

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION AND FOLKLORE: SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE AND LOOTING IN TURKEY

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Abstract. The ongoing destruction of archaeological sites in Anatolia is well known but less so are the Anatolian–Turkish oral traditions, beliefs and social norms that tolerate the irreversible damage being done by the local communities involved. This paper reports the findings of a qualitative research I undertook in the Black Sea region of Turkey where extensive looting occurs including the Safranbolu World Heritage Site. Using an ethnographic approach enabled me to conduct first-hand interviews with 91 informants and 9 *hodjas* or self-proclaimed spiritualists who advise local people on their search for buried treasures. My fieldwork shows a lack of archaeological heritage awareness and a tolerance of looting that stems from folklore, reinterpretation of Islamic hadiths, and cultural codes. Today, the protection and preservation of archaeological heritage and associated artefacts depends on whether local communities value them more than the buyers of illicitly obtained artefacts.

Keywords: folklore, archaeological destruction, looters

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1. Introduction

This paper reports the outcome of a field study concerned with how and why the looting of cultural heritage in Turkey is strongly associated with local folklore and traditional beliefs. Given the scale of the ongoing destruction and the stiff legal penalties looters already face, this research set out to obtain an ethnographic view of the rituals and activities of people who find and then illicitly destroy archaeological assets, while often fearful of endangering their wellbeing and freedom in the process. I sought to engage with communities that search for hidden, buried, charmed, or ‘protected’ treasures, to hear their current attitudes and beliefs regarding mythological entities such as the Islamic *jinn* and their relevance to the productivity and safety of looters.

The following discussion aims to reveal the unseen and possibly overlooked driving forces behind the looting, including the role of *hodjas* or spiritualists who claim to commune with mythological *jinn* entities to locate buried treasures and free them from spells and enchantments that are believed to protect them from being uncovered. The discussion addresses the powerful influence of local folklore and beliefs on the conduct of the looting.

It is well known that the threats posed to archaeological heritage by looting have become a pivotal concern for archaeologists, anthropologists, and folklorists (Hollowell and Nicholas 2009, Alwa 2001, Atwood 2004, Barker 2018). Currently scholars suggest that collaboration with local people is essential to conduct projects at all levels (Field et al. 2000, Fogelin 2007, Shapiro 1994). Archaeologists have combined ethnographic fieldwork in their own methodologies to comprehend more fully a particular community or setting with its cultural context. Such fieldwork generates ethnographic data relevant to the interpretation of finds in excavations and of their present meaning, and sharing this knowledge with the community (Lawrence and Main 1996, Marthari 2001, Moses 2020, Wobst 2013). In this way researchers are encouraged to collaborate with local people and meaningfully address problems related to their research. In such contexts, archaeological knowledge becomes multifaceted, recognising that information about human behaviour is not easy to read through archaeological artefacts alone. The rich content of their context in social life goes beyond the simple structure of the material.

2. Materials and methods

The fieldwork for the present study was conducted in three areas located in the Black Sea region of Turkey with a written history of settlement going back to the Hittites. Homer mentioned this area as Paphlagonia in the Iliad (70–71, 127). There is a vague reference to Paphlagonia as an area located along the Halys River (Herodotus 1861: 122). Phrygians, Persians, Romans, Seljuks, and Ottomans ruled in the region as well. The fact that the history of the area promises archaeological assets from these periods makes it vulnerable to treasure hunters.

The study was undertaken between June and October 2017, September 2019–March 2019, and May–September 2021 in order to understand the motivations and dimensions of the phenomenon of antiquities looting. I aimed to gain an insight and explanation as to how and under what circumstances this phenomenon was able to continue despite the legal penalties in place. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork, I gained to access to an experienced mentor of looters in Safranbolu. With his recommendation, I was able to interview 68 informants who stated that they are active and interested in searching for treasures, and 23 who stated that they had formerly done so. I also interviewed eight students of art history, archaeology, and history, who helped treasure hunters to read, date, and identify antiquities for a small fee. All of the other interviewees were in full-time employment or retired with a pension (Table 2). I was also able to interview 9 *hodjas* who stated they had regular contact with mythical *jinn* whom they persuade to identify and locate hidden or protected treasure and to communicate with some who are unwilling to do so. In Turkish–Anatolian folklore, the title *hodja* is vested in people who performs acts through the assistance of supernatural power, or *jinn*. Seven of the *hodjas* had attended Islamic *madrasah*.

None of my informants had a detailed knowledge about the history of Anatolia, but some were experienced in archaeological fieldwork. A few individuals among excavation teams working in groups of six or eight people are able to classify objects according to their archaeological period and to estimate the prospective price that may be offered by a middleman.

Table 1. Ages of informants

Age brackets	Number of individuals
19–29	31
30–39	24
40–49	10
50–59	7
60 and above	19

Digging with the assistance of *jinn* on illicit excavations in Turkey is mentioned in studies that were conducted in Van, Nevşehir and Adana (Uysal 1974, 1983, 1985, Savran 1997, Yolcu and Karakaya 2017, Şenesen 2016, Çalışkan 2019, Konyar 2008: 222, Akkaya and Efe 2015: 110). In my fieldwork, I identified 15 *hodjas* who were advising treasure hunters at the time; six refused to be interviewed for fear of legal pursuit by the police. Of those agreeing to participate, nine interviews went smoothly, since I assured them that they would not be mentioned in any text by

Table 2. Daytime occupations of informants

Occupations	Number of individuals
Full-time employee in factories	17
Full-time employee in repair-shops	12
Full-time employee in cold rolling mills	18
Full-time apprentice in repair shops	4
Retired with pension	23
<i>Hodjas</i> educated in informal <i>madrasah</i>	7
<i>Hodjas</i> self-educated	2

their real names. All respondents were labelled with pseudonyms that are common Turkish names as it is suggested in prior studies to protect the privacy and security of participants (Hick 1977, Amstrong 1993, Guenther 2009, McCormack et al. 2012, Svalastog and Eriksson 2010, Brear 2018).

I preferred to conduct unstructured interviews because I believed certain topics could present themselves unexpectedly and be relevant to one of the various dimensions of my study. This helped me to amend questions accordingly. The questions were categorized into four groups: (1) personal information; (2) level, and structure of participation in illegal excavations; (3) methods and knowledge used and gained during their practices; and (4) feelings, thoughts, and attitude about the illegal digging. All 91 looters were unaware of the value and importance of archaeological resources to cultural heritage. This attitude reflects the folk belief that “Anatolia is full of gold and silver”, and many folk narratives and expressions feed this attitude as well. Undertaking illegal excavations with the help of *jinn* is also affected by oral tradition in which heroes find hidden, buried, or forgotten treasures with the help of *jinn*.

3. What or who are the *jinn*?

The existence of *jinn* is widely accepted in Islamic communities and described and defined mostly in the Qur’an and the *hadith* which is collection of deeds and words of Muhammad. Muslim societies have common faith in the existence of *jinn*. Even though *jinn* and human beings are believed to be similar, their origins and lives differ (Al-Ashgar 1998, 2003, Khalifa 2005, Sakr 2001). The Qur’an (in Surah Ar-Rahman) states: “He created man from sounding clay like pottery, and created

jinn from smokeless flame of fire”. *Jinn* are said to inhabit caves, deserted places, graveyards, and darkness (Al-Ashgar 2003). These places are commonly where looters carry out illegal excavations. *Jinn* are also believed to possess different forms, human and animal (El-Zein 2009: 89-103). Many who claim to interact with *jinn* do so in order to cure ailments, disabilities, spiritual problems, engage in witchcraft, and locate hidden, buried or stolen objects (Khalifa and Hardie 2005: 351, 2011: 69-75, Cohen 2008: 104-108, Dein and Illaiee 2013: 291-292, Karataş 2021: 171-188).

Hodjas assert that once a *jinn* is called forward s/he will be both in the command of their human friend and will not harm looters as long as they satisfy their wishes. In my fieldwork, all looters I encountered were Muslim, and most were working with Muslim scholars specialized in treasure locating; a few of these looters, however, were also acting on the advice of Christian priests (*papaz*). Prevalent among Turkish looters is the notion that to find ethnic treasures, it is necessary for them to seek assistance from non-Muslim scholars (Çalışkan 2019, Kocaoğlu 2021).

Several fieldwork studies have reported on community beliefs and practices involving possession by spirits (or ghosts and *jinn*). Typically, members of the community with a physical or mental disability are thought to be possessed by *jinn* (Karataş 2021, Çalışkan 2019, Savran 1997). *Jinn* are believed to have the power to harm people (Nourse 1996, Al-Houdalieh 2012). Clergy and experienced actors are employed to cleanse victims of spirits in rituals involving reading or citing religious verses over them, inhaling incense, and washing them in holy waters (Nourse 1996, Karataş 2021, Jankowski 2001).

In the present study, 34 informants stated that they had interacted with *hodjas* and *jinn* to locate valuable objects. Another 39 stated that they consulted *hodjas* before they undertook excavations in an effort to ensure their safety and success. Six who said they had previous contact with *jinn* experienced unpleasant situations and had subsequently given up digging for treasure with their help. After making numerous fruitless excavations, 12 informants stated that while they continue to believe in the existence of *jinn*, they no longer employ *hodjas* because they are expensive and ineffective.

The informants I interviewed work in groups of five to seven men. None openly confirmed that they unearthed artefacts with the help of *jinn*, but they were willing to talk about finds that other groups had made with spiritual help. Over time I observed that each of the groups mentioned obtained help at some level during their excavations, but they told their own stories as if they were others’. Their narratives about looting indicate that *jinn* are called upon to locate valuable artefacts by communicating with the original owners and also to break any spell which had been cast upon potential looters. During my fieldwork, I compiled narratives in the form of personal recollections of looting activity, many of which contain supernatural elements attributed to *jinn*.

4. Cultural, religious, folkloric, and bureaucratic reasons of ongoing antiquities looting in Turkey

The looting of antiquities is an international problem, the motivations, and dimensions of which have been the subject of numerous studies (Wobst 2013, Weihe 1995, Vitelli 1996, Özdoğan 2002, Al-Houdalieh 2012). Plundering of cultural heritage dates to ancient times, and its motivations and structures vary in war, peace, and political chaos. The environment in conflict zones has seen extensive looting of archaeological heritage, since they offer opportunities for both locals and outsiders to ransack known sites and museums (Çakırca 2015: 21-25, Çokişler 2019: 56-72, Atwood 2004: 1-5, Montgomery 2015: 76-78, Sidorsky 1996: 19-27, Bauer 2015: 3-4). These practices have resulted in irreversible loss of valuable cultural and historical data, knowledge of potentially great significance for tracing the history of humanity. For these reasons, all forms of looting and trafficking of archaeological heritage is regarded as stealing history in literature, as a 'crime against the Turkish nation' in the Turkish penal code (Law 2863 – Atwood 2004: 144, Byrne 2016: 345, Davis 2002: 236-237, Brodie et al. 2001: 10-20, Shaw 2003: 108-130). Legislation dating from 1874 aimed to protect cultural and natural assets, requiring every excavation within the borders of Ottoman Empire to obtain a permit, and forbidding the removal of national treasures from the country without permission (Çal 1997: 392, 2005: 266-267, Ceylan 2008: 42-56, Özel and Karadayı 1998: 1-14). Thereafter, law 2863 of 1983 imposed imprisonment on looters of six months to five years plus a fine.

Because Turkey is one of the largest source countries of cultural property, it is highly vulnerable to looting and smuggling. Cultural property has the quality of state property in law, whether the object or location has been discovered or not. The law also states that any person or group that finds or knows the existence of such property must notify the authorities, which must be reported to the Ministry and regional museum directors. The department of anti-smuggling and organized crime (KOM) within the Turkish National Police and Gendarmerie General Command are tasked with undertaking operations and for developing looting prevention strategies. In the year 2019 alone, over 50,000 artefacts were recovered by the authorities in Turkey (KOM 2020).

Turkey's archaeological loss through illicit excavation has been recorded in several studies which went on to report that the main motivation for looting in Turkey is poverty and the inadequacy of law enforcement (Özdoğan 2005: 111-123, Özel and Karadayı 1998: 1-14, Özgen 2001: 119-120, Rose and Acar 1995, Lawrence and Main 1995: 150-160). None of the above mentioned were ethnographic studies, which are very rare as folklorists and anthropologists are reluctant to conduct fieldwork with criminals. Enthusiastic researchers must tread a fine line between the crime-fighting teams and the criminals (Inciardi 1993, Armstrong 1993, Humphreys 1970, Brajuha 1986, Scarce 1994, Källman and Korsell 2009). It is therefore understandable that the most frequent question my colleagues ask is how I undertake such fieldwork.

W. Alva (2001) states that ongoing looting activities are closely related to the existing oral tradition. Growing up with treasure hunting narratives, young people are

prone to believe that their neighbourhoods have treasures waiting to be discovered. Anatolian–Turkish oral tradition includes legends, tales, and narratives of personal experiences of treasure hunting that are repeated by succeeding generations. These tell of the possibility of finding treasure and becoming enriched as were past heroes. In collecting seventy-five treasure narratives, the majority of my informants confirmed that they had first heard about the past generations’ treasure narratives and sought to emulate them, even as teenagers. Such narratives suggest that only good and hardworking people may find treasures after undergoing difficult and testing situations.

The finding of buried treasure is one of the oldest and most common motifs in folklore worldwide, and folk heroes are expected to discover buried or hidden treasures (Ernst and Garry 2005: 329, El-Shamy 1997: 432). By passing on knowledge of possible archaeological sites and teaching spiritual codes, Anatolian oral tradition serves to encourage and guide potential looters. To illustrate, statements such as ‘a treasure cave with swords playing in its mouth’, ‘treasures that can be reached after consecutive tests’, ‘treasures protected by a spell or talisman’, ‘to be chosen or called by the treasure’s spiritual owners’ are frequently encountered in treasure narratives in Turkey (Boratav 2013: 82, Alangu 1990: 94–107). Evliya Celebi’s travelogues show that such narratives drew treasure seekers especially to Istanbul with charmed treasures waiting to be uncovered in the past too (Kahraman and Dağlı 2006: 97). Treasure narratives are popularly recounted in coffee houses and give pleasure and hope to the listener. In a cross-culture motif index, treasure and treasure hunting related motifs do not indicate any criminal activity in the context of folklore.¹

Throughout my fieldwork I noticed that local people did not seem to judge the looters as they did other criminal groups. Looting is not perceived as harming innocent people directly. My informants stated that looters are not dangerous to society when compared to rapists, thieves, murderers, and vandals but instead are humble laymen who dig in search of treasure. Looters are referred to as gravediggers or treasure hunters (*defineci*), and these terms only have cynical contexts. Turkish culture also has a work ethic that respects even the labour of looters although they are exploited by organized criminals. Idiomatically, it is felt that looters and traffickers of illicitly obtained artefacts in Turkey only earn a pittance (*devede kulak*) and that they are exploited by criminals. Studies on the profits of looting show that looters typically obtain only between one and five percent of the market value of cultural property (Özgen 2001: 119, Borodkin 1995: 378, 406, Kimberly 2012: 608–609, Matsuda 1998: 91, Barker 2018: 462, Bauer 2015: 2, Campbell 2013: 120–25). The department of anti-smuggling and organized crime (KOM) seized more than ninety thousand dollars only during their operation in İzmir (KOM 2021: 70).

The looting of archaeological objects is closely bound to folk beliefs in notions such as luck, destiny, and share. My informants repeatedly cited these in interviews

¹ International motif index of folk literature has recorded many common motifs that related to treasures, and treasure hunters. Some of them have been recorded under the codes of F244-3, F244-4, F244-5, F244-6, D2157.1.1, D2157.3.2, F531.6.8.3.1, H511.2, F420.4.8, B11.1.3, F451.6.9, F81.5, F451.5.2.13 (Thompson, 1958/2016).

in which their attitude toward looting was remotely defensive. Mostafa, for example, claimed that each man who went digging in a group should receive their fair share of any finds. My informants defended looting by comparing it to more harmful crimes, such as rape or murder. Eray said: “We don’t poison children with drugs, we are not rapists, nor burglars or terrorists, but if we get caught with any archaeological object, we face three years imprisonment. We are a little bit criminal, but not much.” Notions concerning destiny, luck, and share (*nasip*) are also mentioned in other countries’ looting experiences. Finding treasures is closely associated with determination and being at the right time and in the right place to dig and fulfil the promise to become wealthy (Matsuda 1998: 88-89, Mullen 1997: 514, Foster 1964: 41-42, Coldwell 1977: 230-231, Barker 2018).

Public attitudes towards looting in Turkey reflect a combination of oral tradition and the way looting is typically portrayed in the Turkish media. Personal experience narratives circulated through the media mostly discredit state officials who are believed to be involved in the trafficking of cultural and historical artefacts. It is commonly felt that officials who are supposed to protect cultural heritage in fact seize and smuggle valuable objects themselves, while others replace originals with replicas. News about corrupt officials furthers the credibility of these narratives. During my field research, looters discredited several officials by relating their own experiences. Mohammed stated: “Five of us were digging in Obacık region where we got raided by two of the local gendarmeries. We had found two small statues and an icon. They put our findings into their official car, but they didn’t take us in. Why? There are many corrupt officials who do not care about us – only our findings. They just seize them from us. They know that we can’t complain about them. What can we do? If we file a report, we get taken in. We must live with that”. Aside from this statement given in Safranbolu, I recorded similar personal experiences in Bartın, Kastamonu and Yozgat. All imply that officials who are expected to protect cultural heritage are involved in both the looting and smuggling of artefacts at some level.

Application of the law on the conservation of cultural and natural property offers a bonus to anyone who finds cultural property in Turkey. The amount of this bonus varies depending on who owns the land where it is found. If on private property, 80% of the amount estimated by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism as the value of the cultural objects is to be divided equally as bonus between the person who found it and the owner. If the land belongs to the state, 40% of the appraised value will be given to the finder as bonus. Even though the awards offered to looters who are possible finders of hidden or buried cultural property seem to be encouraging, implementation of the law makes this complicated. Looters are most likely to dig on state property, illicitly, without official permission. My informants related numerous instances where an artefact had been determined to be a ‘priceless cultural object’ by the Ministry, with the finder being entitled to nothing. During my interviews many showed me letters that state a priceless cultural property case. Under these circumstances, a looter would feel double failure because they have nothing to show for revealing their valuable find along with their identity. One of my informants, Remzi, related what happened to him after he reported his discovery:

We heard that the state offers a bonus after we had unsurfaced a golden sculpture in a graveyard. Next day we took it to a jeweler who weighed it and offered us the equivalent of its value in gram gold. We wondered if it would be appraised more if we notified the authorities. They opened a record, told us to wait as they needed to estimate the value of our find. After four months, they informed me it was priceless. So, we got nothing, and my identity was revealed. Today, I still run errands for the team, but my friends resent me because I convinced them to apply for the bonus.

The gap in the law regulating the payment of a bonus to landowners and finders must be counted among reasons why looters continue their illicit excavations. Instead of paying fair market value for recently discovered items found by the public, state instructions are to seize them and declare such findings as priceless. This practice was criticized by my informants, most of whom say they would be willing to report their findings if they knew that they could benefit from the bonus. Erdem, my informant, expressed his thoughts in these words about the regulation:

If the state could fairly apply its regulations related to the bonuses, all of us would give our findings to it. This would create a safe environment for us too. We are both afraid of not getting the bonus and going directly to jail. Since we don't have strong networks who could sell our objects off, and to estimate their real market value, we would prefer to do our work with the collaboration of the state but knowing so many friends working in the area who have experienced a priceless case, we are not prone to notify the authorities.

Many informants expressed that they would feel secure and be willing to notify the authorities if the bonus regulation could be applied regardless of the legitimacy of an excavation, and if it offered fair market value for objects instead of declaring them priceless (Karataş 2021). Although several studies on the causes of contemporary illegal digging reported that poverty is one of the main reasons for ongoing looting activities in Turkey, my fieldwork shows that looters are not ultimately motivated by poverty (Özel and Karadayı 1998: 1-14, Özdoğan 2005: 111-123; Özgen 2001: 119-120, Rose and Acar 1995: 46-54, Uysal 1983: 134-141). All my informants, including retired looters, had a stable income. Most were working in factories, machine shops, or practicing their occupations on their own. Starting their illegal activities at a young age, most are drawn to searching for treasure and enjoy the associated excitement. Former members of looting teams actively mentor young recruits. I also recorded eight instances of former looters relating how they missed the excitement they experienced during excavations. Mevlüt, who is 62 years old, defined his looting experiences as memories that make him feel alive:

As a man I am the breadwinner, digging with my friends was the only exciting thing I did for myself. Did I make money? Yes, sometimes.

But the running away from gendarmeries, having secrets, searching for something that nobody has ever known is there, and touching it for the first time before the world made me feel alive. Without these experiences I am only an ordinary man. It was making me feel special. That is why I miss the digging which I can't do after I lost my strength, and sight.

Another significant reason for ongoing looting in Turkey is related to the mis-interpretation of religious teachings. In Islamic laws *rikaz* (ore) means buried treasures. *Rikaz* regulates the treatment of treasure including valuables like gold and silver according to where it was found, and specifies tax liabilities arising. In cases where the landowner is unknown, the finder is entitled to keep it and be exempt from tax. He is obliged to find the owner of the land and divide it among its stockholders. *Rikaz* also requires taxes to be paid for findings made on state owned lands (Aktan 1996: 87-88, Al-Houdalieh 2021b: 24, Sabiq 1998: 282-283). Anyone finding any kind of valuable on land that belongs to the state can become the owner, as long as no one claims it within a one year period of discovery. He is required to pay a tax of one-fifth of its value. In practice looters have reinterpreted this *hadith* in Turkey and prefer to donate this portion to the poor. Ömer, one of my informants, said he had found a lachrymal vase and quietly asked his friends if they knew the owner. "I knew there will be no one to claim it, but I needed to ask if there is. We already donate one-fifth of what we get for it to the poor. If it brings more than we expected, we give them more too". This statement reveals reinterpretation of the *hadith* for taxation and the notion that Muhammed advised his people to ask others if they know the owner of unattended valuables before removing them.

5. Spiritual guidance and the assistance of *jinn* among antiquities looters

All my informants claimed to have received spiritual guidance to some extent when digging. All were able to interact Muslim *hodjas* and other religion's clergymen respected in the looting community. In this context treasures are believed to exist in three categories: (1) normal ones, (2) 'captious' (*tuzaklı*) ones, those that ambush people, and (3) those seized by *jinn*. To be able to extract the first two depends only on the field experience of the looters and their luck. Digging for the last category, however, is much more complicated and dangerous because they are thought to be safeguarded by talismans (*tulsim*) and *jinn*. Such protected treasures are believed to have belonged to either ethnic or archaic people who lived in the area and are often classified normal, ethnic, and archaic treasures. Many Rum (ethnic Greeks) left Turkey during the population exchanges in 1923 and looters believe that they hurriedly buried their valuables and activated talismans to protect their assets until they returned. Ancient treasures are named for findings associated with people who lived here in the distant past, such as the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and their assets are believed to have passed into the hands of the *jinn* over time. Both ethnic and ancient treasures require the help of spiritual mediators because they are believed

to be impossible to extract from the ground otherwise. Leaving the excavation site alive and sound depends on the deactivation of the charms and transfer of the *jinn*'s property rights over the assets found, and only *hodjas* or priests can achieve this.

In such cases, some informants stated that they continue to seek the help of special *hodjas* of Arab origin who live in Hatay, Adana and Gaziantep, and are widely reputed to have special powers and to be experienced in convincing *jinn* to give up their treasure. Out of town *hodjas* come with significant expenses which makes local ones more popular amongst looters. Aside from helping looters with *jinn*, *hodjas* are also employed as traditional healers and in the performance of witchcraft. Christian priests also consulted as *hodjas* sometimes refuse to assist treasure hunters who search for ethnic treasures as these were charmed by the followers of other religions. Believers in Islam hold that they cannot always invoke the cooperation of *jinn* who are associated with another faith or if a treasure was charmed in ways unknown. As stated to me by a *hodja*:

Jinn eat, love, get married, give birth as we do and believe in different religions. There are non-believers, Jews, Christians, and Muslims among them. Mine is Muslim, and male. I ask him if he can convince other *jinn* to give up their rights. When he asks, Christian *jinn* sometimes let us have the treasure in exchange for an offer. If he doesn't give up his rights, then there is nothing we can do. We cannot push those of Christians, they will bargain with priests who know how to deal with them.

Several of my *hodja* informants told me that the *jinn*, regardless of their religious affiliation, require something in return for the unearthing of a treasure but not for revealing its location. They said the *jinn* required them to perform vile acts or ones that are forbidden or considered *haram* in Islam, such as adultery, consuming alcohol, sacrificing some types of animals, or drinking menstrual blood. Several of the *hodjas* reported that *jinn* were present during excavations that took from eight hours to several weeks to complete. *Hodjas* advertised their ability to assist looters to remove antiquities in the shortest possible time. In one year, nine local *hodjas* I interviewed claimed to have helped eight groups of looters to conduct 86 illicit excavations in the three areas selected for my field study. In their opinion, 11 treasures were associated with Rum whose assets had been seized by Christian *jinn*, and their spells could not be dissolved by them; priests who specialize in witchcraft were invited from Hatay, Adana, and İstanbul. My informants who participated in these excavations told me that priests communicated with *jinn* through young girls who have blue eyes and blond hair. They also brought holy water to sprinkle on an area before the start of an excavation, a ritual called sealing (*mühürleme*), which bans the *jinn* from entering the area. The Muslim *hodjas* I interviewed claimed they had worked for looters seeking to unearth 23 charmed ethnic, 34 ancient and 18 normal treasures over a 12-month period. *Hodjas* are only expected to intermeditate between looters and *jinn*, so all excavation work was conducted by looters. In most cases, *hodjas* accompanied the looters to the field and performed rituals beseeching the *jinn* not to harm them.

Ancient treasures are assumed to be possessed by *jinn* as the original owners are believed to have had their assets enchanted by a sorcerer who in turn ordered a *jinn* to protect the treasure, as long as the original owner lived. After the passing of the original owner and the sorcerer, the treasure is thereafter said to be possessed by the *jinn* and bequeathed to their children. In this way, the current protectors of a treasure are acknowledged as the descendants of the first *jinn* charged with their protection.

Methods of searching for protected treasures vary depending on the level of interaction required with the *jinn*. Initially, a *hodja* summons the *jinn* to be present and to reveal the exact location. *Jinn* can be asked to draw a map or to provide an image of nearby landmarks reflected on water. I witnessed a *hodja* summon *jinn* and draw a map of the location of a treasure. The summoning of *jinn* to make images appear in water was described as follows by *hodja* Kazım:

First, I perform ablution. Then I prepare a large bowl of water and cite verses from the Qur'an. When my *jinn* comes I feel unwell but I ask him to reflect the image of the place in which the treasure is hidden. I describe what I see on the water with details as most of the places are not familiar to me. Then my customers go to find it and I summon my *jinn* friend to ask if he can help to extract it by giving me coded words or a recipe to break the spell.

Another method requires a human subject, mostly selected from people with disabilities and children since it is believed that *jinn* do not harm the innocent. Here the *hodja* cites over the subject verses from the Qur'an, such as the Sura al-Bakarah, and invites the *jinn* to talk through the voice of the subject. As soon as a *jinn* is present, the possessed person loses control over his/her will. The *hodja* asks the subject several questions in order to identify the characteristics of the treasure, such as its exact location, and contents. Sometimes, a *hodja* performs two sessions in which he first learns the whereabouts of the treasure and then uses the subject to pinpoint the exact location and to learn the price to be paid. This price may include the *jinn* requiring looters to perform pagan or polytheistic practices. Twenty-seven informants said they were asked to perform certain acts including fornicating in front of audiences, drinking alcohol, sacrificing animals that Muslims are forbidden to eat such as hedgehog, dog, cat, etc. Many of these practices have been recorded in previous studies conducted in Turkey (Araz 1995: 163, Çalışkan 2019: 130, 132, Şenesen 2016: 292, Savran 1997: 378).

Failure to locate a treasure is normally attributed either to the *jinn* or to the treasure itself. Only twelve of the respondents blame the *hodjas* as they experienced failure repeatedly. Others believe that *jinn* relocated the treasure because they wish to turn them over to descendants of the original owner. Another explanation is that a *jinn* is fearful of other stronger ones.

Twelve informants said they had given up digging with the help of *jinn* but reported that they still applied a traditional remedy known as 'read and blow' (*okuyup-üfleme*) to protect themselves from the *jinn*. Here the looter reads certain

chapters or verses from then Qur'an, then blows over water and flour that is poured over the area the night before an excavation. Looters check to see if any marks appear that would point to the area being protected by *jinn*. In circumstances where looters think this the case, they either cancel the excavation or seal the area during daylight. My informant, Serdar, described sealing as follows:

Anyone who is able to read the Qur'an can seal the workplace where they will dig at night. If not the *jinn* will mess with you all night long. We are five in our group, so each of us reads a chapter from the Qur'an over water. Then we pour the water in a circle around the excavation. As long as we stay in the circle, nothing happens. After being deceived many times by the *hodjas*, we tried these methods, it works most of the time.

Despite the freewill agreement to be possessed by *jinn*, the experience is reported to be harmful. I learned during my field study that young children, people with disabilities, and volunteers can be possessed by *jinn*. It was related to me that *jinn* sometimes refuse to leave the body of a possessed person or to occupy another body nearby. Five of my informants claimed that they had been possessed during excavations. One reported that the *hodja* was able to remove the *jinn*, but the experience had harmed him. His wife told me that her husband was previously joyful, energetic, chatty, but after getting involved with the *jinn* he turned into an introvert and began to be disturbed by sound and light.

6. Conclusion

The looting of antiquities must be examined within its social and cultural context shaped by the religion, folklore, politics, and economy prevailing in any given society. These considerations deepen our understanding of the dimensions of this problem, its motivations, and multifaceted realities. Even though Islam itself does not encourage or condone the looting of antiquities, neither does it strictly condemn the activity. This enables looters to reinterpret the *hadith* of Muhammed concerning *rikaz*. In Turkey, the Presidency of Religious Affairs granted a ruling (*fatwa*) in 2014 stating that searching for antiquities is forbidden because it goes against secular law and violates public and individual rights. This, however, had no effect beyond confirming the regulation of secular law and did not emphasize the importance of awareness about the value and importance of archaeological resources to the nation, future generations, and the history of humanity. Lack of awareness of the slow disappearance of archaeological resources endangers the historical consciousness of future generations, of all human beings in general. While Islamic law condemns people who damage graves, looters vandalize tombs because they believe that non-Muslims who had to leave the country during the population exchanges hurriedly buried their valuables in such places. The antiquities looters have also learned from experience that non-Islamic archaeological objects – particularly sentimental

personal items – yield more money on the market. Objects associated with classical antiquity fetch high prices. Most of my informants stated that this sort of business requires networkers who have friends in high places both at home and abroad.

While previous studies have declared that poverty is the principal motivation for ongoing looting activities in Turkey, my fieldwork in the Black Sea region suggests otherwise. Almost all of my 91 informants were in gainful employment and did not rely on looting for their primary income. They were instead motivated by a sense of pride, fostered by folklore that enables them to dream of a better life. Adherents to Anatolian–Turkish folklore, social norms, beliefs, and oral traditions will counter with proverbs and notions such as *Elija*, belief in the influence of luck and superstition, and practices such as deciphering dreams that include references to treasure. Only those who adhere to these will have a chance to be in the right place at the right time. My informants stated that they associated their finds with being at the right time and place, and folklore helped them to endure hardships and despondency during excavations. Other studies have also shown that people of Islamic and other faiths have long been unearthing and looting antiquities with the help of spiritualists who claim to be able to commune with mythological entities such as the *jinn* (Al-Haudalieh 2012).

Social norms label looting as gravedigging in Turkey and it is generally thought of as a hobby or side activity, even if exhausting, physical work that carries stiff penalties under law. Popular belief is that corrupt office holders and criminals take the lion's share of the profits from illicit sales of looted artefacts. Even if the archaeological community in Turkey practices ethical standards and follows bureaucratic procedures, their work is severely restricted by a perennial shortage of personnel and resources. Looters are often the first to find and open new sites of significant scientific interest, with no fewer than 11 of my 91 informants stating that they had done so.

My informants, however, do complain that the bonuses promised to finders by law are denied them by the authorities, particularly if they come from illicit excavations. Officialdom serves to restrain looters from reporting their discoveries, even when they want to do so. Knowing that bonuses are promised to looters as well as police informers and officials, my informants stated that they do not trust the authorities to apply the law fairly. As evidence they refer to theirs' and others' finds having been classified as 'priceless', rendering them worthless and potentially exposing the finder to criminal charges. My informants stated that they participated in social networks where others related their experiences concerning the assignation of priceless status to their finds. Some even uploaded images of official reports as evidence.

Today it remains the case that the archaeological community in Turkey and worldwide continues to struggle with the looting of heritage sites (Barker 2018, Al-Houdalieh 2012a, 2012b, Bowman 2008, Brodie and Renfrew 2005, Byrne 2016, Elia 1997, Gates 1997, Matsuda 1998). Clearly, the protection and preservation of cultural heritage and archaeological finds largely depends on whether local communities value them more highly than the buyers of illicitly obtained artefacts. Presently the situation is made worse by imperfect penalties and rewards that fail

to secure their preservation for future generations. Numerous cross-cultural studies have focused on the effectiveness of legal and regulatory strategies and declared them insufficient (Atwood 2004: 170, Shapiro 1994: 293, Bator 1982: 312, Weihe 1995: 84-90, Özgen 2001: 120, Rose and Acar 1995: 46-50). Turkish society does not seem to be aware that its cultural heritage is being drastically plundered or that looting of archaeological heritage is tantamount to taking part in stealing history. The losses impact culture, tourism, education, the environment, sciences, governance, and the rule of law. Social and political attitudes are another dimension of a problem that is seldom accurately portrayed in the mass media or in ways that engender awareness leading to actual appreciation, cultural patrimony, and involvement in cultural heritage preservation.

The results of this study suggest that ethnoarchaeological fieldwork enables us to explore the social, cultural, economic, and political drivers of illicit looting within a community, on site and in situ. Knowing why and how looters are active locally is a crucial first step that would help communities to participate in discovering the extent of the problem and then taking appropriate measures to stop it. Interviews with antiquities looters provide multifaceted information including motivations, dimensions, and methods behind the plundering and/or vandalizing of archaeological resources, and the prevalence of antiquities looting at the local and global levels. This study has shown that the ongoing destruction continues to be tolerated in each of three communities I consulted across the Black Sea region due to local beliefs and attitudes rooted in folklore and reinterpretation of religious and cultural codes. Both the informants who participated in this study and the local communities they live amongst have little awareness of the value of their cultural heritage rooted in prehistoric times.

Looting of antiquities involving spiritual guidance and *jinn* has been noted in previous studies. The majority of informants I interviewed believe in the existence of charmed or protected treasures, and the possibility of finding these with the help of spiritualists. They believe that *jinn* have power to relocate protected treasure or simply to provide false information. Planning and undertaking an excavation require financial resources, much of which are spent on the services of *hodjas*. Informants I interviewed had collectively spent thousands of working hours in the search of protected treasures in this way. Only a few stated that they had actually found treasure using these traditional methods and beliefs, while all the time exposing themselves to the risk of suffering serious mental and physical harm arising from invoking the help of *jinn*, or the failure to release a treasure from a spell cast to protect it. Some informants mentioned traditional rituals they performed in an effort to protect themselves accordingly. Others said they experienced disappointment, wasted their money and time, and lost their trust in *hodjas* over time. Most pursued their belief that *jinn* can help people to find charmed and hidden treasures, that employing a *hodja* is both more dangerous and expensive, since they believe *jinn* will be present while they are actively working. This finding suggests that looters will continue with or without the assistance of *jinn* to vandalize archaeological heritage, as they intend to keep looking for artefacts they consider as hidden or charmed treasures.

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