

# Destruction, Looting of Antiquities Robs Nations of Their Heritage, Bankrolls Terrorism

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In August 2015, Islamic State militants dragged an octogenarian, bespectacled man into a public square in the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria and beheaded him. The crimes for which Khaled al-Asaad paid with his life were listed on a placard that the group bound to his bloodied body, which they hung by the wrists from a traffic light, his severed head on the ground beneath his feet. He had attended “infidel conferences” and served for years as the “director of idolatry” in Palmyra, [the Guardian newspaper](#) reported. Asaad, who had served for 40 years as director of antiquities for his native Palmyra, was also murdered because he refused to tell his captors where Palmyra’s centuries-old treasures were hidden, according to the [Guardian](#) and other [newspapers](#).

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Palmyra “contains the monumental ruins of a great city that was one of the most important cultural centers,” UNESCO writes on its website. “From the 1st to the 2nd century, the art and architecture of Palmyra, standing at the crossroads of several civilizations, married Graeco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences.” Palmyra was — and still is to many — one of the world’s most cherished heritage sites, in spite of two occupations by the Islamic State, during which numerous structures and artifacts were destroyed for propaganda, while others were looted for profit.

A few days after Asaad was brutally slain, the Islamic State [blew up](#) the nearly 2,000-year-old Temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra. Dedicated to the Phoenician god of storms and fertilizing rains, the temple had welcomed Christian and Muslim worshippers during its 2 millennia of existence. To Syrians, it symbolized the inclusivity and diversity of their culture. The temple was the first edifice in Palmyra to be set upon by Islamic State militants wielding jackhammers, pickaxes and explosives. Many of the lawless acts of destruction were filmed — part of the group’s well-honed communications effort.

Other ancient sites in Iraq and Syria that have been destroyed or ransacked by the Islamic State include the Mar Elian Christian monastery near Palmyra; the town of Dura-Europos, near Syria’s border with Iraq, which housed the oldest-known Christian church; the museum in the Iraqi city of Mosul; the Assyrian city of Nineveh, dating from centuries before the birth of Christ; and the ancient city of [Nimrud](#) in Iraq. That list is far from complete.

The two war-weary neighboring countries in the volatile Middle East are not the only ones to have witnessed the [wanton and senseless destruction](#) of historic sites and the looting of national treasures. The same is happening in Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya, and has happened over millennia on every continent, usually as a byproduct of war or conquest in which thousands, if not millions, of human lives were lost.

Today, headlines from warzones tend to be weighted more heavily toward the impact on civilians, not the destruction of historical sites and artifacts. At a gut level, that makes perfect sense: Lives are more important than stone. Particularly with the latest revelations that a chemical weapons attack in a rebel-held area of Syria killed scores of people, including children, it is difficult to ignore the staggering human suffering in that country after six years of war, which has left an estimated 400,000 people dead. Images of children writhing and choking from toxic poison naturally take precedence over those of dilapidated ruins and relics.

But British philosopher Julian Baggini argues that it’s alright to be equally upset by the destruction of history.



PHOTO: THE DAY AFTER HERITAGE PROTECTION INITIATIVE (TDA-HPI)

Artifacts purportedly looted by the Islamic State were recovered in the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor, near the border with Iraq.

"We know that people matter much more than things and yet it seems we can be more moved by cultural vandalism than cold-blooded murder," he wrote in a 2015 [commentary](#) for the Guardian.

"Caring about humanity is about more than wanting as many hearts to keep beating as possible. What matters is not just how many people live, but how we live," he said, adding that certain ideals are worth dying for. "If al-Asaad believed Palmyra's heritage mattered more than his own life, then we are not so monstrous if we find our own reactions imply we feel the same."

## Compassion for Both

It's not an either-or choice, argues Amr Al Azm, an associate professor of history and anthropology at Shawnee State University in Ohio and co-founder of The Day After, an NGO that seeks to cut down on the looting of treasured artifacts from Syria.

"I hear a lot, 'Why are you focusing on stones, on rocks, on the past? You should be focusing on the humanitarian disaster,'" Al Azm told The Washington Diplomat. "It's as if there's a binary — you can either care about culture and stones or you can care about people, but you can't care about both. But the people and the culture are totally intertwined. The stones and objects without the people they represent are dead; the Syrian people, without their long and rich history, are lost."

On that note, Deborah Lehr, founder of the Antiquities Coalition, and Wendy Chamberlin, president of the Middle East Institute, argue that the Islamic State is continuing a long tradition of using heritage as a weapon of war.

"The connection between the erasure of heritage and human atrocities is long-standing, as oppressors obliterate the past by erasing symbols of conquered cultures. From Caesar's arson of the Library of Alexandria to the Nazis' destruction of synagogues to the Taliban's demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas, eliminating cultural identity is a strike against the spirit of a people," they wrote [in a Huffington Post commentary](#).

The Islamic State, also known as ISIS, has fought viciously to control people's past, present and future, seizing vast tracts of territory in Iraq and Syria before finally losing ground last year. The group was forced out of Palmyra in March 2016 but recaptured the city in December that same year, when the Syrian Army and its Russian allies were focused on other parts of Syria. The second occupation was much shorter-lived, but the group again attacked the city's cultural heritage, demolishing much of the Tetrapylon monument and destroying the façade of a Roman theater. Again they captured their violence on memory cards and posted videos to social media.

But this was just the visible part of their destructive rampage. "You see a tower or tomb being blown up, but you don't see that ISIS has stripped it clean before they blew it up," Al Azm said. "The blowing-up part, they use for propaganda, to send a message — similar to what the Taliban did in Afghanistan to the Bamiyan Buddhas, for instance — that, 'We have the ability to act with impunity and the international community is essentially impotent to respond.' Looted artifacts, on the other hand, are an income stream for ISIS. They didn't invent looting, but they've taken it and put it on steroids."



PHOTO: BERNARD GAGNON - OWN WORK / CC BY-SA 3.0  
Palmyra's nearly 2,000-year-old Temple of Baalshamin has been destroyed by the Islamic State.

## Heritage for Sale

This, of course, runs contrary to the official Islamic State line on selling looted goods — or at least contrary to the propaganda spiel the radical group puts out. It supposedly destroys ancient artifacts because pre-Islamic works of art are considered heretical.



Palmyra's nearly 2,000-year-old Arch of Triumph has been destroyed by the Islamic State.

PHOTO: JERZY STRZELECKI - OWN WORK / CC BY-SA 3.0

But the sale of looted antiquities has helped finance the group's destructive campaign — against both history and humans — on an unprecedented scale. Beyond extortion, oil profits and taxes, the group's fighters have reaped untold millions of dollars from smuggling the artifacts they stole.

In fact, as the Washington Post noted in a [2015 report](#), plundering became not only a lucrative business, but a well-organized one.

"The Islamic State grants licenses for the excavation of ancient sites through its 'Diwan al-Rikaz' — a governing body for overseeing resources in the 'caliphate.' The body has a department for oil and gas, as well as antiquities," wrote Loveday Morris.

"They steal everything that they can sell, and what they can't sell, they destroy," Qais Hussein Rasheed, Iraq's deputy minister for antiquities and heritage, told Morris.

After capturing the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2014, for example, the Islamic State released a video showing fighters smashing artifacts in the city's museum with sledgehammers and drilling into them with power tools. A voice on the video said the ancient statues were worthless bits of idolatry and deserved their fate.

But when U.S.-backed Iraqi troops recaptured part of Mosul early this year, they found a tunnel underneath parts of the city, full of (thankfully) untouched artifacts. Similar stashes of ancient artifacts and artwork have been found in other Islamic State strongholds after earlier victories and raids against the terrorist group, such as when U.S. soldiers killed one of its top leaders, Abu Sayyaf, in May 2015. They found in his eastern Syria home not only a collection of real and fake artifacts, including electronic records of gold coins dating from Roman times, but also receipts on his computer for more than a quarter of a million dollars in taxes paid to the Islamic State for the sale of ancient artifacts. Sayyaf used to issue looting permits to locals who paid him a tax for the privilege.

In a lawsuit filed in December 2015, the U.S. government sought forfeiture of some of the artifacts found in Sayyaf's home. Up until then, the conventional thinking about the Islamic State and antiquities trafficking was that the two didn't mix. But experts soon learned that the group — like so many before it — made huge profits from plundering history.

"Cultural racketeering — the global trade in looted antiquities — is a multibillion-dollar industry that funds organized crime and terrorists like Daesh (also known as ISIS)," wrote the #CultureUnderThreat Task Force in an [April 2016 report](#) for the Middle East Institute. "Cultural cleansing — the systematic destruction of a targeted group and its heritage — has been used by Daesh, al Nusra, and other terrorist organizations to terrorize populations under their control."

## Breaking the Cycle

But it takes two to tango, and if the Islamic State makes money selling artifacts, someone is buying them.

"You need to cut demand for these antiquities," said Tasoula Hadjitofi, who was forced from her home in Famagusta, Cyprus, when Turkey invaded in July 1974, and for most of her adult life has fought against antiquities trafficking. Once a thriving tourist destination, Famagusta has been a ghost town since the Turkish invasion.

"I've spent 40 years of my life bringing back the looted artifacts of Cyprus because I, myself, cannot go home," Hadjitofi told The Washington Diplomat. "When you buy an artifact, you are giving money to extremism but also fueling division because you're driving the demand for artifacts and offending a fellow human being."

Stolen antiquities are extremely difficult to trace. Larger items often undergo a laundering process to conceal their source. Smaller items can be bought or sold over the internet or float on the antiquities market for years. The market itself is poorly regulated and littered with stolen goods that often wind up in the U.S. or Europe.



PHOTO: BY JAMES GORDON FROM LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA - PALMYRA, SYRIA / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS CC BY 2.0

The Antiquities Coalition, Asia Society and

Middle East Institute created the #CultureUnderThreat Task Force to raise awareness of the issue and advocate for government action. It created a series of recommendations for the U.S. government — among them, designating a senior director at the National Security Council to fight against what it calls “blood antiquities” and terrorist financing, as well as bolstering the Immigrations and Custom Enforcement’s “seize and repatriate” strategy with investigations and prosecutions that dismantle criminal networks engaged in the antiquities black market.

On that note, attorney Ricardo A. St. Hilaire wrote a recent paper for the Antiquities Coalition arguing that the Department of Justice should appoint prosecutors to specifically pursue criminal cases against smugglers, corrupt dealers and their accomplices.

He noted that in the last decade alone, the Department of Homeland Security has recovered and returned more than 7,500 illicit artifacts to 30 countries as part of its fight against cultural racketeering.

These restitutions, however, have rarely led to the successful prosecution or imprisonment of antiquities traffickers, allowing them to stay in business, Hilaire said in his brief. By prioritizing repatriations over indictments, he says the federal government’s “seize and send” policy has failed to curb a vast black market industry, which fuels transnational crime, conflict and terrorism.

“If you can imagine a world where police recover stolen cash, illegal drugs and hijacked autos but let the bank robbers, narcotics dealers and carjackers go free, then you can understand the unrestrained business of transnational antiquities trafficking,” said St. Hilaire

Deborah Lehr of the Antiquities Coalition argues that to fully address the problem, destination countries and countries of origin must both take action.

“Given the level of destruction and the massive looting taking place in the Middle East and Northern Africa, these artifacts would inevitably begin to find their way to the United States — the largest art market in the world — as well as to the

European Union,” she [wrote](#) in the Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies. “This potential influx of illicit heritage has raised questions about the role of the United States and Europe as a ‘safe harbor’ for antiquities. Our view is that the long-term solution lies, instead, in blocking access to ‘demand’ country markets, while working with local governments to help strengthen their own laws, protections, as well as raising awareness about the long-term importance of protecting heritage. In many instances, these countries are dependent upon these very artifacts for their economic well being, so protecting the past is a way of ensuring economic potential in the future.”

Policymakers are taking notice. At a conference held at the Louvre Museum in Paris in March, a dozen nations and individual donors pledged some \$75 million to safeguard endangered cultural heritage. Earlier the same month, France and the United Arab Emirates launched the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas, a public-private partnership that will finance projects to protect, conserve and restore cultural property threatened by armed conflict.

Also at the end of March, officials from the Group of Seven (G7) bloc of industrialized democracies signed a declaration in Florence, Italy, expressing concern about the dangers of terrorist attacks, armed conflicts, natural disasters, raids and looting on cultural heritage. As the G7 culture ministers met in Florence, Italian police thwarted an alleged plot to blow up the famed Rialto Bridge in Venice, a reminder that violence targeting cultural treasures also strikes countries at peace.

Hadjitofi applauds all of the conventions and declarations that outline ways to stop the illicit trafficking of stolen heritage and the destruction of iconic structures. But she says that ordinary people need to be involved to make a real impact on the ransacking of world history.

A pillaged Roman coin from Palmyra, a statue from Sana'a, a mosaic from Tripoli or a bracelet from Helmand may be coveted treasures to many buyers. But to refugees like Hadjitofi and to immigrants from hotbeds of looting, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, they are reminders of home — and of what has been lost. Hadjitofi says enlisting the help of these people is critical to the cause. She herself has helped to recover and repatriate nearly 200 cultural artifacts that had been plundered from areas of Cyprus under Turkish occupation, including the sixth-century Kanakaria mosaics.

In 2011, Hadjitofi founded Walk of Truth, an NGO that works to recover stolen antiquities around the world. Central to Walk of Truth’s ethos is Hadjitofi’s belief in the power of ordinary people to identify stolen treasures and protect threatened heritage. Walk of Truth also advocates for more countries to sign and ratify the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflict and for tougher laws against art traffickers when they are caught. But it also asks people to simply keep their eyes and ears open.

Al Azm has taken a slightly different tack by harnessing modern-day technology to protect the past. As you read this, a team of undercover operatives and archaeologists are at work in Syria, applying a water-based forensic polymer called SmartWater to some of the country’s most treasured artifacts. SmartWater is invisible to the naked eye but glows bright yellow when a special light is shined on it. It can’t be washed off and remains on an object for years.



PHOTO: JERZY STRZELECKI - OWN WORK / CC BY-SA 3.0  
The façade of Palmyra's Roman theater was destroyed during the Islamic State's second occupation of the city.



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Two women walk past the huge cavity where one of the ancient Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, used to stand on June 17, 2012. The monumental statues were built in A.D. 507 and 554 and were the largest statues of a standing Buddha on Earth until the Taliban dynamited them in 2001.

"So let's say a Roman gold coin shows up in an auction and you tell the seller, 'Well, I think this was looted from Syria.' And they say, 'No, no. This comes from the collection of Uncle Luigi who got it from his grandfather, who had it in his collection since 1880.' If you have a substance like SmartWater on the coin, then you can prove five, 10, 15 years later when this coin shows up in an auction that it was looted from Syria — and return it," Al Azm explained.

The aim is to sow doubt in the minds of buyers, who might hesitate to spend thousands of dollars on a dubious item. "We can plant the seed of doubt in buyers' minds and let it grow, so that demand subsides, prices go down and it's no longer profitable to do this kind of work," Al Azm said. "That's our hope."