

A proposal for the regulation of the trade in coins between Cyprus and the U.S.A.

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Background

Personal

I approach the question of the traffic in pre-modern coins from the vantage point of both the numismatist and archaeologist. I am presently curator of the Princeton University Numismatic Collection and from 1980 to 2000 was a curator at the American Numismatic Society. I teach a course on Numismatics at Princeton, and have done so at the University of Michigan and the University of Notre Dame. Though not personally a collector, I am a member of several organizations composed in part of collectors of ancient and medieval coins. On the other hand, one of the major fields for my doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania was in archaeology, I am a member of the Archaeological Institute of America, and I have worked as a numismatist on two sites in the Dominican Republic excavated by the University of Florida and, most recently, at Princeton University's site of Polis in Cyprus. In connection with the Cyprus excavation, I am researching and writing up a hoard found in the excavations in an earlier season, for which I visited the excavation last summer to study the topography and excavation notes and went to Nicosia to examine and photograph the coins in the National Museum of Cyprus. I spoke on the general issue of the relationship of coins to antiquities laws before the CPAC at a meeting it held in New York in 2000.

Pre-modern Cypriote Coinage

My understanding is that the proposed regulations are to cover coins minted and found in Cyprus that are more than 250 years old, that is from the archaic period through most of the Ottoman. I wish to call to the Committee's attention that in most periods it is not possible to infer that a coin minted in Cyprus was found there, and conversely, many coins found in Cyprus were minted elsewhere. This is a reflection of Cyprus's complicated history. In the archaic and classical periods (c.600 – c.325 BCE) Cyprus was ruled mainly by local authorities and its coins (minted in about six main mints) were distinctive. However, Cypriot coins of the classical period are commonly found in hoards on the mainland, though mainland coins are relatively rare in finds on Cyprus. In the Hellenistic period (c.325- c.50 BCE), Cyprus was part of the empire of Alexander the Great and

his successors, including both those of the Ptolemaic (Egypt) and Seleucid (Levantine) dynasties; in this period its mints issued coins of an appearance and standard like those of others, and its coinage is found extensively mixed in with those of other mints both in finds on the mainland and on Cyprus; as in most periods coins of bronze tended to be more local in circulation than those of gold and silver. In the Roman and Byzantine periods, minting on Cyprus was sporadic, and the coinage in circulation there was generally similar to those throughout the empire, characterized by the occasional admixture of local coinage in with a great quantity of imported ones. In the Lusignan period (1192-1489), Cyprus again has its own distinctive coinage, and Cypriote coins from this period are rarely found elsewhere, nor are imported coins of the period commonly found on the island. In the Venetian period (1489-1570), Venetian coins circulated on Cyprus, though there were also special issues for the island, and high-denomination silver coins were often countermarked with distinctive Cypriote marks of value. In the Ottoman period (1570-1918), Cyprus was again part of a larger empire and its coinage circulation was not distinctive.

General observations on the relationship of coins to archaeological sites

There are many aspects in which coins are like any other archaeological artifact and deserve the same protections accorded to other classes of artifact. Virtually all pre-modern coins that are known today have been in the earth. There are two main reasons that coins were put in the earth, resulting in what numismatists generally class as distinct types of finds.

Some coins were lost accidentally and not recovered; these are generally low denomination coins, usually of bronze, and are most typically found on archaeological sites and as isolated finds by metal detectorists. The careful recording of the recovery of such coins is of great importance to both archaeologists and numismatists. As an example, I'll cite the case of Morgantina in Sicily (the site of the alleged illegal removal of works of art owned by American museums). The actual identification of the excavated site in Sicily with the documented settlement of Morgantina is based in large part on the finding there of a significant number of coins attributed to that mint. Conversely, the chronology of the Roman Republican silver coinage has as its basis the discovery in the excavations of Morgantina of examples of early silver denarius issues in a stratigraphic context datable to its documented destruction in the Second Punic War. Had that part of the site been looted before it was

excavated, both archaeology and numismatics would have lost irretrievable evidence.

The other main way in which coins find their way into the ground is through hoarding, the intentional hiding of groups of coins for security reasons. Such hoarded coins are generally of the higher denominations available and are often those most sought after by collectors and by museums interested in coins as works of art.

Ancient people sometimes secreted their hoards within or near their homes; such a hoard would be part of a larger archaeological context. In other cases they buried their wealth in fields or woods, in which case the coins themselves (and the vessel they were buried in) constitute their principal context. Much of numismatic analysis is based on comparisons of coins of different issues found together in one hoard with those found in other hoards. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hoards were commonly studied and published by numismatists working outside the area of finding, who purchased them intact with information on their provenance. As countries have regulated the export of antiquities found within their borders, the responsibility for the publication of coin finds has increasingly devolved on the antiquities authorities in the countries in which they are found.

A proposal

Though the placing of pre-modern coins minted and found in Cyprus on the bilateral agreement of prohibited trade items between Cyprus and the United States might provide grounds for legal proceeding in certain clear cases, it is unlikely to have a significant deterrent effect on either the finders of coins on Cyprus who sell the coins illicitly, the dealers who profit from the trade, nor the collectors who seek examples of a specific coinage. Incentives are needed for finders to take their coins to the local authorities, resources are needed so that the antiquities authorities in Cyprus can adequately record and study the coin finds, and a mechanism is needed so that American collectors who esteem the cultural heritage of Cyprus can buy coins minted or found there with the knowledge that they are not contributing to the destruction of archaeological sites or the dispersal of national treasures.

A system of licensing of coin finds and exports could be devised to meet these needs, whereby the finders of coins in Cyprus either in archaeological excavations or by chance discovery would identify all coins to government authorities, expert numismatists working for the Cypriote government would document all finds and decide which coins were important to keep for the national patrimony, and those coins

not selected for retention would be issued an export license tied to an online digital database. Purchasers of such coins could pay a licensing fee for each such coin, and the proceeds from this process could be used to fund the numismatic agency of the Cyprus Antiquities Authority.

The above statement represents my personal professional opinion and is not necessarily that of the Trustees of Princeton University.

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