Ancient Coins and the Cultural Property Debate

Introduction

Rick Witcher

Ancient coins have been collected and studied for centuries and, until fairly recently, the trade in newly discovered coins was an accepted feature of the hobby. Historically, there was often a close cooperation among dealers, collectors, and scholars who wished to study ancient coins to advance numismatic knowledge. Information about the find spot of coins was often transmitted from the finder to the dealer, and thence to collectors and scholars. And it was often possible to make complete records of newly discovered intact hoards of ancient coins, which are of crucial importance in establishing the chronologies of many series. Under this arrangement, of course, much information was lost, but much was preserved as well.

Beginning in the 1960s, a number of factors combined to fundamentally change the way the market in ancient coins operated. First, sensitive metal detectors became widely available, and these were increasingly used to search for metal antiquities, including coins. Although the use of metal detectors is illegal in many countries, their use has become widespread, and the volume of recently excavated ancient coins available on the market has increased dramatically.

Secondly, countries where ancient coins are found began to more aggressively enforce their national patri- mony laws, which claim ownership for the state of all antiquities found in the country, whether on public or private land. This increased vigilance drove the illicit trade in ancient coins underground, and finders and dealers, who have a strong interest in preserving the market in ancient coins, used to search for metal antiquities, including coins. Some archeologists believe that the suppression of the illicit trade will also eliminate demand for antiquities, and thereby end illicit excavation. Thus, in the ongoing debate, archeologists are largely aligned with the countries where antiquities are found, whereas they are opposed by dealer and collector groups who wish to maintain the trade in ancient coins. So the current situation is complex and evolving, and it is important for collectors to understand the issues involved.

The ANS has a long tradition of scholarly numismatic research and publication, often based upon the availability of information about the source of ancient coins, and thus supports efforts to preserve contextual information. On the other hand, much of the membership of the ANS consists of coin collectors and dealers, who have a strong interest in preserving the right to responsibly collect ancient coins. And the bulk of the ANS’ wonderful cabinet of coins is the result of generous donations from member collectors. Thus, the ANS seeks a balance wherein the licit trade in ancient coins can be maintained, while preserving contextual information. So, in the interest of informing its membership (and the public at large) on the issues involved, we have inaugurated a series of articles on various topics relating to ancient numismatics and the cultural property debate.

The first in the series, presented below, is an article explaining the archeologist’s perspective, by Dr. Sebastian Heath. Sebastian is a long-time member of the ANS staff who now works with the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World. Moreover, Sebastian has worked as a field archeologist, and serves as the Vice President for Professional Responsibilities at the AIA.

The second article in the series, which will appear in the next number of the Magazine, will be authored by attorney Peter Tompa, an ANS Board member who often represents the Professional Numismatic Guild, the International Association of Professional Numismatists, and the Ancient Coin Collectors Guild on cultural property issues. Peter’s article will outline the perspective of the numismatic trade.

Beginning the Dialog: An Archaeologist’s Perspective

Sebastian Heath

Somebody has to go first. With that phrase I start what I hope will be an ongoing discussion exploring the overlap of archaeology, numismatics and the vigorous debate over the trade in ancient coins. I’m grateful to Ute Wartenberg Kagan for asking me to contribute and I want to stress that I look forward to reading what others will have to say. I will not always agree with them, and I know that not all ANS Magazine readers will agree with me. That’s the point. The ANS is an institution that can accommodate differences among its members, especially when it has an opportunity to promote dialog between their differing views.

The only view I represent in this column is my own. That’s important because there are quite a few professional persons that I could adopt. I’m a faculty member at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University. I hold the elected and unpaid office of Vice-President for Professional Responsibilities at the Archaeological Institute of America. And my title is listed here as Research Scientist on the ANS magazine web site, a position that I use to collaborate with ANS staff to enable online access to the society’s immense resources for numismatic research. If there is a position that I write from now, it’s ANS Life Member, and there will be no doubt that I also bring the perspective of a field archeologist. I’ve been working in the Mediterranean for over 25 years so I share with a large number of my fellow ANS members an abiding fascination with the material culture of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. I, of course, don’t choose to own that culture personally and I work as an archeologist to make sure that as much information as possible about all ancient objects is recorded and available to the public, particularly information about find spot.

I don’t expect an interest in preserving find spot information to be controversial. All members of the ANS community can appreciate the discovery of a hoard such as that found buried more than a foot underground in Frome, England (figs. 1-3). The vast majority of the 52,503 coins in this hoard are not especially valuable from the perspective of how much money they would fetch in trade. There are over 12,000 pieces of the Gallic Emperor Tetricus I (d. AD 274) alone, many of which might sell individually for under $20.00. Dispersed on eBay or VCoins, two Internet sites that support a very active trade in unrecorded coins, this hoard would essentially no longer exist. Any information that it can tell us about economic integration in Northern Europe would be lost. Furthermore, the archaeologists and numismatists studying the Frome hoard have now suggested that it is best understood as a votive deposit that was handed over to the gods, and not as a store of wealth that was handed over to the gods, and not as a store of wealth for future generations.

It is good news, therefore, that funds have been raised to keep the coins in a public collection available for study by future generations. I contrast the successful recording of the Frome Hoard with the following quote from an e-mail that came to me on September 20, 2010 via the Yahoo group “Uncleaned Ancient Coins”:

Hoard with the following quote from an e-mail that came to me on September 20, 2010 via the Yahoo group “Uncleaned Ancient Coins”:

"I think it is important to keep in mind that ancient coins are not just an interesting curiosity or a valuable investment, but also important cultural artifacts that reflect the customs and beliefs of the people who created and used them. It is important to preserve these artifacts for future generations, not only for their intrinsic value, but also for what they can tell us about the past. To this end, I believe that we should support efforts to keep ancient coins in public collections available for study. I look forward to reading more articles in this series on the topic of cultural property and ancient coins."
I have received some more uncleaned coins from my friend in England. These are coins he and his mates have found while metal detecting. There are some nice individual uncleaned coins if you want to clean an(sic) quality individual coin and also one group of 20 uncleaned AE-4s. Limited inquiry suggested that these coins were not registered within the UK’s Portable Antiquities Scheme, which raises the very substantial possibility that they were illegally looted.

I'm not assuming that the coins described in this offer came from a hoard as magnificent as the Frome discovery. But I hope that all ANS members can recognize that buying these coins, and coins from similar offers that appear on a regular basis, would be part of sustaining demand that in turn sends searchers out into fields and so leads to further destruction of knowledge about the ancient world. The coins found by a detectorist and his mates could have been of great cultural importance. Unfortunately, we do not know. It is certain that the e-mail that is our only record of their existence will be a source of frustration for any one trying to reconstruct a complete picture of monetization in Roman Britain. That’s not intended as a condemnation of all numismatic trade. But I do think offers of plausibly illegal coins coming from countries such as the United Kingdom, which is praised for its legal market, tell all of us interested in the ancient world that a very substantial problem exists, both in the British Isles and elsewhere. Indeed, most collectors and dealers whom I speak with in private readily agree with this assessment.

It is because the ongoing looting of coins is a problem that I have chosen to participate in hearings in front the Cultural Property Advisory Committee (CPAC) in Washington, D.C. as part of the process by which the United States enters into or extends agreements—known as Memoranda of Understanding (MoU)—with other countries to restrict the import of antiquities under threat of illegal excavation. The so-called “MoU process” is complex and like many who have taken part, I would welcome more transparency. But the principle behind my involvement is simple: it is appropriate that our shared public institutions work to balance the commercial interests of dealers, the personal interests of collectors, and the strong-felt interests that I represent as an archaeologist. MoUs have been effective in providing a legal context for intercepting illegally traded antiquities and these successes indicate to me that the US should enter into agreements with more countries. As it stands, coins are now included in MoUs with China, Cyprus, and Italy. This is an important step in allowing the United States to exercise its own sovereignty in the protection of a well-established public interest: the ongoing study of our shared past.

These brief comments can’t stand as a full exploration of all the complex issues. I’m hoping to have started a conversation and to have done so in a way that invites useful response. Dialog does not require any compromise in principles and may lead to concerted action by the numismatic trade, collectors and archaeologists towards a transparent, legal and honest system of protecting cultural resources around the globe. Such a system is not yet in place and may be a long way off. As an archaeologist, I welcome the opportunity to find partners willing to work towards that future within the ANS’ wise and thoughtful membership.

More information on the Frome Hoard is available at:
http://finds.org.uk/blogs/fromehoard/
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frome_Hoard
http://www.flickr.com/photos/finds/
sets/72157624319051565/