Archaeological Looting: Realities and Possibilities for New Policy Approaches
A conference convened by the *Past for Sale* project of the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at the University of Chicago

Who Loots and Why?
What we know from recent research
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Recent scholarly findings suggest that the answer to the question "Who loots and why?" can be divided into four stages. These stages account for the different types of participants and mechanisms involved in the illicit antiquities trade, ranging from local subsistence diggers in so-called source countries to buyers in market countries. Money is exchanged from one person to the next throughout the process, and each stage is characterized by its own unique set of skills.

Stage One – Subsistence Diggers

The chain of looting begins with subsistence diggers. These individuals are responsible for the actual removal of objects from the soil. While poverty and social instability motivate subsistence diggers' actions in some cases, participants at this level are varied in their background. The only unifying thread is that each participant was presented with, and seized upon, the opportunity to make extra money through looting.

Stage Two – Smugglers

The second stage of looting consists of smugglers, the individuals who are responsible for moving the archaeological material. One of the on-going debates among scholars is whether smugglers of antiquities are also smugglers of narcotics, weapons, and other contraband. There is

some evidence to suggest overlap in terms of smuggling activities, but it is also clear that smugglers sometimes specialize in particular types of antiquities. Due to the nature of the work, individuals at this stage show the largest amount of variability.

Stage Three – Intermediaries

Individuals at this stage are the smallest population because of the specific skill set required. These individuals are responsible for moving antiquities from smugglers to the final stage of collectors. This level often consists of antiquities dealers, galleries and, with the rise of the World Wide Web, internet stores.

Stage Four – Collectors

At the final stage of the looting chain, collectors are participants who purchase illegal antiquities. This stage includes both private and public collectors and are often located in market countries. Participants at this level may wish to own antiquities as a status marker. Various strategies for legitimizing the objects are deployed prior to final purchase. By cleaning the objects and doctoring paperwork, the looting trail is blurred or erased.

II- How is the illicit trade organized?

Most of those who study the trade agree that it is a network. This means the illicit trade is organized into a variety of actors who depend on each other to move antiquities along. However there is still disagreement about the nature of this trade. Some argue that the Network is a repetitive process while others argue the network consists of varied actors at each point; these actors can change with each area or instance of looting.

The Network as a Repetitive Process

This view of the illicit antiquities network views the process as much more set across actors. The network creates and then maintains itself through the power of individual actors. An example of this view is illustrated in the article "Temple Looting in Cambodia" by Simon Mackenzie and Tess Davis. The article explores the illicit antiquities network in Cambodia, paying particular attention to the "middle steps" of the process.

In their paper, Mackenzie and Davis present a picture of a network that funnels antiquities from multiple starting points into only a few paths across Cambodia. These "funnels" are determined by the geographic origin of antiquities and are maintained by a main set of actors who consistently maintain their roles.

The Network as Varied

From this perspective, the network operates through nodes, which vary with each instance of looting. An example of this view is offered in "The Illicit Antiquities Trade as a Transnational Criminal Network," by Peter Campbell. Campbell explores the illicit antiquities trade by moving through each stage. Throughout the article Campbell depicts the trade as consisting of varied actors at each stage. Although certain patterns evolve, overall each actor can be any number of individuals. Equally important is Campbell's view that the network, which is non-hierarchal in nature, can change with each instance of looting and to keep pace with evolving technologies. For example, Campbell devotes a section of his article to exploring the way the internet has impacted the illicit antiquities trade.

Select bibliography

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