

The Telegraph

Digital Monuments Men wage online war against Islamic State looting

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Skills once used to track terrorists are now being used to track stolen antiquities and smugglers through the digital bazaars of the Middle East



An Isil flag fluttering atop the circular wall bounding the orchestra at the Roman theatre of the ancient city of Palmyra Photo: AFP



By **Ben Farmer**

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The shadowy figures sitting in front of computer screens scroll through endless pictures of Iraqi and Syrian antiquities on sale to the highest bidder, no questions asked.

As they trawl online auction sites, Facebook and Twitter, they note the accounts, pseudonyms and emails of the shady vendors offering ancient Greek coins, Sumerian tablets and Assyrian seals.

Sophisticated computer programmes crunch the torrent of data they gather, matching photographs with known missing treasures, seeking links between the sellers, and mapping networks of connections.

A few years ago the small team scouring the digital bazaars of the Middle East were using their skills to hunt terrorists and disrupt insurgent networks.

Now all in the civilian world and driven by their horror at the archaeological destruction and looting which has followed the spread of **Islamic State** fighters, they have decided to use those same skills to track down priceless treasures and the unscrupulous racketeers who threaten them.

“The idea came from the shocking images from the Middle East and the way cultural history is just being destroyed by Islamic State,” said one of the team with a background in the British special forces.

“It just flies in the face of everything that’s decent. Anyone can see that destroying the world’s cultural heritage in the name of religion or faith is just wrong.”

The small anonymous team go by the bland name of the Committee for Shared Culture, which gives little hint as to the nature of their task, or breadth of their skills.



Islamic State militants take sledgehammers to an ancient artifact in the Ninevah Museum in Mosul in February (AP)

Their mission to save the imperilled archaeological heritage of the Middle East has also led them to be nicknamed the ‘digital Monuments Men’, **after the team of academics portrayed in the 2014 George Clooney film**, who tried to save art treasures from the Nazis.

“We have got very good over the last ten years at finding people,” the source said.

“Everyone leaves a digital trace, on social media, or the web. Now, it’s the same for items. Using the same techniques people have been using to map and find terrorists, we can now find items and map networks of smugglers.”

Governments are overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge, so the team decided to start on their own. The team of a dozen or so former intelligence workers, academics and linguists are funded by a wealthy private individual with an interest in antiquities, but are also looking for further funding, he said. They choose to remain anonymous for security reasons.

“It came out of a number of conversations with similar-minded individuals and we decided it was something we could do without waiting for somebody else to act.

“Using some of the techniques we have been using for the past few years, plus the skills of our colleagues who are Arabists, linguists and so on, we thought it was something we could do without waiting for somebody else to act.”

The spread of extremists such as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as Isil or Isis, has seen not just the wanton destruction of globally important sites such as Nimrud, but also an explosion in looting.

The smuggling of antiquities out of the region to black markets in Turkey, Beirut and beyond is now believed to be one of the militants’ main sources of income.

France Desmarais, director of programmes and partnerships at the International Council of Museums, said: “The scale and the rhythm of the looting in Iraq are unprecedented. It’s a huge free for all.”

There is opportunistic looting by common thieves, looting encouraged and taxed by warlords and specialised “looting to order” to satisfy unprincipled collectors.

She said: “Looting will always flourish when you have instability in a country and this is a worst-case scenario.”

Museums have been captured and stripped, while satellite imagery shows hundreds of holes have been sunk to plunder archaeological sites.

What is stolen is spirited away, often through Turkey and Lebanon, before heading to collectors, many believed to be in the UK and US.

Deborah Lehr, chair of the US-based Antiquities Coalition, a non-profit group devoted to fighting the destruction of heritage sites, said: “What Isis is doing is encouraging people in their territory to go out and loot and they take a tax on those items. They then guarantee safe passage out through Turkey.”

The trade has been estimated to be worth billions.

She says the amount of legally declared antiquities being transported from Iraq has risen tenfold in the past two years. Just because they are legally declared does not mean they are legal though, she says.

“It’s not like cocaine, where if customs finds it, it’s always illegal. If you find an ancient urn, customs doesn’t know if it’s legal or not legal without looking

at the history and you can fake provenances.”

The boom in online auction houses has made the shadowy trade easier, she said.

“It’s a flourishing trade online.”

It is here that the digital monuments men focus. The need for buyers to be specific about what is on offer makes it easier for individual pieces to be found. The digital footprint that comes from using social media also throws up connections. The team have found at least one antiquities seller with Twitter links to Isis militants inside Iraq.

Potential smugglers and routes that are found can be passed onto the police or international authorities.