

# EDITORIAL

Is anybody now confident about the ethics of the antiquity trade? If cultural heritage is the property of descendant communities, then they presumably have the right to destroy it. But if it belongs to all of us, then where should the objects be displayed and cared for? In the country of discovery, obviously – or is it so obvious? There are advantages for the home country in promoting monuments as national icons and tourist attractions; but there is every advantage too in spreading home-produced objects around the world to raise curiosity and teach people to appreciate cultural difference: showing Chinese artefacts to English children and vice versa. If archaeological finds are the ambassadors of culture, who will decide where to send them? If the market is the accepted democratic method of redistribution (which seems to be the way things are going) then the rich, and the rich countries, will buy all the antiquities. We commercial democrats will have no justification in using restrictive legislation to “keep treasures in Britain” (especially if they were not “ours” in the first place).

As an alternative, we might create something like a “global organisation for the origination and distribution of cultural property” (GOODCUP). This would decide where something “came from”, what it is worth and who should have it, who should pay and who need not – a market system, but a regulated and authenticated one, which might achieve security, fair distribution and descendant rights. It is true that a successful market might develop an appetite which can only be fed by digging more objects up, and this would raise a dragon that was famously flouted by Mortimer Wheeler when he sold Iron Age slingshots at Maiden Castle. But at least the onus would then be on controlling access to sites rather than the sprawling international antiquities trade. If the regulation was good enough, all digging would be controlled by licence, and an artifact without a context card would become impossible to sell. We look forward to hearing reader’s views on this key element of the new world order: should the trade in antiquities be forbidden, regulated or permitted to flourish?

Meanwhile, the miraculous reappearance of the Bactrian Hoard beneath the Presidential Palace compound in Kabul is worth the attention of Indiana Jones. The treasure was sealed in 1989 in a concrete bunker behind a steel door secured with seven locks whose keys were held by seven different people since dispersed around the world. Successive regimes, including that of the Taliban, had tried and failed to get in. With the expectation of retrieving a mass of bullion, entry was achieved in August 2003 with the aid of German specialists. As well as the Bactrian gold, the vault is now thought to contain trunks of objects from the Kabul Museum, also put away for safe keeping by President Najibullah in 1989. The 20 000 gold objects of the Bactrian Hoard, excavated in 1978 in northern Afghanistan, have been seen only once in the last 25 years (in 1982) by Viktor Sarianidi, the archaeologist who discovered them. All the artefacts which had remained in the museum were battered into dust by the Taliban in February 2001, and the following month they notoriously dynamited the Bamiyan Buddhas.

Many of the lost objects belonged to the hybrid east-west Gandhara art of the Kushan kingdom (first-sixth century AD), objects which have a strong attraction for collectors. *The Art Newspaper’s* correspondent Elspeth Moncrieff has pointed out that the western interest in Gandhara art, which developed in the 1880s, contributed to collections in London and Paris and that these survived when those in Kabul were destroyed. However in 2003 the market remained a bit flat. “The problem is that there is very little good quality material around

(although there is a lot of minor), and if anything has come out of Afghanistan, it has certainly not made its way onto the legitimate art market. Provenance has become even more essential in this market, and wealthy collectors are now being very circumspect. This explains the world record price of \$669 500 paid for a seated Buddha sold at Southeby's in New York in September 2002." This second-third century statue of grey schist had a *good provenance*. After its discovery by a local farmer in Peshawar in 1880 it was presented to Charles Pearson, a district inspector of schools, who presented it in turn to *his* old school, Charterhouse (England), where it had remained ever since. Thus do antiquities become antiques.

🔍 A British answer to the challenge of treasure-hunting – the Portable Antiquities Scheme – seems to be having some success, by dint of a charm offensive where the message “reporting is good” has replaced the more traditional snarl-offensive “treasure-hunting is bad”. Metal-detecting is praised on TV, local finders are hailed as heroes and the British Museum has put on a special exhibition *Buried Treasure – Finding our Past* (reviewed in this issue). No-one can be sure where this new love affair will end, but nor can we grudge it moments of hedonistic satisfaction. The Hollingbourne hoard is a Bronze Age weapons cache discovered by David Button whilst using a metal detector, and reported to Andrew Richardson (Kent Finds Liaison Officer), who organised an excavation on the site. In the latest annual report of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, Arts Minister Estelle Morris said the excavation was “a prime example of involving local people in archaeology and highlighting the educational value of the Portable Antiquities Scheme”. Another cracking object is the so-called Leopard Cup from Abergavenny, found by Gary Mapps, which is one of the highest quality Roman vessels to have been found in Wales. Subsequent excavation by the Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust revealed a possible funerary context for the vessel, for it was associated with cremated bone and potsherds of Roman date. Mark Wood, Chair of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council [formerly *Resource*], which helps manage the Scheme, said that more than 49 500 other finds have been recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme in the period of their report, many of which would otherwise not have been recorded. All the finds registered by the Scheme are listed on an online database ([www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)).

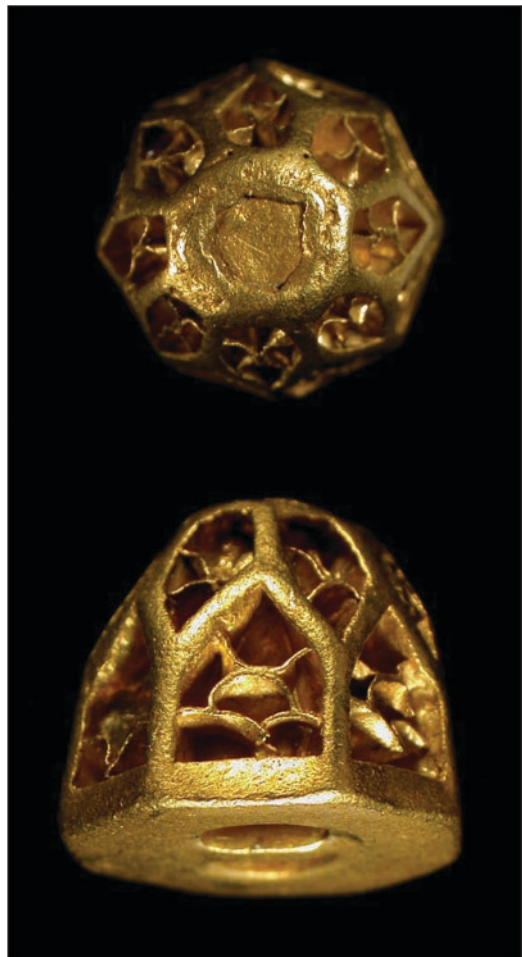


Figure 1 A recent portable Antiquity from the Isle of Wight: pyramidal sword belt fitting of gold, c620–670 AD.

☞ Is the present the new past? Our correspondent Stephen Houston fears that things are moving that way in the USA, partly at least because academic archaeology tends to be situated in Departments of Anthropology. He argues that the desire to integrate archaeology into the current political agenda is hampering our ability to see the past clearly, and he sends us this despatch:

“Archaeologists feel the need to make their work interesting to anthropologists, who tend to command our departments by sheer numbers. Yet our socio-cultural colleagues pay little heed to these proffered flowers, our sad acts of courtship. One response among American archaeologists has been to embrace “presentism”, the shifting, present-day response to the past. A specialist in hermeneutics might find something gratifying in this spectacle. For my part, I continue to press for attention to remote realities – to what actually happened in the past. Some North American archaeologists have little choice in this thrust towards presentism. Their interpretations are closely scrutinized and actively criticized, often with shocking, personalized passion, by Native Americans themselves. Such archaeologists could not ignore the present if they wanted to. But in some places it is not always a simple matter to cleave Native Americans (Maya) from Native Americans (European descent); the two are comprehensively mixed in much of southern Mexico and northern Central America. How are ethnicities supposed to be clear-cut in places where virtually everyone lays legitimate claim to indigenous blood? There is also a great deal of unfairness in attacking those who are, and will always be, the most sympathetic to indigenous needs.

What cannot be remedied easily is the gradual unravelling in Mesoamerican scholarship of the old bonds between socio-cultural anthropology and archaeology. That beloved and gifted scholar, Evon Vogt, not now in good health and long since retired from Harvard, forged with Gordon Willey a strong link between the two, with numerous reciprocal insights resulting from that friendly partnership. In our haste to “presentize” to see (correctly) the Maya and other peoples as something other than cultural fossils, that bond is no longer so strong, especially in the current focus among socio-cultural anthropologists on Maya intellectual or activist movements.

Another move towards “presentism” is laudable, but we must await further testimony as to its wisdom. This is the impulse to see archaeological projects as development projects for the communities (not always Maya ones) that now settle around most archaeological sites. The days of exploration in remote jungle ruins is long past in most of Guatemala and Mexico. The sight of malnourished villages, with extreme poverty in all its forms, would soften the hardest heart. And the fact of the matter is that these communities cannot be ignored: their inhabitants will loot sites if not involved in their protection and can pose great physical danger to archaeologists who slight insistent, local needs. For my part, a Guatemalan colleague and I had to negotiate with guerillas to dig at the ruins of Piedras Negras, Guatemala. Other archaeologists have had to bargain with innumerable, often warring communities that surround archaeological sites. Each, with equal force, lays claim to benefits accruing from those sites. However, I see three problems with this new focus on “development archaeology”: first, archaeologists are not trained in developmental anthropology, a field guided, as the UN can tell us, by shifting objectives; second, the sums we deploy are tiny in comparison with other sources; this means that, having raised local expectations, we cannot possibly meet them, with yet further consequences of an ugly nature; and third, the “presentism” of such

archaeology should not, at our peril, shift us from what we do best, studying the past. If archaeology becomes solely a matter of serving present-day needs, then why dig deeply at all? Why not simply tart up sites for tourists, fixing masonry surfaces, as has been done for years in many parts of Mexico?"

Such thoughts have some relevance to the issue of how to treat human remains, which is discussed further in the Debate section of this issue.



📖 The *Antiquity* essay prize for 2003 was won by Nerissa Russell and Kevin McGowan for their article “Dance of the Cranes” which used analysis of the wing bones of *grus grus* to suggest their use in ritual dances at Çatalhöyük (*Antiquity* 77: 445-455). The *Ben Cullen Prize* for a young author was won by Jason Ur for his mapping of ancient road networks in Mesopotamia using satellite images (*Antiquity* 77: 102-115). This prize, awarded by Ian Gollop, is intended for contributors who are 30 years old or younger, so a coy indication of age from future competitors would be most helpful to the judges. The *Antiquity* quiz at TAG (the Theoretical Archaeology Group) which met this year at the University of Lampeter, Wales, was won by a formidable team consisting of Professors Thomas, Bradley, Darvill, Tarlow, Hedeager and Austin. They generously offered their prize to the student winner of the tie-breaking question: “Who was the founding editor of *Antiquity*?” First with the answer was Cole Henley, just finishing a PhD at Cardiff, who gets a year’s free subscription. Views on how to regulate the formation of future quiz teams will be gratefully received (especially from readers under 30).

📖 Farewell to David Oates, towering scholar of Mesopotamian archaeology, excavator at Nimrud (1955), Tel al-Rimah (1964) and Tell Brak (1976) whose obituary we carry in this issue. We extend special sympathy to Joan Oates, his long term partner and *Antiquity*’s chairman.

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York  
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