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The Antiquities Trade: Research, Action, Impact



Scott Carroll, director of the Green Collection, and the Green Newest Sappho fragments – Atlanta, 7 January 2012

The illicit trade in in Graeco-Roman Papyri from Egypt: what should be done next?

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In 2009, a wealthy family of American evangelical Christians decided to start collecting Biblical manuscripts and memorabilia to be displayed in a future public museum of the Bible. The family – the Greens of Oklahoma City, owners of the arts and crafts store chain Hobby Lobby – had extraordinary economic means and a precise cultural agenda. The enterprise attracted a strange crowd of dealers, auction house curators, academics and pseudo-academics which created the conditions for a perfect storm in the languishing sector of Biblical manuscript collecting and in academia, too.

This paper discusses the story of the ca. 5,000 Green papyri, including the Newest Sappho fragments, which were supposed to be displayed in the Museum of the Bible opened in Washington DC in 2017, but were instead repatriated to Egypt in 2020. This repatriation, one of the many enacted by the Green family and their museum, was the result of sustained public pressure and law enforcement investigations. The Museum of the Bible/Green collection case – which has been the focus of an Impact Case submission for the REF – has shed light on the unethical and illegal collecting of Egyptian papyri and the role of academics in it. The paper reports on the impact case's major actions and outcomes and outlines what still needs to be done to solve the problem of the illicit trade in Egyptian papyri and direct and indirect academic participation in it.