

# CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN CONFLICT ZONES

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Palmyra in central Syria was captured by militants in 2015. A number of important temples have already been destroyed and others remain at serious risk of irreversible damage  
(Photo: Joseph Eid / AFP / Getty Images)



DESPITE DOZENS OF INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS AND THE INCREASINGLY VOCAL CONDEMNATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, CONFLICT LOOTING AND THE PLUNDERING OF CULTURAL HERITAGE CONTINUES VIRTUALLY UNABATED ACROSS MANY OF THE WORLD'S CURRENT CRISIS ZONES. WHILE THE CONSERVATION OF LARGE ARCHITECTURAL COMPLEXES IS OFTEN PROBLEMATIC ENOUGH, THE PRESERVATION OF MOVABLE ANTIQUITIES IS PROVING NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE, WITH POROUS BORDERS ALLOWING SMUGGLERS TO ILLEGALLY TRANSFER ANTIQUITIES TO DEALERS AROUND THE WORLD, FUELLING ONGOING CONFLICT AND HUMAN SUFFERING.

A 2014 report by UNESCO into conflict looting in Syria found that archeological sites are being systematically targeted for clandestine excavations by well-organised and often armed groups, not all originating from Syria. Museums outside of Damascus have had their collections plundered or destroyed, with the number of illegal excavations and incidences of looting increasing exponentially since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. Most alarmingly, a number of terrorist groups have been actively targeting cultural heritage locations across Syria and Iraq, causing irreparable damage to some of the region's oldest and most unique sites.

Whilst the scale and scope of plunder in Syria and Iraq is currently unparalleled, conflict looting has also inflicted a devastating toll upon other regions of the world in recent years. Instability and fighting in northern Mali in 2012 allowed for the widespread looting of some of West Africa's most important cultural sites, leaving four thousand priceless manuscripts - some over 700 years old - missing from Timbuktu's fabled Ahmed Baba Institute.

Even when illegally excavated cultural property - removed from places like Italy, Greece, Cyprus, and Syria - is recovered and returned, much has still been lost. The value of cultural heritage is found not just in the object itself but in the place and perspective in which it was discovered. Much remains to be done, therefore, to ensure that our past has a future.



Looted Iraqi antiquities seized after being smuggled into the United States are put on display by the Department of Homeland Security before their return to Iraq.  
(Photo: Kelly Lowery / ICE)