Madame Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

I thank you for the opportunity to speak today before this committee. I come here in support of the proposed Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and the Hellenic Republic. There are three reasons why I support the Memorandum of Agreement.

One. I am an archaeologist and art historian of the ancient Greek world. It is my privilege to be a member of a Classics department at a state university in New Jersey; I have published one book and over a dozen articles and book chapters in my field. I have over a decade's experience working in Greece, on excavations and in material study. I have first-hand knowledge of the looting of archaeological sites. When looters dig in search of valuable objects to illegally sell, they obliterate the archaeological record, the delicate layers of soil and cultural deposits which remain as precious testament to the everyday lives of ancient Minoans, Athenians, Spartans, Macedonians, Romans, or Byzantines. Each semester, when teaching a particular era of ancient Greek history or class of objects, I find myself in the position of having to tell my students that our knowledge is permanently stunted because of illegal looting. The culture of the Early Cyclades dating to the 3rd millennium BC, the circulation patterns of Classical Greek coinage, the meaning of the extraordinary terra cotta figurines from 4th and 3rd century BC Tanagra, these are only a few examples of the knowledge we all have lost due to looting in Greece.

I am aware that those who collect and sell ancient Greek coins seek exception to the proposed import restrictions. As an archaeologist, I am compelled to point out that coins are just one class of object found at an archaeological site and when looters dig for coins they destroy the archaeological context around them as they would do searching for any object. Those opposed to import restrictions on coins also argue that these objects, in antiquity, circulated across too many modern international boundaries to be considered the protected patrimony of any one country today. In actuality, most ancient Greek coins were struck for local use within the boundaries of Greek city states and only circulated in that local. There are exceptions to this but exceptions should not constitute an argument for exemption from the import restrictions. I support the Memorandum of Understanding because it will discourage the looting of archaeological sites in search of coins and any other objects for illegal sale.

Two. I support the Memorandum of Understanding with the Hellenic Republic because this will reduce the role the US plays in the illegal market for Greek antiquities. The looting I describe above does not happen benignly or accidentally; it is done because Greek antiquities, from silver
techadrachma to marble statues, fetch very high prices on the international antiquities market. Indeed, as we have recognized since the 18th century and the work of Adam Smith, supply will always meet demand. Since the United States’ signing into law the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act in 1983, we recognize the existence of the illicit antiquities trade and the role of demand from market countries. Today, the US remains one of the major market countries for Greek antiquities. I support the Memorandum of Understanding because it seeks to reduce the role of the US in this trade.

Third. I support the Memorandum of Understanding with the Hellenic Republic because of what I would argue is this country’s special debt to that land and its ancient heritage. Indeed, the founding fathers of our nation greatly revered the intellectual achievements of the Classical world. Reading the correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams (incidentally including scores of quotes in Greek and Latin) one is struck with the extent to which these men drew on the philosophy and historical paradigms of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The Federalist Papers of Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay are littered with allusions to Classical political philosophy as well as direct references to the leagues described by ancient sources: the Amphictyonic, Achaean, Aetolian, Lycian—formed by the Classical Greeks in order to achieve political and physical security.

It is not hyperbole to say that it was through the inspiration of Classical Greek literature and culture that the first generation of great American intellectuals conceived the humanistic and enlightenment principals upon which the Constitution of this country is based. I argue that the United States owes a particular debt to the cultural patrimony of Greece. What is left we must fight to preserve. We must act, such as we can, to keep it safe.