

# Marketers of treasure hunts send people on wild goose chase

*One person single-handedly determined to destroy Iran*



A cameraman holds a mobile phone showing the map of a buried loot.  
● PETER DEJONG/AP

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With the approach of treasure hunters, all valuable pieces of information are destroyed. Everything is struck by a pickaxe and discarded. There is no testing, no publication, and no one will ever find out what has been unearthed that could be studied at a national or international level.

## No place left untouched in Iran

In Iran, there is almost no place that treasure hunters have not dug up. There is no undamaged ancient site in Iran without a single exception. All of them have been damaged, based on the assumption that there is gold or some other story lying there. However, there are very important points that I always repeat to raise awareness.

One of these is about buying and selling treasure maps, the same fake maps that you will find. The second source of income for the creators of these maps is identifying treasure locations. They come and look at walls and see shapes that, in their view, indicate something, but we know these shapes do not exist. For example, they might say the profile of a mountain looks like an eagle, and its beak points to a tree, so you dig ten meters there, and they charge a hefty fee for this “expertise”. The third way they make money is by selling treasure-hunting or metal-detecting devices. These devices cost hundreds of millions of tomans to billions, and you can rent them for millions of tomans daily. Even if they get confiscated, it’s still a major income source for those involved.

No device can visualize the shapes of treasures. The most advanced ground-penetrating radar devices show you the depressions and elevations of soil sediments, which are useful for our archaeological work, not for showing you a jar full of coins. These are all illusions.

The fourth method of income generation for these people is offering courses and workshops. A rational person might ask, “If you have the treasure map and are selling it, why don’t you go and retrieve it yourself? Why sell it to me?” The answer is that they claim they have clients who don’t allow them to do so, which leads us into the realm of superstition.

## No treasure? Client moved it

The treasure hunter pays for the map, pays for the expertise, risks everything to dig at night, and in the process, destroys all the information that we archaeologists could have obtained to understand the site. Then they tell the promoter, “I went there and found nothing.” The promoter responds, “The client must have moved it.” These people have justifications for everything; they have billions of tomans in income and millions of followers and they even operate openly.

## Top officials mistake archaeologists for treasure hunters

We formed a task force in the Organization of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism called the Task Force to Combat Online Treasure Hunting. Instead of chasing those who dig in the deserts, we should go after those who openly provide their phone numbers and addresses, and destroy sites in view of everyone online. At the very least, their Instagram and Telegram accounts should be blocked.

The task force did not achieve any results. After much effort and many lawyers, an arrest warrant was issued for one person. I know this warrant will eventually go to an appeals court and turn into a fine. The warrant was not even for destroying ancient sites but for physically assaulting a guard at one of these sites. The issue of pro-



↑ Hamed Vahdati Nasab

**INTERVIEW** *The methods of treasure hunt marketers have changed with the advent of social media. Treasure maps and treasure-hunting tools like metal detectors are now being sold openly on Instagram, Telegram, and other social media platforms without any fear. However, in this process, it is only the treasure marketers who pocket huge sums of money through deception and fraud. Treasure hunting in ancient sites and every corner of Iran has existed for a long time. However, treasure maps are no longer exchanged with the same level of secrecy as in the past. Treasure hunters now sell such means of destroying history through their social media accounts without any fear, and their followers are increasing day by day. The mere thought that even a small number of people who follow them might be deceived and, in the hope of finding treasure, dig up ancient layers of stone and soil is terrifying.*

*Hamed Vahdati Nasab, the head of the Society of Iranian Archaeology and a paleoanthropologist, explores the issue of treasure hunters and the damage they have caused to Iran’s ancient sites in the interview translated below.*



The photo shows a site at Mount Savalan (Sabalan) in the Ardabil province of northwestern Iran where stone has been roughly shaped to resemble the head of an eagle. Promoters of treasure hunts spin such natural phenomena as signs indicating treasure in maps they sell.