

AFTER FORGETTING. RESEARCH ON THE PROVENANCE CLUSTERS OF THE 20th CENTURY AT THE HERZOG AUGUST LIBRARY (in German)

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The decision to acquire and integrate standing collections or groups of works at modern collection-based institutions is made for different reasons and often reflects the financial situation and economies of academic, library-scientific, museum and archival interests. This has become evident in a re-evaluation of several collections at the Herzog August Library (HAB) in Wolfenbüttel, carried out in connection to a current project. Since the 1970s, the HAB has acquired several specialist libraries which were integrated into the main collection. The process largely focussed on the completeness of the bibliographical data or the inclusion of a representative selection to supplement the main collection. Less emphasis was placed, however, on the collections' origin and to what extent items belonged together. The provenance of the volumes – an aspect of library-historical interest from today's point of view – was hardly documented, if at all; their character as an autonomous collection was all but lost to the ‹oblivion of storage› (*Verwahrensvergessen*) (A. Assmann in reference to F. G. Jünger). Until recently, historians and biographical researchers were not even aware that these (partial) collections existed; as seemingly homogeneous parts of a comprehensive collection, they had fallen under the radar of scientific visibility, so to speak.

If a collection is rediscovered in connection to holdings-related research, this usually happens in contrast to or despite the original intention. For many years and likely for the foreseeable future, the private and institutional collection activities of the 20th century (and beyond, in some cases) focused on research on Nazi-confiscated cultural assets. The working method deliberately strips the objects from their apparent context, starting by simply removing them from the shelves and evaluating them. For provenance researchers in search of Nazi loot, their primary interest in these library holdings is not to identify them as part of former or contemporary collections, but rather as a provenance cluster, i.e. as a group of items with partially identical and partially divergent proto-provenances. The result is not merely a reconstruction of historical collections, but rather a revaluation of the collection concept which enables researchers to perceive its inherent historicity, along with its impact and transformative potential over time until the present day.

Building on the current findings of an HAB project on Nazi-confiscated cultural assets in the collections and collection-like groups of the 20th century, this presentation examines the history of collection practices to highlight the undulations of forgetting and disappearing, excavating and rediscovering (and re-inventing), and contextualise them based on selected examples from a library-oriented and cultural-historic perspective.