

Ancient Coin Collecting – Organization, Praxis and Epistemology

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Black Box or *Vas Hermetis*?

One of the commonest sentence fragments that appear in the writings of nationalistic archaeologists is “... disappear into private collections”. It is unclear whether such people are exhibiting their own black box mentality or are trying to appeal to such a mentality in others. Perhaps there are degrees of both. If we assume that such people are being completely honest about their perception we must wonder about their ability to perceive *process* outside of the archaeological site. The term “black box mentality” is most commonly used in the discussion of modern technology to indicate that a person knows that some sort of process is going on within the black box, but they are unaware of what this process might be and have little interest in finding out. They understand, however, that something will “come out the other side” and what comes out will be useful to them in some way. Perhaps it might be more accurate to accuse these cultural heritage crusaders of having a “black hole mentality” instead.

There are more than a few spouses and friends of ancient coin collectors who might often wish that such collections *were* black holes because they are often required to make agreeable noises when shown the collector’s latest purchases. Those of a literary bent might be reminded of Stephen Leacock’s “The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones”¹ on such occasions as they glance, longingly, at the door.

Fortunately, many people actually enjoy being shown ancient coins: I once gave a talk about ancient coins and artifacts at my daughter’s school. I passed around a number of coins and other objects for the kids to look at as I spoke. For weeks afterward, kids would greet me by name as I walked down the street and I think they welcomed such an interesting break from their books. Perhaps one or two of them went on to become coin collectors, historians or even archaeologists.

Ancient coins have been collected since ancient times – when they were actually modern coins, but the collecting of ancient coins did not become widely popular until the renaissance. For those who could not afford to buy the originals at that time, Italian sculptors made imitations and fantasies in the ancient style. Coin collecting also became known as the “hobby of kings” and these large and impressive royal collections became the basis of later national collections. Throughout these times, most ancient coins have been affordable by collectors from all walks of life. They are not rare objects and in one story I read when I was young, a student had defined the Romans as a “people who built roads and dropped coins”.

¹ <http://www.online-literature.com/stephen-leacock/literary-lapses/4/>

By the early nineteenth century, coin collecting had become the serious study of numismatics and John Yonge Akerman, who specialized in Roman coins, started the *Numismatic Journal* in 1836. It follows, then, that these ancient coins have their own life that is much longer than that of the collector. As ancient coins are, one by one, “disappearing into private collections”, entire collections of them are reappearing – transformed, on to the market or into museums.

The nature of this transformation is interesting: a collection is the product of a classification process whereby the collector makes a purchase choice for an entirely subjective and perhaps idiosyncratic reason. He will then make another purchase in the same way, but the second purchase will relate to the first creating a new relationship between the two. This process will continue, but the objects will, in a sense, “speak” to the collector revealing other relationships that he was not consciously aware of at the outset. If the collection is intended to be general, then the differences will become more important and the collector will try to maintain this variety in future purchases. As the “conversation” proceeds, new categories will reveal themselves to the collector and these will also affect his future choices.

If the collection starts out by being specialized, the same process will ensue, but the collection will have the unifying feature of the subject of the specialization. It does not have to be an obvious classification system such as a coin of each Roman emperor, or a coin from each Greek city state in a region, or a coin from different time periods. The specialization might be coins that depict buildings; animals; different deities or any number of other subjects.

There is a tendency for collections that start out being general to become more specialized over time. The reverse happens only rarely. Yet, as the collection progresses within its area of specialization, a greater number of classificatory divisions become apparent. The collector will find orders within these divisions and sometimes these divisions and the nature of their relationships will reveal information that no one had ever noticed before. It is most likely that these revelations will be directly connected to the very personal and idiosyncratic nature of the collector’s own interests, and if they are not, then the interest of the collector will then shift to include the subject of the revelation. The product is almost alchemical: not only is the collection becoming transformed, but also is the collector.

He will undoubtedly feel the need to educate himself more about the subjects that are being revealed and the books that he will read, besides giving him more information, will also pose yet more questions and all of this will feed into the way he adds to his collection.

I am speaking here, of course, about an “ideal” collector: a person who will add to the knowledge of his subject. Even if he never writes about it, the collection itself will become a reference work that can be read much like a book by anyone who can devote the necessary time and intelligence to the task. Many such collectors will realize, though, that a book or a web-site will communicate far better and reach more people than the

collection itself. Consequently, it is not uncommon for the fruit of private collections, or even the collections themselves, to be shared through a more universal medium of communication.

It is impossible to tell which collector will go on to making a real contribution to the subject of his choice. It takes incidences of serendipity for such a thing to happen – and it might happen quickly, after many decades, or never at all. It is nothing that a collector should be concerned about: if his interest does not grow it is because he has no personal need for it to grow and his collection might remain nothing more than an occasional diversion from the pressures of day to day life. There is nothing wrong with this at all and collectors should not feel obliged, in any way, to become authorities. If it does happen, it is because the collector has a personal need for it to happen. It is a natural and organic process.

When the collector dies or changes his interests to something different, the collection will most often be sold or donated to a museum. Of the two possible fates for the collection, it might come as a surprise to many that I would recommend the former. The reason for my preference is that we have already determined that the collection is not a static thing, but a process. Were it to go to a museum, there is a chance that it would be broken up and become integrated with coins of a similar nature as defined by the curator. Even if the collection stayed together as a whole, its new custodian and series of future custodians would have a completely different psychology and it is unlikely that their interests would be the same as the original collector.

If the collection is specialized and it is to be sold, it will attract the attention of a number of auction-houses whose staff will realize that it will, in turn, attract other specialized collectors of the same sort of material. This will give them a financial advantage over that of general sales and it only takes two desperate collectors in the same room to create a new record price for a great and desirable rarity that they both might have been trying to obtain for many years.

The auction house will prepare a profusely illustrated catalogue, which will reflect the order determined by the original collector. Later, this catalogue will become an important reference work in its own right. It is unlikely that a collection donated to a museum would be so published, and because of the general lack of funding for museums, and the dependence of the sales of the catalogue to pay for its production, such publications are often slow to reach the market. Many of the British Museum catalogues of ancient coins, for example, are decades old and quite out of date—lessening their value to scholarship.

The costs of publication and research and a museum's charges for photographs and reproduction rights often prohibit coherent major works. More often, they encourage only small academic papers about a tiny part of a collection that can be published far and wide in a variety of journals, some obscure and difficult to obtain.

The academic value of auction sales catalogues is well known to scholars and museums and libraries often contain great collections of these catalogues. Noteworthy among these

is the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University where a collection of more than 42,000 coin sales catalogues are maintained as an important research tool.²

Many people lament the breaking up of a collection, but the contents do not vanish. Instead they recombine into new collections in a process that makes our own short lives puny by comparison. Each time that the coins come together into new collections, they reflect the personalities and the years of learning and discoveries of yet more collectors and they give us more, century after century.

To freeze coins in public collections and to make it difficult for collectors to continue to go about their task is wrong. To make them sacred and untouchable objects to be venerated -- “priceless artifacts” or to hold them as monuments to nationalism is a crime against the human intellect and the value of the individual.

Provenance

Provenance can mean both the original find-spot and the subsequent ownership of an object. *Provenience* is sometimes used to describe only the details of the find, itself, but objects had an existence prior to them being found and the more general term *provenance* should recognize that former existence. Archaeologists stress the importance of recording of provenance for three reasons: it can be used to determine the purpose of an object and help with the creation of distribution patterns by the examination of the circumstances of its original find. It can also prove legitimacy by its subsequent chain of ownership.

A superficial examination of these statements would see nothing wrong with them: an object is found and the details of the find are recorded. Then, the subsequent locations of that object are also recorded in an ongoing process. If we imagine a utopian world then such a process can take place within such a world leading to a complete understanding of the past and proving the legitimacy of ownership of the objects of the past. Of course, the latter would hardly be needed, because in such a utopia, crime would not exist. There is also a philosophical problem by placing the find details at the beginning of this chain of ownership: obviously, the object was created at some point – its creator would be the original owner and its first location should be considered very important. If only the find spot is described as the first entry of the object’s provenance then archaeology and treasure hunting become only salvage operations. Thus we see situations such as some Athenian coins being returned to Turkey because that is where they were salvaged, and not to Athens, where they were originally issued. That the term *cultural property* is used in such situations is thus rather odd.

The title of a 1993 paper by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew proclaimed that *Collectors are the real looters*.³ It is imagined that if the trade in coins and antiquities were stopped,

² <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/dept/coins/library/salescatalogue/>

³ *Archaeology* 46(3):16-17.

then archaeological sites would no longer be robbed for such objects. Again, this is a utopian view of the world that, ironically, fails to recognize any historical reality.

In the eighteenth century, land clearances in the highlands of Scotland left many stone-built houses abandoned and most of the stones were then used to construct fences to contain livestock and to define farm boundaries. We might also wonder if some of the original stones of these houses were also taken from previous structures. The Iron Age promontory fort at Hengistbury on the south coast of England was found to have included cupellation hearths, which were used to extract silver from argentiferous copper that was mined in the West Country. Not only that, but billon coins imported from Brittany seem also to have been recycled there and hoards of these coins in Jersey and France have also been determined to have been collected for this recycling process. Many hoards of metal objects as early as the Bronze Age are found where their purpose was recycling. Archaeologists call these *founders' hoards*. In the nineteenth century, it was quite common for Bronze Age gold torcs to be melted down to claim the gold, even though gold did not fetch the high prices that it does today. It was not just gold that was reclaimed, but silver, copper, iron and other metals have been recycled in the past and are still recycled today. Even relatively valueless objects are recycled: if you look for an old abandoned barn, you might well see parts of other wooden objects that were used for repairs.

Archaeology is the study of the material remains of the past, but many archaeologists fail to recognize that the past is a continuous process. This failure is a very curious phenomenon. Any archaeologist would readily admit process if questioned about it, yet their actions would appear to contradict the fact and the *conservation* of the past is one of the commonest concerns of archaeology.

This practical aspect of archaeology has identified archaeologists as the cultural enemies of many North American First Nations. It is an important part of the culture of many of these people that human remains and the objects used in their burial rites are all allowed to decay and vanish naturally. This is not a difficult philosophy for most people to understand and it is quite a common religious practice around the world. Many people believe that their souls or spirits cannot move on unless their mortal remains cease to exist. Even many people without a defined religious belief find some satisfaction in the idea that their mortal remains will return to nature.

Ironically, archaeologists want, instead, to recycle these remains – to transform them from their original state into *learning materials*. This is similar to what many coin collectors want to do, but coins are not considered that important in burial customs of many contemporary peoples. There is the ancient custom of placing coins on the eyes of the departed and in China “hell money” is burned during funeral rites (this is specially printed “imitation” money).

There seems, thus, not to be a clear philosophical stance that is being adopted by archaeology with regard to a deliberate recycling of the past by individuals or the natural

“recycling” through decay and the conservation of the objects of the past that freezes these objects in time. There are many ambiguities in this subject, but the overriding archaeological opinions lean heavily on the side of the conservation of archaeological sites. A critic might point out that archaeology, itself, is a destructive process. Some archaeologists have gone as far as to say that archaeological sites should not even be excavated and should be preserved for such a time that the science of archaeology has progressed further so that valuable information would not be lost. This is; frankly, a crackpot idea that fails to realize that progress is only ever achieved through action and experimentation and the neglect of archaeological sites would make archaeology stagnant as a discipline and would make archaeologists redundant.

So what is the real source of this confusion? Praxis is practice that comes from theory but practice, in turn, generates or modifies theories. Archaeologists usually study a very focused aspect of the past. Their sites are frozen in time at the point of their abandonment. This is not the commonest state for things – most things are either transformed over time, or are destroyed and replaced with other things. Either situation is an indication of process and process is that which transforms life and the universe. We can look at the process, or we can try to freeze one arbitrary point of it. If we attempt to examine the process then the points becomes less of a reality and if we look only at this arbitrary point of the salvage operation that brings the object to our attention then the processes that led to that object being in that position vanishes from few. By focusing on the site, alone, the historical context of the objects at that site is thus not considered important to archaeology.

The objects are denigrated in every way – archaeologists often speak of any attention to the objects apart from their site context as “merely antiquarianism”. Such subjects as art-historical analysis are viewed with suspicion and such data is often ignored. A recent example of this was a chariot burial at Ferrybridge in Yorkshire, England, where the skeleton remains of a man was recovered who had been wearing an *involute* brooch. This type of brooch is classified as La Tène 2 and was manufactured between the early 2nd and the early 1st centuries BC. Preliminary reports focused on the C14 tests of bones at the site and had dated the burial to the 5th century BC even though a photograph of the involute brooch was included in the press release. Later, it was discovered that bones discovered in the outer ditch, which were originally dated to the 1st or 2nd century AD had been curated for more than a century before burial. My reporting of the anomalous C14 dates of the animal bones within the burial mound and the error in the dating of the brooch were never explained.

The aspect of provenance that deals with knowledge gained through the find-spot of an object is thoroughly static. While the object itself can speak to us of its origins, the events that took place between its creation and its abandonment in the ground can only be described through hypothesis or fiction. Once recovered, it resumes its process through people reacting to it in some way. The provenance that is the subsequent chain of ownership, like its previous abandonment, is another series of static states: we do not know what it *meant* to any of these subsequent owners unless they tell us. We mostly measure our own lives, superficially, by our success, our health and our happiness. If we

look a little deeper, some of us will include the variety of our experiences. Our interest in other lives, though, is almost exclusively measured by the variety of their experiences. We might be pleased that others are successful, healthy and happy, but we do not necessarily find such things very *interesting*. Once an object has been described and catalogued, its process can only then continue in any meaningful way through the actions of people. We are less interested in who these people are than how they came by the object and what it became to them.

The artificial and nationalistic cultural heritage, which places a theoretical ownership on objects by people as collectives rather than individuals, does little to encourage any real personal involvement. Objects treated in this way become less interesting to most people, and visitors to the museum where they reside will not even see the vast majority of these objects. The objects will sit on trays in closed cabinets. Real cultural heritage is an aspect of a culture that is absorbed deliberately by an individual and is combined with one's own life experiences. The object, which meant something specific to its original creator, might convey some of that meaning through its form to a later owner, but the circumstances of its acquisition will add further meaning to the new owner: it could be that the object was a gift from someone dear. It might have been purchased during a particularly happy day. Perhaps the object's purchase was the culmination of a long quest. The object might have reminded the person of a friend for some reason, and was purchased as a gift to that person. The object might be bought because it was a bargain, or because it was a souvenir of a visit to some interesting place.

When I was young, I bought a green, corroded lump of a coin from a prominent London coin dealer. It had come from a famous hoard of Celtic coins found in Jersey. I knew it was most likely to be a coin of the Coriosolite tribe of Brittany because it was these coins that made up the bulk of the hoard. I saw a larger lump from the same hoard consisting of many coins but could not afford to buy so many. The single coin cost me about the price of a dinner at a restaurant. I took it back to the shop where I worked and later that day I found a bottle of nitric acid in the basement of the shop. Being rather too eager to clean off the corrosion, I poured a little of the acid over the coin. It almost exploded in a cloud of green smoke. The fumes sent me reeling backward and a couple of drops of the acid burnt small holes in my jacket. Miraculously, the coin did not suffer (such a reaction was due to the exact alloy of that particular coin – if it had been a different alloy, it might have been badly damaged). What was revealed to my great surprise was a Coriosolite coin in nearly mint state, but with a smooth dark gray tone. I bought many hundreds of ancient coins when I was young, but the circumstances of that one remained with me as a cherished memory. About fifty years later, I had reclassified Coriosolite coinage, interpreted much of their iconography and had my book on them published at Oxford. If that incident had not happened, and I had seen such a coin at a museum, it would not have had the Zen-like effect on me that it did and I would have never done such research. I saw many more beautiful coins than that one in museums and owned not a few, myself.

I have seen the statement made by several archaeologists that the value of a coin found at an archaeological site is to provide a date for the site. I see this as an example of harnessing Pegasus to the plow. One must wonder about the skills of such an

archaeologist who would have no clue about what he or she was excavating were it not for a coin among the finds and structures, the type of which had been previously identified and dated by a numismatist. Other archaeologists have stressed the importance of patterns of coin finds over a great area. Now, each of these kinds of data can be valuable, but what is not mentioned in such accounts are the problems in using provenance data. We are led to believe that the provenance data actually reconstructs history for us. One archaeologist has pointed out the folly of such a view.⁴ We not only have to take into consideration the types of environments which preserve such finds for us and make them available to be found, but we also have to realize that another pattern might also be revealed by such finds: the pattern of archaeologists on the ground.

Along with my Coriosolite coin, in the hoard from Le Catillon in Jersey, were a small number of British silver coins, and a few years before my experiment with alchemy and Zen, the origin of British silver coins was dated by this very hoard. The hoard was thought to have been buried in the Gallic wars by people fleeing from Caesar's troops. Now we realize that the hoard was originally intended to be recycled at Hengistbury and the coins had been gathered together some time after the Gallic war. In many references, though, the original dating of these silver coins has been retained even though the evidence for such has been proven to be wrong.

There are obvious ways in which find-spot data can be made more useful, but so far, these methods are being used only in England and Wales: the British Treasure Act and various voluntary reporting systems ensure that a great number of finds made by the public are recorded. The value is not only in the numbers, but in the widespread locations of such finds which help to "level the ground" in respect to the effect of archaeological explorations being focused on locations convenient to universities. Of course, the skewing of data caused by environmental situations conducive to the discovery of objects – or not, will still effect the construction of objective distribution patterns. City areas with little green space will continue to record less finds than cultivated farmland. Nevertheless, parts of the U.K. are providing researchers with valuable data of a kind that is irretrievably lost in many countries with more draconian laws about the ownership of such finds.

Some archaeologists have suggested even more rigid practices with regard to provenance details. One of the most extreme and potentially disastrous recommendations is that collectors should only buy provenanced objects from dealers. These archaeologists imagine that such a practice will lead dealers into buying only "legitimate" stock because the archaeologists also believe that most of the objects without provenance are the result of the looting of archaeological sites. That coin collectors have worried little about the find spots of their coins for hundreds of years and the majority of all coins, whether in private or public collections, have no such find spot data whether legitimate or not, seems not to have entered their minds at all.

⁴ Rodwell, L. W. 1981: *Lost and found: the archaeology of find-spots of Celtic coins*. In B. W. Cunliffe (ed.), **Coinage and society in Britain and Gaul: some current problems** (CBA Research Report 38), 43-52. <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/adsdata/cbaresrep/pdf/038/03807001.pdf>

To people who have actually studied collecting and the market, this suggestion of insisting on buying only coins that have been “legitimized” as such is met with due skepticism. Even if we imagined that every dealer and their suppliers would suddenly stop buying material that was not accompanied by find spot or other provenance data, then the millions of unprovenanced coins would suddenly lose their commercial value. Collectors and their heirs would see collections rendered worthless and the bulk of available stock would vanish from the market. The price of provenanced objects would skyrocket as a natural response.

Of course, such an event could never happen. Dealers would realize that their business would be over or they would be forced into being less than select in determining the legitimacy of provenance data that came with the coins that they buy. The criminal activity of providing false receipts and false find spots would increase exponentially and the legitimate find spot data base would be corrupted and rendered useless as a result.

The levels to which this criminal activity would rise can easily be imagined: numbers of criminals would soon be making false reports of finds in the U.K. to provide “legitimacy” for their coin finds. Objects, which could never have been found in Britain, will acquire the false references of old collections and badly described lots in early and unillustrated sales catalogues. Old paper is easy to come by and faked receipts can be almost impossible to detect.

It would seem that these archaeologists have not thought very deeply about the ramifications of what they suggest. They have also gone against the ethics policies of some of their own professional societies by promoting an increased commercial value in coins and antiquities. Auction sales have already registered steep increases in the price of provenanced objects and some new “world record” prices have already been recorded.

The Way Forward

An important focus, on both sides of the collecting issue, has been concern about the loss of knowledge. Some archaeologists have said that collecting encourages the looting of archaeological sites and that an object stripped from its archaeological context has lost ninety percent of its information. Numismatists have countered these arguments by saying that the vast majority of coin finds are not stratified site finds; that looting will continue with or without collectors because coins have value not only as collectors items, but as bullion and even souvenirs or curiosities that are eagerly purchased by tourists. Numismatists also have said that the prospection of ancient coins has resulted in a huge number of new types being discovered that has greatly added to our knowledge, not only of the coins themselves, but also of the people who issued and used them. They feel that draconian restrictions on collecting will only result in the loss of new knowledge and an end to numismatics as a viable discipline.

The archaeologists' claim that a coin loses ninety percent of its informational value when taken from its archaeological context is a revealing statement. Of course, no one can quantify knowledge not yet gained. Assuming that these archaeologists are being honest and truly believe what they say, the only way that this statement can begin to be made logically valid is to restrict the types of knowledge that could be gained to those that can be discovered through the current practices of archaeological excavation. Even then, the resulting estimates are difficult and perhaps even impossible to state. One cannot merely *count* facts, one also must estimate the relative *importance* of such facts and that can only be subjective and based on the current questions one is asking of the evidence.

By first defining what is important, and then showing that collecting leads to a loss of most of that data, archaeologists are presenting a circular argument. All they are really saying is that collectors are not field archaeologists. Well, we all knew that already. It is unfortunate that those archaeologists have not bothered to discover what numismatics is really about and how (as I described in the first part of this paper) the infrastructure of numismatics includes prospection, collectors, scholars and dealers and cannot operate at all without this complete infrastructure. It is most sad, though, that these archaeologists seem incapable of adopting an inter-disciplinary approach to the past. Their ideology states that the past is entirely under the control of archaeology and that the past can only be discovered through the excavation of archaeological sites. This has led them to lessen the value to knowledge that the study of objects themselves can provide when seen within the context of similar objects regardless of their site context. Such archaeologists call such studies "mere antiquarianism".

In all fairness to archaeologists, I hasten to add that only a vocal few of these archaeologists really hold such an extreme view. Archaeometallurgists study the objects themselves and their comparisons are made between similar objects from many different sites or even where no site information is known. So-called "finds specialists" (which includes numismatists) also treat the objects in isolation in archaeological excavations.

In the higher echelons of theoretical archaeology the problem of such exclusivity is well known: Ian Hodder, the British pioneer of post-processualist archaeology now working at Stanford in the U.S. says of the general public that:

"...they are kept at a distance from archaeological artifacts by glass cases, systems analyses and the jargon of social theory. Where they *do* manage to gain some access to an immediately experienced past, they are often directly confronted by the archaeological establishment, or else their views are studiously ignored."⁵

Alison Wylie is a Canadian philosopher working at the University of Washington in Seattle who writes of archaeological philosophy and theories. She says:

⁵ Ian Hodder, **Reading the Past**, Cambridge, 1986, p. 163.

“North American (anthropological) archaeologists define themselves as authoritative experts on a resource of great public significance that they are best fitted to document, appraise, and exploit. There is considerable tension implicit in adopting a stance as protectors of a scarce and valuable resource while at the same time advocating interests that make archaeologists primary users of that resource.”⁶

The smugness and condescension that many collectors encounter coming from the most vocal of the anti-collecting archaeologists is almost palpable. No small wonder – these archaeologists know that they are foxes guarding the hen house.

In the search for knowledge, no small stone is left unturned. Richard J. Bernstein illustrates this fact by referring to the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce:

“The philosopher who most carefully and penetratingly distinguishes epistemological skepticism from human fallibilism is Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce criticizes the picture of scientific reasoning that represents it as a linear movement from premises to conclusions or from individual “facts” to generalizations. In its place he emphasizes the multiple strands and diverse types of evidence, data, hunches and arguments used to support a scientific hypothesis or theory. Any one of these strands may be weak in itself and insufficient to support the proposed theory, but collectively they provide a stronger warrant for rational belief than any single line of argument—like a strong cable that is made up of multiple weak strands. This shift in characterizing scientific argumentation is one of the reasons Peirce so emphasized the community of inquirers—for it is only in and through such a critical community that one can adequately test the collective strength of such multiple argumentation.”⁷

This practice is familiar to those who study the ancient Celts for the lack of material evidence has to be compensated for by studies in the Classical histories and geographies, in later Irish epics, in linguistics and in comparative mythology, to mention just a few subjects. When the Celtic Coin Index was started at Oxford, not only archaeologically excavated material was included, but also chance finds, and coins in both private collections and dealers and auction house catalogues.

Compare this philosophy with the policy created by the Archaeological Institute of America for the inclusion of a paper into their *American Journal of Archaeology*:

“In keeping with the revised (2004) policy of the Archaeological Institute of America, the AJA will not accept any article that serves as the primary publication of any object or archaeological material in a private or public collection after 30 December 1973 unless its existence is documented

⁶ Alison Wylie, **Thinking from Things**, Berkeley, 2002, p.234.

⁷ Richard J. Bernstein, **Beyond Objectivism and Relativism – Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis**, Philadelphia, 1983, p.69.

before that date or it was legally exported from the country of origin. An exception may be made if, in the view of the Editor-in-Chief, the aim of the article is to emphasize the loss of archaeological context. Reviews of exhibitions, catalogues, or publications that do not follow these guidelines should state that the exhibition or publication in question includes material without known archaeological findspot (see N.J. Norman, "Editorial Policy on the Publication of Recently Acquired Antiquities," *AJA* 109 [2005] 135-6)."⁸

Clearly, ideology has been considered more important than scientific knowledge. It should also be noted that there are countries that do not permit the exportation of ancient objects at all. The exception that is made is made, again, only for ideological reasons.

The Society for American Archaeology includes a similar restriction in their *Principles of Archaeological Ethics*:

The Society for American Archaeology has long recognized that the buying and selling of objects out of archaeological context is contributing to the destruction of the archaeological record on the American continents and around the world. The commercialization of archaeological objects - their use as commodities to be exploited for personal enjoyment or profit - results in the destruction of archaeological sites and of contextual information that is essential to understanding the archaeological record. Archaeologists should therefore carefully weigh the benefits to scholarship of a project against the costs of potentially enhancing the commercial value of archaeological objects. Whenever possible they should discourage, and should themselves avoid, activities that enhance the commercial value of archaeological objects, especially objects that are not curated in public institutions, or readily available for scientific study, public interpretation, and display.⁹

The slant here is obvious: "commodities for personal enjoyment or profit" sums up what many archaeologists think about collectors and dealers. There is no admission that such people could ever be interested in studying the past and contributing to the knowledge base, yet, in practice in many areas, the importance of the collector and the dealer is acknowledged. The collection of sales lists by the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge being a clear example as well as the Celtic Coin Index.

Alison Wylie¹⁰ presents another important example: the publication of C. P. Donnan's articles on the Moche culture of Peru by *National Geographic* which "prominently featured material held in private collections, some of which was undeniably looted." Donnan said "If I had known now what a crucial difference the information [recovered

⁸ <http://www.ajaonline.org/index.php?ptype=page&pid=2>

⁹ <http://www.saa.org/AbouttheSociety/PrinciplesofArchaeologicalEthics/tabid/203/Default.aspx>

¹⁰ op. cit. p. 235-7.

from privately held collections] would make in our ability to accurately reconstruct this ancient society, I would have gone about it with even deeper resolve.”¹¹

I have certainly increased the value of Coriosolite coins by reclassifying them and increasing their earlier six classes to fifteen groups. Prior to my book, a collector need only have to have bought six of these coins to have a representative collection, but now they would need fifteen of them, and the leading world dealer in Celtic coins uses my classification system in his sales lists. I suppose that the Society for American Archaeology must disapprove of my ten-year research into these coins.

In addition to lamenting the loss of important knowledge caused by the policies of the SAA and the AIA in restricting what information should be published, we have to question the validity of what information these two societies actually do publish: such an ideological criterion eliminates any proper typology. We must come to the conclusion that typology has been eliminated from proper archaeological research. Where it should go now is anyone’s guess. If archaeologists consider themselves as the “authoritative experts” on the material past and hold on to their restrictive ideologies then their errors will soon become apparent even to the most casual observer. There are more than a few archaeologists who are dismayed about these policies and understand that, like Peirce and Bernstein, any evidence, no matter how incomplete, is yet important and should be taken into serious consideration. It should certainly never be suppressed. I doubt that Peirce would have ever imagined that scientific knowledge would ever be suppressed as the Inquisition was long over in his time, even though he is considered by many to have been more than a century ahead of his time in philosophical matters.

So what is to be done about all of this? There is no human activity that is exempt from criminal involvement. Looting of archaeological sites will continue to increase unless the security at source is addressed. Targeting collectors and dealers far away from the source to exercise “due diligence” in their purchases fails to recognize that with hundreds of years of collecting where provenance was not considered important, the vast majority of unprovenanced ancient objects are completely legal. Of course, some assert that what was captured by the victors in war should now be reclaimed by the losers, but unless the law to that effect was in force when such captures were made, then no legal claim can be made. To do otherwise would open the largest “Pandora’s box” that the world has ever experienced. By directing energy toward the consumer to help stop looting, entropy will come into play and considerable time, effort and money will be wasted on prosecuting people so far down the totem pole of illicit dealing that its effects will be barely even noticed by those at the top. This is a phenomenon understood by law enforcement agencies: a few years ago a “crack house” on my street was raided and I witnessed the police storm the house with guns blazing. At the other end of the street lived a young man with his family. He was well known on that street to be a small time dealer in marijuana. One of my neighbors asked the detective in charge of the crack house operation if they would be raiding the house of this young man later. The detective replied that while they knew what he was doing, he was such a small time operator that it would be a waste of

¹¹ C. B. Donnan, *Archaeology and Looting: Preserving the Record*, **Science** 251: 498.

police and legal resources to do anything about it. They were more interested in the people who supplied this young man's suppliers.

Although the looting of archaeological sites can never be stopped, and the statistics show that despite all the UNESCO declarations and several high-profile arrests, it has actually been on the increase, looting can be diminished. This trend has happened in England because of the combination of the Treasure Act, voluntary reporting and, generally, a healthier relationship between archaeologists, collectors and particularly metal detector users. The latter being remarked upon by Ian Hodder who says: "Those archaeologists who try to work with, rather than against, metal detector enthusiasts have found ways of encouraging cooperation and understanding."¹²

Collectors who buy from coin shops should be left alone as these dealers have to keep proper records of their purchases and these records are legally available to the police. Those who buy from on-line dealers without premises should use their best judgment in each case. Efforts should be made to step up the security of known archaeological sites, and metal detecting should everywhere be made legal with certain provisions that will lessen any damage to stratified remains. A legitimate international trade in coins and antiquities should be encouraged in all nations as this has been proven to increase our knowledge of the past as I have outlined here. Similar measures to England's Treasure Act and voluntary reporting systems should be implemented everywhere. This will not only lessen looting and provide a wealth of new and important information about the past but can also be used to create income from the taxation of the sales of everyone from the finders to the dealers. There is nothing to stop some of that income from financing archaeology and local museums, both of which are very susceptible to economic downturns.

Most importantly, though, politicians should try to avoid being befuddled by the protectionist and nationalistic archaeologists who make such absurd claims as to say that ninety percent of the information is lost when an object has lost its archaeological site context. They should also be aware of the fact that many of these same archaeologists have personal motives in supporting foreign powers, as they fear that to not do so will limit their own possibilities of excavating abroad. The past is vaster than these archaeologists can imagine. Coins had an important life before they were abandoned in archaeological sites or lost in the fields and the infrastructure of numismatics that must include finders, dealers, auction houses, scholars and collectors is very important to maintain if the subject is to survive at all.

¹² *Op. cit.* p. 163.