Experts say that the smuggling of antiquities out of Iraq is funding terrorist activities

BY ROGER ATWOOD

Terrorist groups in Iraq are skimming money off the country’s booming trade in looted antiquities to help finance attacks on civilian and military targets, a U.S. military expert on antiquities said.

Marine Reserve Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, who led the military’s probe into the 2003 looting at the National Museum in Baghdad, said that his sources in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East have given him detailed, up-to-date information on the trade in looted antiquities. It’s not the number one source—that’s kidnapping and extortion. But it’s a source.” Investigators have also found evidence that Hezbollah benefits from antiquities smuggling, he said.

Bogdanos gathered the information when he was investigating antiquities smuggling as an assistant district attorney in New York—his job in civilian life—and has shared it with U.S. and Iraqi authorities. The information is mostly hearsay, he admitted, so it is not admissible in court, but it can be useful in assisting criminal investigations.

“I have every level of hearsay imaginable, with informants who tell me, for example, ‘I bought an artifact two weeks ago from a guy who I know works for a Shiite militia,’” Bogdanos said. He cautioned that although he has evidence proving that terrorist groups take a cut from artifact smuggling, he has none that shows they finance the actual looting of sites.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, ancient sites all over Iraq have come under relentless assault from organized teams of looters, sometimes numbering in the hundreds. According to widely published photographic evidence, Sumerian sites in largely Shiite southern Iraq, which include the earliest cities in human civilization, have been devastated by looters looking for coveted cylinder seals and cuneiform tablets.

It is illegal in the United States, the European Union, and most other countries to buy or sell antiquities that can be shown to have been removed from Iraq since 1990. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove exactly when looted antiquities came out of the ground.

Other sources said that Bogdanos’s assertions seemed plausible. “We have detected evidence of proceeds being used for drug and weapons trafficking, as well as for money laundering. So it would be a natural conclusion that they would go to terrorist activities as well,” said Christopher Marinello, executive director and general counsel at the Art Loss Register in New York. After hearing Bogdanos speak at Yeshiva University’s Cardozo School of Law on the link between antiquities smuggling and Middle Eastern radical groups, Marinello said, he was “frankly convinced that there is a connection.”

Extremist groups levy taxes on shipments of looted antiquities as they travel overland from Iraq into Jordan, Syria, or Turkey, said Bogdanos. The antiquities are almost all freshly dug, not stolen museum artifacts. Those culled from Sumerian sites are generally routed through Jordan or Syria, he added.

In Antiquities Under Siege: Cultural Heritage Protection After the Iraq War, a book of essays by experts in Iraqi antiquities recently published by AltaMira Press for the University of Chicago’s Cultural Policy Center, Bogdanos recounts how...
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U.S. investigators tracking down stolen museum antiquities in Baghdad often found that the thieves also had ties to violent groups. In 2005 U.S. Marines in northwest Iraq arrested five insurgents holed up in a bunker with weapons and ammunition, and 30 artifacts stolen from the National Museum.

Donny George, former director of the National Museum, pointed to evidence that radical groups condone looting. At major Sumerian sites, he said, signs have appeared stating that Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr permits the digging and selling of antiquities as long as the proceeds are used to build mosques or attack American forces. Whether the signs actually reflect Sadr's views is unclear, George added, but "Sadr is not stopping the digging on these sites."

Antiquities are flowing freely out of Iraq, according to George, who is currently a visiting professor of anthropology at Stony Brook University in New York. "Unfortunately the American forces are doing nothing to stop the looting because they say they don't have orders." Police forces in Iraq and around the world have confiscated about 4,000 of the approximately 15,000 artifacts looted from the National Museum in the chaotic aftermath of Saddam Hussein's downfall, he said, adding that about 17,000 objects believed to have been pillaged from ancient sites since 2003 have been recovered inside Iraq and returned to authorities. That number is probably only a fraction of the looted artifacts in circulation, George said. Hundreds more have been seized in Jordan, Kuwait, and Syria, as well as in Europe and the United States, according to news reports. Syrian officials recently returned to Iraqi authorities 701 objects, including gold coins and jewelry, seized by Syrian customs officials.

Not all of Iraq's neighbors are providing information on seizures of suspected looted antiquities, George said. "We don't know what the Turkish and Iranian authorities have captured."

Roger Atwood is author of Stealing History: Tomb Raiders, Smugglers, and the Looting of the Ancient World (St. Martin's/Griffin).