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DESTRUCTION OR THEFT?

Islamic State, Iraqi antiquities
and organized crime

TOM WESTCOTT

MARCH 2020



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Cover photo: An Iraqi soldier surveys artefacts damaged by IS militants at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hatra, Iraq, 2017. © *Tom Westcott*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic State (IS) occupied territory in Iraq from mid-2014 to mid-2017 and, at its height, controlled almost a third of Iraq's land mass and had dominance over 4 500 historical sites. In 2015, less than a year after seizing control of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, IS released video footage showing militants smashing up priceless ancient statues in Mosul Museum and blowing up the Assyrian site of Nimrud, prompting worldwide condemnation.

Although militants claimed they were destroying non-Islamic heritage, Iraqi archaeology experts say these acts were carried out largely to conceal extensive looting of valuable artefacts to help fund their new 'state' and associated terrorist activities.

This report examines evidence of looting by IS in and around northern Iraq's Nineveh governorate. Considering claims that IS not only stole exhibited Iraqi antiquities, but also carried out illicit excavations to plunder new, undiscovered treasures, the report re-evaluates the organization's self-proclaimed ideological destruction – in reality, organized looting for profit – as an example of 21st-century organized crime.

The report also considers evidence of the onward flow of stolen Iraqi antiquities, and seeks to establish the most likely routes along which stolen artefacts were moved from a terrorist-occupied swathe of territory into neighbouring countries. It considers how IS terrorists transferred artefacts to other organized criminal networks, en route to long-term storage facilities, collectors and global marketplaces.

The demise of IS as a territorial entity, combined with its well-publicized destruction of heritage, means this topic has, by 2020, largely fallen off the radar. However, with countless artefacts from Nineveh still missing, and Iraqi archaeology experts alleging that IS members excavated important historical sites for their treasures, some of these plundered antiquities are now moving through different rungs of organized transnational criminal networks as they head towards collectors of global antiquities and other marketplaces, rendering this an ongoing organized crime.

This report also highlights the need to raise awareness of such thefts in an effort to ensure that global collectors and auction houses are alert to Iraqi antiquities of potentially suspect provenance and with links to terrorist activities entering the global antiquities marketplace in the forthcoming years and decades.

Sources of information

The author visited Mosul during and after the liberation battle (October 2016 to July 2017), and again in December 2019, conducting interviews with heritage experts, security officials and local residents. Interviews with Iraqi heritage professionals in Baghdad took place in December 2018, and November and December 2019, and with international crime-prevention organizations specializing in combating antiquities trafficking in December 2019 and January 2020. The author draws extensively from these interviews in this report.

The defaced head of an ancient statue at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hatra, occupied by Islamic State from 2014 to 2017. © Tom Westcott



DESTRUCTION IN THE NAME OF IDEOLOGY



A smokescreen for terrorist financing

Islamic State seized control of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, in June 2014, thereafter rapidly expanding its control to almost a third of the country. Within its Iraqi territory, in 2015, IS occupied more than 4 500 archaeological sites.¹ These included two UNESCO World Heritage sites – the 1st-century Parthian city of Hatra and the Old Assyrian capital, Ashur; as well as two other sites on UNESCO's 'tentative list',² Nimrud and the ancient city of Nineveh.³

Within a year, IS's effective social-media campaign, which it relied upon to spread terror and generate worldwide publicity and infamy, had featured footage of militants smashing up ancient artefacts in Mosul Museum⁴ and, later, at the 3 300-year-old former capital of the Assyrian empire, Nimrud, 30 kilometres from Mosul.⁵

In the Mosul Museum video, an IS militant, states: 'These ruins that are behind me, they are idols and statues that people in the past used to worship instead of Allah ... The Prophet Muhammad took down idols with his bare hands when he went into Mecca. We were ordered by our prophet to take down idols and destroy them.' He then says: 'When God orders us to remove and destroy them, it becomes easy for us and we don't care, even if they cost millions of dollars,' calling attention to the antiquities' high value and IS's apparent disregard for this.⁶

The videos prompted worldwide condemnation, including from UNESCO.⁷ After the country had been liberated from IS, it was confirmed by Iraqi heritage staff, site guards and local residents that certain priceless statues and sites had indeed been destroyed by IS. The American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) documented 156 separate incidents of damage perpetrated by IS, including 27 involving archaeological sites.⁸

Among Iraqi heritage professionals, as well as local residents and heritage site guards, this well-publicized destruction was viewed with horrified incredulity, but also with some degree of suspicion. Iraq's Minister of Culture, Dr Abdulameer al-Hamdani, said: 'Everywhere terrorists took control, there was a combination of looting and destruction to remove artefacts and erase Mesopotamian culture.' And the director of the

◀ The remains of an Assyrian lion sculpture in Mosul Museum. Museum staff believe IS destroyed this piece because it was too large to steal. © Tom Westcott

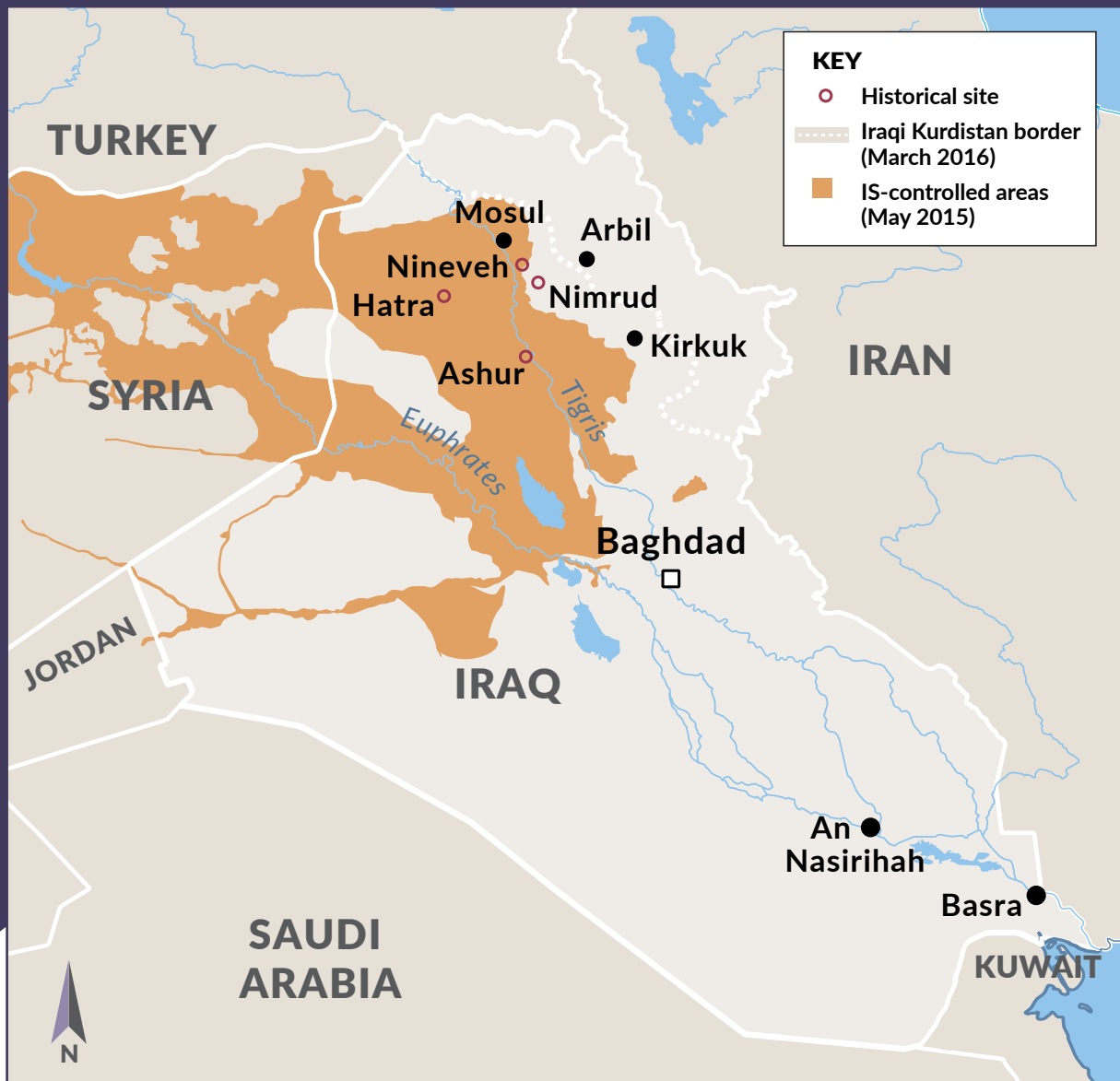


FIGURE 1 Iraq's ancient heritage sites plundered by IS

Mosul Museum, Zeid al-Obeidi, said he noticed immediately in the video of IS militants attacking museum pieces that other exhibits, which should have been visible in the background, were missing.

Former director general of the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad, Luma Yass, said the videos were a ruse to disguise IS's real intention, which was to generate income.⁹ 'IS propaganda made people think they had destroyed the antiquities ... but it wasn't true, it was just propaganda. After this public destruction, IS could freely loot, using the proceeds to fund their terrorist activities,' said Yass. She claimed that 'almost all the artefacts were looted because this, along with the oil, was one of the main ways for them to get money'.¹⁰

In Iraq, a primary trading resource for the group was oil, but the looting and smuggling of antiquities also played an important role in IS's self-funding. Internationally, the strong likelihood that IS plundered and traded antiquities was highlighted in several reports outlining terrorist financing. However, as the purpose of these was to



▲ IS propaganda left on a destroyed artefact in Mosul Museum. © Tom Westcott

◀ Iraqi Minister of Culture, Dr Abdulameer al-Hamdani, inspects exhibits in the Assyrian Gallery of the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad, November 2019. © Tom Westcott

draw attention to IS funding sources, these have limited relevance now since IS as a territorial entity has collapsed.

Evidence gathered over two and a half years supports assertions that IS members' destruction of Iraqi heritage, under the guise of artefacts being non-Islamic, ostensibly to show their contempt of 'idolatrous' objects from pre-Islamic eras, was actually staged to cover up their real intention: to loot sites and trade the artefacts outside Iraq for financial gain. It also suggests that the looting, from a range of sites, was more considerable than had previously been thought. This research considers how such looted antiquities were transferred outside Iraq using existing criminal networks engaged in smuggling, and how they may continue to move through transnational organized-criminal channels specializing in antiquities trafficking.

To the author's knowledge, no comprehensive research has previously been carried out on either the extent of IS looting in Iraq, the onward transit of antiquities stolen by IS, or their potential future in the global marketplace.

That IS stole antiquities in Iraq is not speculation, as recoveries to date have shown. Concrete evidence of such acts started emerging in 2015, when US forces carried out airstrikes on the home of senior IS member Fathi Ben Awn Ben Jildi Murad al-Tunisi (known as Abu Sayyaf) in Syria.¹¹ Following the attack, ground forces recovered a stash of antiquities stolen from Mosul Museum, some still bearing their original reference numbers, which were eventually returned to Iraq. In addition, after the liberation of Mosul, Iraqi armed forces found looted objects in civilian homes occupied by IS members.

IS transferred hundreds or even thousands of Iraqi antiquities to organized-criminal networks.

Despite such recoveries, museum staff estimate that between 50 and 70 per cent of the museum's former treasures are still missing, presumed stolen. When they were able to access the museum, several months after liberation, staff realized the full extent of the losses. Walls had been stripped of exhibits and, in one hall, not a single fragment of any artefact could be found, including those destroyed by IS on camera.

Through extensive interviews conducted for this report, evidence was found that IS either deployed expert archaeologists, or received remote instructions and guidance from such experts, who directed the terror group towards sites to excavate. Several Mosul archaeologists claimed that some senior members of IS knew what they were doing, which artefacts they were looking for and where to find them.

Such evidence would support a re-evaluation of IS activities as organized crime, as opposed to ideological vandalism, building a gradual picture of a sophisticated criminal enterprise engaged in the looting and trading of highly prized antiquities.

IS told Mosul residents they had blown up the shrine of Nabi Yunis (the Prophet Jonah) to stop people 'praying to graves' – something forbidden in Islam. However, senior Mosul archaeologists have pointed out that removing the shrine and mosque was essential for IS to be able to gain access to loot an ancient Assyrian palace. As IS showed the world footage of their members destroying statues in Mosul Museum, behind the scenes they were carefully extracting exhibits to trade them.

IS held Mosul between 2014 and 2017, a period during which they could act with impunity, including looting Iraqi heritage and ruthlessly excavating historical sites. This time frame of three years, during which they allegedly had access to archaeological expertise, gave the group the opportunity to transfer hundreds or even thousands of antiquities outside Iraq to organized-criminal networks of smugglers and traders. According to INTERPOL, high-value plundered antiquities would, at some point, have to enter higher-level organized-crime networks specializing in the trafficking of antiquities to facilitate their eventual shipment to global markets of private collectors and traders.

Although IS as a territorial entity has been destroyed, it continues as a group (under its new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, following the death of former 'caliph' Omar AbuBakr al-Baghdadi), as an ideology and as an insurgency movement.¹² In late 2019, senior Kurdish officials said IS remnants had regrouped in northern Iraq.¹³ Furthermore, an unknown number of IS adherents either escaped or survived fighting and are still alive; some are hiding in countries where IS formerly held territory; some are in camps or prisons in Iraq and Syria; others live freely in neighbouring countries or their own.¹⁴ This research shows that, in 2017, IS still had some antiquities within its control, and this may still be the case today. If held by militants in areas severely damaged by airstrikes, some missing Iraqi antiquities may have been lost or destroyed.

As it was crucial for looted artefacts to be distanced from associations with the terror group, missing antiquities may already have found their way into private collections or long-term storage facilities that are part of the logistical supply chain in the marketing of antiquities. Others may be in the process of being laundered using illicit systems of generating provenance (e.g. traceable records or proofs of purchase), a system



Lieutenant-Colonel Abdul Emir al-Mohamed Alwi, a historian, contemplates Mosul Museum days after it was liberated from IS, March 2017. © Tom Westcott

that lends legitimacy. Others may still be in the process of being moved between transnational organized-criminal networks.

IS also allegedly targeted antiquities in other countries where they held territory, for example, in Syria but this report is centred on Iraq, focusing on three sites in Iraq's Nineveh Province, Nabi Yunis, Mosul Museum and Nimrud. It also looks at how the spoils of such looting and theft have been moving inside Iraq and beyond its borders, charting how IS have transferred them to other criminal networks, on a journey ultimately to

transnational organized criminals who specialize in antiquities trafficking.

This report plays an important role in reconsidering the actions and consequences of IS's looting of, and trading in, Iraqi antiquities. In the process, it both re-evaluates actual losses against what the group publicly claimed it was destroying and attempts to trace the subsequent movement of looted artefacts. Such research is crucial, in that it contributes towards efforts to combat organized crime involving antiquities, especially acts perpetrated by terrorists, and, ultimately, to potentially helping save global historical treasures.



EXTREMISTS OR EXPERT ARCHAEOLOGISTS?



The case of Nabi Younis

Islamic State targeted the mosque and shrine of Nabi Younis on 24 July 2014. According to local resident Mohamed Abdullah: 'Before they blew it up, they took all the historical stuff to sell somewhere. They loaded a lot of items from the shrine into cars and drove [them] away.'¹⁵

Abdullah said IS militants told local residents they were destroying the mosque because it contained graves, principally that of Younis, something prohibited by Islam. 'They said tombs inside mosques interfere with prayers to Allah, and mean you are praying to the corpse, like a shrine,' Abdullah explained. He said that, at the time, he had doubted that fundamentalist interpretations of Islam were the real motive for the destruction of this site, saying: 'After they left, I walked in the ruins and everything was destroyed. There were copies of the Quran lying on the ground. They never even picked those up, and yet they call themselves Muslims.'¹⁶

According to the head of the Nineveh Antiquities Directorate, Ali Hazeem, the real purpose for destroying the shrine had nothing to do with Islam, but was rather to facilitate the looting of an ancient Assyrian palace lying beneath the mosque.

'IS talked about people going to graves and gave reasons and made excuses but the true purpose of blowing up Nabi Younis was to remove the mosque on top and then remove artefacts from the palace underneath,' he said. 'It's clear they knew the site very well and knew the palace was there.'

According to former dean of Mosul University's Archeology College Dr Ali Yaseen al-Juboori, the last major archaeological digging at the palace below Nabi Younis had taken place in the mid-20th century, carried out by British teams, after which further explorations were prohibited. This was primarily because the weight of the mosque

◀ The ruins of the mosque and shrine of Nabi Younis (the Prophet Jonah), Mosul, 2017.
© Tom Westcott

meant further explorations were deemed unsafe but, with the mosque gone, it was safer for IS to tunnel into the palace, he said, adding: 'IS definitely found stuff there. I'm sure when they got into the palace they would find artefacts and other things we don't know about.'

Juboori said IS also excavated an area near the shrine, where Assyrian-era treasure troves had previously been discovered:

When the Iraqi government widened the main street, they hit part of the north-east section of the palace and found many pieces, many small treasures, in a storeroom of the king, which are now in the Iraqi Museum, so ... around that area there were a lot of remains of the king's treasure. One of the tunnels IS dug was in exactly the same place where the Iraqi government had found those artefacts. IS knew where to dig and where they [might] find the king's storehouse and more of his treasure; they knew in advance what they were looking for.

This paints a very different picture from the one IS showed the world in their propaganda videos. This internationally marketed image of thuggish terrorists operating under fundamentalist interpretations of Islam is further undermined by some of Mosul's most experienced archaeologists.

In 2013, one year before IS arrived in Mosul, Juboori, then still dean of Mosul University's Archeology College, had bought an archaeological tool called a magnetometer, to survey existing archaeological sites in Nineveh and potentially discover new ones. He described the magnetometer as a complex device that required training to operate it.

'When IS came, I took the device home, along with other important tools, which I stored in my basement. Before I left Mosul, I called my assistant and asked him to keep these expensive tools and equipment safe for me. So, we moved everything to his house and I left,' he said. 'After two or three months, my assistant phoned me and told me IS had knocked at his door and asked specifically for the magnetometer.' Fearing for his life, the assistant had handed the equipment over.





There was a collection of ancient artefacts on the floor, which looked as though they had been amassed by IS, possibly to sell.

Juboori said the level of IS intelligence, given that they knew his assistant had the device, was surprising, but what was more important was why IS needed that device:

The magnetometer was very important for IS in digging their tunnels under Nabi Younis. From this incident, I believe IS had an archaeologist with them who knew how to use the device and how to tunnel, as had previously been done in the mid-20th century. In fact, I am 100 per cent sure IS had an expert archaeologist with them.

Juboori also alleged that, more generally, IS must have had access to foreign archaeological experts, or their guidance, because, he said, the knowledge and capacity IS exhibited when it came to looting extant antiquities and searching for undiscovered ones were far beyond the scope of most Iraqis. 'They definitely had information and expertise from abroad, because they knew in advance what was in the important places, and that's why they dug the tunnels [under Nabi Younis] to get access as quickly as possible and loot whatever they found. They had both information and expertise,' he said.

In 2015, a Financial Action Task Force report on IS financing stated: 'ISIL's [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's] ability to earn revenue from the illicit sale of antiquities is contingent upon the presence of antiquities within territory where ISIL operates, knowledge of their existence, and ISIL's ability to recognize materials as artefacts and develop some estimation of their value.'¹⁷

Juboori's assertions that IS either had experts with them or access to people who could advise them remotely suggests that the terrorist group did understand the value of antiquities, and the potential of archaeological sites they targeted. This supports the hypothesis that IS was an organized-criminal enterprise that planned to trade antiquities for revenue.

His claim that IS would have found treasures beneath Nabi Younis is supported by post-liberation archaeological digs at the palace. A team of German archaeologists have already unearthed a stash of gold coins, among other artefacts, according to Hazeem, who showed photos of several such recent discoveries.

'The Germans found these in just a few seasons, but IS were there for three years, so just imagine what they could have taken,' he said, adding: 'Of course, they have taken things, but the problem is, we don't know what or how many.'

As well as potential treasure troves from the king's storehouses, IS also tunnelled into the main parts of the palace, where ancient sculptures survived. Spanish photographer Andoni Lubaki, one of the few Western journalists who entered the palace in 2017, said: 'There were a lot of carved reliefs on the walls, including two headless horses, some figures and inscriptions in Aramaic. There was a collection of ancient artefacts on the floor, which looked as though they had been amassed by IS, possibly to sell.'¹⁸

Basel Ayad Seaad, a lecturer at Mosul University's Archaeology Department, also found crucial evidence that IS had transferred artefacts from the underground palace. On the floor of the ruined Mosul University's Natural History Museum, which had been smashed, looted and used as a bomb-making facility, he found an official IS document in 2017.



The fragments of a pair of *lamassu* (winged bull) statues in Mosul Museum that museum staff say IS destroyed because they were too large to steal. © Tom Westcott

Dated 28 Rajab, 1436 (i.e. 17 May 2015), this document (a photograph of which was shown to the author), which was issued by IS's Diwan al-Rikaz (meaning the 'department of precious things that come out of the ground'), opened with the lines: 'Thanks be to God, we were looking for the *lamassu* [winged bulls] in Nabi Yunis, which we found.'¹⁹

Seaad was reluctant to allow the document to be photographed or transcribed, as it will form part of his future PhD research, but he explained that it detailed the finding of a *lamassu* and its transferral to the Natural History Museum for temporary storage.


'Outside Iraq, people think IS made an Islamic state with Islamic rules but, in reality, in Mosul, we saw that IS were thieves. They stole oil, antiquities, people, houses and metal. And they stole to sell,' he said. 'They stole things from museums, they didn't just destroy everything. Even in Mosul University's Natural History Museum, much is

missing, not destroyed. They only destroyed items that weren't valuable.'

The *lamassu* in question was no longer in the Natural History Museum by the time of liberation, suggesting it had already been moved elsewhere, possibly into the hands of international crime networks.

Although IS destroyed two *lamassu* sculptures in Mosul Museum, which, according to museum staff, were too large to move, and damaged and destroyed other *lamassu* on display in the city, such sculptures are valuable in the global antiquities markets.

This case provides further evidence that IS were searching for specific antiquities and gives further credence to the notion that they were being guided by specialists – either archaeologists, collectors, antiquities' traders or experienced criminals specializing in antiquities trafficking. This suggests their activities at the Nabi Yunis shrine were either part of, or linked to, the lucrative organized crime of antiquities smuggling.



**DESTRUCTION
DISGUISES
LOOTING**



Islamic State did not always need to tunnel into ancient sites to loot treasures, as there were already many exhibited antiquities that they could plunder more easily.

The group's interest in ancient artefacts became apparent when militants entered the premises of the Mosul Museum the day after they took control of the city. As the museum's director, Obeidi, explained, IS occupied the museum on 10 June 2014 and immediately stopped employees going to work. 'On 26 February 2015, they published a video showing the demolition,' he said.

During the intervening eight months, the group were able to loot the museum of exhibits that they had the will or capacity to steal. The sheer size and weight of some items made stealing them impossible.

The images of destruction shown in the videos have also been questioned. Culture Minister Dr Hamdani said: 'We saw the videos and I believe some big statues were destroyed, but small objects were stolen to be sold to support [their] terrorist activities.'

Obeidi noted that, in the IS destruction video, some exhibits appeared to be already missing from their place in the museum. Footage did not indicate that these missing museum exhibits had been damaged prior to removal (for example, there were no fragments on the floor), leading him to believe these had been stolen by IS before the video was filmed. Some other exhibits, clearly visible in the video, remained untouched by the sledgehammer-wielding militants. These had vanished by the time Mosul was liberated. Such missing and untouched items in the video were also noted by scholars outside Iraq.²⁰

When Iraqi forces liberated the museum in early March 2017, they found an almost empty building, where walls had been stripped of former treasures. Two days after the liberation, journalists found that just a handful of exhibits remained intact; there were fragments of stone engraved with cuneiform writing scattered on the floor, along with a small pile of documents, manuscripts and books on a table.²¹

◀ An Iraqi soldier enters a storeroom, the sealed-up entrance to which IS militants smashed open, Hatra, 2017. © Tom Westcott



An Iraqi soldier in the looted and empty Mosul Museum during the conflict in 2017.

© Tom Westcott

Some of these books had vanished by the time museum staff could gain entry, months later, Obeidi said, indicating that other thefts, unrelated to IS, happened following liberation.

Two and a half years later, in December 2019, Obeidi accompanied the author on a tour through Mosul Museum where, he said, a proven 50 per cent of artefacts remained missing, believed stolen. In reality, he said, the missing items constituted an estimated 60 to 70 per cent of the museum's exhibits. Of the remaining and recovered exhibits, 50 per cent had been left seriously damaged.

Ancient heritage artefacts sold on the black market

The museum housed three main valuable collections: the Assyrian, Hatran and Islamic galleries. The Assyrian Gallery was systematically looted by IS but some objects too large to steal were destroyed, including a pair of huge *lamassu*, a lion sculpture, an artefact known as the Yellow Stella and a throne base of an Assyrian king. Said Obeidi:

In the Assyrian room, there was clear evidence that some things had been stolen and others not. We assessed all the remaining pieces and compared them to the museum's former collection, to find out what was missing. ... We found

that not everything was broken, and there were many things which had been stolen ... IS put a lot of effort into concealing what they were doing, to hide that they were stealing the antiquities.

Pointing out one former wall-hung exhibit, where all that now remains is a piece of cement with wires trailing from it and a tiny painted fragment, Obeidi said:

One of our very important treasures – a decorated, painted marble frieze from the palace of Ashurnasirpal in Nimrud – was stolen from here, ripped right off the wall. Just one tiny piece remains. Most of its original colour had survived. This is a very rare and valuable artefact, and worth a lot on the market. Some missing antiquities, such as this, are completely irreplaceable.

Fellow archaeologist Ghassan Sarhan believes this piece is now 'on the black market'.

The slots on the museum walls showing where vanished exhibits used to be displayed indicate how carefully they were removed to avoid damaging them. Sarhan pointed out how the metal rods, formerly holding a frieze from Nimrud in position, had been bent outwards, showing how the slabs had been carefully removed.

Even the museum's Islamic Gallery, which Obeidi noted was not shown in the 2015 IS video, was extensively looted, save for a pair of wooden tomb coverings. The walls of this gallery are now a stretch of empty space. Among many other missing artefacts from this gallery are two ornate ancient *mihrab* (mosque niches showing the direction of Mecca). Obeidi said these must have been removed piecemeal, with great care, saying that not a single fragment of the Sinjar gypsum, of which they were made, had been found. This gives further credence to the suggestion that IS had antiquity specialists with them, or guiding them.

The museum's Hatran Gallery formerly displayed statues from the 1st-century Parthian city of



The position of a 13th-century prayer niche (*mihrab*) stolen by IS from Mosul Museum. © Tom Westcott

Hatra, a remote site in the Nineveh Plains that was under IS control until April 2017. Both the site itself and the Hatran Gallery featured in IS destruction videos.²² While leaving intact much of the structure of Hatra, which they used as a training centre for child soldiers, IS smashed into walled-up storage chambers and wrenched open metal chests containing artefacts.²³

In the museum, IS stripped the Hatran Gallery completely bare; not a single exhibit, or even a fragment, remained. As Obeidi said, this 'means only one thing – they stole them'.

That every fragment in the Hatran Gallery was removed is an anomaly, especially because, in the Assyrian Gallery, fragments of destroyed artefacts were left where they fell.

Transnational criminal networks control illicit trade in antiquities

The Hatran Gallery statues were of a more transportable size. It may seem unlikely that there would be a market for damaged and defaced antiquities. However, pieces of sculptures are also desirable on the market, according to the coordinator of INTERPOL's Works of Art Unit, Corrado Catesi, who said: 'A collector can be interested in a fragment, if it is an important fragment.'

Catesi explained that the dismantling of sculptures was not uncommon, especially in the case of marble statues, which could then be sold in parts. He said this happened in organized-criminal networks dealing with antiquities. For example, with ancient Roman sculptures, the head and bust could be sold separately. 'It is feasible that this could have happened in Mosul because that is happening in illicit markets everywhere,' he explained. It is also possible that collectors could want such defaced statues for personal collections, or a museum of Islam, which might wish to document IS.

Not all the items IS destroyed in the Hatran Gallery were originals. 'In Mosul Museum, some statues were copies; it's easy for us to identify these, but not for non-experts. IS destroyed the copies and stole the originals,' Yass said. American PhD student Christopher Jones, who specializes in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, also identified a number of statues that IS destroyed as copies.²⁴

If IS could identify which statues were real and which were reproductions, it lends further weight to Juboori's suggestion that IS either had expert archaeologists with

Mosul Museum's director, Zeid al-Obeidi, shows the position of a marble frieze from the palace of Ashurnasirpal, Nimrud, removed by IS.

© Tom Westcott



them or were receiving remote guidance from them. That IS targeted at least some copies for destruction also supports local experts' theories that destruction in the museum was intended to conceal IS looting. He also noted that IS could have stolen a collection of copies of Nimrud treasures, made in replica gypsum, which arrived in Mosul just a few months before IS came and were stored in a warehouse, which, by the time the city was liberated, had been levelled to the ground.

And, as mentioned, IS had control over the Mosul Museum for over eight months before they released their video; considering other items in the gallery were already missing in that footage, there is a possibility that IS could, in the meantime, have had further replicas made for the purposes of their destruction propaganda.

According to INTERPOL's Catesi, many smuggled antiquities seized by Lebanese and Turkish border authorities in recent years have been copies. 'A lot are fake because the market is requesting objects of art [from this region] and organized criminals are producing fake works of art, but we don't know from where exactly,' he said. 'Yes, IS could have made copies, but this is only a hypothesis. We need ... to understand what really happened.'

The possibility that IS destroyed mainly copies could make sense of why it was important for them to remove every fragment of those destroyed statues in the Hatran Gallery, but left the remnants of the destroyed items in the Assyrian gallery where they lay. Experts assessing the damage after the liberation would be able to identify whether those fragments were from originals or reproductions.

If artefacts were believed to have been destroyed, that could reduce the likelihood, in the global antiquities markets, of certain antiquities being flagged as stolen or of dubious provenance. With the video evidence of IS having destroyed these statues, the assumption would be that, if a remarkably similar piece were to appear on the market, it would be viewed as precisely that – merely another similar statue from Hatra.

The speed with which IS took over Mosul Museum indicates a focus on antiquities from the outset of their seizing the city. They always knew that their 'state' was doomed to failure, according to former IS commander Abu Abd Al-Haq Al-Iraqi, who said, in a televised interview: 'They were always thinking that the Islamic State would not be able to maintain its control of the cities. Therefore, they always laboured to build bases in the desert, preparing an alternative for when the downfall [of ISIS] would come.'²⁵ This would make sense of why IS made swift work of stealing from the museum, before their caliphate collapsed.

Hazeem also believes IS were being directed from outside Iraq, especially after he personally interviewed one of the men who appeared in the video. 'He was a volunteer and did it because he'd been told it was *haram* [forbidden by Islam], but who is making the decision that it's *haram* and telling him it's *haram*?' Hazeem said. 'IS preys on ignorant people, simple people who don't know what they're doing, but the people behind them know what they're doing. It is the guys behind the doing that need to be found and prosecuted.'

He added: 'IS are getting orders from outside Iraq. It's simple people who carry out damage, destruction and looting, but what happened in Nineveh was organized crime from outside Iraq, backed by instructions and money from outside the

What happened in Nineveh was organized crime, backed by instructions and money from outside the country.

country.' For the culture minister, Dr Hamdani, IS activities were also 'an organized operation', a combination of destruction (of larger pieces) and looting and theft of more portable items.

One difficulty facing researchers now is establishing the extent to which such thefts were organized from within or outside the group. However, according to Catesi, moving high-value antiquities along the supply chain to international collectors and marketplaces would necessitate using organized-crime networks. 'You can make an illegal excavation by yourself but, at the end, you will have a huge problem [selling] objects worldwide. This needs the support of organized crime, and organized crime is deeply involved in the antiquities trade,' he said. 'Illicit trafficking by organized criminals is when objects are taken from [one] area to another, to another region or country, or to the market. No individual can do this – only organized crime. Most illicit antiquities trafficking is dealt with by organized crime, without doubt.'

Considering the difficulties IS would face transferring stolen antiquities, be it the spoils of illicit excavations or thefts of exhibited artefacts, to international marketplaces, it would be realistic to classify this as organized crime.

Catesi said that, although inventories were crucial to curbing antiquities trafficking, among the Nineveh sites, only Mosul Museum had an inventory of exhibits, making it difficult to accurately record the extent of IS's antiquities pillaging in Iraq. In the case of Nimrud, for example, its antiquities were not numbered or clearly listed in an inventory, according to archaeologist and conservator Saad Ahmed, who heads the Mosul Museum conservation laboratory.

Although IS had been swift to target Mosul Museum and Nabi Yunis, they did not target Nimrud until October 2014. 'When IS came in October, they told us to leave and not to come back, and they took control of the site until liberation,' said former Nimrud police security guard and local resident Mohammed Abu Jassem. 'They brought tools and equipment, including a bulldozer and excavator.'

He said IS closely guarded Nimrud, noting that there was movement of vehicles to and from the site during night-time. 'I don't know if they took things but, because it was dark, they could do anything,' he said.

The Iraqi government confirmed that Nimrud was destroyed on 5 March 2015, which means IS had had five months to strip the site of its treasures before destroying it.²⁶

'It was a very, very powerful explosion, almost like a nuclear weapon,' Abu Jassem recalled. 'In my personal opinion, they blew up Nimrud in a deliberate move because they didn't want anyone to have proof that they stole things from there. ... when I went there, about ten days after liberation and looked at the former rooms, the important tablets were [no longer] there.'

He described these tablets as a carved frieze, detailing life during the Assyrian Empire, including daily routines, religious customs, battles and victories. Hamdani also confirmed this frieze was among the artefacts IS stole: 'Before destroying Nimrud, IS took Assyrian bas-reliefs from the Ashurnasirpal palace and some other artefacts.'

In July 2017, this once expansive historical location looked like an abandoned building site, with fragments of shattered history – cuneiform writing and *lamassu* manes

– reduced to heaps. Abdullah,²⁷ a local resident and fighter with Nimrud Liwa (a unit of Iraq's anti-IS Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) Force), which guarded the site in the months following liberation, echoed Abu Jassem's sentiments: 'The best stuff was smuggled to Europe and sold. Local residents [who stayed in the area held by IS] told us that, after IS came, they were forbidden from entering the site but they watched IS fighters stealing truckloads of antiquities from here,' he said. 'Stuff from here is worth millions of dollars, and IS took it and then destroyed the big pieces.'²⁸

Nimrud antiquities are indeed of high value. In 2018, an Assyrian relief from Nimrud, dating from the reign of King Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), sold at Christie's auction house for \$31 million, making it the second most expensive ancient artwork ever sold at auction. It was a sale the Iraqi Antiquities Recovery Department had tried, without success, to stop from going ahead.²⁹

Abdullah indicated an area near where an Assyrian king and queen were reportedly buried, saying: 'Underneath here is an archaeological site and experts say it's full of treasure. A lot of gold was found there before, underground in boxes.'

After demolishing extant structures, IS then had a year and a half, before the area was liberated, to potentially further excavate at the site for such treasures. According to local archaeologist Leila Salih, before IS occupied the area, only 30 per cent of the site had been excavated.³⁰

Due to the extent of the destruction at Nimrud, which Hazeem said was between 85 and 90 per cent destroyed (being one of the sites hardest hit by IS), archaeologists say they don't yet know what illegal excavations IS carried out there, or what additional treasures they might have taken, after looting on-site exhibits. However, any such newly excavated items would have the future sales advantage of being previously unknown and unrecorded.

'One of the biggest problems we face with world auctions is recovering artefacts stolen from sites. These are not numbered, like the statues in Iraqi museums,' said former head of Iraq's Antiquities Recovery Department, Muthanna Abed Dawed. 'Auction houses ask us to prove artefacts are Iraqi, even though everyone knows they are Iraqi, and often know the exact place they are from, but items from illegal digging are undocumented.'³¹

Most illicit antiquities trafficking is dealt with by organized crime.



TRACING THE FLOWS OF ANTIQUITIES STOLEN BY EXTREMISTS



Moving artefacts to neighbouring countries

In a 2016 Strategic Security Analysis report, Dr Christina Schori Liang writes: 'IS has become the richest and most violent terrorist group in modern history, with an estimated wealth in 2015 of over USD 2 billion from oil sales, smuggling, sale of stolen goods, extortion, and looted banks and antiquities.'³²

Liang estimates that, of IS's annual income, deemed to be between US\$2.35 and 2.68 billion, antiquities trafficking and [in-state] taxation accounted for US\$20 million at the time of writing. Other contemporary reports suggest that an additional alleged revenue source was from taxing smuggled antiquities. 'Although it might be impossible to show a direct link between the ISIL and the sale of a specific artefact, ISIL makes money in two ways from antiquities, both through selling looted artefacts and taxing traffickers moving items through ISIL-held territory.'³³

There has been some criticism of media claims that IS made huge sums of money from the antiquities trade, and questioning of unproven figures, but, according to experts, the terrorist group undoubtedly made money from this trade, although the real figures will probably never be proven.³⁴ Regardless, to make money from looted antiquities, IS had to move them outside Iraq towards global marketplaces and collectors, which is where their real value could be unlocked.

As a designated terrorist entity, IS relied heavily on black-market trade with neighbouring countries, a trade in which antiquities appear to have played an important role. IS did not believe in borders and, during the time they held territory in Iraq and Syria, the border between the two countries was largely open, meaning movement of goods that would be deemed smuggling under normal circumstances, under IS control, became merely trade.

◀ An artist reproduces a sculpture destroyed by Islamic State at the archaeological site of Nimrud. © Sabah Arar/AFP via Getty Images

During Islamic State's time, stolen artefacts were sold and exchanged at the border.

For example, an Iraqi surgeon forced to work in IS hospitals for three years (who gave his name only as Dr Mohamed) said most medical supplies for Mosul had to be imported into Iraq via the black market, but explained that this was 'normalized' under IS.

'There was normal trade between Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Not with the Syrian government but with [other groups] who stole drugs from Syrian hospitals, health centres and pharmacies. When our medical supplies ran out, IS traded to get more,' he said. Although Dr Mohamed said he did not know the intricacies of these trade systems, it is possible that antiquities could have played a part in IS trading, possibly by means of a barter system, as the group had limited ways of generating funds inside the state itself.

'During Islamic State's time, stolen artefacts were sold and exchanged at the border,' said Culture Minister Dr Hamdani. 'There was cooperation between terrorists and smugglers. Smugglers find a way to take the artefacts out of the country, and terrorists control borders, so they support each other.'

FLOWS OF ARTEFACTS TO TURKEY VIA SYRIA

According to Juboori, the Iraqi border was open for IS to exploit because northern Syria was part of their so-called state, except for the eastern Kurdish region. 'IS didn't believe in borders, so they could put antiquities in trucks and take them to Gaziantep [in Turkey]. Whenever there's war, there are smugglers – to deal in oil, people, money or art. ... Some smugglers are interested in looted archaeology, some in domestic [goods].'

Although no one whom the author interviewed had concrete evidence of the specific details of the onward flow of the antiquities stolen from northern Iraq, Iraqi archaeology experts point to Turkey as the principal destination outside IS-held territory and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon. For Hazeem, the route along the supply chain appears to be self-evident. 'No evidence is needed. The borders were open to Turkey. ... It's clear to everyone what happened,' he said, explaining that the route in to Iraq for militants was the same route used to smuggle out stolen artefacts. 'All the antiquities went the reverse way, to Turkey.' The flow of antiquities, Hazeem said, confirming that this is common information, went from Iraq via Syria to Turkey on their onward journey to the end markets.

This alleged route for antiquities is supported by IS documents, including one issued by the Aleppo Province's Diwan al-Rikaz, which stated: 'All antiquities, moved statues and unprocessed gold bullions are to be confiscated in the event that they are being passed through the border areas towards Turkey.'³⁵ The document suggests that some civilians in Syria were also looting historic sites (although no one the author interviewed confirmed that this happened in IS's Iraqi territory), and supports the notion that IS was keen to keep control over the movement and trade of looted antiquities, including those they had not been responsible for taking themselves.

Key evidence that artefacts IS had taken from Mosul were later transferred to Syria emerged when a haul of hundreds of items were recovered in Syria by American forces, following a 2015 US-led attack on the home of senior IS member Abu Sayyaf.³⁶

‘The Abu Sayyaf case is important. The US killed him in Syria and he had with him many of our items, which the US government sent back to Iraq. We received 483 items in total, in 2015, which are now here in the museum,’ said the head of the legal division of Iraq’s Antiquities Recovery Department, Ali al-Taib. ‘Abu Sayyaf was IS’s head of finance, so this is very important evidence showing the illegal trading of Iraqi antiquities funded terrorists and terrorist groups.’

For Dawed, this case is further evidence that IS were trading antiquities. ‘When the US found the artefacts [in the possession of Abu Sayyaf], it showed he was selling them in Iraq and Syria to fund terrorist activities.’ This runs counter to what IS had portrayed in the media and to the world – that they had destroyed them. The country had lost countless Iraqi artefacts that had been smuggled out of Iraq and sold on world markets, Dawed said.

In Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, the general director of the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Archaeology and Heritage, Dr Abdullah Khorsheed Qader, corroborated the direction of the trade route: ‘Here in Kurdistan, we are very close to Mosul but we had closed borders during IS’s time, so nothing could come in, but IS had open borders with Syria and Turkey. All things, including antiquities, have gone through Turkey.’

At a meeting of international archaeologists, Qader had asked a Turkish participant why Turkey had not blocked the roads during the IS occupation, to prevent stolen antiquities being moved outside Iraq and into the global marketplace. The reply came: ‘What can be done? Even now, there are human organs being smuggled across that border.’

During the period of IS control, civilians had been forbidden from asking questions, Hazeem said, which had further confounded efforts by the Nineveh Antiquities Directorate to research what had really happened to the stolen antiquities, as they received differing reports from civilians.

Antiquities traded among transnational criminal networks

Some artefacts looted by IS in Iraq and also Syria are currently circulating on the black market, including among transnational crime networks that operate in illicit markets other than antiquities. On the lower rungs of such criminal networks, items may change hands several times in and around the Middle East or Europe, before they are transferred to organized-criminal networks specializing in antiquities trafficking and, from there, to private collectors or traders, at which stage they finally enter the mainstream global markets. Maria Minana, associate

programme specialist at the Movable Heritage and Museums division of UNESCO, said the same networks that deal in drug smuggling would also sometimes traffic antiquities using existing routes and networks.

An Iraqi negotiator and people smuggler named Ali,³⁷ who has since 2015 been helping smuggle Yazidi women and children kidnapped by IS and other extremist groups, and has formed functional relationships with mid to senior level IS militants, said he had been offered antiquities for sale by terrorists. Ali showed the author photos and video footage from WhatsApp conversations with members of IS and al-Qaeda offshoot Al-Nusra Front in Syria's Idlib Province, featuring items he had been offered for sale in 2017.

Among these images were ancient Christian manuscripts, some with gold-plated covers, for which Ali said huge sums of money were being asked. Video footage showed ancient gold coins with the current owner running his fingers through them. A contact with close associations in the people-smuggling world, who also saw the footage, said that a people smuggler in Greece had bought either the same stash of golden coins or one that looked remarkably similar for US\$2 million in 2017.³⁸

This tallies with comments made by archaeologist Michael Danti to *The New Yorker* in 2015 to the effect that he had seen 'looted antiquities marketed directly to potential buyers via social networks, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat'.³⁹ The author of the report pointed out that, 'Whereas auction houses and antiquities dealers worry about paperwork and provenance, the social marketplace reaches a class of potential buyers with less scrutiny and greater anonymity.'⁴⁰

Ali was being offered objects by individual IS members, who were looking to generate funds towards the end of IS's hegemony, most likely to help them pay for themselves to be smuggled out of the last bastions of IS territory. Although Ali said he did not purchase any items and that eventually his contacts stopped offering them, his case is an example of how antiquities were being moved, in 2017, along a supply chain from IS to civilian criminal networks, and shows how some looted antiquities were traded at lower levels – from terrorist to smuggler.

► An Iraqi soldier examines archaeological findings in a tunnel dug by Islamic State in Mosul near the tomb of the prophet Nabi Yunis. © Aris Messinis/AFP via Getty Images





It is the responsibility of a buyer to confirm the proper provenance of a piece of art or an antiquity.

Such lower rungs of organized-crime networks were crucial in creating a distance between stolen antiquities and their terrorist suppliers, and were key to enable artefacts to be smuggled out of Iraq, or Syria, using existing routes and networks, so they could eventually reach specialist antiquities traffickers or more lucrative marketplaces in the West. At the point when antiquities left the hands of IS and entered smuggling networks – whether or not they specialized in dealing with antiquities – they entered another world of organized crime, not necessarily one directly connected to terrorism. If the people smuggler based in Greece had indeed bought the same haul of coins shown in the video, it becomes possible to envisage how stolen antiquities were moved out of Middle Eastern countries into Europe.

‘Generally, by the time things turn up, the criminals are well out of it. They’ve made their money and are gone, and, because of the passage of time, owners are often genuinely innocent,’ said James Ratcliffe, director of recoveries at the world’s largest database of stolen art, the Art Loss Register. He cited the recent case of an ancient Egyptian golden sarcophagus looted in 2011 and sold, in 2017, to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. The sarcophagus, with an estimated value of \$4 million, was returned to Egypt in September 2019, after being seized by the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office from the Metropolitan Museum, where it was on display.

According to the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, the sarcophagus had been stolen in October 2011 in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution. ‘It was then smuggled out of Egypt and transported through the United Arab Emirates to Germany, where it was restored, and to France, where it was sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in July 2017.’⁴¹ The case of this sarcophagus is one example of the complex routes and multiple changes of hand that characterize the modus operandi of those who traffic illicit antiquities, and shows the extent to which European countries are, at times, complicit in the trade.

‘The high-profit business of smuggling and trafficking antiquities has been around for centuries. But it is the responsibility of a buyer to confirm the proper provenance of a piece of art or antiquity,’ explained the special agent in charge for Homeland Security Investigations, New York, Peter C Fitzhugh.⁴²

Trafficking high-value antiquities: Networks and laundering

Although some small items, or those held by individual IS members may move through the lower echelons of organized-criminal networks, according to international organizations specializing in combating antiquities trafficking, high-value artefacts would need to be moved into more specialized organized-crime networks in order to reach collectors and international marketplaces.

‘When illicit antiquities leave Iraq, mostly they go into organized-criminal networks because the hardest part [of the trade] is to move an antiquity into the



market, so they need to know the illicit network to reach the marketplace,’ said INTERPOL’s Catesi. ‘When you [are dealing with] important archaeological objects with values of millions [of euros], you need the correct dealers and collectors, and this is very high-level serious organized crime. You can sell something small online as an individual but if the value is €50 million, you can’t just put it on [an online marketplace] – you need to propose the correct object to the correct buyer, and this always goes through organized crime.’

At the highest level, organized criminals dealing with illicit antiquities also need to have senior-level connections with key organizations and individuals in the antiquities trade, said Catesi. This usually precludes looters themselves from making direct sales to high-value end markets further downstream in the chain, such as collectors or auction houses, forcing them to rely on organized-criminal networks to sell the stolen antiquities.

‘The problem is, even at the top of the market, not enough questions are being asked,’ said Ratcliffe. ‘Organized, professional criminals are lying to buyers. They’re not stupid people who are selling, they are organized and intelligent, and can provide documents and evidence to support [the artefact’s legitimacy and provenance] – all of which we see right at the top of the market.’ He also said that, although a lot of high-level antiquities trading is linked to organized crime, a blind eye has been widely turned to this in global markets.

The process of looted antiquities changing hands, sometimes multiple times, can be crucial to gaining legitimacy because, once the artefacts are transferred to

The Nineveh Antiquities Directorate has recovered over 100 items in and around Mosul that were stolen by IS.

© Tom Westcott

*Valuable antiquities
are moving illegally
into Europe along
the same routes
as refugees.*

transnational criminal networks specializing in antiquities trafficking, complex processes of creating fake authentication and provenance can commence.

Falsifying an item's provenance can involve producing a series of receipts that show the artefact has been 'legitimately' bought and sold on the legal market, which may start at an antique or junk shop. Each time the artefact is then sold on, it has a receipt. Other provenance documentation is forged by networks of organized criminals around the world, in Middle Eastern countries, including the UAE and Israel, and as far afield as Japan, according to Ratcliffe. Such fake documents enable buyers to prove that an artefact was bought in good faith and, for sellers, that it was sold in good faith. According to Art Loss Register staff and Iraqi officials, 'in good faith' is the principal line of defence used when artefacts on the market are flagged as being of dubious provenance.

For antiquities looted by IS, this process of 'laundering' items is crucial, as it enables artefacts to be distanced from the group – a step that is essential to avoid salespeople or collectors falling foul of authorities for funding terrorism, a widely prosecutable worldwide offence.

Under UN legislation, since 2015, no antiquities from Iraq or Syria should be offered for sale without genuine provenance documentation as clear proof that they had been taken out of the countries decades earlier. After IS started targeting cultural sites, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 2199, revising extant legislation (UNESCO Resolution 1483) to impose an import ban on all cultural property originating in Iraq and Syria.⁴³ This resolution stepped up pressure on member state countries by acknowledging the link between the looting of cultural objects and the financing of terrorist entities, including IS and al-Qaeda, according to UNESCO's Minana. 'The moment [the sale of cultural property originating in Iraq and Syria] was linked to national security, attitudes changed and the art market response in member states was positive,' she said. 'There is still a lot of work to be done but we've seen positive changes, and some art markets, dealers and auction houses have been more attentive [to provenance].'

That Iraqi artefacts looted between 2014 and 2017 might be associated with IS would make these items problematic to trade or exhibit. 'If artefacts from museums had been looted under IS, it will be hard for people to hold onto them because of the terrorist links, and it would also be difficult for people to exhibit or sell them,' said Ratcliffe. 'We're talking about terrorist financing. This would bring heavy action, for example in London.'

However, as Catesi noted, the illicit antiquities trade relies on traders and buyers having few moral qualms about artefacts' origins, as well as on their readiness to accept bogus provenance documents.

Looking at these examples, it is possible to build a picture of the ways IS moved looted Iraqi antiquities outside the country. These appear to potentially include sales or exchanges enacted at border areas, most likely the border between Syria and Turkey, and, for high-value artefacts, the transfer of items into transnational organized-criminal networks specializing in antiquities trafficking. As IS lost territory


and militants were dispersed, individuals started offering antiquities for sale to other networks of smugglers, working in different areas of organized crime.

If we accept allegations that IS was taking advice from foreign experts, there remains the possibility that some particular artefacts were stolen to order, especially in the early days of the IS domination of Iraq, and it is possible these were moved out of the country via an alternative, unknown, route, facilitated by organized-criminal networks. As we have seen, IS spent considerable time at Mosul Museum and Nimrud. And, as Ratcliffe said: 'There are definitely collectors out there who do not care [about provenance]. It's the minority, but they have money. Some would rather have something amazing even if it's from a bad source.'

In addition to suspect artefacts being trafficked from the Middle East into the hands of Western traders via organized-criminal networks, there are also cases of refugees fleeing to Europe having been arrested with antiquities, according to Dawed. Iraqi artefacts have been found in Turkey, Italy, Bulgaria and Serbia. 'These were transit countries used by refugees travelling to the EU, and police have found items with refugees, who were moving the stuff from place to place,' said Dawed. 'For example, Bulgarian police have confiscated 122 pieces from refugees. We're not certain yet whether they are all Iraqi pieces or if some are from Syria, but we are working on this.'⁴⁴

It is not known whether such refugees had, or have, any connection with IS, were being used by other organized-criminal networks as mules, or if they had personally looted or purchased the items. However, the phenomenon does tally with archaeologist Danti's claim cited in *The New Yorker* that, according to his sources on the ground, 'valuable antiquities are moving illegally into Europe along the same routes as refugees'.⁴⁵

WHERE
ARE THE
ARTEFACTS
NOW?



Although there is considerable anecdotal evidence that members of IS and other extremist groups in the region have been involved in illegal trading of cultural property, it has been a challenge for researchers to accurately report on or assess the level of looting and smuggling of artefacts by IS. Because thefts took place in the closed environment of a country occupied by a terrorist entity, the only people who really know what happened are IS members themselves. Hazeem's interview with one of the IS members involved in the destruction in Mosul Museum, whom he described as a 'simple person', indicates that only senior IS personnel, and probably comparatively few of them, were party to the intricacies of IS's involvement in looting antiquities.

These challenges continue to this day. The full extent of what has been stolen is still unclear and the condition of artefacts seen to be damaged on video, but now missing, is not known. The quantities and types of artefacts looted by IS's illicit excavations of historic sites is also unknown. However, given the time frame that IS had to work in (in Nineveh, for example, approximately two and a half years), the extent of missing items and evidence of archaeological excavations, it is likely that the terror group was able to move a considerable quantity of artefacts out of Iraq.

Furthermore, it is possible that some stolen items that remained inside Iraq's borders have been lost or destroyed in areas where IS suffered defeat, which often came about with considerable use of airpower.

Not all antiquities stolen by IS left the country, however. Several hundred items have been recovered within Iraq, mostly by Iraqi forces who, during and after the liberation battle, routinely checked civilian homes commandeered by IS and searched vehicles at checkpoints, looking for rogue fighters or improvised explosive devices. Others have been found by displaced Mosul civilians returning to formerly IS-occupied homes.⁴⁶

◀ An ancient manuscript found by a civilian in a market in December 2019 and returned to the Nineveh Antiquities Directorate. © Tom Westcott



Fragment of a Nimrud frieze, showing jackhammer marks, found in a civilian home by Iraqi security forces.

© Tom Westcott

Recovered artefacts, returned to the Nineveh Directorate of Antiquities, are logged and stored in a dedicated storeroom. Mostly from Mosul Museum, among these is a valuable fragment of a Nimrud relief frieze, bearing the scars of the jackhammer with which it was apparently extracted. Many recoveries have been unwieldy or delicate objects, not easy to safely transport, which is possibly why they were not taken outside Iraq.

Although Mosul Museum staff said recoveries have dwindled since 2017, a rare manuscript – an embossed and leather-bound 600-year-old Islamic tome – was returned as recently as December 2019. A civilian spotted it on sale in a Mosul market. Tucked inside the pages, he found a stamp from Iraq's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage on a torn-off page fragment, so he commandeered the book and returned it to the Directorate of Antiquities.

Pieces are occasionally still being recovered in other northern Iraqi provinces. In mid-January 2020, local news portal KirkukNow announced on Twitter that security forces in the city of Kirkuk had arrested three people carrying 38 artefacts originating from Mosul.⁴⁷ Accompanying photos showed a range of figurines, metal jewellery and cylinder seals. While several appeared in good condition, indicating they could be museum pieces, others, including ancient jewellery, were rusty suggesting these could be the spoils of illegal IS excavations. Such cases show that some items stolen by IS remain in Iraq.

Beyond Iraq's borders, experts say, some IS-looted antiquities are likely to be in storage, as it is common for looted artefacts to be held in storage for lengthy periods of time. Storing items this way allows time for media attention to subside, for people to forget, or even for a new generation of experts to take roles, who would not necessarily have the same intricate knowledge of missing antiquities as their predecessors. Long-term storage could be arranged by private individuals or collectors, or more organized systems.



A screenshot from news portal KirkukNow.

According to Catesi, some IS-looted artefacts may well have found their way into special storage facilities, which would be another indication that IS were working with organized-crime networks specializing in trafficking high-value antiquities.

'We don't know where artefacts from Mosul Museum have gone. They could be somewhere in depositories waiting to be sold; they may have already been sold, anywhere, because collectors are everywhere,' he said. Antiquities trafficking is a crime that demands patience, he said. 'It takes time. [These antiquities] are somewhere, waiting. Everyone is looking for them. Anything and everything is possible, but we don't have the answers for the moment.'

As well as allowing time for experts to leave posts or for the media and the general public to forget, Culture Minister Hamdani noted that storing an item could also increase its value.

With artefacts of dubious provenance, storage could be decades-long, said current head of Iraq's Antiquities Recovery Department, Waffa Hassan, who explained that some artefacts stolen from Iraq in the 1990s were only now appearing in international auctions. The Art Loss Register's Ratcliffe supported this, saying that current markets reflected practices carried out by looters decades earlier.

'We have to wait because we don't know when these objects will appear on the market. Nazi stolen artworks appeared after 75 years. Usually [looted objects] are sold to collectors through illicit sales, go into private collections and appear again when the collector dies, and we have to hope objects will be sold then,' said Catesi, adding that this made it vital for information to be passed to INTERPOL at the earliest opportunity.

It appears likely that some of the larger and more recognizable items looted by IS in Iraq are either already in private collections, or being held in storage facilities or unknown hiding places. And it could take years or even decades for such antiquities to reappear on international marketplaces.

A man in military-style clothing, including a tan cap with a patch and a dark jacket, is kneeling on the floor of a damaged building. He is looking down at something on the ground. A rifle is visible behind him. The background shows a doorway and a wall with arched windows. The floor is littered with debris, including a plastic bottle and a white plastic bag. The text "SHORT-TERM ACTS OF CRIME, LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS" is overlaid in large white letters.

SHORT-TERM ACTS OF CRIME, LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS



There is substantial evidence that members of IS looted antiquities from Iraqi heritage sites to sell to illicit trade networks. This can be viewed as short-term organized-crime activity, largely carried out over just two and a half years, but it has long-term implications for a range of transnational organized criminal networks, through whose structures the stolen antiquities most likely continue to move.

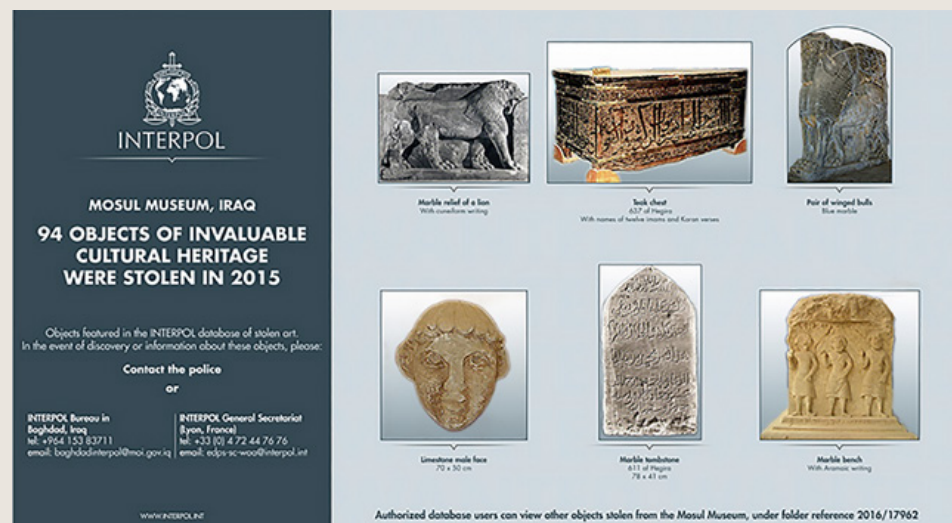
The lower levels of these networks comprise smugglers focused on other activities, such as human smuggling or drug trafficking, but who have the network contacts to be able to shift antiquities from the source country across borders to neighbouring countries. Most likely, such smugglers are either paid to transport items from point A to point B, or engage through speculative purchasing of, for example, gold coins, which could, in the future, be sold on for a profit. Such criminal networks not only facilitate the movement of antiquities into other countries, but also generate a distance between the illicit goods and IS, which is crucial to reduce the perception that antiquities are associated with the funding of terrorism. Further up the ladder are organized criminals who specialize in antiquities trafficking, who, according to Catesi, are an essential part of the chain for trading high-value looted antiquities on the global market.

The real value of Iraqi antiquities lies in global marketplaces, which is where, eventually, antiquities looted by IS are likely to end up. International organizations, such as INTERPOL, play a crucial role in helping to combat this illicit global trade, including specifically Iraqi antiquities targeted by IS.

In 2015, the International Council of Museums produced a document titled *Emergency Red List of Iraqi Cultural Objects at Risk*, updated from an original 2003 leaflet. Illustrating 'the categories or types of cultural items that are most likely to be

◀ An Iraqi soldier gathers fragments of an artefact in Mosul Museum, just days after the museum was liberated by Iraqi forces in March 2017. © Tom Westcott

An INTERPOL document detailing items stolen from Mosul Museum.



illegally traded', the red list states: 'The fight against illicit trafficking in cultural goods requires the enhancement of legal instruments and the use of practical tools disseminating information, raising public awareness, and preventing illegal exportation.'⁴⁸

INTERPOL, too, prepared a poster in 2016 showing six examples of '94 objects of invaluable cultural heritage' stolen under IS, in an attempt to raise awareness of thefts.⁴⁹ However, one of the six items shown, a wooden Islamic tomb covering, was not actually stolen but remains in situ in the museum, and two others – a marble relief of a lion and a pair of *lamassu* – were severely damaged; their fragments are in the museum. Such discrepancies were doubtless a consequence of inaccurate information circulated at a time when Mosul was under the control of IS, but shows that even information currently held by INTERPOL, one of the main institutional impediments to antiquities trafficking, is partially inaccurate and probably incomplete.

Both INTERPOL and the Art Loss Register hold internationally available databases, listing artefacts stolen from Iraq (including some taken by IS), which auction houses and collectors should check, but such lists urgently need updating to include missing antiquities from Nimrud and Hatra, as well as an updated version listing missing items from Mosul Museum.

There appears to be general ignorance surrounding the thefts of antiquities perpetrated by IS. For example, staff at the Art Loss Register in London said they were unaware of the extent of IS looting from Mosul Museum, and would welcome receiving a comprehensive list of missing, presumed stolen, items. In such a climate of global ignorance, there is a serious risk that antiquities looted by IS will be traded in international marketplaces in the forthcoming decades.

Urgent work needs to be done therefore to publicize more widely the nature of the looting carried out by IS in Iraq, to raise awareness among collectors, traders and auction houses, and to ensure that, during the forthcoming years and decades, items originating from Iraq, even those with provenance documentation, are properly and carefully cross-checked.

In Iraq, antiquities authorities should, as a matter of priority, prepare comprehensive lists detailing missing artefacts known or believed to have been stolen during the IS years. Staff at Mosul Museum should prepare a new document clearly listing every missing item, believed stolen, as the last one received by INTERPOL was from 2016, and, as mentioned, it contains discrepancies.

Where records might have been destroyed or are incomplete, local experts should be employed to urgently compile lists, preferably with photographic evidence, based on their own knowledge, former records or academic studies. Catesi said, with regard to missing Iraqi antiquities, that one of the biggest problems faced was a lack of inventories and, crucially, an absence of photographic records. He noted: 'When people who know [about these antiquities] die, the information will disappear.' Efforts should be made to encourage local experts to visit remote sites, such as Hatra, to establish and list what was stolen.

Such lists would serve as long-standing documents that could make an important contribution to stopping future trafficking and sales of Iraqi antiquities looted under IS.

A more significant problem is posed by antiquities that IS looted through illicit excavations because these are unrecorded. Given the time frame and freedom that IS had, excavating historical sites with impunity and using any methods they chose, it is likely that such spoils are considerable.

Iraq has a long-standing problem with illegal digging at archaeological sites, with suspect spoils routinely appearing on global marketplaces. It has a concurrent problem with recovering such items, especially those with, albeit suspect, authenticity documents. Given that it is possible for many additional artefacts stolen by IS to start circulating in the markets, the need to raise public awareness that Iraqi antiquities offered for sale could originate from IS – and, therefore, that purchases could be linked to funding terrorism – is crucial.

To help combat this marketing, efforts should continue to firmly implement UNESCO Resolution 2199, which prevents trade in any artefacts illegally removed from Iraq since 1990, across participating member states.⁵⁰

Ongoing work by international crime-prevention agencies should be ramped up, with a specific focus on items potentially stolen by IS, including an attempt to crack down on countries known to have relaxed laws with regard to artefacts of dubious provenance, such as the UAE and Israel, using the fact that IS, a known terrorist entity, is associated with such items, to tighten up regulations pertaining to antiquities trading. There should also be greater efforts to crack down on dubious authentication documents, which help 'launder' antiquities and enable organized-criminal networks to transfer objects from illegal black markets to legitimate marketplaces.

More awareness-raising needs to be done inside Iraq, including educating people on the cultural, rather than financial, value of preserving local heritage. Although it is illegal for civilians to possess antiquities, stolen artefacts continue to appear in markets or be seized by security forces. More work is also needed to educate people, especially the young, on the cultural value of preserving Iraq's heritage for future generations. A medical student studying at Mosul University, for example, admitted that he 'couldn't care less about a bunch of old stones' – an attitude that

There is a serious risk that antiquities looted by IS will be traded in global marketplaces in the forthcoming decades.

an archaeology lecturer at Mosul University, Dr Hussein Zahir Hammoud, said, was prevalent and urgently needed addressing.

'Iraqis don't know the value of archaeology sites. People see them as a way of making money, and it is only through changing this mentality that we can stop this,' he said. Hammoud is working on a project to teach young people the importance of Iraqi heritage, and such local initiatives deserve international support and funding, as they can make an important contribution towards helping protect the future of Iraq's antiquities.

According to Art Loss Register's Ratcliffe, artefacts from the western Asiatic region, which includes Iraq, are currently in demand, fuelling existing trade. 'That's what the trade wants and that's what looters want, and the Western Asiatic is a large area,' he said.

For UNESCO's Minana, changing the attitude of the art markets, at the end of the chain of transnational organized crime specializing in antiquities trafficking, is crucial. 'If there were no demand, there would be no illicit trade,' she said. 'We need preventive work in source countries and also with collectors – even collectors on online platforms. With online trading, everything has changed and [sales] have become much easier, because it's very difficult to control what's sold on online platforms. A lot of awareness-raising still needs to be done.'

Although international institutions have a crucial role to play, awareness-raising should also extend to the general global populace because, as long as people remain ignorant of the full extent of IS's looting of Iraqi antiquities, sales of artefacts could well continue on online platforms. Comprehensive lists of potentially looted items should be circulated globally and made readily available to ordinary citizens.

'Objects coming from this zone should not be bought or sold, especially archaeological items without clear certificates of provenance,' said Catesi. 'People should check the INTERPOL database to understand if an object [has sound] provenance and should always ask about certificates. Everyone has a role in this fight. It's something we can do now, for the future.'

It may take many years, or even decades, for Iraqi antiquities looted under IS to surface on international marketplaces but, in the meantime, crucial work can be done now to help ensure that the spoils of this ruinous example of 21st-century organized crime, carried out under the guise of Islamic ideology, are properly addressed and not allowed to slip under the radar.

NOTES

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