

Press release

**The British Museum helps to return rare Sumerian plaque to Iraq**

*Rare 4000 year old limestone sculpture will go on temporary display before returning to Iraq.*

**Press image:**

The British Museum and the Art and Antiques Unit of the Metropolitan Police Service have worked together to identify and return a rare ancient sculpture to Iraq. The limestone wall plaque has been demonstrated by Museum experts to originate from an ancient Sumerian temple from around 2400 BC. This important piece was illegally removed from Iraq and discovered by authorities in the UK.

The Sumerian plaque was offered for sale by an online sales platform, Timeline Auctions, in May 2019 when it was inaccurately described as a ‘Western Asiatic Akkadian tablet’. It was said to come from a private collection formed in the 1990s but without further provenance. It was brought to the attention of the Metropolitan Police Service (Art and Antiques Unit) who, following further enquiries, brought the plaque for examination at the British Museum. The authorities in Baghdad have generously permitted it to go on display at the Museum before it is repatriated to Iraq.

This object is part of a votive wall plaque dating to about 2400 BC and belonging to the Early Dynastic III period of southern Iraq. It is carved from local limestone and shows a large seated male figure, clean-shaven, and wearing a typically Sumerian form of long skirt, known as a *kaunakes*, which was woven in a tufted pattern. The individual is a high-status male, either a high-priest or a ruler. He holds a ceremonial goblet or conical beaker in his right upraised hand, while his left holds a palm frond on his lap. He sits on a decorated stool.

It is part of a larger, originally square, plaque probably measuring about 25 cm across, divided into different scenes which would have shown a ritual banquet scene.

Temple plaques such as this are rare and there are only around 50 examples known in existence. They are only known from important Sumerian city-sites in southern and central Iraq and eastern Syria, including the famous sites of of Ur, Nippur, Khafajah and Mari.

They are thought to have been originally attached to the wall by means of a large knob inserted through a hole in the centre, although sadly none have yet been found *in situ* at ancient sites. The style of this particular piece places it in the Sumerian heartland of southern Iraq, rather than the other regions where they have been found. The traces of burning are a feature found on some previously excavated at the site of Tello/Girsu, where the British Museum’s DCMS funded Iraq Scheme has been carrying out archaeological training and excavations, and it is possible that it comes from there. This site was extensively excavated and looted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and looted again in the 1990s during the Gulf War, and most recently in 2003 during the Iraq War.

This piece is an exciting and important new discovery, has not been previously published, nor is it known to be listed on any museum inventory. It was brought to the attention of the Metropolitan Police Service (Art and Antiques Unit) and, following further enquiries, the plaque was disclaimed by its consigner and it will now be repatriated to Iraq. Objects that are seized are brought to the British Museum for identification, analysis and cataloguing. The Museum then liaises with colleagues in the national museums and antiquities organisations of the countries concerned to arrange the return of these objects.

**Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum** said, “The British Museum is absolutely committed to the fight against illicit trade and damage to cultural heritage. I am delighted that we are able to assist in the return of this important object to Iraq, via the Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in London. An important part of the Museum’s work on cultural heritage involves our close partnership with law enforcement agencies concerned with illicit trafficking. This case is another good example of the benefits of all parties working together - in this case museums, government departments, and the Met Police - to combat looting and protect cultural heritage”.

**His Excellency Mohammad Jaafar Al-Sadr, ambassador of the Republic of Iraq** said, “We have a unique relationship and a great joint cooperation with the British Museum in various fields including returning stolen Iraqi antiquities, training Iraqi archaeologists, and the reconstruction of archaeological sites damaged by terrorism. In addition to today’s retrieved antiquity, other artifacts are in the process of being returned in the near future. We extend our gratitude to the British Museum staff for their efforts and cooperation with us and look forward to our continued and remarkable cooperation well into the future”.

**DI Jim Wingrave, Central Specialist Crime, Metropolitan Police Service** said, “The Art and Antiques Unit are pleased that this important piece of heritage is being returned to Iraq. We know that its country of origin has been extensively looted over many years, especially during times of conflict. In order for buyers to be sure that they are not acquiring illicit material and fuelling the trade in stolen antiquities they should conduct a thorough due diligence process before every purchase”.

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**The British Museum and the return of trafficked antiquities**

The British Museum works very closely with the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Baghdad. Since 2015 we have delivered training of over 50 of its employees through the UK Government-funded Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme, involving courses at the British Museum and participation on excavations in Iraq, including the site of Tello/Girsu itself. A survey made of the previous looting at this site indicates a concentration on an area of the site known as ‘Tell A’, which we know now to have been the temple to the Sumerian god Ningirsu. It is therefore probable that, if this fragment does come from this site, then it belonged to this temple and future excavations may even reveal some, or all, of the missing parts.

The British Museum is the main advisory body in the UK in the event of any enquiries over illicit trafficking or export licensing of antiquities, and we work very closely with government departments including the UK Border Force, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, the National Crime Agency, the Metropolitan Police Service (Art and Antiques Unit), the Arts Council, auction houses, dealers and private collectors. When objects may be repatriated to their country of origin, the British Museum then takes the lead on how to do this in the most appropriate manner. Since 2009 we have repatriated over 2300 antiquities, to Afghanistan, a monumental glazed tile from an important Islamic monument at Vobkent, near Bukhara, in Uzbekistan, and many other objects to Iraq.

In 2017 the British Museum identified a small group of antiquities previously seized by the Metropolitan Police Service from a London dealer who has since ceased trading. The objects included fired clay cones with cuneiform inscriptions proving that they had originally been placed inside the walls of the temple at Tello/Girsu and came from looting there the previous month. They were repatriated to Baghdad after an official handover ceremony at the British Museum on 10th August 2018.

On 19th March and 29th August 2019, the British Museum handed over further antiquities seized by UK Border Force and investigated by the Fraud Investigation Service of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. These consisted of a 12th century BC stone monument known as a *kudurru* (‘boundary stone’) and a large collection of 156 clay tablets written in cuneiform script. All come from looting, most likely in about 2003. The *kudurru* was probably found at a site near the ancient city of Nippur, 110 km northwest of Tello, whereas most of the tablets belong to an archive from an ancient city known as Irisagrig which is now believed to be the site of Tell al-Wilayah, located 130 km northwest of Tello. All have been already repatriated to Baghdad.

The present case is therefore in a long line of successes involving many agencies and individuals, and again illustrates the value and importance of these long-term relationships.



Images for press can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3cgNBCy>

Contact the Press Office: [communications@britishmuseum.org](mailto:communications@britishmuseum.org)