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A Survey of the Material and Intellectual Consequences of Trading in Undocumented Ancient Coins: a Case Study on the North American Trade

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Abstract

Ancient coins are among the most widely collected and demanded objects among American collectors of antiquities. A vocal lobby of ancient coin dealers/collectors has arisen to protect the importation of undocumented material into the United States and also seeks to make a distinction between antiquities trafficking and that in ancient coins. Coins are an equally important historical source and are no less important 'antiquities' than a Greek painted vase. I examine the scale of the trade in ancient coins in North America and address some points made by proponents of a continued unfettered ancient coin trade.

An overview of ancient coin collecting

The collecting of ancient coins as an avocation has existed since at least the Renaissance, as an outgrowth of the antiquarian movement that originated with Petrarch (1304-74). However, the ancients also collected and exchanged coins for reasons that had nothing to do with commerce. For example, the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, was known to have dispensed exotic coins at festivals, which he had acquired (Suet, Aug. 75).

The fact that Augustus and others chose to collect coins and coin-like objects is evidence that other Roman nobles may have done likewise. Apparently, coin collecting may also have extended far down the social ladder. An observation by Pliny the Elder (c. AD 23-79) – that some people would pay more for silver coins of Mark Anthony, struck a half century earlier, because they had been debased with iron and were thus a curiosity (Pliny, NH 33.46) – suggests not only a widespread fascination with coins during Roman times, but also the existence of a marketplace in which coins could be analyzed and traded (see Clain-Stefanelli 1965 for early collecting and a history of numismatics).

Today, with the increased employment of scientific techniques and interdisciplinary approaches in all academic disciplines, numismatics is more important than ever for our understanding of the ancient world. However an overwhelming increase in demand for ancient coins, are causing problems for both archaeology and the serious study of coins alike.

Because it evokes an immediate and close connection to the ancient past, one that we can literally hold in our hand, the collecting of ancient coins has become an almost addictive pastime for many people today. Many collectors like to think of their coins in their original context, wondering, "Who might have held them?" "What might they have once been used to purchase?" and "What historical events might they have been witness to?" "If only the faces on those old coins could speak!" Such Romantic notions may be the impetus for collecting, but to answer any of these questions with any degree of certainty, we must study coins in their original contexts, which are destroyed when coins are ripped from the ground, without record, by a profiteer and

many dealers and collectors, however, do not often consider the material or intellectual consequences of their activities.

Market snapshot

In 1993, it was estimated that 80% of all ancient coins openly sold on the market had been dug up within the past 30 years (McFadden 1993; see also discussion in Beckmann 1998: 25). Now, I suspect the percentage is even higher given that the supply of ancient coins on the market surged during the 1990s, particularly from Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In addition, the increasing use of the Internet for commercial activities has allowed dealers and collectors to network as never before and made auctions and dealer inventories easily accessible to a global audience, thus fueling a growth in demand (that has outstripped the supply of previously documented and provenanced antiquities, including coins, prompting the search for fresh sources (Chippindale and Gill 2001; Elia 2001; von Kaenel 2004: 152-154).

To illustrate the scale of the traffic in undocumented ancient coins, it may be helpful for us to consider a few statistics. As one prominent scholar and numismatist recently reported, a single seller on eBay (the German site) recently claimed to have sold more than 170,000 ancient coins from Serbia, which the seller alleged were taken from in and around Viminacium. These coins were sold in the approximately 2.5 years since the seller became a member on the site in November 2004 (von Kaenel 2007; figure 1). A quick look at this individual's feedback record indicates most of his customers are North American.

The screenshot shows the eBay German interface for an auction of Roman coins. The title is 'Ungereinigte RÖMISCHE MÜNZEN von guter Qualität!'. The price is EUR 1.02 (including VAT), with a 'Sofort Kaufen' button. The offer ends on 04.05.07 at 22:48:39 MESZ. Shipping costs are EUR 3.25, with an option for 'Unversicherter Versand' to Germany or 'Weltweit'. The seller has 9404 items available. The seller's profile shows a high feedback score of 4385 (99.6% positive) and a 'Sicher kaufen' badge. The listing also includes a 'Sicher kaufen' section with instructions on how to check the seller's profile and return policy.

Figure 1. Screenshot of an eBay auction by the German seller under discussion.

Several auction houses and ancient coin dealers host auctions each year in the United States and dozens more in other parts of the world. One of the largest auction houses in the United States, Classical Numismatic Group (CNG), hosts three printed auctions per year and regular bi-weekly electronic auctions on its website. Each January, CNG holds its largest sale of the year, known as the 'Triton Sale'. In the latest Triton Sale,

Triton X, some 19,087 ancient coins were sold, the vast majority having no reference to any previous collection (table 1).

Provenance	Ethical Legitimacy	Total Coins	Percentage
Old collector named or auction ref. provided for a pre -1973 catalogue	Appears legal, on the market before 1973 (U.S. adoption of UNESCO)	32	0.17% - or approx. 1/600 coins
Auction ref: 1974-1980	Questionable. This date range represents its first known appearance on the market	9	0.05%
Auction ref: 1981-1985	“	12	0.06%
Auction ref: 1986-1990	“	11	0.06%
Auction ref: 1991-1995	“	17	0.09%
Auction ref: 1996-2000	“	31	0.16%
Auction ref: 2001-2006	“	106	0.56%
Modern collector simply named as previous owner	Questionable. No previous record of prior sale.	3607	18.90%
Completely undocumented	Highly questionable. No records at all	15262	79.96%
	Total: 19087 coins		

Table 1. Level of documentation for coins from the CNG Triton X Sale (8 Jan. 2007). Coins dating beyond c. AD 1200 were excluded; the vast majority of coins included were Greek or Roman. Individual lots 1-904 and bulk lots 1480-1645 comprised the data sample. Some medieval and world coins comprised other lots, but were largely excluded for simplicity and clarity of argument. The coins that commanded the highest premiums were ancient.

The value of the total lots sold (94%) resulted in a cumulative hammer price of \$5,963,565. CNG's normal autumn sale, prior to the Triton X sale, realized a hammer price of \$1,325,917. By my count, only 32 of the 19,087 ancient coins in the latest Triton sale were sold referencing a pedigree pre-dating 1973, while others referenced only the names of modern collectors or more recent auction references. Approximately 80% of the lots provided no previous record at all.

In addition to auction houses, dozens of ancient coin and antiquities dealers operate in North America. For example, on VCoins (<http://www.vcoins.com>), a website developed to compete with eBay, 109 ancient coin dealers are actively selling coins (all VCoins data checked 22 June 2007). Eighty-one of the 109 dealers on VCoins are located in the U.S. and Canada, with 17 of the total selling bulk lots of ancient coins, and 48 selling other antiquities as well. According to the VCoins homepage, approximately 73,000 lots are being offered for sale, but it is unclear whether or not this includes the inventory of 'sold coins' that some dealers show. The 73,000 lots also include books and supplies, but factoring these out the figure drops to about 69,000 lots. However, when figuring in bulk lots of ancient coins, the number rises to approximately 75,000 coin-lots and has the potential to increase substantially when considering that many of the bulk lots advertise a price per coin with no disclosure of how many are actually available. According to the VCoins homepage, the total market value of the lots available for sale is approximately \$14.5 million.

Between June 4 and July 2, 2007, I tracked listings in the Ancient Coins section of eBay (the U.S. site) and found that, on average, approximately 5,000 to 5,300 lots of ancient coins are sold per week. A number of dealers sell bulk lots of uncleaned ancient coins fresh from the ground (e.g. bags of 1000, 100, or priced per piece), often indicating that such coins were "excavated" in Eastern Europe—especially the Balkan countries. If one assumes that this one-month period reflects trends throughout the year, one may conclude that between approximately 260,000 and 280,000 coins are sold each year on the eBay-U.S. website, not counting bulk lots. These rough numbers indicate the large-scale importation of ancient coins from the Old World and the potential movement of between half a million to a million coins sold in the North American marketplace annually, taking no account of local coin dealers who sell ancient coins in various cities and towns throughout the country. The trafficking in undocumented coins is clearly a multi-million dollar industry in the U.S. and Canada alone.

A coin's journey to the North American marketplace

How does material enter the U.S.? Although the prospecting for antiquities (including coins) and the exportation of such objects without a permit is illegal in many countries, the U.S. has only adopted import restrictions on ancient coins with Cyprus, while the prohibition on import of coins from Iraq is based on the general sanctions against importation of illegally removed cultural materials from Iraq. This means that once a group of coins is illegally robbed from an archaeological site or its material context and smuggled from the country of origin, it is openly and easily sold on the American market in most cases since the origin of coins, which could travel widely in the ancient world, can be difficult to trace once divorced from their original find spot. The illicit excavation of ancient coins does not differ from the systematic looting of other antiquities, and some good investigative work has demonstrated the way ancient coins from Israel, for example, are most often procured and then 'legally' exported by falsifying pedigrees (see Kersel 2006: esp. 194-198). It has been reported that at least one coin dealer has suggested avoidance of honest provenance-reporting on eBay auctions in order to avoid suspicion regarding illicit imports from Cyprus (Gill 2007).

Clearly, there is systematic looting for ancient coins in places like the Balkans as well. One documented case reports the seizure of 60 kg of ancient coins (19,860 specimens) at the Frankfurt airport that had been smuggled from Bulgaria (Dietrich 2002; von Kaenel 2004: 154-156). The shipment was bound for the United States and the individual shipping them had previously been arrested multiple times for antiquities smuggling and was associated with high-ranking politicians. For jurisdictional reasons, the coins were transferred to Munich where they were released by the Prosecutor's Office and have presumably reached the United States for commercial profit.

Customs officials in Frankfurt continued to investigate the shipment and determined that this was one of several which had passed through Frankfurt to the U.S. They also estimated about one ton of ancient coins (c. 340,000) from Bulgaria had been shipped to the U.S. by this single individual, presumably spoiling dozens of archaeological and historical sites in the search for them. This was not an isolated incident; a similar shipment from Eastern Europe was seized on the German-Austrian

border in 1999 (Szemethy 1999a; 1999b; 2000). Despite the increasing awareness of the general public and the professional community about looting and cultural property issues, the trade in undocumented ancient coins continues to grow and remains a serious problem for those wishing to preserve valuable information about the past and protect our common cultural heritage.

Coins in context

When an historic or archaeological site is prospected by metal detectorists and dug up, the stratigraphy is disturbed. As a result, one of the most reliable means to date various occupation levels is removed, and potential study of the economic conditions and demographics of the site are forever destroyed. The ancient coin dealer lobby in the U.S., the Ancient Coin Collectors Guild (ACCG) has become increasingly organized and influential amongst certain groups in recent years. The lobby frequently argues that archaeologists only care about coins for the dates they provide and then allow them to disintegrate in improper storage conditions. This, however, is a gross misconception and an exaggeration: although one may cite a few isolated incidents from the past, this hardly represents the standard in modern archaeology. It is true that coin finds are not always given the thorough treatment they deserve by excavators and are not always properly published; nevertheless, treatment of coins by archaeologists is not as grim as the lobby portrays and the study of coins in archaeological contexts has improved over the past few decades and continues to do so. In any case, does the simple fact that a few archaeologists have not published their coin finds in a timely manner excuse plunder?

When coins are found *in situ*, their exact find spots and archaeological contexts are recorded and the coin is stored in a warehouse or museum where it can be properly conserved and studied (see figure 2). Some specimens will enter museum collections where they are made available for the public and results are published, either with the excavation report or separately. In Israel, for example, artifacts are housed at the Israeli Antiquities Authority, which employs numismatists to study numismatic finds. On the other hand, coin collectors and dealers frequently store ancient coins in flips (plastic holders) some of which are made of PVC (a chemical that can harm coins) or in rigid PVC-free flips that can wear down the details of a coin. Some collectors carry ancient coins in their pockets as 'good luck charms' and others make ancient coins into jewelry (ShopNBC advertises ancient coin jewelry on its network and other specimens can be found on eBay and VCoins).

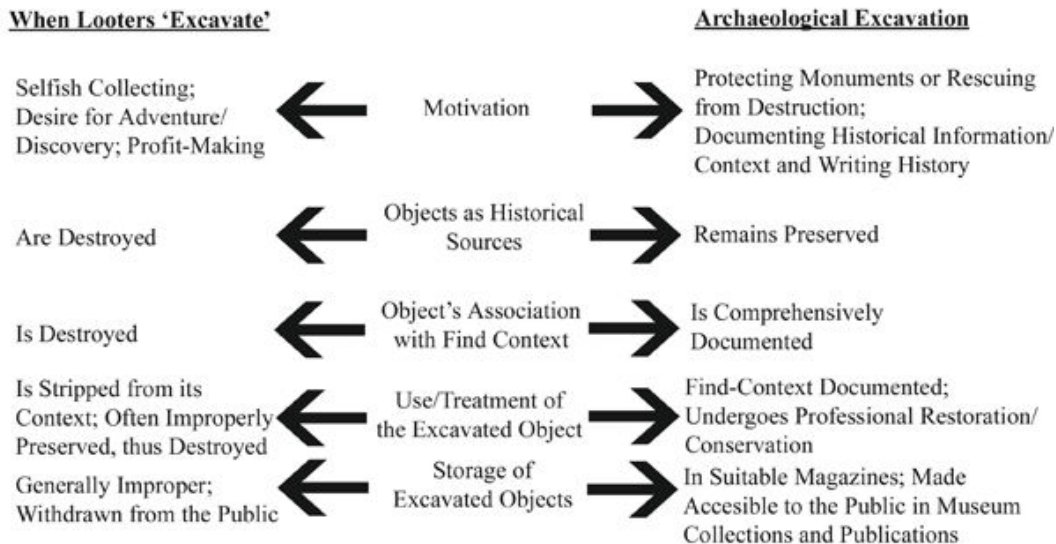


Figure 2. Chart by author, translated and modified from Fasold, Stutzinger, and von Kaenel 1995: 26

Some dealers and collectors even tool or rework the details of a coin to make it more visually appealing. A search on the Internet will also reveal a number of different cleaning methods used by dealers and collectors to clean coins, many of them potentially harsh and harmful to the coins. Indeed, one may find some instances in which archaeologists have mistreated objects from archaeological sites (especially in archaeology's earlier days), but the notion that collectors and dealers generally treat ancient objects with greater care than trained professionals is a highly specious and debatable claim, which only detracts from the core issue: the material and intellectual consequences of indiscriminate market activity.

The notion that, once a date is obtained from a coin, it is disregarded by professionals is also completely erroneous. In recent decades, all fields of ancient studies (history, archaeology, etc.) have become increasingly interdisciplinary and must take account of developing approaches in other fields. Numismatics is a field that also incorporates such interdisciplinary approaches and relies on archaeological contexts for valuable information (see, for example, Finley 1975: 87-100; Howgego 1995: xi-xii; Sheedy and Papageorgiadou-Banis 1997; Rotroff 1997; Walker 1997). In addition to dates, coins in archaeological contexts provide information about human activities, the growth and contraction of settlements through time, and also the economy of the period (for general information, see "Coins and Archaeology" 2007).

Since 1960, the Frankfurt School of Numismatics has been producing volumes for the series *Fundmünzen der römischen Zeit in Deutschland (FMRD)*, which catalogues coin finds from hoards and sites throughout Germany; similar initiatives have begun in other European countries. These are valuable catalogues for scholars wishing to study the ancient economies and circulation patterns. The *Fundmünzen der Antike* group also sponsors an important monograph series, *Studien zu Fundmünzen der Antike (SFMA)*, which publishes extended analyses directly relating to coins from archaeological contexts; monographs can be published in English, French, German, or Italian. The study of coins in archaeological contexts provide unique insights that undocumented and looted coins cannot offer, including the study of ritual (for example, Haselgrove and Wigg-Wolf 2007; Creighton 2000), special supplies of coin

types sent to certain groups to communicate certain ideas via the designs (for example, Kemmers 2005; 2006a: 219-244), and various economic studies at site-specific and regional levels (for example, Kemmers 2006b; Peter 2001; von Kaenel 1999). The archaeological and scholarly numismatic world realizes that there is greater application for the study of coin finds in context than just dates.

Common misconceptions

It is often asserted that 'collectible' coins sold on the market come from hoards found by metal detectorists in the middle of fields away from any sort of proper historical or archaeological site (for example, Tompa 1998: 73-75; Tompa and Brose 2005: 205, 207-210), sometimes with the reasoning that most coins were buried by Roman soldiers before battles. One great flaw in this reasoning, however, is that many other types of ancient coins are sold on the market in addition to Roman coins! Additionally, it is clear that coin hoards are not only found in the middle of fields devoid of associated archaeological remains, but can comprise a large percentage of coin finds from archaeological sites. At the Magdalensberg, for example, more than one-third of coins were found in hoards at the site (*FMRÖ* 2.1; and forthcoming unpublished research by S. Krmnicek). In western Germany, one can also see how common hoards are in places such as Cologne, Trier, and Mainz, where hoards can make up significant percentages of coin finds in ancient settlements (refer to the appropriate volumes of *FMRD*).

The argument also defies logic since a hobbyist or someone looking for coins to sell for profit would naturally begin looking in a known area of habitation rather than empty fields; furthermore, it is well documented that many sites have been spoiled by metal detectorists looking for ancient coins and other metal objects. For example, after the publication of some Iron Age coin finds from Roseldorf, Austria (Dembski 1991), metal detectorists flocked to the site and robbed it of coins, causing significant damage in the quest for their own personal profit and greed (Dembski 1994; 1995). When Frankfurt University began excavating at Groß-Gerau, a site near Frankfurt, Germany, they were perplexed by the lack of coin finds until they determined the site had already been robbed of coins by a local metal detectorist (per discussions with colleagues at Frankfurt University).

At Burghöfe, Germany, two metal detectorists leisurely despoiled the site of approximately 5,000 coins and 3,000 other metal objects over the course of ten years (Keller 1992; von Kaenel 1994: 7; 1995: 218). Carnuntum, in modern Austria, is also frequented by looters and causes significant problems with the study of the coin finds (Alram and Schmidt-Dick 2007: 64). It is often asserted that 'collectible' coins only come from hoards, where they are better preserved (Tompa 1998: 73-75; Tompa and Brose 2005: 205, 207-210). Single finds of excavated coins can be just as well-preserved or 'collectible' as hoard coins, contrary to the arguments of the lobby. For example, at Yotvata, Israel—a Late Roman site with a particularly corrosive soil—a large number of the single finds are rather well preserved (see for example figure 3, publication of the coin finds from this site is forthcoming). In short, a collector or dealer who does not demand viable documentation has no notion regarding the origin or circumstances in which that coin was found. Most coins on the market are undoubtedly single finds from archaeological sites or from hoards ripped from their original contexts and associations.



Figure 3. A selection of excavated coin finds from Yotvata, Israel. A.) *folles* of Constantine the Great, RIC VII (Siscia) 55; B.) *folles* of Constantine the Great, RIC VII (Lugdunum) 53; C.) *folles* of Maximian, RIC V.2 (Max. Herc.) 607.

Those who argue that proper archaeological sites do not produce large numbers of coins are simply unfamiliar with the scholarly literature. Many large hoards and thousands of single finds can be found at sites of varying sizes. Familiarization with the *Fundmünzen* inventories and similar publications will show that coin finds frequently are found in great numbers at civilian and military sites alike, as the numbers from Burghöfe illustrate. The idea that large hoards, devoid of any archaeological context associated with settlement-remains, satisfy collector and dealer demand is a fallacy; in fact, the selling practices of many coin dealers betray this notion. For example, when looking at bulk lots of coins on eBay and VCoins, one can read in the descriptions various disclaimers that there may be a mixture of Greek, Roman, Islamic, Medieval, or even modern coins in the lots; clearly, these are not the contents of an ancient hoard, which usually would have a much tighter chronological association, but rather the accumulation of coins robbed from multiple archaeological sites with different periods and ranges of occupation.

Ethics and ancient coin collecting

The vocal ancient coin dealer lobby has arisen to protect its interests in the importation of ancient material, the vast majority of which has no documentation and may well have been procured through suspect means. Thus far, few academic numismatists have commented on the trade, perhaps, in part, because there are a number of numismatists that come from the collector tradition and because of the vociferous nature of some tradesmen (for some who have made comment see, for example, Finley 1975: 96; Kraay 1976: xxiv; Göbl 1987: 74ff.; Beckman 1998; von Kaenel 1994; 1995; 2007). Nevertheless, the number of numismatists who are more sensitive to contextual study and the problem of plunder is growing and scholars have

recognized that ancient objects are more than aesthetic objects: in a recorded context they are invaluable historical sources.

The professional community and the public at large cannot continue to remain silent about these issues. The search for coins to fuel market demand contributes to the destruction of valuable information for serious numismatic research *and* archaeology. When an object is looted and removed from its context (without proper documentation and recording), it also robs the world of cultural heritage and information about our past that we might otherwise be inheritors to, and that heritage and information is lost forever. We cannot think that ancient coins are less significant than Greek vases—when looted, both are forever divorced from their historical and archaeological contexts and irrecoverable information is lost when the site from which they came is vandalized. The relative abundance of ancient coins to Greek vases, for example, is irrelevant.

Although ancient coin collecting has a long historical precedent, not all practices accepted in humanity's past are still considered 'ethical' today. For example, the ivory trade, which also had millennia of precedence, once flourished until the African elephant became increasingly endangered; only after laws were passed to protect the elephants did it become widely accepted that the ivory trade was unethical. Like the African elephant, our common cultural heritage is an endangered species.

Already, some ancient coin collectors and dealers are complaining about rising prices on Internet discussion groups. These price increases may be a result of the already dwindling supplies from Eastern Europe or could be attributed to the price-control practices routinely exercised in the antiquities market (Watson and Todeschini 2006; Mason 2005). All of the wonder that holding or seeing an ancient coin evokes: "Who once held it? What was it used for? Where was it used?" is information that only contextual study can hope to provide any meaningful answer to, but this is erased when a coin is looted and enters the market devoid of context. Although appearing on the market in large quantities, ancient coins are a finite resource and each one that is ripped from an archaeological site and its original context, without a record, forever lessens our ability to understand the world of our forbearers.

For those seeking to preserve cultural heritage and information about our past, the trade in illicitly excavated and exported ancient coins is perhaps one of the greatest threats to cultural heritage since ancient coins are the most widely collected ancient objects. Perhaps it may be possible for scientific inquiry and private collecting to coexist, but at present it is clear there is very little self-regulation occurring in the ancient coin trade and this is causing significant damage for mere self-interest. Legislation alone will, likely, do little to curb the trade and protect sites without more stringent enforcement in importing or source countries (countries from which antiquities are taken). Public education and dialogue are the only ways to begin addressing these problems. Coin collectors share with us a great passion for the ancient world; these collectors are the ones we should seek to inform about the issues, as these are the people who can force dealers to change the ways they import material by refusing to buy undocumented coins. Many collectors have expertise in identifying ancient coins. It may be useful to encourage these people to volunteer as staff numismatists at archaeological sites so they can see where ancient coins really come from and better understand the type of information that comes to light when they are

found in context. It would also allow the collector to participate in the thrill of discovery rather than buying bulk lots of coins by the pound or an undocumented coin for their cabinet. Such a prospect, I believe, would be beneficial to both sides, especially since many scholarly numismatists are overburdened with material, and more numismatists are needed to process coin finds in the field.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: A similar version of this article appeared on the SAFE website in the Fall of 2007: http://savingantiquities.org/feature_coins.php. David Gill and I plan on producing a more substantial study on the material and intellectual consequences of collecting undocumented ancient coins for printed publication.

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