

**Testimony of Dr. Robert Drennan**  
Before the  
Department of State  
Cultural Property Advisory Committee  
Regarding the Proposed Renewal of  
The Bilateral Agreement Between the  
Republic of Colombia and the United States of America

September 10, 2015

Chairman Gerstenblith, members of the committee, my name is Dr. Robert Drennan, and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of myself and the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) in support of the proposed renewal of the bilateral agreement between Colombia and United States for the protection of Colombia's archaeological heritage.

I am Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for Comparative Archaeology at the University of Pittsburgh, member of the SAA, Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Member of the National Academy of Sciences. I have carried out archaeological research in Colombia for more than 30 years in collaboration with colleagues in several universities and other institutions there and have authored, co-authored or edited some 35 books and articles on this research.

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 8,000 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.

Colombia's archaeological heritage is among the richest in the world, although not as widely known as that of some countries. Large, densely settled populations, organized as chiefdoms, inhabited many of the country's regions for 2500 years or more prior to the arrival of Spanish explorers and conquerors in the sixteenth century. My collaborators and I have recorded thousands of archaeological sites. Some of these are the remains of ordinary ancient habitation areas; many others contain monumental tombs and other significant structures. These latter sites are the principal source of the pre-columbian works of art in such media as stone, ceramics, and gold that are desired by collectors.

Colombia's archaeological heritage has attracted looters for centuries, at first simply because of the commercial value of the gold of which burial offerings were often made, and more recently because of the commercial value of pre-columbian works of art and craft. The consequences of looting to recover such pieces are well-known. When Colombia's tombs are pillaged by looters in search of pieces that can be sold, virtually nothing recognizable remains. Not only are the prize objects removed with no record of their places of origin, the archaeological evidence of a prehistoric past (which by definition can only be learned from archaeological research) is irreparably damaged. The tombs sought by looters typically occur in residential sites, where careful

excavation can enable us to reconstruct prehistoric ways of life. The most spectacular tombs may occur in association with the residences of the important individuals buried in them. When the evidence of how these people lived is obliterated by illicit excavations we lose our chance to understand the nature of their importance in their social context, and how the preeminent social roles they played came to be in the first place. Just as significantly, the people of Colombia—and the world in general—lose an important part of their past, of the human story.

Attention to and protection of Colombia's archaeological heritage has steadily improved through the years that I have observed, and the existing Memorandum, which went into effect in 2011, has had an undeniable beneficial impact. The Colombian national police have formed a Task Force for Investigating Crimes against Cultural Heritage. This group's persistent and ongoing investigative efforts have compiled information about permanently established networks through which flow illicitly excavated archaeological pieces and stolen cultural property of all kinds. Their work has seriously interfered with the illegal trafficking in cultural property. The importance of cultural property in the day-to-day operations of Colombia's customs service is reflected in the fact that the customs declaration travelers must fill out now asks specifically about cultural property among their possessions.

Under the auspices of the Colombian Ministry of Culture and the International Council of Museums, and with support from the U.S. Department of State, a committee of experts created a brochure on endangered Colombian cultural property. This brochure has been published since the current Memorandum went into effect as an entry in the ICOM's series of *Red Lists*. These brochures are published in four languages and receive wide distribution around the world. Their target audience includes customs officials in all countries, the personnel of customs agencies and freight forwarders, museums, art and antique dealers, collectors, and the public in general. The aim is to alert all concerned to the nature of Colombian cultural property at risk, to inform about the damage caused by the illicit traffic in such property, to make it easier to recognize such objects, to make clear the legal strictures involved, and to provide information about how to contact appropriate agencies if needed.

One example showing that legislation protecting archaeological remains actually carries substantial weight on the ground, is the case of Nueva Esperanza. Archaeological remains were reported in the process of planning for the construction of a major electricity substation just south of Bogotá. These remains turned out to be those of a large nucleated pre-hispanic Muisca settlement. Against strong political and economic opposition, construction was delayed and an extensive multimillion dollar excavation project was funded under the terms of regulations to protect cultural heritage. Fieldwork was concluded last year, and laboratory analysis of the materials recovered proceeds as of this writing. The plan is to make the entire detailed dataset from these excavations available to the world in the open-access online University of Pittsburgh Comparative Archaeology Database. This was one of the largest-scale archaeological projects ever carried out in Colombia and when complete its results will comprise a signal contribution to our knowledge of Colombia's pre-hispanic past.

Recently founded Masters' and Doctoral programs in anthropology and archaeology at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and at the Universidad de los Andes have grown and become more solidly established during the past five years. New programs in archaeology and cultural

heritage have been founded at the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia and at the Universidad Externado. Special activities, such as the Observatorio de Patrimonio Cultural y Arqueológico at the Universidad de los Andes, make cultural patrimony issues a vibrant presence in these programs. The research projects of these institutions now often place heavy emphasis on engagement of local communities in all parts of the country. An especially strong example is a project in Sopó, Department of Cundinamarca, led by Dr. Luis Gonzalo Jaramillo of the Universidad de los Andes, which combines scientific research on the prehispanic and historic past of the municipality's territory with active community participation in the rescue and preservation of its cultural heritage. The Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia publishes materials on cultural heritage for the general public and for school teachers, and in collaboration with several other institutions has just concluded the first "Archaeology Week" with exhibits, lectures, films, and children's activities.

Opportunities for Colombian students to pursue training in other countries have broadened, and the number of students taking advantage of these opportunities has increased. Participation of Colombian scholars in these fields in international scholarly activities has also grown substantially, as has the participation of international scholars in collaborative programs and scholarly meetings in Colombia. Citing just my own direct experience, in the past five years I have directed the dissertation research of five University of Pittsburgh doctoral students in archaeology who have successfully carried out their field research in Colombia with the support and involvement of the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia and of schools, universities, and local cultural groups in different parts of the country. These projects have provided opportunities in a setting of international scholarly collaboration for field training and experience for scores of students from Colombia, the United States, and other countries.

The pace of all these sorts of activities, many of which are specifically envisioned and encouraged by the Memorandum, has steadily increased over the past five years. These activities are all contributing effectively to the protection of Colombia's archaeological sites and cultural heritage in general, and to legitimate control of and international access to Colombia's cultural property. Much of this progress would not have been made without the Memorandum.

The situation in Colombia has thus improved on many fronts in the ten years since the original Memorandum was signed, but conditions still unfortunately meet the thresholds set forth in Section 303(a) of the Cultural Property Implementation Act. Much of Colombia's extensive countryside has scattered populations and minimal police presence in general; access is often difficult. Campaigns to increase awareness that pre-columbian Native American artwork is not simply a potential economic resource have had palpable impact, and protection work continues to advance through both education and enforcement, but more remains to be done.

Sadly, the U.S. continues to be a major market for looted Colombian cultural materials. Since the points of origin, especially in the case of archaeological materials, are so widely scattered across the Colombian countryside and so difficult to protect, the U.S. border continues to be a critically important restricted point at which to interdict illicit traffic. The existing Memorandum continues to be a vital tool in this effort. On its authority, shipments of protected Colombian archaeological materials have been stopped and the materials properly identified and documented and returned to Colombia.

In sum, the existing Memorandum has been successful. It has both encouraged and enforced substantial progress on a number of different fronts in the effort to control illicit traffic in cultural property, to preserve and protect Colombia's cultural heritage, and to facilitate legitimate international access to it. The Memorandum, however, is still very much needed. There is every reason to believe that a renewal would help to maintain the momentum and lead to continued progress in the future.

I thank the Committee for this opportunity to submit testimony, and urge it to approve renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding with Colombia.