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Egypt's Heritage Plundered Anew

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD MARCH 20, 2014

Looting of ancient Egyptian treasures by organized syndicates and enterprising villagers has been occurring at a frantic pace since the first days of the nation's uprising in 2011. More than 50 artifacts were stolen from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo at the height of the uprising, including items dating back to the time of the pharaohs.

Across a nation lax in security, more than 1,000 treasures were stolen from the Malawi National Museum in Minya last summer. Thieves took off with jewels of the pharaohs and painted sarcophagi that were part of a priceless trove, leaving burned mummies to underscore the crime. Satellite photos have shown areas stippled with fresh excavations by thieves raiding prized archaeological regions. Such plundering dates back millennia to the grand burials of the pharaohs, but now it has grown to catastrophic proportions in a modern market instantly open to "cultural racketeers" and global connoisseurs, according to Egyptian authorities.

Last week, those officials asked the Obama administration to take emergency measures to stanch the outflow of treasures being plundered up and down the Nile. "Our history is being stolen and sold here in the United States," Egypt's antiquities minister, Mohamed Ibrahim Ali, said in Washington. The United States — a leading buyers' market for Egyptian antiquities — was quick to respond, with the State Department promising cooperation by relaxing standards that currently require customs officials to have precise information in hand about a stolen item before they can act.

The need for broader safeguards became clear soon after the uprising when officials at Christie's and at eBay grew suspicious about provenance claims and blocked the auction of Egyptian antiquities. Archaeologists at George Washington University are organizing an international coalition that could include American auction houses, art dealers and individuals to halt the sale of any antiquity lacking a stamp of approval from the government in Cairo. Egyptians deserve the world's help in protecting their cultural heritage.

A version of this editorial appears in print on March 21, 2014, in The International New York Times.

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