

TREASURE HUNTING AND PILLAGING IN SICILY: ACQUIRING A DEVIANT IDENTITY

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Abstract: Treasure hunting, the pillaging of archaeological sites and the resultant trade in antiquities have been increasingly subject to negative sanctions both by governments and international bodies. Rural Sicilians, conditioned by a history of exploitation at the hands of outsiders to view government regulations with suspicion, do not label treasure hunting as *ipso facto* deviant. However, if such actions cause damage to property or persons within the community, the perpetrators will be labelled as deviants and will be subjected to formal sanctions in accordance with the unwritten code of *omerta* (“manliness,” respect). A specific ethnographic case is examined in detail.

Résumé: La chasse au trésor, le pillage de sites archéologiques et le commerce d’antiquités sont de plus en plus sujet à des sanctions négatives par les gouvernements et les organisations internationaux. Pour les habitants des régions rurales de la Sicile, longtemps méfiants des interventions gouvernementales à cause de l’exploitation historique de leur pays par des étrangers, la chasse au trésor ne représente pas une activité *ipso facto* déviante. Par contre, si ce genre d’activités cause des dommages aux propriétés ou blesse les habitants, les auteurs seront vus en tant que déviants et devront répondre à des sanctions formelles en accord avec le code du pays *omerta* (“manliness,” respect). Cette étude examine un cas ethnographique en détail.

Introduction

Treasure hunters have desecrated and pillaged ancient necropolises for centuries. Surviving papyri dating back to the reign of Rameses IX (1142-1123 BC), in fact, indicate that Egyptian tombs and monuments have attracted treasure-hunting robbers from the moment they were built (Fagan 1977:609). Today, most countries have heritage laws to protect their archae-

Anthropologica XXXIII (1991) 161-175

ological sites. According to concerned individuals and organizations, however, these laws are often insufficient and ineffective; the illicit trade in antiquities has reached a critical level (see Adams 1981; Bator 1983; Coggins 1972; Meyer 1974; Muscarella 1981; UNESCO 1970, 1972; Vitelli 1984). They suggest that action must be taken to protect our collective cultural heritage.

In this paper, I will focus specifically on treasure-hunting activities in Sicily. Although Sicilian archaeological sites are protected by Italian heritage laws, certain people continue to search for treasure in the less-well-known sites. The local people regard treasure hunting as an acceptable way of improving their financial status; they do not identify treasure hunters as criminals. It is only when these individuals engage in activities that have severe ramifications for other community members that they are identified and treated as deviant.

Many Sicilians, then, do not share the sentiments of the individuals, organizations and governments that are preoccupied with terminating treasure-hunting activities. This indicates that the role of "treasure hunter" can be viewed in either a negative or a positive way depending on the audience. My aims in this discussion are to examine how: (1) various audiences view treasure hunting; (2) the positive role of "treasure hunter" in rural Sicily can be transformed into a negative role; and (3) certain individuals come to acquire a deviant identity.

Treasure Hunters and Their Audience

The International Scene

During the last 15 to 20 years, various individuals and interest groups, including archaeologists, have spoken out against the illicit traffic in antiquities. These people feel that there is a need to protect and preserve our collective cultural heritage. In order to accomplish this goal, they have developed two primary plans of action. The first plan of action involves making people — i.e., collectors, museum officials, government officials, as well as the general public — aware of the problem.¹ The second plan of action involves active lobbying to persuade governments not only to institute and enforce heritage laws, but also to develop international agreements that will make it difficult for dealers to transport antiquities from one country to another. The primary objectives of this awareness campaign and lobbying process, then, are: (1) to encourage government intervention; and (2) to discourage individuals and institutions from purchasing antiquities that may have been obtained illegally.

These plans of action have achieved some success. At the 1970 and 1972 UNESCO general conferences, a number of countries ratified various reso-

lutions concerning the prohibition and prevention of illicit traffic in antiquities. Once these resolutions were ratified, the lobbyists began to pressure governments, particularly that of the United States, to pass a bill(s) to implement the UNESCO convention. This effort has also met with success; the U.S. legislature, for example, passed such a bill on January 12, 1983 (see Herscher 1983).

At the international level, treasure hunters who pillage archaeological sites are portrayed as thieves or vandals. They are petty criminals who are not only breaking the law, but destroying (by disturbing the sites) and selling their own cultural heritage. Since treasure hunters are difficult to deal with at the international level, the rationale behind the awareness campaign and lobbying process is to discourage treasure hunting by drying up the demand for antiquities in the industrialized countries.

The National Scene

Most, if not all, countries have instituted heritage laws to protect their national treasures for posterity.² Italy has made a particularly strong commitment to preserve and protect its antiquities. By law, all antiquities discovered on Italian soil fall under state ownership (Burnham 1974; Lerici 1966). Both treasure hunting on archaeological sites and trafficking in antiquities are criminal offences in Italy. The Italian government, however, does not have the funds to actively seek out and discourage treasure hunters who prey on the less well-known sites. Italy is simply too rich in archaeological sites to allow for adequate enforcement of existing laws. The problem is complicated further by some local officials. For example, certain officials may ignore or take a less active interest in treasure-hunting activities on minor and/or uninvestigated sites, in order to preserve friendly relations with members of the community. Although treasure hunting is officially frowned upon and punishable by law, it continues to occur in certain areas of Italy.

The Local Scene

In order to understand how rural Sicilians view "treasure hunting" and "heritage laws," it is necessary to first outline some aspects of recent Sicilian history. The earliest evidence of human habitation in Sicily dates back to the Paleolithic—20 000 BP and earlier (Brea 1966). The island was occupied by the Greeks, the Romans, the Saracens and the Normans (Ahmad 1975; Finley 1979; Mack Smith 1968a). After a period when it languished under Bourbon rule, Sicily officially became an integral part of the newly united Italian state in 1861 (Mack Smith 1968b).

This extended period of foreign domination and exploitation created a state of economic and social poverty in the region. According to Lopreato

(1967), this state of affairs reached severe proportions during and after the period of Italian unification. The economic policies of the new government favoured the northern regions of Italy; unification did not improve conditions in the south. In response to government inaction, and increasingly adverse economic and social conditions, a large portion of the population chose out-migration. Initially, southern Italians migrated to northern Italy and other European countries. By 1900, the pattern changed; people began to travel to overseas destinations such as Argentina, Brazil, Canada and the United States. John C. Weaver (1977:10) estimates that "between 1900 and 1910 roughly two million southern Italians" emigrated, permanently or temporarily, to overseas destinations. A second major wave of emigration occurred after the Second World War.

It is ironic that the land which attracted so many foreign invaders now sends its own people to foreign lands. The tremendous out-migration and emigration from Sicily, however, has helped improve socio-economic conditions on the island. Today, although conditions in Sicily are not yet comparable to those in northern Italy, the gap between southern and northern Italy is finally beginning to diminish.

In summary, this historical sketch suggests that Sicily suffered from an extended period of foreign domination and exploitation, which led to severe social and economic problems. Due to these factors, reticence became an ingrained behavioural trait. People in positions of power have taken advantage of the situation to maintain the status quo. This, in turn, has given Sicilians the impression that they cannot trust the official system and the people who run it; in order to get by, Sicilians have learned to rely on the unofficial systems of economic and political patronage (Blok 1975; Boissevain 1966, 1974).

Rural Sicilians, in general, do not believe that the Italian government instituted "heritage laws" for their benefit. People feel that laws are made to benefit the rich and powerful; they simply do not trust the governments intentions. Based on the historical sketch outlined above, it is not surprising that Sicilians should feel this way. At the same time, rural Sicilians have a wealth of folk tales concerning buried treasure.³ Many of the treasure tales indicate that, as a result of the Saracen conquest of Sicily, a very large quantity of gold, diamonds and other valuables are buried at particular locations. These treasure tales provide rural Sicilians with an incentive to actively search for the hidden treasure troves. The legendary sites, however, are often located on ancient necropolises.

The following excerpts from a conversation with Zio AnM., one of my informants, will serve to illustrate how rural Sicilians view both treasure hunting and heritage laws:

In ancient times the Saracens took possession of Sicily; they came in through Syracuse in the east. Those that fought against the Saracens moved back, retreating, until they arrived at a point called. . . . In that area they fought for years. Those that retreated included rich people who brought with them whatever they had—objects of gold and valuables were brought with them. The time was passing and the people were dying, so they made a type of cemetery on the . . . mountain. They dug in the rock, made graves, placed the dead in the graves, and placed, depending on their ability, whatever they could in the grave—pieces of gold, pottery, cardboard. As a symbol everyone placed something in the grave.

In the period after the War of 1944-45, after 45, all the people went . . . to dig. [They hoped to] find antiquities, money, pottery that was thousands of years old, and some found empty graves. Maybe they had been poor people. Then the government came to know about the digging and made a law that no one could now dig without government authorization. . . . The law still exists, but people continue to go and dig. But as far as money and things in abundance, no one has found any; neither those that went on the government's behalf, nor those others. But as far as objects of terra cotta, designed in the style of the Greeks and Romans and Arabs there have been many finds.

Zio AnM. makes it clear that Sicilians are aware of government regulations protecting archaeological sites. He also makes it clear that people disregard the law in the hope of discovering a major cache. Upon further questioning, Zio AnM. provided the following rationale for disregarding the law:

The people would complain about this government law about not digging. . . . The government had made it like a tourist zone. If [they were] tourists, foreigners from out of the country, they got authorization quickly to dig for as long as they liked and whatever they found they could keep. Therefore the people could no longer hold back, because it was said that there was a large treasure around that mountain. So the people continued to go and dig, but up to now no one has found the treasure, neither the tourists nor the local people.

A number of rural Sicilians confirmed that they shared this view.

If one examines Zio AnM.'s comments, it is apparent that the local people do not completely understand the rationale behind the heritage laws and/or they have devised their own rationale to justify their decision not to abide by those laws. The government is portrayed not as the protector of archaeological materials, but rather as a political force that is attempting to redirect local wealth to foreigners. Since Sicilians feel that they cannot trust the government to look after their interests, the laws are only effective when the authorities are present to enforce them.

For rural Sicilians treasure hunting is an acceptable means by which individuals can improve their financial status in the community. Mistrust of

government, the presence of a well-developed treasure lore, social and economic problems, as well as a variety of other factors, have led rural Sicilians to place a "positive" value on the role of "treasure hunter."

Treasure Hunters

The individuals who actively seek out buried treasure on archaeological sites share the sentiments of other rural Sicilians. Treasure hunting is viewed as a legitimate, although potentially dangerous, profession. The individuals who engage in this type of activity are ordinary members of the community; they have various economic, social and kinship ties with other community members. Treasure hunting is simply a way of supplementing their income and, if they find the major cache, a way of drastically improving their financial status.

Treasure hunters have little difficulty locating appropriate sites for their activities. Many Sicilian hills and mountains are dotted with what look like small caves. People refer to these hollows as the "caves of the Saracens"; in reality, however, they are *tombe a formo* (oven-shaped tombs) built during the Sican and early Greek periods. Little, if anything, can be found in these tombs. Treasure hunters are much more interested in the underground sepulchres containing valuable grave goods that are sometimes found adjacent to the earlier sites. These burial grounds often date back to the Greco-Roman period.

Sicilian treasure hunters have devised a variety of methods to locate grave goods; the two primary methods, however, are:

- (1) to slowly, but systematically, dig test pits along the slopes of specific hills; and
- (2) to obtain information concerning the location of buried treasure from spirits. A group of four or five men, for example, may conduct a spiritualist meeting, in which a particular spirit is questioned, through a medium, about the location of a treasure trove. Zio AnM. provides the following description:

About six months went by and the same three persons returned. . . . They did another spiritualist sitting. . . . I was present too. They invoked the spirit Solomon and the subject fell asleep, in response that he was ready to speak. They asked if he had a treasure for them to find. . . . [H]e gave them explicit instructions of where to dig. He [Solomon] said: "Dig because there is so much gold and diamonds to load 12 animals." So the next day . . . he [the spiritualist] did another sitting and the subject, while asleep, got up and with the pick struck the spot where they were to dig.

The first step an individual(s) takes when he finds an item of value is to travel to Palermo. Once in Palermo, he must rely on one or more contacts, who are often paid, to locate a suitable buyer. The *ragattieri* (black marketeers) purchase coins and decorated pottery at relatively low prices, but resell the material at very high rates. Rural Sicilians insist that the person who locates the items makes very little in this transaction. People continue to search for treasure, however, because they hope to discover a major cache. The treasure hunters are more interested in the legendary gold and jewellery than they are in the actual archaeological material.

In summary, the treasure hunters do not contravene local expectations. Their behaviour is acceptable not only from their own point of view, but also from the point of view of other rural Sicilians. This allows the treasure hunters to maintain a positive self-image.

Acquiring A Deviant Identity

Based on the preceding discussion, it is fair to say that rural Sicilians do not regard treasure hunting as a deviant activity. It is an acceptable means by which individuals can supplement their income. The treasure tales provide people with an incentive to carry out this activity, while distrust of government provides a rationale for not abiding by heritage laws. The positive role of "treasure hunter," however, can be transformed into a negative role if the individuals fail to meet local expectations. Recently, three treasure hunters were labelled and treated as deviant, at least temporarily, for precisely this reason.⁴

The three individuals chose one of the less-well-known, and virtually unprotected, archaeological sites to conduct their treasure hunting activities. They made use of a tractor to uncover a layer of earth in the hope of discovering gold and other valuables. The police, however, caught them in the act and placed them under arrest. According to Zio Sa., the shopkeeper who related the story to me, the three men were quickly released. He explained this by stating: *avivanu la mani* (they had a "hand" in a position of power). The local rumour is that someone paid the owner of the land adjacent to the site to inform the authorities that he had hired the men to plough his field, and that they had mistakenly moved onto the archaeological site.⁵ Several days later, although much more cautious, the three men were again on the site searching for treasure.

The treasure hunters' return to the site coincided with a major fire on the mountain. Someone, apparently, set fire to the site's vegetation. The flames quickly spread down the slopes consuming the grain, prickly pears and olive trees on the adjacent properties. The local people believe that the three men set fire to the site's brush, in order to make it easier to locate the treasure.

Although the three individuals denied setting fire to the mountain, they instantly became "deviants." The local people began to treat them differently not because treasure hunting itself is a deviant activity, but rather because the methods they employed had severe ramifications for other community members. The farmers obviously lost their crops and other food products; however, the entire community was affected. The shepherds lost grazing land. The hunters complained that game became scarce in the area. Shopkeepers and travelling merchants complained that their volume of business had declined. In general, then, everyone had something to complain about. As a result of the fire, life in the community had been disrupted.

The community residents made no attempt to contact the legal authorities. Instead, they abided by the unwritten Sicilian code of *omerta*: an honourable man does not inform on others, nor does he rely on the authorities to protect his interests. The local people devised their own means of taking action against the individuals they held responsible for causing the disaster. These plans of action were based on the notion that the three treasure hunters no longer deserved the respect of others.

Sicilians associate "respect" with the notions of *honour* and *shame*. These two concepts are of major importance throughout the circum-Mediterranean region. In 1954, Julian A. Pitt-Rivers (see also 1966, 1977) presented a discussion of the Andalusian moral or value system in terms of honour and shame. This early discussion of the topic has influenced the work of most, if not all, mediterraneanists who deal with the phenomenon. Pitt-Rivers (1966:21; 1977:1) defines "honour" as not only the "value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society." Honour, then, is intimately linked to an individual's *reputation*.

Among Sicilians honour and shame are interrelated and complementary qualities. An individual's honour is a reflection of his or her reputation within the community. This reputation is based on both moral and economic factors. In order to maintain a good reputation, the individual must live up to local expectations. Honour, then, is a positive quality. Shame, at least in certain respects, is also a positive quality. A person who has *shame* does not act in a *shameful* way. It is a quality that enables individuals to regulate their own behaviour, and thereby maintain their honour. A person who has both honour and shame commands respect.

An individual's reputation influences how he or she is able to interact with other members of the community. Engaging in what the community regards as "shameful" behaviour may have severe ramifications. The individual may be subjected to negative sanctions such as vicious gossip, partial or total ostracism and, in certain cases, violence. These negative sanctions obviously have an immediate effect on the individual. More important, however, are the long-term effects these sanctions may have on both the ac-

tual individual who committed the “shameful” act and his or her entire family. They may have severe implications, for the entire family’s future in the community: (1) a negative reputation affects the individual’s ability to make suitable marriage arrangements for his or her children; (2) the descendants of an individual who has committed a “shameful” act may be referred to not only by their own name but also by a qualifier such as son- or grandson- of the fool, cuckold or some other term appropriate to the specific misdeed that had been committed; and (3) the individual and his or her family may no longer be viewed as suitable business partners. By maintaining a “good” reputation within the community, Sicilians are taking positive action towards avoiding negative sanctions and ensuring their future well-being.

The treasure hunter’s alleged involvement in “setting fire to the mountain” earned them the reputation both of failing to meet local expectations and of engaging in “shameful” behaviour. Certain individuals displayed their resentment toward the treasure hunters by openly cursing them. One individual, for example, stated that: “the persons who set fire to property should have their hands become paralysed, so they would not be able to strike a match again.” Sicilians usually regard verbal curses of this sort in a negative way. From a Sicilian point of view, verbal curses and vicious gossip are variants of the *mali lingua* (evil tongue), the casting of evil by means of the spoken word. More specifically, Sicilians believe that strong emotions such as anger and envy may activate an evil power residing within each of us. The verbal curse provides the mechanism by which this evil power is directed toward others. Although only witches and sorcerers can actively control this power to cause intentional harm, everyone has the potential to inadvertently injure others by means of the evil tongue. Since verbal curses may harm others in situations where there is no purposeful intent to injure, Sicilians display their respect for others by avoiding this type of behaviour. When a person utters a curse in anger, he or she often tries to qualify the statement to ensure that everyone knows that it should not be taken literally. Sicilians regard verbal curses in a negative way, because they recognize that this type of behaviour disrupts interpersonal relationships. By openly cursing the three individuals, the local people made it clear that the treasure hunters’ status in the community had changed. They were no longer respected community members.

The treasure hunters soon found that this change in status affected the way people interacted with them. The male members of the community, for example, chose to display avoidance behaviour toward them, in order to express their displeasure at what had transpired. Much of this avoidance behaviour took place within the context of ritual drinking and other leisure activities. Ritual drinking is a key male activity in Sicily. After supper the

men usually walk up and down the main street or *piazza*, and occasionally enter one of the bars for a friendly drink. Once in the bar, the men literally struggle with one another to pay for the drinks. This struggle, however, is not chaotic; it is regulated by the following implicit rules.

- (1) If someone is already in the bar when others arrive, he should buy the drinks. It is a sign of disrespect for a man to ignore, or try to avoid, this convention.
- (2) It is morally wrong for an individual to constantly take advantage of the hospitality of others. Everyone is expected to take a turn at playing the role of "host" during the course of the evening. If this is not possible, it is expected that the individual will make an effort to even things out in the near future.
- (3) Unless it is a special occasion, only a fool would constantly insist on buying drinks for everyone. A man's first loyalty is to his family; therefore, he should not be extravagant with his money.
- (4) It is also a sign of disrespect to refuse the hospitality of others. Everyone is entitled to play the role of "host."

Providing others with hospitality, then, is one way that a man displays his respect for others. In addition, it serves as a means by which the host himself gains *honour*. From a Sicilian point of view, a good host commands respect. The treasure hunters, however, were not treated as true men; they were not allowed to take part in the ritual drinking process.

When the three treasure hunters entered one of the local bars, either individually or collectively, the other male members of the community did not acknowledge their presence with the usual courtesy. Instead, the men continued to converse with one another, and in some cases turned their backs to the treasure hunters. Sicilians regard this type of behaviour as an explicit insult. In the bar context, individuals go to great lengths to avoid turning their backs on others, and to apologize whenever they are in a position where there is no alternative. The treasure hunters experienced further insult, because no one offered to buy drinks for them. If the treasure hunters themselves attempted to take part in the ritual drinking process by offering to pay for drinks, the other individuals would excuse themselves by saying something to the effect that: (1) they were on their way out of the bar; or (2) they had only entered to quickly look for someone. The male members of the community, then, would neither offer nor accept drinks from the treasure hunters. In effect, they were denying the treasure hunters both respect and a means by which they could attain honour.

The female members of the community engaged in activities that tended to complement the plan of action adopted by the men. The women took action through both verbal curses and gossip. During the course of the day,

women often take time off from their various chores to visit each other and have a cup of coffee, while they discuss the events that have taken place in the community. The behaviour of the treasure hunters drew a great deal of attention. The conversations focussed not only on the fire and destruction, but also on the very character of the individuals involved and of their families. While discussing her feelings about a particular treasure hunter, for example, one woman asked others: *cu lu caca?* (who *shit* him out?)—in reference to his birth. The obvious intent of this statement is to identify the individual as no better than excrement. However, at another level, it implies that the individual's parents, and his mother in particular, are responsible for producing this filthy creature. In addition, if he himself is a filthy creature, then those family members who have preceded him and those that he has fathered, or will father, may also be contaminated. These types of negative statements were often followed by verbal curses such as: *malanni chi ci pozzanu viniri* (may many misfortunes befall them). Vicious gossip of this type eventually reaches the individuals under discussion.

Although both males and females displayed negative feelings and actions toward the treasure hunters, their plans of action did not include physical violence. To a certain extent, violence was avoided because of two interrelated factors. First, no one actually witnessed the treasure hunters setting fire to the mountain. Secondly, the treasure hunters consistently denied their involvement in this tragic event. The fact that the treasure hunters appeared to have friends in high places may also have operated as a factor.

In summary, then, the plans of action of both male and female members of the community tended to complement each other. The men effectively denied the suspects "honour," while the women heaped "shame" upon them. The treasure hunters, and to a certain extent their families, virtually became outsiders within their own community. The treasure hunters were no longer respectable human beings.

This attitude, however, was not maintained over an extended period of time. The treasure hunters and their families were not "outsiders"; instead, they had various kinship and/or friendship bonds with practically everyone in the community. Although their actions were "shameful," people could also point to numerous occasions when they themselves had engaged in positive interaction with the treasure hunters. This made it difficult for them to view the individuals solely as "excrement." Slowly certain people began to suggest that the fire on the mountain may have been started accidentally by a careless smoker. Others began to suggest that hunters from another town may have been responsible for the fire—i.e., outsiders had deliberately set fire to the mountain in order to attract game animals to their own area. These types of statements indicate that community members, or at least some community members, were interested in the reintegration of the trea-

sure hunters into the society. This reintegration process had not been completed when I returned to Canada, but I suspect that the treasure hunters and the other community members have reached some type of accommodation. The negative sentiments are probably no longer as pronounced. The individuals, however, are likely to be reminded occasionally of the events that transpired. Implicit in this is the notion that further "shameful" behaviour will not be tolerated.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that treasure hunting on archaeological sites is, or is not, a deviant activity depending on the views of the audience we are dealing with. At both the "international" and "national" level, this type of activity draws a negative response. Various individuals, organizations and governments regard treasure hunting as a deviant activity. Treasure hunters are viewed as grave robbers and petty criminals. Since treasure hunting is a "deviant" activity, every effort must be made to stop the practice and punish the culprits.

At the local level, the situation is different. Although rural Sicilians are often aware of government regulations protecting archaeological sites, the laws and regulations have little meaning for them. The long period of foreign domination and exploitation has left them with the impression that government regulations are not instituted for their benefit. Instead, many believe that it is "outsiders" who will benefit from the heritage laws. This attitude, combined with a rich lore dealing with buried treasure, has ensured that treasure hunting remains an acceptable way of improving one's financial status. In general, rural Sicilians do not consider treasure hunting to be a "deviant" activity.

Although treasure hunting is not regarded as a "deviant" activity by the local people, individuals who engage in this type of activity may quickly be transformed into "deviants" if they fail to meet cultural expectations. Whether a treasure hunter is, or is not, considered "deviant" depends on the methods he uses. More specifically, the individual(s) must avoid gaining financially at the expense of others. By setting fire to the mountain side, the culprits created hardship for other community members. It was the severe ramifications of their activities, and not treasure hunting itself, that led people to: re-evaluate their views of the treasure hunters; identify and label them as "deviant"; and treat them as individuals unworthy of respect.

Notes

1. The editors of the *Journal of Field Archaeology* have been particularly diligent in this awareness campaign.
2. For a country-by-country discussion of heritage laws see Burnham (1974).
3. For a discussion of treasure tales in other societies see Crossman (1979), Erasmus (1961:250-251), Foster (1964, 1965), Schryer (1976) and Wagley (1968:127-128).
4. Certain details have been disguised or changed to protect my informants.
5. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, I made no attempt to interview the landowner, the police or the three treasure hunters.

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