

The illicit trade

Italy awaits biggest ever trial of tomb robbers

Operation Ghelas has uncovered a ring stretching across western Europe

ROME. Operation Ghelas, which has dismantled a major Italian antiquities smuggling operation stretching across Western Europe, will come to a climax in February when 70 defendants are brought before a judge for a preliminary hearing in Gela, southwest Sicily. The investigation, carried out by the Italian Cultural Patrimony Protection (TPC) squad, concluded last summer with an unprecedented 85 indictments and 52 arrests—the biggest bust ever of the *tombaroli* (“tomb raiders”).

Government officials, teachers and plumbers are among the

suspects. Fifteen have already pleaded guilty to various charges, among them carabinieri Carmine Maschio, who admitted to driving loot across the Swiss-Italian border.

Alessandro Suterardo, the public prosecutor, says that more than 2,000 antiquities were recovered, such as amphorae, statues, and coins from major archaeological sites in Sicily, including Morgantina, Syracuse, Selinunte, and Gela, as well as in Puglia and Lazio. He said the “four-celled” network of international collaborators distributed stolen antiquities through

intermediaries in Switzerland, Germany, Spain, the UK, and the US, including Munich’s Gorny & Mosch auction house.

The hunt began three years ago after Sicilian police confiscated antiquities and metal detectors from several residents of Gela—notably 43-year-old Orazio Pellegrino, the ringleader of one of the four “cells”—and put them under surveillance. “When we wiretapped their phones, we intercepted frequent conversations to a number in Switzerland, so we realised that they might be selling antiquities to someone there,” Mr Suterardo said.

This led to Francesco Davoli,

an Italian taxi driver living in Zurich. With the cooperation of Swiss authorities, his house was searched. Ivo Hoppler, the Swiss prosecutor, told us: “Davoli left to go to work at around 4.30am. We arrived at 6am, and searched for two hours. We found coins packaged in plastic display envelopes.” The taxi driver quickly became the primary informant on the case, fingering several associates and eventually leading police to the Barcelona gallery of Bea Felix Cervera, a well-known dealer.

“We went in with the Spanish policemen and found a hidden door. When he opened it we

could not believe our eyes: there were hundreds of precious objects, the majority clearly illegal,” Mr Suterardo told us. The most precious object the Sicilian police recognised was an ancient Roman marble basin that had been stolen from a private house in Rome. The gallery owner is being prosecuted in Spain, and the government has formally invited Italy to take back much of the haul.

The insights gained in Operation Ghelas have furnished leads for other investigations, which have taken the Sicilian TPC squad to Rome in recent weeks.

Cathryn Drake

Italy returns artefacts to Iran and Pakistan

ROME. The Italian Culture Ministry has agreed to return 41 Middle Eastern artefacts to Iran. The objects, dating from the tenth to 14th centuries, were part of a 309-piece haul seized in 2005 by Italian police at a flea market in Milan. The restituted works include coins with inscriptions in Arabic (1256-1336) and a tenth-century terracotta bowl from the Persian Samanid dynasty. Ninety-nine other items from the haul have also been returned to the Pakistani government following their attribution by experts at the National Museum of Oriental Art in Rome. A spokesman for the Italian police said that the works had arrived in Italy via Thailand. Two people, a Pakistani and an Italian, have been charged with dealing in illegal artefacts in connection with the seizure. F.G.C.

Greece drops charges against former Getty curator

BOSTON. Greece has dismissed criminal charges against Marion True, the former antiquities curator at the Getty Museum, for allegedly receiving stolen goods. The charges related to a fourth century BC gold funerary wreath purchased for the Getty in 1993, which Greece says was illegally excavated and belongs to it under its antiquities ownership law. Dr True was to have faced trial but, on 27 November, the court dismissed the case, saying the charges were made too late.

The tribunal accepted Dr True’s argument that California’s statute of limitations must be applied. Under Greek law, if a foreign national is charged with a crime that allegedly took place outside of Greece, in a jurisdiction with its own criminal law that could apply to the case, then Greece is required to apply the statute of limitations that would apply in the foreign jurisdiction. In Dr True’s case, the statute of limitations had expired in California, where the allegedly stolen goods would have been received.

Dr True has always maintained that she is innocent. The charges were filed against her in

Athens in December 2006, shortly after the Getty returned the highly prized gold wreath, which is believed to have come from an ancient Macedonian tomb, to Greece.

Harry Stang, Dr True’s US lawyer and a member of the Los Angeles law firm Bryan Cave LLP, told *The Art Newspaper*: “Although the case was dismissed on procedural grounds, the prosecutors never submitted any evidence of the commission of a crime by Dr True. Had the case gone to trial, she would have established her innocence.”

Martha Lufkin

□ The latest hearing in the Italian trial of former Getty antiquities curator **Marion True** and the Paris-based dealer **Robert Hecht** took place in Rome on 14 December. Dr True faces charges of conspiring to acquire antiquities for the Getty, which Italy says were illegally excavated. Archaeologist Daniela Rizzo continued her testimony related to Etruscan artefacts purchased by the Getty in 1990 which the prosecution alleges were illicitly removed from Italy. The next hearing is scheduled for 15 February.

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