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The Ilves Collection : A Finnish manuscript collector and the academic facilitators

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A photograph of an ancient, cracked clay bowl, likely a Mesopotamian artifact. The interior of the bowl is covered in dense cuneiform script. In the center of the bowl, there is a circular diagram with several intersecting lines forming a star-like pattern. The bowl is set against a background of reddish-brown soil or sand.

VARIANT SCHOLARSHIP

Ancient Texts in Modern Contexts

EDITED BY

NEIL BRODIE, MORAG M. KERSEL
& JOSEPHINE MUNCH RASMUSSEN



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The Ilves Collection: a Finnish manuscript collector and the academic facilitators

Rick Bonnie

Abstract

Since the 2010s, several Finland-based scholars have been introduced to and ultimately have worked with a collection of ancient manuscript fragments of considerable size currently housed in Helsinki. The so-called ‘Ilves Collection’, in the possession of an anonymous collector, has received some scholarly attention in recent years – not only for its objects but primarily because of the suspicious nature by which the collection was obtained. In this chapter, I address whether the Ilves Collection is a largely eBay-obtained manuscript collection, as well as discuss the fact that it demonstrates links to high-profile international cases that have received intensive scrutiny recently. Furthermore, I reflect on the stated motivations of the scholars who worked on this problematic collection, placing it within a broader framework of the issue of academic facilitation – that is, the act of study, authentication, valuation, and publication – of the antiquities market.

Keywords: lves Collection, Finland, Coptic manuscripts, eBay trade, academic facilitators

Introduction

During the last few decades, scholars of history and philology have had increasing hands-on opportunities to touch, study, and publish text-bearing cultural objects (e.g. cuneiform tablets, papyri) closely associated with Mesopotamian, Biblical, and early Christian history. Often the material was obtained by wealthy individuals for their private collections, occasionally to establish a museum. In most cases documentation on how the material was obtained remains extremely poor.

In recent years, research has shown that many of the recently surfaced artefacts contained in such collections, notably the Schøyen and Green Collections, have questionable histories involving illicit activities, whether looting, smuggling or forgery (Justnes and Rasmussen 2017; 2021; Mazza 2018; 2019; Moss and Baden 2017; Prescott and

Rasmussen 2020). As a result, a number of scholars as well as professional organisations have increased their efforts in advocating against using such questionable materials in research and have devised policies to stop the study and publication of such material (Brill 2020; SBL 2016; see also Gerstenblith and Kersel in this volume).

The Finland-based ‘Ilves Collection’ should be understood within the context of these broader developments in the field, notably within Biblical studies (on specifics of the collection’s name, see below). In 2016, scholars at the University of Helsinki successfully received national funding to study and publish the Coptic manuscripts from the collection.¹ The collection contains more than 200 larger Coptic manuscript fragments, mainly on papyri and parchment, as well as hundreds of Greek and Arabic manuscript fragments. It has been estimated that in terms of its size, the Ilves Collection contains over a 1,000 manuscript fragments.

What has remained unspecified in research on this collection thus far is how exactly it was compiled. How did the private collector behind the Ilves Collection obtain the fragments? As I will detail below, while the collector has provided anecdotal narratives that the collection dates back to the 1940s, documented evidence traces much, if not all, of the Ilves Collection to no earlier than the 2000s. What is more, the documentation places the collector within an intricate international web of antiquities dealers, advisors and institutions, including Bruce Ferrini, Yakup Ekşioğlu, Scott Carroll and the Green Collection. The collector behind the Ilves Collection, while at face value only a minor player, may be of larger significance and more familiar with the illicit antiquities market than perhaps previously thought.

Moreover, what motivates scholars to continue conducting research on this problematic collection? What are the consequences of this engagement? The consequences of conducting scholarly work on illicit antiquities (*e.g.* participation in price formation, promotion of market confidence, obstruction of police investigations) has been discussed in detail over the past decade (Brodie 2009; 2011; 2016; Brodie and Kersel 2012). However, while not aiming to downplay the severity of such consequences, I highlight the results of a study and publication decision in relation to issues of accessibility, preservation, and knowledge formation. The reason why I do this is because, for scholars less concerned with context information, including those working on the Ilves Collection, the above-noted consequences have seemingly had less of an impact than archaeologists especially would have hoped; such scholars instead concentrate their argument around issues of object preservation. Building upon an argument I recently made elsewhere (Bonnie forthcoming), I conclude this chapter by arguing against the notion of ‘preservation’ as it pertains to scholars working on the Ilves Collection and their efforts to justify studying and publishing scholarly texts on the collection’s problematically provenanced material.

The Ilves Collection

It is commonly understood that the Ilves Collection is housed in Helsinki, Finland, and is in the possession of a collector who wishes to remain anonymous. The exact reasons for

1 The official Academy of Finland funding decision is archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20210716080132/https://akareport.aka.fi/ibi_apps/WFServlet?IBIF_ex=x_hakkuvaus2&CLICKED_ON=&HAKNRO1=299291&UILANG=en&TULOSTE=HTML. Accessed 16 July 2021.

naming the collection 'Ilves' (meaning, in Finnish, a Eurasian lynx) remain unclear to me. In Finland, the word is also generally associated with the *Tampereen Ilves*, a professional ice hockey team, and can be used as a male's first or middle name. To my knowledge, there is no clear link between the collector and any of these associations.

The Ilves Collection primarily consists of manuscript fragments, whether on papyrus, parchment, or vellum. Rough estimates based on available information suggest that the collection contains more than 1,000 manuscript fragments, primarily in Greek, Coptic and Arabic. It is unclear when precisely this collection was obtained. The collector insists that at least part of the collection was obtained by their late grandfather sometime back in the 1940s. However, as shown by my research, public information for activities on the online auction platform eBay indicates that at minimum, several hundred manuscript fragments, if not the entire collection, originated no earlier than in the early 2000s (see further below).

The earliest published traces of collecting activities for the Ilves Collection are documented by Hani Takla, who in the 2000s started to study the trade of dismembered Coptic manuscripts on eBay (Takla 2014). Takla has provided information on the backgrounds of various eBay sellers who actively sold dismembered manuscripts, tracked the activities of hundreds of auctions for such manuscripts and asked for information from successful buyers. His data shows that the Ilves Collection obtained through eBay a substantial number of dismembered Coptic folios in auctions held between December 2008 and March 2009 by a Turkey-based seller named 'cashout', who later changed their username to 'minnos2004' (Takla 2014: 709, 714-716).

Further insights on the early collecting activities for the Ilves Collection come from information published on the institutional website of Robert Kraft, a professor emeritus of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania. From 2005 onwards, Kraft started to track eBay auctions of dismembered papyrus that were originally in the possession of the controversial manuscript dealer Ferrini but were subsequently being auctioned off by a representative named Michael J. Farr after Ferrini declared personal bankruptcy (Kraft 2007; on Ferrini, see Mazza 2015: 120-122; Moss and Baden 2017: 32-33). For a short time, Kraft documented the eBay accounts of the winning bidders at such auctions. Upon inspection, I noticed that the public profile of one particular bidder, a person trading under the eBay account 'cde789', indicated that the bidder was based in Finland and had been active from around February 2003 onwards. Furthermore, the information on eBay showed that the individual primarily bought ancient manuscript fragments or associated materials through this account, but never seems to have sold anything.

The link between eBay account 'cde789' and the Ilves Collection is verified in three different ways. First, the eBay account information shows a considerable number of transactions by 'cde789', with eBay account 'minnos2004' fitting the time frame suggested by Takla (note, though, that no exact dates are provided on eBay). Second, in feedback given by one of the sellers ('ebuyerrrrr') to 'cde789', he once addresses the buyer using a Finnish male name that matches the first name of the collector as reported to me by a scholar who has worked with the collection. Third, another scholar who worked directly with the collection identified photographs of the papyrus fragments bought by 'cde789', shown on Kraft's website, as being part of the Ilves Collection.

A network of familiar dealers

Since mid-2017, I have searched for, gathered and examined data on ‘cde789’ and any transactions by the owner of the account, information publicly available through eBay and independent auction data aggregate websites, such as WorthPoint² and AntiquesNavigator,³ to understand better the acquisition history of the Ilves Collection. This has resulted in a dataset consisting of a total of 463 transactions – all as one buyer. The earliest transaction for which I could obtain a date was from mid-2006, by Farr (eBay account ‘mjgreffarr’), while 24 other transactions seem to have occurred earlier, between the start of the account in February 2003 and mid-2006. The latest dated transaction available is from early 2019.

The items for which ‘cde789’, the collector of the Ilves Collection, ultimately had the winning bid – and thereby obtained the auction lot – were auctioned off by 64 different eBay accounts in total (Figures 1; 2). From many of these accounts, either smaller traders or larger antiquarian shops selling through eBay, the collector obtained only one or a few items. However, three accounts in particular stand out as significant in terms of their quantity:

- ‘mjgreffarr’, the account of Ferrini’s representative, Farr (116 transactions);
- ‘minnos2004’, the Turkey-based antiquities dealer (100 transactions); and
- ‘ebuyerrrr’, another Turkey-based antiquities dealer now identified as Yakup Ekşioğlu (74 transactions) (for the identification, see Nongbri 2020; see also Mazza 2020; Sabar 2020).

Together, they account for 63 per cent of all eBay transactions by ‘cde789’, *i.e.* pertaining to the Ilves Collection.

These three accounts are not only significant in terms of numbers, but all three accounts have also played a significant role in recent times with regard to illicit trafficking activities worldwide in relation to text-bearing ancient artefacts. The manuscript dealer Ferrini has been associated in the trade of Dead Sea Scroll-like fragments in 2003 (Schutten 2005) as well as in shady trades involving the Gospel of Judas manuscript (Brodie 2006). The possibility that the dismembered manuscripts auctioned off on eBay by Ferrini’s representative Farr may have contained fragments of the Gospel of Judas most likely led to increased awareness from buyers (Moss and Baden 2017: 33), possibly also the collector of the Ilves Collection.

The Turkey-based account ‘ebuyerrrr’ was previously named ‘MixAntik’ and in 2020 was publicly identified with the Istanbul-based antiquities dealer Ekşioğlu, who has been linked to the trade of Sappho papyrus fragments and thousands of other papyrus fragments obtained during the years 2009–2013 by Hobby Lobby Inc, as part of the Green Collection, and the Museum of the Bible, all of which have a dubious provenance (*e.g.* Mazza 2019; and in this volume; Moss and Baden 2017; Sabar 2020).

Finally, the account ‘minnos2004’ is another Turkey-based antiquities dealer with whom Hobby Lobby Inc and the Museum of the Bible have connections. The journalist

2 <http://www.worthpoint.com>.

3 <http://www.antiquesnavigator.com>.

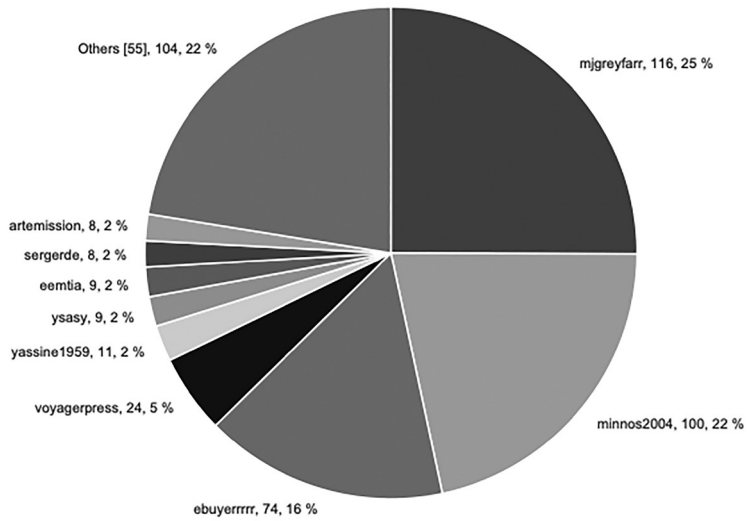


Figure 1: Graph showing the number of transactions per eBay seller ($n = 463$).

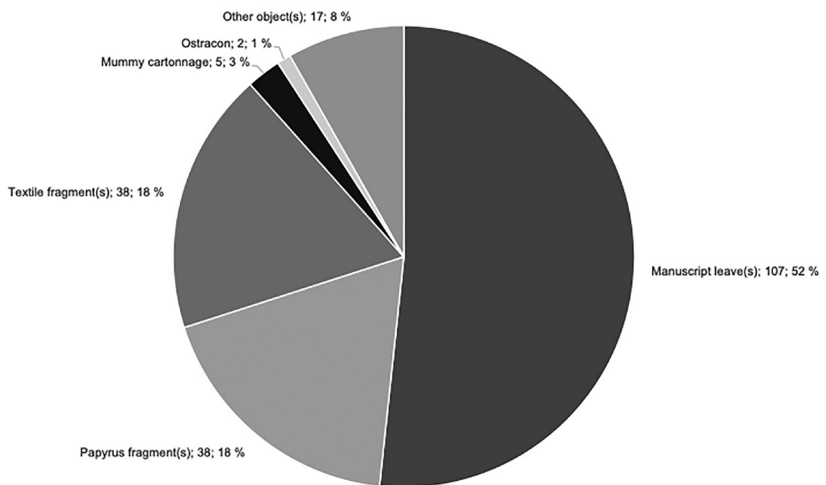


Figure 2: Graph showing the number of objects per object category ($n = 207$).

Ariel Sabar notes in a 2020 article in the *Atlantic* on the connections between Dirk Obbink, the Museum of the Bible and the wider antiquities trade that in 2016, the then director of the Museum of the Bible collections, David Trobisch, met with ‘another of the Greens’ papyrus suppliers’ in Istanbul to understand the shady provenance of their collections. Trobisch noted to Sabar that this particular supplier ‘wanted to know whether I came with the police’ (Sabar 2020).

A combination of evidence associated with the 2009 trading activities of the Green Collection, a collection closely associated with the later Museum of the Bible,⁴ and the Ilves Collection trades shows that Scott Carroll, the Green Collection's director in 2009, was likely assessing acquisitions in Istanbul at the location of 'minnos2004'. The fragments of P.Ilves Copt. 101 appear on a photograph shared publicly on Carroll's Facebook site.⁵ The photograph was posted on 1 December 2009 and appears in a photo album named 'Magic Carpet Tour 3: Papyri and Manuscripts', together with 16 other images. In describing the 13 different albums, Carroll wrote: 'Trip to Istanbul and Jerusalem to acquire artifacts for the museum. Inside are a very small, more like minuscule, sample of artifacts grouped by type or dealer' (Carroll 2009).

In a recent publication, Coptic philology expert Ivan Miroshnikov (2017a: 191, note 2) writes that the P.Ilves Copt. 101, which is a Coptic private letter, was allegedly purchased for the Ilves Collection 'on eBay in 2009' and 'sold by a dealer from Turkey with the online handle "eurasiavision". This eBay dealer seems to be identical with the "cashout" known to be involved with the sale of dismembered manuscripts'. The eBay account 'cashout' later changed their account name to 'minnos2004' (see also Takla 2014: 709-710). Available information on the Ilves Collection thus suggests that Carroll at some point during his trip to Istanbul was assessing papyrus acquisitions of dubious provenance from the dealer behind the eBay account 'minnos2004'.

The activities of Ekşioğlu and the still unknown dealer behind account 'minnos2004', as it is now known, formed a considerable part of the large papyrus collection of the Green Collection, and later of the Museum of the Bible, in which scholars such as Obbink were also involved (e.g. Mazza 2019; Moss and Baden 2017: 22-61; Sabar 2020). Recently, as no documented provenance for this material exists, the Museum of the Bible has returned these papyri to Egypt, the place from which the material had allegedly been looted and illicitly exported (MOTB 2020).

A small collector who fabricates provenance narratives?

The gathered data from eBay and independent auction data aggregator websites, together with existing publications, also provides insightful information about the antiquities collector behind the Ilves Collection. Finland is not frequently considered a destination market for cultural artefacts like papyri fragments (Maaperä 2017: 50; Thomas *et al.* 2018), and as such, the Ilves Collection is an anomaly, which stands out. On the other hand, compared to some internationally well-known privately-held collections, the supposed size of the Ilves Collection – said to consist of more than 1,000 fragments – is not notable. One reason why this collection, then, has received considerable attention is the timing of the research project undertaken by University of Helsinki researchers working on this collection. This occurred at around the same time that various scholars, authorities and

4 The Green Collection's name giver, Steve Green, is both president of the craft store chain Hobby Lobby Inc, the formal owner of the Green Collection, and co-founder, primary financier, and chair of the board of the Museum of the Bible. For further discussion on these links, see Moss and Baden (2017: 25).

5 Compare the photograph of the papyrus' back side on Carroll (2009; archived at <https://perma.cc/9F2Y-RRHB>; accessed 17 May 2022) with Miroshnikov (2017a: 199, figure 2). Note that P.Ilves 101 is made up of several smaller fragments that are erroneously positioned in the photograph shared by Scott Carroll.

news reporters exposed the issues surrounding the collecting of similar materials by the Green Collection and the Museum of the Bible (see notably Mazza 2018; 2019).

A question that has bothered me from the start is whether the Ilves Collection is just one of many similar relatively small-scale private collections that exist around the world, or whether it perhaps is on par with some of the larger internationally well-known collections. If we look at the prices paid on eBay for the auction lots now in the collection, at first glance the values do not particularly stand out. The winning auction price could be retrieved for 122 transactions. The average price per auction paid, excluding shipping costs, was \$139.79, with the lowest prices being paid for Egyptian textile fragments (\$0.99; from 'ebuyerrrr') and the highest prices being paid for a Coptic manuscript (\$2,000; from 'yassine1959') and a Coptic book cover (\$1,125; from 'antiquariat-kunsthandel'). A simple comparison of the average sales price against the total number of transactions suggests a total paid price of \$64,724.36, excluding shipping costs. This averages out to just over \$4,000 per year for the roughly 16-year active period between early 2003 and early 2019.

It is possible, however, that this cost estimate is too low, as only minimal information could be retrieved for transactions with 'minnos2004' (100 transactions) due to the fact that this eBay account has been set at 'private' (already noted by Takla 2014: 710).⁶ Furthermore, only two prices were obtained for the 116 transactions with Ferrini's representative, Farr. The nature of some of the auctioned items may mean that the ultimate auction prices for these items were significantly higher than the average price that I was able to calculate based on available data. This suggestion is supported by the fact that at least one auction lot obtained as part of the Ilves Collection, as reported by Takla (2014: 715), but which I could not identify through my dataset, sold for over \$400. Yet, even with a considerably elevated average price per year, the eBay transaction information does not immediately suggest that the Ilves Collection is substantial.

It remains unclear whether and to what extent the Ilves Collection includes manuscript materials obtained outside of eBay. If we believe the collector's provenance narrative to be true, that the collection can be traced back to the 1940s, then surely parts of the collection would have been obtained elsewhere? But is the collector's provenance narrative trustworthy? In mid-2020, scholars working on the Ilves Collection organised a small exhibition at the Finnish National Archives that included 19 objects from the collection. In an email to me in July 2020, one of the researchers wrote that these objects 'are those that, according to our knowledge, were purchased in London in the 1940's'. No further substantiation for this claim was provided. Furthermore, it is unclear why the collector provides a 1940s purchase origin for parts of the collection. Given the nature of the collection, it could have something to do with the adoption of more stringent antiquities legislation in Egypt during the early 1950s (Ikram 2011: 143; Mazza 2019: 178), though this remains speculation.

Interestingly, none of the 19 exhibited objects can be traced definitively by me to any of the dealers specified above based on the eBay transaction information that I collected. It should be noted, however, that only minimal documentation is available for most

6 eBay feedback profiles can be set either to 'public' or 'private'. eBay strongly encourages public feedback profiles for reasons of trust and transparency between traders. If the feedback profile is set to 'private', all feedback comments are hidden, and the account can no longer sell items. See eBay (n.d.).

transactions in the dataset, usually with no accompanying image or item description. This makes it almost impossible to trace most individual items within the dataset. However, digital photographs of manuscript fragments in the Ilves Collection made by the collector between 2009 and 2014, which I have seen and studied, are of great help here and in fact seemingly contradict the collector's 1940s provenance claim.

All 19 exhibited objects appear in this digital photograph collection, yet their file names and 'creation date' time stamps reveal no apparent relationship between any of the objects. All the photographs in the collection have file names based on a classification system devised by the collector, a system roughly organised by date of acquisition and/or photograph. However, where one would expect the supposedly older 19 exhibited objects to be grouped together at the beginning of this classification system, this is not the case; instead, they are randomly spread throughout the system – e.g. 'B55' (obj. no. 18), 'B321' (obj. no. 19) and 'B408' (obj. no. 17). The failure to group the older objects together seems odd if all of them indeed belonged to the oldest sections of the collection and would have been purchased roughly simultaneously during the 1940s in London.

The same can be said regarding the 'creation date' time stamps on photographs of the exhibited objects, as the creation date shows that the photos were taken on different days over a period of more than three years, from early 2010 to late 2013.⁷ Again, if these exhibited objects were obtained in the 1940s, one would expect at a minimum the photographs to have been taken during roughly the same period. Adding to the confusion, the 'creation date' time stamps fit neatly within the period during which the collector of the Ilves Collection was actively acquiring manuscript fragments from, notably, the Turkey-based dealers 'ebuyerrrrr' and 'minnos2004'.

While all this does not definitively disprove a potential 1940s acquisition for the exhibited objects, it does raise considerable questions regarding the collector's statement. In fact, the exhibited objects are generally quite similar in kind to those objects that have been sold through eBay by both 'ebuyerrrrr' and 'minnos2004' (see also photographs in Hyland 2021). It is also noteworthy to remember that, because 'minnos2004' set its eBay feedback information from public to private, all its transaction data is unknown and, as such, I have been unable to obtain information (no image, no item description, no sales price) from eBay on any of its transactions. It would be quite convenient, if known, for the collector of the Ilves Collection to choose precisely those objects as part of a 1940s acquisition narrative, as they are effectively untraceable. It is interesting as well to note that the only transaction from 'minnos2004' that can be traced – P.Ilves 101, which is shown on Carroll's (2009) Facebook page – is missing from the exhibited objects, despite it being the most studied manuscript in the collection.

Of course, other possibilities remain open. The collector could have bought the exhibited objects from other eBay dealers that I have yet to trace, or the objects were bought from elsewhere at around the same time that he took the respective photographs. It is not uncommon that eBay dealers engage in direct sales without the platform's interference. For instance, Roberta Mazza (2019: 188-189) has shown how Ekşioğlu, the dealer behind

7 In examining the photographs' metadata, I have paid particular attention to the stored Exchangeable Image File (EXIF) format information, which is created by the digital camera with which the photograph is made. Among other things, it details the exact time and date the photograph was taken.

the eBay account ‘ebuyerrrr’, after having established initial contact through eBay, tried to sell manuscript fragments with highly dubious origins through direct text messaging. It is probable that many of the transactions associated with the Green Collection occurred through such manner, outside of the online auctioning platform.

There are some indications that the collector of the Ilves Collection also acquired manuscript fragments during the 2000s and 2010s directly from dealers and other collectors. I have received information that, during the period when representative Farr was auctioning off the former Ferrini collection, the collector of the Ilves Collection did acquire fragments for which he had initially lost the bid on eBay directly from the U.S.-based collector Ernest Muro. However, I have not been able to verify this information. Moreover, as already noted, Ekşioğlu on one occasion in his transaction feedback, names the collector by his first name. It is possible that the two were on familiar terms with one another, though whether this means that certain transactions were also handled directly, outside of eBay, remains unclear.

However, if my reasoning here is correct, then such transactions would have considerable implications. First, the collection may be substantially larger than the transactions on eBay account ‘cde789’ suggest. It remains unclear as well whether the collector of the Ilves Collection may have used and/or uses other eBay accounts. Second, the collector may be considerably better connected in the network of international dealers and collectors of unprovenanced manuscript fragments, not only through eBay but also directly. Third, and perhaps most important, the collector appears to show awareness of potential moral condemnation or negative exposure for the trade in manuscript fragments and, as such, aims to keep a low profile. This means even fabricating and adjusting a provenance narrative that he knows is difficult to track; it also means continuing to be ambiguous, if not dishonest, about his collection’s origins with the scholars involved.

None of the above implications should be viewed as certain, but the evidence and information that I have seen thus far does seem to suggest it. Indeed, especially the fact that the collector of the Ilves Collection is obsessed with anonymity would fit this pattern. The above-mentioned exhibition in mid-2020 did not mention anywhere by name the Ilves Collection nor that most exhibited objects were from that collection. The Finland-based scholars involved in the study and publication of this collection have continued to maintain the anonymity of the collector. In fact, Takla (2014: 715, note 18) has noted that during their contact in December 2011, the collector ‘asked his name [to] be held from print’ and thus referred to him by his initials YH only. More remarkably, ‘YH’ claimed to be ‘only the representative of the Collection,’ though it is unclear what exactly he may have meant by that.

Even earlier, in July 2006, Kraft noted that one of the buyers of the Ferrini material on eBay requested anonymity, after which Kraft stopped gathering the eBay account names of buyers as part of his research on the trade in dismembered papyri (Kraft 2007). Kraft no longer remembers the specifics of this request (email, 24 November 2017). However, of the eight buyer eBay accounts that Kraft lists, only ‘cde789’ (the Ilves Collection) and two other accounts are listed once – all three with their first transactions in July 2006. Kraft moreover specifically noted that it was ‘an agent for others’ who contacted him with the request to stop listing buyer accounts (Kraft 2007). While it remains unproven that the request came from the person involved with the Ilves Collection, the resemblance

between Kraft's 'agent' and Takla's 'representative' seems remarkable. Considering the above evidence, the fact that Ekşioğlu only once during all their transactions – 74 in total – mentions in the feedback the collector's first name (see above) may be equally due to requested anonymity.

The academic facilitation of the Ilves Collection

In November 2012, at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) Annual Meeting in Chicago, Antti Marjanen, a now retired professor of gnostic studies at the University of Helsinki, presented two Coptic parchment fragments possibly associated with the Apocalypse of Paul (SBL 2012). The fragments in question were held in the Ilves Collection and show that as early as 2012, scholars in Finland had access to the collection. That it was Marjanen who, to my understanding, was the first to publicly engage with the Coptic fragments in the collection is perhaps not extraordinary. Marjanen is a well-respected scholar in the field of gnostic studies, co-author of the first Finnish translations of the Nag Hammadi writings and the Gospel of Judas, and one of few Finnish experts on the Coptic language. It is not surprising, knowing the background of the Ilves Collection, that the collector would offer the material to Marjanen for study.

Further research on the collection developed as part of the project Publication of the Coptic Manuscripts of the Ilves Collection (2016–2020), led by Marjanen, which received funding from the Academy of Finland. That project aimed 'to conserve, catalogue, edit, and publish [the] Coptic manuscripts' from the Ilves Collection (Ilves 2016).⁸ So far, though, no catalogue has yet appeared and only a few manuscript fragments have been published (Miroshnikov 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2018).

The start of that publication project in late 2016 was embedded in some controversy, with one of the original project researchers quitting out of ethical concerns of working with undocumented material. The controversy was also one of the reasons leading to the start of the Working with Cultural Objects and Manuscripts working group among researchers (including the author) across the Faculties of Arts and Theology at the University of Helsinki. This developed several initiatives to stimulate discussion on the issues of working with unprovenanced cultural objects; that is, cultural objects with notable gaps in terms of their history of ownership. For example, in June 2017 an international colloquium on the topic was held (Immonen *et al.* 2020); a cross-faculty master's level lecture course was developed to discuss the legal and ethical implications of working with cultural objects; and a small survey was conducted among Finnish researchers, museums and heritage professionals (Thomas *et al.* 2018).

Furthermore, when in 2017 I first identified the connection between the Ilves Collection and the eBay account 'cde789', I discussed and shared all my provenance information with the project in order to discuss the consequences and options for the project. There was no meaningful follow up discussion, although the project discussed the issues internally and some changes were undertaken. For instance, when it became clear after the project's starting date that the collector continued to be an active buyer on eBay, the group decided not to work on any newly obtained manuscript fragments. Around the time, or shortly after, the publications by Miroshnikov (2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2018) had appeared,

8 See also note 1 above for the official project abstract, as stated on the Academy of Finland's website.

the group also decided to start with the oldest objects in the collection – the alleged 1940s material. To date, none of this material has been published, although it did appear in the small 2020 exhibition.

What motivated Marjanen, Miroshnikov, and others involved with the project to start studying and publishing the Coptic manuscripts from the Ilves Collection, and why did they continue to engage with the collector and the collection even after receiving information about its dubious provenance? An answer to these questions might be found in the little published information that is available on this research project. As the project website states, ‘The importance of the project lies in making the manuscripts of the collection accessible to the public, following the principle that “a manuscript available to one scholar is available to all”’ (Ilves 2016; quote from Robinson 1977: 29). The quote, supposedly originally attributed to the Coptic scholar Hans-Martin Schenke, is taken from a review of the Jung Codex (Nag Hammadi Codex I) by James Robinson, a renowned New Testament scholar who played an important role in the Nag Hammadi and Gospel of Judas origin narratives. Robinson’s 1977 review discusses the context and controversies surrounding the lengthy period during which the broader scholarly community was denied access to the original text of the Jung Codex.

In a later statement by Miroshnikov, a slight shift in focus occurred around the time when the collection’s dubious recent provenance surfaced: ‘While I realize that the unknown provenance of the papyrus raises ethical concerns, I also believe that the papyrus itself has historical and philological value and thus should be published’ (Miroshnikov 2017a: 191, note 3). The issue is no longer only about accessibility of the material, but also about perspectives. For Miroshnikov, the historical and philological information that can be retrieved from the manuscript fragments outweighs the absence of archaeological information, as well as, or so it seems, any potential legal or ethical concerns regarding its acquisition.

The statements by the project and Miroshnikov bear considerable resemblance to the ‘preservation’ trope that often lingers in the thinking of and discussions with scholars working with text-bearing unprovenanced artefacts. Public statements along those lines are rare, but the Assyriologist David Owen (2005: 1816) put it bluntly as follows: ‘From my perspective, any and all such written documentation must be rescued, recorded, preserved, and published. ... [T]he current body of texts now in private hands includes critically important historical, literary, religious, and economic information’.

Different from the notion of rescuing the actual objects, an idea often associated with collectors of dubiously-provenanced heritage objects (*e.g.* Omland 2006: 233-237), text-concerned scholars like papyrologists, biblical scholars, and Assyriologists centre more on the recording and preservation efforts of what, according to them, is the essence of the object – the text itself. As Mazza recently has forcefully critiqued this view, she observes that past generations of papyrologists have viewed ‘[t]he reading and transcription’ of these texts ‘as what mattered most’, viewing it almost synonymous as preserving the object as a whole (Mazza 2021: 390). Perhaps, to those text-focused scholars, the opinions of Owen or Miroshnikov initially make sense. But what exactly are they preserving, and just what are they not preserving? In what manner are they preserving the material, and to what purpose? Most importantly, for whom are they undertaking this preservation effort?

To start with the last of the three questions, those researching the Ilves Collection described it on their website as being of interest to ‘the public’. Yet do they mean here literally everyone or primarily scholars? How is such benefit guaranteed? Additionally, how many future generations are we talking about? Discussions of long-term preservation, discoverability and accessibility are remarkably absent in the responses by those scholars opting to publish unprovenanced manuscript fragments. In what follows, I highlight three particular related issues and show that a decision to preserve an unprovenanced object through publication equally means making the decision to deselect, degrade, decontextualise and destroy.

First, just what is being preserved is a selective process in itself. As the antiquities market is driven by demand, it is ultimately collectors, and those scholars facilitating that collecting through study and publication, who determine what is of value and should be kept and what should be destroyed. It is good to be reminded of those objects that, due to the publication of papyri fragments, are being deselected or destroyed, thereby removing them from future scientific study. The act of deselection, or destruction, is as much a conscious decision (based on present needs and interests) as the act of selection, or rescue.

Second, by choosing recently surfaced manuscript fragments with unclear provenance, some scholars are choosing not to work with the tons of unpublished manuscript material that is currently actively preserved and curated in institutions around the world, such as at the University of Oxford, the British Museum or the University of Michigan (Nongbri 2018: 227-228; Verhoogt 2017: 169-170). It seems odd that scholars are publishing manuscript fragments with questionable or illicit origins, while at the same time overlooking these unpublished artefacts. There is a grave danger that the longer these objects sit unstudied in museum storages and repositories the more fragmented, degraded and decontextualised they will become. The unfortunate result may be that they will become obsolete to future scholarly interests.

Third, the curation of legacy data – artefact, notes, drawings, photographs, publications and the connections between them – is highly important for future generations to continue to have access to and work with the materials and findings. Whether curation practices follow any standards regarding the collection of recently surfaced objects remains in many cases unknown due to a lack of transparency about how the material has been documented and stored. For example, the type of facilities, the underlying circumstances and the name of the person curating the Ilves Collection all remain unclear, as does the question of whether and when objects are being sold off or repatriated. Equally unclear is what happens to the existing documentation related to the objects in those latter cases.

Furthering knowledge?

This brings me to my final point: Does the publication of the Ilves Collection further our knowledge? The researchers themselves write about making the manuscripts available to the public. However, the contextual information is low, the material is already degraded and continues seemingly to be so, and no clear documentation is seemingly available. As such, what is ultimately made available is just a faint reflection of the manuscript itself.

The motives for choosing to study a legally dubious and ethically objectionable collection of manuscripts over objects that have been cared for by professional curators for decades are not entirely unclear. In the case of the Ilves Collection, the decision seems to relate as

much to ease of access as well as to self-interest and desire by the scholars involved, whether because of their particular specialisation or because the object in question clarifies a historical problem of scientific importance to them. It does not seem to serve future generations far and wide (for discussion of Eurocentrism, see Gad 2019). In fact, scholars from the Global South, the places from which these manuscripts seemingly derive, have neither the objects nor often the ability to gain access to the publications, even though access to knowledge is considered a basic human right (UN 1948: Art. 27; see also Willinsky 2006: 143-154).

The danger for wider scholarship, though, is that the publication of unprovenanced objects ultimately seems to lead to a higher degree of conservatism, since only the object's value in the immediate sense for that respective scholar (*e.g.* the text, perhaps even only a section of that text) is being carefully documented and preserved for future scholarship. This means that it does not further our understanding much beyond the already established canon (Gill and Chippindale 1993). Text-concerned scholars would probably argue fiercely against this view, suggesting that texts provide substantial information beyond just their archaeological context. While much information can surely be retrieved from, for example, a decontextualised papyrus fragment, the question of whether this information is substantial is value-laden and depends a great deal on which (future) scholar is offering a response.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have presented a profile of the Ilves Collection derived from the collector's public eBay account information. This profile shows that this manuscript collection has close ties with both international dealers and better-known private collections. The manuscript fragments being traded all have unclear if not illicit origins, probably accounting for one reason why the collector continuously insists on remaining anonymous. The provided profile also raises suspicions that the collection is more sizeable than what can be seen through the eBay transactions, in fact more sizeable than the scholars involved have estimated. While there is no indication in the collected evidence that the collector of the Ilves Collection ever sold a manuscript fragment, even this possibility cannot be entirely dismissed without knowing more about the nature of his character and behaviour.

I also have shown how the purveyor of the Ilves Collection has been able to build close connections with Finnish academics who were largely unaware of the problems in working with unprovenanced cultural objects. However, even as the wider field of Biblical studies in particular has become increasingly aware of these problems, the scholars working with the Ilves Collection have shown little signs in public of adapting to this new situation. Instead, to justify their work the scholars involved have seemingly built an argument around the 'rescue' trope that is so common among scholars more concerned with texts than objects. In this chapter, I have argued against the notion that such scholars are rescuing these objects from destruction by highlighting issues of selection, access and preservation. Based on current practices, I ultimately argue that these scholars are making the choice to publish the Ilves Collection primarily to benefit themselves, but this also has negative implications for the development of knowledge.

The nature of the illicit antiquities trade in Finland and the role the country plays within wider international networks of trafficking remains little understood. The general public, professionals and the authorities still consider Finland to some extent a small player within the trade. The uncovering of the Ilves Collection may provide some grounds to perhaps reconsider such ideas.

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