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Small Finds, Big Values: Cylinder Seals and Coins from Iraq and Syria on the Online Market

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Abstract: Discussions about looted antiquities often focus on large, culturally and monetarily valuable items. Nevertheless, it is clear that mundane small finds, which sell for relatively small amounts, account for a large portion of the global market in antiquities. This article highlights two types of small artifacts—namely, cylinder seals and coins, presumed to come from Syria and Iraq and offered for sale by online vendors. We argue that the number of cylinder seals and coins sold on the Internet has increased steadily since 2011, reaching a peak in 2016–17. This shows that the trade in Iraqi and Syrian antiquities has shifted from big-ticket items sold in traditional brick-and-mortar shops to small items readily available on the Internet for modest prices. The continuing growth of the online market in antiquities is having a devastating effect on the archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria as increasing demand fuels further looting in the region.

Keywords: small finds, cylinder seals, coins, online market, auction, Iraq, Syria, Mesopotamia

INTRODUCTION

Discussions on looted antiquities have often focused on large, culturally and monetarily valuable items that make headlines. As a result, small finds, which in reality account for the majority of the market, are overlooked. Indeed, there is a prevailing attitude present

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in the public and in the media that downplays the importance of the situation when individuals are caught with looted antiquities that are not of high value. In August 2017, a British national was arrested at the Bodrum airport in Turkey for allegedly trying to take 12 ancient coins out of the country and was sent to prison. A member of parliament from the British Conservative Party described the incident as "an innocent, albeit foolish, mistake," and the individual was eventually released without charge.[1]

Nevertheless, it is clear that mundane small finds, which sell for relatively small amounts of money, account for a vast quantity of looted antiquities available on the market.[2] What is more, we have found that the online market for small finds is growing. This article highlights two types of small artifacts—namely, cylinder seals and coins, presumed to come from Syria and Iraq and offered for sale by online vendors. Neil Brodie notes that small objects looted from Iraq and Syria have been sold openly and in great quantities on the Internet since 2005.[3] They are often inexpensive and not aesthetically pleasing, leading policymakers and scholars alike to underestimate their significance. Our findings, however, reveal that small finds must be considered when studying looted items appearing on the market.

In contrast to traditional brick-and-mortar auction houses, the Internet market reaches collectors from different socioeconomic backgrounds, brings together buyers and sellers from distant locations, and makes it financially viable for sellers to "trade in low-value and potentially high-volume material" by storing large inventories in low-cost locations.[4] This study focuses on cylinder seals and coins sold on LiveAuctioneers, an auction consolidation website established in 2002, which brings together objects from auctions all over the world, allowing users to easily bid on items.[5] Data on coins sold in past auctions were also gathered from CoinArchives.[6] Similar sale patterns have been observed on eBay as well, but this auction site is difficult to track as it is riddled with fakes and does not archive past sales, making it hard to assess how many objects were sold over a specific time period.[7] All of this activity highlights the sophisticated nature of the Internet market for antiquities and the importance of online auctions for the disposal of looted objects.[8]

[1]"Sussex Man held in Turkey for Smuggling Ancient Coins," *BBC News*, 23 August 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-sussex-41026849 (accessed 28 December 2017).
[2]Elkins 2012, 91; Brodie 2015.
[3]Brodie 2015, 17.
[4]Brodie 2015, 11.
[5]LiveAuctioneers, https://liveauctioneers.com/pages/ (accessed 22 January 2019).
[6]CoinArchives, https://www.coinarchives.com/ (accessed 6 March 2019).
[7]Brodie 2015, 11.
[8]This study focuses on cylinder seals and coins, but it should be noted that these represent only a fraction of the types of antiquities from Iraq and Syria that are available online. In many cases, however, it can be difficult to determine the country of origin of a particular object. It is rare to find objects such as the Byzantine period mosaic panel that was sold for £10,000 at Bonham's in 2014 (*Antiquities*, 3 April 2014, Lot 77). This is a mosaic with a Greek dedicatory inscription that lists several individuals, including one from Androna or modern al-Andarin, located in Syria and excavated by Oxford University between 1997 and 2007. The mosaic panel would have been set into a floor and was therefore

CASE 1: CYLINDER SEALS

The following analysis focuses on Mesopotamian cylinder seals sold on LiveAuctioneers from May 2003 (the earliest available date of sale on the website) through December 2018. Cylinder seals, which were used as administrative devices in the ancient Near East from the fourth through the first millennium BC, are among the most popular items on the antiquities market. They are small cylinders (two to four centimeters tall) often made of semi-precious stones such as haematite, with intricate geometric and figurative designs as well as inscriptions carved on their surface in reverse. When rolled on wet clay, the design produced an unbroken frieze, which indicated ownership and authenticated documents, much like personal signatures and official stamps today. Due to their elaborate designs and the high level of craftsmanship required to carve them in miniature, these objects have been of interest to antiquities collectors for centuries.

Cylinder seals were used over a vast geographical area from Turkey to Iran and down to the Persian Gulf. As a result, they are ubiquitous across the Middle East and can be found in large numbers at Bronze and Iron Age sites. The majority of these objects, which are of middling quality, are sold for modest prices, which makes them attractive to middle-range buyers, who cannot afford big-ticket items.[9] In the United Kingdom (UK) online market, where the majority of these artifacts are offered for sale, most cylinder seals have a starting bid of £100–£200 (although some start as low as £5) and sell within the £100–£300 range. There are, of course, particularly high-end examples in terms of craftsmanship and preservation, which

immovable, which allows us to establish Syria as its country of origin. Given that it appeared on the market in 2014, it is highly probable that it was removed from Syria after the start of the conflict in 2011. The auction claims that the piece came from an "American private collection" and was acquired in 1986. Even if this claim of provenance were true, it still was acquired after the signing of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, 14 November 1970, 823 UNTS 231 (1970 UNESCO Convention), which was ratified by the United States in 1972. An extremely similar mosaic inscription, which also mentioned the site of al-Andarin had already appeared on the Lebanese antiquities market in 1987, having been looted from Syria (Salamé-Sarkis 1989, 322–25). Many small finds such as Roman military items, for example, are extremely popular with collectors, featured frequently in auctions recorded on the LiveAuctioneers website, and have been found in both Syria and Iraq. The Roman military had forts from Iraq to the United Kingdom, and the fact that Roman military items look the same no matter where they come from means we cannot state with confidence where a particular piece originated and when it was unearthed. Therefore, such items have been excluded from this study. Some military objects sold by TimeLine Auctions have been deliberately compared with Simon James's (2004) Dura Europos publication of Roman military equipment in the catalog descriptions. These range from very inexpensive items, such as a "Roman Snaffle Bit Cheek Fitting" (TimeLine Auctions, 25 February 2016, Lot 412, sold for £20), to the slightly more expensive "Roman Bronze Articulated Shoulder Armor (TimeLine Auctions, 12 February 2015, Lot 296, sold for £250 and described as being "extremely rare"), and certain exceptional pieces such as a "Roman gladius with bone hilt" (TimeLine Auctions, 12 September 2015, sold for £11,000). This could be suggestive that the objects might come from Syria, but it cannot be proven.

[9]This statement excludes collectors who focus exclusively on high-quality cylinder seals.

sell for £1,000 and above, but these are few in number. In addition to being among buyers' favorite items, cylinder seals are also popular for looters due to their ubiquity as well as their small size and portability, making them easy to transport out of countries of origin without getting caught. As a result, they are among the artifacts most vulnerable to theft. When the National Museum of Iraq was ransacked following the Coalition invasion in April 2003, 5,144 cylinder seals were reported stolen from a small storage room in the basement of the building.[10]

Overview of the Material

Although the cylinder seal itself and the administrative technology it ushered in were developed in southern Iraq shortly after the invention of writing, the practical usage of these small objects aided in their spread across the ancient Near East over a short period of time. Not only the objects themselves but also the kinds of imagery and information they bear were shared across this vast region. Consequently, it is often impossible to pinpoint the place of origin of a seal, even though there are stylistic groups, such as Anatolian or Old Syrian, that are often mistakenly linked to geographical locations. Ancient cultural boundaries and modern political ones rarely coincide, and the vast areas controlled by the ancient kingdoms and empires of the Bronze and Iron Ages make it difficult to place these objects in context unless they are systematically excavated. For example, Akkadian cylinder seals can easily be found at sites in northern Syria, even though the core area of the Akkadian empire is believed to be the region around modern Baghdad. Similarly, seals that are stylistically categorized as "Syrian" have been found in a wide area from Central Turkey (for example, Konya-Karahöyük) all the way down to Israel (for example, Tell Kabri). For these reasons, the study presented here covers cylinder seals broadly identified as Mesopotamian, which are mainly found in Iraq and Syria.

A total of 1,457 individual cylinder seals were studied through the sales records on LiveAuctioneers. They were all visually identified by the present author as Mesopotamian, based on style, shape, and impression (where available), using digital photographs provided in the listings.[11] The dataset focuses only on seals that were sold and excludes lots that were passed. Lots generally comprised a single cylinder seal, although a number of lots containing two or more seals were also encountered. Lots consisting of stamp and cylinder seals and mixed lots combining cylinder seals and other types of artifacts were not taken into consideration. Moreover, lots of more than four cylinder seals, which are often described in the listings as "mixed groups of cylinder seals" or "Near Eastern stone cylinder seal groups" and are accompanied by a single photograph showing all the artifacts, were also excluded from the analysis since the items could not be observed individually to allow a clear visual identification. Figure 1 shows the

[10]Brodie 2006, 211.

[11]Cylinder seals from other cultures, such as Chinese or Ecuadorian, were excluded.

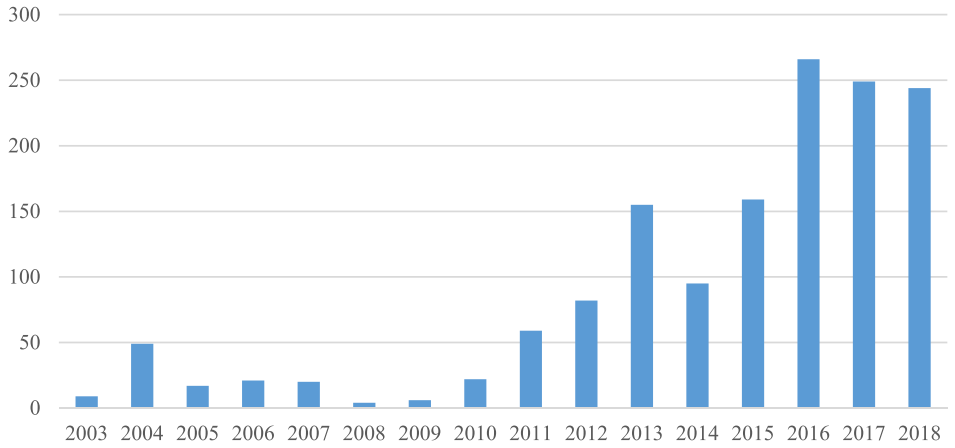

Figure 1. Mesopotamian cylinder seals sold on LiveAuctioneers, 2003–18.

total number of Mesopotamian cylinder seals sold on LiveAuctioneers from May 2003 through December 2018.

The data show that the number of Mesopotamian cylinder seals sold between 2003 and 2010 was extremely small, fluctuating between four and 22 items per year, except for a sudden spike in 2004 when a US dealer sold 49 seals in a single auction in November. Starting in 2011 a striking increase can be observed, with spikes in 2013 and 2015, and sales reaching an all-time high in 2016–18. Although all 20 seals sold by a particular US dealer in August 2016 are fakes, the general increase presents a noteworthy development. Thirty seals sold in 2013 from the collection of Edgar J. Banks, American diplomat, antiquities collector, and archaeologist, and a group of 36 seals from the family collection of the New York rare book and manuscript dealer Adam Weinberger, sold as a single lot in 2016, constitute a small percentage (approximately 15 percent) of the total sales in these years and are not significant enough to bias the data.

One should remember that what dealers offer for sale online does not necessarily reflect the actual number of seals they have available for sale. As Katharyn Hanson observed first hand when she visited a dealer in Chicago, they "can have far more material available than that advertised online, and an interested buyer may be offered other items in private communications that are not open for public viewing."[12] This is only valid for dealers who maintain physical galleries in addition to online auctions, but it is indicative of the enormous scale of operations.

To reiterate, the objects studied here could only be visually examined through the photographs provided by the dealers. As a result, the authenticity of individual items could not be verified in every case, although a small number of fakes were identified. One of the ways dealers often ensure the authenticity of the objects they offer for sale is to have them validated by experts, who can identify the age and

[12]Hanson 2011, 122.

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culture of the objects and ascertain that they are genuine. In the case of cylinder seals (and cuneiform tablets), the most commonly consulted expert was Wilfred Lambert, emeritus professor of Assyriology at Birmingham University, who in an interview with the *New York Times* in 2003 estimated that he had evaluated several hundred items from Iraq, working for several London dealers.[13] The dataset analyzed here includes 421 cylinder seals allegedly authenticated by Lambert in the 1980s, all of which come from unnamed private collections. In a number of cases, the listing also mentions handwritten notes by Lambert that accompany the seals, but only two of the 421 listings provided visual evidence of these notes in the form of a photograph. Although Lambert is known to have authenticated hundreds of seals during his long career, one should keep in mind that these certificates may not necessarily be authentic in all cases. This common credential could easily be used to falsify provenance and legitimize the sale of objects illegally removed from their countries of origin.

When we look at the dealers who sold Mesopotamian cylinder seals on LiveAuctioneers, we see that most are physically located in the United States (32 out of 39 dealers), while four are in the UK, two are in Austria, and one is in Germany (Table 1).[14] Despite this, the overwhelming majority of the material was sold by TimeLine Auctions in London, which specializes in antiquities and coins. The earliest record of cylinder seals offered for sale on LiveAuctioneers by TimeLine Auctions dates back to 2010. From this date onward, TimeLine Auctions appears to have dominated the online market in cylinder seals, with 62 percent of all material sold. All seals sold prior to this date were handled by US dealers.

The most common identifiers used to describe cylinder seals in the listings are Western Asiatic and Near Eastern, followed by Mesopotamian. For the more knowledgeable collector, more specific chronological and stylistic terms, such as Akkadian and Old Babylonian are used. In a small number of cases, countries of origin of the seals (that is, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey) are indicated, although the majority of items are offered and sold under more generic and often vague

Table 1. Physical locations of dealers who sold Mesopotamian cylinder seals on LiveAuctioneers

Country	Number of dealers	Number of cylinder seals
United States	32	554
UK	4	900
Austria	2	2
Germany	1	1

[13]Martin Gottlieb and Barry Meier, "The Plunder: Of 2,000 Treasures Stolen in Gulf War of 1991, Only 12 Have Been Recovered," *New York Times*, 1 May 2003.

[14]One dealer, identified simply as "S," could not be located. Only one seal from the Edgar J. Banks collection was sold by this merchant in 2013.

descriptors such as Western Asiatic and Near Eastern. Finally, Jordan is used as the find-spot of three seals, although this information appears to be intentionally misleading, as will be discussed below.

Provenance and Legality

Provenance, defined as an antiquity's ownership history, is undoubtedly the most debated aspect of antiquities on the market. As Brodie and Palmyre Manivet note, provenances in auction catalogs and on online auction sites, as in our case, are always incomplete.[15] They rarely provide a full history of ownership and sales of an object. Sometimes they include the name of a previous owner, a publication, or a previous sale, which allows the provenance to be independently verified, but, in most cases, they are limited to a single date or to what Brodie refers to as clichés, such as "property of a London gentleman, acquired before 1989" or "acquired on the UK art market 1970–1990," which are impossible to verify since documentation regarding the ownership and/or sales of the objects is not made available.[16] One should keep in mind that provenance is not proof of legality and lack of provenance does not necessarily mean that an object is illegal. Nonetheless, without established provenance, legality is impossible to determine.[17] Such provenance can also be easily manufactured for illegally excavated items that reach the antiquities market.

This incomplete information aims to show that the object in question left its country of origin by a certain date, often determined by local or international law and, hence, can be traded legally on the antiquities market. For the material analyzed in this study, two dates are particularly important:

- 1970, when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970 UNESCO Convention) was adopted.[18] The date of this Convention is often mistakenly interpreted as "suggesting that material out of its country of origin before 1970 is legally on the market."[19] However, whether or not an object can legally be exported is determined by national legislation—that is, 1936 for Iraq and 1963 for Syria.
- 1990, when the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 661 imposed trade sanctions on all commodities and products originating in Iraq, including cultural objects.[20]

[15]Brodie and Manivet 2017, 4.
[16]Brodie 2014, 63.
[17]Hanson 2011, 122.
[18]1970 UNESCO Convention.
[19]Brodie 2015, 15.
[20]UNSC Resolution 661, 6 August 1990.

To these we should also add the UNSC Resolution 2199, adopted in February 2015, which prohibits the trade in Syrian cultural property, including archaeological objects, illegally removed from the country since the beginning of the Syrian civil war on 15 March 2011.[21] In addition, in 2016, the United States adopted the Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act, which also prohibits trade in cultural material from Syria, bringing the United States into compliance with UNSC Resolution 2199.[22] However, loopholes in the law, which requires importers to provide very little evidence to prove the date of export and the country of origin of an object, continue to enable illicit cultural material from Syria to enter the United States.[23]

When we look at the provenance information provided for the 1,457 individual cylinder seals sold on LiveAuctioneers from May 2003 through December 2018, we can see that 90.6 percent of the material has some sort of provenance, while the remaining 9.4 percent is unprovenanced, meaning that the objects have no purchase history, paperwork, or documentation listed on the website. This percentage corresponds to the large majority of seals sold between 2003 and 2008, all of which were handled by two dealers in the United States (Figure 2). The situation appears to have changed dramatically starting in 2009, and no more than a handful of unprovenanced seals were sold since, although a spike can be observed in June–December 2017, when 10 percent of the seals sold (22 of the 225) had no provenance information. All of these were sold by dealers in the United States.

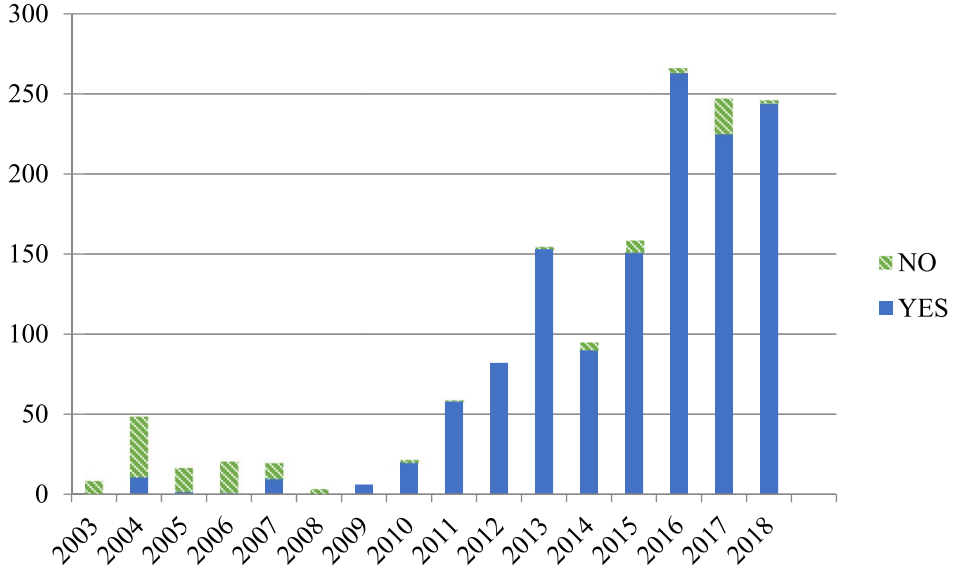

Figure 2. Provenance information for Mesopotamian cylinder seals sold on LiveAuctioneers, 2003–18.

[21]UNSC Resolution 2199, 12 February 2015.
[22]Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act, HR 1493, PL no. 114–151, 5 September 2016.
[23]Stephens 2017, 375, 377–80.

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For a more detailed analysis of provenance, the provenance classes established by Brodie in his study of cylinder seals sold at Sotheby's and Christie's in 1985–2013 were applied to our data.[24] Accordingly, the material was divided into four classes, based on the date thresholds described above (Figure 3). The data show that the majority of the material has a provenance that dates to 1970–89, which falls between the 1970 UNESCO Convention and UNSC Resolution 661. However, it is not possible to determine whether the objects left their country of origin between these dates or whether they were only acquired in this period since their provenance is limited to phrases such as "from a London collection acquired in the 1970s" or "property of a London gentleman; part of his family collection since the 1970s." Nonetheless, these data show that, for the segment of the online market represented by the sellers on LiveAuctioneers, the date threshold that renders a Mesopotamian cylinder seal legal is that of the UNSC Resolution 661 rather than the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Although this date range suggests that all of these objects were outside their countries of origin before import restrictions were imposed on Iraqi and Syrian cultural material, there is no date or documentation placing them outside these countries when the national antiquities laws of Iraq and Syria were passed, making all of the antiquities found after 1936 and 1963 respectively the property of the state. A surprising result of this analysis is that, for 24 percent of the provenanced material that was sold on the website, there is no date provided. Instead, the provenance is limited to the stock phrase "ex – city name – private collection/collector," which seems to be sufficient for buyers. All but one of these seals were sold by dealers in the United States.

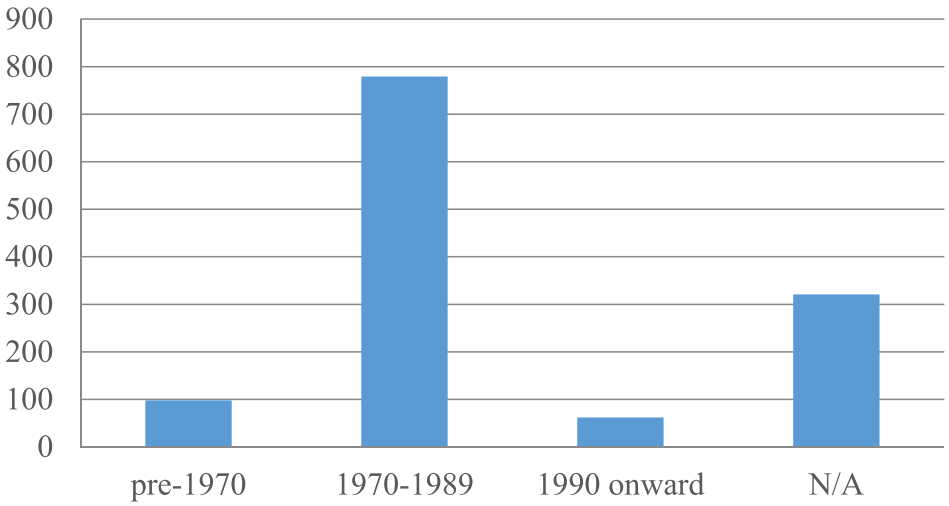

Figure 3. Reported provenances of Mesopotamian cylinder seals sold on LiveAuctioneers, 2003–18.

[24]Neil Brodie, "The Rihani Provenance," *Market of Mass Destruction*, 8 May 2017, 5, http://www.marketmassdestruction.com/the-rihani-provenance/ (accessed 13 December 2017).

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In addition to a year/year range, the provenance provided for the seals analyzed here also includes information on previous owners. Two percent of the objects were deaccessioned by museums in 2016–18, another 2 percent had information on a previous sale by an auction house or gallery, 78 percent are presented simply as coming from a private collection (for example, property of a London gentleman, ex Orange County private collection), while 1 percent indicate the name of a previous owner.

Of special interest here are 42 cylinder seals formerly in the Rihani family collection and sold by TimeLine Auctions between May 2015 and November 2017. The Rihani collection is a well-known provenance, and all cylinder seals sold on LiveAuctioneers are said to have been acquired before 1991. However, Ghassan Rihani's name raises red flags, as he was mentioned by several people involved in the trade of Iraqi antiquities looted during the Gulf War in 1991 as one of the "few powerful dealers" handling objects that made their way to Jordan.[25] Neil Brodie's recent study on the Rihani family collection, and the legality of Ghassan Rihani's antiquities operations,[26] also places this provenance on shaky ground. Brodie notes that the Jordanian export license authorizing Rihani's export of antiquities to London only "legitimizes the export of Jordanian material from Jordan, but not the export of material originating in other countries."[27] Despite this, all but one of the 42 seals from the Rihani family collection sold on LiveAuctioneers can be traced to other countries, namely Iraq and Syria.[28] One should note here that information on find-spot or country of origin is provided for only five seals, which are identified as Jordanian and Anatolian. Almost all are described as Western Asiatic, and the majority has further chronological identifiers, such as Akkadian and Old Babylonian. We argued earlier that stylistic and iconographic analyses of cylinder seals are not precise indicators of geographic origin, that Mesopotamian cylinder seals traveled extensively in antiquity (some were found as far as Greece), and that determining find-spots for such objects is extremely difficult since cultural boundaries of ancient Near Eastern cultures rarely coincide with modern political borders. Nonetheless, it is beyond doubt that the majority, if not all, of the seals in question must have originated in either Iraq or Syria.

A closer examination of each of the seals also reveals that the identification provided in the listings regarding the place of origin or style of a number of them appears to be misleading. Three listings advertise seals described as "Western Asiatic

[25]Gottlieb and Meier, "The Plunder."

[26]Neil Brodie, "Last Week, the Art Loss Register Was Endorsing…" *Market of Mass Destruction*, 30 May 2016, http://www.marketmassdestruction.com/last-week-the-art-loss-register-was-endorsing/ (accessed 13 December 2017).

[27]Brodie, "Last Week."

[28]The chalk cylinder seal dated to the second millennium BC is described as a "Western Asiatic Ammonite Cylinder Seal" on the website. The territories ruled by the Iron Age kingdom of Ammon correspond to modern-day Jordan. If this seal was indeed found in Jordan, then it is the only object studied here that could have been legitimately exported under the export license.

Jordanian cylinder seals" dated to 1950—1550 BC and invite interested buyers to compare Edith Porada's work on the seals that emerged from Kathleen Kenyon's Jericho excavations for similar types.[29] The comparison with Jericho, now located in the Palestinian territories, but formerly occupied by Jordan between 1949 and 1967, provides several advantages for the seller of these objects. First, an academic publication by one of the foremost experts in the world in terms of seal studies adds a certain level of importance and prestige to the objects even for the expert buyer. Second, highlighting parallels with material excavated during the 1955–58 seasons at Jericho, long before the 1970 UNESCO Convention, might suggest to the unsuspecting buyer that these seals also may have been found and removed from their country of origin in that period. Third, similar seals found in systematic excavations at Jericho reinforce the identification of these objects as Jordanian, which makes their export legal under the conditions of Rihani's export license and separate them clearly from Mesopotamian cylinder seals from Iraq and Syria, due to the possibility of being illegally acquired.

However, the situation is different when one looks at the details. First of all, the said publication by Porada only mentions three cylinder seals and one seal fragment excavated at Jericho.[30] A visual analysis of the seals from the Rihani collection shows that there are no iconographic or stylistic similarities between them and the four objects published by Porada, which renders the parallel inaccurate. Moreover, all of the seals from the Rihani collection present characteristic traits in terms of iconography, composition, and style that place them within the classic Syrian style.[31] The work of Adelheid Otto, who mapped out known find-spots of all classic Syrian seals in museums and public collections around the world, shows that the area of distribution of cylinder seals similar in style and iconography to the so-called Jordanian seals from the Rihani collection extends far beyond Jordan, covering all of coastal Syria and parts of southern and southeastern Turkey, with only a handful of examples found outside of Syria proper.[32] If these three seals were indeed found in Syria, their export by Ghassan Rihani would violate the terms of his export license. One also wonders whether Jordan, rather than Syria, was used as a geographical indicator for these seals, which were sold in May 2016, to avoid any legal scrutiny and to facilitate their sale a year after the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2199, prohibiting the trade in Syrian cultural property.

The same inconsistency in terms of identification can be observed for nine additional cylinder seals from the Rihani collection sold by TimeLine Auctions between May 2015 and February 2017. Six of these are described as Old Babylonian, one simply as Babylonian, one as Hittite, and one as Anatolian, pointing toward

[29]Porada 1965.
[30]Porada 1965, 656.
[31]For parallels, see Otto 2000, 196, 197, 200, 201, 237, 238, 243.
[32]Otto 2000, 126.

Iraq and Turkey as possible countries of origin since they were the main areas where these ancient civilizations flourished. Visual analysis shows that all nine of these seals are Syrian in terms of style and iconography and could have been found in modern Syria. The listings state that all 42 seals from the Rihani collection were acquired before 1991, long before the embargo on Syrian cultural property. Nonetheless, the circumstances of their recent sale suggest that they may have been purposefully misrepresented as to their possible country of origin in order to avoid legal scrutiny or deterring potential buyers.

The observations presented above show that there is a steady increase in the number of Mesopotamian cylinder seals sold on the online market, which coincides with the beginning of the Syrian conflict and the rise in looting of archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria. It is impossible to determine with any degree of precision where the majority of the 1,457 Mesopotamian cylinder seals analyzed here came from, although it is clear that most, if not all, of them were found in Iraq and Syria, where the administrative technology of sealing documents, containers, and rooms with stone cylinders carved in intricate designs was invented. This significant increase is in keeping with the observations made by Brodie and Manivet regarding the popularity of small items that have been flooding the market in recent years and the increase in the number of cylinder seals sold by Christie's London, particularly after 2011.[33] The growing demand for cylinder seals is a significant threat for archaeological sites and museum collections in Iraq and Syria as it encourages looters to provide even more material for the seemingly insatiable global market.

The difference in the numbers of cylinder seals offered by UK and US dealers is also noteworthy. The relatively small number sold between 2011 and 2017 by dealers in the United States and a number of easily spotted fakes among these may be interpreted in two ways: either illegally excavated cylinder seals from Iraq and Syria do not make it to the US market and are instead replaced by fakes or they are sold through different channels. On the other hand, the number of items sold by dealers in the UK during the same time period almost doubles the US sales and suggests that the UK, and particularly London, continue to be a hub for the sale of illegally traded antiquities from Iraq and Syria since the 1990s.[34]

CASE 2: ANALYSIS OF COINS FROM MINTS IN NORTHERN IRAQ, NORTHEAST SYRIA, AND SOUTHWEST TURKEY

The analysis of coins in this section focuses on regional mints—namely, those in northern Iraq, northeast Syria, and southwest Turkey. The mints in question primarily, although not exclusively, date to the Roman period. Coins, like cylinder seals, are small and easily portable. They are made from precious (electrum, gold, and silver)

[33]Brodie 2015; Brodie and Manivet 2017.
[34]Brodie 2006.
[35]Elkins 2012, 95; 2017, 4–12.

and non-precious (bronze and copper) metal, and since they are usually the official output of the government, they have symbols and often inscriptions that provide information about the ruler, place of production, and sometimes even the date. As such, they can be studied for what messages they might have given to the population who used these coins, although the extent to which the intended audience might have noticed these messages has been debated.[35] It is of course difficult to tell how long it takes for coins to come to the market, but Nathan Elkins estimates that many coins are shipped directly from the Middle East.[36]

The value of coins varies widely: some coins are worth large amounts of money, while others sell for relatively little amounts. Coins are sold through auction houses, coin dealers, and wholesalers. Many coins are easily available to collectors who wish to purchase online. In general, electrum and gold coins are the most valuable, followed by silver and bronze, but this hierarchy of value based on metal alone is not always applicable because a variety of other non-economic factors can influence how much collectors are willing to pay for a coin. Some individuals are interested in collecting the coins of a particular rule or from a particular place. Still others wish to collect specifically Jewish coins, for example. An individual coin may not be worth very much. However, some sites produce many coins, and, therefore, these all add up to signs of major looting at archaeological sites. Even when a coin is not worth a lot on its own, it might be more valuable if sold as a lot. In December 2015, Baldwin's auctions sold a group of post-reform Umayyad dinars as a set.[37] The catalogue described the set as "[t]he favorite collecting goal for those interested in Islamic coins is to make up a full set of Umayyad dinars struck between the years 77h and 132h."[38] The set sold for £300,000.[39] Coins do not even need to be cleaned and legible to be sold for a value; even uncleaned and illegible coins are worth money as the website dirtyoldcoins.com, for instance, demonstrates. The desirability of certain coin types can lead to not only the production of fake coins but also altered coins in order to make them more saleable. This occurs even with low value coins where the margin for profit is small.

Coins have been widely collected by individuals for centuries and continue to be extremely popular amongst antique collectors today.[40] Coins are items that can be easily looted from archaeological sites to satisfy this demand since they are high

[36]Elkins 2008, 3–4; 2012, 93, 97–100; see also Ute Wartenberg Kagan, "Isis, Numismatics, and Conflict Antiquities," *Pocket Change Blog*, 2015, http://numismatics.org/pocketchange/isis-numismatics-and-conflict-antiquities/ (accessed 6 April 2017).

[37]"Umayyad Reform Gold Coinage Set to Headline Baldwin's Islamic Auction," *Just Collecting*, https://www.justcollecting.com/miscellania/umayyad-reform-gold-coinage-set-to-headline-baldwins-islamic-auction (accessed 6 April 2017).

[38]"Islamic Coins," *Numisbids*, https://www.numisbids.com/n.php?p=lot&sid=459&lot=4085 (accessed 14 June 2019).

[39]"Islamic Coin Auction 19," *Six Bid*, 25 April 2005, https://www.sixbid.com/browse.html?auction=364 (accessed 6 April 2017).

[40]Sayles 2003, 39–46; Elkins 2008, 1; 2012, 91.

[41]Elkins 2008, 5; 2012, 93–94.

value, small weight items that are easily transported. Since they are made from metal, they can be easily found at archaeological sites with metal detectors, which in turn encourages a form of unregulated digging that serves to destroy archaeological sites.[41] There is a thriving market in coins, both online and through auctions, and provenance is not often given. Elkins analyzed the CNG Triton X Sale on 8 January 2007, where he noted that only 32 of the over 19,000 coins sold had a provenance prior to the 1970 UNESCO Convention, while others were said to come from recent sales, and 80 percent of the coins at the auction had no provenance at all.[42]

Since many coins contain specific information about mint marks and rulers, it might be assumed that coins would be a more reliable indicator of provenance.[43] It is important to keep in mind, however, that coins are very portable and often traveled over large distances in antiquity. Some coins can be found thousands of kilometers from their place of production[44] and may have a wide distribution in contrast to cylinder seals, which are more regional (see earlier discussion), making it difficult to provenance them. This is particularly true for coins minted from important mints such as Rome, Constantinople, or Antioch, which have a wide distribution over a large area. These mints are not a reliable indicator of the find-spot; coins from the mint of Rome can be found in Italy just as easily as they can be found in modern Syria or Iraq. In this way, coins have more in common with manuscripts, which move over large distances both in the medieval period as well as today.[45] Even mints that one might consider to be "regional" can have a large distribution, such as the western European mints of Arles, Tarragona, Trier, and Lyon, whose coins appear commonly in the eastern Mediterranean in the Late Roman period.[46] A coin of the emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37) struck in Lyon has even been found in a grave at the site of Tillya Tepe in Afghanistan.[47] Other coins did not circulate widely beyond their city of issue and, therefore, can be used to show patterns of looting in specific countries, as previous studies have demonstrated and this article confirms. Roman provincial bronze coins, for instance, generally

[42]Elkins 2008, 3.

[43]Neil Brodie, "Trafficking Out of Syria," *Market of Mass Destruction*, 27 July 2016, http://www.marketmassdestruction.com/trafficking-out-of-syria/ (accessed 21 December 2017).

[44]Elkins 2015, 238.

[45]Takla 2014; Brodie 2015. For a history of this practice, see de Hamel 1996. The main difference between manuscripts and coins, however, is that manuscripts can be dismembered and sold as individual pages, whereas coins cannot be sold in sections. The phenomenon of manuscript dispersal can be seen in the dispersal and acquisition of Syriac manuscripts from the same region as the coins under examination here. Some of the manuscripts produced in this region made their way to monasteries in Egypt in the medieval period, from where they were acquired by Western collectors in the nineteenth century and dispersed. Walker 2005, 5; Brock and van Rompay 2014; Martyros 2016. Concerns about looting led to manuscripts in northern Iraq being hidden during the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's occupation (Jarus 2016).

[46]Waagé 1952; Morrisson 1980; see in general Elkins 2015, 237.

[47]Cambon and Jarrige 2007, cat. no. 95, 189.

[48]Jones 1963, 313, 315, 317–18, 323–24; Elkins 2015, 238–41.

circulate locally.[48] Elkins notes that, while certain coins minted on Cyprus did circulate beyond the island itself, most of them did not, particularly in the Roman period.[49] It is interesting to observe in this context that the only excavated hoards of Roman coins from Cyprus mints found outside of the island of Cyprus actually come from the site of Dura Europos.[50]

Similarly, certain types of coins can be considered typical for parts of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. In her study, Ute Wartenberg Kagan demonstrates that a certain coin type that primarily circulated in Syria increased in its numbers appearing on the market after 2011. These were the radiate coins of Zenobia and her son Vabalathus Augustus, which are extremely rare and hardly ever found in archaeological excavations except for one example that was found at Antioch. While a regional coin minted in Syria should be expected to be found in Syria, other coins from further away also circulate largely in Syria—namely, coins from the site of Kyme in western Turkey. Even when numbers of coins from a particular mint increase, this does not necessarily mean that they come from Syria but that they could also come from another place where looting took place.[51] There are a number of local mints that are typical of third century AD Roman military sites along the Euphrates in southern Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.[52] Therefore, a careful study of the archaeological records of both stray finds and excavations in Syria and northern Iraq can reveal coin types from the region that are likely to be unique and only circulate in this area. Looted hoards that have appeared on the market and have been published are clearly less reliable in terms of provenance, but they can help supplement the information from excavations.

Using the auction consolidation website CoinArchives, one can observe a number of trends for coins from this region. First, this study considers Roman coins of the emperor Gordian III (AD 238–44) from the mint of Singara. The mint of Singara was a very short-lived mint that only operated during this particular ruler's reign and, thus, should be extremely rare in the market. The coins are certainly rare in excavations. They have been found at Dura Europos in both hoards and individual site finds but are otherwise absent from other sites except for one found at Antioch (modern Antakya) (see Figure 4).[53] While one might expect to find coins from the mint of Singara at the nearby Roman fortress of Ain Sinu, located approximately 30 kilometers away, no coins of Gordian III were found there at all. Only a small number of coins have been found at the site in total, however, and it is not clear

[49]Parks 2004, 159; Elkins 2015, 238–39; see also Fehlmann 2014, 160–65.
[50]Bellinger 1949; Parks 2004, 159–60.
[51]Brodie, "Trafficking"; Ute Wartenberg Kagan, "Collecting Coins and the Conflict in Syria," 2015, https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/wartenbergsyria-coincollecting.pdf (accessed 29 August 2016).
[52]Butcher 2013, 7–9.
[53]Bellinger 1949; Butcher 2013, 7, fig. 3, table 5; Frascone 2015, 27, cartes 3b, 5.
[54]Oates and Oates 1959, 237–42.

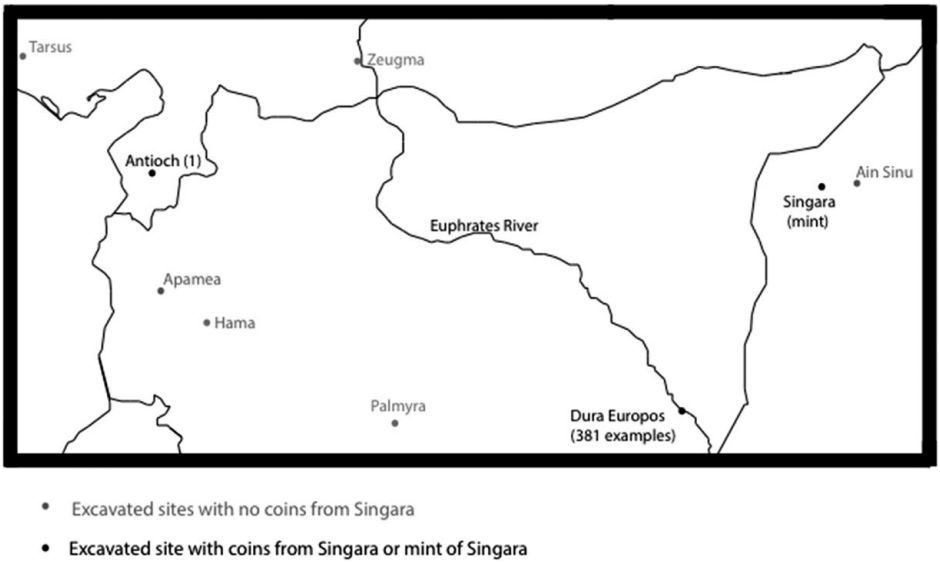

Figure 4. Map showing location of third century AD sites (adapted from Frascone 2015, carte 3b and carte 5).

exactly when the site was abandoned.[54] Complicating matters is the fact that the city of Singara (modern Sinjar) has never been excavated.[55]

On 4 September 2016, there were four coins for sale from the mint on eBay, and, in December 2017, seven coins were up for sale for between $49 and $500 per coin. Singara coins are fairly rare in museum collections, with important numismatic collections having only a few examples: 17 of these coins are at the British Museum; 24 at the American Numismatic Society (of which 11 come from the Dura Europos excavations); and four at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow. If one looks at Gordian III coins from the Singara mint auctioned from 2001 to 2019, it is clear that despite being a single issue of one ruler, these coins are not as rare on the market as one might expect and, therefore, are sensitive to the impact of current events on the region. First, the coins dramatically spiked in 2009. Coin numbers then decreased considerably in 2010, only to start climbing again with a peak in 2011–14, with the highest number in 2013. The numbers then dropped again in 2015, rising once more in 2016 and then fell slightly again in 2017, rising to its highest point in 2018 (see Figure 5). Not all coins have been counted in these numbers since some have been sold in lots where the exact numbers of coins from different mints are not specified. Most of the coins have no provenance information, although one came from a collection that was said to be prior to the 1970 UNESCO Convention and another 21 came from later collections. One coin even

[55]For the city walls, see Oates [1968] 2005, 97–106; Palermo 2011–12, 91–100.

[56]See "What Is Dante Alighieri Collection?" *Forum on Ancient Coins*, http://www.forumancientcoins.com/board/index.php?topic=78305.0;wap2 (accessed 14 June 2019).

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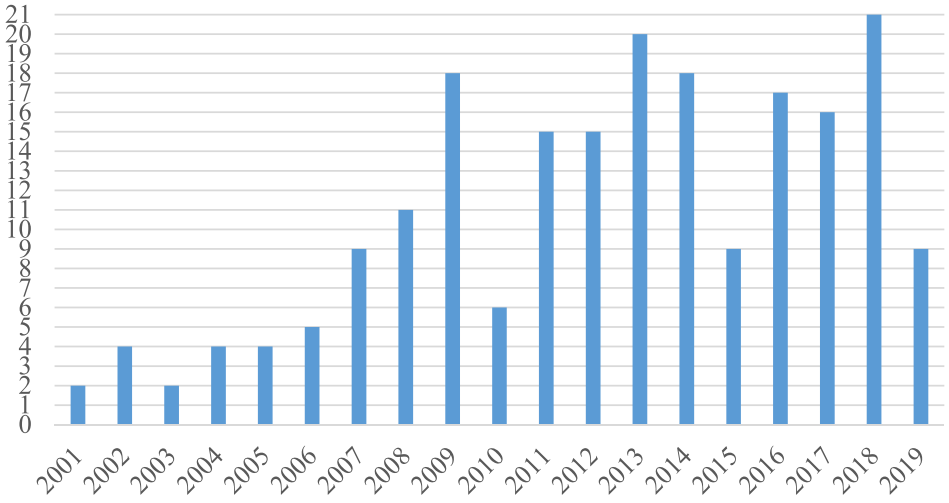

Figure 5. Coins of Roman Emperor Gordian III, minted at Singara.

comes from a collection known as the "D. Aligheri collection" (CNG electronic Auction 206 Lot 379), a pseudonym for a collector who wanted to remain anonymous,[56] which makes reconstructing the history even more problematic.

Since so many coins of Gordian III were found archaeologically at Dura Europos and essentially nowhere else in the region, it is plausible to connect these coins to the looting associated with these coins at this and other Euphrates sites in Syria. Other coins are not quite so helpful in determining such patterns. A comparison between the coins of Gordian III from Singara with those coins minted in the region in what is now southwestern Turkey at Edessa (modern Urfa), Carrhae (modern Harran), and Nisibis (modern Nusaybin) reveals several interesting points (Figure 6). First, the number of coins from the mint of Singara of Gordian III on the market is larger than the other three mints. Second, only the numbers of coins from Edessa are sufficiently large to make comparisons with Singara. In that instance, after a rise in the number of coins on the market starting in 2006, the numbers fall in 2010, reaching a low in 2013, rising and falling until they reach a peak in 2017 and falling slightly in 2018. Already a large number of coins have been auctioned in 2019, even though only the auctions before the beginning of March have been noted. This makes it likely that it is related to looting in the region and the number of coins on the market increasing, but the pattern is different from the Singara mint coins, which could indicate micro-regional differences in the sites that are being looted. Since coins from Edessa circulate more widely than the Singara coins and were minted in what is now Turkey, one cannot state definitively that all of these coins are likely to come from modern Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, given the fact that they are found at many Syrian sites archaeologically, it seems likely that this rise in 2014 could reflect looting in the region since 2011.

[57]Wartenberg Kagan, "Collecting Coins."

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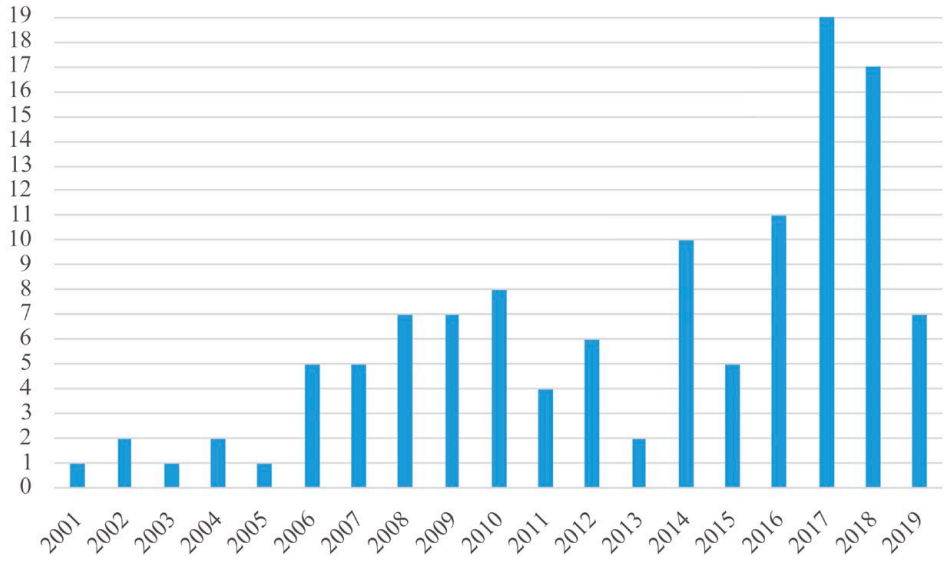

Figure 6. Coins of Roman Emperor Gordian III, minted at Edessa.

Interestingly, however, coins from any ruler that come from the northeastern Syrian Roman mint of Rhesaina, for instance, are not particularly common, but their number increases dramatically in 2006, when a single collector who seemed to have a large number of these coins auctioned off their collection (Figure 7). If one excludes these coins, the largest spike occurs in 2009, when one sees a similar spike in

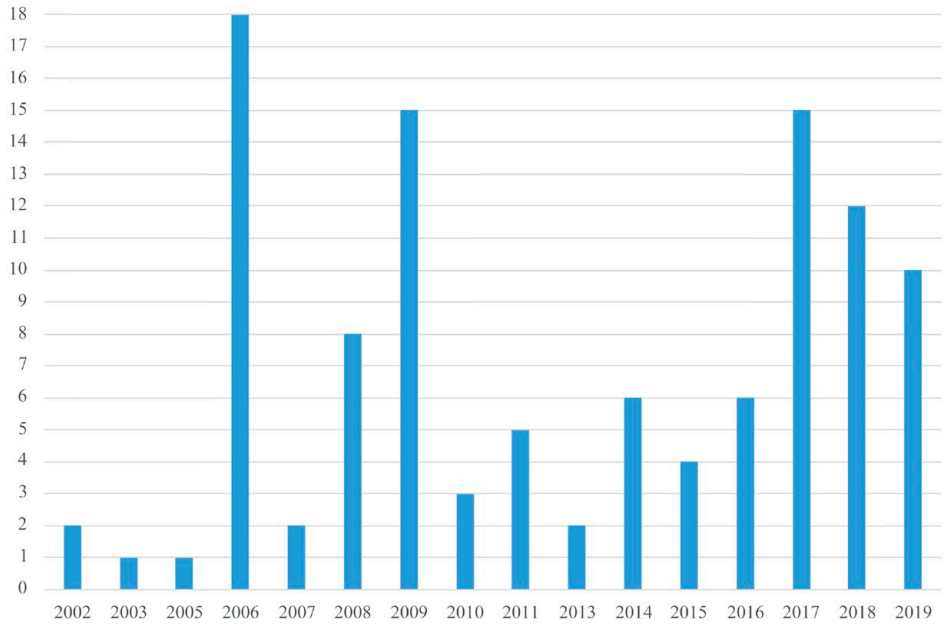

Figure 7. Coins of the Roman mint of Rhesaina.

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the Gordian III Singara coins. In contrast to those coins, however, coins of Rhesaina are low in 2013, although they rise in 2017, falling slightly in 2018. It looks as if there might be another spike in 2019 given the large number of coins already being auctioned on the market.

Other coins, such as rare fourth-century BC Achaemenid coins minted at Hierapolis/Bambyke (modern Menbij in north Syria) (see Figure 8), also increased after 2011, as did coins that were struck in northern Mesopotamia in the kingdom of Adiabene (AD 15–116), which was subject to the Parthians and whose capital was at modern Irbil. The coins struck at Adiabene are extremely rare, with one coin appearing on the market in 2009, followed by two coins in 2010, one in 2011, three in 2014, one in 2015, four auctioned in 2018, and one auctioned already in 2019. Therefore, given the rarity of these coins, it seems likely that they are appearing on the market due to looting in the region of northern Iraq. Coins from Adiabene are desirable not only because they are extremely rare but also because the kingdom converted to Judaism in the first century AD before it was destroyed by the Romans. This makes it only one of two kingdoms where the rulers purposefully converted to Judaism—the Khazars in what is now Russia are the other—meaning this it is the only kingdom of its type in the Near East. Therefore, for collectors of Judaica, these types of coins are extremely desirable.

The numbers presented here came from the professional version of coinarchives.org. It is important to note that this data has to be examined carefully. If one uses the non-professional version of the website, which is free, not all of the coins are listed, and different patterns emerge. Further, as has already been noted, some coins are sold in lots and therefore cannot be counted at all because it is not made

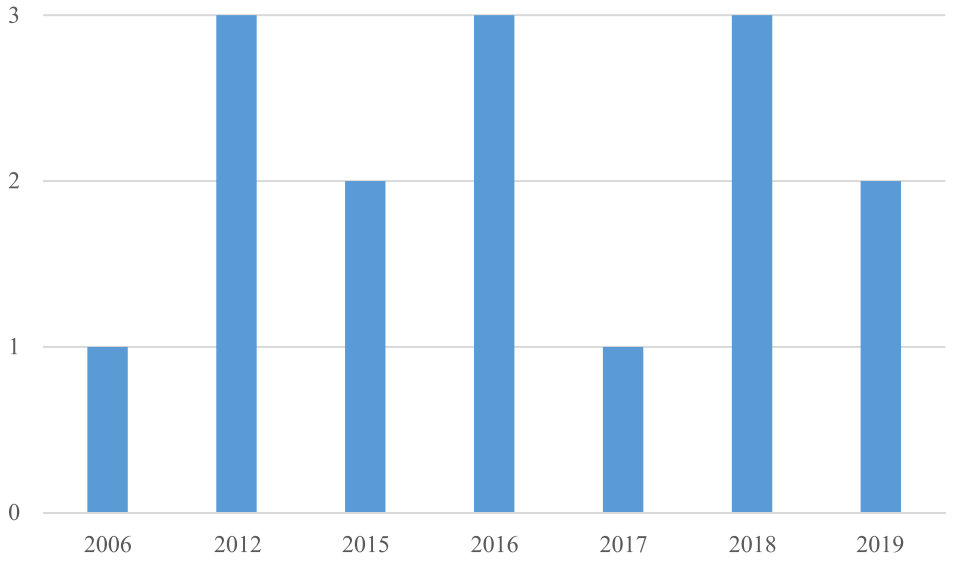

FIGURE 8. Fourth-century Achaemenid coins minted at Hierapolis.

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clear how many were actually sold. In addition, this is not a complete listing, and coins from other sites might give dramatically different views. Additionally, some coins are said to come from old sales, but Wartenberg Kagan advises treating all of these coins as if they are new to market unless these statements can be verified.[57] It should be kept in mind that, while the overall numbers of coins are not large, the trends seem to be significant. They suggest that the time to market for coins is not that long and that once looting is under way, small portable objects can reach the market fairly quickly. The differences in the regional mints may point to different patterns of looting, but since archaeological investigation in this region has been limited to a small number of sites (and other sites, such as Singara, have been neglected entirely), the picture remains murky.

Nevertheless, it is clear from material seized by the Kurdish People's Defense Unit in 2015 from fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that the Islamic state is interested in coin identification and presumably the value of those coins. As noted by Wartenberg Kagan, a photograph of the book *Archéologie et histoire de la Syria II* opened to page 17, which is an article by Maurice Sartre, "La Syrie sous la domination achéménide," showing Achaemenid Persian, imitation Athenian owl, and Phoenician coins, indicates that someone in ISIS was trying to identify coins. The facing page was a map of Syria that was at the end of the book on page 590, and the photograph clearly shows that the majority of the book has become detached from its binding. Indeed, as Wartenberg Kagan notes, the book, which also contains other coin articles, would be a good resource to someone trying to identify coins from the region. It has been suggested that the volume may have come from the Ar-Raqqah Museum.[58] Wherever the book came from, it shows that individuals were trying to identify the coins that they had in their possession. Even though numismatic training can take years, most individuals can be trained to generally identify particular types of coins, particularly with the advent of the Internet and other resources for coin collectors.

Some individuals have been skeptical of how useful this book would be to ISIS. Peter Tompa points out that since the page was apparently open to coins that were from coastal areas, ISIS could not have used it to identify and subsequently price coins because that region was outside of their control. He concludes that ISIS should have bought "a decent price guide."[59] Of course, if the book was really looted from the Ar-Raqqa Museum, ISIS may have been limited in their book selection. Further, Tompa has not studied the coin circulation of inland north Syria or he would have known, for example, that a Persian *siglos* (pictured in the illustration) was found in the excavations at Dura Europos,[60]

[58]Hardy 2015; Wartenberg Kagan 2015.
[59]Tompa 2015.
[60]Bellinger 1949; but see Duyrat 2016, 308, who notes their rarity.
[61]Sartre 1989, 17, fig. 1.

and imitation Athenian owl and Phoenician coins[61] have been found in a hoard from north Syria, for example, that was said to be approximately 100 kilometers east of Aleppo.[62] It should also be noted that Tompa works as a lobbyist and attorney for the Ancient Coin Collectors Guild as well as being a coin collector himself[63] and has stated in an online interview that the "single-minded obsession with archaeological context puzzles most coin collectors."[64]

TIME TO MARKET

As Brodie noted, there has been little evidence for post-2011 objects from Syria reaching Europe or North America, even though this is believed to be happening.[65] Indeed, Syrian objects have been seized in neighboring countries from where they would presumably be trafficked to Europe and North America, but nothing has appeared in Europe and North America itself. Brodie has argued that, rather than assuming that the objects are being stored away to be sold later or that it is all being sold on the black market, the market itself has changed. Prior to 2011, many of the objects being sold were high value items, whereas now, small, low-value objects are being traded instead. As he states, it is difficult to determine provenance of these objects and track this type of trade.[66]

In more concrete terms of establishing definite provenance of antiquities, photographs in the possession of ISIS leader Abu Sayyaf, recovered on 15 May 2015, show some antiquities with Mosul Museum numbers, specifically a ninth-century BC ivory plaque from the site of Nimrud.[67] The town of Mosul was taken over by ISIS on 10 June 2014, and, presumably, the ivory plaque was stolen sometime thereafter. Assuming that the plaque was stolen during the ISIS destruction and looting of objects in the museum in 2014 or 2015 (and not during the earlier looting of the museum in 2003), this means that the plaque entered the antiquities supply chain no earlier than 11 months before its image was recovered. Therefore, it is clear that the time to market could actually be quite short, even a matter of months.

While one might argue that these objects would all be sold on the black market because they are either highly recognizable or have museum numbers on them, this is not necessarily the case. Frank Holt observed that more than 75 of the 627 coins from the Qunduz Hoard formerly in the Kabul Museum, which

[62]Van Alfen 2002, 1–2.
[63]Fehlmann 2014, 164; Elkins 2015, 236.
[64]*Chasing Aphrodite Blog*, 25 March 2013.
[65]Brodie, "Trafficking."
[66]Brodie, "Trafficking."
[67]See Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/isil_leader_loot.pdf (accessed 14 June 2019).
[68]Holt 2012a, 207, no. 51; 2012b, 270, no. 7.

are very recognizable to numismatic experts and collectors of Greco-Bactrian coinage, were being sold openly on eBay or in auctions.[68] According to Bopearachchi, materials from the Kabul Museum appeared in the Peshawar bazaar only a few days after the museum was looted.[69] Although this evidence is more anecdotal than the Mosul Museum materials, it once again argues for a short time from looting to market.

The evidence does seem to indicate that certain coins from the conflict zone are reaching the market fairly quickly, although it depends on the coin type and what year a particular coin is the most common. This would confirm the previous work done on coins that shows for certain specialized types with a limited circulation area, and one can demonstrate that these coins are likely to have come from Iraq or Syria. Even when coin numbers are not particularly large, they still seem to be indicative of this trend as increasingly rare coins are available. This is particularly true with the Singara mint coins, which should not be so common on the antiquities market, particularly given the short length of time that the mint was in operation (AD 242–44) unless they were coming from an area that has been intensively looted.

CONCLUSION

It is now evident that small finds and coins account for a large portion of the global market in antiquities, a major problem that has been largely overlooked, although new studies addressing the issue are beginning to appear. The two case studies presented here argue that relatively low value portable objects are being smuggled out of Iraq and Syria and offered for sale on publicly accessible auction websites in large numbers. The ability to reach buyers of various socio-economic backgrounds around the world and the financial advantages of being able to store large inventories of small objects in low-cost locations are among the main factors that contribute to the continuing growth of the online market in antiquities. This growth is having a devastating effect on the archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria as the increasing demand in these easily accessible objects is fueling further looting in a region that has suffered from illegal excavations and plunder of its cultural heritage long before the start of current conflicts. Going forward, increasing buyers' awareness and focusing law enforcement and policy efforts on the online market and on small finds are important steps that should be taken to face this challenge. In 2016, LiveAuctioneers pledged, along with several other businesses, to help stop the illegal trade of wildlife products.[70] One hopes that they display the same sensibility toward trafficked antiquities in the future.

[69]Bopearachchi 2002.

[70]Jani Actman, "JetBlue, Etsy, and Others Want to Help Stop Wildlife Crime," *National Geographic*, 3 March 2016, https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/03/160303-wildlife-trafficking-internet-businesses/ (accessed 16 January 2018).

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