

The Jesus' Wife Papyrus in the History of Forgery¹

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Many forgeries pass through a cycle of fabrication, acceptance, doubt and final rejection. Consideration of a number of modern forgeries, notably those of Constantinos Simonides, illustrates how forgers exploit prevailing debates, look for persons or institutions on whom to practise their deception, and are often undone by their own errors, especially when manufacturing provenance. This 'syntax' of forgery can be applied to the case of the Jesus' Wife papyrus, though the participation of media corporations and the existence of the internet add a new element to the process.

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1. A 'Syntax' of Forgery

Students of the Greco-Roman world have many occasions to confront the problem of forgery. In this field forgeries, proved or probable, ancient or modern, abound: the Getty *kouros*, the Themistocles Decree, the Fibula Praenestina, the Historia Augusta, the Donation of Constantine, to name only a few. At the same time, some artifacts now considered certainly authentic were doubted on their first appearance: an example is the manuscript from Trogir (Croatia), first

¹ I am grateful to Francis Watson for inviting me to contribute to this discussion and for his advice, and to Glen Bowersock, Peter Parsons, Joseph Reed and Christopher Stray for further advice and criticism. For my information about Constantinos Simonides I have relied heavily on J. K. Elliott, *Codex Sinaiticus and the Simonides Affair: An Examination of the Nineteenth Century Claim that Codex Sinaiticus Was Not an Ancient Manuscript* (Thessaloniki: Patriarchikon Idryma Paterikōn Meletōn, 1982). J. A. Farrer, *Literary Forgeries* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907) ch. III, 'Greek Forgery: Constantine Simonides', treats Simonides gently; R. Schäper, *Die Odyssee des Fälschers: Die Abenteuerliche Geschichte des Konstantin Simonides* (Siedler, Munich, 2011) is a general and journalistic account.

published in 1664, that is the only source for a classic of Latin literature, Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis* ('Dinner with Trimalchio').²

Such problems continue to arise. The so-called *Toparcha Gothicus*, an anonymous work which if genuine provides important evidence about tenth-century Rus', was first published in 1819 by a German scholar living in France, Karl Benedikt Hase. In 1971 I. Sevchenko argued that it was a forgery by Hase himself; there was initial resistance, but the case now appears to be closed.³ There continues to be debate about an enormous papyrus first published in 2008, and allegedly containing part of the first-century BCE geographical writer Artemidorus, though the weight of opinion is in its favour.⁴

The so-called *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*, first made known in 2012, has gone through similar fluctuations of opinion, though the tide now seems to be flowing strongly against its authenticity. It therefore seems timely to situate the papyrus and the controversy surrounding it in the context of the general phenomenon of forgery. I shall first try to outline what might be called a 'syntax' of forgery, that is, the various components, from the intellectual and social situation into which the forgery is introduced, through the forger himself (I have not discovered an example of a woman forger), his motives and materials, the reception that his product receives, both positive and negative, down to the aftermath of continued debate. Secondly, I shall try to fit what is known of the Jesus' Wife forgery into this syntactical framework; this will not add to what has been adduced in this journal or elsewhere to prove that the papyrus is forged, but may help to show how the forgery could have come about, and how it fits into an often-repeated sequence of deception, acceptance and rejection.

For forgeries to succeed there must be an atmosphere receptive to them: a forger will usually not manage to impose on others unless his product, by accident or design, comes into a setting ready to give it a favourable reception. To take an example of a forger whose name will often recur in this discussion, Constantinos Simonides: in 1860 Simonides gained access to the considerable papyrus collection of a Liverpool merchant named Joseph Mayer, and promptly produced a papyrus scrap containing a few verses of the nineteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. The papyrus was said to be of the first century, thus three centuries earlier than any biblical manuscript then known. Moreover, it contained an important variant from the accepted text in Matt 19.24: Jesus' saying about a

2 S. Gaselee, *The Bibliography of Petronius* (London: Blades, East & Blades 1910, reprinted from *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* 10 (1910)) 170–3.

3 I. Sevchenko, 'The Date and Author of the So-Called Fragments of *Toparcha Gothicus*', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 25 (1971) 115–88; I. P. Medvedev, 'Excellent Scholar, Excellent Forger – the Case of Karl Benedict Hase', *Manufacturing a Past for the Present* (ed. J. M. Bak, P. J. Geary, G. Klaniczay; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 144–55.

4 On this papyrus, see further below.

camel passing through the eye of a needle was due to a textual corruption, and the true text was not 'camel' but 'cable', not κάμηλος but κάλωσ.⁵

In 1861 Simonides published a volume of facsimiles illustrating his various discoveries in Liverpool, and in this he showed not just one scrap of Matthew's Gospel but several pages, which had been 'written about the fifteenth year after the ascension of our Saviour, by the hand of Nicolaus the Deacon, that is to say, in the forty-eighth year after the Incarnation of the Divinity'. Contemporary accounts show the sensation that this discovery made in Liverpool, though it encountered immediate doubt in London. At one and the same time, it appeared to prove the antiquity of the gospel tradition, and ended a debate as to whether Matthew had originally written in Greek or Hebrew. It also gave a text of Matthew 27.19 that revealed the name of Pilate's wife to be 'Pempele', omitted in all other manuscripts.⁶

Simonides' *Fac-similes* produced an amusing duel between two religious periodicals. *The Christian Remembrancer* concluded its satirical examination by saying:⁷

Whether, therefore, we consider these papyrus fragments of the New Testament (1) in regard to the *manner* of their introduction to the world, which must always be a point of some importance when we come to examine the genuineness of ancient writings hitherto unknown; or (2) listen to the evidence of competent scholars (men who have characters to maintain, and no sinister interest to tempt them to deceive us) as to the *external* marks of spuriousness patent on the documents themselves; or (3) note for our own satisfaction the numerous internal symptoms of fraud and interpolation they exhibit, the halting scholarship, and unsupported statements of the editor, the empty verbiage and feeble interpolations of the text; we feel ourselves entitled to draw the conclusion broadly stated by the Council of the Royal Society of Literature in reference to Hermippus' letter to Horus (Report, p. 7) [another of Simonides' 'discoveries' in Mayer's collection] that there are absolute grounds for believing these papyri to be 'rank forgeries, probably of very recent date'.

The Literary Churchman replied:⁸

We confess that we are not proud of the tone adopted by public writers towards this Greek. 'Old English fairness', of which we have heard much, has displayed itself but little. In the last number of *The Christian Remembrancer*, in a careful article devoted to this subject, Dr. Simonides is twitted with transparent

5 Elliott, *Codex Sinaiticus*, 133–4; cf. C. Simonides, *Fac-similes of Certain Portions of the Gospel of St. Matthew, and of the Epistles of Ss. James & Jude: Written on Papyrus in the First Century and Preserved in the Egyptian Museum of Joseph Mayer* (London: Trübner, 1861) 45–6.

6 Simonides, *Fac-similes*, 46.

7 *The Christian Remembrancer*, July 1863, cited Elliott, *Codex Sinaiticus*, 141–2.

8 *The Literary Churchman*, 1 September 1863, cited Elliott, *Codex Sinaiticus*, 142–3.

roguery throughout. We have read that paper without being convinced of anything, except that the writer was bent on urging a foregone conclusion. Of course he may have been, and we should think he is, fully convinced of the versatility and dishonesty, the paleographical ingenuity and bad scholarship, of Dr. Simonides; but his readiness to accept the 'Report' of the Royal Society of Literature, which sat in judgement on Dr. Simonides last February, shakes our confidence in this critic. We were present at that meeting to which the Report refers, and our surprise is great at the representation made of what took place. The Greek priest Nicolaides, who was brought forward as the witness to condemn Dr. Simonides, is, we suppose, still in this country; but the entire silence which has been prudently observed respecting him, and the enquiries raised in other quarters as to the trustworthiness of this 'archimandrite' (so, we think, he was called), ought in fairness to be remembered, on Dr. Simonides' side. And as to the cursory glance at the papyrus being represented as a grave inspection – it is insulting to everyone who was there.

In the article before us, there is, we are bound to say, the same spirit of which we complain, and complain all the more, because the ascertainment of the *truth*, in this matter, concerns Christian literature very deeply.

This debate over Simonides brings out another factor that can complicate these debates: that of religion. An unpersuasive forger but a brilliant manipulator, Simonides played the religious card tirelessly, praising the piety of his believers and invoking God's forgiveness on his critics. Similarly, his supporters were surely influenced by the hope that his documents would vindicate traditional accounts of Christian origins at a time when critics such as David Friedrich Straus had called them into question.

A receptive atmosphere is a necessary condition for the acceptance of a forgery, but not a sufficient one: the forger must have the ability and the means to bring the imposture off. Here again Simonides provides an example. The Joseph Mayer mentioned above was a wealthy businessman with a passion for collecting Egyptian antiquities of every kind and date. Among his possessions were large numbers of papyri bought from the much-travelled clergyman Henry Stobart, all of them (so far as is known) genuine: one of them is famous among classicists as containing a large part of the *Funeral Oration of Hyperides*, a Greek orator of the late fourth century.⁹ Believing Simonides an expert palaeographer, Mayer had given him the free run of his collection, and in retrospect it is clear that Simonides, once let loose among Mayer's papyri, used them to fabricate new texts, sometimes by washing the writing away, at other times using the blank backs of papyri and making the front side invisible by pasting them down. We shall return to the question of blank papyrus.

9 C. Babington, ed., *Hyperidou Logos epitaphios: The Funeral Oration of Hyperides over Leosthenes and his Comrades in the Lamian War* (Cambridge: Deighton and Bell, London: Bell and Daldy, 1858).

As well as a generally receptive atmosphere, a forger may have a particular person or group of persons in mind, either because he considers him or them an easy 'mark' or, as has happened with other forgers, because he nourishes a secret grudge against the establishment. One of Simonides' motives for forging the supposedly earliest text of the New Testament was surely his long-running feud with no less a person than Tischendorf, the discoverer of the Codex Sinaiticus. Though Tischendorf first saw parts of the Codex in 1844, and managed to take away some leaves, it was only on a later visit to St Catherine's Monastery in 1859 that he removed the larger part, which is now in the British Museum. He announced his new discovery in a letter to a German newspaper in April, and this letter was published in translation in the *Journal of Sacred Literature* in July. As we have seen, Simonides produced his supposed fragments of Matthew's Gospel in the very next year. It so happens that in the same year (1860) he also began to claim that he himself had written the Codex Sinaiticus, having copied it at the age of fifteen on Mount Athos. This claim led to a protracted feud with Tischendorf and, like Simonides' alleged facsimiles of New Testament papyri, a long series of articles pro and con in British journals.¹⁰

Forgers also forge to make money, though this is probably less true with forgeries of manuscripts than of art-works, where the potential returns are so much higher.¹¹ About 1855, Simonides offered to Karl Richard Lepsius, then Professor of Egyptology at Berlin and considered the founder of modern Egyptology, a Greek manuscript written by one Uranius of Alexandria and containing a history of the kings of Egypt. Delighted to find an ancient work that so precisely confirmed his own theories on the early history of Egypt, Lepsius advanced 2,000 thalers to the Prussian Academy to allow it to buy the manuscript (assuming a rough equivalency between an 1855 thaler and an 1855 dollar, that would be some \$60,000 today). Ludwig Dindorf, an indefatigable editor of Greek texts, was equally enthused, and began to produce a critical edition, which he contracted with the Oxford University Press to print.¹² Lepsius, meanwhile, after he had begun to copy out the text, concluded that it must be a forgery, whereupon he hurried back to Leipzig, recovered his 2,000 thalers, brought Simonides back to Berlin, and had him arrested. Meanwhile Dindorf had proceeded with his edition and handed in his manuscript, but on the news of Lepsius' change of mind the

10 Elliott, *Codex Sinaiticus*, 26–70.

11 A recent case in which a printed forgery involved large sums is Mark Hoffmann and the so-called 'Oath of a Freeman'; for a summary account, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Hofmann (accessed 17 December 2014).

12 *Uranii alexandrini De regibus Aegyptiorum libri tres. Operis ex codice palimpsesto edendi specimen proposuit Gulielmus Dindorfius* (Oxford University Press, 1855). A copy of this work is in the Houghton Library of Harvard University; among the previous owners are Ingram Bywater, editor of many celebrated Greek texts, and Falconer Madan, Bodley's Librarian from 1912 to 1919.

Oxford University Press destroyed the print run, and it is now a valuable rarity. This blunder largely undid Dindorf's reputation.¹³

The forger must not only have a receptive atmosphere, perhaps also an intended 'mark', but he must also have the materials and the ability to bring off his imposture. Materials are usually not hard to find, as when Simonides had a ready supply of papyri in Mayer's Museum: the difficulty lies in making the materials resemble the intended forgery. Here Simonides ran into immediate trouble. To produce large blank pages on which to write whole documents, he was forced to glue together papyri of different dates, as was visible even in 1860, when papyri were still comparatively unfamiliar. Sometimes he had also to remove ancient writing from the papyrus, and for this purpose he seems to have used wet blotting paper: unluckily for him, small flecks of the blotting paper remained on the surface.¹⁴

Similarly, even with the most authentic-looking materials the forger has to contend with his own human limitations. It was soon noticed that several of Simonides' forgeries, allegedly of different date and type, exhibited similar handwriting. An anonymous writer in *The Athenaeum*, one of Simonides' most effective and determined critics, observed about his *Fac-similes*:¹⁵

That the handwriting of all of them is that of one and the same person, we appeal with confidence to every one who has any acquaintance with early MSS. Let them compare, for instance, the Us, Es, As, Ds, and they will not fail to perceive running through them all the most striking family likeness – a resemblance too remarkable to be the result of accident, and such as we nowhere find in genuine MSS. differing by centuries in date.

A forger similar in some ways to Simonides, though one with considerable literary ability, is the poet Thomas Chatterton (1752–70). Chatterton had access to a church in his home town of Bristol that housed a chest of neglected medieval parchments. These parchments he used to produce his so-called Rowley Poems, written by an hitherto unknown monk in the fifteenth century. Thomas Tyrwhitt, still remembered for his five-volume edition of the poems of Chaucer, was evidently intrigued by this discovery of a new, late medieval poet, and brought out the first edition of the Rowley Poems in 1777, but cautiously withheld his name from the volume. After further research, however, he recognised that the poems were forged, and the third edition, published over his own name in the next year, carried this sub-title: 'The third edition, to which is added an Appendix, containing some observations upon the language of these poems;

13 For this controversy, Elliott, *Codex Sinaiticus*, 123–31.

14 Elliott, *Codex Sinaiticus*, 154–5.

15 *Athenaeum*, December 7, 1861, cited Elliott, *Codex Sinaiticus*, 145.

tending to prove, that they were written, not by any ancient author, but entirely by Thomas Chatterton.' In the appendix Tyrwhitt has especial fun with the glossary that Chatterton provided for the interpretation of unusual words in the supposed Rowley. In compiling this Chatterton had relied on Stephen Skinner's *Etymologicum Linguae Anglicanae*, but in his haste had misread certain of the entries. For example, he had glossed a word of his own invention, *alyse*, with the meaning *allow*. Tyrwhitt shows that Chatterton had found the word *alyfed* in Skinner glossed as 'allowed', and drily observes, 'In the Gothic types used by Skinner *f* might be easily mistaken for a long *s*.' Tyrwhitt was not the only doubter: another was Dr Johnson, who on a visit to Bristol climbed the church tower to inspect the chest which had contained Rowley's alleged poems.¹⁶

Yet Chatterton continued to find defenders. Tyrwhitt's third edition was answered three years later by one Jacob Bryant, who produced his own volume of over 600 pages. Here Bryant attempts to answer every one of Tyrwhitt's criticisms in detail, spending for example several pages to justify the impossible *alyse* that Tyrwhitt had dismissed in a few lines. Belief in the genuineness of Rowley lasted at least until the end of the century.¹⁷

Perhaps the hardest thing of all to forge is provenance. A forger cannot alter the past as he can alter documents or material objects, and thus it is that forgeries often break down on provenance – the establishment of a chain of evidence (location, ownership, documentary record) that will lead securely back to the alleged source. In Simonides' case, his past history of fraud, especially the forged Egyptian History of Uranius, made exposure comparatively easy. A modern instance is the already mentioned Getty *kouros*. This first appeared on the art market in 1983, when it was bought by the Getty Museum, accompanied by documents purporting to prove its authenticity. These took the provenance back to a collector in Geneva who had allegedly bought it in 1930 from a Greek dealer. One of the documents was a letter of 1952 from a well-known scholar of Greek sculpture, Ernst Langlotz, comparing the statue to another, undoubtedly authentic, statue of similar type. Later inquiries revealed that the postcode on the Langlotz letter did not exist until 1972, and that a bank account mentioned in a 1955 letter regarding repairs on the statue was not opened until 1963. Thus the

16 First edition: [T. Tyrwhitt, ed.,] *Poems, Supposed to Have Been Written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley, and Others, in the Fifteenth Century* (London: T. Payne and Son, 1777). The third edition (T. Payne and Son, 1778) appeared under Tyrwhitt's own name with the sub-title given above; the 'Appendix' also appeared independently (same publisher and date). *Alyfed*: Tyrwhitt, 'Appendix', 328–9. Dr Johnson's visit: J. Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (ed. R. W. Chapman, revised J. D. Fleeman; London/Oxford/Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976) 751–2.

17 J. Bryant, *Observations upon the Poems of Thomas Rowley: in Which the Authenticity of Those Poems Is Ascertained* (London: T. Payne and Son, 1781) 136–9.

provenance fell apart: the Getty Museum's website now says that the statue is 'Greek, about 530 BC, or modern forgery'.¹⁸

Another device for creating a fake provenance is to insert a forged object into a collection of genuine ones. In 1979 it was noticed that a papyrus in a well-known collection in Milan contained some lines of the Hellenistic poet Bion of Smyrna; the text was already known from a Late Antique quotation. The papyrus was a small rectangle, 6.4 cm. wide and 4.3 tall, written with what seemed an usually blunt pen, and with ink of variable density. The physical oddity of the writing, combined with certain anomalies in the script, made it easy to prove a modern forgery.¹⁹

The forger's product once launched usually has to find its own way: as the case of Simonides shows, it is risky for its creator to be identified, and anonymity is the rule, though not an invariable one. Given the right atmosphere, and sometimes an adroit selection of the 'mark' by whom the product is to enter the public domain, a forgery can sometimes go a long time undetected. Rarely, however, does it go unsuspected, and when that happens personal factors come into play. Those who first believed its authenticity are unwilling to change their minds for fear of loss of face (and sometimes, of financial loss); those on the other side can be actuated by motives other than a disinterested desire for truth, for example by *odium philologicum*.

An argument sometimes made by defenders of forgeries is that they would have been impossible to forge. In 1954 a respected Cambridge scholar, Geoffrey Woodhead, published a fragment of pottery inscribed with Greek writing. Woodhead interpreted the object as a message passed between the oligarchic conspirators who in 411 BCE overthrew the democratic government of Athens. It could not be a forgery, he argued, since 'the skill and knowledge required to produce the inscriptions would surely be more than even an exceptional forger could command'. Within months the French epigraphist Louis Robert had proved that the words had been copied from a printed source, a published inscription concerning the drainage of marshes in central Greece.²⁰ The lesson to be drawn is that mere guesses as to what is 'impossible to forge' are never enough: some forgers, though not most of those so far considered, are much more cunning than the ordinary public can imagine.

18 [wikipedia.org/wiki/Getty_kouros;](http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=12908) <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=12908> (both sites accessed 12 December, 2014).

19 C. Gallazzi, 'Un papiro falso con un frammento di Bione, cm. 6.4 X 4.3', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 34 (1979) 55-8, with photograph on Plate IV. The physical similarity to the Jesus' Wife papyrus is striking.

20 A. G. Woodhead, 'A Political Sherd', *Annual of the British School at Athens* 48 (1953) 191-9, especially 191 n. 1; L. Robert, *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 1954, 494-505.

The final stage, in the case of an actual forgery, is detection, which can come in various ways. In Simonides' case, the Prussian Academy used chemical reagents on the supposed history of the kings of Egypt, which was a palimpsest manuscript, to show that what he had claimed to be the earlier text was in fact the later one. These tests, when combined with philological and palaeographical analyses, were overwhelming, and as we saw led to Simonides' arrest, and to considerable embarrassment for Dindorf and for the Oxford University Press. When the forger conceals his identity, as is more usual, disproof is more difficult. The Getty *kouros* fell into disrepute because of its stylistic eccentricities, the clearly faked documentation, and scientific testing. These tests determined that the marble was from the island of Thasos, which conflicted with the alleged sixth-century date of the statue, a time much earlier than Thasian marble was generally used for statuary.

Disbelief can be slow in coming, if it comes at all. Chatterton's forgeries enjoyed a comparatively short life, though his reputation as a poet in his own right remained high well into the nineteenth century. The Ossian poems of his contemporary George Macpherson continued to find believers, or at least appreciative readers, for about a century, though they had been immediately and publicly denounced by Dr Samuel Johnson and others.²¹ And even Simonides has enjoyed a recent comeback. In the early 2000s an Italian bank bought a huge papyrus, 3 meters long, with a geographical text that was identified as a work of the first-century BCE geographer Artemidorus. This was sumptuously published in 2008 as *Il Papiro di Artemidoro* by a respected Italian group of philologists and art-historians. Even before the publication, a professor at the University of Bari, Luciano Canfora, argued it was a forgery, possibly by Simonides, and the bibliography of the controversy now extends to many thousands of pages.²² My own opinion is that the papyrus is genuine beyond a doubt, and if it were a forgery could not be from the hand of Simonides. His forgeries and assertions – Uranius, the fragments of Matthew's Gospel, his claim to have written the *Codex Sinaiticus* – were exposed almost as soon as they were made, and the extant specimens of his handiwork are totally unlike the Artemidorus papyrus.

21 On Johnson's dispute with George Macpherson, the forger of Ossian, Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 576–80.

22 C. Gallazzi, B. Kramer, S. Settis, eds., *Il Papiro di Artemidoro (P. Artemid.)* (Milan: LED, Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2008); L. Canfora, *The True History of the So-Called Artemidorus Papyrus* (Bari: Edizioni di Pagina, 2007). R. Janko, *Classical Review* 59 (2009) 403–10, reviewing both the 2008 publication of the papyrus and two of Canfora's book-length attacks on it from 2007 and 2008, concludes that Canfora's case is 'extremely strong', and adds arguments of his own; I am not convinced.

2. The Jesus' Wife Papyrus

Many questions about the Jesus' Wife forgery will probably remain forever unsolved, since those who could answer them have every reason to remain silent. The forger's motivations could have been several. The similarity of his forgery to the plot of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* has often been noticed, and such fictional inspiration has a possible parallel in Morton Smith's *Secret Gospel of Mark*, with its seeming echoes of a now-forgotten novel, *The Mystery of Mar Saba*.²³ Others have suggested that the forger was aiming to exploit current debates about the role of women in the ministry, and some have even wondered whether feminist scholars, and Karen King in particular, provided the forger with a 'mark': either he intended to find a sympathetic person or institution to whom to sell his wares, or more diabolically intended his fraud as a bomb, primed to blow up and to discredit such scholarship (or perhaps the institution) when it was exposed. But, as has recently been observed, 'Money is surely the leading candidate.'²⁴ King has quoted the owner as saying that 'a European manuscript dealer had offered him a considerable amount' for the fragment. She does not say whether he offered to sell the papyrus, or the batch of which it was a part, to her or to the Harvard Divinity School: in any case, he is said to wish to remain anonymous to avoid being 'hounded by people who want to buy' his treasure.²⁵

The ways in which the Jesus' Wife papyrus was exposed all have their parallels in past history: the questionable provenance, the suspicious resonance with contemporary problems and debates, the amateurish script, the ill-concealed copying of a printed source, the claim that the papyrus 'would have been impossible to forge'. Two aspects are, by contrast, very modern. One is the involvement of news corporations, which have little interest in the fine points of scholarly discussion. An example, if a more sensational one, is the involvement of the German newsmagazine *Stern* and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation in the publication of the supposed Hitler Diaries; once Hugh Trevor-Roper had realised that they were forgeries, the presses were rolling, and it was too late.²⁶ It is unknown, and will presumably remain so, at what point and in what way the Smithsonian Channel became involved in the Jesus' Wife affair, but a correspondent for *Smithsonian Magazine* said in an article dated within days of King's presentation that he had talked with King 'over dinner in Cambridge before she left for Rome'.

23 F. Watson, 'Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of the Mar Saba Letter and the Secret Gospel of Mark', *JThS* 61 (2010) 128–70, especially 163–70.

24 J. Biden and C. Moss, 'The Curious Case of Jesus' Wife', *The Atlantic*, December 2014, 80.

25 A. Sabar, 'The Inside Story of a Controversial New Text About Jesus', *The Smithsonian Magazine*, September 17, 2012, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-inside-story-of-a-controversial-new-text-about-jesus-41078791> (accessed 12 December, 2014); Biden and Moss, 'Curious Case', 80.

26 A. Sisman, 'The Expert', *Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010), 475–506.

The Smithsonian Channel also planned to air a one-hour documentary about the papyrus on September 30, 2012, having announced it as ‘one of the most significant discoveries of all time’, but quickly postponed the programme because of the debate about authenticity, and did not air a revised version until May, 2014. This documentary must have been in preparation well before September 2012.

The date when a decision was made to submit the papyrus to scientific testing seems unclear. The Harvard Divinity School’s current web page says: ‘On September 18, 2012, Karen L. King announced the existence of a papyrus fragment dubbed “The Gospel of Jesus’s Wife” at the International Coptic Congress in Rome. *In the months following this announcement* [my emphasis], papyrological examination, scientific analysis of the ink and papyrus, and various forms of imaging were performed by multiple professional teams.’ On the other hand, a press release put out by the Harvard Divinity School on 10 April 2014 states: ‘*Over the past two years* [my emphasis], extensive testing of the papyrus and the carbon ink, as well as analysis of the handwriting and grammar, all indicate that the existing material fragment dates to between the sixth and ninth centuries CE.’²⁷ Even if ‘two years’ should be taken literally, and scientific testing began before September 2012, it was wrong, both ethically and tactically, to agree to a collaboration with a commercial media company before proper scientific testing of the papyrus. Moreover, once the papyrus was tested for date, it proved to be of the seventh or eighth century, which greatly lengthened the odds against its being genuine (King had assumed that it was of the fourth century).

The other ‘modern’ aspect of the controversy is the existence of the internet. To the credit of Karen King and the Harvard Divinity School, a pre-print version of her publication appeared online as early as September 2012, and all of the papyri owned by the anonymous collector were also put online, including the John fragment that for some observers proved the *coup de grâce*. Much of the discussion about the papyrus has also taken place in electronic form. Had all this information been made available before September 2012, and in addition had expert Copticists had an early chance to study both the Jesus’ Wife papyrus and the even more compromising Gospel of John, the whole clumsy apparatus might never have got off the ground, much time and trouble might have been spared, and several reputations might not have suffered grave damage.

27 gospelofJesus'swife.hds.harvard.edu/introduction; gospelofJesus'swife.hds.harvard.edu/testing-indicates-gospel-Jesus's-wife-papyrus-fragment-be-ancient (both sites accessed 12 December, 2014).