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Twenty-three arrests and around 10,000 cultural items seized

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Twenty-three arrests and around 10,000 cultural items seized

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- 1 On 18 November, 2019, an international police operation involving over 350 police officers, supported by Europol (within the framework of EMPACT) and Eurojust, dismantled an international organized crime group involved in large-scale trafficking of looted archaeological items resulting in the arrest of 23 individuals, 80 house searches, and the seizure of around 10,000 cultural items, including hundreds of figurative terracottas. Operation Achei, as it was called, was led by the Italian Carabinieri Department for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (Carabinieri) supported by Europol and Eurojust, the French OCBC (Office central de lutte contre le trafic de biens culturels), the German Bavarian LKA (Bayerisches Landeskriminalamt), the Serbian Criminal Investigations Directorate, and the British Metropolitan Police Service – London. The investigation began in 2017 to fight the looting of archaeological sites in Calabria, southern Italy, where the cultural heritage includes important Greek and Roman sites.
- 2 The investigations revealed that the illegal excavations were managed by a well-structured organized crime group able to carry out all phases of the trafficking. The different rings of the network, led by two Calabrians living in the province of Croton, included looters, fences, intermediaries, and mules operating from different Italian regions. The key facilitators were also acting from Djion, Munich, London, and Vršac coordinating the supply chain. The damage caused to the Italian cultural heritage by this criminal group is very significant since the criminals were looting archaeological sites for many years.
- 3 Europol Analysis Project FURTUM supported the investigation by coordinating the information exchange, holding several operational meetings, preparing the action day and providing on-the-spot analytical support in Italy to cross-check operational information against Europol's databases. Eurojust supported the execution of the European Investigation Orders and arranged a coordination center to follow the action in real-time.

Fig. 1. Carabinieri Department for the Protection of Cultural Heritage and Europol personnel survey looted artifacts



Photo: Courtesy Europol

Fig. 2. Looted terracotta figurine



Photo: Courtesy Europol

Fig. 3. Artifacts looted from south Italian sites



Photo: Courtesy Europol

ABSTRACTS

On 18 November 2019, an international police operation involving over 350 police officers, supported by Europol (within the framework of EMPACT) and Eurojust, dismantled an international organized crime group involved in large-scale trafficking of looted archaeological items resulting in the arrest of 23 individuals, 80 house searches, and the seizure of around 10,000 cultural items, including hundreds of figurative terracottas.

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Keywords: Operation Achei, archaeological looting, Europol, Eurojust, Croton, Calabria.

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