

Re: Archaeologists are the real experts – aren't they?

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"Tom McDonald" <tmcdonald2672@nohormelcharter.net> wrote in message news:2q2vd.2070\$Rs6.910@fe07.lga...

> NeilJackman@gmail.com wrote:

>> *I agree with what Martyn Harrison says about the need to preserve
>> contexts, however the last bit about collectors not being able to do
>> anything good for the science of archaeology is going too far, they
>> have already proved their worth especially in battlefield archaeology
>> (BBC2s Two Men in a Trench archaeology series used detectorists quite
>> often), and in the field I work (pre-construction archaeology) having
>> detectorists do the proposed construction route alongside
>> archaeologists would be great, its a pity that most archaeology
>> companies in Eire are a bit too tight fisted to consider them.
>> Theres a middle ground we can both dig.*

>>

>

> *I will agree to one other thing. Many farmers (and some
> others) in my county have collections of artifacts (mostly stone
> bifacial tools they call 'arrowheads') that they have acquired
> from their acreage, mostly after plowing or while hoeing crops.*

>

> *Most of them (all, in my somewhat limited experience) are quite
> happy to have an archaeologist look at them, photograph and
> measure them, and even (on occasion) take them for a short
> period to study them more closely in the lab. Not only is there
> some pride in doing this, the farmer also gets a professional
> assessment of the artifacts in his/her possession. Not as to
> price (shudder!), but as to type, age, culture, usage, etc.
> IOW, what the artifacts meant to the people who once lived on
> the same ground the farmer loves.*

>

> *Many farmers can tell you with some precision where they found
> each of their artifacts. Almost always to which field; often to
> which acre; and not as seldom as you might think to the square
> rod.*

>

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- > *However, this information is almost always only known by the*
- > *person, and sometimes his/her spouse and, to a much lesser*
- > *extent, their children. Since most farm land in my county has*
- > *been under the plow since the late 1800's, by far the majority*
- > *of original finders, and many of their children, have shuffled*
- > *off this mortal coil, taking much provenance information with them.*
- >
- > *With the information from the original finders, or their*
- > *attentive offspring, it is often possible to use their*
- > *collection as the jumping-off point for a surface survey, and*
- > *test pits on fields without crops (before planting or after*
- > *harvest, or in fallow fields).*
- >
- > *I have met two or three surface collectors of artifacts in my*
- > *county who keep detailed records of their finds that rival those*
- > *of survey archaeologists. These guys have been very helpful in*
- > *providing images of their finds, and often will lend their*
- > *provenanced artifacts to archaeologists for study. This is a*
- > *fruitful collaboration, and both sides are appalled by*
- > *'collectors' who don't treat the provenance with care, or who*
- > *keep their stuff from archaeologists.*
- >
- > *There is a middle ground to be hammered out. The problem, if*
- > *this thread is any indication, is that nerves are very close to*
- > *the surface on both sides. While I'm as happy as anyone to get*
- > *into a wrangle where I can feel righteous, even in defeat (I'm a*
- > *Democrat, after all :-)), this does no good at all in this matter.*
- >
- > *I think one thing that needs doing is each side letting itself*
- > *put aside exasperation with the other long enough to come to a*
- > *common understanding of terms, and of real (as opposed to*
- > *projected) motivations.*
- >
- > *For me, one of the questions about the collectors' side is this:*
- >
- > *What interest is there in the _specific_ context of a given*
- > *artifact? By that I mean, if you stumbled upon an artifact,*
- > *half-buried in the ground, of the type you most treasured*
- > *collecting: would you first dig it out to see it whole; or would*
- > *you take a careful look around it to see and record what an*
- > *archaeologist would (soil color and type, vegetation, exact*
- > *location viz a viz nearby landmarks), geography and geology, etc.?*
- >
- > *A corellary to this question is, how much would such a detailed*
- > *provenance add to the value of an artifact as opposed to a*
- > *general (to the square mile, or farm, say) statement of provenance?*

What a thoughtful and constructive post! Maybe there is hope for us to arrive at a sensible approach after all!

In answer to your questions:

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1) No ethical collector or dealer (the few unethical ones who bring disgrace upon collecting can all be locked away in prison forever as far as I am concerned) wants possession of an artifact that is:

- a) Displayable in a museum
- b) Needed in any way for science
- c) Looted from an archaeological site
- d) Stolen from an individual or institutional collection.

2) If I stumbled upon an artifact half buried in the ground I would very carefully unearth enough of it to be sure that it really was an artifact, without disturbing the site in any other way. Then I would put something over it to conceal and mark the find, and I would report it to whatever authority had jurisdiction. If the find occurred in an area (much of the USA for example) where the property owner had jurisdiction, I would report it to the property owner. If I were also the property owner, I would want an archaeologist involved if possible in the excavation.

I would however draw the line at being told that archaeologists were all too busy to even come look at the find, but in the meantime I must not disturb it because in a hundred years or so they might get around to wanting to take a look. I would also draw the line at being told that I would have to pay for the archaeologist. In either of these cases (unless constrained by law) I would then do the excavation myself, write it up as best I could with photographs of the site at various stages, and send the archaeologists my report. Being a professional numismatist, having written many scientific papers and having done a lot of reading of archaeological reports, I do have some qualifications to do that.

3) I can't speak for collectors of anything other than coins.

To a coin collector or to a numismatic researcher, site context is of varying importance. If it indicates something about the circumstances under which the coins were buried or the owner, that is possibly significant. Apart from that, most of the details that are important to archaeologists are not important to numismatists.

What is extremely important to a numismatist is a very detailed report of the coins in the find, with a photograph of each and a description including the types, legends, weight, die axis, control marks, countermarks etc. For format see any volume of SNG. The distribution and condition of the coin types is essential information because it is important in dating the hoard.

It is important to note that coin hoards were very rarely concealed in a location in which there is anything else to be found beside the coins and their container.

4) Coins which have provenances attributing them to a specific hoard find are more valuable to collectors than unprovenanced coins. As with famous collections, a provenance to a numismatically significant hoard (the Cunetio hoard is an example) is more valuable than provenance to an unremarkable hoard. Beyond these facts, there is very little differentiation in value as

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to the non-numismatic details, if any, of the site.

Dave Welsh

Unidroit-L Listowner

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Unidroit-L/>