The Possibility of a Swedish Market for Antiquities Looted From Conflict and War Zones: A Risk Analysis

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A Cooperation Between

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Swedish National Museums of World Culture

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The Possibility of a Swedish Market for Antiquities Looted From Conflict and War Zones: A Risk Analysis

A study by:

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- Maria Ellior, Chief Super Intendent at the Cultural Heritage Crime Unit, Swedish Police
Swedish initiatives: Reports in the field of cultural heritage crime

• Cultural heritage crime: The Nordic dimension (2005). Theft from museums, libraries …
• Crime scene: The church (2005). Theft from churches
• Cultural heritage crime (2008). Important cases
• Looting (2007): Looting and damaging
• Illegal export (2012)
• Swedish market for cultural objects from war and conflict zones: A risk analysis (2018)
• Theft from The Royal Library (forthcoming)
Why is this project of importance?

• Terror financing
• The looting of objects of cultural heritage from the war zones is a high priority matter for the Swedish Police, against the background of Sweden being a signature of Resolutions 2199, 2253, and 2347 of the Security Council
Mapping the Market for Risk Objects: An Easier Method of Risk Analysis in the Trade of Looted Goods
The Impossibility of Question A

• To what extent are “conflict antiquities” present in the art market of our country?
Hence, Question B

• *Is there a market for these types of objects in our country? If so, where do these items come from?*

Where are the objects (which markets or market types)? What objects are most/more prevalent? What is the estimated financial volume of these objects in the market?

• Here, we established the term "risk object".
The Nature of Risk Assessment

• A risk assessment study can only give an estimate of the extent of criminal activity – a "quantified probability"

• The data given by this quantified probability can, if specific enough, serve as a tool for preventive measures
Chosen Conflict Zones and Countries

Qualifying factors for a chosen zone are:

- Ongoing armed conflict
- This conflict has lasted at least five years
- Confirmed evidence of archaeological looting
- Credible indications of that looting financing an ongoing conflict

Five countries were selected for this study, Iraq and Syria amongst them.
What Export Data Is Available?

- What \textit{quantities} of cultural objects are exported from conflict zones?
- What \textit{types} of cultural objects are exported from conflict zones?
What Market Data is Available?

• Detailed provenance of individual objects
• Pictures and descriptions of catalogued objects (i.e. objects from auction houses and from the Internet auction markets between individuals) -> ”The Internet Study”
• Objects on display in galleries, antique shops (as well as descriptions from store owners) -> ”The Field Study”
• History of risk object occurrence in the market from past catalogues -> ”The 1997/2007 Catalogue Study”
Practicalities & Problems

• "Blanket coverage" of a market only available when researching catalogued markets (mainly auction houses and internet sales rooms)

• Visiting antique stores will, at best, only provide a “snap shot” of what’s offered for sale

• Description from the seller of an object will not always be truthful: a “margin of error” in registering objects

• As the researcher herself wasn’t an archaeologist, a group of museum experts were of help securing the quality and truthfulness of the registered objects
The "Search Engine" Solution

• Any and every term that could be used to describe an object classified as a "risk object" were put into a search engine, set up for the purpose of finding a variety of key words, giving about 75 "hits" per day via e-mail.

• The terms could be regional ("Syrian", "Iraqi"); historically geographic ("Sumerian", "Assyrian", "Babylonian") or related to archaeology in any sense ("fragment", "excavated").
Matching Market Data to Object Data

Any object type number is matched in a code register to the corresponding market type number in a data base.
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RESULTS

The Swedish Art Market

• During a six-month period, 1642 objects classified as “risk objects” were found and registered on the Swedish market.

• In total, the objects had an estimated value (based on sale price, or starting bid price if found at an auction), of 116,000 Euro.

• To put this in perspective, under the same six-month period, 705 risk objects were found in the catalogues of one single auction house in a larger European country, with an estimated value of 53.4 million Euro.
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Has the number of risk objects increased from the time before the conflicts had started?

Our conclusion is that this drastic change in market venues is the main reason for the increase (although supply, demand and changes in tastes may have played a part)
Result: Representation of Regions and Conflict Zones

• The overwhelming conclusion to draw from this study is to look beyond modern geographical terms
• Only 75 of the registered risk objects were described by the seller as Syrian, Egyptian, Afghan, Libyan or Iraqi
• Terms to search for in catalogues were instead ”Assyrian”, ”Abbasid”, ”Byzantino”, ”Sassanidian” etc
• A comprehensive map of the historical geography of the regions thus had to be made
Regional Results: The ”Roman” Concern

- All Roman objects that weren’t exclusively marked or distinguished as ”western Rome” were included

- Rome encompassed almost all of the studied conflict zones

- Taking Rome ”out of the equation” and excluding Roman objects, 596 objects with an estimated price of ca € 34,700 were found
Results: Representation of Risk Objects

• The overwhelming majority of "risk objects" found on the Swedish market were coins, representing 92.3% of the catalogued objects
• Following coins, the other dominating category were other small precious metal objects such as jewelry (4.1%)
• What can this indicate?
Results: The Market Study

• As mentioned, an auction house search engine was set up for a variety of “key words”, giving ca 75 “hits” per day
• The overwhelming majority of these hits were misrepresented or mis-named objects, but a pattern of the risk object market soon emerged
Market Study: Raising the Main Concern

• The overwhelming majority of objects – 81.2% - were found on Swedish ”Ebay-type” web sites
• This market consists of peer-to-peer private sales and auctions where a registered company only provides the ”venue” and assumes little to no legal responsibility for the sold goods
• What makes this the **main concern**?
Why is the Swedish Police Interested in this Matter and an Active Participant in this Research Project?

Since 2016 the Police has a special function, on a national level, for crimes concerning cultural heritage

• Investigation team

• A national coordinator (cooperation with other authorities, crime prevention, participating in an EU law enforcement network et cetera for the purpose of developing the work against cultural heritage crime)
We wanted to know more about this:

The police in Europe mention the fact that they don’t know much about any looted objects existing in their country.

Through this research we were able to obtain a general picture about the situation in Sweden regarding objects with a possible origin in the countries that have been suffering from war and conflicts. We now have more detailed picture of risk objects and risk markets in our country (internet market/auctions between individuals, smaller objects of precious metal and the challenges of historical geography)
But…

- Even if we after this research do not have any indications of any large volumes of archeological objects from conflict zones on the open market in Sweden, we still cannot exclude that some objects may come to Sweden for trading and also as a financial source for terrorism.
Cooperating With Other Authorities

War Crimes

• The Swedish Prosecution Authority
• The Swedish Migration Board
• Swedish Security Service
Cooperating With Other Authorities

Public information/Public relations
• The Swedish National Heritage Board

Expert advice regarding objects
• The museums of cultural heritage
Nordic Cooperation

- Law enforcement authorities, The Customs, Expertise competent in the field of Culture Goods
The EU Network Cultnet

Law enforcement authorities and expertise competent in the field of Cultural Goods
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