

The Importance of Archaeological Context

By John Russell

We often hear that the market in plundered artifacts destroys archaeological context, but the reason why this is such a great loss is often not clear to nonarchaeologists. In this talk, the crucial importance of archaeological context will be illustrated through the analysis of two case studies.

In the first case, a single archaeological object (a cylinder seal from north Syria) is examined for cultural information from two different perspectives: what we can determine about its culture if this piece had appeared on the market without provenience, compared with what can be determined if we know its exact archaeological find spot. What emerges is that in the former case, we can know nothing at all about the people who created the seal, or even if it is authentic, while in the latter case, the seal opens a new chapter in the history of the region.

In the second case, we analyze a sculpture in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, comparing the object's published provenance information with the visual characteristics of the object itself. The result is a surprising disjunction between object and text, which highlights that we know nothing about the object's ancient connections, and indeed calls into question its very authenticity. My conclusion is that objects with provenience can be rich resources for the past, while those without provenience inform us primarily about the present.