



BROWN

JOUKOWSKY INSTITUTE FOR ARCHAEOLOGY
AND THE ANCIENT WORLD

Brown University
Box 1837 / 60 George Street
Providence, RI 02912
TEL: 401-863-3188 FAX: 401-863-9423
Joukowsky_Institute@brown.edu

May 13, 2014

To: Cultural Property Advisory Committee

Re: Memorandum of Understanding on Request from the Government of Egypt

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. My colleague, David O'Connor, has already outlined very strongly the historical and current position of the American Research Center in Egypt and the reasons we currently support the request of the Egyptian government that the United States impose import restrictions on archaeological and ethnological material from Egypt. I hope in my comments only to provide some additional details that will help highlight the importance of this matter. As Dr. O'Connor mentioned, I am a professor at Brown University and a member of the Board of the American Research Center in Egypt. I serve as the chair of the Center's Archaeological Research and Expeditions Committee, and so am aware of the range of issues faced by American projects working in Egypt. I speak both as a representative of the American Research Center in Egypt and as an individual actively engaged in archaeological excavations in Egypt. I will primarily address two issues of direct relevance to the determinations before the committee: whether or not the cultural material of Egypt is in jeopardy, as well as what such jeopardy means for scholarship; and whether the imposition of import restrictions is consistent with the international community in terms of the exchange of ideas and materials. I will do this primarily though not entirely by means of relating my personal experiences doing archaeological research in Egypt in the last few years. My project is sponsored by the American Research Center in Egypt but is not funded by or directly run by the Center.

The cultural material of ancient Egypt is in jeopardy. It is in jeopardy because of the looting of archaeological sites and museums. I will speak first of archaeological sites, as that is where my own experience lies, and then briefly of museums. Previously unknown monuments and objects still lie buried in Egypt, and it is vital that they be excavated in a controlled manner that leads to proper records and the protection of sites and objects. As you know, the separation of an object and a context can be disastrous for our understanding of either. One illustration of this that is relevant to the current state of looting in Egypt is an ancient building and associated artifacts that I am currently working on at Abydos. The building itself is entirely buried and was unknown until 2008. It consists of at least 14 connected vaults – each more than 12 meters long – entered off a central corridor. The first two seasons of work on this building revealed many things about it: that it had originally been used for the burial of bird mummies, that part of it had been remodeled into a Christian church in the first millennium. But many things eluded us, including knowledge of the specific ritual practices associated with the structure, and the date of its original use. In 2011 we discovered a deposit of 300 coins and three statues outside the entrance to the building. The statues are of the gods Osiris and Harpocrates. These are not gods very closely associated with birds in ancient Egypt, and show the surprisingly hybrid nature of divine practice at Abydos, which is in many ways an atypical ancient Egyptian site. The coins are closely datable to the reigns of two kings in the 3rd century BC, giving us our first precise date associated with the building. This cache greatly enhanced our understanding

of the subterranean vaults, their use in the complex religious landscape of Abydos, and their date. Likewise, the objects themselves would have been of considerably less significance had their relationship to this building not been known.

The importance, as well as the vulnerability, of these objects was apparent as soon as we found them. A discussion between various projects working at Abydos as well as representatives of the then Supreme Council of Antiquities decided not to announce the discovery, fearing it would lead to looting in the area. My government inspector at the time was instrumental in helping to arrange secure conditions to store the artifacts while at the same time allowing me and my conservator access to them. These remarkable objects were recorded, preserved, and studied thanks to the collaboration between Americans and Egyptians.

Coins and statues are some of the prime types of artifacts that are traded on the antiquities market, and there is no doubt that those my team found would have been immediately saleable had they been uncovered by looters. We found these objects in January of 2011, only days before the revolution began. In the aftermath of the revolution, looting at Abydos increased significantly; I would not be at all surprised if the discovery of the cache had some role in this, as the decision to avoid a public announcement could hardly keep their existence from being known locally. The very area where these were found was the subject of a nighttime looting attempt while I was excavating in 2013. Thankfully the local police as well as the head workmen from my excavation, our guards, and our house staff responded immediately. On this occasion no looting was done. But as Dr. O'Connor noted, Abydos has had hundreds of looters pits dug since the revolution. These have been documented by comparing satellite imagery before and after January 2011, and archaeological fact-checking on the ground. To walk across the site is to see holes with bricks and pots thrown aside, gaping wounds in the archaeological landscape. While the incidence of looting has decreased significantly, the threat to the site and the information it contains remains very real. Abydos stands in the middle. Some sites have seen nearly no looting, and some have seen looting that has nearly destroyed them, has made it impossible for archaeologists to conduct work there.

The impact of looting in museums is also clear, as are the efforts to stop it. The Cairo Museum this month opened an exhibit of 200 objects that were stolen from museums in the aftermath of the revolution. 140 of these objects were recovered on the international market with the help of other governments, including Germany and the UK. 60 were recovered in Egypt before they could reach the international market. The relationship between the looting of antiquities in Egyptian museums and the international art market is unambiguous. The same cannot be proved with regard to illicit excavations because the objects looted there have never been documented before, so cannot be shown to be missing. While the loss is thus less demonstrable, the destruction of information is likely greater. I consider the threat to Egypt's cultural heritage to be extreme and its relationship to the art market to be close.

The second point I would like to address is that the imposition of import restrictions is entirely in line with promoting research and access for the international community. This is best demonstrated by the many ways in which Egyptian and American scholars already work in close collaboration. Dr. O'Connor has already addressed some of the initiatives run by the American Research Center itself, including the incredibly important training of registrars. This is a vital effort for making sure that the already excavated objects in Egyptian museum collections are documented; the success of the program can be demonstrated in part by the success of Egypt in recovering objects stolen from museums. Projects run by other institutions under the aegis of the Center, such as Brown University's excavations, are also instrumental in fostering Egyptian/American scholarly relationships. My project is in all ways collaborative. I have Egyptian members of my staff. The conservator on my project is a lecturer at Cairo University, and the ceramicist is an inspector at the Ministry of Antiquities. They are both

integral members of my team, people upon whom I rely when setting priorities and interpreting material, and responsible for publishing their work from Abydos. In recent seasons I have also trained inspectors from the Ministry in the basics of excavation technique. This happens at two levels. New inspectors come in groups to the site and are given extensive site tours and engage in discussions about recordkeeping and conservation. In addition, each year two or three junior inspectors are with me for a few weeks of the season. They are put in charge of their own excavation unit and I train them in precisely the same way I train my own graduate students. This training exists outside of the formal structure of permits and government inspection.

That the collaboration between Egyptian and American scholars exists at multiple levels is also clear outside of Egypt. A good example is the participation of our Egyptian colleagues in the annual conference of the American Research Center in Egypt, which is the only major gathering of North American Egyptologists. Last year my ceramicist, who also works on other sites run by both Americans and Egyptians, gave a paper on material he was researching. In the conference of April of this year, Egyptian colleagues were instrumental participants in a panel on looting. They were unambiguous in their dismay at what has happened and continues to happen to the sites and museums of Egypt in the wake of the revolution, and in their assessment that Egypt needs help to make further headway towards stopping the looting.

Egypt has asked for our help to stop the importation of artifacts as one part of an approach to stem looting of archaeological sites and museums. A bilateral agreement between the United States and Egypt will strengthen the ability of scholars, Egyptian and American, to protect and research ancient Egyptian civilization while making the heritage of that civilization accessible to the world.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Laurel Bestock".

Laurel Bestock
Vartan Gregorian Assistant Professor of Egyptology and Archaeology
Brown University