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## Research on illicit cultural artefacts

### The case of the Babylonian mathematical cuneiform texts in the Schøyen Collection

Mehreen Sheikh

#### The unprovenanced texts

In 2007, a leading Swedish expert on Babylonian mathematics, Jöran Friberg, published a collection of Babylonian mathematical texts in the Norwegian Schøyen Collection. Some of the “...amazing discoveries...” (Friberg 2007, cited from the back cover), however, are not new; they were identified several decades ago by other researchers (the latter term, and the terms scholars and scientists will be used synonymously here to refer to persons who conduct scientific research). To present the ideas of another as one's own, while at the same time neglecting to credit the source, can be described as a questionable research practice. Questionable research is a term that is often used to describe practices such as publishing selective results or concealing facts. Scholars who introduced the term described it as the “...exploitation of the gray area of acceptable practice” (Loewenstein et al. 2012:1). Furthermore, and as I shall illustrate later in this paper, there are legal and ethical concerns regarding the unprovenanced texts. What are the reasons for these deviations from good research practice? There are several approaches to exploring the issue. This paper will focus primarily on structural features of the research community that have a profound impact on the ethical conduct of scholars. Firstly,

however, it is necessary to take a closer look at the project in question.

The book, *A Remarkable Collection of Babylonian Mathematical Texts* (BMT 2007), consists of 533 pages, 12 chapters and ten appendices, and is intended to provide a broad account of Mesopotamian mathematics. The research material consists of ancient clay tablets engraved with mathematical cuneiform texts. In the introduction, Friberg praises the Norwegian collector Martin Schøyen for collecting the clay tablets and for making them available to scholars for evaluation and publication. According to Schøyen, the tablets were collected from the antiquities markets in the 1980–1990s. In the Statement of Provenance (ownership history), placed after the introduction section in the book, Schøyen lists the names of 16 collections in Europe and the USA as the sources of almost all tablets. But Friberg, the author of the book, claims that “...the great majority of the mathematical cuneiform texts in the Schøyen Collection are new additions to the corpus, probably emanating from relatively recent excavations in Iraq” (Friberg 2007:142). According to Neil Brodie (2007:14), a recognised researcher on the issue of illegal trade of cultural artefacts, Friberg's opinion “...seems sound, given that none of the texts had previously been published”. This means that the texts have probably been removed illegally from Iraq. Large-scale looting and

illegal export of artefacts from Iraq started after the 1991 Gulf War. Thus, all or parts of Friberg's research material could be part of the trade in illegally-acquired artefacts, and all the involved parties are knowledgeable of this fact.

Friberg is clearly aware of the fact that his research material raises ethical questions. At the very beginning of the book, he claims that "...in an ideal world, unprovenanced texts coming from the antiquities market would not exist, and since they do exist in the real world, some claim that serious scholars should have nothing to do with them" (Friberg 2007:V). However, since most of the collections of non-European ancient texts in Western museums are unprovenanced, he has no ethical qualms about working with them, and he avoids the serious scientific concerns inherent to working with them. He also points out that many of the classical works on mathematical cuneiform texts would not have been realized if the scholars had hesitated to work on texts (Friberg 2007:V), in other words, on illicit artefacts.

#### Illegal enterprise

The crucial issue that Friberg ignores is that trade in unprovenanced manuscripts, meaning cultural artefacts that do not have a documented origin, a history of ownership or an archaeological context (provenience) (Mizzi and Magness 2019:137), is illegal. There are scholars, especially text-based scholars, who believe that the circumstances surrounding how ancient texts are obtained are of negligible interest. Their main concern is the textual content (as argued by Prescott 2017:54). But as pointed out by Patty Gerstenblith (2014:220–221), the founding President of the Lawyers' Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation, written material without archaeological context resembles other forms of undocumented artefacts. She argues that the entire context of a site may be destroyed when any type of artefact is plundered. Furthermore, she maintains that textual materials, like cuneiform tablets, are "...equally subject to national ownership laws as are other forms of ancient objects" (Gerstenblith 2014:221). When taken without consent,

they would be classified as stolen property in the United States and the United Kingdom. For instance, in 2017 the United States Justice Department fined Hobby Lobby, an arts and crafts store chain in Oklahoma, in the amount of three million USD and forced them to turn over 3,594 cuneiform tablets and other artefacts. The ancient clay tablets, which originated in Iraq, were smuggled into the United States through the United Arab Emirates and Israel, contrary to federal law (Department of Justice 2017). In a recent study, Neil Brodie (2020) presents a comprehensive analysis of the damages caused to Iraq, by not only the looting and smuggling, but also the study and publication of some of these cuneiform tablets. According to Brodie, returning the tablets to Iraq does not fully repair the socio-cultural harms caused to the country's sovereignty, cultural self-determination, and dignity. He also highlights how Iraq, the lawful owner of the tablets, has lost control over its texts, once transcribed and published (Brodie 2020:96).

Illicit trade in cultural artefacts has been going on for centuries. As a criminal enterprise, it usually increases during wartime and natural disasters. Up until the nineteenth century, there were only bilateral and multilateral agreements that prohibited theft and looting of cultural heritage items. After the massive looting that took place during the Second World War, the world developed its first international tool for the protection of cultural heritage during wartime: The 1954 Hague Convention. Yet as the thefts from museums and looting of archaeological sites intensified during the 1960s, coinciding with the growing interest in art, there came an increasingly urgent need for an international treaty during wartime and peacetime. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property is regarded as the most important international agreement for forestalling illicit trafficking of cultural objects (UNESCO 2018). On their website, UNESCO (2019) lists several

recent restitution cases of cultural objects using the 1970 Convention.

During the past twenty years Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria have fallen victim to widespread looting and smuggling of their cultural heritage. In addition to the cultural, social and psychological impacts, some archaeologists have directed particular attention to a further consequence of illicit trafficking. As pointed out by Christopher Prescott (2017:54), an archaeologist at the University of Oslo and a scholar particularly interested in the illicit trade in antiquities, "...it is a source of revenue for those involved in crime (extending into drugs, trafficking and weapons) and violence". According to an in-depth study by Samuel A. Hardy (2021), an archaeologist and criminologist at the Norwegian Institute in Rome, even the removal of cultural property under the pretext of rescue, may help to finance criminal organizations and violent political movements. Brodie (2009:49–52) has similarly pointed out that there is little doubt that unprovenanced manuscripts stem from illegal trade that – among other things – is used to finance war and terror, along with laundered money obtained through criminal enterprises. He claims that the reason why scholars are reluctant to undertake a rigorous investigation of a manuscript's provenance is that such an inquiry might reveal that it was exported illegally, at which point it would become a police matter.

Thus, there are potential consequences on both the collective and the individual level when international or domestic law is violated. An UNESCO report (2018) describes several recent operations, arrests and trials deriving from illicit trafficking of cultural objects. This supports Rasmussen's (2020:103) assertion that

... the ratification of the 1970 Convention is a strong signal to any stakeholder involved in the antiquities trade, antiquities collecting and antiquities researchers of various disciplines. Presumably, few of these would comfortably identify as criminals. ...

Beyond issues pertaining to ethics, politics and jurisprudence, the question arises as to whether or not we can have confidence in the scientific integrity of a research effort that is probably, or even potentially, part of the illicit trade in cultural artefacts.

#### Questionable research practice

Scientific integrity has to do with the exercise of research ethics through good scientific practice. Two of the most important ethical norms, according to The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet 2017), are to be truthful about one's research and not make unauthorised use of the research results of others. Since research involves building further on the results and ideas of others, it is crucial that the researcher makes clear who has done what, by stating the author and the printed source. According to Loewenstein et al. (2012:1), questionable research practices, such as failing to report all of a study's conditions, are much more prevalent than cases of clear scientific misconduct. The latter authors argue that the exploitation of the grey area of acceptable practice may be more damaging to the academic enterprise in the long run, than outright fraud. Parts of the BMT study show signs of dubious research practice. For instance, a closer look at the synopsis of the research, which intends to provide the reader with an indication of the book's content and importance, reveals a misrepresentation or distortion of the research. According to this synopsis, Friberg has made "... numerous amazing discoveries, through a close study of the many new texts" (Friberg 2007, cited from the back cover). The text mentions, in particular, the three-dimensional Pythagorean equation and the icosahedron (Friberg 2007).

Let us start with the three-dimensional Pythagorean theorem. This is an issue discussed on page 206 of the book. Friberg analyses two texts, one Sumerian and one Akkadian, which deal with the theorem stating that the area of the square on the hypotenuse (the side opposite the right angle) is equal to the sum of the areas of the squares on the other two sides. It is explained



that as the creator of the method knew that  $A=us$ , then he also knew that  $d^2=u^2+s^2$ . This is generally called the Pythagorean theorem. However, Friberg does not use this frequently used term, and instead calls it the Diagonal Rule. Thus, this hardly represents "...new evidence of Babylonian familiarity with sophisticated mathematical ideas and objects", as the study suggests. In fact, Otto Neugebauer (1969 [1951]) had already discussed this issue in his book *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity*, where he states that:

The above example of the determination of the diagonal of the square from its side is sufficient proof that the "Pythagorean" theorem was known more than a thousand years before Pythagoras. This is confirmed by many other examples of the use of this theorem in problem texts of the same age, as well as from the Seleucid period. In other words it was known during the whole duration of Babylonian mathematics that the sum of the squares of the lengths of the sides of a right triangle equals the square of the length of the hypotenuse (Neugebauer 1969:36).

Other scholars has also ascertained this point. A valuable source of information about the BMT study is a review of the book by Mark Geller, a professor of Jewish Studies, and Mark Ronan, who is a professor of mathematics. Both scholars have experience in reading ancient Mesopotamian texts, and we are told at the beginning of the review that they worked on the review of the BMT volume for more than five years. In addition, they point out that Otto Neugebauer had already identified the existence of the Pythagorean theorem in Babylonian mathematics in his book *Vorgriechische Mathematik*, published in Berlin in 1934 (Geller and Ronan 2014:238). Although the BMT study has several references to Neugebauer's work, neither *Vorgriechische Mathematik* nor *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity* are mentioned in the book or listed in the bibliography. To my knowledge, the study only cites works by Neugebauer that do not deal with the Pythagorean theorem, for instance, *A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy*

(Naugebauer 1975), *Astronomical Cuneiform Texts* (Naugebauer 1955), and the German and the American Oriental edition of *Mathematical Cuneiform Texts* (Neugebauer and Sachs 1945).

The other amazing discovery, according to the synopsis, is Friberg's assertion that the Babylonians were familiar with the concept of icosahedron, a geometrical object with 20 faces, each face of which is an identical equilateral triangle. But in their review, Geller and Ronan uncover yet another attempt to present an audacious discovery. They write "...it is not too bold [as Friberg claims in the book] because the topic is covered by Keith Critchlow in his book *Time stands still from 1979*" (Geller and Ronan 2014:239–240). Critchlow is a Professor Emeritus at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London and a leading expert in sacred architecture. He has studied a wide range of Neolithic artefacts. In the book *Time Stands Still*, Critchlow (1979) provides an extensive account of the concept of the icosahedron. This source has not been mentioned in the BMT study.

It may be true, as stated in the summary on the back cover of the BMT book, that the 120 mathematical clay tablets from the Norwegian Schøyen collection have not been published previously, but some of the main new discoveries and knowledge, which the scholar claims to have obtained through the study of the ancient tablets, are far from new. Based on the above examples, it would appear that the main motive is perhaps to make the BMT project appear more original than it is. This may explain why the study neglects to reference the two previous discoveries and studies on the same issue. According to The Swedish Research Council, "...the researcher's integrity is important currency that must not be allowed to devaluate. If this should happen, it could cause the researcher to lose credibility for a long time to come" (Vetenskapsrådet 2017:25). Similarly, Loewenstein et al. (2012:8) establish that "...the prevalence of questionable research practices raises questions about the credibility of research findings and threatens research integrity by producing unrealistically elegant results".

The ethical attitude and conduct described above are in accordance with another research project connected to the Schøyen collection (cf. Sheikh 2018), which has drawn international criticism surrounding some manuscripts with dubious provenance. The project reveals how the study of the controversial Buddhist manuscripts from Afghanistan and Pakistan conveyed a distorted picture of the latter religion and its history. Moreover, like the BMT study, the research on the Buddhist manuscripts was also marred by questionable research practices, e.g. presenting one's work as new and original and at the same time failing to acknowledge previous researchers and their exact same discoveries and conclusions.

#### The research community as a social institution

To understand why scholars are willing to endorse questionable research practices and jeopardize their academic reputation by engaging with illicit artefacts, we have to direct attention to the community in which the scholars operate. By analysing the research community as a social institution with a set of formal and informal norms and a social practice that regulates the activity of its members, we can gain insight into how this institution not only permits but also encourages dubious research, albeit indirectly.

#### The formal social organization

In his renowned book, *The Scientific Community*, sociologist Warren O. Hagstrom (1975) describes the traditional scientific community as a group of men working within a formal and an informal organization. For him, both the formal, idealised notion and the informal organization of the research community have a crucial influence upon the behaviour and attitude of the person, as does any other social institution.

The formal abstract notion of the world of research consists of a well-organized community with its rules, sanctions and expectations, all purposefully planned. Its core business is to produce and transfer knowledge to a world that is

both culturally and technologically dependent on insight acquired through the scientific method. This means that all aspects of the society, the education system, industry, health service and politics rely on the knowledge, integrity and the competence of researchers (Mahoney 1979). That is why governments invest such vast amounts in research. Moreover, parts of the formal idealised features of the research community are the hard-working scholars who are preoccupied with finding solvable research questions, collecting data, cooperating with colleagues and convincing them of the importance of their findings. Naturally, they are rewarded with recognition from the research community and benefits in the competition for resources, which is an essential goal of the research activity. Unlike most other professionals, scholars enjoy independence in their work situation, which gives the profession of researcher both status and respect (Mahoney 1979). The entire aforementioned idealised notion of the research community is not shared by most researchers, as Michael J. Mahoney (1979) suggests, but he may be right that it is perhaps the main publicly held notion of the world of research.

Furthermore, the formal concept is often appealed to in defence of certain practices within the research community, where it is perceived as a descriptive concept of what a research community actually is. In this regard, the latter abstract notion has one important purpose. It functions, as Waterton and Smith (2010:5) point out with regard to the classical notion of community, as a means of maintaining the status quo. For example, scholars who advocate the continued right to conduct research on unprovenanced artefacts base their claim on the formal notion of the research organization. They use the established assertions affiliated with the latter concept, or the folklore of science (Mahoney 1979:357), to justify their claim. In 2006, the Biblical Archaeology Society issued a statement against steps to prohibit the publishing of unprovenanced material. The scholars who signed the document, including Friberg, emphasized the right and duty of academics to

research and publish unprovenanced artefacts that turn up on the antiquities market (Prescott and Rasmussen 2020:3).

Furthermore, the concept of the formal social system diverts focus from the actual activities, most importantly the social processes that take place within the research community. At worst, by maintaining the focus on the ideal concept of the research community, unethical and unscientific conduct for the most part remain concealed or pass under the radar. The remarks of Christopher Prescott regarding the role of academics involved in illicit trade in artefacts highlight how the inviolable conception of research often serve to protect and preserve dubious research:

A sort of defence is built around a concept of unfettered research – that research is an immediate obligation that has priority over social, political or long-term consequences. Indeed, it is strange that in 2016 one should have to argue the imperative of ethical responsibilities with researchers from the humanities – that all actions cannot be defended in reference to the sanctity of research... (Prescott 2017:54).

There is generally divided opinion among scholars regarding the issue of working with unprovenanced materials. According to one recent survey among scholars who work with the Dead Sea Scrolls, the majority of the responders (93 %) were willing to follow official policies of noting uncertainties when referring to objects with unclear provenance (Bonnie et al. 2020:8). On the other hand, the survey also revealed that only 3 out of 111 responders would absolutely refrain from publishing an unprovenanced object that has been published. Textual scholars, who often do not work in the field, have rarely any hesitation in working with unprovenanced artefacts. As Brodie (2009:46–47) notes, they claim that the written information the artefacts contain is relatively independent of context. They also assert that the study and publication of manuscripts has little or no effect on looting. Regarding the stances

among archaeologists, Dennis Mizzi and Jodi Magness' article "Provenance vs. Authenticity" provides a leading perspective concerning scholarly engagement with unprovenanced artefacts. According to them, "...any artifact that lacks verifiable documentation of its provenance – whether or not it is authentic – should not be studied or published by scholars" (Mizzi and Magness 2019:135). Such scholarly involvement could legitimize and enhance the monetary value of such fragments and enhance the antiquities trade, looting, and the creation of forgeries. It could also potentially contaminate the existing dataset by forgeries (Mizzi and Magness 2019:158). However, Mizzi and Magness (2019:159) do make a few exceptions from the above-mentioned basic principle, for instance if the purpose of a secondary publication is to highlight that an already published fragment is fake or lacks documentation of its provenance, or if the point is to discuss the antiquities trade. According to this standpoint, the project *Lying Pen of Scribes* (2021), headed by Årstein Justnes at the University of Agder in Norway, is a good example of legitimate research on unprovenanced artefacts. The latter project has revealed the forgery of more than 70 so-called post-2002 Dead Sea Scrolls fragments, which still remain part of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls dataset, even though they are undocumented, unprovenanced, and forged.

#### The informal social organization

According to the descriptive approach within the sociology of community, we must explore the kinds of problems raised by underlying structures and functions, and most importantly, the interdependencies that exist in the community if we are to understand the specific character of a community (Elias and Scotson 1974:28). These factors are the bonds that hold the community together. Such an approach has to take into account the roles, interactions and the human relations that take place within the community. The focus on the latter factors, which are part of the informal organization of a community, may

reveal how people are not always free to act and choose independently (Elias and Scotson 1974:xviii). It is important to note, however, that the research community in general, as along with specific communities, is complex. It contains several interconnected elements that make it difficult to properly understand its overall working. One way to analyse such a system is to highlight its crucial elements, e.g. competition.

Studies over the past several decades have revealed how the research community is a bed of fierce competition for recognition, which leads to lack of cooperation among colleagues (Hagstrom 1975:69–105; Fang and Casadevall 2015), research fraud, general distrust among members, suspicion and fear that colleagues are out to steal one's work (Mahoney 1979:362; Anderson et al. 2007), and disputes regarding priority claims (Merton 1969; Heffernan 2014). Some scholars, such as Hagstrom (1975), have raised concerns regarding competition in research and have suggested that the main reason behind deviant behaviour in the scientific community is competition for recognition. According to Hagstrom (1975:70), the most important manifestation of the competition is the experience of being anticipated, that someone else will present the research results and claim the much-coveted rewards. Some recent in-depth studies also confirm that competition even leads some researchers to use improper means to pre-empt competitors, perform biased peer reviews, and engage in dubious research practices (Anderson et al. 2007). Thus, to obtain funding for further research projects, to warrant promotion and achieve recognition, researchers have to participate in fierce competition with their colleagues to get their research published, both quickly and on a grand scale. In addition, there is a race to establish a priority claim to an idea or a discovery, and this is done mainly through publication (Hagstrom 1975). Although competition is a crucial aspect of the research community, the behaviour and attitude of the competitors are not attributes publicly acknowledged by the members. They are rather part of the informal system. These informal

aspects of the research community are learned through the socialization of the scientist to norms emphasizing research and publication.

Academic competition is not a new phenomenon in our time, although analysts agree that it has intensified during the last two decades. From the very beginning, the most important task of administrators has been to continually improve research productivity. The history of science has shown that there has always been a positive relationship between research productivity and academic competition. According to sociologist Joseph Ben-David (1960), who viewed competition as a favourable influence on the research enterprise, academic competition was what led to the acceleration of scientific research in the 18th century. He argues that it was the creation of organizations, meaning autonomous university institutions with independent structures, which led to the development of internal competitive conditions and created favourable values for science. In addition, it was the competitive system of the American and German sciences which increased scientific productivity, i.e. the number of scientific discoveries. Successful scientists were rewarded with university chairs and facilities, which encouraged others to take up science. Ben-David (1960) argues that this created pressure for further expansion of facilities and training (Collins 1968).

The notion of a favourable relationship between research productivity and academic competition is still deeply rooted in the whole system's ideology and practice. What is disconcerting is that this concept has a serious influence on the members' attitude towards scholarly engagement with illicit cultural artefacts. In many cases, for example, the administrators advocate and even encourage research on objects that lack documentation of provenance. As a case in point, the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) in Norway initiated an inquiry in 2005 concerning the guidelines for research on material with dubious provenance. This happened after several journalists and archaeo-

logists had raised serious concerns regarding the dubious provenance of the Buddhist manuscripts from Afghanistan. On a general level, the committee did point out the importance of provenance. It suggested that "...if they [researchers] suspect that material is stolen or acquired in an ethically questionable manner or if there is uncertainty linked to origin and provenance, they should initially report their suspicions to the research institution" (NESH 2005:1). It also recommended that technical assistance provided for identification, classification and conservation be completely transparent, and that "...a disclosure obligation should also apply where there is a suspicion that material is stolen or acquired in an ethically questionable manner or where there is uncertainty in respect of origin and provenance" (NESH 2005:1). Yet, with regard to the Schøyen Collection, the committee primarily emphasised the issue of freedom of research and new knowledge, and encouraged the continuation of the project. It stated that "...as regards the relevant writings and fragments in the Schøyen Collection, they are of very substantial research-related value" (NESH 2005:4–2). Even the rector at the University of Oslo conveyed his support and encouragement to the Schøyen researchers, saying that "...the University of Oslo has made a note of the recognition of your research in international forums" (Braarvig 2006, general introduction). Understandably, the Schøyen research team used the above statements as clear support for their ongoing and future research on material with uncertain documentation of origin and ownership (Sheikh 2018:18). Although several institutions in Great Britain, Sweden and Norway have withdrawn from collaboration with Schøyen, government-funded researchers – for example at the Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society in Oslo (Prescott and Rasmussen 2020:71;74) – still continue to research and publish material from Schøyen's collection. Similarly, there are probably a number of research projects focused on unprovenanced artefacts taking place in European and American universities right now. For instance, Brodie

(2009:42) names several research councils and departments in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia that have provided financial support to academic studies on unprovenanced manuscripts. Thus, the fundamental objective of those who administrate the research community – i.e. to enhance research productivity by facilitating competition, may be an obstacle to combating research and trade in illegal cultural artefacts. As long as administrators believe that research on such material can facilitate research productivity, they will continue to support such research.

The attitude and the work of researchers are governed not only by the above-described conditions, laid down tacitly by the administrators. The research community as a group also plays an important role in the socialization of the researcher. As in any other socialization process, researchers internalize the values of their community. They also internalize the current group conceptions as to what is acceptable scientific research and what are acceptable scientific manners. Hagstrom (1975) claims that these norms must become continually reinforced in order to survive, and that the aim of the whole socialization process is to maintain consensus in the research community (see also Collins 1968). According to sociologist Robert K. Merton (1957), one of the most important research norms is the idea that the main role of scientists is to advance knowledge. One might add that the advancement of knowledge is only achieved through originality, which is the production of new theories and new findings. This norm exerts enormous pressure on scientists to establish a priority claim to an idea or a discovery. Merton (1957), who viewed the latter process in a positive light, argues that in the institution of science, originality is at a premium. Those who have fulfilled their roles enjoy both recognition and respect. In Merton's (1957:639) words: "They have made genuinely original contributions to the common stock of knowledge". Because of the large rewards and emphasis assigned by the research community to originality, Merton at this point claims that the recognition of originality

becomes a top priority. More recently, Strevens (2003:55), who has a less favourable perception of the latter competition, describes it as "...a winner-takes-all race, that is, a race in which there are no second prizes". The reason is that additional discoveries of the same phenomena are pointless. The first discoverer will gain all the rewards no matter how slim the margin is, and this further intensifies the competition. This is why Strevens (2003:56) terms academic competition as the "...rewards and benefits race". He believes that the latter system is not accidental, but was introduced into modern Western science as a system of incentives that would encourage researchers to devote their time and energy to particular research areas or programmes and claim the benefits promptly. The priority system is therefore one of the most powerful norms governing the research community, as the basic salary they receive, regardless of their achievement, is not a strong enough incentive. Instead, it is regarded as compensation for teaching and administration, not for their scientific enterprise (Strevens 2003:56).

Hence, to fulfil their most important role and claim the rewards, scholars are always looking for a chance to acquire the best research material. Just like antique collectors searching for outstanding pieces for investment purposes, scholars search for rare and unique research material that could provide them with an opportunity to present an original contribution to knowledge. Unprovenanced artefacts, which are often previously unknown material, perfectly fulfil the above-mentioned requirement for the premium rewards. As one of the Schøyen researchers described the unprovenanced Buddhist manuscripts from Afghanistan and Pakistan, they are considered scholarly gold (Brodie 2009:44). Similarly, the following statement from Friberg shows his tremendous enthusiasm for the 300 previously unknown mathematical texts, many without clear ownership history:

The Schøyen Collection contains almost as many clay tablet texts as all the classical works

from 1935–1945 together. It's nothing short of sensational that such a large collection is being made available to researchers (CAS 2002:4).

The sensational headlines created by such research projects are a good illustration of how noteworthy these items are for gaining recognition for the scholar involved and for the particular research community. Like the BMT project, the Buddhist Manuscripts project in the Schøyen Collection received further financial support, promotions and increased international collaboration after the exaggerated claims and interpretations about the research project. Despite persistent criticism from some journalists and archaeologists concerning the provenance of their research material, the scholars are still publishing the manuscripts and enjoying the recognition and rewards (Sheikh 2018). This indicates that they are living up to the established norms and expectations of the research community. This is because an important attribute of the socialization process entails that members who live up to the norms receive positive acknowledgement, which are actual or promised rewards.

The above example reveals one of the driving structural and cultural factors that tempt some scholars to engage in questionable research practices. When the main motivation behind the research is the premium rewards, rather than a sincere quest for new knowledge, scholars can develop a careless attitude towards their research material. The disturbing reality is that the norm regarding the advancement of new knowledge is so predominant within the research community that the principles of good research practice have become secondary in importance. This reality has pervaded the research community. As the Swedish Research Council states, ...what has also become evident is that there is a widespread perception in the research community that others are acting dishonestly, or bending the rules (Vetenskapsrådet 2017:63). It is noteworthy that the attitude of those who conduct scientific research on unprovenanced artefacts is deeply influenced by the norms and values that these scholars internalize in the course of their

socialization within the research community; in addition, they are attracted by unchecked and explicit structural incentives.

### Conclusion

There has been much focus in archaeology and the field of heritage on the illegal trade in cultural artefacts since the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Brodie 2009, 2011; 2020; Prescott 2017; Prescott and Rasmussen 2020; Hardy 2021). These studies provide comprehensive insight into the many legal and ethical issues surrounding the illicit trade of cultural artefacts, including the academic involvement and the issue of unclear provenance. Among archaeologists, heritage researchers and some text researchers there is a growing appreciation of a need to critically address the research work of scholars who dismiss the importance of provenance and participate in the illegal acquisition of cultural heritage from war-torn countries. Still, there are strong indications of a counter-current of continued support for such practices as well as an institutional reluctance – even resistance – to addressing such practices. This paper provides an example of how scholars with no reservations about participating in a potentially illegal enterprise can compromise the scientific integrity of a research effort. By analysing such questionable research practices in the light of social studies concerning both formal and informal structures of the research community, I have underscored how the research community itself sometimes undermines its own fundamental ethical principles. In line with previous findings, I have demonstrated how the inherent competitive conditions in the research community can be the root of dubious practices, and that formal assertions about the world of research legitimises and protects questionable research practices.

Future research should explore this issue further by highlighting other important factors that undermine good research practice, for example the role of colleagues. Why do co-workers remain on the sidelines? Why are they often

reluctant to openly confront dishonest behaviour among peers, such as that of the scholars who have worked with the Schøyen-Collection?

### Summary

*This paper examines whether we can have confidence in the scientific integrity of a research effort that could potentially be part of the illicit trade in cultural artefacts. As an example, I use the research on the ancient clay tablets from the Schøyen Collection. A closer study of the research product reveals questionable research practices, and the latter issue is then put into a wider context. After highlighting the importance of the research community as a social institution in shaping the norms and values of its members, and its influence on what is desirable research, I explore how these expectations and guidelines impact research conducted on illicit cultural artefacts.*

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