

**Inscribed tablet may be piece of ancient history****Date:** Monday, September 03 @ 08:24:21 CDT**Topic:** Civilizations**Copyright**  **FayObserver.com**

Larry Buie just wanted to help Eddie make a little money from a clay tablet that may date back to antiquity. Instead, Eddie may be looking at a hard line of questioning. A museum official said she thinks the tablet with the foreign symbols may have been smuggled out of the Middle East. “We’re talking FBI,” said Margaret Schroeder, who works with the museum at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. “This is illegal. It ain’t an obvious copy.” The institute is devoted to the study of early Near Eastern civilizations.

A reporter e-mailed photographs of the tablet to the museum Monday in hopes of determining its authenticity. The artifact, Schroeder said, appears to be from the Ur III empire from around 2300 B.C. The Ur III Dynasty was a period when the city of Ur dominated Mesopotamia — part of modern-day Iraq. It gave the ancient country a century of peace and prosperity. “If it’s authentic, it’s potentially a very valuable piece,” said Ken Robinson, director of public archaeology at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem. It also could get somebody in a lot of trouble. “This is the sort of thing being smuggled out of Iraq,” Schroeder said. “This is the sort of thing that is nasty.” After examining the pictures, Schroeder said, she contacted the FBI. Newsom Summerlin, an FBI spokesman for the Charlotte division, said Wednesday that the FBI neither confirms nor denies investigations as a matter of general policy. The Charlotte division includes Fayetteville. Buie said he did not steal the tablet. He said one of his tenants, whom he identified only as Eddie for publication, didn’t steal it, either. Buie, who is 56, said Eddie gave him the tablet about six months ago. They worked out a deal, Buie said, in which they would split any profits if Buie could sell it. “I’m going to do what’s right by it,” he said. Buie canb.....

(contd)...e vague on details. He said Eddie lives rent-free in one of his rental houses in St.

Pauls. Eddie is a drywall hanger who has worked for Buie and now has health problems.

According to Buie, Eddie has had the tablet for at least a couple of years. “He had it long before his wife died. I think it came out of Pennsylvania,” he said.

As the story goes, a girl brought the tablet along when she visited Eddie’s wife. Somehow, Eddie’s wife wound up with it.

Buie said he doesn’t know much else about the artifact’s recent history.

Or, for that matter, its ancient history.

Odds and ends

Buie has seen his share of odds and ends at local flea markets, auctions and yard sales, but the Fayetteville native said he has never seen anything like this tablet with the wedge-shaped impressions.

“Don’t look like no writing I ever seen,” he said as he cupped the small slab in beefy hands that have hung drywall for years.

The compressed tablet has the shape of a swollen Pop Tart. It can’t weigh more than 5 pounds.

The tablet smells like clay, and one corner is cracked and appears to have been sealed back together. A small chunk looks to be missing.

“I don’t know if it’s worth nothing,” Buie said. “I hope it’s real.”

He spread the tablet on a white cotton hand towel on the kitchen table at his home in the Old Campbellton part of town.

He said he has shown the tablet to no more than 20 people.

Buie put the tablet in a thin plastic mailing wrap — just as he got it from Eddie — before covering it with a small plaid blanket. He put plastic bubble wrap around that before the tablet was placed in a beat-up cardboard box.

“Then,” he said, “I put it in a special place.”

Search for answers

In search of some answers, Buie once took the tablet to the Museum of the Cape Fear.

Bill Surface is the registrar of the museum, which chronicles and preserves the history of southern North Carolina. Surface recalls Buie bringing it by, probably six to eight months ago, but he said the museum couldn’t help him.

“We don’t have any experts here for something on that part of the world,” Surface said.

“Most people would know we would be the last people.”

After perusing pictures of it, Robinson, the Wake Forest archaeologist, said it appears to be a clay tablet with cuneiform writing.

The cuneiform script is used to describe early writing in the Middle East in which wedge-shaped impressions are left on a clay tablet. A blunt reed called a stylus was used to make the characters while the clay was still wet.

Cuneiform is one of the earliest known forms of written expression and was in widespread use long before the development of modern alphabets.

As for the tablet’s authenticity, Robinson said, “There’s just no way to know.”

“If it is authentic, it needs to be in an archaeological facility or museum to be taken care of,” Robinson said.

He said an illegal antiquity market exists for “this stuff brought into the United States by collectors.”

It’s a problem that archaeologists are facing worldwide, he said. Treasure hunters dig up artifacts, disrupting archaeological sites in the process, and remove them from the country where they were found.

“That’s a big loss for the cultures, too,” he said.

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