

## **THE MILITARY'S ROLE IN SEIZING WAR BOOTY AND PROTECTING CULTURAL TREASURES**

Any military can expect a torrent of international condemnations if it damages or destroys a cultural treasure. The expectation towards the military to pay attention to the protection of cultural treasures and artifacts, however, has not had a long history. This study aims to show the historical development of the relationship of the military and cultural heritage protection through some accentuated examples.

Before the bourgeois era, instead of the protection of cultural artifacts, their collection was the norm. The monarchs at the top of the social strata considered it the proof of their power to hoard the treasures into their palaces. In most cases, the rulers used their military for the treasure hunt, because this way the safeguarding of the captured treasures was guaranteed during the homebound journey.

### **Ancient Empires**

In the Assyrian empire, which had the most advanced military of the Ancient Middle East, war booty had a major role in financing the empire. The Assyrian administration noted down every piece of the booty, to which numerous cuneiform tablets and palace reliefs testify. A detailed relief was found in Sargon II's palace in Dur-Sharrukin, describing the king's eighth campaign, during which his troops raided the city of Muṣaṣir (in the kingdom of Urartu) and its temple, dedicated to the god Haldi. The relief depicts the temple of Haldi, and above it, the soldiers carrying the valuables out of the temple. We can also see scribes, accurately noting down the collected items. Another relief shows the articles being measured on a scale, and the soldiers carrying vessels and, on a lower register, soldiers taking apart a statue with axes. The reliefs represent the behavior that was expected to be shown towards the defeated at the time. They saw nothing contemptible in the victorious army plundering the defeated city.

Although after their demise the culture and treasures of the Assyrian and also Egyptian empires and sank into oblivion for over a thousand years, taking war booty

remained an important strategic tool. The Romans continued the practice of plundering, but for them, demonstrating the empire's power was considered of key importance, therefore after successful campaigns they held triumphs when they paraded the beaten county's captives, exotic plants, animals and treasures like a mobile exhibition.

Although the triumphs of the Middle Ages did not reach the grandiosity of those of the Romans, the institution of *triumphus* was adopted by the European empires. Moreover, triumphal arches became fashionable again during the Renaissance. The most famous, the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, commemorates the Napoleonic wars.

### **Scientific Plundering**

Napoleon played an important role in the history of war booty. He was the first famous general to recruit scientists for one of his expeditions with the not-so-secret goal of gathering relics. In 1798 he marched to Egypt to cut off the route of the British to India and he defeated the Mameluks at the Battle of the Pyramids. His victory was short-lived, but the significance of the Egyptian expedition is that Napoleon took the country's 150 best scientists to map the ruins of Ancient Egypt. The explorations began and their results were published in a gigantic opus, the *Description L'Egypte*, which preserved several, since destroyed relics on its pages.

Napoleon's trip to Egypt greatly contributed to the increased interest towards Ancient cultures. However, for the researchers reaching the Middle East, the interests of their sponsoring states came first. They continued the millennia-long gathering practice of their rulers but, following the principles of the times, the fruits of their excavations were not transferred to palaces but to the newly founded Louvre, British Museum or the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin.

In the following century and a half the European powers quarreled over the Ancient relics while a new voice, based on the principles of Enlightenment, started to gather ground. Its followers reasoned that it is immoral to treat the values of cultural heritage as war booty. In the second half of the 19th century the groundworks of international regulations were laid. However, it was not until 1954, that the Hague Convention, a fully-functioning international agreement was signed.

By the 21st century, time has come for countries with invaluable Ancient artifacts to raise their voices in their attempt to get back - at least on loan - the treasures which

were found in their land and were taken away to the big museum of Europe and North America. The vanguard of this movement is Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt, who has urged a number of museums to return his country's treasures, claiming that they were taken illegally. He would need them especially because his country plans to open the new Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) at the foot of the Pyramids in Giza in 2013. His basis for negotiations is his threat to suspend the excavation permits of the above mentioned countries if they fail to cooperate.

That brings us to the difficult question whether the invaluable Ancient treasures have a better home in the most famous museums of the world or at the site where they were found. Those supporting keeping them in museums argue that those institutions provide the best security and the other side's argument is that when they are removed from their context, they might be pretty, but their original meaning is lost.

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