

Neil Brodie 2007

“Archaeologists, collectors, museums and John Boardman”

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museum also include some questionable acquisitions where information to the visitor is denied due to carelessness or budgetary constraints. Like the borrowed royal Benin bronze head, from the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, that stands anonymous like a Swedish Consul General in a glass case with no information available to the visitor unless revealed by an educator. There are numerous themes that could be discussed through this object: African kingdoms, British aggression,

museum ethics, and repatriation. They are, however, other stories, but unlike the Swedish Consul General, the Benin bronze probably did not ask for its anonymity. It is an artefact on display with its context still left in the closet.

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Archaeologists, collectors, museums and John Boardman

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John Boardman has recently offered us his views on the antiquities trade (Boardman 2006). The issue, as he sees it, is clear: a small clique of 'politically-correct' and 'philistine' archaeologists and legislators imbued with a 'fanaticism of disgust' have embarked on a 'witch-hunt' against a broader constituency of collectors and museums. The 'restrictive practices' of this clique produce a 'censorship of scholarship' that is 'unrealistic', 'unjust and dangerous'. Meanwhile, in the 'real world', motivated by a 'spirit of discovery' and a 'zeal for antiquity', the collectors and museums 'save for scholarship and public enjoyment' antiquities that would otherwise be lost or destroyed, and 'blessed with perception and scholarly expertise' they 'share knowledge and information' derived from their study of them.

Boardman's dichotomy is poorly drawn as most museums these days would line up alongside his politically-correct clique of archaeologists, while some archaeologists (including Boardman) would throw in their lot with the collectors. What is striking about his paper though, as the above-mentioned quotes show, is that he couches his argument in such emotive language. Sometimes, the accusations he makes are not worthy of a scholar of his standing; his claim, for example, that the actions of archaeologists concerned to stop plunder are 'matched most obviously by the wilder reaches of the Animal Rights movements',

extremists known for their violent crimes against persons and property, is absurd and no substitute for reasoned argument. Unfortunately, and perhaps not surprisingly, behind the rhetoric, there is very little of substance and much that is factually incorrect.

Boardman repeats the usually unfounded assertion that most unprovenanced artefacts appearing on the market have not in fact been looted, but are 'chance finds'. Unusually, however, to substantiate his claim, he provides examples drawn from his own personal experience. He describes how in the 1950s while on a walking tour of Boeotia he was shown a sack full of Classical figurines by a farmer who had found them on his fields. The implication for the reader is that in Greece collectable antiquities are regularly found by chance and in some quantity. But archaeological research shows that this is not necessarily so. Over the past 30 years, the methodology of field survey has been developed and refined as a technique of diachronic settlement analysis. Large tracts of land are walked systematically by teams of archaeologists, the locations of any artefact concentrations are noted and any significant artefacts are recovered for study and publication. Any saleable artefact would almost certainly be recovered for study, publication and curation. The results of many surveys conducted in Greece have now been published. Objects of scholarly significance have been discovered, and despite Boardman's claim to the contrary, no one has ever claimed otherwise. But scholarly significance and monetary value are not always the same thing, and the fact remains that systematic surveys have not recovered the large quantities of saleable artefacts that Boardman's anecdote would predict. Of course, it is always possible that the very reason that such surveys have not



Figure 1. *Display of excavated artefacts in the Athens Metro.*

recovered such material is that it had previously been collected by farmers and sold. If this is the case, it might introduce a severe recovery bias into survey methodology and distort any historical conclusions drawn from survey data — one of Gill and Chippindale's 'intellectual consequences' — though Boardman does not elaborate on this possibility.

Boardman goes on to say, however, that most 'chance finds' are probably thrown up by construction projects cutting through archaeological sites, citing his own observations in Athens and Chios. The market, he thinks, acts beneficially in such circumstances by rescuing artefacts that would otherwise be lost. Maybe so, but it is hardly an ideal solution. A better strategy is to ensure that damage caused to archaeological heritage by building is minimized by appropriate proactive intervention. PPG-16 was introduced in UK with such a purpose in view, and is generally considered a success (Wainwright 2000, 926). Similar rules are now in place in Greece, and the construction of the Athens Metro provides an excellent example of their utility. Sites encountered during tunnelling were excavated and reconstructions of the excavations together with associated finds are now imaginatively displayed in the relevant Metro stations of central Athens, where they are available for viewing free-of-charge by passers-by (Figs. 1 & 2) (Parlama & Stampolidis 2000). A better strategy surely for the archaeological heritage of Athens than site destruction followed by the 'rescue' of collectable artefacts by foreign collectors, a better strategy at least for those members of the public who spend more time on the Athens Metro than in the homes of collectors.

Boardman accuses archaeologists who oppose the illicit trade of 'censorship of original scholarship' and writes that he was 'brought up to believe that censorship is worse than theft'. He is referring to the policy of some journals to refuse first publication of unprovenanced artefacts. But things are not always what they appear. Some information about the provenance of so-called unprovenanced artefacts must always be known, sometimes, as the case of the Judas Gospel has

shown, a lot is known and will be published when it is profitable to do so. Most times, however, provenance-related information is never released into the public domain, which is why artefacts continue to labour under the epithet 'unprovenanced'. Dealers argue that they keep provenance secret so as to protect client confidentiality or to hide the identity of a source. Sceptics argue it is to facilitate illicit trade. Either way, commercial practice is restricting the amount of provenance-related information being made available for academic research.

It is this restriction of information that constrains academic freedom, not the publication policies of academic journals, and it does so in two ways. First, it obstructs the ability of academics to research either the antiquities trade or contemporary antiquities collecting. Boardman might be surprised to learn that the trade has become a legitimate area of enquiry for criminologists, sociologists and lawyers, who all find their academic freedom seriously curtailed by the heavy veil of commercial secrecy. But there is also a second, more insidious effect. Freedom might be defined as the capacity for informed choice, and academic freedom can only be said to exist when scholars are able to choose a course of research confident in their knowledge of its contexts and possible consequences. Clearly, for unprovenanced artefacts, such an informed choice is not possible. Boardman deplores the effects of non-publication on scholarship, without really knowing what material damage is caused by the trade. He has little to say about criminal involvement in the trade, and the social harm it causes, other than to suggest that it might be less

important than censorship. Again, presumably, he just doesn't know. Yet until the social and criminal relations of the antiquities trade and the material damage it causes have been properly ascertained by verifiable research, which at the moment is not possible, as much because of the intransigence of collectors and some sympathetic academics and museum curators as it is because of the obstruction of dealers, scholars can only choose to study unprovenanced artefacts in complete disregard of any possible consequences. The choice cannot be said to be a free one, in the sense of a knowledgeable one, and it certainly cannot be justified by an appeal to academic freedom.

To illustrate what he sees to be the regressive attitude of archaeologists towards unprovenanced antiquities, Boardman uses the example of the Iron Age Gundestrup cauldron, discovered in a Jutland bog in 1891, though thought to have been manufactured somewhere in eastern Europe. He argues that if a similar object was to appear on the market today then no journal would publish it and no museum would acquire it. Again though, this is not necessarily correct. There is an emerging consensus that unprovenanced objects (including those seized by law enforcement agencies) should be donated to the most appropriate museum or public collection ('repository of last resort' or 'safe haven'), where they will then be available for legitimate study and publication. This solution has been adopted by British museums with regard to artefacts of UK origin (DCMS 2005, 17). Of course, collectors or dealers might choose not to donate objects to such collections, but that regrettable behaviour can hardly be blamed on archaeologists.

Boardman has this to say about the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre (IARC):

It might seem far more appropriate for an institute in Cambridge, largely dependent upon public money, to spend its time investigating misdemeanours committed in the name of scholarship, than to conduct a witch-hunt of collectors and to bully museums in what seems an almost paranoid attack on people and objects (p. 36).

This statement is, quite simply, wrong in every respect. First, the IARC has never received a penny



Figure 2. Model stratigraphy in the Athens Metro.

of public money. Second, concerning scholarly misdemeanours, presumably he does not mean scholarly collusion with the illicit trade but is referring to the problem of unpublished excavations discussed earlier in his paper. He is right, unpublished excavations are a problem, and so are excavated sites that are inadequately cared for, but, again, his criticism misses the target. Since 2001, with exactly this problem in mind, the IARC has been working with British and Greek colleagues towards conserving the Bronze Age site of Phylakopi on the Greek Cycladic island of Melos and publishing new material and information from the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century excavations that were conducted there. Perhaps Boardman is doing something similar? Finally — bullying museums? The IARC has close and productive relationships with the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the Museums Association (MA), and with keepers and curators in the British Museum. The IARC's report *Stealing History* into museum acquisition practices was an initiative of the Museums Association (MA) and ICOM-UK, not of the IARC, and it was researched and written with their full support and participation. It is hard to see how any of this might constitute 'bullying'.

For Boardman, the antiquities world is not a perfect one, but ameliorating practices and institutions have evolved over the centuries so that now it is as good it can get, and he criticizes those who think it could get better. But the Panglossian logic of Boardman's paper is shot through with inaccuracies and infelicities. One wonders what his reaction would be if called upon to peer review a paper of similar standard in his own specialist

area of Classical art. It is hard to imagine that he would recommend publication.

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In the News

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USA

- A boulder inscribed with ancient Native American petroglyphs was found to have been stolen from federal land near Yuma in May. Judging from tracks left, the thieves had dragged the 500 pound boulder to a vehicle (see 'Boulder covered with petroglyphs stolen near Yuma', J. Gilbert, 2 May 2007, Yuma Sun; and 'Petroglyph boulder stolen', 1 May 2007, US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management).
- Two thieves stole a collection of Native American arrowheads from a display in the McQuarrie Memorial Museum, Utah, during a midday raid in May (see 'Arrowheads stolen from S. Utah museum', B. Winslow, 24 May 2007, *Deseret Morning News*). They signed into the museum with assumed names, grabbed the framed displays, hid them under a cloth and walked out through a basement door in front of unaware museum staff.

Israel

Attorneys for the defence in the trial of Israeli collector Oded Golan have presented the court

with photographs dating from 1976 showing the controversial 'James ossuary' (see 'In the News', *CWC*, Issue 12, 2003, 14; 'In the News', *CWC*, Issue 13, 2003, 13; and 'In the News', *CWC*, Issue 16, 2005) on a shelf in Golan's home in 1976. In an enlargement, the whole of the contentious inscription can be seen. If accepted this evidence would place the antiquity in Golan's possession before the 1978 Antiquities Law brought archaeological material into state ownership and would scupper prosecution allegations that Golan forged the inscription after the beginning of 2000 (see 'Collector accused of forging 'James ossuary' say old photos prove authenticity', A. Barkat, 9 February 2007, *Haaretz*)

Greece

- June saw the return to Greece of a 1.3 metre marble torso of a young man which had been stolen from Gortyn, Crete 16 years ago. The statue was discovered in the possession of a dealer in Basel, Switzerland following a tip-off to Interpol. The Swiss-based antiquities dealer was persuaded to voluntarily drop all claims to the piece (see 'Swiss hand back stolen statue from Crete', 14 June 2007, Swissinfo; and 'Greece recovers stolen ancient statue from Switzerland', 14 June 2007, *International Herald Tribune*).
- 1338 undeclared antiquities, including