



British Museum update

IADAA and its fellow association, the UK-based Antiquities Dealers' Association, are grateful to the new Keeper of the Department of Greece and Rome at the British Museum for a highly constructive consultative meeting in November to discuss its review of antiquities thefts. Professor Tom Harrison, appointed to his post since the crisis struck and heading up the current review into the crisis and recovery programme, explained the process of identification and recovery adopted at the BM, along with the ongoing challenges of specifying exactly what had been stolen. The process will take some time, he believes.

As feared, it now seems that the thefts took place over a period of 30 years, starting in 1993, with around 2,000 items taken, although that number may increase. Of those, around 500 are thought to be unrecoverable as their gold elements may have been sold for scrap. Most pieces are ancient cameos and intaglios, although some are from the 18th century. Also included are jewellery, Bronze Age earrings and rings from Cyprus. Around 200 gold items known to have been sold on have, presumably, not been melted down for scrap. Additionally, missing items include small portable sculptural fragments, Greek pottery, terracotta and faience figurines – most were unregistered and so may prove unidentifiable.

In all, around 350 pieces have been recovered, with the BM having knowledge of 620 further items through records.

The complex review involves direct information from the trade, archival material, cast impressions, and an image database. Dealers and collectors have been very helpful, both with information and returns. The BM is developing a compensation framework, which is likely to range from a donor card to the museum to acknowledging those who help. It is taking legal action to recover a small number of items whose holders are resisting requests for return.

We are advised to be alerted by the following:

- The use of the names Paul Higgins, Peter Higgs, and other Higginses based in Sussex
- Usernames such as Sultan1966, german1966, Bodrum1966

Anyone with information is asked to contact recovery@britishmuseum.org

The meeting with Harrison also addressed concerns that the review and appeal may risk damaging legitimate trade. Some IADAA and ADA members reported incidents of clients refusing to buy any ancient jewellery simply because ancient jewellery was among the items stolen and no details of exactly what was missing had been published. With a wider range of missing items, this blight could spread, it was feared. Harrison, who understood the concerns, agreed that announcements from the BM needed to take this into account where possible and said he would run them by the trade associations prior to publication.

Further details may emerge after the December publication of the review.

Lack of resources means that the BM is unable to monitor online sales comprehensively for missing items – but it is clear that eBay is not the main trading platform for them.

The BM is also about to release the details of around 150 missing items via the Interpol database, which begs the question as to why the Art Loss Register apparently advised it not to release details for fear of putting items at risk of destruction – a point argued by IADAA a month ago.

The crisis leaves the BM with significant challenges, including curatorial vacancies it is currently unable to fill. Nevertheless, from the trade's point of view, this meeting proved to be one of the most positive developments in rebuilding a constructive relationship between

dealers and museums. Professor Harrison's enlightened approach is an important part of that process.

Why is the Manhattan D.A.'s office publishing data it knows to be false?

Assistant District Attorney Matthew Bogdanos has been head of Manhattan's Antiquities Trafficking Unit (ATU) since 2018. He has understood since at least 2011 – and probably earlier – that claims of a multi-billion-dollar market in looted and trafficked antiquities have no basis in fact. This is evident from [the opinion piece he wrote for CNN](#), published on July 7, 2011. In that piece he wrote:

“One of the main problems with looting is that if a site is undiscovered, you simply don't know what you don't know. Interpol estimates that the illicit antiquities trade is worth billions of dollars. My question is: How do they know that?”

“If it is illegal and, therefore, a clandestine trade, how do you know the dollar amount? It is similar to the drugs trade; you guess from the amount you're able to seize. It is not a scientific approach, nor one I am comfortable using in assessing the total value of the worldwide trade in illegal antiquities.”

These two paragraphs additionally confirm that Bogdanos is guessing when he associates the scale and importance of antiquities trafficking with that of drugs and weapons. He even tells us that that is exactly what he is doing and that he is not comfortable with it.

If, as he argues, that Interpol – and so anyone else – cannot possibly know the value of the illicit market, it is a logical consequence that they also cannot claim that it is of equal standing in scale and scope to markets in trafficked drugs or weapons. These are simply false claims about antiquities.

Little has changed regarding such data since 2011, except that since 2015, the World Customs Organisation (WCO) has produced annual [Illicit Trade Reports](#) assessing the size and comparative extent of risk categories, including cultural heritage. Those reports include information registered via the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) and so are not comprehensive. However, the figures for cultural heritage, of which antiquities form a miniscule part, [are so small compared with other risk categories](#), including drugs, counterfeit goods, tax evasion and weapons, that it is clear there is no similarity at all in scale or scope between drugs and weapons trafficking, on the one hand, and antiquities trafficking on the other.

Further, the [2020 RAND Corporation report](#), an independent study into open source data on the issue by what is arguably the United States' most trusted research organisation, concluded that available evidence showed that a multi-billion-dollar illicit global market in antiquities was simply unsustainable: *“Simply put, while we cannot claim to measure the size of the illicit market, we can show that observable market channels are too small to act as conduits for a billion-dollar-a-year illicit trade.”*^[1]

That report also concluded that what had become widespread claims of the trade in illicit antiquities being linked to those in drugs and weapons could be traced back to Bogdanos as the original source.^[2]

Twelve years on from publicly declaring that the multi-billion-dollar claim had no basis in fact, and that the link to drugs and weapons claim was pure guesswork, we find that the Manhattan District Attorney's office is still promoting the first claim in its media releases. On March 21, 2023, under the headline [D.A. Braqq Returns 29 Antiquities to Greece](#), the official media release from the D.A.'s office included the following statement: *“Antiquities trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar business with looters and smugglers turning a profit at the expense of cultural heritage...”*. The speaker was Special Agent in Charge for HSI New York Ivan J. Arvelo.

The same quote from Arvelo had been included in the D.A.'s [earlier official media release on January 5, 2023](#), regarding the return of an artefact to the Palestinian authority. It is not clear whether Arvelo made his comment during the ceremony at Bethlehem, when Bogdanos was standing next to him, or afterwards, but it remained uncorrected in both releases.

It is hard to believe that in such a sensitive area of crime fighting official releases from the District Attorney's office would not be scrutinised and signed off by its leading officer prior to release. If Bogdanos is not screening official releases, it raises the question as to why not. If he is, why is he not correcting what at best can be called misinformation that he is well aware of prior to their issue, or at least doing so once they have been released?

He has long known how controversial and false these claims about antiquities are and, as in his 2011 opinion piece for CNN, expressed his discomfort with their use. Such oversight is crucial to the ATU's credibility.

If we cannot rely on the D.A.'s office to issue accurate information relating to this highly sensitive area, how can we have confidence in the rest of what it has to tell us on this subject?

^[1] See *Measuring the international trade in antiquities*, page 70 AND *Issues with the Current Approach for Assessing the Antiquities Market to Terrorist Funding*, page 12 AND *Summary*, page 84-85 AND *Findings*, page xii

^[2] See *Antiquities Trafficking Using Telegram*, pages 49-50

US accused of sending fake Roman mosaics back to Lebanon

The Guardian: November 19: Having launched a media campaign to highlight the return of a series of mosaics to Lebanon in September, the Manhattan District Attorney's office now faces the embarrassment of having eight of the nine pieces identified as fakes, according to this article.

The accusation comes from academics in France and the UK, including Djamila Fellague of the University of Grenoble. "She claims to have uncovered proof that forgers had copied designs from original mosaics in archaeological sites or museums in Sicily, Tunisia, Algeria and Turkey," writes the *Guardian*.

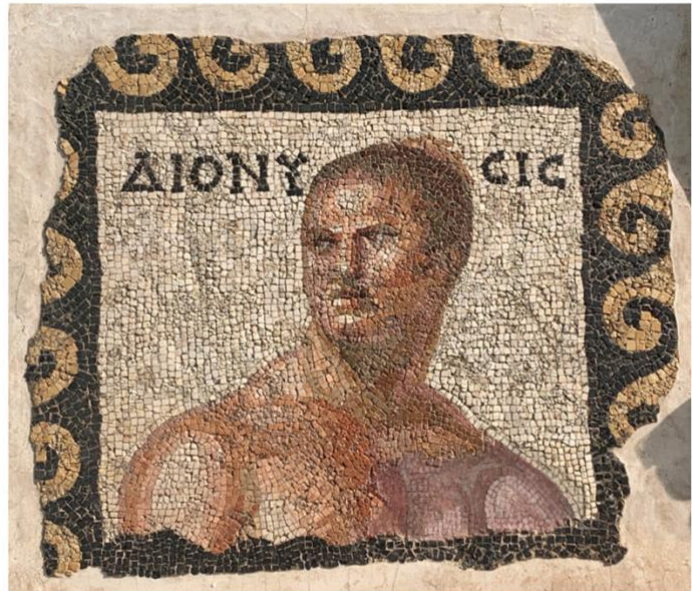
Christos Tsirogiannis, who specialises in investigating looted antiquities using a confidential database he gained access to while working with the Carabinieri, [has recently criticised the DA's Antiquities Trafficking Unit \(ATU\)](#) for not crediting him properly for his help in cases involving seizures. According to the *Guardian*, he says that the evidence of the eight mosaics being fake is "irrefutable".



Special Agent Arvelo, far left, standing next to ADA Bogdanos at the Bethlehem ceremony.

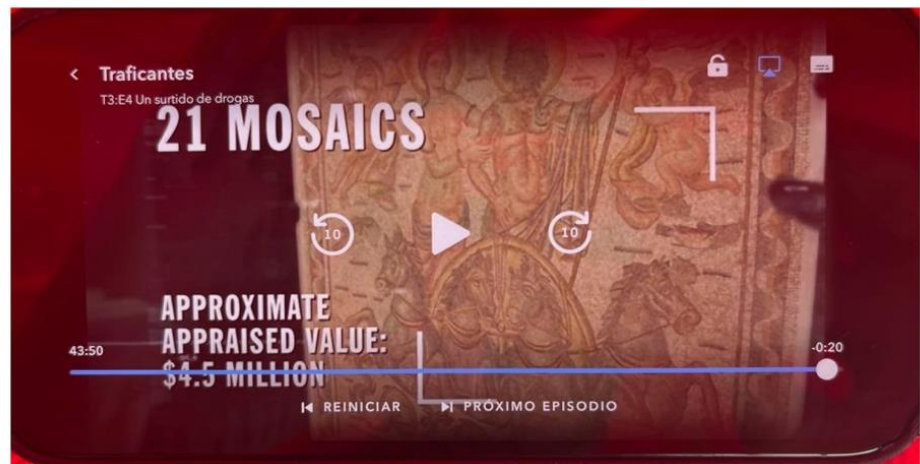
Image courtesy of the U.S. Office of Palestinian Affairs

“Even if you are not an expert, if you put the fake next to the authentic mosaic, you see how similar they are, but also how the quality is actually not that good,” claims Tsirogiannis. The claims raise further questions about the reliability of evidence and expertise being used by the ATU, which declined to say who has been valuing its seizures when asked by *Antiques Trade Gazette* last month. As Fellague told the *Guardian*: “In the press and official press releases – on both the American and Lebanese sides – there has never been any scientific justification to prove that the mosaics were Roman, looted and plundered precisely in Lebanon.”



Mosaic of the athlete Dionysis – one of the pieces seized and returned to Lebanon.

A spokesman for the DA countered: “In order for these antiquities to be repatriated a court had to evaluate our evidence, which included expert analysis about their authenticity and significant details about how they were illegally trafficked. The court found based



*Screengrab from *To Catch A Smuggler* with Professor Rose’s valuation of the mosaics shown.*

on the evidence – which these individuals do not have – that the pieces are authentic.” The University of Pennsylvania revealed that the expert brought in to catalogue the mosaics was its Professor of Archaeology, C. Brian Rose, who is credited in the DA’s media release. The entire operation was filmed by National Geographic television for their show *To Catch A Smuggler*, and footage of this shows Professor Rose providing a valuation for the mosaics of an estimated \$4.5 million. It is not clear whether this figure forms part of the \$9 million valuation quoted by the DA’s media release on September 7, 2023, when referring to the 12 antiquities returned to Lebanon, including the nine mosaics. IADAA has written to the DA’s press secretary asking for clarification but has received no response so far. Are the valuations being issued by academics who are unqualified to do so? That would explain the often wildly exaggerated sums being claimed by the DA’s office. It is also not clear whether valuations claimed for what later turn out to be fakes are then being removed from the totals claimed. Further research by IADAA and fellow association the Antiquities Dealers’ Association has highlighted significant contradictions within the DA’s own figures, as quoted in its media releases.

The illicit trafficking of cultural goods shall be recognized as a security issue

UNESCO media release: November 23: UNESCO is at it again, launching a new initiative linked to antiquities with a series of bogus statistics to justify it.

This time it is a joint venture based in Mexico titled *Protege tu legado (Protect your legacy)*, whose objective is “to raise awareness about the implications and risks of this crime at the community level and ways to prevent and combat it to safeguard cultural heritage”.

“...the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) indicates that crime is correlated to terrorism financing, organized crime, illicit trafficking of drugs and firearms, money laundering, and corruption,” UNESCO’s official release continues – the use of the word “correlated’ is an interesting development as it falls short of firmer links claimed but unsubstantiated in the past.

Next, while acknowledging that “there are no exact figures due to the difficulty of discovering and monitoring these illicit activities”, it qualifies this by adding that:

– The Museum Association estimates that profits from the illicit trade of antiquities range from \$225 million to \$3 billion annually.

– The Organized Crime Group of the UK Metropolitan Police and INTERPOL calculate that these same profits amount to between \$300 million and \$6 billion annually.

– The International Monetary Fund noted that the sum available for money laundering through the art market was equivalent to 2.7% of the world's GDP in 2009, or \$1.6 billion.

While these figures may sound impressive, they are less so when their sources are revealed. The first two have long been known, dating back to 2000 and the UK Parliamentary review conducted into cultural heritage crime. The exact details surrounding them and what they refer to have been available in the Facts & Figures sections of the websites of both IADAA and the ADA for some time.

Paragraph 5 of the Facts & Figures Appendix refers to UNESCO’s earlier misuse of these statistics in 2011.

– The Museums Association figures (now 23 years old) referred to all art and antiques, not antiquities, and were attributed (via the 2000 report by Brodie, Doole and Watson *Stealing History: The Illicit Trade in Cultural Material*) to the November 24, 1990, *Independent* article (now 33 years old) by Geraldine Norman, *Great Sale of the Centuries*. That article is reprinted in paragraph 2 of the ADA Appendix and gives no such figures. ***In other words, the Museums Association claim has no basis whatsoever.***

– The Organized Crime Group of the UK Metropolitan Police and INTERPOL figures quoted come from the same UK parliamentary hearings, the relevant minutes, including explanatory footnotes, of which are also published in paragraph 5 *Facts & Figures* Appendix in full.

As can be seen from the official Parliamentary record – the detailed primary source – the figures UNESCO now quotes are guestimates based on insurance company losses up to the year 2000 involving jewellery, silver, works of art, collectables, antiquities, household and business assets such as computers. It is also estimated that around half the figure quoted results from domestic thefts such as burglaries, with additional losses from National Trust properties, English Heritage and churches.

In other words, these 23-year-old statistics have nothing to do with the looting and trafficking of antiquities at all.

UNESCO gives as its third statistic the sum of \$1.6 billion – equivalent to 2.7% of global GDP in 2009 – available for money laundering through the art market. This is a starkly odd claim, because that would have made global GDP at the time less than \$60 billion, when it was actually almost \$61 trillion. So, the correct percentage would be 0.000026% of global GDP. Such a basic error in UNESCO’s official release points to little care being taken in the fact checking department.

It is also odd that the embedded link in the English language release takes the reader to the Spanish version of a September 2016 UNODC guidelines for preventing cultural property trafficking rather than the [English version](#).

On page 8 of the UNODC guidelines, however, all becomes clear, as it shows that this document and its footnotes are the unchecked source for both the Museums Association figures and the Organized Crime Group figures.

Page 45 of the September 2016 UNODC report quotes the IMF figure as \$1.6 trillion, then correctly 2.7% of global GDP in 2009. However, it is clear that whoever lifted this statistic for the UNESCO release misread this part of the report. The \$1.6 trillion does not refer to money available for laundering through the art market (then worth around [\\$39.5 billion](#) globally), but money available for laundering through the global financial system. **So, again, nothing to do with antiquities or the art market.**

Why is UNESCO relying on inaccurate data that in one instance is 23 years old and wrongly based on a newspaper article that is 33 years old? Why is it not checking its facts properly? Why is it spreading misinformation in this way? Why is it not dedicating resources to acquiring accurate, up-to-date information rather than simply pulling out quotes from old reports that it has not checked?

What appears to be extraordinary incompetence in drawing up the UNESCO media release has significant potential repercussions for the legitimate art market. Every initiative like this is later used as 'proof' that further regulation is required for the art market.

With the bogus nature of the data here exposed for what it is, UNESCO is left with nothing solid to justify developing this initiative.

This is far from being the sole example of such poor standards of behaviour from UNESCO. After publishing the groundless claim (revoked after much criticism 18 months later) that the annual value of cultural property trafficking was \$10 billion, and the exposure of its 2020 campaign against the art market, [The Real Price of Art](#), as almost completely fraudulent, at the very least it needs to review its research protocols to ensure its data is reliably sourced.

We have now written to UNESCO's Assistant Director-General of Culture regarding the matter and await a response.

[Alleged head of Egyptian antiquities trafficking ring arrested in Paris](#)

Art Newspaper: October 31: Further news linked to the Louvre Abu Dhabi case: Serop Simonian, scion of the long established family of Cairo collectors and dealers, has been arrested in Germany and sent to France under a European warrant. He is suspected of being the head of an alleged Egyptian antiquities trafficking ring, according to the report.

German-based Simonian, now in his eighties, denies any wrongdoing and told the *Art Newspaper* last year that the antiquities under suspicion came from his family collection, with many of them legally exported from Egypt in the 1970s and then held for decades in German museums.

The report also details favours granted by New York's Phoenix Gallery to Jean-François Charnier, former scientific director of Agence France Muséums, who advised the Emirates on the Louvre Abu Dhabi acquisitions. Charnier, who was charged over his role in the Louvre acquisitions crisis, does not face any charges relating to this latest revelation. He has admitted to an "error of judgment" over his acceptance of "loans" for family holidays from the gallery's owners but has denied doing any deal to secure the favours, with the holidays involved coming years after his business relationship with the gallery relating to the acquisitions, a position endorsed by the gallery itself.

US university museum returns five looted antiquities to Italy

Art Newspaper: November 7: Yet another example of objects being returned to their source countries because they had links to people associated with trafficking, but without any evidence to show that they were actually illicit.

Whether or not items have been trafficked, this case illustrates once more that the reversal of the burden of proof has been imposed in practice, as this article makes clear: “Among the objects suspected to have been looted or trafficked is an excellently preserved Minoan painted bathtub, which the Carlos museum cannot trace beyond its 1960s acquisition by a Swiss dealer. Subsequently it belonged to Ursula Becchina, wife of convicted antiquities trafficker Gianfranco Becchina.”

The article also states: “In spite of the recent returns, many highlights of the museum’s collection remain without adequate provenance.” Without stating what “adequate” provenance is, the implication appears to be that the museums should divest themselves of items that do not meet an impossible retrospective standard. To do so would all but empty the majority of museums worldwide.



Right: *The Minoan painted bathtub that museum suspects was trafficked. Image courtesy of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory*

British Museum chairman George Osborne tells guests he is eager to reach Parthenon Marbles deal

Art Newspaper: November 16: British Museum chairman George Osborne has made it clear that he wants a deal with Greece over the Parthenon Marbles – delivering his message at a dinner in the gallery where the marbles are displayed.

“Osborne went on to express a hope that ‘we can reach an agreement with Greece’, for at least some of the British Museum’s sculptures ‘to be seen in Athens’,” the *Art Newspaper* reported. “In return, he wants ‘other treasures from Greece, some that have never left those shores, to be seen here at the British Museum’.”

As the article also pointed out: What is surprising is that Osborne said that the Greeks would not be required to ‘relinquish’ their claim, since it is difficult to see how the museum could lend to a country which has a legal claim on the objects.”

Osborne acknowledged that such a deal might not succeed but has yet to address the widely held belief that any Greek government would simply ignore the terms of a deal once any of the marbles were returned to Athens because it would be impossible for them, politically, to send them back to London later.

It seems that with the likely change of Government in the UK next year, the path for return of the marbles may prove smoother. The [Guardian](#) notes that Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, whose own political constituency includes the BM, expected to be Prime Minister after the general election, would not block any loan deal negotiated by the BM. A further indication that talks are progressing towards such a deal came from a [BBC interview](#) with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who said leaving the marbles in the UK would be like cutting the Mona Lisa in half. He also made it clear that any partnership deal with the BM would mean the marbles returning to Greece, with the unspoken implication that once there they would not be returning to the UK.

Just as the newsletter was being signed off, we learned that at the last minute current British Prime Minister [Rishi Sunak had cancelled a meeting](#) with Mitsotakis to talk about the marbles, and Sky News reporting “Number 10 said Mr Sunak would not support any changes to the current laws that prevent the Marbles from being permanently returned to Greece - and suggested he would not be in favour of any loan arrangement”, adding “One senior Tory said that Mr Osborne was drawing up a ‘sordid deal’ that makes his position ‘untenable’, adding ‘he should go’.”

That led to an inevitable backlash, both from Greece and within the UK, [the Greek Prime Minister expressing his ‘displeasure’](#) at Sunak’s behaviour, while the message from Downing Street was that [Mitsotakis had promised not to raise the subject](#) during his visit, a claim disputed by Greece.

Whatever the culture arguments of this debate, it has now effectively been hijacked as a British general election issue, separating Labour from the Conservatives.

[*Tracey Emin and the problem with museum trustees*](#)

The Spectator: November 19: “The appointment of museum trustees has become enormously important in the last few years, as directors and curators of museums press ahead with an activist agenda that undermines the general understanding of what a museum is,” writes David Abulafia, Emeritus Professor of Mediterranean History at the University of Cambridge.

He has nothing against Tracey Emin being appointed a trustee of the British Museum but notes that the nature of its collections would lead one to expect the trustees to have more than the two archaeologists it has among them.

The Professor takes issue with what he sees as the politicisation of collections and related exhibitions, praising a recent BM show on Qing China for being illuminating while frowning on another at the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge for its “finger-wagging” approach “bathed in the murky light of Critical Race Theory, offering questionable statements not just of opinion but of fact”.

The BM is fast learning that being distracted by non-core activities often linked to ideology and political preferences can lead to disaster; Professor Abulafia argues that other institutions suffer from the same problem. He concludes: “The question is, rather, whether we need more trustees with truly relevant expertise, willing to set their face against the dangerous trend that is turning our museums into morgues of imperialism, colonialism, racism and a great many other isms – and, above all, into fortresses of self-righteous dogmatism.”

[*That’s not a potato: mystery of Egyptian treasures found buried in grounds of Scottish school*](#)

The Guardian: November 20: An intriguing tale that remains a mystery after more than 70 years. It starts with a schoolboy digging for potatoes in the grounds of a school in Fife, southeast Scotland in 1952. Digging up what he at first thought was a potato, it was later

discovered to be a 4,000-year-old Egyptian antiquity. The Royal Scottish Museum identified it as a mid-12th century statue head in sandstone.

There the matter rested until 14 years later when pupils at the school found an Egyptian bronze votive statuette of an Apis bull from the Late Ptolemaic Period (664-332 BC). By coincidence, the teacher who took it to the museum for identification had been the boy who found the first piece years earlier, and once the latest find was identified, he pocketed it. Again, no further investigation of the site was made, and it was another nine years until a third discovery was made.

By then the school had closed and the property had been turned into a young offenders institution. This time a group of teenagers came across what the museum found to be an ancient Egyptian bronze figurine of a man. Having heard about the earlier finds, the curator eventually gathered enough information to conduct a new search of the site, which yielded a further 15 objects. By the mid 1980s it was decided to treat the finds as Treasure Trove and the museum acquired them.

It remains a mystery as to who owned the pieces and how they came to be buried on the site. Most probably they were brought back by Alexander, Lord Balgonie, heir to the estate, who visited Egypt in 1856 and died on his return of tuberculosis a year later. As this article explains, "It is possible that grief and the sad association of the antiquities with his early death prompted someone to dispose of them. It also could be that stories of "the mummy's curse", dating to the 1860s, linked such antiquities with ill fortune, prompting someone to bury them."

The story is being retold in a new book, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, published on November 30.



The upper half of a faience shabti inscribed for a man named Hor-sa-lset, discovered in the school grounds. Photograph: © National Museums Scotland