

Neil Brodie 1998

“Pity the poor middlemen”

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in a crate marked 'Peruvian handicrafts' and destined for Switzerland. Peruvian authorities have issued a warrant for the arrest of the man who despatched the crate, Rolando Rivas Rivadeneyra, but the identity of the putative Swiss recipient is not known. The episode shows again how pre-Columbian antiquities are now finding their way onto the European market since the United States imposed import restrictions following bilateral agreements reached under the terms of the UNESCO Convention. This confirms the effectiveness of the Convention in obstructing the flow of smuggled antiquities but also sadly highlights how American initiatives are undermined by the continuing failure of European governments to ratify. At the European Fine Art Foundation (TEFAF) autumn fair in Basel, five of the twenty new exhibitors were specialists in ethnographic and pre-Columbian art and further

growth in pre-Columbian art was predicted. 'We are talking high profits, low risk' said Carol DiBattiste, Deputy US Attorney for south Florida, in the November issue of the Art Newspaper.

Also in October a newly discovered neolithic tomb near the village of Mourèze in southern France was looted. The local mayor was moved to express his disgust with the human race but hopefully his mood lightened when the contents of the tomb were returned within 24 hours. There is some honour amongst (some) thieves after all, although the damage had already been done by removing the objects.

NJB

Information obtained from: *The Times*, *Archaeology*, *The Art Newspaper*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

Pity the poor middlemen

NEIL BRODIE

The illicit trade in antiquities is clandestine. Transactions are hidden from view and provenance is lost as a result, but the economics of the trade are also obscured and it is not clear what profits are realized over what period of time and who, in financial terms, really benefits. Furthermore, when collectors don their humanitarian mantles to argue that their purchase of antiquities injects money into hard-pressed local economies, it is not possible to assess how much of their revenue does actually trickle down.

Over the years a number of cases of illicit trading have been investigated, usually when a valuable 'treasure' has been reclaimed or its status questioned, and several exchange chains have now been revealed. Although these high-profile cases are not representative of the illicit trade as a whole, they do provide some information about what sums of money change hands and what profit margins exist, and for that reason they are collected together here.

First there is the now notorious Euphronius Krater, the 'hot pot' of Hoving (1993, 307–40),

bought by the Metropolitan Museum in 1972 from Robert E. Hecht for \$1 million, but now thought to have been removed from an Etruscan tomb in 1971 (Meyer 1973, 88). The *tombarolo* who first excavated the vase claims to have received only \$8800 for it (Slayman 1998, 44).

The golden phiale of Achyris, from Caltavuturo in Sicily, and presently impounded by US Customs, was bought for \$1.2 million in 1991 by Michael Steinhardt from the Zürich-based dealer William Veres with Robert Haber acting as an intermediary. Veres had acquired the phiale sometime after 1988 in exchange for artworks valued at about \$90,000 from Vincenzo Cammarata, a Sicilian coin dealer, who had in turn obtained it in 1980 from a fellow Sicilian Vincenzo Pappalardo in exchange for goods worth about \$20,000 (Slayman 1998; Mason 1998).

Also from Sicily are the Morgantina acroliths, excavated in 1979 by *clandestini* who sold them for about \$1100. The pieces were subsequently purchased in Switzerland by Robin Symes who sold them on to Maurice Tempelsman in 1980 for more than \$1 million (Robinson 1998; D'Arcy 1998).

In 1988 a Turkish farmer sold a broken marble sculpture of Marsyas to the dealer Ali

Kolasin for \$7400. The piece was then smuggled out of Turkey and displayed for \$540,000 in New York by Jonathan Rosen. After he was shown that the object was stolen Rosen donated the statue to the American-Turkish society and it was subsequently returned to Turkey in 1994 (Rose & Acar 1995, 55).

Finally there is the case of a Song Dynasty head, stolen from the Yongtai tomb in Henan province, China. According to US Customs, it was sold first in 1996 in Guangzhou for about \$840 before being moved to Hong Kong. There it was bought by an American dealer who in 1997 offered it for sale in San Francisco for \$125,000, whereupon it was seized by the US authorities (Maggio 1998).

These figures are summarized in Table 1, which shows the initial and final prices realized, together with the period of time that elapsed between sales.

Figure 1 shows what percentage of the final market price was received by the original finder/excavator/thief. It is clear that in all cases over 98 per cent of the final price was destined to end up in the pockets of the middlemen. The original finder received very little and the final buyer can hardly claim to have obtained a bargain. These percentages are not unusual: it has been observed for instance that in the Petén looters received about \$200–\$500 each for vessels which might ultimately be sold for \$100,000 (Hansen 1997, 48). It is also alleged that William Koch and his associates paid roughly \$3 million for the major part of the Elmalı hoard while one of the original three finders, Ahmet Ali Senturk, received only \$80 and a year in jail (Kornblut 1998).

Of course, the entire profit is not always taken by a single middleman — often there is a chain of transactions. But still, the profits involved are significant. The details of the Achyris

	Initial price (US\$)	Final price (US\$)	Time lapse (years)
Achyris phiale	20,000	1.2 million	11
Morgantina acroliths	1100	1 million	1
Statue of Marsyas	7400	540,000	less than 6
Euphronius krater	8800	1 million	1
Yongtai head	840	125,000	1

Table 1. *The rising price of illicit antiquities.*

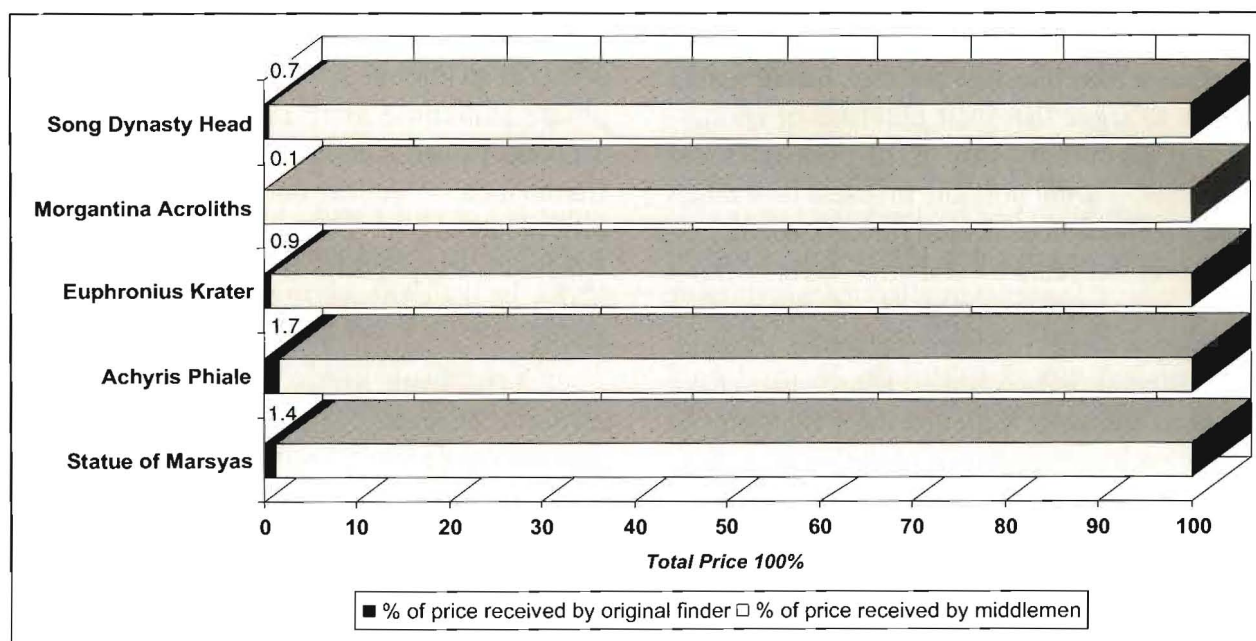


Figure 1. *The percentage of the final market price of an antiquity received by the original finder.*

phiale are reasonably clear and are set out in Figure 2. The largest profit was made by William Veres, who bought the piece in Italy and sold it in Switzerland, so that his high profit margin probably reflects his equally high burden of risk or cost incurred when transporting the piece across the Italian border. It is worth noting for purposes of comparison that the normal percentage of the selling price taken as commission by Sotheby's auction house from a legitimate sale varies between 18–26 per cent depending upon price. Half is taken from the buyer and half from the seller.

These figures reveal the simple truth of the illicit trade in antiquities — there are large sums of money to be made, more than by legitimate trading, and very little of the proceeds ever reach the original finders. It is also likely that these large sums, derived ultimately from rich collectors, sustain the smuggling networks which support the illicit trade. Collectors are, as Elia (1993) says, the real looters; but the middlemen are the main beneficiaries.

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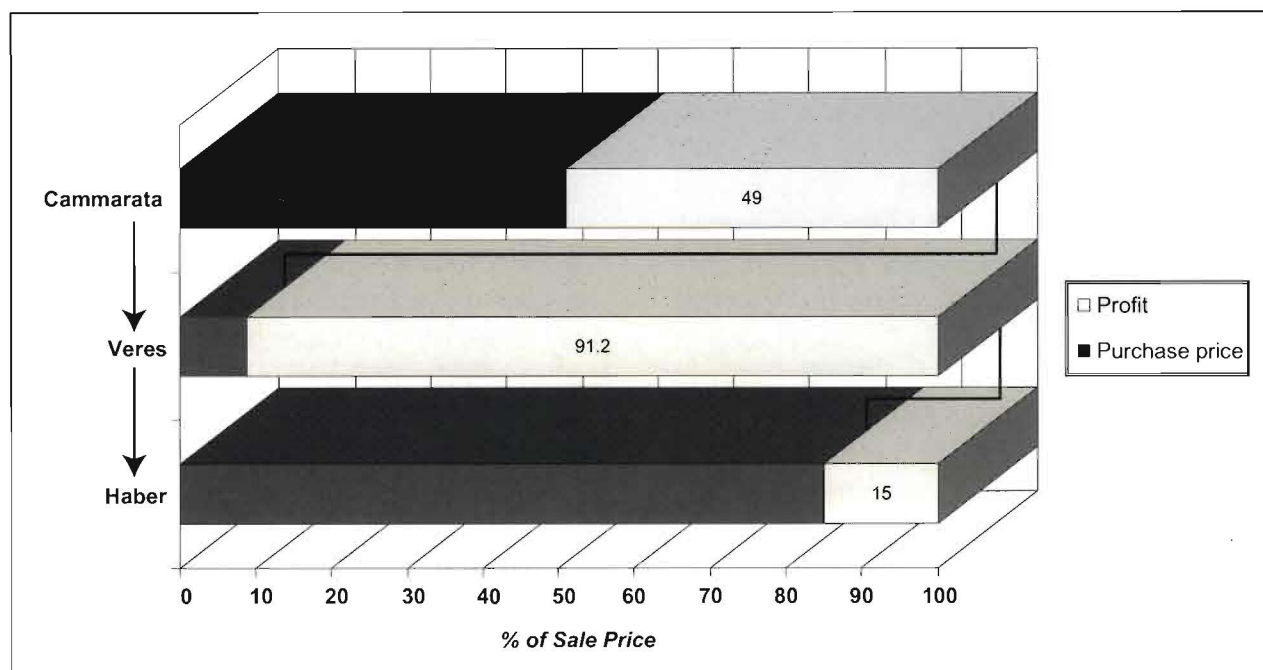


Figure 2. Profits realized by middlemen handling the Achyris Phiale. (To allow for appreciation the price paid by Cammarata has been adjusted upwards by 7.2 per cent per year for the eleven years it was in his possession. It has been estimated that 7.2 per cent was the average annual appreciation of the British Rail Pension Fund's collection of ancient glass over the same period of time [Antiques Trade Gazette, 13 December 1997, 7]).