PLUNDERED HERITAGE:
The Antiquities Trade on Social Media

Alliance to Counter Crime Online

"If it's illegal IRL, it should be illegal to host it online."

THE PROBLEM
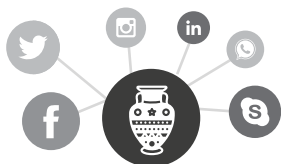
Social media has facilitated the explosive growth of the illegal antiquities trade. A global web of traders, traffickers, and even terrorists use platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp to buy and sell looted antiquities.

200

ACCO member the ATHAR Project is tracking more than 120 groups on Facebook with a combined membership of more than two million members where plundered artifacts are marketed and traded.

The booming trade in illegal art and antiquities has emboldened looters in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflicted places including Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen.

Traffickers in Facebook groups include individuals affiliated with terror groups, suggesting that these illicit sales may be financing terrorism.

THE SPECIFICS

Social media has provided antiquities traffickers with the means to communicate anonymously, demand better prices, bid on items and transact payments globally.

Traffickers offer looted artifacts including mosaics, mummies, architectural elements, and religious relics. Coins and other small items make up the bulk of the trade.

People who loot and sell antiquities in or near conflict zones are often subsistence looters who traffic out of necessity rather than criminal intent.
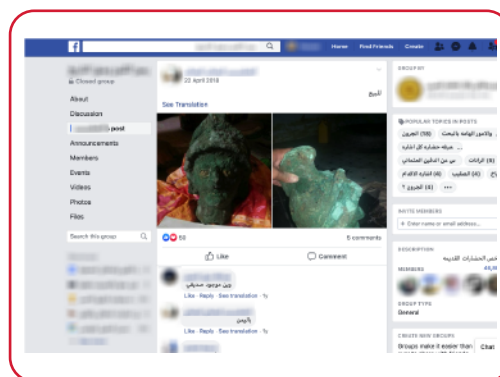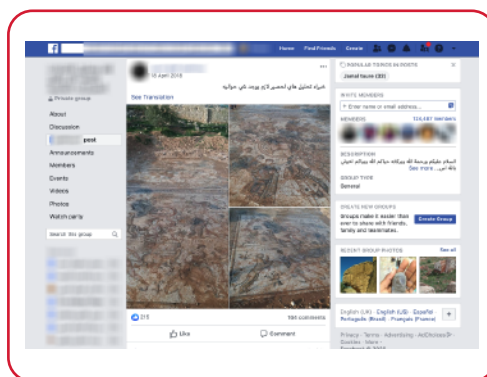
Some items offered for sale are still *in situ*, meaning they are offered to buyers before they are stolen from their original place or setting. There are even "loot to order" groups.

ATHAR says the coronavirus pandemic has made archaeological sites increasingly vulnerable to looting as authorities' resources and attention are diverted elsewhere.

Examples of sale postings from or near conflict zones include photos of artifacts resting on weapons in Yemen, a stolen church bell from Zintan, Lybia, and tombstones in Tunisia.

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HOW IT WORKS

In the case of Facebook, a "Groups" feature allows users to create and control a contained network of individuals with "shared interests" such as trading and trafficking in antiquities.

In some cases the admins of groups for trafficking antiquities request a commission from sales in these groups. This is similar to the "khums tax" practice that was used by ISIS when it industrialized the illicit antiquities trade.

Facebook groups also provide a venue to crowdsource knowledge about how to illegally excavate material.

The transport of stolen antiquities occurs by land, air, and sea. Illicit artifacts can often be easily laundered into the legal market, obscuring their origin.

KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

A year-long investigation by the Antiquities Trafficking and Heritage Anthropology Research Project (ATHAR) identified mulitiple Facebook groups and pages devoted to the illicit trade in antiquities from the Middle East and North Africa.
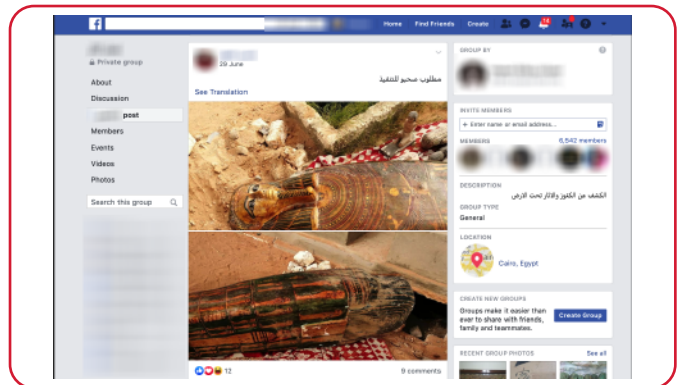
488
Their research identified 488 administrators ("admins") who oversee 95 Facebook groups that form an interconnected global network comprising two million members.

80% **WAR ZONE**
The study found that an astonishing 80 percent of the posts offering artifacts came from conflict zones or countries bordering them.

Many of the items offered resemble those on the Red Lists for the Middle East and North African countries that have been compiled by the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

CURRENT LAW

Outdated laws and weak internal policing mechanisms ensure that tech firms can profit off the trade in illegally trafficked antiquities and face scant liability.

Many tech platforms, including eBay and Etsy ban the trade in cultural property, and in June 2020, after pressure from the ATHAR Project and the UN, Facebook finally banned the trade of antiquities on its family of platforms.

Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act (CDA230) grants liability immunity to any provider of "interactive computer service" for user-generated content. This means that social media platforms can host illegal activity with complete immunity, even when they know it's there.

PROPOSED LEGAL REFORM

It's time for Congress to reform CDA230 and explicitly strip out immunities for illicit content, including the trade in plundered antiquities.

By reforming CDA230, lawmakers could shift the responsibility for monitoring Internet platforms for illicit activity to tech firms, and regulate firms to hand over evidence of illegal activity to law enforcement. If this reform doesn't occur, current campaigns to improve user privacy could have the unintended consequence of making the Internet a safer place for criminals.

ACCO'S MISSION

The Alliance to Counter Crime Online is a team of security experts, academics, NGO leaders, and citizen investigators who have come together to push organized crime and terror activity off Internet platforms.