

**Testimony of Dr. Mitch Hendrickson**  
**Before the Department of State Cultural Property Advisory Committee Regarding the**  
**Proposed Renewal of The Bilateral Agreement between Cambodia and the United States of**  
**America**

October 23, 2017

Chairman Sabloff and members of the committee, I am Dr. Mitch Hendrickson, and I submit this testimony on behalf of myself and the Society for American Archaeology (SAA), in support of the renewal of the bilateral agreement between Cambodia and the United States for the protection of the archaeological heritage of Cambodia.

I am an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, member of various professional organizations including the SAA, AIA, and EuraSEAA. I have conducted research in Cambodia for 16 years, where I have undertaken country-wide surveys of the ancient road systems and directed the excavation and survey of two major sites related to the expansion of the medieval Khmer Empire. I have authored and co-authored numerous scholarly papers on Cambodia's past and currently hold funding from both the NSF and ANR (France) agencies.

The 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.

Cambodia, in my opinion, contains some of the most extensive and important archaeological remains in the world. The Khmer Empire (9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century AD), based at the capital and UNESCO World Heritage site of Angkor, was the largest and most influential political polity in mainland Southeast Asia. The iconic grandeur of temples such as Angkor Wat and Bayon and the immense water infrastructure constructed around the capital represents the culmination of several 1000 years of Khmer cultural development that can be tracked through numerous settlements associated with the Neolithic and Metal Ages. Cambodians are deeply connected to their past, and specifically to the period of Angkor. The temple of Angkor Wat sits at the center of their flag and local Cambodians all dream of visiting the site at least one time during their lives; and those who can, do so repeatedly over their lives and thereby deepen the connection to this history.

Cambodia's most valuable resources are the 1000s of archaeological sites spanning this long history, ranging from the mounded burial-settlements of prehistoric sites to the massive urbanized complexes that typify the Khmer Empire. The 'value' of these sites is simultaneously their greatest asset and greatest downfall. In context, archaeological evidence represent the direct links to understanding how and why small Iron Age communities organized their daily lives and rituals in the landscape and how early rice-growing polities managed to become larger kingdoms and an even larger empire. Out of context, and I specifically refer here to the looting of burials and sculptural works from temple walls, we lose the details necessary to effectively share the story of Cambodia's rich past with the rest of the world. While some information can be

retrieved from properly curated museum collections, it is only a fragment of what can ultimately be obtained from the site.

Two examples of the impact of this looting illustrate the case for continuing the current MOU. The first is the rampant destruction of the Angkorian period of Preah Khan of Kompong Svay, the massive temple complex where I have worked for the past decade. During the late 80s to late 90s, the temples of Preah Khan were ransacked in an attempt to remove (often unsuccessfully) the beautiful carvings that cover the surface of these buildings. Meanwhile, the dense settlement and necropolis surrounding the temple that told the story of the crafts and industries at work inside the complex have been completely mined out in the search for pots, gold, and bronze objects. The second example is the near complete annihilation of Iron Age burial sites across northwestern Cambodia. These large mounds contained 100s of individual tombs buried up to several meters below the surface. Local villagers would tunnel down to retrieve the beautiful bead and shell jewelry, iron and bronze tools and elaborately painted pots, and discard the bones of the individual around who these objects were placed. In both cases, the spark for this work was driven by middlemen who were supplying the global art markets. The price of these artifacts pales in comparison to their value in telling the story of Cambodia.

Through the continued agreement between the US and Cambodia, we have witnessed a considerable decrease in the number of historic era objects being moved into the U.S. and for the repatriation of important items from museums obtained illicitly over the past forty years. That being said, the desire to obtain antiquities by avid collectors here in the US remains a continual threat to Cambodia's cultural patrimony.

The import restrictions laid down by the US Government, alone or in concert with actions taken by other nations, continue to be a critical step in the deterrence of further looting and site destruction within Cambodia. Furthermore, these restrictions also promote the interchange of cultural property among nations seeking to legally undertaken for scientific, cultural and educational purposes.

The MOU between the US and Cambodia has and continues to have a significant and positive effect on looting and ensuring effective repatriation of cultural patrimony. The Cambodian government has made strides to create new agencies (Sambor Prei Kuk Authority, National Preah Vihear Authority) to expand the management and protection of specific sites and provinces. In combination with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and APSARA Authority, the future of local protection is becoming more certain, particularly in the face of enormous economic development. Through various collaborations with international research teams, the Cambodian agencies are made more aware of specific problems and are extremely receptive to ensuring that effective measures (e.g., guards, gateways) are in place to safeguard them for the future.

It is important to note that the MOU between the United States and Cambodia does not hinder properly sanctioned and professional research of patrimony through archaeological, art historical and historical approaches. Cancelling this MOU will hinder the opportunities for researchers here in the United States who have been actively working and helping rebuild Cambodia's academic infrastructure over the past three decades. This agreement, focused primarily on

preventing the movement of objects, is a critical bridge for expanding knowledge and building capacity. The protection of cultural heritage cannot be taken lightly and we have a responsibility, choice and power to be the vanguard to ensure that they are safe for future generations.

I would point out that the MOU should consider several mandates to continue safeguarding Cambodian cultural patrimony: 1) expansion of the GIS databases established through work between the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and the EFEO and the Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor (APSARA) and various international institutions working in the UNESCO Angkor Park region; 2) encourage the establishment of provincial museums to house and maintain antiquities collected via proper research and recovery from illicit looting; 3) collaboration to encourage short-term capacity building in field, laboratory and curatorial techniques; 4) Fulbright support for Cambodians to seek US-based graduate training in archaeology and historic preservation.

In sum, the existing Memorandum has been successful. It has both encouraged and enforced substantial progress on a number of different fronts in the effort to control illicit traffic in cultural property, to preserve and protect Cambodian cultural heritage, and to facilitate legitimate international access to it. The Memorandum, however, is still very much needed. There is every reason to believe that a renewal would help to maintain the momentum and lead to continued progress in the future.

I thank the Committee for this opportunity to submit testimony, and strongly urge renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding with Cambodia.