

RAND Corporation report demolishes current thinking on antiquities trafficking

Most widely held assumptions are wrong, it argues, and this has led to poor policy in tackling the problem

Report names and shames key figures involved in creating hype and speculation, as well as bloggers and journalists

A major report by one of the most respected independent research organisations in the United States claims that current thinking on the trafficking of antiquities is mostly wrong.

Its findings have prompted it to propose a radical change in direction in the search for solutions.

The RAND Corporation argues that a lack of reliable evidence leads to wild speculation over trafficking¹ and poor policy in tackling the problem². The illicit trade in antiquities is much smaller, opportunistic rather than organised, and more widely dispersed than previously thought, it concludes.³

“Our aggregate data suggest that the market for all antiquities, both licit and illicit, is on the order of, at most, a few hundred million dollars annually rather than the billions of dollars claimed in some other estimates ... We believe that, going forward, scholars arguing that the illicit market is larger than we suggest here will need to more clearly articulate the means through which these goods are sold.”

Titled *Tracking and Disrupting the Illicit Antiquities Trade with Open-Source Data*, the report published on May 12 blames bloggers, journalists and advocacy groups for exaggerating – sometime ‘grossly exaggerating’ – the problem to attract headlines, funding and to effect policy change⁴. And it singles out one of the highest profile crusaders against trafficking, New York Assistant District Attorney Matthew Bogdanos, stating that the widely held but inaccurate belief that antiquities trafficking is linked to trafficking in drugs and weapons can mostly be traced back to him as the source.⁵

¹ See *Summary*, page xi

² See *Policy Responses Based on Findings*, page xiii and *Directions for Future Research*, page 97

³ See *Findings*, page xi to xii

⁴ See *Introduction*, page 3, and *Issues with the Current Approach for Assessing the Antiquities Market’s Relationship to Terrorist Funding*, page 10

⁵ See *Antiquities Trafficking Using Telegram*, page 49-50

The report's findings on this point go directly counter to the claim made by Europol Executive Director Catherine de Bolle in her official statement on the recent Athena II operation.⁶

The report also cites figures of \$2 billion for Syria and \$3 billion to \$10 billion for Egypt quoted by Antiquities Coalition Founder and CEO Deborah Lehr in a *Wall Street Journal* article as misleading⁷, while former AC Chief of Staff Katie Paul, who now heads the Athar Project, is accused of obtaining data and screenshots "with a RAND login to a third-party data provider that were published without consultation or permission", an action deemed "ethically dubious".⁸

Major findings in the report, researched with the RAND Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center and partially funded though it work for the US Department of Defense, show that contrary to popular belief, illicit trade in antiquities is largely ad hoc rather than organised and a much smaller problem than previously thought. End markets are global, rather than focused on the West⁹, policy and argument "has been dominated by speculation and hypotheses", while almost no trafficking of antiquities is taking place via the dark web.¹⁰

It also notes that relatively low sell-through rates of legitimate antiquities at auction and through galleries, combined with the challenges of selling antiquities at all because of compliance, show muted demand, suggesting "that auctions could act only as a limited conduit for illicit sales".¹¹

"This reality that antiquities auctions represent a small market that is not always able to find buyers in well-advertised sales is at odds with the media's assumption that there is a booming unmet demand for these goods that is capable of supporting a billion-dollar black market," it concludes.

The report also finds that although fakes are a major issue in general, apparent attempts to traffic illicit items on Facebook are largely illusory, because a large number of the images posted have actually been lifted from recycled news articles or museum websites.¹²

The report concludes that current efforts to tackle trafficking are misguided, ineffective, costly and unrealistic, partially because they are based on inaccurate assumptions.¹³

Referring to transnational policing operations targeting traffickers, like Athena and Pandora, the report states: "For high-value goods and key nodes in the network, efforts by police and customs officials can successfully identify and prosecute criminal actors. However, these

⁶ See press release quote issued May 6, 2020 in relation to Operation Athena II:

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/101-arrested-and-19000-stolen-artefacts-recovered-in-international-crackdown-art-trafficking>

See also *Issues with the Current Approach for Assessing the Antiquities Market's Relationship to Terrorist Funding*, page 10 and *Summary* page 41

⁷ See *Issues with the Current Approach for Assessing the Antiquities Market's Relationship to Terrorist Funding*, page 11

⁸ See *Footnote*, page 43

⁹ See *Findings*, page xii

¹⁰ See *Findings*, page xii

¹¹ See *Issues with the Current Approach for Assessing the Antiquities Market's Relationship to Terrorist Funding*, page 12, and *Measuring the international trade in antiquities*, page 73, and *Summary* page 84 and 85

¹² See *Antiquities Trafficking on Arabic-Language Facebook Groups*, page 54

¹³ See *Policy Responses Based on Findings*, page xiii and *Responding to Illicit Networks*, page 96

enforcement actions are time consuming, costly, and often require significant cross-border cooperation by law-enforcement agencies, which can often be difficult to organize. Instead, a broader-based approach aimed at undermining the trust among illicit actors and in the technologies they rely on could disrupt the illicit market more broadly and cheaply.”

Recognising that “legal standards can be troublesome because a plethora of various laws exist between and within countries, meaning that the correct legal standard that must be met can vary from object to object”, RAND recommends better targeting of clearly identified problem areas.

“...if the market is instead made up of ad hoc opportunists, then there are few centralized nodes that can be targeted to disrupt the whole market,” it argues. “Moreover, expensive and resource-intensive investigations may be inefficient in a market comprising small-scale dealers. In such cases, broader-based disruption tactics, which highlight the risks involved or publicize the damages that looting causes, might be more effective by reshaping the decisions of the individual actors involved.”

It recommends turning to disinformation campaigns: “Messaging campaigns conducted online—for example, through Facebook groups that are used by illicit actors along the supply chain (as discussed in Chapter Four)— would allow destabilizing information to be injected into trafficking networks.”

IADAA chairman Vincent Geerling said: “This is a devastating report from arguably the most respected independent research organisation in the US, which has a 75-year pedigree in advising the Federal government on policy.

“While I am delighted that its conclusions, based on solid research, analysis and evidence, support what we have been saying for years now, it is shocking that so much hype and inaccuracy have been allowed to go unchecked for years and that this has led to goodness knows how much time and money being spent on the wrong approach – an approach that fails to protect the vulnerable while also damaging legitimate market interests.”

See https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2706.html