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## Looting and its impact: the case of Alexanders from Syria

Caroline Carrier and Simon Glenn<sup>1</sup>

The illegal trade and destruction of Syrian antiquities has been attested since at least 1970 and reached catastrophic proportions from 2010 onwards because of several wars in the region, as well as the actions of organisations such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Many architectural and sculptural remains have been destroyed for propaganda purposes, destruction that has received the desired coverage in the media. There are also many specialist articles and books written by archaeologists and historians, focused on creating a record of the lost remains<sup>2</sup>, many using satellite images as a way of studying destruction and looting<sup>3</sup>, and others that attempt to estimate the damage caused<sup>4</sup>. More generally articles about the illegal trade in antiquities, including coins, are gathered together on websites such as: [traffickingculture.org](http://traffickingculture.org) and [savingantiquities.org](http://savingantiquities.org). There is, therefore, much literature on the phenomenon of destruction and looting of archaeological remains in the region. Unfortunately, sources for studying looting in Syria itself are sparse, and, with the few exceptions mentioned above, coins are not discussed alongside other stolen archaeological artefacts. Only an article by Ute Wartenberg Kagan and a chapter in *Wealth and Warfare* by Frédérique Duyrat, both recently published, deal with coins from the region specifically<sup>5</sup>. The evidence suggests that not only have large remains and archaeological sites been destroyed, but smaller artefacts have been used in a more pragmatic way as a source of income.

The intensive archaeological looting and the trade in antiquities that it facilitates have undoubtedly caused great damage to the cultural heritage of the region over the course of many years. The exact level of destruction is difficult to quantify. Several attempts have, however, been made to do so. Pits dug by looters, visible on satellite imagery, customs seizures, and corpora of archaeological artefacts sold on the antiquities market all provide some indication of the situation. Coins are different from other artefacts because they were mass produced and it is therefore difficult to identify specifically stolen coins among others of the same series that are on the market. Die studies are, however, a useful tool in distinguishing individual coins and the different occasions when they were offered for sale. In general, small objects made from precious metal, such as coins or jewellery, are the most susceptible to being trafficked because they are easy to find, transport, smuggle, and ultimately, to sell.

1 The authors would like to thank Frédérique Duyrat, Andrew Meadows and Julien Olivier.

2 See, for example, Veyne 2015.

3 Casana 2015; Casana & Panahipour 2014.

4 Abdulkarim 2013.

5 Wartenberg Kagan 2016; Duyrat 2016, 270-277.

## MEASURING THE PHENOMENON: ALEXANDER COINS FROM ARADUS AND DAMASCUS

Many ancient coins from Syria have appeared on the market over the last ten years. To measure the scale of coin looting and the illegal market we have undertaken two specific case studies: issues in the name of Alexander from Aradus and Damascus. It was possible to track the appearance of previously unknown coins, with the results suggesting that periods of increased numbers of coins new to the market correspond to periods of political unrest in the Middle East. Other factors that may have led to increased coin sales should also be taken into account. Using different case studies François de Callatay has identified certain trends in the numbers of coins being offered for sale<sup>6</sup>. Decreases in the number of coins sold at the time of the two world wars are visible in one of our cases, while the significant increase in coins offered for sale from the 1970s onwards is also found in our data.

### Aradus

Aradus, modern Arwad, is a small island situated off the Syrian coast. Royal and civic Alexanders were produced at the city both in Alexander's lifetime and later under the Seleucid kings. These coins circulated throughout the eastern Mediterranean, mainly in territory controlled by the Seleucids: Syria, southern Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. A corpus of coins issued at Aradus in the Hellenistic period was published by Frédérique Duyrat<sup>7</sup>. The study included coins from auction catalogues produced up to 1998. The corpus was updated in December 2016 for the lifetime and posthumous Alexanders and the coins in the name of Philip IV, with auction sales catalogues for the period from 1998 to 2000 (G. Hirsch, Künker, Lanz-München, Leu, Stack's, Gorny, Baldwin, Monnaies et médailles Bâle) and using Coinarchives.com for the following period from 2001 to 2016. After eliminating duplicates 392 new coins were added.

Fig. 1 shows the number of coins from Aradus sold for the first time each year. Up to 1970, there are never more than five new coins per year, while afterwards come periods of huge increase. Several periods of larger numbers of coins correspond to important political events: changes in government or wars. It is not certain that wars are the only reason for the increase, it has, for example, been suggested that the economic crisis of the 1970s caused investors to diversify into ancient coins, the increase in demand leading to increased supply<sup>8</sup>. A correlation between warfare and the increased appearance of coins is, however, clear. Different periods of increase should be discussed in more depth:

1973 – The beginning of the 1970s is an important landmark since it is the start of higher numbers of previously unseen coins appearing on the market. This increase is, perhaps, a consequence of the 1973 Arab-Israeli (Yom Kippur) war, during which many coins from neighbouring countries made their way onto the market in Jerusalem.

6 Callatay 1990. It should be noted, however, that Callatay's data do not exclude the same coin offered for sale on multiple occasions.

7 Duyrat 2005.

8 Callatay 1990, 261. Unfortunately our data do not include the prices at which coins were sold, an increase in which would corroborate this suggestion.

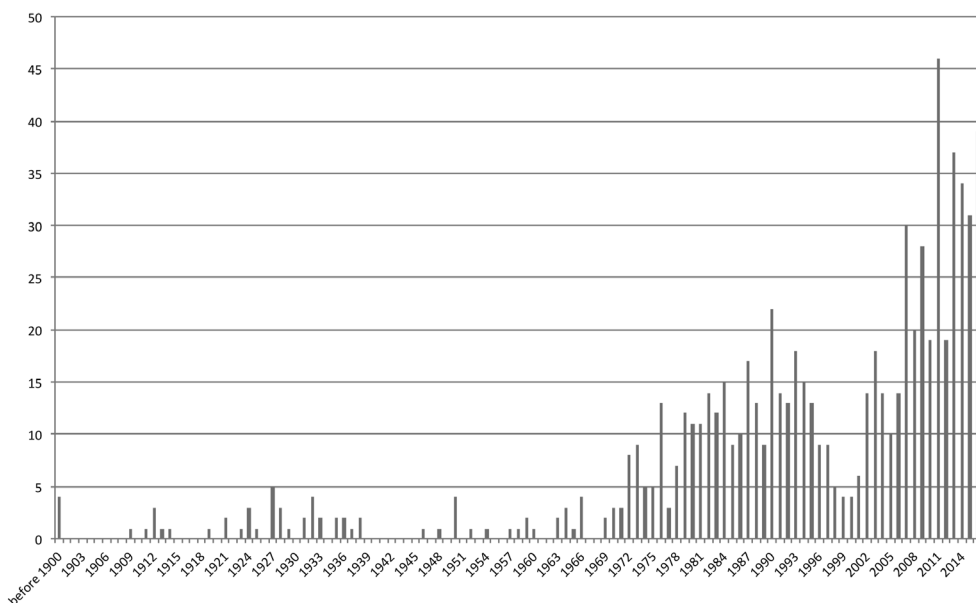


Fig. 1. Aradus, number of coins sold for the first time per year.

1975-1990 – The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and in Syria the Islamist uprising (1976-1982) in which Sunni Islamists, mainly members of the Muslim Brotherhood, led a series of revolts against the government, had a clear impact on the number of coins offered for sale for the first time. During this period several hoards from Lebanon were identified in auctions<sup>9</sup>. The National Museum of Beirut was looted and coins, along with other stolen artefacts, appeared on the market for many years afterwards<sup>10</sup>. Looting of archaeological sites and illegal trading in antiquities were reported at the time<sup>11</sup>. It is most likely that the coins of Aradus sold during this period come from Lebanon.

1990 – A significant increase appears on the graph in this year, perhaps caused by the instability created in the region by the First Gulf War.

2002-2003 – After something of a lull, the level of new coins returns to a higher level in 2003, a change probably caused by the Damascus Spring two years earlier and the beginning of the Iraq War in the same year. The looting of the Baghdad Museum in 2003, following the Coalition invasion and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein may also have contributed. It is likely that, alongside the stolen coins, others were the product of illegal excavation.

<sup>9</sup> Duyrat 2016, 276.

<sup>10</sup> Duyrat 2016, 270-277.

<sup>11</sup> Duyrat 2016, 272-274.

2006-2007 – The next significant increase comes in 2007 and the number of previously unknown coins appearing on the market remains high until 2016, the final year for which we collected data. Since 2003, and especially after 2006, looting has been documented at many dozens of archaeological sites: Tell Bi'a (Tuttul), Er-Rubba, Jebel Khalid, Tell Jifar, Medinet al-Far, Palmyra and Thoul Nayel, being only a few examples<sup>12</sup>. This looting was not the result of opportunistic individuals, but (certainly from 2006 onwards), an organised approach to the looting of significant archaeological sites. Documentation is poor, and it is difficult to determine precisely what occurred during this period. The year 2006 also saw another war in Lebanon, which could have resulted in further illegal activity.

2011 – The civil war in Syria began in 2011. The die study shows that coins sold in recent years are specifically royal issues, rather than civic, a situation that is probably closely linked to the areas of the country directly affected by the war. There is no evidence of looting at Arwad and on the coast opposite the city, nor has it been under the control of ISIS. The coins that are uncovered by looters are therefore those which circulated outside the city's territory in Antiquity and not the civic issues used mainly in the city's area of control, from Orthosia to Laodicea. The year 2011 marks the highest point of the graph and is also the year in which the results of intense looting, with the aid of metal detectors, was identified from satellite imagery<sup>13</sup>. It seems highly likely, then, that the looted coins were sold almost immediately after their discovery.

### Damascus

The corpus of lifetime Alexander tetradrachms from Damascus was gathered for the die study presented elsewhere in this volume (p. 91-126) and provides a comparative set of data for the coins from Aradus. Images were gathered from auction sales with an end date of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2016. The sources used were similar to the Aradus corpus: major auction houses and coin dealers, as well as Coinarchives.com. The numbers of coins from Damascus appearing on the market each year are much smaller than those for Aradus (fig. 2). As discussed by Glenn elsewhere in this volume, the Alexander tetradrachms struck at Damascus seem to have been the result of a single, intense period of minting during Alexander's lifetime, an output of a much different size than the royal and civic issues of Aradus produced both in Alexander's lifetime and later, under the Seleucids. The overall size of the issue is responsible for the smaller numbers of Damascus coins: the peak of fig. 2 is only five coins, compared with a peak of 46 "new" Aradus coins in a year. The number of Damascus Alexanders is also skewed by the many coins from the Demanhur hoard. The hoard's effect on the circulation evidence is also unclear, making it difficult to say where the tetradrachms struck at Damascus circulated. It is possible, if they remained near their place of minting in Antiquity, that the more stable situation surrounding the capital and stronghold of the Syrian regime, accounts for the fewer coins that may have been the product of illegal excavation or other forms of looting.

<sup>12</sup> Casana & Panahipour 2014, 148.

<sup>13</sup> Casana & Panahipour 2014.

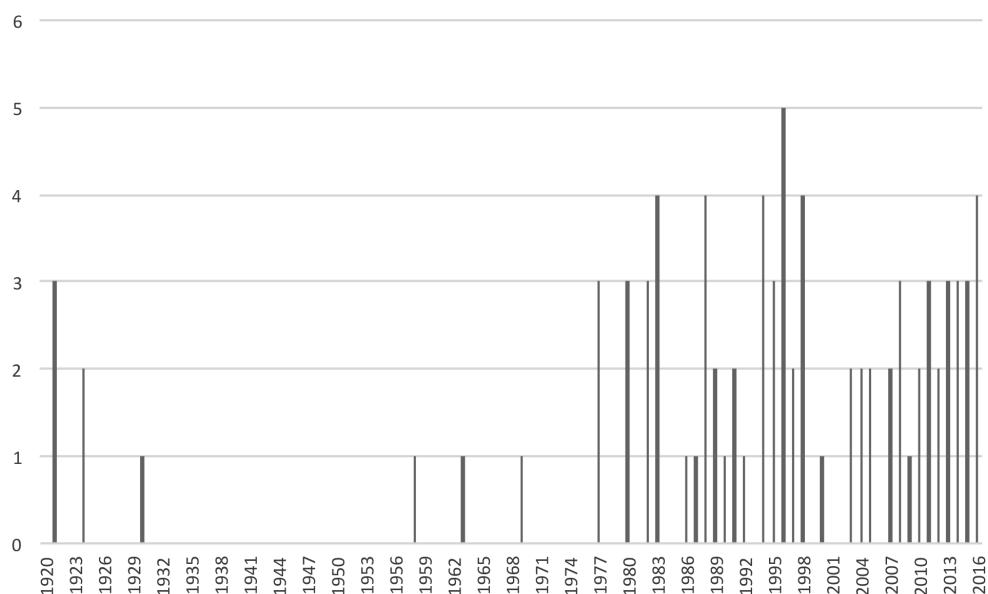


Fig. 2. Damascus, number of coins sold for the first time per year.

### The impact of war on the coin market

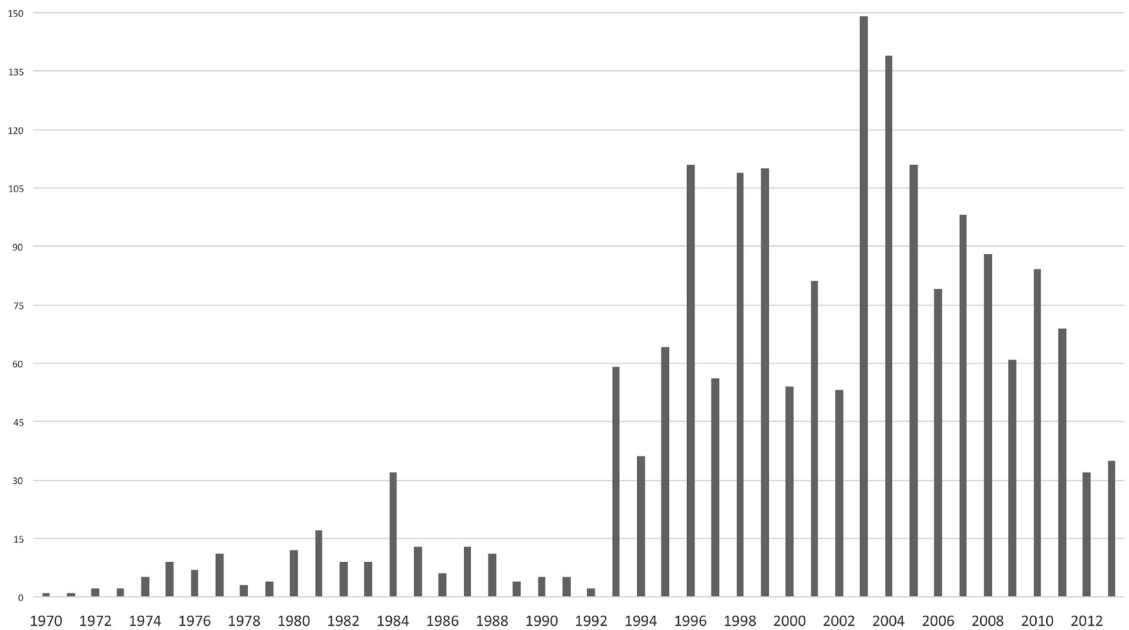
A recent study of the Syrian coins of Zenobia and Vabalathus Augustus undertaken by Ute Wartenberg Kagan has also found similar increases in the number of coins appearing after 1970<sup>14</sup>. Such evidence shows that different series of coins, of different metals, are subject to similar effects during periods of instability. If we compare the data for the Aradus and Damascus coins (fig. 3) we see that for coins sold since 1900, around 90 % appeared only after 1970, the year in which the current Syrian regime began. With new political crises the proportion of coins sold has risen; since the beginning of the 2011 civil war around 20 % of the total number of coins were sold.

	Alexanders from Aradus	Alexanders from Damascus	%
Total number of coins	1748	380	-
Coins (date of sale known)	762 (100 %)	85 (100 %)	100 %
Coins sold after 1970	688 (90.3 %)	76 (89.4 %)	≈ 90 %
Coins sold after 2002	373 (48.9 %)	32 (37.6 %)	≈ 40 %
Coins sold after 2011	206 (27 %)	18 (21.2 %)	≈ 20 %

Fig. 3. The proportion of coins from Aradus and Damascus with a known date of sale.

So far, the data presented has all come from Syria, but evidence from Central Asia confirms the connection between the appearance of previously unknown coins and periods of political instability or warfare in a different part of the world. As part of a die study of the coins of six kings of the early Graeco-Bactrian kingdom, Simon Glenn collected a large corpus both from Coin Archives and an extensive search of commercial numismatic publications<sup>15</sup>. The area controlled by the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings consists roughly of the modern country of Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan and the coins circulated mainly in the same region.

The vast majority (96 %) of the coins with known sale dates were sold after 1970 with just over half of those (53 %) appearing after 2002 (fig. 4). The corpus ends with coins sold before 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013 and does not therefore allow a useful comparison with the Syrian material for coins sold after 2011. The political factors likely to affect the appearance of coins are clearly different in Afghanistan from those in Syria. Afghanistan has been in an almost continuous state of war since 1978, making political events affecting the sale of coins difficult to pinpoint. Following the Soviet invasion of 1979, the numbers of new coins appearing on the market remained steady<sup>16</sup>. The beginning of the appearance of larger numbers of coins



*Fig. 4. Early Graeco-Bactrian coins, number of coins sold for the first time per year.*

- 15 Glenn 2015. The coins of all denominations and metals of six early Graeco-Bactrian kings (Euthydemus I, Demetrius I, Euthydemus II, Pantaleon, Agathocles, and Antimachus I) are included.
- 16 The higher number of coins in 1984 is the result of a single auction of a substantial collection of Graeco-Bactrian coins: Schweizerische Kreditanstalt Auction 2, 27<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> April 1984.

comes only in 1993 (fig. 5), after the Soviet withdrawal, and at the same time as the Afghan Civil War (1992-1996). It is interesting that the Soviet presence in the country did not result in the looting of coins, or at least that such a phenomenon is not visible (perhaps unsurprisingly) in mainly Western commercial numismatic publications. Conversely, a large increase appears in 2003, following the NATO-led invasion of Afghanistan, although the numbers of previously unknown coins had been relatively high under the Taliban. It is, however, interesting to note the decrease in the number of previously unseen coins appearing in 2012 and 2013. With data available only for two years of decrease it is difficult to be certain of conclusions, but the reduced number of coins may suggest that the danger period for looting of coins in Afghanistan is, to some extent, over. It is encouraging, in some ways, that the numbers of looted coins seem to be falling, a phenomenon presumably related not just to war, but also to the level of instability and economic crisis experienced by local people, driving them to search for artefacts to use as a source of income. Over the period covered by the graph, the discovery of the famous archaeological site at Ai Khanum and the publication of the first comprehensive catalogues of Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins in 1975 and 1991 greatly increased interest in these hitherto under-studied coins<sup>17</sup>.

Early Graeco-Bactrian coins	
Total number of coins	2930
Coins (date of first sale known)	1929 (100 %)
Coins sold after 1970	1861 (96.5 %)
Coins sold after 1993	1678 (87.0 %)

*Fig. 5. Study of the proportion of the early Graeco-Bactrian coins with a known date of sale.*

## THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF LOOTING

The appearance of large numbers of ancient coins during periods of instability is probably due also to the widespread use of metal detectors at archaeological sites and looting of museum and excavation stores in the territory controlled by ISIS.

### Looting and metal detector finds

Metal detectors are cheap and easy to use, making them widely accessible. Their use allows metal objects to be discovered quickly and easily. In certain countries, the use of metal detectors has caused major damage to well-known archaeological sites in particular, but also to areas of the countryside in general. The evidence of this is clearly visible from aerial or satellite photographs since certain areas are covered with thousands of pits dug by looters, presumably in locations suggested by their metal detecting equipment. If the looters had dug at random at archaeological sites they would have left different patterns. The use of metal detectors allows the operator to dig only where it is likely that he or she will find a metal object, a feature that explains the lack of so many pits at older archaeological sites, which have few metal objects<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchiner 1976; Bopearachchi 1991.

<sup>18</sup> Casana & Panahipour 2014, 149.



Comparing satellite images of the same archaeological sites taken in different years shows a significant increase since 2010 in the number of pits dug illegally by looters, presumably using metal detectors. Such evidence is to be found for sites in the Egyptian desert, in Syria, Jordan<sup>19</sup>, Turkey<sup>20</sup>, and Afghanistan. It has been estimated that 1,100 km<sup>2</sup> has been looted in Egypt since the start of the Arab Spring<sup>21</sup>. In Syria, the phenomenon has reached an enormous level since 2011, as Casana and Panahipour have shown with photographs of several sites such as Apamea, Tell Jifar, and Tell Bi'a<sup>22</sup>. Another article, published in *National Geographic*, includes satellite images of the site of Mari in the east of the country, taken in 2011 and 2014. The situation is the same: the site was completely pillaged, with the aid of metal detectors, as indicated by the large number of pits<sup>23</sup>. In 2012, looting at the site of Apamea in Syria was reported by a government news agency and 14,000 pits were identified. The state of the site contrasts dramatically with its appearance in images taken just before the start of the civil war<sup>24</sup>. It is reasonable to think that each pit has yielded at least one metal artefact. The looting is systematic; the holes are not dug randomly by looters, but have appeared at the site moving progressively from west to east. Such an approach makes it clear that there are highly organised and disciplined groups of looters in Syria. In February 2013, Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, alerted the UN and the Arab League to the substantial increase of illicit excavations in Syria<sup>25</sup>. In the same year Maamoun Abdulkarim, the director of the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) of the Syrian Ministry of Culture, edited a book that highlighted the current state of archaeological sites and museums in the country<sup>26</sup>. A website was also instituted to promote heritage and the initiatives aimed at protecting cultural property created by the state<sup>27</sup>.

Looting, then, is widespread. Likewise, those responsible for the looting holes throughout the country are from all the armed groups involved in the war. Maps of Syria show that looting has been recorded in every area controlled by the different factions: ISIS, the Syrian Regime, Kurdish and other forces opposing the Syrian regime. So, when someone buys looted Syrian antiquities there is a high likelihood that he or she is effectively funding the war.

The number of looted sites recorded for each area has been compared by J. Casana and it is ISIS that are the most prolific looters. This is the consequence of an encouragement of looting. ISIS uses antiquities for its propaganda by destroying remains and museums and selling what it can find to make profits. The exact level of income for ISIS from such activities is difficult to establish with estimates varying wildly from \$4 million to \$7 billion<sup>28</sup>. The Syrian army is also thought to have been actively involved. Using satellite images, J. Casana has identified the beginning of looting at the site of Apamea, a development that seems to have

19 Bisheh 2001, 115-18.

20 Roosevelt & Luke 2006; Özgen 2001.

21 Parcak *et al.* 2016.

22 Casana & Panahipour 2014.

23 Mueller 2016.

24 Elkin 2012; Abdulkarim 2013, 24.

25 <http://www.archaeology.org/news/1655-unesco-illegal-archaeology-syria>; Abdulkarim 2013, 25.

26 Abdulkarim 2013.

27 <http://www.dgam.gov.sy>

28 Rose-Greenland 2016.

occurred shortly after the invasion of Syrian government forces. Foreign fighters have also been suggested as playing a significant part. According to Abdulkarim, in areas not under the control of the Syrian government, looting has been undertaken by armed groups with the help of hundreds of citizens of neighbouring countries preventing Syrians from intervening. The looters are well organised and know where and for what to search<sup>29</sup>.

Once again Afghanistan provides an interesting point of comparison. Archaeologists were expelled from the country at the beginning of the 1980s by the communist regime recently installed following the Soviet invasion of 1979, and it was possible for them to return only in the 1990s. Paul Bernard has published an account of the excavations at the site of Aï Khanum up until 1978, while also detailing the destruction he observed on his return in 1993<sup>30</sup>. In addition to looting at the site itself, groups of coins characteristic of Afghan hoards appeared for sale in the bazaars of Pakistan. Silver coins sometimes emerge on the market (as evidence presented above suggests) while bronze issues, often rendered unattractive because of a poor state of preservation, are regularly melted down, resulting in a major loss to research<sup>31</sup>. Clandestine excavations were carried out outside identified archaeological sites, with holes from 1.5 to 2m deep dug next to each other, soon after the departure of the Soviets. This is clear from the images taken by Bernard in the early 1990s in which it can be seen that the grass in the area has not regrown fully<sup>32</sup>. The looting in previously unexcavated areas would therefore have been undertaken under the Islamic State of Afghanistan, rather than during the Soviet invasion, a conclusion that fits with the evidence presented above of the appearance of new coins on the market (see fig. 3). Looting was, however, mainly focused on known archaeological sites at that time. For example, 800 gold coins were stolen in the mid-1990s in Jam (Ghur province) and another 2,000 were taken from the nearby Jewish cemetery<sup>33</sup>.

### Looting of museums

Museums and excavation stores can also be the victims of looting and in the Middle East there are unfortunately many examples. The best-known case is that of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, which was looted following the Coalition invasion of 2003. Carefully chosen pieces were stolen and the museum archives destroyed to avoid any possibility of establishing artefacts' true provenance afterwards. This specific event was denounced by the media, but involved only a small part of the many items of cultural property that were stolen from Iraq<sup>34</sup>. Many different groups are responsible for the looting. American soldiers have been arrested and convicted of trafficking antiquities, indeed, many artefacts were sold on

29 Abdulkarim 2013, 16. It should be noted that it is of clear propaganda benefit to the Syrian regime to place the blame for looting on foreign fighters, making it likely that apparent evidence of their involvement may have been exaggerated.

30 Bernard 2001, 990-1011.

31 Bernard 2001, 1027.

32 Bernard 2001, 1010-1011.

33 Thomas & Gascoigne 2006.

34 For example: [http://www.liberation.fr/evenement/2003/04/26/enquete-sur-l-etrange-pillage-du-musee-de-bagdad\\_462768](http://www.liberation.fr/evenement/2003/04/26/enquete-sur-l-etrange-pillage-du-musee-de-bagdad_462768)

the market in the United States and Britain<sup>35</sup>. Islamist organisations should also be suspected of involvement since some looted material was discovered in the home of an ISIS leader in 2015<sup>36</sup>. The Museum has since been rebuilt<sup>37</sup>.

In Syria, in 2013, the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums emptied certain museums and moved the artefacts to alternative storage facilities to avoid a catastrophe similar to that in Baghdad<sup>38</sup>. The looting, however, continues. The site of Palmyra was taken over by ISIS, who executed the curator of the site and seized the contents of the museum to sell onto the illegal antiquities market in the West. The route is easy to identify; ISIS took artefacts and sold them to Western dealers, with many items ultimately finding their way onto the market in Switzerland<sup>39</sup> or Britain<sup>40</sup>. Unfortunately this is a situation all too often seen in times of war. In Libya, during the Arab Spring, the so-called Treasure of Benghazi, consisting of excavated objects and a collection of 2,000 coins, was stolen from a bank vault with little hope of recovery<sup>41</sup>. In Kabul, the National Museum of Afghanistan was plundered following a rocket attack in 1993. About 70 % of the collection disappeared; 40,000 coins from Antiquity to the nineteenth century were stolen along with other antiquities<sup>42</sup>. The Museum collection included the coins of the Kunduz hoard, an important Graeco-Bactrian find, some of which were offered for sale in London<sup>43</sup>.

It seems that armed forces are often the main players in the looting of antiquities, whether regimes (such as the Taliban) incite the destruction of cultural property or the presence of foreign forces creates demand for artefacts. In this latter situation, poor civilians participate because it is one of the few sources of income available to them. Various studies of archaeological looting indicate that 2011 was a turning point<sup>44</sup>. That year marks the start of large-scale looting, as indicated by satellite images taken between 2010 and 2014, along with the sale of coins (see fig. 1). The year 2011 is, of course, noteworthy because it was the year of the Arab Spring and, by some measures, the end of the recent global financial crisis. In Syria, it also marks the beginning of the ongoing civil war.

The aim of those carrying out intensive looting is to sell the objects on the Western antiquities market, where collectors are many and demand is accordingly higher. The large auction houses are based in Europe or the United States, while smaller dealers operate in the Gulf states. These smaller vendors are not always governed by the same laws and so are able to sell looted objects more easily. This route from looting to sale has clear negative consequences: a loss of knowledge and, perhaps, the financing of illegal political organisations.

35 Brodie 2006, 206-214.

36 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/07/15/how-ancient-artifacts-looted-during-the-iraq-invasion-turned-up-in-the-house-of-an-islamic-state-leader/>

37 Lawler 2013.

38 Al-Khalidi 2013; Abdulkarim 2013, 9 and 17.

39 *The Guardian* (03/12/2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/03/looted-palmyra-relics-seized-by-swiss-authorities-at-geneva-ports>.

40 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/antiquities-looted-by-isis-end-up-in-london-shops>

41 Elkin 2012; Yates 2012.

42 <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/53/005.html>; Van Krieken-Pieters 2006, 230.

43 Dupree 1996.

44 Casana & Panahipour 2014.

## LAWS TO PROTECT ANTIQUITIES AND PREVENT ILLEGAL TRADE

Following the events of the Second World War the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was drawn up. The main focus of the Convention was to ensure that cultural property of all types was respected by warring states; a Second Protocol was added in 1999 to apply the Convention also to internal conflicts. Amongst other protections article 4.3 commits states party to the Convention to “undertake to prohibit, prevent and, if necessary, put a stop to any form of theft, pillage or misappropriation of, and any acts of vandalism directed against, cultural property”. As of August 2017, 127 states are party to the Convention, although only 44 (including Egypt, France, Jordan, Israel, Libya, Iran, Lebanon, Germany, Iraq, United States) have ratified it<sup>45</sup>. Switzerland and the United Kingdom are notable as countries with significant antiquities markets, which have signed the Convention and have not yet ratified it, while Afghanistan, a country whose cultural property has suffered enormously is missing entirely.

The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property is the second important instrument of international cultural protection policy. Article 5 of the UNESCO Convention requires states “to ensure the protection of their cultural property against illicit import, export and transfer of ownership”, while Article 10 (a) obliges them “to restrict by education, information and vigilance, movement of cultural property illegally removed from any State Party to this Convention”. 131 states are party to the 1970 Convention as of February 2017, of which 82 have ratified it. Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, UK, and USA have all accepted but not ratified the Convention.

There is little ambiguity in these Conventions concerning the requirements of states to protect their cultural property as well as that of other countries. Although they have not ratified the UNESCO Convention, many countries have long-standing laws that protect their own heritage<sup>46</sup>. Other countries also have their own antiquities laws dealing with the importing of objects. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003 made it an offence dishonestly to deal in a cultural object that is tainted that is to say one that has been excavated or removed from a monument of archaeological interest and the excavation or removal constituted a criminal offence at the time. The Act states that the removal, from monument or the ground, may have taken place in the UK or outside, so long as an offence was committed under the laws of the relevant country. The legislation was aimed at reducing demand for looted objects. Under the Act a prosecution must prove knowledge or belief and dishonesty, a feature that has resulted in very limited use of the law. Indeed, it took 13 years for a successful prosecution<sup>47</sup>.

45 <http://www.unesco.org/eri/la/convention.asp?KO=13637&language=E>

46 See for example: Iran, National Heritage Protection Act 1930; Iraq, Antiquities Law 1936 and subsequent amendments; Syria, Antiquities Law Legislative Decree 222 1963 and subsequent amendments; Afghanistan, Law on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Properties (2004).

47 “Conviction at last under 2003 Act”, Institute of Art & Law, <http://www.ial.uk.com/1448-2/>

The situation is similar in the United States, which has a number of federal statutes covering the smuggling of cultural goods into the country, the main ones dealing with foreign cultural property are the National Stolen Property Act (NSPA) and the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (CCPIA)<sup>48</sup>. Following a judgment regarding Egyptian antiquities imported into the US (*United States v. Schultz*, 333 F.3d.393), it was established that foreign governments can make themselves owners of all antiquities within their borders, including those that are still in the ground, thus allowing for prosecution under the NSPA. It is, however, still necessary for a prosecution under the NSPA for the accused to be proven to have acted knowingly. The CCPIA resulted from the 1970 UNESCO Convention, and allows foreign countries to enter into Memoranda of Understanding with the US if they consider the level of looting in their territory to have become an emergency. Once more the CCPIA requires that the object was purchased with knowledge or reason to believe it was imported contrary to the law, a feature that leads to the statute's limited use in prosecution<sup>49</sup>. Very rarely have these statutes been applied to coins. Since 2009 the Ancient Coin Collectors Guild (ACCG), an organisation whose stated mission is "to promote the free and independent collecting of coins from antiquity", has undertaken a number of legal challenges with the aim of testing import restrictions on ancient coins into the US, particularly focusing on the Memoranda of Understanding established under the CCPIA. The ACCG's central argument has been that the import restrictions have been applied to coins based on their place of production rather than the place of discovery, and therefore the restrictions have been applied incorrectly. Since ancient coins circulated widely, the Guild suggests, coins known to have been produced in a certain country could quite likely have been found in another. Nathan Elkins has strongly criticised this position, pointing out that the ACCG produced no evidence of coin circulation in their cases, and citing many examples of coinage having a limited pattern of circulation away from the mint city<sup>50</sup>. It is to address issues like these that tools such as PELLA are particularly useful, since they gather together recorded findspots for certain coinages.

Efforts to combat the looting and trade of cultural property often seem to be prompted by particular, shocking events. The destruction of the Mostar bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993 was one of the main factors in the drawing up of the Second Protocol of the Hague Convention in 1999, while the destruction of the Bamiyan buddhas in 2001 and the looting of the Baghdad Museum in 2003 have led to renewed attempts to protect cultural property. The results of similar concerns following the destruction of the city of Palmyra are ongoing. The retrospective approach is always one that will have limited success. Often high-profile cases have resulted in renewed attempts to fight the importation of material from specific countries, with that focus shifting from one nation to another based on related events. A representative example concerns the return of a group of 1,500 archaeological objects, including some coins, to Afghanistan by the UK government in 2009. The artefacts had been seized at Heathrow Airport as the result of random searches of passengers arriving from Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates over the previous six

48 Kleeberg 2010.

49 Kleeberg 2010, 21.

50 Elkins 2015.

years. Objects were found in hidden or false compartments or simply among passengers' luggage and were identified by customs officials with reference to the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) Red List of Afghanistan Antiquities at Risk<sup>51</sup>. The scale of the problem is clearly enormous, since it must be assumed that although 3.4 tons of antiquities were returned, this figure only represents a small proportion of the illegal trafficking of such objects. It is highly likely that coins, due to their small size, are particularly affected. Unfortunately, coins are described in very limited detail in the Red Lists: for example, on the Afghanistan Red List coinage from Achaemenid to Islamic issues, is described in only 35 words, with six illustrations of relevant coins. As Neil Brodie has highlighted, very rarely do seizures such as this result in prosecution for those smuggling the objects involved, despite an appropriate legal framework for such prosecutions<sup>52</sup>. A notable feature of this example is the attempt to seize property from a single source country (Afghanistan) by targeting passengers from neighbouring countries considered likely destinations of looted material. The existence of an ICOM Red List for objects from Afghanistan also enabled the authorities to seize material with limited expertise concerning the antiquities themselves. Over the six years of random searches, cultural property from many other countries was, of course, also at great risk. A low chance of being caught smuggling the objects, combined with the high likelihood of no punishment other than the confiscation of the goods is no disincentive to import the material. Indeed, there seems to have been no prosecution associated with the 1,500 objects seized at Heathrow.

The appearance of ISIS has provided a new challenge for the enforcement of laws aimed at protecting cultural property. Looting had, of course, taken place in the territory ISIS controlled for many years, but it seems that the organisation applied an additional tax, or has taken to selling permits allowing holders to loot<sup>53</sup>. The CIA has produced figures at the low end of the range of estimates of the income for ISIS from selling artefacts, between \$6 million and \$8 million, but it seems likely that antiquities are only a small part of the organisation's revenue, when compared with oil, taxes, other forms of trade, and donations from other countries<sup>54</sup>. The ICOM Red Lists have been created or updated for the territory under the control of ISIS, and the destruction of many of the archaeological remains at Palmyra has spurred on calls for a coherent approach to protect cultural property. Previous situations tell us, however, that the existing legal framework, while sufficient on paper to make such looting illegal, will have little impact on the ground. Any new approach must have global coverage and address the demand for looted objects, while offering a credible threat of criminal prosecution with appropriate punishment<sup>55</sup>. The recent introduction of the *Gesetz zur Neuregelung des Kulturgutschutzrechts* in Germany has put dealers under new obligations to check the provenance of objects. The marketing of cultural assets that were previously lost, unlawfully excavated or illegally imported is now banned and detailed

51 [http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user\\_upload/images/Redlists/Afghanistan/redListAfg\\_english.pdf](http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/images/Redlists/Afghanistan/redListAfg_english.pdf)

52 Brodie 2015, 325.

53 For a collection of news articles discussing these developments see Duyrat 2016, xxiv.

54 Meignan 2015.

55 Brodie 2015, 326-329.



due diligence processes are required by law<sup>56</sup>. It is too early to say what effect this will have on the antiquities trade in Germany and outside, but the new provisions certainly firmly fix the focus on those closely associated with the demand for cultural objects.

## CONCLUSION

The evidence presented above confirms earlier suggestions of a link between war or political instability and the appearance of presumably looted coins on the Western coin market. The looting can occur in various forms, with objects either stolen from museums or the result of clandestine excavations. In any case, the resulting loss to scholarship is immeasurable. Although the legal framework to prosecute looters and those handling stolen artefacts exists, it is rarely used to its full potential and as a result demand for antiquities remains high. Only with strong, and visible, deterrents will this demand fall.

In the meantime the PELLA portal can be of use in identifying coins that may be the product of looting. All coins issued in the name of Alexander can look very similar to the non-specialist and thanks to the Symbol search tool, PELLA allows the user to identify a type quickly by searching for one of the many mint marks. In this way, it is possible in a few minutes, and without a specialist library, at least to learn where the coin was minted, whether it may have originated in a modern war-zone, and therefore whether it should be the subject of further investigation. The other use of PELLA is as a tool to perform diagnostics very quickly, combined with information from commercial sources, such as Coinarchives.com to target the coinages subject to looting by determining whether the number of sales is usual or not. When searching for coins in the name of Alexander on Coinarchives.com by mint or area, thousands of commercial records are presented simply in a list format, making them difficult to study. Results organised by Price number, of the kind returned by PELLA are much more accessible. It is then possible to compare the number of coins from a particular geographical area with that held in large institutional collections. From this comparison it may be possible to identify particular series of coins which appear to be over represented in recent commercial sources. Such information can then be used to update the red-lists produced for various countries by ICOM.

An important larger step is the necessity to catalogue the collections of museums in war-zones. Once coins have been photographed and their relevant reference identified they can be incorporated into portals like PELLA. With photographs available, it would be very easy to identify objects looted directly from museum collections. For Syria in particular, it appears that there is a database recording all the artefacts kept in the museums run by the Department of Antiquities and Museums<sup>57</sup>. If the coins kept in Syria were online, it would be possible to recognize them in auction catalogues, but for now, all

<sup>56</sup> The International Association of Professional Numismatists has produced guidelines for coin collectors and dealers explaining the provisions of the new law and the obligations it sets out for parties involved in buying, selling, and importing coins: [http://www.iapn-coins.org/media/catalog/documents/Guidelines\\_for\\_Coin\\_Traders\\_in\\_Dealing\\_with\\_the\\_German\\_Cultural\\_Assets\\_Protection\\_Act.pdf](http://www.iapn-coins.org/media/catalog/documents/Guidelines_for_Coin_Traders_in_Dealing_with_the_German_Cultural_Assets_Protection_Act.pdf)

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/>

the coins stolen in Near East museums can be sold without difficulty because there is no possibility of knowing their provenance. The study of looting in Syria and the possibilities offered by PELLA to combat this phenomenon show that this portal can also, in time, be a tool for the authorities in charge of fighting the illegal antiquities trade.

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