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DEBATE ARTICLE

BETWEEN MYTH AND DESTRUCTION: SOCIOECONOMIC DRIVERS, CULTURAL NARRATIVES, AND THE IMPACT OF LOOTING ON JORDAN'S ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT. *This study examines the issue of illegal excavations and looting of antiquities in Jordan, a country rich in globally significant archaeological heritage. While numerous mystical and religious narratives, such as tales of "jinn" and hidden treasure maps, attempt to explain why looters prowl the desert, the root causes of looting are deeply tied to historical economic deprivation, marginalization, and a lack of viable livelihood opportunities. The illegal disturbance of archaeological sites such as Petra, Jerash, and Khirbet al-Umari not only undermines national identity but also damages humanity's shared cultural heritage. Drawing on insights from law, anthropology, and heritage management frameworks, this paper analyzes both the inadequacies of current legislation and the role of digital and social media platforms in facilitating looting networks. It further critiques the ineffectiveness of purely punitive enforcement strategies. Instead, the study emphasizes the urgent need for community-centered and inclusive preservation approaches. Initiatives that promote education, sustainable economic opportunities, and digital accountability, such as the MEGA-Jordan project, are highlighted as innovative and sustainable pathways toward responsible stewardship and long-term protection of Jordan's invaluable heritage.*

KEYWORDS. *Drivers, cultural narratives, looting, archaeological heritage, illegal excavation, Jordan.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Jordan is located at the crossroads of the civilizations of the past, home to some of the most recognizable archaeological sites in the world, including Petra, Jerash, Mount Nebo, and the Umayyad desert castles. In addition to being meaningful symbols of Jordanian national identity, these sites are also significant elements of global heritage. Though these sites are valuable from historical and cultural perspectives, they are in increasing danger of illegal excavation and looting.

Contrary to popular imaginings that romanticize looting as a form of treasure hunting—or wandering around looking for buried gold based on a mystical belief in supernatural signs or other contextual justifications—the practice of looting archaeological sites is primarily caused by economic distress, social exclusion, and structural disempowerment. Current looting in Jordan is not simply sporadic acts of survival but is organized and involves a range of participants, including local excavators, brokers, smugglers, and international collectors. Local traditions of *jinn*, prophetic dreams, and Ottoman treasure were connected to a landscape of folklore and display a deeper dynamic in defining popular pressures on the heritage market. They are used to explain a process because they have cultural meanings for participants and not because they are the motivation for looting (Hobsbawm 1983). The dominant driving force is economic; in an area with limited development and unemployment, a single artifact, particularly gold coins or statues, can be transformative.

Complicating this crisis is the strained relationship between local communities and the Jordanian Department of Antiquities (DoA), often perceived as remote, elitist, and dismissive of local concerns. The absence of community inclusion in heritage management fosters a perception of entitlement to "the riches of the land," which undermines official conservation efforts. This

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paper aims to provide a multidimensional analysis of looting in Jordan by examining its historical roots, legal frameworks, socioeconomic dynamics, and the role of digital technologies in exacerbating illicit activity. Ultimately, it advocates for a community-centered preservation paradigm that addresses structural inequality and reimagines heritage as a shared, non-commodifiable resource.

This study is situated within the emerging field of public archaeology, which shifts the focus from archaeology as a purely academic or state-controlled discipline to one that emphasizes public engagement, social responsibility, and the ethical stewardship of the past. As Merriman (2004: 5) defines it, public archaeology "concerns the relationship between archaeology and the public, and the ways in which archaeology is used, perceived, and experienced by people who are not professional archaeologists." This framework challenges the traditional top-down model of heritage governance by insisting that archaeological practice must be accountable to, and inclusive of, the communities whose histories it represents.

In the Jordanian context, the marginalization of local populations from decision-making processes surrounding heritage sites has not only weakened protection efforts but has also contributed to a sense of alienation and disownership. By adopting the lens of public archaeology, this paper critiques the current enforcement-oriented paradigm and calls for a reorientation toward participatory conservation, economic integration, and educational empowerment. Only by recognizing archaeology as a public good rather than a state monopoly or a commodity can sustainable and equitable preservation be achieved.

2. METHODOLOGY

Through a critical narrative analysis of legal, anthropological, and heritage management literature associated with looting in Jordan, this paper illuminates and deconstructs the dominant discourse associated with looting. The research draws on interdisciplinary sources, including government reports, academic analyses, and international legal instruments, to further engage with the ways in which socioeconomic marginalization, narratives of culture, and institutional exclusion combine in the illicit excavation of archaeological sites. The analysis is framed within the parameters of public archaeology, which acknowledges the ethical, political, and social dimensions of heritage stewardship and opposes the separation of "experts" and "publics" in archaeological practice (Merriman 2004). Framing community agency and lived experience in the analysis allows us to look beyond a constructed legal and security-based understanding of looting and represent it as a manifestation of structural inequity and a failure of inclusive governance.

2.1 Historical and Legal Framework

Looting in Jordan cannot be understood without examining its legal and historical antecedents. The historical roots of heritage protection in the area go back to the Ottoman Empire, which passed its antiquities laws in 1874 and 1884, ostensibly governing excavation, possession, and export of archaeological materials. These laws prohibited unauthorized excavation and required an imperial government permit for artifact transfers, but Ottoman administrative weakness complicated enforcement. Accordingly, the legal framework was seen more as a symbolic gesture and a barrier than a deterrent.

The British Mandate developed a more systemic approach in the 1925 Law of Antiquities. With its revolutionary statutes and regulations, capitalizing on customary law, Jordan emerged with a framework for laws and regulations concerning protection for its cultural heritage. Following Jordanian independence, the country updated the antiquities law to Antiquities Law No. 21 in 1988. Then the law was amended by Law No. 5 in 2005 and again in 2016 by the Regulations for Archaeological Projects (DoA 2016). These laws make it an offense to excavate without a permit, declare that all antiquities are state property, and then outline the conditions regulating excavation and documentation, as well as research and exposition that are related to antiquities.

Challenges remain for implementation of legislation due to systemic obstacles, particularly for rural and isolated areas that may face issues related to antiquities protection as a result of sites being categorized as isolated rural or under-heralded UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Moreover, Jordan must realize the legal obligations related to the outside world since it is a signatory to the 1970 UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*. The convention obliges state parties to prevent the illicit or undocumented trading of further illicitly trafficked cultural objects by returning looted or illegally exported

cultural objects (UNESCO 1970). Inserting order through legislation and maintaining it, however, may not be achieved since it is evident that action is fragmented, inconsistent, and largely operates without proper accountability, as opposed to having inconsistencies due to arrangements in livelihoods deemed out of the norm due to not having sufficient finance and technology, such as policing and surveying mechanisms for long enough to ascertain positive evidence of investigation or inquire generation.

The enforcement of this industry is compounded by the socio-cultural-religious concept of *rikaz* in Islam, which is understood in Islamic law as "buried treasure" that pre-dates Islam. Although many contemporary Islamic scholars and official *fatwas* affirm the assertion that the state is entitled to 20% of any treasure discovered, most rural communities do not view these legislative proposals as violating Islam because they believe *rikaz* grants the person who finds a treasure private use rights. This theological difference concerning the relationship between state authorities and rural communities creates enforcement challenges because the illegal excavators can often invoke religious justification for their actions.

There are many additional challenges facing the enforcement agencies that stem from a lack of manpower, logistical issues, and corruption. It is important to note that the *Department of Antiquities Report* (2020) and independent scholars' literature are now highlighting how almost every report indicates an increase in looting; however, prosecutions only constitute a small minority of cases. In fact, a number of archaeological looting cases in Jordan have reportedly involved illegally excavating minors, thus avoiding prosecution (Campbell 2013).

Like many post-colonial customs, heritage governance in Jordan is top-down, which puts local knowledge systems and community forms of engagement at the periphery. Structural exclusion associated with previously noted socialistic capital relations only reinforces the notion of alienation and has helped to disassociate the Jordanian public's trust of their institutions of governance.

3. SOCIOECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DRIVERS OF LOOTING

The strategic looting of archaeological sites in Jordan is motivated by socioeconomic reality rather than prevailing ideological or spiritual beliefs. While folkloric elements and religious belief systems form part of the cultural context for treasure hunting, the impetus is primarily grounded in dimensions of structural poverty, economic marginalization, and the informal economies that exist within the periphery regions of the country. Moving into marginal socioeconomic development, the governorates of Ma'an, Irbid, and the Jordan Valley have significantly higher unemployment rates than the national average, and economic opportunities tend to be limited or entirely absent.

Given this precarious environment, illegal excavation offers an alternative approach to a livelihood, albeit one that is illegal. In many cases for families who live where access to antiquities is relatively easy, finding a single piece, especially if it is made of precious metals, can be a game-changing economic opportunity. Accordingly, the looting of antiquities is relegated to a quasi-legitimate survival strategy, not as criminal deviance.

The illicit antiquities trade in Jordan exists relatively independently of larger transnational networks and informal local decentralized networks. Immediacy is local individuals and families undertaking unauthorized digs using tools and perhaps a modicum of knowledge about archaeological context. These antiquities are usually sold to local dealers at an undervalue and passed along as they traverse borders and on to major antique markets in Israel, the Gulf, and Europe.

The value chain disproportionately rewards international collectors and middlemen, with small payoffs accruing to original looters, perpetuating a cycle of economic disenfranchisement and exploitation. Normalization and legitimation are highly facilitated by cultural narratives. Oral traditions in rural communities are replete with stories of buried Ottoman treasures, concealed inscriptions, and mystical visions of secret wealth. These myths are well established in local epistemologies and tend to surround looting with a flavor of ancestral entitlement or heroic salvage (Hobsbawm 1983; Smith 2006).

Such narratives undermine cultural memory and commodification, providing an environment that implies antiquities are not communal or national property, but tribal or personal heritage. Religious and mystical accounts, while less robust, further reinforce these dispositions.

The appeal to *jinn* as guardians of treasure, the employment of *sheikhs* to perform rituals prior to a dig, or the interpretation of dreams as divine maps are the shared motifs in oral and internet accounts (Barakat 1993). These beliefs are more symptomatic of broader

Figure 1. Causes of archaeological looting in Jordan.

cultural imaginaries than they are based on orthodox theology. Islamic law, as construed by mainstream jurists, strictly prohibits unlicensed excavating and desecration of antiquities.

However, such academic perspectives are regularly overshadowed by informal interpretations propagated via social networking sites, peer networks, and self-proclaimed "experts." Ultimately, Jordanian plunder is a confluence of structural economic privation and culturally situated rationales. It is not entirely an act of criminality but rather a consequence of historical neglect, social exclusion, and the failure of heritage management to include local agency and lived experience (Figure 1).

4. ACTORS AND NETWORKS IN THE ILLICIT ANTIQUITIES TRADE

The illicit antiquities trade is a well-organized, hierarchical network that includes everyone from poor local excavators to global collectors and museums. Not only does it permit the commodification of cultural heritage but also perpetuates structural disadvantages and global heritage injustices.

4.1 Local Looters and the Informal Economy

Lying at the grassroots level of this network are local looters, typically poor individuals or families living in economically peripheral or rural zones. They might be engaged in illegal excavation for economic reasons but not necessarily for criminal preference. These individuals typically have little archaeological knowledge and employ basic methods, digging indiscriminately for artifacts with ready marketable value, primarily gold, coins, and inscribed stones. Most are not aware of the cultural, scientific, or legal implications of their actions.

Minors or youth are usually used to circumvent legal liability in the majority of situations (Campbell 2013). They are part of a wider informal economy where the cultural legacy is treated as a commodity that money can be made from rather than a shared heritage. The dearth of effective legal job opportunities makes

looting an economically sound, albeit dangerous, survival option.

4.2 Middlemen and Smugglers

Above them work the traffickers and middlemen who operate as go-betweens between the local excavators and the international market for antiquities. They possess greater financial resources, mobility, and access to equipment employed for falsification. They clean illicitly excavated art by producing false provenance documents, exploiting legal loopholes, or corrupting customs officials to facilitate passage across borders (Campbell 2013). Furthermore, they have a significant role in transforming cultural artifacts into market commodities. As for domestic looters, they receive only a meager percentage of an artifact's market value, while middlemen reap enormous profits with relatively low chances of prosecution. Middlemen also come from politically or militarily volatile regions, such as Syria and Iraq. Jordan's proximity to these regions has made it more of a transit point for trafficked antiquities (Campbell 2013).

4.3 International Collectors, Dealers, and Institutions

Highest in the trading network are private and institutional collectors who provide the financial need that sustains the system. They are antiquities dealers, individual collectors, auction houses, and, at times, museums. Others purchase artifacts knowingly from illegal sources, while others purchase items on the "gray market," where legal and illegal objects are inseparably intertwined together (Renfrew 2000).

Artifacts typically accompany unverifiable or fabricated provenance, enabling institutions to claim plausible deniability. This network level is also complicit in perpetuating the epistemic and ethical scandal of international heritage management. By displaying pilfered artifacts in museums or auctioning them through high-visibility auction houses, these actors drive the cultural decontextualization of antiquities, commodifying fragments of historical evidence into aestheticized objects of possession (Smith 2006).

As Pappé (2011) argues, such dynamics reflect wider asymmetries in global heritage flows, whereby source nations disproportionately bear the burden of cultural loss as cultural capital is accumulated in the Global North.

5. IMPACT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND HERITAGE

The consequences of looting extend far beyond physical removal of objects from the ground; they represent intentional obliteration of archaeological data, cultural erasure, and realignment of historical accounts. Contrasted with controlled scientific excavations that consider stratigraphy, documentation, and multidisciplinary analysis, looting is destructive by nature, targeting high-value sites and discarding material pertinent to archaeological interpretation.

5.1 Destruction of Context and Irreversible Loss

The most important consequence of looting is the destruction of archaeological context. Artifacts do not occur in isolation; their historical, cultural, and scientific value depends on their stratigraphic context, association with other artifacts, and relation to architectural or environmental features (Renfrew & Bahn 2016). Looters, by contrast, are motivated by profit and typically remove only objects of immediate market value, like coins, jewelry, and inscribed stones, and destroy pottery sherds, human remains, and organic material.

These "discarded" materials typically have the most informative value for dating, trade studies, or cultural practice interpretation (Renfrew 2000). The site of Khirbet al-Umari is a stark case in point: repeated illicit excavations have rendered it archaeologically sterile, eradicating layers of information that are vital to historical reconstruction. The same devastation has been reported across the Dead Sea region and northern Jordan, as looters systematically target remote or unguarded sites and leave behind them landscapes of irrecoverable loss.

5.2 Cultural Alienation and Ethical Dislocation

Not only does looting destroy physical heritage, but it also severs the social connections of individuals to the past landscapes. When artifacts are excavated illegally and exported for sale abroad, they lose their cultural context and become items in high-end markets. Displayed in foreign museums or on private shelves, these objects are often detached from their history, thereby disenfranchising descendant communities from stewardship and interpretive roles (Renfrew 2000; Abu-

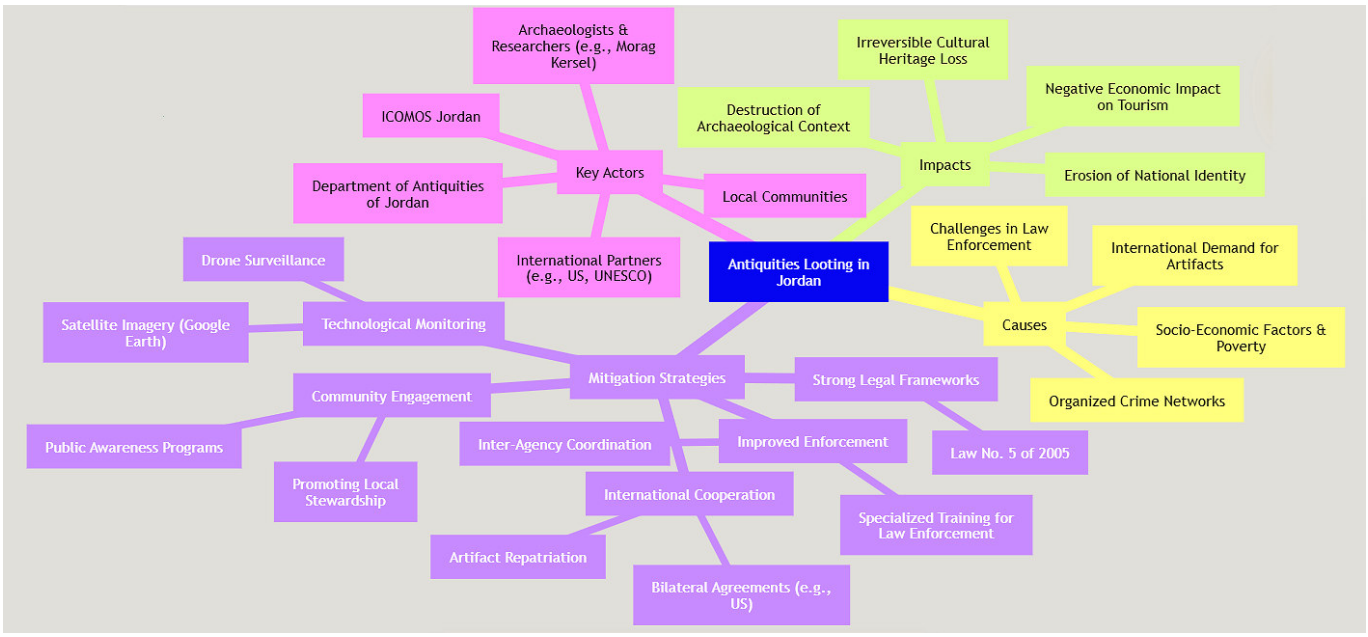

Figure 2. A mind map visually outlines the complex ecosystem surrounding antiquities looting in Jordan (https://ithy.com).

Lughod 1993). This is a process that results in a form of cultural dislocation, whereby source communities are deprived of their heritage and disenfranchised from determining its fate. It is also a question about the global antiquities market that benefits affluent collectors to the detriment of source communities, who bear the price of loss and degradation (Pappé 2011).

6. PRESERVATION EFFORTS AND COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS

Resolving the looting crisis in Jordan involves shifting the paradigm of heritage conservation efforts from elite, punitive, and state-based models to participatory, inclusive, and locally supported models.

Legal frameworks and monitoring systems are needed but are insufficient without building public ownership, trust, and interest-based incentives tied to economic interests that connect heritage preservation to local well-being.

6.1 Digital Tools and Site Monitoring

One of the most promising developments in Jordanian cultural heritage management is using geospatial technologies for monitoring and recording archaeological sites.

The MEGA-Jordan platform, a complete geodatabase developed with the assistance of the Getty Conservation Institute, lists more than 15,000 cultural heritage assets. It allows real-time monitoring of threats such as looting, environmental degradation, and urban encroachment (Getty Conservation Institute, 2020). While the technology is robust, usability by MEGA-Jordan depends on institutional uptake and popular access.

As integrated into school curricula, community workshop facilities, and civil society reporting, it can be removed as a top-down instrument of surveillance and become a bottom-up platform for citizen engagement in monitoring that enhances local stewardship.

6.2 Economic Incentives and Participation

Successful conservation is founded on altering the context so that communities are less perceived as threats and more as partners. The Petra National Trust (PNT) is an example of successful community stewardship of heritage.

By employing local Bedouins as site monitors, guides, artisans, and conservation officers, the PNT has created a system where economic livelihood translates directly into preservation outcomes (PNT 2020). This overlap between heritage and economic self-interest stimulates ownership and pride, removing the incentive for looting as a survival strategy.

To replicate this model entails institutional support, capacity development, and equitable distribution of tourism revenues. Only by communities materially and symbolically benefiting from heritage will they be likely to protect it against internal and external challenges.

6.3 Educational Outreach and Cultural Literacy

Sustained long-term viability depends upon the integration of heritage values into social life through formal and informal education. Formal education through schools has a key role in promoting archaeological literacy. Curricula centered on Jordan's ancient civilizations—Nabataean, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic—can foster national pride and intergenerational continuity. Experiential education, such as supervised excavation, site visits, and conservation, filled the gap between abstract historical information and lived cultural experience. Educational strategies need to address misconceptions about activities like *rikaz*. Looters engage in activities most of the time under the misconception that finding treasure on private land makes it theirs to keep. Interpreting Islamic regulations via religious education and encouraging religious leaders' engagement in public debate can bridge theological and legal perceptions (Al-Houdalieh 2012) (Figure 2).

7. CONCLUSION

Looting Jordanian archaeological sites is not an act of cultural deviance driven by greed or superstition but a symptom of structural economic and social marginalization triggered by a top-down heritage management model. This model leaves local communities isolated from their own heritage. While tales of *jinn*, treasure maps, and divinatory dreams persist in popular culture, they represent cultural rationales for a practice rooted in survival, marginality, and a deep sense of disenfranchisement. Throughout this essay, it has been argued that sustainable heritage protection cannot be achieved by repression alone but must be comprised of an entire overhaul of archaeology as a public, inclusive, and liberatory practice.

The current paradigm of state management, criminalization, and monitoring has failed to quell pillaging because it overlooks the real lives of individuals most directly affected by archaeological sites. Instead of promoting stewardship, it perpetuates a binary opposition of "protectors" versus "vandals" and further entrenches distrust and disconnection. In contrast, the public archaeology values call for a shift toward inclusivity, justice, and co-creation. Models like the Petra National Trust (PNT) indicate how, when enabled as economic stakeholders and guardians of heritage, people themselves become the most effective champions of it.

Technologies such as MEGA-Jordan have great power, but only if they are democratized and integrated into community-led monitoring and education initiatives. Simultaneously, the legal frameworks, such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention, must be supplemented by ethical accountability by museums, collectors, and institutions in the Global North whose consumption generates the illicit trade.

Repatriation, as valuable as it is, is not an endpoint that has to be supplemented with reintegration so that repatriated artifacts are contextualized, accessible, and meaningful to local publics. In the end, protecting Jordan's archaeological heritage requires more than lawmen and sentries; it requires a new social contract among the state, archaeologists, and society.

Heritage must be reimagined not as buried treasure to own, but as people's living, shared heritage. It is only through community-centric, ethically defensible, and economically just approaches that archaeology can fulfill its potential as a public good: a good that strengthens identity, fosters dignity, and makes the past work for the present and future of all Jordanians.

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