



Fragments of the plundered Labours of Hercules which, when last heard of, were heading for London

The men who tore Hercules apart

By Julia Cave

THE TWO marble fragments pictured above, plundered from a superb second century sarcophagus in Turkey, are probably somewhere in London today. Other fragments were recovered by Turkish police and are now safe in Turkish museums. But the chances of all the pieces ever being recovered and re-assembled as they were originally sculpted—depicting the Labours of Hercules—are nil.

The story of the fragments illustrates what is increasingly happening to ancient art treasures as more and more sites are plundered to meet the demands of private collectors seeking a hedge against inflation and of the museums. (In the late Sixties and early Seventies, a new museum opened somewhere in the world every day.) Not only do the plunderers steal the treasures and break them up to make sales easier and more lucrative; they also disturb the sites making proper archaeological studies impossible.

The story of the Hercules fragments first came to light because

some Istanbul children were playing with gravel on the back of a driverless truck one day in April, 1973. The children started throwing the stones at each other and soon revealed some marble fragments beneath the gravel.

Passers-by called the police and the pieces were taken to the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. The truck driver fled when he saw what was happening but was traced to Antalya, a small town on the south coast and interrogated.

The driver said a Turkish farmer, whose land was among the nearby ruins of a Roman city, Perge, had dug up part of the sarcophagus. He had recognised its importance and contacted an Ankara dealer who arranged for some of the pieces to be taken by truck to Istanbul. The farmer was paid about £3,700.

The truck driver also said that another consignment of marble had left Perge in a car and the police eventually tracked this down to the flat of an Istanbul

dealer. They found 29 fragments of the sarcophagus hidden under a bed. (The dealer's son and an American who owned the car were arrested, held in custody a few days, protesting their innocence, and then let go.)

By now archaeologists were certain that the fragments were all from a sarcophagus comparable in workmanship to the famous one in Istanbul said to have been carved for Alexander the Great. But many of the pieces, which had originally made up 12 scenes of the Labours of Hercules, were still missing.

It soon became clear that some had left the country before the police pounced. For, a few months later, a Turkish professor, Dr Jale Inan, was visiting the Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California, when she saw photographs in their archives of two other parts of the sarcophagus. The curator told Dr Inan he received the photographs when the two pieces had been

offered to him for sale for about £8,000 (compared to the £3,700 the Turkish farmer had got for several scenes from the sarcophagus).

The curator had turned them down because he suspected they were "hot"—smuggled from their country of origin. US Customs men then got on the trail and they believe the pieces were returned unsold to a New York dealer who then shipped them to London.

Early this year even more scenes from the same sarcophagus came to light at Perge, after a tip-off to the police. These fragments are now in the nearby Antalya Museum, but Dr Nusin Asgari, of the Istanbul Museum, says: "We are planning to join the fragments at the Antalya and Istanbul museums and exhibit the sarcophagus in Antalya as a sad symbol of illicit trade in antiquities, waiting for its remaining fragments to be found."

● Julia Cave has made two films for BBC2 on archaeological vandalism. The first, *The Plunderers*, will be screened tomorrow night.

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