

ANTIQUWEIGHTS, A LOOTED MATERIAL THAT FLIES UNDER THE RADAR

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At the end of 2023, agents from the Direction nationale du renseignement et des enquêtes douanières (DNRED) put an end to a traffic in looted antiques and laid their hands on nearly 8,000 antique objects, presumed to be from Turkey, that had arrived illegally in France^[265]. Over the past few years, online auction platforms have seen a resurgence in the sale of antique metal material. Among the items sold there are ancient commercial weights.

Commercial weights

Antique Greek trade weights are objects used in daily trading to weigh the goods sold by merchants^[266]. They take the form of metal plates ranging from 1 cm to 15 cm side length, with weights ranging from less than 10 g for the smallest denominations to several kilos for the largest. These objects are generally made from lead, but some weights are produced in bronze. These rarer weights are sold at much higher prices, with some examples fetching several thousand euros. Lead weights represent the majority of items arriving on online sales platforms, as they have the advantage of flying under the radar due to their low monetary value.

A "recent" appearance on the market

Auctioning ancient coins is a long-standing practice. As Fr. de Callataÿ shows, as early as the late 19th century, sales catalogues were already showing potential buyers photos of the lots on offer. The situation for weights, however, is quite different, as this type of object only appeared commonly in sales

around the 1980s. Over the last ten years or so, the number of weights sold on auction sites has risen steadily. A good example is the weights of the city of Cyzicus. In 2020, 136 weights were known from this city in western Asia Minor, whose territory lies in present-day Turkey. Today, no fewer than 256 weights are known, representing 120 previously unknown objects, all of which have appeared on the online antiquities market. Cyzicus' situation is not an isolated one, as the same is true for other cities: the number of weights sold online has risen steadily in recent years, testifying to an ever-increasing flow of objects ripped from the ground and decontextualised.

What do these weights reveal?

The frequent appearance of these objects on online sales platforms, in the absence of any known scientific archaeological excavations in the territory of the object's issuing city, could testify that illegal looting may have occurred or taken place on this territory.

Weights are objects whose production and use are highly localised. In this sense, unlike coins, which may have circulated and therefore be found in places other than their place of issue, weights generally circulate very little^[267] and represent a good marker for studying the case of localised illegal looting. Putting the appearance of these weights over time into perspective could eventually help determine when such looting took place, as there's a good chance that these objects, like coins, are sold off quickly. Indeed, their low monetary value and the lack of scientific knowledge about this type of artefact allow dealers to sell them without attracting attention.

265. See GRIESSEL 2024.

266. For further information, see LEBLANC 2021a-b.

267. GATIER 2014, p. 150, provides examples of Syrian cities.

The example of another city on the Troad is worthy of note, as it confirms this phenomenon of recent, flowing looting. Indeed, until the beginning of 2023, only one weight was known for Assos, and this had been the case since the 20th century. However, archaeological excavations have been taking place on the territory of the ancient city for several years^[268]; this must not have escaped the attention of the looters. Indeed, in 2023 and 2024, three new, previously unknown weights appeared on the antiquities market and were sold by the same auction house. They may have come from a private collection, which was acquired by chance by the auction house shortly after the excavations. But it cannot be ruled out that they arrived on the online market as a result of illegal looting organised by looters who observed the arrival of archaeologists and seized the opportunity to find archaeological material.

The route taken by the weights

Lack of knowledge of the networks prevents us from accurately depicting the chain of events involved in looting this material, but it is nevertheless possible, on the basis of the elements observed, to indicate that this archaeological material seems to follow two main routes.

The first is that looters or dealers do business with national private collectors who collect these objects for a variety of reasons. These collectors sometimes play an active role in the circulation and sale of these objects, which in some cases end up in museum collections. The second route followed by these items is via online sales platforms, where they are sometimes sold by honourable houses, sometimes by companies created from scratch for the occasion, and which, after a dozen or so sales, disappear to allow other auction houses to flourish under other names, always selling the same type of equipment. These temporary houses are characterised by undefined sites, often under construction, and strange addresses (residential housing, isolated suburbs, etc.), which are regularly modified. In some cases, the managers are even in close contact with looters in the countries from which the objects originate, and don't hesitate to contact them directly to request information on the objects being sold. Furthermore, these houses use social networks to solicit professional

numismatists, who are always eager to obtain more data, perhaps as a way to legitimise their sales.

Impact on research

This material, abruptly torn from the earth, still provides information, but it is available at the discretion of the auction houses. Indeed, some well-known and reputable auction houses sell these objects after a study that at least preserves the object's primary information: mass, dimensions, a photograph. Today, however, more and more small, ephemeral auction houses are opening their virtual doors. They don't have the same rigour as the major auction houses, which are designed to endure over time and preserve their reputation. These small companies provide incomplete information, or in some cases no information at all. Doing so, the weight that has already lost its most precious scientific element – its archaeological context – is stripped of all information and becomes unusable. All these weights, of which there may never be another trace, will remain partially (un)known, if the information essential to their proper interpretation is lacking.

Pondera, the answer to the disappearing materials

The *Pondera Online*^[269] project, created by Charles Doyen in 2016, aims to collect and gather information from all known or discovered weights over time on a single platform. This approach addresses the problem of disappearing items sold online. All the weights that pass through auction houses, but also those held in museum collections, are registered on a single platform in open access to facilitate searches and provide access to data that may never be seen again later, as many of these objects disappear into the limbo of private collections. As such, *Pondera Online* takes on a curatorial role. However, there's a flip side to this coin: scientific sanction. Indeed, consigning these objects to an online, freely accessible database makes the information available not only to the scientific world, but also to the world of antiques sales. Indeed, for some time now, many auction houses have been referring to *Pondera* in their descriptions to cross-reference objects similar to those being sold.

268. For more information on these excavations, see ARSLAN 2024.

269. <https://pondera.uclouvain.be/>, consulted 29/08/25. For more information on Pondera Online, see Delvigne & Doyen 2024.

This scientific sanction creates a situation where this information is used to, in a way, if not to sustain, at least to demonstrate toleration of the antiquities market, a provider of new data. But how can we, as scientists, not feel responsible for safeguarding information that is essential for future research into past civilisations? The answer to this question is complex and open to debate, but it's worth "reflecting on our responsibilities to protect cultural heritage, as well as our duty as researchers to preserve knowledge and make it accessible through study to all"^[270].

Conclusion

This case study focuses only on antique weights, but the findings are alarming because they apply equally to a whole range of objects. A glance at the objects sold by the various ephemeral auction houses that can be found online will convince you of this. Alongside weights, there are coins, jewels, seals, small statuettes, etc...that fill catalogues of artefacts offered for sale. All these objects have the advantage, for looters, of being easily spotted by metal detectors and easily sold on the antiquities market. Moreover, few people are interested in them or able to identify them, which, coupled with their low monetary value (particularly for lead objects), makes it easier to slip under the radar.

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1. IAA 2018, p. 2.