

ARTICLE

## The Lion Statue of Ain Dara: Revealing the Fate of an Icon of Syrian Archaeology Looted During the Conflict

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### Abstract

During the Syrian war, many archaeological sites were subjected to systematic looting and destruction, often on a massive scale. Among the casualties of this looting is a colossal basalt statue of a lion that was located at the archaeological site of Ain Dara in northwest Syria. The lion of Ain Dara is a prominent local symbol and of great importance for the collective memory of northwest Syria, especially for the people of Wadi Afrin. Its disappearance will also have serious repercussions for the local economy as it was, in the past, an important tourist attraction. In this article, we investigate how the statue was stolen, why it was stolen, and where it is now. By using the lion statue of Ain Dara as a case study, we aim to shed more general light on the networks responsible for looting and trafficking Syrian antiquities, the factors that have enabled their growth during the conflict, and the role of civil society organizations in reducing their harmful impact on the cultural community of the Syrian people.

**Keywords:** Syria; Afrin; Ain Dara; lion statue; antiquities; looting; trafficking; civil society

### Introduction

At the end of 2019, media outlets began reporting the disappearance of the huge basalt lion statue from the archaeological site of Ain Dara (Figure 1). The lion statue is considered to be one of Syria's most important archaeological monuments, yet despite its archaeological, symbolic and economic importance, we have not seen any scientific report or documented research investigating its theft and disappearance. Through the research reported in this article, we have sought specifically to reveal the fate of the stolen statue whose loss has been described as a violation of international law<sup>1</sup> and, more generally, to provide fresh evidence of the looting and trafficking of antiquities inside Syria.

Syrian cultural heritage underpins national identity; it creates communal bonds to a common past and stands as a tangible reminder of the thousands of years of human experience that shaped Syria as a modern nation.<sup>2</sup> Cultural heritage is also important for

<sup>1</sup> Kabalan 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Al Quntar and Daniels 2016; Lostal and Cunliffe 2016.



**Figure 1.** The lion statue of Ain Dara in its original location (photograph by Ammar Kannawi).

the Syrian economy as it is a major source of employment and foreign income. Thus, the looting of an archaeological site such as Ain Dara and the theft of its monumental lion statue is socially and economically harmful. By focusing on the disappearance of the lion statue, we seek to shed new light on the damage caused to cultural heritage by the harmful and illegal trade of Syrian antiquities. In so doing, we hope to support the development of more effective policies aimed at preventing looting and trafficking, with a special focus on the role of civil society organizations and local communities in protecting archaeological heritage and the need for relevant international organizations to cooperate with them. We start with a brief overview of how the looting and trafficking of antiquities have increased since the 2011 revolution in Syria, focusing down onto events in Afrin since 2015 and how they affected the archaeological site of Ain Dara. We then describe the methodology and report the results of our research into the theft of the lion statue. Finally, we consider what lessons can be learnt from the theft of the lion statue and our experience more generally about the role of civil society organizations in heritage protection.

### **Syrian archaeological heritage since the start of civil conflict in 2011**

The conflict that has been taking place in Syria since 2011 has affected all aspects of life, as well as badly damaging archaeological heritage. Antiquities have been subject to destruction, vandalism, looting, and illegal trade.<sup>3</sup> They have been stolen from museums and storage facilities and extracted from archaeological sites through undocumented and illegal excavation.<sup>4</sup> One recent report estimated that 29 out of 55 museums have been exposed to

<sup>3</sup> Al Quntar 2013; Al Quntar and Daniels 2016; Ali 2013; Brodie 2015, 2022; Cunliffe 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Brodie and Sabrine 2018; Casana 2015. Looting and trafficking in antiquities has been a crime in Syria since Antiquities Law issued by Legislative Decree No. 222 dated October 26, 1963, with all following amendments.

theft.<sup>5</sup> A study of satellite imagery conducted in 2016 established that 355 out of 3,641 identified archaeological sites in Syria showed evidence of post-2011 looting.<sup>6</sup>

These acts of destruction followed years of ineffective government policies that failed to involve local communities in their shared cultural heritage and did not encourage their participation in protecting it.<sup>7</sup> Instead, cultural heritage was offered protection under the centralized umbrella of national authority and law, implemented through the agency of the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) in a way that alienated local communities. For example, the DGAM worked to preserve the inhabited archaeological villages of the limestone block in northwestern Syria (“Ancient Villages of Northern Syria” or “Dead Cities”) without taking into account the needs of the local community, especially about providing the basic services and new housing necessary to accommodate an increasing population. Many people were forced to leave and move to other areas of Syria.<sup>8</sup>

With the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011 and the violent responses it triggered in terms of killings and population displacements, archaeological heritage lost this weak umbrella of government protection. Various motives for antiquities trafficking have been identified in the literature,<sup>9</sup> but in this Syrian context, for the actors involved it became either a strategy of everyday subsistence and survival, an act of resistance against government authority, or a source of illegitimate gain for criminal and militia groups.<sup>10</sup> Antiquities were moved to countries immediately adjacent to conflict areas through transnational trafficking networks operating across the western border areas of Syria between Aleppo and Gaziantep (Turkey) in the north and Homs and Baalbek (Lebanon) in the south. Poor border security allowed the organization of an unobstructed archaeological trade. Many Syrian refugees benefited from it, though situated as they were at the bottom of trading chains, rarely on equitable terms.<sup>11</sup>

### The political situation in Afrin (2012–2023)

Afrin is an administrative district in the northwest of Aleppo Governorate, centered in the city of Afrin (Figure 2). The DGAM has been absent from the Afrin region since the end of 2012 when the area fell under the control of local Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG),<sup>12</sup> which later established what is known as the Autonomous Administration in November 2013.<sup>13</sup> In 2016, with Russian air support,<sup>14</sup> the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) extended their influence and control across large areas of territory north of Aleppo, including the city of Tal Rifaat,<sup>15</sup> which at the time was an important symbol of resistance in Aleppo Governorate against both the Syrian government and Da’esh.<sup>16</sup> The SDF displaced many Arab inhabitants of the newly-controlled territory, leading to a marked deterioration in relations between the area’s Arabs and Kurds.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ali 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Casana and Laugier 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Hamu and Kannawi 2024; Gillot 2010; Sabrine 2022.

<sup>8</sup> SIMAT 2020a.

<sup>9</sup> Fabiani 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Almohamad 2022; Brodie 2022: 34–36.

<sup>11</sup> Cengiz 2022: 148, 152–153; Dinand 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Turko 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Radpey 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Hajj 2016; Stuster 2016.

<sup>15</sup> France 24 2016; Walsh 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Abu Al-Khair 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Netjes 2022.

At the beginning of 2018, Turkey launched a military operation to take control of the Afrin region under the name of Operation Olive Branch<sup>18</sup> and promised to take possession of Arab areas controlled by the SDF.<sup>19</sup> This promise prompted the anti-government (opposition) Free Syrian Army (FSA) and affiliated opposition militias to participate in the military operation alongside Turkish forces. Operation Olive Branch culminated with the Turkish army and allied opposition militias securing control over the entire region of Afrin (Figure 3), followed by reprisals against the region's inhabitants with widespread acts of looting and confiscation and subsequent population displacement.<sup>20</sup> Most of the archaeological sites were transformed into military headquarters for the opposition factions, such as Cyrrhus (Nabi Hori), or military bases for the Turkish army, as at Tel Jindires.<sup>21</sup> Many archaeological sites,<sup>22</sup> including Ain Dara, were damaged by bulldozing and illegal digging.<sup>23</sup>

### Damage to the Ain Dara site

The Iron Age Syro-Hittite site of Ain Dara in northwest Syria comprises an archaeological mound that includes an acropolis and a lower town (Figure 4).<sup>24</sup> It is located on the right bank of the Afrin River 5 km to the south of the city of Afrin and is famous for its temple, which is decorated with huge bas-reliefs dating to the end of the second millennium BC.<sup>25</sup> Ain Dara is one of the most important archaeological sites in northwest Syria and is a tourist attraction which, before 2011, attracted visitors throughout the year.

When one of the authors (AK) visited Ain Dara in 2015, he found that some YPG units had commandeered the archaeological mission's on-site dig house as their administrative headquarters, where there were several departments and service offices. A training camp had been established on a part of the lower town that, after levelling, had been paved over with a layer of limestone brought in from outside. The YPG had also built underground reinforced concrete buildings for use as ammunition and weapons depots next to the dig house, as confirmed by satellite and aerial photographs (Figure 5).

During the 2018 Operation Olive Branch battles, Ain Dara was subjected to an aerial bombardment targeting the southern façade of the temple at the top of the hill (Figure 6).<sup>26</sup> Two deep bomb craters in the thresholds of the southern entrance obliterated the imprints of human feet which had distinguished the entrance to the temple. The floors, walls, and sculptures of the entrance hallway and the southern façade were also badly damaged. When the fighting ended, Ain Dara fell under the control of Syrian opposition militias (al-Jabha al-Shamiyya and Harakat 'Ahrar Alsham) that used the site as a training camp.<sup>27</sup> At the end of 2019, media outlets began reporting that Ain Dara had been looted and bulldozed and that the lion statue had disappeared (Figure 7).

<sup>18</sup> Al-Jazeera 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Abu Al-Khair 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Amnesty 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Archaeological sites that were bulldozed include Tell Burj Abdallo, Tell Qibar, Tell Afrin, Tell Deir Sawan, and Tell Aswad, among others. All of these sites were looted by antiquities dealers and illegal excavators in agreement with the military factions controlling those areas and without preventative intervention by the Turkish armed forces.

<sup>23</sup> ASOR 2018; North Press 2020; SOHR 2020a.

<sup>24</sup> Abu Assaf 1990.

<sup>25</sup> Novák 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Danti et al. 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Nidaa Post, live ammunition training for newly graduated fighters from the Special Forces of the National Liberation Front, video link on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/jKfmMgJg6cU?si=RpTk1LFKhR-c9lWv> (accessed May 29, 2024).

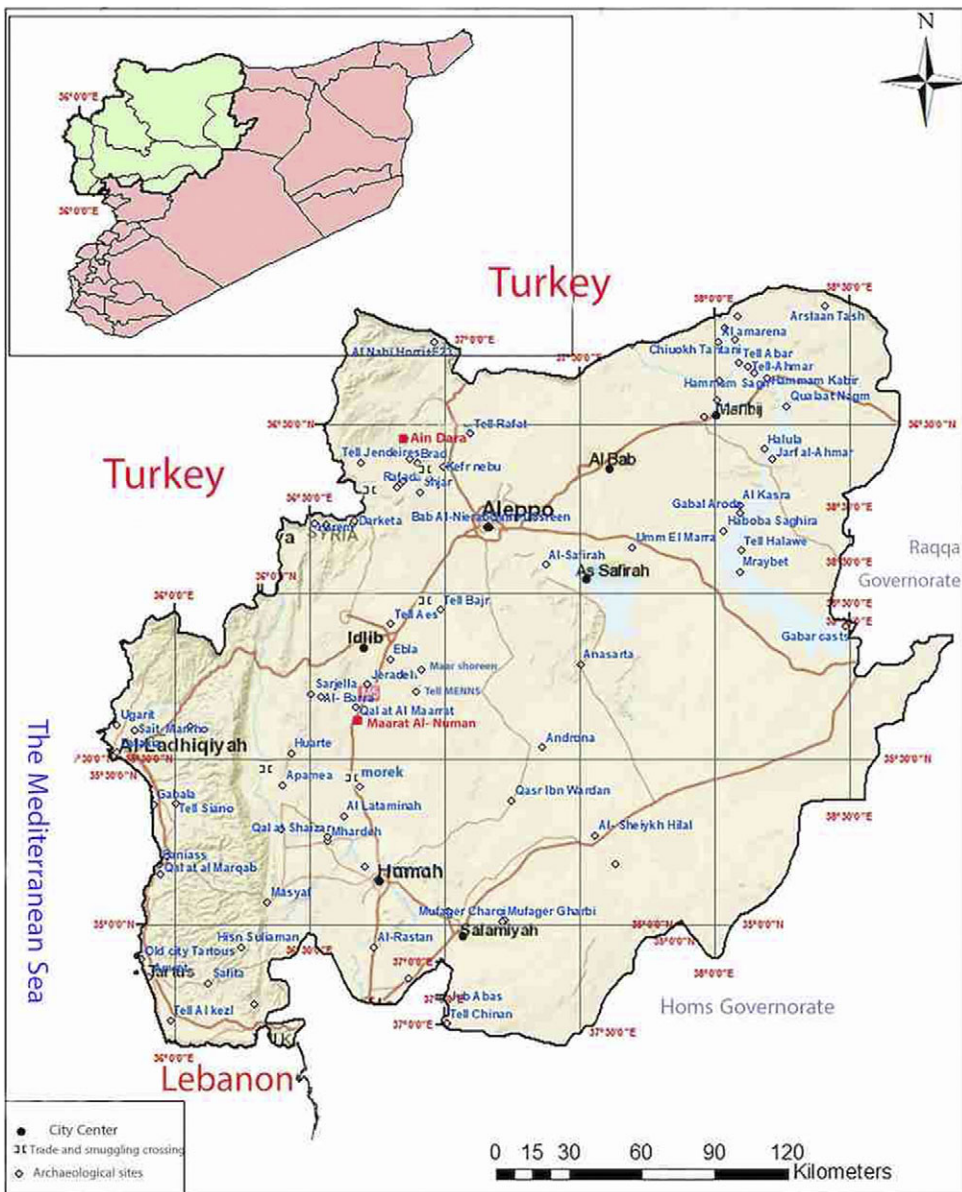


Figure 2. Map of archaeological sites in northwestern Syria (drawn by Ammar Kannawi and Youssef Annan). The locations of Ain Dara and Maarat al-Numan are indicated by red markers and text.

At the beginning of 2020, we (AK and DG) noticed through our work within the SIMAT project<sup>28</sup> that extensive digging operations on the site using heavy machinery had stopped, though not before destroying the surface of the hill and the entire lower town.

<sup>28</sup> Syrians for Heritage (SIMAT) is a non-profit cultural organization based in Berlin, Germany with an operating team in northwest Syria. More information about SIMAT and its activities is available on its website: <https://syriansforheritage.org/> (accessed October 20, 2023).

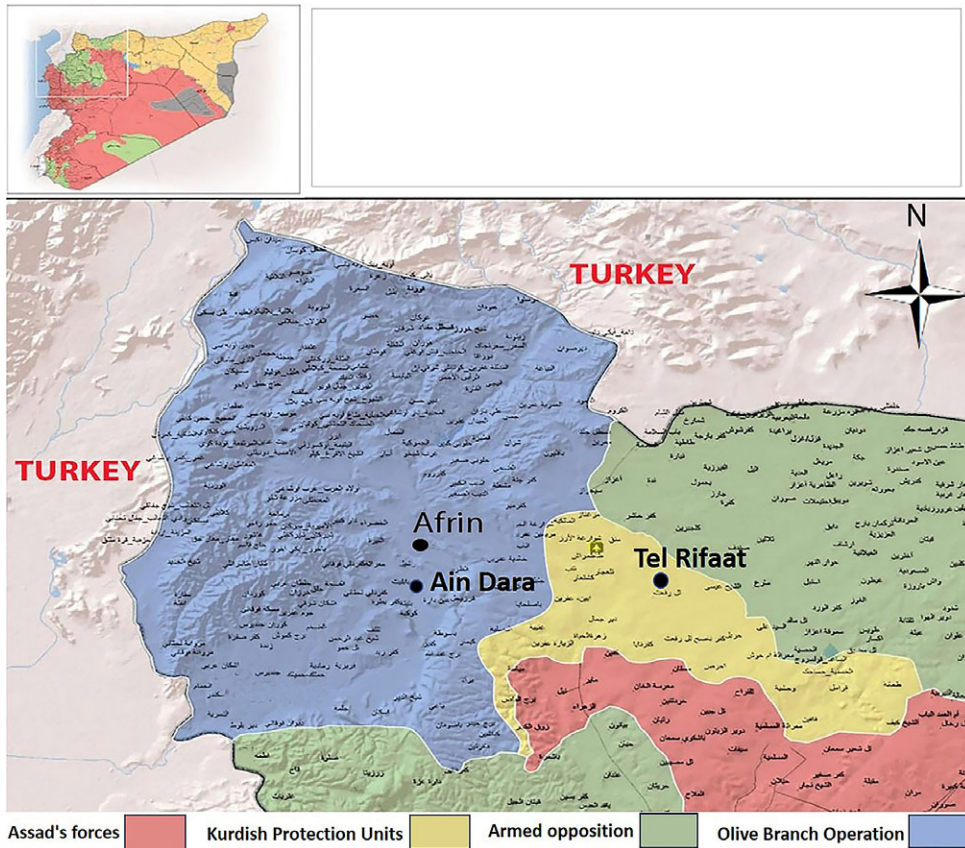


Figure 3. Zones of military control after Operation Olive Branch. (The photograph is available online on the website Jusur lildirasat: 2018-04-01 خريطة النفوذ العسكري في سورية (jusoor.co); accessed 6 April 2024).

The temple had been badly damaged and many previously unknown basalt bas-reliefs had been revealed. Fragments of basalt reliefs that had been destroyed by the 2018 bombardment were found neglected and scattered on the perimeter and slope of the hill. The storage rooms of the mission dig house had been disturbed and the contents of all boxes of artefacts, including those from the prehistoric site Al Dederiyeh, had been emptied onto the floor (Figure 8).

The chaos that followed Operation Olive Branch in 2018 caused discontent and unrest among the local population and concern among civil organizations active in the area, leading to demands for improvements in public security. Subsequently, on September 20, 2020, what is known as the Grievance Response Committee was formed by several military factions in the region,<sup>29</sup> with the aim of restoring property to its rightful owners.<sup>30</sup> The popular rejection of violent and unlawful acts facilitated the implementation of projects and repair works at several archaeological sites within the region, including Ain Dara, where

<sup>29</sup> The Committee for Redressing Grievances was formed as an initiative launched by the Syrian Islamic Council, with the participation of the Sultan Murad, Al-Jabbah Al-Shamiya, and Jaysh Al-Islam factions.

<sup>30</sup> Faham 2020.

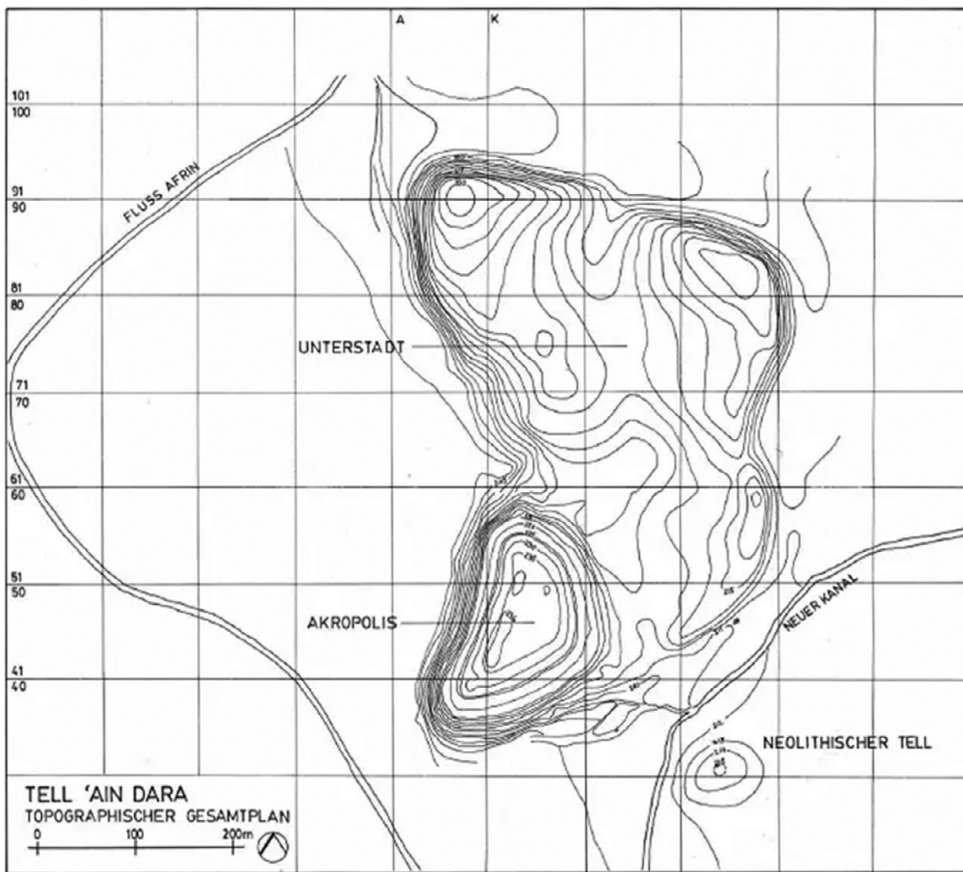


Figure 4. Topographic plan of the Ain Dara site (Novák 2012: 43).

SIMAT and the Idlib Antiquities Center<sup>31</sup> were able to obtain approval and encouragement from one of the most powerful military actors in the region (al-Jabha al-Shamiyya) and the support of the local civic authorities (the local council of Afrin city). Permission was obtained from these organizations for the preparation of a protection plan for the temple and for the preservation of the newly discovered sculptures exposed by the bulldozing and excavation work that had taken place in 2019 and to protect them from theft. As of 2022, this project is still proceeding and will protect the site and preserve it for rehabilitation once the conflict has ended.

<sup>31</sup> The Idlib Antiquities Center is an independent civil society organization operating in northwest Syria, committed to preserving cultural property, cultural heritage, and human rights for all in accordance with international law. The centre was established in July 2012 by a group of archaeologists, workers in the field of antiquities conservation, and legal experts, with the support of Syrian archaeologists in Europe. The main objectives of the Center are to document violations against cultural heritage; organize awareness campaigns in schools and universities; preserve and protect cultural heritage, including architectural sites, monuments, artefacts, and other materials; and prevent the foundations of archaeological sites from collapsing. More information is available on its Facebook site: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064319124222&mibextid=ZbWKwL> (accessed October 20, 2023).



**Figure 5.** Aerial photograph of the mission house at Ain Dara site, with arrows pointing to the modern buildings that were added by the SDF, as well as the location of a training camp established next to the mission house. (Ammar Kannawi/SIMAT 2021).



**Figure 6.** Aerial photograph of the Ain Dara temple showing the damage caused by the aerial bombardment in 2018 (Ammar Kannawi/SIMAT 2021).





Figure 7. Aerial photograph showing the bulldozing work at the Ain Dara site (Ammar Kannawi/SIMAT 2021).



Figure 8. Damage caused to artefacts stored in the warehouse of the mission house at Ain Dara (Ammar Kannawi/SIMAT 2020).

### The theft of the lion statue of Ain Dara

Until 2019, the lion statue, which is remarkable on account of its size and sculptural style, was preserved in its original setting within the archaeological site of Ain Dara. The lion statue weighs 12 tons, with a base length of 2.5 m, a length including the head of 3.30 m, a width of 0.80 m, and a height of 2.70 m.<sup>32</sup> In addition to its size, it has a special importance because of its distinctive sculptural style. It dates to the ninth or eighth century BC and may

<sup>32</sup> Al-Serafy 1960.

have decorated the temple gate with a corresponding lion statue opposite.<sup>33</sup> The theft of a statue as large as the Ain Dara lion is problematic in itself, but is also an unusual occurrence with few precedents during the conflict. It has been argued, for example, that ancient coins and other small antiquities have been targeted by antiquities thieves for theft and easy trafficking.<sup>34</sup> The theft of the lion statue will also have serious repercussions for the local tourist economy as it is expected to cause a decrease in the number of people coming to visit Ain Dara in the future.

Starting in late 2019, news reports began to appear about the theft of the lion statue but they were ambiguous and confusing. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is one of the most important sources of information about human and material violations taking place in Syria, reported that the theft had been committed by Turkish forces.<sup>35</sup> The Athrpress website, quoting the US newspaper the *Herald Tribune*, reported instead that Turkish-backed armed militia had stolen it, though without specifying a specific party or faction.<sup>36</sup> This report also emphasized that the huge size of the statue would have made it impossible to move without specialized lifting and transport equipment. The Directorate of Antiquities of Afrin (a modern directorate established by Kurdish civil groups affiliated with the SDF) published a report containing photographs dating back to July 11, 2019, of sculptures discovered at Ain Dara during clandestine excavations still on site, including an image of the lion lying on the ground, covered with a layer of dirt and with a measuring tape extended on top (Figure 9).<sup>37</sup> One commentator believed the pictured measuring tape might have been acting as a guide for potential buyers and feared that the statue would be broken into smaller parts to facilitate its transportation.<sup>38</sup> These available news reports suggest that the lion statue was stolen by Turkish or allied forces for sale abroad, though they have not been verified. In this paper, we examine and challenge this narrative by presenting the results and conclusions of original research into the statue's theft.

## Methodology

To investigate the theft of the lion statue, we adopted a mixed qualitative methodology for conducting the research, comprising personal observation, a literature review, and a series of semi-structured interviews. One of the authors (AK) has been working since 2020 on the SIMAT project to protect Ain Dara, documenting the damage and conducting emergency interventions to stabilize the temple. Through his work, he has gained access to knowledgeable informants who agreed to be interviewed for this research and, more generally, he has acquired a thorough understanding of the history of looting at Ain Dara. Additionally, a critical review of the academic literature and other open-source materials dealing with the looting of Syrian antiquities since 2011, including satellite imagery, was necessary to supplement and verify the sometimes superficial media reporting and to contextualize the theft of the lion statue. The research protocol was subject to ethical review and approval by the Council for At-Risk Academics.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who are familiar with or connected to the issue of the lion statue's theft in 2019. They had all acted in different capacities either investigating the theft of the statue or witnessing or documenting looting at Ain Dara. The identities of all participants have been anonymized and each participant has

<sup>33</sup> Al-Serafy 1960.

<sup>34</sup> Brodie 2022: 31–34; Brodie and Sabrine 2018: 82.

<sup>35</sup> SOHR 2020b.

<sup>36</sup> Athrpress 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Afrinpost 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Zaher 2020.



**Figure 9.** The lion statue of Ain Dara lying on the ground covered with dirt and a measuring tape placed next to it, which was published on social media 2019. (The photograph is taken from the archive of the Idlib Antiquities Center to document the looting of Syrian antiquities).

been awarded a unique alphanumeric identifier. The participants were divided into three different groups according to the nature of their work:

- *Group 1.* Five archaeologists working in the field of heritage protection. Individual participants were numbered and prefixed with the letter A (archaeologist): AP1–AP5.
- *Group 2.* Two people working in the judiciary and courts. This group was prefixed J (judiciary): JP6–JP7.
- *Group 3.* Three Syrian opposition militia members were active in areas of Turkish control. This group was prefixed M (militia): MP8–MP10.

Interviews were conducted in mid-2022 and all participants were informed of the research topic and objectives, and their participation was dependent upon their voluntary consent. Participants from each group were asked specific questions targeting their relevant area of expertise but were allowed to provide additional information without restriction. It was important to study the theft of the lion statue before too much time had elapsed, while witnesses were readily available and their recollections were fresh. This time sensitivity of research into archaeological looting has been highlighted by recently published recommendations.<sup>39</sup> The interview transcripts and other research-associated materials are being curated in secure storage.

## Analysis

All participants (within all groups) agreed that the theft of the Ain Dara lion statue was unlawful and had been condemned by the local authorities and the local community. Except for MP8, at the time of the interview, all participants were directly associated with the issue of the statue's disappearance. At least one participant in each group held a senior position, meaning that they were talking in a semi-official capacity and their statements should be treated as such. All participants provided mutually comparable information, which from their different occupational perspectives provides a triangulation that confirms the validity of the results.

### *The date of the theft*

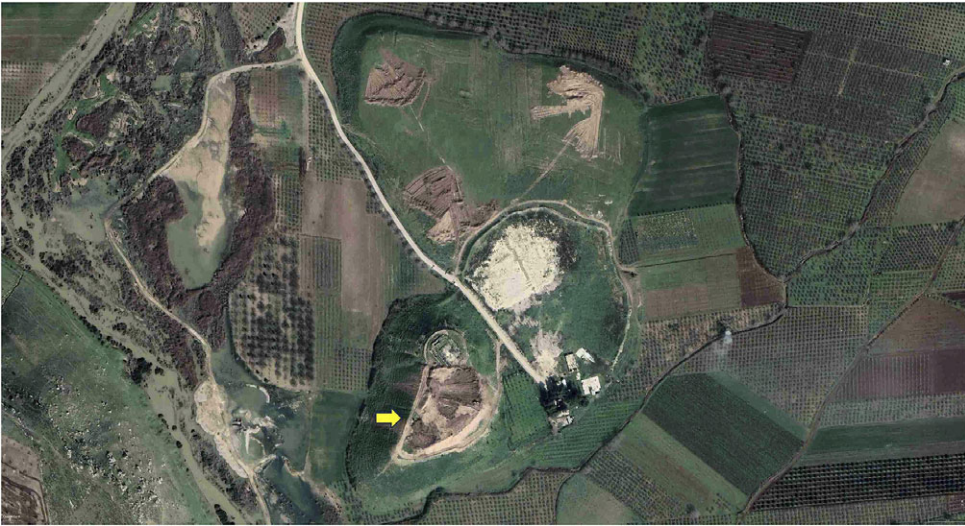
Participants in Group 1 (archaeology, AP1–AP4) witnessed no evidence of looting or secret excavation at the Ain Dara site during their visit there in mid-2018 (that is, several months after the end of Operation Olive Branch) and confirmed that the lion statue was still in place then. They agreed that the theft happened at the end of 2019, though were unable to provide an exact date. Satellite images on Google Earth show that illegal excavations began in February 2019 (Figure 10), extending over the entire acropolis and some small parts of the lower town. These images also show that the lion statue was in place until at least July 14, 2019 (Figure 11), though it had disappeared by September 28, 2019 (Figure 12). Thus, the statue must have been stolen sometime between July and September 2019, which is consistent with the participants' information and media reports that appeared in December 2019.

### *The theft and transport of the statue*

Participants from all three groups stated that five people were involved in stealing the statue. Except for a bulldozer driver, they had all been working in the antiquities trade before 2011 and had the necessary experience and contacts to dispose of the statue. In agreement and complicity with a militia member in charge of the camp at Ain Dara and on the pretext of constructing fortifications, they were able to bulldoze the site's surface and conduct excavations. The bulldozer operator [Khalid]<sup>40</sup> broke the statue into three pieces and buried parts of it in the ground, suggesting it was a new discovery to facilitate the sale process, as confirmed by the image of the statue along with a measuring tape circulating on the Internet in 2019 (Figure 9). This attempt to deceive potential buyers and conceal the known identity of the statue was confirmed by participants AP3 and JP6. The process of breaking the statue into several pieces is a procedure followed in some cases by antiquities

<sup>39</sup> Almoḥamad 2021: 250.

<sup>40</sup> Personal names in square brackets are pseudonyms used to conceal real identities.



**Figure 10.** Satellite image of Ain Dara dated to 25 February 2019 with the arrow pointing to the beginning of excavation and bulldozing work. (Image taken from Google Earth).



**Figure 11.** Satellite image of Ain Dara dated to 14 July 2019 with the arrow pointing to the lion statue still in situ. (Image taken from Google Earth).

thieves, where they resort to dividing a large object into smaller parts to evade inspection and perhaps transfer the antiquity in stages and assemble it later.

After excavation, the statue was sold to [Saeid] from Qalaat Al-Madiq and [Husayn] for either \$3,000 (according to JP7) or \$3,500 (according to MP9). Although the two prices do not match exactly, the sum of money involved is low. In fact, it might not constitute a price at all. It may represent a bribe paid to the complicit militia member in exchange for his permission to move the statue, or perhaps an initial payment to the excavators with an expectation of further payment provided the statue could be smuggled out of Syria and delivered to an



**Figure 12.** Satellite image of Ain Dara dated to 28 Sept 2019 with the arrow pointing to the location of the now stolen lion statue. (Image taken from Google Earth).

outside buyer. The participants indicate that [Saeid] and [Husayn] had agreed with a Lebanese antiquities merchant to transfer the statue and hand it over to him. Most likely, the agreement was based on the image of the statue after it had been buried in the ground on-site without the merchant knowing its true identity. The statue's parts were transported by medium-sized freight trucks loaded with a shipment of carved building stones. The building stones trade is popular in the region and trucks can easily pass through the scattered border inspections. The first destination was a village in the countryside east of Maarat al-Numan (Idlib Governorate), where the statue was buried. The landowner was discovered to be [Yusif], who was engaged in the antiquities trade.

### *The statue's intended destination*

The participants confirmed that the statue was buried east of Maarat al-Numan in preparation for its transfer to Lebanon. The intention to smuggle the statue to Lebanon is not unexpected, as Lebanon is a common transit country for smuggling Syrian antiquities and the main people involved in the theft of the statue had experience in the antiquities trade from before the 2011 revolution. They had long-established communication networks to facilitate smuggling antiquities through government-controlled areas of Syria to Lebanon. AP5 confirmed that [Saeid] is well-known for trading and selling stone antiquities in Lebanon. Although it is known that the statue was moved and temporarily hidden in the countryside east of Maarat al-Numan, it is not known whether it remains buried there or whether it was transferred to Lebanon as planned. From the available information, most of the participants believe that the statue remains buried in Syria and never reached Lebanon.

### *Failure to recover the statue*

As the participants emphasized, efforts made by three different parties to recover the statue after the method of its theft and its location had been revealed failed. The participants agreed that the main reason for this failure was the Syrian government's invasion of the area

where the statue was thought to be hidden. The investigation and search for the statue began in December 2019 or January 2020, during which time the Syrian government, supported by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and allied militias launched a massive attack against Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other opposition factions in northwest Syria under the name Dawn of Idlib 2.<sup>41</sup> The military campaign began on December 19, 2019 and continued until March 2020, causing the displacement of over 700,000 civilians,<sup>42</sup> and culminating with government forces and their allies seizing control of large areas of northwest Syria. By the end of January, the village in which the statue was suspected of being hidden was in the hands of government forces.

As confirmed by participants, we believe another reason for the failure to recover the statue was the inability in the opposition-controlled areas of the administrative and judicial authorities of the FSA and HTS to coordinate their efforts. Investigations into the statue's theft were conducted separately by the FSA in Afrin where the statue was stolen and by HTS in Idlib where the statue was thought to be buried.

### The looting of Syrian antiquities and the inadequate means of protection

Despite the different experiences and perspectives of the participants within the three interview groups, they all emphasized the dangers posed to Syrian cultural heritage by archaeological looting and the need for cooperative efforts to protect it. Protection work should not be limited to archaeologists. Different groups of society must be involved in protection and conservation by raising public awareness of the importance of heritage, as emphasized by the participant (JP2). Participants also pointed out that there is no law or legislation recognized by the current local authorities that protects antiquities<sup>43</sup> and that the weakness of the security system in the region, in addition to the neglect of archaeological heritage by the current authorities, of various political affiliations, greatly contributes to the widespread looting.

The participants highlighted the inadequate response of international organizations tasked with the protection of heritage, especially UNESCO, which, since 2011, has done nothing to support civil society organizations operating in areas outside government control in northwestern Syria. For example, in 2015, UNESCO launched a project that included the establishment of the Observatory for Syrian Cultural Heritage in Beirut (ESSHP) for an initial period of three years supported by €2.5 million funding from the European Union and later extended,<sup>44</sup> which was criticized for focusing solely on important sites.<sup>45</sup> However, we believe that another reason for the failure of this UNESCO project was its focus on working with the DGAM and ignoring the civil organizations working to protect heritage in areas outside governmental control, which was the case in most conflict areas where protection was urgently needed.

As another example of the failure of this international policy regime, we (AK, DG, SAQ) can talk about our personal experience while working on a project to protect the Idlib Museum, inventory its holdings, and identify looted pieces, which we carried out through SIMAT in cooperation with the Idlib Antiquities Center. One of the most important results of this project was the preparation of a list of 5,550 looted objects registered in the museum's

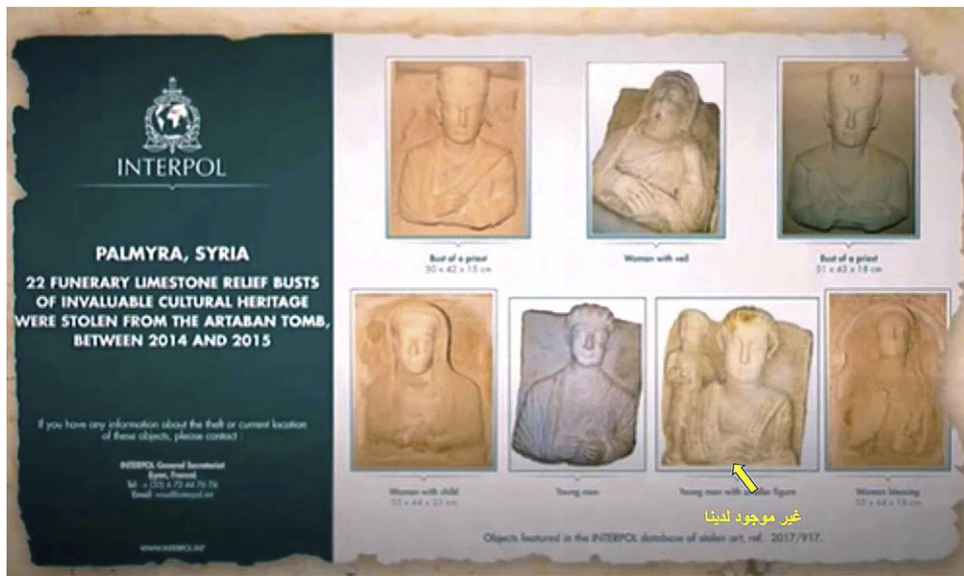
<sup>41</sup> Ergin 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat 2020.

<sup>43</sup> The current courts in the northwestern regions of Syria still recognize the Syrian Antiquities Law No. 222 of 1963 in terms of defining what is archaeological and what are the boundaries of an archaeological site. However, it ignores the penalties for trespassing on archaeological sites and considers them inequitable.

<sup>44</sup> UNESCO 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Brodie 2015: 319.



**Figure 13.** The INTERPOL notice of the Palmyrene sculptures looted from the tomb of Artaban. (Available at the ICOM International Observatory on Illicit Traffic in Cultural Goods at [https://www.obs-traffic.museum/sites/default/files/ressources/files/INTERPOL\\_Poster\\_Palmyra\\_2017.pdf](https://www.obs-traffic.museum/sites/default/files/ressources/files/INTERPOL_Poster_Palmyra_2017.pdf)); accessed 6 April 2024).

records, including 1,550 cuneiform tablets from the bronze age site of Ebla.<sup>46</sup> (These numbers include only artefacts with museum numbers). Although we tried to supply Interpol with this information to add to their Stolen Works of Art Database,<sup>47</sup> it was not possible, as Interpol cannot accept information from civil society organizations and could not make exceptions for the specificity of a civil conflict such as the one in Syria. This absence of international support has greatly impeded the process of saving and searching for the holdings of the Idlib Museum. It cannot take place at the present time and there is no reason to believe that the task will be any easier in the future.

### Cases of looting similar to that of the Ain Dara lion statue

The illegal excavation of Syrian antiquities has markedly worsened since 2011, with the aim of recovering new, unregistered, or unknown artefacts that are easy to sell and trade after concealing their origin. The case of the Ain Dara lion statue is an unusual example of the theft of a well-known and documented antiquity, but it is not the only one. There are several other examples of important and documented antiquities being stolen from previously excavated sites or museums. Such thefts were repeated on a large scale as civil unrest and conflict spread through Syria, and many museums were subjected to acts of theft and looting of varying severity.<sup>48</sup>

Possibly the most egregious case was the theft of Palmyrene sculptures from the tomb of Artaban in the city of Palmyra, which were reported lost in 2014 by the DGAM, with Interpol publishing a note including pictures of seven of the stolen sculptures (Figure 13).

<sup>46</sup> SIMAT 2020b.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Cultural-heritage-crime/Stolen-Works-of-Art-Database> (accessed October 20, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> Ali 2020.





**Figure 14.** Palmyrene sculptures from the tomb of Artaban after recovery and curation in the Idlib Museum (Ammar Kannawi/SIMAT 2020).

It was later found that these sculptures had been removed from Palmyra during the period of government control and transferred through the Da'esh-controlled areas in the Syrian Badia to Idlib Governorate, which, when they arrived there in 2016, was under the control of various armed opposition factions. By the time the sculptures arrived in Idlib in 2016, the publication of images and the Interpol memorandum had discouraged their sale outside Syria and they remained hidden in Idlib until 2019 when members of the Idlib Antiquities Center managed to recover them and deposited them in the Idlib Museum (Figure 14).<sup>49</sup>

The itinerary of these Palmyrene sculptures demonstrates the ability of antiquities dealers and smugglers to move easily through different areas of political or military control in cooperation with military or militia authorities that can provide them with safe passage as part of the various smuggling deals. Despite the hostile relations between government-controlled areas and HTS-controlled areas in Idlib, smugglers and traders established extensive smuggling networks in coordination with militias and government military personnel, who were able to move freely in military vehicles to ensure the transfer of prohibited materials such as antiquities, oil, and drugs between the two areas, and the

<sup>49</sup> SIMAT 2020c.



**Figure 15.** A group of cuneiform tablets looted from a Syrian museum in the possession of an antiquities dealer in Idlib (Ammar Kannawi).

transport of people returning from Lebanon or defecting from the Syrian government forces.<sup>50</sup> It also happened at Qalaat al-Madiq, Morek, and Al-Eis crossing.<sup>51</sup>

We believe that the case of the Artaban tomb sculptures is similar to that of the Ain Dara lion statue. The disclosure of the theft and the attendant publicity made known the stolen pieces and thus reduced their saleability. In addition, the fact that the parties concerned with the protection of heritage did not neglect to investigate the theft contributed greatly to their recovery and restoration after three years of work. Similarly, for the Ain Dara lion statue, although efforts to recover the statue have so far failed, the case has not been neglected or abandoned. There is still a chance that the statue will be recovered, as happened with the Palmyrene sculptures.<sup>52</sup>

The Ain Dara lion and the Artaban sculptures were transported to Idlib Governorate, highlighting the importance of Idlib as a market for the antiquities trade inside Syria and ongoing trade and transport across the Lebanese or Turkish borders to buyers outside Syria. Many experienced traders in Idlib Governorate have been active since before 2011, especially in the villages east of Maarat al-Numan, such as Tell Manis, Maar Shoreen, and those of the al-Ghab Plain, especially Qalaat al-Madiq. After 2011, these traders benefited from the uncertain political situation in the Idlib region, which was subject to the fluctuating control of several military factions that were not able to ensure security until HTS took control of the area in January 2017. Unfortunately, HTS did not prioritize the protection of archaeological heritage; on the contrary, it became involved in looting and clandestine excavations. These factors made Idlib an open market for the illegal antiquities trade.

<sup>50</sup> Cengiz 2022: 144–145.

<sup>51</sup> Alshaami 2021.

<sup>52</sup> While in storage at Idlib Museum, in June 2021 the Artaban tomb sculptures were threatened with destruction by non-Syrian jihadist elements under the pretext that they were idols. Although some media outlets reported that the sculptures had been destroyed, this was not the case. The sculptures were hidden in a timely manner by members of the Idlib Antiquities Center and SIMAT, and remained safe.

For another example of the role of Idlib as a market for the trade of antiquities, our (AK) private sources inform us about an insufficiently documented incident of an antiquities dealer from the city of Sarmada on the Turkish border trying to promote antiquities in his possession in 2020, among which was a group of cuneiform tablets bearing inventory numbers (Figure 15). We believe that these numbers and the pieces in his possession are from the Raqqa Museum and had been looted sometime after 2013.

## Conclusions

In terms of objectives and methods, the theft of the Ain Dara lion statue was no different from the looting of other objects that had been taking place in Syria since 2011. What was different was the response of the local authorities to the theft, who took measures aimed at criminalizing the theft of the statue and attempting to recover it. The authorities were forced to take steps aimed at recovery from the disturbed political situation in the region, with its attendant and widespread violations against people and public and private property. The media were active in raising the issue, mobilizing public opinion to embarrass the authorities, and forcing them to act. In confirmation of this, we note that the local authorities tried and convicted two people for the theft of the statue, but no prosecutions have been brought against those responsible for the extensive looting that took place across the entire site of Ain Dara.

Despite the positive role played by the media, the case of the lion statue theft confirms the ambiguity of media reporting when conveying news of looting and emphasizes the need for critical evaluation. Often the media are simply reporting hearsay but sometimes they are clearly politicized. In this case, media reports accusing Turkey of stealing the statue or transferring it to an area under its control have proven false. Despite the large number of Syrian antiquities being smuggled through Turkey, as confirmed by many studies and reports,<sup>53</sup> the participants' information confirmed that the intended destination for the lion statue was Lebanon. The statue was first moved to Idlib Governorate, where it was buried, as we have described, in a village east of Maarat al-Numan, in preparation for its transfer to Lebanon via smuggling routes that pass through the areas controlled by the Syrian government. But changes in territorial control at the beginning of 2020 as government forces and their allies advanced into new areas disrupted these previously-established smuggling routes, and thus inhibited the task of moving the statue, especially after government forces took control of the village where the statue was buried.

The case of the Ain Dara lion statue provides an important example of how civil society organizations and individuals can act to protect heritage in the absence of official authority during conflict. Although the lion statue was stolen, the active involvement of civil society organizations meant that the theft did not go undetected or unpunished, and the statue could not be sold. Hopefully, due to this involvement, the statue will be recovered. However, this protective role of civil society organizations, despite its importance, is still limited due to the extent of the region's archaeological heritage and the large number of violations taking place. It is regrettable that the international community and international institutions concerned with the protection of cultural heritage, especially UNESCO, ignore these civil society organizations. This international failure is a sorry consequence of the stagnation of international policies regarding heritage protection in times of armed conflict. The Syrian situation, with its political and military division,

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<sup>53</sup> Cengiz 2022.

requires greater flexibility and the involvement of different civil society actors in heritage preservation. Most humanitarian NGOs operating internationally have adopted a remotely managed localization approach.<sup>54</sup> Locally-led initiatives have the advantage of better access and richer networks within the concerned communities. They also have a better understanding of the cultural and geopolitical contexts. UNESCO and similar international governmental organizations should consider the utility of such localized bottom-up approaches in conflict areas. This research has shown the benefits of involving local actors who could cultivate the trust of informants through their deep community connections and demonstrated commitment to heritage preservation. Preservation cannot be limited only to the internationally recognized national organizations, which, in this case, is the DGAM, as it does not have any authority or presence on the ground in the northwestern regions of Syria.<sup>55</sup>

Entrenched international policies do not bear sole responsibility for the failure of cultural heritage protection in Syria. The laws in force in Syria do not involve local communities with cultural heritage. Heritage protection must grow from individual engagement through to community participation.<sup>56</sup> Civil alienation from heritage will inevitably weaken its protection. Therefore, we must work to develop recognition that heritage is culturally and economically important for the individual and society and work to spread awareness of the importance of heritage, starting from the early school stages, publishing pamphlets about heritage and the need to preserve it within school curricula, introducing more about Syrian antiquities and their role in serving the community, and developing the local economy.

In conclusion, we were able, through this research, to provide documented and verifiable information about the impact of war on the looting of Syrian antiquities and to demystify the disappearance of the Ain Dara lion statue, revealing the mechanisms of its theft and trade and identifying the parties concerned. Because of the publicity and changes in military and political control, we believe that the statue remains buried east of Maarat al-Numan and that its smuggling to Lebanon is now unlikely. We have not published all the information we collected during this project since what is not published might be helpful for any future efforts to recover the statue.<sup>57</sup> We hope that this research will be a catalyst for similar projects that might identify and investigate other stolen Syrian antiquities – for example, from the Idlib Museum and the Raqqa Museum – to facilitate their future recovery before it is too late and the witnesses are lost or their memories fail.

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<sup>54</sup> Elkahlout and Elgibali 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Alnabo 2024.

<sup>56</sup> Jammo no date.

<sup>57</sup> Recovering the statue is one aim of a project carried out by SIMAT to document and protect the Ain Dara sculptures revealed by the excavation and bulldozing work that took place in 2019. The project has succeeded in securing some of the sculptures that had been prepared for looting and instituted measures to protect them. SIMAT still refrains from publishing any details regarding the project because of the potential risks and threats as the conflict continues in the region, and Ain Dara remains under the control of military factions. One of SIMAT’s priorities in the next stage of the project will be to work on recovering the Ain Dara lion statue, using the information obtained through this research.

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