

Attitudes in Transit: Symes Material from Market to Source

Introduction

This article uses two cases of Symes material to observe grounds for both optimism and pessimism in the attitudes of stakeholders in so-called “source,” “transit” and “market” countries. Representatives of the latter two have behaved better than expected, apparently taking the initiative in repatriation processes. By contrast, the Italian authorities have shown a disappointing lack of transparency regarding concluded repatriation cases, both in not giving due credit to other parties and in not communicating other details which would advance research on the international illicit antiquities network.

“Market” Country

In a forthcoming publication (Tsirogiannis 2017), I identify a promising trend in the levels of cooperation I have experienced from some US museums when confronted with evidence regarding their acquisition of illicit material. I here single out the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, where in 2009 I matched a Greek South-Italian calyx krater with that depicted in two Polaroid images from the Medici archive and a professional image from the Symes archive. In researching my publication, I sent to the staff the photographic evidence from both the confiscated archives, and the museum in return supplied me with the information about the object in the museum’s archive. When I wrote recently to double-check the image permissions for my publication, the Speed Art Museum registrar, Ms Rolfe, requested the publication date as relevant to “active discussions with the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage.” I wished then to find out if the Speed Art Museum had taken the initiative to contact the authorities following the evidence I sent them. If they had done so, they would be the first museum to have gone even beyond the AAMD guidelines which presuppose an ongoing claim on a work of art (AAMD 2008, para. 6) in requesting of the museums prompt action to address this, including when given information by a third party. Unfortunately, the museum representatives declined to comment further since discussions with the Italians were ongoing, but overall I would count this as part of an encouraging development in the largest “market” country concerning stewardship of illicit material in its museums.

“Transit” Country

An equally encouraging trend of initiative in the most notorious “transit” country may be deduced from the facts behind the recent return of 45 boxes full of Etruscan, Greek and Roman antiquities from the Geneva Free Port to Italy. In January 2016, the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Geneva issued a press release announcing this return which made clear that the discovery of the boxes was made by the Swiss prosecutor Claudio Mascotto, after the Italian authorities sought judicial assistance in March 2014 about a case of a looted sarcophagus thought to be stored in the Geneva Free Port. The evidence for the Italian origin of the material was reported as follows: “Based on the inventory and an on-site examination, an Italian expert concluded that the remains came from illicit excavations mostly perpetrated in necropolises located in what are now the regions of Umbria and Lazio (former Etruscan territory)” and that “the antiques had been brought to Geneva by a former high-profile British art dealer, whose name has been linked in the past to the trading of several looted antiquities throughout the world” (Public Prosecutor’s Office of Geneva 2016). The press release was accompanied by four images depicting a fragmentary Greek South-Italian vase, a marble Roman relief and close ups of the heads of two Etruscan terracotta sarcophagi (male and female). The antiquities were stored in the Geneva Free Port by an off-shore company that was not named by the press release. The press deduced that the unnamed company belonged to the now disgraced illicit antiquities dealer Robin Symes (Squires 2016). All 45 crates arrived in Rome at the end of January.

“Source” Country

In the light of such actions from agents within “market” and “transit” countries, I have been disappointed on three counts by the behaviour of those acting on behalf of Italy, a foremost “source” country of the antiquities trade. First, I was struck by the way in which the Italian officials presented this repatriation as chiefly the work of the Italian judicial authorities and the Carabinieri; witness Dario Franceschini, the Italian Culture Minister during the presentation of the Symes material: “The recovery shows once again the exceptional work by the Italian judiciary and Carabinieri in the framework of an

excellent collaboration with foreign authorities” (ItalyUN, it 2016) – this disguises the foremost role of the Swiss Public Prosecutor in the discovery. On Twitter, following the presentation, Franceschini was bolder: “*Grazie ai Carabinieri tornano in Italia reperti archeologici eccezionali che saranno restituiti ai loro territori* [Thanks to the Carabinieri back in Italy, exceptional archaeological finds will be returned to their territories].”

The second point on which I have been taken aback is the apparent unwillingness of the Italian authorities to release further details regarding successful repatriations. The Swiss Public Prosecutor’s office press release referred to a link between the confiscated Symes antiquities and looters: “... investigators from the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale in Rome linked some of the items discovered at the Free Ports to the misdeeds of tombaroli (tombraiders) they were investigating” (Public Prosecutor’s Office of Geneva 2016). However, no further details were given nor any photographic evidence was presented by the Italian authorities even after the return of these antiquities was celebrated in Rome. This constitutes an unnecessary withholding of evidence from the public and the researchers, since this case is concluded and the objects are safely repatriated. If the state authorities do not act on their responsibility fully to inform the public of the details of concluded cases of national importance, it is the responsibility of researchers to do so, whenever they have this ability.

Third, they fail to cooperate with academic researchers. Having already identified 732 antiquities depicted in the confiscated Symes archive that became the core of my PhD in Cambridge, and having offered dozens of identifications from the confiscated Medici, Becchina and Symes archives to the Italian authorities over several years, I contacted the Carabinieri (on January 22, 2016 at the relevant address tpcoperazioni@carabinieri.it) requesting images of all the antiquities stored in the 45 crates already repatriated, as their further comparison with the confiscated archives would have been beneficial for the continuation of my wider research on the international illicit antiquities networks and the ways they operated. Up to the date that I sent this piece for publication (6 May, 2016), I have received no reply from the Carabinieri, although Professor Jean-Robert Gisler of the Federal Department of Justice and Police in Berne verified to me (personal communication) that all the crates were of Italian provenance, they have been found stored in the same room in the Free Port of Geneva and that that room had no other antiquities belonging to a country other than Italy. Lacking a response from the Carabinieri, I had to conduct my academic research on the basis of the photographs accompanying the Swiss public prosecutor’s press release and various articles appearing in newspapers and weblogs, apparently from images made available by the Swiss authorities to the media

on request, as stated in the press release.

Even from this scattered basis for research, I found that various points asserted by the Italian authorities require nuancing. The first is the link with “*tombaroli*,” which gives the impression to a non-expert public that the Italian authorities have proofs that link the objects directly to those who originally looted the objects from the ground. However, my brief examination of the material from the Swiss press release found a link with the convicted illicit antiquities dealer Giacomo Medici, known to be buying directly from looters (but this is a step removed from what the Italian authorities implied); the heads on the two Etruscan terracotta sarcophagi are depicted cut in images from the Medici archive (see figs. 1-4).

From the *Live Science* website (Gannon 2016), I was able to identify a Pompeian fresco also from the Medici archive (figs. 5-6). These identifications were presented on February 4 and 5 in the blogs *Looting Matters* maintained by Professor David Gill (Gill 2016a, b) and *Market of Mass Destruction* maintained by Dr Neil Brodie (Brodie 2016, see figs. 5-6).

Several further identifications were made possible through images sent to me by the ARCA CEO, Dr Lynda Albertson and by the British journalist Howard Swains, who attended the presentation of about half of the repatriated material in Rome, on March 22. From their photographs I was able to identify nine more objects, seven of them depicted in the Medici archive (figs. 7, 9, 11-12, 14 and 16) and two in the Symes archive (figs. 18 and 20). They are presented here interlaced with their images from the Carabinieri presentation in Rome.

- 1-3) Three marble decorative elements in the form of gears (see figs. 7-8)
- 4) Part of a terracotta fragment of a horse and rider, belonging to a much bigger decoration of an Etruscan temple (see figs. 9-10)
- 5-7) Three frescos, Etruscan and Pompeian (figs. 11-17), one of which (figs. 16-17) was recorded in a video of material in the Geneva warehouse, but was absent from the official presentation of the material in Rome
- 8) A fresco (figs. 18-19)
- 9) a Roman marble relief (figs. 20-21)

I wish to make two points from these few identifications and the way they were made. First, while the Italian origin of the Etruscan material that Medici trafficked is self-evident, the evidence for the Italian origin of the material that appears only in the Symes archive, in particular the marble relief, is less clear (such Roman material could have been looted from anywhere around the Mediterranean). As far as we know, it is not in Medici or any other confiscated archive that would prove

its Italian origin. As far as public knowledge is concerned, the basis for the repatriation to Italy is not proven. If the Italians have such evidence, they should publish it. Second, we must emphasize from this process the *lack* of further knowledge gained for illicit antiquities network research. From an academic point of view, the connection between Medici and Symes was already known (Watson and Todeschini 2007:73, 79; Tsirogiannis 2013a). Not much more can be said on the basis of a few photos only - several more identifications would have been made if the Carabinieri had sent me images of the antiquities that were not presented in Rome and did not appear in any media, comprising about half of the overall repatriated objects. Once this material is eventually dispersed to various museums throughout Italy, even if each of these objects is exhibited as coming from the 2016 Symes confiscation, it will be impossible for researchers to re-associate them as part of the Symes stock in order to further knowledge of the illicit networks. I would argue that the police and judicial authorities of the culturally rich (“source”) countries should treat repatriated material in exactly the same way archaeologists work and publish excavation material: as a context in which antiquities interact to produce valuable information, which is lost once this material is dispersed without first being published in its entirety.

Conclusion

This short reference to significant cases connected by Robin Symes suggests that, contrary to expectation, it is currently the Italian authorities, representing (in market terms) a “source” country that claims its stolen cultural property, who are withholding the most information on cases regarding repatriation of antiquities. At the same time they are implicitly taking credit for significant work done by foreign third parties. By contrast, representatives of a ‘transit’ country (the Swiss Public Prosecutor in Geneva and the Federal Department of Justice and Police in Berne) and of a “market” country (the staff of the Speed Art Museum in the USA) have demonstrated a pleasing level of openness and readiness for cooperation when approached for the conduct of academic research.

In fact, I no longer expect to be updated by any Italian authority regarding identifications I have made in the antiquities market and US museums and offered to the Italian state over the last 10 years. On several occasions I have found out only from press articles about the repatriation to Italy of antiquities I have identified and notified the Italian authorities before auctions take place in the UK and the US (Tsirogiannis 2013b:10-11, 2015, 2016) – and I see the Carabinieri taking full credit in publications (e.g. for the two Canosan kraters repatriated in 2012, see Landolfi *et al.* 2013:246-249). The Carabinieri have taken advantage of the work of other researchers too; the pioneering forensic archaeological work of Dr. Daniela Rizzo and Maurizio Pellegrini on the confiscated

archives of dealers, resulting in hundreds of repatriations for the Italian state since 2005, is carefully presented as the success of the Carabinieri in Italian state publications (e.g. see Landolfi *et al.* 2013:231-236, 260). Only investigative journalists refer in full to the real contribution of these two Italian archaeologists situated at the Etruscan Museum of Villa Giulia in Rome (e.g. Watson and Todeschini 2006: *passim*; Isman in Godart and De Caro 2007:35).

The Italian authorities have not been transparent with the evidence for concluded repatriation cases, and they have not given due credit to the work of others. For these reasons, I will from now on cease to inform these authorities of the results of my research, contacting only international bodies and national authorities who cooperate equally with me. As Professor Ricardo Elia wrote (Elia 2007:18), “enough is enough.”

Figures



Figs. 1-2: The head of the male Etruscan sarcophagus in a Medici regular-print image (left) and the same head restored on the sarcophagus' lid from an image accompanying the Public Prosecutor's press release in Geneva (right).



Figs. 3-4: The head of the female Etruscan sarcophagus in a Medici regular-print image (left) and the same head restored on the sarcophagus' lid from an image accompanying the Public Prosecutor's press release in Geneva (right).



Figs. 5-6: detail of the Pompeian fresco depicted in a Medici regular-print image (left) and in an image (right) made available by the Public Prosecutor's office in Geneva to journalist Megan Gannon.



Figs. 7-8: Three marble decorative elements in the form of gears in a Medici Polaroid (left) and the same three antiquities in an image taken by Mr Howard Swains during the Carabinieri presentation of the Symes material in Rome (right).



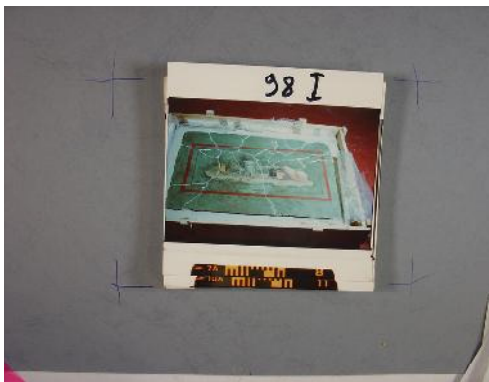
Figs. 9-10: Terracotta fragment of a horse and rider in a Medici Polaroid (left) and among various other terracotta fragments in an image taken by Mr Howard Swains during the Carabinieri presentation of the Symes material in Rome (right).



Figs. 11-13: the first of the three frescoes depicted in two Medici Polaroids (left and centre) and in an image taken by Dr Lynda Albertson during the Carabinieri presentation of the Symes material in Rome (right).



Figs. 14-15: the second of the three frescoes depicted in a Medici regular-print image (left) and restored in an image taken by Dr Lynda Albertson during the Carabinieri presentation of the Symes material in Rome (right).



Figs. 16-17: the third fresco in a Medici Polaroid (left) and restored in an image taken from a video footage by the Carabinieri in the Geneva Free Port (right).



Figs. 18-19: the Symes fresco depicted in a professional image from the Symes archive (left) and restored in an image taken by Dr Lynda Albertson during the Carabinieri presentation of the Symes material in Rome (right).



Figs. 20-21: the Symes marble relief depicted in a professional image from the Symes archive (above) and in an image taken by Dr Lynda Albertson during the Carabinieri presentation of the Symes material in Rome (below).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor David Gill, to Dr Neil Brodie, to Professor Jean-Robert Gisler, to Dr Lynda Albertson and to Mr Howard Swains for their help and cooperation.

References

- Brodie, Neil. 2016. Robin Symes loses his heads. *Market of Mass Destruction*, 4 February (available at <http://www.marketmassdestruction.com/robin-symes-loses-his-heads/>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Elia, Ricardo. 2007. Comment on “Irreconcilable differences?”: scholars for sale, *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*: University College London (18): 16-18.
- Gannon, Megan. 2016. Photos: Stolen Archaeological Treasures Returned to Italy, *Live Science*, 4 February (available at <http://www.livescience.com/53606-photos-etruscan-treasures-returned-italy.html>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Gill, David. W. J. 2016a. Robin Symes, Returns from Geneva and the Medici Dossier. *Looting Matters*, 4 February (available at <http://lootingmatters.blogspot.co.uk/2016/02/robin-symes-returns-from-geneva-and.html>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Gill, David. W. J. 2016b. Further Medici Material Identified in Geneva. *Looting Matters*, 5 February (available at <http://lootingmatters.blogspot.co.uk/2016/02/further-medici-material-identified-in.html>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Godart, Louis and Stefano De Caro. 2007. Nostoi: Capolavori ritrovati. Roma: Segretariato Generale della Presidenza della Repubblica.
- ItalyUN.it. 2016. 45 crates of looted, “exceptional and unique” antiquities returning to Italy. *ItalyUn.it*, 24 March (available at <http://www.onuitalia.com/eng/2016/03/24/45-crates-looted-exceptional-unique-antiquities-returning-italy/>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Landolfi, Maurizio *et al.* 2013. *Capolavori Dell'Archeologia: Recuperi, Ritrovamenti, Confronti*. Roma: Gangemi Editore.
- Public Prosecutor's Office of Geneva. 2016. Archaeological remains: Geneva returns two Etruscan earthenware sarcophaguses and numerous other priceless works and fragments to Italy. *Public Prosecutor's Office of Geneva*, 14 January (available at <http://ge.ch/justice/vestiges-archeologiques-geneve-restitue-l-italie-deux-sarcophages-etrusques-en-terre-cuite-et-de-nom>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Squires, Nick. 2016. Disgraced British art dealer's priceless treasure trove discovered hidden in Geneva. *The Telegraph*, 1 February (available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/switzerland/12134541/Disgraced-British-art-dealers-priceless-treasure-trove-discovered-hidden-in-Geneva.html>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Tsirogiannis, Christos. [2013a]. *Unravelling the hidden market of illicit antiquities: The Robin Symes–Christos Michaelides network and its international implications*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of Cambridge.
- Tsirogiannis, Christos. 2013b. “Something is confidential in the state of Christie's.” *The Journal of Art Crime* 9: 3-19.
- Tsirogiannis, Christos. 2015. Peucetian stamnos. *Trafficking Culture* project website, 15 November (available at <http://traffickingculture.org/data/tracking-illicit-antiquities/peucetian-stamnos/>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Tsirogiannis, Christos. 2016. Two Canosan Volute Kraters. *Trafficking Culture* project website, 30 January (available at <http://traffickingculture.org/data/tracking-illicit-antiquities/two-canosan-volute-kraters/>, last accessed 1/5/2016).
- Tsirogiannis, Christos. Forthcoming 2017. Illicit Antiquities in American Museums: Diversity in Ethical Standards, in Chappell, D. & Hufnagel, S. (eds.) *Handbook of Art Crime*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Watson, Peter & Cecilia Todeschini. 2006. *The Medici Conspiracy*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Watson, Peter & Cecilia Todeschini. 2007. *The Medici Conspiracy* (revised edition). New York: Public Affairs.