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Dear Members of the President's Cultural Property Advisory Committee:

I am writing in support of the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt's petition that the U.S. Department of State impose a series of import restrictions to protect Egypt's cultural patrimony under Article 9 of the UNESCO Convention (1970). Specifically, I would like to address the following three points, outlined in the "Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act," which are relevant to your committee's deliberation—namely:

- that the cultural patrimony of the requesting nation is in jeopardy from the pillage of archaeological materials;
- that U.S. import restrictions, either alone or in concert with actions taken by other market nations, would be of substantial benefit in deterring the serious situation of pillage; and that
- import restrictions would promote the interchange of cultural property among nations for scientific, cultural, and educational purposes.

First, the loss of any nation's artistic heritage is a loss of the history and memory of its people. The complex cultural ecosystem of Egypt is no exception. Nearly five millennia old, it includes artifacts that were the pride of pharaohs, Ptolemies, traders, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The stories of countless individuals are contained in these objects, and our understanding of Egypt's history depends on knowing where they came from and when. I also believe, as an archaeologist and a historian, that a greater knowledge of past can help the people find their way in the present.

That was the reason I wrote my March 3, 2014 op-ed in *The International New York Times*. In it, I drew attention to the urgent need to protect one aspect of Egypt's cultural heritage which has often been ignored: papyrus looting. In recent years, several tiny scraps of papyrus—some no larger than a business card—have gone on to become household names in popular circles. The fragment of the "Gospel of Jesus' Wife" was one recent headline grabber; the discovery of lost works of the seventh-century B.C. Greek poet Sappho, the subject of my op-ed, another. Both papyrus pieces remain in private collections.

Owners and collectors of papyrus stand to win big, if their texts prove to be valuable. Consequently, we need to be on the look out for where will the next “spectacular” text will come from. Egypt’s arid climate has long been known to be the perfect preservative for papyrus. Rubbish heaps are plentiful throughout portions of the country, like in the Fayyum. Many papyrus collections were excavated in the early twentieth century. As is becoming more clear, however—through evidence in academic publications, at conference presentations, even in news about museum planning—the next fragment of Homer or Sappho is not necessarily going to be pulled from the trash.

Current data is unequivocal: papyrus is being “extracted,” or “harvested,” from Egyptian mummy masks. (Reusing papyrus was a way to line the inside of a mummy). Demonstrations of how to extract papyrus have taken place on at least one U.S. college campus, in 2011; in 2013, an video was posted on-line that tells researchers how to do so. In it, the face of a mummy mask can be seen as it is washed away, over several hours, in order to yield a piece of papyrus with writing on it. Parts of Egypt’s cultural heritage are literally being dissolved in a hunt for the next classical (or Biblical) text.

Restrictions protecting Egypt’s cultural patrimony are thus not only a dire need; there must also be a clear recognition that Egyptian mummy masks, or “cartonnage,” need specific protection. Such language should also make clear that this protection applies to masks from all periods of Egypt’s history—from the pharaonic age to Ptolemaic to Greco-Roman times. A strong statement about the importance of mummy masks to Egyptian culture, combined with an awareness of the interconnectedness of Egypt’s history, would be a strong deterrent to the illicit sale of papyrus in on-line auction houses and at other venues. It would also send a clear message to those who work with this material that openness and transparency about provenance and acquisition are of the utmost importance.

Finally, I would like to address the cultural, educational and scientific benefits of adopting this resolution. As the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt wrote in its petition, theft from museums and the traffic in other stolen or illegally excavated material represent “violations [that] destroy interconnected layers of civilization, erasing the history of [Egyptian] sites and endangering the national memory of Egypt.” The value of studying and appreciating this “interconnectedness” cannot be overstated. In Egypt, a country whose “cultural patrimony comprises all artifacts produced during the prehistoric eras [c. 5000 B.C.] through the Ottoman Period,” it is vital that all these pieces—from the largest sarcophagi to the smallest votive or coin—be kept in place so that Egypt maintains the fullest, most kaleidoscopic picture of its past.

Egypt will surely benefit, and as we learn more about what our own heritage owes to Egypt’s rich history, so will we. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to talking with the committee on June 2nd.

Sincerely,



Prof. Douglas Boin, Ph.D.