

23 August 2005

Mr. Jay Kislak
Chair, Cultural Property Advisory Committee
U.S. Department of State
301 4th Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20547

Dear Mr Kislak,

I write with all due respect to urge the Cultural Property Advisory Committee to renew the existing bilateral accord with the Republic of Italy regarding import restrictions on the importation of certain categories of antiquities. At the same time, as an archaeologist with direct recent experience of clandestine looting in Italy, I would like to request permission briefly to address the committee at its meeting of September 8th.

For more than a century Italy has provided the museums and collectors of the world with a substantial percentage of their acquisitions of Graeco-Roman antiquities. Italy both produced and absorbed a remarkable number of works of ancient art, and the Italian source of some categories may seem surprising: thus roughly 75% of Athenian black-and red-figure vases are of Italian origin, because they were exported from Greece to Italy in ancient times.

The specific provenance of most of the Italian antiquities in the U.S. and elsewhere is unknown, a circumstance indicating both that such works very likely originated in unauthorized excavation and also that they were probably exported illegally. The consequence of such pillaging is either damage to or destruction of the ancient context of the work-- of the house, villa, temple, tomb, or public building where it was found.

In a world governed, as we would wish it to be, by law and reason, this situation could not be allowed to continue, and fortunately steps have been taken to ameliorate it. The adoption of the bilateral agreement between Italy and the U.S. on import restrictions is one important example. While it is too early to assess accurately its impact on pillaging, it is my impression that the extent of clandestine digging has diminished in recent years, though it has certainly not been eradicated. I hope to be able to say more about this on September 8th.

Adoption of the agreement has also been accompanied by important changes in Italy, which can in some sense be considered reforms. The Italian government has improved the care of archaeological sites by augmenting custodial staffs and increasing surveillance conducted by the several branches of

police. Maintenance of sites has been improved by fencing, brush-cutting, landscaping, and the installation of lighting and motion detectors. Large grants have been sought and obtained from the European Union to improve the presentation of sites to visitors. Most major sites now have their own museums where recent finds can be stored and displayed, resulting in increased public understanding and appreciation of the local site. School programs bring archaeological sites to life for young people. Special temporary exhibitions have proliferated, especially in southern Italy and Sicily.

At the same time, Italy has relaxed traditional strict limitations on the temporary export of antiquities, making it possible for U.S. museums to obtain long-term loans of artifacts and works of art for purposes of study, exhibition, and conservation. Travelling exhibitions have been organized in Italy, and some of these can be sent to the U.S., although the costs must (reasonably) be borne by the borrowing party. The traditional generous Italian policy of encouraging foreign archaeological projects is now accompanied by the possibility of loans of antiquities to the institution conducting the excavation. The University of Virginia, which for twenty-five years has excavated at Morgantina, has thus recently requested the loan of objects for exhibition and study in the university's Art Museum. Such loans as this one require sufficient time for planning and funding, and they cannot take place overnight.

In Italy's long history of dealing with the huge problem of protecting of its remarkable cultural patrimony, the bilateral accord with the U.S. is a very recent development. It is also a very positive one. For the reasons outlined above-- Italy's effective internal efforts to improve its management of sites, and its eager support for long-term loans and exhibitions in the U.S.-- I believe that the bilateral accord has had demonstrable positive effects and therefore should be renewed. The clandestine pillaging of ancient sites for personal gain is a very deeply rooted social and economic phenomenon, not easy to eliminate. The bilateral accord recognizes the problem and contributes toward controlling it.

Yours truly,

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