



Rescuing cultural properties in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami that hit the north-east coast of Japan on 11 March 2011. Upper: all that remains of the Archaeology Store at Yamada Town in Iwate Prefecture. The building and its contents were swept away by the tsunami and not even a single pottery sherd was found within 50m of where the store once stood. Lower: archaeologists from the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties sifting through stinking mud and rubbish looking for artefacts outside the Ishinomaki Culture Center in Miyagi Prefecture. The stricken region is famous for fishing, and the overwhelming stench of rotting fish from the ruined freezer stores compounds the sense of devastation. Photographs supplied by Akira Matsui (herald@nabunken.go.jp).



*Excavation in progress at El Mirón Cave, Cantabria, Spain. Middle Palaeolithic occupation has been contacted in the test-pit (left) and Upper Palaeolithic surfaces are being dug at the bottom (centre). The Mirón Project, carried out by the Instituto Internacional de Investigaciones Prehistóricas de Cantabria (University of Cantabria) and the University of New Mexico, is the subject of a report in a forthcoming issue of *Antiquity* under the authorship of Lawrence Straus, Manuel González-Morales and Jose Miguel Carretero. Photograph taken on 2 July 2010 by Manuel González-Morales (moralesm@umican.es).*

EDITORIAL

Our science produces huge quantities of artefacts — more than 50 000 a year are collected off the surface of the fields of a small island like Britain, urban archaeology unearths millions of bits and pieces, and there's plenty more where those came from: the output of a Roman potter spread over the empire and broken into sherds must run to hundreds of millions. We have never really worked out what to do with all this stuff. The majority sits in museum basements while a glamorous handful perform as desirable assets in an anarchic version of the art market. For researchers, all artefacts are data, or fossils of behaviour, witnesses of action that speak only in context. But objects get personal too, and even data-hungry archaeologists can understand this — who can forget the sensation of first uncovering a bronze brooch, or a flint scraper, an ordinary thing suddenly transfigured through chance encounter? While for most people a postage stamp (if they ever use one) remains a receipt for payment stuck on a letter, for others an array of stamps in an album becomes a picture gallery and a world geography combined. And surely such material collections awaken curiosity just as often as the narratives of myths, history or prehistory?

Sooner or later, however, the weevil of mammon spots more food, and passion is turned into price. Price has other rules, even other-worldly ones: it's not governed by archaeological ideas — how much effort it took to make the artefact, the rarity of its materials, the distance it travelled — not even by what it might fetch in the market; it obeys some ethereal sentiment, like a religion. If a high priest of the art market utters a paean of praise about a heap of nails and string, its price also soars up to heaven. The infection has reached the antiquities market too, evident in the witless quantities of money paid to metal-detectorists (*Antiquity* 84: 295–6). What possible use could the Staffordshire hoard (£2.5m) be to a private purchaser? You could wear it I suppose, or invite an impressionable young person upstairs to see your sword pommels. Objects without contexts are worthless except as bullion, but to melt down artefacts is equivalent to making people into meat.

The power of archaeological materials to tell us about the past is locked in a permanent duel with their power to enrich someone, be it a collector, a community or a nation. Take the case of the stunning treasure just recovered from the Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple, located inside East Fort, in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India. Chamber A, one of six known to contain gifts realised from centuries of brilliantly successful international trade, included 17kg of gold coins dating back to the East India Company period, gold trinkets weighing one tonne, an 18ft-long golden necklace weighing 2.5kg, a sack full of diamonds and thousands of pieces of antique jewellery studded with diamonds and emeralds, not to mention golden vessels and crowns.

According to many Hindus this is the property of the god Vishnu, whose jewel-encrusted statue it includes, and whose earthly custodian is the Martanda Varma Travancore family, ancestral maharajahs. Others believe it should belong to the Indian state and that the state should curate it. Others have expressed the view that it belongs to the people of Kerala, and should be turned into money (est. \$22.3 billion in total for Chamber A, 'without even calculating the antique value of the objects') and distributed forthwith to the needy. The

icons of gold could be seen as extravagant monuments to ancient centralised power, power that could now be properly exercised by returning to current generations the symbolic storage of their ancestors. But there are other ways of generating revenue, of course, like admitting paying tourists to the temple, something only allowed presently to Hindus.

The granite doors of Chamber A were allowed to be levered open as a result of a successful action in the High Court by lawyer T.P. Sundara Rajan. It has been followed (7 July 11) by an application to open Chamber B, and on 15 July the *Times of India* announced the results of the latest hearing: “The Kerala government, Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple management and heirs of the Martanda Varma Travancore royal family on Thursday agreed before the Supreme Court that the unprecedented wealth unearthed at the temple belonged to the deity and no one else can lay claim on it. Relieved by the unanimity among parties, Justices R.V. Raveendran and A.K. Patnaik said the priority was to appoint an expert panel which could suggest guidelines for the safe-keeping of the treasure, its security and the possibility of displaying some of the ancient artifacts in the temple’s museum. . . . Appearing for the temple management, senior advocate K.K. Venugopal suggested appointing the curator of the Supreme Court Museum for the preservation and restoration of the ancient artifacts. He said ‘those with artistic and historic value could be preserved, but articles which have no heritage, artistic or historic value are to be kept separately. These are the items which can possibly be disposed of and converted into cash or immovable property by persons competent to act on behalf of the temple.’” As for the second chamber, (Kallara B) the decision was postponed, but royal family heir Rama Varma’s power of attorney holder told the court through senior advocate P.P. Rao “that the unopened vault, should not be opened without conducting the traditional *Deva Prashnam* [seeking the deity’s permission], so as not to incur the displeasure of Lord Padmanabha”. Future decisions will not have been simplified by the death of the principal protagonist T.P. Sundara Rajan on 17 July, provoking comments about the wrath of god.

The historical value of the treasure would appear to be an important factor, but not exactly paramount. The celebrated historian M.G. Sashibhushan was asked hopefully “do you think the interest the world over is due to the possible history behind the wealth?” The professor was under no illusion: “No, it is the glitter of the yellow metal that has dazzled the world. Only a minority will be interested in the historical aspect of the wealth. All the journalists who have come from all over the world have asked me questions only about the amount of wealth and the yellow metal and not the historical aspects”.¹

☞ Prominent among the paradoxes evident in this case is the fact that, like electricity, antiquities seem only to create energy when they move. If you keep them in a temple vault, or even visit them in a museum, it may do fundamental things for the souls of visitors but won’t necessarily make much money. Trade them, or lend them, or exhibit them abroad and both the lender and borrower are enriched. If antiquities are not moved about, the argument goes, they would lose their value (or rather their price). Hugh Eakin began his revealing article in the *New York Review of Books* about the trafficking of antiquities by citing Cicero’s successful prosecution speech against Gaius Verres, former governor of Sicily: “Among the most sacred and revered Sicilian sanctuaries there was not a single one

¹ Sources: rediff.com, 12 July 2011; *The Sunday Times* 10 July 2011; *The Times of India* 15 July 2011.

which he failed to plunder; not one single god. . . did he leave in the possession of the Sicilians". Verres fled into exile, and a victory against the might of private money and political preferment had been won by an exceptionally skilled lawyer. The Getty Museum's large-scale acquisitions of antiquities originating from the Classical world also ended in a trial in Rome (in 2010) and while prosecutor Paolo Giorgio Ferri failed to make charges stick against the Getty executives selected to take the fall, he created sufficient embarrassment to change the balance of judgement in favour of return. The mass of evidence collected by the Italian Heritage Protection Police (Carabinieri TPC), included thousands of polaroid photographs of freshly looted works of art dutifully (if imprudently) recorded by a Geneva dealer. The Getty spent \$16 million on legal fees between 2005 and 2007 alone in order to defend their right of retention, being obliged all the same to release hundreds of millions of dollars worth of artefacts to Rome and Athens. This left "the Getty Villa a pallid shadow of its former self," remarks Eakin, adding "rarely have lawyers been paid so much to lose so much"².

The demand for Classical works to set up new museums has not abated, as we saw in the eccentric proposal to furnish the new super-museums in Dubai with Roman rather than Arabian works of art (*Antiquity* 83: 264). How could such a demand be regulated? Very few objects retrieved before 1960 have a provenance in the archaeological sense of being accompanied by a context card; step one might be to make all travel illegal without one — the context record becomes an object's passport. In our world, the country of origin always has a greater claim on an antiquity than its owner, and is thought to retain, so to speak, the *droit de seigneur*. We could make some moral headway by supposing that the power of antiquities lies not in possessing them, but in displaying them. They would thus perform like other cultural assets — plays, music, ballet. Public benefit can then be redefined as providing universal access to the world's cultural achievements. This might suggest a new and more inspiring role for the public-spirited billionaire. If amassing collections and building museums to put them in are out of fashion, perhaps a more subtle strategy can take its place: first keep existing museums going and then pay for the magnificent antiquities they already hold to travel the world as ambassadors for their makers. A modern Andrew Carnegie could make that happen.

☞ Some recent dramas from the coal face. In England, local councillor Alan Melton hit the UK headlines by announcing the end of rescue archaeology in the Fenland: "The days of the Local Authority employing expensive consultants to evaluate your proposals are gone. . . a requirement for an archaeological dig/survey will not be required. Common sense will prevail! The bunny huggers won't like this, but if they wish to inspect a site, they can do it when the footings are being dug out. . . . This will stop the stupid requirement of having to strip a whole site, after trenches have already criss-crossed the site, in some cases requiring the development to be constructed on piles or some other stabiliser, at a far greater un-recoverable cost. We shall also relax conservation rules, particularly around sustainability and listed buildings. We will of course not seek to break the law, but we will be practical."

² Source: Hugh Eakin, What went wrong at the Getty? *The New York Review of Books* 58.11 (July 2011), 27–9.

The Melton affair ('bunnygate') was swiftly marginalised, thanks to prompt media intervention by archaeologists Chris Evans and Mike Heyworth, but there is an uneasy feeling that some British planners remain secretly unconvinced of the need for archaeology and have difficulty reconciling it with the latest outbreak of wealth-creation fever. They might enjoy an anecdote owed to their opposite numbers in Inner Mongolia, who also had to square the circle of money and antiquity, and did so with the help of public debate. A Bronze Age site extending over 1ha lay in the path of a highway designed to connect the city of Chifeng to Chaoyang. The Deputy Director of the Inner Mongolian Archaeological Research Institute, Cao Jian'en, knew the site was there, and had been given the best part of 2009 to remove it. Coincidentally, he was a native of Chifeng, and felt himself to be an important player in the development that would link his home-town with the wider world. His personal struggles between wanting to preserve the site and wanting to finish on time, exposed on YouTube, will touch a chord in every professional³.

First sampling the site with eight trenches for the sake of speed, the team gradually became aware of the scale of the settlement they were unearthing and the excellent state of preservation of its oval clay-bonded rubble buildings spread across the ridge. The tipping point came when Cao returned from a meeting after an 800km drive to be shown the excavated half of the mighty curvilinear building 'F8' by assistant Sun Ningsong. The next step in the procedure would normally be to 'preserve it by record' and then destroy its wall and get beneath it. Should they? After much soul-searching Cao ordered an immediate halt to trenching and a complete change of strategy to area excavation. F8 was revealed in its glorious entirety and bit by bit the lineaments of a mud and stone town 4000 years old were brought into the light of day.

Cao was in deep trouble now, since this unilateral action would hold up the road. Having revealed enough of the buildings to make the case, he took the decision to the Inner Mongolian ministry and thence to Beijing. A site visit followed, where the great and the good urged preservation *in situ*, and that same night the dilemma was presented to the Municipality at Chifeng where the town was asked its opinion. Mayor Wang, speaking on behalf of the citizens, expressed their views: "We, people of Chifeng, would rather travel to Chaoyang by donkey than destroy this site." Cao was mightily relieved: "After all the preservation of the site would benefit generations. It isn't just about a road".

The mood established, design teams swung into action to divert the half-finished highway, presenting a detour option and an underpass option. In this case the latter, being the least expensive, won the day. The people of the world's fastest growing economy, and their local governments, have clearly decided that the past, however remote, has a place in their future.

Martin Carver
York, 1 September 2011

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgPpLVz83OA&NR=1>