



BOOK SUMMARY

Ancient Treasures

By Brian Houghton

A recurring theme in *Ancient Treasures* is looted treasure, and the way it more often than not finds its way to many of the world's greatest museums, who have knowingly accepted such illegally excavated treasure hoards. There is a stark contrast between the European and North American leisure pursuit of treasure hunting, and the activities of looters in poor countries, such as some nations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, which are rich in archaeological remains (see the chapters on the Lydian Hoard and the Morgantina Treasure). Looting is a way of life for some villagers in these areas, though they often receive as little as 1% of the actual value of the objects they recover, the rest going to middlemen and dealers. A country's archaeological sites and museums are always most at risk of looting during times of war and political upheaval and it has been estimated that between 3,000 and 7,000 objects are still missing from the Iraq Museum, which was looted in April 2003.

A number of stories in this book examine how treasures, in the form of hoards, are hidden during times of war and catastrophe, such as at ancient Pompeii, and much more recently during the War in Afghanistan. This theme is linked to the often fabulously wealthy Roman and Viking hoards buried in the ground for safekeeping when their civilizations were beginning to crumble, only to be unearthed centuries later by humble metal detectorists. It must be noted that it is often not possible to tell why and by whom a hoard was deposited in the ground; there were probably a wide variety of reasons, some of which would perhaps be beyond our understanding. Although hoards often may have been buried for safekeeping, the preponderance of many of them close to rivers, streams and wells (e.g. at Bath, at the River Thames at London Bridge, and at Llyn Fawr, a lake in the Cynon Valley, South Wales), and the massive nature of some deposits (e.g. the Frome hoard of 52,500 Roman coins, from Somerset in the West of England) do suggest a ritual explanation for some examples.

Two chapters in *Ancient Treasures* deal with a favorite theme of treasure hunting tales - shipwrecks. The rich New World plunder of the Spanish Treasure Fleets of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries has been the target of elaborate salvage attempts by modern treasure hunters, mainly off the Florida coast, whilst the remains of Admiral Zheng He's huge Chinese Treasure Ships of the 15th century and their cargoes have been far more difficult to track down. The world of fake ancient artifacts is covered in another section of this work, which shows that as long as there are people rich enough and greedy enough to be fooled by appearance, often spectacularly so, as in the case of the Chiemsee Cauldron, then the trade in fake antiquities will continue to flourish.