

**Testimony of Carlos Flores Manzano M.Phil. M.Sc. on the  
Proposed Renewal of El Salvador MOU**

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**Background:** I am a Salvadoran archaeologist who has trained as an archaeologist at the Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador and worked in El Salvador, I did my master's degree in Archaeological Material Science EMJMD ARCHMAT at Sapienza Università di Roma/Aristotelus Panemisthemios Thessalonikis/Universidade de Evora and I'm currently pursuing my Ph.D. in anthropological archaeology at Yale University.

I've been active in archaeological studies, surveys and research in El Salvador since 2013. I have also kept abreast of developments in the trafficking of cultural heritage in El Salvador, and observing and denouncing the destruction of cultural heritage in El Salvador.

On behalf of myself and the Society for American Archaeology, I strongly approve of the proposed renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding with El Salvador for the protection of its archaeological heritage. My testimony will focus on the four determinations as outlined in the Cultural Property Implementation Act.

**Is El Salvador's archaeological record still under threat from looting and pillaging?**

El Salvador's archaeological record is unfortunately still under threat from looting, both casual and professional. Casual looting is the occasional theft, usually of small, portable objects by tourists and locals alike as they run across them. Professional looting is organized theft on a larger scale. Most of it happened during the civil war years, but nowadays it has expanded to selling looted artifacts online. While casual looters may keep the items for themselves, they can also resell them. Professional looters are deliberately out to make a profit from their theft.

The following five circumstances are the keys to understanding the current threats to El Salvador's archaeological heritage:

First, most of the looting networks are masked as antiquities stores or artisans' shops and jewelry stores where they hide the archaeological pieces in their back rooms (La Prensa Gráfica 20 de enero de 2002a pp. 5C). Some looters specialize in the strata where the "good things" are located.

Second, the Departamento de Arqueología of the Ministerio de Cultura de El Salvador, as of September 10<sup>th</sup> of 2024 has only two archaeologists and they are overwhelmed with all the sites they have to monitor, cultural resources management activities, and looting prevention. The Departamento de Registro of the Ministerio de Cultura de El Salvador lacks a main expert archaeologist to assign to cases. The decrease in staff after massive layoff of around 600 workers

from the Ministry of Culture has impacted the operations and protection of heritage in El Salvador (Excélsior. 2024, June 27; Digital News 2024, August 26).

Third, poverty is on the rise in El Salvador. Prices of food have increased 233%, the most expensive in history (El Diario de Hoy 2024, July 23). Housing costs have increased at least 36%, and in some places buying a house has gone from \$10,000 USD to \$250,000 USD (Voice of America 2024, March 25). Looting is an easy way to get some cash to survive, and specialized underground dealers can amass wealth with the right connections through trafficking to the United States or Europe (La Prensa Gráfica 2002b, January 20).

Fourth, even though security has increased due to the State of Exception (Ultima Hora SV 2024 September 9), the borders are still porous, and some criminal groups make use of this fact. Though the power of the police and the military has increased, and the general sense of safety in the country has grown, trafficking of illicit materials across our borders still occurs.

Finally, massive, unprecedented development is increasingly becoming the principal factor in the destruction of El Salvador's past. For the past several decades, gang activity had inhibited new development. That problem has now been nearly eliminated by the government, which also has implemented pro-development policies for the country leading to the explosive growth of new subdivisions, highway projects, resorts, shopping malls and other projects, extensively modifying the landscape. A half-built hydroelectric dam was recently finished, causing the inundation of a river valley. The center of the capital city, San Salvador, has historic sites dating back to 1546, with pre-Hispanic archaeology also both above and below a thick mantle of the AD 5<sup>th</sup> century Ilopango volcanic ash. This historic center is now being intensively modified under a redevelopment plan, and the historic areas of other communities with deep colonial and in some cases prehispanic roots are also being modified. The foregoing is taking place with, at best, minimal involvement from archaeological professionals since it constitutes a crisis situation which goes far beyond current institutional capacity. These development projects are causing destruction of archaeological sites and, in so doing, expose artifacts which may be sold by those involved, thus entering networks of illicit traffic.

### **Has El Salvador taken steps internally to protect its cultural resources, and is it fulfilling its commitments under the current MOU?**

The Government of El Salvador has taken steps internally to protect its cultural resources. It is fulfilling one of the commitments under the current MOU by entering into a Cooperation Agreement between Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador (2024) and the Ministerio de Cultura de El Salvador (2024), subscribed by the new Minister of Culture Raul Castillo and the Viceministra de Diáspora y Movilidad Humana, Cindy Portal, on July 8<sup>th</sup> of 2024. The government also made reforms on June 26<sup>th</sup> to cultural historic preservation laws to better protect cultural heritage (Asamblea Legislativa de El Salvador 2024, June 26<sup>th</sup>). The amendments mandate improved planning for projects that may have impacts on important historic and cultural resources. Under these changes, undertakings that impact previously unknown historic sites and objects can be delayed or even have their permits suspended until authorities can resolve the issue.

### **Are import restrictions still the best available method the U.S. can use to prevent the importation of stolen objects?**

Import restrictions are one of the best available methods in which the U.S. can prevent the introduction of stolen objects from El Salvador to its market. The return of looted cultural heritage is also of great benefit. Because of the very nature of a black market it is difficult to quantify the volume of stolen and trafficked artifacts that make their way into the U.S., but it is certainly not an insignificant number, and the lack of import restrictions on the part of the U.S. would only exacerbate the problem. It is also important to investigate and prosecute the individuals involved in looting and exporting from El Salvador. One possible avenue to take to further deter looting and trafficking would be to cancel the U.S. visas and freeze assets of anyone involved in cultural heritage trafficking from El Salvador.

### **Is El Salvador open to foreign scientist and researchers studying its cultural resources, and making exhibits of its archaeological materials available to foreign museums (international scientific exchange)?**

El Salvador is very open to foreign scientists and researchers for the study its cultural resources. The nation welcomes the expertise and intellectual contributions made by foreign scholars such as Akira Ichikawa Project at San Andres, Payson Sheets Project at Joya de Ceren, Jonathan Kaplan Tapalshucut Project and the Nobuyuki Ito Project at Chalchuapa. The oversight and approval process needs to be improved, however, in terms of standardization of documents and the time it takes to review the plans of work. The officials concerned need to ensure that archaeology projects are overseen by an archaeologist, not architects or archaeology-students who claim to be archaeologists.

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