

Cultural Property Crime

*An Overview and Analysis of Contemporary
Perspectives and Trends*

Edited by

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Crime and Conflict: Temple Looting in Cambodia

Tess Davis and Simon Mackenzie

Introduction: Cambodia's Looting Problem

As we are seeing now with the “Arab Spring,” and have seen throughout history, cultural destruction is often a handmaiden to conflict. In the Southeast Asian nation of Cambodia, fighting erupted between government forces and the communist Khmer Rouge in 1970 and did not end until the 1998 death of Pol Pot and subsequent surrender of his remaining forces. While contemporary accounts and photographs confirm the country's ancient Hindu and Buddhist temples were largely intact before the war, most were then cut off from the outside world for decades, and some remain difficult and even dangerous to reach today due to poor roads, jungles, landmines, and unexploded ordnance (UXO). It is thus only now becoming possible to systematically investigate the wartime plunder of Cambodia's antiquities, an undertaking that is growing more important each year as the country steps up efforts to recover its stolen treasures from overseas collections.

Cambodia is internationally celebrated for the twelfth-century ruins of Angkor Wat, the crowning achievement of the Khmer Empire, which ruled much of Southeast Asia from the ninth to fifteenth centuries. But this temple—said to be the largest religious monument in the world—is just one of many in the country. While only the size of the US state of Oklahoma, Cambodia boasts 4,000 known prehistoric and historic sites, with more discovered each year (MOCFA, 2013). But despite a long tradition of archaeology dating back to the French colonial era (1867–1953), only a fraction has been thoroughly surveyed, and even fewer scientifically excavated. So when looters reach them first, the only evidence of theft is often an empty hole in the ground, or an empty space on a temple wall. Calculating how many antiquities have been stolen and their value is thus very difficult.

Still by 1993—the same year as the United Nations-sponsored elections that some credit with putting Cambodia on the road to stability—the *Phnom Penh Post* estimated that almost 80% of all temples had been looted (Channo, 1993). Twelve years later in 2005, noted art historian Helen Jessup went

further by stating, “there is not a single site that is not affected” (Perlez, 2005). While these figures are clearly subjective, it is theoretically possible to measure the extent of looting, and this has been done for select sites. The conclusions from these studies suggest that nationwide statistics, if they existed, would be grim.

For example, in 2006, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Heritage Watch conducted a looting survey at the 2,000-year-old burial ground of Wat Jas in northwestern Cambodia. During rescue excavations, a team of archaeologists “extensively recorded the damage, mapping and taking aerial photographs to fully illustrate the scale of destruction” (Heritage Watch, 2014). Afterwards, the NGO’s founder and archaeologist Dr. Dougald O’Reilly said Wat Jas “has been completely decimated. Not one of its estimated 1,000 graves remains undisturbed” (AP Worldstream, 2006).

That same year, Heritage Watch completed an additional two-year study of looting at temple sites throughout the country, including Banteay Chmmar, Beng Melea, Koh Ker, Phnom Banan, Phnom Chisor, and Tonle Bati. These surveys were originally meant to map the extent of plunder, but the damage was so ubiquitous that plotting it would simply have created overlays of the temple layouts. Therefore, for the purposes of the report, the few remaining architectural elements and statuary were plotted and photographed, along with particularly egregious incidents of theft. Without exception, all of the sites surveyed had been pillaged, and extensively.

Before and after the above topical studies, general archaeological surveys and excavations have also frequently recorded evidence of looting. While these references are often just footnotes to other research, they still demonstrate that none of Cambodia’s historic periods or geographic regions has been spared since the 1970 outbreak of civil war. Plunder appears in the pages of O’Reilly’s (2004; 2006) reports from Iron Age cemeteries in the northwest, Miriam Stark’s (1999) at Pre-Angkorian sites in the Mekong Delta, and Eric Bourdonneau’s (2011) at the tenth-century capital of Koh Ker.

When taken together, these scattered reports paint a picture of a cultural tragedy that reduced Cambodia’s temples—some of which had stood for a millennium—from open-air museums to riddled shells within decades. Due to the reach, scale, and speed of this devastation, experts have long believed it is the work of organized trafficking networks. However, for those supporting this belief, it has been difficult to move beyond anecdotal evidence to more systematic or scientific data.

Interview-Based Reports of Cambodian Looting and Trafficking

In an attempt to better understand Cambodia's story, we present an empirical study of a wartime antiquities trafficking network constructed from interviews conducted during ethnographic criminology fieldwork. The orientation of these interviews varied from short factual conversations to more in-depth, oral-history type discussions, which sought to elicit rich personal narratives of life during the conflict period and individual interviewees' knowledge of looting and trafficking of statues and other cultural objects during that time. Our case study focuses on the bloody conflict with the Khmer Rouge, from 1970 to 1998, which decimated both the kingdom's population and its archaeological heritage. While this article is of a historical nature, we hope it will start to answer some of the still-unresolved questions in the academic literature on the illicit antiquities trade during combat while providing lessons for better protecting cultural objects and sites in the present.

In 2013, we travelled approximately 2,500 kilometres around dozens of temple sites in northern, western, and central Cambodia. We then crossed into Thailand and the central trading hub of its capital Bangkok, where stolen art has long been known to make the jump from East to West. Helped by local contacts and translators, we tracked down and interviewed a variety of Cambodian and Thai looters, traffickers, and dealers, who helped us to flesh out the networks that had been taking (and in some cases are still taking) pillaged statues out of Cambodia and onto the international market. Emerging from these first-hand narratives of participation in looting and trafficking statues was a picture of two channels from the country.

We label these channels the "organized crime channel" and the "conflict channel." We have documented the former in depth elsewhere (Mackenzie and Davis, 2014); it is a network of actors moving a considerable volume of statues from temple sites like Angkor and Koh Ker, through the transit towns of Sisophon and Poipet, across the border to Thailand's Aranyaprathet, and onwards to Sa Kaeo and then Bangkok. This network was operated in considerable measure by key people who bore many attributes of organized criminals. In contrast, the second channel, which we describe here, moved objects by a different route via different actors, and these were more centrally involved in the country's military conflict than the less ideological and more opportunistic actors who ran the organized crime channel.

The channel we describe here drew from many of the same northwestern temples as the first channel: we visited and draw data from sources at Angkor (including the Roulous grouping and Banteay Srei), Banteay Chhmar

(including Banteay Torp), Beng Mealea, Koh Ker, Phnom Banan, Preah Khan of Kompong Svay (the Bakan), and Sambor Prei Kuk. Instead of the northwestern trafficking route through Sisophon and Aranyaprathet, however, these statues were routed directly northwards, through the deep forests of the Kulen region and former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng, across the Dangrek Mountains forming the due northern border, to Khun Han and Kantharalak on the Thai side. Again, from there the statues moved to Bangkok and onto the international market.

In summary, Channel 1 was controlled by local mafia, thrived in areas long after peace returned, and exploited main highways and commercial routes. Channel 2 instead snaked through the minefields and jungles of northern Cambodia, a region controlled by the Khmer Rouge on and off until their 1998 surrender. These differences lend support to our approach in looking at the former from an organized crime standpoint and the latter from an armed conflict standpoint. Of course, some of the key players along Channel 1 were affiliated with armed factions, and Channel 2 was not the exclusive purview of the Khmer Rouge so the distinction we make is to some extent reified for analytical purposes.

The Debated Role of the Khmer Rouge

The Khmer Rouge's trafficking of arms, gems, and timber is well documented (see Global Witness, 1995; Le Billon, 2000; Fafo Institute, 2002), but their role in the illicit antiquities trade has remained controversial. Given their mission to obliterate traditional Cambodian culture and replace it with a new revolutionary culture, it seems only natural they would have targeted the country's archaeological heritage. A prominent collector of Cambodian art has certainly employed this argument, defending his dealings in looted Cambodian art as necessary to rescue it before Khmer Rouge cadres "shot it up for target practice" (Mashberg and Blumenthal, 2013).¹

Alongside the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), the ongoing and still-struggling tribunal that Phnom Penh and the United Nations first established in 1997 to try the most senior members of the regime,

1 It is worth noting he has also used another justification, telling the *New York Times* that 'in a previous life I had been Khmer, and that what I collect had once belonged to me' (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/13/arts/design/us-links-collector-to-statue-in-khmer-looting-case.html?pagewanted=all>).

Sarah J. Thomas (2006, p. 29) researched the Khmer Rouge's destruction of cultural property and found:

Following its seizure of power in April 1975, the Khmer Rouge regime proclaimed a return to 'Year Zero' and set about demolishing links to the past, to the outside world and to religion. As part of their systematic attack upon Buddhism, the Khmer Rouge desecrated or destroyed most of Cambodia's 3,369 [contemporary] temples, inflicting irreparable damage on statues, sacred literature, and other religious items. Similar damage was inflicted on the mosques of the Cham, some 130 of which were destroyed. The Khmer Rouge regime attacked Christian places of worship, even disassembling the Catholic cathedral of Phnom Penh stone by stone until only a vacant lot remained. The Khmer Rouge destroyed all 73 Catholic churches in existence in 1975.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to documenting the "Killing Fields," likewise wrote "The Khmer Rouge deliberately targeted Cambodian cultural resources, destroying temples, forbidding traditional dances and music, and leaving no space for cultural expression beyond propaganda for the regime" (2013, pp. 1–2). According to it, "[t]his cultural devastation left Cambodians unmoored, deepening their suffering from the loss of their loved ones and significantly complicating their attempts to reconstruct Cambodian society."

On the other hand, noted historians have claimed the Khmer Rouge spared and even protected Cambodia's ancient temples and sites, albeit only for their own perverse needs (the kingdom's glorious past featured heavily in party propaganda). According to Elizabeth Becker (2013), the award-winning journalist who has covered Cambodia since 1973 and written a thorough account of its recent history, "During their murderous regime, the one thing the Khmer Rouge protected was [Angkor Wat]. They killed or worked to death nearly two million Cambodians, but they preserved those magnificent temples as the symbol of Cambodia's greatness. In those days would-be thieves would have been hard-pressed to spirit stolen art across the heavily defended border to Thailand."

So did the Khmer Rouge destroy or preserve Cambodia's ancient temples? While further research is needed, our initial fieldwork indicates both. The party did have a long and complicated history. Over the decades, they shifted from guerrilla fighters to heads of state and back to guerrilla fighters. Their use—or misuse—of Cambodia's past changed along with their changing fortunes.

General Indications of a Confused Relationship between Conflict and Looting in Cambodia

Villagers at temples across the country repeatedly told us that organized looting and trafficking started in approximately 1970, the same year that war officially erupted between the Khmer Rouge and Cambodian government. This emphasis on organized trafficking is necessary, as looting certainly took place in the colonial era and the early years of independence, the most infamous example of which was conducted by young Frenchman André Malraux at the temple of Banteay Srey in 1922. Malraux's subsequent trial and conviction made headlines throughout Indochina and even back in Paris. The scandal is still remembered today since he went on to become one of France's most celebrated writers and its first Minister of Culture. However, our sources reported without exception that, despite such incidents of thefts, the temples were largely intact before the war. This is confirmed by photographs taken at the time by the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* and by scholars like Madeleine Giteau, which show the sites rich in statuary.

Sources at Anlong Veng, Banteay Chhmar, Phnom Banan, and other sites described heavy and methodical plunder from around 1970, which they attributed to the state forces of General (and subsequently Prime Minister) Lon Nol. A former soldier in his army—whose position allowed him to mix with the Lon Nol elite—told us that as many as eighty percent of senior officers were involved. He and others were even able to name some of the guiltiest officials, some of whom are now living comfortably in the United States (which backed Lon Nol's rule). These reports are not surprising, for even though we have not yet found anything in the existing literature specifically linking Lon Nol's army to the illicit antiquities trade, much has been written about his administration's notorious and unparalleled corruption. Lon Nol took power in a US-backed coup in 1970 and ruled until the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975. Becker (1998) details his "appalling practices," noting "his army drafted children to inflate its numbers, padded payrolls with 'phantom soldiers' to pay off rapidly promoted and corrupt officers" and that he himself "permitted other forms of wholesale corruption" (p. 123). All in all, she summarized his Khmer Republic as a "brief and corrupt experiment" (p. 189).

In addition to Lon Nol's government forces and the Khmer Rouge, the Northern Vietnamese Army (NVA) were also operating in Cambodia during the early 1970s. Moreover, even then, there were credible reports of NVA involvement in antiquities trafficking. A former US intelligence officer who had been assigned to the region told us:

My intelligence agent network in Cambodia in March–July 1970 reported the NVA capturing the Angkor Wat area and looting statues and bas reliefs to sell on the art black market in Hong Kong to raise hard currency for their war effort. Some idiot analyst . . . in Saigon started arguing with me in message traffic that was impossible that the NVA were there . . . “because the NVA have no interest in being that far inside Cambodia, they only want to secure the border areas to continue infiltration of men and munitions.” . . . I clearly remember this message exchange with the staff analyst because the looting of cultural artifacts really offended me, even in war time.

The NVA presence at Angkor has since been corroborated, for example, in the acclaimed memoir *Le Portail* by anthropologist François Bizot (the only Westerner to have survived capture by the Khmer Rouge). The former US intelligence officer to whom we spoke felt Bizot’s account “confirmed that my agent report about the NVA capturing and looting the Angkor Wat area was likely correct.” He added, “Having some experience in these matters and routes, my guess is the NVA moved their covered antiquities booty . . . to Aranyaprathet, Thailand” (a key stop on what we have identified as Channel 1). “The border there has been (and is) very porous, and armed NVA/[Viet Cong]/Sihanouk Liberation Front fighters, or western or other civilians hired for the purpose, with two or more trucks of loot could easily bribe their way across the border to Thailand. . . . Smuggling has gone on for centuries in the area, and these are routes that could have been used by smugglers for years, so the border crossing scenario was well-rehearsed and well-greased.”

In marked contrast—according to accounts from our fieldwork—the Khmer Rouge did indeed protect (or at least did not target) Cambodia’s ancient temples in this 1970–1975 phase of the Civil War. While rogue soldiers or units certainly may have trafficked antiquities, doing so would have defied the party leadership. Both Khmer Rouge victims and perpetrators also consistently reported to us that the regime continued this stance towards ancient temples during the 1975–1979 Killing Fields (even while slaughtering the descendants of those who built them). Angkorian heritage was a key part of the Khmer Rouge narrative, and the party strictly controlled this narrative from the top down. Moreover, the Khmer Rouge sealed Cambodia’s borders immediately upon their victory, halting most legal trade, and illegal trade with it.

The situation changed after the 1979 Vietnamese invasion. Interestingly, we received few reports of looting by Vietnamese forces then or during their subsequent decade long occupation, even though they certainly would have had the opportunity. But as the Khmer Rouge went from a governing force to a fragmented army and news of their atrocities spread, they began to lose key

international backers. These included Singapore, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (whose preference for the Khmer Rouge over Vietnam has been likened to the old axiom “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”). Their financial situation became critical in the late 1980s, when even China started pulling its support. Beijing finally struck the deathblow in the early 1990s, cutting the Khmer Rouge’s last major source of funding (Kristof, 1993).

Without money to continue their armed struggle and facing rising defections and factional fighting, it is not surprising the Khmer Rouge would turn from revolutionaries to bandits. The territory they controlled was rich in gemstones, lumber, and temples. Pol Pot himself ordered they be put to use, stating in 1991, “Our state does not have sufficient capital either to expand its strength or enlarge the army. . . . The resources [in our liberated and semi-liberated zones] absolutely must be utilised as assets” (Fafo Institute, 2002, p. 17). The Khmer Rouge found a ready market across the border in Thailand.

Again they were not alone. The 1989 Vietnamese withdrawal had left a power vacuum in Cambodia, with the country divided into several political factions, each with its own army. According to villagers, all these various forces were active looters during the 1990s—from the Khmer Rouge to the Cambodian army to the variety of paramilitary forces. Sometimes our sources did not know who exactly was responsible for the plunder as these groups were fluid and soldiers frequently shifted allegiances between them. Moreover, even while actively trying to kill one another on the battlefield, they apparently had no problem doing business together off it. Such collusion between enemies, especially between the Khmer Rouge and Cambodian government, has also been noted in previous research on Cambodia’s wartime timber trade. According to Le Billon (2000), “This contradictory logic of political accommodation between supposed political and battlefield enemies to further their own ends was repeated in numerous instances at the local level” (p. 792). Looters within military forces also worked closely with organized criminal gangs without any military affiliation in both Cambodia and Thailand.

The puzzle that is the illicit trade in Cambodian antiquities may never be complete, but one thing is clear: organized antiquities trafficking largely started with the war but did not end with it. Business continued along the same routes likely by the same people. Some participants may have switched hats from fighters to gangsters; others may have stayed in or entered the Cambodian army. Villagers do report looting by “soldiers” at Preah Khan within the last decade as well as the misuse of old military equipment like metal detectors (used in landmine and UXO clearance efforts) or trucks in support of looting and traffic.

Furthermore, in some respects, the 1998 Khmer Rouge surrender presented new possibilities for plunder: for example, it opened temple-rich areas of the

country that had been inaccessible to the outside world since 1970. In another example, we were told that a high concentration of landmines perversely protected the temples of Koh Ker from thieves well after the conflict ended, but a heavy round of looting immediately followed demining efforts in the mid-2000s (one of the authors even photographed vast pits at the site during this time). The sad truth may be that antiquities trafficking did not slow thanks to peace, but because after the war there was little left to steal.

Le Billion (2000) has also noted that cultural and natural resources, timber, in this case, can be protected by conflict as well as destroyed by it: “Ironically, twenty years of war saved Cambodia’s forests from the destruction associated with economic growth in the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] region. Despite heavy US bombing and the murderous agrarian utopia of the Khmer Rouge, forests survived the 1970s. Their exploitation during the 1980s remained limited, the result of continuing war and a trade embargo by the west. By the late 1980s, nearly two-thirds of Cambodia’s surface was covered by forests; a key asset for a country among the poorest of the world. Since then, however, much of Cambodia’s forests have been exploited by intensive commercial logging as the country progressively reintegrated into the global economy” (pp. 786–787).

A Specific Case Study: The Butcher of Cambodia

The best illustration of the Khmer Rouge’s ambiguous, and shifting, relationship with antiquities is the general known as Ta Mok. He is a shadowy figure, so much so that even today, scholars differ on his real name and birth year. “Ta” (តា) means “grandfather,” a friendly honorific belying his other *nom de guerre*, “The Butcher.” That he would earn such a distinction amongst a whole regime of murderers speaks to his major role in the Khmer Rouge purges. As late as 1997, he reportedly continued to orchestrate massacres from Anlong Veng, killing some 3,000 people outside the town (Rowley, 2009). Some even suspect he poisoned the head of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot himself, on 15 April 1998.

A former monk, Ta Mok fought for Cambodia’s independence in the 1950s and joined the Khmer Rouge in the 1960s. Over the decades, he rose through their ranks. He was never one to lead from behind; he lost a leg during combat in 1970. He eventually became the party’s “Brother Number 5.” After the Vietnamese invasion and occupation, he retreated to Anlong Veng, and he and his followers waged war from there for another twenty years. Government forces captured him near Thailand in 1999, and he died in a Cambodian prison in 2006 still awaiting trial for genocide and crimes against humanity. He main-

tained his innocence until the very end and even afterwards in a statement to be read upon his death (Aglionby, 2006). Becker (p. 487) thus calls him “a true veteran of every phase of the revolution.”

Ta Mok’s former lakeside villa in Anlong Veng is now an historical monument, even listed as an architectural and cultural attraction in *Lonely Planet* (2014). This open-air concrete complex is empty today save for brightly coloured murals of Angkor Wat and Preah Vihear temples that still adorn its walls. When Ta Mok lived here, however, it would have looked more like a storeroom. After his arrest, government forces found and confiscated sixty-one Khmer sculptures weighing in the tons. The same had also happened in 1994, when they briefly captured Anlong Veng and with it another haul of art from Ta Mok’s house (Dodd, 1994).

That such a cache would be found just kilometres from the Thai border and its ready art market would suggest that Ta Mok was an active participant in the illicit antiquities trade. But his family and supporters, some of whom remain in the area as caretakers of the property, disagree. One of Ta Mok’s sons in law told the anthropologist Timothy Dylan Wood (2009):

Ta Mok used to capture things from smugglers which he would then put in the house . . . When the government came, they took some of these things. When Anlong Veng was liberated again, he tried to collect the old things again. Finally, the government army came and took all the things. Thus, he said the house on the lake is no longer his house and that he wants it to become a museum with ancient artefacts such as statues, busts, etc. captured from Thai smugglers (pp. 158–159).

A caretaker at the villa today—a man who had served in the Lon Nol army as a young man before joining the Khmer Rouge and eventually becoming a stalwart follower of Ta Mok—echoed this sentiment to us. He told us that Ta Mok was a guardian of antiquities. Yes, he did confiscate pieces from looters, but did not loot himself, and in fact he punished looters with death. The collection of sixty-one statues in his personal house in the warzone of Anlong Veng was a “collection for the local people.”

The similar claim was made by another former comrade of Ta Mok, who now holds a prominent position in the regional government. He too said Ta Mok did not loot or traffic antiquities himself and that the sixty-one statues were seizures from actual looters and traffickers. Moreover, these looters and traffickers were said to have no ties to the Khmer Rouge, but were instead soldiers from the Cambodian military and paramilitary groups. He did not explain why such enemies of the Khmer Rouge would traffic antiquities directly through

their territory instead of going around it. Ta Mok intercepted them when they were trying to cross the border into Thailand to meet buyers and dealers. Interestingly, this individual and others also note that when the government captured Ta Mok's house in 1999, some of his best pieces disappeared before making it to the Angkor Conservation.

Wood (p. 160) remarks that, "Beyond revering Ta Mok as a local and indeed national hero, [such] assertions cohere around a particular nationalist sentiment that portrays him and the Khmer Rouge loyalists in Anlong Veng to be defenders of Khmer sovereignty as well as conservators (and potential curators) of its glorious past." It is possible—even very likely—that Ta Mok did begin as a preserver of antiquities, especially when doing so meant toeing the party line as described earlier by Becker. At the Khmer Rouge's height of power, during the 1975–1979 Killing Fields, he and the other Khmer Rouge certainly would have had both the motivation and means to enforce such a policy.

Woods (p. 161) notes "However, the view of Ta Mok's greatness does not meet with unanimity among Anlong Veng's former Khmer Rouge." Nor, as we discovered, was there a consensus among Ta Mok's former business associates. A number of individuals from both these groups have now gone into hiding along the Thai border, serving as monks or taking on legitimate professional roles. They admitted organizing antiquities trafficking with Ta Mok using the route we have identified as Channel 2, noting that it was hardly their most serious crime.

According to these former associates, Ta Mok entered the trade as a looter-for-hire for dealers from Thailand. This is not surprising given his close relationship with members of the Thai army and criminal gangs, which allowed him to orchestrate a lucrative—and well-documented—cross-border trade in gems and timber, and even led to rumours that he had been granted Thai citizenship (Phnom Penh Post 1998). But upon seeing the profits Thai middlemen were making, he decided to cut them out and forged links himself with buyers further up the chain.

It is not difficult to find an explanation for Ta Mok's change of heart, if indeed one did occur, as he and the Khmer Rouge would have needed the money. Throughout the Killing Fields (1975–1979) and even into the subsequent Vietnamese occupation (1979–1989), the Khmer Rouge survived with backing from China and others (in what is still a source of embarrassment for the international community, they also retained a seat at the United Nations until 1993). But when these allies finally began to pull their support, the Khmer Rouge were forced to find other means of arming their cause. Anlong Veng was rich in gems and timber, as well as antiquities, and all were apparently sold to the highest bidder.

Those farther from Anlong Veng and with no personal relationship to Ta Mok also speak openly today (and in years past) of his role in the illicit antiquities

trade. In fact Uong Von of the *Conservation d'Angkor*—an institute in Siem Reap charged with preserving Khmer artifacts, which acts as a storeroom for pieces removed from temples for safekeeping—has referred to Ta Mok as “the chief thief” of Khmer antiquities.² The Conservation itself had been a repeated target for looters (including, at least according to press reports, those from the Khmer Rouge): the enclosure was attacked three times between 1992 and 1993, and, in one particularly violent raid, 300 marauders stole dozens of statues and murdered a guard. This attack forced the government to ship a hundred of Angkor’s remaining artifacts to Phnom Penh for safekeeping in the National Museum (Chouléan et al., 1998, p. 112).

A caretaker at the Conservation confirmed to us that Ta Mok “collected artifacts,” and showed us many of the sixty-one statues that had been seized from his house in Anlong Veng. These stone masterpieces ranged from architectural elements like lintels, to human torsos (probably representing gods), to the mystical and multi-headed snakes called *nagas*. Still others were on display at the Angkor National Museum in Siem Reap. It is not known from which exact temples these were taken, but stylistically they appear to come from a number of different sites.

There is further anecdotal evidence specifically placing Ta Mok at the tenth-century ruins of Koh Ker, which rank among the most heavily plundered of all Cambodia’s temples. Villagers there report that he personally visited the site in the early 1980s, ordered the temples cleared of vegetation, and then carefully photographed a number of statues in the main grouping at Prasat Thom (“Big Temple”). All later disappeared. No one we spoke to directly accused him of their theft.

Ta Mok would have been in a good position to loot Koh Ker, or benefit from its looting, had he wanted to do so. His relationship with the site has already been well-documented by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (transcripts of DC-CAM interviews with villagers from Koh Ker on file with the authors) and others researching the Khmer Rouge era. While it was not in his zone during the early years of the Civil War or the Killing Fields, after the 1979 Vietnamese invasion, it fell under his control (which is the period during which locals report his interest in the temples). Indeed, many of Koh Ker’s villagers fled to him in Anlong Veng, first to escape fighting between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese during the 1980s, and then between the Khmer Rouge and other Cambodian factions during the 1990s. The community would retain close ties to Ta Mok until the 1998 Khmer Rouge surrender, with large numbers only returning from Anlong Veng in 1999 and 2000.

2 <http://www.museum-security.org/97/1911997.html>.

More work on this topic is needed, but if the Butcher of Cambodia were indeed responsible for some of the plunder at Koh Ker and other temples, it means that prominent masterpieces now on the international art market may have passed through his very hands. This possibility certainly gives added moral context to Cambodia's ongoing efforts to recover its statutes. But regardless of Ta Mok's own role, which perhaps will never be perfectly clear, our research and that of others is beginning to reveal the bigger picture of wartime looting in Cambodia, confused as it is.

Conclusion

The illicit trade in Cambodian antiquities that we detail here shares many similarities with that now being reported in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq and Tunisia. It thus serves as a warning that armed forces in these conflicts may indeed be funding their operations through antiquities trafficking. Regional looting in war-torn Cambodia by various military forces seems to have been an exploitation of available resources to provide necessary financial support for ongoing participation in conflict. This helps to explain why (for example) there were reports of Vietnamese looting in the early 1970s but not in the 1980s. During the former, the Vietnamese were a struggling guerrilla force, but during the latter, they were a state power with many sources of income at their disposal. Similarly, the Khmer Rouge apparently did not loot during the 1970s while in a position of power, but turned to it only after being reduced to jungle fighters. Of course, these are generalities and oversimplifications, but they warrant further research.

Cambodia's story likewise serves as a caution for another reason: it reminds us that the illicit antiquities trade stemming from the Arab Spring will likely continue well after the fighting ends. Peace opens up new avenues for business while closing others. The corruption and instability endemic in post-war countries like Cambodia creates an environment amenable to antiquities trafficking and other organized crime.

The combined results of our studies of the conflict channel reviewed here and the organized crime channel outlined here and reviewed more fully elsewhere suggest that alongside individual, low-level subsistence smuggling, the illicit trade in Cambodian antiquities has been the enterprise of both organized crime and of groups involved in armed conflict in the decades since 1970. The line between mafia and soldiers was often blurred, and even when the two groups were distinct, they still worked closely together. This gives important context to the movement of looted antiquities from Cambodia's warzones to

the art market (cf Davis 2011), calling to mind comparisons with other traumatic origins in transnational precious goods markets like the issue of “blood diamonds.” The question to what extent it is appropriate to speak of “blood antiquities” calls out for more research.

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