

JOSEPHINE MUNCH RASMUSSEN - ÅRSTEIN JUSTNES

Tales of Saviours and Iconoclasts On the Provenance of “The Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism”

Abstract

Academic research on newly discovered ancient Buddhist manuscripts is largely based on objects that come from the antiquities market and to a much lesser degree on objects coming from documented and controlled archaeological excavations. Despite their being unprovenanced, collectors and scholars often present such objects with narratives mimicking provenance. The use of the label “Dead Sea Scrolls” attached to archaeological material without connections to Judaism or early Christianity is a prevalent example of this scholarly praxis. In this article, we deconstruct provenance narratives associated with the undocumented Buddhist manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection and discuss their implications for research on these manuscripts and beyond.

In 1994, the British Library acquired 60 Buddhist scrolls in Kharosthi script from the antiquities market.¹ According to John Darnton of the New York Times, they were “purchased for a ‘five figure sum’ by an anonymous donor, who presented them, through an anonymous dealer, as a gift”.² In the summer of 1996, the Norwegian manuscript collector Martin Schøyen bought 108 fragments from London-based manuscript dealer Sam Fogg.³ From 1996 to around 2000, probably also later,⁴ Schøyen – according to the Schøyen Collection’s website – acquired another 5000 fragments and 7000 micro-fragments of “Buddhist scriptures”.⁵ This

¹ Brodie 2005, 8.

² Darnton 1996.

³ The Schøyen Collection 2019a; Fogg 1996.

⁴ According to a 2002 article by Martin Bailey, Schøyen purchased Buddhist manuscripts through Sam Fogg as late as in 2002: “The most recent batch of manuscripts reached Europe in July, and again passed through Sam Fogg to the Schøyen Collection”.

⁵ The number of manuscripts and fragments reported by the scholars involved in publishing the material and by the collector himself varies greatly. Cf. The Schøyen Collection 2019a: “Foremost is a collection of manuscripts found in caves in Bamiyan, in Afghanistan, in 1993-95. They comprise around 5,000 leaves and fragments, with around 7,000 micro-fragments, from a library of originally up to 1,000 manuscripts. These manuscripts, together with 60 in the British

material was described as associated with that of the British Library. And just like the British Library's manuscripts, it had no documented history of ownership.

Research on newly discovered ancient manuscripts is largely based on objects that come from the antiquities market – and to a much lesser degree on objects coming from documented and controlled archaeological excavations. Within text- and manuscript studies, critical assessment of ownership history has often been of secondary importance if at all addressed. This tendency has been pointed out in several contributions to the field in recent years.⁶ In the absence of proper legal and scientific documentation, antiquities dealers, collectors, and involved scholars often make creative references to established corpora and well-known collections. Objects tend to be pooled with certain labels and narratives carrying a particular embedded significance. In the case of the Buddhist manuscripts under scrutiny in this study, the phenomenon is most noteworthy in the prevalent appeal (by scholars and collectors) to similarity in importance to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In 2004, it was revealed that some of the fragments acquired by the Schøyen Collection had been looted from the National Museum in Kabul in the nineties, and in 2005 Martin Schøyen agreed to return seven fragments to the museum.⁷ In this article, we study the provenance narratives that are still attached to the so-called “Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism” in the Schøyen Collection. We argue that these stories effectively came to hide the dubious provenance of these diverse manuscripts and fragments in the collection.⁸

At Buddhists' and Scholars' Request: The Invention of a Rescue Operation

The Buddhist manuscripts are the only section in the Collection that were specifically acquired to prevent destruction, after requests to do so were received from Buddhists and scholars.

The Schøyen Collection 2019a

Library, have been called the ‘Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism’. They are the earliest Buddhist scriptures known, spanning the 2nd to 7th centuries AD. They are written on palm leaf, birch bark, vellum and copper. ... The first fragments were acquired by the Schøyen Collection in the summer of 1996 from the London bookseller Sam Fogg's Oct 17 lot 39. The bulk of the material was acquired in London between 1997 and 2000”. In his 2002 contribution, Braarvig 2002a, 60 gave significantly lower numbers: “There are a few complete manuscripts in the collection, e.g. a very good manuscript of the Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita (‘The Diamond Cutter Sutra’), and the Samghatasutra, as well as sizeable parts of the Buddhist monastic codex, but apart from these there are about 2000 sizeable fragments from whole pages down to 5 or 6 cm², while there are more than 5000 microfragments smaller than this”. Matsuda 2000, 100, on his part, had only two years earlier given higher numbers: “On the occasion of our visit in November 1997, the total of the fragments in the collection was approximately 6,000, and it expanded to 10,000 one year later. The number must continue to increase even as I am writing this report. However, I have to add that this is the total Mr. Schøyen alleges, and is not our count. We must note that three-fourths of the manuscripts are fragments of several centimeters around. The total of 10,000 includes many small portions bearing one legible character”.

⁶ E.g., Ruts, Kersel 2014; Mizzi, Magness 2019; Justnes, Rasmussen 2017, 2020; Bonnie, Goff, Jokiranta, Thomas, Tzoref 2020.

⁷ NRK TV 2004; The Schøyen Collection 2019a.

⁸ Cf. Brodie 2009, 42: “The description of ... manuscripts as unprovenanced really means that they have no ownership history, or ... no information is publicly available as to how they passed from their countries of origin onto the international market and into private hands. Sometimes they are simply said to have ‘appeared’ Braarvig 2000, but in the absence of any evidence to the contrary it is often supposed that they have recently been excavated clandestinely and exported illegally from the country of origin”.

In the very first passage of the general introduction to the first volume of the series *Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection*, editor-in-chief Jens E. Braarvig writes:

Recently, to the great surprise and joy of the scholarly community of Buddhist studies, a sizeable collection of Buddhist manuscripts appeared, with new and important material for the study of Indian Buddhist history, religion and culture. According to scanty and partly confirmed information from the local dealers, most of these mainly Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts were found quite recently in Afghanistan by local people taking refuge from the Taliban forces in caves near the Bamiyan valley, where an old library may have been situated, or possibly hidden. There are certain indications, however, that some of the material comes from other places. The manuscripts, which are mostly in fragments, were probably damaged already in the late 7th or the early 8th century, since the latest examples of scripts in the collection are from the 7th century. According to information passed on by the manuscript dealers, many manuscripts were further damaged when Taliban forces blew up a stone statue of the Buddha in one of the caves. Local people trying to save the manuscripts from the Taliban were chased by them when carrying the manuscripts through passes in the Hindu Kush to the north of the Khyber Pass. Further damage was incurred in this period, but the rescue operation was for the most part a success.⁹

Especially two elements in this piece stand out:

- (1) Despite the fact that Schøyen bought the manuscripts on the antiquities market, from several different dealers, what is presented is a sensationalist, single narrative about a rescue operation, based “on scanty and partly confirmed information from the local dealers”.¹⁰
- (2) Notably, there are direct links between the provenance¹¹ constructions and the physical state of the manuscripts. According to Braarvig, the manuscripts have been damaged three times: (a) They are “mostly in fragments” because they “were probably damaged already in the late 7th or the early 8th century”; (b) “many manuscripts were further damaged when Taliban forces blew up a stone statue of the Buddha in one of the caves”; (c) even further damage was incurred when “[l]ocal people trying to save the manuscripts from the Taliban were chased by them when carrying the manuscripts through passes in the Hindu Kush to the north of the Khyber Pass”.

In the second volume, appearing two years later, the Bamiyan provenance is further promoted, now in light of the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001:

Since the publication of the first volume in this series in 2000, Afghanistan, the source of the manuscripts which that volume presented to the scholarly public, has become the focus of world attention in ways entirely unforeseeable at the time. The events of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing war in Afghanistan ... have made a household word of Bamiyan, a name long

⁹ Braarvig 2000, xiii.

¹⁰ It should be noted that Braarvig here trusts sources that were part of the same market that sold Schøyen looted manuscripts from the Kabul Museum (see below).

¹¹ While *provenience* usually refers to the actual findspot and archaeological context of a find, *provenance*, on the other hand, covers an object’s history of ownership, including its provenience. In this article, we only use the term *provenance*. Findspot and archaeological context remains undocumented for the material we discuss and thus cannot be assessed in isolation from provenance.

familiar to scholars of Buddhism but otherwise generally unknown. Indeed, earlier last year Bamiyan had already been in the news, when the Taliban demolished the giant Buddhas there despite the international outcry which the announcement of their plan to do so evoked.¹²

In 2010, Braarvig publishes a shortened, but almost verbatim version of the narrative he presented ten years earlier in volume 1 (quoted above). In the 2010 version, a more specific date of the major events is indicated: The local people took “refuge from the Taliban forces in caves near the Bāmiyān valley ... *in 1993-95*”.¹³

The current version of the Schøyen Collection website has this description:

This material largely avoided destruction during the recent civil war (between several local war lords and the Taliban) by being taken out of the war zone. However, significant parts that remained in Afghanistan when the Taliban took power in most of the country in 1996 were earmarked for destruction, together with other Buddhist objects and monuments. The Collection played a major role in rescuing these items for scholarship and for the common heritage of mankind.¹⁴

The colorful details about Schøyen’s “rescue operation” of the manuscripts from the Taliban were revealed already in 2004 to have been fabricated. This was uncovered in part 1 of the TV documentary *Skriftsamleren* [the Manuscript Collector] aired by the Norwegian broadcaster NRK.¹⁵ Based on interviews with various informants in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Britain, and Norway, the documentary revealed that manuscripts from Afghanistan had been looted and smuggled for commercial purposes *before* the Taliban came into power. The journalists also found that the Schøyen research team had been aware that some fragments in the collection had been stolen from Kabul Museum, but kept silent about it. Furthermore, it was revealed that a portion of the manuscripts sold to Schøyen by London dealer William “Bill” Veres, had been looted and smuggled from Gilgit in Pakistan.¹⁶

In the ensuing public debate in Norway, Schøyen subsequently changed and demystified his story: “My rescue mission was that I made it known in London that I would pay a fixed price per square inch for Buddhist manuscripts. This is how the manuscripts were collected”.¹⁷ According to Schøyen’s line of argument, it was the fact that the manuscripts ended up *in his possession* that made it a rescue. The acquired manuscripts were perceived and portrayed as “out of harm’s way”, and the providers were characterised as “refugees”.

¹² Braarvig 2002b, xiii.

¹³ Braarvig 2010b, xviii (our emphasis).

¹⁴ The Schøyen Collection 2019a. From 2001 to the present, the website has been revised several times, also including numerous revisions of origin and acquisition details for specific objects.

¹⁵ NRK TV 2004. The documentary was aired in two parts, the first on 7 September, and the second on 14 September. An English summary and review of the documentary was published by Lundén 2005; cf. also Omland 2006; Nafziger, Paterson, Renteln 2010, 611-612.

¹⁶ Lundén 2005.

¹⁷ Martin Schøyen in an interview with the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten 10 September 2004: <https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/q1o1l/kun-opptatt-av-aa-bevare-verdensarven>. Translation to English by Prescott, Rasmussen 2020, 77.

It should be noted that regardless of whether the manuscripts were sourced by professional or subsistence looters, refugees or by Taliban associates, Schøyen's offer effectively gave a revenue for actors involved in trafficking the goods. Despite the legal and ethical conundrums entailed in Schøyen's acquisition of Buddhist manuscripts,¹⁸ the roles and responsibilities of the various actors and institutions that were involved in the collection at the time, remain unclear.¹⁹

Scholars working on the publication of the material – and more than anyone Schøyen himself – have kept on presenting the provenance of the manuscripts within the framework of a rescue narrative. The attitude of responsibility and custodianship is also prevalent in further statements by Schøyen:

The Collection feels a strong sense of responsibility for the safekeeping of the Buddhist manuscripts from Bamiyan that have survived over the centuries, and often against the odds, for over 5000 years [*sic*]. The Schøyen Collection's duty of care fundamentally involves full and careful assessment of the risks of onward transmission of any of its acquisitions. ...

It is important to understand that these items appeared on the antiquities market as *refugee items* from the Taliban and that the entire collection was in danger of being dispersed in a way that would almost certainly have meant a major loss to Buddhist scriptural scholarship.²⁰

Remarkably, these statements manage to combine the Taliban destruction with motifs often used in support of appropriation of cultural heritage objects: iconoclastic and willful destruction of cultural heritage, the responsible and concerned collectors, and refugees fleeing culture-hostile terrorists. The underlying narrative echoes colonial fantasies of superiority: the entitlement of the Western collector to be the one who removes objects “for their own protection” and out of concern for ancient scripture and culture.

“*The Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism*”

Very soon they were being called the “Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism” in the media, and although the claim implicit in this designation seemed exaggerated, at least in the beginning, it nevertheless aroused public interest and guaranteed high prices in the market. Both factors may have contributed to further scrolls being preserved after their discovery by local people in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Paul Harrison and Jens-Uwe Hartmann 2014, xv

In biblical scholarship, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is often celebrated as the most important archaeological finding of the 20th century. Among the over 900 manuscripts allegedly found in eleven caves between 1946/7 and 1956 are the oldest manuscripts of the Jewish

¹⁸ Nafziger, Paterson, Renteln 2010, 611-612.

¹⁹ Prescott, Rasmussen 2020.

²⁰ The Schøyen Collection 2019a (our emphasis).

Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament. The scrolls are controversial, iconic, and surrounded by colorful narratives.²¹

In 1996, the expression “Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism” was used in a press release from the British Library. Here, ancient languages scholar Richard Salomon was quoted describing the new manuscripts and fragments as “potentially ‘the Dead Sea scrolls of Buddhism’”.²² This label was quickly picked up by the media²³ and on 7 July, Salomon described the acquisition to the *New York Times* as follows: “The importance of these new manuscripts for the study of Buddhism is potentially comparable to that of the Dead Sea Scrolls to Judaism and early Christianity”.²⁴ The term “Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism” was also employed in his initial overview of the British Library collection in 1999.²⁵ Both in the 1999 Schøyen catalogue and on the collection’s website,²⁶ the label was used as a heading.

When editor of the influential *Biblical Archaeology Review* Hershel Shanks interviewed Schøyen about his collection in 2002, Shanks explicitly reflected on this labelling practice:

How do you underscore the historical significance of a recently recovered cache of ancient Buddhist manuscripts? You call them “the Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism”. That’s what Graham Shaw, deputy director of the British Library’s Oriental and India Office Collections, called a horde [sic] of documents purchased in 1997 by Martin Schøyen How much are they worth? “It’s incalculable,” the London *Times* reports him as saying. “How would you put a value on the Dead Sea Scrolls?”²⁷

According to Shanks, the Dead Sea Scrolls label underscores historical significance beyond compare and signifies incalculable worth.²⁸ When he goes on to describe the provenance of Schøyen’s Buddhist manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls are not only his main point of reference, they also serve as an interpretational key:

Exactly how the manuscripts were found remains something of a mystery. What seems clear is that they came from Afghanistan. Refugees fleeing from the Taliban claim to have found them in caves near the Bamiyan valley, where the Taliban destroyed two giant statues of the Buddha in 2001 ... Like the manuscripts from the Dead Sea caves, this collection may have been maintained as a library in the caves where they were found, or they may have been hid-

²¹ Mroczek 2018.

²² Brodie 2005, 8.

²³ See for example *Los Angeles Times* 1996.

²⁴ Darnton 1996.

²⁵ Salomon 1999; see also Brodie 2005.

²⁶ Caption from 10 January 2001, see The Schøyen Collection 2001.

²⁷ Shanks 2002, 31.

²⁸ In his 2005 book, Dead Sea Scrolls scholar Timothy Lim further elaborates on this aspect, using the appearance of the expression in a 2004 article in *The Independent* as his point of departure: “Notable is the way the newspaper headline used ‘the Dead Sea Scrolls’ to signify a collection of ancient manuscript finds. The Kharosti texts are Buddhist scrolls dating to the 1st century CE and have no historical connection to Judaism. They are significant for the study of the early development of Buddhism and the search for the historical Buddha. The comparison, suggested by the staff of the British Library, was intended to underscore their great antiquity and importance. The peculiar usage of the name is evidence that the Dead Sea Scrolls have taken on a symbolic status. They are no longer just the scrolls of a Jewish sect that lived by the Dead Sea, but represent any important discovery of ancient manuscripts” (15).

den there by ancient refugees. Also like the Dead Sea Scrolls, the manuscripts are mostly fragments.²⁹

According to Shanks, Schøyen's Buddhist manuscripts may – *like the Dead Sea Scrolls* – “have been maintained as a library in the caves where they were found”. And *like the Dead Sea Scrolls*, they are for the most part fragments. Shanks' suggestion that the manuscripts may have been hidden by ancient refugees also correlates to the theory that a substantial part of the Dead Sea Scrolls were hidden in caves by Jews fleeing from the Romans. The sense of urgency and threat is thus further strengthened by this associations to the Dead Sea Scrolls.³⁰

In a short article in *Minerva* from 2007, Geoffrey Clarfield praises Schøyen's accomplishments and compares his efforts in “saving” the Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism with famous archaeologist Yigal Yadin's efforts in saving the Dead Sea Scrolls:

Neither UNESCO, the European Union, nor any other official museum, library, or institution of higher learning has been able to do what Mr Shoyen has done, almost single-handedly protecting these price-less cultural treasures from the hands of mad religious iconoclasts.

In this respect he is similar to the late Israeli archaeologist Yigal Yadin, who saved many of the Dead Sea Scrolls for the new State of Israel in 1948. The Bamiyan texts span the centuries of AD 100 to 700, thus pre-dating and overlapping with the Dunhuang caves collection. They were probably ritually buried for similar reasons. It is not surprising then that scholars are calling this collection “Buddhism's Dead Sea Scrolls”.³¹

But by enrolling “the Bamiyan texts” among the Dunhuang caves collection and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Clarfield manages not only to mystify Schøyen's “treasures”, but also to give them something that in the context appears as an ideal and recognizable archaeological circumstance and flavor.³²

Schøyen himself employs the Dead Sea Scrolls label extensively in reference to his own collection. Judging from a 2001 caption of his website, the Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism refer *only* to manuscripts from Bamiyan in Afghanistan. And, even more specific, the term refers to manuscripts from *a single library that originally belonged to a Buddhist monastery*.³³ This use of the label turns Schøyen's manuscripts – that were bought from different dealers over several years and apparently had multiple provenances – into a perfect comparative partner for the Dead Sea Scrolls that were found at Qumran in the forties and fifties.³⁴

²⁹ Shanks 2002, 31.

³⁰ Apart from the threat posed by Romans to the Judean Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Taliban's presumed threat to the Buddhist manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, the findings of biblical texts in an Irish bog, also labelled Dead Sea Scrolls, was followed by unsubstantiated speculation (by a scholar) that the manuscript had been hidden in the bog to avoid the threat of Viking destruction. See Gillingham 2012, 373.

³¹ Clarfield 2007, 44.

³² The comparison between Schøyen and Yadin is at best highly imprecise. Yadin did not “save” any scrolls for the State of Israel in 1948. At that time, he was serving in the military.

³³ The Schøyen Collection 2001.

³⁴ Other Schøyen scholars seem to use the Dead Sea Scrolls label in a broader sense than Schøyen. For Harrison, Hartmann 2014, ix, for instance, the Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism refer to manuscripts found in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the nineties: “More important ... have been the sensational manuscript finds, sometimes called the ‘Dead Sea

The first generation of scholars tended to describe the Dead Sea Scrolls as a library belonging to some kind of monastery.³⁵ This labelling praxis has a strong rhetorical effect that serves Schøyen's overall interests: to give the material a position of unquestionable legitimacy and importance.³⁶ The label not only functions as a generic trademark signifying manuscripts' scriptural and cultural importance, it also reflects a labelling practice with serious analytical and ethical implications: By calling undocumented manuscripts "Dead Sea Scrolls", the question of archaeological context is effectively put in the background.

Constructing an Ideal Provenance for Unprovenanced Manuscripts

A certain effort has been made with regard to establishing the origin and the Buddhist school from which the material stem [*sic*]. Regrettably most of the information available about the physical origin is quite scanty, and any archaeological survey has up until now been difficult.

Jens E. Braarvig 2010b, xx

Text- and manuscript studies have been a latecomer to critical discussions of provenance. Also in the field of Buddhist manuscript studies, issues of provenance have traditionally been considered to be of secondary importance.³⁷ The research practice reviewed in the following must therefore be interpreted in light of a longstanding tradition and prevailing tendency to care more about content than materiality, and more about the original ancient context than provenance and recent object biographies.

From Sam Fogg's and Lore Sander's description of the first 108 fragments that Schøyen bought in the summer of 1996, it is clear that they are unprovenanced. Their one-page description of the fragments ends in a vague speculation:

The collection appears to consist of texts from a single Buddhist school, yet contains leaves in a wide variety of scripts and material without much duplication. This suggests that the entire group of leaves may have consisted of rejected leaves from a monastic library which were de-

Scrolls of Buddhism,' in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the nineties of the last century. They have attracted – and continue to attract – an unusually high level of public attention, which at least indirectly helped the scholars concerned in conveying the impression that they were involved in something very important". Cf. also Matsuda 2000, 98. Interestingly, however, it appears from an internal British Library document accessed by Neil Brodie that, contrary to statements by supporters of the British Library's and later of Schøyen's acquisitions, the scrolls ended up being regarded as much less sensational than the Dead Sea Scrolls: "... they are unlikely to revolutionise Buddhist studies in the way the Dead Sea Scrolls pushed back the date of a Hebrew bible and enabled the reconstruction of the pre-Christian history of Palestine" (quote in Brodie 2005, 9).

³⁵ Cross 1958; Milik 1959. For a more recent synthesis, see Crawford 2019. Crawford argues that Qumran served as the central library and scribal center for the Essene movement.

³⁶ The Dead Sea Scrolls label also played a part in Hilde W. Nagell's assessment of the ethical justification for the purchase, research on, and publication of the Buddhist manuscripts in Schøyen's collection following the controversy about the collection in Norwegian media, see Nagell 2005, 172: "... the Buddhist material in the Schøyen collection has been labelled 'the dead sea scrolls of Buddhism'. Nobody has denied the great scientific value of this material. The scientific value is reflected in the purchase of manuscripts by the prestigious British Library". By referencing the British Library and the Dead Sea Scrolls in her argument, Nagell attempts to underscore the great scientific value of the Schøyen manuscripts, and thereby defend its purchase and publication.

³⁷ E.g., Allon 2007; 2008.

posited in a stupa or in a statue, a frequent practice which served both to sanctify the container while preserving the scriptures from destruction.³⁸

In his 2002 contribution in *CAS Oslo 1992-2002: Advanced Study in a Norwegian Context*, Braarvig, on his part, links these and other manuscripts to *a single cave* in Bamiyan:

The site of these Buddha statues [in Bamiyan] is surrounded by caves, and in one of these caves were found the manuscripts we now have as they are preserved in the Schøyen Collection – the result of the effort of Mr. Martin Schøyen in acquiring these manuscripts systematically through purchase from Afghan tradesmen through London antiquarians.

What exactly the collection represents, being the remains of a great ancient collection of Buddhist scriptures, and what function and status this collection had, has not yet been decided with certainty. It had, however, been kept in the cave where it was found in the early nineteen nineties, since as an original collection it was destroyed in the early 8th century A.D., possibly by the then invading Muslim armies from the West. Thus the collection is, unfortunately, fragmentary. So the cave in which it was found just less than ten years ago probably served as a deposit from what once formed a huge library, that is, unless all the disconnected leaves originally formed pious gifts offered by passing pilgrims for the safety of their journey – a practice also documented elsewhere on the Silk Road.³⁹

However, when interviewed by the *Art Newspaper* the same year, Braarvig laments that the manuscripts and fragments “are shorn of context” and that local looters have been keeping the find-spot a secret:

From a scientific point of view the fact that the exact find-spot is unknown and that proper excavations have not been carried out is deplorable, since the manuscripts are shorn of context,” he explained. Instead, it has been left to local looters to take the material, keeping the source of their treasure a secret.⁴⁰

In the third volume of *Buddhist Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection* from 2006, published in the wake of the exposure of the dubious nature of Schøyen’s acquisitions, Braarvig brings in new information about the provenance of the manuscripts and their find spot:

Recently more information on the *likely find spot* of the manuscripts has been made available by the work of Kazuya Yamauchi, who visited Bamiyan in October 2003 and established what is a *very probable provenance* for them [our emphasis]. The editorial committee is grateful to him for publishing his findings in this volume, and expresses the hope that further systematic archaeological work can be conducted *in situ* in collaboration with the Afghan authorities.⁴¹

³⁸ Fogg 1996, 47.

³⁹ Braarvig 2002a, 58.

⁴⁰ Bailey 2002.

⁴¹ Braarvig 2006a, xiv.

The quoted piece is peculiar: It gives the impression that the volume contains a chapter by Yamauchi in which he argues for Bamyian as a very probable provenance. However, Yamauchi's contribution in the volume is limited to three photos attributed to him in the appendix. No references are made to published field surveys or archaeological documentation.⁴² The modified provenance for the Schøyen material allegedly suggested by Yamauchi and conveyed by Braarvig in the 2006 volume, is Zargaran. A two-page appendix is preceded by the following short explanatory text by the editor:

The three photographs and the information presented here have been kindly supplied by Mr. Kazuya Yamauchi ... Zargaran is a settlement some 1.2 km east of the site of the smaller of the two giant Buddha statues carved into the cliffs on the northern side of the Bamiyan Valley, which were demolished by the Taliban in 2001. There Mr. Yamauchi was told by villagers that about ten years previously one of the caves had collapsed in an earthquake, revealing a large quantity of manuscript fragments which, when gathered together, made a pile approximately 10 cm high. Although the locals claimed to have burned them, it may be that not all of them were destroyed. It is therefore possible, though not absolutely certain, that a substantial proportion of the Buddhist manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection come from this location.⁴³

What in the introduction was presented as the establishment of a “very probable provenance” is now reduced to a “possible” provenance for a “substantial portion of the Buddhist manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection”.⁴⁴ Braarvig and Yamauchi trust the locals' story about the earthquake “revealing a large quantity of manuscripts”, but seemingly not the part about their destruction. The account serves several purposes: beyond activating an age-old trope about local populations' inability to care for manuscripts (see for instance Nongbri 2019), it serves to support an attractive provenance for the manuscripts.

Despite Braarvig's changing provenance assessments, the Schøyen Collection website still maintains that all the manuscripts come from a single library in Bamyian.⁴⁵ According to Schøyen – and unlike the manuscripts from other similar collections – *all* the manuscripts that he bought from *several different* dealers on London's antiquities market, through a period of four years or more, came from the very same spot on earth – a library in Bamiyan. The idea that all manuscripts and fragments originated from such a library has several major implications: Since the objects, according to Schøyen, come from *a single collection*, they belong together and should be studied together.

⁴² A few years earlier Yamauchi had told Norwegian journalists that he had never found any manuscripts in the caves at Bamiyan. According to him, the caves had been thoroughly looted long before the Taliban came to power in 1998 (NRK TV 2004, summarized in Dhammika 2008).

⁴³ Braarvig 2006b, 1.

⁴⁴ Cf. also Braarvig 2000, xiii: “There are certain indications ... that some of the material comes from other places”. In their introduction to the voluminous anthology *From Birch Bark to Digital Data*, Harrison, Hartmann 2014, vii note: “Although it is claimed that the manuscripts [in the Schøyen Collection] come from one place, the collection is extremely diverse ...”. Correspondingly, Sander 2014, 176, note 38 states that “it is doubtful that Zargaran ... is the finding place of all the fragments in the Schøyen Collection”. Fourteen years earlier, Sander 2000, 87-88 had also expressed doubt about the possibility of a single cave origin.

⁴⁵ See note 1.

Neil Brodie comments that Braarvig, despite his knowledge that some of the material in question came from Pakistan, not Afghanistan, invokes an illusion when he congratulates Schøyen for saving the manuscripts as a “consistent whole”.⁴⁶ Braarvig knew that the fragments and manuscripts his team was studying came from different contexts and countries,⁴⁷ still the idea of a *consistent whole*, a library, a collection, is at the core of the narrative that is repeatedly disseminated by the involved actors.

The construction of the Bamiyan context provided an attractive (pseudo-) archaeological context for the manuscripts that came from the antiquities market in London.⁴⁸ It suggests a connection to Bamiyan yet it is vague enough not to be incriminating.

Provenance Recycled?

Le 31 juillet 1930, M. Hackin, alors chargé d’une mission en Afghanistan, expédiait de Bamiyan un rapport où il décrivait les travaux en cours. Il signalait en particulier une grotte située à l’Est du Bouddha de 35 mètres, recouverte par les éboulements de la falaise, et qu’il avait réussi à dégager en partie; il l’avait trouvée obstruée par les débris d’une partie de la coupole qui s’était effondrée. Outre des restes importants de peintures et de sculptures, “cette partie contenait une grande quantité de manuscrits sur écorce, malheureusement soudés en masse compacte et extrêmement friables; l’écriture brahmi domine; quelques rares manuscrits sont en kharoṣṭhi”.

Sylvain Lévi 1932, 1

According to Lore Sander, sometime in 1998 the Schøyen team became aware of fragments from the Kabul Museum in the Schøyen Collection.⁴⁹ Several of Schøyen’s acquired Bud-

⁴⁶ Braarvig 2004, 37, quoted in Brodie 2009, 48.

⁴⁷ Cf. also Matsuda 2000, 101: “According to the present writer and his colleagues’ observations, the recently-appeared scriptures seem to contain manuscripts found in other places in Afghanistan or in Pakistan including Gilgit, though this is not based on firm grounds”.

⁴⁸ In 2014 another Schøyen scholar, Richard Salomon, gave a public lecture entitled “Retrieving the Buddhist Canon at Bamiyan” at Stanford University Salomon 2014. In the Q&A session, he confirmed the uncertainty of the provenance of these manuscripts:

Question: “Two questions, first of all: You know, this place in Bamiyan, was this an archive accessible to the only inner circle, or masses could get access to these, you know, documents? ...”

RS: “Well, you know, unfortunately, *we can only guess*, because these things were *not discovered in situ*, they were ... *not found in the course of archaeological discovery*. They are *found by people unknown and passed around*. So, *we can only guess and extrapolate from what we do know*. I think *it is pretty safe to guess* that these were the contents of some sort of monastic library. ...

So, but I think exactly where these things were and why they were there, *we just can’t know* that. But I think these were either parts of a monastic library, or in some cases they might have been, as I said, ritually buried old manuscripts”.

Q: “Is there textual evidence for a monastic library?”

RS: “No. No, I just made it up [laughter]. Um, *not that I’m aware of. Not explicit references*” [0:52:08 to 54:42; our emphases].

What Salomon essentially describes is the insecurity that faces the scholars who works with unprovenanced material. They can only guess.

⁴⁹ Cf. Sander 2014, 175: “... we found damaged fragments from the Kabul Museum in Martin Schøyen’s much increased collection when we worked on it for the first time in 1998 (Figs. 4 and 5 [pictures of six fragments])”.

dhist fragments were identical to those that Joseph and Ria Hackin had discovered in 1930.⁵⁰ Many of the holdings of the Kabul Museum were destroyed or looted when the museum was attacked by rival insurgent groups in 1992.⁵¹ The manuscripts had in other words been looted from the museum collection, and subsequently been marketed by London antiquities dealers — before ending up in the Schøyen Collection in Norway. The team notified Schøyen of this, but apparently not the museum from which the manuscripts had been stolen. The research group and Schøyen kept the Kabul Museum provenance to themselves for several years until confronted by the NRK documentary team in 2004.⁵²

Seven fragments stolen from the Kabul Museum were eventually acknowledged by the Schøyen Collection as belonging to Afghanistan and were, according to the collection's website, given back to the museum already in 2005.

As a gesture of goodwill, the Schoyen Collection gave seven fragments, that had already been published in 1932 and were part of the Hackin Collection, to the Afghan National Museum on September 5th, 2005. These fragments are now held by the Schoyen Collection on behalf of the Musuem [*sic*] for security and preservation reasons only: they are no longer part of the Schoyen Collection itself. As part of the goodwill gesture, the Collection has also agreed to present the Museum with a further 43 or 44 manuscripts from the same provenance which would bring the Museum's holdings back up to its pre-war level of around 50 fragments.⁵³

There is conflicting information regarding when the seven fragments were actually handed over to the museum. According to a statement by Afghanistan's foreign ministry, the transfer happened in October 2007.⁵⁴ As stated in the quote above, Schøyen had 43-44 additional fragments "from the same provenance". On the Schøyen Collection website (2019b), reference is made to the similarity between the Schøyen fragments and the Hackin manuscripts: "Similar fragments were in the Hackin collection in Kabul Museum, which was destroyed during the recent Afghan civil war". As noted by Sander, albeit not acknowledged on the website, Gudrun Melzer identified more Hackin fragments in the Schøyen Collection.⁵⁵ This raises a somewhat disturbing question: Could some of the additional fragments also have been among the manuscripts looted from the Kabul Museum in the nineties, and later audaciously presented as a gift from Schøyen to the museum?

It should be noted that the links and overlaps between the Schøyen and the Hackin collection are not restricted to the fragments apparently flagged by Sander in 1998 and the ones identified by Melzer. There are also noteworthy parallels between the provenance suggested

⁵⁰ Sander 2014, 182-183 provides pictures of seven of the looted Hackin fragments in the Schøyen Collection (see figure 4, 5, and 6).

⁵¹ Najimi 2011, 348.

⁵² NRK TV 2004; cf. also transcript of interview with Braarvig in Prescott, Rasmussen 2020, 78-80.

⁵³ The Schøyen Collection 2019a. Strikingly, this kind of formal but unrealised repatriation would allow the Schøyen Collection to act as the manager of this part of the Kabul Museum collection without transparency and audit.

⁵⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2008; Krieken-Pieters 2010, cf. also Prescott, Rasmussen 2020, 80.

⁵⁵ Sander 2014, 182-183. See also Sander 2014, 176, note 38: "The following originals were found in the Schøyen Collection: Lévi, no. 4 = no. 2373/3; Lévi, no. 9 could be reconstructed by Gudrun Melzer from the following fragments: nos. 2382/45/ 6+2382/45/2c+ 2382/45/4b+2382/45/4c+ 2382/45/4a+ 2382/ 45/5c".

for Schøyen’s “Bamiyan manuscripts” and the account given by Lévi of the fragments found by Hackin.⁵⁶ In fact, the provenance in the 2006 Schøyen Series volume seems to be framed with key elements from Lévi:

Levi 1932, 1	Braarvig 2006b, 1
<p>Le 31 juillet 1930, M. Hackin, alors chargé d’une mission en Afghanistan, expédiait de <u>Bamiyan</u> un rapport où il décrivait les travaux en cours. Il signalait en particulier <u>une grotte</u> située à <u>l’Est du Bouddha de 35 mètres</u>,</p> <p><u>recouverte par les éboulements de la falaise</u>, et qu’il avait réussi à dégager en partie; il l’avait trouvée obstruée par les débris d’une partie de la coupole qui s’était effondrée. Outre des restes importants de peintures et de sculptures, “cette partie contenait <u>une grande quantité de manuscrits</u> sur écorce, malheureusement soudés en masse compacte et extrêmement friables; l’écriture brahmi domine; quelques rares manuscrits sont en kharoṣṭhi. ...”</p>	<p>.... Mr. Kazuya Yamauchi of the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo, Japan, who visited the <u>Bamiyan</u> area in October 2003.</p> <p>Zargaran is a settlement some 1.2 km <u>east of the site of the smaller of the two giant Buddha</u> statues carved into the cliffs on the northern side of the <u>Bamiyan</u> Valley, which were demolished by the Taliban in 2001. There Mr. Yamauchi was told by villagers that about ten years previously <u>one of the caves</u> had <u>collapsed in an earthquake</u>,</p> <p>revealing <u>a large quantity of manuscript</u> fragments ...</p>

When scholars lack proper provenance information or other documentation on how their research data have been procured, they tend to turn to accounts that are already established and accepted within their research tradition.⁵⁷ Lévi’s and Hackin’s accounts represent fundamental narratives in the historiography of Buddhist heritage in Afghanistan.

Demand and Consumption of Manuscripts: Collectors, Scholars, and Buddhists

[During the nineteenth century] large public and private collections were assembled. The Queen’s Own Corps of Guides, for example, amassed a collection to decorate their mess at Mardan which was later presented to the British Museum. Collecting Gandharan [*sic*] art was reduced by the subsequent establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India, the Treasure Trove and various antiquities acts, but has recently reached a new crescendo. This has resulted in the looting of hundreds of sites in northern Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Ishan Ali and Robin Coningham 1998, 11

⁵⁶ Lévi 1932, 1-45. For a detailed comparison between a newsletter written by Braarvig in 2001 and Lévi, see Sheikh 2018, 77-79. Sheikh accuses Braarvig of plagiarizing Lévi.

⁵⁷ This phenomenon has also been recognised in connection to the marketing and branding of the so-called post-2002 “Dead Sea Scrolls”. In lack of archaeological provenance, they were by default backtracked to Qumran Cave 4 e.g., Justnes, Rasmussen 2017, 4-6.

There is a correlation between where there is an influential scholarly tradition of relevant manuscript studies and where there is a market demand for unprovenanced manuscripts and antiquities. To make material available to academic communities is a concern that is often stated in favor of scholarly use of unprovenanced material supplied by the antiquities market.⁵⁸ The case for the acquisition of Buddhist manuscripts by the Schøyen Collection rests on the premise that destruction of the manuscripts was the only other option. The inherent claim is that by “saving” and making the material available for scholars, the harm and destruction caused by its extraction is counterbalanced.

Although the lack of provenance and context information is occasionally pointed out by Buddhist manuscript scholars themselves,⁵⁹ this does not seem to prevent them from involvement in and facilitation of private collectors’ and institutions’ acquisition of undocumented material. In the general introduction to the first Schøyen series volume, Braarvig mentions Lore Sander’s consultancy work for London dealer Sam Fogg.⁶⁰ It is also clear from Braarvig’s piece that Richard Salomon already at an early stage had close ties to Fogg. It was Salomon who in 1996 brought the news to the “Buddhological milieu” that Fogg had sold a collection of Buddhist fragments to Schøyen. In other words, already from the start major scholars played key roles in assisting Fogg. It is also likely that Schøyen conferred with the research group assembled around Braarvig in December 1996 in connection with later purchases of Buddhist manuscripts.⁶¹

In her research on antiquities collectors and dealers in Norway, Josephine Munch Rasmussen found that while dealers may recognize and acknowledge detrimental sides of antiquities trafficking, collectors tend to employ moral arguments to support their collecting activities.⁶² Schøyen’s recurring expressions of concern also correspond to observations by MacKenzie and Yates:

The “saving” narrative casts the actions of the market-end actor not only as positive, but heroic. As habitats and sites are destroyed, usually (at least within this narrative) by forces unrelated to the market such as war or encroaching development, collectors save so-called “or-

⁵⁸ E.g., Yardeni 2018, 39-42; see also Owen 2005, 1816; Cuno 2009, 2010; Bailey 2002.

⁵⁹ E.g., Braarvig 2014, 163; Harrison, Hartman 2014, xxi; Salomon 2014.

⁶⁰ Braarvig 2000, xiii.

⁶¹ Braarvig 2000, xiii: “The Buddhist Manuscripts in The Schøyen Collection (BMSC) project was established on the basis of an informal meeting during the IAS conference on An Shigao convened by Paul Harrison in Leiden in December 1996. On that occasion, Richard Salomon, in charge of editing the Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts of the British Library also recently found in Afghanistan, brought the news that Sam Fogg, a manuscript dealer in London, had sold a collection of 108 Buddhist fragments to a Norwegian collector named Martin Schøyen A meeting was convened to discuss how the Buddhological *milieu* should approach this collector in order to find a way whereby this intriguing material could be made available to the scholarly world. Participants in this meeting were Richard Salomon, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Kazunobu Matsuda and myself. It was then decided that I should try to get in touch with Martin Schøyen”. See also Braarvig 2014, 161: “At the beginning of 1997 contact was made with Martin Schøyen, who generously made the material available to the group. In that same year, during which a large quantity of new fragments were also acquired by Mr. Schøyen, the process of sorting the fragments according to script-type and giving them a reference number was largely completed”.

⁶² Rasmussen 2014.

phaned” antiquities and orchids: they care for them, conserve them and protect them for the good of all humanity.⁶³

Controversies and considerations regarding “safe deposits” and evacuation of objects from and within Afghanistan in the mid-1990s to early 2000s have been laid out by cultural property lawyer and former Secretary of the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage, Juliette van Krieken-Pieters, using the Schøyen case as an example of the potential risks and problems associated with the “safe-haven” concept:

The Norwegian collector, Schoyen, justified his illicit collecting of Afghan Buddhist manuscripts from Bamiyan Valley in the 1990s as a case of “rescuing” endangered heritage. The difference between this and the safe haven concept is that Schoyen’s motivations clearly extended beyond preservation, as demonstrated by his attempt to sell his entire collection after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, at an astronomical profit.⁶⁴

The flow of antiquities and manuscripts from archaeological sites to private buyers and institutions is part of a world trade that rests on colonial legacies. Importantly, as shown by Denis Byrne (2016), there are also significant internal markets in the elite and middle classes in for example Southeast Asia that are seldom acknowledged in current cultural heritage research. With shifting global economic powers, there is a pull in the antiquities market towards – and within – Asia, as observed by Yates, Mackenzie, and Smith (2017). They suggest that the flow of antiquities is not necessarily a movement from poor *countries* to rich ones, but from poor *communities* to rich ones.⁶⁵ While they explain this as an expression of the aspirations of cultural capitalists/collectors, Byrne finds that in the countries he is studying (the Philippines and Thailand) antiquities collecting is mixed up in national agendas. It appears that Buddhist material associated with Gandhara cultures is in demand not only among Western collections, but also in Asian antiquities markets.⁶⁶ In 2010, an exhibition of Buddhist manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection was co-produced with the Thai National Buddhist Affairs and the Supreme Sangha Council.⁶⁷ In 2015 to 2016, manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection were exhibited in a tour through Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia.⁶⁸

Some of the academic handling and publications of the material seem to reflect an attitude that the looting, trafficking, collecting, and publication are “neutralized” by a connection to contemporary Buddhist claims to the material and the “teachings” of Buddhism. Notably, a

⁶³ Mackenzie, Yates 2016, 340-357.

⁶⁴ Krieken-Pieters 2010, 85-96. For more on the campaign to sell the entire Schøyen collection to the Norwegian state in 2002, see Prescott, Rasmussen 2020.

⁶⁵ Yates, Mackenzie, Smith 2017, 246.

⁶⁶ For an account of privately held Japanese collections similar in material, acquisition and provenance to that of the Schøyen Collection, cf. Matsuda 2014.

⁶⁷ Braarvig, Liland 2010.

⁶⁸ Overseas Thai Missionary Office 2016.

letter of support from the Dalai Lama was included in the preface of Salomon's first publication of the Kharosthi manuscripts in 1999 acquired by the British Library five years earlier.⁶⁹

Schøyen on his part tends to align his collection with purposes of preservation, peace, and tolerance within a pseudo-Buddhistic framework contrasted to the historical, current, and future presence of Islam in Afghanistan:

Should these MSS ... be returned to Afghanistan after they have been published – or at least as soon as peace, order, religious tolerance, and safe conditions can be reliably established in that country? ... there are historical facts bear [*sic*] on the question of whether the manuscripts should be returned to present-day Afghanistan.

The manuscripts were produced at the time of the Kushan Indo-Scythian Empire, later conquered by the Huns. Modern Afghanistan did not exist. The area has since changed religion from Buddhism to Islam, and its languages from Sanskrit and Gandhari to Arabic, Dari and Pashtu. Most of the cultural descendants of the original Buddhists now live outside Afghanistan. More than half of the manuscripts were actually written in what is now Pakistan and India.

More tragically, the Buddhist monasteries and their manuscripts were mostly destroyed in the 8th century by Muslim invaders. The remaining sites were, to a greater extent, destroyed by the Taliban very recently, including, most infamously, the two giant statues of the Buddha that were blown up in 2001. ...

Despite the statements of current interested parties, there is still no evidence that full stability is likely or achievable in Afghanistan in the next few years. Instability is also a concern in some of the bordering countries. For these reasons and in full awareness of its global heritage duties, the Schøyen Collection cannot consider Afghanistan a safe home for these manuscripts in the future. This policy position has been taken with full respect for the current Government of Afghanistan which is working hard to achieve peace and stability under very difficult circumstances.⁷⁰

The recurring association between Buddhism and peace, on the one hand, and conversely of Islam with violence and destruction, on the other, corresponds with persistent, global myths about religious violence.⁷¹ When looted antiquities end up in powerful communities away from their place of origin, they are often linked with a perceived right and duty to remove such cultural heritage from areas of predominantly Muslim populations.⁷² Although cultural heritage is protected under law in most countries, there is a peculiar lack of acknowledgement of this fact in accounts of the threats facing cultural heritage in Muslim countries.

⁶⁹ Cf. Dalai Lama 1999: "All Buddhist traditions have been at pains to ensure the authenticity of the teachings they propound. ... They will provide fascinating insights into how the teachings of the Buddha were studied, preserved and understood nearly 2,000 years ago. And as such, I believe that they will reinforce and clarify rather than challenge our modern understanding of the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism. In terms of historical inquiry, these texts also document the importance of Gandhara as a centre of Buddhist literature and scholarly thought. They confirm Gandhara's key role in the transmission of Buddhism from India, the land of its origin, to central Asia and beyond".

⁷⁰ The Schøyen Collection 2019a.

⁷¹ Jerryson 2015.

⁷² Cf. Pollock, Bernbeck 2009.

There are two points that should be emphasized here: The first is that Schøyen's and the associated scholars' rhetoric surrounding the Buddhist manuscripts is recognisable within Western colonial legacies of scholarly practices and collection acquisition. A second point, however, is that other claims to the manuscripts, such as from contemporary Buddhist stakeholders, may also sustain, and be sustained by, the trade in unprovenanced manuscripts.

Implications for Research

Manuscripts and collections residing in the Kabul Museum have a prominent place in the development of historiography and creation of historical identity in Afghanistan.⁷³ While Gilgit and Kashmir in Pakistan and Bamiyan in Afghanistan may be the places of origin for many of the manuscripts discussed above, the appropriation and publication of this recently surfaced material takes place elsewhere, in entirely different and remote communities. In the context of private collections, the interdependence of scholars and collectors means that Buddhist manuscripts are effectively forced into a narrow interpretational frame. While, as stated by Muhammad Zahir,⁷⁴ “new archaeological excavations in the different regions are changing our perspectives of Buddhism in Pakistan and are now defying the age-old colonial narratives of Buddhism”, scholarly research based on looted material in private collections has a tendency to do the opposite. It collapses complex, unprovenanced materials into a narrow interpretational frame that fits the desires of its consumers. The loss of contextual sources of knowledge (as a consequence of looting) limits the possibility of appropriate scholarly interpretations.

Conclusion

What effects can be traced from this close interdependence of scholarly publication and private manuscript markets? In this article, we have shown how provenances are created on “scanty and partly confirmed” grounds, and how particular narratives surrounding the manuscripts are recycled and reinvented. Most striking is perhaps the speculative use of comparative material and the idea of a library, or multiple libraries, that serves to gather, so to speak, manuscripts with different origins and different provenances, and lets the scholars create ancient collections – often practically identical with modern ones belonging to wealthy collectors. In the case under scrutiny in this article, reworked stories about manuscript discoveries and prominent labels like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran library sometimes even become interpretational keys. The term “Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism” misrepresents the material, and it is surprising that it has met so little resistance. The use of this sensational label supports the laundering of the unprovenanced and looted manuscripts and fragments from Afghanistan and Pakistan that ended up on the market in the nineties. It not only communi-

⁷³ See, e.g., Green 2017.

⁷⁴ Zahir 2017, 89.

cated that the artefacts were the oldest and most significant Buddhist manuscripts in the world but established that they were to be regarded as scriptural relics.

The more fundamental motifs at play – the colonialist romanticizing – are not disseminated in a vacuum. They often have a direct and predictable effect as well: the everlasting threat represented by *others* (Muslim populations, the Taliban, the ignorant locals) conveys and underlines stereotypes that also serve to justify the access and ownership interests of scholars and private collectors. The tropes, labels, and constructed provenances serve to legitimate acquisition of looted manuscripts. The result is research output that primarily serves to accommodate the interest of powerful stakeholders in the trade.

Josephine Munch Rasmussen
Department of Religion, Philosophy and History
University of Agder
josephine.m.rasmussen@uia.no

Årstein Justnes
Department of Religion, Philosophy and History
University of Agder
arstein.justnes@uia.no

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