

The Jinn and Dowsing Rods: The Recent Tragedy of Antiquities Plundering in Tulkarm, Palestine

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, archaeological and historical sites and monuments have faced significant challenges from antiquities looting, particularly as the political strife on the ground has intensified. This persistent global issue has caused the destruction – partial or total – of countless ancient sites and historical features, alongside the undocumented removal of numerous archaeological and artistic artifacts. Over the past few decades, looters have increasingly relied on supernatural intermediaries, such as jinn and dowsing rods, to identify buried treasures and other valuable objects, causing damage to archaeological sites and the irretrievable loss of cultural heritage. The two principal goals of this study are to describe a deadly accident involving antiquities looters digging a 10-meter-deep shaft-tunnel in Tulkarm, Palestine, and to present the results of a “dowsing blind test” undertaken immediately following that horrific catastrophe.

Keywords: Jinn and dowsing rods, antiquities looting, physical hazards, Tulkarm.

الجن وقضبان الكشف عن الآثار: المأساة الأخيرة بسبب نهب الآثار في طولكرم، فلسطين

واجهت المواقع والمعالم الأثرية والتاريخية على مدى العقود الماضية تحديات كبيرة بسبب نهب وسرقة الآثار، خاصة في الدول التي شهدت - أو ما زالت تشهد - صراعًا سياسيًا وعسكريًا. وقد أدت هذه الظاهرة العالمية المستمرة إلى تدمير جزئي أو كامل لمئات الآلاف من المواقع والمعالم الأثرية والتاريخية، فضلاً عن نهب عدد كبير من الأعمال الفنية والأثرية من سياقها الحضاري دون أي نوع من التوثيق. وقد اعتمد لصوص الآثار خلال هذه العقود بشكل متزايد على وسطاء خارقين للطبيعة، مثل: الجن، بالإضافة إلى أسياخ الكشف عن المواد الأثرية؛ وذلك لتحديد موقع ومكان الكنوز المدفونة وغيرها من المواد الأثرية الثمينة، مما تسبب في إلحاق ضرر بالغ بالمواقع الأثرية والخسارة التي لا يمكن تعويضها لمصادر التراث الحضاري. ويكمن الهدفان الرئيسيان لهذا المقال في وصف حادث مميت ليق بلصوص الآثار الذين حفروا نفقًا بعمق 10 أمتار في طولكرم كأحد الشواهد الدالة على ظاهرة سرقة الآثار في فلسطين، وتقديم نتائج اختبار الكشف عن المواد الأثرية باستخدام الأسياخ المعدنية الذي أجري مباشرة بعد تلك الكارثة المروعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجن وقضبان الكشف عن الآثار، نهب الآثار، المخاطر المادية، طولكرم.

Introduction

Archaeological sites, both major and minor, provide valuable insights into societies and civilizations of the past, allowing us a window into many aspects of a culture: everyday life, economic activities, socio-political structures, architecture, and religious beliefs, among others. However, the majority of these sites worldwide are facing ongoing risks from a variety of perils, whether human-caused or occurring naturally, such as: warfare and political conflict (Kulenovic, Kulenovic and Sirovica, 2021, p. 3), negligence, encroachment, vibration, unsustainable tourism, urbanization (El-Gohary and Abdel Moneim, 2021, p. 261), erosion and inundation, agricultural activities, mineral extraction, and —accounting for a significant portion of the ongoing destruction— antiquities looting (Brodie and Renfrew, 2005, p. 344). Many scholarly publications have demonstrated that over the past two centuries more than 50 percent of all archaeological resources worldwide have been looted or even destroyed, with most of the cultural objects ending up in the illegal art and antiquities market (Proulx, 2013; Fabiani, 2018). Over the years, the international community has implemented a range of treaties, protocols, and international regulations to tackle this significant and ever-increasing phenomenon (Auwera, 2013). Furthermore, several countries have enacted domestic laws regarding antiquities and set up specialized institutions to combat antiquities looting, trafficking, and cultural destruction (Calvani, 2009, pp. 31-32; Al-Houdalieh, 2012a, p. 23; Reep, 2022; Beltrametti, 2023, p. 205). However, even with such regulations in place against the looting of historical and archaeological sites and monuments, antiquities looters continue to damage heritage resources, and middlemen-traders —along with their sometimes-unwitting client museums and collectors— are still responsible for the illegal trafficking of ancient artifacts, regardless of their origin (Brodie, Doole and Waston, 2000; Vrdoljak, 2016, p. 16; Brodie *et al*, 2022).

The plundering of cultural heritage assets and the associated illegal trafficking of ancient artifacts is a significant global issue, as noted by various scholars (Merryman, 1986; Park, 2002; Karlzen, 2010, Al-Houdalieh, 2012b, p. 115; Kersel and Hill, 2020). In certain countries, this illicit activity has evolved into a widely-embraced and socially sanctioned economic endeavor. Antiquities looting and trafficking are highly detrimental to human civilization and are ranked as the third most significant contributor to international crime, following drugs and weapons (Kouroupas, 1998; Vasileska and Miloshoska, 2022: 65; Brodie *et al*, 2022, p. 121). This trend has escalated since World War II, particularly as global criminal networks have gained dominance and started trafficking cultural artifacts from their original locations into other countries, including both the legal and illegal markets (Park, 2002, p. 943).

The global antiquities trade's precise monetary value is uncertain, but it is estimated to range between 4.5 and 6 billion US dollars annually (Vasileska and Miloshoska, 2022, p. 67); however, Brodie *et al*, (2022, p. 121) stressed the importance of conducting more frequent and reliable quantitative evaluations of this nature on a global scale. McAndrew approximates the worldwide sales of material culture items in 2022 to be around 67.8 billion US dollars, surpassing the levels seen in 2019 before the pandemic (McAndrew, 2023, p. 14). Findings from several different studies indicate that in the sale of antiquities objects, middlemen and traders typically receive around 98% of the final purchase price, while the original finders realize only about 2% of that retail value (Borodkin, 1995, p. 337; Brodie, 1998, p. 8; Brodie, Doole and Waston, 2000, p. 13; Kersel, 2005, pp. 80-83; Yahya, 2008, p. 497; Al-Houdalieh, 2012a, p. 22). UNESCO points out that the monetary value of distinctive and desirable objects may increase up to one hundred-fold as they are traded (UNESCO, 2011, p. 4). This is particularly evident when these items transit from the illegal system into the legitimate antiquities market (Brodie, 1998).

Engaging in illicit digging in search of valuable archaeological finds is a dangerous activity that can result in severe physical harm and even fatalities. The level of risk in these pursuits is determined by several factors, such as the number of people involved, the duration and pacing of daily work, the fieldwork experience of the antiquities looters, and the level of caution exercised.

Physical hazards can arise from the use of heavy machinery or even traditional excavation hand-tools, from working in confined spaces like open trenches or rock-cut underground spaces (e.g., tunnels, caves, tombs and cisterns), digging alongside the remains of ancient walls or beneath live trees, working on steep slopes, and from environmental conditions like working at night or in inclement weather.

In previous research studies, the primary author has classified the hazards that either cause or pose a risk of physical injury as follows: cave-ins, falling stones or digging tools, use of heavy machinery, contact with insects and snakes, working in adverse weather conditions, potential encounters with jinn (Al-Houdalieh, 2013, pp. 323-325), and deadly conflict between antiquities looters and the owners of the excavated property (Al-Houdalieh and Jamal, 2020, pp. 10-11).

During their fieldwork, antiquities looters are regularly exposed to actual harm, resulting in serious injury of varying degrees or even tragic death. Below are some examples of tragic, fatal incidents that occurred in several countries over the past four decades: In 1990, an antiquities looter died as a result of the collapse of a tunnel in which he was digging together with others in Na Tomotowa, Mali (Panella, 2014, p. 494). In 2007, a group of eight individuals were excavating an ancient cistern in Beit 'Ur al-Tahta (Ramallah Governorate, Palestine). While they were resting together inside, a section of the cistern collapsed on them, resulting in the deaths of three individuals on the spot and injuries to the remaining five (Al-Houdalieh, 2013, p. 327). In 2020, a group of five individuals excavated an abandoned cistern in Kufr al-Diek (Salfit Governorate, Palestine). During their digging, they applied a petroleum-based thinner to a large stone, to weaken and break it using fire. Two members of the group, who were brothers, died immediately due to suffocation (Al-Houdalieh and Jamal, 2020, pp. 11-12). In 2020, a six-member family group was excavating beside a septic tank in Deir al-'Asal al-Fouqa (Hebron Governorate, Palestine) using traditional tools and rock drilling machinery. The rock drilling caused a partial collapse of the tank's wall, resulting in the flooding of wastewater over the diggers. Five individuals were killed immediately and the sixth died a few days later (Archive of the Directorate of the Tourism and Antiquities Police, 2020).

In 2012, a group of at least 12 people were excavating a deep hole beneath the floor of a house in Arab Al-Manasrah north of Luxor, Egypt. Ten people died instantly as the loose, sandy walls of the hole collapsed on them, including four brothers, and two more were injured (Ahram Online, 2012). In 2017, a group of men engaged in looting were excavating a 10-meter-deep shaft beneath a house in Tahta, Sohag Governorate, Egypt. The shaft collapsed suddenly on the diggers, causing the immediate deaths of four individuals (Ahram Online, 2017). In 2018, two brothers were excavating a 20-meter-deep shaft beneath the floor of a shop in Akhmim, Egypt. While they were in the lower part of the shaft, it collapsed on them, resulting in their immediate death (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2018). In 2021, a young man and his mother-in-law were digging a 6-meter-deep and 6-meter-wide pit inside a traditional residential building in Giza, Egypt. They were buried by collapsing sand, resulting in both of their deaths. The Civil Protection Task Force spent seven hours recovering the two bodies. Later, the deceased man's wife escaped with her children over concerns about legal responsibility (Egypt Independent, 2021). In 2021, a group of at least two individuals were searching for ancient artifacts in a subterranean rock-cut tomb in Abu 'Alanda, Jordan. One person died instantly, and another was severely injured, as the accumulated deposits inside the tomb collapsed on them (Al-Ghad, 2021). In 2022, a man and his wife were digging two holes in their bedroom in Giza, Egypt. One of the two holes caved in on them, killing them instantly (Al-Sherbini, 2022). Finally, in 2023, a group of at least two individuals were excavating an old cave near Sum on the outskirts of Irbid, Jordan. A fatality occurred when large stones and earth deposits collapsed on two persons at the bottom of a deep hole, resulting in the death of one and severe injury to the other (Al-Hadath, 2023).

Jinn and dowsing

In Palestine, many individuals, including Muslims, Christians, and Samaritans, claim that they have sometimes interacted with jinn for various reasons, including the locating of hidden treasures and ancient items. Jinn (singular jinni) are understood to be spirits, often capable of assuming human or animal form and exercising supernatural influence over humans. Intermediary individuals, usually known as "sheikhs" (or, pejoratively, as "charlatans"), use various techniques to summon jinn in order to locate treasures and other material culture objects.

These practitioners will typically first summon the jinn to present itself and then enlist a human subject, typically an infant male or female, for the jinn to possess, reading over the person certain verses or chapters from sacred texts and/or special spells. Some practitioners claim the ability to summon jinn without transferring them to a human subject. When someone is possessed by a jinni, the jinni communicates through the affected individual, providing specific details about the location and nature of the concealed treasure. Many “sheikhs” and antiquities looters acknowledge two types of hidden treasures: regular ones (not guarded) and those believed to be guarded by jinn. Discovering and extracting the first type of valuables relies entirely on the looters’ field experience and luck. Exploring the second category, however, is intricate and hazardous due to the protection of jinn. The stories that are told illustrate the perceived risks. If one stumbles upon a “protected” treasure, it is said to be impossible to remove it from that location, even if it is already in a sack being taken away. Furthermore, some “sheikhs” believe that jinn deliberately mislead people about the whereabouts of hidden treasures in order to cause not only wasted effort but also the destruction of their valuable personal property, such as inhabited houses, courtyards, cisterns, and agricultural terraces (Al-Houdalieh, 2012b, pp. 106-111). This phenomenon, as we recently learned, forms part of the backdrop for the tragedy at Tulkarm.

Dowsing (or divining), according to Ellis, was utilized by many ancient civilizations, among them the Babylonians, Persians, Medes, Greeks, and Romans. They utilized various tools such as Y-shaped forked twigs, tree branches, iron or steel rods, magnetic needles, and wands. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, the dowsing rod became a popular topic of discussion and publication, resulting in the widespread adoption of dowsing throughout many social groups in Europe. Dowsing rods have historically been utilized for many purposes, including locating underground water sources, identifying ore and hidden treasures, delineating the boundaries of buried constructions, and determining the depth of ores and material culture (Ellis, 1917, pp. 5-15).

Dowsing in archaeology is a controversial subject with limited published results, despite extensive research having been conducted (Daynes, 2012, p. 2). Generally speaking, professional archaeologists have little faith in the use of dowsing to map concealed ancient structures or to locate artifacts or human skeletal remains. Some archaeologists and geophysicists, despite their prevailing skepticism, have conducted “blind dowsing tests” at various archaeological sites worldwide to assess the efficacy of this technique for archaeology. However, the test results were mixed: the majority yielded unfavorable outcomes while the remainder seemed to confirm dowsing’s validity. Leusen ascribed the failure of most field experiments to poor test design and execution, the overlooking of significant statistical biases, and variations in the dowsers’ personal abilities (Leusen, 1998, pp. 123-137).

Whether scientifically verifiable and warranted or not, there has been a significant increase in the use of dowsing by antiquities looters in Palestine. This practice is promoted and demonstrated in numerous field training videos created in various languages by practicing dowsers and widely available on social media. Additionally, there are numerous documented cases where individuals or groups were caught in the act of using dowsing rods by government authorities responsible for the security and protection of cultural heritage resources. Most of these practitioners claim in their videos that they can trace buried archaeological structures, voids, caverns, reservoirs, tunnels, subterranean rock-cut tombs, and pinpoint the location of minerals and valuables, as well as estimate their depth from the surface. As for equipment, they advise using two simple L-shaped copper wires or rods about 60cm to 1.03m in length. In 2017, a Palestinian dowser published an eBook detailing the use of dowsing rods for locating hidden things. The publication provides a comprehensive explanation of the dowsing process using L-shaped rods, emphasizing the significance of their movements during fieldwork. The author of this eBook emphasizes that the rods function primarily through a binary “yes/no” response mechanism. The dowser should hold a rod in each hand, he says, point them toward the ground for a few seconds, then stretch them parallel to each other with a gap of about 20 cm in-between.

After that, the dowser should move quietly and slowly in any desired direction over the potential archaeological site. When the rods cross, the dowser is likely above hidden items or a void. When the rods swing apart, toward the outside, it signifies the presence of a solid underground structural boundary. To then determine the outline of an underground structure, the dowser should move in various directions around the site, noting the rods' reactions, and mark the spots by setting stones, flags, or sticks. Moreover, the author of this eBook stated that the depth of buried treasures or structures can be determined by following this highly ritualized procedure: First, both rods are pointed toward the ground for a few seconds, then the right-hand rod touches the ground for about 20 seconds. Next, both rods are raised parallel to the ground, then the left rod is lowered while the right one is raised above shoulder level. The right rod then rotates clockwise, with each full rotation indicating half a meter in depth (For security considerations, and in accordance with the request of the eBook's author, the researchers have opted to withhold both the author's identity and the title of his publication in order to maintain confidentiality).

The author offers readers of his eBook online the opportunity for personal communication by either mobile phone or email, thus the primary author ("I/me/my" in the following account) was able to easily engage with him. Over the span of 10 days, I contacted the author of the eBook by phone on three occasions, with each call lasting between 30 and 50 minutes. During the initial call, I provided my complete name, discipline, place of residence, affiliation, and a brief overview of my research project. I mentioned that I had carefully reviewed his publication and found it to be valuable. The conversation then shifted to a general discussion on the subject of dowsing. During the second and third calls, we discussed the global dissemination of the dowsing phenomenon, as well as the diverse techniques showcased on social media. On the third call, based on eBook's author eager engagement on these matters, I inquired whether he might agree to meet face-to-face, at a location of his choosing. The resulting encounter was at a café in the city of Ramallah and lasted for 2.5 hours. (The second author was not involved in this interview, so as to not compromise the subject's trust or arouse in him any possible fear of prosecution). During the discussion, the author of the eBook was asked whether he would be willing to participate in a dowsing experiment for scientific purposes, and he agreed without hesitation. We note that he is 33 years old and single, with ten years of practical dowsing expertise and a two-year diploma in software design.

Three days later, I accompanied the dowser to Khirbet al-Lauz, without informing him of the name of the place, its archaeological history, or any previous archaeological activities that had been carried out there. I myself am intimately familiar with this Khirbet, having unearthed there many subterranean structures from the Roman and Byzantine periods in 2007, after which these features were completely back-filled and hidden at the conclusion of the excavation season. (For more detailed information about the previous work at Khirbet al-Lauz, see Al-Houdalieh, 2008, 2009, and 2018.) The dowser and I arrived at the Khirbet around 9:30 a.m., with the weather clear and sunny and the ground surface relatively dry. There was no noticeable wind movement nor were there any humans or animals present. For the blind dowsing test, which lasted 2.5 hours, the dowser was asked to practice his skills on three specific parcels of between 500 and 1200 square meters each, sites where I had excavated a Roman-era ritual bath (mikveh) and a cistern located very close to each other, a Byzantine subterranean arcololia burial cave, and a Byzantine wine-press. Once again, all of these once-exposed features were back-filled long ago, with no trace of their existence visible when one traverses the landscape. Moreover, one farmer there has recently constructed agricultural terraces and installed a metal door at the entrance to his land parcel. The dowser searched the first land parcel by carefully but randomly walking over it, and 10 minutes later said: "There are no underground structures in this plot of land". I then asked that we double-check the result of the dowsing by crisscrossing this land along imaginary grid lines, both lengthwise and transversely, with a spacing of 2 meters in between. My objective was to ensure that the dowser walked directly over both the mikveh and the cistern several times, in both directions: north-south, and east-west. Once completed, the conclusion of the dowser was again negative. The same dowsing and test procedures were used on the second and third plots of land (Fig. 1), with similar negative results. Thus, based on our findings, we can conclude that dowsing rods are an unscientific technique that wastes time, effort, and money, as we also recently discovered from the tragedy in Tulkarm.



Figure 1: Dowsing at Khirbet al-Lauz, 10 March 2024, Looking north.

The case of the Tulkarm tragedy

Tulkarm is located in the northwest part of the West Bank, northwest of Nablus, southwest of Jenin, and east of, and immediately adjacent to, the “Israeli segregation wall”. The name Tulkarm is derived from the Aramaic phrase *Tur Karm*, which means “Vineyard Hill” (Al-Salim, 2015, p. 39), a derivation attested also in the Samaritan Chronicle (Conder and Kitchener, 1882, p. 162). During the Ottoman-Turkish period, this city was a small town under the jurisdiction of the Nablus district (Thawaba, 2009, p. 31). In 1892, it was officially organized as a municipality and became the administrative center for the region. In 1922, Tulkarm had a population of 3,350, comprising 3,109 Muslims, 208 Christians, and 33 persons of other religions. The population has gradually expanded since the second quarter of the 20th century. In 2017, Tulkarm city had a population of 64,532, while its governorate had a total population of 186,760, encompassing 35 surrounding villages plus two refugee camps (Palestine Central Bureau, 2018, pp. 67-68).

Based on information provided by the Palestine Tourism and Antiquities Police Department, on our meeting and discussion with the Police Director of Tulkarm Governorate, and on reports in the local media, the recent catastrophic event unfolded as follows: Six months before the incident, a certain individual (called hereafter the “mediator”) contacted the homeowner and planted the idea of a possible hidden treasure under the man’s house. Later, the mediator returned to the home with a «sheikh», who claimed specialized knowledge of locating hidden treasures and other ancient objects with the aid of jinn. This sheikh, a 75-year-old retired man with a secondary school education, is the father of four children. He informed the property owner that there was an ancient treasure buried beneath his house, a treasure protected by a jinni. The owner was unsettled about the situation, vacillating between doubt and belief, and he ignored the visit for months. Then, one month before the accident, the mediator, who later took part in the illegal digging in this spot, made yet another return visit to the home and mentioned a close contact he had with a skilled dowser. He inquired whether the owner would want to invite the dowser to come and identify the specific location of the buried treasure. The property owner accepted the suggestion but asked for one-weeks’ notice to make arrangements with his family, since they all currently occupied the house with him. Ten days before the digging started, the dowser and the mediator came to the house, bringing two L-shaped copper dowsing rods in a back bag. After some time, the dowser (a 44-year-old blacksmith with a primary school education and the father of nine) began dowsing by moving from one room to the next, evaluating the movement and rotation of the rods. He concluded that a hidden treasure lay nine meters below a certain area inside one room of the house, pointing to it with his finger.

The homeowner is a 34-year-old father of three who has a secondary school education. Being unemployed at the time and in need of resources to support his family, he agreed that the mediator should proceed and coordinate the team for the digging process. The mediator is a 42-year-old businessman, originally from the Gaza Strip but residing in Tulkarm for the past decade, the father of three and possessing a secondary school education. The mediator then enlisted two other individuals to collaborate with him and the homeowner on this endeavor. He informed them that if they found and collected the potential treasure, they would be paid a certain portion of it, or daily wages if they were unable to find it. The two individuals, ages 37 and 41, are from the Gaza Strip and have their own remarkable stories: Both were employed in the Israeli labor market via work permits which allowed them to stay overnight at their place of employment inside Israel, as needed. With the outbreak of the conflict on October 7, 2023, however, Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Palestinian Territories quickly canceled all work permits for all Palestinians, regardless of their residency. Following this pronouncement, Israeli authorities began arresting and detaining Palestinians, from both Gaza and the West Bank, who were working in Israel. Then, on November 5th, the two individuals, together with around 5,850 other Gazan laborers, were expelled from Israel and released in the West Bank. The two, along with a few of their friends, made their way to Tulkarm and sought shelter together. So, when the mediator invited the two men to participate in the digging, they immediately accepted, having been uprooted and lacking any resources or means of supporting themselves.

The day before digging, the homeowner transferred his family to a different property, to facilitate the project about to get underway. The dowser had previously identified the spot above the presumed hidden treasure, being in the eastern portion of the bedroom, so the owner relocated his bed to make way for the digging. The two hired diggers proceeded to cut through the bedroom's paved floor, then started sinking a nearly vertical shaft underneath. They worked for two weeks, beginning each day at 9:00 a.m. and ending at 2:30 p.m., using both traditional digging equipment and two powered, hand-held rock drilling tools. When they had excavated somewhat beyond the prescribed depth of nine meters, the promised location of the hidden treasure, they began feeling nervous and defeated. At that point, the homeowner again contacted the dowser, who once again practiced his dowsing technique, then said: "Look, there is definitely a cavity containing a hidden treasure, but this is not the exact location. You must dig horizontally northwards for another four meters to find the exact position of the treasure". They debated what steps to take, then started to drive a horizontal tunnel a certain distance. On the final day of work, they encountered bedrock and attempted to shatter it with the rock drilling equipment. Unfortunately, their drilling breached the wall of a neighboring rock-cut septic tank, and the large hole opened at the base of the tank allowed a great volume of sewage to be forcefully ejected onto and over the two workers, at a depth of around 10 meters below the floor level.

The accident happened at 2:00 p.m., with the homeowner and the mediator both standing near the top of the shaft. They successfully intervened to rescue one individual, but despite their best efforts, they were unable to save the second. The rescued person was at that time unconscious and suffering from asphyxiation, but those present chose not to call for an ambulance out of fear of legal consequences (The rescued man later revived on his own, without medical intervention). At 11:00 p.m., the property owner informed his father about the tragic incident, presented him with some details, and sought aid. The father immediately notified the police and advised his son to surrender himself to the police officers. The police immediately alerted other Palestinian law enforcement agencies and requested that Civil Defense also respond to the spot. The 37-year-old individual who had been rescued was only then taken to the hospital. The mediator fled to a nearby governorate in the West Bank but was apprehended the next day and transferred to the public prosecutor. The Civil Defense team, beginning at 11:15 p.m. and working continuously for six hours, were able to pump out the wastewater and extract the deceased's body. This person who died was 41 years old and the father of eight.

On February 12, 2024, the day after the tragedy, the two authors (“we/us/our” in the following narrative) visited the crime scene along with officials of the Palestine Department of Antiquities and several Palestinian law enforcement agencies. The home is located in Tulkarm’s historic core, in what locals refer to as the western or Christian quarter, and has two stories, the upper one reached by an exterior staircase. The ground floor of the property, built 65 years ago, measures about 120 square meters and includes a corridor, bedroom, living room, kitchen, and a bathroom. Upon entering the bedroom, we noticed a 1.2-meter-square cut-out area in the traditional floor tiles, leading down into a shaft. The vertical shaft cuts through compact, grayish earth deposits and measures 1.2m x 1.2m near the top. Then, at a depth of 2.5m, where there is a sort of landing, it narrows considerably in diameter (Fig. 2), proceeding downward to a (now) total depth of 7.5m. In the shaft’s walls, we observed abundant charcoal, a few pottery sherds, and scattered stones of different sizes. Furthermore, nearly filling the bedroom, we observed numerous large plastic bags of various sorts filled with the soil removed in the course of excavating the shaft (Fig. 3). The persons involved apparently stored all the extracted earth in these sacks, intending to move them to another location at the conclusion of their activities, all at once, in order to prevent detection by neighbors, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, or the Tourism and Antiquities (T&A) Police.



Figure 2: The vertical shaft of the tunnel, Photo by Salah Al-Houdalieh.



Figure 3: The plastic bundles filled with soil deposits inside the bedroom, Photo by Salah Al-Houdalieh.

After documenting the crime scene, we visited the office of the Tourism and Antiquities Police for Tulkarm Governorate. There, we met with the officers, asking them two main questions: What is the prevalence of antiquities looting in Tulkarm Governorate, and have there been any excavation activities in the neighborhood of the property in question in recent decades for purposes of uncovering ancient objects? Three policemen were interviewed, and their responses are summarized below: Their field visits to the governorate's archaeological sites, they said, revealed a considerable increase in the frequency of encroachments, and they observed that some antiquities looters used mechanized equipment to seek for valuable objects. They believe that this exceptional surge is the result of Palestinian workers being excluded from the Israeli labor market immediately following the outbreak of the attack on the Gaza Strip, leaving a large number of them unemployed. Regarding the second question, the officers requested a short time to respond, and after two days, we received the following: The residential quarter in question has been vandalized multiple times over the past twenty-four years, as proven by T&A Police archives, which includes the following cases: In 2001, three members of the same family were caught red-handed unearthing an ancient subterranean rock-cut tomb, and they were apprehended with 200 pottery oil lamps, 10 glass vessels, and four jars. In 2007, four antiquities looters were detained while digging in the garden of an inhabited house, and they were found in possession of three pottery oil lamps, nine glass beads, and a metal tool. In 2008, a person was detained while digging a 10-meter-deep shaft in his courtyard, but with no archaeological artifacts in his possession. In 2017, three antiquities looters were captured red-handed while excavating a 9-meter-deep tunnel, with smashed pottery vessels in their possession. Finally, in 2020 a looting group of two individuals were caught red-handed digging a 10-meter-deep tunnel inside their inhabited house while in possession of a few broken pottery oil lamps.

Conclusions

Over the past five decades, antiquities looting has emerged as a global concern, thoroughly investigated by a wide array of scholars and practitioners from disciplines including archaeology, anthropology, art history, law, criminology, economics, and political science. These fields have collectively explored the phenomenon from various perspectives—its historical trajectory, underlying socioeconomic drivers, operational modalities, cultural and material impacts, and the structure of trafficking networks. Additionally, researchers have shed light on the linguistic practices, specialized tools, and techniques employed by looters, as well as the grave physical risks they often face. These interdisciplinary studies have informed the development of numerous intervention strategies and policy recommendations aimed at deterring illicit excavation and disrupting the trade in looted cultural property. Yet, despite these theoretically grounded and often collaboratively implemented measures by states, law enforcement agencies, and international heritage organizations, the rate and scale of looting have continued to escalate with alarming persistence.

This enduring failure compels us to re-examine the foundational assumptions behind these interventions. Have we, perhaps, underestimated the complexity of the problem? Is the ineffectiveness due to a deficit of political will or a lack of appropriate enforcement tools? Could the global economic imbalance between wealthy and low-income nations be exacerbating heritage exploitation? Are religious fundamentalism, political opportunism, and systemic poverty contributing factors? Might a culture of opportunistic profiteering be overshadowing ethical concerns about heritage preservation? Finally, should our interventions focus more sharply on the structural and systemic dynamics that sustain antiquities looting, rather than concentrating solely on the individuals involved? These unresolved questions lie at the heart of the crisis—and until they are meaningfully addressed, the integrity of the world's cultural patrimony remains gravely imperiled.

One particularly revealing facet of the looting phenomenon is the intersection of traditional belief systems and illicit excavation practices. In some communities, the use of jinn and dowsing rods — rooted in folkloric traditions and mystical worldviews— is invoked to guide the search for buried treasures. These beliefs are often deeply entrenched in local cultural systems, where supernatural entities are thought to possess the ability to reveal hidden wealth or direct excavators to auspicious locations. Dowsing rods, similarly, are believed to function as mystical instruments capable of detecting underground artifacts or structures. While such practices may be culturally significant to those who perpetuate them, they can serve as powerful justifications for looting. In a previously published field study, Al-Houdalieh (2012b, p. 116) found that relying on jinn for uncovering antiquities is not only economically ineffective but also fraught with danger, especially when dealing with objects believed to be spiritually “protected”. These observations highlight the need to disentangle cultural belief from criminal practice without dismissing the former, offering a nuanced framework for education and prevention rooted in local epistemologies.

The dangers faced by those involved in looting activities are often underestimated, yet they are stark and immediate. Unregulated and clandestine excavations frequently take place in structurally compromised environments, where the risks of collapse, suffocation, or accidental flooding —particularly from ruptured wastewater systems— are ever-present. These hazards can result in severe injury or loss of life, underscoring the urgency of not only protecting archaeological sites from destruction but also safeguarding the well-being of individuals, often impoverished or misled, who risk their lives in these unlawful undertakings. Effective heritage protection, therefore, must be framed not merely as a legal or preservationist objective but as a humanitarian imperative as well.

A poignant piece of Palestinian folk wisdom captures the essence of preventive thinking: in a conversation between two individuals, one praises his late grandfather's skill in healing fractured bones, while the other responds by admiring his own grandfather's wisdom in preventing fractures altogether. This metaphor aptly encapsulates the strategic pivot we must undertake —from reaction to prevention. Addressing the conditions that precipitate looting before damage is inflicted is not only more effective, but more sustainable.

As Brodie and Renfrew (2005) and Barker (2018) have argued, the existing responses to antiquities looting and trafficking remain insufficiently robust and inadequately coordinated. They advocate for a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and participatory approach that brings together government authorities, heritage professionals, law enforcement agencies, and local communities. A truly effective response must include the strengthening of legal protections for cultural heritage, increased investment in archaeological site monitoring, expansion of public education initiatives, and mechanisms for local community empowerment. Equally important is the need for transparency and vigilance within the global art market, whose complicity—whether intentional or inadvertent—enables the circulation of looted material culture. Only through such holistic and integrated strategies can we begin to reverse the tide of destruction and secure the future of the world's cultural legacy.

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