

How researchers can stop the plundering of cultural treasures

September 25 2017, by Phillip-André Baarøy



DIG HOLE: Satellite images of the ancient city of Mari in southeast Syria clearly show how the plundering of cultural artefacts leaves its mark. The image on the left is from 4 August 2011, while the image on the right was taken on 11 November 2014. Credit: DigitalGlobe | U.S. Department of State, NextView License | Analysis AAAS

Illicit trade in cultural artefacts destroys historical knowledge and finances terrorism. "Professionals have to say no to authenticating

cultural artefacts of questionable or dubious ownership history," says researcher Josephine Munch Rasmussen.

"Here is the artefact.

Håkon Roland from the Museum of Cultural History carefully presents a sword that is several thousand years old. It is from an important Bronze Age culture in Western Iran.

"The police seized the sword from a private person because they suspect that it was illegally removed from the country of origin. We will look after it until it is potentially returned to Iran," Roland says.

If the Iranian sword was illegally removed from the country of origin, this is far from being an isolated case. Illegal trade in cultural artefacts is a widespread problem.

Knowledge is lost

Looting is taking place right now in countries such as Iraq and Syria, Bolivia and Peru, Cambodia and China. Art and cultural artefacts are being stolen from archaeological sites and illegally transferred for sale on seemingly legal markets in wealthy countries. Important historical knowledge is lost forever.

"We lose an enormous amount of knowledge because of this," says Josephine Rasmussen.

According to the researcher, documented finds provide a completely different level of knowledge than individual artefacts without any other specific information.

"An individual artefact, for example a Roman coin, can be exciting for

collectors and numismatists, but if we don't know where it was found, the potential for it providing information is rather limited. If the coin has in fact an archaeological context from India, and not the Roman Empire, we lose important knowledge about contact and trade," she says.

Islamic State selling to the West

In addition to destroying the scientific basis for knowledge about previous cultures and societies, income from the illegal sale of cultural artefacts is used to finance acts of war.

Terrorist organisations, including IS, have been responsible for widespread plundering in Iraq and Syria and artefacts from these actions have ended up on illegal markets in Europe, the Arabian peninsula and the USA.

"IS has made a big show about their iconoclasm and wish to destroy all traces of other religious practices or historical eras. However, at the same time, the plundering and sale of artefacts from the areas they destroy are an important source of income," Rasmussen says.

Increasing awareness

Rasmussen wrote both her master's thesis and doctoral dissertation on the [illicit trade](#) in cultural artefacts.

She is part of a research group at the University of Oslo that received special praise from international researchers in the latest evaluation of humanistic research in Norway. Rasmussen and her colleagues were commended for having contributed to highlighting the problems with and raising awareness about the purchase and sale of cultural artefacts.

At the start of the 2000s, there was little focus from the police and decision-makers on putting a stop to the illegal [market](#). However, the situation is now completely different.

In 2007, Norway ratified UNESCO's 1970 convention that protects physical cultural artefacts from [illegal trade](#). The Norwegian cultural authorities, police and customs, and museums are working together to stop the illegal market.

Due to IS' income from plundering, the UN Security Council resolved in 2015 to instruct all member states to implement measures to prevent the illegal trade in cultural artefacts from Iraq and Syria.

"For various reasons, there has been an enormous increase in the focus on combating the illegal market and that is very pleasing," Rasmussen says.

Require evaluations from Professionals

At the same time, Rasmussen is of the view that professionals have the most important means of putting a stop to the market. The illegal trade of cultural artefacts is seldom punished. It is difficult to determine the legal status of an artefact.

When artefacts that have been stolen or plundered appear in the market, there will be little information that can link these to a specific place of origin or rightful owner. It is therefore also extremely difficult to prove that an individual artefact originates from, for example, an illegal excavation.



An attempt was made to illegally import this Buddha statue into Norway in 2011. This summer, Foreign Minister Børge Brende returned the sculpture to Myanmar from where it was originally stolen. Credit: Museum of Cultural History, UiO/Ellen C. Holte

"An evaluation from a professional is often a key factor when artefacts are sold." Professionals are therefore involved in influencing the market in a manner that many are probably not aware of," Rasmussen says.

"If an expert has vouched for the authenticity and cultural historical significance of an artefact, this will most often increase the sale value. Plundering will continue as long as there is demand for these types of artefacts in the art and antiquities market, but the market is also dependent on experts and professionals.

Professionals have to say no

Rasmussen calls for greater caution to be shown by institutions that are invited to work together with private collectors and market players, and for more ethical awareness from professionals who are used to evaluate artefacts that may be part of the illegal market.

"If the ownership history of an [artefact](#) is not clear and it cannot be proven that it was obtained in a legal manner, researchers should say no to evaluating it," she says.

Rasmussen understands that it may be difficult for a researcher to refuse to study something that appears to be of major interest. However, when something suddenly appears that seems too good to be true, it most often is.

"Typically, cultural artefacts without a documented track of ownership are either fakes, or they have been obtained through destructive plundering."

Difficult evaluations

Håkon Roland agrees that professionals play an important role in stopping the illegal market. He emphasises that the Museum of Cultural History follows international ethical guidelines and that professionals shall not evaluate artefacts when they are uncertain as to whether these were legally obtained.

At the same time, Roland admits that there can often be difficult tradeoffs:

"There are also grey areas. Sometimes we receive artefacts that will be melted down and destroyed if we do not accept them. We then end up with a tradeoff between preventing the loss of items that are of cultural historical value and being in breach of ethical guidelines," he says.

Provided by University of Oslo

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