

# HIGH CRIMES: STUDYING THE ILLICIT ANTIQUITIES TRADE IN THE BOLIVIAN ANDES

July 26, 2013 Donna Yates Day of Archaeology 2013 Andes, antiquities trafficking, Art crime, Bolivia, churches, Colonial, Criminology, Cultural property, Heritage, La Paz, Latin America, looting, South America, Tiwanaku, University of Glasgow

Although I am a trained field archaeologist, I now work for a [criminology department](#). I study the looting of archaeological and historic sites and the transnational trade in illicit cultural property. That is what I am doing now, in La Paz, Bolivia, 3700 feet above sea level, thanks to a Fulbright grant and a Leverhulme fellowship.

I am part of the University of Glasgow and the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research's [Trafficking Culture project](#). My research group is approaching looting and antiquities trafficking from new angles to hopefully come up with interesting regulatory responses to this problem. Besides larger criminological and market analyses, our project is engaged in several regional case studies. That is where I fit in. I am looking into [this phenomenon in Latin America](#) and, right now, in Bolivia.

At the moment I am working on the looting of remote Conquest-era churches and the international market for stolen ecclesiastical paintings, sculpture and silver. The Andes are filled with rural churches: they were part of the evangelising mission of the Spanish Conquistadors. These churches are filled with spectacular and regionally-specific art. Most notable in Bolivia is silver work: for several hundred years [the majority of the world's silver came from Bolivia](#) and Indigenous artists had a ready supply to make thousands of beautiful objects of devotion. Unfortunately there are collectors out there who are willing to buy stolen church art and, as supply meets demand, poor Bolivian communities are robbed of their heritage.



*Painting of Santa Rosa stolen from the church of the Bolivian village of Jesus de Machaca and recovered on the London art market in 2011 (image via. Bolivia's Ministry of Cultures)*



*This church at the Bolivian village of Laja was robbed in 2012  
(wikimedia commons)*

Bolivia is culturally rich but economically poor. These churches are in bad states of repair and are insecure. Many cannot be alarmed, even if they are located in an area with electricity, because there is no money for such things. In most of the villages where churches are located residents live well below the poverty line so the idea of paying a full time guard is laughable. Increase police presence? Not when the nearest police outpost is 100km away over an unpaved road. Not when this country is thought to have one of the most corrupt police forces in the Americas.

But even the most important and well-protected Bolivian churches are not safe. In April the church of the Virgin of Copacabana, Bolivia's most holy and miraculous shrine, was robbed of the silver and gold that anointed the Virgin herself. The baby Jesus in her arms was stolen as well. A priest who was at Copacabana on temporary assignment was jailed this week for involvement in the robbery. The holy pieces have not been recovered. My guess is that they were carried into Peru and then on to anonymity. That was the 6th church robbery in Bolivia in only 4 months.

I am constantly asked why these silver-filled churches were not robbed before. If they have been sitting out there, vulnerable, for 500 years why are they only being robbed now? The best answer I can give is that there was no illicit market for these items before. These churches are being robbed because terrible people want to own beautiful things.

I warn I am writing in advance because my day will include being without internet.

So what will my day be? On this day of archaeology I will take a taxi to the La Paz cemetery then squish myself into a minibus. I will head westward for about two hours until I reach the famous UNESCO World Heritage Site of Tiwanaku.



*A 17th century painting of the Virgin of Copacabana surrounded by silver (public domain)*

Tiwanaku is a vast, monumental, pre-Inka site that I excavated at (when I was a diggy-archaeologist) back in 2004 and 2005. I am sad to say that in 2011 Tiwanaku's conquest-era church was robbed. It wasn't the first time. The thieves have not been arrested and the objects stolen have not been recovered. I am going out there to talk to old friends about the robbery. I am interested to hear their perceptions about how the theft could have been prevented, their thoughts on the response of public authorities, and how they feel the robbery has affected the community. I want to hear the facts but I also want to hear wild speculation, rumours, and emotion. I think emotion is very important in this kind of work.



*Tiwanaku's conquest-era church was built by the Spanish from stoned looted from the nearby World Heritage site. It was robbed in 2011 (photo by the author)*

And, really, this is an emotional issue with grave consequences. Just last year two men were caught robbing the church in the small Bolivian village of Quila Quila. The villagers apprehended the men and, in a public display of frustration, insecurity, and fear, they lynched the alleged robbers and buried them behind the church.





*A ruined and abandoned church in the Altiplano, Bolivia's high plain (Jduranboger, CC attribution)*

I don't think most people imagine that what I do is archaeology (even the Day of Archaeology website doesn't have a category for this post to fit into!), but I think that it is. The past is what we say it is, and we believe that the physical remains of the past are important. That they are worthy of being preserved as tools of both memory and identity. When they are ripped from their contexts and sold on the black market, everyone loses. We are all robbed because we will never get to know the information those objects contained. "Neocolonialism" is a word that is bandied about quite a bit in Bolivia: it is a word that even people with no education know.

The illicit antiquities trade is a prime example of neocolonialism. When objects are stolen from vulnerable areas of the developing world and moved into the hands of rich people in the developed world, we perpetuate an unjust imbalance. We keep people down.

This is my dream job. I am so thankful to be able to do this research.