New Documents Prove ISIS Heavily Involved in Antiquities Trafficking

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tag: Abu Sayyaf, Andrew Keller, ISIS, looting

Ever since ISIS burst on to the international scene a year ago, rumors have been surfacing that the group was deriving a significant amount of revenue from antiquities smuggling. A commonly quoted figure was that the group had made at least $36 million from looted antiquities, which derived from a report by Martin Chulov (http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-isis-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power) based on documents captured by the Iraqi Army in early 2014. The figure in fact referred to money made from all types of looting in the al-Nabuk region of Syria, not only the looting of archaeological material.

Chulov was not allowed to keep or copy the documents, which remain in the possession of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. Many others have pulled large dollar figures out of thin air, including a common claim that antiquities looting is ISIS’ second-largest source of funding. The lack of hard evidence for any of these claims has led to skepticism (http://chasingaphrodite.com/2014/11/18/dantis-inference-the-known-unknowns-of-isis-and-antiquities-looting/), especially from antiquities dealers (http://culturalpropertyobserver.blogspot.com/2015/08/a-question-of-degree.html), that ISIS is making any significant amount of money from archaeological looting.

That is no longer the case.

Last night a number of officials from the U.S. State Department, Homeland Security, the FBI, the DOJ, and the United Nations convened at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art to present newly declassified evidence of ISIS’ deep involvement in industrial level antiquities looting.

The story began on May 15. That night, several V-22 Osprey aircraft and Blackhawk helicopters descended upon a multistory building in the Syrian village of al-Amr, southeast of Der ez-Zor, Syria and offloaded a unit from the U.S. Army’s Delta Force.

They were looking for a Tunisian (http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/19/us/isis-abu-sayyaf-name/) named Fathi Ben Awn Ben Jildi Murad al-Tunisi, better known by his nickname Abu Sayyaf, who was believed (http://www.cbsnews.com/news/inside-the-us-raid-against-senior-isis-leader-abu-sayyaf/) to be either ISIS’ chief financial officer or its “Emir of Oil and Gas.” The operators stormed the building (http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/05/16/u-s-troops-fought-hand-to-hand-in-syria-raid.html) and engaged in a shootout with a dozen or so of Abu Sayyaf’s bodyguards, killing the last few men in hand to hand combat as they tried to hide behind human shields. Abu Sayyaf tried to resist and was killed.

The raid freed an 18-year old Yezidi girl whom Abu Sayyaf had been keeping as a slave. Abu Sayyaf’s
wife Nasrin As'ad Ibrahim was captured (https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/16/statement-nsc-spokesperson-bernadette-meehan-counter-isil-operation-sy-1). Believed to have been a full and knowing participant in her husband’s activities, she was turned over to the Kurdish authorities in Irbil for trial (http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/100820151).

The raid also uncovered a stash of antiquities (http://eca.state.gov/cultural-heritage-center/iraq-cultural-heritage-initiative/isil-leaders-loot) which seemed to confirm that ISIS was deeply involved in the antiquities trade. The discovery was hailed as the first material evidence that ISIS was directly involved in antiquities trafficking. However, many of the artifacts recovered were fake (http://paul-barford.blogspot.co.uk/2015/07/isil-antiquities-looking-at-that.html), and much of what was found was not particularly valuable.

Last night, Andrew Keller, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions at the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, presented a number of newly declassified documents (https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/final_presentation_to_met_on_isil_antiquities_trafficking_for_das_keller_9.29.2015_.pdf) seized during the raid.

The documents show ISIS has a department known as the “Diwan of Natural Resources,” an administrative division which oversees the extraction of both oil and antiquities.

The Diwan of Natural Resources has a sub-division dedicated to antiquities looting, divided into eastern and western regions. Each region has its own offices dedicated to excavation, exploring and surveying new sites to exploit, research into known sites to know where to dig, and marketing the finds.

On November 21, 2014 Abu Sayyaf was appointed to head Antiquities Division of the Diwan of Natural Resources. He was given the job due to being “very knowledgeable in this field” and because “people in the Levant who work in the field of antiquities are weak of faith and Abu Sayyaf has experience in dealing with them.”
As director of antiquities looting, Abu Sayyaf issued permits to diggers excavating sites in Syria. Excavating without a permit is considered illegal and subject to punishment by a Sharia court.

Statements circulated by ISIS on September 13 of this year further emphasize that only the Antiquities Division can grant permits and...
those conducting unauthorized excavations will be punished. It can be recalled that last July ISIS publicly smashed several funerary busts from Palmyra which were confiscated from unauthorized excavators (http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/the-trade-in-stolen-syrian-artifacts#.qgJd9ZWyD). They did the same with several Assyrian sculptures looted from Tell Ajaja (http://www.timesofisrael.com/radical-islamists-take-hammer-to-syrian-artifacts/) in May 2014.

The purpose of the permit system is to ensure that the diggers pay a 20% khums tax, a windfall tax leveled on profits from antiquities digging (https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2014/08/17/syria-iraq-islamic-antiquities-trafficking-tax/). A receipt book was recovered from Abu Sayyaf’s compound recording the payment of khums.
Totaling all the receipts indicates ISIS has made at least **$1.25 million** from antiquities smuggling.

It should be emphasized that this is a minimum figure, as there may be other receipts which were not recovered, and more revenue was likely collected both before Abu Sayyaf was appointed to head the division and after he was killed.

However, there can no longer be any doubt that ISIS is engaged in highly organized, systematic looting of archaeological sites inside the territory it controls and is deriving revenue from the practice.

The documents captured during this raid appear to have galvanized a number of government agencies into action. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the State Department’s [Rewards for Justice](https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/) Program, typically used to pay large sums of money to informants who turned in men such as Ramzi Youssf and Uday and Qusay Hussein, will now be offering $5 million rewards ([http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/247470.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/247470.htm)) for anyone who provides information that leads to significant disruption of ISIS efforts to smuggle oil or antiquities.

Lev Kubiak, the Assistant Director of International Operations at Homeland Security Investigations, hopes to set up working groups to gain scholar’s input to help government agents better track artifacts. FBI section chief Maxwell Marker and Acting Deputy Assistant Attorney General Richard W. Downing threatened to use a wide variety of laws to prosecute both buyers and sellers of conflict antiquities, including laws against possessing stolen property and providing material support to terrorist organizations. Maxwell further emphasized “please, do not purchase objects believed to have been looted from Syria and Iraq” and asked people to report solicitations to the authorities.

The theme repeated for most of the panel was demand. Keller’s own slideshow ended with large letters: **Demand Drives Trafficking.** If ISIS is making money off antiquities someone is buying, and moves are going to be made to tamp down on demand in the West.

The evidence produced last night was damning and shows this is a national security issue as well as a cultural property issue. Purchasing antiquities looted from Syria does not save them from destruction by ISIS. Instead, it both funds their genocidal ambitions and encourages more looting.

Given the current situation, more drastic measures limiting the sale of Middle Eastern artifacts may be required. What is for sure is that no one can now deny the link between archaeological looting and funding ISIS.

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