

Testimony before the Cultural Property Advisory Committee  
U.S. Department of State

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Chairperson Gerstenblith and members of the committee, on behalf of the American Research Center in Egypt I and my colleagues wish to express our appreciation at having the opportunity to meet with the Cultural Property Advisory Committee of the Department of State and to provide commentary on the request of the Government of Egypt that the Government of the United States place import restrictions on archaeological and ethnological material from Egypt representing its prehistoric through Ottoman heritage. The request is made under Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.

The American Research Center in Egypt strongly supports the request and believes its implementation would be of substantial benefit to the preservation of the extraordinary cultural heritage of Egypt, which is currently under serious pressure in several ways. Specifically, the measure would provide a substantial discouragement to actual or intended pillaging of Egyptian archaeological sites, and of museums as well.

The looting of sites and thefts of artifacts are admittedly longstanding problems in Egypt, as in many countries with a rich archaeological and cultural heritage, including the U.S. However, due to the vigilance of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities and its predecessors, pillaging has historically been largely kept in check. Unfortunately, the extraordinary challenges and circumstances of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and the uncertain times since then have enabled pillaging to greatly expand in scale, and present a major threat to the survival of much of Egypt's cultural heritage. The purpose of the pillaging is to sell the illegally acquired art works and archaeological artifacts, ultimately to buyers in the United States, as well as other countries. Apart from its illegality, pillaging and the marketing of artifacts deprives them of reliable documentation and wipes out valuable information about the past.

The American Research Center in Egypt also supports the circumstance that the application of the import restrictions will be consistent with the general interest of the international community in the interchange of cultural property among nations for scientific, cultural, and educational purposes. As regards material from Egypt, this provision is highly desirable.

Before further commentary on this requested restriction, I would like to briefly inform the Committee of the unique experience and authority that the American Research Center in Egypt brings to discussions about the maintenance and enhancement of Egypt's cultural heritage. The Center's activities in these regards is always in close collaboration with the

relevant Egyptian authorities, whose dedication to the preservation of monuments, sites and museums is exceptionally strong and consistent, but whose resources are limited; hence, such collaborative initiatives are warmly welcomed.

Given these circumstances, the American Research Center in Egypt is happy to provide expert testimony to the issue of concern today, and to be available on any future occasion when the Committee seeks advice on matters pertaining to Egypt's cultural heritage.

Let me first briefly introduce those members of the American Research Center in Egypt delegated to be here today. I am David O'Connor, a professor of ancient Egyptian art and archaeology at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University; previous to that, I was Curator in Charge of the rich Egyptian collection and galleries of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. In addition, I have directed major excavation and conservation projects in Egypt for over forty years.

Also present today is Professor Laurel Bestock of Brown University, representing a younger generation of scholars and teachers and herself a noted director of excavations in both Egypt and the Sudan. We both serve on the Board of Governors of the American Research Center in Egypt and will be happy to respond to any questions Committee members may have. Attending as guests are Dina Aboul Saad, the Center's Director of Development and as such well aware of a broad public concern, extending through our lay members and beyond, about the dangers threatening Egypt's cultural heritage; and William Inglee, a distinguished member of the Center's Board of Governors.

The American Research Center in Egypt was founded in 1948 and is the oldest organization in the United States dedicated to working with the broad based United States academic community and university system, as well as other research organizations, to foster greater understanding of Egypt's extraordinary cultural heritage through exploration, documentation and preservation efforts and to collaborate closely with Egyptian authorities in enhancing Egypt's ability to preserve and protect its own irreplaceable sites and cultural treasures. Given this focus the Center plays a critical role in fostering strong cultural ties between the United States and Egypt. Made up of over thirty institutions dedicated to the study of Egypt's heritage and the preservation of Egyptian antiquities, the Center is the leader of a coordinated effort to focus on all aspects of Egypt's rich cultural heritage spanning the ancient Pharaonic period, as well as historically significant Christian and Islamic sites of more recent eras.

The American Research Center in Egypt institutional members include prestigious universities and museums which have made critical efforts at the multiple sites in Egypt where they work. The Center itself undertakes conservation projects and training activities in Egypt, as well as maintaining an essential coordinating office in Cairo, working on behalf of its members in securing permission to work within Egypt, and performing a unique role in training and developing Egypt's human resources in relation to heritage, specifically in the areas of archaeology, documentation, conservation, and modern collections management. Over one thousand Egyptians today have directly benefited from the Center's sponsored training programs that are designed to build their

capabilities to protect and preserve their own cultural past. The Center's registrar training program at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo proved invaluable in the response to a break-in during the 2011 Revolution, as it had created a modern database of the Museum's collection and equipped Museum staff with the ability to ascertain very quickly which objects were damaged or missing. If funding was available, this training could be provided at Egypt's other museums. Such documentation is invaluable in itself, and also aids in the identification of stolen art works and artifacts.

While receiving financial support from its members and individual donors, in recent decades the Center's activities and those of its many member organizations have been directly or indirectly supported by invaluable, targeted USAID funding. This visionary support by the United States government has enabled the Center and its member universities and organizations to take extraordinary steps in recent years to preserve and conserve unique world heritage sites in Egypt.

Twenty years ago the Center was selected to undertake an important initiative, funded by the United States government, to provide funding for the preservation and restoration of Egypt's cultural heritage. Funded by USAID a broad program of work was initiated; it included conservation of historically and culturally significant architecture, works of art, religious inscriptions, and archaeological artifacts covering thousands of years of Egypt's cultural achievement. The results of this program have been far ranging and monuments that were on the verge of being lost have been saved and are open to the public. Hundreds of Egyptians have received technical training in heritage management, culturally significant objects have been preserved, and these results have been shared with the scholarly, professional, and general public through a series of publications. The work stands as a testament to the significant contribution that the United States of America has made to preserve Egypt's cultural heritage as well as helping to ensure that tourism can remain an important part of Egypt's economy.

Regarding Egyptians trained via the Center's programs, training to-date has been provided to 405 in field archaeology, 360 in conservation, 12 in museum registration, 46 in museum and site management, 90 in skilled craft management, and 137 in job training. As to contributions to American scholarship, on average the Center assists 20-25 research expeditions each year, as well as individual scholars and student fellowship holders.

The American Research Center in Egypt has always enjoyed very positive relationships with the Ministry of Antiquities and its predecessors, as well as with other governmental agencies having oversight with Center sponsored scholars, students and projects. Since the 2011 Revolution, such relationships have continued with little change, and American scholars and projects, like those of other countries, continue for the most part to receive approval and facilitation on an almost routine basis. This situation includes access to museum collections and materials in antiquities storerooms, subject to oversight procedures necessary for safeguarding the interests of both the Egyptian authorities and the foreign scholar. The principal difficulty for the Center until recently was that its proximity to Midan el Tahrir, a favorite site for large demonstrations, made it difficult at times for the Center's dedicated expatriate and Egyptian staff to get to their offices, but

they responded by continuing their work from their homes; this problem has now largely diminished.

Given this record of achievement, the American Research Center in Egypt strongly supports the request that the United States impose restrictions on the importation of archaeological and ethnological material from Egypt. The Center does so because the urgent challenges and growing risks to heritage in post-revolution Egypt require emergency measures. In the absence of the requested restrictions the looting of archaeological sites and even museums has greatly increased in Egypt over recent years in order to supply the international antiquities market. The requested restrictions would discourage much of this pillaging and provide a standard that other countries may well be likely to follow as regards this important protection afforded to Egypt's cultural heritage.

The American Research Center in Egypt and its individual and institutional members can directly attest to the serious threat that actual or potential pillaging has become in Egypt. Not only sites, but even museums are involved; during the Revolution the Egyptian Museum, Cairo was robbed of valuable items (almost all of them have been recovered), more recently the important Malawi National Museum at Minya was robbed and vandalized. Overall, the Egyptian authorities have responded vigorously to these problems, although security issues vary from site to site; some have been more heavily affected than others. The Ministry of Antiquities employs substantial numbers of site guards, and historically it and its predecessor institutions have addressed the issue of pillaging with considerable success. The extraordinary circumstances of the current situation in Egypt, including the severe economic climate, have resulted in significantly lessened resources just at the time they were most needed and limited the Ministry's ability to scale its response to meet that problem. At the same time, the Ministry has made every effort to ensure that on-site and other research by Americans and others continue, and on accommodating American led preservation and documentation work. Moreover, the Egyptian police provide a 24-hour security presence for American and other researchers when they are present in the field. The police also collaborate with antiquities officials in inhibiting pillaging and conducting follow-up investigations. Complete on-the-ground coverage is not possible—the number of sites is simply too large—but overall the barriers to pillaging are considerable, although the Ministry is frank about the seriousness of the situation, as is indicated by the request it has made.

Professor Bestock is going to report to you in depth as regards the current pillaging problem in Egypt. However, to end on a personal note, I was deeply affected by the impact of pillaging upon our New York University sponsored project at Abydos in southern Egypt. In over forty years of directing excavations in Egypt I had never before encountered the huge upsurge in pillaging experienced during the first few weeks of the 2011 Revolution. We were not in Egypt at the time, but our on-site Egyptian staff reported that every night multiple gangs of pillagers spread over the site, intimidating our unarmed guards and ultimately creating 200 looting pits, which we thoroughly documented in a subsequent field season. In an emergency response, we immediately hired many additional guards, most of whom (numbering 28) are still on our pay roll. Initially, the local police were unable to respond to the situation and our staff engaged in

a campaign of subterfuge, using flare guns and starter pistols as well as ingeniously building a fake armored car that they drove across the site at night in order to persuade pillagers the police were present. Eventually—thanks to the intervention of the antiquities authorities—a nightly police presence was provided to the site, and has continued to the present day. To all intents and purposes pillaging has stopped at Abydos, although occasionally attempts are made, probing for vulnerabilities; these are all successfully intercepted, but demonstrate that the threat of renewed looting remains.

As regards Egypt as a whole, potential and actual pillaging continue to be major problems, and the imposition of import restrictions as requested by the Government of Egypt would contribute significantly to the discouragement of continued looting, as it would reduce the underlying market and monetary incentives; moreover, these restrictions could well provide a model for European and other countries to follow. A positive response to the Egyptian request would also be appropriate recognition of the support and collaboration provided by the Egyptian authorities in the past and today to American and other researchers and projects exploring the many facets of Egypt's cultural heritage. Equally importantly, such a response would send a strong message of American support at a time when such a positive message is badly needed in Egypt.

Moreover, such a restriction would be an important part of a larger initiative, manifest in the deep concern felt for the survival of cultural heritages over the entire world. For example, a few days ago I moderated a panel discussion sponsored by The Institute of Fine Arts of New York University and involving experts on the impact of war damage, pillaging and conservation problems extending from West Africa, through North Africa and Egypt and into Iraq and Afghanistan. The restrictions proposed here, while specific to Egypt, would be a major step forward in this globally significant struggle. It is important however that the process continues to make possible the educational and scholarly exchanges that have united The United States and Egypt, and should continue to do so.