

How the BBC helped Ittai Gradel crack the British Museum thefts – Chalke Valley History Festival revelations



Above: BBC Culture Editor Katie Razzall, far right, and her investigations team with Dr Ittai Gradel, second right, at the Chalke Valley History Festival talk.

On June 25, *The Chalke Valley History Festival* played host to a BBC seminar on the thefts from the British Museum. BBC Culture Editor Katie Razzall and her team of investigators shared a platform with whistleblower Dr Ittai Gradel in front of a packed audience as they told the tale of how the thefts came to light and Dr Gradel's pivotal role in exposing them. The audience listened spellbound as, accompanied by slides and excerpts from the current BBC documentary series on the issue, the panel unfolded the course of events over a 15-year period.

Dr Gradel started by explaining his background and interest, and the nature of the gems involved, detailing their historical importance and variety, before setting out how his suspicions first arose about the eBay seller from whom he had been acquiring items since 2015.

The turning point came when he spotted direct evidence in the form of flaws in one gem that matched those in the records of the British Museum collection. The thief had largely sold off items that had gone unrecorded but slipped up after years of getting away with it, he added.

The BBC team of investigators told how they had tracked buyers down to the United States and Germany, where one journalist, Darin Graham, found what was arguably the most important missing gem in a public exhibition.

The audience treated Dr Gradel as a hero, especially after learning about the difficulties he had faced trying to get the British Museum management to take his alerts seriously. They were equally clear about how important they considered the museum to be as a British institution.

The BBC has now released a podcast series, *Shadow World*, currently a series of ten episodes covering the scandal and how it unfolded. [It is freely available to listeners.](#)

Archaeologist accuses Zahi Hawass of violating excavation laws

Egypt Independent: June 12: “The Assistant Professor and Acting Dean of the Faculty of Archeology and Cultural Heritage at the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Monica Hanna has filed a [report](#) to the Attorney General accusing famed Egyptian archaeologist [Zahi Hawass](#) of receiving grants from external parties to illegally finance excavations,” this report begins.

Egypt’s laws prohibit private interests from being involved in excavations, but Hanna’s report accuses the Bibliotheca Alexandria of acting as a conduit for external grants that are then passed on to Hawass’s excavations in Saqqara and Luxor under cover of the Zahi Hawass Center.

Germany returns looted antiquities in Berlin’s Altes Museum to Italy

Art Newspaper: June 14: Another article where the headline does not reflect what has actually happened. Berlin’s Altes Museum has returned 25 antiquities, including 21 Apulian vases, to Italy. The authorities believe that some of the vases might be looted and trafficked, because of previous links to the convicted Italian dealer Giacomo Medici – but the sole ‘evidence’ of them being looted is that he once had polaroid photos of them. Despite this, Hermann Parzinger, the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, argued that this was absolute proof of their illicit nature: “Four of them are proven to have been from illegal excavations—with the others it is not absolutely certain, but there are grounds for strong suspicion.”

“Although the remaining 17 vases are not proven to be looted, they are so similar to the other four that it is presumed they were stolen from the same grave, Parzinger says.”

These assumptions ignore the fact that while Medici was convicted of looting and smuggling, and a large number of items were confiscated, a very large number were also returned to him because, following lengthy investigations, the authorities could find no evidence that he had acquired them illegally.

Turkish official challenges British claim on Parthenon sculptures’ ownership

Fox News: June 5: The latest salvo in the battle over the Parthenon Marbles seeks to undermine British claims of ownership by stating that the Ottoman regime never authorised their removal by Lord Elgin. As with so many claims of this type, its robustness is upgraded as the message is passed on.

The base of the claim is that the Turkish authorities can find no documented evidence of an imperial edict or firman permitting Elgin to proceed with the removal of the Marbles. In some media reports, as well as in the direct claims of some officials involved – such as Greek Culture Minister Lin Mendoni, quoted here – this has been interpreted as absolute proof that no such permission was granted, rather than an acknowledgement that the document may exist but cannot be found.

UNESCO Code of Ethics Conference, Paris

June 14: The conference consisted of two sessions:

Session 1: **Level of due diligence required when verifying that an object is not the product of illicit trade**

Session 2: **Co-operation with national authorities in the return and restitution of cultural property**

Session 1 panellists included the following:

Cong Liu: China: Secretariat for Association of Auction Houses
Elodie Jeannest De Gyves: Specialist in medieval sculpture, plus scientific researcher for museums. Runs Sculpture & Collection
Will Korner: Head of Fairs, TEFAF, plus founder of Cultural Heritage At Risk database
Gokhan Cete: Dept for the fight against trafficking in Turkey and author of reports
James Ratcliffe: UK: Art Loss Register

This session started by looking back to the origins of prioritising due diligence and provenance, quoting 1995 as the date and crediting UNESCO as the pioneer, but failing to mention how it was inspired by CINOA and IADAA.

One of the first things mentioned was [UNESCO's database of national legislation past and present](#), which might prove useful when it comes to EC Reg 2019/880. However, when you click through to the embedded link on the UNESCO page, it links to nothing.

While it was a good opportunity for the panellists to showcase how compliant they were, in itself this did not add much to the debate.

Cong Liu set out a laborious system of practice which simply demonstrated state control in China, but whose example would destroy much of the market if adopted in the West. While it included standard elements such as checking consignments against 'banned' lists, it also meant subjecting every item to independent scrutiny by the Provisional Agency of Cultural Heritage Administration (PACHA) prior to sale. It is difficult to see how sales can go ahead on this basis.

Gokhan Cete acknowledged that UNESCO's code of ethics would be unworkable without the art market's voluntary co-operation – a theme constantly echoed throughout both sessions. He noted that the most effective means of Turkey reclaiming its heritage were bilateral agreements with the US and Switzerland.

Both Will Korner of TEFAF and James Ratcliffe of the ALR spoke strongly about the costs and practicalities of compliance. While recognising that it is important for the market to set standards and minimise risks, they also advised that those looking to regulate the market needed to respond proportionately when it came to due diligence and provenance.

Ratcliffe concluded: "If people can't live up to the standards set [by UNESCO], no one will follow it. That is crucial. It must be feasible within the market sense."

Session 2 Panellists included:

Christina Berking (IDK) 1000 members (Germany)
Anauene Dias Soares (Brazil museums)
Angelika Elstner (ILAB)
Colonel Hubert Percie du Sert (Head of central office against cultural property trafficking: OCBC)
Jahangir Selimkhanov (Adviser to Minister of Culture, Azerbaijan):
Mohammed Al-Mimar (Culture Ministry Iraq):

While the presentations and debate generally lacked depth, the message came through loud and clear that without recognition of time, costs and proportionality, any voluntary code wouldn't work.

A Carabinieri officer in the audience told how they had been working very well with the art market in Italy, saying dealers and auctioneers often checked with them regarding items they proposed selling. However, he added that despite having three million objects on their database, they only had one million photos, and photos were the key.

Christina Berking intervened to list the extensive amount of regulation and paperwork which already provides transparency and puts a great burden on micro businesses. Any code should be proportionate, she said. The code of ethics puts the burden on dealers to proactively approach the authorities, she added. This can be difficult and even illegal because of contractual obligations and GDPR rules. A dealer cannot list an item as stolen on a database without evidence that it is illicit.

She also explained about the much overlooked aspect of statutes of limitation, saying the normal situation is that the consignor is not a criminal and is acting in good faith. Previously illegal objects might now be legal. She noted the terms of UNESCO and the fact that if a country does not ask for an item back within three years of being alerted to a possibly illicitly exported item, then it cannot do so.

She also explained that unless a dealer is selling an item, they are unlikely to investigate its origins because of the time and cost, while the country of origin making a claim would not be willing to undertake the cost or burden of work in research an item either, which leaves the item in limbo.

Concluding advice from the speakers included the following:

- More training required for governments, trade and enforcement.
- States need to make databases more available.
- It's about proportionality.

Some of the non-market speakers confused patrimony claims with the repatriation of looted items. Anauene Dias Soares defined artworks as distinct from cultural goods and argued that the latter should not be traded – a controversial and impractical viewpoint.

Colonel Hubert Percie du Sert described the OCBC as more of a PR than investigative body. He said that databases were the essential element for due diligence but did not say whether this included making them available to the market.

Significant presentational difficulties with some speakers whose English was very poor meant that the points they were making were often missed.

In summary, non-market speakers tended to talk in general terms, making non-specific demands without really offering solutions. A distinct lack of clear thinking or analytical depth showed that they had not really thought about the issues at hand to any great degree and did not understand the market.

The market-based speakers were much more forensic and precise – possibly because they have had more incentive to be so. The chief message that resulted from this was that UNESCO needed to ensure a proportionate approach that did not damage the market or its code would not be adopted.

3,300-year-old ship discovered off Israeli coast, the oldest ever found in deep waters

The Times of Israel: June 20: The Israel Antiquities Authority has announced the discovery of an ancient ship – up to 3,300 years old – on the bed of the Mediterranean during a survey by the country's natural gas company. Dating to the 14th-13th century BCE, the Late Bronze Age, it is said to be the most ancient ship ever found in the deep seas.

Of great significance, the find demonstrates that mariners of the period could navigate without a line of sight to the shore, the IAA said. Also important is that the cargo of hundreds of amphorae is largely intact, as the image here shows.

The wreck was found 90 kilometres off northern Israel's coast, at a depth of 1.8 km.

"Only two other shipwrecks with cargo are known from the Late Bronze Age in the Mediterranean Sea...both found off the Turkish coast. Yet both of those shipwrecks were found relatively close to shore," said Jacob Sharvit, head of the IAA marine unit.

The depth of the wreck means that it has not been disturbed until now.

“During the operation, the team confirmed that the ship was 12-14 meters long and was transporting hundreds of vessels. Some were visible above the ocean floor, but the muddy bottom concealed a second layer of amphorae,” the article reports.



An amphora rescued from the sea during the operation.
Image courtesy of Israel Antiquities Authority and Euro News.

Egypt Parliament Acts to Confront Online Sale of Antiquities

Aawsat.com: June 22: Despite the headline, this initiative is chiefly about tackling the offer of antiquities via social media sites, something that the legitimate trade has been warning against for years.

Unfortunately, it also revives the false statistic promoted by UNESCO from 2020 as well as the long debunked claim about the importance of the illicit market: “UNESCO issued a report in 2020 saying that the antiquities trade is valued at about USD 10 billion every year, while art and antiquities are the third largest black market in the world after drugs and weapons.”

The Jewelry Highlights From Christie’s London Upcoming Antiquities Sale

JCK Online: June 24: This article previews jewellery lots in [Christie’s](#) upcoming Antiquities auction on July 3, part of the summer season of such sales. Here are the catalogues for sales at [Sotheby’s](#) (July 3), [Bonhams](#) (July 4), [Lyon & Turnbull](#) (July 31).

Looted antiquities are in the spotlight in new digital museum

Science: June 26: A new online gallery of reportedly looted and trafficked objects, the Museum of Looted Antiquities is run by Jason Felch, author of the Chasing Aphrodite blog, who is said to be co-funding the project with the Achilles Research Group. The latter is also run by Felch, in partnership with Katie Paul, former chief of staff of the Antiquities Coalition and now co-director of the ATHAR Project, along with Amr Al-Azm, who is also part of the Achilles team.

Felch explains here that the main purpose of the museum is to “build the first reliable data source about the illicit antiquities trade. It’s really important to know the basic parameters of that black market in order to inform policy decisions and understand what we’re reckoning with.”

Acknowledging that most estimates of the size of the illicit market are made up, he refers and links to the [Yates and Brodie paper from 2023](#) to show this.

Where MOLA's claims are less convincing is in setting its own estimates, which amount to an illicit trade worth \$2.5 billion. This is because the value of trade, whether legal or otherwise, is always understood to refer to the annual total, whereas the \$2.5 billion Felch gives is based on an extrapolation for all repatriations for which they have [records going back to 1950](#) – a completely different concept and a meaningless figure. What's more, a vast number of repatriations involve items for which there is no evidence whatsoever of their being illicit; they are simply returned under the terms of bilateral agreements, known as Memoranda of Understanding, legal vehicles used to support soft power diplomacy. It is generous to label the claim as misleading at best, and indeed it conflicts with the Yates and Brodie report that Felch himself refers to here.

This is still a project in its infancy, and any genuine effort to map and accurately assess the value of the illicit trade is a positive move. However, this has all the hallmarks of the anti-market propaganda we have become so used to over the years. It would be interesting to hear from Drs Yates and Brodie what they think of it.

Who Owns the 'Victorious Youth'?

New York Times: June 30: A surprising article from the NYT, which usually takes an anti-market stance. This is a measured view from Adam Kuper, an anthropologist and the author, most recently, of *The Museum of Other People: From Colonial Acquisitions to Cosmopolitan Exhibitions*.

Kuper sets out the context for Italy's [now successful] claim over *Victorious Youth*, the Greek statue famously found on the seabed somewhere in the Adriatic in 1964 and later sold to The Getty in California.

"In 2018 Italy's highest court declared the statue the property of Italy — while conceding that it might have been discovered in international waters and that the sculptor was probably Greek," Kuper writes.

"Some of the reasoning was technical: The statue had been landed at an Italian port by an Italian-flagged vessel and had remained on Italian soil for several years. Some arguments depended on historical interpretation: When the statue was created, the judge said, "the artist had most probably visited Rome and Taranto." The judge added, "At the relevant time, Greece and Rome had enjoyed good relations, and thereafter, Roman civilization developed as a continuation of Hellenic civilization." These considerations were, in the judge's view, sufficient to establish a "significant connection" with Italy, a state that came into existence in 1861. In May, the European Court of Human Rights upheld Italy's right to seize the statue."

While Kuper acknowledges the widespread view that "questionable pieces" should be returned, he asks whether they are being returned to the right people. "If a statue cast in Greece 2,000 years ago is discovered off the coast of Italy, is it part of the heritage of modern Italy?"

For a start, centuries after the original loss, it can be difficult to identify the descendants of the original owners.

Kuper quotes Kate Fitz Gibbon of the Committee for Cultural Policy, who criticised the Manhattan District Attorney's office for not just facilitating but celebrating the handing over of Tibetan artefacts to Tibet's occupier and oppressor, China – a point also made by IADAA. Even more questionable, as also highlighted by IADAA on several occasions, is the bizarre decision to hand back the Benin bronzes to Nigeria, especially when they have ended up in the hands of the descendant of the Oba of Benin, who sold countless people into slavery to acquire the metal from which the bronzes were made.

This returns process has continued despite protests from the descendants of the slaves who were sold.

“The desire to repair historical injustices is honorable. And certainly great museums have questions to answer about some of their prized possessions. But in the rush to undo earlier wrongs, we risk perpetrating fresh injustices,” writes Kuper.

As we have also pointed out when it comes to *Victorious Youth*, whatever else Italy may base its claim on, its failure to demonstrate that the sculpture was found within its domestic waters means that claim does not meet the terms of [Article 4 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention](#) on illicit cultural property to which Italy is a signatory.