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# Essay

## The Pillage of the Ancient Tombs in the Crimea

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Archaeologists in Russia have been long aware of the illicit excavation and theft from ancient burial places in the Crimea. In fact, the history of robbery from the tombs commenced during ancient times, the perpetrators being contemporaries of the dead either from the same tribe or incursory aliens. For example, the stone vaulted tombs built by Greek colonisers in the third century B.C. and situated in the northwest of the Crimea were pillaged by the Scythians, who then re-used the structures for their own dead. Later, in the fourth century A.D., invading Huns robbed the tombs and buried their fellow tribesmen in the same stone vaults.

The burial mounds of south Russia are also examples of funerary structures which were robbed in antiquity. Their original builders were contemporaries of the creators of the three great pyramids at Giza in Egypt (c. third millennium B.C.); these mounds were plundered by later waves of invading nomads and adapted for their own purposes. The tradition of burial in mounds was maintained in the Caucasus region until the eighteenth century A.D.

The motivation for tomb-robbing was not restricted to the hunt for 'treasures'. The Greek cemetery at Chersonesos, with its remarkable stone monuments often covered with delicately carved inscriptions, was used effectively as a quarry by the Scythians in order to build the foundations of a tower (the 'tower of Zenonos') as a response to military threat in the second century B.C.

The scale of pillage from the ancient tombs in the Crimea and south Russia accelerated during the nineteenth century in response to the demand from Europe for the fabulous types of finds known to be contained in some of the great barrows. Treasure hunters were known locally as the 'lucky men' and their activities included forgery of artefacts as well as the systematic plunder of ancient sites. Some of the objects in the south Russian collection of the Louvre are now thought to be examples of these nineteenth century fakes.

During the last five years, there has been a considerable increase in tomb-robbing in south Russia. The relaxation of travel restrictions

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The Pillaged Scythian Tomb (1st. century B. C. – 1st. century A. D.) near Kulchuk, Crimea. Photograph by courtesy of the authors.

in Russia and the Ukraine has made it easier for illicitly excavated objects to reach western Europe and destinations further afield, often ending up in private collections. Whereas a century ago, tomb-robbers were illiterate peasants equipped with no more than a spade, today they are professionals in their chosen field. Many of the robbers read special archaeological literature and are well-acquainted with ancient sites, particularly graves. They are more mobile than their predecessors and are not averse to carrying firearms and other weapons whilst pursuing their trade. Metal detectors and sounding devices, imported from the West, are used to identify potential sources of objects. Their task has thus been made much easier. The thieves are particularly interested in finding artefacts made of gold or silver, any works of art, jewellery, beads and black and red figured pottery. The modern day robbers confine their activities to times of the year outside of the archaeological excavation season; they favour early spring or late autumn. It is assumed that a close watch is kept on the arrival and departure of archaeological expeditions.

In 1992, the authors explored the settlement in the Crimea known as Kulchuck ('Red Hill' in the Tartar language) and the adjacent tombs. There was a Greek settlement at Kulchuck from the mid-fourth century B.C. until the mid-second century B.C. A subsequent Scythian settlement lasted until the first century A.D.

Last year three Scythian tombs at Kulchuk dating from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. were pillaged. In all three cases the robbers knew exactly what they were looking for. After excavation of the tombs it became apparent that the modern 'treasure hunters' had been predated by robbers in antiquity by approximately 2000 years. It is difficult to say what these 'amateur archaeologists' found in the course of their digging; we found a small number of glass beads manufactured in Egypt and Syria, some bronze artefacts and a small silver bell.

In concluding this report, the authors would like to note that the appearance in the West of any artefact from south Russia with a valid export license can occur only as the result of illicit excavation and trade. The laws of the independent states created after the dissolution of the USSR define all archaeological finds as national property and prohibit their export by the private individual.

