

Iraq marks return of looted Gilgamesh Tablet from the U.S.

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The Epic of Gilgamesh is considered one of the oldest pieces of literature in the world, telling the story of a Mesopotamian king on a quest for immortality [File: Immigration and Customs Enforcement/AP Photo]

Baghdad, December 8 (RHC)-- A small clay tablet dating back 3,500 years and bearing a portion of the Epic of Gilgamesh, that was looted from an Iraqi museum 30 years ago and recently recovered from the United States, has been formally returned to Iraq.

The \$1.7 million cuneiform tablet, known as the Gilgamesh Dream Tablet, is one of the world's oldest surviving works of literature and one of the oldest religious texts. It was found in 1853 as part of a 12-tablet collection in the rubble of the library of Assyrian King Assur Banipal.

The tablet was looted from an Iraqi museum during the 1991 Gulf War by mercenary U.S. troops. Officials believed it was illegally imported into the United States in 2003, then sold to the owners of craft store chain Hobby Lobby and eventually put on display in its Museum of the Bible in Washington.

Federal agents with Homeland Security Investigations seized the tablet from the museum in September 2019. A federal judge in New York approved the forfeiture of the tablet in July this year.

In a news conference on Tuesday in Baghdad, the Iraqi foreign minister delivered to the culture minister three artefacts recovered from the US and the United Kingdom: the tablet of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian ram's head and a Sumerian tablet.

The Tablet of Gilgamesh "is of great importance, it is one of the oldest literary texts of Iraq's history," Minister of Culture and Antiquities Hassan Nazim told the AFP news agency.

During the news conference, he stressed the "message sent to all those who smuggle our antiquities and have sold them at international auctions: ultimately, the fate of such operations is restitution."

UNESCO has described the process of recovering the valuable artefact as the culmination of decades of cooperation between the U.S. and Iraq, both of which are signatories to the UNESCO Convention of 1970.

amesh tablet to Iraq

In one year, Iraq has recovered nearly 18,000 artefacts, including 17,899 pieces returned from the US mid-year. The artefacts were returned in late July on board a plane carrying Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhemi from a trip to Washington where he met US President Joe Biden.

"This day represents a victory in the face of the desperate attempts of those who try to steal our great history and our ancient civilisation," Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said on Tuesday. The tablet reappeared in the UK in 2001. An American art dealer bought it from a London-based Jordanian family in 2003, before sending the piece to the US without declaring its true nature to customs.

It was then sold to antique dealers in 2007 for \$50,000 under a false certificate of origin. The tablet was sold once again in 2014 for \$1.67m to the owners of Hobby Lobby, the Green family, conservative Christians who wanted to display it at their Museum of the Bible in Washington.

A museum curator became concerned about the tablet's origins in 2017, feeling that its documentation was incomplete. It was finally seized in 2019. Iraq has seen its historical artefacts looted for decades, including since the US invasion in 2003 and the rise of the ISIL (ISIS) group 10 years later.

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