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Tuesday H:30 ° L:22 ° 30°

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- 04:55 Fajr

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  - Fajr 04:55
  - Shurooq 06:09
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- Luxury
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- Motoring
- Comment

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- F1
- Golf
- Horse Racing
- Tennis
- Rugby
- North American
- Comment
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John Dennehy

Dec 11, 2014

December 11, 2014

Stealing from history: the looting and destruction of Iraqi and Syrian heritage concern us all

The looting of ancient sites in Syria and Iraq by cash-strapped locals and militas is one of the many disturbing features of the region's conflict. But the problem is not new.

One of Aleppo's historical neighbourhoods burns during an assault by Assad's military in 2012. Courtesy Sipa USA / REX

John Dennehy

Dec 11, 2014

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In September, the US secretary of state John Kerry told an audience gathered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York about another disaster facing Syria, a country already gripped by catastrophic civil war. In no uncertain terms, he warned of the scourge of the looting of archaeological sites, labelling ISIL the worst offender.

“The looting of Apamea and Dura-Europos, the devastation caused by fighting in the ancient Unesco heritage city of Aleppo, the destruction of the Tomb of Jonah – these appalling acts aren’t just a tragedy for the Syrian and the Iraqi people,” Kerry said.

“These acts of vandalism are a tragedy for all civilised people, and the civilised world must take a stand.”

Satellite images of Apamea, the remains of an ancient city near Hama, show a pockmarked landscape, with 15,000 crude holes covering 50 per cent of the site, dug by looters intent on pillaging its treasures. “I hate to look at satellite pictures of what happened to Apamea,” says Lamia Al Gailani Werr, an Iraqi-born archaeologist based in London. “Apamea is unbelievable. They’ve completely wrecked it.”

What is being lost in Syria? This is a question that is consuming archaeologists, academics and heritage specialists – and one that extends much farther than just Syria.

But for now, Syria and northern Iraq are ground zero. The archaeological heritage of this region is among the richest in the world. It is the cradle of many civilisations, whose treasures range from ancient empires that pre-date Islam and Christianity to magnificent Roman ruins, from 11th-century Islamic shrines to Unesco World Heritage Sites.

Syria alone is home to six Unesco World Heritage Sites, with a further 12 on the tentative list. All are now under threat. The Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums has tried to keep a damage assessment record since the civil war erupted in 2011.

While this is not comprehensive or always reliable, the spreadsheets make for grim reading: looting, vandalism, destruction, theft, gunfire, shelling, bombings, fire and illegal building on historic sites are imperilling its cultural heritage.

Aleppo, Syria’s largest city and a crossroads for trade, people and culture since ancient times, has been particularly hard hit. Its vast labyrinthine souq was gutted by fire in 2012. The Citadel, a castle that dates back to 3000BC, has also been damaged, while the minaret of the Umayyad Mosque was toppled by fighting in 2013. But hundreds, if not thousands, of other sites have been looted.

“Syria is the worst-case scenario. It is the worst situation I’ve ever seen. Satellite imagery shows massive, mechanical looting of sites,” says France Desmarais of the International Council of Museums.

Palmyra, another ancient settlement founded in about 2000BC, has also been affected by illegal excavations and theft. Syrian authorities last month said it had managed to confiscate three busts from Palymra dating from 200AD that had been hacked off a tomb.

Werr says the damage being done in Syria is worse than the extensive looting in Iraq in 2003 following the US-led invasion. However the picture varies from area to area and spans an arc from western Syria to militant-controlled eastern Syria and northern Iraq.

But even in southern Iraq, where the government remains in control, looting is a massive problem.

According to local reports from the country last week, Dhi Qar Governorate Council reported that most archaeological sites in the area had been hit by theft and illegal excavation. The council noted that only 200 guards monitored 1,200 sites and called on authorities to do more to protect them.

The militant group ISIL also currently controls part of northern Iraq, but here, according to Werr, the looting is minimal when compared with Syria. It is the destruction of shrines, most dated to the Abbasid Period between the 11th and 15th centuries, that’s more troubling. “The destruction is so bad, it will be impossible to restore them. This is catastrophic to Iraq’s heritage,” Werr says.

This, says Professor Peter Stone, a cultural heritage expert and secretary general of the Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield, is specific destruction of culture. “If you look at the more extreme groups in Mali [in 2012], they had a particular agenda and were destroying antiquities, archives, mosques and tombs that didn’t fit their version of Islam. The same is happening in northern Iraq to bits of Islamic architecture and also Christian and other minority-religion architecture.”

However, the problem of looting is not a recent one. According to Neil Brodie, an archaeologist and leading expert on the antiquities trade, it has been a problem for decades. “There was a lot of looting in Iraq in the 1990s, and in Afghanistan too after the Soviet withdrawal,” he says. “There were lots even coming up in auction houses before that in the 1980s. It stretches back 25 years at least. It’s nothing new.”

Other countries in the region have also been hit severely, and well before the current convulsions. Brodie says there are sites in Jordan whose total looting probably happened in the 1990s, and the situation in Yemen is also quite bad. “While the outlook in Syria is grim,” he says, “that’s just where the spotlight is.”

However, while there is agreement this problem has always been there, the illegal trade in antiquities has also been escalating. Stone says it has been growing over the past 100 years at a steady rate. “The two measures we do have are the number of holes in archaeological sites that shouldn’t be there, which has been going up. And the second one is the number of antiquities with dubious provenance which have been found on the illicit antiquities market. The implication of that is the illicit market is getting bigger and bigger. In Syria it is a problem, in Libya it’s a problem,” says Stone.

There has been a flurry of reports in the western media over the past three months regarding ISIL’s central role in trafficking these so-called “blood antiquities” for substantial amounts of money.

But the picture on the ground is not so simple. It’s a story of shady dealers, brutal militias, corrupt middlemen, poor villagers, porous borders and, very often, government forces that are unable to provide security – and indeed sometimes turn a blind eye in exchange for bribes.

Experts agree that it is difficult to trace precisely the path of looted antiquities from archaeological site to the market or private collection, but most of the on-site looting is done by disenfranchised locals. “The majority of those are looting on the basis they need money because their normal source of income has dried up. They then sell to dealers who come around to villages and those dealers are usually semi-locals, similar nationalities, and those dealers will get the stuff out to a number of centres in the vicinity,” says Stone.

Then, whoever happens to be in control of the area takes a cut.

“It has been going on for years and years. Even in Mosul when the government was there, people – merchants, businessmen, everyone – had to pay protection money. And so is the case with looters. They let the looters loot and take a percentage. Looting is not only done by Isis,” says Werr.

“In the 1990s in Iraq, dealers would wait in cars and they have practically a price list ready. But with no proper government it gets worse. But it has always been there, a long history. By the 1990s, everyone was joining in. Satellite pictures just before 2003 were as bad if not worse than after the 2003 war.”

So how much money is ISIL making from looted antiquities? Several media reports over the past two months put it at millions of dollars. One said ISIL had made $36m (Dh132m) alone from looting at one site in Syria. A spokesperson for Unesco’s Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Heritage Project also called the high figures being quoted grossly inaccurate. Desmarais agrees: “If someone gives you a number today, they are lying to you.

“These items are going into dormancy or if sold are at very small prices because they are hot and risky. They have no provenance, are looted and illegal so their price tag is very low,” she says.

The militants are known to be financing their reign of terror through a variety of murky channels: kidnapping, extortion, corruption and theft, as well as private donations and sales of oil and antiquities. But no one can say how much. “At one point we used to say that an object from Latin America taken from a site would go for 1,000 times its first selling price when eventually being sold in an auction house. The initial margin is therefore very low. The big price will be down the chain,” says Desmarais.

Brodie also questions the financial figures put on looting and has called for proper verification. “I don’t believe these figures,” he says. “In 2013, Sotheby’s New York turned over $20m in antiquities sales from the entire Mediterranean and Middle East area, so ISIL would need to be making more than Sotheby’s from one site. For another perspective, assuming found antiquities in Syria are worth $50 each (which is an optimistic estimate), ISIL would need to have found and sold 720,000 antiquities.”

Most illicit antiquities are either brought to secure stores, where they will be hidden for up to 20 years; be trafficked immediately onto the illegal market; or else some dealer will try to fabricate provenance (verifiable ownership) certificates and try to sell them on the legal trade.

What these dealers try to do, says Stone, is claim that this antiquity has been out of a country for a long time. For example they could claim an object has “been in my grandfather’s house because he collected it in Egypt when he was there in the Second World War. He’s recently died and therefore we are moving on and this is a legitimate object. That object could go onto the legal trade.”

But experts say the vast majority is not going down the legal route.

“Not much goes through auction houses – it’s too public. So it’s probably being sold privately,” says Brodie. These questions are also of major concern to those in the museum world.

Ziad Rajab is custodian of the Tareq Rajab Museum in Kuwait, which houses one of the finest collections of Islamic ceramics, jewellery, textiles, glass, calligraphy and manuscripts in the world. Its contents are priceless and were painstakingly brought together, piece by piece, by his father, who started collecting in the 1960s.

“Today, in this day and age of war and revolution, you have to be really careful about what comes to you privately,” says Ziad. “After the Iranian revolution, after the troubles in Afghanistan, after the troubles in Iraq, many things have come to us with very, very dodgy provenance so we say no. It’s just no.”

However, Rajab says there has not been an increase in people offering dubious artefacts over the past few years. “We’ve had lots of people try to contact us and they’ve got something which they say is from some site in Syria or wherever. We wouldn’t see these people. Sometimes they’ll leave an envelope with photographs of things in it. All sorts of people. Lots of things have come by which were dubious.”

Most of the items in the Kuwaiti museum came through the big auction houses as they had a sure provenance, but the market for antiquities is vastly different now.

In the 1960s, Rajab says, it was a buyers’ market as there were few national collectors interested in Islamic art. But now, that has now utterly changed.

“Ever since the Gulf countries, Qatar and Abu Dhabi have started collecting, it is a seller’s market too. Artefacts are much more sought after. Now there are big national collectors with endless funds. Buyers really have to be very, very careful.”

According to Gaetano Palumbo, the World Monuments Fund programme director for North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, there is agreement that the top auction houses of the world are now much more cautious about what goes on sale through their auctions.

“In the latest Unesco meetings regarding Syria and Iraq, a representative from Christie’s was present. Of course, provenance documents can be falsified but they said they are paying a lot of attention and not putting anything on sale that is not clearly provenanced.”

There have been several examples of items that have had to be returned to the source country or withdrawn from an auction house. In 2013, for example, Christie’s withdrew six works of art in a sale in London that had been stolen from an excavation site in Egypt. These were returned to Egypt.

Christie’s say it is committed to the prevention of the illicit trade and makes every effort to ensure that no looted artefacts go through its auctions. “We work closely in partnership with Unesco, Interpol, the US Department of Homeland Security and Scotland Yard’s art and antiques unit. And we have strict procedures to ensure we only offer works of art which are legal to sell,” Christie’s said in a statement to The National.

But most of the looted antiquities do not go through the major global auction houses which, along with museums, are now much more cautious about what they buy or put up for sale. According to Desmarais, a whole range of smaller actors are involved: the smaller auction houses, the dealers and the underground internet, known as the darknet.

One of the main problems is that many looted artefacts simply end up in someone’s house – as a status symbol. Rajab recalls one example in Jordan, where he saw a relief taken from an archaeological site and built into the wall above the fireplace.

“That’s sacrilege. Absolute sacrilege. To end up in a museum, that’s one thing. But a lot of this stuff ends up in private homes and nobody will ever see them.”

This is a sad reality that those involved in cultural heritage are seeking to tackle. And the market for looted antiquities has now moved from Europe and the United States to Asia, particularly China where the appetite for archaeological artefacts is growing.

“As long as it will be chic and posh for you to have an archaeological piece in your living room that guests can admire, we’ll be talking about this. We need to get this message across that it’s a crime. Collecting looted antiquities is a white-collar crime. People have died for this. People buying are sometimes feeding insurgencies, the purchase of arms, financing other types of criminality,” says Desmarais.

Internationally, there are two agreements that deal with looted and trafficked antiquities. First, there is the 1970 Unesco convention. “But this is not the strongest of conventions – you can get a slap on the wrist from Unesco,” says Stone. “A much stronger convention is the 1995 Unidroit convention. This is much more robust international law but the difficulty is that far fewer countries have ratified the second convention because it is much stronger.”

Another problem is that legislation has to be the same in the source and host country for anything to be done. Frequently, says Stone, something is not explicitly illegal in both and that is when it's difficult to get anything done.

More recently, in 2003, the UN passed a resolution calling on all members to stop the trade in Iraqi antiquities without the correct provenance.

So what is being done on Syria? The EU has now banned the import of antiquities from Syria, but there has still not been such a move by the UN. The International Council of Museums and Interpol have drawn up lists of material known to be stolen from the country. Additionally, Unesco has held a number of workshops on how to combat the illicit trafficking of cultural property. These were held in Syria and, most recently, last month in Beirut, and featured national authorities, Interpol, local community organisations, scholars, artists and local citizens. A petition signed by many archaeologists and accompanied by 17,000 signatures was sent to the UN in September and a ban is expected in the near future.

According to Sam Hardy, who runs Conflict Antiquities, a blog that monitors the issue, a new law in Germany could point the way forward. This will require a certified export licence for an antiquity in order to secure an import licence.

"The dealers will inevitably argue that it presumes guilt, but it doesn't, any more than hygiene certificates for food do. And it won't be perfect – there will still be forged certificates, but it'll make a big difference."

With no end in sight for a regional conflict that has claimed the lives of more than 200,000 Syrians and continuing violence in neighbouring Iraq, the outlook for preserving those countries' cultural heritage is pretty bleak. As Rajab says: "If you loot from an archaeological site, you have destroyed it.

"The knowledge that comes with how an object was found, what it was found with, where it was found. You have destroyed it. You've lost all the knowledge."

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