

Homecomings: Archaeological Ethics and the return of Looted Antiquities

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Report by Mary Coe

David has been working for about 20 years on a project to locate and return looted items, to be found in museums in America, Europe and Japan who have them because they were for sale. David has been working with the police in Italy and Greece in order to identify stolen goods. Looting has taken place for many years and is now taking place at sites such as Palmyra, Syria. In 1990, by chance, an archive of photographs was found in Geneva which showed stolen items, both on receipt and when cleaned. This has been invaluable for identification purposes.

Bronze pieces from a Romano-British village at Icklingham were looted and sold to a collector in New York. The farmer who owned the land received no recompense. The Crosby Garrett Helmet was sold at auction. It was said to have been found in Cumbria but all context has been lost and there is no proof of the find spot. Whether or not the Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece is a continuing debate. This situation is different in that we know where the marbles came from. David is concerned with items found since 1970 when many countries signed up to a UNESCO Convention regarding the sale of antiquities.

Italy has successfully retrieved pieces from North America, but less so from Europe. An exhibition called 'Nostroi' was held in Rome and then moved to Athens, displaying recovered items. Italy and Greece have been working together on retrieval. In the exhibition was a sculpture of two griffins tearing a deer which may have been a table base. It was looted from a probable villa site in south-east Italy and identified in the J. Paul Getty Museum through the photo archive. In the British Museum there are pieces from Iraq mostly collected by Leonard Woolley. The Benin Bronzes were brought back by the Benin Punitive Expedition, sent to avenge the killing of a British official. David raised the question of whether or not these and similar pieces should be returned. Syrian antiquities are on loan to a museum in America. Two statues were said to be from a Mithreum in Tyre but were more likely to have been looted from Syria. Sculptures from Cambodia were auctioned in New York. These had no feet but at a Cambodian temple site there are bases with the feet.

Auctions of antiquities in New York reached a peak in 2010, with a value of nearly \$140m. The average figure is \$20-\$40m a year. About 85% of the items have no recorded archaeological context. Tiny fragments from a possible sanctuary site which was looted for many years were sold to raise money for the "Save the Elephant" appeal by the WWF.

The problem with retrieval is that many American museums believe that as they bought in good faith, they have a right to display the items. A Greek

krator, bought for \$1m by the New York Museum of Art depicts a scene from Homer's Iliad. There were suspicions that it was stolen but it was difficult to prove. The breakthrough came following a raid on the Freeport in Geneva. Goods coming into a country can be sold at a Freeport and taken to another country without the formalities of customs. It was found that many items in museums belonged to Giacomo Medici. Photos of him standing next to his pieces were found and photos of the same pieces were found in Geneva giving the necessary proof. Through this means Italy has retrieved items from private collections and museums have agreed return when faced with the evidence. Italy has retrieved about 200 items from America which represents about 1% of the photo archive.

A number of pots by one artist were displayed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. They are believed to have come from cemeteries in South Italy which tomb raiders had attacked with a digger. Another group in Berlin were possibly from one tomb group. The Geneva photos were taken by polaroid camera and stopped in the 1980's.

The Getty Museum has a jug from Italy. A photo shows that it had been reconstructed from fragments. Investigations showed that pottery often left Italy by post in a number of packages, after being deliberately smashed. In a different scam, a fragment could be given to a museum, then over a number of years, adjoining pieces would be offered to the museum, at a price. This has a tax advantage for the seller in the American tax system. Also in the Getty Museum, there are pieces of wall paintings which have all come from one panel. They had been cut to fit into a suitcase. About 100 items have been identified as belonging to Italy but are still to be returned. Italy rewards co-operating museums by loaning them objects from properly recorded sites.

After his talk, David answered some questions. Stolen items are found in British museums but to a lesser degree than elsewhere. The Museums Association encourages knowledge of the history of any piece and a lack of money prevents many purchases. Giacomo Medici has been convicted but due to illness is not at present in prison. The curator of the Getty Museum was on trial, but it became protracted so the case was dropped. St Louis Museum of Arts acquired a mummy mask from a Swiss dealer. The Egyptian Government said it was stolen. The museum believed the excavator had sold it in Brussels from where it was sold to Croatia. The case was taken to court by the Government but theft could not be proved. The museum had taken the Government to court to stop the mask being confiscated but they dropped their case when the Government case was dropped.