

PERU

Defence of Archaeological Monuments in the Northern Coast

The northern coast of Peru is the scene of an extensive and important cultural process. Its valleys and fields host testimonies to a past built by men with recognised technical and artistic abilities, which today provide a sample of the splendour of their culture. For the present, this has become the foundation of material and spiritual identity.

Over the years, throughout many countries of Latin America, properties that are part of the cultural heritage – whether they are of material or intangible character – have suffered an intensive and irreversible process of plundering and pillage. These properties are threatened by increasing international demand for catalogued objects such as ‘works of art’, supplying a market of dealers, wounding the monuments and sites and erasing important pages of their contexts. These pages obviously constitute the most important information for the reconstruction of history and for the reconciliation of the past and present.

The laws for protection of cultural heritage, enacted by governments in the short republican life of Peru, have not been sufficiently efficient for conservation, in some cases generating no protection and the establishment of a dangerous level of impunity.

For the past 10 years we have been working with an important archaeological museum on the northern coast of Peru. Apart from the responsibility for the valuable collection that it exhibits and houses, it has in the past years also faced the drama of looting and the depredation of archaeological monuments and sites. In 1993, during continuous reconnaissance in the valleys of Lambayeque, we identified organised groups of *huaqueroq* (destroyers of monuments) who destroyed sites in search of precious metals and ceramic objects that permitted them to survive and feed a chain and network of moveable goods.

In one of the many interventions that we have undertaken we discovered a mob of more than 200 people who had taken possession of archaeological complexes in order to loot them and obviously destroy them. Following this event, the members of the museum formulated a profound reflection on the responsibility that we have towards heritage and, above all, towards future generations who should not be deprived of the privilege to enjoy their past. Due to this reflection, we decided to face the serious problem with organised responses, directed towards concrete objectives, by constructing a structured framework for action to achieve identified goals. The account of each of these steps is described briefly below.

Imposing legality in the area of archaeological monuments in danger

One of the first tasks was the establishment of a working group that was familiar with the extent and accessibility of the impacted area. The group also needed to be able to integrate itself into a police group, with the support of a representative of the Public Ministry and the media, to participate in daily and sustained intervention actions to dissuade the looters from actively seeking out monuments. Simultaneously, another very small group, during long nights, undertook intelligence work that detected places where the looters collected and stored the stolen goods they were preparing to sell. For the first six months, these simultaneous actions resulted in a reduction of the looting and increased protection of the monuments; they also led to the recuperation of more than 3000 pieces that were being listed for sale. Most importantly, these actions fragmented the organised groups through the subse-

quent legal actions established under the relevant statutes. Of course, in none of these cases were excessive actions undertaken. There was no impact on the property of other people, nor was there a violation of individual integrity other than through the application of means established under the existing legislative regime.

This harsh action was necessary to achieve the clear objective of recuperating the monuments and, above all, to save the sites from depredation. Those of us who were involved in each instant of this process have the conviction that the path we embarked on was difficult but unavoidable.

Organisation of the civil population into groups for archaeological protection

With the first step accomplished and the ample diffusion of this theme by the press, the community at large was able to understand that destroying archaeological sites and monuments is not legal and will be punished under law. A few villages organised under sorts of co-operatives, rural patrols, and farming groups had all suffered for years the lack of a presence of law in their lands. Those who plundered the monuments also carried out criminal actions such as robbery of livestock, assault on homes and personal attacks. Hence, certain sectors saw with pleasure that at last, after many years, the authorities were doing something for them and for their homes. In this context we decided to get closer to them and try to work towards achieving a common goal through the protection of archaeological and historical monuments. During long days of work we met together in these houses to talk about heritage and about the possibilities of development, not only from an economic point of view but also through the elevation of dignity and strengthening of identity.

In 1996, at the end of June, we organised a ceremony of oath-taking in a locality called Ucupe, reuniting more than 300 people who voluntarily and in an organised manner offered their utmost efforts to defend the heritage. That morning was impressive, because for the first time the descendants of the Mochicas, Lambayeques and Chimus – who for years had resisted looking at their lives through the mirror of the past – swore on their honour to defend the heritage. These groups have worked well and, in exchange, they have received our support for some of their essential tasks, such as problems with their land, consultancy for the right use of water and integration of labour in the projects to investigate and defend the monuments. However, the First Step actions have not stopped: it is clear that the intensity has notably diminished, but the protection groups exercise a transparent control and retain ongoing communication with the Museum.

Search for more efficient norms and laws for the defence of cultural heritage

Over the years, the State has taken its attention away from National Culture and has also contributed to establishing a legal corpus that is extremely complicated. In practice, the current legislative regime does not permit the exercise of just mechanisms that guarantee the protection of cultural heritage.

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