

Testimony of Dr. Anita G. Cook  
On Behalf of the Society for American Archaeology  
Before the Cultural Property Advisory Committee  
On the Renewal of the MOU between the Republic of Peru  
And the United States of America  
Under Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention

January 9, 2007

I am Anita Cook, Professor of Anthropology at The Catholic University of America, and am testifying in support of the Republic of Peru's UNESCO Convention Article 9 request for the protection of its archaeological record and cultural patrimony.

I teach and have been involved in archaeological research both in the Andean highlands and on the coast. I have been active in Andean archaeology since 1977 and have been directing archaeological projects since the early 1980's. In addition to field research, I have served as a consultant to numerous art and natural science museums, and I have completed two books on Peruvian prehistory. My specific expertise includes "art" objects and popular iconography that master artisans of the Huari and Tiwanaku cultures of the Middle Horizon (AD 500-1000) produced.

As an archaeologist, I am trained to scientifically prepare sites for systematic excavation, recover artifacts, and preserve remains. More significantly, I work to relate these artifacts to a cultural context – knowing that an architectural space was a home, a palace, a tomb, a shrine, or an open market or workshop area tells a unique story about the object's age, and its role in society. Context allows us to see the artisans who produced the piece, its popularity, and something about the people, culture and significance of the object in the daily life of a prehistoric community.

To wrench an object out of the earth, out of its priceless context with an untrained hand, means to completely devalue this object – to strip away its real value. Any looted and un-provenienced object on the shelves of a museum or in the house of a collector has suffered such an identity theft. It has been devalued – it has lost its significance and meaning, been removed from its cultural context, and much of the knowledge that could have been gained from the proper study of the object is lost forever. In addition, looting destroys the sites that the objects are stolen from, further damaging our ability to learn about the past. Attached below are photos that document the effects that looting has on Peruvian archaeological sites.

The demand for Peruvian artifacts remains high. The art market abounds with examples of Huari and Tiwanaku ceramics, portable art objects in various media, particularly textiles, including spectacular tunics, headgear and ceremonial wall hangings that display religious and ceremonial imagery. Indeed, objects pertaining to the major cultures of the Andes appear in almost every catalogue of the major art dealer auctions: Sotheby's, Christie's, Butterfields, Heritage Auction, etc., and a Google search online will result in many hits to still more critical artifacts.

The arid coast of Peru, which favors good artifact preservation, is a prime target of modern day looters. A great number of the elites were buried along this coastline. These burials contain individuals in their finest attire, accompanied by beautiful objects. In the more remote highlands, royal tombs have been completely ravaged. At the capital of Huari, monumental architecture attests to the royal wealth and power of those once buried here, but what remains of these mausolea are defaced walls and destroyed tombs. Linda Manzanilla, a renowned Mexican archaeologist who has also worked at Tiwanaku and has visited Egypt, came away from her first visit to Huari saying that she had seen nothing like the scale and engineering feats that she caught a glimpse of during her visit to the site – nor had she seen such devastation.

On the bright side, intervention has been successful in a number of remarkable salvage/emergency excavations on the north coast. For example, Sipan (under the direction of Walter Alva) and Sican (under the direction of I. Shimada) revealed magnificent royal tombs. It is my observation that the situation on the North Coast is exemplary. Highly publicized and visible archaeological finds at the site of Moche, Chan Chan, Sican and the now famous central coast site of Caral have all benefited from funding provided by the Peruvian Congress, along with foreign funding that helps protect patrimony.

While recent Peruvian congressional support has been forthcoming, especially on the North Coast, other areas rely on scarce local resources and foreign collaboration. The Institute of National Culture (INC) of Peru still needs critical professional staff, funds and equipment to protect major archaeological zones of the south coast and central highlands. This has not gone unnoticed by organized crime groups, as they are mainly responsible for the horrific degradation of remote sacred burial sites in these areas. Looters desperate for fresh goods are now targeting these places, and the resources available to protect sites are severely limited. On the coast, isolated desert environments require heavy machinery, four wheel drive vehicles, backup gasoline tanks, camping and other supplies that are completely beyond the means of local INC officials, who often lack even transportation to these isolated locations. They lack cameras to record looting activities, and internet access to send alerts on recently stolen or looted materials. Provincial museums have also been targeted.

The Peruvian government is aware of the challenges it faces. There has been a collective effort to curtail the theft of cultural patrimony on archaeological sites as well as museums. While I have unlimited admiration for the bold efforts of many people to expose what appears to be part of an organized crime ring, I am equally concerned for their safety. There are few professionals here or in Peru who would assume the risks that accompany public exposure of this kind. These dedicated people can only succeed with international support and renewal of this MOU.

Real estate development poses its own issues. In 1999, a very important Huari site in the highland Valley of Ayacucho suffered considerable damage resulting from construction of new homes. A multinational group, including local and international archaeologists,

students and the community teamed together to salvage as much of the site of Conchopata as possible. Funding and support was forthcoming from universities, private grants (National Geographic, Heinz Foundation), and Federal grants (National Science Foundation). Initially intended to last just one field season, our final excavations were completed in 2004. This salvage work was so important that the project became a source of local pride and today is the site from which we have accumulated the most valuable information on the Huari Empire in over two decades. Salvage projects of this type that involve cultural resource management is part of Peru's new legislative effort. Industry, agriculture, mining and construction companies must now pay for an evaluation of the areas they want to use in order to assess whether prehistoric or historic remains will be impacted (see Ann Peter's letter where she elaborates on progress made under the previous Toledo administration's efforts to protect patrimony along the Camisea gas duct, a transect that crossed over the Andes from the Amazon to the coast of Peru). In Dr. Peter's words, "it reflects a major improvement in site protection and contributes to growing public awareness that heritage conservation is a reasonable expectation and even a possible source of employment." We need to encourage and support these efforts, which would not be possible without the MOU.

The importance of renewing this MOU cannot be overstated. We stand at the beginning of a new presidency in Peru. Some directors will stay, and others will be replaced. Newly appointed administrators will need to be acquainted or reacquainted with progress made to date, and problem areas that still need considerable attention. In this area alone the MOU will serve as a strong source of continuity. Researchers will continue to travel to Peru, and international grants to support bi-national projects hopefully will continue, such as those from Fulbright, The Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, just to mention a few. Funds from universities will also continue, as these institutions recognize the critical role these culturally rich areas provide in the teaching and training of the next generation of archaeologists and other researchers into the past.

Archaeologists pertaining to the National Institute of Peru and national police are working together to conduct field surveys and actively investigating suspected looters. Efforts have been made to educate the public on cultural heritage resource protection. On a recent trip to Peru, for instance, at the Lima airport I noticed large advertisements informing travelers about the law and the detrimental effects of looting. Peru's legislature has also been involved. As Professor Shimada noted, it passed legislation to protect and preserve Sican cultural sites and artifacts. The Peruvian Congress did the same for the great urban capital of the Chimú Empire, Chan Chan. Recognizing the importance of archaeological sites for tourism and national identity, both the congress and government of Peru are actively taking steps to assure their conservation and protection.

Failure to renew the MOU at this critical juncture would risk tremendous potential loss of all the significant progress made thanks to recent Peruvian and international efforts.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



1. Cerro Sapame looting - aerial view of the devastating effects of grave looting at an extensive cemetery on the slopes of Cerro Sapame (ca. A.D. 900-1532) in the Lambayeque region of the north coast of Peru. There are ca. 1000 looters' pits visible here. Photo by Izumi Shimada.





2. Huaca Las Ventanas - aerial view of the Huaca Las Ventanas mound at the site of Sicán (ca. AD 900-1100) in the Lambayeque region of the north coast of Peru. Clearly visible are numerous, large pits and dozens of long, deep bulldozer trenches made by grave looters. Photo by Izumi Shimada.



3. Vicus - Photo showing the pockmarked landscape created by intense grave looting that destroyed the Vicus cemetery in the upper Piura Valley on the far north coast of Peru. This looting is the source of the hundreds of Vicus (ca., AD 300-800) ceramics and metal objects now possessed by museums and collectors in the US. The pits seen here reach depths of 30 to 40 feet. Often children were used to retrieve artifacts at the bottom of these deep tombs. Photo by Izumi Shimada.