

# Numismatics and the antiquities trade

by **Martin Beckmann**

## Preface

This paper grew out of my own personal curiosity when, about two and a half years ago, I was doing archaeological work in Greece. I began to wonder just where all the coins currently on the market come from, and decided to do some research and try to find out. Everyone can come up with one or more anecdotal tales about how coins make it to the antiquities market, but I was hoping that I could find some solid, published facts about this question; the results of my investigation have been mixed. However, I did manage to find a lot of rather interesting information, and I present some of it here. My primary desire was to encourage dialogue on this subject; and since beginning to write this article I have seen this dialogue begin to evolve on its own, both in journals like the *Celator* and on internet mailing lists. I hope this paper may constitute a constructive addition.

A word about myself may be in order. I am a graduate student of Roman archaeology, am moderately well versed in numismatics, and I have participated in a number of digs and field research projects. I was also an active collector of coins, first Canadian and then ancient; however, reasons both financial and "ethical" have, since I began my studies, gradually put an end to my active collecting. This is not to say that I have come to the conclusion that the private ownership of antiquities is a bad thing; hardly. I do however harbour some reservations regarding their purchase on today's market, the reasons for which may become clear through the reading of this article. But this article is NOT designed to be a rhetorical piece against the antiquities trade. Though any claims to "complete scholarly impartiality," made by anyone, can be nothing but false (for everyone is influenced to some degree by their personal feelings, particularly when the matter is one as sensitive as this), I have tried to give primary place to the facts as best I could uncover them. I hope this article, above all, is informative. And please do comment!

## Introduction

One stormy day in the 1st century BC, a merchant ship bound from Greece to Rome ran aground and foundered off the

coast of North Africa. To the bottom went a cargo destined for the art markets of Rome, artwork chosen to grace the gardens and porticoes of senators and aristocrats. When divers recovered this shipment nearly 2000 years later, it was found to contain pieces as old as the 4th century, modern sculpture (that is, 1st century), and even some metal artifacts which, though newly made, had been deliberately patinated, perhaps to make them appear older than they actually were (the earliest evidence of art market forgery...? See Ridgeway 1995). In recovering, conserving, and studying the contents of the Mahdia wreck, archaeologists have thrown light on the ancient roots of an activity which still causes some pleasure and others ulcers today: the modern trade in ancient artifacts. In the following article I want to look at this trade, its causes and effects, and the problems it creates. I will focus specifically on the trade in ancient coins, for this is a topic almost never broached by collectors of these particular artifacts—or at least not until very recently.

## The Source

Where do all the coins on a dealer's table come from? Simply put, the answer is "the ground". It has been estimated that at least 80% of all coins on the market today have been dug up within the last 30 years (McFadden 1993). While some of these newly found coins may be the result of casual finds by a farmer tilling the field or by piecemeal digging on ancient sites, the overwhelming majority have been found as a result of the ever-increasing use of metal detectors. In the 1970's Charles Garret (founder of a large US metal detector company) was able to write that "metal detectors are virtually unknown in Europe and, obviously, if detectors were utilized in the correct manner, countless thousands of priceless archaeological treasures could be discovered" (Garret 1979, p. 208). A huge surge in interest followed and by the early 1980's there were about 180,000 active detectorists in England alone; a recent survey by the Council for British Archaeology has indicated that this number has dropped to around 30,000 (*MDAE* pp. 6-7; in other countries like Greece and Turkey, where ownership of a metal detector is illegal, it is anyone's guess how many are in use).

These detectorists are responsible for half of all coins and fully 90% of all hoards

found in England since 1988 (*ibid.* pp. 10-11)—this information, from British Museum statistics, is based only on finds which are actually reported. Given the low level of reporting of metal detector finds, the true numbers are certainly much higher. The bulk of the other half of coin finds can be ascribed to official excavations, which (through the removal of large quantities of dirt) result in more finds of single coins. Hoards, being much larger, are much more easily found with detectors (see below). While the odd metal detector find is accidental (such as the monstrous hoard of Late Roman silver plate and nearly 15,000 coins found at Hoxne, England, by a Mr. Eric Lawes while searching for a friend's lost hammer), the majority are made by people purposefully and systematically searching for "buried treasure". Two of the most "bountiful" source countries are Italy and Turkey, while major new finds increasingly come from the countries of eastern Europe (as anyone who has been to a recent coin show knows).

## From Finder to Dealer: Laws

Each major source country has laws governing the discovery and dispersal of ancient artifacts. In Turkey, Greece, and Italy all finds must in theory be reported to the antiquities authority. If a state museum wishes to acquire a find, the finder is then supposedly entitled to a reward relative to the value of the find. For example, Italian law automatically makes all found objects the property of the state and prohibits private appropriation, sale, or purchase of such objects. To encourage people to report finds Italy also has a policy of rewarding the finder with 25% of the current market value in cash or a share of the finds. Unfortunately, this seems to seldom work in fact: For example, the finder of the famous Riace bronzes got only the equivalent of \$17,000 in compensation for statues which, had they been sold on the art market, would have likely brought millions ("News," *Minerva* March/April 1995). With this sort of thing going on, it is not surprising that people who find such treasures often turn to illegal means of disposal.

Even more unfortunately, it seems that even the offer of a realistic reward does not serve to convince all people to turn in their finds. In Britain, the Treasure Act (which recently replaced the old common law of Treasure Trove) requires all finds of two or more coins more than 300 years old (ten or more,

if they contain less than 10% silver or gold) to be reported to government officials (*Treasure Act*, pp. 3-5). Museums are then given the option to acquire these objects from the finder, to whom they must pay full market value. This sum is determined by independent appraisers and seems to be quite fair: Mr. Lawes received about 1.5 million pounds for the Hoxne Treasure. Nonetheless, it seems that even such a generous reward policy is mostly ineffective. Even in England, "only a minuscule proportion of metal-detected finds ever makes its way into archaeological records" (*MDAE* p. x). The new Treasure Act expands the categories of finds to be reported and also streamlines the reporting process, but the good it will do seems questionable in light of the Council's survey (see Bland 1994).

In some countries, low compensation is not the only deterrent to reporting of finds. In Greece, if the find is not bought by a museum (or confiscated), the finder is allowed to register and retain it. This however effectively forbids the finder from selling it, and if it goes missing the finder is liable to be prosecuted. A similar policy applies to the land on which archaeological remains are found. Landowners are sometimes so afraid of confiscation that they hide or destroy any artifacts they accidentally uncover (see Lazrus 1995, p.134). Others simply sell them on the thriving black market, with the result that all information as to their context is lost forever.

### Smuggling

With such antiquities laws in place, the only way that most coins can be exported from their country of origin is by being snuck out without official permission and without any record of their provenance. Needless to say, accurate documentation of these activities is hard to come by! Nonetheless, I have come across some sources relating to coins, the value of which the reader must of course judge carefully. One main transit point for coins on their way from source country to market is London (A. Walker, personal communication), attractive because of relatively lax U.K import laws on antiquities. The U.K. has still failed to ratify the 1970 UNESCO convention requiring the return of illegally imported or exported artifacts. Acar and Kaylan (1990) have done extensive research (supported to some extent by the

Turkish government) on the looting of antiquities in Turkey and their sale in Europe, particularly through Munich. Arnold Saslow provides an interesting, if hearsay, description of one facet of the antiquities trade between Turkey and Germany (Saslow 1990a). The scene is set in rural Turkey and soon moves to the shadowy offices of Turkish middlemen in Munich (routinely overlooked by Turkish authorities in pursuit of stolen antiquities, apparently). These men are identified as "often major consignors to some of the world's most prestigious auctions" (Saslow 1990 a, p.37). This route of trade appears still to be important. A Berman dealer wrote in a recent *Celator* advertisement that "Our location near Munich enables us to obtain 'new' coins (hoards and individual pieces) offered by Turks, Bulgarians, 'Yugoslavs' etc." The fact that such coins are legally imported into Germany or England does *not* mean that they have been legally exported from their country of origin.

### Coins, Ethics and the Collector

All of the information that I could recover points to the conclusion that the great majority of coins on the current market are removed from their original archaeological context (be this an ancient city or an isolated hoard) with little or no record of their provenance. This is reflected at coin auctions and on the bourse floor. Sometimes a coin will be attributed to a previous collection, sometimes a dealer may indicate a country or vague geographical area of origin, but the great majority of coins are sold without any provenance whatsoever. Most of the removal of coins from the ground is done by people explicitly searching for coins (and other metal artifacts) to sell. What is really at issue, it seems to me, is not whether or not this actually happens (for clearly it does) but whether or not it is important. Does it really matter that coins are dug up somewhere, smuggled to market and sold to collectors? To answer this question, one must examine what sort of damage this unrecorded removal of coins causes to the archaeological record, and what the scale of this damage is.

### Effects of Removal

The act of digging into an archaeological site to remove an artifact of course damages the site. What sort of damage results from the removal of coins by detectorists? To answer this, the capabilities of metal detectors have to be known (the following specifics were kindly provided to me by Mr. Earl Hautala, ex-president of the Mount Diablo Metal Detectors' Club; further

details can be found in *MDAE*). There is a great degree of variation due to detector type, operator skill, ground conditions and nature of the object detected. An ordinary detector can detect a quarter-sized coin in about 15cm of soil in average conditions, or as deep as 30cm in optimal soil conditions. A hoard of coins the volume of a basketball might be detected as deep as 2-3m. Specialized instruments can attain greater depths of detection: in the late 1970's new style VLF "Deepseeking" detectors were capable of finding large coins at depths deeper than 60cm and a quart-sized container at 1.2 meters or more (Garret 1979, p. 193). These capabilities have undoubtedly been approved on. Few treasure hunters want to go about digging holes a meter deep for every signal, however, and thus detectors with lesser capabilities can be profitably used. Thus it would seem that most finds of single coins would occur in the uppermost layers of a site, often in the ploughsoil if the site has seen agricultural activity. Hoards could be found at significantly greater depths, but they are much rarer than isolated finds. It should also be kept in mind that not each detection would be a coin. For each coin, a number of nails and other metal objects and scraps would also be located; for each of these a hole would also be required.

What then of the damage to a site? Conceivably, a thoroughly detected site with many metal artifacts could be severely pock-marked. It seems however that this pock-marking would not be likely to extend deep into the stratigraphy of the site (except in the case of large hoards). While regrettable and irreparable, I would venture to say that this sort of damage would likely not be disastrous to most sites with deep stratification.

A more serious concern involves the loss of the artifacts themselves. Above all, the most important form of damage done to the archaeological record by coin hunters is the removal and unrecorded dispersal of hoards. At the British Museum 89% of hoards recorded between 1988-93 are known to have been found by metal detectorists compared to only 40-60% of single finds (*MDAE* pp. 10- 11). The value of such original ancient coin groups to the numismatist is immense. They are, in effect, 'snapshots' of the ancient coin population, and provide evidence for coin circulation (with all its political and economic implications), the sizes of issues, and in some cases they are indispensable for dating the coins themselves. Some

hoards may reach the market "intact", but this is the exception and even these have most likely been culled for the best specimens, potentially rendering the remainder useless for study as a hoard (for this complaint made from a dealer's perspective, see Saslow 1990b).

The scope of the damage caused by unrecorded removal of hoards appears rather surprising when looked at on a regional level. Eric McFadden (1993) has reported that some areas have apparently been so worked over by treasure hunters that they have begun to show diminishing returns, including the entire island of Sicily. It must be remembered that the supply of in situ ancient coins is finite, and once they are removed from the ground a great part of their information is lost forever. In the case of single finds in the ploughsoil this is not likely to be a big problem. In the case of hoards, however, the damage caused by their removal and dispersal is extremely serious. In the estimation of Richard Reece, for a hoard, "the moment it is split up 90% or more of the information is lost" (personal correspondence).

### On the Other Hand

Another effect of the trade in coins is that a large number of coins have come to light, many more than would be known if coins were only uncovered in official digs. Up until recently, almost the entire corpus of numismatic knowledge as we know it has come as a result of the study of unprovenanced collections (as indeed all of the major non-excavation related collections are). Until most recently, most or all of the major figures in numismatics were collectors either privately or through the museum appointments which they held. Many numismatic studies have no need of provenance whatsoever. Indeed, extensive use is constantly made of coins published in auction catalogues which illustrate hitherto unknown varieties or aid in establishing die sequences. In some cases, they provide the only published reference for a newly found hoard (and often extremely well published at that, except for the glaring lack of sound provenance). Also, coin collectors are often quite involved in independent research. I know of one superbly knowledgeable collector who regularly aids in the identification of coins found during official excavations on various archaeological sites in Greece. Coins are certainly the most easily accessible field of antiquities collecting, economically speaking, with many coins available at very inexpensive prices. This has opened the field up to a wider range of people, not just the elite

wealthy connoisseurs, and encouraged these people to take a more scholarly approach to the topic. The pages of *The Celator* contain examples of such work.

Metal detecting can have a number of positive aspects when finds are reported. The CBA's report notes particularly advances in understanding of Iron Age coinage, but notes that a very large number of detected coins are still not being reported to archaeologists (MDAE p. 40). Metal detecting can also result in the discovery of hitherto unknown sites, and in the U.K. at least a good number of these would come to the attention of authorities. In other countries, however, the finder would hardly run cheerfully to the nearest museum to report a discovery; most of these sites likely remain unknown.

### Conclusion?

It is rather difficult to attempt to provide conclusions to the question of the "ethics" of the coin trade; nonetheless I tentatively present some here. It seems fairly clear that the majority of coins currently on the market are recent finds and these finds are mainly the result of metal detecting activity, a purposeful search for coins to sell on the market. This searching causes damage to the archaeological record and, to varying degrees, to the archaeological sites themselves. Finds of single coins cause the least damage, and in some cases this may be negligible. The removal of hoards, on the other hand, can cause significantly more damage to sites and their unrecorded dispersal results in the single greatest loss of numismatic and archaeological information. While due to the limited capabilities of detectors the overall numismatic record may not be in grave danger, coin hoards are.

The main problem, as I understand it, is not the collecting of coins but in the manner in which these coins reach the collector—unprovenanced. Both collectors and museums have the desire and funds to purchase coins. With no other purchasing options available, the majority of these funds go (more or less directly) to finance the unrecorded removal of coins from their source sites and countries. The exceptions are purchases of coins which have been on the market for a long time (and these were at some time removed from a site) and purchases by museums of coins reported by their finders (relatively(?) common and also fair in the UK, not so in other countries).

The current international legal attempts to control the antiquities trade

seem doomed to only partial success if not complete failure. Major buying countries are not likely to agree to rules suggested by source countries who cannot enforce these rules in their own territory. The apparent inadequacy of even such liberal laws as the Treasure Trove Law (now the Treasure Act) in encouraging the reporting of finds shows that all the responsibility cannot be left entirely to the finder. Encouragement of greater cooperation between finders and governments may be successful at increasing the rate of reporting of finds in a country with laws as liberal as the UK's, but such a scheme is currently an impossibility in countries like Italy, Greece, and Turkey. Perhaps positive results in Britain may lead to changes in the antiquities policies of these other countries, and thus to a decline in the amount of information lost. This is unlikely to occur at any time in the near future, however.

Collecting has been around for thousands of years and is apparently here to stay. In the case of coins, it has been and continues to be the realm of productive scholarship. The way ahead seems to lie in a greater awareness of collectors for the value of provenanced artifacts and a greater willingness on the part of source countries to make such artifacts available. The former, I think, will be much easier to achieve than the latter; also, without the latter the former may be to no avail. Is it possible that collectors could have an influence on governments by voicing a desire for provenanced artifacts and thus encouraging the sale of such? As it is right now, the only way coins (and other antiquities) can get out of most source countries is illegally and thus without any provenance beyond hearsay. No constructive moves are currently being made to make provenanced material available to collectors. The collector is left with a choice: buy them unprovenanced or buy nothing. Some people would say that buying nothing would be the solution. Would it? Certainly it would stop legal trade. However, just as other illegal trades flourish, so would that in antiquities (as it does now, for example, in many Pre-Columbian artifacts). Poor farmers, bedouins and peasants too would keep digging, looking for treasure in ancient tombs and ruins, only not selling on the market but smashing anything which could not be melted down as scrap. Some of the onus lies on archeological professionals and governments in the source countries; these are the people who are most empowered to act and they are located at the very root of the trade.

My purpose in writing this article was not to forge a perfect and lasting solution to these problems. Rather, I intended to

present in a concise format the facts about the antiquities trade (as best I could uncover them) without taking sides, and this I have tried to do. Regardless of the success of my work, I hope this paper encourages active debate about the antiquities trade, the destruction it causes, and the role of coin collectors (and all other parties) in the trade.

## References and Further Reading:

Most of the information presented in this article comes from articles and news briefs in the magazines *Minerva* and *Ancient*, the *Journal of Field Archaeology*, and from personal communication with various individuals. The "News" section of *Minerva* in particular proved to be very informative, though this source may be biased, as noted by R. Elia in his review of the first issue of the magazine (Elia 1991; Elia questions the objectivity of *Minerva* in view of the numerous ads by dealers in most likely looted merchandise and he asks if the purpose of articles in *Minerva* is to inform readers or to entice them to buy. One might of course ask this same question of *Ancient* or *The Celator*).

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