

Looted in Syria – and sold in London: the British antiques shops dealing in artefacts smuggled by Isis

When Mark Altaweel agreed to hunt for ‘blood antiquities’ in London dealerships, he was expecting more of a challenge. But as the archaeologist discovered, relics from the ruins of Palmyra and Nimrud are now on display in British shops – and so far no-one has worked out how to stop it

Mark Altaweel is surprised at how easy it is. A few hours into a hunt around London, [the near-east specialist](#) from the UCL Institute of Archaeology has uncovered objects that, he says, are “very likely to be coming from conflict regions” in Iraq and Syria. The items – pieces of early glass; a tiny statue; some fragments of bone inlay – range from the second to fourth centuries BC. Altaweel says they are so distinctive that they could only have come from a particular part of the region: the part now controlled by the so-called Islamic State. That we were able to find such items openly sold in London “tells you the scale – we’re just seeing the tail end of it,” he says.

This week, Unesco has added its voice to a chorus of concern, warning that looting in Iraq and Syria is taking place [on an “industrial” scale](#) – one more sorry aspect to the devastating conflicts in the region. This Mesopotamian area, the cradle of civilisation, is a giant archaeological site – it’s where the first cities were built, and contains treasures from the Roman, Greek, Byzantine and Islamic periods. Today, the pillaging of cultural heritage sites shows up on satellite maps that are pock-marked with hundreds of recent, illegal excavations. Some media reports suggest this income stream is the “second-largest source of revenue” for the group (after oil sales), but in reality it’s impossible to tell. What’s certain is that, while Isis grimly documents [its destruction of Unesco sites such as Nimrud](#), profiteering from plundered antiquities has helped make it the most cash-rich terror group in the world.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/antiquities-looted-by-isis-end-up-in-london-shops>