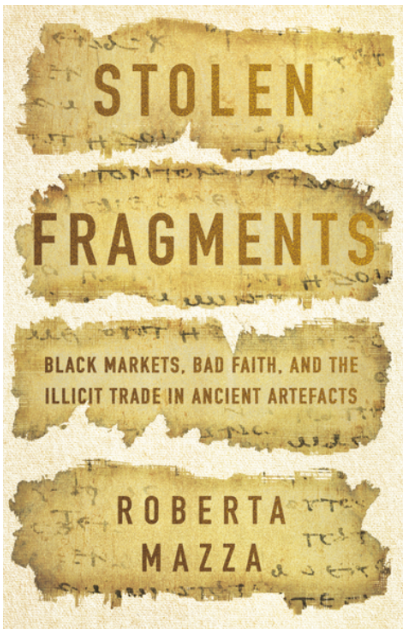
RBL 02/2025



Roberta Mazza

Stolen Fragments: Black Markets, Bad Faith, and the Illicit Trade in Ancient Artefacts

Stanford University Press, 2024. Pp. 272. Hardcover. $30.00. ISBN 9781503632509.

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For over a decade, Roberta Mazza, Associate Professor of Papyrology at the University of Bologna, has been casting light on the darker aspects of papyrology and the fields it touches, namely, the illicit and unethical trade in ancient textual artifacts. Her book, *Stolen Fragments,* marshals this insider experience into a riveting account of the fateful partnership between (former) Oxford papyrologist Dirk Obbink and individuals involved with the Museum of the Bible (MotB) and its Green Collection. The book unfolds as a chronological narrative taking place (more or less) during the 2010s, documenting how these players, driven by a mix of evangelical Christian apologetic fervor, financial gain, and scholarly hubris, together engaged in antiquities smuggling, theft, and the obfuscation of provenance. Rather than configuring these activities as exceptional or fringe, Mazza shows how the practices that animated MotB collecting both intersects with the duplicitous nature of the contemporary art/antiquities market and reflects the operational logic of the colonial discipline of papyrology since its inception in the late nineteenth century.

The book begins with a prologue in which Mazza describes a now-infamous day at Baylor University in January 2012. There, apologist Scott Carroll publicly destroyed an Egyptian funerary mask made of papyrus documents in order to stage a false "discovery" and thus launder the provenance of a selection of literary papyri, including a fragment of Paul's Letter to the Romans, that Obbink had stolen from the UK's Egyptian Exploration Society and sold to craft

store owner Steve Green and his nascent evangelical Bible museum. Astonishing in its own right, this story is emblematic of the way that these men treated antiquities, and thus it is told to introduce key themes that Mazza explores in the subsequent chapters. Key to her account is the concept of provenance, that is, documented evidence of where an ancient artifact came from and how it got where it is. Fabricating or obfuscating provenance, so Mazza claims, is entirely negative. Not only does it inhibit sound historical scholarship because it destroys crucial contextualizing evidence; it simultaneously perpetuates the illegal, unethical, and (neo)colonial trade in cultural heritage.

Chapter 1 offers historical context for MotB collecting practices and Obbink's involvement in them, by introducing the Oxyrhynchus papyrus collection now held at Oxford University. It describes the collection's origin in the late nineteenth century as an effort by the Egypt Exploration Fund (now Society) to search selectively for biblical and classical manuscripts, part of a broader colonial practice of claiming Egyptian cultural heritage as the rightful inheritance of the West. Mazza critiques the classic myth that Western possession of papyri is done legally and "saves" them from "primitive" Egyptians. She notes, for instance, Grenfell and Hunt's efforts to manipulate *partage* agreements so they could take home better finds and E. A. Wallis Budge's smuggling of the Bacchylides papyrus to England by chopping it up. By highlighting the destructive efforts Western scientists have undertaken to subvert laws governing antiquities exports, this chapter places twenty-first-century collecting practices in a longer historical continuum.

Chapters 2 and 3 set a more temporally proximate stage for the MotB/Obbink fiasco, detailing the origin of the Green Collection in 2009 and situating it in the overlap between scholarship and the global antiquities market. Chapter 2 builds on existing scholarship in its portrayal of the emergence of the Green Collection as a combination of evangelical biblical apologetics and a tax scheme. Scott Carroll approached Steve Green with the idea for a museum that curated antiquities to tell a story of the production and faithful transmission of an infallibly true Bible. Green became keen to undertake the project as a charity with 501(c)(3) tax status, enabling him to obtain massive tax write-offs if he donated antiquities appraised at a value much higher than he purchased them. As Mazza explains, Obbink became the linchpin in the scheme, since he had papyri to sell, study, and appraise. Obbink's position as such becomes increasingly legible in chapter 3, which shows how papyrologists have often participated in the market with impunity. They publish material sold through auction houses because of the prestige textual discoveries can bring them. A growing number of papyrologists are attuned to the damage done by the market and its representatives such as Christie's and Sotheby's, which, Mazza notes, regularly turn a blind eye to provenance stories fabricated to hide looting and smuggling. Thus, the two papyrological societies have established professional regulations forbidding participation in the market. Nevertheless, as this chapter shows, those involved in the MotB did not care about provenance and purchased looted artifacts anyway to service their religious and financial aims.

The remaining chapters unfold in chronological order, following several clusters of textual artifacts that came into the possession of the Green Collection or its associates (like Obbink). They document the dubious circumstances under which these actors acquired artifacts, their attempts to cover up those circumstances, and their efforts to engage in reputational damage control. Much of the information comes from Mazza's active involvement in publicly demanding disclosure of the manuscripts' provenance with documentation and private engagement with an illicit dealer (which resulted in death threats and police involvement!).

Chapters 4–6 trace the acquisition of three groups of manuscripts: a selection of New Testament papyri, most notably the so-called First Century Mark; papyrus fragments with lines attributed to the Greek poet Sappho; and a fragment of a leaf from a Coptic codex with text from Galatians. In each case, these manuscripts had their provenance obfuscated while researchers engaged their *text* for scholarly and apologetic purposes. According to Mazza, apologists Scott Carroll, Daniel Wallace, Josh McDowell, and others eschewed scholarly standards of transparency in order to bolster the apologetic value of the New Testament papyri for evangelical audiences with misleading paleographic claims, all the while lying about their provenance. Further, some of the classics community were happy to limit their engagement with the Sappho papyri to the literary analysis of lost lines, ignoring the fact that Dirk Obbink was manufacturing a series of incompatible provenance stories. Mazza also recounts that MotB Collections Director David Trobisch lied to her about their acquisition of the Coptic Galatians fragment, which she had seen listed for sale on eBay and spoken with the ostensible seller over Whatsapp.

Chapters 7 and 8 narrate key events that began to crack the façade of integrity the MotB had sought to create, immediately before its opening in 2017. Police seized cuneiform tablets that the MotB had smuggled out of Iraq, scholars demonstrated that Dead Sea Scrolls fragments purchased by the Greens were actually modern forgeries, and the provenance of the Coptic Galatians was revealed to have been fabricated by the dealer. These blunders could have been prevented, Mazza shows, for Steve Green had been informed by a specialist years earlier about the ins and outs of provenance documentation and why it was important for legal acquisitions, yet the collection continued with their dubious purchases and cover-ups.

Chapters 9–11 document how things continued to unravel, leading to the MotB's repatriation of thousands of papyri to Egypt, the police seizure of a Sappho papyrus, and the arrest of Dirk Obbink. Mazza describes how the Egypt Exploration Society suspended Obbink from his role as editor of the Oxyrhynchus papyri and put pressure on him to publish a number of New Testament papyri in the collection. Textual critic Michael Holmes, meanwhile, was appointed director of the Green Scholars Initiative and began investigating the origins of their collection in response to growing calls of concern from inside and outside the museum. These two actions revealed that Obbink was using his privileged access to steal Oxyrhynchus papyri and sell them to the Greens. With Obbink's thefts revealed, his (shifting) claims about the provenance of the

Sappho papyri came under scrutiny, and it was found that Obbink had staged its acquisition in a Christie's lot. From here, the details of acquisitions and cover-ups of Sappho papyri and the Coptic Galatians become especially murky—it still remains unclear where these manuscripts actually came from. But while MotB representatives (including Green) claim to have been duped by Obbink's self-interested deceits, Mazza draws attention to their consistent history of ignoring the question of provenance since the very beginning of the Green Collection.

The book concludes with an epilogue in which Mazza reflects on the state of a field that was able to support such a string of antiquities thefts, smuggling, and cover-ups, calling on scholars to conduct themselves with greater integrity and to reject participation in the antiquities market.

In many ways, the events documented in *Stolen Fragments* feel like a true-crime drama. We encounter an impossibly complex network (even for insiders!) of individuals, institutions, artifacts, motivations, and points of view. We know the outcome: Obbink was a thief who betrayed his scholarly guild, and the MotB had to repatriate thousands of illegally acquired artifacts. But that outcome is not really the point. It is rather the way in which Mazza depicts the events in all their perplexing detail that makes this story so compelling, and it is the way she provides context for those events that gives power to her larger theoretical claim: that documenting provenance is a fundamental constituent of the responsible handling of ancient artifacts, which have come to us through extractive (neo)colonial regimes.

The engaging narrative style of this book affords it a welcome public appeal, but *Stolen Fragments* should be taken seriously by papyrologists, too, and read carefully by scholars and students who are interested in the use of (textual) antiquities in classical and biblical studies. It joins a number of recent works that constitute a wake-up call for a field that has labored under its own mythology of disinterested scientific objectivity for too long and should galvanize scholars in the field to ask better questions about our primary sources and, for those who are not directly involved in the work, to hold colleagues to higher standards. If we take one practical imperative from this book, it is that our collections of papyri, rare books, and other antiquities require continued maintenance and investigations into their acquisition history. But in doing so, we should be wary of reproducing old colonial desires to "save" Egyptian artifacts in the quest to accrue prestige, a disciplinary habit that Mazza forcefully critiques.

Finally, it might be tempting to understand the purchase and theft of the Oxyrhynchus papyri, smuggling of cuneiform tablets, and so on as an issue unique to the apologetic imperative of American evangelicalism or as acts of a single, rogue Oxford professor. Indeed, the book does not diminish the duplicity of Obbink himself or the unscholarly aspects of Christian apologetics; it is careful to show that the MotB is part of a tradition of American evangelical Bible museums that instrumentalize ancient manuscripts for their religious aims. But Mazza makes it clear that these would be reductive explanations, insofar as she sets her narrative in the context of colonial-era

papyrus acquisitions and frequently describes the Green Collection in relation to other well-known collections (e.g., Manchester, Duke, Yale) who have likewise swelled their holdings by purchasing looted, stolen, and smuggled goods. Mazza's argumentation thus raises larger questions for scholars to wrestle with concerning the complex relationship between individual scholars, academic fields, and the role that geopolitical structures governed by the orientalist and colonialist ideologies of modernity and their extraordinarily wealthy capitalist representatives play in shaping knowledge production.