



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

February 8, 2018

Society for American Archaeology Supports US Decision to Remain Engaged with UNESCO

Washington, DC—The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) fully supports the US Department of State’s commitment to remain engaged with UNESCO with the aim of supporting the important work done by that organization, especially in the areas of protection of world heritage and promotion of scientific collaborations (Department of State press release, October 12 2017). SAA believes that such cooperation would most efficiently take place as a full member of UNESCO, but considers that these initiatives should continue in any event if the United States moves to a Permanent Observer Mission status at the end of 2018.

SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 7,000 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

SAA believes that implementation of the World Heritage Program (<http://whc.unesco.org/>) is in the best interest of the United States, as a means of protecting globally important and unique heritage sites, combatting poverty through heritage tourism and the establishment of locally sustainable economies, and strengthening democracy through the empowerment of local communities. Thus, we note that the protection and reconstruction of the World Heritage monuments in the Malian city of Timbuktu after the attacks there in 2012 has been central to the mobilization of local communities against Islamist insurgents in the region. Cooperation by Timbuktu’s citizens led to the first conviction for destruction of cultural heritage before the International Criminal Court in 2016, of a member of Ansar Dine. On a smaller scale, the establishment of Cultural Banks has served as a support for community pride and resistance against extremism in Mali, and this model is being extended elsewhere in West Africa. Our members have also seen training for the protection of cultural heritage serve as a focus for teaching peacekeepers other elements of ethical behavior in situations of armed responsibility.

We note that inclusion on the international UNESCO World Heritage list and the lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage is eagerly sought by most countries. Such listings are generally sources of pride, as well as testaments to a country’s culture and its history. We believe that people who have access to this sort of pride in their cultural heritage will be correspondingly less likely to be attracted to the extremist movements that exist around the globe today. Such UNESCO listings are also accompanied by

management plans, which seek to guide heritage protection, research, access, and tourism, as well as identify how funds to cover these tasks will be supplied. These management plans are often foundational documents for the development of sustainable economies and tourism regionally, and not simply for the immediate environs of the UNESCO sites in question. We recognize that there are areas in which these management plans could be improved, especially in terms of increasing the role of indigenous and local communities in their formulation and execution.

There are potential economic benefits of UNESCO World Heritage status as well, and such benefits could contribute to the prosperity – and thus the social and political stability – of the communities around UNESCO sites. One challenge for UNESCO, in cooperation with countries around the world in which World Heritage monuments are located, lies in developing management plans that can in fact provide such economic benefits and then distribute them to local populations. We see a significant and continuing role for the United States in supporting the development and implementation of these management plans, which have the potential to sustain and stabilize local communities in countries where America has major national interests.

Protection and promotion of world heritage is a multifaceted issue, involving both major challenges and great opportunities for national governments and international organizations engaged in these questions. The Society for American Archaeology hopes that the United States will continue to play a central role in global responses to these questions, as it has in the past.

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About the Society for American Archaeology *The Society for American Archaeology is an international organization dedicated to the research, interpretation, and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 7,000 members, the Society represents professional, student, and avocational archaeologists working in a variety of settings, including government agencies, colleges and universities, museums, and the private sector.*