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April 15, 2002
Washington, D.C.

I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Robert Sharer, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. I have been asked to provide testimony on behalf of the Society for American Archaeology.

As a professional archaeologist with 35 years of experience conducting research in Central America, including Guatemala, I have seen far too many examples of the destruction of the world's archaeological heritage caused by looting and thefts. The record shows that Guatemala has been one of the principal targets for this epidemic of archaeological looting. This is due to the fact that the so-called art market will pay large sums of money for Maya antiquities—especially carved stone sculpture (usually cut from larger monuments that are destroyed in the process), jade artifacts, and perhaps most of all, polychrome-painted pottery vessels (usually ripped from their archaeological context in plundered tombs). In this case, as in many other countries, the big market for the most valuable stolen antiquities is not in the country of origin; instead most of these looted objects are smuggled into the United States to be sold for tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars each. The recent increase in the amount of tragic destruction wrought by looting is well documented in Guatemala—and can be directly correlated to the inflation in prices paid for Maya antiquities over the past few decades, and the increased access to Maya lowland sites that are no longer protected by their isolation.

I have been a reluctant witness to this growing loss of Guatemala's irreplaceable cultural heritage over the past 30 years. In the course of conducting several archaeological projects in Guatemala, I have seen first hand the results of the destruction wrought by looting in both the highlands and lowlands. My first contact with looting in Guatemala was in the 1970s while excavating in the Verapaz highlands. Although at the time a fairly isolated region, every Classic period tomb my project encountered had been looted—Classic polychrome pottery being the prime target for looters in both the highlands and lowlands. I also saw firsthand the theft of carved stone monuments, and the break-in and robbery of a small local municipal museum's storeroom.

One of my graduate students is currently conducting archaeological research in the western highlands—an area that remains one of the most isolated parts of Guatemala. He reports that of the approximately 130 sites he recorded during his survey in 2001, about 50 percent were looted. Most of these sites are in rugged terrain far from any possibility of government protection. It can be said that the more accessible highland sites are well-supported and protected by the government, especially those visited by tourists and that generate economic benefits, such as Iximche, Mixco Viejo, and Utatlan. But the demand for stolen antiquities is such that even well guarded sites are targeted. For example a well preserved stone mosaic god mask at the site of Quirigua was stolen right off a building wall.

The greatest problem and challenge lies in the lowland areas of the Peten—the heartland of Classic Maya

civilization. Archaeological research has been conducted at a handful of Peten sites, but there are thousands of sites that have never been recorded. Even large sites are still being discovered, but invariably when found by archaeologists they have been already plundered by looters. The Guatemalan Instituto de Antropología e Historia (IDAEH) attempts to protect most prominent sites with guards. It also sponsors programs to locate and register sites, and the very presence of projects like that directed by Guatemalan archaeologist Juan Pedro LaPorte in the eastern Peten does discourage active looting, at least during the research season. But when the archaeologists leave, the looters usually return.

Some looting is casual and opportunistic. But the major damage, done by large scale excavations that tear out the cores of monumental buildings, is done by well organized and well armed teams. At least some are retired guerrillas who have become full-time looters. In the southern Peten, the looting of carved monuments at the twin capitals of the Petexbatun kingdom, Dos Pilas and Aguateca, began as soon as the Vanderbilt project closed down in the mid 1990s. In 1998 armed looters cut off and stole several carved blocks of Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic Stairway 4. Fortunately these blocks were recovered. But in 2001 part of Stela 16 was removed and a previously unknown hieroglyphic stairway was exposed by looters. In the northern Peten, American archaeologist Richard Hansen reports that looters are now going back into already pillaged sites because the earlier looters missed many burials and other primary deposits. But experience has taught the looters where to find such deposits and the polychrome pottery and other marketable artifacts they contain. So this "second wave" of looting is, in effect, finishing off any chance of salvaging useful archaeological data from a growing number of sites.

One of the most intense and dramatic confrontations between looters and archaeologists is taking place in the Naranjo region of the eastern Peten. Naranjo was a major polity capital during the Classic period and although many of its monuments have been recorded, the site has never been thoroughly investigated. Now that can never happen, since most of the archaeological record has been destroyed by systematic looting. An IDAEH program headed by Guatemalan archaeologist Vilma Fialko has been working against great odds to try to protect Naranjo from looters and at the same time salvage whatever information can be gleaned from the gutted temples and palaces at the site. Naranjo was once protected by IDAEH guards, but well-armed looters drove them away in 1996. In 1997, when Fialko and her colleagues attempted to reassert control, they were directly threatened by the looters. Since 1999 Fialko and her team have been working at Naranjo to track the damage, record data from looter's excavations, and backfilling to prevent structural collapse. Some 150 looter's trenches and tunnels have gutted almost every building in Naranjo's urban core. There is evidence that looters found at least two unrecorded carved stelae; both were cut up and the marketable portions stolen. Most recently Fialko reports that looters are beginning to target Ucanal, another important and largely undocumented site nearby.

Fialko's work at Naranjo has also produced some rather frightening information on the scale and organization of looting in this region. The looters operate in well-organized and large teams, and appear to have one or more base camps hidden in the tropical forest. They are well armed and dangerous, for they are closely allied with international drug smugglers. They are also sophisticated in their approach to looting, for they target specific types of buildings and architectural groupings where tombs containing prized polychrome vessels are found in predictable locations. One such target are Plaza Plan 2 groups which, ironically, have patterned tomb and burial locations that were documented by archaeological research at Tikal in the 1960s.

Our knowledge of Maya civilization is based on a small sample of archaeological data. Only a few Peten sites have been scientifically investigated. Both the number of sites that have been looted, and within these sites the number of structures that have been gutted by looters, are vastly greater than have been properly investigated, probably by a factor of at least a thousand to one. As one indication of this disparity, although no one knows the actual count, the numbers of Classic Maya pottery vessels either on the art market or in private collections outnumber those from archaeological documented contexts by several thousand to one. These disparities indicate that the toll taken by looting has already seriously jeopardized any hope for archaeologists to gain a comprehensive understanding of Maya civilization.

The problem of protecting archaeological sites in Guatemala is immense. Most sites on the Pacific coast are on private land, and property laws make it very difficult for government authorities to monitor, let alone prevent, the looting and destruction of sites by property owners. Guatemala has a growing cadre of professional archaeologists, educators, government officials, and private citizens, who are working night and day to try to protect sites against looting. My Guatemalan colleagues tell me about government efforts to more vigorously enforce the laws protecting the national patrimony, to intercept the illegal export of looted artifacts, and to educate local officials about the threat and need to crack down on looting. But Guatemala possesses one of the greatest concentrations of archaeological sites in the entire world. Although the will to protect the archaeological heritage is clearly there, this effort is up against far more powerful economic forces. In the first place, the economic resources within Guatemala are far too limited to protect the thousands of archaeological sites that exist in the Peten, let alone the rest of the country. Second, the economic pressure exerted by an "art market" that will pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for a single example of Classic Maya "art" trumps even the most sincere and determined efforts to protect archaeological sites.

Although the problem is huge, I believe we must continue to do everything possible to reduce the destruction caused by looting. The proposal to renew import restrictions on Pre-Columbian archaeological material from Guatemala is a crucial step in this direction. A number of my colleagues in the US and Guatemala have urged that the import restrictions not only be renewed, but be strengthened to further help Guatemala in its efforts to reduce the toll taken by the looting of its cultural heritage.