

**"BABEȘ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SECURITY STUDIES**

**Antiquities, Silent Victims of Trafficking and Illicit Trade – A Source of
Terrorist Financing. Global Sanctions as a Disruptive and Preventive
Instrument**

Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

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Keywords: illicit trafficking, cultural terrorism, destruction of cultural heritage, trade in cultural artifacts, international legal framework, emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, blockchain, heritage education, role of cultural institutions.

This thesis aims at analyzing the causal relationship between the illicit trafficking of cultural artifacts and the financing of terrorism, while also highlighting the profound impact of this phenomenon on cultural identity and international security in the contemporary world.

The central hypothesis stated in this research asserts, in an original manner, that the illicit trade with cultural artifacts is a significant source of terrorist funding, and that the current international legal framework - marked by the lack of effective coercive mechanisms and insufficient cross-border cooperation - proves to be inadequate in combating this cultural scourge.

To achieve its objectives, the study focuses on:

- The analysis of certain relevant case studies regarding the destruction and trafficking of antiquities from Syria and Iraq, used by the Islamic State as a source of funding;
- The investigation of the actors and mechanisms through which cultural artifacts are extracted and placed on illicit markets;
- The evaluation of the international legal framework, particularly of the post-2015 adopted measures;
- The assessment of the role of emerging technologies and heritage education as complementary tools in preventing this phenomenon.

The research methodology applied in this study is complex and interdisciplinary as it combines qualitative methods, legal content analysis, and case study approaches. The methodological objective was to construct a coherent analytical framework for investigating illicit trade and trafficking with antiquities as a means of terrorist financing. This process was materialized by correlating legal, ideological, technological, and educational perspectives.

The research used a complex methodological approach, integrating:

- Documentary analysis of primary sources that are relevant to the regulation of antiquities trafficking;
- Relational and systematic analysis applied to the interaction among the actors involved in the trafficking process;

- Thematic analysis of the applicability of emerging technologies (blockchain, artificial intelligence, 3D scanning) to cultural heritage protection;
- Critical analysis of educational initiatives and heritage awareness campaigns;
- Discourse analysis of the ideological narratives used by the Islamic State to justify heritage destruction;
- Historical-descriptive case studies on major episodes of cultural destruction and illicit trafficking;
- Correlation of primary sources with scientific sources from international specialized literature.

Chapter I highlights the importance and vulnerability of cultural heritage confronted with contemporary threats, particularly with the destruction, looting, and trafficking of artifacts conducted by the Islamic State as a means of financial gain. The study emphasizes that, while such practices have historical roots, they now take on a dual function - both financial and ideological, being instrumentalized by organizations like this terrorist group.

In the light of the instability caused by the Arabic Spring, especially in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State launched a systematic campaign to destroy and loot cultural heritage. The three case studies - concerning the looting of the Mosul Museum, the destruction of the Palmyra and Nimrud archaeological sites - show that these actions were recorded and disseminated online for propaganda purposes, cloaked in religious rhetoric.

Six other case studies - on the statue of King Entemena, a Roman mosaic from Syria, a golden ring with a carved gemstone, a golden necklace with coin and assorted brooch, Lost Treasure Operation, and artifacts confiscated from Hobby Lobby - demonstrate the financial motivation behind these actions. The Islamic State was directly or indirectly involved in the trafficking of these cultural artifacts, which were illegally obtained, accompanied by falsified documentation, and attempts to introduce them into legitimate international markets.

The research shows that while the group publicly destroyed the symbols of non-Islamic civilizations, it simultaneously looted and trafficked cultural assets for financial profit. Thus, cultural heritage was transformed into both a strategic propaganda tool and a source of terrorist funding.

Chapter II analyzes the actors involved in the illicit antiquities trade from the Middle East and the distribution mechanisms by which these artifacts reach international markets. As the Islamic

State expanded its territory in Syria and Iraq, it coordinated systematic excavation and looting operations at archaeological sites. These activities were carried out not only by militants but also with the involvement of locals, archaeologists, and even factions of the Syrian army.

From extraction to international market integration, the artifacts go through several stages, often accompanied by falsified provenance documents to create a veneer of legality. The trafficking networks include intermediaries, smugglers, dealers, auction houses, and even museums, all of which may contribute to concealing the illicit origins of the items.

The study identifies two main distribution types: traditional mechanisms (similar to arms or drug trafficking) and cyber mechanisms, which exploit the online environment for anonymous and difficult-to-monitor sales. The continuous demand on the international art market sustains the illicit supply. Ideological justifications of the Islamic State are often used to mask the financial motivations and money laundering operations of terrorist groups. Consequently, illicit antiquities trafficking poses not only a serious threat to universal heritage but also serves as a viable method of terrorist financing, facilitated by transnational criminal networks, legislative gaps, and extensive use of advanced technology.

Chapter III offers an integrated analysis of the legal, technological, and educational dimensions involved in preventing and countering the trafficking of cultural artifacts as a source of terrorism financing. In response to the destruction caused by the Islamic State, the international community adopted between 2015–2022 a series of legal instruments, including UN Security Council resolutions and EU regulations, which explicitly recognize the link between cultural crimes and terrorism financing.

The research also emphasizes the potential of emerging technologies - blockchain, AI, and 3D scanning - to support artifact traceability and authentication, though their effectiveness depends on system interoperability, standardized protocols, and international cooperation.

The educational component is also crucial, particularly in cultivating a culture of responsibility toward heritage protection. Heritage education and institutional training, alongside with initiatives from cultural institutions, play an active role in preventing trafficking and in safeguarding endangered cultural values.

In conclusion, the effective combat against the illicit trade of cultural artifacts requires an integrated and interdisciplinary approach. Legislation, technology, and education must operate synergistically: legislation without awareness becomes ineffective, technology without regulation

is vulnerable, and education without institutional support remains limited. Only a coherent strategy, backed by international and interinstitutional cooperation, can ensure the genuine protection of cultural heritage and prevent its exploitation for criminal and terrorist purposes.

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