

Chapter 7

The Market in Iraqi Antiquities 1980–2009 and Academic Involvement in the Marketing Process

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Introduction

In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, the large-scale looting of archaeological sites in Iraq started, and worsened around the time of the 2003 Coalition invasion, when the National Museum and other cultural institutions in Baghdad were also ransacked. These events were a source of public and political consternation, and prompted some legislative and law enforcement responses aimed at protecting Iraq's archaeological heritage (Emberling and Hanson 2008; Rothfield 2008; Stone and Farchakh Bajjaly 2008). Since 1974, it had been illegal under Iraqi domestic law to export archaeological artefacts from Iraq. Then, on August 6, 1990, the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 661 imposed a trade embargo, which made it illegal under international law to trade in archaeological artefacts exported from Iraq after that date. But despite the prohibitory intent of these laws, there continued and continues to be a healthy international (and illegal) market in Iraqi antiquities (Brodie 2006, 2008a, b). This paper offers an analysis of this market, with a view to (a) introducing some reliable, quantitative data into the public domain and (b) suggesting a new strategy of non-legislative interdiction.

The Market up to 2003

The state of the antiquities market from 1980, through August 1990 (when UNSCR 661 was adopted), to April 2003 (when the Iraq National Museum was attacked) can be gauged from statistics describing antiquities sales held at the major London

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and New York auction houses.¹ Christie's is used for the London part of this analysis because of the three major London auction houses that sell antiquities – Sotheby's, Christie's and Bonhams – only Christie's maintained sales through the period in question, holding major antiquities-only sales two or three times per year. Figure 7.1 shows the combined number of lots of unprovenanced Mesopotamian cylinder seals and cuneiform-inscribed objects consigned for sale at Christie's each year.² Both types of artefacts are found mainly in Iraq, and so the figures can be taken as indicators of the larger market in Iraqi antiquities. It is clear that during the period in question, the quantities of unprovenanced artefacts being offered for sale did not diminish; in fact, if anything they increased over the years running up to 2003, even though by 1994 notice of the trade embargo imposed by UNSCR 661 had been provided by the major London and New York auction houses in their relevant

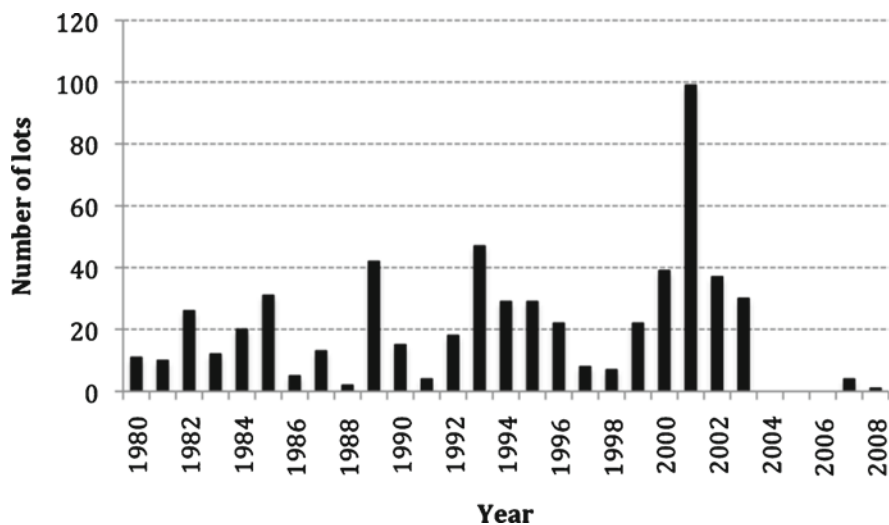


Fig. 7.1 Number of lots of unprovenanced cylinder seals and cuneiform objects offered annually at Christie's London 1980–2006

¹ Illustrated catalogues produced by the major auction houses are the only publicly accessible, long-term source of information about the antiquities market. The material appearing for auction can vary in quality, but is mainly middle to high range. Really expensive unprovenanced objects are traded outside the auction market in direct private transactions. Poorer quality material is nowadays traded mainly on the Internet.

² Cylinder seals are, as the name suggests, small cylinders engraved with a figurative or abstract design and sometimes with a short inscription. They were rolled on soft clay to create a reverse impression of their design which would function as a sign of ownership or authority. Cylinder seals were made from a variety of hard materials, and are usually in the range 2–4 cm long. Seal impressions were often made on clay tablets inscribed in the cuneiform script, which could be fired to produce a durable document. Cylinder seals and later cuneiform tablets underpinned the administrative systems of ancient Mesopotamia from about 3000 BC to 500 BC and today are found mainly, though not exclusively, in Iraq.

antiquities sales catalogues.³ The increasing market volume suggests that new material was appearing, and new material could only have been moving out of Iraq through illegal means.

For New York, the largest data run available is for Sotheby's auction house, and the number of lots of unprovenanced Mesopotamian cylinder seals and cuneiform objects offered annually at Sotheby's are shown in Fig. 7.2. On average, fewer lots were offered at Sotheby's New York than at Christie's London. Auction statistics are not a straightforward reflection of the total antiquities market, but the ones presented here do suggest that for the period in question the New York market in unprovenanced Iraqi artefacts was smaller in volume than the London one. This observation is fully in accord with other evidence suggesting that much of the trade out of Iraq during the 1990s was passing through London (Brodie 2006: 214–222; Gibson 1997, 2008: 35–38).

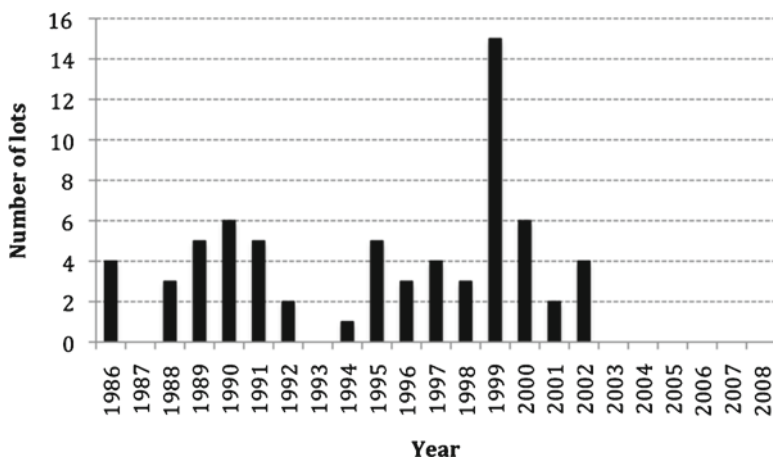


Fig. 7.2 Number of lots of unprovenanced cylinder seals and cuneiform objects offered annually at Sotheby's New York 1986–2006

³For example, the following statement appeared in the London Christie's catalogue of their December 12, 1990 Fine Antiquities sale: A recently imposed United Nations trade embargo prohibits us for accepting bids from any person in Iraq and/or Kuwait (including any body controlled by Iraq or Kuwait residents or companies, wherever carrying on business), or from any other person where we have reasonable cause to believe (a) that the Lots(s) will be supplied or delivered to or to the order of a person in either Iraq or Kuwait or (b) that the Lot(s) will be used for the purposes of any business carried on in or operated from Iraq or Kuwait.

Bonhams' first ever "Antiquities" sale catalogue of April 1991 contained a similar statement, and so too did comparable Sotheby's catalogues (for example, in the catalogue for the London December 1992 sale). These statements were aimed very much at potential buyers. There was no mention of potential consignors, and no overt prohibition on consignments originating in Iraq, even though Article 3(a) of UNSCR 661 stated specifically that States should prevent "The import into their territories of all commodities and products originating in Iraq or Kuwait exported there from after the date of the present resolution."

The issue of provenance is crucial here. Provenance is known ownership history, and so when an artefact is offered for sale with provenance, a potential purchaser can easily ascertain whether the piece is legally on the market, or not. For an unprovenanced artefact, however, it is harder if not impossible to establish its legitimacy. Thus, the unprovenanced Iraqi material being offered for auction between 1990 and 2003 might have been moved out of Iraq in part or in total before 1974, the date of the Iraqi domestic law prohibiting export, or before 1990, the date of international sanctions imposed by UNSCR 661. Equally, the material might all have been moved out of Iraq after those dates, and have entered the market illegally. The absence of provenance meant, however, that the auction houses would have had no necessary knowledge of that fact.

In May 2003, UNSCR 1483 lifted trade sanctions on Iraq, except for those on weapons and cultural objects. Article 7 of UNSCR 1483 specifically stated that the trade in Iraqi cultural objects would be prohibited when “reasonable suspicion exists that they have been illegally removed” from Iraq since the adoption of UNSCR 661, and that the return of any cultural objects stolen from cultural institutions or other locations in Iraq since that time should be facilitated. Since that date, the sale of unprovenanced Iraqi artefacts at public auction in New York and London has stopped almost entirely (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2), perhaps because of the widespread negative publicity that followed on from the break-in at the Iraq National Museum, or because of UNSCR 1483, though there might also have been a financial consideration, as discussed below. The fact that unprovenanced Iraqi artefacts suddenly disappeared from the auction market after 2003 is an important one as it reinforces the impression already formed that before 2003 a large part of the unprovenanced material on the market was there illegally. Otherwise, if it had been there legally, after 2003 it could have continued to have been consigned quite openly without any fear of criminal prosecution. Absence of provenance, it seems, is a good indicator of illegal trade.

The Sîn-iddinam Barrels

Some of the unprovenanced artefacts being sold at auction during this period were almost certainly looted. Between 1997 and 2002, for example, eight cuneiform inscribed clay barrels, dating to about 1900 BC and celebrating King Sîn-iddinam’s dredging of the River Tigris, appeared for auction. Not one had any indication of provenance. The first to appear was at Sotheby’s New York in May 1997. The catalogue entry stated correctly that at the time only three similarly inscribed barrels were known – one each at the Louvre, the Ashmolean Museum, and Chicago’s Oriental Institute. The fact that the Sotheby’s barrel was previously unknown might have raised questions about the legality or otherwise of its provenance, but, if it did, they were not enough to stop the sale. Nor were any questions asked over the following five years when a further seven unprovenanced barrels turned up at auction. It is hardly credible that so many of these barrels should have been in circulation since before 1974, eluding scholarly and public view, only to appear en masse at a time

when there was widespread looting of archaeological sites in southern Iraq. A more parsimonious explanation for their sudden appearance is that, in fact, they were looted after 1990 and illegally traded.

Financial Considerations

The auction houses' decision in 2003 to stop offering unprovenanced Iraqi material might also have been influenced by the economic climate of the market. Economic analyses of the auction market in antiquities are in their infancy, yet it is clear that the value of the market in Iraqi antiquities started to increase in the late 1980s. Figure 7.3 shows the total annual value of all cylinder seal sales made at Christie's London over the period 1981–2008. These statistics are not derived from repeat sales and therefore do not chart the changing price of individual cylinder seals through time. Fluctuations in value might, for example, be due to variations in the quality and thus the price of seals being sold. What the statistics do reliably indicate, however, is the value of the market, and by extension the auction house's profit margins over the period in question (derived from buyer's and seller's premiums levied on the achieved price at auction). Thus the profits being made by Christie's from cylinder seal sales started increasing in the late 1980s, and stayed at a high level until 2002, when they declined sharply.

Not all lots offered for auction sell, and those that do not sell must constitute a loss for the auction house. The auction house devotes time and resources to their presentation, but receives no commission for a successful sale. Figure 7.4 attempts to place the cylinder seal sales in this broader market context. It shows the mean price per lot offered. Mean price per lot offered (as opposed to per lot sold) is intended to offer a composite measure of material profitability, offsetting the loss made from unsold lots against the profit made from sold lots. It is clear from Fig. 7.4 that the profits being made from cylinder seals sales started dropping after

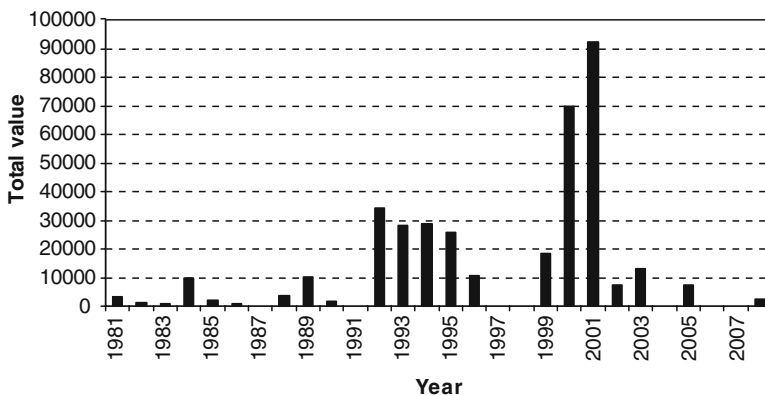


Fig. 7.3 Total annual value (£) of cylinder seal sales at Christie's London. Values deflated to 1975 using the Consumer Price Index

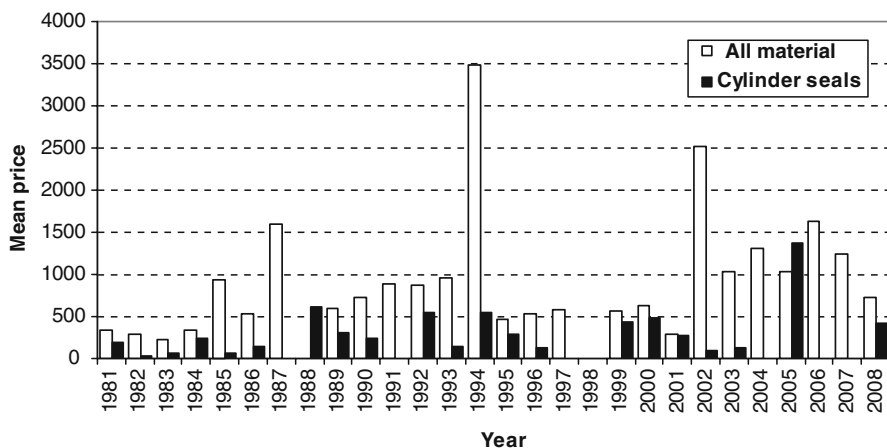


Fig. 7.4 Mean price per lot offered (£) of cylinder seal sales compared to sales of all other material at Christie's London. Values deflated to 1975 using the Consumer Price Index. For 1988 and 1998 there are no data for "all material" sales. The high mean prices for 2005 and 2007 are for good quality, well provenanced seals

2000, while from 2002 onwards profits from other types of material were increasing. This observation that cylinder seals were becoming less profitable in the run-up to the 2003 Coalition invasion seems confirmed by satellite and field surveys of southern Iraq that suggest looting intensified in the early 2000s, and diminished after 2003 (Curtis et al. 2008; Stone 2008). If more seals were reaching the market from Iraq, supply would have begun to outstrip demand.

Thus until 2002, Christie's clearly had a financial interest in maintaining sales of cylinder sales despite the UNSCR trade embargo. Once profits started declining, however, it might explain in part why Christie's and other auction houses were then less willing to shoulder the adverse publicity and possible risks involved in selling unprovenanced material. It might have proved expedient to stop offering artefacts of declining profitability and concentrate instead on selling more profitable and less controversial categories of material. Further research will establish whether the market fluctuations charted in Figs. 7.3 and 7.4 were characteristic of the market in Iraqi antiquities more generally, or specific to cylinder seal sales at Christie's. The facts that sales of unprovenanced cuneiform objects at Christie's stopped in 2003 along with those of cylinder seals, and that a similar situation prevailed at Sotheby's New York, suggest it was a more general phenomenon.

The Market in December 2006

Outside the auction market, after 2003 Iraqi artefacts continued and have continued to be openly traded on the Internet. On one day – 5 December 2006 – there were at least 55 Web sites offering antiquities for sale and that might have been expected to

sell Iraqi objects.⁴ In fact, 23 of those sites were offering for sale or had recently sold cylinder seals and/or cuneiform-inscribed objects. In total, there were 78 cylinder seals and 147 cuneiform objects listed (Table 7.1), but the real number might have been higher than the data suggest. There is no guarantee that what is openly offered for sale on a Web site represents the entire stock available for sale, and some Web sites specifically stated that this was in fact the case. Thus, there might have been more material available for sale than was advertised, potentially much more.

Hardly any of the cuneiform objects were advertised with a verifiable provenance. It is also instructive in this context to note the named findspots of the cuneiform objects (Table 7.2). It is suspicious that although the modern nation states of Iran, Israel, and Syria were identified as findspots, Iraq was not named once. Presumably, the term Mesopotamia was used instead. There was no evidence provided on any Web site to allow any of the findspots to be verified, and some of them, such as Mediterranean, seem unnecessarily vague. The reluctance of dealers to use the word “Iraq” as a geographical identifier suggests that even if they had no

Table 7.1 Iraqi artefacts for sale on the Internet in 2006 and 2008

	December 2006	September 2008
No. Web sites identified	55	72
No. Web sites offering cuneiform objects/ cylinder seals	23	32
No. cylinder seals offered	78	142
No. cuneiform objects offered	147	330
Total no. artefacts offered	225	472

Table 7.2 Provenance and findspot information for cuneiform objects available for sale on the Internet in 2006 and 2008

Provenance or findspot	Number of objects (2006)	Number of objects (2008)
Named previous owner	3	8
Mesopotamia	71	47
East Mediterranean	0	180
Mediterranean	12	9
Central Asia	0	4
Israel	8	6
Syria	8	10
Iran	1	0
Elam	1	0
Isin	1	1
Larsa	0	4
Lagash	1	0

⁴The search included Web sites selling ancient Mediterranean or “Classical” antiquities, either solely or in part, but excluded Web sites that specialise in, for example, Precolumbian or African artefacts.

specific knowledge of illegal provenance, they were well aware that many Iraqi objects were illegally on the market, and had also realised that specifying a findspot other than Iraq helps to reassure potential customers and confound police action. In fact, so long as care is taken when attributing findspot not to use the word “Iraq”, it would appear possible to sell illegally exported Iraqi material with relative impunity. There was no real attempt to “launder” objects by providing them with a false provenance of a real or fictitious “old collection”.

The Market in September 2008

In September 2008, the Internet survey conducted in 2006 was repeated, with the aim of establishing whether the market had changed over the intervening period. The results suggested that the market had actually increased in volume. There were more Web sites offering artefacts for sale, and the total number of available artefacts had more than doubled (Table 7.1). As in 2006, some sites were claiming a larger stock than advertised. The Royal-Athena Galleries Web site, for example, carried the following notice: “In addition to the pieces illustrated above, we have an extensive array of other cylinder seals ranging from \$300 to \$2,250 and cuneiform tablets and foundation cones ranging from \$250 to \$2,750 in price”.⁵ Also, and again as in 2006, there were no stated findspots of Iraq (Table 7.2). Two more things in particular stand out from the 2008 data. One is the appearance on the market of several “clay bricks” carrying an identical Neo-Babylonian inscription. The second is the prominence of the Barakat Gallery, offering 229 cuneiform pieces – 69% of all cuneiform material on offer. Both cases are discussed further below.

In August 2009, the sites identified in September 2008 were revisited to establish how many of the objects tabulated in 2008 had been sold, and to make an estimate of total annual sales values. Many of the objects tabulated in 2008 were still being advertised for sale, some were marked “sold”, and many had been removed from display. The presumption here is that any object appearing in 2008 that had been removed by 2009 had been sold. (Another reason might be that it had been recognised as fake and quietly removed.) Leaving aside for the moment material on sale at the Barakat Gallery, about 75% of the objects offered for sale on other Web sites had been sold (and in most cases there was new material available). Not all objects sold had been advertised in 2008 with prices, but for those that were, the aggregate sales values are shown in Table 7.3. If these data are used to estimate mean prices, which are then multiplied by the total number of objects sold, then the total estimated value for the year of all cylinder seal sales would be \$58,321[(38348/48)*73], and for cuneiform objects \$78,530 [(42744/43)*79], or a combined value of \$136,850.

⁵<http://www.royalathena.com/PAGES/Under2500/neeastcat2500.html>. Accessed 23 September 2008.

Table 7.3 Internet sales other than the Barakat Gallery, September 2008 to August 2009

Material	Number of objects for sale (September 2008)	Number of objects sold (August 2009)	Number of objects sold with price information	Total value of objects sold with price information
Cylinder seals	123	73	48	\$38,348
Cuneiform objects	101	79	43	\$42,744

The Nebuchadnezzar Larsa Bricks

In September 2008, six Web sites were displaying examples of what were said to be clay or cuneiform bricks from Larsa (Table 7.4), carrying an identical Neo-Babylonian inscription celebrating King Nebuchadnezzar’s restoration of the temple of Shamash in Larsa. A Web site entry of LMLK Blogspot dated July 8, 2006⁶ carried images of three more bricks said to be similarly inscribed that had appeared on eBay “over the past few years” (i.e. the few years before 2006). Brick no. 1 on the LMLK Web site was the same one as the September 2008 eBay brick, but otherwise the bricks are all different. Thus, there are at least eight examples of this inscribed brick that have been in circulation since 2003, and that do not seem to have been documented before that date.

There are 11 examples of this text on architectural blocks in the British Museum. The dimensions of the texts are in the approximate range $19 \times 11 \text{ cm}^2$, while the dimensions of the blocks themselves are in the range $34 \times 33 \times 9 \text{ cm}^3$ (Walker 1981: 90). It is notable that the dimensions of the “bricks” appearing on the Internet in 2008 closely approximate those of the texts on the British Museum blocks, and close inspection of images shows that in fact the recently appeared “bricks” had been cut down from larger blocks with the use of circular saws. Saw marks were clearly visible on the backs of several bricks, and the front view of one brick had what appeared to a horizontal saw-cut in its top edge. The saw marks constitute clear evidence that the “bricks” had been removed destructively from their architectural contexts and cut down in size to facilitate their illegal transport from Iraq. The question is, when? Larsa has suffered badly from illegal digging in recent years. The site guard was murdered in 1991 and the site was heavily looted in 2003. A National Geographic-sponsored team of archaeologists visited Larsa in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 Coalition invasion and reported severe damage to some large brick buildings of a type that often contained cuneiform archives. The situation seems to have improved by the time a British Museum team visited the site in 2008 and reported little evidence of recent looting (Wright et al. 2003; Stone 2008: 76; Curtis et al. 2008: 14, 17). Nevertheless, there is no concrete evidence at the moment to show that the sawn down Nebuchadnezzar bricks were

⁶<http://lmlk.blogspot.com/>; posted July 8, 2006. Accessed 23 September 2008.

Table 7.4 Websites showing Nebuchadnezzar Larsa bricks in September 2008

Dealer	Object as described	Dimensions (cm)	Price
Aweidah Gallery	Clay brick	21 × 13	Sold
Treasuregate Gallery	Clay brick	20 × 13	\$2,000
BidAncient	Cuneiform brick	21.5 × 14 × 2.5	\$1,100 – sold
Harlan Berk	Terracotta brick	21.3 × 13.3	\$2,500 est.
eBay	Cuneiform brick		\$1,450 res.
Ancient Resource	Brick inscription		Not for sale

removed from Larsa in 2003, though again, as for the Sîn-iddinam barrels, the most parsimonious explanation for their sudden appearance on the market after 2003 must be that they were looted.

The Barakat Cuneiform Objects

The Barakat Gallery (Los Angeles, London) had on offer 229 cuneiform inscribed objects in September 2008, almost all clay tablets or cones. Most of the objects were complete, though some had been reconstructed from two or more fragments. None had any provenance and the stated findspots are listed in Table 7.5. When approached, Barakat stated that the tablets had been in the gallery owner's family's possession since 1956, when they had been bought from a dealer in Jordan.

The major part of the cuneiform objects offered by Barakat (181 in total) comprised tablets dated to the first half of the twenty-first century BC. Their findspots are listed in Table 7.6. Included in this number was a quantity of the so-called messenger tablets – tablets recording the disbursement of rations to official messengers. At least 43 of these tablets dated to the year 2027 BC, and the same personal names could be found repeated on different tablets. Table 7.7 shows the names repeated on just four tablets, chosen at random. The fact that the same names appeared on these different messenger tablets shows that the tablets comprised an archive from a single archaeological site, and suggests that the larger twenty-first century corpus is part of the same archive. If that is in fact the case, then it is strange that according to Barakat some of the tablets had a findspot in Israel, others had a findspot in Syria, while the vast majority were said to come from the Eastern Mediterranean (Table 7.6).

The size distribution of the Barakat cuneiform tablets stands out from that of the tablets on other Web sites, with a modal maximum dimension in the range 6–8 cm, compared to a modal maximum dimension in the range 4–6 cm for all other Web sites (Fig. 7.5). The Barakat tablets were also being offered for prices far higher than those being asked by other Web sites. The price data of all Web sites other than Barakat show a general correlation between tablet size and price (Fig. 7.6). This correlation is to be expected, as tablet size is an indicator of inscription length, and the interest or importance of the inscription is a major determinant of price (though clearly there are other factors at work, such as wear,

Table 7.5 Stated place of origin for cuneiform objects offered by the Barakat Gallery in September 2008

Origin	Number
Mesopotamia	22
Syria	7
Israel	6
Mediterranean	9
East Mediterranean	180
Central Asia	4
None	1

Table 7.6 Stated place of origin for cuneiform tablets dating to the first half of the twenty-first century BC offered by the Barakat Gallery in September 2008

Origin	Number
Mesopotamia	0
Syria	6
Israel	5
Mediterranean	8
East Mediterranean	159
Central Asia	3
None	0

Table 7.7 Personal names repeated on four “messenger tablets”

AM0062	AM0063	AM0085	AM0103
Lu-dingirra		Lu-dingirra	
Shu-Adad	Shu-Adad		
Pululu	Pululu	Pululu	
Puzur-Sin			Puzur-Sin
Sharrum-bani		Sharrum-bani	Sharrum-bani
Shulgi-satuni		Shulgi-satuni	
		Hulal	Hulal

legibility, and breakage). About 50% of the Barakat tablets were offered “price on request”, but the remainder were shown with a price, and they do not fit the correlation observed for all other Web sites. In general, the prices of the Barakat tablets were an order of magnitude greater than those of tablets offered on other Web sites. The reason for this large price difference is hard to explain, as it seems more than what the market bears. One explanation might be that Barakat is setting prices artificially high to deter the casual purchaser and attract “high-end” customers – wealthy institutions or private collectors. The actual sale prices negotiated with such customers might be much lower than the advertised ones. In similar fashion, the Barakat cylinder seals were being offered for prices an order of magnitude greater than those on other Web sites (Fig. 7.7), though for cylinder seals the correlation between size and price is not so marked.

By August 2009, 204 of the Barakat cuneiform objects had been sold, including all objects from the putative archive. Only one cylinder seal had been sold, for an unspecified price. The total sales value of the 132 cuneiform objects that had price

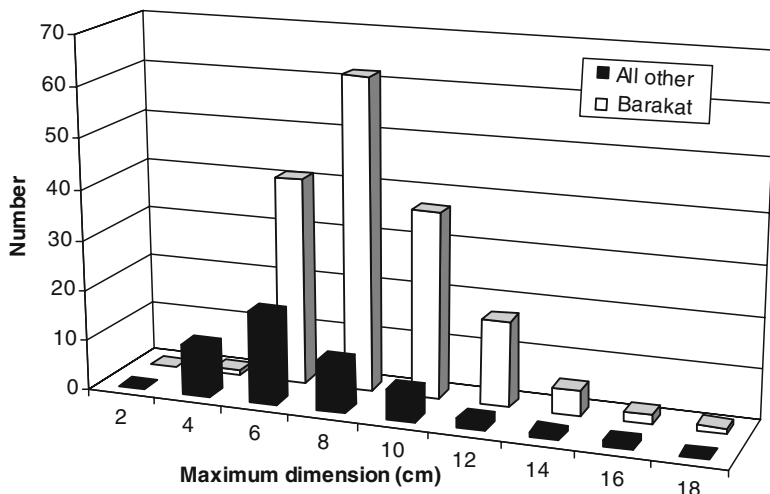


Fig. 7.5 Size distributions of cuneiform tablets offered for sale on the Internet in September 2008

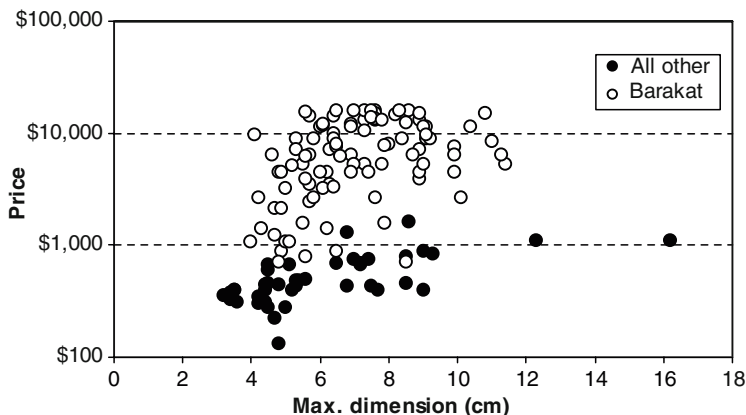


Fig. 7.6 Correlation between cuneiform tablet size and price in September 2008, also showing the high prices of Barakat tablets

data was \$921,484, which multiplied up for the total 204 objects sold would be \$1,424,112. Even if the real total is assumed to have been an order of magnitude less than this figure (\$142,411), thus bringing the Barakat prices down into line with those for the rest of the market, it would still be substantial. When this down-sized Barakat figure of \$142,411 is added to the sales values from other Web sites, the total value for cuneiform object and cylinder seal sales for the period September 2008 to August 2009 was \$279,262. This figure is almost certainly an underestimate, however, because it takes no account of objects that might have been offered and

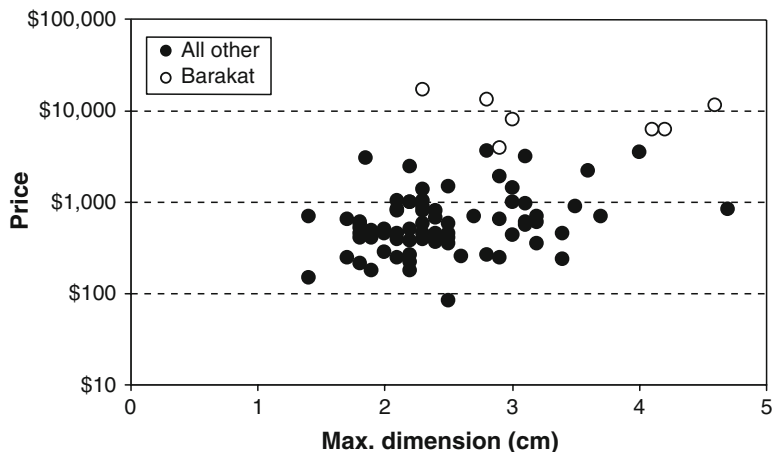


Fig. 7.7 Cylinder seal prices in September 2008

sold between the two study dates of September 2008 and August 2009, nor does it take any account of objects that might not have been advertised for sale on a Web site, but still sold by Internet dealers in direct transactions (as intimated by Web sites offering more material than advertised). It is important also to note that this figure of \$279,262 does not describe the total value of all Iraqi objects sold on the Internet. There were many other types of object and material from Iraq being offered for sale, so the annual sales value for all Iraqi objects would be much higher.

Academic Involvement and the Problem of Fakes

Of the 142 cylinder seals offered for sale in 2008, 32 had been described by Wilfred Lambert, and he had also translated 211 of the 332 cuneiform objects on offer. Lambert is Professor Emeritus of Assyriology at Birmingham University and a Fellow of the British Academy. Lambert's identifications and authentications, and those of scholars like him, are of central importance for the antiquities market. They support a credible pricing regime by establishing the quality, interest and rarity of pieces on offer, and maintain customer confidence by keeping the market free of fakes. Most of the pieces that carry a Lambert authentication are unprovenanced, and Lambert himself seems unconcerned about provenance, or lack of it. When he was interviewed on the subject by the *New York Times* in April 2003, soon after the plunder of the Iraq National Museum, he admitted that he does not usually know the histories of objects he authenticates, and he suspected that the dealers who use him did not know either (Gottlieb and Meier 2003). But Lambert cannot be alone. Translating cuneiform inscriptions and identifying cylinder seals are expert tasks, and clearly some unacknowledged expert had translated the texts of the Nebuchadnezzar Larsa bricks and the Sin-iddinam barrels,

for example, before they were offered for sale. The involvement of academics in the antiquities trade, and particularly the trade in ancient written materials, must be more pervasive than is generally recognised (Brodie 2009).

The importance of Lambert's work and that of other experts for the market is highlighted by the observation made by cuneiform expert David Owen, of Cornell University, that between 2003 and 2008 he identified fewer than 500 genuine cuneiform tablets on the Internet, but that he also observed fake tablets (Owen 2009: 131 note 3). The routine suppression of provenance that is a feature of the antiquities market is conducive for the entry into commerce of fakes because no checks can be made on their origin. But the Internet market is even more vulnerable to penetration by fakes than the more established antiquities market of auction houses and high street galleries, for two reasons. First, and Owen is unusual here, Internet sales are not routinely monitored by experts in the way that catalogues of the major auction houses are. Second, not all Internet vendors have a long-established reputation for good faith business to maintain. Thus, if they are caught selling fakes, they can simply change their name and address and start again. This option is not open to a major auction house like Christie's, for example, or even to some of the more established Internet dealers, who, like the auction houses, do regard and protect their reputation as a commercial asset. It is material sold on eBay in particular that has come in for a lot of criticism as regard fakes. Most Internet dealers, in fact, do seem to be concerned about the problem of fakes, presumably because if the public believes that the market is badly compromised by fakes, customer confidence will deteriorate and business will decline or collapse. Increasingly, Internet dealers are offering illustrated advice on how to recognise fakes. Even before the advent of the Internet market, authenticity was of greater concern than provenance to dealers, and most dealers, including Internet dealers, offer guarantees of authenticity.

The Internet antiquities market is still organising itself into a mature commercial institution. Establishing customer confidence is an important part of that process, and there are different strategies in play. One is the development of electronic marketplaces, which bring together on a single Web site and exert some quality assurance over a range of Internet dealers, or "members", offering closely related types of material. Trocadero, for example, links to the inventories of dealers in art and antiques, including antiquities. Customers visiting the Trocadero site can search according to material or browse according to vendor. By August 2009, there were more than 20 dealers listed as selling Mediterranean antiquities. Trocadero offers no guarantees to customers and accepts no liabilities as regards its members. It does, however, reserve the right to exclude members who are found misrepresenting material for sale, and it is probably in the interests of participating dealers for this to happen. VCoins offers a similar venue but with the emphasis more on coins than art. Absence of provenance, of course, is not misrepresentation, though passing off a forged piece as a genuine one is.

A second strategy used to guard against fakes is, as already described, the use of academics to authenticate material before sale. By September 2008, however, one Web site, the UK-based Collector Antiquities, had gone a step further and was

offering a “cuneiform reading service”.⁷ Translations of cuneiform texts could be prepared for prices ranging between £30 and 105, depending upon the length and difficulty of the text. The service also stated that “If the piece is of academic importance and interest the translator requests that you would agree to allow the images/inscription to be recorded for eventual publication, so the new information is made available to scholars”. Thus, the expert providing the service benefits twice over, first by receiving monetary payment, and second by receiving academic credit through publication. The translation can be made from a photograph, and there is no stated requirement to submit proof of legitimate title or evidence of legal export from Iraq. The service is available generally, and offers a good means of establishing the authenticity of objects bought from Collector Antiquities, or elsewhere. (And, in passing, also of transferring the cost of authentication from the vendor to the customer). The same Web site offers extensive discussion of fake cuneiform objects and cylinder seals, explaining how to recognise them, and includes a page advising on the perils of buying from eBay.

Conclusion

The data presented in this paper argue strongly for the existence of an illegal trade in Iraqi artefacts. When viewed in aggregate, the evidence that much of the material appearing on the market has been recently looted in Iraq appears overwhelming. The auction houses stopped selling unprovenanced material after 2003. Internet dealers never describe material as coming from Iraq. Large numbers of previously unknown but recognisable objects like the Sîn-iddinam barrels and the Nebuchadnezzar Larsa bricks appear, but with no explanation as to provenance or origin. These market observations mesh with information coming from within Iraq itself about the scale of archaeological looting. For any one individual object, however, it is difficult to prove that it was actually found in Iraq or to establish at what date it was taken out of Iraq. Dealers are always keen to emphasise that large quantities of material moved out of Iraq during the Ottoman period and under the British Mandate before the promulgation of the 1974 domestic law, and they are not always wrong (e.g. Eisenberg 2004). The market is a grey one, with dealers and collectors able to transact unprovenanced objects of unknown legitimacy, protected from certain knowledge that any material is stolen. There is little risk involved to dealers of being convicted for being selling stolen material.

The same market data reveal very little about the organisation of the trade. The degree and nature of the trade’s organisation, and its possible links with other criminal trades or with terrorist groups, remain obscure. It is sometimes claimed that military or law enforcement agencies have intelligence about broader criminal articulations, and these claims might be true, but it is the nature of such intelligence that it cannot

⁷<http://www.collector-antiquities.com/314/>. Accessed 5 August 2009.

be made public. In its absence, the empirical assumption has to be made that although the illegal trade in Iraqi artefacts is likely to be organised, and is by definition transnational, it is organised within itself and not as part of a larger criminal enterprise.

Mackenzie (2009: 55) has drawn attention to the importance of “facilitators” at the interface of legitimate and illegitimate markets, and suggested that they can be protected by codes of conduct or licencing requirements. One group of facilitators in the market for Iraqi antiquities comprise the academics who describe and authenticate objects. Although professional codes of ethics proscribing such practices do exist, they have little normative force. One reason is that the academics concerned can defend their work to their peer professional community as “rescuing” historical documents for the public benefit. More research into the criminal structure of the trade and its negative social consequences might alter the ambivalent perceptions of peers and open academic involvement to closer scrutiny and more effective professional censure. If academics are abstracted from the antiquities market, it will diminish in profitability, size, and destructiveness.

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