

Portable Antiquities, Pragmatism and the ‘Precious Things’

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The metal detecting debate splutters on, its latest iteration framed rather unhelpfully in the context of a discussion of looting. Without wishing to belittle the importance of either of these issues, I would argue that a more constructive discussion should be grounded in less confrontational terms. In my opinion our task is not, as Gill suggests, ‘to bridge the gap between the archaeological community and those involved in metal detecting,’ but to mend the divide *within* the archaeological community between the minority of archaeologists who use metal detectors as a principal tool of fieldwork, and the majority who do not. It is a measure of this community’s widespread elitism and class snobbery that the most feckless professor of prehistory with a string of unpublished excavations is likely to be afforded a thousand times more respect than the most diligent member of a metal detecting club.

I am delighted to see that David Gill has turned his attention to the thorny issues of treasure policy and portable antiquities in England and Wales. Few people can be as well informed of the broader international context and significance of these issues than this terror of the auction houses and scourge of weasel-like art curators. As I would hope and expect, his analysis of these issues is subtle and well informed, drawing on an impressive range of quantitative data. Nonetheless, there are a number of points in his discussion of metal detecting in Britain, and the Portable Antiquities Scheme in particular, that I disagree with or would like to examine in more depth.

In Defence of PAS

To begin with Gill’s analysis of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), it appears that in places he loses sight of its fundamental nature as a *voluntary* recording scheme. This leads him to misrepresent some of the results: the fact that ‘approximately two thirds of [metal detecting] club members ... report some of their finds to PAS’ is a figure that any initiative based on voluntary participation would be justly proud of, and which PAS rightly highlights as a success. Similarly, for anyone versed in the history of the ‘STOP’ campaign and the long-standing animosity between metal detectorists and the archaeological establishment (e.g. Addyman 2009), the fact that ‘some people report [finds] regularly while others rarely, if at all’ would still be seen as a considerable step on the road to reconciliation and respectful cooperation.

Elsewhere in his analysis I believe Gill’s understanding of the mechanics of metal detecting lets him down somewhat. The tendency towards greater numbers of finds being recorded in areas of arable agriculture is due to metal detectorists’ preference

for working on ploughed fields where buried artefacts are annually shuffled through the upper half metre of topsoil, bringing them within the limited range of most modern metal detectors. In light of this I disagree with the implications of Gill's assessment of this, 'that some undisturbed archaeological material is being removed from its archaeological context.' No doubt 'some' is, but the majority of metal detector finds have been ripped from their context – and that context annihilated – by ploughing.

Despite these minor disagreements, most of Gill's analysis is a clear-sighted examination of the weaknesses and lacunae of the Treasure Act. The discussion of the Icklingham Bronzes demonstrates that the theft of ancient 'art' most commonly associated with Mediterranean countries can on rare occasions occur in Britain. Together with the recent case of the Crosby Garrett helmet this demonstrates the weakness of the Treasure Act in protecting bronze objects. However it is unfair to suggest, as Gill does, that these cases somehow reflect on PAS as well, declaring that 'in spite of the Treasure Act and PAS, a scheduled site ... can continue to be raided.' This explicit injustice towards PAS continues into Gill's more general study of looting, to the point that I think it worth reiterating that looting is a *crime*, whereas PAS focuses on encouraging and enabling *voluntary* recording within the *legal* archaeological and recreational activity of metal detecting. It is amusing that Gill finds it necessary to highlight 'concern that there are some detectorists whose main aim is to make money from this activity.' Making money from selling finds is not inherently illegal in Britain, nor does it preclude the prior recording of these objects with the PAS. The amateur's disdain for the professional has no place in twenty-first century archaeology.

Pragmatism in Heritage Protection

While I have read Gill's paper as an (occasionally unjust) critique of PAS it is by no means an intemperate attack. Nevertheless these attacks are common, and in light of this I think it is worth examining the philosophical underpinnings of the Portable Antiquities Scheme as I perceive them. For the record I am not now, nor have I ever been involved with the Portable Antiquities Scheme: this is an outsider's view. The archaeological record is a finite resource subject to innumerable threats and sustained destruction and archaeologists have a responsibility to manage this resource, in part through the identification and management of threats. Metal detecting constitutes a potential threat to the archaeological record, and we are duty-bound to manage this. Exactly how much of a threat it is, and how we should go about managing it is the subject of vigorous debate.

Some opponents of metal detecting would like to see it made illegal, or at least severely restricted. This is similar to the widespread view that criminalizing recreational drugs will eliminate their harm to society. This naïve belief is usually founded on a socially conservative ideology and a willful ignorance of the overwhelming evidence that demonstrates the manifold failures as well as the catastrophic social, individual and financial costs of drug prohibition. Pragmatists who do not have their heads buried in the sand (or elsewhere) tend to advocate a 'harm reduction' approach. In drugs policy

this takes a range of forms including needle exchanges, which recognize the reality of drug use and try to ameliorate its negative impacts. PAS can be regarded as a similarly pragmatic approach to the ‘harm’ caused to the archaeological record by metal detecting, as PAS coordinator Roger Bland stated:

... the philosophy of the Scheme is that it is not about encouraging metal detecting, but it recognises that it exists and is legal ... We believe it better to engage with detector users, encourage them to behave responsibly and report their finds than to ignore them, as was often the attitude in the past. They will go on detecting regardless and we will all be the losers if we fail to record their finds. (Bland 2005: 446)

Given the growing body of research based on PAS databases (e.g. Anderson 2010) it is clear that engaging with metal detecting can go beyond harm reduction to form a positive and productive strand within general archaeology.

Curiously enough there are other similarities between the drugs prohibition campaign and the anti-metal detecting movement in archaeology. One is the degree of hysteria surrounding both debates: in the case of drug policy this explains the predominance of punitive authoritarian approaches and the widespread unwillingness to engage with evidence-based policy. Within archaeology the small faction of anti-metal detector zealots often resemble the grotesque Tubbs in *The League of Gentlemen* clutching her snow-globes and shrieking ‘Don’t touch the Precious Things!’ (BBC 1999-2002).

A second, related similarity between the campaigns against drugs and against metal detectors is the unwillingness to consider the wider context. Drugs expert Professor David Nutt and colleagues recently caused controversy with a study published in the *Lancet* that calculated the social and individual harms associated with different legal and illegal drugs. This paper controversially demonstrated that alcohol is considerably more harmful than heroin or crack cocaine, and tobacco more harmful than cannabis, ecstasy or LSD (Nutt *et al.* 2010: 1561-3). In a policy environment immune to blinkered prohibitionist hysteria such a study might herald changes in healthcare and legislation to protect the population from real dangers rather than imagined ones. It would be instructive to create a similar chart ranking the various threats to archaeological heritage in Britain; from coastal erosion and ploughing to worms and moles. Despite serving as a lightning-rod for knee-jerk heritage protectionism I seriously doubt that metal detecting would make a prominent appearance on any such ranking. Thus not only is the metal detecting debate needlessly divisive and intemperate, it is also staggeringly unimportant.

Discussion

Gill’s paper concludes with a series of questions about the future of portable antiquities policy and the protection of heritage. Amongst these questions are several that should form the basis for interesting and timely debate: the strengthening of the Treasure Act; greater scrutiny of the sale of artefacts; the international trade in archaeological

material; and the future of heritage funding are all areas of concern. However it seems incongruous that amongst these key issues Gill asks whether more powerful metal detectors are capable of penetrating to greater depths. If we are truly concerned with the protection of archaeological heritage then this is of roughly equivalent unimportance to the question of whether rabbits are digging deeper burrows in response to global warming.

There are parts of the world where looting poses a serious threat to archaeological heritage and our ability to interpret the past. Britain is not one of these places. Nonetheless there are serious threats to archaeological heritage in Britain. Metal detecting is not one of these. However, metal detecting without reporting finds is nearly as reprehensible and harmful to heritage as excavating without publishing. Fortunately the Portable Antiquities Scheme and its hard-earned relationship with the metal detecting community offers a practical, pragmatic and proven solution to this problem. Doom-mongers wringing their hands at what they no doubt regard as metal detectorists' proletarian insurgency into the archaeological domain should turn their attention to the real, tangible threats to archaeological heritage. Perhaps they might care to stand beneath a crumbling cliff on the Norfolk coast and command the tides to turn back. Meanwhile metal detectorists, medievalists and anyone else who cares about the preservation and study of metal artefacts could more constructively campaign for a revision to the Treasure Act, in response to the frustrating losses and damage to heritage that David Gill and others have brought to our attention.

References

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