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THE REAL VALUE OF THE ISIS ANTIQUITIES TRADE

BY BEN TAUB

New findings are shedding light on the ISIS antiquities trade, but they've often raised more questions than they've answered.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THAIER AL-SUDANI / REUTERS / LANDOV



One day this fall, at the Metropolitan, home to the largest art collection in the western hemisphere, the museum's director, Tom Campbell, welcomed a group of archeologists, collectors, dealers, numismatists, and counterterrorism officials. "The network of organizations represented here today are among the great guardians of ancient civilization," he said. They had gathered to hear a range of speakers, from the Deputy Secretary of State to a regulatory executive at eBay, discuss the looting and destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq. Campbell began with a summary of the last thirty-five hundred years of iconoclasm. Then, for nearly thirty seconds, he bowed his head in silence to honor Khaled al-Asaad, a Syrian archeologist born in 1934, whom ISIS fighters publicly beheaded for refusing to disclose the locations of Palmyra's hidden antiquities.

What ISIS hates, it destroys, and ancient artifacts are no exception. To erase pre-Islamic history, it has employed sledgehammers and drills at a museum in Mosul, explosives at Palmyra, and all of these weapons, plus jackhammers, power saws, and bulldozers, at Nimrud. In one video (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/26/isis-fighters-destroy-ancient-artefacts-mosul-museum-iraq>), a fighter explains that ISIS must smash "these statues and idols, these artifacts," because the Prophet Muhammad destroyed such things after conquering Mecca, nearly fourteen hundred years ago. "They became worthless to us even if they are worth billions of dollars," he adds. So, at the Met, many were puzzled when Andrew Keller, a soft-spoken senior official at the State Department, unveiled newly declassified documents proving that ISIS maintains a marginally profitable "antiquities division."

Keller's documents had been retrieved by U.S. Special Forces, in May, during a predawn raid that killed Abu Sayyaf, a high-ranking ISIS officer who occasionally hosted Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at his home in eastern Syria. (He also kept a Yazidi slave and an American hostage, Kayla Mueller (<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/who-killed-kayla-mueller>), who died in February.) Abu Sayyaf served ISIS as the director of oil-smuggling operations. The man in charge of trafficking antiquities for most of 2014 was described in a letter between militants as "a simpleton who can't manage the division." So, sometime late last year, Abu Sayyaf took on the simpleton's responsibilities in addition to his own. It

was a sensible acquisition; ISIS manages oil and antiquities under the same bureaucratic umbrella, the “Diwan al-Rikaz,” an archaic phrase that literally translates to “Department of Precious Things That Come Out of the Ground.”

In archeological terms, there are about twelve thousand years of precious things buried in Syrian ground. ISIS treats most of them as a natural resource, ripe for extraction and profit. A chart found in the raid shows that Abu Sayyaf dispatched investigation teams to identify places “that are anticipated to have precious things,” then licensed locals to excavate the sites with shovels or rented backhoes. Amid Syria’s wartime chaos, this arrangement offered a rare chance for civilians to earn some cash; anything they dug up was theirs to sell, though Abu Sayyaf collected a twenty-per-cent tax on behalf of the “state.” The percentage comes from an Islamic scripture denoting the caliph’s share of war booty and valuable minerals found within conquered territory.

There has been widespread speculation, echoed by government officials, that ISIS probably sells whatever it can and destroys large, famous treasures as a publicity stunt. To the contrary, the little evidence there is suggests that, on the issue of iconoclasm, ISIS is consistent. In a document procured by the analyst Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, the group warns of consequences for anyone caught “dealing in idolatrous antiquities and ephemeral statues,” and reports indicate that, even off camera, these rules have been enforced. Keller did not acknowledge that zealotry likely trumps profits, but he did reveal that when American troops ransacked Abu Sayyaf’s home, they found a large number of leftover artifacts—gold coins, silver dirhams, old beads, terra-cotta fragments, an ivory plaque, an ancient manuscript, and heavily corroded copper bracelets—mixed with fakes. Keller also said that a handful of receipts discovered on Abu Sayyaf’s hard drive show that, during his six-month tenure, the Syrian branch of the antiquities division collected at least two hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars in taxes—a notable sum, but hardly a drop in the billion dollars that ISIS amassed last year, according to State Department estimates.

Later that evening, a gruff senior government official named Robert Hartung announced that the “Rewards for Justice” program (tagline: “Stop a terrorist. Save lives.”) would offer up to five million dollars for information leading to the disruption of antiquities sales that benefit ISIS. Stemming the illicit antiquities trade, he said, would “disrupt the group’s ability to finance its operations and activities.” Shortly afterward, an ancient-art dealer named Randall Hixenbaugh took to the microphone to express his bewilderment at the government line. “It seems odd to me that we’re this concerned about this as a money stream,” he said. “Of course it’s a major concern for cultural heritage, but it seems to be probably among the smallest revenue streams that this criminal organization has.” There was a pause. A moderator from the State Department replied, “We’re aiming to cut off all their revenue streams, however small it may be, to try to stop their activity.”

With no apparent plan to quell the looting in Syria and Iraq, the government’s approach seems to be to scare or prosecute unscrupulous buyers. But Hixenbaugh argued that an “insatiable demand in the West” for looted Near Eastern antiquities

does not actually exist. “There are hundreds of thousands of legally acquired antiquities from Mesopotamia in the United States,” he said. “Palmyra reliefs are generally unpopular. They often go unsold at auction.” A reporter who writes about the art market was unimpressed with Abu Sayyaf’s hoard. He leaned over and whispered to me, “The idea that there’s a shadowy mass of collectors interested in purchasing crap that they can never sell again is absolutely ludicrous. Nobody wants esoteric, untraceable numismatics.”

There was a reception afterward in front of the Temple of Dendur, built two thousand years ago to honor a very different Isis—the Egyptian goddess of motherhood, nature, and magic. It is precisely the kind of structure ISIS would love to destroy. Standing before its sandstone gate, Hartung told me that he’d left something out of his presentation: the Rewards for Justice program also applies to oil smuggling, which accounts for hundreds of millions of dollars of ISIS revenue. When I asked a government spokesperson whether targeting illegal oil buyers was the real focus of the initiative, she said, “Shame on you!” and suggested that any Syrian antiquities left intact could play a part in reviving the country’s tourism industry after the war.

I later found Hixenbaugh, the antiquities dealer, standing near the floor-to-ceiling windows, sipping complimentary wine. He looked exasperated. He felt that some speakers had made “outlandish” appraisals. In a segment about the conference, CBS News reported (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-relying-on-smuggling-antiquities-to-fund-terror/>) that ISIS generated “hundreds of millions of dollars” from antiquities transactions, although that figure—which rivals the annual haul of antiquities sold legally throughout the entire world—was not mentioned onstage. “We’re looking at objects that are worth hundreds of dollars here,” Hixenbaugh told me. “When we say that these antiquities are worth millions of dollars, I think that prompts people to pick up shovels in eastern Syria. Are we not adding to the problem right now, by hyperbolic assessments of value?”

Last month, I sent photographs of the artifacts retrieved in the Abu Sayyaf raid to Rachael Goldman, a professor of ancient history at the College of New Jersey and a certified member of the Appraisers Association of America. Without being able to touch the artifacts, assigning an exact dollar figure is impossible, but Goldman came to the same cursory conclusions as Hixenbaugh. “The pieces I saw don’t have that kind of high value,” she told me. “I don’t know how you would come up with millions.” She added, “When you said to me, ‘I want you to look at these pictures,’ I was thinking of something akin to the Ishtar Gate, and what you’re showing is sort of, like, junk.” Beyond academia, she said, “the appeal for them is going to be very limited.”

A curator of ancient art at a prominent museum agreed. The only object that caught his attention was an ivory plaque from Nimrud, which ISIS fighters had stolen from the Mosul Museum. As we cycled through the other pictures on my laptop, he sighed and shook his head, seemingly uninterested, and occasionally identified fakes. Beyond looting, he noted that no matter how much effort ISIS puts into cultural depredation,

the group will always fall short of the inadvertent destruction caused by large infrastructure projects where modern civilizations flourish atop ancient ones. In 2000, a new dam in southern Turkey unleashed the Euphrates River onto the ancient Greek city of Zeugma, near the Syrian border, halfway through its excavation.

At the Metropolitan, the State Department displayed only three out of the eight unique receipts found in Abu Sayyaf's possession. It seemed odd that these three accounted for a mere twenty-four thousand dollars in taxes, less than a tenth of what Keller had declared as the cumulative tally. When a State Department press officer sent me partially redacted copies of the remaining receipts, I noticed that two of them accounted for eighty percent of all antiquities sales, and that the figures—a hundred and sixty-one thousand dollars and forty thousand dollars—had been recorded in dollars, while other accounting had been done in Syrian pounds. Did these two sales represent a vast haul of low-quality objects, or a few of extraordinary value? Did the eight handwritten receipts account for all antiquities sales over a six-month period, or was Abu Sayyaf a lousy accountant?

After the State Department gave me the Arabic copies of Abu Sayyaf's antiquities documents, I showed them to Bernard Haykel, a professor in Near Eastern studies at Princeton University and an expert on ISIS. Sitting in his office amid thousands of books—some shelved, others in teetering, waist-high piles—Haykel examined a section of Arabic text that hadn't been translated for Keller's slideshow at the Met. The document describes various roles within the antiquities division. It says, unambiguously, that the excavation teams should extract not only antiquities but also metals and minerals.

Tamimi, the analyst who collects ISIS administrative documents, recently published new evidence that the group is desperately seeking and confiscating valuable metals and minerals. It is especially hungry for gold. In August, ISIS announced its financial system would return to the gold dinar of centuries' past. Many people dismissed this as a fantasy, but two months later, Turkish authorities busted a mint near the Syrian border producing the currency.

Taken as a whole, Abu Sayyaf's antiquities documents raise more questions than they answer. In one letter, Abu Sayyaf is said to have experience in dealing with "people in the Levant who work in the field of antiquities," people who are "weak of faith." Might that explain the photograph of an idolatrous Assyrian bust that was discovered on his cell phone? And what of his signature, which, though he is Tunisian, reads, "Abu Sayyaf al-Iraqi"? Several U.S. government agencies would not explain this discrepancy, but a French journalist named David Thomson told me that it was a tactical deception dating back to 2004, when Abu Sayyaf left Tunisia to fight the Americans in Iraq. By pretending to be Iraqi, foreign jihadis who were captured by American troops could avoid deportation to their home countries and, upon their release or escape, swiftly return to Al Qaeda. "For this reason, those Tunisian jihadi veterans are still called 'al-Iraqi' today," Thomson said. "And they often hold high positions inside the Islamic State."

Archeologists can no longer visit most of Syria, so they monitor the cultural depredation from a safe distance: outer space. Using high-resolution satellite imagery, Jesse Casana, an associate professor of anthropology at Dartmouth, tracked the growing number and size of pockmarks in the earth at thousands of archeological sites throughout the country. In a study (http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5615/neareastarch.78.3.0142#pdf_only_tab_contents) published in September, he wrote, “Our data show quite compellingly that war-related looting is most frequent and most widespread in Kurdish and opposition-held areas, which are, perhaps unsurprisingly, also the regions with the weakest centralized authority.”

Casana found that where there is governance—in areas controlled by ISIS and the Syrian regime—looting takes place at a smaller percentage of sites, but with unmatched meticulousness and rapacity. Looting at the ancient Roman city of Apamea, in western Syria, began in 2012, shortly after the site was invaded by the Syrian Army. Once the central portion of the site had been thoroughly plundered, Casana wrote, “looting holes gradually encroached onto the private fields nearby, but did so in an orderly manner, looting on a block-by-block basis within the Roman city grid. This later phase of looting, likely involving heavy machinery and large numbers of laborers, took place as Syrian troops were garrisoned on the site just a few hundred meters away.” Today, digging has slowed at Apamea because there’s hardly anything left to find.

The Apamea looters were free from the ideological and territorial constraints that limit ISIS profits: statues and idols are fair game, collectible, and apparently seeping into the international black market through established smuggling routes that predate Syria’s war. The archeologist Michael Danti, who spoke at the Met, recently told me in a phone call from Iraq that he has seen looted antiquities marketed directly to potential buyers via social networks, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat. 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. Danti said that, according to his sources on the ground, valuable antiquities are moving illegally into Europe along the same routes as refugees. Meanwhile, in ISIS territory, he said, leftover artifacts are sold to locals at public auctions in Raqqa.

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