



New leads on looted Middle Eastern antiquities

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Where do antiquities looted from archaeological sites by ISIS and other groups end up? The material from Syria and Iraq identified thus far on European and U.S. markets, and through seizures in Turkey, Lebanon and elsewhere, has been mostly unimpressive collections of small finds like pottery, figurines, coins, metalwork (some of it fake), and a smattering of larger sculpture.

Given the vast extent of damage to archaeological and heritage sites documented on the ground and [from satellite imagery](#), the question is, where's all the good stuff?

The recent news that looted statues from the Syrian site of Palmyra have been [seized at a Geneva free port](#), along with ancient sculpture from Yemen and Libya, begins to fill in the blanks. Not surprisingly, the items were shipped to Switzerland from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, some of the states providing direct support to ISIS.

But the statues appear to have been in Switzerland [since 2009 and 2010](#) and their looting thus predated the current conflicts. Looting antiquities in the Middle East has been part of local subsistence economies for generations, so it is possible that the objects reached Geneva through middlemen, and were routed for whatever reason through the Gulf.

But antiquities looting is also a vocation for Middle Eastern regimes. This was documented in a recent interview with an [expatriate Syrian archaeologist](#) who implicated a regime figures like Bashar al-Assad's uncle Rifaat al-Assad and former interior minister Ghazi Kanaan.

If nothing else this again puts the lie to [regime propaganda](#) that has ludicrously depicted the al-Assads and indeed, all Syrians, as [faithful and loving stewards of the past](#). Whatever the role antiquities and heritage played in Syrian identity, the desire for profit and the need to eat are paramount. It also suggests that regime players are participants in an illicit global economy that embraces both Qatar and Switzerland, into which ISIS is an upstart.

It has been clear since the beginning of the Syrian civil war that all sides - ISIS, the 'moderate' rebels, and the regime - have destroyed archaeological and heritage sites and have looted for profit. But ISIS took longstanding routines of looting and selling and optimized them to

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maximize its local control and tax receipts, dominating yet another part of the economy. But business is also business; profit trumps ideology. ISIS and the al-Assad regime have a history of bartering, especially oil and gasoline. Antiquities are just another commodity to all the parties.

While the profits made by local emirs and 'ISIS central' from looting were perhaps tens of millions of dollars, and paled before the hundreds of millions made from oil smuggling, taxation, and extortion rackets, including human trafficking, the destruction of archaeological and heritage sites has been immense. Sites like Palmyra, Aleppo, Hatra, Nimrud, and countless others are irretrievably damaged.

ISIS's exploitation of antiquities while professing its hatred is simply the reverse of the Saddam and al-Assad's regimes' approach. Regime expressions of love for the past, which so entranced Western scholars given access to sites and collections, were covers for systemic neglect and personal exploitation. ISIS is equally duplicitous. ISIS videos showing them blowing up iconic sites such as the ancient city of Nimrud outside of Mosul have a dual purpose, demonstrating religious antipathy towards the non-Islamic past and objects of pagan interest, but implying that, with the right connections, fabulous antiquities might still be had.

Here the Qatar connection again comes into play. Along with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Qatar is one of the states most closely associated with ISIS, with private citizens and the leadership providing financial support as well as political cover. Qatar's traditional role as a Gulf trading hub is equally important. For decades there have been rumors that Gulf States are involved in exporting illegal antiquities from Iraq to other countries, including Iran. There are also many reports regarding looted materials collected by Gulf citizens, with an emphasis on objects Islamic period objects. Fabulous wealth makes anything possible including outfitting palaces with looted sculpture, mosaics and architectural elements. And despite much publicized anti-money laundering initiatives, Gulf States have done little to interrupt the flow of antiquities, goods or money.

The Geneva seizure also brings another part of the looting equation into better focus. Free ports, tax-free warehouses largely beyond the reach of local customs and international law enforcement oversight, are a serious problem, particularly when it comes to stolen antiquities. Goods from art to wine may be parked for brief periods or for many years, effectively disappearing off the books. Looted antiquities cool off for extended periods before being brought to market with falsified papers. Swiss auction houses, as well as those in Britain, have long been favored spots for marketing antiquities, almost invariably described as coming from 'old family collections.' This problem will worsen.

The Geneva seizure is a warning. Large and potentially profitable antiquities are still out there, including in free ports. The Syrian conflict has attracted too much attention to stolen antiquities. Major sellers are likely waiting for the demise of ISIS and a 'peaceful transition,' a federated Syria, or, most likely, until the regime and its Iranian, Russian, and Hezbollah associates crush their opponents and innocent civilians into dust. More names of those involved in antiquities trade – regime, ISIS and 'rebels,' antiquities looters and dealers, and Gulf financiers and middlemen - need to be added to terror and anti-money laundering watch lists, now.

Once peace returns an era of real profitability will begin, with barrels of 'post-conflict reconstruction' funding to steal, and with stockpiles of antiquities from 'old family collections' emerging from free ports and

other hiding places. After the dead are buried continued vigilance will be needed. The sellers of loot will be among those who helped in the murder of Syrians by the hundreds of thousands.

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