

# SOME NEW EVIDENCE DOCUMENTING THE INVOLVEMENT OF DA'ESH IN SYRIA WITH THE ILLICIT TRADE IN ANTIQUITIES

Isber Sabrine

Ristam Abdo

Neil Brodie

## ABSTRACT

We present here some new evidence documenting the involvement of Da'esh with the looting and illicit trade of antiquities in northeastern Syria. We have interviewed four people who have first-hand knowledge of its activities and acquired some images of looted objects and Da'esh administrative documents. We examine this new evidence in the context of previously reported accounts of Da'esh involvement with the antiquities trade. We also report looting at some previously unknown archaeological sites, describe extensive looting when northeastern Syria was controlled by the Free Syrian Army, and critically examine the reliability of prices reported inside Syria.

**KEYWORDS:** Syria, antiquities, Da'esh, Free Syrian Army, looting, illicit trade

The involvement of Da'esh with the illegal excavation and sale of antiquities inside Syria is well known, in outline form at least. Yet although there is clear

evidence that Da'esh was profiting from antiquities trafficking, there remain unanswered questions about the nature and extent of its involvement—questions relating to the organization and governance of excavating and marketing inside Syria and to the pricing structure of the trade and its profitability. Most of the reporting on these issues appeared between 2014 and 2017 while Da'esh was in control of large areas of Syria, and access was difficult if not impossible. The reporting was of necessity usually secondhand, often speculative, and cannot always be relied upon to provide an objective account of what the situation was “on the ground.” Now that Da'esh has been largely ejected from formerly occupied territories, the opportunity arises for more reliable data gathering to illuminate further its involvement with the illicit trade in antiquities. In this article, we make a start by publishing some new evidence collected during 2020. First, we present information derived from interviews conducted with four people inside Syria who lived and worked under Da'esh occupation and who have firsthand experience of Da'esh actions as regards the excavation and sale of antiquities. Second, two of the interviewees provided some prices and images of antiquities said to have been sold inside Syria, which we reproduce. Finally, we make public two previously unseen Da'esh documents relating to its governance of the internal antiquities market that were discovered in Raqqa in 2020. This exercise in

evidence collection continues work presented elsewhere for Tell Ajajah in Hasakah Governorate (Abdo 2021) and complements an ongoing project of damage assessment presently being conducted by the Authority of Culture in North and East Syria (ACNES) in Al Jazira Canton (ATPA 2016; Abdo and Ahmed 2017; Abdo and Qassem 2017; Abdo, Ahmed, and Qassem 2017). Figures 1 and 2 show the locations of modern towns and cities and archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

The Salafist-jihadist organization Da'esh emerged as a significant military force in 2013 when it began to subjugate territory in northeastern Syria and western Iraq. In March 2013, it seized control of Raqqa, adopting the Syrian city as its new “capital,” and in June 2014 routed the Iraqi army at Mosul before occupying a large part of western Iraq. The same month, following on from its military success, it declared the Caliphate, and by the end of 2014 Da'esh controlled large areas of Syria



FIG. 1  
Political geography of Syria, showing major towns and cities and governorates mentioned in the text. (Map by N. Brodie.)

and Iraq with power over seven or eight million adult people (Al-Tamimi 2015b; Burke 2017; CNN 2019). From 2015 onwards, concerted military action by a range of oppositional forces pushed Da'esh back and recovered lost territory, with Mosul liberated in July 2017 and Raqqa in October 2017 (Burke 2017). In northeastern Syria, ground fighting was conducted by Kurdish fighters of the Democratic Union Party (YPG), later incorporating Arab contingents as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Mogelson 2017). Since liberating Raqqa, large areas of the Syrian Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor Governorates, and a smaller part of Aleppo Governorate, all east of the River Euphrates, have

remained under SDF protection as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) (Chughtai 2021).

After declaring the Caliphate in June 2014, Da'esh established a civil administration structured around Diwans—government departments or ministries. The Diwan al-Rikaz (Ministry of Natural Resources and Minerals) included an antiquities division, which regulated the antiquities market in Da'esh-controlled territories. On May 16, 2015, US Special Forces raided the Syrian compound of Abu al-Sayyaf al-Iraqi, the then head of the Diwan al-Rikaz, in Deir ez-Zor Governorate. They recovered documentary evidence of Da'esh's

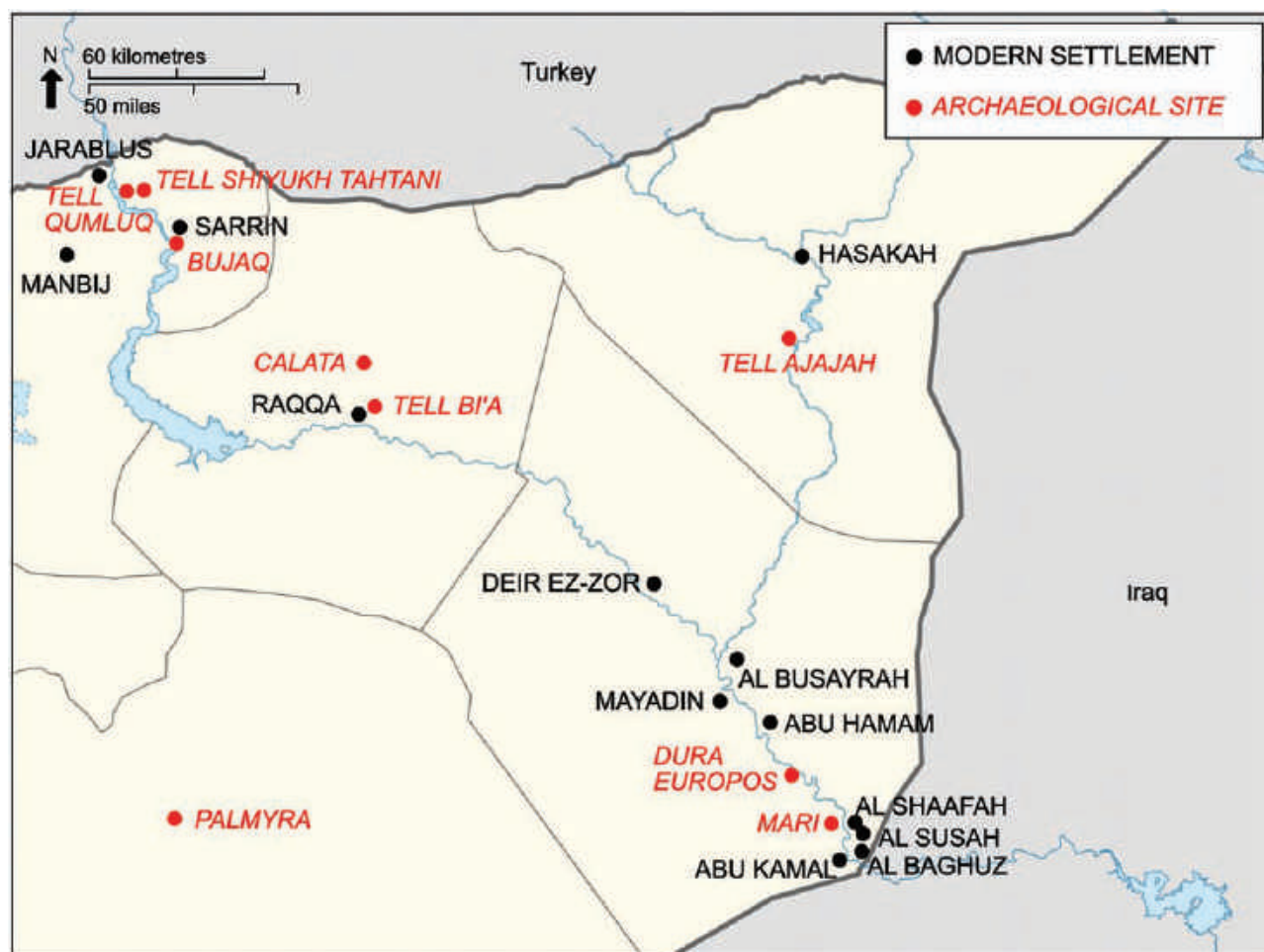


FIG. 2

Northeastern Syria, showing modern settlements and archaeological sites mentioned in the text. (Map by N. Brodie.)

antiquities operation, together with a large quantity of illegally obtained antiquities and images of antiquities on al-Sayyaf's computer hard drive and cell phone.<sup>1</sup> The al-Rikaz documents seized during this raid, alongside reporting from inside Syria (Al-Azm, al-Kuntar, and Daniels 2014; Al-Azm 2015), established in broad outline how Da'esh had organized an antiquities market in occupied areas of Syria. Dating back to late 2014, the documents revealed how Da'esh was encouraging and regulating the excavation and sale of antiquities through a permit system. Any excavation was prohibited without a permit issued by the antiquities division of the Diwan al-Rikaz and a 20-percent tax was payable on the proceeds of any antiquities sales in areas under Da'esh control. The new evidence we are presenting here confirms the fundamental accuracy of this account and supplements it with more fine-grained information about prices and objects on the market.

Where possible, we have identified any sites we mention with the appropriate EAMENA (Endangered Archaeology of the Middle East and North Africa) numbers to allow them to be easily located on the EAMENA database.<sup>2</sup>

### Looting in Eastern Aleppo Governorate

Our first interviewee (P8) works for a foreign mission active in eastern Aleppo Governorate. He reported generally upon the looting of some archaeological sites in the Ayn al-Arab district during the conflict. While the area was under the control of first the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and subsequently Da'esh, evidence of clandestine digging appeared at the site of Tell Qumluq, located 10 km south of Jarablus on the east bank of the Euphrates (Aleppo Governorate; EAMENA-0119529) (Abdo and Ahmed 2017: 3–4). The eastern part of the site is now submerged because of river damming and the tell survives as an island. Digging was concentrated on the eastern side of the tell. On the river's edge, a mosaic incorporating animal scenes was discovered. It was sold to an antiquities dealer and smuggled out to Turkey. Some Roman-period tombs were also emptied of their

glass vessels (one with the image of a snake on its neck), oil lamps, and coins (Fig. 3). Sometimes human bones were left scattered on the ground surface.

The site of Tell Shiyukh Tahtani (Aleppo Governorate; EAMENA-0118853) (Abdo and Ahmed 2017: 7–8), located on the east bank of the Euphrates, has previously been excavated by an Italian mission. Toward the east of the site, when it was under FSA control, a large mosaic floor was exposed (Fig. 4). Two sections of the mosaic decorated with figurative scenes (said by P8 to comprise a woman, some soldiers, columns, and fortifications) were removed and sold to Turkish dealers (P8 believes the pieces were subsequently transported to Israel). What remained of the mosaic was later rescued through excavation and conservation by the Gezira Antiquities Directorate (Fig. 5).



FIG. 3  
A looted tomb at Tell Qumluq. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



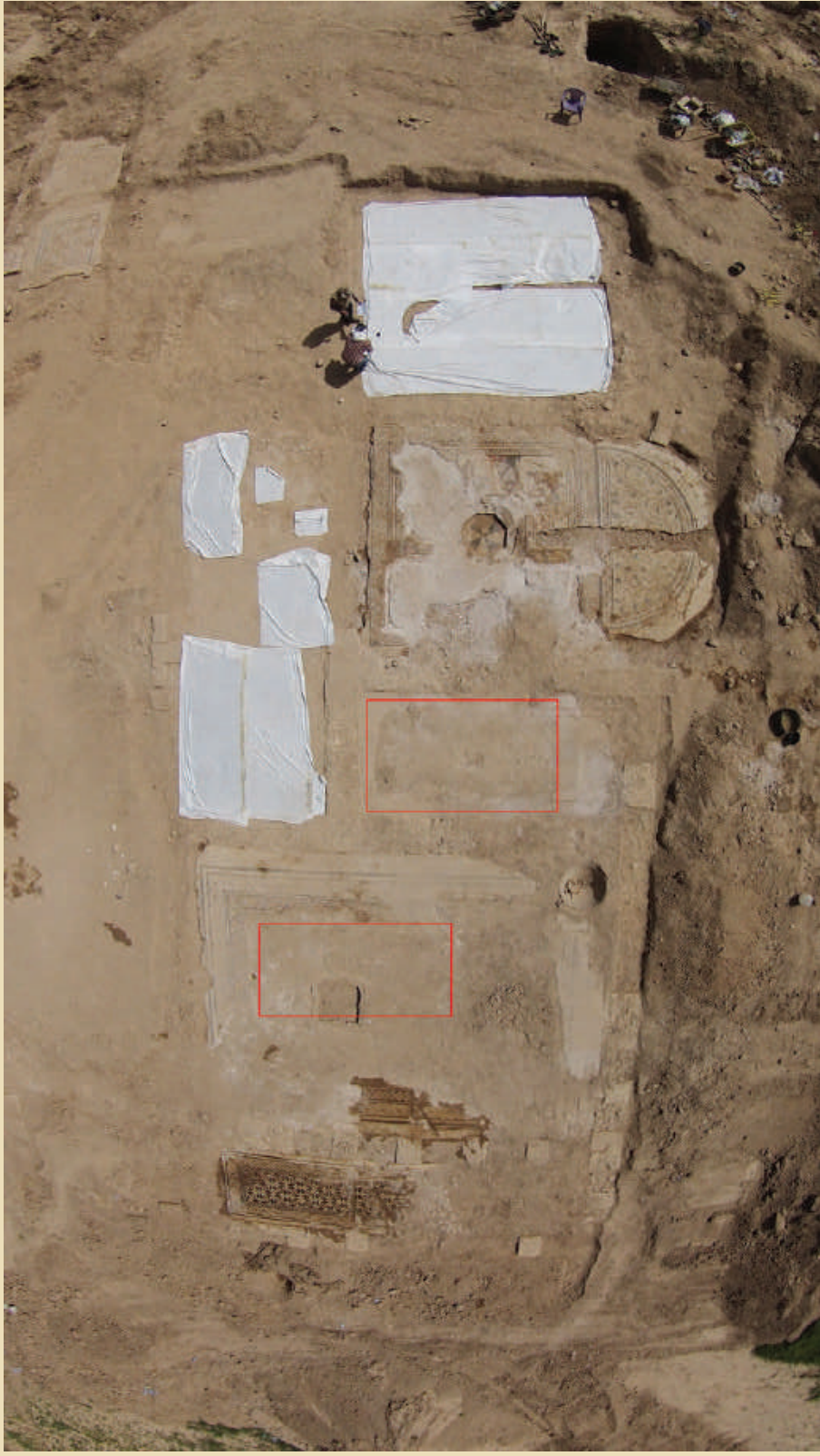


FIG. 4  
Aerial view of the mosaic at Tell Shiyukh Tahtani saved as part of a rescue campaign in 2017. The red rectangles show the locations of parts of the mosaic that had been stolen. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



FIG. 5  
Closer view of the mosaic rescued in  
2017 at Tell Shiyukh Tahtani. (Courtesy  
of R. Abdo.)



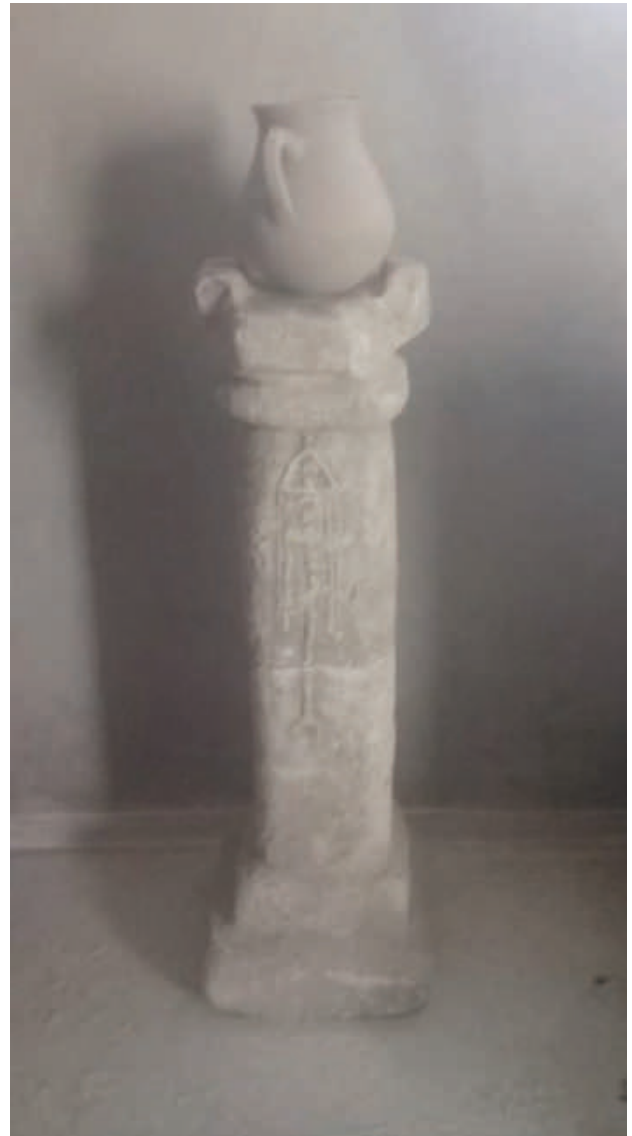
At Bujaq Citadel, located on the east bank of the Euphrates, roughly opposite Qal'at Najm (Aleppo Governorate; EAMENA-0118728), dozens of looters' pits appeared during the period of Da'esh occupation. Tomb no. 2 is known to have been looted under Da'esh (Figs. 6–8).



**FIG. 6**  
Tomb 2 at Bujaq after looting. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



**FIG. 7**  
Roman glassware looted from Bujaq. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



**FIG. 8**  
Decorated stone pedestal from Bujaq, looted and sold abroad. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)

### Looting in Deir ez-Zor Governorate

Interviewee P9 is an antiquities dealer from Deir ez-Zor city, who was resident there through periods of FSA and Da'esh rule. He reported serious looting of the archaeological sites of Mari (Tell Hariri; EAMENA-0117594) and Dura Europos (EAMENA-0118404) in Deir ez-Zor Governorate and at the towns of al-Susah (a group of Bronze Age cemeteries), al-Shaafah, al-Baghuz, and Abu Hamam. Mari, Dura Europos, and the site of Tell Ajajah

(Hassakh Governorate; EAMENA-0156317) were subject to clandestine excavations for three years while the area was under FSA control and a further year under Da'esh. Large work gangs were active at Dura Europos throughout, with people traveling to work there from other parts of Syria such as Idlib Governorate (Brodie and Sabrine 2018: 77–78). While it was in FSA hands, Dura Europos became an open marketplace. Diggers would sell their finds on site to dealers from Raqqa, Hama, and Idlib. Some at least were acting as proxies for dealers abroad. P9 knows of one dealer active at Dura Europos who was acquiring material on behalf of a dealer in Dubai (who has recently died). It has been reported elsewhere that hundreds of people digging at Dura Europos were employed by a “mafia” from Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon (Cockburn 2014; DGAM 2014).<sup>3</sup> Analysis of a satellite image dating to April 2014 concluded that by then 76 percent of the area inside Dura's city walls had been damaged, with approximately 3,750 looting pits outside the walls (AAAS 2014; UNITAR 2014: 73–81). This damage had already occurred before Da'esh occupied the area later in 2014 (Hardy 2015). At Mari, P9 reported that Da'esh deployed heavy machinery for two months under the direct supervision of Abu al-Laith al-Dairi, who was at the time Abu al-Sayyaf's deputy and head of the al-Rikaz antiquities division. This confirms other reports that Mari was looted sporadically between 2012 and 2014 but then more intensively while under Da'esh control until 2017 (AAAS 2014: 19–21; Butterlin and Mura 2019; DGAM 2020).

### The Da'esh Antiquities Market in Raqqa City

Two people were interviewed in Raqqa: P10 and P11. P10 is a sculptor who was resident there under both the FSA and Da'esh. Before 2011, he had been authorized to produce replica artifacts and continued to produce them during the conflict. Some at least entered the market as fakes and were sold abroad. P11 was also resident in Raqqa under Da'esh and has a longstanding interest in archaeology and antiquities.

P10 shared some of his personal experiences. Before the arrival of Da'esh, the FSA had confiscated a large

group of artifacts from his possession, including some replicas he was in the process of carving, though he was subsequently able to recover them. During that time, someone offered him an object stolen from Raqqa Museum for 150,000 SYP<sup>4</sup> (a stone figure incorporating the head of a sheep and the head of a child<sup>5</sup>), but he could not afford to buy it. After Da'esh took control of Raqqa, P10 was arrested, and most of the objects in his possession were confiscated. Abu al-Laith sentenced him to punishment for dealing with idols, some of which he had made himself and others were antiquities he had acquired locally. Fortunately, the sentence was lifted after the death of Abu al-Laith.<sup>6</sup> Through intermediaries, P10 then started buying and collecting antiquities produced by the widespread excavations encouraged and authorized by Da'esh. After the defeat of Da'esh and the liberation of Raqqa by the SDF, P10 surrendered a large collection of antiquities to the internal security forces of the AANES.<sup>7</sup> Some at least had been stolen from excavation storage facilities.

P10 and P11 provided mutually corroborating accounts of the activities of Da'esh in Raqqa. After Da'esh seized control of most of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor Governorates, it immediately arrested many of the antiquities dealers (and some site guards), confiscating all antiquities in their possession, before inviting them to work under Da'esh supervision. It then opened al-Rikaz antiquities offices in the cities of Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Mayadin, and Abu Kamal (Deir ez-Zor Governorate).<sup>8</sup> The first head of the Diwan al-Rikaz, including its antiquities division, was Abu Sumaya al-Tunisi, who was succeeded by Abu al-Sayyaf al-Iraqi. The al-Rikaz antiquities division was managed successively by Abu al-Laith al-Dairi, Abu al-Wafa al-Tunisi, and finally Abu Mujahid al-Tunisi. The al-Rikaz office in Raqqa was initially located on Tal Abyad Street near the Wadi Junction, then moved to the al-Naim Roundabout, and finally to the al-Ajili neighborhood. The office was staffed by people knowledgeable about archaeology, who were paid salaries of around 300 USD per month. The office also employed observers to supervise licensed excavations. Office personnel were forbidden to engage for their personal benefit in activities relating to the excavation or trading of antiquities.



One of the first actions of the Raqqa al-Rikaz office was to issue an administrative circular calling on people in possession of antiquities to surrender them in exchange for 80 percent of their appraised value, with Da'esh withholding 20 percent as "tax." The office also granted permits for excavation. A permit was provided free of charge once the applicant had undergone a test examination and identified the site to be excavated. Each permit recorded the name of the holder and was valid for a period of 15 days, open to extension. Anyone obtaining a permit was entitled to assemble a team for fieldwork and to use heavy machinery for digging.<sup>9</sup> The permit required that all excavated artifacts should be delivered to the al-Rikaz antiquities office for valuation and sale. Some appraisals at least were conducted by a foreign "expert" employed by Da'esh. The permit holder would receive an agreed percentage of the estimated value along with a receipt. If a permit holder was caught not declaring the correct number of excavated antiquities and concealing some of them from Da'esh inspection, they could be confiscated without recompense. Sometimes the al-Rikaz office would leave the antiquities with their excavators in exchange for a payment of 20 percent tax. If the excavators could not afford to pay the tax up front, the antiquities could be deposited at the office, until such time as they could be sold, with 80 percent of the sale price returned to the excavator. Transactions were recorded by written documentation. Da'esh was particularly interested in buying valuable antiquities. Al-Rikaz offices bought and sold antiquities exclusively for US dollars, paid in cash.

Statues were often destroyed because they were considered to be idolatrous, though the official Da'esh policy toward "idols" appears to have been ambiguous. Dealers were forbidden from transacting statues (sculpture in the round), and Da'esh would confiscate statues of different sizes from dealers and destroy them while the dealers looked on. Dealers wanting to trade statues would need to conceal them and arrange for them to be "smuggled" out of Da'esh-controlled territory. Any dealer caught in possession of a statue on more than one occasion would be sentenced to flogging. Relief sculpture was not subject to this ordinance and could be sold through the al-Rikaz. According to P11, however, Da'esh

itself would trade in anything valuable, even statues or figurines.

It has previously been reported that in order to maximize its tax revenue, Da'esh tried to ensure that sales of looted material would be conducted within its jurisdiction (Al-Tamimi 2015a). "Smuggling" antiquities out of Da'esh territory without paying tax was forbidden, and any discovered antiquities would be confiscated. To enable this internal market, Da'esh allowed ingress for non-affiliated or even foreign dealers or smugglers (Faucon, Kantchev, and MacDonald 2017; Russia Today 2016).<sup>10</sup> P10 and P11 confirm this was the case. Raqqa became an international marketplace for selling antiquities. Material would be brought there from other Da'esh-held cities in Syria such as Tadmor, Deir ez-Zor, and Hasakah, as well as from Iraqi cities such as Mosul. Often these antiquities would then be bought by brokers working for large dealers living abroad. One group of brokers was working for the same Dubai-based merchant identified by P9 as receiving material from Dura Europos, while another was representing a Turkish merchant based in Istanbul. Sold antiquities were transported abroad via several routes, with the most important passing through Turkey.

### **The Da'esh Antiquities Market in Deir ez-Zor Governorate**

P9 supplied some information about the market in Deir ez-Zor Governorate. After Da'esh took control of the governorate, it established an al-Rikaz office on Saraya Street in Mayadin city. Mayadin is south of Deir ez-Zor city and closer to the major archaeological sites of Mari and Dura Europos and thus well placed to control excavations there. As in Raqqa, Da'esh began granting licenses for archaeological excavations. Each license bore the name of the holder, who would be the person in charge of excavation, together with the names of people permitted to work with the license holder, the name of the site to be excavated, and the period of validity (half-a-month or a month, open to extension). The license might also list some conditions, such as specifying the use of pickaxes only, requiring

all recovered antiquities to be sold to the al-Rikaz office for 80 percent of their appraised value, and requiring the destruction of any figurines or statues discovered during excavation.

## Prices and Images

P11 supplied some general and specific prices for antiquities sold in Raqqa under Da'esh occupation, the majority sold by dealers or excavators. He also supplied images of some of the objects:<sup>11</sup>

- Roman gold coins sold for between 2,500 and 10,000 USD each. 100 Roman gold coins said to be from Dura Europos were sold for 100,000 USD.
- Silver coins sold for between 15 and 20 USD each.
- Copper and bronze coins were sold by the kilogram. Each kilogram would sell for 100 USD (Fig. 9).
- Pots were generally sold for between 2 and 5 USD each, with rare pieces being sold for more. Some glazed Islamic dishes said to have been excavated from locations close to al-Busayrah in Deir ez-Zor Governorate and Palmyra in Homs Governorate were sold for 100 USD or more each.
- Oil lamps sold for about 1 USD each.
- Stamps sold for between 100 and 1,000 USD.
- A piece of Assyrian stone relief excavated from Tell Ajajah and decorated with what P11 described as a wedding scene (perhaps a banquet scene) was sold for 25,000 USD and transported to Turkey.
- A stone sculpture of the head of an Assyrian king was sold for 3,500 USD.
- A group of gold vessels excavated from al-Susah was sold for 1.2 million USD.
- A group of glass vessels (about 25 in total) that had been stolen from Palmyra Museum was sold for 4,500 USD and transported to Turkey.
- About 400 cuneiform tablets from the Raqqa Museum were sold in Raqqa sporadically for about 15 to 20 USD each.<sup>12</sup>
- A “royal” cuneiform tablet with envelope was sold in the region of Tell Ajajah for 5,000 USD.
- Close on 100 bronze peg or nail foundation figurines stolen from the Raqqa Museum were sold for 25 USD each.<sup>13</sup>
- Pottery vessels stolen from the Raqqa Museum were sold in the neighborhood of Deir ez-Zor city for 25 USD each.
- An onyx bowl inlaid with ivory, precious stones, and gold said to have been dug out of Greek- or Roman-period tombs at Calata (located 35 km north of Raqqa, on the west bank of the Balikh River) was sold for 17,000 USD (Figs. 10–12).
- Precious stones and rings extracted from Tell Ajajah were sold in the neighborhood of Hasakah city for 10 USD each.
- A set of Neoassyrian bronze decorative elements (measuring 20 × 15 cm and 20 × 8 cm) said to be from Tell Ajajah, bearing gods and composite animals. Each plaque was sold for 10,000 USD. A larger one sold for 100,000 USD (Fig. 13).
- A set of Early Bronze Age shell plaques likely from a wall mural said to have been discovered by chance at the town of al-Susah sold for 36,000 USD. Before this discovery, Bronze Age remains were unknown at al-Susah.
- A mosaic measuring 100 × 60 cm and decorated with human figures said to be from a site near al-Jarniya in the vicinity of Raqqa was sold for 3,000 USD.
- Seven golden deer weighing 6 g each and said to be from Mari were sold for 100,000 USD.
- About 50 precious crystal jars and saucers decorated with drawings of fish and said to be from Dura Europos were sold for about 3,000 USD each, some for as much as 5,000 USD.
- Beads, pottery, and terracotta figurines said to be from the site of Tell Bi'a (EAMENA 0118876) in Raqqa Governorate were sold for about 10 to 15 USD each.
- An unusual inscribed stone figure said to have been discovered at Nimrud in Iraq was kept by Da'esh and offered for sale at Mosul for 600,000 USD. The high price asked was because the inscription was judged to be important, which suggests that Da'esh had access to scholars able to translate and assess the significance of cuneiform inscriptions.
- A 12 cm high hollow gold statue of a king, said to be Roman and from Dura Europos, was sold for 10,000 USD.

- Two silver figures, 12 and 25 cm high and said to be from Dura Europos, were sold, with the smaller figure selling for 700 USD.
- About 50 figures of different sizes said to be from Abu Hamam (in the vicinity of Deir ez- Zor) were sold for about 5,000 USD each, with the largest (approximately 1 m height) selling for about 25,000 USD.
- A group of bronze figurines excavated from the Tell Ajajah site were sold for between 400 to 500 USD each.
- A stone sculpture (50 cm high) said to be from Tell Ajajah sold for 20,000 USD.
- A group of gold and silver bracelets, rings, utensils, and plates from Dura Europos was sold for 60,000 USD.



FIG. 9  
Roman copper coins said to be from Dura Europos. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



FIG. 10  
Calata cemetery, looted during Da'esh occupation. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



FIG. 11  
A looted tomb in Calata cemetery. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)





**FIG. 12**  
Onyx dish said to have been found at Calata. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



**FIG. 13**  
A Neoassyrian bronze decorative element said to be from Tell Ajajah. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)

P11 also supplied images of objects said to be from Mari and Dura Europos,<sup>14</sup> some of which we reproduce here. The objects said to be from Mari are particularly impressive (Figs. 14–18). P9 reported some prices for antiquities from Mari and Dura Europos sold in Deir ez-Zor Governorate during the periods of FSA and Da'esh control.

Mari:

- Large clusters of beads sold for between 500 and 10,000 USD each.
- Cylinder seals sold for between 200 and 1,000 USD each.
- Shell figurines ranging in size from 3 to 10 cm sold for 300 USD each.
- Small stone figurines ranging in size from 8 to 15 cm sold for between 2,000 and 10,000 USD each.
- Cuneiform tablets sold for 100 USD each.



**FIG. 14**  
A small vessel in the form of a ram said to be from Mari. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)

Dura Europos:

- Roman gold coins sold for between 2,000 and 3,000 USD each, while silver coins sold between 15 and 20 USD each.
  - Gold jewelry, including earrings, rings, bracelets, and necklaces, was sold for 5,000 USD per piece,
- and one entire group of jewelry was sold for 100,000 USD. Silver jewelry, including silver rings, necklaces, and utensils, was sold in groups for prices ranging between 20,000 and 100,000 USD.
- Bronze lamps sold for 200 to 1,500 USD each.



FIG. 15  
Shell plaques or inlays said to be from  
Mari. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)





FIG. 16  
A stone stele said to be from Mari. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



FIG. 17  
Gold jewelry said to be from Mari. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



FIG. 18  
A stone quadruped (possibly a lioness) bearing a cuneiform inscription said to be from Mari. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



## Documents

The Da'esh government building in Raqqa near the Naim Roundabout that housed the al-Rikaz antiquities office was badly damaged by a Coalition airstrike in October 2017 (Fig. 19). In October 2020, rescue exploration of the wreckage recovered some documentary evidence of the Da'esh antiquities operation (Fig. 20). We publish two of the documents here.<sup>15</sup>

Document 1 (Fig. 21) dated to 1438 AH and AD 2017 is a template for the test associated with permit applications. Questions examine the applicant's knowledge of Da'esh regulations and punishments for non-compliance. The first two questions relate to a ruling on the sale of idols.

Document 2 (Fig. 22) is a bill of sale dated to 6/12/1436 AH (September 9, 2015) recording the sale by Da'esh of 501 ceramic objects (123 small and large jars, 51 dishes, 4 censurs, 322 lamps, and 1 inscribed stamp) for 1,500 USD. Da'esh states that it will not bear any responsibility for sold goods and that the money paid is nonrefundable.

## Discussion

Much of the new evidence we have presented here speaks for itself and does not require further discussion. Having said that, we think there are four things worth commenting upon. First, there are accounts of objects being discovered at locations with no previously known archaeological sites, such as the Bronze Age cemeteries at al-Susah. Going forward, these sites will need to be located and mapped.

Second, the interview accounts suggest some continuity in the organization of looting and trafficking (though not governance) through FSA and Da'esh periods of control, which enlarges upon what is already known from satellite imagery (Casana and Laugier 2017: 11–15). As the testimony and personal experiences of the interviewees show, the same excavators and dealers continued to work throughout. The (now deceased) Dubai dealer was likewise doing business through local proxies under first the FSA and later Da'esh. The extent

of site looting under periods of FSA control has been poorly reported and often blamed on Da'esh (Hardy 2015). At sites such as Dura Europos, where most damage seems to have been caused during FSA rule, more careful chronologies of looting are called for. It is noticeable that our interviewees had nothing to say about the FSA profiting from the trade, but then again, we had not asked them about the FSA.<sup>16</sup> Our interview questions were focused on the activities of Da'esh, and we had not expected to hear so much about looting and trafficking under the FSA. P9 did report that antiquities found under FSA control would be sold on or close to the site to dealers waiting in attendance, which contrasts with the centralized administration introduced by Da'esh. We have previously described the importance of long-established dealers active in Idlib Governorate as part of a “criminal economy” (Brodie and Sabrine 2018), and although we do not have enough information to say much about the possible persistence of market relationships of this sort in northeastern Syria, we see no reason why they should not have existed. They are testament to the resilience of the trade and its ability to adapt to changing local circumstances and are certainly worth exploring further.

Third, there is the issue of cash payments. The interviewees state that sales transactions were conducted in US dollar banknotes, while at the same time reporting some extraordinarily high prices. P11, for example, said that a group of gold vessels from al-Susah sold for 1.2 million USD. The highest denomination US banknote is 100 USD and it weighs a gram.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it would require 10,000 100 USD bills weighing 10 kg to pay 1 million USD cash. A bag specifically designed to carry 1 million USD in 100 USD bills measures 46 × 30 × 15 cm.<sup>18</sup> It would be eminently practical for one person to carry around 1 million USD in such a medium-sized bag, but it does pose questions about the security arrangements in place to protect against theft and about just who exactly inside Syria would have access to such large sums of hard currency. The fact that large quantities of USD banknotes were being exchanged for high-value antiquities that were then moved out of the country for sale abroad also raises the specter of money laundering, though from the evidence at hand it is not obvious to us what would be



FIG. 19  
Da'esh government building in Raqqa near Naim Roundabout in October 2020. It was badly damaged by an airstrike in October 2017. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



FIG. 20  
Rescue exploration of the remains of the Da'esh government building in Raqqa near Naim Roundabout in October 2020. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)



FIG. 21  
Da'esh template for permit examination. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)

the purpose of such putative money laundering and who might profit from it. Like market persistence, the whole issue of cash payments is in need of further investigation.

We hope to revisit issues of market persistence and cash payments through future research, but here we can explore in some more detail our fourth subject of commentary, which is the reliability of the prices reported by P9 and P11. Secure knowledge of prices inside Syria is a necessary foundation for assessing the value of the antiquities trade to Da'esh, which in turn is a requirement for successful policy development. In previous publications, the prices reported for transactions inside Syria have been considered abnormally high when compared to prices achieved at sales in end-market destinations such as London and New York (Brodie and Sabrine 2018: 81). Typically, on the international market, antiquities at source sell for less than 10 percent of the price that might be achieved at destination (Brodie 1998).

FIG. 22  
Da'esh bill of sale. (Courtesy of R. Abdo.)

At first glance, some of the prices quoted here also appear to be unusually high. P11 reported, for example, that Roman gold coins sold for between 2,500 and 10,000 USD each, with those said to be from Dura Europos selling for about 1,000 USD each. P9 reported that Roman gold coins from Dura Europos sold for between 2,000 and 3,000 USD each. Thus, generally, for Roman gold coins inside Syria, the interviewees suggest prices in the range of 1,000 to 3,000 USD. It is hard to assess how these prices might be compared to those achieved on the destination market. The Sixbid auction archive,<sup>19</sup> which lists past auction results, shows that over the past ten years Roman gold aurei have sold in Europe and the United States for anything from a few hundred USD to a few hundred thousand USD each—much lower and much higher than the prices reported inside Syria, which isn't very helpful. A better price comparison can be obtained using two coins identified after the Abu Sayyaf raid from images on



the hard drive of his computer and believed to have been sold internationally.<sup>20</sup> The first coin was an aureus of the emperor Antoninus Pius, dating to AD 138–161. Auction results in the Sixbid archive show that over the past ten years aurei of Antoninus Pius have sold for prices in the range of 1,300 to 50,000 USD. There have been four sales involving three coins matching the exact type appearing in the complaint, with a low price of 1,688 USD, a high price of 3,350 USD, and an average price of 2,791 USD.<sup>21</sup> The second coin was an aureus of the emperor Hadrian, dating to AD 125–128. In the Sixbid archive, over the past ten years, Hadrianic aurei have sold for prices in the range of 1,000 to 130,000 USD. There have been 15 sales of coins matching the exact type appearing in the complaint, with a low price of 3,009 USD, a high price of 16,593 USD, and an average price of 6,007 USD.<sup>22</sup> So, on the face of it, average prices in Europe and the United States are probably higher than those being reported inside Syria. A coin bought for 1,000 USD in Syria might sell in Europe or the United States for a thousand USD more. But it is difficult to establish just how large the price differentials would be, on average or for individual coins.

Another way to assess the price of gold coins is to look at their intrinsic or bullion value. In other words, when considered only as a lump of gold, how much would a coin be worth? The bullion value would then provide a pricing floor. The Sixbid Hadrianic aurei weighed on average 7.15 g. Between 2012 and 2017, the price of gold on the international market ranged from a high of 57 USD per gram down to a low of 34 USD per gram. Therefore, the bullion value of a Hadrianic aureus would have ranged from 408 USD down to 243 USD. During the period of Da'esh control, from 2014 to 2017, gold prices were on average lower, ranging from a high of 44 USD per gram down to a low of 34 USD per gram. Therefore, under Da'esh, the bullion value of an aureus would have ranged from 315 USD down to 243 USD. These bullion values are much lower than the reported sale prices. Reporting from Idlib Governorate, Olivier Moos observed that dealers inside Syria might buy looted gold coins for their bullion value and not their projected market value (Moos 2020: 11, 29), but that seems not to have happened here. If the prices in the range of 1,000 to 3,000 USD reported by P9 and P11 are correct, they imply that gold coins were quite

literally selling for more than three times their weight in gold.

Overall, it is difficult to reconcile what appears to be the high price of gold coins in Syria when compared to the prices of similar coins in Europe and the United States or more generally to the price of gold. Yet the reporting from inside Syria is consistent. Here, the two interviewees P9 and P11 independently reported prices broadly in the range of 1,000 to 3,000 USD. In Idlib Governorate too, free from Da'esh, it has previously been claimed that Late Roman and Byzantine gold coins would sell for about 1,500 USD each (Brodie and Sabrine 2018: 81). Perhaps gold aurei bought in Syria for between 1,000 to 3,000 USD and sold in Europe or the United States for a thousand USD more might create enough of a profit margin to incentivize their trade, we do not know. Clearly, the mechanics of the coin market can only be dimly perceived by outsiders such as ourselves.

The situation for cuneiform tablets is clearer. P11 reports them selling for about 15 to 20 USD each, with an important one sold for 5,000 USD. P9 reports higher prices of approximately 100 USD each. These prices are similar to those ranging from 30 to 100 USD reported from Iraq in the early 2000s (Farchakh Bajjaly 2008: 137; Atwood 2003; Bretkopf 2006). On the end-market, during a series of online auctions in the United Kingdom during 2020, 41 cuneiform tablets sold for an average price of 3,000 USD.<sup>23</sup> Many of these tablets were unusual or of singular interest, however, so perhaps the prices were higher than might be expected for a typical administrative tablet. Nevertheless, there is an appreciable price gap between 100 USD or less in Syria and 3,000 USD in the United Kingdom, which is what would be expected on the international antiquities market. More pricing information is forthcoming from the US court document describing the 2010 US-based Hobby Lobby corporation purchase of Iraqi antiquities in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>24</sup> Hobby Lobby paid \$1.6 million USD for 5,548 antiquities, comprising 1,500 cuneiform tablets, 500 cuneiform bricks, 35 clay envelope seals, 13 extra-large cuneiform tablets, and 500 stone cylinder seals.<sup>25</sup> That works out as 288 USD per object. The Hobby Lobby advisor suggested that, once in the United States, the material might have an appraised value of 11.82 million USD,<sup>26</sup>

or 2,130 USD per object, not far off the 3,000 USD average price achieved by cuneiform tablets in the United Kingdom. In a very approximate way, this international pricing structure does make sense. Cuneiform tablets would sell for less than 100 USD inside Syria (or Iraq), a few hundred dollars more on the transit market (United Arab Emirates), and ten or more times the Syrian price in Europe or the United States. It is typical of what would be expected for the international antiquities trade more generally.

The bill of sale dated 6/12/1436 AH (see Fig. 22) offers some corroboration of the prices reported by P11. It records the sale by Da'esh of 501 ceramic objects including 123 jars and 322 lamps for 1,500 USD. That works out to be approximately 3 USD per object. P11 reported that pots sold for between 2 to 5 USD each and that ceramic lamps sold for about 1 USD each, which is in reasonable agreement with 3 USD average price of the bill of sale. Ceramic lamps typically sell in Europe or the United States for prices in excess of 50 USD, often for a few hundred USD. Again, this magnitude of price differential between source and destination is typical of the international antiquities trade and again encourages us to believe the prices reported by P11. If the prices reported by P9 and P11 for cuneiform tablets and lamps are correct, it affords more confidence in their reporting of gold coins. Their prices might be believable, or at least in the ballpark of believability. They are not totally unbelievable. But if we consider the prices supplied by P9 and P11 for lower-priced antiquities to be reliable, what about the more expensive ones selling for tens of thousands USD? We have already expressed our reservations about hard-currency transactions, and it is difficult to achieve international price comparisons for the high-priced antiquities. We cannot in all honesty offer an informed opinion on their reliability. And when considering the high-priced antiquities, it is not certain what proportion of the market they represent. Do they comprise the total or near-totality of valuable antiquities sold, reported and described singularly because of their local notoriety, or do they represent only a small sample of a much larger trade?

Even if the prices claimed for high-value antiquities are accepted as real, it should be borne in mind that they

do not equate to Da'esh profit. If Da'esh was taxing transactions honestly, it would only have profited by 20 percent of the prices reported by P9 and P11. It is, however, obvious that in many cases Da'esh was setting prices and handling transactions, suggesting it would have been able to insert itself into the trading chain as a broker, attempting to buy inside Syria for a low price and sell to foreign merchants for a higher price. Documents recovered during the Abu al-Sayyaf raid include the record of a dispute between the finders of some gold antiquities and Abu al-Laith.<sup>27</sup> Al-Laith offered 70,000 USD (87,500 USD minus 20 percent tax) for the antiquities, hoping to sell them to dealers from Turkey for 200,000 USD. The finders were aware of the price differential and were afraid they were being defrauded. But more generally, if Da'esh was buying low and selling high, its profits from the antiquities trade would have exceeded those derived from tax alone. Given that USD were used for all transactions, antiquities brokerage would also have provided foreign currency, which might in itself have been an important reason for Da'esh to have controlled the market.

Ultimately, the new evidence we have presented here documenting the very active involvement of Da'esh with the antiquities trade inside Syria raises more questions than it answers. Nevertheless, we believe our understanding of the policies and actions of Da'esh is now on a firmer footing than was previously the case, and it has allowed us to suggest some new avenues for future research.

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## Notes

1. Keller 2015; United States of America v. One Gold Ring with Carved Gemstone, an Asset of ISIL, Discovered on Electronic Media of Abu Sayyaf, President of ISIL Antiquities

Department; One Gold Coin Featuring Antoninus Pius, an Asset of ISIL, Discovered on Electronic Media of Abu Sayyaf, President of ISIL Antiquities Department; One Gold Coin Featuring Emperor Hadrian Augustus Caesar, an Asset of ISIL, Discovered on Electronic Media of Abu Sayyaf, President Of ISIL Antiquities Department; One Carved Neo-Assyrian Stone Stela, an Asset of ISIL, Discovered on Electronic Media of Abu Sayyaf, President of ISIL Antiquities Department. United States District Court for the District of Columbia (1:16-cv-02442), December 15, 2016. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/press-release/file/918536/download>.

2. <https://database.eamena.org/index.htm>.
3. See Greenland et al. 2019 for estimates of the potential market value of Dura Europos (and Tell Bi'a).
4. It is hard to establish a USD equivalent. In March 2013, on the international market 1 USD would buy 71 SYP, though international exchange rates probably had very little bearing upon what was happening inside Raqqa.
5. We subsequently learned that this object carries a Latin inscription, which translated reads "This work was presented by the merchant of Baalbak to the temple of the God Jupiter." It was originally discovered in the village of Abu Qabei 'Sharqi, 10 km west of Raqqa, and is marked with a museum number.
6. US Special Forces killed Abu al-Laith along with Abu al-Sayyaf during their May 2015 raid on al-Sayyaf's compound.
7. <https://www.facebook.com/736896926496668/videos/204503987438687/?sfnsn=wa>.
8. There was also an al-Rikaz antiquities office in Manbij in the northeast of Aleppo Governorate (Al-Azm 2015). Manbij was occupied by Da'esh from January 2014 until August 2016.
9. For example, heavy machinery was used at Surah (30 km west of Raqqa), Tell Ajajah, where evidence of illegal excavation has been documented (ATPA 2016: 23–25; Abdo 2021), and Mu'azar (50 km southwest of Hasakah).
10. In February 2016, a YPG unit seized IS documents including an official paper allowing safe passage for a Turkish dealer through Da'esh-held territory (Russia Today 2016).
11. We cannot vouch for the authenticity of any object shown on these images.
12. We have subsequently learned that about 70 of these tablets were from Tell Bi'a and 29 were from Tell Membaga, with the remainder from Tell Khuwayrah, Tell Sabi Abiad, Humam al Turkmen, and other sites. All are marked with museum numbers.
13. We have subsequently learned that these foundation nails had been confiscated from an antiquities dealer who claimed they had been found at Tell Sabi Abiad. They had all been marked with museum numbers.
14. Again, we cannot vouch for authenticity.
15. It is interesting also to mention a document recording the sale of plastic waste where the currency unit recorded is the silver dirham, part of the trimetallic coinage introduced by Da'esh in August 2015 (Oxnevad 2016). Weighing 2 grams of fine silver, at the time of its introduction the dirham had an intrinsic value of 0.9 USD (Markowitz 2015).
16. We are not implying that the FSA and Da'esh were the only armed groups inside Syria permitting an illicit trade in antiquities, merely that they were the two significant players active in the study area during the time in question.
17. <https://www.uscurrency.gov/about-us/currency-facts;https://center/faqs/Currency/Pages/denominations.aspx#:~:text=The%20present%20denominations%20of%20our,these%20denominations%20meet%20that%20goal>.

**ISBER SABRINE**, PhD 2020, University of Girona, is the co-founder and president of the organization Heritage for Peace. Since 2011, he has been an affiliated researcher of the Institución Milà y Fontanals of the Spanish National Research Council and has been involved in projects and research on the protection of cultural heritage during conflict. He has published several articles and book chapters related to the illicit trade of antiquities during conflict, and he is co-editor of the book *Kulturraub–Fallbeispiele aus Syrien, Irak, Jemen, Ägypten und Libyen*. (Heritage for Peace, Institución Milà y Fontanals de investigación en Humanidades [IMF-CSIC], Barcelona, Spain; [esper.1985@yahoo.com](mailto:esper.1985@yahoo.com))

**RISTAM ABDO** is an archaeologist specialized in cultural heritage protection. Since 2011, he has been working on the protection of cultural heritage in northeast Syria. His work focuses on the documentation of and emergency interventions at archaeological sites. He has published many papers related to heritage protection in northeast Syria. Currently, he is managing several international projects related to heritage protection in northeast Syria. (Organisation of Heritage in North Eastern Syria, Raqqa, Raqqa, Syrian Arab Republic; [ristem.ab@gmail.com](mailto:ristem.ab@gmail.com))

**NEIL BRODIE** is an archaeologist with a special research interest in the illicit trade in antiquities. He has published more than fifty papers and book chapters devoted to the subject. (Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East & North Africa, School of Archaeology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom; [njb1012redux@gmail.com](mailto:njb1012redux@gmail.com))



18. <https://sdrtraveller.com/products/1m-hauly-heist?variant=43001521806>.
  19. <https://www.sixbid-coin-archive.com/#/en>.
  20. See United States District Court for the District of Columbia (1:16-cv-02442), December 15, 2016, cited above, n. 1.
  21. NAC, May 26, 2014: 3,350 USD; Rauch, September 21, 2015: 1,688 USD; Roma, August 26, 2017: 2,821 USD; Naville, April 29, 2018: 3,303 USD.
  22. CNG, September 19, 2012: 13,000 USD; Künker, March 11, 2013: 4,158 USD; Roma, December 28, 2013: 6,604 USD; Hirsch, February 13, 2014: 3,009 USD; Roma, March 22, 2014: 6,925 USD; CNG, May 18, 2016: 4,250 USD; Rauch, November 7, 2016: 16,593 USD; Roma, March 23, 2017: 5,626 USD; NAC, May 30, 2017: 4,099 USD; Bertolami, September 19, 2017: 5,944 USD; Hirsch, September 20, 2017: 3,722 USD; Roma, September 29, 2019: 3,202 USD; Künker, March 16, 2020: 5,355 USD; NAC, May 25, 2020: 3,603 USD; CGB, June 16, 2020: 4,014 USD.
  23. Timeline Auctions: February 2020, lots 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233 and 2166; June 2020, lots 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 249, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259 and 1693; September 2020, lots 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, and 177.
  24. United States of America v. Approximately Four Hundred Fifty (450) Ancient Cuneiform Tablets; and Approximately Three Thousand (3,000) Ancient Clay Bullae, United States District Court Eastern District of New York, (CV17-3980), July 5, 2017.
  25. See above, n. 24. Here pp. 8–11.
  26. See above, n. 24. Here pp. 10–11.
  27. See United States District Court for the District of Columbia (1:16-cv-02442), December 15, 2016, cited above, n. 1. Here pp. 5–6 and attachments H-1 and H-2.
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