



December 2, 2014

The Honorable Dave Camp
Chairman, House Committee on Ways and Means
1102 Longworth House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20515

The Honorable Sander Levin
Ranking Democrat, House Committee on Ways and Means
1106 Longworth House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Camp and Congressman Levin,

The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) asks you to support H.R. 5703, the "Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act." We urge the Ways and Means Committee to rapidly consider and approve this important legislation.

SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 7,000 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

Since the Second World War, it has been the policy of the government and armed forces of the United States to take all reasonable measures to safeguard the physical cultural resources of nations experiencing political turmoil, armed conflict, and natural and man-made disasters. In the decades since 1945 a network of international agreements, federal statutes, and Department of Defense directives has developed to implement this policy. Nevertheless, there are certain improvements that could be made to tighten the net and better preserve humanity's shared cultural heritage. H.R. 5703 would make some of those important changes.

For example, under current law the U.S. can place trade restrictions against the importation of archaeological and ethnographic materials from a nation experiencing difficulties only if 1) the nation in question is one of the state parties to the 1970 UNESCO Convention; and 2) only if it requests such help through diplomatic channels from the United States. Syria is currently undergoing an extremely traumatic and destructive civil war, one that is threatening its enormously rich and significant cultural resources. Already a large number of historic sites have been destroyed, and even more have been plundered of their artifacts to sell on the black market. Although it is a state party to the 1970 Convention, the Assad government is not able to initiate

the dialogue necessary for the creation of import restrictions. The Engel / Smith bill would close this loophole by granting the President the authority to impose restrictions on the importation of Syrian cultural materials without a formal request from the Syrian government. There is precedent for this provision—similar action was taken in 2004 with Iraq.

Further, H.R. 5703 would establish the position of White House Coordinator for International Cultural Property Protection. The person named to this post would coordinate the international cultural property protection activities of numerous federal agencies, including the Departments of State, Justice, Defense, and the Agency for International Development. Having policy in this area overseen by a single officer in the Executive Branch will promote increased efficiency, and ensure the U.S. is able to bring to bear the maximum amount of emphasis when and where it is needed around the globe. Congress would also have a specific individual to hold accountable for any difficulties in implementing U.S. policy and law with respect to the protection of cultural property.

In addition, the legislation would authorize the State Department to make grants to private individuals or organizations for the purpose of international cultural property protection. Very often, private and non-governmental organizations are the only ones able to operate effectively in war zones and other areas affected by conflict or natural disaster. In recent years, such groups trying to save endangered items of cultural heritage have been at work in Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. Giving them additional and badly-needed resources in areas at risk of destruction due to political instability, armed conflict, or natural or other disasters would significantly aid in these efforts.

H.R. 5703 would allow the U.S. to rapidly increase its presence and impact in this often under-appreciated, but vital, area that resides at the intersection of trade, defense, and foreign affairs. We respectfully request that your committee take up and pass this important legislation as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeffrey H. Altschul". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Jeffrey H. Altschul, Ph.D., RPA
President