



## SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

August 13, 2021

Dear Members and Concerned Peers and Public,

The SAA Board of Directors recognizes the rising COVID 19-rates from the latest variants are a cause for concern about the 2022 SAA annual meeting and its format. Our commitment to member safety remains firm and unchanged, and for this reason, we are closely monitoring the situation.

Since the start of the pandemic, the board and its advisory committees have prioritized member safety. We canceled the 2020 annual meeting and then converted the 2021 annual meeting to a virtual format—with the expert guidance of the first Virtual Meeting Components Task Force—which prompted the reduction of registration fees and refunds.

In the wake of the 2021 virtual meeting, the board launched the Virtual Meeting Components Task Force 2 to analyze meeting participation, including the post-meeting survey responses, and further examine virtual options. In-person meetings historically average around 4,000–5,000 attendees. The 2021 virtual meeting had 2,108 attendees. It had a lower proportion of student participation than the in-person meetings have had. In 2021, 355 members dropped out of the program and were refunded their registration fees. In the 2021 post-meeting survey (754, or 27%, of the meeting registrants participating), a large number (20.5%) expressed a strong preference for an in-person meeting, though some comments expressed concerns about the high costs, decreased convenience, and worrisome carbon footprint of travel associated with an in-person meeting.

Given members' strong preference for an in-person meeting and the wider availability of vaccines, the SAA has been planning for an in-person 2022 meeting, while also exploring virtual components. For decades, in order to provide the best meeting rates and secure the most functional space, SAA boards have requested its executive director contract with meeting hotels years in advance. The Chicago meeting hotel was contracted in 2016. The pandemic, however, has changed our traditional relationship with meeting venues. Unlike 2020 and 2021, insurance against cancellation due to a pandemic is no longer sold. As such, if the board cancels the in-person meeting right now, the SAA will be obligated to cover the costs of \$480,160 in deposits and contracts. That amount increases to \$640,224 on 12/31/2021. These cancellation costs will be in addition to the costs to implement a virtual 2022 meeting, which range from \$100,000 for a basic stripped down virtual-only meeting to over \$1 million for a live, synchronous hybrid meeting. We also know that, as with the 2021 meeting, a hybrid or virtual meeting may result in lower attendance and therefore decreased revenues. How great this loss in meeting-based revenue—and even membership dues—might be cannot be known until we survey the membership to determine if members will attend and/or are prepared to pay the higher costs for a virtual meeting or fully hybrid meeting.

Regardless of the final tally, if member safety warrants shifting to a virtual meeting for March 2022, the SAA and its members will have very real costs to absorb.

We recognize these costs could be substantial and we also recognize the benefits of virtual and hybrid meeting options. We understand the uncertainties of COVID-19 restrictions on international travel, and the burden of costs for those who must fly from outside the United States to attend an in-person meeting. Difficulties with visas, travel costs, and health and safety requirements, restrictions, and risks make a virtual meeting such as the one held last year attractive and accessible for many international members. We have also heard that virtual meetings are attractive to students, those with financial and/or scheduling constraints, and those with mobility challenges.

There is much to consider when planning an international conference even in the best of circumstances. Unfortunately, for 2022, we find ourselves facing yet another annual meeting in an era of uncertainty around pandemic conditions and risks. Shifting the meeting to an all-virtual format like last year removes uncertainty, but members have also indicated that employers did not support a virtual meeting with paid leave time or reimbursements and, in many other ways, it did not meet needs like networking. Six months ago, few of our members were eligible to be vaccinated, but now, there is greater vaccine availability. Many universities are planning full in-person operations and the AAA is planning a largely in-person meeting in November. The SHA and AIA are planning physical meetings in January. We will be learning from their experiences but will also remain flexible and vigilantly aware of a rapidly changing situation.

We also know that you must remain nimble in this space. Anyone requesting a refund before December 1, 2021, will receive 100% of their monies back. After December 1 and prior to March 1, 2022—minus a \$25 processing fee—people can withdraw from the program and be refunded. At any point (including after March 1, 2022), if there are extenuating circumstances for why you cannot attend the meeting (such as visa denial or government restrictions on travel), please know the SAA staff will issue a refund when documentation is provided.

The SAA board, now and in the past, planned well for a rainy day. Thanks to that planning, we have avoided reducing services or staff, even with the deficit incurred from the 2021 annual meeting. But cash reserves will only last so long. Even as we face these difficult financial realities, the safety and well-being of our members and staff remain of uppermost concern for the board. We ask for your patience and understanding as we, SAA members and staff, navigate these challenges—and overcome them—together.

Sincerely,

SAA Board of Directors