



Networks, Antiquities, and Black-market Users

Quarterly Report (Q1 2026)

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NABU Project: Networks, Antiquities, and Black-market Users

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About the Authors

This report was produced by **Turaath Tech**, a research and development firm working at the intersection of technology and cultural heritage protection. Turaath Tech focuses on investigating the online trade in cultural goods, developing tools for large-scale data collection and analysis, and supporting efforts to identify and disrupt illicit trafficking networks. Its work combines technical methodologies including web scraping and data analysis with domain expertise in cultural heritage governance. Through projects like NABU, Turaath Tech aims to generate actionable insights for researchers, policymakers, and law enforcement in North Africa and West Asia, while contributing to broader efforts to improve transparency and accountability for cultural objects.

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Yazeed El Jinini is Director of Operations at Turaath Tech and co-author of the NABU Project report series. He oversees organisational strategy, partnerships, and the implementation of research initiatives. His work focuses on translating research outputs into operational and strategic frameworks, including the development of partnerships and institutional collaborations that support the sustainability and impact of Turaath Tech's work.

Executive Summary

The NABU Project is a 12-month research initiative spanning 2026 and dedicated to documenting the circulation of material culture from Iraq across the open web. The first phase of the project, covered in this report, focuses on the online, Saudi-based marketplace Athar Sale, which is self-described as “the first Arab market for buying and selling ancient artifacts” (Athar 2020a).

NABU project aims to address the resource gap faced by Iraqi heritage management authorities, such as the Antiquities Police and the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, in monitoring online sources at scale. By collecting and analysing large volumes of publicly available data, the project seeks to produce structured documentation, identify high-risk sellers and listings, and generate actionable intelligence for Iraqi partners. Research focused on listings of objects presented by sellers as being older than 200 years or of particular cultural or artistic significance, which would therefore be subject to Iraqi legislation on the protection of antiquities (Law No. 55 of 2002 for the Antiquities & Heritage of Iraq 2002).

Key Findings

Analysis of the Athar Sale platform as of March 2026 revealed a heavily stratified market where activity is concentrated among a small core of sellers:

Seller Concentration: Out of 22,161 registered “shops” (seller accounts), 84% (18,625 accounts) had not listed any objects, and only 0.24% (53 accounts) had listed 10 or more objects. This long-tail distribution indicates that a small number of high-volume sellers drive a disproportionately large share of the overall supply.

Geographic Distribution: None of the high-volume seller accounts (those with 10 or more listings) were found to be based in Iraq. High-volume sellers are instead concentrated in a small number of geographic hubs, with Egypt dominating by a significant margin.

Listing Growth and Concentration: During the data collection period (2 February until 2 March 2026), active listings increased by 6.9% (from 5,533 to 5,917). This growth was heavily concentrated in numismatic and philatelic material (coins and stamps), which increased their market share from 46.7% to 49.3%.

Iraqi Seller Presence: Out of the 5,917 collected listings, only 46 were published by seller accounts based in Iraq; of these, 24 were flagged through manual review of being in potential violation of Iraq’s Law 55 (2002).


Case Studies and Risk Indicators

Four case studies were defined which contain ‘red flag’ indicators consistent with potentially illicit activity present to varying degrees across the entire dataset:

Case 1: Alleged 1,000-Year-Old Kufic Qur’an. This listing was posted by a one-time seller (AS-06) and showed an absence of provenance documentation and an informal pricing structure (no listed asking price with the seller requesting direct contact from potential buyers).

Case 2: Multi-Object Seller with Long-Distance Indicators. Seller AS-09’s profile is ostensibly based in Iraq, but they have provided a Spanish telephone number for potential buyers. The listing contains an unusual grouping of multiple diverse objects and indicators of an international link, suggesting cross-border operations.

Case 3: Multi-Coin Seller with Regional Indicators. Seller AS-10 listed their location as “Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Türkiye” with a Syrian phone number. This suggests a regionally concentrated sphere of trade, enabling the sale of multiple coins from the Ilkhanid period.



Case 4: Cross-Platform Listing of “an Old Book.” This listing was published by a recent member of Athar Sale (having just opened their account in January 2026) and was the only listing among those examined to have been cross-posted to another platform. Seller AS-18 shared the object in a looting-oriented Facebook group, which suggests an attempt to either legitimate the object, get more information on it, or identify a potential buyer.

Based on the research dataset and framed by the case studies, the report identified a consolidated set of ten risk indicators for future detection of potentially illicit listings, including representation of the object as an antiquity, absence of provenance, limited descriptive/photographic information, informal pricing, and the presence of international link indicators.

Key Recommendations

The report offers targeted recommendations for different stakeholders. For the platform (Athar Sale), we recommend implementing identity verification and stricter requirements for sellers listing antiquities and developing procedures for information sharing with national and international authorities. For policymakers and regulatory authorities in Saudi Arabia (as the governing jurisdiction of Athar Sale), we suggest requiring platforms to implement due diligence measures for cultural property listings, including minimum information requirements. For cultural heritage authorities in Iraq, we recommend prioritising platforms with a stronger presence of Iraq-based sellers over Athar Sale but adopting an indicator-based monitoring framework to prioritise investigations into possible illicit activity on any platform.

About the NABU Project



The NABU Project is a 12-month research initiative (January–December 2026) documenting the circulation of ancient and Islamic-period material culture originating in Iraq across the open web.

Heritage management authorities in Iraq – including the Antiquities Police, the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), and museum officials – often lack the resources to monitor open online sources at scale. The NABU Project addresses this gap by collecting and analysing large volumes of publicly available data, producing structured datasets and analytical outputs that expand documentation of Iraqi material culture and support research into objects removed from their archaeological and historical contexts.

The project responds to a broader issue in the documentation of Iraqi artifacts: while large numbers of cultural objects circulate online, many are poorly recorded or entirely absent from the historical record. Previous research has largely focused on major social media platforms, English-language marketplaces, and established auction houses (Al-Azm and Paul 2019; Brodie and Manivet 2017; Topçuoğlu 2019). In contrast, the NABU Project investigates niche platforms operating primarily in Arabic and serving regional user communities. Structured across four quarters, each focusing on a different platform, the project's first phase (presented in this report) analyses the online marketplace Athar Sale – self-described as “the first Arab market for buying and selling ancient artifacts” (Athar 2020a).

The project does not make judgments regarding artifact authenticity, but it does prioritise objects represented by sellers as older than 200 years and therefore subject to Law No. 55 (2002) for the Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq. Research focuses on artifacts attributed to Iraq or offered by sellers based in Iraq, spanning ancient and Islamic periods. These include coins, votive sculptures, ceramics, metalwork, and manuscripts, among other object types, which are often listed at price points accessible to international buyers.

The methodological core of the project is the systematic collection and structuring of data from publicly accessible websites using Python-based web scrapers. These tools gather information from thousands of listings, including object descriptions, seller identifiers, prices, publication metadata, comments, and references to provenance, geography, materials, and historical periods.

The data are then analysed with the following project objectives in mind:

- Identify 100 unique sellers involved in the online sale of Iraqi artifacts
- Identify risk indicators to inform an automated mechanism for flagging suspicious listings
- Produce actionable intelligence for Iraqi partners, compiled in quarterly reports

Beginning with this report, the NABU Project will generate a growing body of structured documentation (in both English and Arabic) on Iraqi artifacts circulating online. By recording not only the objects themselves but also the ways they are described and contextualised, the project contributes to broader scholarly and policy-oriented efforts to understand and protect the material heritage of Iraq and the broader region.

More information on the project can be found at www.turaath.tech/nabu-project.

Data and Methodology



This report draws on data collected during Q1 2026 as part of a broader effort to document the online circulation of Iraqi material culture. Data were collected from the Athar Sale website using a simple Python-based web scraper. The tool was developed to respect the operation of the source platform; rate limiting prevented overloading the host and no evasive measures were taken to access private or restricted data. The resulting dataset consists of object listings, seller account details, and interactive behaviour such as comments, 'likes', and 'wish lists.' The tool systematically captured large volumes of publicly available content, followed by manual review which allowed for closer inspection of relevant posts, verification of object types, and identification of patterns that are not easily detectable through automated methods alone.

Data were collected from the following object categories, found to be most likely to contain listings relevant to the present study:

- jewellery and accessories
- books and manuscripts
- old paintings and handicrafts
- old coins and stamps
- miscellaneous
- antiques (subcategory of 'antique furniture and household antiques')

The dataset includes archaeological, historic, and contemporary objects. While not all items raise clear legal or ethical concerns, their inclusion is important for understanding the broader systems within which illicit material circulates (Leeson et al. 2025a).

As with all research based on open data, the dataset reflects what is publicly accessible rather than the full scope of activity. Completed transactions, off-platform communications, and private content remain beyond the reach of this study. The findings presented here should therefore be understood as indicative of observable patterns rather than exhaustive documentation of the trade. To assess platform growth and shifts in listing distribution during the research period, data were collected in three rounds (2 February, 16 February, and 2 March 2026). The findings presented in this report draw on the most recent dataset (2 March 2026), except where noted.

Ethical and Legal Safeguards

This report and the accompanying dataset have been prepared to minimise potential harm and ensure compliance with applicable legal frameworks. All data were collected from publicly accessible online platforms for non-commercial, research purposes. Web scraping was conducted in Jordan, targeting a Saudi-based platform, on behalf of a company registered in Portugal. The process did not involve bypassing technical protections, accessing private accounts, or violating any known laws, and focused solely on content visible to any user. No direct links to listings are provided, and no identifiable personal information has been included in either the report or the dataset. Where necessary, details have been intentionally generalised or omitted to avoid inadvertently promoting or facilitating the circulation of potentially illicit material. Seller identifiers in the dataset have been pseudonymised: while this preserves the ability to track patterns of activity across multiple listings, it prevents attribution to identifiable individuals.

Images reproduced in this report from online listings have been blurred or partially obscured. Their inclusion is intended solely to document the existence and presentation of listings identified during monitoring. Visual details have been reduced to prevent promotion or commercial use, and images are provided only as contextual evidence for the analysis.

These measures collectively ensure that the methodology and data presentation adhere to responsible research practices, respect privacy, and remain within the bounds of legal and ethical standards across the jurisdictions involved.

Data Availability

All public data underlying this report – including the dataset and Python scripts – have been made openly available online. This is intended to support transparency, reproducibility, and further research on the circulation of cultural material in digital environments.

<https://github.com/turaath-tech/nabu-project>

However, as indicated above, certain data fields, including direct listing and image URLs, have been excluded from the public dataset to reduce the risk of tracing or recirculating objects. The dataset is structured to support analysis of patterns and behaviours, rather than identification of individual listings. An unrestricted version of the dataset can be made available to relevant authorities, qualified researchers, and heritage management stakeholders upon request and includes listing URLs, image URLs, and identifying information associated with seller accounts.

Legal Framework



To define what constitutes 'licit' and 'illicit' activity in this context and to guide the monitoring of potentially problematic online listings, this section briefly outlines the legal framework governing the circulation of cultural goods in Iraq.

Iraq's legal framework for the protection, ownership, and trade of cultural heritage is grounded in national law and informed by international norms. Antiquities and Heritage Law No. 55 of 2002 is the principal statute governing archaeological and heritage objects. Under this law, all antiquities in Iraq (defined as movable and immovable objects over 200 years old and heritage materials less than 200 years old with historical, national, religious, or artistic value) are considered property of the State unless formally registered with the Antiquity Authority (the SBAH) (Law No. 55 of 2002 for the Antiquities & Heritage of Iraq 2002).

Law No. 55, particularly Articles 17 and 22, makes clear that possession, sale, gifting, transportation, and removal of antiquities or heritage materials without written authorisation and proper registration violate Iraqi law. It also explicitly prohibits the sale or export of antiquities and cultural heritage items from Iraq except under narrowly defined conditions (such as official purposes for research, conservation, or sanctioned exhibitions).

In addition to domestic law, Iraq is a party to international conventions aimed at preventing illicit trafficking in cultural property. For example, Iraq has ratified the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970), which obliges State Parties to prohibit and prevent the illicit trade of cultural property and to cooperate for the restitution and return of illegally exported items (UNESCO 1970). Iraq's 2002 legislation implements aspects of these obligations, reinforcing prohibitions on unauthorised transfers and establishing mechanisms for confiscation and repatriation where unlawful removal is demonstrated.

In terms of enforcement, the implementation and execution of antiquities laws is primarily overseen by the SBAH, which regulates archaeological sites, museums, and the circulation of cultural property, and defines what is considered licit or illicit. Enforcement on the ground is carried out by the Iraqi Antiquities Police, a specialised unit tasked with preventing looting, investigating trafficking, and supporting seizures (Law No. 55 of 2002 for the Antiquities & Heritage of Iraq 2002). Broader support comes from the Ministry of Interior and the Iraqi Customs Authority, which handle criminal investigations and border controls. Together, these bodies implement Iraq's legal framework for heritage protection, though enforcement can vary depending on capacity and local conditions.

Collectively, this legal framework provides a basis for distinguishing lawful commercial activity from suspicious or potentially illicit conduct. Understanding these legal parameters is essential for interpreting online marketplace data in a way that aligns with Iraqi statutory and international cultural property protections.

Treatment of Authenticity and Potential Counterfeits

Authenticity cannot be conclusively determined from publicly available listing data. We do not conduct physical examinations, materials testing, or independent provenance verification of any objects. Accordingly, no definitive determinations are made as to whether a specific object is genuine, looted, or counterfeit. Instead, listings are assessed using observable risk indicators and treated according to how they have been presented by the seller. Objects described as authentic antiquities are evaluated against the requirements of Iraqi law, which restricts the sale and export of antiquities older than 200 years and presumes state ownership in the absence of lawful registration. Should the object be presented as an antiquity but in fact be counterfeit, this would also violate Law No. 55 (2002), particularly Article 22 which states “It is forbidden to counterfeit or imitate antiquities” (“لا يجوز تزوير أو تقليد المادة الأثرية”); thus, the circulation of replicas and possible forgeries remains operationally relevant and, further, can obscure illicit trade patterns and complicate enforcement assessment.

Listings explicitly described as modern replicas, copies, or imitations are not excluded from analysis. While these may reflect genuine modern manufacture, they may also serve to reduce scrutiny or create ambiguity around authentic objects of illicit origin. These listings are assessed in context, including seller behaviour, pricing patterns, and cross-posting activity.

Throughout this report, an absence of provenance, export authorisation, or documentation is treated as a risk indicator. One of Athar Sale’s structured data fields asks: “Is there an evaluation certificate for the piece,” (“هل يوجد شهادة تقييم للقطعة”) to which each listing must indicate a response in the positive or negative. However, it is unclear what is meant by “evaluation certificate” and whether this refers to documentation verifying the object’s authenticity or condition, or if it refers to other materials demonstrating provenance, ownership rights, or right of export or sale.

Athar Sale also makes mention of a “prohibited materials policy” (“سياسة المواد المحظورة”) in its Terms and Conditions to which users must adhere, but no further information on this policy can be found on the platform (Athar 2020b).

Lastly, this report frames findings in terms of ‘indicators consistent with potential illicit trade,’ rather than categorical conclusions. The project applies a structured, risk-based analytical framework focused on behavioural and documentary indicators rather than concrete judgements.

Platform Overview: Athar Sale

Athar Sale, or simply “Athar,” is an online marketplace where authenticated users list objects for sale in one of the following categories: antique furniture and household antiques (“اثاث و تحف منزلية قديمة”), old coins and stamps (“عملات و طوابع قديمة”), old paintings and handicrafts (“لوحات و أعمال يدوية قديمة”), books and manuscripts (“كتب و مخطوطات”), jewellery and accessories (“مجوهرات و اكسسوارات”), old cars (“سيارات قديمة”), and miscellaneous (“متفرقات”). The managing authority of the platform is unclear, but the site’s Terms and Conditions refer to legal obligations of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), so it is likely to be registered in Saudi Arabia and/or run by a Saudi team (Athar 2020b). The website’s footer includes the credit “One of the projects of the Etqan Group” (“احدى مشاريع مجموعة إتقان”) but it is similarly unclear whether this signifies ownership, management, or just technical development of the e-commerce platform. To avoid incorrect assumptions of ownership or affiliation, we refer to both the website and managing authority as “Athar Sale” throughout this report, distinguishing between the platform and the owner where necessary.

As of 16 February 2026, there are 22,161 “shops” on Athar Sale, representing seller accounts. 84% (18,625) have not listed any objects, while 12.5% (2,771 accounts) have listed just one object. Only 0.24% (53) have listed 10 or more objects; for the purposes of research into trafficking behaviour, these are particularly important as they represent high-volume sellers. However, manual analysis determined that none of these high-volume accounts are based in Iraq, indicating that while Athar Sale is a popular and active platform, it does not appear to be a common venue for Iraqi dealers.

Table 1 illustrates the number of sellers grouped by listing volume for every account with 10 or more listings. Each row represents a group of seller accounts with the same number of listings: the first column indicates how many accounts fall into that group, the second column indicates the number of listings per account, and the third column shows where those sellers are based. For instance, there is one seller account with 219 listings, and it is based in Egypt; similarly, there are three accounts which each have 17 listings, and they are based in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt. We discovered during a manual examination of the source that the number of listings each shop has is different on the shops landing page compared to each sellers’ account profile; it is possible that the discrepancy is due to deactivated listings that have not been updated on sellers’ profiles. For the purposes of this research, we have opted to use the figure indicated on the shops landing page, which presumably also includes removed listings.

# of sellers	# of listings	geographic distribution
1	219	Egypt
1	126	Morocco
1	91	Türkiye
1	86	Egypt
1	84	Saudi Arabia
1	57	Egypt
1	53	Egypt
1	46	Jordan
1	45	Saudi Arabia
1	41	Egypt
1	39	Egypt
1	37	Egypt
1	33	Egypt
3	32	Morocco; Egypt (2)
1	29	Egypt
1	27	Finland
1	25	Saudi Arabia
1	24	Saudi Arabia
2	23	Egypt; Saudi Arabia
1	22	Algeria
2	20	Egypt (2)
4	19	Saudi Arabia; Egypt (2); Jordan
2	18	Austria; Egypt
3	17	Saudi Arabia; Syria; Egypt
3	15	Egypt; Mexico; Algeria
5	14	Saudi Arabia (2); Egypt (2); Morocco
2	13	Yemen; Saudi Arabia
6	12	Egypt (2); Syria (2); Jordan (2)
5	11	Saudi Arabia (2); Egypt (2); Jordan
4	10	Egypt (2); Syria; Austria
5	9	
16	8	
14	7	
18	6	
24	5	
74	4	
142	3	
413	2	
2771	1	
18,625	0	

Table 1. Athar Sale seller accounts grouped by listing volume, with geographic distribution for accounts with 10 or more listings.

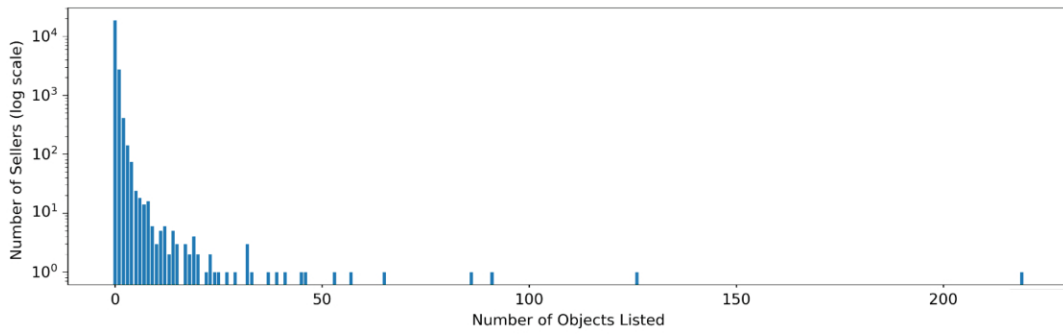


Figure 1. Distribution of Athar Sale sellers by number of listings (logarithmic scale). Matplotlib.

The distribution of listings on Athar Sale shows a heavily right-skewed, long-tail pattern in which the vast majority of sellers (99.1%) have listed three or fewer objects (Figure 1). These are likely individuals selling objects opportunistically (perhaps they were inherited, found, or casually acquired) rather than as organised traffickers. Overall, the distribution is characterised by a large proportion of inactive accounts and modest upper-tier concentration in which a very small minority (0.24%) accounts for a disproportionately large share of total listings (26.5%). In other words, most accounts on the platform are low-volume participants or effectively inactive, while a small number of high-volume actors drive a significant portion of overall supply.

From a monitoring and enforcement perspective, the distribution suggests that targeted scrutiny of high-volume sellers would yield disproportionate impact. If a small percentage of sellers account for a large share of listings, focusing analytical and compliance resources on these nodes could be more efficient than diffuse monitoring across thousands of low-volume accounts. However, Campbell (2013) contends that, because actors in the illicit cultural goods trade are relatively interchangeable, removal of key individuals would not have the desired effect on the volume of the trade. Rather, he notes the impact of greater monitoring and enforcement of the locations where actors in the illicit trade communicate – in this case, online marketplaces. “Since networks lack a central authority to cut off at the head,” he suggests, “they can be combated by removing locations where criminals interact, hence cutting them off at the feet” (Campbell 2013: 134).

The large number of accounts listing zero objects suggests a substantial layer of inactive users. This may reflect speculative registration or platform churn (abandoned accounts), and it further reinforces that active trading is concentrated among a relatively small subset of committed users.

Overall, the distribution aligns closely with known dynamics of online cultural goods markets: a stratified structure, a concentrated core of higher-volume actors, and a wide periphery of low-volume, likely opportunistic sellers operating within a platform that lowers barriers to entry and fragments visibility of upstream supply chains (Brodie et al. 2019; Campbell 2013; Sargent et al. 2020).

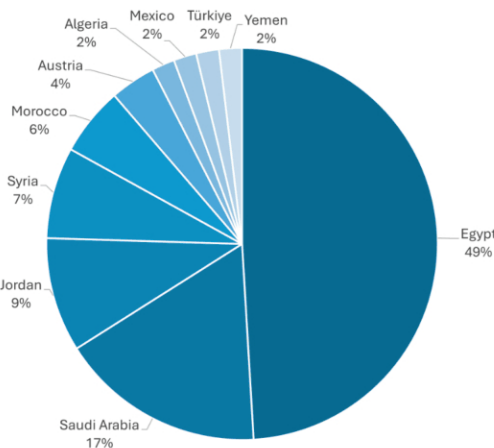



Figure 2. Geographic distribution of Athar Sale seller accounts with 10 or more listings.



High-volume seller accounts (≥ 10 listings) are not evenly distributed across Arabic-speaking countries but instead are concentrated in a small number of geographic hubs (Figure 2). Egypt dominates by a significant margin, followed by Saudi Arabia and, at some distance, Jordan, Syria, and Morocco. This clustering suggests that sustained, high-volume activity is more likely to occur in specific national contexts where online trade in cultural goods is more visible, possibly normalised, or logistically more feasible. In the case of Egypt, the scale of participation indicates a highly visible online antiquities market in which sellers operate at volume and with relative consistency. Saudi Arabia's prominence, as the apparent host country of the Athar Sale platform, may indicate a role as a marketplace environment rather than a source context, with sellers using the platform as a venue for reaching buyers.

As mentioned, no high-volume seller accounts are identified as being based in Iraq. Rather, Iraq-based sellers are likely to participate at lower volumes, often having listed just a single object. While previous research in this field has documented the involvement of opportunistic individuals and intermediaries in the illicit trade in Iraq (Campbell 2013; Sargent et al. 2020), the discrepancy between the volume of activity reported in these studies and what has been documented in the present report suggests that Iraqi participants in the illicit trade are relying on other venues besides Athar Sale for their operations.

The absence of high-volume Iraqi sellers suggests that Athar Sale is unlikely to warrant targeted investigation by Iraqi authorities. However, the concentration of high-volume accounts in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as in other countries with smaller but notable clusters, indicates that it may be of more immediate interest to enforcement bodies operating in those jurisdictions. Al Khabour (2023: xviii) has noted Egypt and Saudi Arabia as transit points for illicit cultural goods originating elsewhere in the region, suggesting investigation and monitoring of sellers in these countries may aid in the identification of potentially trafficked artifacts. This also points to the value of cross-border cooperation, particularly between Iraqi authorities and their counterparts in neighbouring countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria, where objects of Iraqi origin may be circulated and sold.

Object Typologies

Data were collected in three passes from each of the six target categories identified as relevant for the project's purposes. The first round of data collection, conducted on 2 February 2026, retrieved 5,533 active listings across all categories. Data collection was repeated on 16 February 2026, at which time all but six of the previously scraped listings were found to still be active, plus an additional 187. However, it should be noted that some of the 'additional' 187 listings may have already been active on 2 February, but could not be scraped for various technical reasons, including server timeouts, issues with webpage formatting, and other backend problems. This possibility emerged after the re-scraping conducted on 16 February encountered technical issues while attempting to gather data on the 187 'new' listings, of which only 139 could be successfully scraped, resulting in a new total of 5,672 listings. Data collection was repeated for a third and final time on 2 March 2026. 37 of the previous listings had been taken down in the interim two weeks and an additional 286 had been added. After re-scraping (and skipping five listings with technical issues), we were left with 5,917 final listings for analysis.

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of listings scraped during each round of data collection across each of the six object categories. Percentages are given in black to indicate each category's share of the total, while percentages in green represent growth during each two-week period. Growth of over 1% has been signalled using bolded text.

Category	2 Feb 2026	16 Feb 2026	2 Mar 2026
Jewellery and Accessories % of total	604 10.92%	607 (+0.5%) 10.7%	612 (+0.82%) 10.34%
Books and Manuscripts % of total	861 15.56%	865 (+0.46%) 15.25%	880 (+1.73%) 14.87%
Old Paintings and Handicrafts % of total	409 7.39%	410 (+0.24%) 7.23%	415 (+1.22%) 7.01%
Old Coins and Stamps % of total	2,582 46.67%	2,705 (+4.76%) 47.69%	2,919 (+7.91%) 49.33%
Miscellaneous % of total	657 11.87%	661 (+0.61%) 11.65%	666 (+0.76%) 11.26%
Antiques % of total	420 7.59%	424 (+0.95%) 7.48%	425 (+0.24%) 7.18%
Total	5,533	5,672 (+2.51%)	5,917 (+4.32%)

Table 2. Distribution of Athar Sale listings by category for each of the three scraping passes.

While overall listings increased by 6.9% over the four-week observation period, growth was disproportionately concentrated in numismatic and philatelic material (coins and stamps). These listings expanded by 13% across the three scraping rounds and increased their market share from 46.7% to 49.3%, indicating consolidation of the marketplace around portable, monetisable heritage goods. Despite all categories growing throughout the period, the relative size of each decreased to accommodate the growth in listings of coins and stamps.

From a trafficking theory perspective, the increasing concentration of listings in numismatic material reflects a common pattern in illicit and semi-licit heritage markets: the prioritisation of small, portable, high-liquidity objects that are easy to transport, conceal, and monetise (Al Khabour 2023; Brodie et al. 2019; Leeson et al. 2025a). Coins, especially when they are sold individually rather than as collections, function as low-risk commodities within grey markets, allowing sellers to operate at the blurred boundary between licit collecting and potentially illicit circulation (Elkins 2012, 2022). At the same time, it is important to note that many of the listed coins appear to be modern issues and may not raise provenance or ownership concerns. Their prevalence may therefore reflect not trafficking dynamics but instead more typical behaviour of online marketplaces, where standardised, easily photographed, and widely collected objects generate consistent demand and repeat listings. Specific case studies of high-risk or potentially illicit coins are presented in the next main section, Case Studies.

Of the 5,917 listings under study, just 46 were found to be published by seller accounts based in Iraq. This is one of the more surprising discoveries of the present study, though it supports the notion that Athar Sale is not a platform for high-volume dealers and sellers in Iraq. Rather, sellers based in Iraq appear to be limited and opportunistic, with just one or two listings in most cases. Figure 3 shows the distribution of Iraqi listings by object type compared to the platform average.

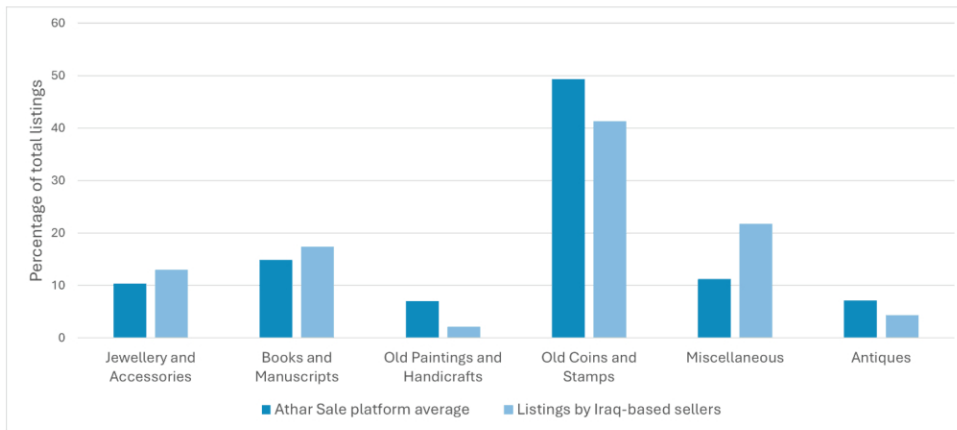


Figure 3. Distribution of Iraqi listings by object category compared to the platform average.

The distribution generally echoes the platform average, though Iraqi objects are slightly more representative of the jewellery, books, and miscellaneous categories, and somewhat less representative of paintings and handicrafts, coins and stamps, and antiques. However, as discussed in the Case Studies, listings are frequently miscategorised; in one case, several objects purported to be Sumerian artifacts were categorised inappropriately as ‘old paintings and handicrafts.’ This may represent an unfamiliarity with norms of online sales, which would support the assumption that Iraqi-based sellers tend to be more amateur and opportunistic rather than professional dealers.

The 46 listings were posted between 2021 and 2026, with a peak in 2024 followed by a sharp decline (with just a single active listing each from 2025 and 2026).

We manually examined each of the 46 Iraqi listings and flagged items that had been presented by the seller as being older than 200 years or of particular historical, national, religious, or artistic value, in which case they would be subject to Law 55 (2002) on Antiquities and Heritage. In total, 24 listings were flagged for further investigation, published by 18 unique sellers. Of these 24 listings, just one has an “evaluation certificate” (see Case Study 3).



Case Study 1. Alleged 1,000-Year-Old Kufic Qur'an

The first case study concerns an allegedly complete manuscript of a Kufic Qur'an dated by the seller to the 4th century AH (approximately 912–1009 CE).



Figures 4-5. An allegedly complete manuscript of a Kufic Qur'an dated by the seller to the 4th century AH (approximately 912-1009 CE).

The Seller

The manuscript was listed for sale by Seller AS-06, whose account was created shortly before the listing was published in mid-November 2023. This is the seller's only listing on the platform. The manuscript was placed in the 'books and manuscripts' category without an asking price and, like most objects on the platform, without an evaluation certificate.

The listing has been added to one wish list, but the seller has no followers and does not appear to follow any other accounts. The platform's "last seen" indicator suggests that the seller has not returned to the platform since publishing the listing approximately two years ago. Reverse-image searches did not identify the manuscript being offered on other online marketplaces, indicating that the object does not appear to have been simultaneously marketed elsewhere, at least among indexed listings.

Although no price is specified, the seller provides a full telephone number, suggesting that the price would be discussed through direct contact. This pattern is consistent with informal online marketplaces in which transactions are arranged privately rather than through publicly listed prices (Al-Azm and Paul 2019). The country calling code of the number provided (+964) is consistent with the seller's claim that they are based in Iraq.

The Listing

The manuscript is described using generalised and largely non-technical language, including terms such as "luxurious and precious" ("فاخرة و ثمينة") and "one of the finest and oldest Kufic manuscripts" ("الخطية الكوفية"). The listing notes that the manuscript is written on "Samarkand paper" ("ورق سمرقندي"), a term sometimes used in manuscript descriptions to refer to paper associated with Central Asian papermaking traditions that spread throughout the Islamic world after the introduction of papermaking technologies from China in the 8th century CE (Bloom and Blair 2009: 105). The manuscript is also described as being written in Kufic script, an early style of angular Arabic calligraphy widely used in Qur'an manuscripts during the first centuries of Islam, particularly between the 8th and 10th centuries (Bloom 2001: 92, 104–108).

Beyond these elements, however, the listing provides little additional contextual information supporting the claimed 10th-century date, place of production, or provenance of the manuscript.

Photographic documentation is similarly limited. Five images are provided (six in total including one duplicate), most of which focus on individual pages or decorative elements highlighting calligraphy and ornamental headings. Only a single image shows the manuscript's cover, which appears to be leather-bound with a circular geometric design. The limited number of photographs restricts the ability to assess the manuscript's completeness, condition, or identifying features. It also suggests that the listing was not prepared in accordance with typical market practices for the sale of historical manuscripts, where prospective buyers would normally expect detailed photographs and descriptive information prior to purchase.

As with the other objects identified in this study, no provenance documentation or ownership history is provided. In the absence of such information, it is not possible to determine whether the manuscript originates from a documented private collection, earlier market circulation, or other source. The absence of provenance information is a common feature of the listings examined and may reflect either illicit trade practices or the activities of informal sellers unfamiliar with standard documentation expectations in the antiquities and manuscript markets.

Unlike most listings examined in this study, the seller does provide an extended narrative intended to contextualise the manuscript's significance. The description notes that complete Qur'an manuscripts written in Kufic script are rare and that many museums preserve only fragmentary examples. Several institutions are cited as holding Kufic Qur'an materials, including the British Museum, the Āstān-e Quds Razavi Museum in Mashhad (Iran), the Lahore Museum (Pakistan), and the National Museum of Qatar. The seller further attributes the manuscript's stylistic features to Abbasid artistic traditions and suggests that its decorative elements reflect artistic styles associated with Khorasan (a historical region spanning parts of present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) in the 4th–5th centuries AH (10th–11th centuries CE). According to the seller, these characteristics support the proposed dating of the manuscript and indicate that it reflects the later phases of Kufic Qur'an production. The inclusion of museum references and stylistic terminology suggests an attempt to situate the manuscript within a broader scholarly and institutional context, reflecting documented practices in the antiquities market where academic language and evaluations are used to confer legitimacy (Brodie 2011; Dietzler 2013; Smith 2025). Particularly in Iraq, narratives of historical and cultural significance are central to the construction of value in the heritage sector (Leeson 2025).

Key Indicators Observed

Several features of this listing can be treated as 'red flag' indicators of suspicious or potentially illicit activity. Across the four case studies presented in this report, such indicators are identified and used to develop a consistent framework for the automated flagging of listings warranting further investigation, reducing the need for manual review of large volumes of data.

In the present case, the following are identified as key indicators of potential concern:

- Object presented as an antiquity: The manuscript is described as a complete Kufic Qur'an dating to the 4th century AH (10th century CE)
- Absence of provenance documentation: No ownership history, export documentation, or collection record is provided
- Limited descriptive information: The listing provides minimal codicological details supporting the claimed date or origin
- Limited photographic documentation: Only five unique images are provided
- Informal pricing structure: No asking price is listed; the seller instead provides a telephone number for direct contact

These characteristics were also observed across the wider dataset, suggesting common trends in how cultural goods are presented in informal markets. Further, the fact that this is the seller's only listing and that the manuscript does not appear to have been advertised on other open platforms suggests that AS-06 may be an opportunistic or occasional seller rather than a professional antiquities dealer. As such, the listing provides a representative example of how cultural objects have been marketed on the online marketplace of Athar Sale.

Case Study 2. Multi-Object Seller with Long-Distance Indicators (Iraq-Spain)

In another case, one seller posted multiple objects for sale in a single listing. The listing, titled "Sumerian pieces displayed for the first time" ("طع سومريه تعرض لأول مره"), contains photos of at least nine unique objects.



Figures 6-9 (from left to right). A weathered stone head; a screenshot of a video showing a cuneiform tablet or stele fragment, with other objects in the background; a metal bracelet or arm band; a coin with a man's head facing to the left. Latter two cropped from the originals.

The Seller

As with the seller who listed the Kufic Qur'an, the user responsible for these items appears to have created their account primarily for the purpose of publishing this listing. The account, identified here as AS-09, has been registered on Athar Sale since October 2022, when the listing was posted. This remains the seller's only listing on the platform, and according to the website's "last seen" feature the account has not been active for approximately two years. The user also shows no broader engagement with the platform: the account has no followers and does not follow any other users.

Although the account profile indicates that the seller is based in Iraq, the contact information provided in the listing includes a Spanish telephone number (+34). The seller also posted a comment beneath the listing stating: "ارجو التواصل على رقم وتساب الرقم اسباني" ("For those interested, please contact this Spanish WhatsApp number" ("اللمهت"), followed by the number. While it is not possible to determine the precise nature of this arrangement, the combination of an Iraq-based seller profile with a Spanish contact number indicates a degree of international association. This could reflect a variety of possibilities, such as the use of overseas intermediaries for communication or payment, the involvement of individuals in different countries, or the use of an internationally registered phone number to facilitate contact with buyers outside the region.

The Listing

The objects include two votive sculptures, two terracotta or sandstone figurine fragments, a cuneiform tablet or stele fragment, a twisted metal bracelet or arm ring, what appears to be an ancient coin, and two stone sculptures (possibly marble), one of which is a very weathered head. One or two photographs are provided for each item. In multiple images, including one which appears to be a screenshot taken from a video, other artifacts can be seen in the background. While the listing was published on 18 October 2022, the photos and video may have been taken around 13 May of that year, as evidenced by a lined notebook visible in some shots, on which the date “2022/5/13” is written.

As with the previous case study, the seller has declared that these objects are not accompanied by an evaluation certificate. The items, grouped together in a single listing, were listed for \$1 – a placeholder amount, or perhaps intended to attract potential buyers sorting by price low to high. As mentioned above, interested buyers were instructed, via the comments section, to contact the seller directly through WhatsApp.

The listing was published in the ‘old paintings and handicrafts’ category of Athar Sale, which it is worth noting does not accurately reflect the types of objects depicted. It has been added to one wish list, but the listing has not had any other engagement in the form of ‘likes’ or comments by other users. Reverse-image searches indicate that the listing does not appear to have been cross-posted to other platforms.

Several details make this case particularly notable. First, the grouping of multiple disparate objects in a single listing is unusual. Second, the video screenshot and other images suggest the seller, AS-09, has access to additional objects beyond those included in the listing. Finally, the use of a Spanish phone number raises questions about the seller’s operational structure. While one possibility is that the individual is based in Iraq, as their account profile claims, and simply uses a Spanish WhatsApp number, another possibility is that multiple individuals are involved, with one located in Iraq and another in Spain.

Key Indicators Observed

This listing shares the key indicators observed in the previous case study, namely: an object presented as an antiquity (in this case, as “Sumerian pieces”), an absence of provenance documentation, limited descriptive information (in this case, none at all), limited photographic documentation (14 unique images for at least 9 objects), and an informal pricing structure in which prospective buyers are encouraged to contact the seller directly.

In addition to these, the following key indicators were observed:

- Unusual grouping of objects: Multiple diverse items are sold together in a single listing, which is atypical for formal antiquities markets
- Evidence of seller’s access to additional objects: At least two images show other artifacts in the background, suggesting the seller’s access to more items
- International link indicators: Use of a Spanish phone number alongside a claimed Iraqi seller location suggests cross-border connections

This case study reinforces patterns identified across the entire dataset as well as distinctive features of this seller, notably the unusual grouping of multiple objects, evidence suggesting access to additional cultural goods, and the presence of cross-border indicators. Together, these factors illustrate both common and unique ways in which cultural objects are marketed on informal online platforms, of which perhaps the long-distance link indicator is the most intriguing for research into the international trafficking of cultural goods.

Case Study 3. Multi-Coin Seller with Regional Indicators (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Türkiye)

The third case is another multi-object listing, this one consisting of five coins of similar material, all with Arabic inscriptions. Contextual information has been provided on the image of one (see Figure 10), but only one side is pictured from each of the five.



Figures 10-12 (from left to right). A silver dirham with contextual notes suggesting it was minted in 658 AH in Hama, Syria; two silver dirhams; two silver dirhams.

The Seller

Referred to as AS-10, this seller appears similarly inactive on the Athar Sale platform as their counterparts already discussed in this report. They created their account in July 2024, and as of the time of writing have no followers and are not following any other accounts. This is their only listing, and it appears (from the “last seen” feature) that they have not been active on the platform since posting.

Unlike the other sellers, this account has indicated its location as “Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Türkiye” rather than “Iraq,” and they have provided a phone number with a Syrian country code (+963), suggesting they are either based in Syria, from Syria, or frequently travel around the region. While the previous case study suggested a potential long-distance cross-border connection between Iraq and Spain, this listing points to a regionally concentrated cross-border dynamic spanning four neighbouring countries. This distinction reflects two broad patterns observed in the movement of cultural goods associated with Iraq: long-distance linkages to more distant markets, and regionally networked circulation within neighbouring states (Al Khabour 2023: xviii; Brodie et al. 2019: 103–104; Sargent et al. 2020: 32–36). While the nature of this cross-border connection remains unclear (i.e., whether these countries function primarily as sources, transit points, or markets), it nevertheless indicates an international dimension to this seller’s activity.

The Listing

The listing has been published under the title “Syria, Türkiye, Lebanon,” with three photos showing what appear to be five distinct silver coins. Comparative analysis of the coins’ shapes indicates that the images depict one side of each of five separate coins, rather than the same coins shown from multiple angles. This diverges from standard practice in numismatic documentation and cataloguing, where both obverse and reverse are typically shown to enable assessment of condition and authenticity (CoingraderAI 2025; Numista 2025).

Operating under the assumption that the coins are authentic, as alleged by the seller, the main image appears to show a silver dirham struck in 658 AH (1259–1260 CE) in the city of Hama (present-day Syria), during the reign of Hulagu Khan (r. 654–663 AH / 1256–1265 CE), founder of the Ilkhanate. In line with the hierarchical political structure of the Mongol Empire, the coin bears the name of his overlord Möngke Khan (Baldwin's Auctions 2009). It follows established Islamic numismatic conventions: it is struck in silver, denominated as a dirham, and features Arabic inscriptions including the kalima (Islamic declaration of faith) alongside Mongol titlature, illustrating the Ilkhanids' adoption of local monetary and administrative practices in recently conquered territories. Although minted in Syria, such coins circulated widely across northern Mesopotamia and formed part of the integrated monetary economy of the 13th-century region (Sinclair 2012). While no contextual information is available on the other four coins, they also appear to be silver dirhams bearing the kalima in a similar style, suggesting a broad contemporaneity with the Hama coin and potential production under the same authority.

The listing has been appropriately categorised under 'old coins and stamps.' However, unlike the others examined in this quarter's research, it remains unclear whether these objects are being sold from Iraq or from one of the other countries indicated in the seller's listed location. The seller notes the existence of an "evaluation certificate" for at least one of the coins; however, the listing is similarly unclear whether this refers to an assessment of authenticity or documentation supporting lawful ownership, sale, or export.

The listing was published on 18 July 2024, around the time of the account's creation, and no asking price has been indicated, suggesting that prospective buyers are expected to initiate contact directly via the listed phone number. As with the other case studies presented so far, reverse-image searches indicate that the objects have not been cross-posted to other marketplaces.

Key Indicators Observed

This listing shares several indicators observed in previous case studies, including: presentation of objects as antiquities, absence of provenance documentation, limited descriptive information (with only one of five coins identified in detail), limited photographic documentation (with only one side of each coin shown), international link indicators (in this case suggesting a regional operational scope), and an informal sales structure in which no listing price is given and prospective buyers are encouraged to make direct contact.

In addition to these, the following distinct indicators were observed:

- **Ambiguous geographic attribution:** The listing title and seller profile reference multiple countries (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Türkiye), making it unclear where the objects are located or from where they are being sold
- **Unclear supporting documentation:** Reference to an "evaluation certificate" is not accompanied by clarification of its nature or relevance to legal ownership or export

This case highlights a different form of cross-border dynamic than that observed in the previous example, pointing not to long-distance movement toward external markets but to a more regionally concentrated pattern of circulation. The clustering of multiple neighbouring countries in the seller's profile, combined with a Syrian contact number, suggests a transnational operating space in which objects move across borders within the region. Such patterns are consistent with trafficking models that rely on short-distance transfers, informal export routes, and shifting points of sale rather than fixed locations (Al Khabour 2023; Campbell 2013). In this context, the ambiguity surrounding the objects' origin is itself significant, highlighting how vague geographic language can complicate efforts to trace the circulation of cultural goods while at the same time expanding the potential market for sellers.

Case Study 4. Cross-Platform Listing of “an Old Book”

The final case study concerns an object presented by the seller as an antique book (whose etched cover features a khamsa hand flanked by two six-pointed stars) accompanied by a protective pouch that appears to be made of leather.



Figure 13. An alleged “old book” (right) and a protective pouch, possibly leather (left).

The Seller


The final seller, referred to as AS-18, is also the newest to the Athar Sale platform. They created their account in January 2026, shortly before publishing this, their only listing. The account has no followers and is not following any other users, and the “last seen” feature indicates that the seller last accessed the platform in February. They have listed their location as Iraq but have provided an invalid phone number; although the number begins with “0374,” which suggests an Armenian country code, it contains too many digits to correspond to a valid Armenian number.

The profile image associated with the account is the logo of the international technology company SLB. This distinguishes AS-18 from other sellers on the platform, who typically use anonymous avatars, images of objects, or generic landscape photographs. While the use of such a logo could indicate a personal or professional association, it does not, in itself, confirm any connection to the company.

The Listing

The listing is titled simply “An old book in good condition” (“كتاب قديم بحالة جيدة”), with no further description or contextual information provided. It was published in the ‘books and manuscripts’ category on 6 February 2026 without an asking price. It has not been added to any wish lists and has received no comments. The seller has indicated that no evaluation certificate is available for the item, and only a single photograph of the object has been provided (Figure 13).

The object’s material characteristics (such as the uniform ‘aging’ of the leather, the lack of structural deformation, and what appears to be an applied patina), iconography (consisting of highly stylised symbolic motifs), and construction techniques (particularly the clean stitching holes and relatively recent-looking etched lines) diverge in several respects from historic manuscript and bookbinding traditions. Indeed, these features give the impression of modern production methods rather than historic manufacture, suggesting that the object may be a replica or prop rather than an authentic historic book. This interpretation is supported by the limited photographic documentation: the single image shows only one angle and does not include views of the spine, back cover, or interior pages, nor does the listing provide any contextual information about the object’s origin or use.



At the same time, the seller has not explicitly represented the object as an antiquity, describing it only as “an old book.” No chronological claims are made, and it is not specified whether “old” is intended to mean “older than 200 years,” which would bring the object within the scope of Iraq’s Law 55 (2002) on Antiquities and Heritage.

This listing is included among the present case studies because it is the only Iraq-linked listing identified in this dataset that was cross-posted to another platform. Specifically, it was shared to (and later removed from) a very active Facebook group dedicated to identifying signs believed to indicate the presence of buried artifacts. This group has nearly 900,000 members and generates dozens of posts per day, with discussions ranging from archaeologically informed observations (e.g., site stratigraphy and material indicators) to more speculative or quasi-divinatory interpretations of landscape features.

The cross-posting of this listing is particularly significant as it suggests an attempt to engage multiple, distinct audiences beyond the original marketplace. While the primary platform facilitates sales, the Facebook group functions as a space for interpretation, validation, and community-driven knowledge exchange. By introducing the object into this secondary context, the seller could be seeking to generate interest, establish perceived authenticity, or identify potential buyers. This behaviour points to a multi-platform strategy (however casual) in which different online environments serve complementary roles in the circulation and commodification of goods.

Key Indicators Observed

This listing does not exhibit many of the indicators identified in the preceding case studies. The object is not explicitly presented as an antiquity and therefore diverges from more typical patterns associated with the sale of unprovenanced artifacts.

Instead, a single indicator is of note:

- Cross-platform posting in a looting-oriented community: The listing was shared to a large Facebook group dedicated to identifying signs of buried artifacts, where discussions relate directly to the discovery and extraction of archaeological material

While the object itself raises fewer immediate concerns than other cases, its circulation within a looting-oriented online community introduces a different behavioural pattern from the previous case studies, shifting from where sellers operate (geographically) to how they operate. This illustrates how ambiguous listings can become inserted in environments that facilitate the identification, circulation, and commodification of cultural material.

Risk Indicators and Future Detection




The four listings presented in the Case Studies contain key indicators of risk which are present to varying degrees across the entire dataset. To summarise, these are:

- Object presented as an antiquity
- Unclear or unverifiable provenance and supporting documentation
- Limited descriptive information
- Limited photographic documentation
- Informal pricing structure
- Unusual grouping of objects
- Evidence of seller's access to additional objects
- International link indicators
- Ambiguous geographic attribution
- Cross-platform posting in a looting-oriented groups

Beyond having individual merit, these indicators frequently appear in combination. Listings exhibiting multiple indicators (such as an absence of provenance, ambiguous geographic attribution, and evidence of international links) present a higher level of risk than any single feature alone (Desboeufs et al. n.d.). This is particularly important for marketplaces such as Athar Sale, in which amateur and opportunistic sellers may inadvertently demonstrate signs of illicit trade through ignorance of market norms. For this reason, indicators are best understood as tools for prioritising further review rather than as evidence of illegality.

At the same time, indicators vary in their evidentiary weight. Some are more directly linked to potential legal violations, while others, such as limited descriptive or photographic information, are not inherently suspicious but rather support an overall risk profile.

There are several ways in which these results could be operationalised by heritage management authorities, one of which is through the development of a semi-automated or fully automated tool to assist in the early identification of high-risk listings. This tool would analyse listings for predefined criteria, scoring or flagging entries based on the presence of multiple indicators. Certain indicators are more readily operationalised: for example, informal pricing structures can be detected through pattern analysis against market norms (or even simply the absence of a listing price), and ambiguous geographic attributions can be identified by scanning descriptions for vague or generic terms. Other indicators, such as cross-platform posting, whether a seller has access to additional objects, or limited descriptive information, are more challenging to automate, potentially requiring machine learning methods to understand context (Ferro et al. 2025; Leeson et al. 2025a), integration across multiple platforms, or manual verification. However, by prioritising indicators that are computationally detectable while incorporating human review for more nuanced signals, such a tool could provide a scalable method to monitor listings and focus investigative resources on the highest-risk cases, without relying on complete or perfect data.



In terms of workflow, each listing could be assigned a risk score based on the presence and severity of observed features. Indicators that are more easily quantified, such as informal pricing, absence of photographic documentation, or ambiguous geographic attribution, could carry higher weight in the score, while less readily detectable features, such as cross-platform posting or vague descriptions, could contribute lower or conditional points. A cumulative threshold could then be established where listings exceeding a certain score are flagged for manual review. This would allow the system to balance computational efficiency with human oversight, ensuring that high-risk cases are prioritised without overburdening analysts. Over time, the scoring model could be refined using feedback from verified cases, improving its accuracy and adaptability.

The mechanisms underlying this tool have already been deployed to varying extents by law enforcement in the region and abroad, most notably with the Italian Carabinieri's Stolen Works of Art Detection System (SWOADS) and the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism's TraceART system, both of which use artificial intelligence and machine learning for the automated monitoring and detection of listings of potentially illicit cultural goods (UNESCO 2025).

Recommendations



The following recommendations are derived from the findings of this study and are tailored to the actors with decision-making authority over platform practices and regulatory frameworks, rather than individual users who operate within these systems. These recommendations address the roles and responsibilities of (1) the Athar Sale platform, (2) Saudi policymakers (as the governing jurisdiction of Athar Sale), and (3) Iraqi authorities. Together, they aim to support proportionate, context-specific responses that enhance compliance, improve monitoring practices, and strengthen safeguards against the illicit trade in cultural goods.

Athar Sale (Saudi Arabia)

1. *Strengthen listing requirements*

Require sellers to provide minimum information, including proof of legal ownership and selling rights (and, where relevant, export rights), provenance details, geographic attribution, and clear images.

2. *Clarify and publish prohibited materials policy*

The site's Terms and Conditions refer to a prohibited materials policy, but this does not appear to be publicly available. This policy should be clearly accessible, detailed, and aligned with national and international cultural heritage laws.

3. *Introduce seller verification*

Implement identity verification for sellers listing antiquities or archaeological objects. Require sellers to select a location from a dropdown list of countries rather than enter their location as free text (to address the issue of sellers indicating regions rather than specific national jurisdictions).

4. *Strengthen collaboration with national authorities*

Develop procedures for information sharing and rapid response to problematic listings.

Policymakers and Regulators (Saudi Arabia)

5. *Promote platform accountability*

Require platforms to implement due diligence measures for cultural property listings, including minimum information requirements for the online sale of antiquities. This could include a certification process through which platforms can demonstrate their adherence to best practices.

Law Enforcement and Cultural Heritage Authorities (Iraq)

6. *Prioritise online platforms based on risk*

While Athar Sale provides useful insight into the characteristics of potentially problematic listings, the results of this study suggest that it is not widely used by high-volume or particularly active sellers based in Iraq, despite higher levels of activity in other regional contexts (e.g., Egypt and Saudi Arabia). Iraqi authorities may therefore consider prioritising platforms and networks with stronger presence of Iraq-based sellers, while maintaining only light-touch monitoring of Athar Sale.

7. *Adopt indicator-based monitoring frameworks*

Use the identified red flags as a screening tool to prioritise investigations into possible illicit activity. Resources should be allocated to listings showing high-risk combinations of indicators.

Cross-cutting Recommendations

In addition to the specific recommendations derived from the present study and presented above, there also emerged a set of suggestions which are already recognised as good practices among practitioners working on the illicit trade in cultural goods; the findings of this study reaffirm their continued relevance rather than frame these as novel recommendations. Buyers and collectors should exercise due diligence by requesting provenance documentation and verifying the legal status of objects prior to purchase, while remaining alert to common red flags such as vague descriptions, missing documentation, or unclear origins, and avoiding transactions that may pose legal or ethical risks (UNESCO, ICPO-Interpol, and ICOM 2006; Wartenberg and Dmitričenko 2022). At a broader level, addressing these challenges requires greater coordination across platforms, researchers, and authorities, including the promotion of shared standards and collaborative approaches (Al Khabour 2023; Brodie et al. 2019; Leeson et al. 2025b). This includes further efforts to standardise indicator frameworks to enable comparability across studies, develop automated or semi-automated tools for identifying high-risk listings at scale, and consistently incorporate legal context into analytical approaches (UNESCO, ICPO-Interpol, and ICOM 2006; UNESCO 2025). Throughout, it is essential that such work is based on strong ethical data practices, including anonymisation, the avoidance of harm to individuals, and careful handling of sensitive information (Brodie et al. 2019; Van den Eynden et al. 2011).

Conclusion



The NABU Project's Q1 2026 report established the initial phase of documentation and analysis of Iraqi material culture circulating across the open web, focusing specifically on the Athar Sale online marketplace. The work of this quarter established a simple but effective and reproducible methodology for web scraping and data analysis that will be applied to additional niche platforms as the project progresses. Overall, this research confirmed the role of Athar Sale as an active platform for the circulation of cultural goods, with key findings that improve our understanding of the illicit and semi-licit heritage trade in the region.

For instance, the listings examined during this reporting period appear to reflect low-value, informal online trading activity rather than an organised or professional antiquities market. The absence of high-volume sellers in Iraq, repeated listings of similar objects by the same accounts, or professionally presented antiquities suggests that the platform is unlikely to function as a primary marketplace for large-scale trafficking operations based in Iraq. Nevertheless, the presence of objects described as antiquities and offered without documentation indicates that the platform still serves as a venue for the informal circulation of cultural objects whose legal status cannot be verified. It is important to note that these conclusions have been drawn in the specific context of Iraqi seller listings and cannot be extrapolated for listings from sellers in other, better represented countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for which additional research is recommended.

These observations provide an initial baseline for understanding the types of listings and seller behaviour present on Athar Sale, which may assist in distinguishing opportunistic individual sales from patterns more consistent with organised trafficking in future monitoring.

In closing, we revisit the overarching objectives of the NABU project, which are to i) identify 100 unique sellers involved in the online sale of Iraqi artifacts, ii) identify risk indicators to inform an automated mechanism for flagging suspicious listings, and iii) produce actionable intelligence for Iraqi partners, compiled in quarterly reports. This Q1 report has advanced the first objective, consolidating available data on 18 unique sellers ostensibly based in Iraq and responsible for listings of cultural goods which appear to violate Iraq's Law 55 (2002) on Antiquities and Heritage. Regarding the second objective, this report has identified a set of ten risk indicators, distilled from the research dataset and embodied by the four case studies discussed. Lastly, while identifying details of sellers and listings have been redacted from the public version of this report and accompanying dataset, they are included in the unrestricted version available to Iraqi authorities, making it operationally actionable and fulfilling the third objective of supplying authorities with intelligence that can support investigations and enforcement.

Ultimately, the NABU Project is generating a growing body of structured documentation in both English and Arabic. By recording not just the objects, but the context in which they circulate, this report directly contributes to broader scholarly and policy-oriented efforts to understand and protect the material heritage of Iraq and the wider region, based on novel analysis of Arabic-language, regional marketplaces. Forthcoming quarterly reports will extend this analysis to other online platforms, further developing the foundation for actionable intelligence to support Iraqi partners.

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