

Looted Gilgamesh tablet returned to Iraq

The ancient cuneiform, once fated to be displayed at the Museum of the Bible, was sold by Christie's for \$1.7m to the owners of the arts and crafts chain Hobby Lobby

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23rd September 2021 22:06 BST



The cuneiform tablet bearing a portion of the epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian epic poem Photo: ICE-HSI

The Gilgamesh tablet—the ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform tablet at the centre of years-long legal tussles between Christie's auction house, federal authorities and the owners of the arts and crafts chain Hobby Lobby—was returned to Iraq today in a ceremony held at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

Unesco believes that the artefact, which dates from 1600 BC and is inscribed

with part of the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, was looted from an Iraqi museum in the 1990s and smuggled into the US in 2007. The Oklahoma-based company Hobby Lobby—whose billionaire owner Steve Green founded the Museum of the Bible in 2018—purchased the tablet from Christie’s for nearly \$2m in 2014, with the intent to display it at the museum.

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house knowingly consigned a looted work. However, there is no evidence that the consignor, who is said to have purchased the piece in good faith from an antiques dealer in 2007, knew the piece had been looted when he put the work up for auction.

Earlier this year, Hobby Lobby also [filed a lawsuit](#) against the former Oxford University professor Dirk Obbink, claiming he was paid \$7m for several ancient papyrus fragments that he had stolen from the archives of the Egypt Exploration Society, housed at the university. The fragments, also intended to enter the evangelical museum’s collection, were returned to the society.

The tablet is the most significant object among more than 17,000 artefacts the US is returning to Iraq. “By returning these illegally acquired objects, the authorities here in the US and in Iraq are allowing the Iraqi people to reconnect with a page in their history,” the Unesco director Audrey Azoulay said in a statement. “This exceptional restitution is a major victory over those who mutilate heritage and then traffic it to finance violence and terrorism.”

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