

Ahmed Fatima Kzzo
Sapienza University of Rome
ahmed.kzzo@uniroma1.it

Helen Malko
Stanford University
malko26@stanford.edu

Jehad Haron
The American Center of Research
jharon@acorjordan.org

Pearce Paul Creasman
The American Center of Research
pcreasman@acorjordan.org

**Ahmed Fatima Kzzo,
Helen Malko, Jehad Haron
and Pearce Paul Creasman**

Cultural Heritage and the Fight Against Illicit Trafficking in Jordan: The Project to Prevent Illicit Trafficking

Abstract

Jordan is rich in archaeological and natural sites that form an essential part of the history and heritage of various peoples. This cultural heritage constitutes a critical element of national wealth, and therefore it is necessary to preserve and protect it from threats such as illegal excavations and illicit trafficking of cultural items. The American Center of Research (ACOR) initiated a collaborative project to enhance national and international efforts to preserve and protect this heritage and to highlight Jordan's role in preventing illicit trafficking of artifacts across the region. This paper presents an overview of the project and its goals, accomplishments, and future plans to solidify Jordan's efforts to combat illicit trafficking on local, regional, and international levels.

Introduction

Every year thousands of artifacts disappear from museums, places of worship, libraries, and archaeological sites. From figurines to paintings, from coins to jewelry, from religious items to archaeological finds, tens of thousands of cultural objects forming part of the world's human heritage are stolen. Conflict zones are attractive targets for criminals, and western Asia unfortunately suffers from looting at an unprecedented scale. Located at the heart of this region, Jordan plays an important role in combating these activities, protecting not only its own rich and diverse cultural heritage but also those of its neighbors. Built on mutual understanding, shared values, and bilateral cooperation, the Prevention of Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property Project supports Jordan's efforts to defend its cultural heritage and strengthen its role in the region.

Background of the Project

On December 16, 2019, the former director general of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DoA), Yazeed Alayan, and the U.S. assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, Marie Royce, signed a memorandum of understanding that aims to restrict the trade of archaeological artifacts and antiquities (Keziah 2019)¹.

Through a grant from the Public Affairs Office of the U.S. Embassy in Amman and in partnership with the DoA, the American Center of Research (ACOR) started the project to reactivate the DoA unit dedicated to preventing illicit and illegal trade of archaeological artifacts by building the capacities of the DoA staff and other stakeholders. In order to implement this project, in a meeting held on April 19, 2022, at the department, Prof. Fadi Bala'awi, director general of the DoA, and Prof. Pearce Paul Creasman, executive director of ACOR, signed two agreements. One of these implements the aforementioned project to prevent illicit trafficking and preserve Jordanian cultural heritage resources of all kinds over a span of two years (American Center of Research 2022).

Project Structure

The project was designed to undertake a variety of tasks fundamental to achieving its goal. These included status assessment and gap analysis, logistical support, and training courses for archaeologists and related staff in the DoA. The project compiled bibliographic material, including Jordanian legislation related to cultural heritage, international protocols, and agreements pertaining to cultural property. In preparation for

developing the course material, academic publications related to illicit trafficking were collected and reviewed. This material formed a resource for the training toolkit and courses. The focus was on current methods and practices used to prevent looting, to identify and track looted material culture, to inventory such objects, to store and protect them so that they remain viable legal evidence, and to repatriate them. To implement such activities, the project was devised to provide the DoA unit with the needed technical support and equipment, including computers, specialized cameras, and software, as well as a training manual for sustaining the development of the unit after completion of the project.

The training courses were divided into two levels: first level and second/advanced level. The first level built a base of legal knowledge for the participants. Thus, it concentrated on legislation, conventions, and international laws and organizations. The first level covered all the governorates of Jordan, which are divided into three regions: northern (Irbid, Al Mafraq, Jarash, and 'Ajlūn), central ('Ammān, Az Zarqā, Mādabā, and Al Balqā'), and southern (Al Karak, Ma'ān, Aṭ Ṭafilah, and Al 'Aqabah). A training course was organized in each region. Subsequently, the second level was held in 'Amman, after a selection of participants from all the governorates of Jordan who successfully passed the first level had been made. The second level was dedicated to giving more details on legal issues and practical cases.

The training sessions featured in-person and recorded lectures by professors and other experts. To overcome the language barrier, the recorded lectures were translated and subtitled in Arabic. In addition, participants engaged in exercises for tracking artifacts and using

¹ For the complete text of the memorandum of understanding, see the website of the U.S. Department of State: <https://www.state.gov/jordan-20-201>.

search engines or databases (*e.g.*, the Interpol database). Visits to museums and archaeological sites also took place to further raise awareness of needs and ways to protect cultural property and prevent illegal excavations (FIG. 1).

Project Activities

Training Courses

The first-level course was held in ‘Ammān from April 3 to 10, 2022, for employees of the DoA working in the governorates of ‘Ammān, Az Zarqā’, Al Balqā’, and Mādabā. Another course was held in Irbid, from June 19 to 23, for the governorates of Irbid, Al Mafraq, Jarash, and ‘Ajlūn².

The two courses trained thirty staff members, including inspectors, assistant inspectors, museum curators, and department heads. Approximately 37% of the participants were women (FIG. 2). Almost half of the participants had never received any training related to cultural heritage preservation and protection. Each participant submitted a short paper after the end of the course. These varied in topic and included legal issues, cases related to illicit trafficking or smuggling of cultural property, and interviews with looters of archaeological sites.

Equipment

The project delivered equipment to support the performance of the DoA. The equipment consisted of laptops, desktops, cameras and other photographic tools, and barcode printers and scanners (FIG. 3) and was adapted to different circumstances of work: in the

field or in offices.

To increase the capacity of the DoA’s employees working with this equipment, we led a two-day training course on barcode- and QR-coding systems at the DoA warehouse in Tabarbūr (FIG. 4). The training covered different aspects of these systems, including how to generate QR codes from the database, how to choose suitable label materials considering the shape and material of an artifact, and the storage environment, such as humidity and temperature.

International Expert Network

One of the main challenges that face the DoA employees—or any archaeologist—is determining if an artifact is authentic. This is especially true when artifacts seized in Jordan arrive from faraway places and cultures, such as Australia or Africa. To address this, the project created a list of experts in different specialties from around the world; this can be searched by type of artifact (*e.g.*, pottery, statuary, inscriptions, numismatics). In this way, if any DoA employee wants to report, for example, a statue, they can search under this category to find a list of experts who specialize in statuary and can be contacted for advice. There are further filters related to geographical area and historical period to help refine the search.

Conclusion

The UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property states, in article 5, that “to ensure the protection of their cultural property against illicit import, export and transfer of ownership, the States Parties to this Convention undertake, as appropriate for each country, to set up within their territories one or more national services,

² After the 15th International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan (ICHAJ 15), the third first-level course was held in Al ‘Aqabah for the southern governorates (Al ‘Aqabah, Ma‘ān, At Taflah, and Al Karak), in which eight DoA employees were trained.

where such services do not already exist, for the protection of the cultural heritage, with a qualified staff sufficient in number.” In addition, article 14 states: “In order to prevent illicit export and to meet the obligations arising from the implementation of this Convention, each State Party to the Convention should, as far as it is able, provide the national services responsible for the protection of its cultural heritage with an adequate budget.” Like Jordan, most countries in the region are party to this convention³. Unfortunately, more than fifty years after

³ Jordan has been a party to this convention since 1974; the USA joined in 1983. See: <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural#item-2>.

this convention, many countries still do not have enough financial resources or enough qualified and efficient staff dedicated to protecting cultural heritage and combating illicit trafficking. Thus, more international efforts and collaboration in this field are requested.

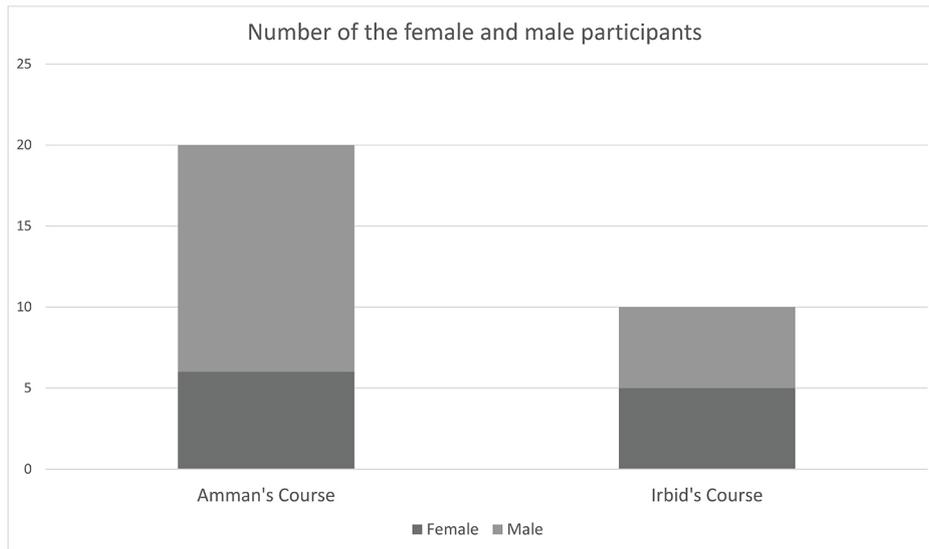
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1. The participants visiting the Museum of Dār As Sarāyā in Irbid (photo by Ahmed Fatima Kzzo).

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2. Number of female and male participants in the courses of 'Ammān and Irbid.



3. Delivering equipment for the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (photo by Abdelfattah Ghareeb).



4. Training in the QR coding system (photo by Abdelfattah Ghareeb).

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