



Why Hobby Lobby is in trouble for importing artifacts

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Hobby Lobby, the national arts-and-crafts supply chain, illegally imported thousands of ancient relics from the Middle East, according to the Justice Department. The family-owned, Evangelical Christian company must now turn over rare clay tablets and artifacts that likely once came from Iraq. William Brangham learns more from Deborah Lehr of George Washington University.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Now to a major legal case involving the alleged smuggling of ancient religious artifacts. Late yesterday, the Department of Justice said that the nationwide arts and crafts company Hobby Lobby illegally imported thousands of ancient relics from the Middle East.

William Brangham has the story.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: The government's complaint against Hobby Lobby involves the purchase and importation of 5,500 rare clay tablets and artifacts from Israel and the UAE, antiquities that likely once came from Iraq.

Prosecutors allege that company missed several red flags indicating that this purchase was highly suspicious. Hobby Lobby argues this was an innocent mistake caused by inexperience. In an agreement with the Justice Department, the company must now turn over all the artifacts and pay \$3 million.

Hobby Lobby is a family-owned evangelical Christian company. They were at the center of the 2014 Supreme Court case that ruled companies can't be forced to cover birth control for their employees, and they're also constructing a multimillion dollar bible museum here in Washington,

D.C. that will open this fall.

For more on this case, I'm joined now by Deborah Lehr. She's chairman of George Washington University's Capitol Archaeological Institute and she's founder of the Antiquities Coalition, which works to stop the looting of world cultures.

Welcome to the NewsHour.

Can you tell me just the basics? What is — you heard what I said about the overview of this case. What is the government alleging that Hobby Lobby did wrong here?

DEBORAH LEHR, George Washington University: The government is alleging that they imported knowingly items from Iraq and that they used falsified shipping labels and that they didn't get the appropriate import permits to be able to bring these antiquities into the country.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: And what are these antiquities? What are the items that we're talking about?

DEBORAH LEHR: They are things, as you said, that are destined for their biblical museum, and they are clay tablets and cylinder seals and ancient items that were part of that time period in Iraq.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: So, my understanding is the company says these were not destined for the museum, they said they were just part of their larger collection. But the government also argues that there were all sorts of red flags that should have tipped off Hobby Lobby that this was not an appropriate purchase to make.

Can you tell us what were some of those red flags?

DEBORAH LEHR: Absolutely. First, Hobby Lobby is a sophisticated importer and they know very well that you have to designate the country of origin and the appropriate tariff line when bringing these into the country. This was not done. These items, instead of being declared as antiquities, were declared as clay tiles or samples.

They were not noted that they were coming from Iraq but, instead, that they were coming from Turkey, and it's no mistake that we have an agreement with Iraq that if they were being brought in and declared coming from Iraq, they would have to get an appropriate permit. Yet, we don't have a similar type of agreement with Turkey.

They're also coming from a part of the world where conflict antiquities are being actually excavated by groups like Daesh or ISIS, and knowingly being exported and used as a means for funding terrorism. And so, there are quite a few red flags that they should have known, and at a minimum they should have done provenance research, which they didn't do. What they actually paid five individuals through seven different accounts and, as I said, then, shipped these in different packets, which might be understandable, but to several different locations in the United States and without the appropriate or accurate shipping records.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: Now, the company agreed they're going to give back these items and willing to pay this \$3 million to the government. The company argues that they are new to this business and that this was really sort of a rookie mistake, that inexperience is what caused these problems, not any intentional looking past these concerns you've raised.

DEBORAH LEHR: Well, that's a very interesting argument for a group that has a business that's based largely on importing into the country, and it's those two claims that they are actually being fined for. We could understand potentially that they may not be sophisticated about the specifics of what importing antiquities from Iraq are involved, but they are building a museum where they are importing and collecting historic items from around the world. So, we hope that there are not other rookie mistakes that they have made within their bible museum and the antiquities that are there.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: I mean, Hobby Lobby is certainly not the first organization or institution to sort of trip this particular wire. I mean, major cultural institutions in the United States in the past have had similar problems. I mean, this is — it's not an uncommon problem.

DEBORAH LEHR: Well, it's not an uncommon problem, but we haven't seen a find quite this large, and that it's very hard to bring about these kinds of cases, though we commend the United States government and certainly ICE for the seizures that they're making. But the trade in antiquities and the list of antiquities is a global problem, and we're seeing it on the increase as we see conflict in the Middle East and — where

there are millions of sites still yet to be excavated. It's very much just an endless, almost excavation that's out there for thieves to take advantage of.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: As we mentioned, they're building this enormous museum and some of Hobby Lobby's 40,000 other items apparently are destined to go into this museum, and other experts in antiquities have raised concerns about the speed at which some of those items were gathered.

Have you heard those same concerns?

DEBORAH LEHR: Yes, we've heard those same concerns and one hopes they have actually done the type of provenance research that they should be doing to ensure these are not part of the illicit trade. They actually had consulted one of the leading cultural heritage lawyers in the case of this specific import with items coming of these 5,000 items who had recommended that they do a lot more additional research. And so, they actually had ignored the warning they received from their own attorney.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: All right. Deborah Lehr of the Antiquities Coalition, thanks so much.

DEBORAH LEHR: Thank you very much.