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Restitution in the Time of COVID-19: A Fertility Statuette Representing a Mother Goddess Returns to Iraq.

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Restitution in the Time of COVID-19: A Fertility Statuette Representing a Mother Goddess Returns to Iraq.

Lynda Albertson

ARCA Blog, July 29, 2020

- 1 Modeled from clay and painted (Fig. 1), this female figurine replete with voluptuous curves, and depicted naked and sitting with her arms folded under her breasts, in a pose suggestive of childbirth was discovered by officers working for the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale, whose job it is to carry out surveillance of internet sales of suspect art.

Fig. 1 – Halaf figurine

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- 2 The tiny seated figurine, whose features clearly suggest fertility and the renewal of life, is typical of “mother goddess” figurines originating within the Neolithic culture of Halaf, named more than a century ago after one of the first sites where these types of figurines were found. The people of the Halaf culture resided in the geographical regions later known as Northern or upper Mesopotamia. Representations of these types of female figurines have been found as far west as Cilicia in Turkey, to the east along the border of Iran and Iraq, north as far as Lake Van in Turkey, and south as far as the Damascus basin in Syria. This one however made her way much farther. She was found in faraway Udine, in northeastern Italy.
- 3 Yesterday, in a formal handover ceremony in Rome (Fig. 2) at the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, the Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini, alongside General Roberto Riccardi, Commander of the Carabinieri for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, acknowledged the importance of this figurine as representative of the known narrative of sixth-millennium Halaf social practices. In returning this artifact to the Iraqi people, Franceschini, in his role at Italy's *Ministro per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo*— MiBACT underscored the ministry's commitment in the field of cultural diplomacy, and the TPC Carabinieri Command's role in tracking down and recovering illegally exported heritage from other vulnerable source countries found within Italy's jurisdiction.

Fig. 2 – The Iraqi ambassador to Rome Safia Taleb Al-Souhail receives the figurine

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- 4 These seated Halaf figurines in general range in size from small to tiny, and like this one, are usually less than 10 centimeters tall. Picking it gently up, the Iraqi ambassador to Rome, Safia Taleb Al-Souhail, demonstrated that it would fit comfortably in the palm of someone's hand. Its tiny size, just 9 x 3 cm, along with its suggestive imagery have made portable Mesopotamian antiquities like this one extremely popular among traffickers. This is so typical, that an image of one, almost identical, is printed on the ICOM-Emergency Red List of Syrian Cultural Objects at Risk, given that the original site where these types of figurines were discovered was at Tel Halaf in Syria.
- 5 In describing the circumstances of this artefact's discovery General Roberto Riccardi, Commander of the Carabinieri for the Protection of Cultural Heritage stated that the Carabinieri TPC squad in Udine first identified the suspect auction in an online sale, and working with historians affiliated with the Department of Humanities and Cultural Heritage at the Università degli Studi di Udine, determined that the statuette was an authentic artefact of the Halaf culture. The Italian authorities, in turn, worked with their Iraqi counterparts to coordinate details for this object's eventual restitution. How the antiquity was determined to be Iraqi in origin was not discussed.
- 6 Ambassador Al-Souhail stated that she appreciated the efforts made by the Italian authorities and the Carabinieri forces in combating organized crime that involve the smuggling of Iraqi antiquities. She also commended Italy's commitment to activate a Memorandum of Understanding which the parties signed, between both countries in that regard and to Italy's commitment to international agreements and relevant Security Council resolutions.

ABSTRACTS

A looted statuette of a nude female belonging to the Halaf culture of northern Iraq was returned to Iraq by Italian authorities.

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Keywords: Looting, Halaf, fertility figure, female nude, restitution