



## IADAA NEWSLETTER DECEMBER 2020

### **Police discover large network of European auction houses selling stolen ancient Greek artifacts illegally**

Greek City Times: November 28: This report details the discovery of a rare and valuable coin by German looters in Greece five years ago and how it was later traced to a sale at an auction house in Munich.

This is the starting point for a tale of looting, smuggling and illegal sales through auction houses in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Switzerland and Great Britain, with police raiding suspects' homes and searching their cars.

According to the report, the first set of trials against suspects began in October in Greece, where 47 defendants appeared.

At the centre of the criminal network is a shadowy figure known as The Grandfather, a 69-year-old man with a long history of illicit activity involving ancient artefacts, stretching back to the 1970s.

"As the NIS (National Intelligence Service of Greece) continues the investigation it has been revealed that numerous European and American auction houses have been involved in these illegal transactions involving the ancient Greek artifacts, with more details to be revealed at the Patras Board of Appeals in the following weeks," it continues.

The dramatic tale points to a significant breakthrough for the Greek authorities, who can be praised for protecting their cultural sites.

The real problem, however, is that because no one allegedly involved has been named, it is impossible to gauge how accurate this report is, especially as there has been so much hyperbole and exaggeration in the media when it comes to such claims. This also means that suspicion will fall on the innocent; those auction houses and dealers specialising in the same discipline in the same countries who have had nothing to do with this.

No mention is made of whether the 47 defendants were found guilty or innocent. If guilty, why have they not been identified? It is important for justice to be seen to be done, but that includes exonerating the innocent as much as punishing the guilty. Separating the two is part and parcel of guaranteeing transparency and the protection of the honest trade, as well as the removal of the guilty so that the trade is not tainted by their activity.

IADAA will be keeping a close eye on developments.

<https://bit.ly/3axZRQd>

### **Government redefines treasure to increase protection for archaeological finds**

UK Government: December 4: The UK Government is to reclassify its Treasure Act to save more artefacts for the nation. Claiming that the "Changes will make the treasure process more transparent and efficient for museums and the public", the Government proposes to add important archaeological finds that are not made of precious metals and gemstones to the definition of Treasure that comes under the ownership of the Crown and so can be reserved for museums.

"The growing popularity of metal detecting since the inception of the act in 1996 has brought to light an increasing number of finds from Roman Britain that do not meet the current treasure criteria because they are often made from bronze and not precious metals," says the Government.

"Some items of national importance have been lost to the public or at risk of sale into private collections."



The UK's Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) has been held up as a model of how to win public support in controlling discoveries and ensuring that finds are preserved in context for the benefit of research and the nation.

<https://bit.ly/3qC8YVx>

#### **Gold coins, medieval treasures discovered in British countryside during lockdown**

CBS58.com: December 11: The UK's Portable Antiquities Scheme has registered 47,000 objects discovered by metal detectorist and amateur enthusiasts in 2020 – including a major rise in finds during the initial lockdown between March and May.

Two coin hoards have been among the finds: one containing 50 South African gold coins unearthed near Milton Keynes, the other 63 gold coins and one silver coin dating to the reigns of Edward IV and Henry VIII.

<https://bit.ly/3mKxGA2>

#### **French authorities seized more than 27,000 potentially looted artefacts hoarded by a single collector in Belgium**

Artnet News: December 17: In what sounds like a one-man crimewave, French authorities in Belgium have seized more than 27,400 Roman coins and artefacts illegally excavated throughout eastern France by a single man and his mother living in Belgium.

"Identified only as Patrice T., the subject of the ongoing criminal investigation is suspected of planting his illegal archaeological finds from France in Belgium," says Artnet.

It is thought that he did this because using a metal detector is illegal in France but not in Belgium, where finders are allowed to keep what they discover if they own the land. The suspect is reported to have recently bought an orchard in the Belgian town of Gingelom and then made a 'discovery' of 14,154 Roman coins – just over half the number of pieces he was eventually caught with.

The items found in his possession also include bronze bracelets, Iron Age torques, brooches, Renaissance belt buckles and other antiquities.

<https://bit.ly/2KNEJKS>

### **Great pyramid relic discovered in Scottish cigar box**

Nine News: December 17: An Egyptian curatorial assistant working in the University of Aberdeen's museum collections has found a lost set of fragments that make up one of only three relics found within the Great Pyramid at Giza.

Abeer Eladany was reviewing the collections when she noticed that an old cigar box decorated with her country's former flag appeared to be in the wrong place.

The box contained fragments of a large piece of cedar wood, known as 'Dixon's Relics', that had been missing for more than 70 years. The other two objects found in the pyramid were a ball and hook, now housed in the British Museum.

"There are different theories about the wood's purpose and date of origin – some researchers think it's part of a larger measurement tool, which they believe could provide clues as to how the towering pyramids were constructed," says the report.

<https://bit.ly/37Dozga>

### **Egypt demands Italy hand over former Italian diplomats over smuggled antiquities case**

Ahram Online: December 18: The Egyptian authorities have demanded the extradition of two Italian diplomats exposed as smuggling Egyptian artefacts to Europe. Former Honorary Consul Ladislav Otakar Skakal and former Trade Commissioner Massimiliano Sponzili were thought to have been involved in the smuggling of tens of thousands of objects out of Egypt under the cloak of diplomatic immunity, with Skakal being tried in his absence and sentenced to 15 years in prison as well as a fine of one million Egyptian pounds.

However, Egypt's extradition demand comes at the same time as an outcry in Italy over French President Emmanuel Macron's awarding of the Legion d'Honneur to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.

Prominent Italian intellectual Corrado Augias has returned his own Legion d'Honneur in protest, saying that Al-Sisi should never have received the honour because of the country's human rights abuses. These include the notorious kidnap and murder in Cairo in 2016 of Italian student Giulio Regeni, thought to have been targeted because of his research work into Egyptian trade unions.

Mr Augias called the murder of Regeni an open wound and "national insult".

Giovanna Melandri, a former culture minister and the president of Rome's MAXXI contemporary art museum, announced she would follow suit.

<https://bit.ly/3nKQqRh>

<https://bit.ly/3mEeAvy>

### **Azerbaijan urges UNESCO not to politicize cultural heritage protection in liberated lands**

MenaFN.com: December 24: UNESCO has become caught up in political controversy as a result of its intervention in the complex and long-running dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave.

Recognised as Azerbaijani but administered by ethnic Armenians since 1994, the enclave has long been a hotbed of tension, partially because no peace deal was ever struck when the war over it came to an end in the early 1990s.

Now, however, Russia has brokered a deal, signed by the two sides, which took effect in early November. The deal allows Azerbaijan to take control of areas of the enclave that it captured during the conflict, with Armenia agreeing to withdraw from adjacent areas in the coming weeks. Russian peace-keepers will be deployed to police the front line.

The deal has angered Armenian protestors who launched an attack on their own parliament and prime minister's office.

Against this backdrop, UNESCO has called on Azerbaijan to react to its proposal to carry out an independent mission with a view to drawing up an inventory of significant cultural properties for protection in the enclave. This includes buildings and other cultural property of importance to Armenian culture.

As this article notes, Azerbaijan is not happy with UNESCO's public comments. Its culture ministry accuses UNESCO of failing to investigate war crimes involving the destruction of Azerbaijani cultural property by Armenia over the past 30 years, and of ignoring Azerbaijan's appeals for UNESCO's intervention.

"We believe that UNESCO must fulfil its mission independently and objectively and not allow the issue of protection of cultural heritage to be politicized," the ministry said. "Such press releases by UNESCO do not correspond to the spirit of cooperation between Azerbaijan and UNESCO. Azerbaijan is open to a constructive dialogue with UNESCO to discuss the details of the mission and reiterates its readiness to cooperate with UNESCO based on respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of internationally recognized borders of the member states."

<https://bit.ly/3o6W3cw>



### **Egyptian authorities bust fraudulent antiquities trafficking ring**

Egypt Independent: December 24: The Interior Ministry has announced the arrest of a gang who have been selling fake antiquities to unsuspecting members of the public. The gang was reportedly caught while preparing items for export and had been promoting the fakes via social media. The image above was released as part of the investigation.

<https://bit.ly/3mWnhkV>

### **Unesco using 'bogus' figures to inflate the cost of stolen art to \$10bn, say dealers**

Daily Telegraph: December 28: A summary of some of the details surrounding the fake advertising campaign and associated claims made in October and November, this article was published prominently as the page 3 lead report in the Telegraph. Access to the article online is by subscription only.

<https://bit.ly/2L3dWKF>

### **Egypt faces increased home illegal digging for antiquities amid COVID-19 pandemic**

Xinhua: December 28: Job losses and growing poverty as the result of the pandemic have led to more people turning to desperate measures to make money, including digging for treasure beneath their own homes, this report explains.



Notably, the Egyptian officials are reported as saying that the crisis has “in large part been fostered the myth of easy wealth”.

“The Egyptian interior ministry has reported 8,960 cases of illegal digging in several provinces in the south of Egypt from March to the end of November in 2020, against 4,115 in the previous year,” Adel Abdel-Azeem, former assistant to the interior minister in the Upper Egypt region, told Xinhua.

“A total of 3,364 illegal cases were reported in August alone,” he said.

The illegal digging has led to the collapse of some homes, with people being killed or injured.

“Abdel Hakeem al-Saghir, chairman of Dendera Temple complex in Qena Province, [said] the closure of the archaeological sites during the curfew period encouraged nearby residents to excavate under their houses in the late hours of night.

“He also pointed out that 99 percent of the illegal digging activities resulted in no findings but deaths with the collapse of the deep tunnels dug under the houses without any scientific tools.”

This report sums up much of what IADAA has been arguing over the past few years – a position now confirmed by the Egyptian authorities themselves: the exaggeration of looting and trafficking statistics, together with the exaggeration of the demand for and value of looted material only serves to encourage further crime. In addition, despite the extensive number of cases and damage reported by the Egyptian authorities, “99 percent of the illegal digging activities resulted in no findings but deaths”.

Those continuing to exaggerate the situation as a means of propaganda should think long and hard about the consequences, as this sorry tale illustrates.

<https://bit.ly/3nV7iF4>

### **Congress poised to apply banking regulations to antiquities market**

New York Times: January 2: An update on proposals to include antiquities in the US Bank Secrecy Act as a means of introducing anti-money laundering regulations to the trade.

The latest move in this debate is Congress’s overruling of the Trump veto on measures proposed under the National Defense Authorization Act, which opens the door to further and direct regulation of the antiquities trade.

This article quotes a number of views about such measures being overdue, partially because of what is seen as the opacity of the trade and partially because of fears over issues such as terrorism financing.

“This is an area where clearly organized crime, terrorists, and oligarchs have used cultural artifacts to move illicit funds,” says John Byrne, a specialist lawyer.

This quote shows just how easy it is to muddy the waters. Recent research shows that organized crime and terrorism finance are not areas of activity associated with the antiquities trade – to this date no single case has been made public involving the latter beyond the 2015 Abu Sayyaf raid in Syria and we have yet to hear of any claim, let alone pay-out, from US Secretary of State John Kerry’s much-vaunted \$5 million reward fund, set up in 2015 to prevent ISIS from benefiting from trafficking in oil, mineral resources and antiquities.

Byrne’s inclusion of ‘oligarchs’ here also shows that the evidence being used to promote this legislation has nothing to do with antiquities. Instead it refers to the high-profile case of Russian businessmen Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, who used high-value fine art sales to bypass US sanctions – a case the article goes on to refer to.

Meanwhile IADAA member and New York antiquities dealer Randall Hixenbaugh, also quoted in the article, points out that “Virtually all transactions of high-dollar amounts in the ancient art business are handled through financial institutions and instruments already covered by the Bank Secrecy Act.”

The other aspect of this that is usually overlooked is that by comparison to Contemporary and Modern art, Jewellery and other high-value art market disciplines, antiquities are generally traded at much lower values and are already the most targeted area of the market

by law enforcement, making them arguably the least attractive form of collectables for money launderers.

While lawmakers may have concerns about confidentiality around buyers and sellers in the art market, this has nothing specifically to do with antiquities, but is a more general concern. Antiquities dealers may fear that such interference will damage legitimate business, but the same could be said to be true of many other areas of the market, especially high-end Contemporary and Modern art.

Of chief concern, however, is what appears to be a proposal to introduce the legislation and then consult on it afterwards – the reverse of what usually happens in the introduction of legislation.

Preventing money laundering is a clear responsibility of governments, but so is protecting legitimate business. To enforce measures before you have even begun to check their efficacy is to court disaster and to sacrifice one set of responsibilities in the attempt to meet others.

<https://nyti.ms/3beylYD>