

The value of forgeries for historical research

Christa Wirth and Josephine M. Rasmussen

Abstract

All objects provide us with insights into the historical contexts in which they appear. In this chapter, we argue that dichotomizing between the forgery on the one hand and the authentic on the other is troublesome. Putting more knowledge value on the ‘authentic’ than on the ‘fake’ means ignoring the fact that fakes are historical artefacts in their own right (Salman 2009: 263). If we jettison forgeries from the study of history, we are missing an opportunity to study the historical processes of creating the past. Therefore, we explore new analytical categories for objects/manuscripts. Instead of bifurcating the objects into forged and authentic, we cut across the material in a different way: inspired by Clifford Geertz, we distinguish between ‘thick data’ and ‘thin data’. The distinction between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ can be determined by a simple question: Is there rich data for the research question we want to ask? If so, it can be considered thick data and thus valid for research. Forgeries provide us with thick data in many respects, though not for the ancient past. We suggest that *both* forged and authentic ancient objects generally have more historical relevance for modernity than they have for antiquity. This is because many of these objects possess thick data in relation to modernity but only thin data in the case of the ancient past. Looking at our own fields of history and archaeology, we theorise on the validity of knowledge obtainable from ancient and forged objects. Our hope is that this chapter will be read as an explorative intervention into the field of manuscript studies.

Keywords: authenticity, forgery, methodology, thin data, thick data, collectors, imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, masculinities, manuscript studies

A scandalous mess

In recent years, the exposure of widespread forgery, looting, and theft of ancient manuscripts¹ has shaken academic communities and institutions and highlighted problematic research practices (Bonnie *et al.* 2020; Brodie 2020; Davis 2017; Justnes and Rasmussen 2017; 2019; 2020; Mazza 2015; 2019; Mizzi and Magness 2019). It has long been acknowledged that the demand of collectors and academics for archaeological manuscripts creates incentives for forgery and theft (Brodie 2009; 2011; 2016; Brodie and Kersel 2012; Rollston 2014; 2017). When scholars overlook problematic provenances, their scholarship enables misuse of ancient remains for political purposes. In 2000, archaeologist Colin Renfrew referred to the destruction of ancient sources through looting and antiquities trade as an ‘ethical crisis’ in archaeology (see also Gill and Chippindale 1993). Årstein Justnes (in this volume) describes forgeries as disclosing, to some extent, a crisis in his subfield of manuscript scholarship, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Qumran studies. While the social harm connected to the looting of archaeological sites has been a widely addressed topic in studies of antiquities trafficking, it is rather the fear of the implications of forgeries in the datasets that tends to stir most concern among Dead Sea Scrolls scholars (Justnes and Rasmussen 2020). Beyond the focus on identifying forgeries through scientific testing of authenticity (*e.g.* Loll 2019), there seems to be a growing interest within the fields of manuscript studies to engage critically with topics of provenance, and among the reasons given for this interest is the exposure of forgeries (*e.g.* Johnson 2017). Phrasings such as ‘contamination of our scholarly data’ (Tigchelaar 2017: 178) and descriptions of forgeries that have ‘polluted our dataset’ (Justnes and Elgvin 2018) indicate a belief that once forgeries have been weeded out, ancient manuscripts as sources have a quality of purity. Perhaps it also reflects a sense of epistemic loss among scholars who see their sources falling away. Assaf Nativ and Gavin Lucas (2020: 853) recently asked ‘Archaeology is about antiquity – but does it have to be?’ In light of the above-described situation in some fields of manuscript studies, the following question is perhaps helpful to find a way forward: What is an appropriate mode of knowledge production based on the messy mix of forgeries and ancient materials?

Forgeries are problematic, but ancient remains are messy too

The production of manuscript forgeries often seems to be motivated by a manipulative appropriation of the past in service of contemporary agendas, such as with the Leviticus ‘anti-gay’ fragment (Justnes 2017: 71; Moss and Baden 2019: 35); the ‘James Ossuary’ (Brodie and Kersel 2012; Burleigh 2008); the ‘Gospel of Jesus’s Wife’ (Sabar 2020) or the ‘Hazon Gabriel’, a so-called Dead Sea Scroll in stone (Justnes and Rasmussen 2020), to name only a few. By and large, the remedies that are often suggested by manuscript scholars themselves revolve around compensating for deficient provenance by, for example, separating or flagging objects of unclear provenance in research and publications (*e.g.* Rollston 2017, see also Tigchelaar 2017), or by only considering objects from securely documented contexts and provenances (Bonnie *et al.* 2020; Mizzi and Magness 2019; Nongbri 2021; see also Nongbri 2022). We take this as an indication that some subfields of manuscript studies

1 Here broadly defined as any ancient-appearing material containing writing. In this chapter, we consider manuscripts as artifacts and subsume them under the umbrella term ‘objects’.

are attempting to move beyond the idea that ancient texts speak for themselves.² Common to these more novel approaches is that they all aim to ensure the continued access and opportunity to engage with the (presumed) ancient circumstances of objects. In that sense, they are all pragmatic solutions to a situation where forged or looted objects constitute a problem to be circumvented to return to what was being done before: the study of the ancient past. As argued by Dennis Mizzi and Jodi Magness (2019: 139), sources grounded in an archaeological stratigraphy enrich and add data to the ancient context of the material, and additionally serve the purpose of ensuring authenticity. Manuscript scholars are thus encouraged to seek archaeological provenance to avoid being duped by forgeries. It is this turn towards archaeological provenance we will engage with in the following.

The problem we are foreshadowing is that the formulaic dichotomy often employed to differentiate between the forged and the authentic perhaps lends an epistemic reliability to the authentically archaeological that is both simplistic and problematic. Joan Gero, feminist pioneer of archaeology and anthropology noted that ‘Reading my colleagues’ work, I am often troubled by their clear assertions of knowledge gained from their research undertakings while at the same time I am puzzled that there is so little discussion about the uncertainty that accompanies archaeological research at every step’ (Gero 2007: 312). Manuscript scholars who turn to archaeology in an attempt to secure an empirical bedrock should perhaps be warned. As Alison Wylie (2017: 203) has pointed out, ‘Archaeological data are shadowy in a number of senses. They are notoriously incomplete and fragmentary, and the sedimented layers of “interpretive scaffolding” on which archaeologists rely to constitute these data as evidence carry the risk that they will recognize only those data that conform to expectation’. Taking cues from Wylie and Gero, the situation in manuscript studies and related fields offers an opportunity to seek out new ways of seeing shadowy and messy data.

Very concretely, Nativ and Lucas have argued for the value of archaeology without antiquity, as stated above. The discipline’s orientation towards the ancient past as its central concept is challenged by alternative modes of archaeology and heritage: ‘In principle, and on the empirical grounds upon which the field is established, there is no a priori reason for archaeology to limit its concerns to the past: the discipline does not have to be about antiquity’ (Nativ and Lucas 2020: 854). Heritage studies, and more particularly critical heritage studies, acknowledge heritage in this way as a process of continuous meaning-making (e.g. Smith 2006). We take inspiration from feminist research traditions in which research must consist of ‘a process of continuously building and rebuilding provisional empirical foundations’ (Wylie 2017: 204). In the following section, we suggest how one of these alternative ways of doing and thinking archaeology could look. Archaeology can inspire a critical approach to find spots and context, but instead of trying to recreate ancient meanings and contexts that are lost, we suggest treating *objects as material culture of the recent past and present*.

2 For discussions on the competing positions between archaeological and text-based research, see Rutz and Kersel (2014).

Thin and thick data and the relevance for modernity

Leaving the (ancient) past behind, a methodologically appropriate archaeology can rest perfectly well on modernity. To gain valid information about the modern past, scholars should rely as much on the recent history of authentic (ancient) objects as on the history of forged objects. Therefore, we employ new analytical categories. Instead of bifurcating the objects into forged and authentic, we cut across the material in a different analytical way: we distinguish between ‘thin data’ and ‘thick data’. The distinction between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ can be determined by a simple question: Is there a rich context for the research question we want to ask? If so, it can be considered thick data. Thin data on the other hand provides researchers with only punctiform information that is neither significant nor robust enough to make appropriate contributions to the research project. ‘Thin’ is *not* equivalent to ‘forgery’. And ‘thick’ is *not* equivalent to ‘authentic’. If there is a lot of information about an object available that answers a researcher’s question about that object, the data is thick. A forged manuscript concocted by a late-nineteenth-century scholar that comes with ample documentation surrounding its manufacture can provide thick data for research questions addressing how the forgery emerged. However, making far-reaching interpretations and claims about the ancient past based on an authentic yet unprovenanced object is an example of dabbling in thin data. We suggest that both forgeries and authentic ancient objects generally have more historical relevance for modernity than they have for antiquity. This is because these objects possess thick data in the case of modernity and thin data in the case of the ancient past. There is more contextual historical information about modernity to be found in the world.

We take inspiration from Clifford Geertz’s method of ‘thick description’ which allows one to makes sense of ‘a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he [the ethnographer] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render’ (Geertz 1973: 10). We extrapolate Geertz’s approach for capturing cultural and historically grown meaning (Green 2008: 56-57) to the case of objects and propose that scholars can access thick data from within the rich well of information that springs from the known history of the object. This enables scholars to make valuable interpretations of cultural and historical meaning. Any relevant study is dependent on the context of the object and the richness of information embedded in this context for the specific research question the scholar poses.

For example, a forgery with a rich and documented history of ownership is well suited to a study of—among other topics—collecting practices, taste-work, and price developments. In other words: it provides thick data for this line of questioning. An authentic object appearing on eBay without any verifiable information about its find-circumstances, provenance, or origin, is not well suited to investigate the ancient past because of the thin data surrounding the object in regard to archaeology. However, it is still of interest to a study of online trade in unprovenanced materials (thick data). Both a forged object and an authentic object presented on an auction site can be explored within a valid methodology for their framing, labelling and materiality. If we analyse such objects (both forged and authentic) as described above, and the rich data surrounding them, they become intriguing objects of study for modernity, yet less relevant for antiquity, and in the case of fakes, of course, completely irrelevant for antiquity. In his account of the history of manuscript

forgeries, Christopher Rollston (2014: 193) describes how forgeries become part of the historical record for the periods in which they were produced. Elizabeth Marlowe makes a related observation in the case of the so-called Fonseca bust, an unprovenanced marble portrait assumed to be from the second century CE: ‘The Fonseca bust is thus deeply enmeshed in the historiography of Roman art. Our heavy reliance upon it is, however, inversely proportional to how much we actually know about its ancient history – far less than we know about its eighteenth-century history’ (Marlowe 2013: 21). Acknowledging that the Fonseca bust says more about modern than about ancient history, Marlowe suggests that prehistorians should prioritise objects with a well-documented provenance (‘grounded’ objects, in Marlowe’s terminology). Similar problems are prevalent for all types of material of unclear provenance circulating in and beyond academic knowledge-making. For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls material is connected to a rich recent history of academic and religious engagement, publications, museum exhibitions, trade records, and ownership history (e.g. Gimse 2020; Kersel 2011; Kjeldsberg 2019). Academic research related to or coming out of manuscript studies and that has dealt critically with the introspection of academic practice or recent history of material of unclear provenance includes, for example, Michael Press’s (2022) study of the nineteenth-century forger Moses Shapira; Rollston’s (2005) seminal work in which he locates himself as a scholar vis-à-vis the market in ancient inscriptions; Matthew Rutz and Morag Kersel’s (2014) edited volume bridging archaeological and text-based research on ancient manuscripts; Roberta Mazza’s (2015; 2019) studies on research ethics and the modern biography of papyri; Rachel Yuen-Collingridge’s study in this volume of Constantine Simonides’ nineteenth-century forgeries as works of ‘realism’; Malcolm Choat’s (2019) examination of and detection of fake papyri; Nils Korsvoll’s study in this volume of textual authenticity vs. provenance in scholarship relating to Aramaic incantation bowls; and Justnes’ (e.g. 2019; and in this volume) studies of forgeries in Dead Sea Scrolls scholarship. Conversely, the traditional research on, for example, the Dead Sea Scrolls and its claims about the Biblical past is not only ‘contaminated’ and invalidated by the forgeries, but by the basic methodological shortcomings of materials that are so limited and fragmentary and therefore dubious that most claims appear overstretched. Altogether, as modern and contemporary commodities they possess thick data which allows research topics that are both richer and, we contend, more appropriate. Therefore, not only are authentic objects that surface again in modernity relevant objects of study, but also forgeries that appear in the same time period. But it is not only a matter of recognising the value of forgeries as historical records. It is also recognising that authentic objects with provenance documentation of variable quality are ultimately richer sources of historical knowledge for the time of their resurfacing than for the time of their ancient deposition.

Relevant questions and disciplines

The relevance of an object for historical inquiry has to do with historical developments outside as well as inside of academia: imperialism, nation-building, professionalisation of academia, decolonisation, the admittance (or lack thereof) of new perspectives and people in the academy such as women and other marginalised groups – these all affect what avenues of research and objects are seen as relevant and valid. Consequently, the questions that we propose for scholars in manuscript studies, archaeology, and history

and for which there is thick data are (and we will discuss this later in greater detail): In what institutional and disciplinary contexts (in history) do different subjects attribute meaning to objects or deem them irrelevant? What makes something a historically relevant source material? To be able to answer these questions, it is pivotal to develop an awareness of institutional and disciplinary historicity and how they tie into larger global historical contexts. Two moments that distinctly shape our research interest are, first, European imperialism, that starting in early modern times entailed the transatlantic slave trade and among other imperial phenomena, the looting and acquisition by Europeans of archaeological artefacts on the African, Asian, and American continents. Second, the emergence of modern academic disciplines which were closely tied to the gendered nation-state building that was entangled with European 'high imperialism' in the nineteenth century. Research in manuscript studies, history, and archaeology can all benefit from a self-awareness of the history of the disciplines and how it contributed to masculinist empire and nation-building in modernity.

Postcolonial studies and women's history/gender studies are examples of disciplines that are aware of their own historicity on the one hand and on the other have provided theoretical and empirical insight into how imperialism and masculinities shaped academic epistemologies. It took the interventions of scholars from the Global South to address the deep political commitment of European and North American academic disciplines to colonization. In terms of Western scholarship in the Middle East, Edward Said (1978: 11) noted: 'For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second'. This way, Said pointed out the political character of knowledge: 'My argument is that each humanistic investigation must formulate the nature of that connection in the specific context of the study, the subject matter, and its historical circumstances' (Said 1978: 15).

In this chapter, we centre contemporary scholars and scholars of the past as subjects in our analysis. It also means that we are employing our own disciplines – history and archaeology – in ways that we think are relevant to manuscript studies, both in the past and currently. Our biases and ambitions manifest in our normative statements about research and we acknowledge self-awareness of the fact that we are also bound to the practices and political and institutional contexts of the humanities.

Scholars working with an intersectional gender perspective have shown how gendered political and historical conditions form knowledge, relevance, professionalization, and expertise in their own discipline and others (*e.g.* Applegarth 2014). Women's history and then gender studies' scholars have been cognizant of their own disciplinary history and recognise that their disciplines in the United States grew out of the second women's movement (Opitz-Belakhal 2010: 11). Gender as a category of analysis and as an object of inquiry (Scott 1986) make legible just how scientific relevance, historical contexts, and masculinities were and continue to be intertwined (Milam and Nye 2015). And feminist scholars do not veil this historical fact of societal continuities and shifts being reflected in academic institutions, epistemologies, and practices in the name of a middle-class masculinist idea of detached 'objectivity' to the society it is studying. On the contrary,

the awareness of feminist and gender studies scholars that (historical) politics shape epistemologies adds self-reflexivity to an analysis.

As scholars in manuscript studies, archaeology, and history we might favourably take our cues from women's/gender studies when it comes to raising our consciousness of our own discipline's history and how this genealogy shapes the epistemologies we produce today. What has been relevant to collect and retain in antiquities collecting, trade, and scholarship has been due to the discretion of gentlemanly scholars and collectors. Consequently, collecting practices of the present are steeped in masculinities of modernity.

The historical sentiment of distinction through aura

In 1936 Walter Benjamin wrote that (2008: 22), authenticity lends an artwork – or one might suggest an ancient object – its 'aura'. Only a unique object has aura inscribed and the uniqueness stems from the historical context or 'tradition' from which it emerges. This is what conveys the object's authority and thus distinguishes it from products of 'technological reproduction' (Benjamin 2008: 21) seen in modern works such as film and photography which according to Benjamin lack aura. Interestingly, Benjamin distinguished between the effects of forgeries made by hand from those made by mechanical mass-reproduction: 'But whereas the authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand, which it generally brands as forgery, this is not the case with technological reproduction' (Benjamin 2008: 21). The hand-made forgery is unique and arguably mimics the authentic in a way that, in the case of ancient manuscripts, has retained its authority on the same level as authentic manuscripts. Benjamin put the uniqueness of the forged object in the same auratic category as the authentic. Reading Benjamin this way, what stands out is that the main analytical interest was less the question of authentic vs. forged but the question of the function of reproduction for different social classes: auratic objects distinguish themselves from mass reproduction in as much as the latter have the effect of distracting and entertaining the 'mass' of people (Benjamin 2008: 38-39). Conversely, the 'art lover' (Benjamin 2008: 39), located by Benjamin (2008: 15) within the bourgeois 'ruling class', brings an attitude of 'concentration' to the encounter with an art object. The bourgeois observer thus stands in front of the unique (whether forged or authentic) object completely absorbed. We suggest that the allure of auratic artworks as argued by Benjamin in 1936 remains a significant feature in the business of archaeological artifacts. We also find support for this point in empirical work by Justnes showing how in the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls there has been a remarkable willingness to accept the authority of poorly executed forgeries (Justnes 2017). In her study of communities of collectors of Middle Eastern antiquities, Kersel found that collectors generally did not fear being duped by forgeries. These communities, Kersel (2011: 528) states '...exhibited an amazing ability to suspend all disbelief in pursuit of the artifact'. The acceptance of shoddily-made forgeries can be explained, we argue, by the fact that the presence of auratic objects signifies a certain meaning such as class. Whether or not the auratic objects are forgeries is a question of secondary importance compared to their functioning as markers of class. Extrapolating from Benjamin, our observation is that collectors and scholars are (still) smitten to surround themselves with the aura of ancient objects, be they forged or authentic. As long as an object is treated as authentic, it has the power to distinguish its holder. Arguably then, forged or not, these objects manifest a distinction (*sensu* Bourdieu 1984) in relation

to the general population and thus are an essential identity marker of the bourgeoisie. But whereas Benjamin illuminated the auratic through the prism of class, one might add the analytical category of gender to analyze how the relationship to auratic objects was also an expression of masculinity. Auratic forgeries and auratic authentic objects may thus provide thick data for the scholar to analyze how the objects signified modern white, male, bourgeois identities.

In the history of antiquities collecting, the consumption of forgeries and authentic objects are intertwined (Rollston 2014). Forged and authentic ancient objects work, as we have argued above, to similar effect. Consequently, it is relevant to study both forged and authentic objects side by side. Collecting and studying in the late nineteenth century was a means to create scholarly white, bourgeois masculinities separate and apart from workers, women, and racialized others – an essential process in the professionalization of academic institutions who attained professional status by among other things the exclusion of what they assumed to be subalterns (e.g. Applegarth 2014; Milam and Nye 2015: 9). Thus, by surrounding themselves with auratic objects requiring concentration, the scholars/collectors consciously emphasized their separation from the ‘rest’. In addition, the bourgeois cultures of masculinity inscribed in institutions of higher learning reached into the global project of colonialism and high imperialism. The gentlemanly, racialized, and imperial conduct was then forced onto the colonial subjects (McClintock 1995; Pietsch 2013: 1, 6). As James Clifford has stated (1988: 220-221), collecting ‘*appropriated* [original italics] exotic things’ added another dimension to the making of Western scholars, institutions, and anthropology in a time when modern academic disciplines were formed. He suggested that the practice of collecting must be analyzed within the context of ‘powerful discriminations’ (Clifford 1988: 221). As observed by Kersel (2012: 260-261), theorization on collecting practices is often ultimately considered to be about control. Collecting and possessing antiquities thus conveys dominance, conquest, and ownership of the past and distant lands. Mieke Bal (1994: 106) has argued that possessing, collecting, and displaying valued objects is a form of fetishism, but one that is provided with an ethical and educational alibi. Not least, Benjamin recognized how the auratic piece (of art) becomes fetishized:

... less through the process of its creation than through the process of its transmission. If the work of art remains a fetish ... it attains a cultural position that lends it a sacrosanct inviolability. It also remains in the hands of a privileged few. The auratic work exerts claims to power that parallel and reinforce the larger claims to political power of the class for whom such objects are most meaningful: the ruling class. The theoretical defense of auratic art was and is central to the maintenance of their power (Benjamin 2008: 15).

In this sense, both collectors and scholars fetishize their objects and thereby fetishize and manifest their political power in society.

What to study: topics, historical contexts, institutions, and actors

The contexts of these fetishized, auratic materials provide thick data for answering questions about the intertwined worlds of the bourgeoisie that built its identity and institutions on the principle of exclusion. Historical asymmetries invoked by gender, class, nation-building, and colonialism³ illuminate how disciplines and institutions in which specific objects became relevant during modernity were configured. Relevant research within these asymmetries is to deconstruct topics such as scholars', dealers' and collectors' (power) fantasies, and meaning-making, valorisation, and fetishisation of their objects within institutions. Modernity should not only be in the interest of historians and archaeologists when studying ancient objects, forged or not, across different nation-building contexts. We believe that manuscript studies could fruitfully pivot towards modernity for the same purposes.

The historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger recognised and theorised about the fantasies and social constructions that come into force during turning points in history. They took their cues from the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to develop the concept termed 'invention of tradition'. These invented traditions are 'paraphernalia and ritualized practices ... which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past' (Hobsbawm 1983: 1, 3). Societies that undergo massive social change, develop a counter-movement of (invented) traditions to insinuate a continuity by projecting them into a long-ago or mythical past. In the case of Israel, for example, this is salient as various myths, sites, and material remains, both forged and genuine, have been employed for nationalist purposes. And the history of the modern discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is one of many examples of such employment. But more generally, the use of archaeology in the service of nation-building and heritage-making is inherent to nationalism. Modernity with its vast transformation triggered a need for constructed continuity to create a sense of stability (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). Nation-states most successfully created these historical projections all around the world. For example, Philippine nationalism depended on building a linear continuity from a pre-colonial past to develop an authentic self during decolonization (Nolasco 2019: 158; Salman 2009: 262-263; Wirth 2019; 2021). Similarly, Italy and Greece echoed a Roman and respectively a Greek antiquity to establish continuity during the making of their modern nations (*e.g.* Papadopoulos 2007). In the case of the Balfour Declaration during World War One, the proposed homeland for the Jews in Palestine rested on a narrative centring ancient Israelites in Palestine while rendering ancient non-Israelites peripheral (Corbett 2015, in Meskell 2020): '... archaeology supplied the imputed ideological and moral justification for national ambitions in the Holy Land' (Meskell 2020: 557). In Norway, the discovery of rich Viking-era ship burials coincided with the independence of the Norwegian state in 1905 and became formative to the building of a national identity resting on the idea of cultural continuity (Østigård 2001). Historians of archaeology have repeatedly and convincingly demonstrated how archaeology has been standing in the service of nation building (*e.g.* Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022; Kohl 1998).

3 This is not an exhaustive list of analytical categories. Others could be religion, race, and sexuality, for example.

To this day, ideas and expectations emanating from governments sometimes reinforce the nationalist trajectories that formed in the late nineteenth century. As researchers in Norway, a significant example for us is the recent call by the Norwegian Minister of Education for the humanities to contribute to ‘nation building’ (Lie 2021).

Hobsbawm (1983: 9) points to three types of invented traditions: ‘a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups’, ‘b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority’, and ‘c) those whose main purpose was socialization’. Along these lines, we claim that the fantasies about an ancient past that scholars, collectors, and other actors attach to ancient objects are not only invented traditions, but also richly contextualized phenomena that provide thick data about modernity. We therefore ask: What historical, political, and social conditions in modernity enable these fantasies?

As argued by historian Maya Jasanoff (2004: 112), collections and collectors played a complex role in shaping the image of empire as well as of the nation. The late-nineteenth-century professionalization and national institutionalization of academic disciplines that would participate in the governance and control of colonized subjects during high imperialism (Díaz-Andreu 2007: 210) provides a relevant benchmark of modernity. ‘Like other human sciences such as geography, anthropology, and history, archaeology became a tool of imperialism’ (Díaz-Andreu 2007: 210). The knowledge that emerged in these wider contexts contributed to and was the result of the imperial projects (Díaz-Andreu 2007: 210). Therefore, ‘ancient’ objects – forged or not – that gained traction in the public and academic imaginary within nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity must be read against the backdrops of nation- and empire-building.

The following study of the cousins and romantic couple, Fritz and Paul Sarasin, shows how the historical contexts of bourgeois masculinities, colonialism, science, and nation-building provide thick data in a manner that is useful for studies beyond those of ancient or forged remains. The Sarasins, from the Swiss city of Basel, travelled to Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) and Celebes (present-day Sulawesi) in the Dutch East Indies, as gentlemanly scholars. The ethnographic and natural historical materials that they collected on the island of Celebes are stored in the Museum der Kulturen and the Naturhistorisches Museum in Basel. The Sarasins hailed from the Basel ruling class, which is why they were not constrained financially on their scientific adventures. Around 1900, this class was also substantially overrepresented in the Basel Naturforschenden Gesellschaft (Society of Natural Science). Not only financial means or education decided participation in the Naturforschenden Gesellschaft, but also religion/confession: although approximately one third of all Basel inhabitants were Catholic, they were absent as members, as were Jewish inhabitants. The society remained a Protestant-only club for men (Schär 2015: 36, 83, 96-97). Consequently, as Bernhard C. Schär states, ‘... this little group of Protestant, educated and/or wealthy men determined what direction the natural science would take based on the questions they asked, the data they collected, the methods they applied and the interpretations they developed’ (Schär 2015: 84; translated by Wirth). And thus, this socio-economic-cultural milieu shaped the formation of scientific collections. In the late nineteenth century, major parts of Basel’s natural scientific collections travelled along the routes of Basel’s upper crust, including missionaries, businesspeople, and diplomats who were entangled with European colonial networks – even though Switzerland itself

never owned any colonies. Like many other Swiss participants in colonization, Paul and Fritz Sarasin depended on and aided the Dutch empire in its colonizing efforts in Southeast Asia (Schär 2015: 8). Hence, historical objects that appear in collections have been deemed relevant by specific privileged groups that contributed to and profited from colonialism. How this happened and who these groups were should be our interest when studying collections.

Returning to our couple from Basel – these two natural scientists projected their tropical fantasies and results from their studies in Celebes onto a long-ago Swiss prehistory. They did this by comparing and aligning the behavior and objects of their studied contemporary humans in Celebes with the behavior and objects of a prehistoric ‘Swiss’ population. They then traced a timeline down to the present of the modern Swiss nation which supposedly stood at a higher level of development vis-à-vis the prehistoric Swiss and contemporary people of Celebes. With this invented tradition the Sarasins contribution to nineteenth-century Swiss history and nation-building that was interlocked with racialised colonial science. Again, the meanings that scholars attributed to the objects they studied were tied up with a European, masculinist, nation-building that ran parallel and was intertwined with Europe’s colonising projects. Not least, the case of the Sarasins demonstrates how a modern discipline – here *Volkskunde* (European ethnology/folklore) – can trace its roots to colonialism (Schär 2015: 312-319, 331).

Collections of private individuals have been foundational for what are now public museums, university collections, botanical gardens, and zoos. In archives as well as museums, the acquisition of an object attributes historical validity to it. Thus, the archive as an institution attributes meaning to an object just by retaining it (on reflections of the use of primary sources in colonial archives, see Stoler 2009). Museums have further explicit and implicit mechanisms for ascribing value to objects. Firstly, objects that make it out of the collections and which curators showcase manifest meaning to things. The practices of colonial collectors – whether Biblical, archaeological, ethnographic or otherwise – have been formative to current collecting practices. This is particularly salient in the ongoing engagement of collectors, dealers, and scholars⁴ with ancient objects and manuscripts. Unlike some academic fields, which have for decades undergone intense debates on repatriation and deaccessioning, the amassing and appropriating of collections in the fields of ancient manuscript studies are ongoing. The formation of collections such as that of the Museum of the Bible or the Schøyen Collection strikingly features the motivations and tropes associated with traditional colonial or imperialistic collecting, such as saviour narratives and religious-political ambitions (e.g. Rasmussen and Justnes 2021). In the case of the Schøyen Collection, national ambitions were at the heart of the public discourse surrounding it in 2000 when Schøyen and other supporters of the collection campaigned for the Norwegian state to buy and display it. Bendik Rugaas, who was Norway’s National Librarian at the time, advocated for the collection’s potential to ‘put Norway on the global map, culturally speaking’ (quoted in Prescott and Rasmussen 2020: 71).

In the art and antiquities trade, scholars routinely contribute their knowledge for validating the significance, authenticity, price estimate, and meaning of objects (e.g. Brodie 2009; 2011; 2020; Justnes and Rasmussen 2017; 2020; 2021). Some antiquities

4 Under the category scholar we subsume researchers, archivists, curators, librarians, and other experts.

are perceived as aesthetically pleasing, easily displayable, and not necessarily in need of an explanation. For others, such as objects with any form of writing or pictography that are otherwise unspectacular, the need of the expert interpreter is more immediate. Marlowe has recognised the similarities between the Kantian approach to beauty in art history, and that of a prehistorian's defence of the intrinsic value of objects regardless of their context: 'the more arresting the object, the less its context matters' (Marlowe 2013: 7-8). The sentiment of intrinsic value echoes Benjamin's concept of a class-based aura (Benjamin 2008: 15, 24). In textual scholarship, a similar sentiment is tied to a valuation of content over context. With some exceptions, the authority of the expert interpreter is often tied to their affiliation with academic institutions.

The institutions in which scholars receive(d) their training are historically often themselves owners of collections and archives. Scholars who publish from within these institutions are then in turn used and referenced in the context of auctioning, brokering, and marketing similar material. Above, we lightly touched upon the specificity of ancient manuscript collections compared to other forms of colonial collecting practices: why is it, for example, that while many ethnographic museums are deaccessioning and attempting (with various degrees of success) to repatriate and 'decolonise' their collections, the fields of ancient manuscript studies are still amassing and appropriating material for the purpose of building collections? A partial answer may be found in contextual and historical study of the antiquities markets: the interconnection of collectors-dealers-scholars on an individual level and of collections-market-academy on an institutional level functions as a traditional and continued cross-validation of importance.

In parallel, a cross-validation of aesthetics is established. Collectors, dealers and scholars can agree and therefore create a demand from an aesthetic that conveys authenticity, whether the object is authentic, or fully or partially forged. An object that is not constrained by its contextual data and documented provenance tends to be treated as a conveniently empty canvas onto which the desires of the holder are projected (*e.g.* Rasmussen and Justnes 2021).⁵ Even more recent forgeries are modelled and mimicked in line with the aesthetics of the academic disciplines and markets as they formed in the nineteenth century. The history of the disciplines of history and archaeology casts long shadows within which we are trying to study objects that emerged within a context of modernity. The forgeries that emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were created according to the rationality and aesthetics of academic disciplines established in the nineteenth century in order to convey authenticity in the eyes of the twenty-first-century spectator. In a tautological circle, the twenty-first-century researchers then authenticate a scholarly rationale that justifies their own discipline which is nothing but a mirrored self.

5 See also Staffan Lundén's (2016: 469) study on the Benin bronzes in the British Museum as hybrid Edo-British objects. Lundén argues that these objects are as much revealing the desires of the British enquirer as they provide information about Edo culture.

Unprovenanced objects as material culture of the present and recent past

We have argued that ancient and forged objects are instrumental to the development of not only imperialism, colonialism, masculinities, and nation-building, but that these projects are formative to the development of the academic traditions and collecting practices that appropriated ancient and forged objects and ascribed meaning to them. As such, both ancient and forged objects are material culture of the recent past. A basic and definitional methodological sentiment in archaeology and history is that objects must be studied *in their context*. To assess what meanings, values, and usage the objects held for the people who invented, formed or at various stages engaged with them, it is necessary to address some fundamental questions: What is the circumstance in which the object appears? What is the context? Here, we have suggested that forged and ancient objects make meaningful appearances in the recent past and the present. For example, instead of the Essenes of early Christianity, the Dead Sea Scrolls may be more appropriately employed to study the actors involved in the making and maintenance of the fields of Dead Sea Scrolls studies and Biblical studies.

The context and documented find circumstances for many of these objects are not in the ground of an archaeological excavation site, but in institutions, archives, and marketplaces. The people who engaged with them, shaped them, interpreted and attributed meaning to them, are the actors inhabiting these find circumstances: collectors, dealers, and scholars. This suggested approach of analyzing the thick data of modernity calls for other actors and sites to be studied than has previously been the tradition in ancient manuscript studies.

The challenges of the shift

Introducing a methodological shift or even suggesting a move away from thin data towards thick data is not without its perils. The scholars operating from within institutions who thus far have not handled ancient objects critically enough are confronted with several institutional constraints. Hobsbawm's typology that we referred to above appears particularly applicable to the case of academic disciplines which consolidated themselves within modern university institutions in the late nineteenth century, in the case of Europe. If we study an object when it has (re)surfaced during modernity, we should thus scrutinise how such objects functioned and function as 'paraphernalia' and become embedded in the 'ritualised practices' that establish academic group membership and manifest hierarchical academic institutions, with the goal of 'socialising' the next generation into the scholarly class of academics or in Hobsbawm's words: 'imparting the practice to new practitioners' (Hobsbawm 1983: 3). The initiation into these repetitive rituals and attachments to established objects function as a safe career investment for both young and established scholars. Successful objects, in as much as they can pass as authentic, will be created and interpreted within the logic of an invented tradition, thereby failing to challenge the discipline but guaranteeing instead its stability as a discipline on its most fundamental level. The intergenerational transmissions of knowledge and objects should thus be added to the above non-comprehensive list of topics to be studied. Notably, the antique collections of research institutions that form the educational basis or research focus of generations of scholars, are formative for academic practice. As Wylie (2017: 207) says about archaeological scholarship, the 'entrenched