

Dr Hunter's Shield: 'Miscellaneous Curiosities' and Antiquarian Debates

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It is not surprising that in 1813 Captain Laskey referred to the Renaissance shield in Hunter's collection as a work of 'great antiquity'.¹ There may be no surviving record of the object entering Hunter's collection, or any mention of this particular object in the Trustees' catalogues, but the shield represents a number of interesting points of practice in the field of antiquarianism during the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries in Britain. In 1813, Hunter's shield was categorised under 'miscellaneous curiosities' because scholarship and research of ancient artefacts, based on material evidence, was still a largely new practice. In fact, Hunter's shield points up the inconsistencies that characterised antiquarian methods whenever there was an attempt to reconcile ancient texts with physical objects or reproductions of those objects.

The only clue that remains and is relevant to this object in Hunter's original collection is a letter from Dr Wilkinson to Dr Hunter dated August 17th 1779. In this letter, Dr Wilkinson makes the offer of an ancient shield to be placed in Hunter's museum at 16 Great Windmill Street.² Dr Wilkinson was a physician, a member of the Society of Antiquarians and the Royal Society and the shield that he was offering was the famous 'Dr Woodward's shield'. This object, now in the British Museum, has a long and intriguing history which is worth recalling here as an example of the sorts of questions Hunter's shield would have prompted and as an indicator of Hunter's own expertise and connoisseurship.

Dr John Woodward (1665/1668 -1728) was Professor of Physic at Gresham College, London, a member of the Royal College of Physicians, London and first Professor of Geology at Cambridge University.³ He is considered to be the founder of modern Geology and his ideas expressed in *An Essay Toward a Natural History of the Earth* (1695) 'stands at the beginning of modern historical paleontology'.⁴ Woodward famously confronted Sir Hans Sloane at the Royal Society and fought a duel with Dr Richard Mead as well as publishing a satire on his character.⁵ He was, however, an avid collector and his museum at Gresham College was visited by Ralph Thoresby, an antiquarian and collector from Leeds (1658-1724) and the traveller and writer, Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach (1683-1734), among others notable intellectuals. He had an abiding interest in Roman antiquities and published a book on London's Roman

¹ This appears to be the first reference to the shield in Hunter's collection. See Captain John Laskey, (1813) *A Catalogue of the Hunterian Museum, Including Historical and Scientific Notices of the various Objects of Literature, Natural History, Anatomical Preparations, Antiquities, &c. In that Celebrated Collection*, Glasgow. At p. 73, he writes: "Many other Miscellaneous Curiosities are placed on this side of the Room, the most prominent of which, and deserving of the highest attention from its great antiquity and workmanship, is a Roman Target or Shield, in a high state of preservation, and supposed to be unique. It consists of a hollowed round piece of wood, which is covered with a thick stronger leather, beautifully carved; the principal figure is Minerva helmeted, her right hand holding erect a spear or lance; her left reclining gracefully on an aegis or shield of an antique form, on which is portrayed Medusa's head. Her attributes, the Owl, Cock &c. surround the figure, the remainder of the surface is filled up by pointed tracery, foliage and flowers. It is an article of great rarity and beauty".

² See C. Helen Brock, (2008) *The Correspondence of William Hunter 1740-1783*, London, Pickering & Chatto, pp. 301-313.

³ See Joseph Levine (1977) *Dr Woodward's Shield, History, Science and Satire in Augustan England*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

⁴ Roy Porter, (1979) 'John Woodward: "A Droll Sort of Philosopher"', *Geology Magazine*, vol. 116, No. 5, p.337.

⁵ Levine, p.16. See also, John Woodward, *The Two Sosias: or The True Dr Byfield at the Rainbow Coffee House to the Pretender in Jermyn Street [A Satire on Dr. Mead]* London, 1719.

remains.⁶ The controversy surrounding Woodward's shield originated from his own belief that the object was an ancient artefact and he solicited numerous opinions to support his view. The evidence of antiquity, according to Woodward's backers rested with the iconography of the shield; that is the story of Camillus, the famous Roman General who drove an army of Gauls out of the city and retrieved the gold payment given as a bribe to persuade them to leave. The story is told by both Plutarch and Livy. Woodward decided the shield's imagery corresponded so closely to these ancient authors that it must have been produced at the same time, as a form of commemoration. The shield's material was also used to explain its antiquity as: 'The Art of working on metal was not brought to perfection which appears in this shield till the Reign of Nero'.⁷ Also, the depiction of the architecture of Rome on the shield was thought to be historically accurate.

There is no doubt that Hunter would have been more than aware of these controversies, which makes a comparison with his shield and Woodward's all the more fascinating. In his letter to Hunter of 1779 Dr Wilkinson wrote: 'But from the time of Nero to ye 15th century no monuments of that Art appeared in any degree comparable to ye workmanship of this *Parma Votive* which may be needless to mention to one so skilled in ye knowledge of Ancient coins as yourself'.⁸ By 1779 Hunter was acknowledged to have collected an impressive number of ancient Roman and Greek coins. Despite having taken up the serious study of numismatics as late as 1770 with the purchase of, classical scholar, Richard Dawes's (1709-1766) collection, Hunter managed to amass one of Europe's finest collections and in 1782, a year before Hunter's death, Charles Combe published his comprehensive catalogue of Hunter's ancient coin collection.⁹ With his collector's connections and his knowledge of classical texts, Hunter would have been interested in Woodward's Shield which, since Wilkinson had acquired it in 1767 along with Woodward's various manuscripts and engravings of the object, had by now attracted a good deal of comment and debate. In fact, in 1780, a year after the shield was offered to Hunter, Richard Gough, an eminent antiquary and director of the Society of Antiquaries published the most concise summary of Woodward's Shield as a footnote in the second edition of his *British Topography*, this came to be the last word on the famous shield. Gough explains the arguments on both sides but declares that the shield is undoubtedly from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries and his evidence derives from the depiction of Rome: 'No antient artist could be so ignorant as to ascribe such buildings to that period'.¹⁰ Gough also makes an important point about the practice of collectors during Woodward's time:

'When Dr Woodward's curiosities were sold, it was the fashion to under-value them, and nobody bidding for the shield, Col. King had it knocked down to him for 100/. It was bought at the sale of the Colonel's effects, March 1768 by Dr Wilkinson, for forty guineas. He purchased also the letters &c. relative to it'.¹¹

It might also be worth noting that Joseph Levine attributes the information regarding Wilkinson's payment of forty guineas to the sculptor Joseph Nollekens (1737-

⁶ John Woodward (1723) *Remarks upon the Antient and Present State of London occasion'd by some Roman Urns, Coins and other Antiquities, lately discover'd*, London.

⁷ Atticus, (pseudonym for Robert Ainsworth (1660-1743). He was Woodward's executor and compiler of his Sale Catalogue) *The London Journal*, April 19, 1729.

⁸ Letter from Dr John Wilkinson to Dr William Hunter, dated August 17th 1779, transcribed in C Helen Brock, (2008) *The Correspondence of William Hunter 1740-1783*, London, Pickering & Chatto, pp. 301-313.

⁹ Peter Black, (2007) ed. *"My Highest Pleasures" William Hunter's Art Collection*, Glasgow and London, Paul Holberton Publishing, p.184.

¹⁰ Richard Gough (1780) *British Topography, Or an historical account of what has been done for illustrating the topographical antiquities of Great Britain*, London, p.720n.

¹¹ Gough, (1780), p.720n.

1832) who recalled seeing Woodward's shield at the house of Colonel Richard King (1682-1767):

'There lived Colonel King one of my father's oldest friends; he was a very great collector of all sorts of singular things; and had a very curious old shield which belonged to the famous Dr. Woodward, who was intimately acquainted with the great Sir Christopher Wren'.¹²

He added in a footnote:

'I find by a letter in the British Museum, that the Doctor's shield sold at the sale of Col. King, to whom he had bequeathed it, for the sum of forty pounds – An Account of this shield, in Latin, was written by Robert Ainsworth the antiquary in 1734. For another see, *British Topography* vol. I, p. 720'.¹³

Clearly Gough's account was the basis for this detail.

It seems likely that Hunter did not take up Wilkinson's offer because he knew that the shield was not antique and, perhaps, given the debates surrounding the object, it was too contentious an item to have in his own museum. The materials of both Hunter's shield and Woodward's also provide evidence of their age. As an object made of wood and leather, the probability of Hunter's shield having survived from antiquity is extremely rare. Similarly for Woodward's, and there was much argument from his opponents against the idea of an object made of iron surviving from antiquity. In Woodward's day, the Scottish antiquarian, Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (1676-1755), met him at the Royal Society and examined the shield for himself:

'For if he (Woodward) had noticed that it was of Iron, he might easily have concluded that it was so far from being Roman that it could not be above 100 or 150 years old. His skill likewise in metals and rust might have demonstrated to him that had his shield been a foot in thickness it must needs have decayed since the days of the Romans and that not one of those fine figures on it had been seen'.¹⁴

Moreover, it is Clerk, Woodward's contemporary, who remarks on the strange paradox of antiquarian practice that appeared to affect his colleagues, that is, in allowing their dedication to classical texts to sometimes obscure the physical evidence with which they were increasingly confronted:

'I should regard it a mean thing to build up a library of huge volumes on antiquities, and yet to disdain the very objects which the most learned men, as Graevius, Gronovius and Montfaucon, have explained with such expenditure of time and toil. The things themselves speak and for the most part explain themselves; but descriptions, however, accurate, present to the mind only confused or shadowy ideas...'¹⁵

Hunter's sympathies would have lain with Clerk. In his dealings with colleagues over objects for the collection at Windmill Street he prioritised the physical evidence of the objects over any descriptions. One such example is the exchange of correspondence between Hunter and the British diplomat Sir William Hamilton (1731-1803) over the Giraldis coin collection. This was a collection of ancient coins and medals which had been recommended by Hamilton who wrote to Hunter: 'I can assure you this is no dealer's collection but is sold by the gentleman whose father and grandfather made the collection in this country'.¹⁶ On this occasion, Hunter enlisted the advice of Sir Charles

¹² John Thomas Smith, (1829) *Nollekens and his Times*, edited by Wilfred Whitten, vol. I, London, Henry Colburn, p. 37.

¹³ *Nollekens and his Times*, (1829), p. 37, n.2.

¹⁴ Letter from Clerk to Lethieullier, "*Reliquiae Galeana*" pp.253-55, quoted in Levine (1977) p.265-266.

¹⁵ In a letter from Clerk to Boerhaave, quoted in John M Gray (1892). Ed. *John Clerk, Memoirs*, Scot. Hist. Soc. XIII, Edinburgh, pp.236-240.

¹⁶ Sir William Hamilton, Naples, to William Hunter in London, August 21, 1781.

Townley (1737-1805) as a connoisseur of ancient sculpture. The medals turned out not to be what Hamilton thought they were and he subsequently had to reimburse Hunter for the money he had paid out, £330. When the whole collection arrived in London it was valued at only £83.

'I was aware of the large bronze being ill preserved & of no great value but I was made to believe that the Silver Imperial & family Medals which I sent were very valuable - I was therefore thunderstruck when I saw in your letter of the 20th of June that the whole Collection produced no more than £83.2. I have been the Dupe of a rascally Abbé, whom I really did not suspect to be dishonest before - however tho' the loss is not indifferent to me I will think as little about it as possible...'¹⁷

Clearly in contemplating the 'great rarity and beauty' of his Renaissance shield, Hunter recognised its value as a piece of virtuoso craftsmanship from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. However, he would also have imagined it alongside its predecessors, those similar objects in other collections that he would have known of. In Joseph Levine's book, the author describes at least four 'ancient' shields contemporary with Woodward's and Hunter's, these being: Dr Mead's Shield depicting Scipio, the Shield of Dr Spon (from Jacob Spon's *Recherches Curieuses*, Lyon 1683), Ralph Thoresby's shield, illustrated in Thoresby's *Ducatus Leodiensis*. London 1715, and a shield belonging to the Duke of Norfolk, engraved by George Vertue.¹⁸ Hunter's shield therefore belongs amongst a group of important ancient and modern artefacts that were circulating among eighteenth-century antiquarians, stimulating their researches and questioning their methods.

¹⁷ Sir William Hamilton, Naples, to William Hunter, August, 1782.

¹⁸ Joseph Levine (1977), p.272.