

# Treasure Hunting

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Last weekend, my family watched ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark,’ one of the greatest movies of all time. The first time I saw it was in Milwaukee in 1981. I’ll never forget the opening scene where Indy was being run down by a gigantic boulder while trying to recover the Chachapoyan Fertility Idol. Unfortunately, rival Rene Belloq stole the idol from Indy.

Unlike Belloq, when Indy travels to exotic locales to obtain ancient artifacts for the museum, he observes the rules established in the International Treaty for the Protection of Antiquities. While this is a fictional treaty, actual laws do exist to protect cultural artifacts. Like Belloq, Hobby Lobby has apparently violated these rules.

In 2010 and 2011, the arts-and-crafts chain store bought more than 5,500 Iraqi artifacts for \$1.6 million, and then smuggled them into Oklahoma City, home of the store’s headquarters. Some of the items included cuneiform tablets, cuneiform bricks and clay bullae. Cuneiform is the wedge-shaped writing used thousands of years ago, while bullae are clay balls imprinted with a seal.

Steve Green, the president of Hobby Lobby, is currently building a Bible museum in Washington estimated to cost \$800 million. Green has been collecting ancient artifacts since 2009. He would obviously be interested in artifacts from Iraq, which is located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The area, once known as Mesopotamia, has been labeled the “Cradle of Civilization.”

Because of concerns over looting by all of the visiting troops in the war-torn Middle East, it is a crime under U.S. law to possess or traffic in Iraqi archaeological treasures if they were illegally removed from the country since 1990 or if there are reasonable grounds to believe they were. Exporting antiquities is also illegal under Iraqi law.

Claiming to be archeological rookies, Hobby Lobby asserts it didn’t know it was violating any laws. “The company was new to the world of acquiring these items and did not fully appreciate the complexities of the acquisitions process,” Hobby Lobby said in a statement. “This resulted in some regrettable mistakes.”

Prosecutors disagreed, however. Investigations revealed that Hobby Lobby used multiple middlemen to obtain the antiquities, phony or misleading invoices, shipping labels and other documentation to get the items past U.S. customs agents.

For example, cuneiform tablets were labeled as “ceramic tiles,” and other items were falsely identified as originating in Turkey or Israel. Artifacts were also deliberately undervalued, such as one shipping label that listed 300 clay tiles valued at \$1 each, when they were actually clay bullae worth \$84,120. Finally, items were shipped in small batches to multiple addresses in Oklahoma City to avoid detection by customs agents. While some shipments were seized, many got through.

Prosecutors claim these actions were a clear indication that Hobby Lobby knew what it was doing. As a result, they reached a settlement where the store agreed to pay a \$3 million fine and return all of the artifacts it brought to the U.S.

Green and Hobby Lobby are no strangers to federal cases. All 600 Hobby Lobby stores are closed on Sunday so its 28,000 employees may observe the Christian Sabbath. In addition, in 2014 the U.S. Supreme Court held that because of the privately-held chain’s religious ties, it did not have to supply birth control to employees under the Affordable Care Act.

So if I run out of cuneiform, chances are it will be out of stock at Hobby Lobby.

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