and targeted collecting (as opposed to simple accumulating) and underpin price formation. That is not the issue here. The Sealand tablet biographies show that still in the twenty-first century the close collaborative work of Assyriologists continues to mesh with the market. It ensures realistic pricing and thus profit taking. It might even fulfill the personal need of some collectors for scholarly approbation and more generally for public acclaim.

The general opacity of the antiquities market and the singular or incommensurable qualities and thus values of the objects being transacted hinder or obstruct reliable pricing and foster or facilitate dishonesty. Market actors are unable to enter transactions with any degree of confidence, and with potential buyers unwilling to risk money buying an object of unknown authenticity or value and in consequence with potential sellers struggling to turn a profit the market faces failure. It is one reason why many antiquities are bought and sold at public auction where open competitive bidding offers the possibility of establishing

value and price through consensus. For private sales, however, consensual price-setting is not a viable option. Instead, buyers must rely upon the quality assessment of experts or expert resources, including scholars and scholarly publications. A buyer can conduct due diligence in person through extensive provenance and market research in advance of purchase, though that imposes significant transaction or opportunity costs that might deter purchase and depress the market. Another option is for the buyer to outsource due diligence. One way of doing this is to buy from ‘reputable’ dealers – trusted sellers who stabilise the market through their reputational-backed guarantee to conduct thorough due diligence and establish good provenance of any object offered for sale. The Hobby Lobby complaint is probably correct when it states that:

*Collectors also rely on the expertise of sophisticated art sellers, such as established galleries and auctioneers, to verify an object’s legal ownership. Accordingly, the sale of an object at a reputable auction house indicates to the art market that the auctioneer considers the object to be legally owned, and the art market, in turn, relies on the auctioneer’s imprimatur of legality with respect to future sales, loans and exhibitions (Hobby Lobby 2021a: 4-5).*

At a UNESCO meeting in 2013, a Christie’s spokesperson championed this view when he stressed that his company actively discourages illicit trade by insisting that potential consignors provide the recent history of objects (UNESCO 2013: 13). He emphasized the need for cooperation and information exchange. One year later, for the GDT, Christie’s did reach out to the Antiquities Dealer but did not communicate to Hobby Lobby the Antiquities Dealer’s opinion that the tablet’s provenance ‘would not hold up to scrutiny’, did not include the Antiquities Dealer in the GDT sale catalogue’s statement of provenance, and did not even reveal the existence of the Antiquities Dealer. Hobby Lobby only learned about the Antiquities Dealer through the U.S. forfeiture action (Hobby Lobby 2021a: 6-9). Thus, in 2014 Hobby Lobby appears to have considered the Christie’s catalogue as presenting a reliable account of provenance, subsequently learning the hard way that its trust was misplaced. In obvious contradiction to its claim to share information, Christie’s suppressed a commercially damaging and potentially incriminating communication about the GDT’s provenance, demonstrating that reputation is no guarantee of probity.

For buyers who are sceptical or distrusting of the honesty or reliability of a seller such as Christie’s, scholars offer another source of outside expertise. Assyriologists are in possession of what Karpik (2010: 51) calls ‘oriented knowledge’. They are personally able to draw upon the accumulated knowledge of their discipline and their own scholarship to identify objects and provide judgments of importance and authenticity that are otherwise elusive for non-expert buyers. The Cuneiform Expert accompanied the Antiquities Dealer to London in 2003 to advise upon the purchase, and other commercial collaborations between dealers and scholars have been noted (Brodie 2011: 129-131; Mackenzie *et al.* 2019: 63). Wealthy private collectors are able either to retain their own Assyriologists or to hire Assyriological expertise. Rosen was employing an Assyriologist by at least 1997 (Owen 2007: vii), and it is hard to believe that Schøyen would have been active in the cuneiform market without Assyriological advice and assistance, provided perhaps by Kovacs or a predecessor. The oriented knowledge of Assyriologists allows

buyers who can afford it to act more confidently in the market and without them the market would suffer.

While the work of Assyriologists directly supporting the market by advising collectors and dealers can be termed ‘active engagement’, studying and publishing cuneiform tablets in private possession might be characterised more innocuously as ‘passive engagement’, in that it is intended to further historical scholarship. Any commercial consequences are unintended and claimed minimal enough not to outweigh the public interest of publication (Brodie 2019). Yet, from what can be deduced from the Sealand tablet biographies, when viewed holistically scholars do maintain a central market presence as information brokers and it is hard to identify any kind of firewall between active and passive engagement. There was a seamless network of scholarly contact and communication linking together the acquisition and study of the GDT and its associated Sealand tablets from point of purchase in 2003 to peer-reviewed publication in 2007 and beyond. The networked Assyriologists shared information in print and privately among themselves about tablets in private possession and the contents of their texts. The financial worth of this scholarship has been clearly demonstrated by the massive price appreciation of the GDT.

But private collectors no doubt acquire cuneiform tablets for a variety of not necessarily exclusive reasons. Their material ambitions to possess historical objects or to profit financially cannot always be separated out from coinciding personal aspirations. Hobby Lobby, for example, is understood to have collected cuneiform tablets for their Biblical associations while at the same time profiting financially from tax-deductions claimed for their donation to the non-profit MOTB (Moss and Baden 2017). Alongside Rosen’s tax benefits, his donations to Cornell seem to have involved ‘naming rights’ whereby the CUNES collection was named publicly after himself and his wife. Schøyen has been quoted as saying that his collecting was motivated by the work of scholars in understanding history (Schøyen 2009). The close personal relations and acts of hospitality that are evident in the acknowledgments of Assyriological publications advertise the existence of a socially-embedded market where personal and economic objectives can be pursued simultaneously. Scholarly association clearly has value in itself. It is notable that although the Assyriologists studying the Sealand tablets were aware of their questionable origins at no point do they seem to have conducted any further investigations into their provenance or to have alerted any outside authorities. While it is comforting to study material vaguely understood to have been illicitly-traded without knowing any details, it might be more disconcerting to know that their trade was profiting a senior member of the Saddam regime. Perhaps the sociality of the market acts to ‘capture’ or ‘entangle’ Assyriologists, so that they do not ask awkward questions for fear of losing access to a valuable research resource or simply of offending a colleague or a collector who has come to be viewed as a personal friend. They become personally invested in the ongoing security and wellbeing of private collectors and their collections. Thus, it has become accepted practice to publish unprovenanced tablets as the property of an anonymous owner even when the identity of the owner is known and the origins of the tablets are suspect and to acknowledge the generosity and philanthropy of collectors without enquiring too deeply about the source of cuneiform tablets in their possession. But when such obfuscations become fossilised in academic resources such as the CDLI or monograph series such as the Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology, they come preciously close to laundering – laundering the tablets and laundering the reputations of those who hold them.

Cause	Outcome
<i>Weak agency.</i> Inadequate information about the nature of and/or consequences of a market; others enter the market on one's behalf	<i>Extreme harms for the individual.</i> Produces destitution; produces harm to the basic welfare and/or agency interests of the individual
<i>Vulnerability.</i> Markets in a desperately needed good with limited suppliers; markets with origins in poverty and destitution; markets whose participants have very unequal needs for goods being exchanged	<i>Extreme harms for society.</i> Promotes servility and dependence; undermines democratic governance; undermines other regarding motivations

Table 4. Possible defining characteristics of a noxious market (Satz 2010: 98).

## Noxious scholarship?

Debra Satz (2010) has discussed the moral limits of markets in such things as human organs and weapons. She argues that these markets might be considered noxious, in that despite the benefits that that accrue to some participants (*e.g.* organ recipients and arms manufacturers), overall they are characterized by gross asymmetries of agency, with individuals forced to participate on disadvantageous or even harmful terms by economic duress (*e.g.* organ donors) and/or with extremely harmful outcomes (*e.g.* armed conflict). She has developed criteria for describing how a market might be harmful for individual actors or for societies and thus how it might be judged noxious (Table 4).

Turning to the market in cuneiform tablets, it is well established that the looting was at its height through the late 1990s and early 2000s while Iraq was subject to economic sanctions and ultimately invaded by the U.S.-led coalition (Brodie 2006; Stone 2008). Many people had been rendered destitute and archaeological sites provided a ready source of saleable cuneiform tablets and other antiquities. Nevertheless, with access to the lucrative international market mediated through senior Ba'ath party officials or tribal hierarchies, and probably with only limited means of assessing the true market value of a singular piece such as the GDT, individual diggers would struggle to obtain anything like a fair market price for their finds. There would also be the ever-present danger of violence. Many deaths directly or indirectly related to looting and trafficking of Iraqi antiquities have been documented (Brodie 2016: 131-132). The disadvantaged position of diggers at the very bottom of an international trading chain meets Satz's causative criteria of individual vulnerability and weak agency.

The looting and illegal trade out of Iraq violated Iraqi sovereignty and cultural self-determination. The criminality and corruption of responsible political and civil actors is also socially harmful. Thus, although some individual actors such as Arshad Yasin might have profited from trade and diggers might have benefited from looting archaeological sites in that it provided a much-needed source of income, overall the looting and trafficking proved harmful for Iraqi society. It is notable that at the handover ceremony in Washington D.C. the Iraqi Minister of Culture described the recovery of the GDT as restoring self-esteem and confidence to Iraqi society (SBAH 2021), antonyms almost for Satz's societal harms of servility and dependence.

It is hard to feel any sympathy for Hobby Lobby, given its egregious record of acquiring unprovenanced and ultimately illicit or fake antiquities (Brodie 2020; Gerstenblith 2022; Mazza 2021; Moss and Baden 2017; and see Mazza and Gerstenblith in this volume), but nevertheless it might be characterised according to Satz's criteria as having suffered a financial loss because of weak agency, in that when considering

the purchase of the GDT it naively took the provenance provided by Christie's as fact, when by 2014 the scholarly community was demonstrably aware that the GDT had been acquired as part of a larger group of First Sealand Dynasty tablets and so could not have been sold as its provenance claimed at a San Francisco auction in 1981. If Hobby Lobby had dug deep into the scholarly literature it might have ascertained that fact for itself, but then if the scholars had been more open about their knowledge Hobby Lobby might have been spared the effort and the GDT might have been recovered for Iraq many years earlier.

Thus, the market in Iraqi cuneiform tablets from the 1990s through to the 2000s was individually and socially harmful. If the engagement of Assyriologists was of central importance to the market, then so too the work of Assyriologists must also be considered harmful. Whether the harms caused by the market and by extension Assyriological engagement would be considered *extreme* enough to warrant the designation noxious is no doubt open to debate. But it is a debate worth having.

## Acknowledgments

This chapter has been greatly improved by the insightful comments of Patty Gerstenblith and was made possible by the kind support of the Arcadia Fund through the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa project of the University of Oxford's School of Archaeology.

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