Bulgaria is trying to claw back tens of thousands of ancient artefacts plundered from its historic sites in a £25m-a-year export racket, writes **Eric Randolph** in Sofia

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of Hanoi and Saigon's pavement cafes and tree-lined avenues. Then explore ancient temples and civilisations in Cambodia, all whilst enjoying the best of

eal-life vampires, giant rock vaginas, ancient sites to rival those of Greece and tome – Bulgaria's archaeologists are putting their country on the map of world history, but first they nave to stop the mafia stealing its treasures.

The illegal diggers come at night with shovels and sacks, hunting through the places where they know the professionals have been. They're looking for the tonnes of ancient artefacts that lie hidden in Bulgaria's

In the past two decades, Bulgarian law enforcement agencies say this plunder has turned into a €30m-a-year industry for local gangs, putting it a close third behind drugs and prostitution. The artefacts - gold Roman coins, ancient Greek silver, Thracian military helmets - wind up with falsified documents in auction houses in Europe and North America, or increasingly with wealthy Arab and Asian collectors.

"You cannot put a value on what is lost because the real loss is information," says Professor Bozhidar Dimitrov, director of the National Museum of History in Sofia, who has spearheaded efforts to reclaim lost relics. "Even if we recover them, we don't know where they were originally found, so our understanding of the his-

Police say there are 300 criminal treasure-hunting gangs in Bulgaria at present, but as many as 50,000 people are thought to be involved in illegal digging in some form. Entire villages have been known to take part in some impoverished corners of Bulgaria.

Belatedly waking up to the scale of history from around the world.

Canadians," said Prof Dimitrov. "Acou-showed up at my office with two huge formerly the residence of Communist ple of years back, they returned 21,000 suitcases full of priceless artefacts." dictator Todor Zhivkov, who ruled artefacts in one go.

"The Italians had so much to return more like a Bond villain's than that of The Communist legacy is part of the

that the minister of culture became a historian: wood-panelled walls and reason why only a quarter of Bulgaria's

treasures are thought to have been discovered so far. Trapped behind the rock, leading into a womb-like cave. Iron Curtain for half a century, Bulgaria had few tourists, which meant minimal investment in archaeology and preservation.

This was followed by a decade of political confusion and economic criorganised crime groups had almost completely free rein.

"In the Nineties, the police could stop only about 10 per cent of the stuff leaving the country," estimates Prof Dimitrov. "Things have improved a lot. Now they get about 70 to 80 per cent. The police show up all the time with new hordes they have seized from

As if to prove the point, the professor cuts the meeting short to receive governor of the town. the deputy director of the police, who says he has 2,000 artefacts to hand over, discovered in the basement of a local antiques store.

Historical discoveries have been one of the few bright spots for Bulgaria's beleaguered economy in recent years, helping to convince the authorities of the need to protect their heritage.

Archaeologist Nikolay Ovcharov nicknamed "Bulgaria's Indiana Jones" - has just started the final excavations at Perperikon, a 7,000-year-old sacred site deep in the Rhodope mountains whose highlight is a walk-in vagina.

First discovered in the 1980s when ethnographers interviewed local vil-safe. its visitors.

bringing in a lot of wealth."

shrine – a 10-metre vulva carved in the Around midday at the right time of year, a phallus-shaped ray of sunlight

vagina," says Prof Ovcharov, remembering the moment he first saw the sis after the fall of Communism, when cave in 2002. "It was so unique. It still makes my hair stand on end."

> A grave unearthed in the Black Sea resort of Sozopol last year turned up a skeleton with an iron stake through its rib cage. It belonged to a famous 14thcentury pirate named Kirov, whose job was to attack the ships of illegal Venetian traders. He was later made

"It rivals Machu Picchu. Bulgarian archaeology can change the way people

blood of the living. Although Kirov was given an aristocrat's burial, locals eviwork, and snuck in after the funeral to to keep his soul from escaping. They pulled out his teeth, too, just to be

lagers, Perperikon was in ancient times

The discovery reached the press althe high demand from overseas means as famous as the oracle at Delphi in 👚 most by accident. Prof Dimitrov was 🧪 Bulgaria's treasures will continue to Greece, a place of wild bacchanalian sneaking a cigarette outside Sozopol's disappear into private collections, rituals to the goddess Dionysus, and, town hall just after the grave was found while authorities face a relentless chalaccording to legend, the birthplace of and some journalists came up to tease lenge trying to protect over 40,000 the Greek prophet Orpheus, which him about his heavy smoking. He only known archaeological sites across the counted Alexander the Great among mentioned the vampire to deflect country. attention.

The skeleton of a man at Sozopol in Bulgaria, with an iron stake driven through his chest. Below: 2nd and 3rd Century figurines of Greek gods; archaeologist

Nikolay Ovcharov NIKOLAY DOYCHINOV/ AFP/GETTY; VALENTINA PETROVA

they were so popular. It was featured in over 1,200 publications. That's more than covered the fall of our Communist dictator.

The vampire has proved a great pull for tourists, and drawn further attention to the astounding discoveries being made in Sozopol.

In 2010, a marble box containing a tooth and bits of skull were found on an adjacent island which are said to be relics of St John the Baptist. Foreign experts dated them to the first century AD and said the DNA belonged to a Middle Eastern man, making the claims plausible enough to attract coach-loads of pilgrims.

Another site in the town has uncovered the ruins of Roman baths alongside a Greek temple to the God Poseidon and a medieval church - a rare chance to see the evolution of worship in a single spot.

This is not so surprising for Bulgaria, a country whose strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia has made it one of the world's most soughtafter territories throughout the ages Greeks, Romans, Thracians, Byzantines and Ottomans all fought countless wars to gain control of its fertile lands - a bitter irony given the controversial emigration of young "It felt very unusual standing in a Bulgarians over the past two

Not all are happy with the government's efforts to control the trade in historical artefacts, however. Bulgaria's small shopkeepers complain about restrictions on selling any pre-twentieth

"The police can shut me down for having just one old coin," says Constantine Georgiev, owner of a small bric-a-brac store in Sofia. "But this just means the trade in antiques is controlled by around 10 very rich guys with political connections. No one goes after the big mafia bosses because they can afford the bribes."

Efforts to increase sentences for illicit smugglers have started to change attitudes towards a crime that was not taken too seriously in the past.

"Many used to see it as a fun adventure," says Prof Dimitrov. "The men dig while the women do a barbecue. You had police and even priests taking

Indeed, a 41-year-old priest from the northern city of Vratsa was busted in 2010 after conducting over 1,000 illegal sales of ancient coins and jewellery over the internet.

But despite these efforts, experts say that widespread corruption and

"We lobbied for an amnesty a few

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tory is gone.'

the problem, Bulgarian authorities are worried about the cost of the ship-along window staring up at the Vitosha trying to claw back some of their lost ment, so he ordered his entire delegamountains. "It was designed to intimi-"The record so far belongs to the when they came here. He himself smoked cigarettes - the museum was

Prof Dimitrov's huge office looks Bulgaria for 35 years up to 1989.

tion to carry two extra bags of luggage date guests", he says between chain-

reaches an altar deep in the cave.

The big surprise for Bulgaria's historians has been the global interest in

Locals believed the souls of evil men did not ascend to heaven and instead

think about this country"

left their graves at night to drink the dently thought him a nasty piece of drive a stake through the body in order

"It rivals Machu Picchu," says Prof "Suddenly, it became a huge intervears back so that private owners could Ovcharov. "Bulgarian archaeology has national sensation," he says at his of declare what they had on the condienormous potential. It can change the fice, lighting another cigarette. tion it was not sold or exported. That way people think about this country. "Vampires are very common here - was one of the first laws that was over-It can give us national pride as well as we've already found more than a hunturned when GERB [a right-wing dred – so we hadn't thought to Bulgarian political party] took power One of the most extraordinary aspublicise it. I didn't know there was a in 2009," says Prof Ovcharov. "Rich colpects of Perperikon is a nearby fertility vampire movie with Brad Pitt and that lectors are a powerful lobby."