

In 2002, antiquities gallery Phoenix Ancient Art in New York City consigned for sale at Sotheby's New York a third-century AD South Arabian alabaster stele or tablet carved in low relief with an image of the fertility goddess Dat-Hamin. With an estimated sale price of \$20,000-30,000 USD, the stele was said to derive from an English collection. While investigating the object's provenance, Sotheby's staff discovered that the piece had been stolen from the Aden Museum during the 1994 civil war in Yemen. Sotheby's offered to investigate the museum's claim to title, but Phoenix decided instead to relinquish ownership. US Immigration and Customs Enforcement seized the piece in September 2003 and in December 2004 it was returned to Yemen.

A carved slab of alabaster that has survived centuries of wear, a civil war, and looting from a Yemeni museum, is being returned to Yemen after surfacing at a Sotheby's auction.

A repatriation ceremony took place yesterday at the headquarters of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement division of the Department of Homeland Security in Chelsea. The artifact was officially signed over to the Yemeni ambassador.

The piece, known as the South Arabian Alabaster Stele, depicts fertility goddess Dat-Hamim in bas-relief on a foot-high tablet. It is estimated to date from 300-400 A.D. The stele was stolen in July 1994 from the Aden Museum in Yemen's port city of Aden, during the country's civil war.

The recovery of the artifact followed a lengthy investigation. In May 2003, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents learned that the owners of Phoenix Ancient Art, antiquities dealers with galleries in Geneva and on the Upper East Side, had consigned the piece to Sotheby's for auction with an estimated sale price of \$20,000 to \$30,000. Phoenix's owners, brothers Ali and Hicham Aboutaam, had told the auction house that the piece came from a private English collection. In their research to prepare for the auction, Sotheby's staff discovered that the stele was photographed and documented as a part of the Aden Museum's collection. Immigration and Customs agents confirmed that the stele was stolen and issued a seizure warrant in September, 2003.

This wasn't the first time the Aboutaams were caught smuggling antiquities. Last year, Ali Aboutaam was convicted on smuggling charges in absentia by an Egyptian court and sentenced to 15 years in jail.

Hicham Aboutaam was arrested last December on charges that he illegally imported an Iranian ceremonial drinking vessel, known as the "Silver Griffin," which dates to 700 B.C. The vessel, which Mr. Aboutaam claimed to be Syrian, was sold for \$1 million before it was discovered to have been pilfered from the Western Cave of Iran. He pleaded guilty in June.