

The Debate

Academic Censorship

By Sir John Boardman



Fig. 1: A gilt silver disc showing the goddess Kybele in a chariot, with priests, a radiate bust of a god, the moon and sun. Dm. 24 cm. Ai Khanoum, 3rd cent. B.C. J. Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia*, 2015, pl. XVII.

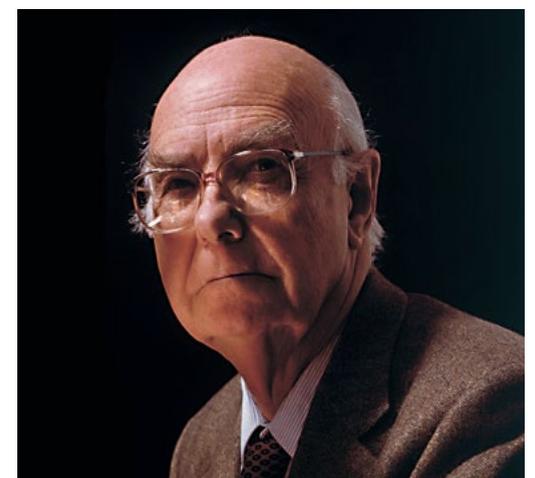
A majority of the books published in the last fifty years about ancient art have depended on illustration of objects which are not from controlled excavations, and to pretend that they are therefore illegal, useless and misleading is, of course, absurd, yet this is the logical conclusion to be drawn if the extreme view about “academic” or “moral” integrity is accepted, and all objects not from controlled excavations are ignored. It is a view more easily adopted by a lawyer than a scholar. But the market is still well supplied with objects which seem to have no recent and authentic recorded history, whether from collections or excavation. It is difficult to see that “morality” is in any way involved, rather than the fear that we may be misled by what is not authentically ancient, and that we are incapable of 100 percent certainty in the matter. At any rate, science can determine date for us, so we are left with the question whether it is better to ignore what might be an important relic of Antiquity in the interests of a “moral” approach to site-robbers and the market. Cer-

tainly, forgers do not deserve to succeed, but I think we have their measure by now. Equally, robbers of sites do not deserve to succeed, but it is very doubtful whether sites can ever be controlled effectively, despite noble efforts by “source countries”.

Some years ago it was said that in Turkey boys who found antiquities on an ancient site could sell them to dealers who would then supply them with forgeries to sell on to tourists/collectors. Yet the recent publication of some 500 Roman seals, gems and rings, picked up over some 30 years by a family walking over the fields concealing the ancient city of Caesarea (S. Amoral-Stark & M. Herskovitz, *Ancient Gems, Finger Rings and Seal Boxes from Caesarea Maritima: the Hendler Collection*, 2016) shows how much is still on the surface, and no less valid as evidence than excavated material. Take for an example a silver chalice of no known provenance in the Bible Lands Museum, Jerusalem of around A.D. 500 (*Guide to the Collection*,

2002, p. 136). It is no doubt from the Palestine area and its Latin inscriptions show it to have been made for a Eucharist ceremony – “Holy is God, holy the mighty one, holy the immortal one, have mercy on us” – typical for the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its lack of detailed provenance cannot disqualify it as a record of Antiquity. It is, indeed, unusual but totally plausible. It would have been a rather different matter if its shape and the inscriptions were quite unique, and its role in Antiquity difficult to explain. Such objects would indeed be suspect, although generally a forger has not the imagination to produce something totally unique, plausible or not, but goes for the commonplace.

It is perhaps a little unwise to give Antiquity the credit for anything quite unexpected or unusual, yet excavation has shown just how innovative Antiquity could be, especially in out-of-the-way places. The classicising works found in Central Asia often seem barely credible in terms of established and conventional scholarship, yet they are from excavation (e.g., the gilt silver disc from Kandahar, J. Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia*, 2015, pl. XVII; here, fig. 1) and we would have lost much if they had not been excavated but “found” and discredited. We need to be careful but not ungenerous in our assessment of what the past can tell us.



Sir John Boardman is Professor Emeritus of Classical Archaeology and Art at Oxford. He has excavated in Turkey, Greece and Libya, and published several books on Greek art and gem-engraving, as well as on the diffusion of classical art in the ancient world, especially in Asia. He is 90.