



The Basalt Desert of north-east Jordan is today one of the most thinly populated areas of the Middle East, peopled only by nomads and settled bedouin. It is also one of the richest areas for archaeological remains. Best-known are the immense prehistoric hunting traps, first spotted by RAF pilots in the 1920s, known as 'kites' - thousands survive. Scattered at various places amongst these are what appear to be small settlements though some are extensive enough to be thought of as 'villages'. They often lie on high ground near areas of mud-pan which frequently floods in winter and where water can be conserved by creating deep pits. The 'huts' are usually curvilinear. Forms vary but the most striking are Wheel-houses. In their ideal form they consist of a small stone built inner circle (the hub), stone walls radiating outwards from it (spokes) to a large outer stone wall (the rim). In some instances there is a further element: a ring of small circular enclosures. Many others are far more amorphous and have been called 'Jellyfish'. Some 'huts' are as much as 50m in diameter and may date back to the sixth millennium BC. They have been identified widely but this photograph shows one of the most extensive groups on the western side of the Azraq Oasis. The view is north-east (APA05/DG106, 3 October 2005) taken using a Nikon digital SLR. Image and caption courtesy of David Kennedy and Robert Bewley.



About 5km due north of Wadi Musa lies the famous Neolithic village of Beidha, tucked away in a bay in the red sandstone hills of Petra and well-known since Diana Kirkbride's excavations of almost half a century ago. A further 5km north-northeast – by air at least – brings the observer to the even more secluded site of Ba'ja. As the photograph shows, it is seemingly hidden inside a mountain. In fact, it lies in a narrow valley – a veritable new 'Siq' through the mountains which opens out at this point as an extensive raised terrace (c. 12 000m²), up to 100m wide, largely blocked by rock-falls at either end. A team from the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology (DEI) in Amman has been excavating there since 1997 (H.G.K. Gebel & M. Kinzel 2007. Ba'ja 2007: Crawl Spaces, Rich Room Dumps, and High Energy Events. Results of the 7th Season of Excavations, Neo-Lithics 1107, 24-33). Once again, a rare Neolithic (second half eighth millennium BC) settlement was revealed (Ba'ja II). The walls stand up to 2.5m high, preserving remains of two-storeyed, pueblo-like architecture with workshops and collective graves beneath the living rooms of shepherds/farmers. Settlements continued in the area as Nabataean, Roman and Islamic sites and ancient field walls within a 1km radius attest (Ba'ja I, III, IV and V). The view is east-northeast over the trenches shortly after the end of the excavation season (APA07/DG190, 19 April, 2007) taken using a Nikon D70S digital SLR. Image and caption courtesy of David Kennedy and Robert Bewley.

EDITORIAL

For most archaeologists, the material culture of the past belongs to us all, so must be kept in trust by a neutral authority for those not yet born. Antiquities are beyond price, and trading them is just bad. It fuels demand and damages sites. No-one reading Elizabeth Stone's satellite exposé of site looting in Iraq (this issue) could doubt that. Zero tolerance is safest. On the other hand, we all know about the large collections stored in the extensive basements of innumerable museums, which are seen only once in a decade by an overworked curator; not to mention the annual tonnage being gathered by commercial companies engaged in CRM. I am sure the unborn will be grateful this stuff will still be there, but the rest of us know less about it than a Roman statuette on someone's mantelpiece. Rigorous laws against looting are famously difficult to police, and encourage destruction of the evidence in the face of disclosure, especially if the penalties are severe. Some indigenous communities might be glad to benefit a little from the sale of antiquities, rather than have them housed in a *don't touch* bunker of a museum. Perhaps a legitimate market would serve to protect antiquities, as well as raise appreciation for the cultural diversity of peoples. Or would it?

'Access to antiquities' may become a hotter topic than ever in 2008. Here are two contradictory examples from the United States, beginning with Fort Drum, New York State, where Laurie Rush, archaeologist in residence, has devised a number of inspired training programmes for sensitising servicemen just off to the Middle East. Pilots were shown a model historic cemetery made of concrete blocks which looked just like the real thing from a helicopter gun-ship. And in amongst the blocks on the ground soldiers were introduced to the idea that the heritage was not just a victim, but a player. Rush explains: "In a recent exercise our guys were engaged by would-be bad guys from the cemetery. Our guys had gone to investigate reports of a weapons cache. They went in carefully, without kicking over tombstones. The danger was that al Qaeda would be using it as a film-op. If it was trashed, that would be propaganda points for them". Drawing attention to the project in the *Wall Street Journal's* blog Melik Kaylan cautioned that: "In the era of chaos in Iraq, it has been all too easy for the world to airbrush out of mind the longstanding record of American custodial service to other peoples' cultures," and he reminds us of the 'monument men' who saved works of art in Europe in the aftermath of WW2. In another current initiative, emulating the method used to bring the list of Saddam's most wanted to the notice of GIs, new playing cards have been designed showing the most precious archaeological sites in Iraq and Afghanistan. The 5 of clubs shows a soldier walking over mounds in Isin, Iraq, the caption reading "A looted archaeological site means that details of our common past are lost forever". On the backs of the cards, the strap-line reads: *Respect Iraqi and Afghan Heritage*. This is repeated, around the image of a cuneiform tablet, in Arabic and the Afghan languages Darri and Peshto.¹

Meanwhile back home another great American institution, *Time Magazine*, decided to launch a love-offensive in praise of investment in antiquities, leading off with a notable success story: the profit raised on a statuette from Mesopotamia:

¹ Opinionjournal, editorial, December 2007; www.wsj.com



Playing cards for the heritage, issued to the US army (courtesy of Jim Zeidler (researcher) & Tracy Wager (graphic artist), Colorado State University.)

“The sculpture is just three and a half inches tall and looks like a female body-builder with a lion’s head. But there’s no question that the 1948 purchase of the ‘Guennol Lioness’ by Alistair Bradley Martin was a brilliant investment. The 5,000 year-old piece of Mesopotamian religious art – presumably of Inanna, goddess of sex and war – was sold at auction by Sotheby’s New York last week for a record-shattering \$57.2 million. Found at an archaeological dig near Baghdad, it is an extremely rare representation of the goddess – known elsewhere as Ishtar – in animal form. She is one of the earliest of the gods whose names have survived through history.”



The Guennol Lioness-great value? (© Jacob Silberberg/Reuters.)

However, experts hasten to assure us that this is not just fun for the very rich:

“The good news is that it is possible for the individual investor to buy antiquities – and for a surprisingly moderate sum... For under \$10,000 a year you could acquire two to four quality objects with good provenance that you could expect would not only hold their value but increase in

value over time". Roman lamps, Roman bronze brooches, Greek pottery (especially south Italian Greek pottery) and Egyptian amulets are listed as objects that are 'overlooked'.²

Unsurprisingly the archaeological response to this article has been outrage. In a letter to the editor, Claire Smith of the World Archaeological Congress said: "many of our members . . . read this article with utter disbelief", and she goes on: "It is difficult to describe or imagine the degree of destruction that takes place in order to find one small object worthy of the antiquities market." WAC has asked *Time Magazine* to run stories to counter the damage done by this article – and let's hope they do. Others point out that stoking the market offends morality at a second level. In her letter of protest, Diane Gifford-Gonzalez for the Society of Africanist Archaeologists said: "We know that this trade exploits the poorest members of underdeveloped countries, who dig up antiquities to feed their families, while the international trade feeds the vanity and greed of persons in the developed world."

And in case you think it is only the academics who wish the whole thing would go away, a vivid glimpse of the oncoming nightmare has been given by dealer Dave Hickey: "A couple of years ago I was at one of those hotel art fairs, where you walk down the hall and every door is open and there are little sculptures sitting on the bedspreads and light works stuck up on the walls. I was walking through one of these, and I was thinking it was kind of strange, it was like Amsterdam without the prostitutes Then I went home that night and turned on the television. This was two days after Americans had entered Baghdad and overthrown Saddam Hussein. There's a guy with a camera, walking down the hall of the Baghdad Hilton and every door is open. In here you can buy Xerox machines, in here you can buy ancient Sumerian artefacts, in here you can buy everybody's medical records in Iraq. Every room was full of stolen shit. And the analogy between that little moment in the hotel and the little moment in Baghdad put a special spin on the art fair phenomenon for me, the idea of absolute, raw, rapacious capitalism . . ." ³

There are contradictory forces at work in the United Kingdom too. Last September Cambridge University Archaeology Department closed down its Illicit Antiquities Research Centre, but has protested at current threats to the Portable Antiquities Scheme. Can we gain an insight here into future moralities? In a valedictory message, Graeme Barker, the Director of the McDonald Institute which hosted the IARC, said it had played a significant role in highlighting the disastrous effects of the illicit antiquities trade on the global archaeological heritage. He praised the commitment and flair of the staff, Neil Brodie and Jenny Doole, and said that the Centre's voice had been influential "in the development of more robust legislative structures and codes of practice for museums and auction houses in the UK, and of greater ethical awareness internationally".⁴ Job done, then?

The *Portable Antiquities Scheme* is among the most innovative and daring heritage initiatives of the decade, being a device for allowing individuals to discover and acquire (and sell) antiquities without prosecution, but also without losing vital information about their context. It issues advice to treasure hunters about responsible behaviour, and explains


² 'Antiquities – the hottest investment' by Maria Baugh, *Time Magazine* 12 December 2007.

³ *The Art Newspaper*, November 2007: 47

⁴ Graeme Barker, pers.comm. Neil Brodie is to set up a new Centre hosted by Stanford University. Find him at: <http://archaeology.stanford.edu>

how to record and report discoveries.⁵ The government-backed PAS employs 39 Finds Liaison Officers who record the location and character of each object and monitor the sale of unreported treasures on e-bay, and six Specialist Finds Advisors, who study them. The proof of the pudding is in the eating: in 10 years the scheme has recorded on its public database more than 300 000 archaeological finds, which would have otherwise gone unreported and thus lost to science.⁶ Arguably, therefore, this is a pudding of genius. Here's an idea that is voluntary rather than authoritarian, relies on participation rather than policing, is inclusive rather than elitist and elevates academic rather than monetary values. Surely this is where the future moral high ground is likely to be tilled? And yet its future funding remains a permanent anxiety.

In the UK, swapping antiquities is also considered to have great benefits for mutual understanding at government level. Here is James Purnell, the British culture secretary, on the subject: "We live in a shrinking world with more contact between cultures and countries than ever before. . . . We need to learn how to live side by side, giving dignity to our differences and understanding our similarities." The way to do that is to improve exchange schemes, so he has given Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, a budget of £3M to do it, in acknowledgement of the political benefits of bringing some warriors of the Terracotta army to London. The BM meanwhile paid \$600,000 to borrow the warriors, although "the exhibition is still expected to generate a significant profit".⁷

 Confused? So am I. Troops in a war zone are trained to avoid damage to sites and leave antiquities in situ, while back home they are encouraged to acquire them as a good investment; UK archaeologists close down the Illicit Antiquity Research Centre but support PAS which researches privately collected antiquities; a ministry threatens to hamstring the PAS budget, but at the same time gives £3M to encourage exchanges of antiquities between nations. Not surprisingly, morality gets lost in this tangle of disjunctive measures. Do we allow exchanges of antiquities for money between individuals, or only between states, or never and nowise?

For me, the real morality starts on site, where the incompetent, improperly designed, badly managed, unreported, unjustified or clandestine investigation of archaeological sites is always wrong, whether it is done by treasure hunters or poorly trained excavators. After that I am not so sure. Maybe regulation is better than preaching. Maybe antiquities would do more for the study of the past as free moving, globally accredited ambassadors than as national hostages. Maybe it will not always be evil to have a Neolithic axe at home.

Martin Carver
York, 1 March 2008

⁵ Department of Culture Media and Sport *Code of Practice for Responsible Metal Detecting in England and Wales*. Scotland does not allow people to keep antiquities.

⁶ See <http://www.britarch.ac.uk>

⁷ *Sunday Times* 30 December 2007, news: 4. *The Art Newspaper* November 2007: 12