



## Fuelling the Insurgency? Antiquities in Iraq By Robert Seddon

Reports that antiquities are being illegally smuggled out of Iraq are wearisomely familiar. In 2003, following the widely publicised ransacking of the National Museum in Baghdad, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) published an Emergency Red List, designed to help dealers and officials to spot potentially trafficked objects. This year an updated version will be released, joining 2013's Emergency Red List for Syria. The catalyst is ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and its attempt to establish a Caliphate by force of arms. Fighting needs funds, and there is evidence that ISIS's funding sources include antiquities trafficking. The trafficking networks, however, were there already.

Before ISIS, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) gained funding from the illicit antiquities trade. Meanwhile, the Mahdi Army reportedly claimed that the trade was moral if the money was spent on guns or building mosques. Iraqi security forces have spent years playing cat and mouse with both paramilitaries and organised criminal groups.

How much ISIS makes from antiquities trafficking is disputed. In fact, the fog of war ensures that a great deal remains uncertain and unverifiable. There are reports of both the smuggling and the destruction of antiquities, but not all of the stories about ISIS's iconoclasm have stood up to scrutiny. It also isn't clear whether ISIS is engaging in trafficking itself, or taking payments from traffickers who operate within the territory its aspiring state controls. One thing we can be sure of, however, is that ISIS is not acting alone. The trade in illicit antiquities is global. Whether objects are looted by impoverished locals or by criminal gangs or under the direction of paramilitaries, they subsequently pass through the hands of international middlemen, and are frequently 'laundered' onto the legitimate market before they find their ultimate purchasers.

In the context of antiquities, 'looting' most often means illegal excavation (although ISIS has also been

accused of trading in stolen objects). It is by no means unique to the Middle East, or to conflict zones; Italy, for example, has its *tombaroli*, robbers of ancient burial sites. The standard moral arguments against looting are largely unrelated to paramilitaries' funding: they involve looters' destruction of the archaeological record, or the cultural impoverishment of nations in which antiquities originated when they pass clandestinely into collections in wealthier countries. In many parts of the world, the causes of looting have nothing to do with insurgency and a great deal to do with a need for money (corruption often compromises whatever oversight exists: some officials are part of the problem, instead of a solution). Not surprisingly, some purchasers of potentially illicit antiquities regard looting as a victimless crime.

The link between insurgency and the illicit antiquities trade is controversial, partly because its scale is hard to estimate, but also because this link represents only a portion of the global market. As the legal scholar Derek Fincham recently pointed out, framing a heritage crime as a peacekeeping or counter-terrorism problem might help to gain politicians' attention, and to obtain funds to clamp down on the illegal trade in order to choke insurgents' income—but if ISIS and other such groups were removed, the international black market in antiquities would continue to exist.

Whether the aim is to stop insurgents or to stop looting, the prescription is roughly the same: since Iraq's government is in no position to protect its archaeological sites adequately, there should be action to affect the demand side of the market, making it harder to trade in antiquities with murky histories when they surface on the visible market. That much is old news. The attention ISIS is presently receiving raises two questions: firstly, whether it will invigorate politicians' will to crack down on the illegal trade (at least while ISIS looms large in their thoughts). Secondly, whether a stronger link will be



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forged in the public's mind between illicit antiquities and dangerous paramilitaries, leading to fewer potential buyers for objects with uncertain histories. The answers to both questions will partly depend on how far those advocating tightened oversight of the antiquities trade are prepared to go in associating looted artefacts with the problems of insurgency.

Meanwhile, ISIS has declared an Islamic State. Whereas the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad was and remains a centre of Mesopotamian archaeological heritage, the newly self-proclaimed Caliphate looks to a sense of history and identity which is above all else doctrinal. The former institution reflects the Iraqi state's political need to hold together the country's factional interests, including both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, by appealing to a shared and ancient history and culture (although in practice, its management has long been under sectarian pressures). The latter is a product of that same untamed sectarianism: its jihad is explicitly a Sunni one. There is consequently no cause for wonder if ISIS sees the antiquities of the region as commodities at best, to be sold on like oil or like the 'blood diamonds' that fuel conflict in parts of Africa. The pre-Islamic history of Mesopotamian civilisation is not part of the story it wants to tell.

The role antiquities can play in shoring up nation-states' governmental legitimacy is itself a source of controversy, whether the nation in question is Iraq or Greece or China. That the Iraqi state would rather display its archaeological treasures to the world than sell them is to its credit, but does not necessarily reflect much more reverence for science, or for cultural history, than is found among traffickers. In this respect too, ISIS is not exceptional. Every state or would-be state tells stories about its origins and why it should exist, and every one of these stories emphasises some details at the expense of the less convenient ones.

It remains to be seen whether other states will see ISIS as a reason to crack down harder on the illicit trade with toughened regulation of the antiquities market—and if so, whether the outcome will be a stop-gap measure or a long-term change. It might be premature to bet against a new Emergency Red List circa 2025.

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