

RITUAL, RISK, AND DANGER: AVOIDANCE RITUALS AMONG ANTIQUITY LOOTERS

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Abstract: This paper deals with the role of taboos and avoidance rituals as a means of psycho-cultural adaptation to taking personal risks among illicit antiquity looters in the Black Sea region of Turkey. My ethnographic fieldwork showed that antiquity looters indeed cared more about the possibility of being crushed by spiritual creatures than of being caught by law enforcement. Spiritual creatures, namely jinn, are the most unpredictable threats imagined by illicit antiquity looters. They force looters to perform rituals to mitigate the perceived danger, including temporary or permanent loss of sanity, loss of limb, or loss of life. The paper concludes that looters' avoidance rituals play a functional role rather than a rational one, and they are performed to show that looters are willing to get along with a spiritual environment beyond their control.

Keywords: risk, danger, ritual, ritual avoidance, illicit antiquity looters

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the destruction of archaeological sites in Anatolia has escalated. The Turkish penal code defines looting as a crime against the Turkish nation and imposes imprisonment on looters from six months to five years plus a fine. Reports of the Department of Anti-smuggling and Organized Crime (KOM) show that more than 50,000 artifacts were recovered during operations in 2019 and 107,939 in 2021 (KOM: 2021). Turkey's archaeological loss through illicit excavations has been mentioned in prior studies focusing on the motivations of the looters (Özdoğan 2005 [1998]; Özel & Karadayı 1998; Özgen 2001; Rose & Acar 1995; Lawrence & Main 1995). The loss of cultural heritage has escalated as local looters have access to technological devices, software, and international connections, as well as spiritual helpers who help them find archaeological assets and extract them safely. Looters face two risks during

illegal excavations. The first is the police raiding and getting caught in the crime. For treasure hunters, being caught by the police while digging means going to jail, but such a possibility can be controlled with worldly measures. For this reason, getting caught by the police is associated with luck and caution. The other is being struck by a jinni, which threatens the looters' and their mates' physical and mental health beyond their freedom, which looters believe can upset the social and economic aspects of their lives. Since antiquity, looters have worked in deserted areas at night; their work entails risks that may result in the loss of limbs, abilities, and life. These risks are only eased by respecting taboos and performing rituals to get along with supernatural beings. Scholars from different areas have defined rituals in various ways, and there are still debates over what should or must be counted as a ritual. Throughout history, rituals have played an essential role in human society. In terms of folklore, anthropology, and sociology, rituals are closely related to religion and, regardless of their rationality and structure, involve supernatural beings (Benedict 1935: 396; Goody 1961: 143–160; Leach 1968: 521; Wilson 1957: 9; Fogelin 2007: 58; Bell 1997: 138). Goody defines ritual as a category of standardized behavior in which the relationship between the means and end is not intrinsic (2010: 36). Rituals are formalized acts that direct their performers' attention to specific thoughts and feelings which carry collective symbolic meanings (Lukes 1975: 291). Rituals appear perfect during the performance, but in reality, there are changes in every performance because they are dynamic and slowly change over time. Since alteration in performance is relatively slow, transformation in ritual form and discourse can be socially tolerated (Rappaport 1992: 250).

Drawing a line between ritual and ceremony, Wilson (1957: 9) focuses on the structure and function of particular acts and emphasizes the feelings and thoughts of participants expressed through ritual. Bell (1997: 139–164), on the other hand, suggests a model that can be applied to identify whether certain acts are more suited to be defined as ritual: formality, rationalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance are presented as characteristics of ritual. Gluckman (1965: 251) draws our attention to sacred and profane differentiation and refers to rituals as holy actions. While ritual, according to Turner (1967: 65), functions to transform the current situation of a ritual object, ceremony approves of it. Rituals are often likened to a distant past experienced by the ancestors of present performers. That is why Schechner (1987: 12) expands his definition of ritual by emphasizing that repetition, rhythm, and syntax transform actions into rituals over time. Even though its future cannot be predicted, its past is well-known. As Howe (2000: 68) points out, ritual is inherently risky because it opens gates between the earth and the supernatural, therefore making unavoidable contact with powerful and

unpredictable forces. Avoidance rituals, on the other hand, are rituals performed in situations that involve risk and may not be controlled by rational means. This study aims to understand if and to what extent ethno-archaeological research can reveal how, when, and why antiquity looters perform avoidance rituals to protect themselves from spiritual creatures. In doing so, I also aim to introduce an ethnographic insight into the mind of looters who have inherited rituals and incorporated them into their performances. Finally, I focus on whether digging for hidden, buried, or “protected and charmed” treasures with the assistance of spiritual creatures, namely jinn, is dangerous.

METHODOLOGY

When conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the Black Sea region of Turkey, I interviewed 68 active and 23 retired illicit antiquity looters during eighteen months, between June 2017 and October 2017, September 2019 and March 2020, and from May to September 2021. The center of my fieldwork was Safranbolu, a city on the UNESCO list since 1994. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I intended to understand whether the penal code could stop looters from illegal digging. The borders of my field research then expanded to neighboring towns as groups of looters in these towns were working on reciprocal terms. Reciprocity included consultation, exchange of technological devices, and, most importantly, exchange of spiritual mitigators who could control and communicate with spiritual guardians of treasures. With the help of my key informant Muslim, a retired antiquity looter who was a mentor to the active ones at the time of my field research, I gained my informants' trust. My informants introduced me to hodjas¹ and priests who were working with them from time to time. Antiquity looters from Safranbolu, Eflani, Ovacık, and Bartın were interviewed on a voluntary basis, promising that their real names would be anonymized in the texts and the audio recordings would only be listened to and decoded by myself. The interviews were labeled with pseudonyms that are common Turkish names, as protecting the privacy and security of participants is the crucial ethical responsibility of a researcher (Hicks 1977; Amstrong 1993; Guenther 2009; McCormack et al. 2012; Svalastog & Eriksson 2010; Brear 2018). I accompanied my informants day and night, observing their activities and conducting interviews at their convenience. I employed semi-structured interviews and recorded them when possible. However, recording interviews was not always feasible, so I wrote detailed notes at the end of each day about the day's events and the interviews. I kept my observation notes and audio recordings in a secure place until I transcribed them.

The region's written history goes back to the Hittites, Phrygians, Persians, Romans, Seljuks, and Ottomans. That is important in ritual avoidance because the treasure's original owner's religion is correlated with antiquity looters' perceived danger. During my field research, I interviewed nine hodjas and a priest who claimed to contact jinn to identify the exact place of hidden treasures, performing rituals to protect looters from jinn and extract the treasure from the ground. Apart from these, the hodjas also perform rituals to convince jinn to transfer their property rights over buried treasures or to deactivate ancient spells.

Digging with the help of jinn in illicit excavations in Turkey has been mentioned in studies conducted in Van, Nevşehir, and Adana (Uysal 1974, 1983, 1985; Savran 1997; Yolcu & Karakaya 2017; Şenesen 2016; Çalışkan 2019; Akkuş & Efe 2015). Even though I could interview six more hodjas, they withdrew their consents for fear of legal action. During fieldwork, I conducted unstructured interviews as I believed topics relevant to one of the various dimensions of my study could unfurl and present themselves unexpectedly. That helped me to come up with new questions that I asked my following informants and redirected me to my prior informants to fill the gaps. Informants' responses to questions about the methods and knowledge gained during the practices directed me to investigate avoidance rituals performed during excavations. Personal experience narratives of my informants encouraged me to participate in six excavations conducted in deserted areas out of town. In this way, I could observe and gain insight into the structure and functions of ritual in the realm of illicit antiquity looting. The following chapter aims to reveal the manners of Turkish antiquity looters who respect the taboos that must be observed to get along with jinn. I proceed to explain what kind of treasures require to be searched and surfaced using jinn. I also describe avoidance rituals developed to protect oneself from the spiritual guardians of treasures. Finally, the discussion reveals cases that show the risks of contacting jinn.

DANGERS AND SOURCES OF RITUAL AVOIDANCE

Risk is our prior knowledge about possible hazards, which might be social, economic, physical, and mental. Studies show that time, place, occupation, interest, and fears affect the perception of danger of individuals or groups (Abt & Smith & McGurrin 1985; Bhandari & Okada & Knottnerus 2011; Hecht 1997; Burgess & Donovan & Moore 2009; Moore 2020; Coleman 2009; Crawford 2004; Katz 1981; Poggie 1980; Tomlinson 2004). Avoidance rituals are performed in situations that are seen as beyond control. Their main distinction from other

rituals is that performers use rituals to ease or deflect the perceived danger, and they are only prescribed as a remedy to avoid possible consequences of risk. As Moore and Burgess (2011: 115) suggest, the central feature of these rituals is that the function of practice as a preventive measure is secondary to the form of ritual. During my field research, one of my informants showed me a YouTube video in which a house was on fire. The house owner was also a looter and was believed to be struck by a jinni. This was not the first calamity that he experienced. First, his children got sick. Then his marriage failed. The fire was the worst, and the only reason for what happened to him was that he spoke before the hodja sealed the excavation site. Having listened to this story, I found Mehmet in the video. He confirmed what was said and added: “I knew the rule. Since I had had ablution, I wasn’t expecting to be struck. I understand now that it wasn’t enough. Ever since I made this mistake, my life turned to hell” (Mehmet, personal communication, September 21, 2019).

The taboos of antiquity looters consist of a series of sayings, such as “Don’t speak at an excavation site before it is sealed”, “Don’t pee or poop at work”, “No women at work”, “Don’t sleep at the site”, “Don’t enter the excavation site without saying *Bismillah*”²⁹. These taboos have a wide distribution along the Black Sea coast. They have also been recorded in studies conducted in eastern, south-eastern, and central Anatolia regions (Uysal 1974, 1983, 1985; Savran 1997; Yolcu & Karakaya 2017; Şenesen 2016; Çalışkan 2019; Akkuş & Efe 2015). All these taboos are linked to cleanliness inside and outside and represent the helplessness of looters. Taboos of looters might be extended to Muslims because their interaction with jinn is taboo in the first place.

Most looters were able to list a number of these taboos without thinking. The taboos represent the requirements of rituals that must be performed to find or extract the treasure and leave the work site without bodily, mental, or social harm. All these taboos originate from common beliefs about jinn existing in Islamic communities. Jinn are described and defined in the Qur’an and the Hadith (deeds and words of Muhammad the prophet). Although Muslim societies have a common faith in jinn’s existence, most Turkish societies transferred the prior spiritual creatures that they had in shamanism into Islam. Shamanic Turks believed in spiritual creatures named *ıye* (possessor) who lived in their realm and could see, help, or harm people. They were free from time and space. They classified these creatures into the White (Tr. *Ak*) and the Black (Tr. *Kara*) according to their abilities and characteristics. While the White could help cure diseases, find lost items, and protect women and children, the Black existed only to bring disasters. *Iyes* were believed to live and reproduce in the space between heaven and earth, and they were worshipped, given offerings, and respected as they could strike those who did not respect them (Araz 1995: 50–70; Lewis

2003 [1971]). *Iyes* had characteristics similar to Islamic spiritual creatures, jinn. Jinn and shamanic *iyes* both live with human beings, have a long lifespan, travel throughout space and time, and can choose between right and wrong. The notion of *iyeye* must have been combined with jinni and dissolved in Islam, after which all the characteristics of *iyeye* were attributed to jinn.

Even though jinn and human beings are similar, their life formula and origins differ (Al-Ashqar 1998, 2003; Khalifa & Hardie 2005; Sakr 2001). The Qur'an validates the existence of jinn by stating, "and indeed, we created man from dried clay of altered mud and the jinn we created aforetime from the smokeless flame of fire" (The Qur'an, 1965, 15: 26–27). Jinn are said to inhabit caves, deserted places, graveyards, and darkness (Al-Ashqar 2003), and are believed to have the ability to possess different living forms, including humans and animals (El-Zein 2009: 89–103). Numerous individuals claim to interact with jinn to cure various sorts of physical, mental, and spiritual diseases and conditions, engage in witchcraft, and locate hidden, buried, or stolen objects (Khalifa & Hardie 2005: 351; Khalifa et al. 2011: 69–75; Cohen 2008: 104–108; Dein & Illaiee 2013: 291–292; Çobanoğlu 2003). The abilities and methods of these individuals are common to shamans who use spirit helpers to find lost objects, cure illnesses, guide the souls of the deceased, and visit deities (Anohin 2006; İnan 2006; Eliade 1999).

In Turkish-Anatolian folklore, jinn are introduced as daunting creatures, and all of the characteristics of shamanic spiritual creatures, *iyes*, are transmitted into jinn by classifying them into two: Muslim and non-Muslim (Tr. *kâfir* / Eng. infidel). They possess deserted houses, places, and unattended belongings. They are primarily active between evening and morning *adhans*³ (Çobanoğlu 2003; Boratav 2013; Bayrı 1972). Therefore, Muslim Turks are expected to respect the taboos related to jinn during this period. Looters look for valid explanations to rationalize their reasons for interacting with jinn. Firstly, looters know that the treasures they seek belong to people who lived in the past. As the distance between the past and the present increases, so does the intensity of ritual avoidance because time is correlated with the status of the treasure. The earlier the archaeological objects, the older the claim of entitlement on them, which indicates a protected status for the treasure. Secondly, knowing jinn can live hundreds of years and travel through space and time, antiquity looters search for their spiritual help. Using spiritual guidance, looters want to harvest the abilities of jinn. At this point, it must be added that looters only perform rituals when they perceive danger at the place they are planning to work.

To illustrate, one of my informants, Erdem, dreamed of seeing green grapes. He asked the mufti, a religious official, to interpret his dream. The mufti interpreted this dream as a sign of good fortune. Erdem lived in a mansion that

used to belong to the Rums, the Orthodox Christian minority who were forcibly migrated to Greece by the population exchange agreement between Greece and Turkey in 1923. Convinced that the treasure promised in his dream was buried under his house, Erdem dug up the floor and the yard. Then, he searched under the roof tiles one by one. Not finding anything, he explored the chimneys. During these months of labor, he did not perceive any danger because he was working in his own house. He stated: "I grew up in this house. Of course, jinn are living with me. But they know me. They know I won't harm them. I respect them. That is why they don't harm me" (Erdem, personal communication, June 6, 2021).

Indeed, studies also agree that as the perceived risk decreases, so does the intensity of ritual avoidance (Katz 1981; Poggie & Gersuny 1972; Tomlinson 2004; Malinowski 1948). Looters are compelled to perform avoidance rituals when they perceive danger, such as working in deserted places at night or searching for a treasure claimed to be seized by a jinni. In both cases, they are expected to obey taboos and perform rituals. At this point, I must clarify that looters searched for three sorts of protected treasures. All my informants reported that they got spiritual guidance during their illicit excavations, depending on what kind of treasure they expected to find. Regardless of where they live, looters have networks that enable them to reach Muslim hodjas and other religious clergy members respected in their community. It is believed that there are three categories of hidden treasures: normal ones, captious (Tr. *tuzaklı*) treasures that set people up and harm them, and those seized or protected by jinn. Looters depend on their abilities, intelligence and luck while digging for the first two. Searching for the last category, on the other hand, is much more complicated and dangerous because these treasures are believed to belong to either ethnic or archaic people who lived in the area and are therefore safeguarded by charms and jinn. In this context, the treasures searched by looters might also be classified into normal, ethnic, and archaic treasures. Ethnic treasures belonged to the recent past when the Rums lived in the area. Since the Rums were forced to leave the country after Turkey and Greece signed a mutual agreement, looters assumed they had no time to take their valuables on such short notice. The Rums allegedly had to bury their assets because they hoped to return when the conditions improved. To protect their valuables until their return, the Rums buried them by activating charms. However, most of them either could not return or gave up on this dream. Therefore, hodjas are expected to use jinn to learn the recipes to break these charms. Ancient treasures, however, refer to the archaeological objects of people who lived in the area in the distant past, such as Romans and Byzantines, whose assets are believed to have passed into the hands of jinn over time. How they estimate the class of archaeological holdings in terms of the period during excavations is a question that one may

ask. Ethnic and archaic adjectives define treasures believed to be protected by the supernatural. Since it is impossible to estimate the period of archaeological assets that looters expect to surface, notions of ethnic and ancient treasures are only used to express the difficulties that supernatural beings pose on looters. In this context, the looters assume that the more trouble they face during excavation, the more ancient the treasure they seek. Additionally, hodjas tell looters that, to cover their failures in the face of supernatural beings, either the treasure was owned by a jinni, who was assigned to protect it in the first place, or the non-Muslim jinn inherited the treasure. Both ethnic and ancient treasures require the help of spiritual mediators as they are considered impossible to extract from the ground without spiritual help. Surviving the excavation depends on deactivating the charms and transferring jinn's property rights over archaeological assets. Only hodjas or priests can accomplish these. Interacting with Jinn and asking for their help to surface archaeological assets requires extreme precautions that can only be managed by spiritual mediators. Only mediators – hodjas and priests – can intercede with jinn and officiate rituals on behalf of looters.

RISK AND RITUAL PERFORMANCE

Avoidance rituals aim to overcome stress and anxiety in case of uncertainty, which is a classical interpretation proposed by Malinowski regarding Trobriand fishermen. He states: "It is most significant that in lagoon fishing, where man can rely completely upon their knowledge and skill, magic does not exist, while in the open-sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results" (1948: 14).

Risk and danger may be related to work, situations, circumstances, and our environment. People perform avoidance rituals because even though we can, to a certain degree, use technological means to estimate nature, we are aware that character has absolute power over us. That is why we cannot entirely rely on rational technology, and we cannot let ourselves ignore possibilities controlled by luck, destiny, and the environment. As scholars state, "man's cognitive image of his capacity to preserve his mortal self through rational technology can never reach the degree of confidence that he can control his environment" (Poggie & Pollnac & Gersuny 1976: 67). They hypothesize that rituals associated with protecting life and limb are more sacred than production-associated rituals. Looters are more concerned about surviving the excavation site, where they work in the presence of a jinni, than the possible yield of the excavation. However, their desire for overnight success forces them to keep digging anyway.

According to Radcliff-Brown (1965), ritual avoidance is nurtured by the idea of ill luck, misfortune, and uncertainties. While describing food avoidance practiced by parents after childbirth for a few weeks, he noted anxiety would also stem from the physiological effect of the rite. It might be a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty stemming from the feeling that something will happen to us, someone, or something, if the ritual is not performed as it should be. In his terms, *primary anxiety* occurs when a person desires specific outcomes and lacks the analytical techniques that can only be eased by a primary ritual. Even though my informants knew they got into these situations voluntarily, their desire to stay safe and sound during and after excavations forced them to seek ritual protection.

Since they avoid interacting directly with jinn, looters work with professionals whose occupation involves contacting jinn. Individuals who work for treasure hunters in Turkey make use of jinn to locate archaeological objects, convince them to give up their property rights over the treasure, learn recipes to break the spell cast upon the treasure or perform avoidance rituals to protect looters from exposure to jinn (Karataş 2021: 171–188; 2022: 303–305; Şenesen 2016: 292–293; Çalışkan 2019: 126). The informants who use jinn to find archaeological artifacts assert that once a jinni is called forth, they will be in command of the hodja and will not harm looters as long as the looters comply with their wishes. Extending Durkheim's (1915) approach, Goffman (1956) inferred that our many diminutive social actions bear traces of religion. He described avoidance rituals as deference coded with prescriptions, interdictions, and taboos that imply acts the actors must refrain from performing. As Schechner (1987) put forward, rituals provide ready-made answers to what thinking works through. Hence, we can say that avoidance rituals are socially approved prescriptions used for socially foreseen risks. It may be better for us to recall Benedict's account of the ritual at this juncture. She also defined rituals as forms of prescribed and elaborated behaviors that occur as spontaneous inventions of the individual (1935: 397).

In my fieldwork, all my informants were Muslim, and most worked with hodjas, who were home-educated and specialized in treasure locating. However, a few of these looters were also acting on the advice of Christian priests (Tr. *papaz*). A few of these hodjas worked as official imams at local mosques. Even though they worked for the government for a salary, they kept helping antiquity looters earn pocket money. When it comes to finding ethnic treasures, getting help from non-Muslim clergymen is a standard method among Turkish looters (Çalışkan 2019; Kocaoğlu 2021; Ibn-i Haldun 1996; Karataş 2021, 2022). As these treasures are believed to be charmed by their owners, looters tend to look for non-Muslims' help not to be struck.

During my fieldwork, I observed Christian and Muslim clergymen, who could control jinn, and perform a common avoidance ritual, namely sealing (Tr. *mühürleme*). While priests perform the sealing ritual with holy water, hodjas mostly prefer white pebbles. But the structure, form, and functions of the sealing ritual are similar in Christian and Muslim traditions. As contact with jinn is considered taboo in Islam, the sealing ritual opens a gate to interact with spiritual creatures. During the ritual, the hodja and looters submit themselves to the hands of Allah the almighty by admitting that only he can protect them from jinn. Accepting the strength of Allah, they perform the sealing ritual as a shelter that acts as an invisible helmet between looters and jinn. Although Islam forbids voluntary contact with jinn to seek help or cause harm to another person, looters ease their guilt for manipulating the taboo by yielding themselves to Allah. To do so, they seek professional mediators who can mediate between looters, jinn, and Allah. Taboos, according to Steiner, are primarily concerned with specific and restrictive situations (1956: 20). Therefore, the sealing ritual is a response to taboo and is prescribed as a remedy to perform excavation if it is the only way to work in a site where a jinni is present and, more importantly, to leave it without being harmed. Perception of this danger by illicit antiquity looters is evidenced by their frequent reference to near or actual mishaps. One of my informants lost his wife after excavation and was extremely hard on himself in his grief. As it was the cold season, he could not refresh his ablution during the last excavation he attended. He kept telling his family that his wife had passed away because of his failure. He believed that jinn retaliated against him by killing his wife. When I visited him at his house a few weeks later, he still blamed himself but also found consolation in that his children and his teammates were alive. There are parallels here with Radcliffe-Brown's interpretation of ritual avoidance (1965 [1952]: 142). His observations show the idea of misfortune, ill luck, and uncertainties nurture that ritual avoidance. Even though Durkheim's (1915) definition of ritual does not refer directly to avoidance rituals, it draws a line between sacred and profane practices, and he gives special consideration to the position of beliefs in a personal deity, guardian spirits, and other supernatural living forms.

Jinni is a guardian spirit who inherits buried treasures. As the original owners of treasures had their assets enchanted, ancient treasures are assumed to be possessed by jinn. According to treasure hunters, sorcerers order jinn to protect the treasure as long as the original owner lives. After the owner and sorcerer die, the treasure achieves a protected status, which means that the jinni possesses the treasure forever. Ancient treasures are believed to have been passed down through the ages since jinn bequeath their assets to their children. This means the present protectors of treasures are acknowledged as

descendants of the first jinni charged with protection. In this case, they are seen as guardian spirits who inherited ownership. Ethnic treasures, on the other hand, belong to a relatively recent past. Since a jinni's lifespan is much longer than that of humans, their first guardian spirits are imagined to be alive. In this case, looters are expected to convince them to transfer their property rights through hodjas. Both cases are required for the sealing ritual because jinn are strong, dangerous, and unpredictable creatures.

I was able to join a ritual for which looters had fetched a priest from Istanbul. In this case, Muhammet and his mates first received help from a Muslim hodja. This Muslim hodja declared that the treasure belonged to a non-Muslim jinni and could not be touched without professional guidance. Since Muhammet's budget was limited and not enough to seek the priest's help, he insisted on continuing with the help of the hodja. At this point, they knew that the treasure was in a cave. Muhammet and his friends had tried to work in this cave from time to time, but they fell asleep as soon as they entered the cave. After multiple failed attempts, the Muslim hodja told them it was impossible because his jinni was scared of the non-Muslim jinni, who was more robust. Then Muhammet asked the priest to perform a ritual that might let them find the exact place of the buried treasure. A priest arrived from Istanbul. He asked the looters to bring a little girl with blue eyes and blond hair. They fetched a little girl from one of the nearby villages. The priest recited some verses from the New Testament and had the little girl drink some holy water. The girl was then asked to look around and say whether she saw anything golden. She pointed to a spot a few meters to the right, on the wall of the cave. Then, the priest let her go and started to perform the sealing ritual.

SEALING EXCAVATION SITE WITH A RITUAL

The sealing ritual protects the area from being excavated in a circle of approximately two square meters to protect illicit antiquity looters from the spiritual guardians of the space. Priests or hodjas mark the area around the excavation site to close it to the entrance and exit of spiritual guardians who have invaded the deserted places. The protected area during this ritual is marked with flour, water, ash, or pebbles. I witnessed six sealing rituals where water and pebbles were used to mark the protected area. Christian priests use only holy water to seal the excavation site. Hodjas, on the other hand, use all kinds of materials mentioned above to seal it. However, the most potent material is pebbles because hodjas write certain verses of the Qur'an on pebbles.

At this point, it must be noted that hiring hodjas to perform the ritual with pebbles is quite expensive, as writing each verse of Sura al-Bakarah over a pebble is time-consuming, and only a few active groups can afford to have this ritual performed. Since hodjas know that finding a treasure is not guaranteed despite the sealing ritual, they require payment in advance for their labor. Hodja Recep told me he only performs sealing rituals with pebbles if looters and his jinni give him a guarantee. That is why most sealing rituals are performed with water. Hodjas and priests read verses from the Qur'an or New Testament over water. They then pour this water to seal the area to create a safe space free from spiritual creatures. As I mentioned above, jinn are believed to be living in deserted places, houses, caves, and graveyards.

Informants described the sealing ritual as the last resort when interaction with jinn is inevitable. Since interaction with spiritual guardians of treasures is the specialty of hodjas, looters are reluctant to be around jinn while working. While hodjas get ready to perform the sealing ritual, looters are expected to observe the abovementioned taboos. Their only duties are keeping taboos in mind during excavation and participating in a purification ritual. According to Douglas (1984 [1966]), three elements are essential in defining the clean-up ritual – dress, motion, and space. Sunni Muslims can achieve this sort of purification ritual by having a *ghusl*,⁴ which has three stages: verbal and practical intention, ritual entering the bathroom, and having a bath. The verbal intention is expressed by saying, “I intend to have a *ghusl*”. Practical intent is displayed by the individual by covering particular parts of the body, entering the bathroom with the left foot foremost, and washing the mouth and nose three times. Then the person rinses the entire body. Finally, they exit the bathroom with the right foot foremost. The meticulousness that the individual is expected to perform in the purification ritual is expressed in folklore with the saying “wash not missing a needle tip”. Although the sequence of rites in the ritual does not have to be logical, they are followed anyway due to beliefs. The purification ritual is broken only after sexual intercourse or ejaculation (Sabiq 2012: 49–52). The looters I interviewed were Sunni males, and they were expected to be in a state of complete purification before digging. This is important as any supernatural trouble experienced on an excavation site is first attributed to the failure of ritual cleansing.

I observed that hodjas asked looters if they were immaculate. During an excavation, one of my informants, Ercan, claimed that he could hear people. It was after midnight, and the closest village was an hour and a half away. We heard nothing, but Ercan kept saying people were having fun around us. Then he heard gunshots. He was in shock and running around. He jumped into a pit to protect himself from invisible bullets. The hodja on site claimed that Ercan

had failed to have a *ghusl*. That is why he heard voices. Douglas's (1984 [1966]) account of the purification ritual is also valid regarding the cleanness of the dress. Since only bodily fluids, such as blood, vomit, or sperm, break the purification of dresses in Sunni tradition, looters are expected to keep themselves clean during excavation. Cleaning clothing is an essential component of the cleansing of looters because any pollution is an open invitation to the danger posed by the jinn. Cleanness of the dress is provided by putting on recently washed clothes just before the excavation. Şakir, my informant, was highly meticulous about the purification of his clothes and kept overalls on during all excavations. He told me that he did not drink anything before going on a dig.

The sealed area is imagined as a room with a locked door marked with a tree branch. The branch also functions as a threshold between the dangerous supernatural environment and our protected earth. Looters use this threshold to go out of or come into the excavation site, and they are expected to be inside the marked circle to be safe and sound. Antiquity looters believe that jinn cannot enter the ring as Allah protects the area. Before the sealing ritual is performed, hodjas contact jinn, using rituals. They conduct an opening ritual to learn the whereabouts of the treasure. They get a bowl of water and read the Qur'an over it. Then they invite jinn to come into the water. My informant, Kazım, who claimed that he controls jinn, described the ritual in his words as follows:

First, I perform a complete ablution. Then I invite jinn into the water. If they refuse to come, I pray to convince them. I can't see them but hear their voices. When they arrive, I feel their presence. I feel sick because of their energy. That is why we don't want to connect with them unless we must. Most of the time, my customers know the whereabouts of a treasure, but they want to pinpoint the exact location. So, I ask my jinni if he knows the place. If he does, he draws a map on the water. Then I describe the map to my customers. If charms or spells protect the treasure, I ask the jinni how to deactivate the charms. If the treasure is archaic and a Christian jinni protects it, it is almost impossible to extract it without paying a price.
(Kazım, personal communication, July 14, 2021)

The respondents confirmed that they were asked to offer extreme gifts to the jinn. Some informants (n=28) experienced that the jinn asked them to offer sacrifices. Even Muslim jinn wanted looters to perform pagan or polytheistic practices. The informants stated that they were asked to perform certain acts such as fornicating in front of the jinni, drinking alcohol, and sacrificing animals they were forbidden to eat, such as dogs, cats, and hedgehogs. I witnessed a hodja tell looters to offer a white rabbit.

In an excavation I participated in, the hodja sealed the site, but the looters could not find any archeological objects. Then the hodja told them that as they approached the treasure, the jinni relocated it. While the looters dug in the sealed area, the hodja recited verses from the Qur'an. It was already midnight when he told the looters that the jinni would not let them explore unless a white rabbit was sacrificed at the center of the sealed area. They started running after rabbits but could not catch a white one easily. It took them hours to catch a rabbit with white spots over a brown coat. They brought the rabbit into the sealed area, but none of the seven could sacrifice it since it was cute. The hodja came forward and offered it. Then he had looters open a hole in the wall of the excavation pit and put the head of the sacrificed rabbit in the hole. Such offerings are an internal part of the excavations that are charmed.

For the charms to be deactivated, looters expect to be asked to offer gifts to the guardian spirits of the treasure. Indeed, rituals, in general, often include offerings that express the performers' sincerity, and every attempt and sacrifice may be made to get along with the spiritual environment (Howe 2000: 69; Durkheim 1915: 302; Hubert & Mauss 1964: 13). In the careful excavation I outlined above, despite approximately five hours of labor, the looters could not find anything, and failure was attributed to being unable to offer a fully white-coated rabbit. Schieffelin's (1996) account of the failure of a shaman to mediate between the supernatural and earthly environments shows that trust is an essential part of the success of a ritual; I was not surprised that the failure of the excavation was not attributed to the hodja. However, my findings about the failure of the mediator challenge those of prior studies, which blame mediators for their mishaps in ritual performance (Keane 1991; Bloch 1989). I assume the differences result from the Islamic belief system in which Allah owns everything created, and hodjas would not fail unless God wanted them to.

Furthermore, there is always a valid explanation that one of the taboos was not appropriately observed. As Tylor (1920 [1871]: 135) stated, "By far the larger proportion, however, are what we should call failures; but it is a part of the magician's profession to keep these from counting, and this he does with extraordinary resource of rhetorical shift and brazen impudence". The credibility of hodjas is primarily ensured through verbal agreements with looters, who promise to share a specified number of archaeological objects anticipated to be discovered during excavations. I want to add that looters only questioned hodjas' credibility when they asked them to perform *haram*⁵ and wanted to be paid in advance. Both looters and hodjas have many explanations about failed excavations: "One of us must have failed to observe taboos", "Jinn relocated the treasure", "The treasure is waiting for his original owner's descendants", "Allah must have spared us", etc.

Antiquity looters asked to offer paganistic and polytheistic gifts have been mentioned in prior studies. Looters generally refuse to perform *haram* since it is interpreted as a rebellion against Allah. Ambitious or helpless antiquity looters, on the other hand, reluctantly agree to perform *haram* to reach the promised treasure (Araz 1995: 163; Çalışkan 2019: 132–130; Şenesen 2016: 292; Savran 1997: 378; Al-Houdalieh 2012; Ibn-i Haldun 1996). Çalışkan's (2019) account of performing *haram* might be an extreme example of helplessness in antiquity looters. Her informants said they had to fornicate in front of audiences. Ethnographic studies conducted among antiquity looters show that they tend to get along with the spiritual environment, particularly with the spiritual guardians of treasures, and they tend to perform avoidance rituals regardless of their religious background, as the most dangerous experience would be harmed by these spiritual creatures (Ibn-i Haldun 1996; Atwood 2004; Coldwell 1977; Hurley 1951; Bayrı 1972; Al-Houdalieh 2012; Gündüz 2001). As these spiritual creatures pose mortal threats to antiquity looters who dream of getting rich overnight, they reluctantly agree to work in deserted places where jinn are believed to be living. At this point, it is necessary to add that the risk of being harmed by a jinni during excavation is given priority over the risk of being caught by the police. Ömer, my informant, explained that police officers are human beings like looters, and he knows what can happen if he gets caught.

On the other hand, a jinni is an invisible and vital spirit with limitless power. Indeed, I met six individuals who claimed a jinni had struck them. Ömer, for example, had been unable to pull himself together since a supernatural event occurred. Even though he was working at a site appropriately sealed through ritual, he saw snakes seven meters below the earth while digging. Stunned, he yelled for help, but his mates did not hear him. He passed out on the bottom of the pit, and the others eventually pulled him up. At the time, two of his teammates were working with him, but they claimed that nothing strange had happened and everything seemed normal. He was working, and there was no snake in the pit. Ömer stayed unconscious for a while. When he woke up, he blamed his friends for not helping him.

The first thing his mates asked him was whether he passed wind while he was digging. Since the purification of an individual can be harmed by fluids and gas exiting the body, they questioned whether Ömer had been correctly purified. Douglas's interpretation of the relationship between pollution and danger is worth recalling in this context. She states that polluters are always wrong, develop a bad condition or cross a line that should not have been crossed, and displacement unleashes danger (Douglas 1984 [1966]: 114). Although Ömer did not intend to pollute his purification state, he did not act meticulously in this regard and became a threat to himself and his teammates.

Finally, I would like to describe the closing ritual performed to return to the earthly environment. Being in an excavation site for hours alongside jinn, looters believe they may also put their families in danger. To protect their families from the threat, looters are expected to have one more *ghusl* before they contact their families. The difference between the closing purification from the regular cleansing ritual is that the looters add vinegar to their bathwater. According to looters, vinegar can clean an individual's aura. As touching them can put their families in danger, they do not contact their family members before the excavation is complete. I witnessed that some looters carried vinegar in a spray bottle just in case. Water mixed with vinegar acts like soap, cleansing dangerous and polluted energy as prescribed by spiritual guardians. At this point, I liken being around jinn to exposure to radioactivity, which quickly makes individuals vulnerable to diseases.

CONCLUSION

Groups or individuals with high uncertainty tend to be associated with ritual avoidance. Avoidance rituals in the perception of danger help ease anxiety and overcome apprehensions. Furthermore, by conducting rituals, individuals can show their willingness to get along in an environment that is out of their control. Through ritual, they display their efforts and helplessness to show they are willing to resign themselves to the supernatural. Apart from the rites of passage accounted for by Van Gennep and Turner, avoidance rituals prioritize self-safety and stem from the mental image of the man that is aware of the limits of his capabilities (Van Gennep 1969; Turner 1991 [1969]). Douglas's and Tylor's interpretations of ritual avoidance parallel my findings, suggesting that pollution is viewed as contagious and can only be prevented through the practice of avoidance rituals (Douglas 1984 [1966]; Tylor 1920 [1871]). In illicit antiquity looting, where the body's social, mental, and physical integrity is more important than being caught by the police, rituals are performed to leave an excavation site safe and sound rather than to extract a treasure. This was expressed by hodja Kazım as well: "Leaving an excavation site in one piece is our priority, of course; all of us also want to leave it with priceless treasures too. But we first need to be alive and in one piece to find them" (Kazım, personal communication, July 14, 2021).

Given that finding a treasure represents the end product of excavation, the sealing ritual represents a desire to leave the excavation site without harm by the spiritual guardians of the treasures. According to Poggie and Gersuny (1972: 67), there is a distinction between production-associated rituals and

the protection of life; limb-aimed rituals and avoidance rituals or taboos are integral to a behavioral response to perceived danger. They emphasize that the contemplation of mortality requires sacred rituals. Looters' rituals prioritize the body's integrity over the excavation yield. Therefore, the sealing ritual ensures that spiritual guardians of buried treasures will not haunt looters. Rituals do not guarantee that looters will leave an excavation site with the treasures they expect to extract, negotiated through offerings and spontaneous contacts between the hodjas and jinn. During the excavations I participated in, the looters could not find any valuable archaeological objects. All failures were attributed to spiritual guardians who allegedly relocated, locked, or cursed the treasure, which was surprisingly enjoyable to witness. None of them accused the mediators. These mediators were mainly respected because they were considered competent in Islamic knowledge, particularly in contacting and controlling jinn. The credibility of hodjas was only questioned when they asked looters to perform *haram* or wanted to be paid in advance. Avoidance rituals are part of the illicit antiquity looters' religious system, which shows shamanic and Islamic characteristics. While looters approach spiritual guardians, they use the verses in the Qur'an and Islamic notions, such as prayers, *surahs*,⁶ and hodjas, as well as the practices of the shamanic belief system. Even though they know their methods are marked as paganistic, they combine them into their sealing rituals. Having Islamic elements in the rituals eases the guilt of looters who are aware that their shamanic practices also put their afterlife at risk. While involved with danger, looters strategically appeal to the Muslim god by reciting verses from the Qur'an, writing or reading them over items such as pebbles, flour, or water. While they expect the help of the jinn to find and surface the treasures, they also appeal to god at the same time, considering him the ultimate effective agent when it comes to being protected from the jinn.

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NOTES

- ¹ In Turkish-Anatolian folklore, the title ‘hodja’ is bestowed upon individuals who perform acts with the assistance of supernatural powers or jinn and are also known for their roles as traditional healers and practitioners of witchcraft.
- ² Shortened from Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim, from Arabic, literally: in the name of God, the merciful and compassionate.
- ³ The *adhan* is a call that invites Muslims to perform each of five mandatory *salah* (Tr. *namaz* / Eng. prayer).
- ⁴ The *ghusl* is ablution that entails washing the entire body to reach a ritually pure state of the body. It is performed in case of ritual impurities such as sexual intercourse, seminal emission, menstruation, childbirth.
- ⁵ *Haram* refers to any act or thing forbidden by Islamic law. Performing or having *haram* results in sin when committed by a Muslim.
- ⁶ ‘Chapters’ of the Qur’an.

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