

The illegal excavation and trade of Syrian cultural objects: a view from the ground

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Abstract: The illegal excavation and trade of cultural objects from Syrian archaeological sites worsened markedly after the outbreak of civil disturbance and conflict in 2011. Since then, the damage caused to archaeological heritage has been well documented, and the issue of terrorist funding explored, but hardly any research has been conducted into the organization and operation of theft and trafficking of cultural objects inside Syria. As a first step in that direction, this paper presents texts of interviews with seven people resident in Syria who have first-hand knowledge of the trade, and uses information provided to suggest a model socioeconomic organization of the Syrian war economy as regards the trafficking of cultural objects. It highlights the importance of coins and other small objects for trade, and concludes by considering what lessons might be drawn from this model to improve presently established public policy.

Keywords: Syria, looting, cultural objects, coins, policy

Introduction

Like many countries in the MENA region, for the past few decades the archaeological heritage of Syria has been robbed of cultural objects for sale on the international market (Abdulrahman 2001). The problem worsened markedly after the onset of civil disturbance and then open conflict in 2011 (Al Quntar 2013; Cunliffe 2012; Casana 2015). Since that time, a lot of academic effort has gone into documenting the damage caused by illegal excavation (and other agencies), making good use of satellite imagery, a technique that for archaeological purposes might be said to have come of age during the Syria conflict. See particularly the work of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR 2017) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS 2017). Civil society groups, particularly those comprising expatriate Syrians, have similarly focused on documenting damage, though closer at hand using cell phones and other digital cameras, as well as identifying and recording stolen objects. See for example the work of the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (APSA 2017) and Heritage for Peace (Heritage for Peace 2017). Inside Syria, the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums of the Ministry of Culture (DGAM 2017) has also been working to document and restore damage.

There has been rather less investigation of the organisation and operation of illegal excavation and trade, perhaps because of difficulties accessing criminal actors in a conflict zone, ethical qualms about engaging in such work, or even a simple lack of expertise or interest. What information is available derives largely from media reporting, though this reporting has been patchy in its reliability and quality. At its best it has been good, but see Sam Hardy's (Hardy 2015) cautionary talk of "churnalism" and other usefully critical commentary on his Conflict Antiquities blog (Hardy 2017). Nevertheless, most of what is known about illegal excavation and trade inside Syria comes from some of the better media reporting, which has on occasion managed to access people with first-hand knowledge or experience of the problem. Unfortunately, much of the media coverage has been biased in its enquiry. The involvement of fighters, traffickers and hard-pressed civilians has been well documented, and the main trade routes out of Syria mapped, but a lot of reporting has been driven by the desire to establish a monetary link between trafficking and armed insurgency or terrorist groups, particularly after the 2013 eruption into Syria of Daesh. Presumably terrorist funding is a matter of international security and thus a subject of acute public and political concern. So although this reporting does contain useful information, it falls far short of comprising a systematic analysis of the organization and operation of theft and trafficking inside Syria.

To make good this investigative shortfall, we present here the synthetic texts of seven interviews conducted in 2016 with people either directly engaged in or with first-hand knowledge of the illegal excavation and trade of cultural objects inside Syria. We conduct a critical study of the texts, with due concern for the circumstances of their production, and discuss their contents in relation to Jonathan Goodhand's tripartite typology of a war economy. We complete our study by considering the implications of our findings for presently established cultural heritage protection policy.

Ethics and methodology

Seven people resident in Syria agreed to participate in this research by being interviewed. Each person was either directly involved in illegally excavating archaeological sites and/or trading excavated objects, or else was in a position to report first hand on such activities. The safety of participants was uppermost in our minds, as we were asking them to report upon illegal activity in a conflict zone. We decided to proceed only after some discussion with each other, and with colleagues, including the head of research management at a major UK university. Several considerations influenced our decision. First of all, at the time of interview, all participants were resident in areas controlled by what would be considered “moderate” opposition groups or by the Salafist Jabhat al Nusra (JAN), now Jabhat Fateh al Sham. Although JAN shares the jihadist ideology of Daesh, at the time of the interviews it did not exert absolute control over the daily life of any of the participants. Thus we did not believe our participants to be in imminent danger of discovery and retribution. We could not have justified such research in areas controlled by Daesh with its record of vicious reprisal. Secondly, the research was primarily concerned with the socioeconomics of illegal excavation and trade, and so the interviews intentionally avoided any questioning about the participants’ political affiliations and actions, or about knowledge they might have possessed about the identities of criminals. Thirdly, we were aware that the participants were communicating with other people outside Syria, so that our own enquiries did not initiate contact or trigger a previously non-existent risk, and might even have moderated already existing hazardous behavior. So, for example, we did not encourage participants to photograph or to engage directly with any illegal activity, though it is clear that some of them had previously been photographing stolen objects. Finally, we questioned the potential benefit and impact of the research. At first, we doubted there was much to be learned about illegal excavation and trade that was not known already from comparable studies in other parts of the world. We soon came to realize, however, that the information contained in the interviews could help shape a more realistic understanding of the problem inside Syria, and thus be important for any future policy formulation or action.

The interviews were conducted by Sabine in Arabic over the period June to July 2016. The interviews were semi-structured with a series of initial questions, but with room for the participants to express their own views. We considered it inappropriate to circulate written consent forms, outline questionnaires, or any other material evidence of their participation. Sabine transcribed the interviews and translated them from Arabic into English. Brodie edited the English translations and produced the synthetic texts published here. He attempted to keep the texts faithful to the original translations as received from Sabine, and Sabine checked and approved the final versions before publication. All personal identities have been anonymized and an impersonal system of participant numbering deliberately chosen to reinforce anonymity. At the time of interview, all participants were resident in Idlib Governorate, but more precise information about their locations of residence has been deliberately excluded. The texts are written in the present tense, but they describe the situation known to participants in early 2016.

Interview texts

Participant 1 (P1)

Before the conflict, P1 worked on construction projects in Lebanon, but that is no longer possible for him because of hazardous travel through the different zones of military control. Now he works as an illegal excavator of archaeological sites. He was excavating sites in his spare time before 2011, though now he does it to make money “to survive”. He is quite experienced and can identify sites from their surface artifacts. He has worked on previously unexcavated sites and on well-known sites such as Ebla and the villages of the Dead Cities. He uses metal detectors, mentioning specifically the French XP metal detector “with four keys”, which he says can be obtained in Turkey for \$1000. He works with a detector in a team with two other people. They sell any finds to a local buyer, and share the proceeds equally among themselves. He says the work is easier now than before the conflict because of the breakdown in public order. Before 2011, possession of a metal detector could be punished by five-years’ imprisonment, though sometimes the police could be bribed to turn a blind eye. He works twelve hours a day, from seven in the morning to seven in the evening. Many days his group finds nothing, but depending upon the value of what is found, he earns on average 10,000 Syrian pounds per month, which is equivalent to about \$20. In a good month, he can earn up to \$50. He considers excavating to be hard work and it does not pay enough for him to live on. He explains that before 2010 the average worker’s wage in Syria was about \$10 per day.

He is looking primarily for coins from the Classical through to Abbasid periods, glass vessels, and also some bronze and copper figures. He mentions specifically that silver Greek coins “with the image of an owl” can be sold for \$400 each, and those with an image of Alexander the Great for \$200. The price of glass vessels depends upon their color – the cheapest can be sold for \$25.

In his village he thinks there are something like 100 excavators and more than 20 buyers. Some buyers were active before 2011, and they remain the wealthiest and continue to control the market. People from areas controlled by the Syrian government and by Daesh also come to his village to sell objects. Material used to move out of Syria through Lebanon, but since 2011 the best route has been through Turkey.

Participant 2 (P2)

Before the conflict, P2 worked as a government employee in Idlib Governorate. Now he works as a buyer. He owns ten metal detectors, and loans them out to teams of excavators, each team usually comprising two people. He owns three types of metal detector, which are brought in from Turkey. French XB detectors “with two or three keys” cost between \$800 to \$1200 each; French GB detectors, able to detect down to four meters, cost \$6000 each; and US Xblower detectors cost \$1700 each. The proceeds from sales of any found objects are divided equally between P2 and each of the two excavators in a team. P2 earns something like \$200 per month, though says that two years ago that figure would have been more like \$1300 per month.

The majority of found objects are coins, and P2 provides some examples of types and prices he can charge: silver Roman coin with image of Nero, \$1500; silver Greek coin with image of Alexander, \$350; Late Roman and Early Byzantine gold coins (4 g weight), \$1500 each; coins of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods minted in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, about \$150 each. He has heard that an Umayyad coin minted in Al Hijaz during the Caliphate of Abd al Malik ibn Marwan was sold to a buyer in the Arabian Gulf for \$50,000. It was found in Soran (close to Hama). In June 2016, he bought an Abbasid coin for 1700 USD which had been found in Lutmanha (also close to Hama).

P2 is aware of other material being sold in the Idlib and Hama Governorates, including some Byzantine silverware found at Al Bara in the Dead Cities, and Assyrian and Mesopotamian objects found at Tell Huash Al Sahriyah, not far from Al Madiq citadel. Jewelry from eastern parts of Syria controlled by Daesh, considered by P2 as “expensive”, has also been sold there. He confirms that there are people in the village of Telminnes producing forgeries for sale inside and outside Syria.

The four main buyers known to P2 in the Idlib and Hama Governorates are located in the villages of Telminnes, Al Madiq, Kfer Zaniti, and Hish. These buyers are wealthy and use intermediaries to transport material out of Syria. They were in business before fighting began. The buyers in the village of Al Madiq (close to Apamea), which is controlled by the Syrian army, sometimes pay senior army officers to leave them alone. They sell material to buyers in Hama. Before the conflict, some of the Hama buyers would take ferry boats from Latakia or Tartous to transport artifacts to Turkey. Many smaller buyers (such as P2 himself) only entered business after 2011. The wealthier buyers are said to be storing objects inside Syria for future sale.

Before 2011, P2 says that most material would pass through Lebanon, and the trade was controlled by high-ranking officers in the Syrian army. After 2011, Turkey became the most practical route. Since 2015, however, Turkey has strengthened its border controls and it has been harder to transport material across, increasingly restricting the trade to small objects and coins. In Turkey, he believes that most objects are bought by foreign dealers, with Europeans purchasing Greek, Roman and Byzantine objects, and Gulf Arabs looking more to buy Islamic objects.

Participant 3 (P3)

Before the conflict, P3 was a government employee, but also excavating in his spare time. Once fighting had begun, he commenced work as a buyer. He would work with a metal detector and a team of six people. Of those six people, two were experienced at illegal excavation and the remaining four had been police officers. They found mainly coins, jewelry and glassware. During the first year of conflict, there was a reduction in trade, but it picked up again afterwards. He stopped working as a buyer in 2015 because of a shortage of finds.

He believes the majority of objects being sold within Syria are coins (Roman, Byzantine and Islamic), but also bronze figurines and glass vessels. He gives some example prices: Byzantine dinar, \$400; Roman coins, \$600 each; Byzantine colored glass vessel, \$200; Roman bronze figure, \$3000, though a few years earlier a similar piece would have sold for \$6000–7000.

P3 states that there are two types of buyer. The established buyers were in business before 2011, and have developed contacts to dealers outside Syria. Post-2011, they have been joined by a group of new buyers, who often supply the established buyers with material. He says that before 2011 some officers of the Syrian army were involved in the illegal trade. The main route out of Syria was through Lebanon, but became too dangerous after 2011 because it was controlled by the Syrian army, and material from Idlib Governorate started moving through Turkey instead.

P3 comments on the organization of the trade outside the immediate area of his own operations. In Apamea, he believes Syrian army officers are bribed to allow the work to proceed. He also believes there is collaboration between officers of the Syrian army and the Free Syria Army. He states there are Syrians in Turkey buying and selling artifacts, and that Turkish criminal gangs are also involved.

P3 refused to work for JAN, who he says is using heavy machinery to excavate, and is being helped by established buyers. In 2014, he travelled with four other people to work at Dura Europos, which was at the time under the control of Daesh. He says there were about 400 groups working there, with the aim of finding coins. Some heavy machinery was being used to excavate. [In January 2014, the DGAM reported more than 300 people working at Dura Europos with the help of “electronic devices”, presumably metal detectors, and selling found objects to buyers waiting on site (DGAM 2014). P3’s estimate of 400 “groups” working there after Daesh took control in late 2014 would imply a much increased number of people, though his estimate is possibly contradicted by P5’s statement (below) that there were 400 people working there].

Participant 4 (P4)

Before the conflict, P4 was a government employee. Now he works in agriculture. He is not directly involved in excavating or trading, but has many first-hand observations. While employed by the government, one of his duties was to investigate illegal excavation and trading in Idlib Governorate. He explains how some Syrian army officers were involved, and that Syrian-based diplomats from other Arab countries would export material from Syria. Since the conflict started, he says excavating has become easier because of the breakdown in public order. He confirms the use of metal detectors, but also says many excavators use long probing rods to locate tombs. Small objects are the most sought after as they are easily transported across borders. Prices for mosaics have dropped so that excavators are content to remove only the figural design elements and leave what remains in the ground.

There are two types of buyers. Established, wealthy buyers who were active before the conflict have been joined by new buyers who have been driven to participate because of their poverty. Buyers might employ excavators directly and pay them a daily wage of about \$17, or else pay freelance excavators a percentage of the sales price for whatever they find. The most important buyers are those who are connected to dealers outside Syria. The route through Turkey is now the most common one, though the route through Lebanon can still be used if buyers have connections to the Syrian army, which might also facilitate

transport. He believes there is a network of buyers that was already in place before 2011, including senior Syrian army officers.

P4 says he is in communication with a Daesh official who is responsible for overseeing activities related to illegal excavation and trade. This official confirms the use of heavy machinery at sites in Daesh occupied territory, and suggests that Daesh employs 35 digging gangs, each gang composed of 45 members who work on-site in ten-person shifts. Most material is transported out through Turkey, sometimes in fuel trucks. Border guards need to be bribed and criminal gangs on the Turkish side of the border are also paid off. He states that Daesh sells some material to a Syrian army officer who can arrange for ongoing trade and transport. Some objects discovered in Daesh territory away from its own controlled excavations are taken to Idlib Governorate for sale, including a statue of a “goddess of spring”, possibly from Mari, which sold for \$13,000, and a “Sumerian” statue, which sold for \$2500. P4 also reports that JAN is controlling excavations on sites under its control, though the group is not as well-organized as Daesh. Some of the JAN material is sold to a Syrian government official. He also states that some Syrian army officers conducted an illegal dig at a site called Tell Hamamiat, not far from Apamea, where they discovered a hoard of Roman gold coins and figurines which P4 believes they sold to a buyer in Al Madiq for \$150,000.

Participant 5 (P5)

Before the conflict, P5 was a government employee, but he was also involved with illegal excavation and trade as a buyer. He has been a buyer since he was 17 years old, following his father and his grandfather before him. Before 2011, he would work for three to four hours a night, but now he works more. He says that before 2011, there was some illegal excavation in Idlib Governorate at Apamea and Telminnes, but that since 2011 it has extended through most of the province. He owns three metal detectors that he loans out to teams of three people, taking as rent 30 per cent of the value of any objects they find. He also pays each worker about \$3-4 per day. They work from seven in the morning to seven in the evening. The majority of people he employs were working in Lebanon before the outbreak of hostilities, but they cannot travel there now because the Syrian army controls the roads. In Lebanon, they used to earn about \$1000 per month, and the cost of living was much lower at that time – a loaf of bread that would have cost only 15 Syrian pounds then would by 2016 cost 100 Syrian pounds.

Most of the found objects are coins. Prices for coins are now lower than before the conflict. A small Roman copper coin, for example, which would have sold for \$10 can now only be sold for about \$2. The price of mosaics has collapsed so that sometimes excavators just leave them in the ground.

Pre-2011, he says the Syrian army would transport material out through Lebanon. The main route out of Syria now for P5 is through Turkey. Sometimes refugees are used to transport material. P5 has a connection with a Syrian army officer in Apamea who can arrange the transport of material through Hama and on into Lebanon. He believes there are Gulf Arabs in Turkey who are buying Islamic coins. P5 is not a big buyer, though he knows some wealthier buyers who are storing material in Syria.

In 2014, he went to Dura Europos when it was under the control of Daesh, where he reckons there were about 400 people excavating. At the time, 20 per cent of any proceeds was taken by Daesh as sales tax, with the remaining 80 per cent being divided between the excavators and the Daesh commander. Some material from Daesh controlled areas is sold in Idlib Governorate.

Participant 6 (P6)

At the time of interview, P6 was living in a refugee camp just inside Syria close to the Turkish border. He occasionally sells some artifacts. Before the conflict, he was a policeman when, he says, Syrian army and Mukhabarat personnel were involved in illegal excavation and trade. The main route out was through Lebanon. Since the conflict started, he believes that all political factions have been condoning or conducting illegal excavations. The people actually doing the digging have been impoverished by the fighting and economic disruption. He has two cousins, for example, who used to work in Lebanon on construction. After their house was destroyed by bombing, they were forced to relocate to the same refugee camp as P6. They now do some excavating, selling whatever they find for a "very cheap price". In general, conditions are so bad in refugee camps that many people have been forced into illegal excavation to earn some money. P5 says his own children are suffering from the economic deprivation and exploitation of camp life. His young daughter is losing her hair because of malnutrition.

Found objects are mosaics, statues, coins and glass vessels. Mosaics are difficult to transport into Turkey and can only be sold for about \$100. Coins sell for between \$2 and \$1000, depending upon type. Glass vessels can be sold for anything up to a couple of hundred dollars, depending upon period and color. Most statues are made of marble. There is no demand for pottery. He knows of one dig at Tell Saer, to the east of Hama, where some gold coins and statues were discovered.

Many buyers inside Syria have only entered business since the start of fighting, and most of them deal in artifacts on only a part-time basis. They do not have permanent employment but earn a living by various means. The buyers inside Syria do not earn much money. Most money is earned by buyers outside Syria.

Some of the trade out of Syria is in the hands of refugees on both sides of the border. Refugees in Turkey are in contact with Turks who can arrange for the sale of material to foreign buyers. P6 has heard that one mosaic was sold to a Russian buyer.

Participant 7 (P7)

Before the conflict, P7 worked as an archaeologist. Now he is working for a humanitarian NGO on the documentation of archaeological sites. He is not involved in illegal excavation or trade, but is a first-hand observer. He explains how at the beginning of the conflict illegal excavation was largely an individual endeavor. As time progressed, however, it became more organized. He is aware of digging in progress over the whole area of the Dead Cities, especially where there are tombs. Buyers control excavation. They pay excavators a daily wage of

500 Syrian pounds, together with a percentage of the value of any find. Normally a buyer will take everything that is found. Small objects are most in demand, and most found objects are coins, other metal objects, and marble statues. P7 knows of one find in the village of Al Bara that comprised a collection of 27 Byzantine copper and silver objects (some dishes, a candlestick, a censer and some spoons). [Possibly the Byzantine silver mentioned by P2]. Two days after its discovery the material was sold for \$17,000, though he later discovered that the material had been resold for \$150,000. Syrian army officers are being bribed in the area of Apamea to allow the illegal excavation and transport of material.

Recently a trade has developed in the column capitals of some Roman and Byzantine buildings. Experienced stonemasons are on hand to remove the capitals and disguise them for transport in shipments of stone. They are taken to Lebanon, and are destined for use in the construction of modern villas and other large buildings.

P7 distinguishes between small buyers and large, wealthy buyers. The small buyers travel around villages looking for material to buy, which they subsequently sell on to the larger buyers. The large buyers are connected to dealers in Turkey and Europe. Sometimes the large buyers send important objects to Turkey for sale, and receive money from their sale by return. There is a mutually beneficial relationship of trust between them and the buyers outside Syria

In 2015, he spent time in territory controlled by Daesh. He says that Daesh has a person in control of illegal excavation, who is responsible for issuing excavation permits. 20 per cent of the value of any found material is paid to Daesh. Sales are arranged using WhatsApp and material can be transported out of Syria into Turkey on fuel trucks. Sometimes material is sold to buyers in Idlib Governorate. [None of the other participants reported using WhatsApp or other means of electronic messaging, though its use is documented elsewhere (Giglio and al-Awad 2015)]. US special forces, for example, discovered images of stolen cultural objects in the WhatsApp folder of Daesh commander Abu Sayyaf's cellphone, discovered by US Special Forces during a May 2015 raid on his headquarters in Deir ez Zor Syria (USA 2016: 12-13)].

Political contexts

At the time of interview, all participants were resident in areas of Idlib Governorate controlled by 'moderate' opposition groups or JAN. For ethical reasons, we did not ask any of the participants about their political affiliations or sympathies, but given their situation we assumed them predisposed to be more critical of the Syrian government and its agents than of opposition groups. Thus it was no surprise to hear most of the participants (all except P1) accusing Syrian government forces of taking bribes or even actively facilitating the theft and trafficking of cultural objects. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore or write off these accusations as tainted hearsay or politically-motivated calumny, as they can be independently corroborated by reports in the media. In 2012, for example, there was an account of the Syrian army or its Shabiha paramilitaries engaged in looting at Palmyra (Moutot 2012), while the illegal excavation of Apamea has been reported as proceeding with the knowledge and connivance of local army commanders (ASOR 2014: 11-12; Harkin 2014). Historically, elements of Syrian government forces became involved in general organized crime after Syria's

1976 occupation of Lebanon, which secured for them control of Lebanese roads and ports and provided opportunities for extorting bribes and illegal taxes on smuggling and other criminal enterprises (Herbert 2014: 72). Reports of their facilitation of or active involvement in trafficking cultural objects go back to the 1980s (Brodie 2015: 325; Clark 2016). This longstanding army involvement in trafficking cultural objects explains the observation made by P2, P3, P5 and P6 that before the conflict the main routes out of Syria passed into Lebanon.

It is important to note, however, that the Syrian army was not the only combatant accused by participants of looting and trafficking. P3 believes the Free Syria Army (FSA) to be involved, and P6 states that all factions are engaging to a greater or lesser extent. Again, these statements about opposition involvement can be corroborated by what has been reported in the media (Luck 2013b; van Tets 2013; Clark 2016). Several of the participants comment upon Daesh, and P3 and P5 claim to have worked at Dura Europos when it was under the control of Daesh. Again, their statements about the organization and fiscal control under Daesh of illegal excavation and trade can be corroborated by media reporting (Al-Azm *et al* 2014) and the Abu Sayyaf documents recovered by US Special Forces in May 2015 (Keller 2015; USA 2016).

Six participants (all except P7) report that by 2016 it had become difficult to transport material out of Syria through Lebanon, and that in consequence Turkey had become the preferred route out. The Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon in 2005, restoring border control to the appropriate Lebanese authorities. Almost certainly, this reassertion of Lebanese control would have obstructed direct smuggling routes passing through Lebanon. But the participants also state that the routes through to Lebanon have become dangerous because they are controlled by the Syrian army or its allies, which implies the ending of traffic from opposition-controlled areas of Idlib Governorate through Lebanon, but not necessarily from areas of Syria under government control. Trafficked material has certainly been seized in Lebanon (Bajjaly 2013; Kadi 2015; Cox 2015; Seif 2015: 71-75), including objects said to have been taken from Palmyra before its occupation by Daesh in 2015 (Jaber and Arbuthnott 2013; Seif 2015: 73-74), so it is evident that routes through Lebanon are still to some extent operational. Similarly, there have been seizures of material in Jordan to the south (Luck 2013a, 2013b).

Socioeconomic contexts

We are following here the typology developed by Jonathan Goodhand (2003, 2005) from his study of the wartime opium economy in Afghanistan. After the collapse there of central government control, he described the emergence of three separate though interacting economies, each with its own motivating rationale and means of mobilizing and allocating economic resources. A “conflict economy” was supporting armed forces in the field fighting for a political objective. A “criminal economy” was the work of criminal entrepreneurs bent on profiting monetarily from opportunities created by conflict. Finally, there was a “coping economy”, comprising poor households and communities whose traditional means of economic production had been eroded or destroyed by conflict, and who in consequence were forced to adopt alternative and often illegal livelihoods to ensure their ongoing survival. While understanding that this

typology is idealized, and that individual actors can embody multiple motivations and relationships, we believe it can be profitably applied to characterize the illegal excavation and trade of cultural objects within Syria (FIGURE 1).

Conflict economy

Starting with the idea of a conflict economy, it is immediately obvious from the observations of our participants, the widespread media reporting, and the Abu Sayyaf receipts, how Daesh has integrated illegal excavation and trade into its war effort with a destructive intensity not seen in other areas of the country. JAN seems to have done likewise, though less systematically, and some members of other opposition groups have been reported selling cultural objects to buy weapons (Luck 2013b). The Daesh conflict economy has been well described elsewhere (Al-Azm *et al.* 2014; Keller 2015), and so it is not our intention to comment upon it further here. We are more interested in characterizing the organization and operation of the criminal and coping economies, and reflecting upon what can be learnt about them that would help shape a more effective public policy response to the theft and trafficking.

Criminal economy

Media reports and the claims made by our participants of Syrian army involvement do not demonstrate direct government organization or control of illegal excavation and trade as part of a conflict economy. Indeed, the DGAM, which is the government's executive as regards cultural heritage protection, is struggling (with some success) to ensure protection where it can across the country (DGAM 2017). Thus the reports of Syrian army involvement probably reflect the actions of locally corrupt or criminal commanders, who are better considered as part of the criminal economy, an economy that pre-existed the conflict. Between 1991 and 1996, for example, 86 pieces of Syrian Late Roman floor mosaic arrived in Montreal (Canada) from Lebanon. Most were recovered and returned to Syria (Fossey 2015). In April 2014, an inscribed Syrian stele offered for sale at London's Bonhams auction house was seized by the Metropolitan Police when evidence came to light that it had possibly been excavated illegally in 1999 (Lamb 2014). Sometime between 2013 and 2016, three funerary reliefs from Palmyra were seized in the Geneva Freeport that had arrived there in 2009 and 2010 from Qatar (AFP 2016). All of these pieces are large and heavy – the inscribed stele, for example, weighs 830 kg. They constitute evidence for a considerable lifting and transport capability of a type that would be difficult to conceal but that could be made available by the army. Alongside the army, there is also independent testimony to the involvement in trafficking of senior members of the government and prominent businessmen during this period (Clark 2016).

What seems to be general knowledge among the participants of the involvement of government officials and army officers in the theft and trafficking of cultural objects provides a window onto what must be their more general experience of government corruption as an inescapable tribulation of everyday life. This

corruption diminishes the availability of legitimate employment and engenders a public disregard for the legal and normative expressions of government authority, including those aimed at protecting cultural heritage. It also encourages popular support for more principled and less corrupt opposition groups. Thus the corrosive influence of the corrupting criminal economy on civil society will have created an environment of opinion and economic deprivation accepting of illegal excavation and trade as a coping strategy, as well as providing the human and financial resources necessary for its material operation. This criminal economy was given room to flourish after 2011 as government and the instruments of government control were increasingly challenged, discredited and extinguished by political opposition and reaction.

All participants make the distinction between wealthy, long-established buyers, and newer buyers who have only entered business since the fighting started. Alongside their corrupt associates in the army or other government agencies, the established buyers talked about by our participants should be considered as part of the criminal economy. P1 says that the established buyers control the market, and four participants (P2, P3, P4 and P7) claim that these established buyers are the ones most able to organize the transport of stolen material out of the country. But although the existence of this criminal economy is clear, our participants had little say about its organization, functioning or reach. From what they say, they appear to have the status of outsiders looking in.

Coping economy

All our participants are excavators, minor buyers, or first-hand observers. They have all suffered unemployment, displacement or both as a consequence of the ongoing civil war and endemic corruption of the criminal economy. The activities and experiences they recount describe their situation within a coping economy. But even within that coping economy there are gradations of wealth and capital. Three of the participants (P2, P3 and P5) describe themselves as buyers, though by their own accounts their economic roles are more fundamental. Both P2 and P5 own metal detectors and in effect rent them out to excavators in return for a share of any proceeds, looking to employ up to ten people each. They are also responsible for arranging the ongoing sale of any found objects. Thus P2 and P5 are at once financiers, with the capital necessary to organize and equip excavating teams, and fences, receiving and selling the excavated objects. Nevertheless, the only confessed excavator among the participants (P1) works independently, and appears to own a metal detector either himself or in conjunction with two other people. Perhaps ownership of or access to a metal detector determines whether an excavator can operate independently of a buyer or not. Our participants also trace some connections between the coping economy and the coexisting criminal and Daesh conflict economies. Buyer P5, for example, states that he has a connection with a Syrian army officer who can arrange transport of material through to Lebanon. Buyers P3 and P7 state that the newer buyers often sell material to the older established buyers, confirmed by P6. The ready availability of a functioning criminal economy is crucial for the ongoing sale and trade of objects obtained initially in the coping economy. Without the criminal economy, it is doubtful whether the coping economy would

take root and flourish to the extent that it has. Four participants (P1, P2, P4 and P5) report people from Daesh-controlled areas selling material in Idlib Governorate. Thus the coping economy is enabled and supported by the criminal economy, and would be unlikely to exist without the trading networks dominated by the established buyers.

Pricing structure of the trade

All participants were asked about prices inside Syria, with a view to establishing some reliable baseline data about the pricing structure of supply chains feeding the destination market. Their replies confound expectations derived from other studies that prices at source are only a minimal percentage of what can be achieved at destination (Brodie 2014). Some comparisons between what participants claim to be prices inside Syria and prices on the destination market can be made using price data recorded on the Classical Numismatic Group (CNG) database of coins sold in the United States between 2002 and 2016 (CNG 2016):

P1 reports a silver coin with a portrait of Nero can sell for \$1500. A sample of 50 Roman provincial Nero tetradrachms on the CNG database sold for a median price of \$275, with a low of \$100 and a high of \$1450.

P1 reports Late Roman and Byzantine gold coins can sell for \$1500 each. A sample of 50 Late Roman and Byzantine solidi minted in Antioch on the CNG database sold for a median price of \$588, with a low of \$220 and a high of \$4750.

P2 reports a silver Greek coin with an image of Alexander can sell for \$350, while P1 reports the same coin can sell for \$200. A sample of 50 Syrian Alexander III tetradrachms on the CNG database sold for a median price of \$260, with a low of \$120 and a high of \$1750.

P1 reports a silver Greek coin with the image of an owl can sell for \$400. A sample of 50 Eastern Owl tetradrachms on the CNG database sold for a median price of \$308, with a low of \$72 and a high of \$1600.

From this admittedly limited comparison, it seems clear that P1 and P2 are claiming prices for coins inside Syria that are in general higher than prices achieved for equivalent coins on the destination market in the United States. Something is obviously wrong. The participants might be misreporting prices, or the financial structure of the supply chain might be affected by presently unknown factors not directly related to the straightforward exchange values of cultural objects. Perhaps cultural objects are being used in money laundering schemes designed to move criminal proceeds out of the county, though there is no evidence as yet to support the existence of such a scheme. One obvious problem is the difficulty of attempting international price comparisons at a time of high inflation and uncertain exchange rates. In 2010, \$1 was worth about 50 Syrian pounds, whereas by 2016 the official rate was 200 Syrian pounds and unofficially in Idlib Governorate perhaps as high as 500 to 550 Syrian pounds. More research is needed here, perhaps to ascertain what currency is used for exchange transactions inside Syria, and what exchange rates apply. Another possibility to be considered is that the increased flow of coins onto the destination market post-2011 might have depressed prices in the United States.

Finally, there is some corroboration of P4's claim that a hoard of gold coins and figures was sold in Al Madiq for \$150,000. The Abu Sayyaf documents contain reference to a find of gold objects that was valued within Syria at

between \$120–200,000 (USA 2016: 5-6). There is an order of magnitude equivalence here, though without knowing more about the exact composition of each find it is not possible to check what prices they might have commanded on the destination market in the United States. The important point though is that if such large sums of money are changing hands inside Syria for found material, even if only occasionally, it would provide a powerful incentive for illegal excavators intent upon finding a valuable “treasure” to continue digging, even when the monetary value of objects actually found fails to meet their expectations.

Policy implications

The interview texts presented here are from participants in what we have characterized as a coping economy. The people involved are probably poorly connected internationally, and by and large, given their situation, do not have access to Syrian army facilitation or protection. We have argued that earlier criminal networks of theft and trafficking have survived post-2011 to constitute the criminal economy, which has in turn provided a necessary substrate for the growth of the coping economy. The time to have taken action against the criminal economy was before the start of conflict in 2011, and it is a failure of a reactive public policy regime that no pre-emptive action was taken at that time (Brodie 2015). A lot of the damage caused to archaeological heritage by illegal excavation could have been avoided.

The participants agreed that by 2016 Turkey was the preferred route out of Syria. P2 stated, however, that since 2015 Turkey has been strengthening its border controls and that the route has become more difficult. This statement is in line with reports from Turkey of intensified border checks and targeted training for customs officers (Sabah 2016). The ICOM Emergency Red List of Syrian Cultural Objects at Risk has been translated into Turkish to aid in the identification of smuggled objects. If P2 is correct in his statement, it does suggest the material efficacy of strong control over border crossings out of Syria.

What stands out now from these interview texts is the use of metal detectors and the commercial importance of coins. As previously discussed, as capital assets, metal detectors are central to work organization and the division of spoils. Some thought might be given as to how the sale and export of metal detectors to Syria might be prohibited, though we think that is probably an unrealistic goal. The problem of coins, however, is more salient and is one that should be tackled. The one excavator interviewed (P1) and the three buyers (P2, P3 and P5) concurred that the objects in demand are primarily coins, alongside other small metal object and glass vessels – in other words, small and portable objects that are easy to conceal and transport across borders. The demand for coins inside Syria should not be a surprise given what is known from seizures in Turkey. In 2016, the International Center for Terrorism and Transnational Crime in Ankara announced that since 2011 Turkish authorities had seized 6,800 objects, the majority of them coins (Myers and Kulish 2016). So while international attention and media headlines have been seemingly transfixed on the idea of important “art treasures” being ripped from the ground, such as the Palmyrene funerary reliefs or Roman mosaics, the reality may be more mundane. Both P4 and P5, for example, state that mosaics are not particularly in demand.

There are large quantities of unprovenanced coins and other small objects likely from Syria openly on sale in the United Kingdom (Brodie 2016a, 2016b, 2016c), and quite probably in the rest of Europe and North America too, though nobody has looked, yet there has been no explicit policy response in the form of targeted law enforcement or customs operations. We believe this deficient response needs to change. The coin trade is quite open to investigation, but would require time and resources being made available to numismatists with the necessary expertise to conduct such investigation, and that is not happening. The damage caused to archaeological sites by the extensive and illegal excavation of coins and other small objects is no less severe than that caused by the excavation of larger objects.

One material reason for the seeming inattention of police and customs enforcement to coins and other small objects is the low monetary value of the objects concerned. While the expenditure of resources on the recovery of important “art treasures” can easily be justified as being in the public interest, it is harder to justify the use of public money in pursuit of generally inexpensive objects of little intrinsic interest. This problem is not a new one, and it is why in the United States the concept of archaeological value was developed in the 1979 Archaeological Resources Protection Act Uniform Regulations to measure the seriousness of an offence against archaeological heritage. Archaeological value is defined as the “... the value of the information associated with the archaeological resource. This value shall be appraised in terms of the costs of the retrieval of the scientific information which would have been obtainable prior to the violation. These costs may include, but need not be limited to, the cost of preparing a research design, conducting field work, carrying out laboratory analysis, and preparing reports as would be necessary to realize the information potential” (SAA 2017). We believe that if this method of assessing the archaeological and thus financial harm of illegal excavation could be more generally accepted internationally, as opposed to the present focus on the cultural and monetary value of individual “art treasures”, it would justify and enable a stronger customs and law enforcement response to the illegal trade in coins and other small objects.

Given what is known of the transport capability of the criminal economy pre-2011, it might be here that larger and more valuable objects are being traded, perhaps using government-protected routes out through Lebanon. Several participants claim to “know” of valuable finds though haven’t handled them themselves, and P2 and P5 believe that some of the larger buyers are storing material inside Syria for future sale. This idea that illegally excavated material is being stockpiled in storehouses inside Syria or its immediately neighboring countries has been floated in media reports (CBS 2015; Myers and Kulish 2016), partly in response to the observation that despite the extensive damage to archaeological sites visible on satellite imagery there have been few reports of demonstrably looted objects appearing for sale on the destination market or being intercepted by customs agencies. The existence of these putative storehouses has not been confirmed, however, and the financial wisdom of storing stolen objects of types readily identifiable to the international community in a conflict zone is questionable, to say the least. Yet even if such hidden stores do exist, it would seem to be a more practical, effective and indeed

urgent policy imperative to take action against what is visibly in operation, which is a thriving illegal trade in coins and other small and portable objects.

Conclusion

From our critical study of the interview texts presented here it is apparent that “looting” in Syria as a process can be differentiated socioeconomically, politically, criminally, and perhaps – and perhaps crucially – materially. We believe our participants to be active within a coping economy that has been forced upon them by the ongoing war in Syria, an economy that stands in stark contrast to the conflict economy of Daesh that has been widely reported in the media and seemingly captured the attention of policy makers. The coping economy is dependent for its operation upon the under-reported but longer-standing criminal economy, and this reliance emphasizes once again the urgent need to tackle illegal excavation and trade in peacetime so that there is no pre-existing organization ready to nourish and support the growth and operation of a coping economy in wartime. The only humanitarian policy response to the coping economy is for the international community to work for peace, repair of civil society, elimination of corruption, and the resumption of normal economic activity. In the meantime, however, more could be done on the destination market to tackle the ongoing and visible trade of coins and other small objects. A high-volume trade in low-value objects is as damaging to archaeological heritage as a low-volume trade in high-value objects. Perhaps more so.

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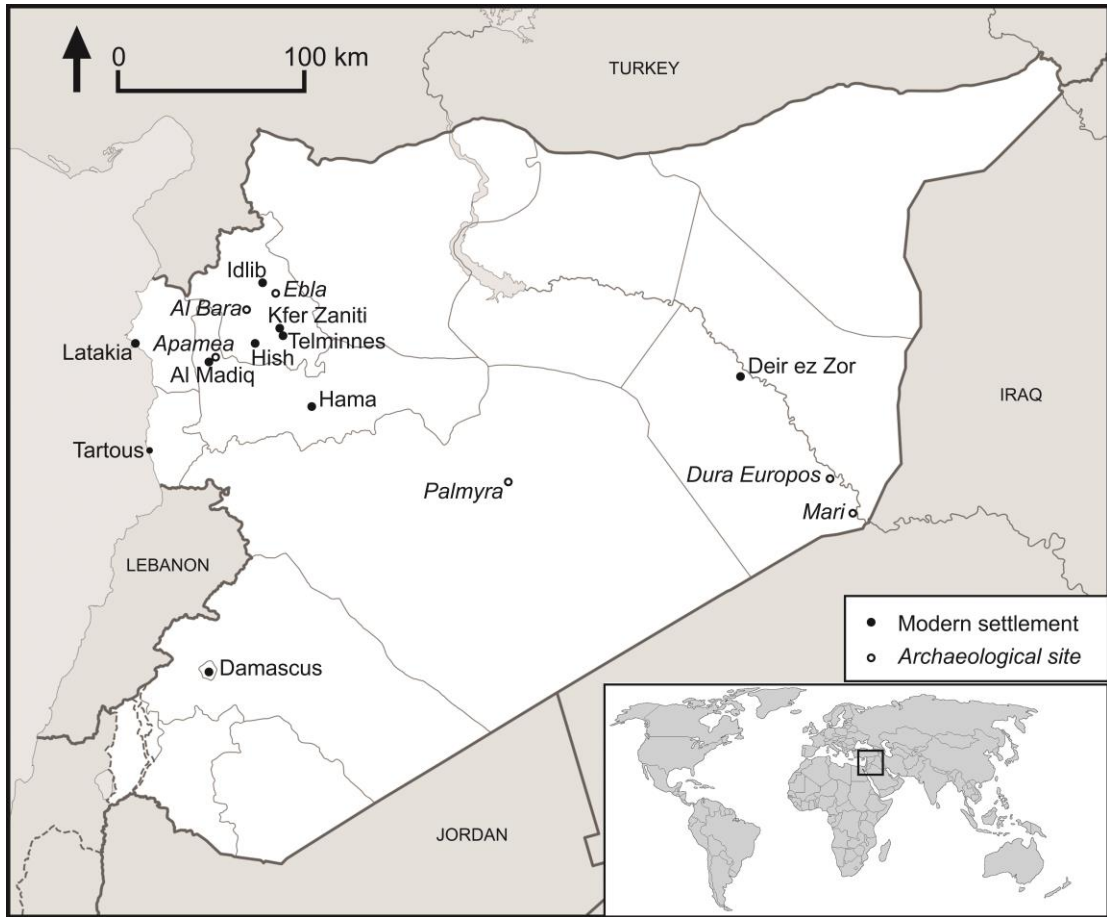


Figure 1

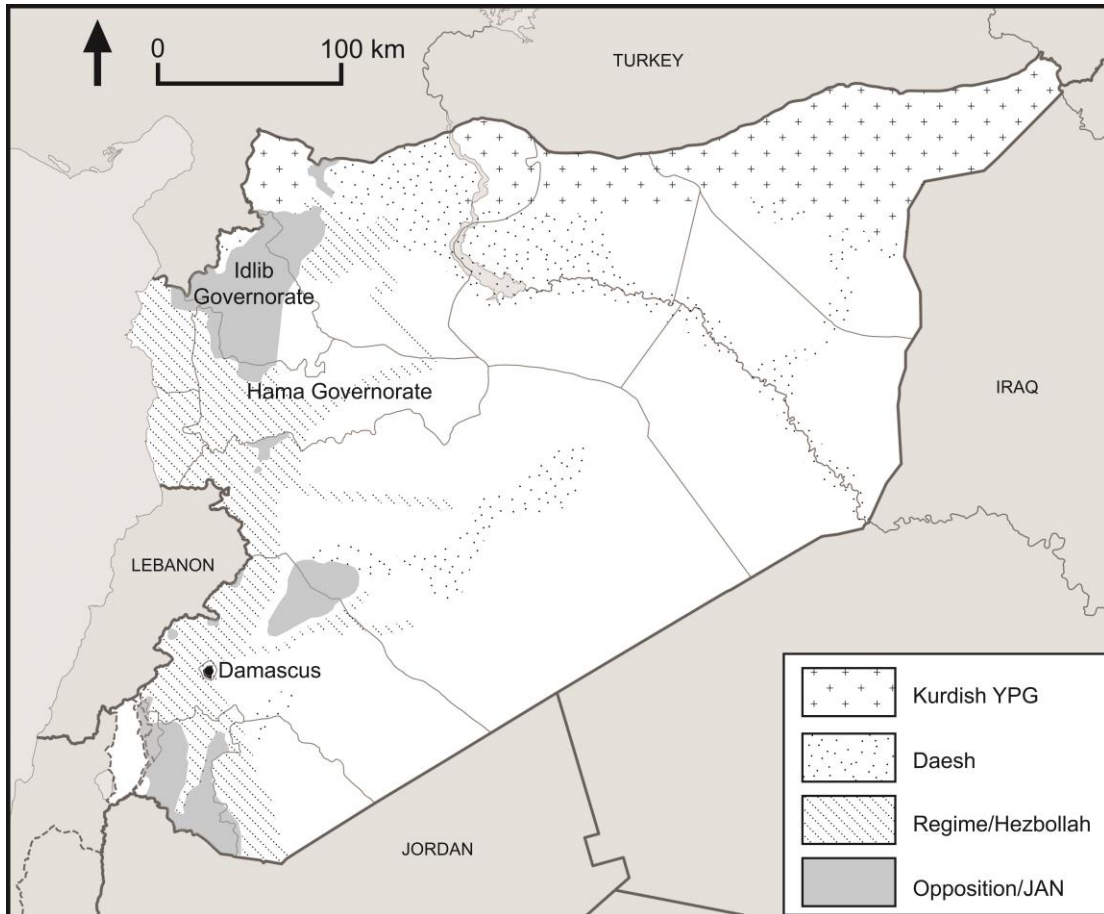


Figure 2

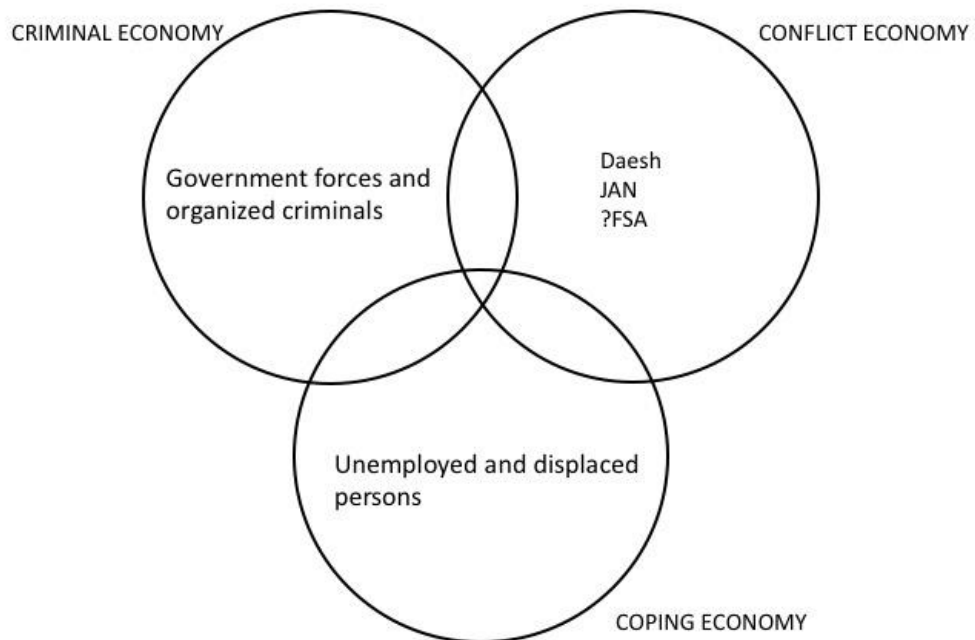


Figure 3