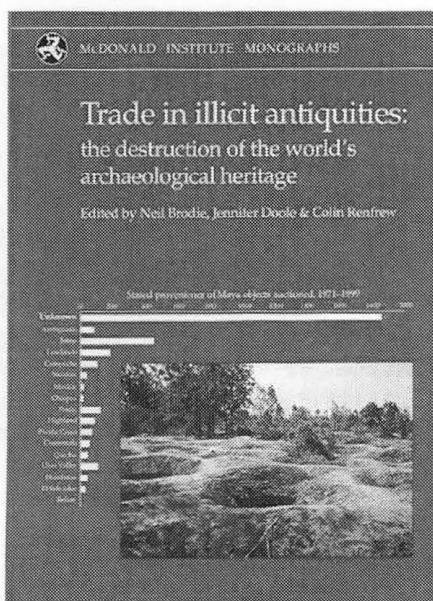


BOOK REVIEWS

Trade in illicit antiquities: the destruction of the world's archaeological heritage

Edited by Neil Brodie, Jennifer Doole, and Colin Renfrew
Cambridge University Press, 2001.
xii + 176 pp., illus., maps



Like the destruction of the world's natural environment the destruction of its archaeological heritage continues in a most depressing manner. The last year and a half brought us the sad story of the looting of the National Museum in Bagdad, which for a time focused not only scholarly but journalistic attention on this significant issue. This book presents twenty papers from an international symposium held at Cambridge University's McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in October, 1998. Scholars and cultural officials from seventeen countries present at length (16 pages: Belize and Niger) or in brief summary (2 pages: Turkey) the situation in their own land. Canada is absent and the two U.S.

papers focus on federal archaeology and on litigation to recover cultural property. It is surprising to see Central America and Mexico, major centres of antiquities smuggling, represented only by a paper by an American archaeologist on Belize and South America only by Peru. Nor is there any presentation on Iran, Iraq, Egypt or the Maghreb while all of Europe and the former Soviet Union is represented only by a four pager on the U.K. that focuses on metal detectors, perhaps the most important issue in that country. One might have looked for an account of the looting of shipwrecks, often permitted by local governments to treasure hunters like recent for-profit projects by a Canadian company in Cuba (Spanish treasure ships), or indeed of modern sites like the Titanic. I focus in this review on topics of perhaps particular interest to readers of *The Midden*.

Chapter One points out the need for hard figures, for a "sounder empirical foundation" that can be used to stir up needed political action by "quantifying destruction and investigating the structure of the trade, criminal and cultural." In spite of the UNESCO convention of 1970 and the UNIDROIT convention of 1995 the trade continues to grow and triumphs are rare. The authors suggest of course that education of public and public officials will help, but smuggled antiquities are small stuff compared to the narcotics trade and interest is not great. A positive step in the academic world was the establishment of the International Journal of Cultural Property in 1990 and in related courses taught at UBC and other educational institutions.

Chapter Two takes us to Thailand and Cambodia, two southeast Asian countries with a rich archaeological heritage under threat. Cambodia is

particularly exposed in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge destruction of its middle class; the Cambodian army itself has looted some sites like Banteay Chmar as recently as December of 1998. Although Thailand has had a relatively stable recent history, plundering of its Neolithic and Bronze Age past has created a catastrophic situation as villagers loot and sell to dealers. Some collectors even carry out their own illicit excavations for desirable objects. Literally thousands of pieces are being smuggled annually into the USA and Canada for sale.

Chapter Three presents the situation in China in six pages and immediately makes the point that the recent "opening" of the country while a "Good Thing" in many ways has had disastrous results for its historical and archaeological heritage with rampant illegal excavation and smuggling and with new reports coming in "almost weekly." At major scheduled sites like the tombs at Reshui, hundreds of locals using explosives and bulldozers have devastated the area. The author give six major examples of plundering and also mentions robbing underwater sites like the Song Dynasty wreck near Huagang Island. Between 1991-1995 the customs service intercepted "more than 110,000 illicit cultural objects" which include only objects seized from tourists, not from mail or freight shipments.

Chapters Four and Five focus on aspects of Pakistan and India. The former looks at the risk to monuments of Gandharan art, the amalgam of Asian and Greek that has become fashionable for collectors these past two decades in particular. The authors make the good point, however, that simple looting is only part of the problem: many sites, for example, are destroyed by

development (roads, canals, building projects, even graveyards) that accounted for nearly 75% of damage in the Charsadda area. Chapter Five gives a number of examples—they could be multiplied manifold, alas—from across India but looks more at pieces smuggled out and eventually recovered; one feels, however, that this chapter touches barely the tip of a very large iceberg. More hard figures would have been more useful than the summary provided of the country's Antiquities and Art Treasures Act.

Chapters Six, Seven and Eight look at Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Niger. Somalia is a desperate case because of the internal chaos that has prevailed there for many years; when civil order collapses, damage to archaeological heritage is one of the smaller things that concern a people struggling to stay alive. The Tanzania chapter talks about the absence of archaeological impact assessments on many projects like roads, pipelines and airports and advocates public education as at least a partial solution; it also is unusual in that it criticizes the country's antiquities service for neglect of duty. Even famous Olduvai Gorge sites have been vandalized. The chapter on Niger is particularly useful as most of us know little of the area; it includes an overview of recent research that in fact takes up much more space than the account of destruction.

The next chapter on Belize is one of the best in the volume. Written by a graduate student at Boston University it was created by a person who spent eight months working on the problem of illegal traffic in antiquities in the second smallest country of the continent. Increased development has opened much of the country with new roads and with it came a boom in plundering ancient sites. The growth in collecting Mayan artifacts both abroad and among the ever growing wealthy families of Mexico and Central America has created a huge market which Gilgan demonstrates with graphs and charts: nearly 2,000 of the 3,300 Mayan artifacts sold in the past thirty years at Sotheby's have no provenance and the average price has grown nearly

twentyfold. The author also carefully surveyed local police records to get a picture of enforcement: it was dismal with an average of three person a year being charged with antiquities looting. The situation is improving now, however, but only a ban on importing antiquities into major markets like the US would really curtail it.

The even richer culture of precolumbian Peru is the subject of the next chapter and once again looting has been at catastrophic levels; as with the drug trade, the local producers receive only a tiny fraction of the eventual market price of the object.

Short chapters follow on Syria, Jordan and Turkey. In spite of stricter police controls in those countries the trade continues to flourish. The Jordanian author suggests tentatively that banning all antiquities trading may in fact be counterproductive and only drive it underground. The paper on Cyprus focuses in particular on the problems in the northern part of the island, occupied by Turkey since 1974, but the author also makes it clear that there were serious problems long before. One positive step was the return to Cyprus by a US court of Byzantine wall paintings cut out of their chapel, but literally thousands of other pieces (particularly ceramics) continue to be smuggled out via Turkey and allegedly offered at dealers like Christie's.

Chapters Eighteen presents a different and most interesting approach to the issue: Ric Elia organized his students at Boston University to study the looting and sale of thousands of Greek-style red figure vases from Apulia in southern Italy. Only 6.9% of ca. 13,600 Apulian vases have known provenances and, while before 1980 the majority of vases were at least in museums, now 75% are in private collections or on the market. Ironically, the careful scholarly study of these vases by Professors Trendall and Campitoglou at the University of Sydney over the past half century has had much to do with creating an appreciation and a market for this remarkable pottery. Such detailed market studies for other types of antiquities would help bring home the

message about the extent of the illegal trade. Chapter Nineteen, the only one by a police officer, briefly presents the vast amount of damage done to Italy's heritage by clandestine excavators but points out the major efforts made by law enforcement bodies in Italy to control the traffic. The scale of the problem can be seen by some figures: ca. 160,000 works recovered by police and 326,000 saved in situ by prompt intervention.

Chapter Twenty by Marisa Marthari, a member of the Greek Archaeological Service, starts with a brief survey of antiquities smuggling from Greece and then presents a case study of the great early Bronze Age culture of the Cyclades islands whose schematic marble figurines influenced modern masters like Picasso and Modigliani. The vast majority of these figurines have come from illicit excavations and from master fakers, indeed to the point that scholarly studies of them have doubtful value in the eyes of many specialists. The author points out a new museum on the small Cycladic island of Ios that puts the culture into a better context and makes it clear to locals how much damage clandestine excavations do to our knowledge of their heritage.

This book is a useful contribution to the topic and presents the situation ca. AD 2000 in a number of countries, especially some like Niger, Kenya and Tanzania about which we hear little. Symposia like the Cambridge one are positive forces in the neverending struggle to preserve ancient sites from wanton destruction, but they are only a very small step on a very long journey. It was good to read in the paper from Syria that Canadian customs officers have managed in 1991 and 1996 to return 86 smuggled mosaic panels back to their home, but such successes are, alas, all too infrequent.

Hector Williams

Hector Williams teaches in Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies at UBC and directs its excavations at Mytilene and Stymphalos in Greece; he has served on the Board of the Archaeological Institute of America for ten years, the last four as President of AIA-Canada.
