

Escalating the War on Looting

By **CELESTINE BOHLEN** MARCH 11, 2016



Artifacts thought to be from the ancient Sumerian city of Lagash, in northern Iraq, seized by the Bulgarian police in 2015. International organizations are stepping up efforts to suppress the market for looted antiquities in hopes of cutting off incentive to supply them. Credit Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

PARIS — Like the wars themselves, the looting of antiquities in Syria and other conflict zones in the Middle East is proving virtually impossible to stop, despite the best efforts of a host of international agencies, cultural organizations and dogged independent researchers.

As the pillaging continues in a region rich in layers of ancient civilizations, the international community is focusing on the marketplace, doing what it can to scare off demand in hopes that supply will shrink. “There wouldn’t be any looting if there wasn’t money to be made,” said Kathryn Walker Tubb, a lecturer at the Institute of Archaeology at University College London.

In the past few years, the effort to intercept the illicit trade has intensified.

In February last year, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution banning trade in artifacts illegally removed from Syria since 2011 and from Iraq since 1990. The International Council of Museums has issued “red lists” for objects at risk in Iraq, Syria and now Libya. Last August, the State Department in Washington announced a

\$5 million reward for information that could disrupt the ransacking and looting of cultural sites by the Islamic State, or ISIS.

Last month, Unesco followed up its Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Heritage Project, introduced in 2014 with the European Union, with a special task force that would deploy experts from Italy's carabinieri force, with its long experience in tracking down looted art, to help hunt down stolen items.

The Asia Society and the Antiquities Coalition recently concluded an international conference on "cultural racketeering" with calls for special training for customs agents and support for local governments in conflict zones to catalogue and safeguard their treasures.

"We believe it is imperative to do what we can," said Christine Anagnos, the executive director of the Association of Art Museum Directors, which last October issued a set of "safe haven" protocols that offer protection for cultural property put at risk by wars and other disasters, with the guarantee that it will be returned to home countries once its safety can be assured. As of February, however, no offers have been made to deposit endangered objects for safekeeping in foreign museums, Ms. Anagnos said.

There have been scattered successes in recuperating smuggled antiquities from war zones. In March 2015, a police raid in Bulgaria [uncovered](#) a cache of statues and other objects thought to be from the ancient Sumerian city of Lagash, in southern Iraq. Also that month, the United States returned to the Iraqi government 65 stolen artifacts that had come from a Dubai-based dealer who had tried to sell them, with faked paperwork, to American museums and galleries.

But investigations rarely produce arrests because of the difficulty in proving the provenance of antiquities, often produced by civilizations that stretched across the ancient world.

Traffickers are also masters at coming up with fake documents that purport to show that the disputed object had been long held by mysterious collectors, now conveniently deceased. Such lack of evidence often means that the authorities often choose to avoid pursuing criminal charges in return for reclaiming the objects, which results in shady dealers getting off the hook, experts say.

But the publicity surrounding the effort to stem the flow of smuggled artifacts from Syria, Iraq and other war zones in the Middle East has had a dampening effect, said Christopher Marinello, the founder and director of the Art Recovery Group, an organization in London that has developed a database to recover lost and stolen artworks around the world.

"The media coverage has done such an incredible job that any reputable dealer will have taken a huge step backwards," Mr. Marinello said. "We see dealers and auction houses coming in with questions about specific objects. We have seen catalogues for antiquities shrink." Small items periodically appear on e-commerce sites: Two coins from Apamea, a looted archaeological site in Syria, recently showed up on eBay, priced at \$84 and \$133.

But most people agree that the market for larger, more valuable pieces has shrunk under international pressure. This concerns Ms. Tubb who fears that precious artifacts are being stashed in warehouses — in the Middle East but also in Europe — where they will remain hidden until the pressure eases.

"Who knows where these things are housed," she said. "There are all sorts of different routes."

Col. Ludovic Ehrhart, an investigator for France's cultural theft police unit, told Le Monde that those trading in "blood antiquities" can afford to bide their time. "These long-standing networks wait three, five, even 10 years before they sell them on the official market," he said.

The role played by terrorist groups such as Islamic State in the looting of antiquities from the Middle East has helped put a chill on the market, Mr. Marinello said. "It didn't hurt that the F.B.I. has said you could be arrested for aiding

international terrorism,” he said. “That is quite an incentive to not buy something.” Although Islamic State’s vicious attacks and subsequent pillaging of Syrian sites like Palmyra have attracted attention, there are other culprits.

“It is not just the Islamic State that is destroying or looting,” said Sam Hardy, a research associate at University College London’s Institute of Archaeology, “although they have certainly upped the attention.”

The looting at Apamea, one of the largest and best preserved Roman and Byzantine sites in the world, took place on an industrial scale, as seen on satellite images that show the area pockmarked by a grid of more than 5,000 looting pits, at a time when the area was under the control of the Syrian government.

“That may not indicate looting that was directed by the regime,” said Mr. Hardy, “but it does suggest looting that benefited the regime.”

According to a 2015 [report](#) by the American Schools of Oriental Research’s Cultural Heritage Initiative, based on satellite images of 1,200 archaeological sites in Syria, more than 25 percent have been looted since the civil war began. Most of the pillaging happened in areas with weak governance, including places occupied by Kurdish and opposition forces, the report says.

Hard proof of the Islamic State’s involvement in antiquities trafficking came in May, when a United States-led raid on a compound in eastern Syria used by Abu Sayyaf, a commander identified as the director of the terrorist group’s oil smuggling and its trade in antique objects.

Abu Sayyaf, who was killed in the operation, was in possession of an odd assortment of artifacts — including an ivory plaque traced to the museum in Mosul, Iraq — Islamic State territory — as well as a collection of coins, bracelets and other easy-to-transport objects and a few obvious fakes.

The cache also revealed receipts for the 20 percent tax on precious materials — antiquities, but also minerals — collected from civilians by Islamic State. The total sum shown from these “tax” receipts reportedly amounted to \$265,000, suggesting that the antiquities trade is just a small part of the group’s financing streams. But it shows the lengths to which the local population is willing to go to survive.

“War is always the worst time for cultural heritage, particularly in a part of the world that was a cradle of civilization,” Mr. Marinello said.