

The ‘Dream Tablet’ Nears the End of a Long Journey Home

The ancient artifact, which contains a portion of the Gilgamesh epic, is going back to Iraq after having been stolen from a museum there some 30 years ago.

By Tom Mashberg

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A 3,500-year-old clay tablet inscribed with a portion of one of mankind’s oldest epics was handed over to the Iraqi government on Thursday, the culmination of a 30-year odyssey which saw the hand-sized object looted from a northern Iraqi museum, sold by a British auction house and showcased in a Washington collection before being seized by Homeland Security agents.

Known as the Gilgamesh Dream Tablet, the object is the last — and most storied — of some 17,000 artifacts that have been publicly returned to Iraq since August as part of a global drive to draw attention to the illicit trade in ancient treasures.

“This exceptional restitution is a major victory over those who mutilate heritage and then traffic it to finance violence and terrorism,” said the director-general of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, whose agency helped organize the restitution ceremony at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

“By returning these illegally acquired objects,” she added, “the authorities here in the United States and in Iraq are allowing the Iraqi people to reconnect with a page in their history.”

While its exact origins are unknown, researchers say the tablet, a jagged piece of cuneiform minutely inscribed in the Akkadian language, was discovered in 1853 in the ruins of an Assyrian library in northern Iraq.

The tablet tells a portion of the Sumerian tale of King Gilgamesh, a superhuman demigod whose adventures include slaying a monstrous bull, outsmarting a sea serpent and surviving a world-destroying flood. The text on the tablet fragment being returned recounts the hero describing his vivid dreams to his mother.

Sometime during the Persian Gulf war in 1991, according to Justice Department officials, the tablet was stolen from its museum, only to re-emerge in 2003, when a Jordanian antiques dealer bought it, dirt-encrusted and unreadable, from a coin dealer in London. The dealer shipped the tablet to the United States without declaring its formal entry, as mandated by law, officials said.

Once in the United States, a cuneiform expert recognized it as bearing a part of the Gilgamesh epic. In 2007, the dealer sold the tablet to yet another buyer along with a false letter of provenance saying the tablet had been inside a box of ancient bronze fragments purchased in San Francisco in 1981.

The false letter traveled with the tablet as it was sold several times in different countries and ultimately by the Christie’s auction house in London in 2014. The tablet was bought for \$1,674,000 by Hobby Lobby, whose founder, Steve Green, wanted to include it among the major exhibits displayed at the Museum of the Bible, which he was building in Washington. The tablet was seized from the museum by Homeland Security Investigations in 2019.

Mr. Green said last year that he “trusted the wrong people to guide me, and unwittingly dealt with unscrupulous dealers.” Hobby Lobby consented to the tablet’s forfeiture based on the tablet’s illegal importations into the United States in 2003 and 2014, American officials said.

Hobby Lobby has since sued Christie's in connection with the sale, accusing it in court papers of "deceitful and fraudulent conduct." Christie's has denied any wrongdoing.

Federal officials said the return is emblematic of efforts to help Iraq recover from the looting of the Baghdad Museum and other ancient Mesopotamian sites during the 2003 American invasion.

The special agent in charge of Homeland Security Investigations in New York, Peter C. Fitzhugh, said his agency would "work tirelessly to interrupt the criminal activities of those who loot antiquities and seek to profit off the theft of a country's rich history."

The tablet was displayed at Thursday's ceremony, during which Fareed Yasseen, Iraq's ambassador to the United States, recalled the despair he felt when the Baghdad Museum was looted. He described the return of the tablet, which will now reside in that museum, as a culmination of years of effort to heal Iraq's cultural heritage wounds. He also called for more multinational efforts to stanch the illegal trade in cultural heritage items, especially black market online sales.

"In these artifacts, the Iraqi people can rediscover our unique heritage, that long predates the Saddam and ISIS stains on our history," he said.