
Cultural Racketeering in Egypt—Predicting Patterns in Illicit Activity: Quantitative Tools of the 21st-Century Archaeologist

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Abstract

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 facilitated social movements that redefined the modern world. These uprisings also served as the catalyst for cultural racketeering, or the systematic theft of art and antiquities by organized criminal syndicates. Although the widespread looting and destruction of sites is well known, it is not extensively documented. There are few detailed numbers on cultural racketeering in Egypt, and many of the numbers that do exist fail to critically examine the issue at large. However, the range of updates that stream from news reports and social media on the continuous looting and destruction of heritage in Egypt since the 2011 revolution has provided a new look at a measureable pattern of illicit heritage crimes. Media and social media reports of heritage threats in Egypt were collected over a three year period and dissected to extract the credible information and demographics that each contained. The data was then graphed and analyzed for patterns. The graphic analysis demonstrated that both individuals and groups seeking to steal Egypt's cultural patrimony are not selective or prone to single attacks; they undertake their efforts repeatedly and at a variety of places with clear evidence of recurring patterns and cycles.

Studying these reports provides a route for researchers to reconcile the lack of traditional data covering huge areas of land. Examining all of the available information on heritage crimes to determine patterns is a critical element in identifying the stage of progress these crimes have reached so that the appropriate course of action can be taken to thwart criminal efforts before the scale of the geographic reach widens or increases in volume. The post-Arab Spring archaeologists of the twenty-first century must be investigators of the present as well as the past by navigating technology, politics, security, and economy in order to protect heritage.

Introduction

Threats to cultural heritage are common the world over. They do not only affect nations in crisis, developed and undeveloped nations alike are afflicted with threats to both modern and ancient history. Looting does not discriminate among nation, ethnicity, religion, or politics. Indeed, heritage crimes are one of the largest areas of study to be undertaken with so little data to fall back on, and it will be years before we have a clear picture of the greater international issue. A comprehensive understanding of heritage issues could be more easily achieved through the use of an established framework or pattern to examine the data currently available to us. As the archaeological world seemed to be paralyzed by the Arab Spring turmoil, Emma Cunliffe of Durham

University, revealed the value of technology in continuing to effectively work toward preservation even away from the trenches and baulks (Cunliffe, 2012).

Heritage crimes across the world take a number of different forms: socio-cultural/political destruction or cultural cleansing (Mali, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt) (Baker, Ismael, & Ismael, 2010); illegal excavation carried out by individuals as well as at the gang and mafia level; criminally organized looting on an industrial scale like that carried out by gangs and mafia, also known as cultural racketeering (Lehr, 2013); damage and looting of heritage sites as a result of land encroachment for development, agriculture, or squatting (India, Bolivia, Egypt, and dozens of other nations worldwide); and museum and facility looting (Iraq, Afghanistan, Greece, Egypt). Despite the evidence for these heritage crimes, there are few numbers that exist on the overall scale of looting and encroachment in Egypt, the region, or internationally. Many of the numbers that do exist are either outdated or based on estimates or customs seizures rather than examining the issue at large.

Despite the range of threats to heritage and nations facing heritage crises, Egypt was specifically chosen as the subject of this study because of its unique position of being one of the few nations that is exposed to all of these threats simultaneously. In addition, the timing of the crisis that caused the security breakdown, serving as the catalyst for the heritage crimes, correlates with the culmination of increasing usage and connectivity in communications and social media technology, which was coincidentally one of the driving forces behind the revolution itself. The same tools that gave voice to the revolutionaries in Egypt also gave a voice to heritage advocates and archaeologists across the country as they scrambled to confirm the status of heritage sites and artifacts across the country.

Illicit antiquities trafficking—or cultural racketeering—is like a virus. It infects a particular population and as news circulate of the riches available in archaeological finds, the virus spreads. As opportunistic looting began developing across the MENA region following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, what began as a local gang trade in many regions gave way to industrialized antiquities trafficking operations.

Understanding the problems of cultural racketeering and cultural cleansing goes beyond the scope of archaeology alone. It is necessary to understand the characteristics of the issue at hand within the greater environment—is it an issue of cultural racketeering, cultural cleansing, encroachment, or something else altogether?

During periods of conflict and crisis, heritage cannot afford to wait. By examining information that comes out of events

in real time—heritage experts may be able to work with governments to explore potential patterns in looting activity.

Challenges of Information Reporting and Analysis in a Global Recession

Since the outbreak of the global recession, the academic community—and in particular social sciences and humanities—have seen a massive cut in funding on the federal level. Congressional cuts, along with the across-the-board reductions known as sequestration, from 2010 to 2013 resulted in the largest overall decrease in a three-year period since the end of the space race (Jhanke, 2015). In fact, during the Arab Spring and post-Arab Spring years, which have been some of the most crucial years for needed social sciences research, federal funding in these areas was at one of its lowest points.

Working and researching in an area that is already underfunded creates new obstacles in the examination of the post-Arab Spring world. The rapidly shifting socio-political dynamics of the Middle East and North African regions in the months and years following January of 2011 required immediate tracking and response to gain an understanding of the ground situation at any given time. Thus, the typical process of seeking out and applying for a grant in order to conduct vital research leaves crucial time gaps during period of conflict and turmoil when information collection and analysis is needed on a nearly daily basis.

To seek out vital information during periods of rapidly moving crises we turn to the Arab Spring uprisings. The same force driving the organized protests during the revolutions of the MENA region also proved to be a vital source of information in tracking and understanding the Arab Spring on a daily basis: social media. The Arab Spring protestors benefited from the free nature of social media, and even when the government banned Internet access, social media organizations such as Twitter made information sharing and reporting available by creating a voice-to-tweet feature in order to bypass the Internet blackout (Arthur, 2011).

Aside from its obvious values in terms of globalization and connectivity, social media also provides information that is available for free—all that is needed is an internet connection. The lower costs of reporting and organizing in real time have major benefits to less financially adept communities in the uprisings (Tufekci, 2013). Additionally, when operating in an atmosphere with a continually shifting plethora of information while facing a dearth of funding, availability of reliable and free information is not only valuable, but also necessary for gaining an understanding of ground dynamics as well as patterns of criminal activity in the various crises related to the Arab Spring. This study examines the patterns related to the state of post-Arab Spring cultural heritage in Egypt.

Social Media as a Tool

One of the most important aspects of social media technologies is that for the first time in history we are able to track a heritage crisis in real time as it is happening and capture it forever in the archives of the internet for free. The range of updates that have streamed from news reports and social media on the continuous looting and destruction of heritage in Egypt since the phenomenon exploded in January 2011 has provided a

measurable pattern of illicit heritage crimes to be examined. This study attempts to gain some measurements from the heritage incidents in an effort to identify the primary sources and process of looting progression in Egypt. In addition, an examination of potential patterns in looting progression using a combination of the Egypt-focused news and social media reports alongside archival media research will explore the possibilities of a framework through which to examine other crisis-driven heritage crimes around the world.

The incorporation of social media as a tool for data collection had a two-fold purpose. First, it allowed for nearly instant updates from some of the world's foremost Egyptologists on the status of sites and museums as chaos was unfolding during the revolution. Second, the examination of social media allowed for a first time look at the counter-culture evolving to combat the heritage threats in Egypt that have sharply risen in the post-revolution years.

The timing of this massive spread of counter-culture efforts would appear to be a byproduct of the Arab Spring alone, but in fact it results from a combination of the following: the increased technological development and access per capita that has resulted from globalization; the greater infiltration of a new generation of technology into the academic sphere both within Egypt and abroad; and perhaps most importantly, an international perspective that has shifted toward a greater concern for heritage as a result of decades of lessons learned from both our world's distant and not so distant wars; and of course the Arab Spring. For example, a Pew study released in February 2014 showed that among Internet users in developing and emerging economies, Egypt has the highest percentage of Internet and smartphone users on social media. Of those Egyptians connected online, 88% of them use social media and 82% of users are online daily (Pew Research Center, 2014).

The archaeological community's international mobilization via social media created a constant stream of communication across time zones. Whereas during previous wars (such as Iraq or Afghanistan) it would take days or months to understand the extent of the museum damage based on publically available information, the use of social media created an atmosphere where updates on the status of the looting of the Egyptian National Museum left only minutes and sometimes seconds between reports. Those communicating used the cross confirmation of reports to dispel rumors and remain focused on the facts.

This continuous stream of communication through social media networks and available media reports provided an opportunity for social scientists to track and analyze information in real time. The great conundrum in the issue of heritage threats is that for governments to change policy in favor of greater heritage protection, concrete evidence and measurable numbers are needed. Unfortunately for the heritage community, the numbers on antiquities trafficking are few and far between, and measuring these types of numbers often takes months or years of research. However, providing a real time resource grants researchers an opportunity to understand phenomena as they occur rather than backtrack to source information.

The early timelines of the most prominent social media groups, namely Facebook Groups and Pages, were filled with a flurry of activity and user comments and posts, but as the cause lost momentum. The ongoing reporting commentary remained centralized around Egyptology but did not just focus on looting-related discussions, it included political commentary and updates as well as general information about new discoveries. Some discussions were somewhat confrontational between individuals. Regardless of the cause, the drive for protection of antiquities took a less public seat in social media as time went on. Social media not only gives insight into the matter of information being communicated in the archaeological community during times of heritage crisis, but it also gives insight into the communication patterns of the academic community.

Although the reports are only a sample of what is happening on the ground, much like a political poll represents a sample of the population, the increasing frequencies of these accounts appearing online are an accurate measure of the general state of cultural heritage in Egypt.

Understanding Landscapes: Economic, Political, Social and Criminal

In analyzing the conditions present within the environment, we must consider both the physical and socio-political landscape of an area of interest. Often times navigating these landscapes will point to the catalyst of the crisis, or to the event that served to acceleration of heritage trafficking or destruction. Gaining an overview of the resources available to the area in peril will be necessary in determining the types of efforts needed moving forward.

Often when a crisis takes place, the government and its available resources are occupied with high-level security issues—or in some cases, the complete reformation of government (CNN, 2011). Both issues occupied Egypt's government during the 2011 revolution. Unfortunately, in any case, cultural heritage ranks low on the list of government and security priorities. It is up to heritage advocates and experts in the academic community to provide governments with information to raise the profile of heritage as a priority security issue even though gathering this information in a timely manner can prove to be a challenge.

One of the unique and inspiring points of the Arab Spring was the rallying of civil society where government resources were absent. When the Egyptian National Museum in Tahrir Square was under threat of looting, young people protesting in the square linked arms in an effort to protect it while yelling, "This is not Baghdad" from the crowd. But citizens cannot stand guard at museums and sites forever.

After the January 2011 revolution and the breakdown of security that followed, tourism in Egypt plummeted. How does this affect heritage? In Egypt, the Ministry of Antiquities, which is tasked with the protection and maintenance of Egypt's sites and museums, was thus denied crucial funds when they were needed most. The revenue generated from ticket sales at heritage sites funds the Ministry of Antiquities, leaving the ministry, as well as its ability to provide protection for heritage sites, vulnerable.

The social, economic, and political circumstances at any given time can have a significant impact on the patterns occurring in the realm of heritage threats, as will be discussed later. However, tracking and understanding the various shifts in socio-political and economic landscapes is necessary to assessing and predicting pattern shifts.

Methodology and Data Sources

The information for the charts compiled for this analysis was derived from a combination of international news and media reports, blogs, as well as firsthand accounts and on-the-ground reports from archaeologists and Egyptologists who organized through social media on Facebook and Twitter. The most prominent use of social media was organization via Facebook where the looting of the National Museum served as the catalyst.

Based on the few official government reports on the progression of the looting, the numbers exhibited within this project are simply a sample of the wider phenomena of heritage crimes taking place across Egypt and the region. The numbers in these graphs are based on single sites, nearly all of which have been looted, illegally excavated, encroached upon or otherwise damaged either continuously, or several times over the course of the years since the 2011 revolution.

This method of research and analysis will not yield complete numbers on the amount of material moved, number of sites looted, or value of antiquities lost. It is only a snap shot of the patterns within the larger looting picture. A comprehensive look at the numbers will require field surveys, artifact registration and database entry, as well as a thorough assessment of missing and damaged objects from the decades old storage facilities throughout the country, not to mention a complete quantifying of all of the illicit excavations throughout the country in "virgin" excavating territory.

The data assignment for each of the categories under "demographic" and "location" graphs is based on what was explicitly described or mentioned in reports or social media. The data assignment for the categories under "classification of heritage incidents" is based on analysis from both the "demographic" and "location" data as well as any additional detailed information on each of the incidents that was not graphed in the charts for this project. No assumptions were made in any of the analysis of social media and media reports. All data and information presented in reports was broken down to suit each category, if information was not available, it was represented as such in the graphs.

Location Classification: Patterns of the Places Affected

A month-by-month breakdown from January 2011 to December 2013 revealed clear patterns in the number of reports referencing specific classification of areas facing heritage threats over the three-year period following the January 2011 revolution (Figs. 1–5).

A pattern emerged indicating a spike in heritage incidents taking place at sites (as opposed to museums or facilities) during the months of March and was consistent over the course of the three years studied. The classification for 'sites' refers to a specific archaeological site (e.g., temple, ancient

International News and Social Media: Location Classification of Reported Heritage Incidents January – December 2011

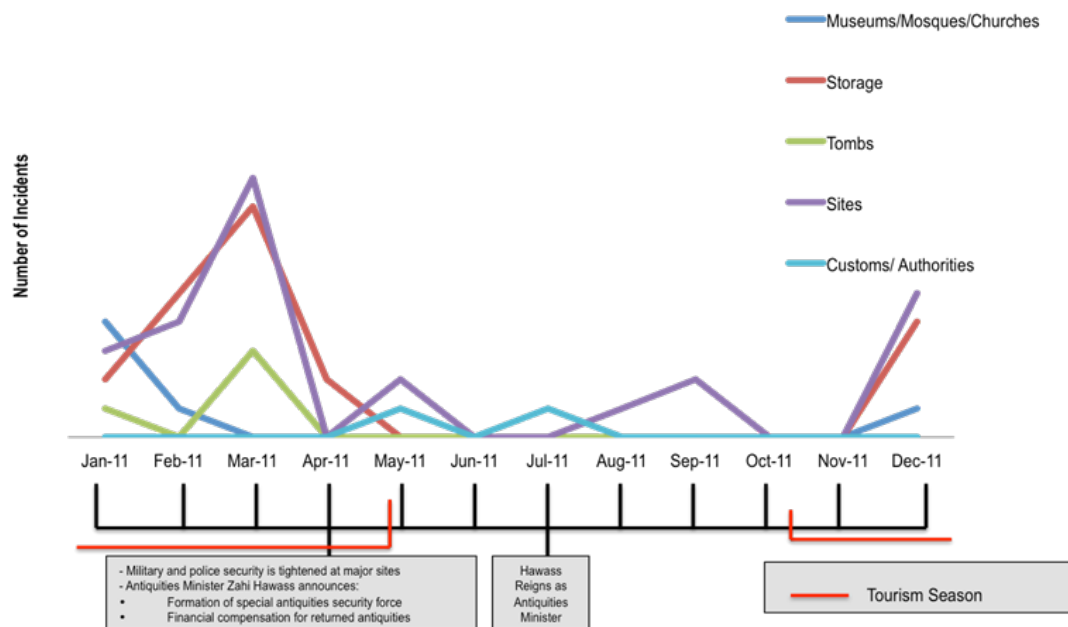


Figure 1: Data from international news and social media reports classified by incident location reported from January 2011 through December 2

International News and Social Media: Location Classification of Reported Heritage Incidents January – December 2012

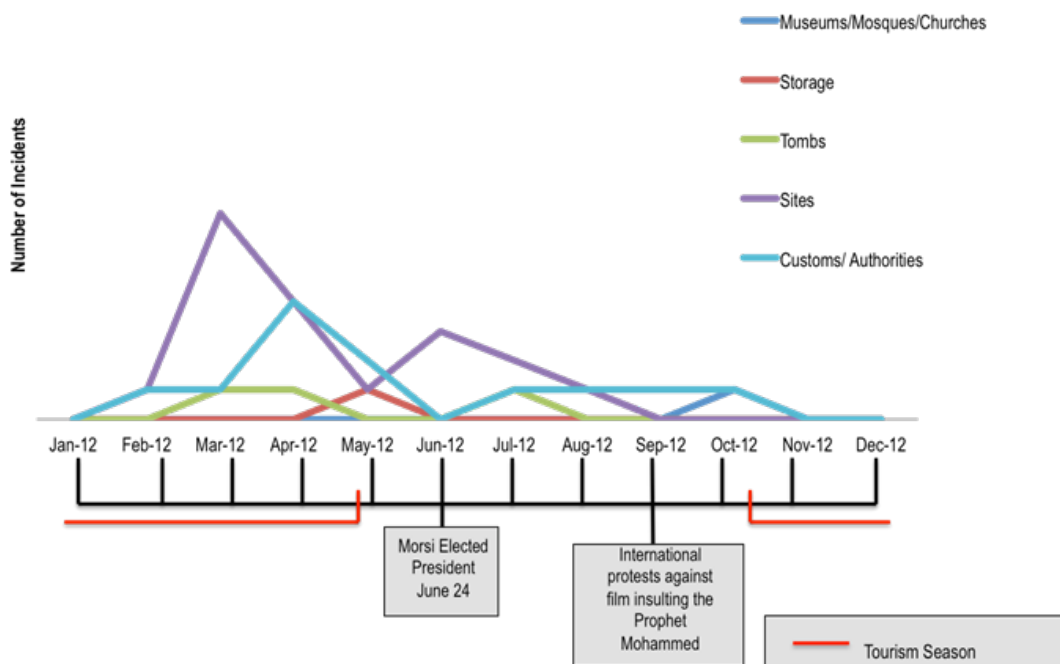


Figure 2: Data from international news and social media reports classified by incident location reported from January 2012 through December 2012.

International News and Social Media: Location Classification of Reported Heritage Incidents
January – December 2013

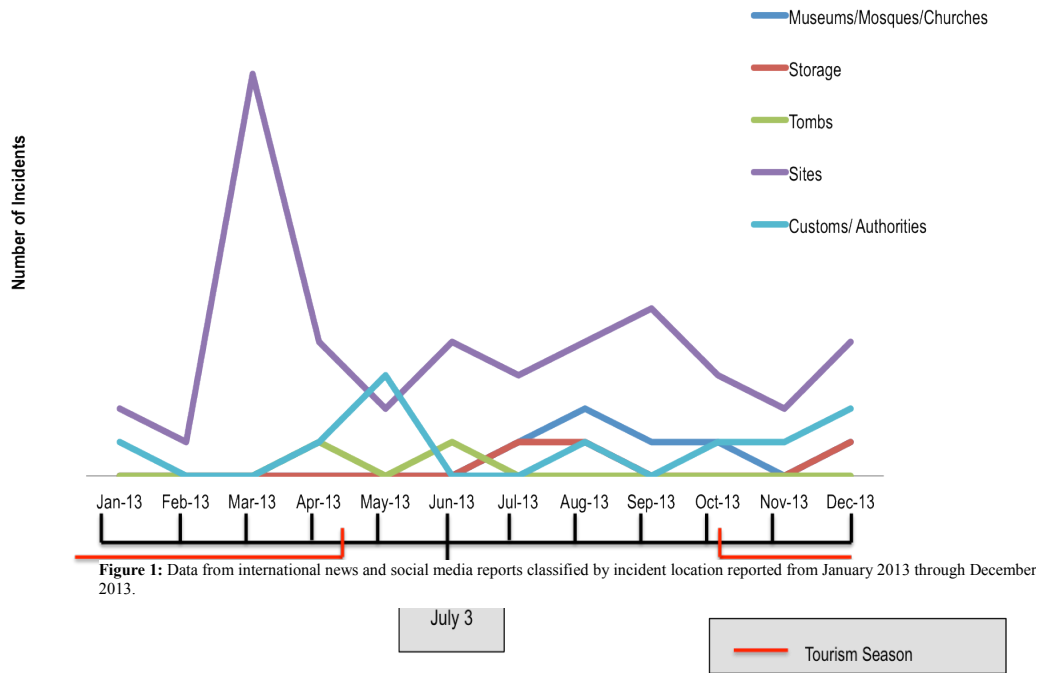
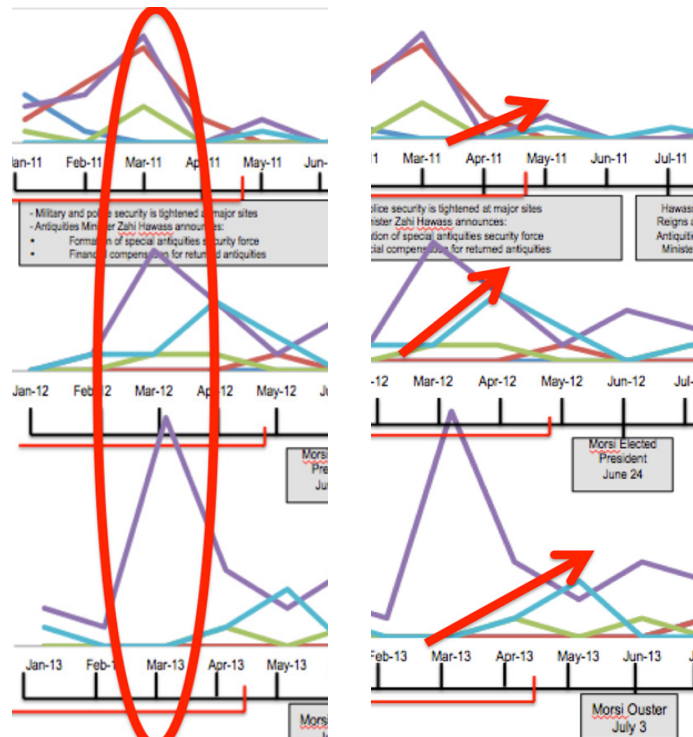


Figure 3: Data from international news and social media reports classified by incident location reported from January 2013 through December 2013.



city) or to a general archaeological region (e.g., the Fayoum or the Delta).

There are several potential reasons to surmise why the month of March would correlate with an increase in looting or criminal heritage activity at archaeological sites. One explanation for this could be the favorable weather between the months of November and April. Incidentally, this is also one of the reasons why these months are typically popular during tourist season. Taking into consideration the typical months of Egypt's tourism season indicates another potential reason for increased activity during these months, which could result from the significantly decreased presence at sites due to the major drops in tourist attendance after 2011. A lack of tourist presence at sites paired with minimal resources for site protection makes sites an easy target during the months with the mildest digging climate.

An additional pattern emerged when examining the monthly breakdown of location classification reports with concern to locations classified as customs/authorities label. This description is used to reference any illicit antiquities already smuggled outside of the country and captured or seized, or those recovered in transit on the "underground smuggling network."

Following the spike at site incidents in March, we see a repetition of increased incidents involving customs officials between March and May, typically in the month of April. The increase in sites affected is followed by a rise in incidents occurring at customs points.

Heritage Incident Classification: Patterns and Processes of Types of Crimes Committed

When taking into consideration the sociopolitical environment during major events in Egypt and throughout the Arab World, we are able to determine several additional patterns. For instance, during several major political events that led to acceleration in looting, there is initially a high rate of looting at locations classified as museums, mosques or churches. In fact, each year from 2011–13 the highest rate of occurrences at museums, mosques or churches occurred immediately following a political event that served as a crisis catalyst. Additionally, storage facilities serve as a secondary target that are at higher risk of looting around periods of political turmoil or instability (Figs. 6–9).

At the beginning of the 2011 revolution, the social media and media reports regarding heritage incidents involving facilities looting (primarily museums and storage facilities) as well as site looting had increased. Why museums and storage

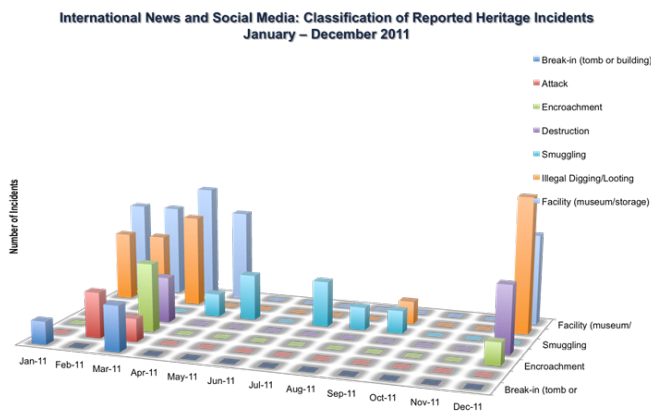


Figure 6: Data from international news and social media reports classified by incident reported from January 2011 through December 2011.

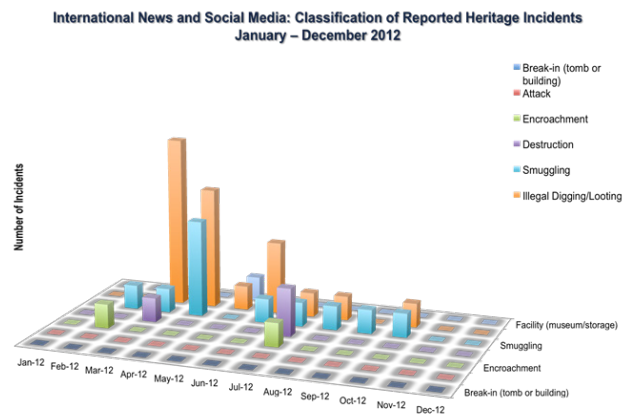


Figure 7: Data from international news and social media reports classified by incident reported from January 2012 through December 2012.

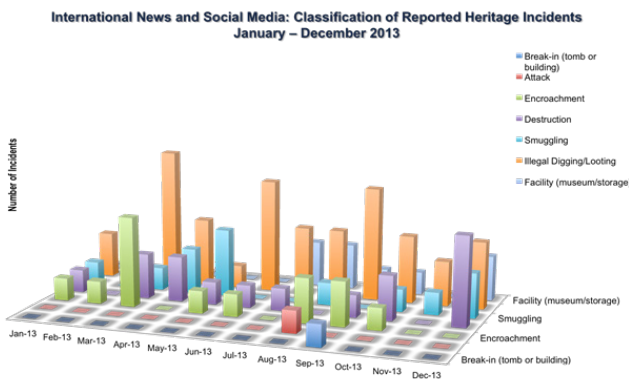


Figure 8: Data from international news and social media reports classified by incident reported from January 2013 through December 2013.

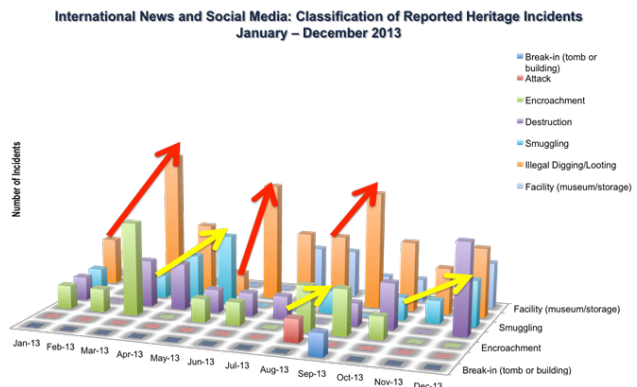


Figure 9: High periods of incidents classified as smuggling nearly always followed high periods of incidents of illegal digging.

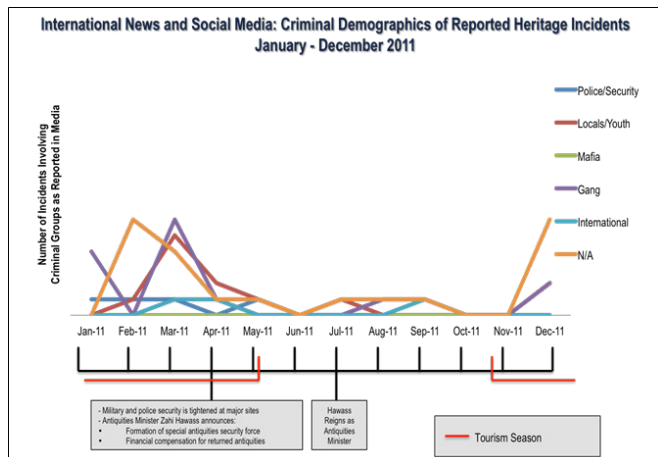


Figure 10: Data from international news and social media reports classified by criminal demographics from January 2011 through December 2011.

facilities? One possible reason for these areas as the initial attempt at looting could be due to the fact that these are known soft targets—there are caches of potentially valuable artifacts that can be looted and moved in a shorter amount of time with less effort than typical site looting. Additionally, minimized security allowed for opportunists to take advantage of these soft targets.

Activity around smuggling incidents rises in the months following the high rates of looting and attacks on facilities and sites. Incidents of illegal digging are highest in March while highest incidents of smuggling appear in April, which are consistent with the patterns exhibited in the location classification breakdown.

The breakdown in 2013 shows a well-established pattern of rises in illegal digging followed by increases in reports involving smuggling. This could mean that the networks that are involved in looting and smuggling do not have the manpower to engage in both phases of the trafficking cycle at the same time.

If we are able to predict the periods or intervals when particular incidents will arrive, we can help nations such as Egypt, which are grappling for security resources for heritage, to use their resources most effectively.

Demographics: Patterns of the People Involved

The three years studied revealed that several different demographics were involved in the heritage crimes recorded, ranging from individuals, to organized groups, to well-established criminal networks. (See Figs. 10–12).

An examination of the key groups in 2011 exhibits that locals, youth, and more generally gangs—organized groups with no known connections to existing criminal networks—represented a major portion of the looters’ demographics in the early months following the revolutions. Locals/Youth in this context refers to recorded incidents where perpetrators of heritage crimes or those involved include local residents from the immediate area around a site or facility, or groups of locals specifically described as youths. None of the recorded

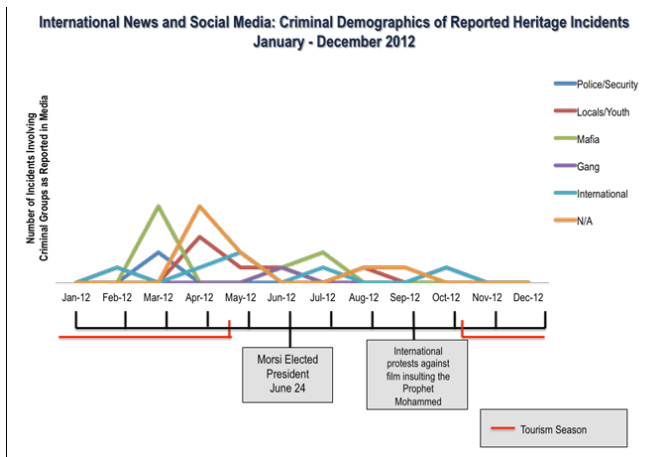


Figure 11: Data from international news and social media reports classified by criminal demographics from January 2012 through December 2012.

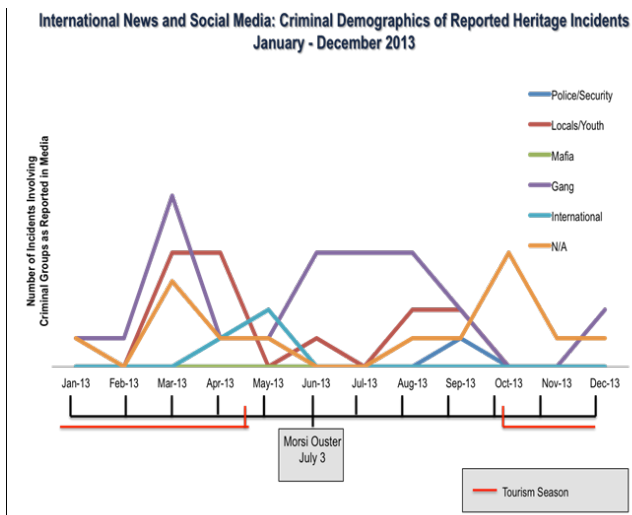


Figure 12: Data from international news and social media reports classified by criminal demographics from January 2013 through December 2013.

incidents in international media or social media described youths committing heritage crimes that were not local to the site or facility in question.

References to mafia, which typically refers to more organized and wider-reaching criminal groups, do not appear until early 2012. Additionally, these demographics correspond with the spikes in site looting as well as increases in smuggling or customs related incidents in the spring months, particularly around March.

In 2013, the number of “international” individuals increases, corresponding with the rise in smuggling related cases at that same time (As indicated by the site classification graphs).

During a period of turmoil global and regional crimes follow an evolutionary path both in the sense of industry growth as well as in the development of the hierarchy of geographic reach and wealth. This principle also holds true to heritage crimes and the black market industry in illicit antiquities. The

greater the international involvement, the further developed the black market industry.

Organized crime has become transnational and international, as groups form alliances wherever or with whomever they need to achieve power and wealth. It has become a global enterprise and is so intermingled in the socioeconomic and political process that it is difficult to separate these entities (Mallory, 2012).

Examining the available information on heritage crimes to determine patterns is a critical element in assessing how these crimes have progressed. This will allow us to take the appropriate course of action to thwart criminal efforts before their geographic reach widens or increases in volume.

Conclusions

For the first time in history, we are able to track a heritage crisis in real time. The range of updates that stream from news reports and social media on the continuous looting and destruction of heritage in Egypt since the revolution in 2011 has provided for the first time a measureable pattern of illicit heritage crimes.

By graphing the reports on a month-by-month basis we are able to see that particular months favor particular activities related to cultural racketeering—such as the high rate of site looting activity occurring annually in March, and the increase in smuggling activity in April, following the site looting spike.

The patterns thus far demonstrate that both individuals and groups seeking to steal Egypt's cultural patrimony are not selective; they undertake their efforts repeatedly and at a variety of places. Sites suffered most in the early months of the Revolution and continue to be the primary targets in 2013. Gangs, locals, and youths have taken a larger role in looting and illicit trade as time has gone on.

The breakdown in 2013 clearly shows a well-established pattern of rises in illegal digging followed by increases in reports involving smuggling. This could mean that the networks that are involved in looting and smuggling do not have the manpower to engage in both phases of the trafficking cycle at the same time. If we are able to predict the periods or intervals when particular incidents will arrive, we can help nations such as Egypt, which are grappling for security resources for heritage, to use their resources most effectively.

The overall scale of heritage crime in Egypt continues to rise. Illicit digging and looting, which dropped off in the second half of 2012, skyrocketed in 2013. In fact, the graphic analysis shows that nearly every category of heritage incident rose from 2012 to 2013.

The majority of steep spikes in any type of heritage event in Egypt appear to be marked by a major political shift or period of turmoil—a “crisis catalyst.” These crisis catalysts include the January 2011 Revolution, the ouster of Mohamed Morsi, and the protests and turmoil surrounding the film depicting the Prophet Mohammed. However, what several of these patterns show is that much of the activity is cyclical—and thus knowing what to expect when a major conflict or crisis occurs can help governments and international organizations be better prepared for heritage protection.



Figure 13: Phases of threatened heritage locations and evolution of players involved.

The fact that many of these incidents accelerate in cyclical and relatively predictable patterns gives heritage experts and policy makers the ability to develop plans of action to thwart these issues before they occur rather than trying to catch up after the fact.

During periods of conflict and economic turmoil, when resources available for protecting people and places are scarce, the resources for the protection of heritage are few, and need to be used in the most efficient manner possible in order to have an impact. By understanding patterns of looting and smuggling used by transnational criminal networks, we are able to create a timetable by which the Ministry of Antiquities and other heritage preservation organizations can follow in order to have the greatest effect—by concentrating resources for protection around sites in the months where looting is its most prominent while focusing customs and border officials on exports of illegal antiquities from March through May.

The cyclical and repetitive nature of these heritage threats has an additional benefit of creating a means of emergency preparedness that can be employed during periods of sudden conflict caused by a crisis catalyst. By understanding the types of patterns that occur in the looting of heritage sites following a tumultuous event governments and organizations can be better prepared in having a footprint of what may take place next so that resources can be allocated most efficiently.

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