

January 16, 2002

Dr. Martin Sullivan  
Chair, U.S. Cultural Property  
Advisory Committee  
U.S. Department of State  
301 4th Street, S.W.  
Room 247  
Washington, D.C. 20547

Dear Dr. Sullivan:

I am writing to you as President of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA). With more than 7000 members, SAA is an international organization dedicated to research, interpreting, and protecting archaeological heritage of the Americas. Since its inception in 1934, SAA has endeavored to stimulate interest and research in American archaeology; advocate and aid in the conservation of archaeological resources; encourage public access to and appreciation of archaeology; oppose all looting of sites and the purchase and sale of looted archaeological materials; and serve as a bond among those interested in the archaeology of the Americas.

In light of our mission and purpose, SAA encourages the U.S. Cultural Property Advisory Committee to recommend granting the request from the Government of the Republic of Honduras to the Government of the United States of America to impose import restrictions on Pre-Columbian archaeological material.

Many of our members, U.S. nationals as well as members from South America, Europe, and Asia, have long-term research interests and fieldwork experience in Honduras. They have observed first hand the destruction of the archaeological record in Honduras as a result of the flourishing and enlarging global market for illegally excavated antiquities. Honduras and the world as a whole are losing a rich and diverse cultural heritage, and action is necessary in order to prevent further plundering of its past.

In particular, two SAA members, Dr. Patricia Urban and Edward A. Schortman, who are both Professors at Kenyon College, have worked in Honduras since 1977. The following comments reflect their personal experience in Honduras since that time.

Since the late 1970's, we have conducted investigations together over an extensive area of western Honduras, including the Naco, middle Ulua, and, currently, the lower Cacaupala valleys. Though we have never gotten to know any looters or collectors in all these years, we have seen the results of their degradation.

Site destruction in Honduras results from several processes of which the most common are: plowing attendant on commercial cultivation of sugar cane, bananas, and rice; construction; and looting. The latter is widespread and varies in intensity from recreational digging (sporadic and involving relatively few people) to industrial excavations (systematic and drawing on the labor of fairly large work gangs). The former comprises a hobby, the latter a livelihood. Examples of recreational looting that we have witnessed include probes dug deep within ancient platforms in search of valuables, such as painted pottery vessels and jade jewelry, intended to grace the excavator's private collection. Such work has resulted in the gutting of monumental architecture at such sites as La Sierra in the Naco valley, Gualjoquito in the middle Ulua drainage, and El Coyote in the lower Cacaupala valley.

As destructive as these practices are, they pale in comparison to the affects of professional looting. In this case, entire sites are systematically pillaged in search of objects for sale, resulting in the obliteration of structures of all sizes. Illicit digging on this scale is most pronounced in the Sula Plain where the major center of Travesia has all but disappeared from the map under the looter's shovel.

Archaeology, as we know, is an inherently destructive activity. Once items are removed from the ground they can not be returned to their find spots nor can their associations with other artifacts and architectural features be restored. Since these associations provide the essential clues that allow us to date sites and infer the activities pursued within them, every effort must be made to record these contexts during the excavation process. Looters, of course, focus on the object and ignore the context, stripping the items they retrieve of that which we most desperately need to reconstruct past cultures. Once looted, this information is lost forever.

At La Sierra, for example, there are at least five major platforms that have been so thoroughly gutted that there is nothing left from which we could date their construction or infer their uses. The buildings in question are concentrated in the center of this political capital and would have yielded invaluable information concerning how this ancient realm (ca. AD 600-800) was ruled and how its people lived. Similarly, at El Coyote, illicit excavations have destroyed at least six large edifices in the site core. We will never know what happened on these buildings and, as a result, major gaps will forever remain in our knowledge of this center and its inhabitants.

Prehistoric Hondurans, outside the major lowland Maya capital of Copan, left no written accounts of their lives. All that we can know about them comes from the study of their surviving materials, including artifacts, floral and faunal remains, as well as architecture. Looting rips these valuable sources of information from our grasp, denying us the opportunity to help bring these forgotten cultures into the discourse of history. In the process, everybody loses; Hondurans are denied knowledge about their past, local residents are left in doubt concerning the nature and

history of their ancestors, and humanity, in general, loses the chance to remember an important element of our shared and diverse past. Archaeological sites and their contents are truly non renewable resources and anything that can be done to protect them through restricting looting will go a long way towards making the past accessible to a variety of interested audiences.

Based on these first hand statements from two SAA members with approximately 25 years of experience, SAA asks the Committee to recommend granting the request from the Government of Honduras to impose restrictions on certain types of Honduran archaeological materials. SAA stands prepared to assist the Committee in preventing the looting of Honduras' national heritage and in protecting archaeological sites worldwide. Thank you for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Kelly, Ph.D.  
President