

Archaeological looting and illicit trafficking of cultural goods

A complex phenomenon and a plague with serious consequences



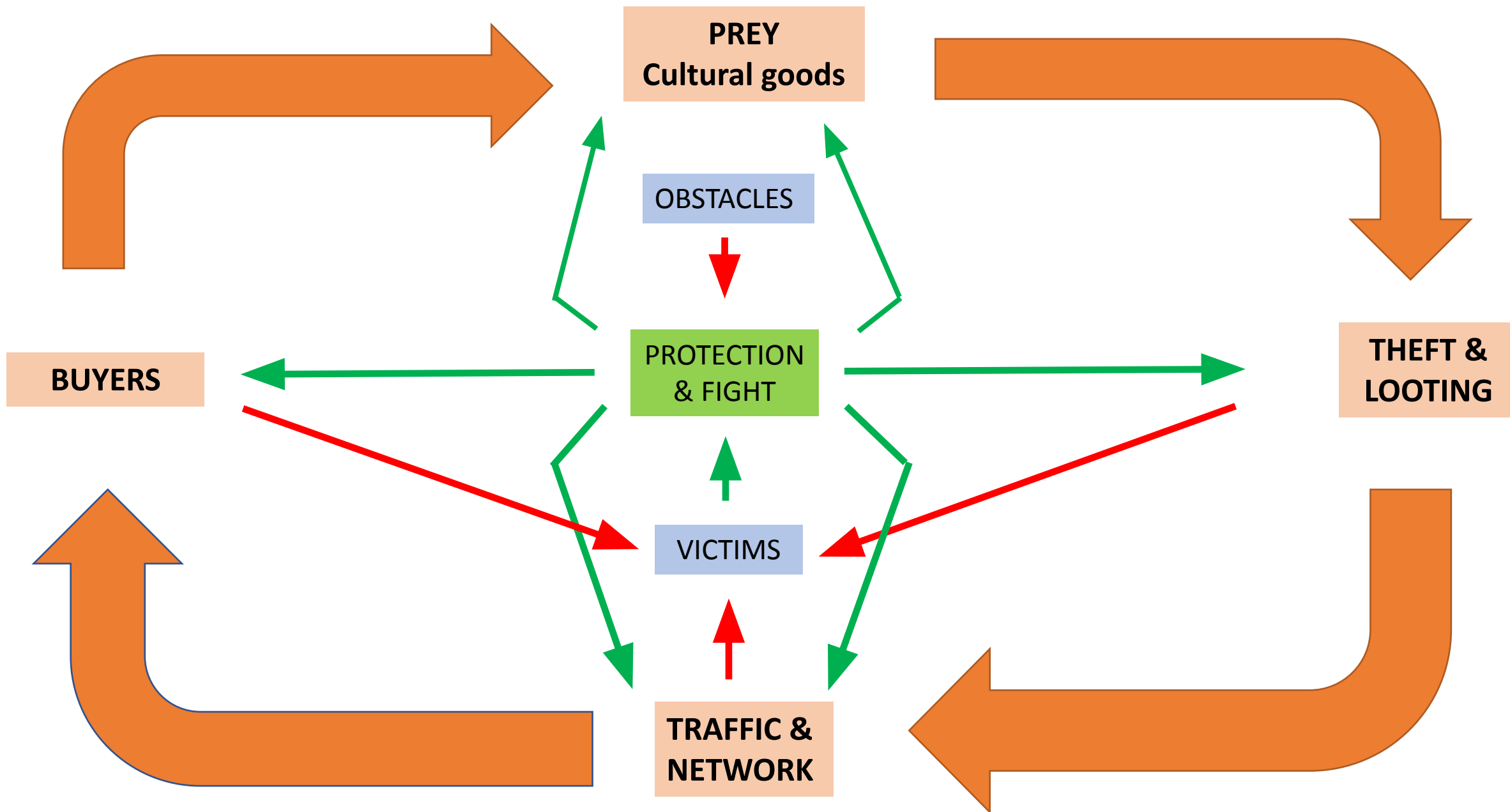
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Ευγένιος Ντελακπού
Lycée Franco-Hellénique



PREY: CULTURAL PROPERTY

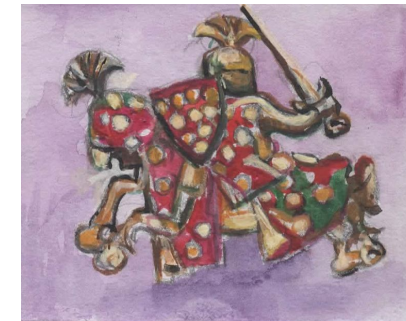
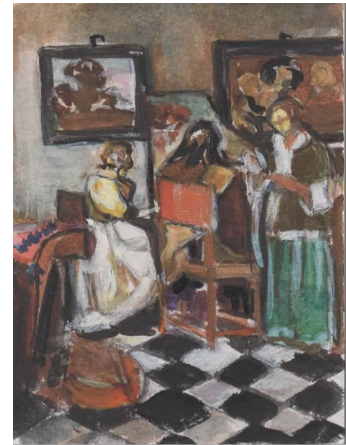
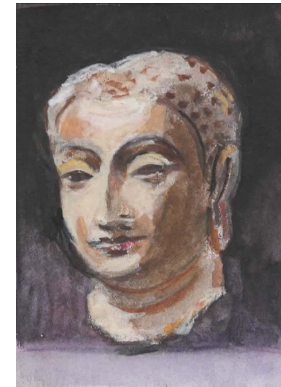
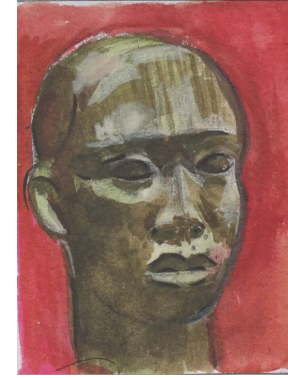
Definition

Cultural goods are objects that are considered important for archaeology, prehistory, history, literature, art or science and that are designated and protected as such by a country as part of its cultural heritage.

Because of their value and their non-renewable nature, it is very important to protect them, particularly against illicit trafficking.

Vulnerability to traffic, which depends on several factors:

- Archaeological and historical information they contain
- Rarity
- Location in a conflict zone, unstable state or disaster-stricken country
- Ease of theft/looting and transport
- Preciousness
- Number of potential buyers ...



THEFT & ARCHAEOLOGICAL LOOTING

Distinction

- Stolen goods: items that have been reported stolen and registered in a stolen goods database. They are inventoried and therefore identifiable.
- Looted objects: archaeological artifacts that have been unlawfully collected or removed from the ground without the knowledge of the landowner and before archaeologists have been able to identify, record or even mark them. As they have not been inventoried, they are very difficult to identify. These archaeological objects have no history and nothing is known about them. These are known as orphan objects.

Different types of looting

Underwater looting

Scavengers use magnets in lakes and rivers, and wreck raiders use diving equipment in the sea.



Detectorism

or metal detecting, involves using a metal detector to locate metal objects buried in the ground. Fans of this activity scour various locations such as beaches, fields and archaeological sites in search of potential treasures such as coins, jewellery, etc.

Profile and motivation of looters and thieves

- Economic reasons
 - . looting and theft for subsistence
 - . amateur looting for financial gain: metal detector users
 - . targeted looting, enrichment of individuals or organisations through the looting/theft of objects with high added value: wreck looters, criminal and terrorist organisations that can force local populations to loot.
- Other reasons
 - . Desire to make a discovery: can become addictive and lead to frustration if not discovered
 - . Desire to participate in archaeological research (in France, there is a correlation between the exclusion of amateurs since the 1970s and the increase in the use of metal detectors).



TRAFFIC AND NETWORKS

Causes of the illicit trade in cultural goods

- The opening up of borders,
- The rapid development of means of transport,
- The growth of the international art market,
- The proliferation of conflicts around the world: less protected archaeological sites and museums,
- Heritage protection is not a global issue,
- Differences in legislation even within Europe, the weaknesses of certain states,
- The negligence and complicity of certain art dealers.

Characteristics of this type of trafficking

Trafficking in cultural goods involves three types of object: looted objects, stolen objects and forgeries.

It is difficult to grasp because it is based on the art market, which is quite legal.

It is important to remember that the price of a stolen or looted object rises as it travels through the market :

- A very low initial price, which speeds up trade,
- A succession of resales that blurs the trail,
- Frequent border crossings complicate procedures,
- Gradual reintegration into the legal circuit: 'laundering' of the object.

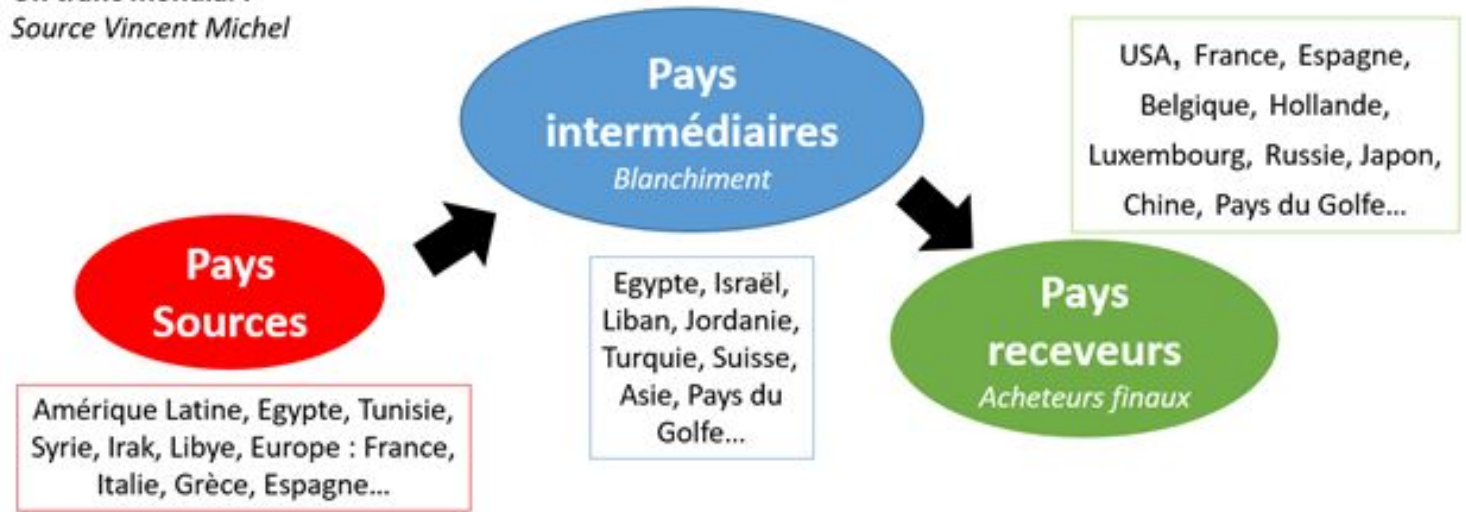
Actors and networks to sell stolen/looted works

- Metal detector dealers: their customer networks include potential buyers and they may have links with networks abroad via detector manufacturers.
- Intermediaries: fences, transporters, including diplomats (diplomatic bags are exempt from inspection), forgers who forge certificates, art dealers, etc.

Networks

- Source countries,
- Intermediary countries which deal with money laundering,
- Receiving countries.

Un trafic mondial :
Source Vincent Michel



Black market, grey market and insertion on the legal market (see next slide)

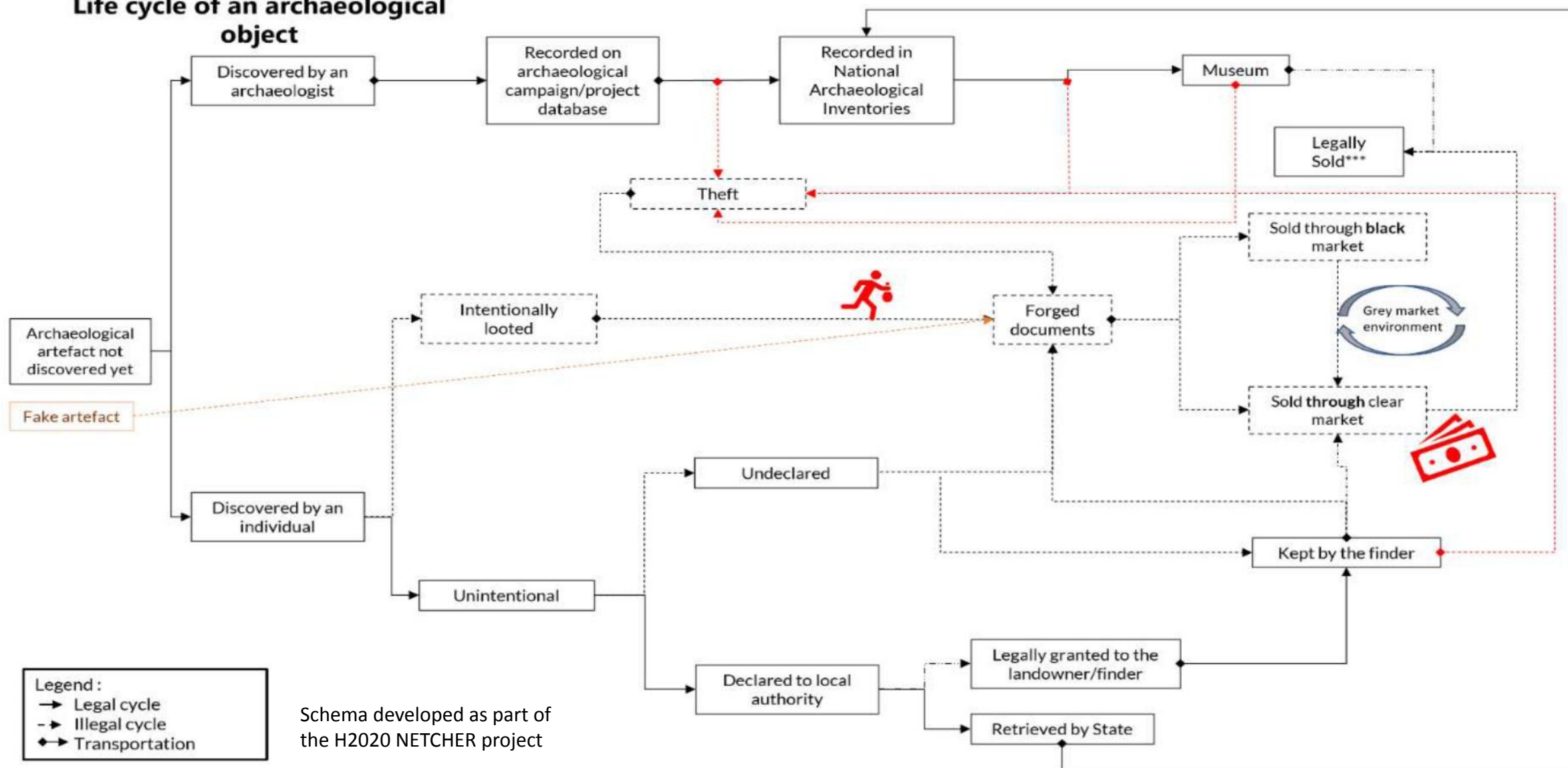
- Internet sales, Darkweb...
- Diverse methods of insertion on the legal market :
 - . Successive sales between insiders to blur the traceability of objects
 - . Export via front organisations and use of free ports for warehousing
 - . Production of false customs documents to conceal the country of origin
 - . Production of falsified passports or use of unscrupulous appraisers and international art dealers...

And also...

- Corruption
- Downstream intermediaries for money laundering and tax fraud ...

Money laundering refers to the process of reintroducing into the legal economy the proceeds of criminal offences (which include, among others, the activities of organised crime, misuse of corporate assets and tax evasion).

Life cycle of an archaeological object



BUYERS

Major role because without demand, there is no traffic!

- Museums ← legal market
motivations: to complete the permanent collections, to present prestigious collection for a new museum...
- Collectors ← legal or illegal market
motivations: personal possession of a property but above all a financial investment which can remain in a safe before being resold with a strong added value
- All of us ← legal, gray or black market (Internet, collectors' exchange, tourist purchases, etc.)
motivations: personal possession of property, bringing back an original vacation souvenir, etc.



End trafficking, save culture, UNESCO, 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-WDjZvvyD4&list=PLWuYED1WVJIMqKqp25VGkiZ2D1JNAgnt&index=4>



The trail of stolen cultural objects - stop trafficking and save culture, UNESCO, 2019,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JymIQP5IWQQ&list=PLWuYED1WVJIMqKqp25VGkiZ2D1JNAgnt&index=3>



FOUILLER / PILLER, Ce n'est pas la même Histoire I, musée d'Archéologie nationale, l'Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives (Inrap) et Service du Patrimoine du ministère de la Culture, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=IsIEICUWBMl>

VICTIMS = ALL OF US

Through:

Loss of knowledge about our past

- Loss of information for looted objects separated from their archaeological context
- Destruction of archaeological sites and sometimes of the objects themselves.

The threat to our security

Because this trafficking finances organized crime and terrorism (10 to 20 billion euros): we speak of “blood antiquities”

The alteration of the development potential of many countries

- Deterioration of tourist resources (sites and museum collections)
 - Cultural impoverishment
- = impact on the memory and identity of the communities concerned
→ weakness of identification and negative impact on self-esteem.



© Guillaume Rovet, in <https://hal.science/hal-01901939v1>



The trail of stolen cultural objects - stop trafficking and save culture, UNESCO, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JymJQPSIWQQ&list=PLWuYED1WVJIMaKq25VGkiZ2D1UNAgnt&index=3>



Heritage is identity, don't steal it – Africa, UNESCO, 2015
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtcltnMG138&list=PLWuYED1WVJIMaKq25VGkiZ2D1UNAgnt&index=5>

PROTECTION OF CULTURAL GOODS AND FIGHT AGAINST LOOTING AND ILLICIT TRAFFICKING

Protection of archaeological works and sites

- museums: anti-intrusion devices, importance of the inventory to certify ownership of the object if it is found
- archaeological sites under excavation: guarding, but expensive

Regulation

- International: 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.
- National: use of metal detectors and ownership of archaeological finds.

The legislation authorising or not such a practice varies from country to country. In several Swiss cantons and in the countries of northern Europe, legislation on detectorism is fairly flexible. Countries such as Spain, France, Turkey and Italy, on the other hand, are more repressive and tend to tighten up their legislation. The latter consider that these practices, outside of any authorised scientific operation and outside of any institutional control, are a form of looting that illicitly feeds the art market.

Law enforcement, by

- Specialised police services at national level (OCBC in France) and international level (INTERPOL)
- Customs service to control borders and the flow of goods.

It applies to the perpetrators of looting and theft, to intermediaries, increasingly - to buyers whose good faith may be in doubt.



Tools

- ICOM's International Standard for the Description of Cultural Objects and Red Lists, which list, by major geographical area, the cultural objects most likely to be looted and stolen. Designed for police and customs officials, heritage professionals and art and antiques dealers, these tools aim to facilitate the identification of looted and stolen objects that they may have to deal with during inspections or potential purchases.



- The police register (France and Italy) is a tool for tracing sales of cultural goods. Compulsory for professional sellers (non-compliance with this obligation is an offence in France punishable by 6 months' imprisonment and a €30,000 fine), it contains the various items of information needed to keep track of objects and their successive owners.

Police register - Research laboratory of the National Police School (France)

- Databases of stolen cultural objects

There are several international, European and national databases. Belgium with 'Artiste' - Italy with 'Leonardo' - France with 'Treima' - Spain with 'Dulcinea'. The best-known database is the INTERPOL PSYCHE database. It is the most important tool available at international level for combating the illicit trafficking of cultural goods. It contains more than 51,000 objects from 134 countries and enables law enforcement agencies in any member country to share information on cultural objects stolen around the world. It is open to the public and available on a mobile phone application: ID-Art.

The screenshot displays the TREIMA 2.0 web application interface within a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window. The page is titled 'TREIMA 2.0 - Microsoft Internet Explorer' and shows details for a specific object, identified by the number 31640. The interface is organized into several sections: 'Objet' (Object) at the top, 'Spécificités' (Specificities) in the middle, and 'Généralités' (Generalities) at the bottom. The 'Objet' section includes fields for 'N° Objet*' (31640), 'N° Affaire' (10339), 'Nb images' (1), 'Hauteur' (37), 'Type*' (PENDULE, HORLOGE), and 'Caractéristiques'. The 'Spécificités' section contains fields for 'Nb de rangées de chiffres' (2), 'Type de chiffres' (CHIFFRES ARABES, CHIFFRES ROMAINS), 'Nb de cadrans' (1), 'Absence de pied' (checkbox), and 'Forme du cadran principal'. The 'Généralités' section features a small image of the object, a list of 'Couleurs' (BLANC, COULEUR CLAIRE - JAUNE, FRANC), 'Matières' (CERAMIQUE, METAL JAUNE), and 'Eléments descriptifs' (2 PERSONNAGES, 4 PERSONNAGES, FEMME, ANGE, ANGELOT, PUTTO, ACCOUE, APPUYE, ADOSSÉ, ASSIS, ACCROUPELI, LISANT, GLOBE TERRESTRE, INSTRUMENTATION, MESURE, MATERIEL D'OPTIQUE). The page also includes a 'Mot clefs, Commentaires' field with the text 'LA LECON D'ASTRONOMIE EPOQUE DIRECTOIRE'. The bottom of the page shows a 'Terminé' status and an 'Intranet local' link.

- Monitoring the web (online sales sites, forums for metal detector users, etc.) and analysing satellite images are the rare tools that make it possible to identify looted objects and archaeological sites. Supplemented by eyewitness accounts, this evidence makes it possible to establish the link between archaeological sites, armed groups and art dealers and prove that the money is going back into these countries.

OBSTACLES

An ambiguous and even harmful cultural heritage and popular culture:

- Promoting the figure of the “treasure hunter” (Indiana Jones, Lara Croft...)
- Museum practice of using the term “treasure” to designate monetary and precious metal deposits
- The fact that heritage belongs to everyone can lead us to believe that it belongs to everyone
- The sacredness of the right to property



Theft, looting and trafficking = low-risk and highly lucrative activity

Disparity in regulation and enforcement capacity depending on the country

Ex. Nicosi convention in 2017 which aims to establish transnational cooperation to curb the trafficking of “blood antiquities” has only been ratified by 6 countries: Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia and Mexico → criminals take advantage of these gaps and the difficulty in gathering evidence, particularly for looting

Political instability: conflict zone, unstable states...

Authors

Agathe LE RICHE-MAUGIS, Bibracte

with the contribution of Corinne CHARTRELLE and Marine CHANTEPERDRIX, ENSP

Version

English Version, September 2024

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