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Who's stealing Afghan cultural treasures?

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Afghanistan's unique location has made it home to the world's most complex civilizations that left a rich cultural heritage. But the war-torn country has now fallen victim to looters, stealing the nation's artifacts.

Ever since Afghanistan was invaded by Alexander the Great, nearly 2,500 years ago, the country has seen one foreign army after another.

In recent times – the British, the Soviets – and now the Americans ...

And whatever reasons they give – the impact of war continues to leave a cultural scar that runs deep through Afghan civilization.

In many countries, the national museum is a source of pride where ancient treasures that explain that country's history are on display. The Kabul museum, instead of boasting a collection that dates back hundreds of years, has bullet holes and destroyed artifacts.

In the civil war, the museum was a military base repeatedly struck by rocket fire and largely destroyed. Later, the Taliban ransacked whatever items had not been moved for safe-keeping.

And now there's a new enemy – smugglers working in areas where foreign forces are currently in control.

Mir Ahmad Joyenda of the Afghan parliamentary international relations commission told RT: "Some military forces of other countries are doing some digging at night", he added "but

unfortunately in the last eight years we didn't put on trial a single smuggler for stealing the cultural heritage of Afghanistan. Nobody has been arrested, nobody has been put in jail and nobody has investigated this issue."

The Afghan government simply doesn't have the resources.

Seven years ago a special police unit was set up to stop the illegal excavations. But 500 officers can't do much – especially when much of the digging is reportedly at night and in areas under NATO control.

Recently, around 7,000 artifacts that had been smuggled out of the country were returned to the museum.

Some pieces were found in England. It was easy for the museum's director to recognize them as being from Afghanistan.

"Most of these 2,000 pieces were taken by these looters – who were Afghan looters – they transferred them from Afghanistan to neighboring country, then to Dubai, and from Dubai to Heathrow Airport. You can't imagine one looter would be able to collect these kinds of artifacts, to steal them, to transfer them by airplane to Heathrow airport in the UK. The simple Afghan people cannot do these activities," says Omara Khan Masoudi, director of the Kabul National Museum.

But NATO forces deny the charges.

Brigadier General Frederick "Ben" Hodges, director OF operations, ISAF regional command south said *"That is completely against the values we hold as an army, stealing is just not acceptable behavior. I'm not aware of it and I certainly wouldn't tolerate it."*

As a former crossroads of major trade routes, Afghanistan's been home to some of Asia's most complex and unique civilizations.

Today, there are 3,000 archaeological sites. And while that rich seam of history waits to be unearthed, those supposed to protect it will need to dig deeper to beat the looters.