

13 May 2014

Cultural Property Advisory Committee

In re: Memorandum of Understanding to Protect the Cultural Heritage of Egypt

To the members of the committee:

I write in support of Egypt's request for import restrictions under as part of the Memorandum of Understanding within the Cultural Property Implementation Act. Since my expertise is ancient coins, I will limit myself to that subject.

A glance at online catalogs of upcoming coin auctions, or at the listings of eBay, shows that coins from Egyptian mints are readily obtainable. On occasion, these coins do have some indication of earlier collections from which they originate. Hoards also have come from Egypt without any indication of their archaeological provenance: one of the more recent was the "Coinex Hoard", which first appeared at a coin show in London in 1992. The hoard was dispersed to several buyers, but was published as an important source of information on a monetary reform of the coinage by Ptolemy IV, in the third century BCE. Thus, the numismatic heritage, part of the cultural patrimony of ancient Egypt, is under siege and has been for many years.

The numismatic history of ancient Egypt is quite clear. Scholars have known for many years that the earliest coins (minted in Alexandria?) rarely circulated out of the country, since they copied Athenian silver coins. Since Egypt had no ready source of silver, the earliest silver coins were debased and thus of little interest anywhere else in the Mediterranean. During the reign of the Ptolemies (late 4th to 1st centuries BCE), gold and some bronze coins were minted in Alexandria. These are distinguished from other Ptolemaic mints by small symbols or letters within the design, differentiating Alexandria from the mints at Curium in Cyprus or Ake-Ptolemais on the Syrian coast. From excavation finds, then, numismatists can confidently say that "the circulation of coins produced both within and outside of Egypt was at first very limited" (S. van Reden, *Money in Ptolemaic Egypt*, Cambridge, 2007, p.33, my italics).

Egypt continued to be a 'closed' monetary system in the centuries following, in part because Augustus gave Egypt a special status as a province of the Roman Empire. No Roman senator could travel to the province without his permission; he hand-picked the governor of the province, to ensure that the candidate would not rebel against the Roman government – especially since the province was so important to Rome as an agricultural powerhouse. No silver coins were imported or minted (beyond one small issue); there were many issues of copper-alloy coins from the 1st to the end of the 3rd century CE, on a system of denominations that was quite distinct from the Roman imperial denominations (see J.G. Milne, *Catalogue of Alexandrian Coins*, Oxford, 1927). Christiansen, who studied all the hoards, excavation coins, and coins from collections that were made in the mint at Alexandria, found that almost all post-Ptolemaic coins remained within the Egyptian province and were in use even 200 years or more after their production. Rarely were coins from other eastern

or western mints found within these same hoards (E. Christiansen, *Coinage in Roman Egypt*, Aarhus, 2004, p.42). “Egypt under Roman rule had an enclosed coinage system,” writes Hopkins, who studies the ancient economy. “Broadly speaking, no Egyptian coins are found outside of Egypt, and almost no Roman coins are found in Egypt. In other words, there was no circulation of coinage between Egypt and other portions of the Roman empire” (K. Hopkins, “Rome, Taxes, Rent and Trade,” in *The Ancient Economy*, ed. W. Scheidel and S. van Reden, NY, 2002, p.214). A prominent dealer explains to his potential customers that, “Due to the closed economy of Egypt, neither imperial [that is, coins minted in Rome or western mints] nor other provincial issues were permitted to circulate within its borders”(W. Sayles, *Ancient Coin Collecting IV*, Iola, WI, p.89).

One collector’s website even notes that: “The fabric of the coins is also unique. The planchets used were often large, dumpy, and exhibit a beveled edge. They were engraved in a characteristic style and will often be found with cracked flans” (Professional Coin Grading Service website, Jeremy Haag, accessed 5/7/2014). Thus, the coins coming out of the mint of Alexandria are readily identifiable, from the 4th century BCE to the end of the 3rd c CE. They are minted to be the circulating currency of ancient Egypt, and would only rarely be found outside of the country. When they do appear in collections or in sales without a provenance concerning their place of discovery, chances are extremely high that the coins came from Egypt, whether legally or illegally.

As part of the MoU, Egypt has to show that it has taken measures to protect its cultural heritage. As a recent seizure of antiquities and arms (reported on January 6, 2014) shows, the Egyptians are taking such measures.

I add my voice in support of the Egyptian application for a MoU. The cultural property of Egypt has been fascinating to collectors in the West for many centuries. As an archaeologist who has published or is preparing to publish the excavation coins of Caesarea Maritima, Tel er-Ras, Bir Madhkur, and Sardis, I can say that the case for including the coins of Egypt, up to the 3rd century CE, is an important and obvious part of the Memorandum.

Sincerely,



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Fellow of the American Numismatic Society (though I do not speak for them)
Member of the Ethics Committee, American Schools of Oriental Research