



The photo shows historic pots and a human skeleton that were damaged through using probably non-delicate measures.
● ILNA



A worker shows the findings of her team's archeological endeavors at an ancient site in Shahr-e Sukhteh, Sistan and Baluchestan, southeastern Iran.
● SOMAYEH HASANLOU/ISNA

moting treasure hunting was not even addressed.

The two million people who follow this individual are not all bad people; many of them are not aware. They say, "He goes around digging things up, and you go around digging things up, what's the difference?" I say the difference is like going to a bathroom barber downtown for your appendicitis pain or going to a highly specialized doctor at a hospital. How much difference is there between these two? That's how much difference there is between those two.

Another issue, which is very painful, is that those who promote treasure hunting push forward the notion that all of us archaeologists are affiliated with the government and that everything we find is transferred abroad through the government. This is absolutely not the case. Every province has a custodian of properties, and all our work is meticulously recorded and documented. In fact, it is overseen, handed over, and received under very complex regulations.

Public thinks of them as heritage saviors

Cultural smuggling happens in all countries. But the claims that the Iranian government, now or in the past, has been officially transferring Persepolis abroad are false. Treasure hunt marketers portray themselves as the saviors of Iran's heritage, and we become the villains. In this duality they create, people are drawn to them. What people need to realize is that they should just search online for a moment and see how we work with brushes and why everything should remain in its place.

We have done experiments that trea-

sure hunters have never heard of: dating tests in world-renowned labs costing millions, sedimentology, soil science, pottery experts, stone experts, biology experts, DNA extraction, isotopic analysis, and elemental analysis. Twenty types of expertise come together to evaluate what we have cleaned with a brush and what 15 people have worked on for a month in a one-meter square.

Please note that in one month, we go down one meter by one meter, and we carry out this work so delicately and meticulously that it takes this long. It is a task that they complete in two hours. The result of our work is that we find out, for example, when humans began living in Iran. An inscription is discovered, providing us with extremely valuable information.

With the approach of treasure hunters, all of this is 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.

'Cultural development' deferring to uncertain future

Sites are protected in Iran, but the issue is that when you have nearly a million ancient sites in the country, you can't place a million Conex boxes with water, electricity, and food for guards. It's not practical. Some prominent sites like Persepolis, Takht-e Soleyman, and Tepe Hissar in Damghan have permanent guards, but the Organization of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism can't place someone on every ancient hill and say, "Guard this place."

"Cultural development" is a term that has become overused. When you hear

"cultural development," it means "let it go;" Cultural development means deferring to an uncertain future. In my opinion, the hands of treasure hunt marketers must be cut short. This is also part of cultural development. We are in an emergency stage now, and in this stage, regulatory bodies like the Organization of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism must act seriously. Provincial security forces must step in, and through cyber police, these accounts must be shut down. Their main source of income is their accounts. If their Instagram and Telegram accounts are closed, they will be almost destroyed. To the people who have spent their money — and some have sold their car — to pay for "expertise," I say, "No statue in Iran's history has ever been as large as a mountain. No human group in Iran has ever carved a mountain into 'the shape of an eagle'. All these 'treasure signs' are superstitions; all these clients and maps are superstitions."

Saddam scared all from digging

Treasure hunters do exist in other countries, but they are very few. It depends on the protocols of those countries. For example, I worked for years in the US, Canada, and Russia in Siberia. A large part of it is that people know that what they call a jar of gold coins has a very low probability. More importantly, there are very strict laws. That is why we had to study the laws of neighboring countries. Iraqi Kurdistan is terrifying. If you are caught digging with a device or a pickaxe, you could easily face five years in prison. No one dares to do this. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq — I don't want to say he did a good thing, I disagree with many

of his actions — the Baathists were so sensitive about cultural heritage that Saddam ordered 12 illegal diggers to be hanged on an ancient hill and left there. Naturally, this is inhumane, but it made no one even think of doing such a thing.

In Egypt, when you visit the pyramids and other places, if you have even a piece of pottery in your pocket, you won't get to leave the country easily. The same goes for Turkey, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

No budget to buy all ancient artifacts

Some give examples like in the UK, where they say you can go dig and sell your findings to the government. This is absolutely not true. If you are out in the desert with a pickaxe, you must have a permit that specifies who you are — whether you are an archaeologist, geologist, or from the environment department. The best-case scenario is that you are gardening in your backyard and find something. There is a website where, by law, you must immediately inform the local cultural heritage representative that you have found something.

Our law states that if you find something on your private property, the government is obliged to buy it from you at a good price, even higher than the market rate, provided you found it on your property, not through archaeological excavation, but by chance during construction or similar activities. In that case, since your ownership of the property takes precedence, the government is obliged to buy it at a price that satisfies you.

But even here we have a problem. The government often doesn't have the money. You hear in the news that his-

torical houses are being demolished because, in principle, the Organization of Cultural Heritage should buy them, but it doesn't have the budget. We would need to allocate a year's worth of oil revenue to the organization so that it could buy all of Iran's old houses.

All Iranian mayors have 'bulldozer' mentality

I am friends with some of the cultural activists there in Isfahan, where a discovery was made during the construction of the metro, and I can tell you that they stepped forward. They brought it to the media and stood by many things to prevent destruction. I don't know what has happened in the selection of mayors in Iran. Why do all mayors have a bulldozer mentality? It's rare to see a mayor who says, "This historic district is beautiful. Let's revive it, give it a beautiful function, and build the parking somewhere else."

There is a destructive mentality in the mindset of some mayors, especially in sensitive areas like Isfahan. Everywhere you touch in Isfahan is historical. The same goes for cities like Shiraz and Yazd. If we look at Yazd, it has had a more intelligent approach to historical sites, leading to significant income generation. Tourists go to Yazd because of its preserved historic district. But in Isfahan, the current situation is due to the mayor being ineffective, and other individuals who stand to gain huge wealth from the construction of towers. The number of influential entities that bypass even the minister of Cultural Heritage is countless.

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The illustration shows a metal detector used to search for buried pots of gold or silver from above the ground.
● MEHMET ABBAS/TURKIYE TODAY



Holes pitter the countryside where treasure-hunting has become a profession in Archar, northwestern Bulgaria.
● VALENTINA PETROVA/AFP