

An Evaluation of Cultural Property Trafficking in Central Anatolia (2017–2021) Through the Lens of Crime Theories (*)

Yasin GÖÇER (**)

Abstract

The crime of cultural property trafficking is one of the most significant international and transnational organized crimes. This study provides a criminological analysis of cultural property trafficking in the Central Anatolia Region of Türkiye. It analyzes secondary quantitative data from the Gendarmerie General Command, covering 3,260 trafficking incidents recorded between 2017 and 2021 across thirteen provinces. The primary scientific aim is to identify and interpret the spatial, temporal, and demographic patterns of this crime. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, and the findings were then interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Rational Choice Theory and Routine Activity Theory. The analysis reveals that trafficking activities are concentrated in specific provinces and are often carried out by individuals with particular demographic profiles, suggesting that both rational calculation and criminal opportunity structures drive the phenomenon. This study contributes to the criminological literature by applying established crime theories to a unique dataset, offering an evidence-based understanding of cultural property trafficking at its source.

Keywords: Cultural Property Trafficking, Criminological Analysis, Rational Choice Theory, Routine Activity Theory, Central Anatolia.

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2017-2021 Yılları Arasında İç Anadolu'da Kültür Varlığı Kaçakçılığının Suç Teorileri Açısından Değerlendirilmesi (*)

Yasin GÖÇER (**)

Öz

Kültür varlığı kaçakçılığı suçu uluslararası ve sınıraşan örgütlü suçların en önemlilerindedir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin İç Anadolu Bölgesi'ndeki kültür varlığı kaçakçılığının kriminolojik bir analizini sunmaktadır. Çalışmada, Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı'ndan temin edilen ve 2017-2021 yılları arasında on üç ilde kaydedilmiş 3,260 kaçakçılık olayını kapsayan ikincil nicel veriler analiz edilmiştir. Temel bilimsel amaç, bu suçun mekânsal, zamansal ve demografik örüntülerini belirlemek ve yorumlamaktır. Veriler, betimleyici istatistiksel yöntemler kullanılarak analiz edilmiş ve bulgular Rasyonel Seçim Teorisi ile Rutin Aktiviteler Teorisi merceğinden yorumlanmıştır. Analiz, kaçakçılık faaliyetlerinin belirli illerde yoğunlaştığını ve genellikle belirli demografik profillere sahip kişiler tarafından gerçekleştirildiğini ortaya koymakta, bu durumun hem rasyonel hesaplamalardan hem de suç fırsatlarından kaynaklandığını göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, yerleşik suç teorilerini özgün bir veri setine uygulayarak ve kültür varlığı kaçakçılığını kaynağında kanıta dayalı bir şekilde anlamlandırarak kriminoloji literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültür Varlığı Kaçakçılığı, Kriminolojik Analiz, Rasyonel Seçim Teorisi, Rutin Aktiviteler Teorisi, İç Anadolu.

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Introduction

Cultural property trafficking¹ is a transnational organized crime that causes irreparable damage to the shared heritage of humanity.² While this crime occurs globally,³ Türkiye, due to its rich historical and archaeological landscape, is a significant source country for illicitly excavated artifacts.⁴ Within Türkiye, illicit excavations are especially frequent in the Central Anatolia and Eastern Anatolia Regions; in Central Anatolia, the illicit excavation rate reaches 35%.⁵ The Central Anatolia Region, in particular, is a hotspot for such activities, with studies indicating that a substantial portion of archaeological site destruction in the area is attributable to illegal excavations. This persistent problem not only results in the loss of unique cultural assets but also severs the connection between these artifacts and their historical context, undermining their scientific value.⁶ In this context, a study conducted by the Türkiye Archaeological Settlements (TAY) Project between 2001 and on 515 settlement sites in Central Anatolia found that 35.3% of damage to artifacts was caused by illicit excavations and treasure-hunting activities.⁷ This rate reflects only destruction arising from treasure hunting and illicit excavations; with such a figure, the Central Anatolia Region ranks as the second most severely affected region.

Despite the gravity of the issue, there is a need for empirical, data-driven research to understand the specific dynamics of this crime at its source. This study addresses this gap by conducting a criminological analysis of cultural property trafficking incidents in Central Anatolia. The primary scientific aim of this research is to contribute to a deeper, evidence-based understanding of the phenomenon by identifying, describing, and interpreting the spatial, temporal, and demographic patterns of cultural property trafficking. The study aims to answer the following research questions: 1. What are the spatial and temporal distribution patterns of cultural property trafficking incidents in the Central Anatolia Region between 2017 and 2021? 2. What are the demographic characteristics of suspects involved in these incidents? 3. How can these observed patterns be interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Rational Choice Theory and Routine Activity Theory?

¹ Hamit Abbasoğlu, "Arkeoloji ve Kültürel Varlıkların Talanı," in *Rezan Has Müzesi Konferansları II: Arkeoloji Mercek Altında*, ed. Zeynep Çulha (İstanbul: RHM, Mas Matbaacılık A.Ş., 2008), 68-69.

² Nazife Sayhan, "Türk Hukukunda Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarını Koruma Kurulları," in *Farklı Hukuk Disiplinleri Gözüyle Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarının Korunması*, ed. Nuray Ekşi, Gonca Dardeniz, and Mert Ülgen (İstanbul: Beta Basım Yayım Dağıtım, 2024), 20-35.

³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Preserving History: UNODC Trainings Spark Action Against Cultural Property Trafficking in the MENA Region," UNODC, 2025, accessed August 28, 2025, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/gpcd/news/2025/preserving-history_-unodc-trainings-spark-action-against-cultural-property-trafficking-in-the-mena-region.html.

⁴ Sayhan, "Türk Hukukunda Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarını Koruma Kurulları," 20-35.

⁵ Cahit Gök, "Kültürel Varlıklar ve Kaçakçılık," in *Rezan Has Müzesi Konferansları II Arkeoloji Mercek Altında*, ed. Zeynep Çulha (İstanbul: Rezan Has Müzesi, 2008), 70-77.

⁶ Banu Özüşen and Ertan Beceren, "Kültür Varlıklarının Kaçakçılığı ve Arkeolojik Tahribat," *Cedrus* 7 (June 30, 2019): 607-625, <https://doi.org/10.13113/CEDRUS.201928>.

⁷ Oğuz Tanındı and Okan Semiha, "TAY Project Destruction Report for the Central Anatolia Region," accessed April 9, 2025, <http://tayproject.org/dosyaia.html>.

To answer these questions, this study analyzes secondary quantitative data obtained from the Gendarmerie General Command, the primary law enforcement agency responsible for rural and border security in Türkiye. The Gendarmerie is responsible for approximately 93% of Türkiye's geographical land area and serves around 20% of the country's population.⁸ The dataset comprises 3,260 trafficking incidents recorded between 2017 and 2021 across thirteen provinces in the Central Anatolia Region. While not directly aimed at policy-making, the findings are interpreted within a criminological framework to offer insights that can inform more effective and targeted prevention strategies.

This article is organized as follows: The next section outlines the theoretical framework, detailing Rational Choice and Routine Activity theories. Section 3 describes the methodology, including the data source and analytical approach. Section 4 presents the findings of the statistical analysis. Section 5 discusses these findings in light of the chosen theories, and the final section provides a conclusion and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding the Drivers of Cultural Property Trafficking

To move beyond a purely descriptive account of cultural property trafficking, a robust theoretical framework is necessary to explain the underlying mechanisms that drive this illicit activity. This study adopts a multi-faceted approach by integrating two complementary criminological theories: Rational Choice Theory and Routine Activity Theory. These theories were selected due to their combined strength in explaining both the motivations of individual offenders and the situational contexts that facilitate the occurrence of crime. While Rational Choice Theory addresses the “why” behind an offender's decision to engage in trafficking, Routine Activity Theory explains the “how” and “where” by focusing on the convergence of necessary elements for a crime to occur.

Rational Choice Theory: Trafficking as a Cost-Benefit Calculation

This theory posits that individuals conduct a cost-benefit analysis before engaging in crime,⁹ making a deliberate decision if perceived gains exceed perceived risks.¹⁰ The theory suggests that people opt to commit a crime when the reward seems greater than the associated risks.¹¹

⁸ Gendarmerie General Command, “Gendarmerie Areas of Responsibility and Protected Facilities,” 2024, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.jandarma.gov.tr/jandarma-tarafindan-korunan-tesisler>.

⁹ Kevin F. Steinmetz and Travis C. Pratt, “Revisiting the Tautology Problem in Rational Choice Theory: What It Is and How to Move Forward Theoretically and Empirically,” *European Journal of Criminology* 21, no. 4 (2024): 513-532, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14773708241226537>.

¹⁰ Derek B. Cornish and Ronald V. Clarke, “Introduction,” in *The Reasoning Criminal: Rational Choice Perspectives on Offending*, eds. Derek B. Cornish and Ronald V. Clarke (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 1-13.

¹¹ Erkan Aktaş and M. Emir Nalçacı, “Suç ve Ekonomi,” *Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi* 7, no. 14 (December 21, 2022): 316-340, <https://doi.org/10.54831/vanyuyii-bfd.1204301>.

From this perspective, an individual will choose to commit a crime, such as cultural property trafficking, if the perceived gains (e.g., financial profit, social status) outweigh the perceived risks (e.g., likelihood of apprehension, severity of punishment).¹² In the context of rural Central Anatolia, this theory is particularly relevant. Vast, often unprotected archaeological sites can lower the perceived risk of apprehension, while the high value of artifacts on the black market increases the potential benefit. This framework guides our analysis to examine suspect demographics (e.g., are they unemployed, suggesting a financial motivation?) and the types of artifacts seized (e.g., are they high-value, easily transportable items?), helping us infer the rational calculations underpinning these crimes.¹³

Routine Activity Theory: The Convergence of Offenders, Targets, and Lack of Guardianship

Developed by Cohen and Felson in 1979 to address gaps in Rational Choice Theory regarding why individuals choose crime, Routine Activity Theory focuses on the crime event itself rather than the offender's motivation.¹⁴ It argues that for a crime to occur, three elements must converge in space and time: (1) a motivated offender, (2) a suitable target, and (3) the absence of a capable guardian.¹⁵ In cultural property trafficking: motivated offenders are individuals driven by factors such as profit, as explained by Rational Choice Theory. Suitable targets are the artifacts themselves, often located in remote, unprotected archaeological sites. Their value, portability, and demand contribute to their suitability. Capable guardianship refers to the presence of formal (e.g., law enforcement patrols, site security) or informal (e.g., local community vigilance) protection. The vastness of Central Anatolia makes comprehensive guardianship challenging, creating opportunities for crime.

This theory provides a framework for analyzing the spatial and temporal patterns of trafficking.¹⁶ For instance, we can examine whether crimes cluster in areas with high concentrations of archaeological sites (suitable targets) but limited law enforcement presence (absence of guardianship).¹⁷

¹² Larry J. Siegel and Joanne Marie Ziembo-Vogl, "Development of Rational Choice Theory," in *Criminology: Theories, Patterns, and Typologies* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2010), 84–85.

¹³ Osman Dolu, "Rasyonel Bir Tercih Olarak Suç: Klasik Okul Düşüncelerinin Suçu Açıklama ve Önleme Kapasitesinin Değerlendirilmesi," *Polis Bilimleri Dergisi* 11, no. 4 (2009): 89–120.

¹⁴ Ronald V. Clarke and Marcus Felson, eds., *Routine Activity and Rational Choice*, vol. 5 of *Advances in Criminological Theory* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 1993).

¹⁵ Aykut Çalıřkan, "Adli Sosyoloji Baęlamında Mala Zarar Verme Suçu ile İlgili Mekân Olgusunun Analizi" (PhD diss., Hacettepe University, Graduate School of Natural and Applied Sciences, 2019).

¹⁶ Vania Ceccato, "Rational Choice, Routine Activity and Situational Crime Prevention," in *The Encyclopedia of Rural Crime*, edited by Alistair Harkness, Jessica René Peterson, Matt Bowden, Cassie Pedersen, and Joseph F. Donnermeyer, 46–49 (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.56687/9781529222036-016>.

¹⁷ Brian P. Boetig, "The Routine Activity Theory: A Model for Addressing Specific Crime Issues," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 75, no. 6 (June 2006): 12–19.

Integrating the Theories: A Conceptual Model for Analyzing Trafficking Networks in Central Anatolia

Rational Choice Theory and Routine Activity Theory are complementary in understanding cultural property trafficking. Rational Choice explains the individual decision-making process of the trafficker, while Routine Activity explains the environmental conditions that create opportunities for these decisions to be actualized. The motivated offender, driven by rational calculations of profit and risk, seeks suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians. This integrated perspective allows for a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, moving beyond individual motivations to include the situational factors that facilitate cultural property trafficking in the Central Anatolia Region.

Background: The Context of Cultural Property Trafficking

This section provides essential contextual information regarding cultural property trafficking, its historical development, and the relevant crime and law enforcement landscape to understand the phenomenon in Türkiye.

A Brief Historical Overview of Cultural Property Trafficking

Cultural property trafficking, a crime as old as civilization itself,¹⁸ has evolved from opportunistic looting to a sophisticated transnational organized criminal enterprise.¹⁹ Historically, the illicit trade in antiquities has been driven by demand from collectors, museums, and, more recently, by the funding of terrorist organizations.²⁰ Türkiye, with its rich archaeological heritage spanning millennia, has unfortunately been a target for such activities throughout history. The systematic plundering of archaeological sites and the illegal export of artifacts have deprived the country of invaluable parts of its cultural identity and scientific knowledge.²¹ Understanding this historical trajectory is crucial for appreciating the contemporary challenges in combating this crime.

The Concept of Crime and Crime Analysis

While crime is generally defined as an act punishable by law, often involving a violation of societal norms and values, cultural property trafficking distinguishes itself as a unique and complex criminal phenomenon.²² Unlike conventional crimes, its victim is often intangible

¹⁸ Ekrem Akurgal, *Anadolu Uygarlıkları*, 5th ed. (Ankara: Phoenix Yayınevi, 2023).

¹⁹ Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM), "Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye, Article 63," 1982, <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuat?MevzuatNo=2709&MevzuatTur=1&MevzuatTertip=5>.

²⁰ Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM), "Parliamentary Resolution No. 1177," 2018, https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR_KARARLAR/kanuntbmmc102/karartbmmc102/karartbmmc10201177.pdf.

²¹ Gendarmerie General Command, "Gendarmerie Areas of Responsibility and Protected Facilities."

²² Talha Şenol, "Rural Crime Studies in Turkey: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Penal Law and Criminology* 12, no. 1 (2024): 79–92, <https://doi.org/10.26650/JPLC2023-1464301>.

and diffuse: the collective cultural heritage of humanity, future generations, and the historical record itself. This crime transcends national borders, involving intricate networks of illicit trade that connect source countries like Türkiye to international markets. The profound impact extends beyond economic loss, encompassing irreversible damage to archaeological sites, the erosion of cultural identity, and the scientific sterilization of artifacts once removed from their original context. Understanding these distinctive characteristics is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.²³ This study employs crime analysis techniques to identify patterns in cultural property trafficking incidents, focusing on spatial, temporal, and demographic characteristics. By systematically analyzing these patterns, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, which can inform more targeted interventions.

Law Enforcement Models and Approaches in Combating Crime

Law enforcement agencies employ various models and approaches to combat crime, broadly categorized as reactive and proactive.²⁴ Reactive policing responds to crimes after they have occurred, focusing on investigation and apprehension. Proactive policing, conversely, aims to prevent crimes before they occur through strategies like increased patrols, community engagement, and intelligence-led operations.²⁵ In the context of cultural property trafficking, both approaches are vital. Given the vastness of archaeological sites and the clandestine nature of illicit excavations, proactive measures, such as intelligence gathering and targeted patrols in high-risk areas, are particularly crucial. The Gendarmerie General Command, as a key law enforcement agency in Türkiye, plays a significant role in both reactive investigations and proactive prevention efforts in its area of responsibility.

More recently, advancements in policing models have led to the development of strategies such as Community-Supported Policing and Predictive Policing. Community-Supported Policing emphasizes collaborative efforts between law enforcement and the public to identify and address crime problems, fostering trust and shared responsibility.²⁶ This approach recognizes that effective crime prevention often relies on the active participation and intelligence provided by local communities.²⁷ Predictive Policing, on the other hand, leverages data analysis and algorithmic models to forecast where and when crimes are most likely to occur, enabling

²³ İbrahim Hakan Göver and Dolunay Şenol, "Toplumsal Bir Olgu Olarak Suç: Sosyolojik Bir Analiz," *Journal of Current Researches on Social Sciences (JoCReSS)* 7, no. 2 (2017): 191–208, <https://doi.org/10.26579/jocress-7.2.15>.

²⁴ Turkish Language Association (Türk Dil Kurumu), "Turkish Language Association," 2025, <https://sozluk.gov.tr/> (accessed April 9, 2025).

²⁵ Tim Newburn, "Transformation of Policing? Understanding Current Trends in Policing Systems," *British Journal of Criminology* 48, no. 1 (2008): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azm057>.

²⁶ Tom R. Tyler, "Legitimacy-Based Policing," *Criminology & Public Policy* 24, no. 1 (2025): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12695>.

²⁷ Dickson Ogbonnaya Igwe, "Inter-Agency Collaboration Against Transnational Crime and Law Enforcement Within Seme Badagry Border Migration Corridor Example," *ESUT Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2024), <https://esutjss.com/index.php/ESUTJSS/article/view/237>.

law enforcement to deploy resources more strategically and proactively intervene.²⁸ While both models offer significant potential for enhancing crime prevention, their application in the context of cultural property trafficking requires careful consideration of data reliability, ethical implications, and the unique characteristics of heritage crime. These modern approaches complement traditional reactive and proactive strategies by offering more nuanced and data-driven methods for safeguarding cultural heritage.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative and descriptive research design to conduct a criminological analysis of cultural property trafficking in Central Anatolia. The research is a retrospective study, examining recorded incidents over a five-year period to identify patterns and trends. The analytical approach is guided by the theoretical framework, analysing descriptive statistics to explore empirical indicators of Rational Choice and Routine Activity theories.

The study is based on the analysis of secondary quantitative data officially obtained from the Gendarmerie General Command of the Republic of Türkiye. The dataset, consisting of 3,260 incident records covering the years 2017 to 2021, was provided to the researchers following an official request submitted to the Gendarmerie General Command. This dataset covers incidents within the Gendarmerie's jurisdiction, which encompasses approximately 93% of Türkiye's geographical land area and serves around 20% of the country's population.²⁹ Each record includes detailed information on the date, time, location, type of incident, and demographic characteristics of suspects, as well as the nature of seized artifacts. This comprehensive dataset allows for a robust criminological analysis of the spatial, temporal, and demographic patterns of cultural property trafficking in the Central Anatolia Region.

The raw data were first organized and coded into a spreadsheet format. Subsequently, they were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods with the aid of SPSS software. The analysis included: Frequency and Trend Analysis: To determine the temporal distribution of incidents across the five-year period and during different months. Spatial Analysis: To map the geographical distribution of incidents across the thirteen provinces and identify areas of high concentration. Descriptive Analysis of Suspects: To establish the demographic profile of individuals involved in trafficking, focusing on variables such as age, gender, and occupation. Categorization of Artifacts: To classify the types of artifacts most frequently seized. All tables and figures presented in the findings section were generated by the author based on this analysis.

This study has several limitations inherent to its data and scope. First, as the analysis relies on secondary data, it is limited to crimes that were officially reported to and recorded by the Gendarmerie. It does not capture the "dark figure" of crime—incidents that go undetected

²⁸ Kevin Macnish, David Wright, and Tilimbe Jiya, "Predictive Policing in 2025: A Scenario," in *Policing in the Era of AI and Smart Societies*, edited by Hamid Jahankhani, Babak Akhgar, Peter Cochrane, and Mohammad Dastbaz (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50613-1_9.

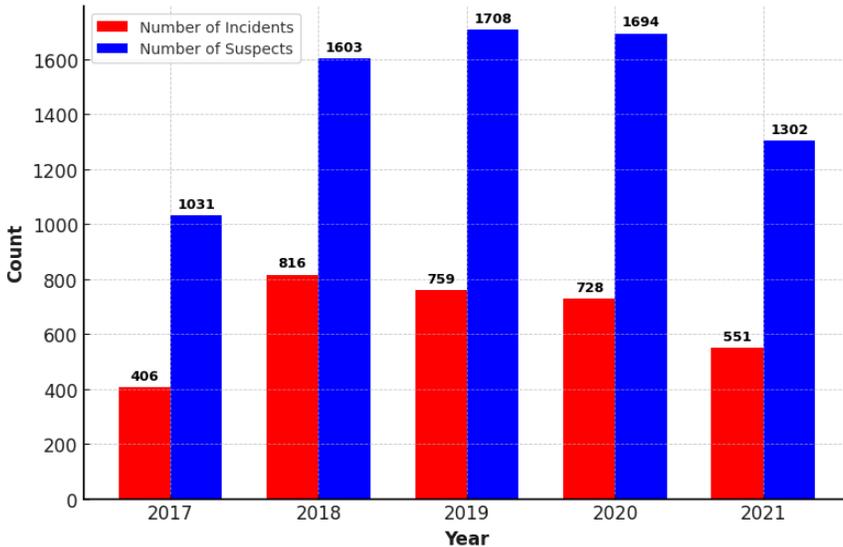
²⁹ Gendarmerie General Command, "Gendarmerie Areas of Responsibility and Protected Facilities."

or unreported. Second, the data are confined to the Gendarmerie's jurisdiction, which is predominantly rural, and does not include incidents occurring in urban areas under police jurisdiction. Therefore, the findings represent the dynamics of trafficking in rural Central Anatolia and may not be generalizable to all of Türkiye. Finally, the data provides information on what was recorded, but not necessarily the deeper motivations or contexts, which can only be inferred through the theoretical framework.

Findings: Statistical Profile of Cultural Property Trafficking in Central Anatolia

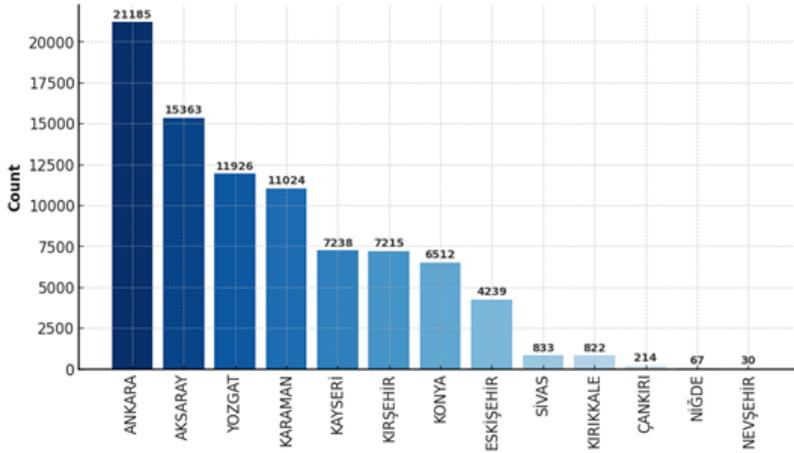
This section presents the empirical findings derived from the analysis of 3,260 cultural property trafficking incident records obtained from the Gendarmerie General Command, covering the period between 2017 and 2021 in thirteen provinces of the Central Anatolia Region (Aksaray, Ankara, Çankırı, Eskişehir, Karaman, Kayseri, Kırıkkale, Kırşehir, Konya, Nevşehir, Niğde, Sivas, and Yozgat). The findings are presented in accordance with the research questions, detailing the spatial, temporal, and demographic patterns, as well as the types of artifacts seized. In these incidents, 7,338 suspects were recorded, and 86,550 cultural properties were seized. When Figures 1 and 2 are examined, it is observed that 3,260 incidents took place in total, 7,338 suspects were involved, and 86,550 cultural properties subject to crime were seized.

Figure 1: Cultural Property Trafficking Incidents and Suspects – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³⁰



³⁰ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data in the Central Anatolia Region within the Jurisdiction of the Gendarmerie General Command (2017–2021)* (unpublished internal report provided to the author upon official request, 2022).

Figure 2: Seized Cultural Property Items – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³¹



Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author’s elaboration.

Analysis of Crime Data

Regarding the temporal analysis of these incidents, the annual distribution in Figure 3 shows that 2018 recorded the highest share (25%), while 2017 had the lowest (12.5%). In 2019 and 2020, the number of incidents declined compared to the previous year, stabilizing at similar rates of 23.3% and 22.3%, respectively. By 2021, the share fell to 16.9%, though it remained above the low point observed in 2017.

Figure 3: Annual Distribution of Cultural Property Trafficking Incidents – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³²



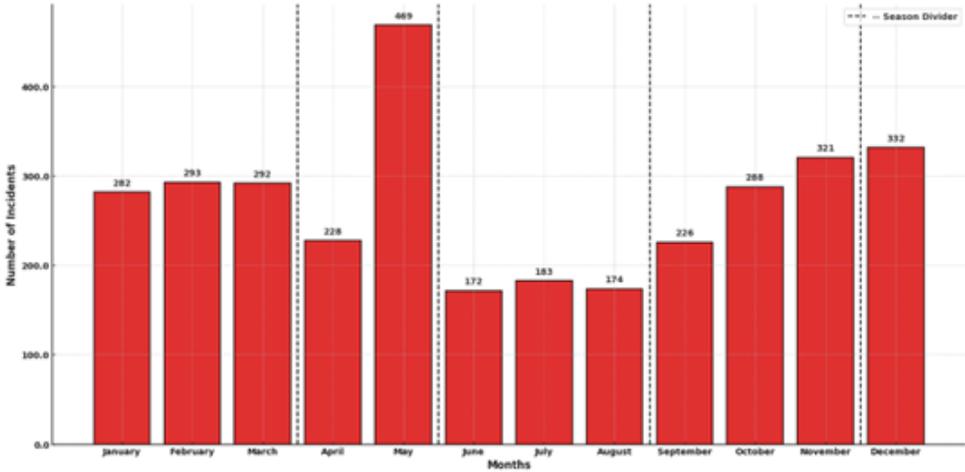
Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author’s elaboration.

³¹ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

³² Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

When incidents are examined by month in Figure 4, May appears as the peak month (469 incidents), surpassing all other months. Although May shows the highest concentration, our research also considers seasonal distribution. In terms of seasons, spring accounts for 30.18% of incidents, followed by winter with 27.82%. Summer records the lowest proportion, at 16.23%, compared to the other seasons.

Figure 4: Monthly Distribution of Cultural Property Trafficking Incidents – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³³

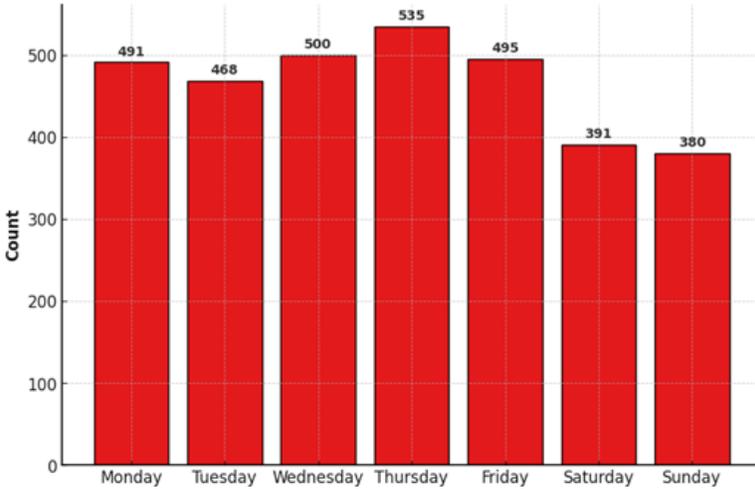


Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author's elaboration.

In the distribution by day, as shown in Figure 5, Thursday records the highest number of incidents (535). However, the analysis indicates that weekdays account for similar proportions, ranging from 14.36% to 16.41%, while weekends display relatively lower percentages (11.99%–6.6%) compared to weekdays.

³³ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

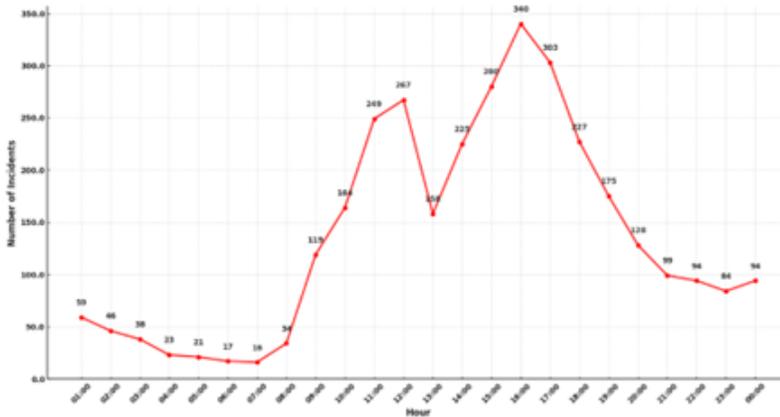
Figure 5: Weekly Distribution of Cultural Property Trafficking Incidents – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³⁴



Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author's elaboration.

When the distribution by hour is examined in Figure 6, the highest proportion is observed at 16:00, accounting for 10.43% (340 incidents). Overall, incidents are concentrated between 09:00 and 20:00, corresponding to daytime and evening hours, while the nighttime interval shows considerably lower intensity compared to the rest of the day.

Figure 6: Hourly Distribution of Cultural Property Trafficking Incidents – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³⁵



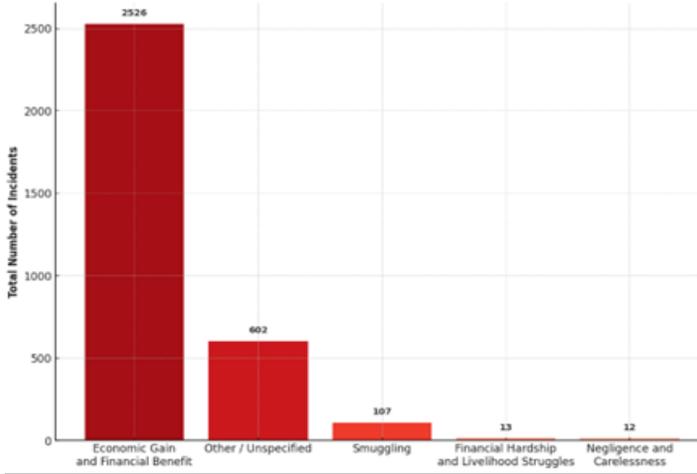
Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author's elaboration.

³⁴ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

³⁵ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

When the reasons for these incidents are examined in Figure 7, 77.48% (2,526 incidents) are found to stem from efforts to obtain financial gain or material benefit.

Figure 7: Distribution of Cultural Property Trafficking Incidents by Suspected Cause – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³⁶



Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author's elaboration.

Demographic Analysis of Suspects

According to Table 1, which pertains to the suspect profile, among a total of 7,338 suspects, 4,337 are registered in the population records of the jurisdiction where the crime occurred. The remaining 3,001 suspects either lack data in the records or are registered in another province. Based on the currently available data, the percentage of suspects registered in the location of the crime amounts to 59.10% of the total.

Table 1: Population Registration of Suspects in Cultural Property Trafficking – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³⁷

Province	Total Suspects	Suspects Registered to the Civil Registry in the Crime Location	Suspects with Unspecified or Different Province Registration	Percentage (%)
Aksaray	314	208	106	66.24%
Ankara	908	285	623	31.39%
Çankırı	181	91	90	50.28%
Eskişehir	581	229	352	39.41%

³⁶ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

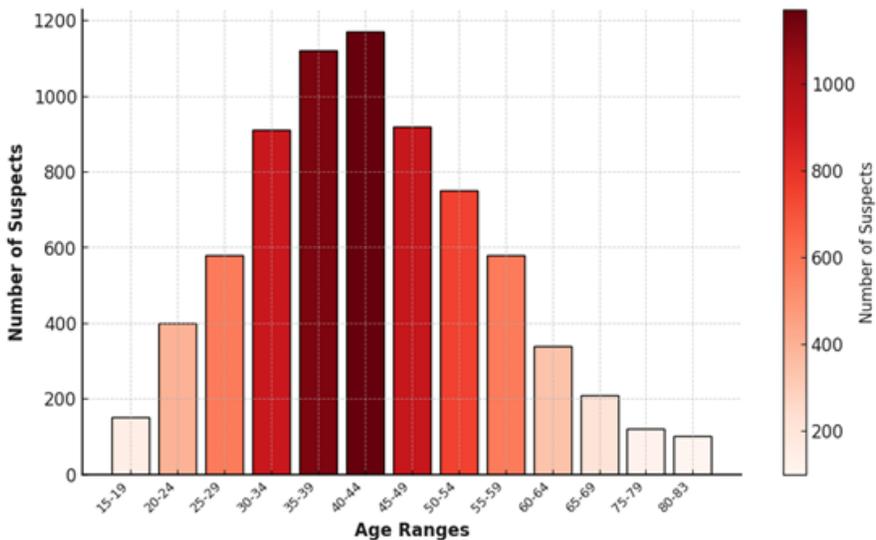
³⁷ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

Karaman	357	218	135	61.76%
Kayseri	837	536	301	64.04%
Kırıkkale	227	90	137	39.65%
Kırşehir	250	123	127	49.2%
Konya	1479	1109	370	74.98%
Nevşehir	813	656	157	80.69%
Niğde	149	81	68	54.36%
Sivas	509	339	170	66.60%
Yozgat	737	372	365	50.47%
Total	7338	4337	3001	59.10%

Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author's elaboration.

When the age distribution of suspects (ages 15–83) is analyzed according to Figure 8, out of 7,338 total suspects, 2,293 fall within the 35–44 age range. The next highest groups are the 30–34 and 45–49 ranges, each comprising 1,828 suspects. In the overall distribution, 4,121 suspects are between 30 and 49 years old, indicating that the majority of suspects fall within this age bracket.

Figure 8: Age Distribution of Suspects (15–83) in Cultural Property Trafficking – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³⁸

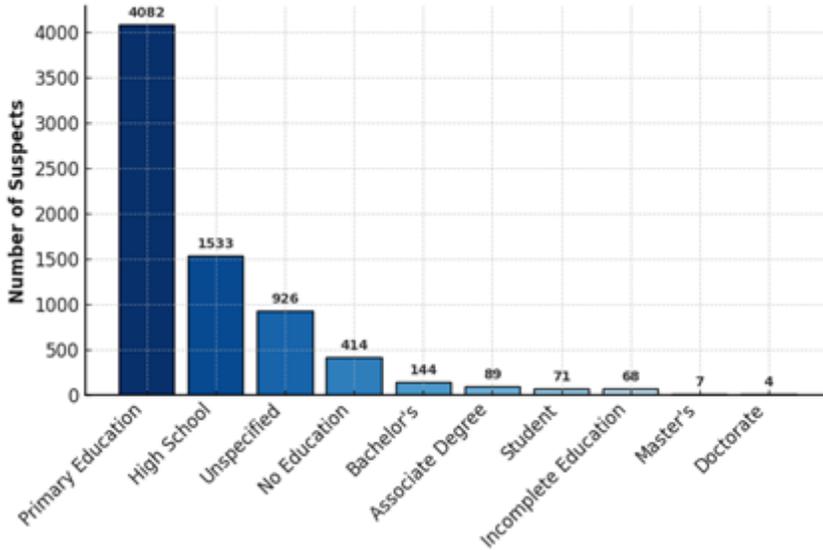


From the examination of suspects' educational levels (Figure 9), among the 7,338 suspects in total, 4,082 completed primary or middle school, 1,533 completed high school, 414 received

³⁸ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

no formal education, 144 held a bachelor's degree, 89 held an associate degree, 7 held a master's degree, and 4 held a doctorate. Additionally, no educational data are available for 926 suspects. Furthermore, 71 are still students, and 68 have not yet completed their studies. Overall, 55.63% of suspects are graduates of primary education.

Figure 9: Educational Attainment of Suspects in Cultural Property Trafficking – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)³⁹

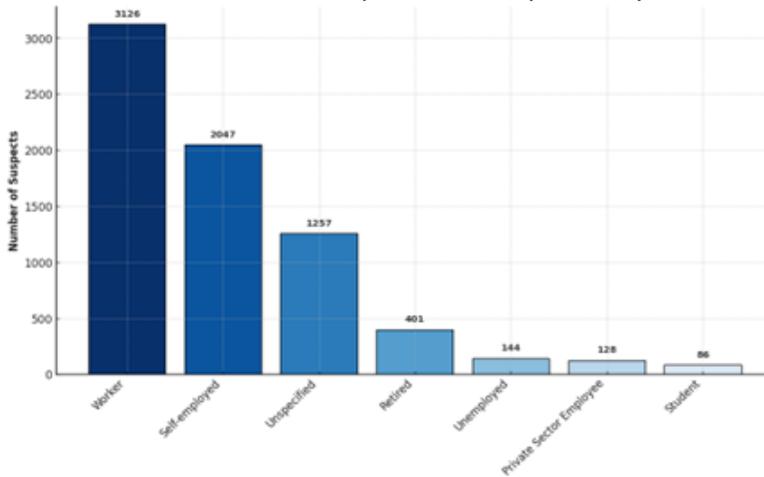


Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author's elaboration.

Regarding suspects' most recent occupation (Figure 10), among a total of 7,338 suspects, 3,126 are laborers, 2,047 are self-employed, 401 are retired, 144 are unemployed, 128 work in the private sector, and 86 are students. No occupational data are available for 1,257 suspects. The largest shares of suspects are laborers (42.60%) and self-employed individuals (27.90%).

³⁹ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

Figure 10: Occupational Distribution of Suspects in Cultural Property Trafficking – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)⁴⁰



Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author’s elaboration.

Analysis of Seized Artifact Types

In the responsibility areas of thirteen Provincial Gendarmerie Commands within the Central Anatolia Region, a total of 3,260 incidents were recorded between 2017 and 2021. As shown in Table 2, 86,550 cultural artifacts were seized during this period. The vast majority consisted of coins (73,259 pieces), underscoring their portability and high market demand. Other categories included 8,873 ornaments and everyday items, 2,368 miscellaneous historical artifacts, 1,563 stone artifacts, 290 clay artifacts, 188 religious and manuscript items, and 9 wooden or organic materials.

Table 2: Seized Artifact Types in Cultural Property Trafficking – Gendarmerie Jurisdictions, Central Anatolia (2017–2021)⁴¹

Type of Artifact	Number
Coins	73259
Ornaments and Everyday Items	8873
Miscellaneous Historical Items	2368
Stone Artifacts	1563
Clay Artifacts	290
Religious and Manuscript Items	188
Wooden and Organic Materials	9
Total	86550

Source: Data provided by the Gendarmerie General Command; author’s elaboration.

⁴⁰ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

⁴¹ Gendarmerie General Command, *Cultural Property Smuggling Data*, 2022.

Discussion and Evaluation

Cultural property trafficking, a crime with deep historical roots, continues to pose a significant threat to global heritage,⁴² often originating in historically rich, developing nations such as Türkiye and flowing toward wealthier markets.⁴³ This study, focusing on the Central Anatolia Region between 2017 and 2021, analyzed 3,260 incidents involving 7,338 suspects and resulting in the seizure of 86,550 cultural properties. The empirical findings, when interpreted through the complementary lenses of Rational Choice Theory and Routine Activity Theory, provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play.

The demographic profile of suspects, particularly the observation that 59.10% of individuals are registered in the same jurisdiction where the crime occurred, aligns with the principles of Rational Choice Theory. This suggests that offenders, often driven by economic motivations, make calculated decisions based on their immediate environment and perceived opportunities.⁴⁴ The data indicating that 77.48% of incidents are motivated by financial gain further supports this, as individuals weigh the potential monetary rewards against the perceived risks of apprehension.⁴⁵ The involvement of multiple offenders in incidents, where the number of suspects is nearly two to two-and-a-half times that of the incidents, suggests a degree of organization and network involvement, consistent with previous studies on the economic drivers of this crime.⁴⁶ The prevalence of certain artifact types, such as coins (73,259 pieces out of 86,550 seized items), also reflects rational choices, as their high portability and market demand make them attractive targets for illicit trade.⁴⁷ This highlights how offenders prioritize items that maximize profit while minimizing the logistical challenges and risks associated with larger, less portable artifacts.

The spatial and temporal patterns observed in the Central Anatolia Region resonate strongly with Routine Activity Theory, which posits that crime occurs when a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian converge in space and time.⁴⁸ The concentration of incidents in archaeologically rich areas, particularly in a region as vast and challenging to monitor as Central Anatolia, points to the abundance of suitable targets (numerous unprotected sites) and a pervasive lack of capable guardianship. While specific provincial distributions (e.g., Ankara accounting for approximately one-quarter of seized

⁴² Zeynep Boz, *Fighting the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property: A Toolkit for European Judiciary and Law Enforcement* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2023), <https://doi.org/10.58337/GIWW3255>.

⁴³ Blythe Bowman Proulx, "Archaeological Site Looting in 'Glocal' Perspective: Nature, Scope, and Frequency," *American Journal of Archaeology* 117, no. 1 (2013): 111–125, <https://doi.org/10.3764/aja.117.1.0111>.

⁴⁴ Emrullah Büyük and Aslihan Murathanlı, *Suç Analizi ve Suçla Mücadele* (Ankara: Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı/Asayiş Başkanlığı, 2017).

⁴⁵ Ufuk Esin, "Eski Eser Kaçakçılığını Önlemede Saptırmalara Karşı Doğru Bilinçlenme Zorunluluğu," *Arkeoloji ve Sanat* 52–53 (1991): 14–17.

⁴⁶ Gök, "Kültürel Varlıklar ve Kaçakçılık," 70–77.

⁴⁷ Çalışkan, "Adli Sosyoloji Bağlamında Mala Zarar Verme Suçu," 34.

⁴⁸ Clarke and Felson, *Routine Activity and Rational Choice*.

artifacts) indicate regional hotspots, the overall pattern suggests that the sheer volume of cultural heritage, coupled with limited surveillance, creates ample opportunities for criminal activity. Temporal analyses, such as the peak in incidents during May and the higher frequency in spring and winter compared to summer, may reflect seasonal variations in agricultural cycles or tourist activity, which could influence the presence of capable guardians or the accessibility of sites. Similarly, the higher incidence during daytime hours (09:00 to 20:00) compared to nights, consistent with findings from other regional studies.⁴⁹ This suggests that offenders exploit periods when their activities are less likely to be detected, or when access to sites is easier. The continuous nature of trafficking throughout the year, despite seasonal fluctuations, underscores the persistent availability of suitable targets and the ongoing presence of motivated offenders.

In synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, it becomes clear that cultural property trafficking in Central Anatolia is a complex phenomenon driven by an intricate interplay of rational decision-making and environmental opportunities. Offenders, often facing socioeconomic challenges, rationally assess the high potential for financial gain from illicit trade against the relatively low perceived risk of detection in vast, unprotected archaeological landscapes. This rational calculation is facilitated by the routine activities that create opportunities: the presence of valuable and portable artifacts (suitable targets) in remote areas, coupled with the inherent difficulties in providing comprehensive law enforcement presence or site security (absence of capable guardianship). The findings underscore that effective intervention strategies must address both the motivations of offenders, perhaps through socioeconomic development and increased awareness, and the situational factors that create criminal opportunities, such as enhanced site protection and more strategic law enforcement deployment.⁵⁰ Understanding this dual theoretical dynamic is crucial for developing more targeted and effective approaches to safeguarding cultural heritage in the region.

Beyond practical implications, this research contributes to criminological theory by demonstrating how Rational Choice and Routine Activity frameworks can be jointly applied to the underexplored domain of cultural property trafficking. This empirical integration deepens our understanding of offender motivations and environmental factors and highlights the importance of context-specific criminological models.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, primarily stemming from its reliance on secondary data from a single law enforcement agency. While the Gendarmerie General Command provides comprehensive records for its jurisdiction, the exclusion of incidents from urban areas under police jurisdiction means that the findings may not be fully generalizable to the entirety of Türkiye. These limitations, however, do not diminish the value

⁴⁹ Erdal Karakaş and İsmail Hakkı Sarıtarla, "Bilecik İli Kırsalında Suç Olaylarının Zaman ve Mekâna Göre Dağılımı (2010–2019)," *Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences* 23, no. 43 (2022): 743–784, <https://doi.org/10.21550/sosbilder.1078899>.

⁵⁰ Charlotte Papillaud Loooram and Jade Lindley, "Preventing and Protecting against Underwater Cultural Heritage Crime," *Frontiers in Conservation Science* 5 (May 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcosc.2024.1396304>.

of the insights gained from this unique dataset, which offers a rare empirical glimpse into the dynamics of heritage crime in rural Central Anatolia. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating data from police jurisdictions, conducting victim surveys, or employing qualitative methods to explore the motivations and networks of offenders in greater depth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provided a criminological analysis of 3,260 cultural property trafficking incidents in Türkiye's Central Anatolia Region from 2017 to 2021, interpreting the findings through the theoretical frameworks of Rational Choice and Routine Activity theories. The analysis revealed that cultural property trafficking is not a random phenomenon but is shaped by a confluence of rational decision-making and environmental opportunities. The demographic profile of suspects—predominantly working-class individuals with lower educational attainment—and the overwhelming financial motivation (77.48% of incidents) underscore the relevance of Rational Choice Theory. Offenders appear to make calculated decisions, weighing the high potential for economic gain against a perceived low risk of apprehension in the vast, often unguarded archaeological landscapes of Central Anatolia. This is further evidenced by the prevalence of easily transportable and marketable items like coins, which constitute the vast majority of seized artifacts.

Concurrently, the spatial and temporal patterns of trafficking align closely with Routine Activity Theory. The concentration of incidents in archaeologically rich provinces and during specific times (e.g., spring and winter months, daytime hours) highlights the critical convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets (abundant, unprotected cultural properties), and the absence of capable guardianship. The findings suggest that the routine activities of both offenders and the broader community create predictable windows of opportunity for these crimes to occur. The interplay between these two theories provides a robust framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of cultural property trafficking: rational actors operate within an environment ripe with opportunities, making the crime both attractive and feasible.

Based on this integrated understanding, several recommendations for future research and policy can be formulated. First, future research should aim to address the limitations of this study by incorporating qualitative data to explore the nuanced motivations and decision-making processes of offenders beyond what can be inferred from quantitative data. Ethnographic studies or in-depth interviews with convicted traffickers could provide invaluable insights into the social and cultural contexts that shape their rational calculations. Second, research should focus on the effectiveness of different guardianship strategies. Comparative studies analyzing the impact of increased patrols, community-based monitoring programs, and technological solutions like UAVs in high-risk areas could provide evidence-based guidance for law enforcement. Third, a more granular spatial analysis, moving beyond the provincial level to specific districts or even individual sites, could help identify micro-level hotspots and the specific environmental factors that make them vulnerable.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that a multi-pronged approach is necessary.

To disrupt the rational calculations of offenders, efforts should focus on increasing the perceived risks while reducing the potential rewards. This includes not only strengthening legal sanctions but also ensuring their consistent and swift application. Furthermore, targeted economic development programs in vulnerable communities could reduce the financial incentives that drive individuals to engage in trafficking. To address the opportunities highlighted by Routine Activity Theory, enhancing capable guardianship is paramount. This requires a shift towards more proactive and intelligence-led policing models, such as Community-Supported Policing and Predictive Policing, which can help allocate limited law enforcement resources more effectively. Investing in technology for site monitoring, fostering inter-agency cooperation between law enforcement, cultural institutions, and academic experts, and launching public awareness campaigns to promote a sense of collective ownership over cultural heritage are all crucial components of a comprehensive prevention strategy.

Ultimately, protecting Türkiye's irreplaceable cultural heritage requires a holistic approach that addresses the crime not merely as a law enforcement problem, but as a complex social, economic, and cultural issue.

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