



Professor Lord Renfrew

Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn

Those who attempt to fight the trade in illicit antiquities soon find themselves embroiled in legal issues. Professor Lord Renfrew, a distinguished archaeologist, sets out some key areas of concern.

The world trade in illicit antiquities has greatly increased in recent years, much to the dismay of archaeologists and all those concerned with the preservation of cultural property. The Illicit Antiquities Research Centre (IARC) monitors and reports on the detrimental effects of this international trade and seeks to expose those involved in the theft, collection, sale or transfer of illicit and unprovenanced objects of cultural importance.

Lord Renfrew is Director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at Cambridge University and an archaeologist with an outstanding international reputation. The IARC is based at the Institute and began operations in October 1997, bringing the public's attention to antiquities which have been stolen, or clandestinely excavated, and then illegally exported. At present, the IARC is urging the British government to follow the USA's lead in ratifying the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the illicit transfer of cultural property.


Lord Renfrew is also concerned at the secrecy which can surround important international transactions involving objects of great cultural importance. A recent example of this has been the Sevso treasure, a collection of late Roman silverware purchased in good faith by the Marquis of Northampton during the 1980s after he took advice from lawyers and art experts. A number of the items were accompanied by Lebanese export permits, some of which were subsequently found to be bogus. The treasure was offered for sale in New York, but this was halted when Lebanon, Croatia and Hungary all claimed the treasure was their own national property (although the claim by Lebanon was later dropped).

A New York court found in favour of Lord Northampton in 1993, but the case raised doubts in the minds of potential purchasers over his title to the treasure and affected future

prospects of sale. It is understood that a claim for damages made by Lord Northampton against his legal advisers has recently been settled, but the details are being kept confidential. This means that unfortunately, important information surrounding the sale of the treasure to Lord Northampton remains secret.

'I think it is a very important case for a number of reasons. One is that if a collector in Lord Northampton's position can sue those who facilitated his purchase for a large amount of money, this should make any dealer in unprovenanced antiquities distinctly nervous – and also make any collector think twice. Another good thing about this is that the implications go further up the chain of supply and should give lawyers, art dealers, and auction houses food for thought.'

In Lord Renfrew's opinion, parties involved in litigation should be compelled by law to disclose details of any settlement involving issues relating to the provenance of cultural items of national or international importance.

The IARC publishes a twice-yearly newsletter, *Culture Without Context*, which reports on a wide sphere of activities, including illegal excavations, areas at risk of looting and action by law enforcement bodies to combat the smuggling of illicit antiquities. In the UK, some progress has been made in recent years to help reduce the trade in unprovenanced cultural objects. Sotheby's, for example, has stopped holding antiquities auctions in London and the British Museum has instituted a policy under which it refuses to buy such items or accept them by gift or bequest. 

'Culture without Context' is available from Jenny Doole. The McDonald Institute, Downing Street, Cambridge, CB2 3ER.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Andrew Colin Renfrew was educated at St Albans School and St John's College, Cambridge, where he was an Exhibitioner, and the British School of Archaeology. He was president of the Cambridge Union in 1961 and, after obtaining a BA in Archaeology and Anthropology (first class honours) in 1962, he gained an MA in 1964 and PhD in 1965. Lord Renfrew was appointed Lecturer in Prehistory and Archaeology at Sheffield University in 1965, becoming a Senior Lecturer and then Reader. He was Professor of Archaeology at Southampton University 1972-81, Professorial Fellow at St John's College, Cambridge, 1981-86, Master of Jesus College, Cambridge, 1986-97 and remains a Professorial Fellow at Jesus College. Since 1981 he has been Disney Professor of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge and, in 1991, became Director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge. He has lectured in a number of countries and been involved with national and international organisations, including the Ancient Monuments Advisory Committee, on which he still sits, and the UK National Commission for UNESCO. He is a trustee of the British Museum and the author of numerous publications.