

Tomb raiders strip Bulgaria of its treasures

By **Malcolm Moore in Sofia**

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Among the paperclips in the bottom drawer of a desk in Bulgaria's National History Museum is a small cardboard box packed with 5,000-year-old gold rings.

• In pictures: Bulgaria's stolen art

"We found 25,000 of them when we went into a grocery shop a couple of months ago," said Svetla Tsaneva-Dimitrova, the head of the museum's restoration team.

"A farmer's wife was wearing them as a necklace. Her husband had just dug them up in a field nearby. As you can imagine, we were stunned."

Each tiny gold ring is 23-carat gold, but nobody knows how they were crafted.

"Modern jewellers cannot make these things without a magnifying glass," said Miss Tsaneva-Dimitrova, adding that similar rings were discovered at Troy.

Found at the same time was a small 20-carat gold dagger from 3,000BC that is "still so sharp you can shave with it."



A Thracian artefact from about 300BC

advertisement Priceless antiques are strewn all over the chaotic laboratory, as restorers are hard at work on a pair of bronze greaves, or leg armour, engraved with the image of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom.

Bulgaria, which was once part of Ancient Thrace, ranks behind only Italy and Greece in Europe in terms of the numbers of antiquities lying in its soil.

The Thracians, who included Spartacus and Orpheus, had a highly advanced civilisation and fought with Alexander the Great on his expedition to Asia. Later, the country was ruled by the Romans, Persians, Byzantines and Turks, all of whom left a rich array of treasure behind.

However, since the collapse of the Soviet empire, little attention has been paid to Bulgaria's cultural heritage.

Although the law states that all archaeological finds belong to the state, much is being smuggled abroad.

Tens of thousands of tomb raiders are systematically stripping Bulgaria. In some parts of the country, whole villages have taken up tomb-raiding and many of the digs are organised by the local mafia.

Volodia Velkov, the head of the police unit that combats organised crime, said tomb-raiding was now generating about £4 billion a year for the crime syndicates.

Mr Velkov and a team of 30 officers are trying to track looted antiquities and stop them leaving the country.

"Since last October, when we started the new department, we have seized 16,000 artefacts," he said.

"More than 30,000 people are involved in tomb-raiding. The business is very well-organized and the expeditions are financed by rich Bulgarians living in the US, Britain and Germany."

Last Friday, a 43-year-old man was caught trying to smuggle more than 100 items into Germany in special compartments within the floor of a lorry. Police found antiquities dating back to 300BC, worth £345,000.

"The main route is through Germany, where there are huge warehouses full of our antiquities," said Mr Velkov.

Miss Tsaneva-Dimitrova said her country was losing the battle: "Some of my former colleagues are now working for treasure hunters.

"They have better equipment than us. Recently we found traces at a site of a military digging machine, of which there are only two in the country," she said.

The treasures can easily be found in the hands of foreign antiques dealers and on the internet. Yesterday, several Thracian items were available on eBay, the internet auction site.

Last November, Christie's in London was forced to withdraw a Byzantine plate after a complaint from the Bulgarian government. It was claimed that the silver plate, had been found in 1903, but it was actually dug up in 1999, according to Naiden Blagnev, a treasure hunter.

Some commentators believe the only way to stop the looting is for the Bulgarian government to licence private collectors.

One advocate of this is Nikolai Ovcharov, a leading archaeologist who recently discovered the ancient altar of Dionysus at Perperikon, where Alexander the Great consulted the oracle before his expedition to Asia.

"The government cannot afford to excavate all the sites itself," he said. "So they should give out concessions and carry out rigorous checks on what is found. The longer it takes to pass a new law, the more treasure we will lose."

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