

January 30, 2007

Via Fax: 1-202-453-8803

Mr. Jay I. Kislak
Chairman
Cultural Property Advisory Committee
United States Department of State
Room 334
301 4th St., SW
Washington, DC 20547

Re: Renewal of MOU with Republic of Cyprus and Possible Inclusion of Coins

Dear Mr. Kislak:

This letter is to outline some facts and thoughts behind my opposition to any effort of the United States government to impose import restrictions on coins, ancient or modern, that originate (or have spent time) on the island of Cyprus. I feel certain you have received a great many comments on this topic both from those who agree with my viewpoint and those who oppose it.

My letterhead does not carry the name of a university, but I have been actively involved in collecting coins of the world, ancient and modern, since I was a small boy. I had the good fortune to inherit this enriching, intellectual, and dignified hobby from my father, a St. Louis physician, one of his brothers, a grocer, and my maternal grandfather before them. My grandfather, who immigrated to the US from the Ukraine around 1900, carried with him a number of very old coins. They have been not only treasured by our family, but provided a great source of learning over the generations.

Thus my own family's involvement is documented to have ranged two continents and more than 100 years.

Any complete explanation of the matters your committee must consider is bound to be complicated, and like all complicated topics this one can certainly be manipulated and oversimplified by minorities with special interests. I have tried to avoid this pitfall, but want to make it clear that I am available to offer more complete information and documentation to you, your representative, or your committee, at your request.

1. It is my understanding and belief that there are no laws in Cyprus preventing private citizens from collecting ancient coins that may have passed through Cyprus in years past, however distant, or that may have been imported to Cyprus in modern times for the purpose of collecting, learning, and enjoying.

I strongly oppose the looting of archaeological sites, as well, of course as any other type of illegal acquisition of coins or other objects in any country. On the other hand, I must say that as an American taxpayer I very much resent being asked to enforce the laws of other nations in these regards. I believe it is incumbent on Cyprus, which has its own resources, to fully and vigorously enforce any local laws against the looting of archaeological sites, just as they protect their museums and public collections.

2. There are several thousand academic and dirt archaeologists in the United States. Their work is almost completely funded by public institutions and private contributions. Many of the most generous private contributors are collectors of ancient coins.

Among these archaeologists is a relatively small group of who are aggressively opposed to the private (or museum) collection of ancient objects of any kind, coins included. More troublesome is that this group has absolutely refused even to discuss the matter in any meaningful forum with collectors, dealers, or museum curators, even those who strongly condemn trade in stolen items and illegal excavations.

What I believe to be a silent majority of archaeologists cower in fear of censure and inability to publish their work in the journals which these demagogues who oppose private collections of any kind or size control. We know a number of academic archaeologists who are serious collectors in their own right, but are afraid to speak out for fear of being blackballed by the *hoi polloi* academic community. Likewise for many academic historians who see the extreme positive aspects of collecting coins.

Almost none of the American academic archaeologists can be considered coin experts and a majority of American dirt archaeologists cannot tell one ancient coin from another under field conditions. Indeed, highly esteemed professional American academic archaeologists at major institutions have (in modern times) gone so far as to identify absolute forgeries of ancient coins found in the United States as genuine, thus creating entire new and totally bogus fields of so called "archaeological study" for individuals who would like to believe that there was contact between the Middle East and the Americas in the first and second centuries AD.

3. I believe there are around 30,000 ancient coin collectors in the US today. I also believe that I can document that an additional approximately one to two million Americans possess at least one ancient coin as a religious keepsake, heirloom, or in a piece of jewelry. The ancient coin collectors represent a broad cross section of the population of the US and include significant numbers of clergymen, college professors (including, as mentioned, a number of academic archaeologists and classical historians!), businessmen, elementary and high school teachers (who often use coins as teaching tools), medical and legal professionals, and religiously observant Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Moslems.

The wholesome, educational, and honorable hobby of collecting ancient coins goes back nearly two millennia, when some Roman emperors collected ancient Greek coins, or even coins of their predecessors. This hobby is also one that is often passed between generations.

4. A large percentage of scholarly numismatic research in the US and worldwide has been and continues to be conducted and published by private collectors and dealers who are by far the leading group of experts in these fields. Virtually all of this work, which is widely referenced by historians and educators, is funded by the collectors

or dealers themselves. One central reason for this is that in the past there has been miniscule academic interest in ancient coins and even today as I write this there is not a single degree or major offered in ancient numismatics by any significant university in the United States. In fact, there are less than a handful of college level courses in ancient numismatics even being taught in the United States and some of those have been or are actually being taught by collector volunteers. The void in academic numismatics has been filled in this country for more than 200 years by serious collectors and scholars who have come to ancient coins as a hobby and not as academic professionals.

It is, therefore, somewhat curious, that suddenly America's archaeologists find themselves so quickly prepared to encourage punitive action against the very group of individuals who have kept this interest alive and flourishing within the U.S. (There is more academic interest in ancient numismatics in Europe, however, serious collectors and dealers are also heavily involved in top-level research and publication.)

5. Ancient coins cannot be considered "culturally significant" by any modern nation unless they have been specifically found within an archaeological excavation, where, in fact, large numbers of old or ancient coins are *not* found. Coins were invented prior to 600 BC for the main purpose of facilitating international commerce (previously accomplished by the cumbersome exchange of weighed metal and other commodities), thus by their very definition they were manufactured for export. Throughout Cyprus and the ancient Near East coins circulated widely and in large numbers. Many ancient coins came into Cyprus from either ancient Europe or the ancient Near East.

6. There are about 300 small businesses in the United States that specialize in buying and selling ancient coins, including some ancient coins that may have, at one time, been in Cyprus.

Ancient coins in general, and especially most of the kinds of coins that can be found in Cyprus or throughout the ancient Near East, are such common and inexpensive objects that they can hardly be declared "culturally significant."

7. Among those interested in seeing and learning about ancient coins that may have passed through or originated in Cyprus are millions of Christian, Moslem, and Jewish Americans, who treasure these inexpensive and common objects as magical windows through which they and their children can gain enhanced views of their own rich cultural heritage.

8. Finally, large numbers of the coins having passed through Cyprus prior to 250 years ago are probably not even archaeological objects because many of them were never buried in the first place since they continued in circulation or secondary use.

Given the above information, you can certainly understand the logistical impossibility of having the U.S. Customs Office manage to understand the origin and dates of coins which most professional archaeologists cannot comprehend without spending days or weeks in a library looking things up. Customs agents will thus find themselves either making unwarranted and incorrect decisions, or become mired in controversy that will do nothing but a disservice to the Customs office and to citizens of the United States.

In conclusion, let me strongly urge that CPAC should NOT include coins of any age in their import restrictions from Cyprus or any other country. On the other hand,

CPAC and the United States of America should depend on the good offices of the sovereign nation of Cyprus to enforce its own laws rather than asking American taxpayers to help subsidize them.

Sincerely,

David Hendin

Fellow, American Numismatic Society

Treasurer, Ancient Coin Collectors Guild

Life Member, American Numismatic Association

Author of:

Guide to Ancient Jewish Coins

Collecting Coins

Guide to Ancient Biblical Coins

Not Kosher: Forgeries of Ancient Jewish and Biblical Coins

In the Balance: Pre-Coinage Currency and Scale Weights of the Ancient Near East (in press)