

PERSONAL VIEW

Just what Libya did not need

■ RICHARD FALKINER looks at the potential impact of a theft from a Benghazi bank vault

NEWS that there has been a major robbery of classical coins from a bank vault in the Libyan city of Benghazi is as alarming for the coin trade as it is for museums and public collections.

It emerges that the robbery took place as long ago as last March and has been touted as the largest archaeological theft ever. The coins alone are reported to amount to 7700 pieces.

It is understandable that the news may have been kept from the headlines in the bellicose turmoil of recent months. However, with the Gaddafi endgame now played out, details started to emerge at a UNESCO conference in Paris during the last week of October.

There is general suspicion that this could be an inside job; hardly anything else of value was touched after the thieves drilled through the concrete roof of the vault.

Quite what has been stolen has yet to emerge, but the sooner it does the easier it will be to stem the flow of stolen classical coins and hopefully lead to their recovery. Clear information will also save considerable heartache for innocent coin and antiquity dealers.

Unfortunately little of this hoard has been photographed, but we do know that most of it was excavated at the temple of Artemis at Cyrene (modern Shahat) between 1917 and 1922, which gives us a strong indication as to what it might include, so here is an overview.

People from the lands which are today Greece began to colonise southern Italy, Sicily and parts of North Africa early in the first millennium BC. By the mid fifth century these colonies were

Legitimate lookalikes



Left: a Cyrenaican tetradrachm (c.370BC) with the extinct sylphium plant which sold at Morton & Eden on October 24 for £90,000 (estimate £15,000-20,000). It sold in New York in 1990 for \$25,000 (then £14,880).

Left: a tetradrachm of Carthage (c.360-289BC) similar to some of the stolen coins. This legitimate example was sold from an old established collection by Dix Noonan Webb last June for £1100.

Similar images are on the stolen coins.

minting some of the most artistic coins of their time – some would say, and with justification, ever.

What has this got to do with Libya on the other side of the Mediterranean sea? Quite a lot. The prosperous Greek-cultured cities of Sicily were in commercial competition with their Punic rivals on the northern littoral of Africa, the ancient Cyrenaica, and this led to war. In war, troops have to be paid above all.

The *Sunday* and *Daily Telegraph* (October 30 and 31) refer to the coins in this hoard as dating “from the time of Alexander the Great” (d.323BC). This is a journalistic cliché and a more recent

report in *The Tripoli Post* indicates that it also includes earlier artefacts and coins as well as later Byzantine and Islamic coins.

While we may not be able to say with absolute certainty which examples of these coins are part of the stolen

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hoard, we can say that exercising the greatest diligence is essential when it comes to material from these periods – especially when it comes to provenance. The trade associations,

such as the IAADA and ADA (Antiquities) and IAPN and BNTA (Coins) will be taking particular care in this context.

Useful guides to coins of the relevant periods include Barclay V. Head’s *Historia*

Numorum, first published in 1887, with later editions, and the same author’s *Guide to the Principal Coins of the Greeks* (recently updated). Both works are fairly readily available. (Douglas Saville +44 [0]118 918 7628 or Spink [+44 [0]20 7563 4025) or John Spring (+44 [0]20 7930 3513).

The first book gives lists of the cities that struck coins and the latter useful illustrations.

It is important, however, to maintain a sense of proportion; just because an example of coins from these periods is on offer does not necessarily mean it is “HOT!”. That said, I urge particular diligence. Seek a pre-March 2011 provenance and follow it up.

The coins of this area often bear an image of the extinct silphium plant and the Punic coins are often characterised by an equine image. This is an over simplification, so it is best to have recourse to the reference books, which are not expensive and could save much agonising.

It seems inevitable that material will be offered in Europe and the US, not least because there have already been reports of attempts to smuggle 503 coins and a gold statuette into Egypt. In addition, large numbers of classical coins have been uncharacteristically appearing in the Benghazi gold market.

This hoard has immense significance as a unique historical document and cultural record of this vast area. Just because this history is less researched than that of southern Europe does not mean that it is any less important in our understanding of the development of civilisation.

Finally, at such times of immense turmoil, treasures like this hoard hold a special place in a nation’s psyche. For this reason, quite apart from the others, Libya needs all our help in recovering it.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

London Deputy Mayor objects to Burlington Arcade plans

Copy of a letter sent to Cllr Colin Barrow, Leader of Westminster City Council by Kit Malthouse AM, London Deputy Mayor for Policing

Dear Colin,

I am writing in connection with the various planning applications received in relation to Burlington Arcade and to register my objections.

While I find some of the cosmetic proposals, lighting, sculpture and

painting, insensitive and awkward, vulgar even, I am most alarmed by the threat to create larger shop units and thus effect a change in the nature and character of the Arcade.

Westminster Council has long had an ambition to preserve smaller shop units throughout the West End, in the hope of protecting the smaller independent retailer. This policy has sadly been largely ineffective. A visitor to the area might just as well visit Westfield or Bluewater,

or indeed any large city to see the same set of chain stores, designers and other retailers selling largely mass produced goods.

Burlington Arcade is a small and treasured oasis in this desert of ubiquity and I would urge you to oppose any application now or in the future, that would give effect to what I gather is the declared ambition of the current owners of the Arcade to turn it into yet another parade of dreary brands.

We welcome your correspondence. Please email the Editor at: editorial@atgmedia.com

The Editor reserves the right to amend correspondence where necessary for publication.