

EDITED BY SANDRA DALLAS

# A SMUGGLER'S DEN OF ANTIQUITIES

**D**uring a 30-year career in the underground antiquities trade, Sami Guner Gulener claims to have slipped hundreds of priceless artifacts through Turkey's porous borders. "I can pass a 10-ton statue through the eye of a needle," he boasts over cigars and whiskey at an Istanbul café.

Now, although he denies having any regrets about his job as a transporter, or "jockey," of stolen and illegally excavated artifacts, Gulener has decided to use his insider's knowledge to help Turkish authorities crack down on a trade that is fast stripping his country of much of its cultural heritage. Objects worth an estimated \$200 million disappear from Turkey each year, plucked from the burial mounds and ancient cities of Anatolia for sale to First World collectors. Professing an interest in slowing the outflow, dapper 47-year-

old Gulener provides Turkey's Culture Ministry with smugglers' names and other information. "I'm not ashamed of anything I've done," he says. "But I'm a patriot. The bureaucrats should know how easy [smuggling] has become before it's too late and everything disappears." Gulener says he receives no pay for the information.



## Since the late '60s, Mafia-style outfits in Istanbul and Germany have dominated the illegal trade in artifacts

**INFORMER**  
"Getting a piece out of the country is the easy part," says ex-smuggler Gulener, at the Archeological Museum in Istanbul

Scholars and government officials need all the help they can get. Illegal exportation of Turkish artifacts dates at least to the mid-19th century, when European archaeology buffs looted priceless monuments such as the Hellenistic Altar of Zeus from Pergamon and Priam's

Treasure from ancient Troy, without Ottoman permission. But experts say the trade has mushroomed since the late 1960s, when Mafia-style outfits sprang up in Istanbul and Germany to mastermind the contraband pipeline.

**ENDLESS SUPPLY.** "It's all about supply and demand," says Ozgen Acar, a columnist with the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, who began crusading against the antiquities trade 25 years ago. "Turks realized about that time that they could buy an ancient piece for a few thousand dollars from the farmer who found it, and sell it in New York or Munich for \$500,000," he says. A turn-of-the-century Turkish law requires that all antiquities be registered with the Culture Ministry within a month of their discovery, and nobody, not even the state, can legally sell them abroad. That means that at some point along the way, most Turkish antiquities in foreign collections were acquired illegally.

Before the international smuggling rings took over, the antiquities trade was centered in Istanbul's labyrinthine Grand Bazaar where, over glasses of tea, shops peddled all kinds of artifacts picked up from thieves and grave robbers. Now, experts on both sides of the law say, some 85% of this booty passes through neighboring Bulgaria, several hours' drive north from Istanbul. A few thousand dollars' worth of *baksheesh*, or gratuity, is usually all it takes to persuade customs officials at the frontier to look the other way. That makes the Turkey-Bulgaria corridor one of Europe's major gateways for narcotics, stolen cars, and guns, as well as antiquities.

Lack of a cultural-protection pact between the two countries, such as the one Turkey has with Greece, makes things easy for antiquities

## Letter From Istanbul

traders. Once the items are safely across the Bulgarian border, they can be exported legally. They are usually taken to the Sofia Airport, then flown to dealers in Western Europe.

Home at various periods to more than 30 civilizations, Turkey provides smugglers with a practically endless supply of objects: Lycian coins, Hellenistic statues, Byzantine silver, even elaborately carved mosque doors. And with more ancient Greek sites than Greece and more Roman cities than Italy, Turkey has in recent decades surpassed both countries as the largest source of classical artifacts. Guarding ancient sites is practically impossible, since many are uncharted and others are too remote or too vast to protect. "CULTURED." "Getting a piece out of the country is the easy part," says Gulener, who claims to have jockeyed out of Turkey several artifacts now displayed in European and American museums. The advent of Mafia-like smuggling rings, which government officials say are controlled by three Istanbul-based family groups, has made selling to international buyers easier, too. The rings have the "ability to market the items through their international connections," including posh European art galleries and jet-setting collectors, says Gulener, who hesitates to call the rings Mafias. "That word conjures images of uneducated gangsters. But these guys are really very cultured, and they tend to have a better eye for quality than most scholars," Gulener says. He claims the groups rarely resort to violence, even against informers such as himself. "I don't think they're going to break my legs," he says, laughing.

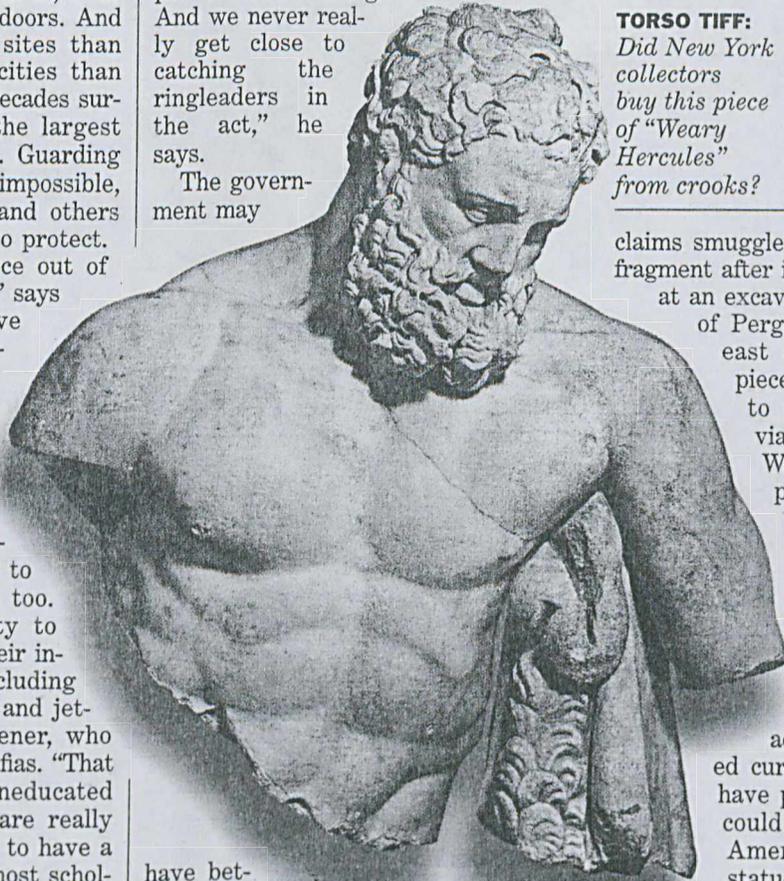
Turkish officials are not so blasé. "We're losing the battle," says Kutlay Celik, head of the Istanbul Police Dept.'s financial-crimes unit, which oversees an antiquities force of just 15 officers. "Given the size of our group and our small budget, we're doing well. But we're still catching only about 5% of the antiquities." Things are changing a little, thanks to tips from insiders such as Gulener. The force has netted more than 1,500 pieces worth nearly \$5 million in the last three months alone, Celik says, proudly showing photos of recovered artifacts stored in the city's new police headquarters. The rescued patrimony is turned over to state-owned museums.

Celik is pushing for an expansion of

the antiquities force. He also wants the government to amend laws that essentially require police to catch antiquities smugglers red-handed in order to prosecute them. "When we catch them with the objects, all they've got to do is say they just obtained the item the day before and were about to register it with the Culture Ministry. It's difficult to prove them wrong.

And we never really get close to catching the ringleaders in the act," he says.

The government may



have better luck targeting the buyers. Armed with a \$50 million government war chest, Engin Ozgen, the Culture Ministry's director-general of monuments and museums, is waging battle in overseas courts and law offices against foreign buyers of antiquities that Turkey regards as stolen or illegally excavated. "By making some high-profile recoveries, we hope to make collectors think twice about buying Turkish artifacts with a questionable background," says Ozgen.

Istanbul police, with just 15 officers on the smuggling beat, say they're overwhelmed

In a case that has become a *cause célèbre* in Turkey, Ozgen and company have set their sights on a sculpture fragment jointly owned by New York collectors Shelby White and Leon Levy, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The marble fragment is the top half of a so-called "Weary Hercules" statue, probably a 2nd century A.D.

**TORSO TIFF:** Did New York collectors buy this piece of "Weary Hercules" from crooks?

Roman copy of a bronze original by the Greek master sculptor Lysippus. The bottom half is displayed in the main lobby of the Antalya museum in southern Turkey.

**COURT CHASE.** Turkey claims smugglers got hold of the torso fragment after it was unearthed in 1980 at an excavation in the ancient city of Perge, 20 kilometers north-east of Antalya. Then the piece probably was whisked to Istanbul and jockeyed via Bulgaria to a dealer in Western Europe. For their part, White and Levy contend they purchased it in the early 1980s from a well-known dealer in Switzerland. "We have no idea how it came out of [Turkey]," Levy says. "We bought it on the advice of a very respected curator." Turkey's lawyers have prepared a lawsuit that could eventually force the Americans to give up the statue. Boston museum officials, who say no such lawsuit has been filed, claim the Turkish government has never presented convincing evidence that the fragment was discovered in Perge or that it was smuggled out of the country.

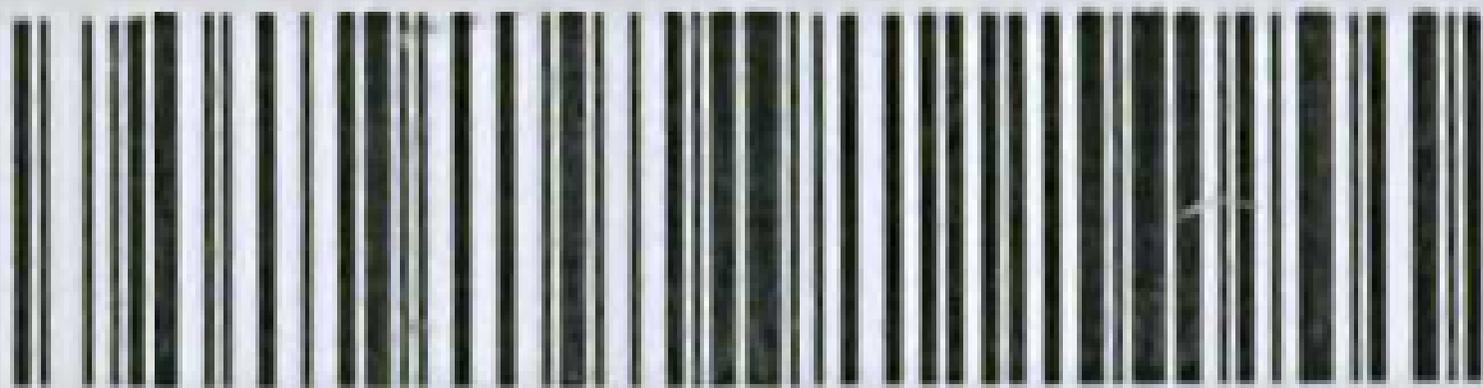
Gulener contends Turkey would be better off spending its money in the marketplace rather than the courtroom. "If the government really wants to stop this trade, they've got to give the museums more money to compete [with international buyers]," he says. Gulener thinks the laws should be changed to allow more private collecting in Turkey. And a cultural agreement with Bulgaria would help, he adds. Until then, says Gulener with a shrug, "there will always be buyers." And where there are buyers, there will always be smugglers.

JOHN DOXEY  
Doxey writes for *BUSINESS WEEK*  
from Istanbul.

**Boğaziçi Üniversitesi**

**Arşiv ve Dokümantasyon Merkezi**

**Jale İnan Arşivi**



**JALARC0301009**