AURORA

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FROM RISK TO RESPONSE:

HOW THE HERITAGE SECTOR ADDRESSES ILLICIT TRAFFICKING

Lujza Varga, Tatjana Cvjetićanin, Jove Pargovski and Aida Vezić

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Sarajevo, 2025

Publisher: Balkan Museum Network

For the publisher: Aida Vežić

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Proofreader: Bojana Bojković

Design: Adrian Memaj

Sarajevo, September 2025

This publication was made within the project AURORA (Artwork Unique RecognitiOn and tRacking through chemicAl encoded data, miniaturized devices and blockchain alliance) project that is being funded by the European Union Horizon Europe program.

https://www.aurora-euproject.eu/

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Introduction by the Editors

The AURORA Project is committed to developing innovative tools to combat the illicit trafficking of cultural goods, demonstrating the feasibility of a non-destructive, efficient, and cost-effective solution for artwork authenticity verification and tracking. By creating a knowledge bridge between technical experts and cultural heritage professionals, AURORA fosters accessibility and democratization among cultural institutions.

An important objective of AURORA is to raise awareness among stakeholders about methods and tools to prevent the illicit trafficking, theft, and destruction of artworks. In line with this goal, Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property – Examples from the Heritage Sector brings together diverse case studies and expert reflections on the global fight against the illegal trade in cultural goods.

By gathering insights from museums, archaeological sites, conservation institutes, NGOs, and related organizations, this open-access publication spotlights existing frameworks, identifies challenges, and showcases innovative solutions. Our aim is to strengthen knowledge-sharing and collaboration across the heritage sector and beyond.

With contributions from authors across multiple regions, the publication highlights institutional responses, legal challenges, digital tools, and community-based initiatives. From high-profile restitution cases to the use of satellite imagery, digital databases, and cross-sectoral cooperation, the articles reveal the wide range of strategies used to safeguard heritage. The global scope of the case studies illustrates the complexity of protecting cultural property in both conflict and peacetime. Several contributions emphasize the role of activism, international cooperation, and even gender perspectives in addressing this pressing issue. From the protective framework of Blue Shield to ICESCO's initiatives in the Islamic world, the publication underscores the urgent need for inclusive and multidisciplinary approaches.

Following current trends, the editors have decided to publish this work in two phases. In the first part of the volume, readers embark on a compelling journey through different perspectives, practices, and challenges. From the halls of the Hungarian National Museum to rural communities in Peru, and from digital innovations to grassroots activism, these contributions demonstrate how diverse actors are reshaping the protection of cultural heritage. Readers will learn how museums are becoming active partners in crime prevention and international collaboration, and how the dramatic theft and recovery of Vlaho Bukovac's Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci, 1861 underscores the importance of cross-border cooperation. They will also encounter cutting-edge interdisciplinary research from the ANCHISE project, which sheds light on Europe's central role in the illicit antiquities trade, alongside community-led strategies in Peru that link heritage preservation with identity and resilience.

The articles further show how digital tools—from online databases to artificial intelligence—are becoming powerful allies in tracing looters, while the activism of organizations such as the Center Against Trafficking in Works of Art demonstrates the importance of civic engagement.

The second part of the publication will feature additional case studies and heritage sector initiatives. Taken together, these contributions illuminate the many layers of resistance to heritage crime, inviting readers to reflect, learn, and draw inspiration from innovative responses across different contexts.

By sharing these stories, we hope to encourage further action, collaboration, and innovation in the global fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property.

Dr. Lujza Varga, Prof. Dr. Tatjana Cvjetićanin, Jove Pargovski, MSc, Aida Vezić, MA

Museum-Led Responses to Illicit Trafficking and Cross-Sectoral Cooperation – the case of the Hungarian National Museum

Péter Buzinkay [1]
Anna Puskás [2]
Lujza Varga [3]

Abstract

This article explores the evolving role of public collections—specifically the Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre (HNM)—in combatting the illicit trafficking of cultural property amid complex modern security challenges. As globalization, armed conflicts, and online markets increasingly expose cultural heritage to risk, the need for interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration has never been more urgent, both at national and international levels.

Using the HNM's initiatives as a case study, the article details its proactive strategy of actively participating in international cross-sectoral initiatives, fostering professional networks and dialogue between law enforcement, public administration, and cultural professionals. In addition, the paper aims to present a comprehensive analysis of the legal mechanisms surrounding the seizure and confiscation of cultural property in Hungary, emphasizing the importance of cooperation between cultural institutions and law enforcement agencies, especially in handling and returning artefacts of uncertain provenance.

The HNM's experiences show that cultural institutions are not passive custodians but active agents in crime prevention, legal enforcement, and community engagement. This model of cross-sectoral collaboration may offer a blueprint for public collections confronting the growing threat of heritage crimes.

Keywords: *heritage crimes, cultural property protection, museum security, seizure, confiscation*

Introduction

The illicit trade in cultural property is not a new phenomenon in either peacetime or armed conflict. However, contemporary security dynamics present new challenges that demand a reassessment of traditional protection strategies. Globalisation has expanded markets and facilitated the rapid and often uncontrolled movement of goods across borders, increasing the vulnerability of cultural property to exploitation. Furthermore, contemporary armed conflicts increasingly target or incidentally damage built heritage, as well as public and private collections, resulting in significant cultural losses. Additionally,

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technological advancements offer both opportunities and threats: while they enhance the capacity for data collection, documentation, and monitoring, they also provide new means for illicit actors to operate. This is further facilitated by the severe increase in the trade of cultural goods through online platforms—one-fifth of the overall art and antiquities market sales is managed online.[4]

The alleged linkage between organised crime and terrorism financing through the illicit trafficking of cultural property—together with other associated criminal activities such as corruption, document falsification, tax offences, and money laundering—has highlighted the need to address this complex challenge, for which strengthened international and interdisciplinary engagement is essential.

As heritage crime[5] and devastating disasters resulting from natural hazards[6] are complex threats, often triggered by multiple reasons and actors, cultural institutions cannot manage them alone. Museums and other public collections, entrusted with the preservation, research, collection, and public accessibility of cultural property, are particularly exposed to these risks. Collections must exercise due diligence during their acquisitions, underpinned by adherence to institutional, national, and international ethical codes. Failure to uphold these standards not only contravenes professional norms but also damages an institution's reputation and public trust. Strict safety requirements and adequate security management are also indispensable to prevent thefts and burglaries. Strong cross-sectoral cooperation with law enforcement, customs, and tax authorities is often essential in handling heritage crimes.

The Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre, Hungarian National Museum[7] (HNM), as Hungary's oldest and one of its largest public collections, established in 1802, plays a leading role in cultural heritage protection. As a historical and archaeological museum that collects, researches, and exhibits important objects from the Neolithic Age to the present day, it manages significant archaeological collections and the knowledge related to them, while also conducting archaeological exploration. Its extensive activities include academic education and training, nationwide coordination of archaeological activities, and official police consulting services, positioning it at the forefront of national and international efforts to counter the illicit trafficking in cultural property.

Theoretical Elaboration

Illicit trafficking in cultural property is closely linked to a broad spectrum of criminal acts, including unlawful excavations, theft, the placing on the market of goods obtained through such acts, illegal export and import, the destruction of cultural heritage, and the falsification of provenance documentation.[8] These activities are addressed within several international legal instruments and strategic documents aimed at strengthening protection and facilitating return and restitution, which set tasks for cultural institutions and state authorities alike.

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, and its Protocols, established the first comprehensive framework for safeguarding cultural property during wartime, prohibiting theft, pillage, misappropriation, and requisition of cultural property during hostilities. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property already focused on peacetime threats, raising global awareness regarding the importance of provenance and establishing ethical standards for museum acquisitions.

As a complement to and development of the 1970 Convention, the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on

4 FATF (2023). Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in the Art and Antiquities Market. FATF, Paris, France.

5 Examples include the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage during armed conflicts, illegal excavations, the illicit trafficking of cultural goods, etc.

6 Examples are clearly shown on the website of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (https://www.undrr.org/our-impact/campaigns/no-natural-disasters).

7 The name and statutes of the Hungarian National Museum were modified on 28 April 2024, creating the Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre. As of 1 July 2024, five public collections merged into the Centre: the National Széchényi Library, the Museum of Applied Arts, the Hungarian Natural History Museum, the Petőfi Literary Museum, and the Hungarian Museum of Commerce and Hospitality.

8 See: Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property, Nicosia, 19 May 2017.

Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects lays down uniform rules for the return of illegally exported goods and the recovery of stolen cultural property, including goods that were unlawfully excavated, or lawfully excavated but unlawfully retained. The 2017 Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property (Nicosia Convention) is the first of its kind in criminalising the illicit trafficking of cultural property, establishing a list of criminal offences to be transposed into national law, thereby further contributing to the harmonisation of criminal definitions and procedures.

Since 2014, the international community has demonstrated increased political commitment to combatting the illicit trafficking of cultural goods. Multidisciplinary initiatives have emerged under the aegis of various international organisations. Notably, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) launched the Heritage Crime Task Force, in which the HNM actively participates as well.

At the European Union (EU) level, significant strides have been made in recent years. The 2021 adoption of a Concept on Cultural Heritage in conflicts and crises, and the subsequent Council Conclusions[9], put special emphasis on the EU-level fight against trafficking in cultural property, evaluating it as a major security concern and highlighting the need for the development and availability of adequate inventories by museums, supported by the possibilities provided by digital technology.[10]

Additionally, the European Commission's 2022 Action Plan against Trafficking in Cultural Goods outlines strategic actions to combat illicit trafficking, including the need to make cultural goods collections less vulnerable through awareness-raising, training of museum staff, investment in protection tools, and maintaining inventories and databases of collected cultural goods up to date.[11] Regulation (EU) 2019/880, concerning the introduction and import of cultural goods, marks a major regulatory advancement by prohibiting the entry of unlawfully exported cultural goods, making imports subject to an import licence or an importer statement.[12.] This enhanced commitment is reflected by the launch of numerous EU-funded projects, in which several European museums also play an active role.

Against this evolving legal and policy backdrop, the HNM has been closely cooperating with law enforcement agencies, as well as contributing to broader international and European initiatives in protecting cultural heritage, especially as regards the combat against illicit trafficking. The legal treatment of seized and confiscated cultural property deserves special attention, as it reveals how national and international legal frameworks intersect in practice. The effective handling of such cases increasingly depends on structured cooperation between law enforcement and cultural institutions. The Museum's concrete experiences, operational practices, and the challenges it has encountered in combatting illicit trade will be elaborated in detail in subsequent sections.

9 9837/21. Council Conclusions on the EU Approach to Cultural Heritage in conflicts and crises.

10 9962/21. Concept on Cultural heritage in conflicts and crises. A component for peace and security in European Union's external action.

11 COM(2022) 800 final. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU Action Plan against Trafficking in Cultural Goods. 13 December 2022.

12 Prior to its adoption, EU-level regulatory frameworks were confined to trade restrictions targeting cultural goods originating from Iraq and Syria.

The Hungarian National Museum's pilot projects to combat heritage crime – Creating a network

In recent years, the HNM has started to improve its responsiveness to heritage crimes through multiple yet interconnected approaches. It reassessed its attitude towards various threats, established a special project to plan and give an appropriate response, and began focusing on capacity building.[13] It also joined national and international research and pilot projects and initiated an interdisciplinary dialogue to properly redesign its Disaster Risk Management (DRM) plans. Better understanding the existing good practices, engaging in capacity building and awareness raising, and re-mapping the actors were the first, parallel, and mutually supportive steps of this work. Realizing the loopholes, the HNM aimed to promote this dialogue and foster cooperation to protect cultural heritage—an initiative that quickly began to outgrow itself.

As an initial step, the HNM has implemented an institutional strategy on cultural heritage protection and reorganised the opportunities resulting from its various projects and roles accordingly.

The HNM's main partner in protecting its collections is the Agency for the Protection of National Cultural Heritage (NKÖV), which is entrusted with safeguarding cultural properties of outstanding national value located in Hungary's largest public collections. Thus, the first talks about improving the museum's capacities in this field were naturally held between these two institutions.

The HNM also joined the consortiums of EU Horizon Europe projects such as AURORA,[14] which develops technical solutions to strengthen the fight against the illicit trafficking of artefacts.[15] The rationale for the HNM's involvement, as one of the end users of these protection tools, was to help include new aspects for the developers, especially given the fact that the HNM has long been involved in police consulting.[16]

As the HNM has a leading role in archaeological activities as well, it is committed to preventing illegal excavations, as these threaten valuable sites and objects, along with information associated with them. The HNM Archaeological Institute is responsible for the nationwide coordination of preventive archaeological excavations related to major investments, while the HNM Archaeology Database (Ariadne Portal) shows and makes accessible registered archaeological sites to support research, teaching, and learning.

Launched in 2017, the HNM's Community Archaeology programme unites volunteers and archaeologists to prevent unlicensed[17] metal detectorists from working for private purposes or in the artefacts market, and to ensure that endangered objects are placed in public collections where professional assistance is ensured. The programme's main aim is to prevent the loss of both the objects and the scientific information they carry.[18]

Inspired by Dr Krisztina Hudák and led by archaeologist Blanka Böröczky, the HNM joined an innovative initiative and established the ArcheoDogs Hungary project, which aims to train dogs to detect

13 The main aim was to become familiar with tools, techniques, and best practices regarding DRM, the recovery of CH, and the response to heritage crime. Amongst others, HNM colleagues participated in courses like the International Training Course on Cultural Heritage and Disaster Risk Management (https://rdmuch-itc.com/5715/) (UNESCO Chair Programme) at Ritsumeikan University's Institute of Disaster Mitigation for Urban Cultural Heritage; and the UNESCO & ICCROM Summer School on Post-Conflict Recovery of Cultural Heritage (https://www.iccrom.org/news/summer-school-post-conflict-recovery), based on the project Revive the Spirit of Mosul, by UNESCO, ICCROM, and Fondazione Santagata.

14 Artwork Unique RecognitiOn and tRacking through chemicAl encoded data, miniaturised devices and blockchain alliance.

15 For detailed information on the project see the AMA (Art Media Agency)'s issue 359 (https://www.aurora-euproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ama-359-en_compressed.pdf) on the illicit trafficking of artefacts, or visit the project's website: https://www.aurora-euproject.eu/.

16 As such, the HNM is working closely with the police's Cultural Property Crime Unit by determining and identifying smuggled artefacts seized by law enforcement, and mapping dubious ownership if applicable.

17 Metal detectors are legal in Hungary, according to national heritage law and its applicable amendments.

18 The Hungarian National Museum opened exhibitions on its Community Archaeology programme and its major findings in 2020 and 2022.

archaeological objects hidden in vehicles or packages. The trainers are currently practicing with four dogs and metal finds from the Roman era.

Meanwhile, with support from the police, the HNM sent one of its staff members to attend cultural heritage protection training offered by the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) and Krems University.[19] Inspired by the good examples learnt there, the HNM reached out to Ludovika University of Public Service—the university responsible for the higher education of law enforcement personnel, military officers, and civil servants.[20]

As Ludovika University responded with great enthusiasm to the idea of collaboration, the HNM, Ludovika University, and NKÖV jointly organised the first national conference on cultural property protection during crises in Hungary on 28 March 2023. This marked the starting point of a wider dialogue among the actors from the cultural, humanitarian, military, law enforcement, and administrative bodies in Hungary regarding the protection of endangered cultural heritage.[21] As a result of this dialogue, the HNM hosted and actively participated in the national Expo on Security.[22]

Figure 1: International CPP Conference in the main hall of the Hungarian National Museum, 24 November 2023. Photo: Hungarian National Museum

19 Cultural Property Protection Course Pilot by the European Security and Defence College and the University for Continuing Education Krems (https://www.donau-uni.ac.at/en/university/faculties/education-arts-architecture/departments/building-environment/centers/center-for-cultural-property-protection/study-programs/esdc.html).

20 One of the long-term aims of this new co-operation between the HNM and Ludovika University is to integrate cultural heritage protection into the general higher education curriculum for law enforcement officers (police, customs, etc.) in Hungary. From a law enforcement perspective, the relatively small proportion of cases related to heritage crime makes this type of crime harder to handle, as general officers often lack the specialised knowledge and routine to effectively manage such cases. Involvement from the cultural sector can improve their efficiency.

21 As a consequence, one of the archaeological inspectors attending the conference asked the HNM to assist in establishing a pilot project aimed at training dogs to find and indicate archaeological objects hidden in vehicles or packages. The HNM joined the initiative, and thus the innovative ArcheoDogs Hungary pilot project was created.

22 BiztonságPiac. For more information, visit its website: https://biztonsagpiac.hu/.

Figure 2: International CPP Conference in the main hall of the Hungarian National Museum, 24 November 2023. Photo: Hungarian National Museum

The International Cultural Property Protection in Crisis Situations Conference, co-organised by the HNM, Ludovika University, and NKÖV, was held at the HNM on 23-24 November 2023.[23] It expanded the scope of dialogue by engaging international actors to raise awareness, exchange good practices, establish international professional networks, and encourage future cooperation and joint projects. The objective was to discuss a range of issues related to preparedness, risk management and emergency response, post-crisis recovery, the fight against the illicit trafficking of artefacts, and general museum security. Following the great success of the conference, the HNM and its partners decided to continue this event and held a second International Cultural Property Protection in Crisis Situations Conference on 25-26 November 2024.

As a result, the HNM redesigned its existing ties with the Hungary Helps Agency,[24] the police, universities,[25] etc., while it also actively sought new partnerships. An important step was establishing a common ground and language among actors from different fields enabling them to understand each other's goals, working methods, knowledge, and terminology.

Meanwhile, some of HNM staff members were invited to join the OSCE-led Heritage Crime Task Force (HCTF), which is a multi-stream programme that addresses the looting of archaeological and cultural heritage sites, the illicit cross-border trafficking of cultural property, and its linkages to organised crime and terrorism financing, as well as cultural heritage protection in war zones and crisis regions, organised by the OSCE.[26] As members of the Task Force, HNM staff are taking an active role in its training workshops for law enforcement officers and in some of its ongoing operations.

23 Watch a short film about the conference (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UoCLfi5lEo&t=4s) and all the lectures at the HNM's YouTube channel.

24 An independent government agency assisting victims of humanitarian crises and persecuted communities.

25 The Pázmány Péter Catholic University and the Budapest University of Technology and Economics.

26 For more information on the OSCE-led Heritage Crime Task Force, see, e.g., the report on the 2023 regional interactive workshop in Pula, Croatia: https://www.osce.org/secretariat/551813.

Figure 3: HCTF workshop in Wroclaw in March 2025.

Handling of seized cultural goods – A case study: Cooperation between culture and law enforcement in Hungary

Building on the HNM's broader efforts to foster cross-sectoral cooperation and develop preventive strategies against heritage crimes, it is important to address a crucial yet often underexamined aspect of cultural heritage protection: the legal and practical handling of confiscated and seized cultural goods.

When talking about confiscated cultural property, the legal regime must be examined first and foremost. In Hungarian legislation, this is broadly similar to that in many Western countries, particularly those in continental Europe. Any movable objects, including cultural goods, can be seized in criminal or non-criminal procedures. (Seizure can also be conducted by civil courts or public authorities.) In such procedures, it is essential to distinguish between seizure and confiscation. While the former is a temporary measure that affects only possession and not ownership, the latter is a definitive decision that deprives both possession and ownership. Seized cultural property is held temporarily by museums and cannot be used for their general functions. In contrast, objects that are confiscated and deposited in museums become a permanent part of their regular collections. Of course, in cases of cross-border heritage crime, not only Hungarian law but also international law and the domestic law of the relevant states must be applied. Based on our experience, effective action against heritage crime requires both legal knowledge and a wide range of multidisciplinary skills—hence the need for cooperation between law enforcement agencies and museums.

But let us begin with the most relevant criminal legislation: the general rules governing criminal seizure and the specific rules related to the seizure of cultural property. The basic rules of criminal law are laid down in the Criminal Code.[27] Some additional rules must also be considered under other (sectoral) laws and regulations. In case of cross-border crimes, means of EU and international cooperation (e.g., legal assistance) can be applied, too. (The 2017 Nicosia Convention,[28] mentioned in Chapter 2, has also been in force in Hungary since 1 April 2022.) In practice, cooperation is governed by internal police and customs regulations, as well as by cross-sectoral agreements (such as the 2012 agreement between police, customs, and the cultural authority). Other practices in the field are also present, such as a 'common practice' of informal

27 Criminal regulations have been in force in Hungary since the Middle Ages, and the first separate Penal Code was created in 1878. The current Code is Act C of 2012. The application of criminal law is regulated by the Criminal Procedure Act (Act XC of 2017).

28 Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property, Nicosia, 19 May 2017.

cooperation between law enforcement agencies and local public collections.

When discussing the seizure of cultural goods, it is essential to mention the legal immunity from seizure. More than a decade ago, Hungary joined the list of countries that have introduced antiseizure legislation: in the case of international loans to museums, cultural goods cannot be subject to seizure.[29] Following often lengthy legal proceedings, perhaps the most important decision from a museum's perspective is the return or restitution of seized (or confiscated) cultural goods, based on civil court decisions or the aforementioned UNESCO or UNIDROIT international conventions. When dealing with heritage crime, special legislation on cultural goods must also be considered. The Criminal Code outlines special criminal offences related to 'cultural goods' and lists aggravating circumstances if the object of the offence is cultural property. (The definition of cultural property in the Criminal Code refers back to the cultural heritage law.) It should be noted that there is no separate legal act on the seizure of cultural goods; instead, special rules are incorporated into general legislation. The most important regulations are laid down by Joint Decree No. 11/2003 (8 May) IM-BM-PM on the Rules Governing Seizure and the Handling, Registration, Prior Sale and Destruction of a Property Seized in Criminal Proceedings and on the Execution of Confiscation. According to Article 3, seized properties requiring special handling may be transferred to relevant organisations. This creates the legal basis for placing seized cultural goods in the custody of a museum. Article 94 further stipulates that confiscated cultural goods shall be (definitively) placed in public collections by decision of the central cultural authority.

Turning to practice, Hungary's position in the international trade and illegal trafficking of cultural goods deserves attention. At present, Hungary can be classified as a transit, source, and target country. It has been a transit country for centuries, serving as a route for cultural goods from Turkey and the Balkan countries en route to Western Europe. Since 2022, the war in Ukraine has also caused Ukrainian cultural goods, especially archaeological artefacts, to pass through the country. At the same time, Hungary itself is a source country: since the Second World War, all kinds of archaeological findings, art, and antiques of European origin have been trafficked to Western Europe and the USA. Over the last two or three decades, Hungary has also become a target country. Since the 1990s, cultural goods related to its history, art, and culture have been imported from all over the world.

When analysing the cases, the individual measures can also be seen as steps in a process of cooperation among the bodies concerned. The first step is the detection of cultural heritage crimes. In many cases, museums notify the police or customs. When the notification comes from another source, such as a private person or an art dealer, the authorities may request an assessment from the central cultural authority, as stipulated in the 2012 multilateral agreement. At a later stage of the procedure, if necessary and in the absence of grounds for exclusion, it is appropriate to seek the expert opinion of a museum. Museums also play an important role in offering safe and professional custody of seized objects.

In criminal proceedings, a decision must also be made regarding the fate of objects seized as evidence, typically resulting in either their return or confiscation. In the event of confiscation, ownership of the objects is transferred to the state and the authorities must place them in a public collection. A further step may justify museum placement: occasionally, the provenance of confiscated items is determined and they are returned to their rightful owners, whether in Hungary or abroad.

Based on the HNM's experience, effective cooperation between law enforcement agencies and cultural institutions is achieved when they establish contact and communication. It is vital to have dedicated contact points. Cultural professionals are encouraged to take a proactive approach in establishing contact, and it is essential that their contributions prove useful to police or customs officers—for example, by providing expert opinions relevant to criminal procedures and responding directly to the inquiries made. This is a learning process in which both sectors must become familiar with each other's institutional goals, working methods, and terminology. Police and customs officers are often grateful for the specialised expertise provided by cultural institutions, without which they would not be able to successfully resolve many cases. It is evident that in heritage crime, the perpetrators often have the advantage. But if the state action is not coordinated, and the state institutions do not cooperate, hardly any results can be achieved. Combatting heritage crime effectively requires the combined expertise, data, experience, and networks of multiple sectors. We are convinced that only through cooperation and joint efforts can these crimes be successfully addressed.

29 Act XCV of 2012 on the Special Protection of Borrowed Cultural Goods.

Conclusions

In recent years, the HNM—uniquely among Hungarian public collections—has launched and contributed to pilot projects specifically focusing on combatting heritage crime, which has proved to be a self-stimulating process.

Different sectors bring different perspectives, and although these collaborations are still informal in many cases, the first step has been taken: the actors have begun to familiarise themselves with one another and with potential areas for further joint work. Filling the gap between these sectors relies on the three Cs: communication, co-operation, and coordination.

Though there is still much to do, the HNM is committed to continuing this work and is therefore planning further conferences, targeted workshops, and other projects to promote this cooperation—an endeavour that is widely supported by experts from other relevant sectors.

Furthermore, the handling of seized and confiscated cultural property demonstrates the practical intersection of criminal law, heritage protection, and international cooperation. Effective custody, legal clarity, and expert consultation by museums play a pivotal role in these processes. The HNM's experience highlights that coordinated, legally sound, and professionally informed responses are indispensable. Without such synergy, state actions remain fragmented and ineffective.

This cross-sectoral approach enables the HNM to perform its tasks as professionally as possible, while also empowering people to feel a sense of ownership over cultural heritage and to participate actively in its protection.

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Biographies of the authors

Dr. Anna Puskás is a project manager at the Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre, Hungarian National Museum, responsible for cultural property protection and museum security-related projects. Besides, she is a research fellow at the Ludovika University of Public Service in Budapest, with a research focus on cultural property protection in conflict zones, the securitisation of cultural heritage issues, and the possibilities of international cooperation in this regard. Previously, she worked for various public administrative bodies in the field of World Heritage protection.

Dr. Lujza Varga is a museum professional with over 14 years of experience in cultural heritage management. She leads the department responsible for international co-operation, project coordination, exhibition management, and cultural property protection at the Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre, Hungarian National Museum. She is an active member of the OSCE-led Heritage Crime Task Force—an international team of experts aiming to fight heritage crime, with special regard to the illicit trafficking of artefacts. She is the confirmed Representative of Blue Shield International in Hungary, with the right to form a national Blue Shield Committee.

Dr. Péter Buzinkay is a heritage professional and the Chief Adviser to the Director General of the Hungarian National Museum Public Collection Centre, Hungarian National Museum. He is responsible for a pilot project aimed at revealing losses in public collections, creating a database, tracking lost items, and initiating claims for their return when possible. He gained his experience in the art trade and cultural heritage administration, in the field of movable cultural heritage protection, relevant legislation, and in various forms of cooperation at national and international levels. He actively participates in trainings and conferences organised by the Hungarian Police, INTERPOL, EUROPOL, etc.

The Theft and Recovery of Vlaho Bukovac's "Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci 1861" to the Museum of Vojvodina: A Case Study in Cultural Heritage Protection and International Collaboration

Aleksandra Stefanov[1]

Abstract

The painting The Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci 1861, created by the prominent Yugoslav painter Vlaho Bukovac in 1901, was stolen on November 28, 1993 from the permanent exhibition at the Castle in Čelarevo, an annex of the Museum of Vojvodina. This artwork is a significant visual representation of a crucial event in Serbian history during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and its theft marked a critical loss for Serbian cultural heritage. In 2021, nearly three decades after the theft, crucial information emerged when the painting was offered for sale to the Gallery of Matica Srpska in Novi Sad through an intermediary. The owner, an art dealer, attempted to sell the artwork despite being aware of its stolen status. For several months, an undercover international investigation was conducted, with curators from the Museum of Vojvodina involved. After an international investigation involving multiple law enforcement agencies, the painting was confiscated in Switzerland and returned to Serbia in August 2021. This case highlights the importance of international cooperation in protecting cultural heritage and the efforts made to recover stolen artworks.

Keywords: *stolen painting, international investigation, cultural heritage, police cooperation, restoration, restitution*

1 Senior curator, Art historian, Museum of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, Serbia

Introduction

The Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci 1861, painted by Vlaho Bukovac in 1901, represents an important event in Serbian history. It is not only a masterpiece of Serbian art but also a symbol of national and cultural identity, a canonical image that is an important segment of the national heritage. The painting became part of the Museum of Vojvodina's collection in 1953 and remained on public display, as part of the permanent exhibition at the Castle in Čelarevo (Balat, 1989), until it was stolen in 1993.

The Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci 1861 was stolen from the Museum of Vojvodina's annex at the Dunđerski family Castle in Čelarevo during the night of November 27-28, 1993, along with four other valuable artworks.[2] The burglars expertly entered the premises and removed the paintings without leaving significant traces of their actions[3] (Музеј Војводине, 1. 12. 1993) (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

This theft occurred at a time when Serbia was experiencing significant political instability and economic crisis, including hyperinflation, international sanctions, and the destabilization caused by the ongoing conflicts in the region. The sanctions imposed on Serbia by the United Nations in 1992 led to severe economic hardship, with many institutions, including museums, suffering from inadequate funding. This lack of resources resulted in poor infrastructure and low standards of protection for cultural heritage, with insufficient security measures, leaving museums and their collections vulnerable. In this context, the theft of the painting was not immediately reported to international institutions, and the investigation remained at the local level, further complicating the recovery process.

It was not until July 2014 that the Museum of Vojvodina received information indicating that the painting had been located in Slovenia. The Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities was immediately informed, as was the Novi Sad Police Department, which took over the case. Although Interpol was also involved in the investigation at that time, it was not determined with whom or where the painting was. The theft from the Castle in Čelarevo remained unsolved until 2021.

Fig. 1 Castle of the Dunđerski family in Čelarevo

Fig. 2 The Annunciation Assembly by Vlaho Bukovac in the permanent exhibition of the Castle in Čelarevo

2 The following artworks remain subject to an ongoing national and international investigation: River Landscape by László Mednyánszky from the late 19th century, oil on canvas, 128 x 162 cm (inv. no. L 392); Square in Samarkand by Franz Eisenhut from 1899, oil on canvas, 230 x 170 cm (inv. no. L 393); and Still Life by Teodora (Dora) Dunđerski from 1907, tempera on canvas, 25 x 35 cm (inv. no. L 400), as well as a silver goblet with a silver and pewter alloy lid dating back to the late 18th century, 16 x 24 cm; 21 x 24 cm (inv. no. 3643).

3 The burglars gained entry to The Castle in Čelarevo from the back, and at around 4:00 p.m., broke through the large door before expertly removing the pictures from the frames, which they left in place. One more painting, Gipsy Woman (Odalisque), was removed from its frame but not taken away.

Cultural Importance of the Painting Annunciation Assembly

The Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci 1861 was created by Vlaho Bukovac (1855–1922),[4] one of the most prominent Yugoslav painters, in Cavtat in 1901. Commissioned by Petar Nikolić, a Zagreb-based merchant, art dealer, and publisher, the painting commemorated the 40th anniversary of the Annunciation Assembly. It was intended to be reproduced in oleographic (chromolithographic) form and widely distributed as a patriotic symbol. The painting depicts the historic Assembly, which took place in Sremski Karlovci in 1861 and was presided over by Patriarch Josif Rajačić. The Assembly was a key event in the Serbian struggle for political autonomy within the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Vasin, 2015). Bukovac based the painting on a lithograph by Josef Anton Bauer (1820–1905) from 1861, created after the original photographs of the participants of the Assembly by Stefan Vulpe, the first photographer in Novi Sad. With 82 portraits of participants depicted, the painting holds exceptional documentary value.

In understanding the significance of this work, it is important to consider not only its artistic value but also its role in shaping the cultural and national identity of the Serbian people (Стефанов & Станковић Пештерац, 2024). The painting's mass reproduction and wide circulation exemplified the use of art as a tool for political and cultural mobilization, cementing its place as a central symbol in the collective memory of the Serbian nation.

This visual representation of the Assembly was mass-produced and distributed across the Kingdom of Serbia and other regions in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy influenced by pro-Yugoslav ideas. It quickly became a visual symbol of national unity and cultural resistance against foreign domination. As an icon of the national struggle, the painting was often displayed in homes and public spaces, solidifying its status as one of the most recognizable patriotic images of the Serbian people in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy of the time.

4 Vlaho Bukovac (ital. Biagio Faggioni; Cavtat, 1855 – Prague, 1922) was educated at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he quickly distinguished himself as an artist whose works garnered significant acclaim and demand. Throughout his career, he moved through a variety of stylistic phases—including academic realism, impressionism, symbolism, and Art Nouveau. His oeuvre is predominantly characterized by large-scale nudes, portraits, and allegorical compositions. Bukovac attained considerable renown as a portraitist and became the favored court painter of the Serbian dynasties—the Obrenović and Karađorđević—as well as of the Montenegrin princely House of Petrović. He was a member of the Royal Serbian Academy (today the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, SANU), a corresponding member of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts, and an honorary member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb (HAZU). He also served as a director of the Czech Academy of Painting in Prague. For further reading, see Kružić Uchytil, V. (2005). Vlaho Bukovac, život i djelo: 1855.–1922. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Globus.

International Investigation and Recovery

The investigation did not progress further until March 2021, when The Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci 1861 resurfaced and was offered for sale to the Gallery of Matica Srpska in Novi Sad through an intermediary. Thanks to the well-preserved museum documentation compiled by previous generations of art historians at the Gallery of Matica Srpska, information about the 1993 theft of a painting by Vlaho Bukovac was recorded in the Gallery's digital database, alongside a lithograph by J. Bauer, held in the institution's collection. The painting was offered to the Gallery via Viber, though at that point the identity of the owner, the intermediary, and the painting's location remained unknown. The offer was also reported to the Museum of Vojvodina. According to the intermediary, a friend of the painting's owner, the painting was being offered by a citizen of the Republic of Serbia currently living in Switzerland, who planned to travel back to Serbia in April 2021, when a meeting was arranged (Стефанов, 2022, p. 200).

An official encounter took place at the Museum of Vojvodina with the individual identified as S. G., who was, at that time, acting as an art dealer and claimed ownership over the painting. He was already aware that the work in question had been stolen prior to the meeting, during which he was presented with documentation and facts regarding the theft. Despite being presented with museum documentation confirming this, he claimed to have acquired the work legally and asserted that he possessed supporting documentation, though he failed to provide it. He further insisted that the painting should be examined by experts to verify its provenance and confirm its status as property of the Museum of Vojvodina. At that time, the painting's whereabouts were unknown, as the current owner declined to disclose its location and expressed no intention of returning it. He continued efforts to sell it.

Immediately after the meeting, the Museum notified and involved the Serbian authorities, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime (abbreviated as SBPOK, in Serbian).[5] The SBPOK cooperated intensively with the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia and the Museum of Vojvodina. The SBPOK launched a police operation conducted in utmost secrecy, as it involved an organized group that had been trading in artworks for many years. During the covert investigation, which was classified, both the director of the Museum of Vojvodina, Tijana Stanković Pešterac, and I, Aleksandra Stefanov, as the curator of the Art Collection, actively cooperated with the police officers. Since S.G. persistently refused to disclose the location of the painting unless he received a guarantee that he would get €600,000.00 for it, our task was to maintain contact with the collector so he would think that we intended to purchase the painting, while also providing the necessary museum documentation to the police and the prosecutor's office.

After several months of investigation, it was determined that the painting was located in Switzerland. This finding led to the initiation of an international inquiry, conducted in coordination with both .[6] The Swiss police and the Prosecutor's Office of Canton II Zurich played a crucial role in the discovery of the stolen painting at S.G.'s house in Zurich in August 2021. On that occasion, in addition to S.G., three other individuals involved in the attempted sale of the stolen painting to the Museum of Vojvodina were arrested. The seized painting was placed in the safe of the Swiss Prosecutor's Office, and criminal proceedings were conducted by the prosecutor's offices in Belgrade and Zurich.

Following the confiscation, and by order of the Ministry of Culture of Serbia, experts from the National Museum of Serbia went to Switzerland and confirmed the authenticity of the seized artwork, and the Museum of Vojvodina provided documentation proving its ownership.[7]

After a period of detention, the suspects were released to stand trial while at liberty. The primary suspect, S.G., sought to establish that he had acquired the painting through legal means. Through-

5 The museum also informed the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia, the Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities, as well as the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia. A joint investigation was subsequently launched by the Service for Combating Organized Crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia and the Prosecutor's Office for organized crime.

6 The inquiry was launched by the Organized Crime Unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, the Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime, the Public Prosecutor's Office of the Zurich II Canton, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, the Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities, and the Novi Sad Police Department.

out the proceedings, he altered his statements, claiming at various times that he had inherited the painting from another art dealer or that he had purchased it at an auction in Austria. He also alleged that there were two identical paintings by Vlaho Bukovac. Among the pieces of evidence, the original frame from which the painting was removed during the theft, visible in archival museum photographs, served as a crucial piece of evidence supporting the Museum's claim (Стефанов, 2022, p. 200).

One year later, the Zurich Prosecutor's Office decided to return the painting The Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci 1861 by Vlaho Bukovac to the Museum of Vojvodina. By that time, the criminal proceedings had been discontinued, and a legal settlement, which was a compromise agreement, had been reached, under which the suspects were acquitted of all charges.

After nearly three decades, and as a result of international cooperation, the painting was returned to Serbia on August 16, 2022, and was publicly displayed (Fig. 3).

At first, the painting was presented in the hall of the Provincial Government—an important event that was covered by all national media. To ensure that visitors had an opportunity to see this exceptional artwork, it was exhibited for one day, on August 19, 2022, in the Small Exhibition Salon of the Museum, alongside its original frame and a set of stylistic furniture that was originally displayed next to the painting as part of the permanent exhibition in the Dunđerski Family Castle in Čelarevo (Стефанов, 2022, p. 201) (Fig. 4).

Fig. 3 Press Conference at the Provincial Government in Novi Sad in 2021

Fig. 4 One-day exhibition in the Little Salon of the Museum of Vojvodina

7 After the acquisition, the painting was registered in the so-called Entry book, the Inventory book II, under Inv. No. 5762 (p. 306), with dimensions of 122 x 192 cm. Following the introduction of separate Inventory books for each museum collection, it was recorded on December 2, 1992, in the Inventory Book I for the Art Collection under Inv. No. L 396 (p. 189), with incorrect dimensions of 122 x 153 cm. The defendant claimed that there were two versions of this painting with different dimensions. The error regarding the painting's dimensions in the museum documentation was one of the main arguments used to support this claim.

Post-Restitution Interpretation and Exhibition

Following its restitution to the Museum of Vojvodina, the painting The Annunciation Assembly underwent a comprehensive conservation and restoration process, accompanied by physicochemical analyses, as well as research into its historical context and interpretative significance. Scientific examinations were conducted by a multidisciplinary team consisting of painting conservators, photographers, materials engineering technologists, and physicists, with experts from the Provincial Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Petrovaradin and the Faculty of Technology in Novi Sad. The analyses were carried out in the "HeritageLab" – Laboratory for the Examination of Materials in Cultural Heritage, a mobile facility for non-destructive testing, ensuring that no additional damage was caused to the artwork (Вучетић, 2024, pp. 145–167). The results of the analyses, which guided the conservation methodology, together with advanced imaging techniques and X-ray (RTG) scanning, unequivocally confirmed that the painting was an original work by Vlaho Bukovac (Брдарић, 2024, pp. 123–145) (Fig. 5).

The findings of this research, which shed light on the fascinating history of a work of great importance for Serbian heritage, were presented by the multidisciplinary team of experts and collaborators at an exhibition at the Museum of Vojvodina in 2024. (Стефанов & Станковић Пештерац, 2024)

Fig. 5 Annunciation Assembly after conservation

Conclusion

The theft and return of The Annunciation Assembly in Sremski Karlovci 1861, after almost 30 years, serve as a testament to the importance of international cooperation in protecting cultural heritage. Although this case of theft was successfully resolved, many other stolen artworks have yet to be recovered. Serbia is a signatory to the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, n.d.-a), yet it is only in the recent decade that data on stolen artworks from Serbian museums has begun to be submitted to international databases, such as the Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects (2022) (UNESCO, n.d.-b). Many museums in Serbia still struggle with inadequate security measures and a lack of digitization, both of which hinder the identification and recovery of stolen cultural property.

This case not only highlights the vulnerabilities of cultural institutions during times of political and economic instability but also underscores the role of museums and law enforcement in safeguarding national treasures. While thefts occur even in the most well-guarded institutions, the situation in Serbian museums is further complicated by the fact that, in many cases, only black-and-white archival photographs of the stolen artworks exist. Additionally, the absence of or incompleteness in museum documentation can significantly obstruct efforts to authenticate and locate missing artifacts.

The painting's return to the Museum of Vojvodina represents not only the restoration of a valuable masterpiece of Serbian art history but also a reminder of the urgent need for systemic improvements in cultural heritage protection. It reaffirms the importance of international collaboration, precise museum documentation, and the responsibility of both institutions and professionals in protecting national heritage.

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Biography of the Author

Aleksandra Stefanov graduated in Art History from the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade in 2003, and completed her Master's degree in European Culture in the Czech Republic and Spain (2005–2006). Since 2007, she has been working at the Gallery of Matica Srpska, first as a curator-documentarist (2007–2010), and later as a curator for education and exhibitions (2010–2015). Since 2013, she has been employed at the Museum of Vojvodina as an art historian and senior curator of the Fine Arts Collection and the Applied Arts Collection. Her research focuses on 19th-century art, as well as the development and phenomena of bourgeois culture from the 18th to the mid-20th century. She has contributed to numerous educational programs and exhibitions for children and has participated in many national and international conferences on museology, cultural management, and heritage protection. She is a member of the national ICOM Committee and serves on the Committees for Awards and Recognitions of the Museum Society of Serbia.

Artefacts, Roots and Networks: An Interdisciplinary Approach to fight Endangered Archaeology and The Trafficking of Cultural Objects

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes the illicit trafficking of archaeological objects in Europe and its neighboring regions, based on contributions from an international symposium held at the University of Poitiers (November 8–10, 2023) as part of the European ANCHISE project. Through a deliberately interdisciplinary approach, the research combines perspectives from archaeology, law enforcement, art market professionals, and museum specialists to provide a comprehensive analysis of this complex issue. The investigation reveals how political instability, economic crises, and armed conflicts create favorable conditions for archaeological looting and trafficking, as demonstrated through case studies from Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Ukraine. Complex legal frameworks combining international conventions, European regulations, and varying national approaches within the EU are examined alongside the roles of key institutions involved in combating trafficking, from international organizations like INTERPOL to specialized national services (for example, Comando carabinieri per la tutela del patrimonio culturale in Italy and Office central de lutte contre le trafic de biens culturels in France). A particular focus is placed on Europe's central role in this illicit trade and the need for coordinated responses. The findings support recommendations for strengthening legal frameworks, improving stakeholder cooperation, leveraging new technologies, and raising awareness among art market participants, thus contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical solutions for combating archaeological trafficking.

Keywords: *archaeological looting, illicit trafficking, conflict zones, art market, provenance research, international cooperation, cultural heritage protection*

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Introduction

The looting of cultural property is a global phenomenon affecting all countries. Extensive research (Brodie et al., 2000; Proulx, 2013; Stone, 2013; Hardy, 2018; Lostal, 2017) demonstrates that political, institutional, economic, and social crises act as catalysts for archaeological trafficking and site destruction.. The ANCHISE project, funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme, adopts an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and combating illicit trafficking of cultural property, particularly archaeological objects.

This article synthesizes findings from an international symposium held at the University of Poitiers in November 2023 that convened archaeologists, law enforcement specialists, museum professionals, and art market experts. Using a multidisciplinary methodology that combines academic research, law enforcement expertise, judicial knowledge, and art market insights, we analyze case studies, demonstrating how crisis contexts facilitate archaeological looting and trafficking.

Vulnerabilities and Dynamics of Archaeological Goods Trafficking: Case Studies

Contexts of Conflict and Political Instability

The relationship between political instability and the vulnerability of archaeological heritage is starkly illustrated across multiple conflict zones. The absence of stable governance creates ideal conditions for systematic looting, deliberate destruction of cultural heritage, and the proliferation of trafficking networks, as evidenced by several critical case studies in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

The Syrian civil war offers perhaps the most comprehensive example of how armed conflict transforms archaeological sites into targets of multiple forms of exploitation. As demonstrated in the analysis of the Mari archaeological site (Butterlin 2025), Syrian heritage has suffered a three-pronged assault: collateral damage from military operations, ideologically motivated destruction for propaganda purposes, and systematic looting for financial gain. This Bronze Age city, dating from the 3rd to 2nd millennia BCE, which had yielded exceptional artifacts—including cuneiform tablets and statues—over decades of scientific excavation, now represents a paradigmatic case of heritage weaponization. Daesh's calculated, media-oriented destructions were not merely acts of looting, but ideological assaults deliberately staged for international audiences.

The methodological shift in heritage documentation is equally significant. With direct research rendered impossible due to site inaccessibility, archaeologists have been forced to adapt from field investigation to remote monitoring through satellite and drone imagery, with data compiled in GIS systems for analysis. Meanwhile, Mari artifacts circulate on the "blood antiquities" market that finances terrorism, alongside numerous forgeries from Syria and Lebanon.

This pattern extends to other conflict zones. In Yemen, as documented by Breton (2025), the civil war that began in 2015—and was further complicated by international intervention—has created a similarly devastating environment for heritage preservation. Museum collections across the country have suffered widely varying fates, from partial preservation to total destruction. The regular looting of numerous sites by both armed groups and local populations continues largely unimpeded, as confirmed through expert visits and satellite imagery.

The Ukrainian case, analyzed by Kravchenko and Chaplian (2025), reveals how recent conflicts create new patterns of heritage vulnerability. Since 2014, and particularly following Russia's 2022 in-

vasion, Ukrainian cultural heritage has faced systematic appropriation in occupied territories. The scale is staggering: in Kherson alone, 85% of museum objects disappeared under Russian occupation. Recovery efforts face dual challenges: objects remaining in Russia are effectively unreachable, while those trafficked abroad from Russia could potentially be reclaimed only if their Ukrainian origin can be conclusively proven—a considerable evidentiary hurdle.

The Libyan experience, documented by Belzic and Michel (2025), further illustrates how conflict transforms previously protected heritage into vulnerable assets. Before the 2011 revolution, the country's relative isolation from international tourism routes had paradoxically shielded its archaeological heritage from systematic targeting. During the conflict, the Department of Antiquities' preventative measures at the revolution's onset—closing museums and securing collections—proved sometimes insufficient in the face of subsequent political fragmentation. As witnessed in sites like Sirte or Shahat (ancient Cyrene), archaeological heritage faces dual threats: direct targeting for valuable artifacts and collateral damage due to unregulated urban expansion.

These diverse case studies reveal recurring patterns across conflict zones. The absence of stable state authority consistently emerges as the primary facilitating factor for heritage destruction and trafficking. Three distinct yet interconnected forms of damage recur across these contexts: collateral war destruction, in which heritage sites become unintended casualties of broader conflict; deliberate ideological destruction, in which sites are targeted for propaganda purposes; and systematic looting, in which archaeological objects are extracted and sold to fund various armed groups.

Socioeconomic Factors and Their Impact

Beyond direct conflict situations, socioeconomic conditions significantly influence the vulnerability of archaeological heritage. A historical perspective reveals how trafficking patterns evolve in response to changing political and economic circumstances across different regions.

The Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq) has seen a notable evolution in trafficking from the Western expeditions of the 18th century to today's organized criminal networks, analyses Favier (2025). During the Lebanese civil war, the Iran-Iraq war, and the Gulf Wars (1980s-1990s), looting and theft intensified yet received limited attention in Western media. The 2003 looting of the Baghdad Museum marked a pivotal moment, highlighting the emergence of "industrial" professional looting alongside deliberate, ideologically motivated destruction.

Four distinct patterns of heritage trafficking emerge in Middle Eastern contexts: (1) looting and theft conducted by local populations or organized gangs often linked to authorities; (2) involvement of high-level government actors in trafficking; (3) illicit circulation of artifacts occurring both internationally and domestically; and (4) ineffective laws due to state complicity. These patterns manifest in contexts of "limited statehood" (Favier, 2025), where central power has weakened and territories are fragmented into semi-autonomous zones. Under such conditions, archaeological heritage receives minimal funding and protection, especially during economic downturns.

Afghanistan presents a parallel case study with distinctive characteristics. As documented by Marquis (2025), trafficking evolved from 19th-century collecting practices into a source of revenue for warlords following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. During the first Taliban period (1995-2001), the focus notably shifted from looting to ideologically driven destruction under the guise of religious justification. The international intervention that began in 2001 temporarily improved conditions by incorporating former looters into archaeological site workforces—a rare example of economic incentives successfully redirecting participants from illicit activities.

Local community responses to archaeological heritage represent another critical dimension of the socioeconomic context. Qassar's (2025) comparative analysis of Egyptian and Syrian sites provides compelling evidence of how engagement approaches significantly impact preservation outcomes. In Egypt, unregulated urban development has enabled widespread looting, with public concern centering primarily on structural safety rather than on values of heritage preservation. This contrasts sharply with Syria's ancient Urkesh, which escaped widespread regional destruction through strategic community integration, which included Arabic-language educational programs about the site's importance, local staff involvement in conservation processes, and economic benefits through eco-archaeological planning and craft industries as community investment in preservation.

When local populations are educated about the significance of heritage and derive economic benefits from preservation activities, they transition from potential participants in looting to active partners in protection. This economic vulnerability underscores the need for sustainable protection models that integrate local communities while addressing broader structural factors that incentivize trafficking.

Actors and Routes of Trafficking

Understanding trafficking networks requires examining their organizational structures, operational methods, and geographic patterns. Several case studies provide insights into how these networks function across multiple scales, from local operations to international systems.

The "Becchina-Medici" network, analyzed by Belzic (2025), offers perhaps the most comprehensive example of a sophisticated antiquities trafficking operation. These Italian traffickers established an extensive network based in Switzerland to acquire and resell artifacts to world-class museums and auction houses. Their connection to organized crime—specifically the Italian Mafia—and their operations under American trafficker Robert E. Hecht illustrate how antiquities trafficking intersects with looters, tombaroli, and broader criminal enterprises. Police raids in Geneva (1995) and Rome (1997) revealed a sophisticated infrastructure, including dedicated exhibition spaces, restoration laboratories, and document forgery operations designed to create an appearance of legitimacy.

Technological developments have transformed trafficking patterns in recent decades. Marugán's (2025) research on the Iberian Peninsula identifies how digital platforms have fundamentally altered traditional trafficking networks. Although the total volume of the illicit market remains unquantified, its estimated value exceeds the legal market's $4 million, indicating a substantial economic scale. Three distinct trafficking levels operating simultaneously were identified: low-value objects sold directly by looters to buyers; medium-value objects marketed through internet platforms with multiple intermediaries; and high-value items handled by specialists who produce falsified documentation to establish apparent legality.

Geographic trafficking routes reveal how artifacts move from source to market countries. Elkhamisy's (2025) mapping of routes from conflict zones identifies consistent patterns: Iraqi and Syrian materials transit through Turkey, Jordan, and Kuwait; Egyptian objects move through intermediaries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia; while Libyan artifacts frequently pass through Egypt. Despite these diverse pathways, destination markets remain concentrated in wealthier regions: Europe, North America, Australia, and East Asia.

The 2011 (Port Said) and 2015 (Damietta) port seizures in Egypt, documented by Elkhamisy and Belzic (2025), correspond directly to the instability following the Arab Spring. The Port Said operation uncovered Cyrenaican artifacts misidentified as Egyptian, underscoring the challenges of accurate identification even for enforcement specialists. Meanwhile, the Damietta operation recovered 1,120 objects—primarily Egyptian with some Libyan items—demonstrating the volume of materials in transit. High-value pieces, including a Lucius Verus head potentially worth €1 million, suggest possible links to weapons financing and underline the connection between cultural trafficking and broader criminal enterprises.

Systemic Challenges and Response Strategies

Challenges in the Circulation of Archaeological Goods

Libya has unfortunately become an illuminating laboratory for understanding the dual life of illegal objects—from their creation through looting or theft to their circulation through laundering processes. The analysis of circulation mechanisms reveals how such objects undergo systematic transformation, both physically and through documentation, to obscure their origins.

The sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene, Libya, examined by Blancher (2025), provides a particularly instructive case study. This extra-urban site, excavated by American archaeologists between 1969 and 1981, yielded an exceptional collection of votive objects—statues, terracotta figurines, lamps, coins, inscriptions—all meticulously inventoried for scholarly purposes. Between late 1999 and early 2000, these items were stolen from storage in Shahat (formerly Cyrene) and began appearing on the international antiquities and art market within months of their disappearance.

Blancher and Michel (2025) identify a central challenge in the structural opacity of the art market—particularly the antiquities sector—which complicates distinguishing between licit and illicit flows while facilitating the legitimization of looted, stolen, or illegally excavated objects. Laundering mechanisms employ sophisticated strategies aimed at fictitiously anchoring objects in acceptable histories. These include referencing anonymous "old collections," citing deceased collectors, integrating objects into commercial stocks presented as private collections, and specifically referencing private collections formed before 1970—the key date of the UNESCO Convention.

These fabricated strategic provenance narratives are reinforced through forged documentation: certificates, fictitious inventories, misappropriated publications, or references to institutions purportedly issuing official documents (Blancher and Michel 2025). Physical alterations of the artifacts include erasure of excavation traces, camouflaged restorations, and fragment re-compositions to alter their appearance and prevent identification.

Certain categories of archaeological objects prove particularly vulnerable to trafficking due to their physical characteristics. Leblanc's (2025) study of ancient weights demonstrates how seemingly insignificant artifacts escape detection. Their small size, apparent banality, and lack of strong symbolic or aesthetic recognition contribute to their invisibility during enforcement operations. Unlike more imposing and easily identifiable pieces—such as busts or sarcophagi—these objects frequently pass undetected through border controls.

Actors and Tools in Combating Trafficking

In today's geopolitical context characterized by instability and globalized exchanges, the illicit trafficking of cultural goods—particularly archaeological artifacts—has emerged as a major legal, security, and cultural heritage concern. Effective response strategies require a clear understanding of the diverse actors involved and the tools they deploy to address this multifaceted challenge.

The acceleration of trafficking in the wake of North African and Middle Eastern conflicts revealed sophisticated systems for looting and laundering archaeological objects, which successfully penetrate legitimate art markets. As Michel (2025) emphasizes, a fundamental difficulty lies in the elusive and decontextualized nature of objects from clandestine excavations, whose traceability is compromised from the moment of extraction. In such an environment, repressive measures alone prove inadequate; effective responses demand a systemic approach anchored in transdisciplinary cooperation.

Given the impossibility of precisely quantifying the scale of trafficking, Michel (2025) identifies four critical measurement criteria: the number of

illegal excavations as origin points of trafficking; sales (particularly via digital platforms); seizures as partial indicators of the black market's scale; and successful restitutions. Universities have emerged as strategic actors in addressing these gaps, with initiatives like the University of Poitiers' CelTrac strengthening the "investigator-specialist" partnership by producing actionable data for enforcement authorities and training a new generation of specialized professionals.

Technological innovations offer promising tools for remote monitoring and documentation. Ubelmann et al. (2025) demonstrate how integrated surveillance systems incorporating satellite imagery, photogrammetry, and algorithmic analysis enable the identification and documentation of looted sites without physical presence. Their case study from Bactria illustrates how these technologies can function effectively even in regions with limited access, providing crucial documentation for both preservation efforts and potential legal proceedings.

International legal instruments constitute another essential element of the protection toolkit. Bilateral agreements, such as the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the United States and Turkey, analyzed by Bayraktar et al. (2025), exemplify the internationalization of protection mechanisms while facilitating restitution procedures. However, their research reveals that the effectiveness of these legal tools remains ambivalent due to limited transparency, opacity in possession chains, and insufficient empirical evaluation of outcomes.

Antiquities and Art Market, and Provenance Issues

The debate surrounding the provenance, particularly regarding archaeological artifacts, encompasses major ethical, scholarly, and economic considerations. Two parallel perspectives dominate this discourse: antiquities dealers, who prioritize economic value, artistic qualities, and object authenticity; and archaeologists, who emphasize contextual information essential for scientific interpretations and understanding.

As highlighted by the current generation of art market professionals (Pillon 2025), who have recognized the imperative for a paradigm shift within their profession regarding provenance research, previous generations regarded this matter merely as a source of "commercial added value." This evolution reflects the maturation of professional practices, where provenance has become not only a guarantee of authenticity and transparency but also a central ethical concern. In contrast, archaeologists have consistently emphasized context and traceability as fundamental to preserving the scientific and historical value of objects.

A 2023 study by the Antiquities Dealers Association, cited by Peacock (2025), revealed that while 60% of marketplace listings mention provenance, significant disparities exist between the treatment of high- and low-value objects. Prestigious artifacts are typically accompanied by detailed documentation, whereas more modest pieces frequently lack any provenance information.

Haldimann's (2025) analysis of the Swiss Édouard Guigoz collection provides an instructive historical example of the complexities surrounding provenance. Comprising primarily Middle Eastern artifacts, the collection shows how documentation gaps generate lasting uncertainties regarding object origins. The controversy surrounding the 1979 restitution of the Aldobrandini Sphinx to Italy highlighted how post-war market conditions, marked by minimal regulation, facilitated the development of private collections through channels that would now be considered illicit.

Girard (2025) notes that the expansion of contemporary provenance research practices is driven not only by rising ethical awareness but also by significant developments in legal frameworks. Increasingly stringent regulations governing international cultural property transfers, including anti-money laundering provisions, have created strong compliance incentives for market participants to adopt enhanced transparency and traceability practices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The illicit circulation of archaeological cultural goods represents a complex challenge at the intersection of heritage protection, international security, and economic regulation. The vulnerability of archaeological objects—often inconspicuous, poorly documented, or easily concealed—facilitates their unlawful removal from territories of origin, while systemic institutional weaknesses further enable trafficking networks to operate with limited risk.

Law enforcement faces significant resource constraints in addressing this specialized category of crime. Effective intervention requires a sufficient number of specifically trained investigators across source, transit, and destination countries. While training initiatives have expanded in recent years, they require substantial extension and consolidation to establish sustainable networks of expertise. The judicial dimension also represents a particular weakness, as heritage-related litigation is typically deprioritized, hindered by limited specialized magistrate training and a lack of dedicated resources.

Cultural authorities require specific regulatory adjustments to address current vulnerabilities. Export licensing procedures present particular weaknesses that potentially facilitate the laundering of looted objects. Revising value thresholds for certificate requirements, strengthening the implementation of export controls, and enhancing cross-border information sharing would significantly improve the monitoring of the outbound flow.

At the European level, regulatory frameworks for the art market require the systematic adoption of the Police Book throughout Europe, alongside targeted modifications to enhance traceability. Reforming documentation requirements in the Police Book to systematically include object photographs and the identities of all transaction participants would significantly improve the ability to track cultural objects. Establishing harmonized documentation standards and explicitly including cultural property trafficking within broader security agendas—connecting it with anti-terrorism, anti-money laundering, and organized crime initiatives—would reinforce the institutional response framework.

The increasing digitalization of the antiquities market necessitates technological adaptation in monitoring and enforcement strategies. Developing integrated monitoring systems that combine human expertise with automated detection technologies represents a promising direction. Simultaneously, increased accountability requirements for online marketplaces and social networks, particularly those facilitating exchanges between looters and potential buyers, would help disrupt digital trafficking channels.

Ultimately, an effective response to the illicit circulation of archaeological goods depends on coordinated action across these diverse sectors and full institutional recognition of the heritage, scientific, and security implications of archaeological trafficking. The convergence of political instability, economic pressure, and organized crime creates ideal conditions for archaeological trafficking to thrive. Only multidimensional approaches that address all three factors can effectively protect irreplaceable heritage while preserving its contextual and scholarly value.

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Vincent Michel is a Professor of Oriental Archaeology at the University of Poitiers. Both an archaeologist and an orientalist, he has devoted the past thirty years to a multifaceted career encompassing teaching, research, fieldwork (in Palestine, Libya, and Jordan, among others), and the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural goods from the Near East (objects, trade routes, and smuggling networks). He lectures on this subject at various universities and institutions and regularly trains both French and international law enforcement agencies. In collaboration with international organizations such as UNESCO and ICOM, he also raises awareness among judicial authorities and local communities. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and frequently organizes academic events that bring together key stakeholders in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural goods.

Maxime Girard

Maxime Girard is a researcher specializing in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural goods, with a particular focus on the art market and its protagonists. He obtained a Master's degree in Law and a second Master's degree in Expertise and Art Market at the Sorbonne University Paris IV. He joined the HeRMA laboratory at the University of Poitiers and the ANCHISE project as a research engineer to provide his perspective on the various actors in the art market and their methods—insights he acquired through working in a major Parisian art gallery.

Dr. Éléonore Favier

Éléonore Favier is an archaeologist specializing in crafts and production in Classical and Hellenistic Greece. After completing a thesis in Greek history and archaeology at Université Lumière Lyon 2, she became a scientific member of the École française d'Athènes (EFA) in Greece, leading a project on the Hellenistic workshops of Delos. Also focusing on issues related to cultural heritage looting and trafficking, she joined the ANCHISE project as soon as she joined the EFA, bringing a field-oriented approach.

Benjamin Omer

Benjamin Omer is a PhD candidate in Criminal Law at Université Lyon 3, where his research focuses on money laundering related to crimes against cultural heritage. He currently serves as a visiting lecturer at the same institution. His professional background includes significant experience in cultural heritage protection, having worked as an Associate Project Officer at the 1970 Convention Secrétariat at UNESCO and as a Project Manager for the H2020 NETCHER project at Centre national pour la recherche scientifique (CNRS). His field work includes trainings and lectures in France, Lebanon, and Palestine. He joined the ANCHISE project as a Project Officer in charge of scientific dissemination for the École française d'Athènes (EFA).

Loom the Looters: Illicit Trafficking of Antiquities and Digital Means to Uncover It

Dr. Afroditi Kamara[1]

Abstract

Illicit trafficking of antiquities and works of art is an ongoing activity, fuelled, on the one hand, by the commodification of art as a means of gaining prestige or evading taxes, and on the other hand, by a combination of poverty and ignorance at the source level (local communities). Established as a practice during the "Grand Tour" of the 17th to 19th centuries, when the legal framework for protection of antiquities was still underdeveloped, it has continued to funnel exhibits to museums and private collections throughout the 20th century through carefully designed methods for concealing or blurring the objects' provenance and time of acquisition. At the dawn of the 21st century, public works or military operations such as the wars in former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine (to name just those close to Europe) have brought an enormous number of new archaeological and art objects to the market, which nowadays has become more impersonal and immediate: electronic auctions and e-commerce facilitate the buying and selling of antiquities and works of art, whereas offshore companies conceal purchases in obscure places. However, information technology can work in the opposite direction: from the quick leak of the Pandora Papers to the development of the ID-Art app, increased efforts now focus on tracing looted antiquities and preventing illicit trafficking. With the use of AI, new methods can be developed to scan news and information on the internet for illicit digs and auctions. Through the examination of some case studies from the Greek experience, we will explain how this can be achieved, and we will suggest means for edifying communities against trafficking.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, digital commerce, auctions, illicit excavations, education, commodification*

Introduction

Looted antiquities and legal documents

The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, ratified to date by 147 countries worldwide, provides "a common framework for the State Parties" on the measures to prevent illicit trafficking as well as to facilitate the restitution of stolen property (UNESCO,1970). The convention, a precursor to the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 1972), sprang from the need to put an end to the catastrophic looting and trafficking of cultural heritage artefacts and works of art, as well as to define the legal framework of what constitutes actual looting. Looking at the historical events that preceded it, we understand that the convention was triggered by the unprecedented looting activity that took place throughout WWII, particularly

1. Time Heritage

by the Nazi forces.[2] The Convention acted as a catalyst in the field of cultural heritage protection, as it was followed by a series of documents aimed at the restitution, rehabilitation, and repatriation of stolen heritage items, especially by imperialist and colonial states (Stahn, 2023).

Within the first decades of the 21st century, the change of the prevailing model of cultural heritage management to a more "bottom-up" approach led to the emergence of a strong tendency towards the "decolonisation" of museums, leading to the reluctant return of cultural property and bolder claims for the repatriation of other items (Robertson, 2020). The most important of these documents is the UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, established in 1995, which aims to facilitate the return, restitution, and repatriation of cultural artefacts stolen either by individuals or foreign invading armies (UNIDROIT, 1995).

Illicit trafficking of antiquities in the present era

Instead of being prevented, however, by these legal documents, as well as by the activity and vigilance of police forces such as INTERPOL, looters still sell illegally excavated or stolen cultural heritage artefacts in any way they can. The art and antiquities market is anything but suppressed, and the Internet has become the worst enemy of the forces combating illegal trade (Votey, 2022). E-auctions, social media pages, and electronic advertisements have turned the illegal art and antiquities trade into a multi-billion-dollar affair where no standards apply: duplicates, forgery, fencing, and illicit excavations are all fair game in this growing market.

In our unstable and fast-changing world, the reasons for resorting to such activities are also increasing. In many countries, particularly in Latin America, poverty leads local communities to illegal excavations in order to support family income by selling antiquities easily found in the desert or in the fields (Yates, 2015). Sometimes the "dealers" are just children who hope to get some pocket money by selling items they find easily and that apparently no one misses.

The widespread presence of ISIS forces in the Middle East has also turned the antiquities trade into a lucrative activity, since in the new-age Islamic agenda, figurative works of art are not only unwanted but also despicable, except as a source of income for the promotion of the Cause (Brodie & Isber, 2019). Wars are also an excellent opportunity for the looting of museum exhibits and works of art, as plundering is considered collateral damage. The Gulf Wars, particularly the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, led to the vast destruction of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad and a dramatic increase in the illicit trafficking of antiquities from the country. In the following years, this spurred an orchestrated effort to recuperate the missing antiquities and the foundation of the International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage of Iraq (Committee for Cultural Policy, 2017). UNESCO, the U.S. Department of State, the UN Security Council, and several other international organisations pledged to support the restitution of Iraqi cultural heritage, most of which was being sold online (Matsuura, 2008). The UN issued Security Council Resolution 1483 on Iraqi antiquities. Unfortunately, it would not be the last one.

The Civil War in Syria created yet another long-standing Middle Eastern source of illicit trafficking and destruction of cultural artefacts and monuments, prompting yet another resolution—2199 of 2015. The following year, the Blue Shield International was established through the collaboration of ICOM, ICOMOS, IFLA, and ICA, primarily to protect cultural heritage in times of war, but also to prevent the illicit export of antiquities from war-ridden areas (Blue Shield, 2016).

2 In Greece, for example, the director of the National Archaeological Museum, Christos Karouzos, was warned by the German archaeologist Gabriel Wälter—then an employee of the Austrian Archaeological Institute—and, together with his wife, Semni, and a dedicated team of museum employees, he buried the statues and exhibits of the museum in subterranean crypts specially made for this purpose. The Hollywood film Inglourious Basterds (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0361748/) touches upon this side activity of Nazi soldiers, which particularly affected Jewish collections, privately owned art, and museum and gallery collections.

Goals and Methods

From looting to trafficking: paths of information

As the reasons leading subjects to engage in the trade of antiquities and works of art vary, so do the means and methods of illicit trafficking. In previous decades, the usual "export" method was to hide objects in trucks and lorries transporting other goods or to load them on private yachts sailing directly out to international waters (Campbell, 2013). The more obscure, forgotten, or unknown objects found their way directly into the hands of collectors or merchants. Objects that were found missing from museums or archaeological sites right after their disappearance often remained for decades in depots, usually in Switzerland's Free Port, until the dust from their disappearance settled and they could slowly be moved to their final destination—auction houses or private collections.

A famous case of looting from Greece spanned two decades and involved a unanimous conspiracy among the local inhabitants and the police authorities of the village of Aidonia in Corinthia, where "omertà" was self-imposed, delaying the authorities' efforts to recover the stolen "treasure" consisting of Late Helladic (15th-13th c. BCE) golden and precious objects (gems and intaglios, rings, jewellery, etc.). While the systematic looting of the 20 chamber tombs in the area was carried out in the mid-1970s, part of the looted items appeared in an auction at the Michael Ward Gallery in New York in 1993 (Elia, 1995).

The Greek authorities were notified, and a litigation process started, based on the finds from the same cemetery that had meanwhile been discovered by the Ephorate of Antiquities of Corinthia (Krystalli-Votsi, 1996). The collection was repatriated exactly 20 years after its initial clandestine excavation, in 1996, and an exhibition at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens preceded its return to Corinthia (Demakopoulou, 1996).

In the case of the Aidonia treasure, both sides (Ward's gallery and the Greek Ministry of Culture) were lacking important information regarding the itinerary of the treasure from Greece to Switzerland and then to the U.S. Part of this information was never revealed throughout the litigation process which ended with the symbolic purchase of the treasure by the U.S.-based "Society for the Preservation of Greek Heritage," which then donated it to Greece after a series of exhibitions on American soil (Αποστολίδης, 2008). Had the Aidonia affair happened today, the means of investigation would be more elaborate and precise. The digital world, as well as advances in identification methods developed in the broader field of Archaeometry, enable us to identify provenance, prove forgery, investigate networks of trafficking, and warn the market about looted artefacts, so that galleries, collectors, etc., cannot rely on the excuse of "due diligence" (UNIDROIT, 1995) in case of litigation following a purchase.

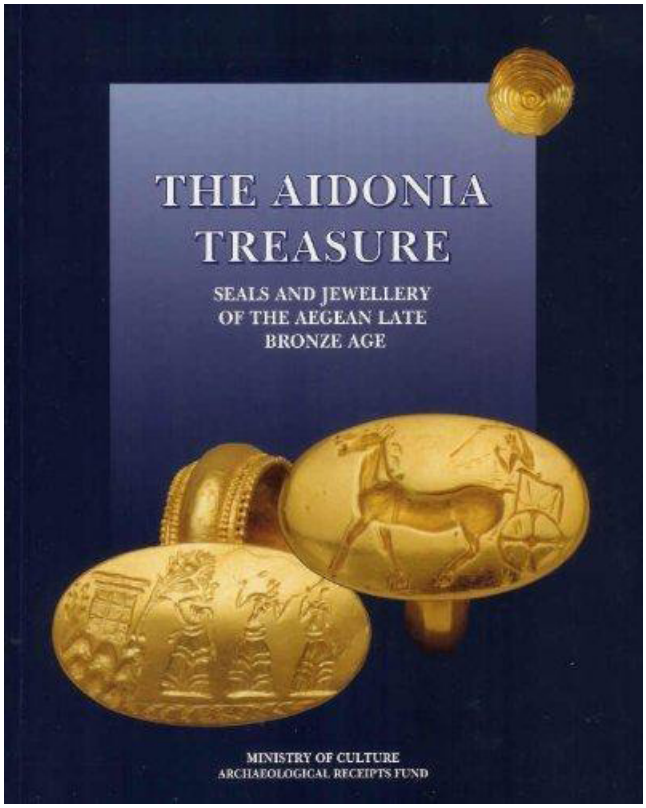

Fig. 1 Cover of the catalogue from the exhibition of the Aidonia Treasure in Greece

INTERPOL and its counterparts

The paramount organisation with a global approach to cultural heritage crime is INTERPOL. Its specialized teams design policies and tools for the recovery of lost artefacts and works of art, and operate missions in collaboration with national authorities. Every June and December, INTERPOL circulates a pamphlet featuring the "most wanted" stolen objects and alerts governments and organisations around the world. This list is based on the Stolen Works of Art Database, an online database accessible upon request, to which ministries of culture and governmental organisations add missing objects each year. At the moment, the database represents 134 countries and contains about 52,000 missing objects.

To facilitate the proper recording of missing objects, INTERPOL has also established the Object ID standard—a methodology for documenting all necessary information that would enable the effective search for stolen art and antiquities. As trivial as this may seem, Object ID is the only internationally acknowledged documentation standard for the identification of cultural goods.

Fig. 2 Webpage of INTERPOL's Database of Stolen Works of Art

https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/objectid/

Museums are encouraged to record their holdings according to this standard to facilitate research in the event of a future loss. Several international organisations, such as UNESCO, the World Customs Organization, the Carabinieri in Italy, the Metropolitan Police in London, and Interpol itself, actively promote the use of this standard (Fanizzo, 2005).

A step forward from the Database is the ID-Art app, available for Android and Apple mobile devices and launched in early 2020. Through this free, downloadable app, all interested parties, from police officers and art dealers to collectors and the general public, can access the Stolen Art Database, check if an object is registered as stolen, notify INTERPOL in case an object or site is at risk, create inventories of art collections, and, last but not least, report items as stolen. ID-Art uses cutting-edge image recognition software to identify objects based on old or blurred photographs of objects stolen long ago. One of its success stories is the recovery of a Renaissance diptych, stolen in 1979, to the Spanish State by the Guardia Civil, with the compliance of the buyer. With the motto "Capture the Art, Capture the Criminals," the ID-Art app also targets the looters

(https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Cultural-heritage-crime/ID-Art-mobile-app).

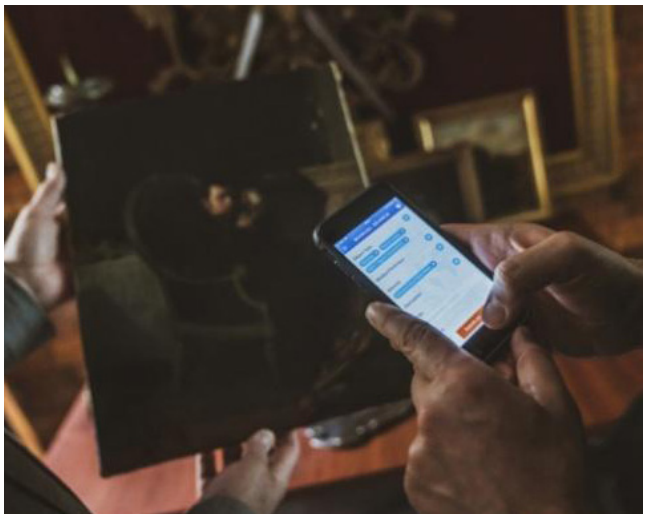

Fig. 3 ID-Art app in use (from the app's website)

Apart from INTERPOL, several other registers and databases play a critical role. The Art Loss Register (ALR) is a private registry of stolen art founded by insurance companies and art dealers to facilitate investigations in collaboration with public and international authorities. Currently, the registry holds 700,000 items and supports about 400,000 cases a year, when museums, collectors, auction houses, and others attempt to investigate the provenance of items and certify that they are not the product of illicit trafficking prior to sale or acquisition (www.artloss.com).

Another important database is the Lost Art Database, maintained by the German Lost Art Foundation, which aims to recuperate works of art expropriated by the Nazi forces during WWII. To date, more than 59,000 objects have been recovered and returned to their rightful owners(https://www.lostart.de/en/).

The FBI also runs its own database, comprising artworks stolen in or from the United States (https://artcrimes.fbi.gov/). The National Stolen Art File (NSAF), founded in 1979, has so far recuperated more than 20,000 objects.

The constant seeker: networks, algorithms, and physicochemical methods

The first quarter of the 21st century has been rich in experimental methods for combating illicit trafficking (Mackenzie et al., 2019). The issue has been raised several times in the news as well as on TV series and films, from Larry Crowne (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1583420/?ref_=mv_close) to the series L'Art du Crime (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6190050/). XRF, laser and industrial microscopy allow scientists to trace fake antiquities and to provide accurate information about provenance. These techniques are used by museums and galleries to certify that their holdings or future acquisitions are genuine, but also, conversely, to prove that alleged copies of antiquities are in fact authentic objects that have been illicitly acquired. Thermoluminescence has also been developed to determine the age and provenance of antiquities—factors crucial to the tracing of looted or fake antiquities. A typical case involved the thermoluminescence analysis of clay figurines from Mali, which flooded the UK market in the 1980s following illicit excavations on the riverbed of the Niger. When the supply could not meet the demand, forgeries began to appear. The Institute of Material Analysis at the University of Oxford was requested to apply the thermoluminescence method to these figurines in order to provide certificates of authenticity, thereby increasing the price of genuine objects by at least ten times (Sease, 1997).

Modern technology, however, extends beyond material analysis and scientific investigation. Algorithms have been tested to trace the trade networks of illicit antiquities, helping authorities not only prevent specific objects from entering the market but also disrupt the entire trafficking itineraries of looted antiquities and works of art (Tsirogiannis & Tsirogiannis, 2016). Based on real-life cases of illicit trafficking of Greek and Italian antiquities, analysed by Watson and Todeschini in their seminal book The Medici Conspiracy (Watson & Todeschini, 2007), the model used known nodes of the trade network to define an additional 181 directed and 171 undirected nodes, thus developing theories of probability. These nodes usually represent individuals or organisations involved in the trafficking of cultural objects. The developed methods and theories, when tested against real-life cases, achieved a maximum accuracy of 60%. No matter how low this figure may appear, such methods can prove valuable in cases where little is known about actual networks, but a large number of potential nodes are available that could plausibly be involved in the network.

Algorithmic analysis can also be used in searching the web for valuable information on looted antiquities. Screening the internet for keywords that may conceal looted objects (based on testimonies from arrested looters), as well as for photographs of antiquities that might be used for "advertising" purposes, has become standard practice among squads investigating crimes against cultural property. Generative AI is expected to become a valuable research tool in this domain (Yates, Graham, & El-Roby, 2023).

Commodification of cultural property and the need for awareness-raising

As is often the case in the constant struggle between protection and the threat to property of any kind, no scientific method developed for safeguarding cultural goods remains unknown to outlaws. Networks engaged in illicit trafficking often have their own tools for misleading their persecutors. A long-standing and particularly difficult challenge in this regard is the commodification of cultural property and the persistent demand from collectors. As long as this demand is strong, looters will be willing to meet it at any cost.

Once the practice of plundering beauty from one place to adorn another was established as early as Roman times, there has been no effective way to suppress this demand, which fluctuates with prevailing aesthetic tastes. Hence, the only truly effective way to stop illicit trafficking would be to eliminate the desire to possess cultural goods that would otherwise be public property.

In this context, technology can only offer the means, but the sciences that can play a leading role are psychology and sociology. The efforts should follow a double track: addressing collectors and dealers on the one hand, and inhabitants of areas known or likely to experience increased looting activity on the other.

Systematic inventorying of collectors, dealers, and auction houses, along with an analysis of their activities over time—even based on their publicly available catalogues—can be analysed through algorithmic methods. These could yield some insights into the provenance of antiquities and artworks, emerging market preferences, trends, and prices. This would provide authorities and museums with an important overview of the trade patterns and perhaps of probable routes followed by objects, allowing them to establish control points.

On the other hand, mapping areas that yield a disproportionately large number of objects currently on the market would offer a basis for a well-orchestrated awareness-raising programme. This could involve working with local schools, preparing itinerant exhibitions, and engaging local authorities in an extensive programme for the valorisation of local cultural heritage.

Drawing on case studies developed through the 2021 SIEM Summer School at the École du Louvre, which the author had the honour to attend, itinerant and virtual exhibitions would inform local communities about the dangers and negative effects of illicit trafficking and turn them into “guards” of antiquities instead of looters. These itinerant exhibitions could include digitised copies of antiquities and works of art illicitly removed from their region, the paths they followed, and how they were recuperated. For example, a case study relevant to Western Greece could highlight the story of the Ephebe of Preveza, a 4th-century BCE statue of an adolescent discovered during the construction of the underwater tunnel at Actium. The statue was sold to dealers and smuggled to Germany, where the perpetrators were finally arrested by INTERPOL (Αποστολίδης, 2008).

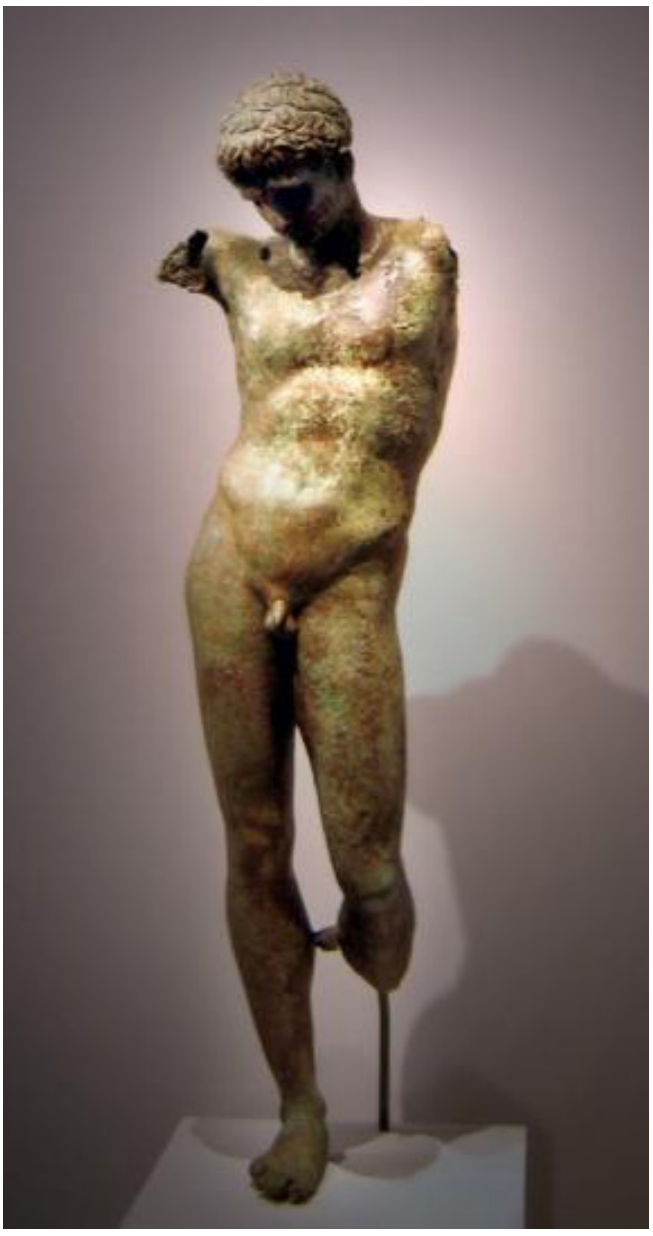

Fig. 4 The Ephebe of Preveza (NAMA 26087)

The exhibition could detail the discovery and transportation of the statue, the ways in which the authorities were informed about it, the INTERPOL efforts and means of investigation, and the eventual arrest and prosecution of the dealers. A children's tale could even be written from the perspective of the statue itself, narrating its journey as if the adolescent were a living person. In both digital and physical formats, the exhibition could travel to municipalities across Western Greece, accompanied by public workshops on the value of antiquities and the dangers of illicit trafficking.

This bottom-up approach would increase local communities' sense of "ownership" over their cultural heritage and thus foster peer pressure in favour of protecting movable cultural heritage. Similarly, projects valorising local cultural heritage, such as the Portable Unit for the Documentation, Characterisation and Conservation of Movable Cultural Heritage Artifacts in Remote Areas of Greece (MoCaCu), implemented by the University of the Peloponnese and Time Heritage between 2013 and 2015 (Kamara et al., 2026), could be expanded and consolidated through an international NGO. Its aim would be to protect and preserve rural cultural heritage, since most cases of looted antiquities occur in rural regions, where agricultural and pastoral activities bring people in direct contact with the land and hidden treasures. Besides technology and the ongoing game of hide-and-seek between authorities and looters, it must be recognised that a shift in mentality is crucial for the protection of our shared heritage.

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Biography of the Author

Dr. Afroditi Kamara is a historian by training; she studied at the universities of Athens, Manchester, and Oxford, specialising in the social and religious history of the Middle East during Late Antiquity. She has worked as a research historian at the Foundation of the Hellenic World, where she also specialised in Digital Humanities and Digital Cultural Heritage. In 2003, she co-founded Time Heritage, a company focused on implementing interdisciplinary projects in cultural heritage protection and management. Among her key achievements are the UNESCO project on traditional games and sports for ODLTG, the research project DIAPLASIS, several Erasmus+ projects, and the co-creation of DIGISMALL, a digital curator for small museums. She is a member of the Hellenic ICOMOS Board and a Councillor at Europeana Network Association (ENA).

Impact of Activism: Center Against Trafficking in Works of Art and Its Key Areas of Action

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Abstract

This article presents the engagement and contributions of the Center against Trafficking in Works of Art (CPKU) in combating art crime in Bosnia and Herzegovina. CPKU is a non-governmental organization dedicated to preventing illegal art trafficking and building capacities to strengthen national networks working on protecting and monitoring cultural heritage and works of art. Due to the complex and layered political structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the problem of illicit art trafficking has been marginalized and neglected by both the government sector and civil society for decades. The problem became more evident in the post-conflict and post-war period. Activities of CPKU can be grouped into three categories that target key challenges: institutional approach, direct impact, and social action. The article highlights major outcomes and notable examples from three core activity areas, showcasing effective practices in combating illegal art trafficking. These include: advocating critical issues before the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina, establishing a database of missing works of art, and promoting public participation by encouraging citizens to report art-related crimes anonymously through the Crimestoppers hotline.

Key words: *art crime, database of missing works of art, institutional networking, non-governmental effort*

Introduction

The protection of cultural heritage and the prevention of its illegal exchange, sale, and transport is an endeavor that requires an interdisciplinary approach and cooperation among relevant experts, institutions, and professionals in the fields of cultural heritage, law enforcement, and the judiciary. UNESCO recommends increasing the level of cooperation between state institutions and non-governmental organizations, especially in areas such as training, awareness-raising, and the implementation of joint projects, as this model of collaboration can enhance the effectiveness of government institutions in fulfilling their mandates (Boz 2018, p. 118.). This paper presents an example of cooperation between the non-governmental organization Center against Trafficking in Works of Art (CPKU) and state institutions and citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, aimed at fighting against art crime. It outlines projects such as the creation of a database of missing works of art, lobbying for the establishment of a national database, and a campaign encouraging citizens to report the theft of cultural property.

1 The International Gallery of Portraits, Cultural Centre Tuzla

2 Center Against Art Trafficking in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Opportunities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is bound by multilateral treaties, such as the Convention on Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (Paris, 1970) and the UNIDROIT Convention on the International Return of Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, (Rome, 1995). However, the country faces significant challenges in systematically protecting artworks and heritage. One of the key issues is that cultural affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina are regulated at the entity and cantonal levels rather than the state level, resulting in a fragmented and inconsistent legal framework (Petrović 2008). This system can be defined as anarchic and in a state of poor efficiency (Mutapčić 2008).[3]

Bosnia and Herzegovina was the scene of war destruction, during which many cultural monuments were destroyed and looted, and movable goods were stolen and illegally exported. Official statistics and detailed analyses regarding the number of missing works of art and objects of cultural property from Bosnia and Herzegovina are not available. While there are now regulations on the import and export of works of art, antiques, and cultural goods at both the state and entity levels, the absence of a national database of missing works of art remains a major obstacle to transparency. Such a database would be of great value if available to law enforcement and security authorities, but also to the general public, who could contribute to identifying, locating, or reporting missing works of art.

Main activities of the Center Against Trafficking in Works of Art

The organization has defined three key areas of action essential for the successful implementation of its activities: direct impact, influence on institutional action, and social engagement aimed at encouraging civic participation.

The need to establish the first Database of missing art

The most visible outcome of the direct impact is the formation of the first, albeit informal, database of missing works of art in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2017. The project was implemented in cooperation with the Central Office for the Fight Against Smuggling of Cultural Goods (OCBC) and the French Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Due to the lack of a national database, the specific need for creating one stemmed from the intention to emphasize its importance in systematically collecting data, highlighting the scale of missing artworks, and enhancing the visibility and transparency of art crime and efforts to neutralize it.

Encouraging active participation from both citizens and museums was a significant element in the development process. Therefore, three museum institutions and two private collectors contributed information on missing artifacts from their collections. However, the database is not fully structured according to the Object Identification standard since it was developed as a pilot project, pending final adjustments and full-scale implementation. It still includes these defined categories of information: name of the artist/author, title, technique, dimensions, date or period, ownership, year of disappearance, year of reporting to the police, and photograph.

3 The main state institution eligible for designation of national monuments is the Commission to Preserve National Monuments, composed of three members, with headquarters in Sarajevo and regional offices in Mostar and Banja Luka. Additionally, each entity, namely the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, has its own relevant institutes for the protection of monuments. Legally speaking, cultural competencies are divided among the entity Republika Srpska, the ten cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (under the coordination of the Federal Ministry of Culture and Sports and the Federal Ministry of Education and Science), and the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Standardizing the database with Object ID norms could strengthen its validity and interoperability across different institutions, facilitate the regulation of the standards of national database, and encourage its implementation. Harmonization of the CPKU database with Object ID standards should be a priority in improving its effectiveness and accessibility. The efforts of international law enforcement agencies to standardize database methodologies indicate that Bosnia and Herzegovina should adopt similar procedures and follow successful examples.

Although the database of missing works of art is informative and state institutions are not obliged to use or search it, access is available to interested parties with the approval of CPKU. The reporting of missing works of art can be carried out free of charge by natural and legal persons, under specific terms. Requests are accepted only after the loss has been reported to the police, followed by a completed form containing the necessary information for the database.

The project's visibility resulted in establishing cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Sarajevo Canton, whose database was expanded using information from the CPKU database. Thanks to the visible information in the database and frequent media campaigns led by CPKU, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Tuzla Canton received an anonymous tip in 2019, which enabled the successful recovery of two missing paintings belonging to the International Portrait Gallery Tuzla. Similarly, another tip was received in 2022 regarding the possession and location of a missing artwork from the collection of the same gallery. The work of art was found in Serbia, and the process of its repatriation is still ongoing.

The current number of registered missing works of art in the database is 234, although it is not final. CPKU is working to establish cooperation with every public museum and gallery in Bosnia and Herzegovina that could provide information on items missing from their collections.

Challenges in Establishing a National Database of Missing Artworks

The efforts to establish the database gradually led to the issue of creating a national database of missing works of art being raised before the state Parliament in 2021. At the initiative of CPKU, a member of parliament addressed a question to the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the State Commission for Cooperation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with UNESCO, inquiring about the reasons why a national database does not exist. In response, it was confirmed that there is no such database in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although competent authorities and the NCB INTERPOL-Sarajevo possess internal databases for recording data.

The formation of a national database of missing works of art requires political consensus, along with the agreement of the entity and cantonal levels of government, which, despite being responsible for cultural affairs, have not shown interest in this matter. The presented response shows insufficient engagement from the lower levels of government, which need to align and coordinate their activities with the higher levels. Such a response from the relevant state authorities confirmed the lack of coordination and administrative cooperation as one of the key factors behind the stagnation. A national database would ensure faster and more efficient communication among institutions, while allowing buyers to verify the provenance of artworks, which would consequently lead to the reporting of cases involving the return of illegally acquired items, particularly those lost during the war.

Promotion of the phone number for anonymous reports

Promotion of the phone number for anonymous reports: An essential aspect of the work of a non-governmental organization is the involvement of citizens and the community in its processes. This contributes to strengthening the sense of social responsibility and trust in the state system. In the research conducted within the framework of the Study of Organised Crime in Bosnia and Herzegovina, out of 1,500 respondents, 47.1% said that they would be willing to act if they had knowledge of criminal group activities, while 52.9% stated they would not (Kržalić 2014, p. 74). One of the reasons why respondents would not act includes a lack of trust in the prosecutor's office and the courts (Kržalić 2014, 8). Although the illegal trade in cultural goods and works of art was not addressed as a form of organized crime in this study, statistical data suggests that society needs additional encouragement and motivation to engage.

With this intention, in 2021, CPKU, in collaboration with the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) and with support from the OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, promoted the Crimestoppers hotline for anonymous tips related to the theft of artworks, movable cultural goods, or to the destruction of archaeological sites. Information about the availability of the hotline was disseminated through a media campaign aimed at raising public awareness that the illegal trade in cultural property and the destruction of cultural heritage are crimes that must be sanctioned or prevented.

Public engagement sends a clear signal to the responsible crime prevention authorities to continue implementing procedures that strengthen the legal order in the country, while also warning potential offenders that their opportunities for criminal activities are reduced, as they are under surveillance from both citizens and authorities. Data on the number of submitted reports has not yet been collected; estimates will be made five years after the campaign implementation.

Conclusion and recommendations

The CPKU case report provides a concrete example of how the non-governmental sector can connect the state apparatus and the public in the joint fight against crimes involving art objects and cultural goods.

In order to overcome the problems— such as the lack of a specialized civil service for art crime, poor coordination between the police and ministries of culture, the lack of a national database of missing works of art, and low public awareness of the importance of protection of cultural and artistic heritage—it is necessary to implement additional tools and promote cooperation and knowledge exchange among various experts with field experience.

In addition to the activities presented, CPKU will continue its activities and lobbying for the establishment of a commission for the return of cultural property and art and will appeal for stricter and more frequent controls of travelers and carriers at border crossings, in order to detect and prevent the smuggling of art and cultural property.

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Biographies of the Authors

Amra Ćebić holds a master's degree in Art History and Turkish Language and Literature from the University of Sarajevo. She is a senior curator at the International Gallery of Portraits within the "Cultural Centre" in Tuzla. In recent years, she has been involved in creating art programs for the institution, organizing exhibitions, workshops, and festivals, as well as implementing restoration and heritage protection projects. She prefers to guide exhibitions, believing that curators can engage visitors, influence their opinions, reinforce traditional perspectives, and raise awareness of history, culture, and art. She particularly enjoys working with elementary school students and developing interpretive workshops, aiming to foster a new generation of museum audiences who will care for cultural heritage in the future. In addition to her curatorial work, she is a member of the Centre Against Trafficking in Works of Art (CPKU) and actively participates in implementing projects and campaigns against the destruction of material heritage and the illicit trafficking of art.

Dženan Jusufović served as Director of the International Portrait Gallery and the Center for Culture in Tuzla for ten years (2010–2020). Prior to this, he distinguished himself as principal clarinetist of the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra from 1999 to 2009, while also pursuing a career as a clarinet instructor at various conservatories in Bosnia and Herzegovina and France since 1993. He has combined a career in music, cultural management, and the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property for over two decades. Since 2018, he has served as an expert consultant for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), specializing in art trafficking issues in Southeast Europe. He is also the founding president of the Center Against Art Trafficking in Bosnia and Herzegovina (CPKU), an organization he established in 2013 to raise awareness, provide training, and coordinate national and international efforts in this field.

Challenges and strategies in the protection of cultural heritage in rural communities. Experiences and proposals from the Comunidad Campesina de Miraflores (Yauyos, Peru)

Rafael Schmitt [1]

Abstract

Rural communities in Peru preserve a vast tangible cultural heritage, yet they face constant threats. This study examines the challenges of conserving cultural heritage in rural areas, particularly where pre-Hispanic sites and documentary heritage are present. Using a qualitative case study approach, the article explores community dynamics in the Comunidad Campesina de Miraflores (Yauyos) related to the looting, extraction, loss, and management of archaeological artefacts and 19th-century documents. Key findings highlight the social and economic dimensions of the issue. Precarious employment, weakened social cohesion, and economic hardship contribute to the black market for cultural heritage. The study discusses the importance of fostering processes of social memory within the community regarding cultural heritage and its value, as well as implementing initiatives for the documentation, digitisation, and safeguarding of documentary heritage. Experiences such as the Iberarchivos programme, which enabled the conservation and digitisation of part of the community's historical archive, and proposals for the creation of a community museum to house privately held local cultural objects emerge as concrete actions driven by the community. Beyond preservation, these efforts enable communities to reinterpret and construct shared meanings of their history and social processes. The study concludes that recognising heritage as a living, shared resource can strengthen local identity, promote collective responsibility for conservation, and generate community strategies to combat the illicit trafficking of cultural properties.

Keywords: *illicit trafficking, peasant communities, collective memory, cultural identity, huaqueros, social dimension, cultural traffic prevention.*

Introduction

Looting and trafficking of cultural artefacts persist as critical issues in Peru, despite the regulatory framework established by the UNESCO convention of 1970 and several national legal instruments (Lozada et al., 2013, p. 118). The theft of cultural property has impacted nearly every church and religious complex in the country, driven by strong demand for sacred art (Ministerio de Cultura, 2018, p. 11; Yates, 2015). Looting of archaeological sites has also left visible marks across Peruvian territory, where the remains of ancient tombs lie scattered across the landscape (Chirinos, 2018), while colonial- and republican-era documents continue to be illicitly removed from both public and private archives (Garfias, 2024).

The looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property remain equally pressing issues in rural Peru, frequently rooted in economic hardship within

1 Instituto de Montaña

regions affected by labour displacement and land concentration, and serving as supplementary economic activities alongside subsistence agriculture (Chirinos, 2018; Günduz, 2001). Beyond their economic dimension, these activities form part of a broader illicit network involving local diggers, intermediaries, and affluent collectors (Coe, 1993), further sustained by international demand and facilitated by digital technologies (Chirinos, 2018, p. 40).

In this regard, two questions arise in order to understand this issue in rural communities: i) How do local dynamics and perceptions of cultural property extraction relate to illicit trafficking? and ii) What initiatives have proven effective or have been proposed to safeguard cultural property and prevent trafficking? To explore these questions, this study occurs in the rural Andean Comunidad Campesina de Miraflores (Miraflores Peasant Community), focusing on local practices and perceptions surrounding the extraction and circulation of cultural heritage property. It examines these dynamics from the late 20th century to the present. Rather than a legal or technical analysis, the research adopts an ethnographic and case study perspective centred on the voices and experiences of the local community.

The research is conducted in the town of Miraflores, capital of the eponymous district, located at an altitude of 3,600 metres above sea level in the Yauyos province of the Lima region in Peru. It lies within the Nor Yauyos Cochas Landscape Reserve, a protected natural area. In Peru, peasant communities are public-interest organisations with legal status and juridical personality, whose members are bound by ancestral, social, economic, and cultural ties, expressed through communal land ownership, collective labour, mutual aid, democratic governance, and the development of multisectoral activities (Ley 24656, 1987). The selection of Miraflores as a case study is justified by its distinctive historical trajectory, the notable presence of archaeological sites in its cultural landscape, and the presence of residents who have encountered and interacted with antiquities. The inhabitants of Miraflores maintain a close relationship with their landscape and with the Ancient Town of Huaquis—a pre-Hispanic settlement, also occupied during the Colonial and Republican periods—where their ancestors once lived before relocating a century ago to establish the current town of Miraflores (Schmitt, 2018).

This article seeks to i) explore the dynamics and perceptions of cultural property extraction within a peasant community and its links to illicit cultural trafficking, and ii) describe effective initiatives and community-proposed measures to safeguard material cultural heritage and counter its illicit trafficking. The study adopted a qualitative case study approach grounded in participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and literature review to triangulate data. Interviewees requested anonymity, so only interpreted accounts or selected excerpts without their identity are included. By privileging oral narratives, the case study approach allowed the research to focus not only on the extraction and possible further illicit trafficking of cultural objects, but also on the relational dimensions that surround them: the communal meaning of these objects, the dynamics of transmission and exchange, and the ethical tensions that emerge between economic necessity and cultural heritage preservation.

Theoretical Elaboration

The dynamics of cultural heritage are closely embedded within global systems of capital production and power structures (Rivera, 2005, p. 120). According to Coe (1993), based on Heath (1973), the pre-Hispanic art market is divided into the realms of production, distribution, and consumption. In the end, these goods are consumed by collectors and museums. But the lowest level of the system is constituted by the huaqueros (Coe, 1993, p. 273). As an illegal industry, this antiquities trade is regulated only by market forces and growing international demand for valuable antiquities, and it depends on poverty and weak policing at its point of origin, at the expense of the history and heritage of local communities (Atwood, 2007, p. 36; Gündüz, 2001, p. 10).

The extraction of antiquities often occurs through clandestine excavations at archaeological sites, commonly referred to as huaqueo in some Latin American countries. Huaqueros are the 'specialists' who extract valuable objects from tombs and ancient settlements. They are typically impoverished rural peasants (Coe, 1993, p. 273), predominantly adult men (Chirinos, 2018, p. 39). This practice is often reproduced by younger relatives (Soares, 2024, p. 499), and sometimes even passed down

from father to son (Gündüz, 2001). In some cases, entire communities sustain their local economies through looting (Atwood, 2004, pp. 234-239).

Gündüz distinguishes between non-traditional and traditional huaqueros. The former destroy heritage for commercial purposes; the latter preserve, understand, and protect their heritage (Günduz, 2001, p. 14). Traditional huaqueros perceive this practice as a means of accessing ancestral inheritance, often invoking their ancestors for help (Ikehara et al., 2023, p. 5). Most of them come from lineages of male huaqueros, preserve their religious beliefs and ancestral customs, and understand that the places where they seek ritual objects are sacred and imbued with great power (Gündüz, 2001, p. 14; Lozada et al., 2013, p. 117). Andean healers demand these objects and collaborate with traditional huaqueros.

Furthermore, not all removed cultural objects leave the rural or community context. Many are found through everyday subsistence activities and remain within community homes through practices of collecting. García (2022, pp. 118-124) defines collecting as the habit of gathering and organising objects around a particular theme, line of thought, or sensibility that links the objects themselves. While individual private collecting is common, there are also collective and community-based forms. According to this author, one of the most notable expressions of collecting in rural communities is through community museums—spaces created by and for the community, displaying objects and narratives collectively agreed upon. These museums serve not only to present the community's heritage to outsiders, but also to strengthen collective identity and foster a sense of ownership over cultural heritage.

Interpretation of Results

The presence of Andean healers in the territory of Miraflores persisted throughout the colonial period, despite the Spanish conquest and Catholic evangelisation (Schmitt, 2020). Nowadays, though many ritual practices are not celebrated as they were in Huaquis a century ago (Fernández, 2015), some beliefs remain integral to how people interact with the landscape and sacred places. For example, leaving gentiles' human bones[2] or excavations exposed can "scare away" the rain during planting season, and even touching these bones may provoke spiritual or physical illnesses (Plinio Reyes, personal communication, December 2024). Some residents of Miraflores have excavated or found some cultural objects in the past, but such interest has also been noted in recent decades among visitors.

At a small restaurant in Miraflores, a young construction worker, originally from another peasant community in central Peru, recounted that he and his colleagues had weeks before discovered some metal pieces at a nearby archaeological site using a metal detector. He was introduced to this practice by his uncle and claimed that this was a common practice in his circle:

> Young people leave for the cities in search of opportunities, to secure a future. Sometimes, when we return [to our town], 'things' appear to us.[3] But for that to happen, one must be in real [economic] need, and then it appears—it all comes down to luck. These things can be sold in the cities because we want to prosper. (Personal communication, December 2024)

He said that valuable metal objects can sell for up to 6,000 soles (1,510 euros), while small ceramic pots fetch around 200 to 300 soles (50-75 euros). Human bones are also in demand. However, he nostalgically recalled that part of his community's history had disappeared in the same way: "Sometimes, as young people, we sell it just to make a bit of money. But then, years go by and it is no longer there, and we wonder what it was, what it meant."

The looting and extraction of cultural objects have been a common, local practice in the town due to the closeness of their agricultural and livestock activities to archaeological sites. Many residents possess pottery, metal, and stone artefacts that they or their relatives retrieved from these sites. This was also echoed in a study by Agathe Dupeyron (2020): "Several villagers showed me ceramic artefacts that members of their family had taken from Huaquis" (p. 182). She also states that "In

2 Gentiles are understood in Andean cosmology as remains of pre-Hispanic inhabitants believed to possess spiritual power and to be linked to sacred places.

3 He referred to the tapados, a term used in Andean folklore, particularly among Andean rural communities, to describe buried treasures from the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods. These treasures are believed to reveal themselves through blazing flames, lights, or even animals. An ethnographic study by Takahiro Kato (1991) recounts several testimonies in the Mantaro Valley.

Miraflores, people care about their heritage, but this has not translated to the same degree of protectiveness" (Dupeyron, 2020, p. 181). Recently, upon becoming aware of the extraction of cultural objects from archaeological sites, community members and local authorities expressed concern and dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, it was evident that clear policies were lacking, both for site protection and effective responses to such offenses.

A box containing silver cultural artifacts, brought from the church of Huaquis to the church of Miraflores, disappeared decades ago. A community member claimed that those responsible for safeguarding the church had subsequently experienced sudden economic improvement. Documentary heritage has also been affected. Miraflores possesses a Community Historical Archive, and all these documents are locally known as El canon. However, according to its inventories, all documents from the colonial period disappeared in the second half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, some of these documents are referenced in an ethnographic study written by Epifanio Fernández (2015). Due to the deteriorated conditions of some of the remaining documents and the partial loss of their archive, the community agreed to apply for funding from the Iberarchivos Programme with the support of the San Agustín de Guaquis Archaeological Project (Proyecto Guaquis).[4] As a result, 30% of the folios—the oldest ones—were successfully preserved and digitised (Schmitt, 2021).

Although the residents do not consult the documents regularly due to the difficulty of their handwriting, they refer to them when seeking information related to the community's history or legal matters. Furthermore, within the framework of the 2023-2025 project for the Conservation, Enhancement, and Sustainable Management of the Yanacancha-Huaquis Cultural Landscape—implemented by the Miraflores Peasant Community and Instituto de Montaña, with funding from the World Monuments Fund—El canon was mentioned as an important and useful source of information. This reflects the enduring presence of the communal archive in the collective memory of the community. They also expressed that the conservation and digitisation of part of the archive represent an essential first step towards its protection.

Dupeyron (2022, p. 182) also mentions that, in the absence of a local museum in Miraflores, people are not deeply involved in protecting archaeological heritage as a common resource. However, the community is interested in having one. The idea of establishing a community museum was first proposed by the community in 2019 as part of the Proyecto Guaquis. At present, the perceived need for such a space has re-emerged with renewed strength, both as a means of preserving and communicating collective memory and as a potential resource for cultural tourism. One consistent idea in the community's vision is that the museum should also serve as a space to reunite artefacts held by Miraflores residents, both those still living in the town and those who relocated to other cities. The perspective on private collecting has also evolved: "If I were to find something now and there was a museum, I would give it so that people could see what has been discovered," said Mrs. Irma Taipe, a member of the rural community and the tourism committee.

Conclusions

Many community members recognise that the extraction and loss of cultural heritage have resulted in the erosion of part of their collective history. However, some also admitted uncertainty about how they would respond if faced with economic hardship in the future. They emphasised that having inventories of cultural objects and documents would be a valuable measure, allowing them to identify missing items in case of loss.

The idea of establishing a community museum also emerged as a strategic response to safeguard cultural objects currently dispersed both within and outside Miraflores. Community members believe that such a space would not only support tourism development but also contribute to a deeper understanding of their local history.

Recognising heritage as a common resource was viewed as a means of strengthening local identity, promoting collective responsibility for conservation, as well as fostering communal policies aimed at protecting cultural heritage, while also helping to mitigate the illicit trafficking of cultural properties.

4 Proyecto Guaquis is an initiative launched in 2014 by the author, focused on the research, conservation, and dissemination of the material cultural heritage of Miraflores. It explores the long-term occupation of the territory, promotes community involvement, supports heritage education, and advocates for the establishment of a community museum.

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Rafael Schmitt is a social archaeologist, built heritage conservator, and cultural heritage manager with over 15 years of experience in cultural heritage projects, including the direction of archaeological interventions in the Peruvian Andes. Since 2014, he has led Proyecto Guaquis, an initiative dedicated to researching, conserving, and promoting the heritage of the Comunidad Campesina de Miraflores (Yauyos, Peru). He currently serves as a specialist in social archaeology, built heritage conservation, and rural landscapes at the Instituto de Montaña. He also coordinates the project for the Conservation, Enhancement, and Sustainable Management of the Yanacancha-Huaquis Cultural Landscape.

ICESCO's Efforts in Combating the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property in the Islamic World

Bilel Chebbi[1]

Abstract

The illicit trafficking of cultural property is a pressing issue within the Islamic world, driven by factors such as political instability, economic challenges, and organized crime. This article explores the strategy developed by the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) to combat this issue. The strategy focuses on three key objectives: strengthening stakeholder capacities, harmonizing legal frameworks across member states, and promoting international cooperation. ICESCO's operational mechanisms include specialized capacity-building programs for law enforcement and cultural heritage professionals, awareness-raising campaigns to educate the public about the importance of protecting cultural property, and the establishment of a regional database for stolen artifacts. The article also discusses the challenges in addressing illicit trafficking, including limited legal expertise in some countries and the lack of effective international coordination. The findings highlight the need for stronger legal measures, improved training for law enforcement, and increased collaboration among member states and international institutions. The article concludes with recommendations to enhance these efforts, including the harmonization of legal definitions and legislation related to cultural property, the integration of modern technologies for tracking stolen artifacts, and the expansion of public awareness initiatives. Through these actions, ICESCO aims to preserve the cultural heritage of the Islamic world and curb the illegal trade in cultural property.

Key terms: *illicit trafficking, cultural property, ICESCO, capacity-building, international cooperation, legal frameworks, stolen artifacts, public awareness.*

Introduction

Cultural heritage is not only a symbol of a nation's history and identity but also a valuable resource that connects generations and preserves the essence of societies. The Islamic world, home to a rich and diverse cultural heritage, faces significant threats to its cultural property. These threats are exacerbated by socio-political instability, economic hardship, and the rise of transnational organized crime. The illicit trafficking of cultural property—ranging from ancient manuscripts to invaluable artifacts—poses serious risks to the heritage of Muslim communities and the broader global cultural landscape.

The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), as the leading organization dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage in the Islamic world, has been at the forefront of combating this illicit trade. Its strategy focuses on strengthening the legal, institutional, and practical frameworks necessary to safeguard cultural property. This article explores the various dimensions of ICESCO's efforts, offering a detailed analysis of its strategy, initiatives, and outcomes.

1 The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) is a specialized intergovernmental organization based in Rabat, Morocco, comprising 54 Member States. It works to strengthen cooperation in education, science, culture, and heritage. Through its Heritage Center, ICESCO supports documentation, capacity building, and policy development, with a particular focus on safeguarding endangered heritage and combating the illicit trafficking of cultural property in the Islamic world.

Facing challenges

The illicit trafficking of cultural property is a multifaceted issue, deeply intertwined with complex legal, socio-economic, and political dynamics. Across the Islamic world, the vast and diverse heritage—spanning archaeological sites, historical manuscripts, and intangible cultural expressions—remains highly susceptible to theft, smuggling, and illegal trade. One of the fundamental challenges in addressing this threat is the absence of a unified legal and operational framework among member states. While many countries have enacted legislation to protect their heritage, significant discrepancies persist in how "cultural property" is defined and the extent to which it is safeguarded. For instance, a 19th-century Islamic manuscript may be fully protected under Egyptian law, yet might not receive the same recognition in another country, creating legal loopholes that traffickers can exploit across borders.

These inconsistencies extend beyond definitions to include punitive measures. Recent legal analyses (ICESCO, 2020) highlight substantial gaps in national legislation, particularly regarding the severity of penalties and the effectiveness of restitution mechanisms. Many legal systems have yet to fully integrate provisions addressing the complexities of modern illicit trade, especially its digital facets. The rapid advancement of technology, marked by the proliferation of social media and online marketplaces, has opened new channels for traffickers, enabling the cross-border sale and transfer of stolen cultural assets with minimal oversight. Research indicates that platforms such as Facebook have, at times, facilitated black-market trading of antiquities, complicating efforts to verify provenance and establish legal ownership (Al-Azm & Paul, 2019).

In response to these intricate challenges, ICESCO has anchored its strategic framework in key international conventions, notably the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention. These instruments serve as global benchmarks for the protection and restitution of cultural property. However, their implementation remains uneven across the Islamic world. While some member states have adopted measures such as UNESCO's model export certificates and actively participate in international reporting mechanisms, others face significant obstacles due to limited resources, technical expertise, or insufficient political prioritization (UNESCO, 2017).

Another critical issue is the role of documentation and inventorying of cultural assets. Maintaining accurate, up-to-date records is essential for both prevention and recovery. Yet, many states encounter logistical and financial barriers that hinder the development and maintenance of comprehensive databases. This shortfall is further compounded by weak integration with international systems like INTERPOL's Stolen Works of Art Database, resulting in fragmented efforts and missed opportunities for restitution.

International cooperation—a cornerstone of ICESCO's mission—also faces substantial barriers. A lack of bilateral agreements, fragmented coordination among national authorities, and weak communication channels hamper the effectiveness of joint efforts. Regional assessments indicate that while countries acknowledge the need for collaborative approaches, the actual practice of information sharing and joint operations is often inconsistent and underdeveloped (ICESCO, 2020; UNODC, 2020).

These challenges are further exacerbated by the broader geopolitical context in which many Islamic countries operate. Armed conflicts, political instability, and socio-economic hardship have historically accelerated the plundering of cultural sites. In post-conflict settings—such as those in Iraq and Syria—illicit trafficking is frequently entangled with organized crime and the financing of terrorist activities, adding layers of complexity to already difficult mitigation efforts (Brodie, 2015).

In conclusion, addressing the illicit trafficking of cultural property within the Islamic world demands a multifaceted and integrated strategy. Harmonizing legal frameworks alone is not sufficient; technological capacity must also be enhanced, international collaboration strengthened, and public awareness fostered. ICESCO's strategic approach reflects a recognition of these layered challenges, aiming to tackle them through a comprehensive model that weaves together legal reform, capacity-building, and diplomatic engagement.

ICESCO Goals and Methods

ICESCO has adopted a broad and practical strategy to address the illicit trafficking of cultural property. This approach integrates legal, operational, and diplomatic measures, recognizing that no single solution can resolve such a complex issue. The organization's vision is grounded in the belief that effective action requires a combination of strengthening national capabilities, harmonizing legal frameworks, using modern technologies, and fostering lasting international cooperation.

Capacity-building of Stakeholders: One of the first steps ICESCO has focused on is helping key actors improve their skills and readiness. These include police officers, customs agents, museum staff, and legal experts, who all play vital roles in protecting cultural heritage. In many member states, there are notable gaps in training, leaving frontline workers unprepared to detect or respond to trafficking cases.

To address this, ICESCO has organized several practical workshops and training sessions across the region. A good example is the Regional Training Workshop on Cultural Property Protection held in Rabat in 2023, which brought together more than 80 participants from 25 countries. This workshop provided hands-on training in the use of INTERPOL's stolen art database, legal restitution procedures, and the implementation of security measures at archaeological sites. ICESCO has also encouraged police and customs training schools to add heritage protection to their curricula, aiming to make this a standard part of officer training in the years ahead.

Harmonizing Legal Frameworks: A major difficulty in fighting illicit trafficking is the lack of legal alignment among national systems. What constitutes protected cultural property in one country may not be recognized in another, creating loopholes that traffickers can exploit. ICESCO's legal team has prioritized working with governments to align their laws with international conventions, particularly the 1970 UNESCO Convention and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention.

ICESCO's 2024 review revealed that many countries still have outdated definitions of cultural property and lack strict penalties for crimes in this area. In response, the organization has issued legal guidelines and held sessions with ministries of culture and justice to revise national laws. These efforts are helping countries modernize their legal frameworks and improve cooperation with neighboring countries to close legal gaps across borders.

Strengthening Operational Mechanisms: While sound legislative frameworks are essential, they must be supported by strong operational systems. ICESCO has worked with many member states to build national databases of cultural objects, which are crucial for monitoring heritage items and quickly recovering stolen property.

One strong example of this is in Uzbekistan, where, with ICESCO's support, a national database was created, now holding records for over 50,000 artifacts. In North Africa, similar projects are underway, and ICESCO is also testing new tools, such as satellite imagery and remote sensing, to help monitor at-risk heritage sites. Another key part of the strategy is pushing for the formation of specialized police units that focus on heritage crimes. In Tunisia, for instance, ICESCO helped establish a Heritage Protection Brigade within the National Guard, which has already intercepted several shipments of smuggled antiquities.

Awareness-Raising and Community Engagement: ICESCO recognizes that heritage protection is not the sole responsibility of officials and experts; it also relies on the wider community. For this reason, the organization has invested in awareness campaigns to inform and engage the public, especially people living near heritage sites, as well as teachers and those working in the art market.

A great example is the 2022 digital campaign "Heritage Is Our Identity," which reached over one million people through social media. The campaign explained the value of cultural heritage and showed the public how to report any suspicious activities they might encounter. Such initiatives are critical to cultivating a culture of shared responsibility.

Promoting International Cooperation: Because illicit trafficking crosses borders so easily, ICESCO has committed to building strong partnerships with international organizations. Formal agreements have been signed with UNESCO, INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization (WCO), and ALECSO, among others. These partnerships facilitate the exchange of information, joint investigations, and technical help when needed.

ICESCO also promotes direct cooperation among member states. A notable success occurred in 2023, when, thanks to ICESCO's mediation, Egypt and Morocco reached a bilateral agreement that enabled the return of a collection of stolen manuscripts to Morocco—a clear example of what can be achieved through effective collaboration.

Case Study: Regional Capacity-Building and Knowledge Exchange

A key aspect of ICESCO's work in recent years has been its consistent emphasis on building capacity in regions where cultural property is particularly at risk. Since 2021, the organization has implemented targeted training programs designed to strengthen the skills and preparedness of professionals working in challenging environments, with particular attention to Libya, Yemen, and Mali. These countries, long affected by conflict and instability, have experienced extensive looting and smuggling of valuable cultural heritage, underscoring the urgent need for effective protection measures.

In Libya, ICESCO collaborated with local heritage authorities and international experts to organize workshops addressing emergency documentation, risk assessment, and practical site security. These sessions equipped heritage professionals with concrete tools to help them safeguard archaeological sites and museum collections, even in areas experiencing ongoing conflict. In Yemen, the primary focus was placed on the legal aspects of heritage protection. ICESCO's training guided local law enforcement officers through the complexities of international restitution procedures and the use of INTERPOL's legal frameworks.

Mali presents a particularly sensitive case. The country's rich Islamic heritage—especially the famous manuscripts of Timbuktu—has been a frequent target of traffickers and extremist groups. ICESCO's response in Mali combined preventive and restorative strategies, offering training in conservation techniques while supporting digital documentation projects to ensure the long-term preservation of vulnerable manuscripts and artifacts.

In addition to these national initiatives, ICESCO has established a regional platform to encourage knowledge exchange and collaboration. The Annual Conference for Cultural Heritage Protection Professionals has become a cornerstone of this effort. It brings together a wide range of participants, including law enforcement agencies, museum curators, legal experts, and policymakers from across the Islamic world. The conference provides a space to share best practices, present research findings, and coordinate strategies for heritage protection. The most recent edition, held in Rabat in December 2024, convened more than 150 delegates representing 30 member states. Discussions at the conference tackled emerging challenges, such as the increasing role of cryptocurrencies in the illegal antiquities trade, alongside successful case studies related to repatriations and community engagement projects.

Through these ongoing efforts, ICESCO not only enhances technical expertise and knowledge but also promotes a deeper sense of solidarity among member states. The organization's work reinforces the idea that protecting cultural heritage is a collective responsibility—one that transcends borders and requires joint commitment. **Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms**: An essential part of ICESCO's strategy to combat the illicit trafficking of cultural property lies in developing strong monitoring and reporting systems. Given that heritage crimes often cross borders, reliable ways of tracking, documentation, and information sharing are crucial to disrupt trafficking networks and support the recovery of stolen artifacts.

Digital Inventories and Databases: Since 2020, ICESCO has prioritized helping member states digitize their cultural heritage records. Digital databases form the backbone of any effective monitoring system, allowing authorities to quickly verify the origins of artifacts and detect any discrepancies.

The databases referenced in this paper are accessible via the Islamic World Heritage (IWH) Portal, developed by ICESCO's Heritage Center: https://iwh.icesco.org. This open-access platform serves as a central instrument in ICESCO's broader strategy to counter the illicit trafficking of cultural property in the Islamic world.

The portal offers structured information on registered heritage sites, endangered properties, and inventories submitted by member states. It also includes geolocated data, risk profiles, and legal references that facilitate provenance research, cross-border cooperation, and the monitoring of vulnerable heritage assets.

By making this information publicly available, ICESCO aims to enhance transparency, support heritage documentation, and strengthen institutional capacity to prevent the illicit transfer and loss of cultural property. The IWH Portal is regularly updated with results from field missions, technical assessments, and capacity-building workshops conducted in collaboration with national authorities and international partners.

ICESCO has worked closely with countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco to establish national databases compatible with global platforms, such as INTERPOL's Stolen Works of Art Database. Rather than just static lists, these databases include geo-location tags, high-quality images, and detailed metadata, all of which facilitate the real-time identification and verification of cultural objects and their status.

Interagency Coordination and Reporting Protocols: One of the recurring problems in heritage protection is the lack of coordination among different agencies. To address this, ICESCO has developed clear and standardized reporting protocols that improve communication among ministries of culture, police forces, customs authorities, and international partners. These protocols provide step-by-step guidance for reporting incidents, handling evidence, and ensuring smooth communication among institutions. A good example comes from Yemen, where the adoption of ICESCO's reporting templates in 2022 enabled officials to promptly report and intercept a shipment of smuggled Islamic manuscripts at a major border crossing (ICESCO, 2023).

International Partnerships and Data Exchange: No single country can tackle heritage trafficking alone. ICESCO has therefore built strong partnerships with international organizations such as UNESCO, INTERPOL, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), allowing seamless information exchange and enabling joint investigations. At the 2024 Rabat Conference, for instance, an entire session was dedicated to improving cross-border reporting. During this event, ICESCO introduced a new online platform that allows member states to instantly upload alerts about stolen or endangered artifacts, helping to accelerate regional responses (ICESCO, 2024).

Early Warning Systems and Community-Based Surveillance: Recognizing that local communities are often the first to notice threats to cultural heritage, ICESCO has begun testing community-based surveillance systems. In Mali and Libya, local volunteers have been trained to monitor archaeological sites and report any suspicious activity using mobile apps connected to national heritage agencies. This approach not only extends the reach of official monitoring efforts but also gives communities a direct role in the protection of their heritage (Al-Azm & Paul, 2019).

Challenges and Future Directions: Although ICESCO has made significant progress, challenges remain. Some member states still lack the technical infrastructure or trained personnel necessary to fully implement digital monitoring systems. Legal obstacles, such as restrictions on data sharing, and bureaucratic delays can also hinder timely responses to trafficking incidents. Looking ahead, ICESCO intends to expand its technical support programs and advocate for more robust legal measures that require clear and fast reporting of cultural heritage crimes.

In summary, ICESCO's layered approach to monitoring and reporting reflects a proactive and flexible strategy. By combining modern technology with international collaboration and local engagement, the organization is reinforcing a collective defense against the illicit trafficking of cultural heritage across the Islamic world.

Interpretation of Results

The comprehensive strategy implemented by ICESCO has led to tangible successes while simultaneously revealing ongoing challenges that demand sustained attention. One of the standout achievements has been the significant enhancement of member states' ability to document and monitor their cultural heritage. Countries like Uzbekistan and Morocco have made considerable advances in developing national digital inventories, thanks to ICESCO's technical and financial support. For instance, Uzbekistan's National Cultural Property Database, launched in 2022, now includes over 50,000 artifacts—many of which are high-risk items from vulnerable museum collections—and has played a pivotal role in several successful restitution efforts (ICESCO, 2023).

The organization's specialized training programs have also delivered impactful results. In Libya and Yemen, workshops held since 2021 have strengthened the capacity of local authorities to detect and intercept smuggled artifacts. In 2023, for example, Libyan authorities successfully seized a cache of Roman-era statues destined for illegal export—an operation made possible by expertise acquired through ICESCO-led training sessions (ICESCO, 2024).

In addition, the annual conference for cultural heritage professionals has become a crucial platform for expertise sharing and policy alignment. The 2024 edition, held in Rabat, besides highlighting best practices, also facilitated bilateral talks that led to the signing of two new heritage protection agreements between North African countries (ICESCO, 2024).

However, despite these advancements, several challenges remain. Achieving legal harmonization continues to be a difficult goal, with significant disparities in national legislation, particularly concerning the definition and classification of cultural property (Brodie, 2015). Some member states have yet to ratify key international conventions or lack the administrative infrastructure to enforce existing laws effectively. For instance, while Tunisia and Morocco have implemented model export certificates recommended by UNESCO, other countries still rely on outdated or incomplete documentation systems, undermining cross-border enforcement efforts (UNESCO, 2017).

Technological and logistical hurdles further complicate the fight against illicit trafficking. Many countries face budget constraints that prevent them from fully digitizing their cultural heritage inventories and from establishing specialized police units. Moreover, the rapid evolution of digital platforms and cryptocurrencies creates new challenges that current legal frameworks are not yet equipped to manage (Al-Azm & Paul, 2019).

Coordination among stakeholders remains another pressing concern. Even though ICESCO has made commendable progress in promoting interagency communication, some countries continue to struggle with bureaucratic inertia and fragmented systems, which delay incident reporting and obstruct prompt responses to trafficking alerts. These issues are especially pronounced in conflict-affected regions, where fragile state institutions and security risks further exacerbate vulnerabilities (UNODC, 2020).

In conclusion, although ICESCO's multi-pronged strategy has yielded significant results—particularly in capacity-building, documentation, and regional cooperation—persistent gaps in legal alignment, technological infrastructure, and interagency coordination emphasize the need for continued investment and innovative approaches. These findings reinforce the importance of adaptable, resilient frameworks capable of addressing the evolving nature of cultural property crimes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The illicit trafficking of cultural property remains one of the most pressing challenges for the Islamic world, threatening tangible symbols of identity, history, and collective memory. ICESCO's integrated strategy—rooted in legal harmonization, capacity-building, technological advancement, and international cooperation—has laid a solid foundation for confronting this pervasive issue. The progress achieved thus far, particularly in strengthening national legal frameworks, building stakeholder expertise, and enhancing monitoring systems, demonstrates the organization's pivotal role as a regional leader in heritage protection.

However, the dynamic nature of illicit trafficking, compounded by geopolitical instability and rapid technological shifts, requires the continuous adaptation and refinement of strategies. In light of the findings and challenges identified in this study, several key recommendations emerge:

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement Mechanisms: Member states are urged to align their national legislation with international standards, particularly the UNESCO 1970 and UNIDROIT 1995 conventions. ICESCO should continue to provide technical assistance for legislative reforms, focusing on closing legal loopholes, updating definitions of cultural property, and instituting stricter penalties for violations. Enhanced enforcement mechanisms, including the establishment of specialized heritage protection units within national police forces, are equally essential (Brodie, 2015; UNESCO, 2017).

Expanding Technological Infrastructure: The development and maintenance of comprehensive digital inventories should be prioritized across all member states. ICESCO is recommended to expand its support for cultural heritage digitization, including the adoption of advanced technologies such as blockchain for provenance tracking and artificial intelligence for pattern detection in illicit trade networks. Additionally, cross-border database interoperability must be improved to facilitate real-time information sharing (ICESCO, 2023; Al-Azm & Paul, 2019).

Enhancing Regional and International Cooperation: Given the transnational nature of cultural property crimes, stronger partnerships are vital. ICESCO should intensify its collaboration with international organizations such as INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization, and UNESCO, while also promoting the establishment of bilateral and multilateral agreements among member states. These partnerships should emphasize joint operations, capacity-sharing, and mutual legal assistance frameworks (UNODC, 2020).

Promoting Public Awareness and Community Involvement: Sustainable heritage protection depends on active public participation. ICESCO is encouraged to broaden its awareness-raising initiatives, tailoring campaigns to target both local communities and key stakeholders in the art market, such as auction houses and private collectors. Education systems should also integrate cultural heritage modules into their curricula to instill a sense of stewardship from an early age (ICESCO, 2024).

Establishing Sustainable Monitoring and Evaluation Systems: Continuous assessment of anti-trafficking initiatives is essential for measuring impact and identifying areas for improvement. ICESCO should institutionalize regular monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms, including annual reviews, impact assessments, and stakeholder feedback loops, to ensure that strategies remain responsive to evolving threats and grounded in evidence-based practices.

Addressing Emerging Threats: The rise of digital currencies and decentralized online marketplaces presents new challenges for heritage protection. ICESCO is urged to invest in research and pilot programs that explore the implications of these technologies, thereby equipping member states with the knowledge and tools required to counteract these emerging threats effectively.

In conclusion, ICESCO's leadership in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property is commendable and has delivered significant gains across the Islamic world. Nevertheless, sustained commitment, innovation, and collaboration are imperative to safeguard cultural heritage against the multifaceted threats it faces. By reinforcing legal, operational, and societal pillars, ICESCO and its member states can pave the way toward a more secure and resilient future for the Islamic world's invaluable heritage.

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Biography of the Author

Dr. Bilel Chebbi is a specialist in cultural heritage management with a PhD in Heritage and Urban Studies. His research focuses on heritage conservation policies, sustainable urban development, and the socio-economic impacts of heritage valorization in North Africa and the Arab-Islamic world. He has contributed to several international conferences and publications on cultural heritage protection, with a particular emphasis on safeguarding historic urban centers and combating the illicit trafficking of cultural property. Dr. Chebbi has worked closely with international organizations such as ICESCO, UNESCO, and ICOMOS on various heritage-related projects. As part of his role with ICESCO, he has been directly involved in the implementation of strategies to counter the illicit trafficking of cultural property across member states. His expertise bridges academic research and practical fieldwork, combining policy analysis with hands-on experience in heritage site management, training programs, and community engagement. He is currently based in Tunis and continues to collaborate on projects aimed at strengthening heritage governance and promoting sustainable cultural tourism.