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Emergency in Mali as looters are plundering ancient treasures



Sudarsan Raghavan / The Washington Post via Getty

By Aisling Irwin

It's plunder on a mighty scale. An archaeological emergency will be declared in Mali today (15 Dec) as ancient sites are destroyed and its heritage flows out of the country.

The Paris-based International Council of Museums is launching a Red List for West Africa, with an emergency section on Mali. Experts have welcomed the list but say that until law and order is restored, and elite buyers abroad are shamed, the plunder will continue.

A Red List highlights generic objects at risk of illegal trafficking, to alert customs officers and art dealers. The Mali list includes ancient manuscripts, sculptures, inscribed plaques and jewellery from the 11th to the 16th centuries, and jewellery and vessels from the Inner Niger Delta dating back to the 8th century.

From the wider region are Palaeolithic tools dating to 20,000 BC and the renowned Nok

sculptures found in modern-day Nigeria, where looting is also rife.

Mali is rich in history. At its height in the late fifteenth century, the city of Timbuktu was a great centre of learning with a vast library of manuscripts.

The government had been managing the heritage well, according to Kevin MacDonald, of University College London. But in 2012, Jihadists invaded from the North, ransacking Timbuktu and destroying nine important mausoleums.



Sudarsan Raghavan / The Washington Post via Getty

The raids continue. The police have gone and tourism has evaporated, replaced by poverty and famine.

“The situation is becoming critical,” says Samuel Sidibé, director of the National Museum of Mali.

News regularly emerges of the latest destruction. Local and foreign diggers recently flocked to a site near the village of Goudjè Touréla, having heard of gold objects, says Sidibé.

“I can live without terracottas but I can’t live with the utter destruction of these archaeological sites in order to have these terracottas,” says MacDonald. “You lose the ability to understand the past.”

In 2012 local librarians and collectors risked their lives to smuggle thousands of manuscripts to the capital, Bamako, but it is thought that thousands more could still be at risk.

There are texts on local commerce and history, religion, maths and astronomy. Collectors are after the latter but “stealing is not selective,” says MacDonald.

Vanishing past

Climate change is adding to the trouble, says Susan McIntosh, of Rice University, Texas, US, who advised on the Red List. Thousands of settlement mounds, up to seven metres high, dominate the flood plain of the Niger, entombing 2,000 years of history.

But these are falling prey to a disastrous cycle of looting, which leaves pits that are vulnerable to erosion, and “historically almost unheard of” rain followed by drought.

“I am heartbroken,” she says. “We are seeing the gradual disappearance of a whole segment of Africa’s past.”

Technology like satellite imagery and aerial photography of sites, three-dimensional laser scanning of architecture and digitalisation of texts have barely touched Mali. Experts say it lacks the profile of other threatened heritage such as the Middle East.

“We the global heritage specialists haven’t done a great job of recording the standing heritage of Mali to allow accurate reconstruction,” says MacDonald.

Read more: Timbuktu’s precious scientific texts must be saved

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