

Testimony of Karen Mudar

Before the
Department of State
Cultural Property Advisory Committee
Regarding the Proposed Renewal of
The Memorandum of Understanding Between the
Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the United States of America
Concerning the Imposition of Import Restrictions on Archaeological Materials from Cambodia

February 17, 2013

Dr. Gerstenblith, members of the committee, my name is Karen Mudar 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 Memorandum of Agreement between the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the United States for the protection of Cambodia's archaeological heritage.

I am an archaeologist in the National Park Service, but am appearing before you today as a member of the Society for American Archaeology and a Southeast Asian archeologist. I conducted my dissertation research in Thailand and have a long interest in elucidating and preserving the archeological heritage of Southeast Asia.

The SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to research, interpretation, and protection of archeological heritage throughout the world. With more than 7,000 members, SAA presents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities; museums; local, state, and Federal government agencies; and the private sector.

Cambodia's archaeological heritage is among the richest in the world, holding an extensive archaeological record of substantial time depth. Intact archaeological deposits allow examination of the impact that domestic plants and animals made on foraging communities, and development of sophisticated societies capable of building monumental architecture and mastering complex crafts such as sculpture and metalworking. Sites from the Bronze Age through the Khmer period are the principal sources of the ancient works of art in media such as stone, ceramics, and metal so desired by antiquities collectors.

I believe that the existing Memorandum of Understanding, which went into effect in 2008, has had a demonstrable beneficial impact. The looting of Bronze Age burial sites that was particularly extensive between 2005 and 2008 has decreased. Destruction of archeological resources, however, still continues. Archaeologists estimate that approximately 90 percent of non-scientifically excavated artifacts enter illegal antiquities trade networks (Moser in Reinecke et al. 2010). The use of new technologies such as LIDAR and ready availability of satellite imagery facilitates the systematic identification and looting of archaeological sites.

Ongoing examples of looting include theft of artifacts from Wat Bo in Siem Reap earlier this year. Thieves removed bronze artifacts including bells and jewelry. While the diligent work of Cambodian Heritage Protection Officers resulted in the recovery of some of the objects through a raid by undercover officers on an antiquities dealer in Phnom Penh, most are thought to have been sold by antiquities dealers. There is also ongoing looting of remote temple sites; recent reports suggest that there has been looting at sites at the Angkor, the Kulen Hills, and in Banteay Menchey province.

Cambodia, however, is working to protect its cultural patrimony. There are numerous examples of achievements and improvements by Cambodian Heritage Protection Officers to stop antiquities trade, including the example mentioned above. They continue to target the illegal sale of artifacts.

Cambodia continues to implement its obligations under all major international agreements for the protection and trade of illegal artifacts and pursues diplomatic agreements to prevent the export of artifacts. Besides the MOU with the U.S., Cambodia entered into an agreement to restrict the import of Cambodian antiquities into Australia, and works with the Thai government to prevent the removal of antiquities across land borders, following an agreement signed in 2000.

Domestically, staff from the APSARA National Authority builds capacity in cultural management through the Angkor Heritage Management Framework Project. The Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts continues to map archaeological sites and develop inventories of new sites. The Cambodian government also partners with NGOs to educate communities to care for cultural patrimony, including publications and public presentations.

The National Museum of Cambodia has been working with international teams to conserve artifacts for educational and scientific purposes, including several projects that were funded by the U.S. State Department through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. In 2009, funding was provided to conserve metal art objects in the National Museum. This project continued building capacity in the Metal Conservation Laboratory that was funded by the State Department, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Global Heritage Fund in 2005-2006. The Cambodian government has supported the conservation of Phnom Bakheng Temple at Angkor, also funded by the Ambassador's fund. Support for these projects is facilitated by the MOU.

The National Museum has also undertaken cultural exchanges and loaned objects for major exhibitions. "Gods of Angkor: Bronzes from the National Museum of Cambodia" was held at the Getty Museum in 2011 through cooperation with the National Museum of Cambodia. Through this and other projects, the government of Cambodia demonstrates commitment to the preservation and protection of its cultural patrimony.

Though the situation has improved in some ways since 2008, when the Memorandum was signed, the cultural heritage of Cambodia continues to be at risk of looting and destruction of archaeological materials. Many residents in rural areas, where most archaeological sites are located, are poor and find it easy to see prehistoric objects and sculpture primarily as a potential economic resource. Despite difficulties, people in the countryside remains the first line of defense against looting of sites, and Cambodia has taken steps to educate the public about the cultural value of archaeological materials and strengthen this defense. International and educational activities have been of vital importance. An extension of the MOU will provide a basis for continued education and conservation of the cultural patrimony of Cambodia.

The U.S. continues to be a major market for looted Columbian materials. Since the points of origin, especially in the case of portable archaeological materials, are widely scattered across the countryside and borders to neighboring countries are relatively porous, U.S. ports of entry continue to be critically important points at which to interdict illicit traffic. Renewal of the MOU deters the importation of Khmer artifacts into the U.S.

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 trade in cultural property, to preserve and protect Cambodia's cultural heritage, and to facilitate international access to study material remains. 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 preservation and protection of Cambodia's cultural patrimony in the future.

I thank the Committee for this opportunity to submit testimony, and urge its approval of renewing the Memorandum of Agreement with the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia.