

Association Internationale de Papyrologues (AIP)

American Society of Papyrologists (ASP)

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## **Joint statement on the papyrus trade**

### **Preamble**

The study of papyri and related artefacts has greatly contributed to our understanding of the Ancient World, especially in the Mediterranean zone, broadly construed.<sup>1</sup> New texts have been made available to the scholarly community over a period of more than two and a half centuries, during which the locations in which papyri are preserved have undergone deep political, social, and cultural changes. As a result, papyrologists are confronted with conflicting desires and obligations: On the one hand, there is the legitimate desire to increase knowledge through the publication of additional texts; on the other, there are the legal and moral obligations to respect papyrological materials and the laws and customs of those claiming possession of them. Papyri, furthermore, are part of the archaeological record and their historical value is diminished significantly when they have been stripped of their original contexts in the course of illicit and undocumented excavations.

It is thus in the interest of all papyrologists to agree on some basic rules of conduct regarding the use of papyrological material. Scholars do not work in isolation: They may interact with local authorities, library staff, and institutions of higher education in addition to colleagues. This declaration aims to provide all those involved in the study of papyri with some general guidelines for navigating the papyrus trade and associated phenomena.

### **Historical perspective**

Since Egypt is by far the principal place of origin for papyri, it offers the best starting point for an historical overview. Over the past century and a half, attitudes towards the purchase of papyri have evolved considerably, both on the side of the local authorities and on that of scholars and dealers – mostly European and North American – who have sought access to new material.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, papyri were discovered by the thousands, sometimes through licit (although poorly documented) excavation but often clandestinely. Illegally acquired materials surfaced on the antiquities market, and the administrative and political structures of the colonial era made it possible to export them (usually legally) to libraries and museums in Europe and North America.

In conjunction with the gradual processes by which Egypt reclaimed its independence during the first half of the twentieth century, more stringent rules came into force to prevent papyri from leaving the country. These did not, however, stop the papyrus trade altogether; rather, an

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<sup>1</sup> In this statement, the word “papyrus” will be used for the sake of concision. The reader should understand that it encompasses other portable media that were used for writing in Antiquity: ostraka, wooden tablets (waxed or inked), sheets of lead and other metals, bones etc.

open market was transformed into a black one. Existing Egyptian prohibitions on the export of antiquities were reinforced by the general consensus reached through an international treaty, the 1970 UNESCO “[Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transport of Ownership of Cultural Property](#)”; it took several decades for some countries to ratify this convention; Egypt revisited the issue in [Law 117 of 1983](#). Over time, many bodies involved in the study of ancient artefacts also promulgated rules of conduct: For example, archaeologists issued a joint declaration as early as 1987; and in 2019 the Society for Classical Studies (USA) approved a “[Statement on Professional Ethics](#)” that includes a section on the use of unprovenanced artefacts.<sup>2</sup>

These regulatory developments have contributed to a slowing of the illicit export of papyri from Egypt, but they have not entirely put an end to smuggling. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, many libraries and universities acquired papyri recovered from mummy cartonnage, and to this day, private collectors and institutions continue to purchase papyri without disclosing the details of their acquisition. Moreover, recent political instability in Egypt and the facilitation of commerce afforded by the internet have eroded progress in stemming illegal trade. In the past, the individuals responsible for acquiring papyri may have been ignorant of the relevant statutes, or perhaps they turned a blind eye to them. Neither response, however, is acceptable in the present era.

In publishing papyri, scholars have made a remarkable contribution to our knowledge of the Ancient World. At times they have also, wittingly or by ignorance, contributed to laundering material of uncertain provenance. In the past, the level of awareness of such an issue was quite low, and it can be said that most scholars have performed their duties as editors of papyri in good faith. Attitudes have changed, and what may have seemed acceptable a few decades ago now appears highly problematic; in addition, scholars are increasingly conscious of the deleterious legacies of colonial rule. In short, shifts in perception regarding these admittedly complex issues justify the need for a set of recommendations.

## **Recommendations**

These recommendations are intended primarily for members of the Association Internationale de Papyrologues and the American Society of Papyrologists, but they should also be considered by all those working with papyrological materials, including library staff and museum curators.

There exists no clear temporal boundary to demarcate licit and illicit holdings of papyri. Countries do not have identical antiquities regulations, and the regulations that are currently in force were not established simultaneously; moreover, ratification of international conventions did not follow at a uniform pace. Beyond this legal dimension, moral sentiment concerning the papyrus trade varies widely and has evolved diversely in different locales. Accordingly the 1970 UNESCO convention seems the most suitable terminus in view of its status as an international treaty. Thus, a papyrus acquired after 1970 that lacks certain documentation of its legal export should hereafter be regarded as illicit, and such materials should not be bought or sold by institutions or individuals.

It must be noted, however, that this boundary does not ensure legality; there are well-documented cases of papyri that were illegally exported before this date, and potential buyers are advised to perform due diligence and research provenance carefully in all cases. It is recognized, moreover, that many collections already contain materials that are illicit under these

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<sup>2</sup> References to other resources on the topic: <https://www2.ulb.ac.be/assoc/aip/webresources.htm>.

definitions. A pragmatic approach towards these objects, one acknowledging their value to science and as illustrations of the historical processes of the antiquities market, is proposed. Thus:

1. **Members of the AIP and ASP** should refrain from taking part in the trade of papyri that are considered illicit. In particular, they should abstain from purchasing such items or acting as intermediaries towards a purchase. If asked to provide expert advice on the contents of such papyri, they should be alert to the legal or moral consequences of their collaboration.
2. **Authors** should in principle avoid the publication of illicit papyri, but it is recognized that such materials are already present in many collections, and that new objects deemed to have extraordinary scientific importance may emerge. In these exceptional cases, authors must document the circumstances of acquisition thoroughly and completely; the identity of the persons involved should be disclosed. Authors should not accept non-disclosure agreements imposed by the keepers or curators of papyri when such agreements prevent proper documentation of the circumstances of acquisition.
3. **Editors** of papyrological journals and monograph series should refuse to publish the texts of papyri lacking this information and more generally should encourage the documentation of provenance as essential for any edition. Questions about a manuscript's authenticity should not be addressed without due regard to its provenance.
4. **Institutions** should refrain from purchasing undocumented papyri. Those that hold papyri (and mummy cartonnage) should carefully document any manipulation (e.g., restorations) that they undergo. They should provide the public with complete access to data regarding acquisitions; likewise, to information regarding modifications to objects and to their facsimiles (e.g., digital images). Papyri should remain accessible in open collections. Institutions that support scholars in the publication of papyri should also contribute to disseminating knowledge and enhancing awareness of the legal and ethical issues regarding the acquisition of papyri, in particular within the context of training the next generation of papyrologists. Special attention should be paid to artefacts that were recovered from a funerary context; institutions should not acquire mummy cartonnage solely for the sake of dismantling it for papyri.