

A

Antiquities Trade, Illicit



Layla Hashemi and Louise Shelley
Terrorism, Transnational Crime, and Corruption
Center, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA,
USA

The cyber environment and electronic commerce have democratized the antiquities trade. Previously, the antiquities trade consisted of niche networks of those associated with galleries and auction houses. While the trade was transnational, there were high barriers to entry preventing the average person from becoming involved. Today's antiquities market has been democratized by the internet and online platforms that allow for the free and often open sale of cultural property and the availability of ancient goods, particularly coins, often at affordable prices. Therefore, what was once a high-end and exclusive commodity is now available to a much broader and less sophisticated customer base. Identifying the actors behind this trade and understanding the extent and profits of this trade requires large-scale data analytics.

Many vendors use open web platforms such as VCoins, Etsy, eBay, and other marketplaces to advertise and sell their products. These sales are possible because Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act releases websites from responsibility for the content posted on their platforms, allowing criminals to conduct their

business online with near total impunity. Recent analysis in 2020 revealed that around 2.5 million ancient coins are being offered on eBay annually with actual sales estimated at \$26–59 million (Wartenberg and Brederova 2021). This massive supply of coins readily available to customers could only be achieved through the extensive looting of archaeological sites in the Middle East.

With a low barrier to entry, online marketplaces allow any individual interested in cultural heritage to collect information and even purchase the items at affordable costs. Because the antiquities trade is a gray trade where there is a mixing of licit and illicit goods, these transactions are often completed with impunity. Therefore, sellers currently do not need to trade on the dark web as they seek to reach the largest number of customers and are not deterred by the actions of law enforcement who rarely act against online sellers of antiquities (Brodie 2017).

Social media platforms are also often used in the antiquities trade. Platforms such as Facebook allow traffickers to reach a large audience with a casual interest in antiquities, thus normalizing the idea of looting for profit (Sargent et al. 2020). These online venues range from private Facebook groups to fora used to discuss the authenticity and value of specific items (Al-Azm and Paul 2018, 2019). Moreover, once the initial contact between the seller and the buyer is made, the trade often moves to encrypted channels, protecting both the seller and the purchaser from detection. While Facebook recently announced a ban on the sale

of historical artifacts, there are still strong indications that sales have not ceased on the platform (Al-Azm and Paul 2019).

Detection of participants in the trade is difficult because of the large volume of relatively small transactions. One solution is the blending of manual and automated computational methods, such as machine learning and social network analysis, to efficiently process data and identify leads and gather investigative evidence. Using large sets of interoperable data, investigative leads can be supplemented with financial, transport, and other data to examine entire supply chains from source through transit to destination countries. Financial investigations of the transfer of digital assets allow for the mapping of transnational transactions through the analysis of payment processing. Only with techniques using sophisticated data analytics will it be possible for investigators to address these crimes. At present, creative and innovative criminal actors frustrate the ability of governments to disrupt this pervasive online criminal activity causing irreparable damage to the international community's cultural heritage.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Persistent Identifiers](#)
- ▶ [Transnational Crime](#)

Further Readings

- Al-Azm, A., & Paul, K. A. (2018). How Facebook made it easier than ever to traffic middle eastern antiquities. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/25532/how-facebook-made-it-easier-than-ever-to-traffic-middle-eastern-antiquities>. Accessed 22 Dec 2020.
- Al-Azm, A., & Paul, K. A. (2019). Facebook's black market in antiquities: Trafficking, terrorism, and war crimes. <http://atharproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ATHAR-FB-Report-June-2019-final.pdf>. Accessed 22 Dec 2020.
- Brodie, N. (2017). How to control the Internet market in antiquities? The need for regulation and monitoring. Antiquities coalition, policy brief no. 3.
- Brodie, N. (2019). Final report: Countering looting of antiquities in Syria and Iraq. <https://tracc.gmu.edu/sites/default/files/Final-TraCCC-CTP-CTAQM-17-006-Report-Jan-7-2019.pdf>.
- Brodie, N., & Sabrine, I. (2018). The illegal excavation and trade of Syrian cultural objects: A view from the ground. *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 43(1), 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2017.1410919>.
- Sargent, M., et al. (2020). Tracking and disrupting the illicit antiquities trade with open source data. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2706.html. Accessed 22 Dec 2020.
- Wartenberg, U., & Brederova, B. (2021). Plenitudinous: An analysis of ancient coin sales on eBay in. In L. Hashemi & L. Shelley (Eds.), *Antiquities smuggling: In the real and the virtual world*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.
- Westcott, T. (2020). Destruction or theft: Islamic state, Iraqi antiquities and organized crime. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Destruction-or-theft-Islamic-State-Iraqi-antiquities-and-organized-crime.pdf>. Accessed 22 Dec 2020.