

Oxford classics professor, 63, is arrested over theft of 'priceless' papyrus bible fragments 'stolen from university library collection and sold to US museum'

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- **Dr Dirk Obbink, 63, was arrested last month on suspicion of theft and fraud**
- **13 papyrus bible fragments were stolen from Oxford University's Sackler Library**
- **The associate professor of papyrology and Greek literature denied the claims**
- **The Museum of the Bible in Washington DC returned all 13 fragments to Oxford**

An Oxford University classics professor has been arrested on suspicion of stealing ancient biblical papyrus.

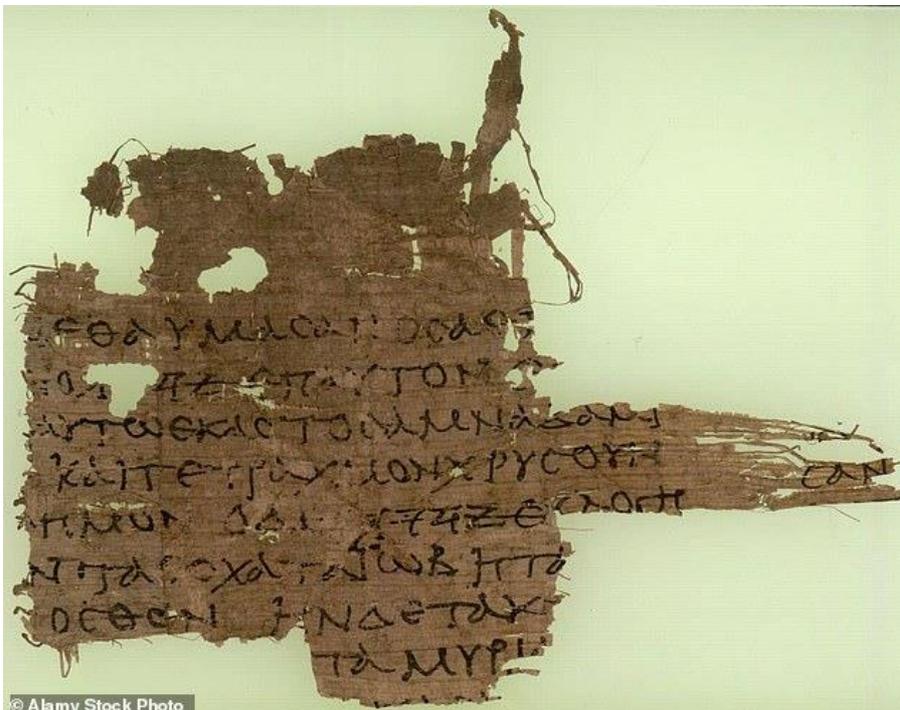
Dr Dirk Obbink, 63, was arrested by police last month on suspicion of theft and fraud after 13 ancient biblical papyrus fragments were sold to the Museum of the Bible, Washington DC.

The associate professor in papyrology and Greek literature at Oxford University has been released while police continue their investigation.

On November 12 Thames Valley police received a report that 13 priceless ancient papyrus biblical fragments had been stolen from the Oxyrhynchus collection at Oxford University.



Dr Dirk Obbink, 63, (pictured) was arrested by police last month on suspicion of theft and fraud after 13 ancient biblical papyrus fragments were sold to the Museum of the Bible, Washington DC. He denied allegations of wrongdoing



13 papyrus bible fragments were stolen from Oxford University's Sackler Library where the Oxyrhynchus collection was kept (stock image)

Dr Obbink has denied any wrongdoing and said the allegations are a 'malicious attempt' to harm his reputation and damage his career.

The ancient papyrus was originally found during the early 20th Century in the Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus.

The Egypt Exploration Society (EES), who own the fragments, claim the ancient papyrus was stolen from the Sackler Library at Oxford University and ended up at the Museum of the Bible.

EES director Dr Carl Graves said: 'These are early fragments of the gospels or biblical fragments. They are testament to Egypt's early Christian heritage and are early evidence of biblical scripture. We don't value them monetarily but they are priceless and irreplaceable.'



The ancient papyrus fragments were sold to the Museum of the Bible in Washington DC (pictured). They have cooperated and returned all 13 pieces to the Egypt Exploration Society

In a statement on its website in 2019 the EES said: 'The MOTB [Museum of the Bible] has informed the EES that 11 of these pieces came into its care after being sold to Hobby Lobby stores by Prof Obbink, most of them in two batches in 2010.'

He also said that the Museum of the Bible had been cooperative and that all 13 biblical fragments had been returned.

The museum was established by the billionaire Green family who own the Hobby Lobby chain of crafting stores.

What is papyrus?

Papyrus is a plant, rather like a reed, which used to grow in Egypt. In ancient times, the Egyptians used it to make small, light-weight boats, sandals, mats and baskets, as well as a paper-like material for writing on.

This writing material is also known as papyrus. Sheets of papyrus were often stuck together to form long rolls (scrolls) for lengthy documents like Books of the Dead. Documents written on papyrus are known as papyri.

The oldest example of a roll of papyrus (without writing) dates to about 2985 BC, and the oldest written papyrus document comes from about 2495 BC.

Source: *The Fitzwilliam Museum*

Dr Obbink was suspended from Oxford in October, a month before the theft was reported, after an investigation was held into the disappearance of the papyrus fragments.

The fragments, which come from Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy, are different sizes, contain different numbers of words and took decades to put together.

Dr Obbink had previously told [the Guardian](#): 'The allegations made against me that I have stolen, removed or sold items owned by the Egypt Exploration Society collection at the University of Oxford are entirely false.

'I would never betray the trust of my colleagues and the values which I have sought to protect and uphold throughout my academic career in the way that has been alleged.

'I am aware that there are documents being used against me which I believe have been fabricated in a malicious attempt to harm my reputation and career.'