

Testimony of Dr. Rosemary Joyce
On Behalf of the Society for American Archaeology
Before the Cultural Property Advisory Committee
On the Renewal of the MOU between the Republic of Honduras
And the United States of America
Under Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention

July 24, 2008

I am Dr. Rosemary Joyce, Professor of Anthropology and Chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of California at Berkeley. I have worked in Honduras continuously since 1977, when I first went there as an undergraduate, and am currently supervising three field projects addressing urgent aspects of cultural heritage preservation, investigation, and presentation. I am one of the two most widely recognized experts on the Ulua Polychrome pottery tradition, which is the target of much of the international trade in pre-Columbian antiquities from Honduras, and was on the doctoral committee for the only serious study of Ulua Marble vases, which are the rarest and most irreplaceable objects that are subject to looting in Honduras. As a past Assistant Director of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University and Director of the Hearst Museum at Berkeley, and visiting curator for exhibitions at museums including the Wellesley College Davis center, I have a clear understanding of the contrasting aesthetic and social archaeological/anthropological values that the objects being looted have.

I believe the bilateral agreement is having a beneficial effect on the problem of looting. While there is still much work to do, as the market in undocumented antiquities continues, the restrictions are helping to reduce the pressures leading to looting.

The international market continues to include a very great amount of Honduran archaeological materials, particularly the Ulua Polychrome pottery vessels and Ulua Marble vases that have long been the focus of the trade. In monitoring gallery websites over recent years, I have noticed a tendency for Honduran polychromes to be featured as "Classic Maya", feeding the broader demand for vessels of the Guatemalan Peten. In effect, Honduran materials are under pressure from the greater control of the traffic in Guatemalan antiquities, not just from markets seeking them for their own intrinsic values.

While some looting of sites still continues, there has been a notable diminution in the severity of looting in the areas I work in—near the city of San Pedro Sula—which in part should be credited to the efforts of the Honduran authorities in education and protection of cultural patrimony. I would like to comment at some length about those efforts.

There have been several developments that show a direct connection between efforts at education in Honduras, and public awareness of the need to preserve cultural patrimony. It is clear that in recent years, a wider segment of society in northern Honduras has come to view archaeological and historic sites as significant cultural resources. This is evident in the attendance at lectures we give at venues including the Museo de San Pedro Sula, the Museo de Comayagua, and the Museo de Omoa; and in volunteered reports of endangered sites (whether the danger comes from development or illicit digging). This greater awareness of cultural patrimony as a direct result of steps taken by the

government is an inference, but there are multiple forms of evidence of results from those educational efforts. I have in my possession a children's book, written in Spanish and published in Honduras, which uses cartoon characters to introduce very young children to the importance of cultural patrimony. Produced by the Institute of Anthropology and History, with copies distributed to scholars as well as school children, this is only one form of outreach to schools that is now an explicit part of the policies of the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History.

Another example of these proactive policies is the institution of school visits to archaeological sites. I have just returned from Honduras, where among other things I visited Dr. Laura O'Rourke at her fieldsite of Yarumela, in the Comayagua Valley. Yarumela is one of only two sites in Honduras where, ca. 1000-700 BC, earthen pyramids 20 meters tall were constructed by people engaged with the Olmec civilization of the Gulf Coast of Mexico. During my on-site visit, Dr. O'Rourke's excavations were visited by an elementary school class, whose students she introduced to the importance of the site, the goal of preservation, and the significance of archaeological research there. Another project I visited was the ongoing excavations directed by Dr. Jeanne Lopiparo at Curruste, near San Pedro Sula. Here, the project archaeologists have developed training programs to introduce local residents and school children visiting the site to the understanding of the past through the systematic investigation of archaeological sites. These efforts were undertaken by these projects in response to direct requests by the Institute.

The Honduran government also has been proactive in outreach to the Honduran press. Again, during my visit to Dr. O'Rourke, the host of a Honduran public affairs television program, Canal Diez, was present filming not only a segment on the site itself, but also the engagement with the school group. At the request of the Honduran government, I participated in the interview, explaining the significance of a major find at the site, the recovery of a locally made cylinder seal with an incised face in Olmec style. Such objects previously have only been known from undocumented excavations and collections; the recovery of one in situ, in a datable context, promises to contribute substantially to understanding of the earliest civilization of Central America.

Such press outreach is now the rule, rather than an exception. While in Honduras I attended a public lecture at the Museo de San Pedro Sula by historical anthropologist Rus Sheptak, which was filmed for broadcast by one television station, and attended by journalists from a second. At a public talk at the Museo de Omoa, in which I participated along with Sheptak and Dr. Kira Blaisdell-Sloan, another local television station attended, filmed continuously, and interviewed Honduran government representatives commenting on the goals of preservation and interpretation of the historical site of the Fortress of Omoa.

At all three sites I visited during this field trip, the Honduran government is actively involved in protection of patrimony. Plans are underway to compensate landowners at Yarumela and to demarcate the site as a national monument. At Curruste, already so designated, funding is arranged to construct a permanent fence, install signage, and build an interpretive center and trails. At Omoa, work is underway to conserve the historic structure of the fort, expand the existing museum, and to work with the community to

identify other historical archaeological remains and preserve them. The excavations we undertook at the latter site are being incorporated into interpretation for visitors.

It is in the area of exchange of scientific information that I can report the greatest progress that I have seen in thirty years of working in the archaeology of Honduras. The Honduran authorities have revised antiquated regulations, circulated them to the international scientific community for comment, and based on comments received, revised those parts of the framework which would have impeded research collaboration. Thus, as I noted, there are currently three active projects affiliated with the University of California, Berkeley, underway at Yarumela, Curruste, and Omoa. In each case, the Honduran government has provided substantial logistic support, extending to such things as the loan of project vehicles. In each case as well, international scholars have been engaged in collaborative discussions about the management of sites to further their preservation. This extends beyond the three sites mentioned to include others; for example, I have been asked to consult on the installation of interpretive trails at Cerro Palenque, near San Pedro Sula, the site I studied for my doctoral dissertation and about which I published a book in 1991. As part of the Omoa project, Dr. Blaisdell-Sloan provided opportunities for seven National University of Honduras students to participate and gain practical experience in the field. Several of these students plan to participate in an international conference this fall, developing presentations based on their experience. I and others from Berkeley will also present papers at the same conference, to be held in San Pedro Sula and Omoa. While in Honduras, I also discussed with Honduran authorities and scholars from Costa Rica collaboratively organizing an international conference to be held in Comayagua in 2009. The level of activity underway is impressive and is distinguished by a combination of serious scholarly engagement internationally; incorporation of training of students from both Honduras and other participating countries in projects; and consistent emphasis on public dissemination of information about the projects themselves, and what they can tell us about the past.

I can add that Honduran authorities who are in charge of enforcing the antiquities laws have taken proactive steps in recent years. They have been actively checking antiques shops in Honduras to identify any local violations of the law, which has led to a substantial reduction of offers of sales of antiquities to international visitors. There are also press reports of arrests within Honduras for trafficking in stolen antiquities. Honduran authorities are cooperating with US Customs officials. These investigations are covered in the Honduran press, increasing the visibility of these actions to the Honduran public that might otherwise be engaged in similar actions.

I believe that the MOA between Honduras and the U.S. is one of the main reasons that the progress I mentioned has taken place. It is a very effective instrument and an integral part of the effort to protect Honduran cultural patrimony, and I urge the Committee, in the strongest possible terms, to recommend its renewal to the State Department.

I thank the Committee for its time and consideration.