

**The British Museum
and UK Border Force
collaborate to return
historic objects to
Ukraine**

Images and captions available here:
<https://bit.ly/3xhBwcQ>

Tuesday 31 May 2022

A collection of medieval metalwork was posted from Kyiv to the UK in 2021 with the intention of being sold on the internet. The package of 86 objects was seized in transit by UK Border Force in July 2021 and jointly identified by curators from the British Museum and the National Museum in Kyiv. These pieces will be sent to the National Museum of History of Ukraine in Kyiv. Until then, the metalwork will be on display in Room 53 in the British Museum to highlight this important work and collaboration between Britain and Ukraine.

Among the 86 metal alloy objects, are cross-pendants that date from around the 11th to 14th centuries and are connected with Greek Orthodoxy. There are similar crosses from the district of Kyiv in the National Museum of Ukraine, believed to be local copies of Byzantine prototypes. The disc-pendants are also widespread in eastern Europe, are of similar date and show the impact of Christianity on the local population. The other objects are finger rings, some also early medieval but the majority are later in date.

Metal detecting by private individuals is illegal in most countries around the world, including Ukraine, and uncontrolled treasure hunting at archaeological sites of all periods causes huge damage and loss of historical information. Some of the pieces likely come from a hoard or graves. Many of these objects are sold with misleading provenances to try and conceal the country of origin, and many objects described as 'Viking' actually come from early medieval sites in Ukraine. Close co-operation between international law enforcement agencies, museum curators and archaeologists help identify the true origin and is an essential first step before the repatriation of stolen or illicitly trafficked antiquities.

The British Museum is committed to contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage in the UK and globally, partnering with law enforcement agencies to identify illicitly trafficked antiquities. Objects seized in this way are brought to the British Museum for identification and cataloguing. The Museum then liaises with colleagues in the national museums of the countries concerned to arrange the return of these objects.

His Excellency Vadym Prystaiko, Ambassador of Ukraine to the United Kingdom, said “We welcome the decision of the British Museum to display the exhibits representing Ukrainian history. This is a timely and sound initiative at this difficult time, when Ukrainians are standing up for their freedom and sovereignty and when the voice of Ukraine needs to be heard in every corner of the world. It is another opportunity for us to demonstrate our deep-rooted history, the authenticity of our people, and our well-deserved and undisputable right to self-determination and statehood. We hope that the ties between the British Museum and the National History Museum of Ukraine will further expand and develop.”

Dr Hartwig Fischer, Director, The British Museum, said “Culture is fragile yet precious. The scale of human displacement and destruction in Ukraine is deeply distressing. The safeguarding and neutrality of culture during conflict is crucial to the future rebuilding of society. We extend our deepest sympathy to our colleagues in museums, and to all the victims of this conflict, whether trapped or displaced, within Ukraine and beyond. We are working together with other organisations to provide aid and support to museums in Ukraine, and you can find a second display celebrating Ukrainian cultural heritage in Room 2.”

Dr Fedir Androshchuk, Director General, National Museum of History of Ukraine, Kyiv, said “We live in a world of constant change as to the role of museums. This process has a direct connection with considerable changes in both societies and the global world. A national museum with a focus on both local history and cultural heritage is an important place where the cultural biography of the country is visualized through single artefacts and specially designed exhibitions. Each country has its own biography and experience which should be learned and shared, and this makes museums important places for both the national and international public. One more important aspect of museum activity is the recording and preservation of cultural heritage.

“The global world and illicit trafficking of objects of cultural heritage have made these assignments internationally collaborative. In the last years, a number of objects acquired by illicit metal-detectorists in Ukraine were sold to private collectors in Russia, Germany and Britain. Some of these artefacts are unique, such as a Viking Age ship’s vane terminal found in Ukraine in 2015 and sold in England in 2016 with a fake provenance. We are facing gigantic transnational looting of Ukrainian heritage which needs to be stopped through common efforts. Today these prevention measures are strengthened by the contribution of the British authorities and British Museum.”

UK Border Force, said “Border Force South Region Cargo Freight Specialist Team detected items of cultural interest in July 2021. These items, which were seized, appeared to be historical pendants and ring artefacts and were referred to the British Museum for further investigation. The Museum confirmed them to be early medieval jewellery from Ukraine. Detections of this kind are rare and the Museum is arranging for them to be displayed until they can be repatriated. This seizure demonstrates the

excellent around-the-clock work Border Force do to search, find and stop these historical artefacts entering the UK illegally, and we will continue to work with international partners to detect such items of significant historical interest.”

Notes to Editors:

British Museum. Ukraine: Culture in Crisis

The British Museum has a further free display *Ukraine: Culture in crisis* inside the Museum's Collecting the world gallery (Room 2). This temporary display celebrates Ukrainian culture from deep history to the present, using objects drawn from the Museum's collection and curated by the Museum's experts. The objects on display provide a talking point for visitors concerned about the current conflict in Ukraine.

britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/collecting-world#temporary-display

To learn more about the protection of cultural heritage in Ukraine visit:

icom-poland.mini.icom.museum/icom-poland-appeal-help-us-help-ukraine

Illicit Trade

The British Museum works in partnership with law enforcement agencies, government departments, Arts Council England, auction houses, dealers and private collectors in the event of any enquiries over illicit trafficking or export licensing of antiquities. When objects may be repatriated to their country of origin, the British Museum offers expert advice on how to do this in the most appropriate manner. Since 2009 we have helped to repatriate over 2300 antiquities, to Afghanistan, to Uzbekistan, and to Iraq. The present case is one in a long line of successes involving many agencies and individuals, and again illustrates the value and importance of these long-term relationships.

The following lists some of these successful cases:

- February 2009: 1500 illicitly trafficked antiquities sent to Kabul
- July 2012: a collection of Begram Ivories stolen from the National Museum in the 1990s sent to Kabul
- July 2012: a large Gandharan sculpture stolen from the National Museum in the 1990s sent to Kabul
- July 2012: 821 illicitly trafficked antiquities sent to Kabul
- May 2016: inscribed Safavid bowl stolen from the National Museum in the 1990s sent to Kabul
- July 2017: large inscribed glazed tile stolen from Chashma-i Ayub in Vabkent in about 2014 sent to Tashkent
- August 2018: inscribed cones of Gudea stolen from Tello in 2003 sent to Baghdad
- October 2018: Bronze Age silver flask sent to Kabul
- March 2019: Mesopotamian kudurru probably stolen from Nippur in 2003 sent to Baghdad

- August 2019: 156 Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets looted from southern Iraq sent to Baghdad
- May 2020: two metal trunks of fake tablets and figurines seized by Border Force at Heathrow are publicised
- October 2020: a consignment of glazed tiles from Uzbekistan detained by Border Force in January 2020
- May 2021: rare 2nd century BC funerary statue from Cyrene seized by Border Force in 2013 returned to the Libyan Embassy

The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS)

Thousands of archaeological objects are discovered every year, many by members of the public, particularly by people while metal-detecting. If recorded, these finds have great potential to transform archaeological knowledge, helping archaeologists understand when, where and how people lived in the past. PAS (www.finds.org.uk) offers the only proactive mechanism for recording such finds, which are made publicly available on its online database.

Managed by the British Museum (in England) and Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, the PAS is a partnership project, working with about 100 national and local partners to deliver the Scheme's aims. It is funded (in England) through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport grant to the British Museum with local partner contributions. All the Finds Liaison Officers working for the PAS are employed locally but work as a national team directed by the British Museum.

The medieval metal work is on display in Room 53 at the British Museum.

The British Museum is open every day
10.00–17.00 (Fridays: 20.30)

Ukraine: Culture in crisis is on display in Room 2 Collecting the world at the British Museum.

Last entry: 16.00 (Fridays: 19.30)
britishmuseum.org/visit#opening-hours
+44 (0)20 7323 8181



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Further information

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