

Archeological Looting in Libya

‘Massive looting of ancient artefacts underway in Libya’

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Libya's priceless historical heritage is in danger of being destroyed in the same way Iraq's cultural riches perished during the United States invasion, warned a Russian expert on West Asia.

Nikolai Sologubovsky, orientalist, writer and film maker, said massive looting and destruction of ancient artefacts was underway in Libya.

“The al-Jamahiriyah National Museum in Tripoli has been looted and antiquities are being shipped out by sea to Europe,” the scholar told Russian television.

The National Museum houses some of Libya's most treasured archaeological and historical heritage. The collection includes invaluable samples of Neolithic, pre-historic, Berber, Garamantian, Phoenician, Punic, Greek, Roman and Byzantine culture.

Mr. Sologubovsky, who spent several months in Libya this year as a correspondent for a Moscow tabloid, said cave paintings in Acacus Mountains that go back 14,000 years were being destroyed by looters.

“They press silk cloth soaked in special chemical solution against rock frescoes and the paint sticks to the cloth and comes off the cave wall,” he said.

The scholar accused NATO forces of destroying some of the most spectacular architectural sites included in UNESCO's World Historical List.

“NATO aircraft have bombed Leptis Magna and Sabratha,” said Mr. Sologubovsky, who is deputy head of a Russian committee of solidarity with the people of Libya and Syria set up earlier this year.

Leptis Magna was one of the most beautiful cities of the Roman Empire and Sabratha was a Phoenician trading post. Both are more than 2,500 years old.

Earlier this summer, the government in Tripoli asked Egypt and other neighbouring countries to block the smuggling of artifacts from Libya, but the looting continued unabated. Egypt's own cultural treasures were plundered when looters ransacked archeological sites and stole a statue of King Tutankhamun and dozens of other precious objects from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo during the “Arab Spring” revolution.

The United Nations cultural body last week warned international art dealers and museums to look out for artifacts that may have been looted from Libya.

UNESCO director-general Irina Bokova said in a statement that dealers should be “particularly wary of objects from Libya in the present circumstances”. She called on Libyans, their neighbours and art dealers to protect the “invaluable cultural heritage”.

Mr. Sologubovsky said the UNESCO appeal came too late, too little.

“Plunder of Libya’s cultural heritage has been going on since February. I’m afraid it faces the same tragic fate as Iraq’s antiquities, which were plundered by the victorious U.S. military,” said the Russian scholar.

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