

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND CRIMINOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING THE ANTIQUITIES TRADE: A COMPARISON OF THE ILLICIT ANTIQUITIES RESEARCH CENTRE AND THE TRAFFICKING CULTURE PROJECT

Aproximaciones arqueológica y criminológica al estudio del comercio de antigüedades:  
una comparación del Illicit Antiquities Research Centre y el Trafficking Culture Project

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**ABSTRACT** The international trade in illegally-acquired antiquities continues to cause damage to cultural heritage worldwide. This paper reflects upon the author's experience working in two university-based projects in the United Kingdom that have tried to engage with the problem. The Illicit Antiquities Research Centre (1996-2007) approached the problem from within an archaeology department. In contrast, the Trafficking Culture project (2014-2016) exists within a criminology department. The paper considers the comparative strengths and weaknesses of these different disciplinary contexts and perspectives. It also discusses some of the difficulties posed by a university environment for scholars wishing to study the antiquities trade.

**Key words:** Antiquities Illicit Trade, Archaeology, Criminology, Illicit Antiquities Research Centre (IARC), The Trafficking Culture Project.

**SUMARIO** El comercio internacional de antigüedades ilegalmente adquiridas continúa causando un daño al patrimonio cultural en todo el mundo. Este trabajo refleja las experiencias de trabajo del autor en dos proyectos universitarios en el Reino Unido que han intentado abordar el problema. The Illicit Antiquities Research Centre (1996-2007) se acercó al problema desde el interior de un departamento de arqueología. Por el contrario, el proyecto Trafficking Culture (2014- hasta el presente) existe dentro de un departamento de criminología. El trabajo considera comparativamente las fortalezas y debilidades de estos contextos y perspectivas disciplinares. También trata algunas de las dificultades planteadas por un entorno universitario para investigadores que deseen estudiar el comercio de antigüedades.

**Palabras clave:** Tráfico ilícito, Arqueología, Criminología, Illicit Antiquities Research Centre (IARC), The Trafficking Culture Project.

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## INTRODUCTION

The other papers in this special issue offer sometimes graphic testimony of the harm caused to cultural heritage by the illicit trade in antiquities and other cultural objects. In this paper, I want to step back for a moment from the problems caused by the trade and look instead towards possible solutions, or at least towards how solutions might be approached. Towards that end, writing as a university-based archaeologist, I offer here some reflections on my participation in two different university-based projects intended to improve our understanding of the trade and in so doing influence public policy. The Illicit Antiquities Research Centre (1996-2007) was situated within an archaeology department and the current Trafficking Culture project (2012-2016) is associated with a criminology department. I will briefly describe their aims and operation before going on to discuss their comparative strengths and weaknesses, and looking at what the future might hold.

## THE ILLICIT ANTIQUITIES RESEARCH CENTRE

In May 1996 the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge established the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre (IARC), which was subsequently launched in October 1997. The IARC was the initiative of the McDonald's then Director Colin Renfrew together with Cambridge Professor of Assyriology Nicholas Postgate. They were acting in response to concerns expressed in the mid-1990s about the alleged involvement of Sotheby's London in the trade, the public exhibition of the Ortiz collection, believed to comprise many unprovenanced antiquities, at the prestigious Royal Academy in London, and the looting of archaeological sites in Iraq in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. I was appointed research director, supported by Jenny Doole and with the association of investigative journalist and author Peter Watson, who had written extensively about the role of Sotheby's in the antiquities trade (Watson, 1997; Watson and Todeschini, 2006). The IARC's stated mission was to monitor and report upon the damage caused to cultural heritage by the international trade in illicit antiquities, to raise public awareness of the problems caused by this trade, and seek appropriate legislative and ethical solutions (for a fuller discussion of the IARC, see Brodie, in press).

Much of the IARC's early research was concerned with establishing quantitative estimates of the trade and the damage it causes, and investigating the organization of trading networks. We understood that for maximum impact the research had to be timely – responsive to current events. Thus there was little point in embarking upon a substantial research project when circumstances demanded short quantitative or qualitative and often reactive assessments of different aspects of the market. The IARC's own research was complemented by the work of PhD students (Morag Kersel, Gordon Lobay, Donna Yates and Jennifer Goddard) conducting in-depth studies of their own selected topics. Since completing her PhD at Cambridge, Morag Kersel has continued active research in the field and is presently Assistant Professor at the Anthropology Department of De Paul University in Chicago (Kersel, 2007, 2012; Kersel and Chesson, 2013). Donna Yates has joined the Trafficking Culture project. The other students have also published some or all of the results of their research (Lobay, 2009; Goddard, 2011).

Research aside, our second challenge was to decide how best to raise public and professional awareness of the problems caused by the trade. For outreach of this sort, we decided to communicate a continuous stream of information and argumentation through whatever channels were available. First and foremost were the pages of *Culture Without Context*, our in-house newsletter, where we could publish substantial papers or shorter contributions by ourselves and outside contributors (available for download at [http://traffickingculture.org/people/culture-without-context/#related\\_publications](http://traffickingculture.org/people/culture-without-context/#related_publications)). The Internet was still in its infancy when the IARC was founded in 1996, but by 1998 Jenny Doole had constructed a user-friendly website containing information about the IARC's mission and news of its projects. Other initiatives included the international conference hosted in 1999, which brought together representatives from 20 countries to share their experiences of the trade (Brodie, Doole and Renfrew, 2001); an attractive report (*Stealing History*) prepared on behalf of the Museums Association and ICOM-UK, but written and designed with a popular readership in mind (Brodie, Doole and Watson, 2000; available for download at <http://traffickingculture.org/publications/brodie-n-doole-j-and-watson-p-2000-stealing-history-the-illicit-trade-in-cultural-material-cambridge-mcdonald-institute/>); and the preparation of a portable display for use in museums. We spent a lot of time traveling around Britain giving talks at universities, museums and archaeological societies, and we were always ready to collaborate with the media by means of interviews and articles. We also worked closely with professional organizations, particularly the European Association of Archaeologists, the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the Museums Association and the Council for British Archaeology. Academic conferences were frequented —on the subjects of law, criminology and museology as well as archaeology.

In 2007 the McDonald Institute closed the IARC. The reasons for this decision have not been fully aired, but I believe they probably grew out of a broader academic opinion that holds it is not the business of universities to engage with research agenda set by outside interests (applied research). I also suspect that the research undertaken was not considered to be of the highest standard compared to mainstream archaeological research (Brodie, in press). I discuss these issues further below after first describing the work of the Trafficking Culture project.

## THE TRAFFICKING CULTURE PROJECT

The Trafficking Culture project was established in 2012 at the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research at the University of Glasgow with funding from the European Research Council. The funding is due to expire in 2016, though we are applying for further research grants that we hope will allow us to continue the project's work. Overall direction and supervision is the responsibility of criminologist Simon Mackenzie and myself, and we have benefited from the support of Suzie Thomas (2012-2014), Tess Davis (2013) and Christos Tsirogiannis (2014–). Donna Yates has joined us from Cambridge as a Leverhulme funded post-doctoral fellow. Each is an active researcher in his or her own right and has published papers in the academic literature (Thomas, 2009; 2012; 2013; Davis, 2011; Tsirogiannis, 2013a, 2013b; Yates, 2013, 2014).

As befits its funding source, Trafficking Culture is primarily a research project. Its overall aim is to produce an evidence-based overview of the illicit trade, with a particular

focus on regulation. It has qualitative and quantitative strands. Qualitative work canvasses the views of market participants about the trade and possible regulatory solutions. It includes key questions asked by any research into transnational criminal trade, concerning the material and financial parameters, the roles and motivations of those involved, and, probably more importantly, the mechanisms and routines involved in smuggling looted antiquities out of source countries. Thus the qualitative strand includes a ‘ground-to-market’ component examining the movement of antiquities out of Cambodia and their placement in major collection worldwide (Mackenzie and Davis, 2014). The quantitative strand of the project aims to assess the utility of publicly-available long-term data available in auction catalogues and museum yearbooks for describing the nature and scale of the market as a whole and complementing work being undertaken in the qualitative strand (see for example Brodie, 2014). The research undertaken by core project members is augmented by PhD students Jessica Dietzler, who had already published on the subject before commencing her PhD research (Dietzler, 2013), Meg Lambert, Annemiek Rhebergen, Emiline Smith and Christine Weirich.

Trafficking Culture also incorporates an ‘outreach’ component. First, we have established a website at [www.traffickingculture.org](http://www.traffickingculture.org), which provides general information about the project, staff members and students. It also includes an ‘encyclopedia’ of short illustrated case studies written to an academic standard and fully referenced so that readers can follow up the cases themselves. The site also offers a large number downloadable publications authored by the team and has a ‘data’ section, where we can post raw evidence of looting and details of work-in-progress. Conceptually, the website is successor *Culture Without Context*, though with content presented more appropriately for the information age. We would like to have included a section offering a synthesis and overview of current news, but our available resources do not stretch far enough. Having said that, the website is very much not intended to be a blog. Its intention is to offer evidence-based objective reporting, thus complementing and perhaps even supporting the subjectivity of the various blogs that already offer from their own perspectives vigorous coverage of the trade. We believe that while blogs have an important role to play in shaping public opinion, the strength of our website lies in its potential to be considered by the public and by policy makers alike as a reliable source of unbiased information. The website has associated social media feeds, and like the IARC we have been continually active in the media, writing op-eds for high-impact newspapers, taking part in radio and TV documentary interviews, and regularly contributing to the routine coverage of cultural heritage crime issues in the news. We are also working closely with organizations such as ICOM, and attend major international academic conferences in law, criminology and archaeology.

## DISCUSSION

At this point, I would like to reflect upon my respective experiences in the IARC and Trafficking Culture. As a first thought, it is possible to draw some obvious disciplinary and operational differences. The IARC was associated with an archaeology department and its research was conducted within a theoretical framework drawn from archaeology and more broadly anthropology. Research was concerned with establishing the nature

and scale of the market and the type of damage it causes – its ‘material and intellectual consequences’ to quote David Gill and Christopher Chippindale (1993). Trafficking Culture is associated with a criminology department and its research agenda differs accordingly. There is recognition that the illicit trade is a crime, and that its negative consequences are social as much as they are material and intellectual. Furthermore, the theoretical toolkit available to criminologists is arguably more suited to investigating the trade, so that for example more sophisticated characterizations of its ‘nature’ are possible when it is viewed the conceptual lenses of organized and white-collar crime.

A methodological plus for Trafficking Culture is that criminology researchers are accustomed to working with difficult research subjects (criminals) and are familiar with the obstacles posed to research by the evasion, non-cooperation and outright obstruction of parties profiting either materially or monetarily from the trade. As I suggested above, I believe these impediments were never properly appreciated by archaeologists judging the ‘quality’ of IARC research, comparing it unfavourably to the data-rich norms of conventional archaeological scholarship and judging it to be ‘soft’ research within a referential frame drawn from the increasingly ‘scientific’ practice of academic archaeology. It was even suggested to me that research into the antiquities trade should not be conducted within an archaeology department. But although archaeological methodologies are not well-suited to the task at hand, within criminology they are routine, and research quality is judged accordingly.

Both the IARC and Trafficking Culture have conducted what might be characterized as applied research – evidence-based research of a material problem with a view to mitigating or resolving the problem through public policy. Operationally, Trafficking Culture is less able to respond to breaking events than was the IARC. The IARC’s funding from the McDonald Institute allowed it to respond flexibly within its broadly defined mission to research and report upon the trade and to raise public awareness. Thus, for example, when the Iraq National Museum was looted in 2003, the IARC was able to react in timely fashion by conducting some basic research into the market in Iraqi antiquities and preparing background papers (Brodie, 2003; 2006). Trafficking Culture’s research is structured around a series of questions that were topical when the initial proposal was written in 2010, but arguably less relevant in 2014. Thus the geographical focus of Trafficking Culture comprises Italy, Iraq and Cambodia, all countries in the news during the 2000s. Since 2011, however, public attention has shifted to the ongoing plunder of archaeological sites in Egypt and Syria and the subsequent trade of looted antiquities from those countries. Because of its pre-existing research design, Trafficking Culture has been much less adept at supporting media coverage of the situations in Egypt and Syria through small-scale research than was the IARC in relation to Iraq in the mid-2000s. Again, however, this operational difference might suggest another reason for the IARC’s closure. Research conducted at Trafficking Culture is more academically-conventional in that it is adhering to a pre-defined set of questions, data and methodologies, and its outputs are judged accordingly. The operational loss is topicality.

What then are the possibilities in a university environment for future research and action as regards the illicit trade in antiquities? My opinion, borne out of my own experience as set out here, is that the strategy offered by Trafficking Culture is more viable than the one adopted by the IARC. The IARC was the vision and initiative of

the then McDonald Institute director Colin Renfrew, and enjoyed his continuing support until his retirement in 2004, after which time it was wound down. The IARC as it was envisioned and constituted was unable to prosper in the disciplinary environment of university-based archaeology. Trafficking Culture, on the other hand, came into existence within the discipline of criminology and for the theoretical and methodological reasons set out above functions successfully within a normal academic funding environment.

I am not a criminologist, but it has been refreshing for me to encounter and appreciate the theoretical and methodological possibilities of criminology and their utility for investigating the trade. Here at least, criminology has the advantage over archaeology. But an archaeological perspective is important too, providing as it does an appreciation of the problems caused by the trade as they apply to archaeological heritage, and sometimes too the expert knowledge of artifact typologies and archaeological cultures that allow the construction of meaningful research questions. There is, in effect, a productive synergy forged along the interface of criminological generalities and archaeological specificities. An important feature of Trafficking Culture is that although it is hosted by a criminology department, it is a genuinely interdisciplinary project benefiting from the participation of criminologists and archaeologists who talk together and who increasingly are coming to understand each other's language. The long term prognosis for Trafficking Culture is uncertain, and its continuing existence will depend upon the attraction of further research funding. Presumably, at some future point in time, potential funding sources will have been exhausted and Trafficking Culture will go the way of the IARC. But hopefully by then the students and junior research staff currently associated with Trafficking Culture will have moved on in their careers and some at least will have followed Morag Kersel in obtaining permanent faculty positions at other universities, whereupon they will be able to benefit from their experience at Trafficking Culture to start their own interdisciplinary research projects.

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