

Editorial

✎ The first paper in this issue is a milestone in British prehistory, a dating for the Sweet Track, one of the Neolithic pathways across the wetlands of the Somerset levels, that is precise to the year 3807/3806 BC. It has depended on three stages of work. First came the European oak chronology, following the ideal of the bristlecone-pine chronology for the desert Southwest of the USA, and beginning with the German sequence in the mid 1960s that went back about a thousand years. Second was the reconciliation, published in 1984, of the German record with the separate chronology developed in Belfast on Irish bog-oaks to make a single European sequence of 7272 years. The third stage, reported here, is the matching of records from archaeological contexts of the British Neolithic across to that sequence.

It is only a generation since dates for the British Neolithic, as for most of prehistoric Europe, were an educated guess – 2000, 2500 or 3000 BC according to where you were educated. In the intervening years, we have relied upon radiocarbon for a better understanding, and that is the good reason why this issue of *ANTIQUITY* returns yet again to the complications which afflict working with radiocarbon. Bowman & Balaam (pp. 315–18) notice in particular: the selection of material for dating with regard to its context; the accuracy and precision of the determination itself; interpretation and publication; and the best use of dating resources. Scott *et al.* (pp. 319–22) report on the new comparative study of dating by 37 laboratories, whose findings do not bring much cheer. Some systematic bias was found, and a significantly greater degree of external variability than is explained by quoted error terms. At the meeting to discuss the study, Scott *et al.* report, 'Immediate and appropriate action was needed to regain scientific credibility for ^{14}C -dating in general and to ensure user confidence in the applied chronology.' These are strong and honest words.

Some of the trouble lies in the ignorance of radiocarbon consumers; the many attempts to educate them can have only limited success when radiocarbon study depends on statistical

concepts and methods far beyond the average archaeologist's innumerate grasp. Much of it lies in the false view taken of radiocarbon in the middle years, when no agreed calibration curve was available. Too many of us, needing units of less than a century in the chronology of later prehistoric Europe, persuaded ourselves that a small miscellany of radiocarbon dates from scattered sites made a sufficient pattern to support nice distinctions. We can see now that a more correct view of error terms and the realities of calibration, taken with the pitfalls of old wood, contamination, human error and – alas – non-comparability between laboratories, define the overall precision of radiocarbon as less than was for a while believed. In the Aegean, for example, the pottery chronology tied to Egyptian historical dates deserves to command the field (see Sherratt's review, pp. 414–15) until there is a radiocarbon chronology based on demonstrably more reliable sources.

A legacy of that era is a corpus of radiocarbon dates for regions and periods that is unhappily scattered in the literature since the regular date-lists in *Radiocarbon* ceased to offer a full picture, and which cannot be trusted until it has been purged by a measure of 'chronometric hygiene' of the kind published in *ANTIQUITY* for Egypt by Hassan in 1987 and for the Pacific by Spriggs in 1989.

In other aspects there is much good radiocarbon news. The accelerator laboratories, working with much smaller samples, allow for example the dates on an organic element in rock-art pigment of terminal Pleistocene date reported by Loy *et al.* in the last *ANTIQUITY* (pp. 110–16). The understanding of bone chemistry is much improved, and with it the potential for better dates from bone, which is not prone to an 'old bone' effect. The practical limit of radiocarbon, at about 35,000 b.p., has not been moved by the accelerators, and the oldest archaeological dates in which one can have a full confidence may still be those made with the old apparatus at Groningen, a glass spaghetti to enrich the sample by a known factor, before conventional counting. For the period from 30,000 to 100,000 – so important for the global spread of *H. sap.*

sap. – much promise is now shown by the new thermoluminescent methods which can address unburnt sediments.

☞ Will someone please save the Berlin Wall? Not all of it, of course, and certainly not the wickedness of spirit that built it. The Wall, more than any other artefact or building, stands for the division of Europe in the cold decades from 1945 to 1989 (though its calendar date falls rather late in that period). Its chipping way over the last months stands for the escape of central Europe into a brighter freedom, for all its uncertainties and perils (on which, in archaeology, see Milisauskas, pp. 283–5). Some of it ought to be preserved as a physical record of the cold: a 500-metre length just to one side of the Brandenburg Gate would do nicely. Thousands of tiny fragments, now going into private hands round the world, do not add up to the same.

But there is a private museum of the Wall, reported to be enjoying a deserved boom. And in Poland, there is talk of a ‘Stalinland’, a kind of theme park where all the statues of the Red Hero and his friends that clutter Eastern cities would be collected together in memory of his era.

☞ *Fake?* is a first-rate temporary exhibition at the British Museum, where it continues until 2 September. A fake is not just a copy, but something made or presented with an intention to deceive. So the classic forgeries for financial gain are there, the van Meegeren Vermeers and the Botticelli *Madonna* who, sceptical eyes saw, had the face of a 1920s film star. In others, the intention to deceive is intellectual. Here Piltdown is the star, with a reconstructed skull that looks for all the world like a modern, long human cranium improbably mated up to an ape jaw (and so it is). With hindsight one is amazed it could fool the experts. Alongside Piltdown is his artefact, the once-famous ‘cricket-bat’ – and, yes, it *does* look entirely like an ancient eroded cricket-bat. Was the reference to English sport part of the hoaxer’s game, or an unconscious expression of some deep desire that the first

man should be ever so English in his culture? The show’s story goes back to fake Babylonian antiquities, explores the credulous world of dried mermen and fishy frauds, and the contemporary fakes of Lego and Rolex watches. The exhibition is exceptionally good and instructive on fakes, copies, hybrids and replicas made for other purposes, like the Roman industry in Hellenistic copies, William Beckford’s designs in a medieval manner, and restorations so comprehensive they amount to new creations; on the vagaries of what is autograph to the artist, what is fair assistance and what is fake in different fields of paint, print and sculpture; on objects dismissed as fakes and later recognized as true. Some objects are shown whose status is still undefined: the chalk figurine from the Neolithic flint mines at Grimes Graves; the Aztec rock-crystal skull (which I did not know to be under suspicion: his teeth are too well cut); and the Vinland map (damned as a forgery by the titanium in its pigment, but now back into play after a re-analysis).

The exhibition shows many fine and curious things – to think about as well as to look at. The presentation is witty and acute. A painter quietly paints Picassos in a corner of the gallery. Terrific! The catalogue is equally good.*

☞ The editorial in the December 1989 ANTIQUITY reported the case of the Kanakaria mosaics, looted from a church in Cyprus, bought from intermediaries in Switzerland, and put on sale by a dealer in the state of Indiana, USA. The case, I remarked, ‘deserves to become a landmark case in the protection of sites’. Already it is material to the future ownership of the Sevso treasure, the most fabulous collection of late Antique silverware, intended to be sold by Sotheby’s later in the year. Dr Marlia Mango, the authority on silverware, has already made a study, in conjunction with Anna Bennett of the London Institute of Archaeology; Dr Mango remarks, ‘Future study of the Sevso Treasure will undoubtedly result in the rewriting of the history of Late Antique art.’ Research results

* MARK JONES (ed.), *Fake?: the art of deception*. 312 pages, 130 colour and 185 black-and-white illustrations. 1990.

London: British Museum Publications; ISBN 0-7141-2058-8 hardback £25; ISBN 0-7141-1703-X paperback £16.95.

will become available by degrees; for now, I address only where the treasure comes from and how its future ownership may be decided.

The treasure comprises four vast plates, five ewers, an amphora, two situlae, a basin and a toilet casket. One plate is inscribed with the name Sevso in a Latin verse:

HEC SEVSO TIBI DURENT PER SAECULA MULTA
POSTERIS UT PROSINT VASCULA DIGNA TUIS

Let these, O Sevso, yours for many ages be,
Small vessels fit to serve your offspring worthily.

Sevso is a Germanic or Celtic name, and the Chi-Rho monogram with the inscription identifies Sevso as a Christian. The pieces are diagnostically of 4th–5th-century date, and are representative of both Eastern and Western empires. They show signs of use and repair, indicative of decades having passed before they were placed carefully together in a copper cauldron, with the plates stacked on the bottom. The sheet-metal cauldron resembles Early Byzantine designs with a kind of crenellated seam that is known from the 6th century onwards. The cauldron itself was worn, therefore not itself new. A radiocarbon determination on carbon-black under its bottom indicates a date earlier rather than later in the period that the style permits. Byzantine suggests the East, of course, but *ANTIQUITY* readers may remember Dr Mango *et al.*'s paper last year (63: 295–311) reporting a 6th-century Mediterranean sheet-copper bucket found in Suffolk, and by no means the first out of west European soil.

Marks on the cauldron indicate the treasure was there for a long period – until, it is presumed, recent discovery. Corrosion products indicate it was in a limestone environment but not in the soil directly, which could mean in or under a building of limestone or in a naturally protected place, such as a cave. The splendid condition of the silver is likely due to the chemical protection offered by the copper cauldron.

The treasure was brought to public notice this spring by Sotheby's in Zurich. The seller is the Trustee of the Marquess of Northampton Settlement, for practical purposes the present Marquess. The family owns two great houses, Compton Wynyates and Castle Ashby, and has

recently been known as sellers. The Greek vases were sold from Castle Ashby in 1980, and Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* in 1985 (for a then-record price for a painting). The Marquess bought the first pieces of the Treasure 'in Switzerland through a London dealer negotiating for him with an agent of the owner in Lebanon', at a date 'quite soon' after 1980. Then, the Marquess says, 'I realized that I had inherited a passion for collecting. As it became clearer that they were part of a stupendous treasure, my determination to buy it all was strengthened.' Five years later, the last four pieces were bought, plus the cauldron and, 'At that stage I became convinced that the Treasure was complete.'

Nevertheless, within five years, the Marquess is selling. He explains, 'It has given me great satisfaction to have achieved my objective of acquiring the whole treasure, but at the same time it has become an enormous responsibility. I would also like it to be enjoyed by a much wider group of people. I have therefore decided to sell it in such a way that it could find a permanent home and, if possible, be kept together for the enjoyment of, and study by, future generations.'

Sotheby's put the Treasure on view in New York in February. They invite offers for a private sale so as to keep the treasure intact. Otherwise it is to be sold by auction in Zurich in the autumn. Their pre-sale estimate, necessarily uncertain for a unique collection, is £40 million – which would be a world record auction price for a single *objet d'art* or closed group.

The two immediate questions.

Is the Treasure genuine and as fine as it appears? Yes.

Where does it come from? The Treasure, Sotheby's reported, 'has export licences from Lebanon which have been ratified by the Lebanese Embassy in Switzerland and in which Sotheby's has absolute confidence'. As to more exact provenance, Sotheby's reported evidence of a find-spot in Lebanon, possibly the Bekaa valley (which has a reputation as a source of antiquities).

The Romans being the Americans of the ancient world, distributing their Samian and silverware wherever their writ ran (and beyond), a collection like this could come from the territories of many modern states. Anticipating questions, Sotheby's checked with all 29



Meleager plate of the Sevso Treasure. Detail of the central panel.

The great hunters of antique myth have conquered the Calydonian Boar. Meleager sits on its skin, flanked by Castor and Pollux. Behind is Atalanta, who stunned the beast with her arrow, and hunters with double axe and club.

Around the scene, the engraved palmettes of the rest of the plate.

Diameter of this central panel about 20 cm, of the whole plate 71 cm.

Reproduced by kind permission of Sotheby's, London.

countries which cover the 4th-century Empire* to see if the Treasure was reported stolen in any of them, or with the international organizations concerned.

These enquiries also have an important legal aspect. The Treasure, remember, was bought in Switzerland and is to be sold in Switzerland, where Swiss legal ideas naturally apply. In most countries of the world, there is not in general good title to stolen, smuggled or other dodgy

goods. Suppose some villain takes your car and sells it on to an unsuspecting third party. If you trace it, then you can re-take possession of it; it remains yours by right. The innocent, if he wants his money back, has a quarrel with the villain, not with you as true owner. Those simple principles do not apply everywhere. In Japan, after two years have elapsed, you may re-take possession but have to compensate the third party.* Under Swiss law, a purchaser

* How many can you name? Sotheby's list is: Albania, Algeria, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Hungary, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Yugoslavia, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Netherlands, Portugal, Rumania, Spain, Switzerland, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, USSR, West Germany (plus Lebanon, the Treasure's declared origin).

* This is the explanation sometimes offered for the puzzle of pictures stolen that are far too well known to be marketable by the thieves, such as the Rembrandt, Vermeer and Manet taken in March from the Gardner Museum in Boston (MA): they go to Japanese private collectors of discretion.

establishes good faith and therefore good title by taking *reasonable care* to ascertain the seller's capacity to deliver legitimate title (which seems to protect the purchaser even if the conclusion so reasonably arrived at is false). In the case of the Kanakaria mosaics, the judge determined that Indiana law applied, but indicated what his judgement would have been under Swiss principles. Noting a speedy transaction taking place in the free-port area within Geneva airport between individuals of a certain character, he ruled that the mosaics had not been purchased in good faith.

This is the other reason that the sellers and Sotheby's as their agents have good cause thoroughly to search if the Treasure is known to any country other than Lebanon. If the Lebanese export permit is good (and they have 'absolute confidence' in it), so is title. Establishing good faith by a most public search for other claim further secures their position in Swiss law.

No state has made public claim, though some strange stories have circulated. The oddest reported the Treasure to have been found in Yugoslavia during the 1970s by a special army unit that acted as a special personal force to President Tito. The Treasure found its way not to the proper Yugoslav authorities, but to London, where it was sold for private benefit.

Events took an unplanned turn when the Lebanese authorities denounced the export document for the Sevso Treasure as forged and fraudulent, despite its having been ratified by the Lebanese Embassy in Switzerland. The Treasure then being on show in New York, Lebanon opened suit under US jurisdiction. The New York court took possession of the Treasure while it considered the preliminary question as to whether the case should be heard in the USA or in Switzerland. Matters larger than geographical convenience for the parties and their witnesses are concerned.

On ANTIQUITY's desk, beside the stunning pictures of the Sevso Treasure in Sotheby's handsome brochure, are two other documents.

One is the new issue of that vigorous magazine *Archaeology Ireland*, agreeable and instructive as usual. In its letters column is a contribution from Mr Terry Cunningham, of Grange Beg, Co. Tipperary:

Recently the 'Sheela na Gig' carving in Kiltinan

Church, Fethard, Co. Tipperary, was taken by persons unknown and I'm very angry about it.

I can hear people say, 'What's that lad getting all worked up about, is a 500-year-old stone that important?' They're right, the carving on its own is not that important, but what is very, very important is that a freedom has been taken away from me and you and everyone else. Up to Tuesday, 9th January, myself, you and anyone else, rich or poor, from anywhere in the whole world were free to come to Kiltinan Church to look at the Sheela na Gig, photograph the Sheela na Gig, sketch the Sheela na Gig, discuss the Sheela na Gig, laugh at the Sheela na Gig, wonder at the Sheela na Gig, even give out about the Sheela na Gig – but now we are not free to do it any more. Someone more important than us, in their own minds, has decided that it would be much better if the Sheela na Gig carving was added to their own private 'art' collection, to be admired by themselves and a few of their select friends.

The other document is an essay, *Celtic stone sculptures* by MARTIN PETCH (London: Karsten Schubert/Rupert Wace Fine Art; ISBN 1-870590-12-0 paperback), published to accompany a London exhibition, and which I have enjoyed reading. Petch writes (p. 30):

Celtic [stone] heads can tell us a great deal about our artistic, social and religious heritage from pre-Christian times onwards. But, as a consequence of the many difficulties that beset serious study, they have been unjustly neglected.

One difficulty is our ignorance of the places from which some of the carvings available for serious study have been taken. From the exhibition and unsold at the time of writing were a Sheelagh-na-gig fertility figure* (provenance unknown, about £4500), a female stone bust (provenance Otley Chevin, West Yorkshire, about £3000), a carved sandstone bear (provenance unknown, about £5500), and a head of a man (provenance unknown, £4200).

The Marquess of Northampton and Sotheby's are taking great care with the Sevso Treasure, commissioning scholarly study and scientific analysis to trace its history, and sincerely searching for clues to its provenance. The Treasure is about 70 kg of silver. The spot price for silver printed in the morning paper is

* There appears no possibility that this chances to be the carving from Fethard, as the exhibition opened some weeks before the date of theft which Mr Cunningham records.

US\$5.09 per ounce. If there is not a value in the art market that is much higher, would it not go the melting way that has taken most classical silver over the centuries? And if not sold to the Marquess, who took trouble to buy all its items, and then on via Sotheby's who seek a single purchaser to keep the Treasure together, then perhaps, item by item, to individual buyers in Japan or Switzerland, never to be re-united or even recognized as a single group?

Stone heads have no bullion value, and Karsten Schubert's prices are more modest. There may be Celtic stone sculptures in many an English garden or house, regarded (if at all) as curiosities, and not so pretty as to surface in auctions of garden ornaments. Found long ago by chance, or removed with knowledge, they have been forgotten. Regard for the *genre* and for the value of the *genre* may bring them to notice, rescuing them from darkness for the delight of

those who care for Celtic statues and study Celtic matters. Perhaps these are the kind of places where the sculptures in the London exhibition came from.

This what Mr Cunningham in Tipperary thinks:

I think it is obvious that a complete rethink of what is valuable and what is desirable is very badly needed.

To put it bluntly – it must be socially unacceptable to possess objects of historic interest that were acquired under dubious circumstances. It must become like the new attitude to the wearing of a fur coat made from the skins of very rare animals. . . .

That change [of attitude] came about very fast. So attitudes can, do and must change as regards historic objects. The next time someone shows you a stone, an urn, even a slip from a plant that you know was got 'underhand' – well at least just say nothing and make a funny grin, the message will get through.

THE FAR SIDE in ANTIQUITY



Before paper and scissors

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David Austin of the University of Wales at Lampeter reminds me that his college has approval for a new Single Honours course in archaeology; Lampeter has recently become a full department of archaeology within the University of Wales, and is to appoint a sixth staff member – all as the Barron report recommended.

The British universities are sorting out their policies for archaeology in the new marketplace now that planning and direction from a national centre is being abandoned. Some departments wish to grow, by new recruitment or transfer. There seems a gratifying level of support within many universities, conspicuously at Reading for example. At Liverpool, the surprise promotion to the major league of science-based archaeology, the university's resolve to make that leap seems to have weakened. The Bradford department of archaeological science was condemned to closure in the Barron recommendations, and members of its present staff have been planning transfers elsewhere in anticipation. Bradford has decided to keep the department and make new appointments, including a full chair, yet outward transfers from Bradford seem to be going ahead.

Now that bids have been put in to the Universities Funding Council, the future configuration of support for departments will begin to clarify. The implications for those departments which seem too expensive or which have difficulties in filling their student places are obviously severe; a head of department who watches these matters carefully tells me it is easy to think of six departments which fall in this latter category, two of them among the six departments on the list for a physical-sciences level of funding.

On the retirement of Rosemary Cramp, the new Professor of Archaeology in the University of Durham will be Anthony Harding, at present senior lecturer there.

On the retirement of Leslie Alcock, the new Professor of Archaeology in the University of Glasgow will be Christopher Morris, at present Reader in Viking Archaeology at the University of Durham.

David Peacock is granted a personal chair in archaeology at the University of Southampton, where he will make a triumvirate of full professors with Peter Ucko and Brian Sparkes.

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