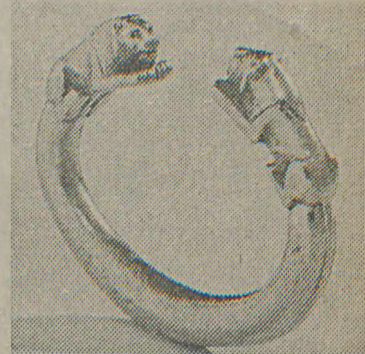


Mystery of a smuggled treasure



Bracelet from the hoard

AN INTERNATIONAL row may well break out over a collection of antique gold jewellery which goes on show next week at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The jewellery was almost certainly smuggled out of Turkey, and found its way to America along a well-established clandestine route.

One archaeologist has gone so far as to say, "International crime is taking over the antiquities business like narcotics smuggling."

The most significant item in the collection is a gold Egyptian cylinder seal (almost certainly unique) which is said to have belonged to an official at the courts of two fifth dynasty pharaohs who ruled between 2497 and 2450 B.C. The Museum claims therefore to date the collection with absolute accuracy. There is also a huge six-strand necklace of twisted spirals, and a diadem with ten looped chains with hanging pendants—137 objects in all, 22 pounds of solid gold.

It is only the fourth hoard of its type to come to light. The first was Schliemann's celebrated treasure from Troy, excavated in 1873, taken to Berlin and lost during the war. The second was the treasure from Dorak, seen only by one man, James Mellaart, the archaeologist, and published in the Illustrated London News in 1959. That too has disappeared.

The third is a collection acquired by the University of Pennsylvania from the Troy-Dorak area of Turkey, also dating from the mid-third millennium B.C.

But the question mark that hangs over this and the Boston Museum's treasure is its provenance—where does it actually come from and how did it get into their hands? It poses a problem not only for the country of origin, but also for experts anxious to assess whether it is genuine and how it fits into a historical context.

The antiquities are usually excavated illegally by peasants or dealers in countries such as Greece, Turkey, Italy and other parts of the Near East. They are exported secretly, and pass from dealer to dealer, often via Switzerland, to Paris, London or New

York, where top museums can pay top prices. As they travel, so their precise origin, or provenance, becomes obscure, their financial value increases and their academic value declines.

The Boston collection is rumoured to have come originally from Cilicia, the region round Mersin on the south east Turkish coast. When it was excavated seems uncertain, but a very similar collection (that is, one extremely like Schliemann's) was offered to the Berlin Museum in 1966. It was refused for lack of provenance. The same, or another, collection was offered in England. What is known is that the Boston material was on sale in Switzerland last year, and was finally purchased by a banker, Landon T. Clay, for a sum said to run to six figures.

The authenticity of illegally exported antiquities remains the great problem however. Forgers today are so skilled it is often impossible to detect a fake. And gold is the best thing to fake as there is no scientific technique by which to date it. Nearly all gold is re-worked, anyway. With objects like those in Boston, the only guidelines are stylistic.

Some of the Boston treasure is similar to Schliemann's, but the question that most archaeologists will want answered is: can the museum show that the collection is "homogeneous"—i.e. that it comes from the same source rather than being amassed by dealers, as many experts now consider the Dorak treasure was. There is going to be no final proof until the museums consent to reveal a treasure's provenance, something they are unwilling to do in case the country of origin refuses them digging rights.

So for the time being the smugglers have a free hand.

Patricia Connor

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