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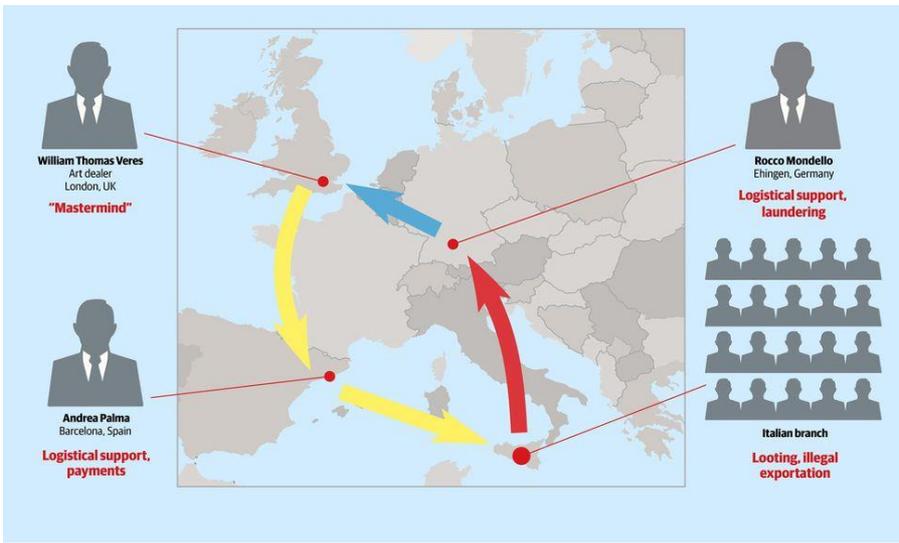


Will the UK be able to take part in antiquities busts after Brexit?

Nineteen of the accused in Operation Demetra face trial in December, while the alleged UK mastermind awaits extradition

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The operation to smash the smuggling network involved the Spanish, German and UK police in collaboration with EU agencies. Courtesy of Carabinieri Comando Tutela Patrimonio Culturale

At a meeting about the looting of cultural heritage held in the British embassy in Rome in October, General Fabrizio Parrulli of the Comando Carabinieri per la Tutela del Patrimonio Culturale (TPC: carabinieri command for the protection of the heritage) flashed up on the screen a diagram that explained the mechanism of the biggest antiquities-looting and smuggling bust ever made by the Italian military police force.

Operation Demetra (named after the looted Greek statue bought by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1986, and restituted to Sicily in 2011) has involved the recovery of around 25,000 items. Mostly tomb goods, dating to when Sicily was a Greek colony (8th century BC onwards), their estimated worth is around €40m. Together, the Spanish, German and UK police, in collaboration with the Europol and Eurojust agencies, have made 23 arrests following enquiries conducted under a European Investigation Order.

Major Luigi Mancuso, who coordinated an investigation that mobilised 250 carabinieri of Sicily and southern Italy, says it began in 2014 with the discovery of a looted tomb near Riesi in Sicily. “We worked up through the byways of criminality until the international nature of the operation was exposed”, he says.

On 4 July, the 23 arrests were made simultaneously—in Sicily, helicopters were co-opted from the Carabinieri division originally set up to track down fugitive members of the Cosa Nostra. The Metropolitan Police’s Art and Antiques Unit in London, the Guardia Civil in Barcelona and the Baden-Württemberg state police used European Arrest Warrants to pull in the other participants.

Central to the Italian branch of the network is Francesco Lucerna, 76, a former tombarolo (grave-robber). He is alleged to have run a group who looted sites around the ancient Greek city of Agrigento

and the town of Nissa. Lucerna also allegedly had a team of forgers producing coins and other artefacts, sold largely to clients in northern Italy.

At the top of the diagram is William Thomas Veres, 64, a London-based dealer in antiquities and coins born in Hungary, who is alleged to have been the mastermind who apparently sent cash to fund the excavations via Andrea Palma, 36, a Barcelona-based archaeology graduate from the university La Sapienza in Rome.

The archaeological goods were smuggled from Sicily by various means, including in the luggage of couriers and lorries with false floors, to Germany. There, Rocco Mondello, 61, of Ehingen near Stuttgart, allegedly provided them with fake provenances, usually “From a Lower Bavarian private collection”. They were then sold through two Munich auction houses, which are currently under investigation, and to collectors in Turin. Profits are alleged to have returned to Veres.

In December, the court of Caltanissetta will try 19 of the accused, who include Lucerna and Mondello, but not Palma or Veres. The latter has been released on bail in London while he awaits an extradition ruling at Westminster Magistrates Court, to decide if he will go to Italy to face charges.

Veres already has a criminal record: he was given a suspended sentence of 22 months for his part in the case of the ancient gold libation bowl called a phiale, ruled in the US courts to have been exported illegally from Sicily into Switzerland, and sold to the New York collector Michael Steinhardt in 1991. It had been illicitly excavated in Sicily and has since been returned. The case was instrumental in transforming the US trade in antiquities because it was taken to the Supreme Court, which ruled that the hypocrisy of giving Switzerland as the country of origin on import documents for antiquities that clearly came from elsewhere was illegitimate.

Operation Demetra fully illustrates what General Parrulli said when he addressed the UN Security Council in March 2017, which is that the protection of heritage requires cross-border collaboration, but it

also raises more of the many questions regarding the UK's position after Brexit.

How will the UK work with Europol, the EU's law enforcement agency, or Eurojust, the EU's judicial cooperation unit? Will it respond to a European Investigation Order, which since May 2017 obliges every EU country to carry out investigations on behalf of another EU country when requested to do so, and will the UK respond to a European Arrest Warrant? Is it the future of the UK to be in operational and law enforcement isolation vis-à-vis its 27 nearest neighbours? As with so many Brexit issues, we simply do not know.