

# IN FOCUS

by Monzer Alaily



## From Manhattan to Tripoli: the odyssey of the looted lady and the bearded man

One year later – 31 March 2023

It was a warm and sunny March morning when the dust gathering at Mitiga International Airport was cleared and the landing strip was prepared to receive officials from the top echelons of Libyan, American, French and United Nations ranks. By 9:00 a.m., the officials made their way onto the tarmac to witness the arrival of a private jet dispatched by Bancroft Global Development for a special reason: the repa-

triation of Libyan cultural artefacts dating back to 300-400 B.C. pillaged from Cyrene (now called Shahhat) in the 1980s and 1990s amid growing instability and upheaval in the region. What the officials were witnessing was the fruition of years' worth of efforts by an *ad hoc* network of archaeologists, law enforcement officials, and diplomats working tirelessly across the globe to preserve cultural artefacts.

■ The archaeological sites of Cyrene (modern-day Shahhat).

## From Libya to the New York Metropolitan Museum: the journey of smuggled artefacts

Cyrene, located in North-East Libya's Cyrenaica region, was an ancient Greek and later Roman metropolis akin to Ephesus, Athens and Rome, is known today as Shahhat. Under Greek rule, Cyrene was one of the greatest intellectual centres of the Classical world: it boasted a medical school and was abuzz with illustrious scholars, philosophers and geographers. The stunning city is now on the UNESCO World

Heritage List, although it is unfortunately considered one of the most neglected and endangered sites in the Mediterranean region. Today, the city hosts several world-class archaeological sites, such as five ancient theatres, including the colossal Temple of Zeus, the holy Sanctuary of Apollo, and a public gymnasium, which was later turned into a forum.

**“Due to political strife, the Cyrene Necropolis, home to the repatriated Libyan statues, was the target of pillaging and looting from the 1980s.**

World-renowned French archaeologist Dr. Morgan Belzic (*French archaeological Mission to Libya*) has catalogued over 200 looted artefacts from Cyrene over the course of a decade. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg; according to Belzic, the 200 catalogued artefacts constitute roughly 10 percent of the actual number of looted relics from the 50 square-kilometre Cyrene site.

Interestingly, the markings and the form of the statues repatriated have a unique Cyrenaic trait. The invaluable cultural artefacts returned to Libya on 31 March 2022 indisputably originated from the ancient city of Cyrene.

The *Veiled Head of a Lady*, valued at approximately USD 500,000, originates from a tomb in Cyrene and her style and delicate veil make her an archaeological masterpiece. According to archaeologists, there are likely fewer than 10 ancient sculptures of a veiled face, all women, in the entire ancient world, all of them are from Cyrenaica. Such statues may have been looted by impoverished residents looking for income or criminal organisations seeking to finance other illicit activity. Regardless of who looted them, most of these particular artefacts traversed a route through Egypt, before ultimately being placed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where they had been on view since 1998.

In the early 2000s art dealers linked to the smuggling of artefacts have generally been able to exploit the Dark Web to take advantage of lax art market regulations (or lax enforcement mechanisms), which

Belzic describes as being “less stringent than the banana market”. The lax regulations enable art dealers to “self-report” the origin and value of statues and other artworks, with little effective oversight or scrutiny.

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As a result, we frequently become aware of masterpieces, such as those repatriated to Libya in March 2022, on display in foreign museums or in the mansions of wealthy people. An even more hidden aspect of this already very complex illegal web of transactions, is the link between the smuggling and sale of cultural artefacts and other serious

crimes such as money laundering, terrorist financing and trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation.

## An ad hoc network vs. criminal networks

### Modalities of art smugglers

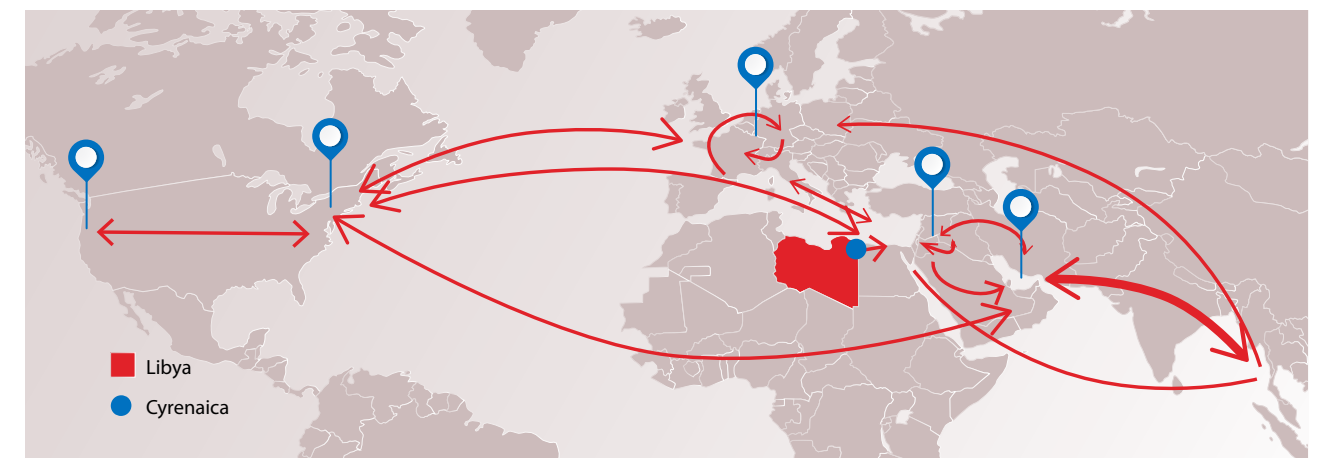
Criminal networks can be so profit-driven that they chop ancient coffins and sarcophagi into smaller pieces to facilitate cross-border smuggling and sales.

Still, what is art crime? Art crime is a global phenomenon that encompasses theft, fraud, looting, and trafficking of cultural goods. This criminal activity generates billions of dollars every year. The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) defines trafficking in cultural property as “a low-risk, high-profit business for criminals with links to organ-



**Such statues may have been looted by impoverished residents looking for income or criminal organisations seeking to finance other illicit activity**

© Thomson Reuters - In the picture: archaeologist, historian and archeologist Dr. Morgan Belzic (left) and the Veiled Head of a Lady (middle), Museum of Libya (Tripoli), 31 March 2022.



ised crime". To combat the illicit trade of art, INTERPOL has established an online [Stolen Works of Art Database](#) to tackle the illicit trade of art.

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As explained by Belzic, “Sophisticated criminal networks are dedicated to profiteering from looted cultural artefacts”. Dr. Belzic and the French Archaeological Mission to Libya have formed a dedicated group of volunteer archaeologists, specialists from other archaeological missions and key Libyan officials from the Department of Antiquities into an *ad hoc* network dedicated to protecting Libyan archaeological sites and museums and to track down artefacts smuggled out of Libya and trafficked in international markets.

#### “Blood Antiquities”

In its heyday, the Islamic State (ISIS) generated substantial revenues (estimated at 100 billion dollars annually) through the systematic looting of over 4,500 ar-

chaeological sites under its control between 2014 and 2018. The revenues from this lucrative activity pushed the terrorist group to institutionalise it through the creation of a dedicated body within its organisational structure. This body was in charge of trading in “blood antiquities”. Similarly, in Libya, political instability and violence placed UNESCO World Heritage sites at the mercy of armed factions, forcing archaeologists exploring these sites to abandon their work.

Compared to the resources available to criminal syndicates who, according to Dr. Belzic, have very sophisticated means of concealing their crimes from authorities, the only real resources available to his *ad hoc* network are time, dedication, and expertise. This is because the resources allocated for researchers, historians, and law enforcement agencies to combat what is frequently perceived as white-collar crime are relatively scant. However, the nexus between cultural and violent crime is becoming more apparent, suggesting that the sale of such artefacts sustains multiple forms of organised criminal activity.

The Manhattan District Attorney’s office led by Alvin Bragg who has established a dedicat-

ed Antiquities Trafficking Unit sees cultural artefacts as “windows into thousands of years of culture [which] deserve to be returned to their country of origin”. The Manhattan D.A. has worked tirelessly over the past years to ensure that any looted cultural goods are located and repatriated. While the Manhattan D.A. was entirely responsible for the investigation of the looted Libyan artefacts which were successfully returned to Tripoli on 31 March, the repatriation was the result of collective efforts of multiple actors. Among the entities involved were the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, archaeologists that provided technical expertise (e.g., determination of origin)



■ Meticulous unloading and protection of fragile antiquities, with the involvement of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), at Tripoli’s Mitiga International Airport, 31 March 2022

to law enforcement, the Libyan Department of Antiquities, and the Libyan Asset Recovery and Management Office (LARMO), which was created with the technical support of asset recovery experts from the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). Journalists and NGOs also played a pivotal role in shining a light on art

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looting and smuggling, and on the efforts needed to successfully recover looted artefacts.

The repatriation ceremony at the Royal Palace of Tripoli was attended by high-level Libyan officials, including the Deputy Prime Minister of Libya, officials from the Libyan State Antiquities Authority and National Museum, the *Chargé d’Affaires* of the Libyan Embassy in Washington D.C., officials of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), the European Union and UNICRI, ambassadors from multiple embassies based in Libya and internationally-renowned archaeologists such as Belzic, as

well as investigative journalists and the key NGO that facilitated the actual and safe transport of the assets.

While there is useful international law with respect to the return of looted artefacts, such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, repatriations such as this remain few and far between. Still, there is an increasing call to prioritise the recovery and return of cultural



■ High-Level Libyan officials, along with other key stakeholders who collectively coordinated the repatriation of the cultural assets, on arrival at Mitiga Airport in Tripoli, 31 March 2022

1 Siggia, S. (2020) *Financing terrorism: The billion-dollar blood antiquities art dealing* <https://pideeco.be/articles/terrorism-financing-blood-antiquities-looted-aml/>

artefacts to their place of origin. The recovery of smuggled artefacts also shines a light on the multi-pronged enterprises of transnational organised crime, and the corruption that allows it to proliferate, indicating that effective responses

must be holistic in nature, with many stakeholders involved.

The return of these artefacts to Libya highlights the importance of involving multiple stakeholders (especially those from foreign jurisdictions

where such artefacts are located, or jurisdictions through which they were smuggled). This will strengthen their vigilance, investigations and cooperation efforts in order to prevent and combat art crimes.

**“ Cultural property speaks a universal language. It educates people and depicts their values and beliefs. Long before television and social media, people communicated through art; they told the stories of their civilisations, and many people, including me, believe that these artists, who create such artefacts, have special insights into life as it unfolds. Pieces such as these today have such historic and artistic importance that they reflect the spirit of the Libyan people. Cultural rights are human rights, and having access to their priceless antiquities is a right of every people”. They cannot and should not be considered commodities to trade for profit on illicit or licit markets.**

**Antonia Marie De Meo, UNICRI Director**

For more information on good practices in the tracing, seizure, confiscation and recovery of cultural artefacts, please visit:

<https://unicri.it/index.php/organized-crime-illegal-trafficking-and-illicit-financial-flows>

For additional reading on the nexus between organised crime and the financing of terrorism, see:

[https://unicri.it/topics/nexus\\_transnational\\_organizedcrime-terrorism](https://unicri.it/topics/nexus_transnational_organizedcrime-terrorism)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Monzer Alaily** is an analyst specializing in combatting the trafficking of cultural goods. Passionate about international criminal law, he obtained his master's degree with distinction in International Law from the University of Kent in Brussels, Belgium. He completed his undergraduate studies in Political Science at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon.

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