



WHY CULTURAL HERITAGE MATTERS

Every day, somewhere in the world, looters destroy archaeological sites and ancient monuments. Why? They are looking for marketable artifacts which can be smuggled and purchased by antiquities dealers, private collectors, and museums. Wars and political conflicts only exacerbate this problem.

The destruction of cultural heritage is worse in countries rich in undiscovered cultural treasures but poor in financial resources. However, looting is not confined to the developing world. Archaeological sites in North America and Europe are also under serious threat.

WHAT IS CULTURAL HERITAGE?

Cultural Heritage includes both physical objects and intangible knowledge and traditions that we inherit from past generations, safeguard in the present, and bestow for the benefit of future generations. It can be an archaeological site, a monument, an artwork, an underwater shipwreck, or a cultural tradition or ritual.

WHY DOES CULTURAL HERITAGE MATTER?

Ancient objects are not just beautiful to look at. Uncovered in their original contexts at archaeological sites and properly interpreted, they help explain how our ancestors lived and the ways their societies functioned. They complete our understanding of the ancient world and, very importantly, enrich our knowledge of ourselves. Antiquities comprise an essential part of our global cultural heritage: they help to tell us who we are and where we came from.

Once removed from archaeological sites and the surrounding context, artifacts lose their potential archaeological and cultural information. While retaining their beauty, they lack their historic value and become "meaningless".

HOW IS CULTURAL HERITAGE THREATENED?

Did you know that the annual trade in illicit antiquities is estimated at more than \$3 billion, ranking behind the illegal drugs and weapons market (UN Global Report, 1999)? In the United States, an estimated 80% of ancient archaeological sites have been plundered. In 2003, more than 15,000 objects were stolen from the National Museum of Iraq when Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled. Middlemen and dealers typically "pocket" 95-99 percent of the final price of a looted artifact (Neil Brodie, Illicit Antiquities Research Centre).

WHY ARE LOOTING AND THREATS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE OF GLOBAL CONCERN?

Much of ancient history is still undiscovered, unexcavated, and undocumented. Looting permanently destroys archaeological sites and, thereby, destroys information locked in this undiscovered past. It leaves us with holes that can never be filled. Its loss and destruction anywhere in the world is a loss to all of humankind. Yet the impacts of looting reach far beyond the academic world. For example, antiquities smuggling has been connected to terrorism: one sobering example is the “blood” antiquities that are funding terrorist groups such as Daesh.

WHAT IS BEING DONE ABOUT THIS?

Since 1970, 112 countries have signed the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, in efforts to combat the black market of antiquities on a global level.

The illicit removal of cultural material from an archaeological site and its country of origin is against the law in almost every country.

Many countries have laws that aim to decrease the looters’ incentive. Recently, the United States House of Representatives passed H. R. 5703 (Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act), which aims to set import restrictions. In August 2014, the United Kingdom adopted the Export Control Syria Sanctions Amendment Order 2014 SI 2014 1896, which enforced the trade sanctions imposed by a previous regulation, which prohibited trading of Syrian cultural property that is suspected to have been illegally removed from Syria.

Despite international laws and conventions, looting and the destruction of cultural heritage continues at an unprecedented level. Yet each one of us can do things to prevent its destruction.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Refuse to buy antiquities of unknown provenance and without proper export permits.
- Report suspicious items to local government authorities.
- Learn about the importance of archaeological context.
- Inquire about acquisition policies at your local museums.
- Support SAFE and other organizations working to document and preserve cultural property.
- Share your concern about the ongoing cultural devastation with your political leaders.
- Encourage your government to preserve cultural heritage and prevent trade of illicit antiquities.