

Action against stolen Italian artefacts

The Hague, 05 July 2018

In the early hours of yesterday morning, arrests and searches took place in Italy, Germany, Spain and the UK against an international organised crime group (OCG) accused of trafficking in archaeological artefacts taken from illegal excavations in central Sicily.

The artefacts were illegally exported to Germany by couriers and smugglers working for the OCG. Once in Germany, the items were provided with false certificates of origin and placed on the legitimate art market, using auction houses operating in Munich as distribution channels.

The investigation was headed, since 2014, by the Public Prosecution Office of Caltanissetta, Italy. Arrest warrants were issued by an Italian judge against 28 suspects: 25 in Italy and one each in Germany, Spain and the UK. Italian officers, members of the Carabinieri Cultural Heritage Unit, were present during the action, and searches were carried out in all four Member States. At present, more than 25 000 artefacts have been seized, with a value estimated at EUR 40 million.

Europol's analysts were involved in cross-matching evidence, both in advance and on the action day. Eurojust's assistance was crucial in coordinating the execution of the arrests and searches in the four Member States on the action day.