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Chair's note: working around the crisis in Libya

By David Atkinson*

Abstract

This is the first in a series of Chair's notes in *Libyan Studies*. We hope that future notes will address easier topics and more straightforward success, but for now we think it is important to communicate what we are doing given the difficult circumstances of Libya today. We trust that this report is useful, and we welcome any feedback.

هذه هي الأولى من مجموعة ملاحظات رئيس جمعية الدراسات الليبية. نأمل بأن تتناول الملاحظات اللاحقة موضوعات أسهل وأكثر نجاحا ، ولكن في الوقت الحالي نعتقد بأنه من المهم أن نتواصل معكم ونطلعكم على ما نقوم به في ظل الظروف الصعبة في ليبيا اليوم. ونحن على ثقة من أن هذا التقريرسيكون مفيداً، كما اننا نرحب دائماً بتعليقاتكم وآرائكم.

Introduction

These are challenging and troubled times for Libya. The relentless instability, threats of violence and actual episodes of conflict and warfare since 2011 have been a tragedy for the Libyan peoples. This situation continues to produce casualties, to fracture civil society and to undermine the economic activities that underpinned Libya's infrastructure and its prospects for any future stability. The political struggle that followed the fall of the Gaddafi regime wracked the country initially, and has now settled into a slow, grinding conflict with different factions, embedded in different regions, struggling over the tenuous and shifting control of the limited government functions and oil revenues that remain. For a long period, none of these factions appear to have been strong enough to overcome their opposition, yet none have been so weak that they faded away. Hence the stasis drags onwards and Libya and Libyans continue to suffer. Besides the trauma and problems of those in Libya, people elsewhere with ties to the region, its people and its cultures and histories look on with concern. For many in the Society for Libyan Studies this conflict also envelops family and friends, or colleagues and research collaborators. The reports that we receive from Libya at our meetings and through other channels are relentlessly grim and sobering.

As a result, and fuelled by our various personal commitments to Libya, its histories and its peoples, we feel compelled to continue our work as best we can and, where possible, to make a positive contribution to Libya's troubled situation. This brief report is the first in a proposed series of annual Chair's notes in *Libyan Studies*. It outlines how the Society for Libyan Studies has responded to the Libyan crisis and how we have developed ways of working around this situation to fulfil our role as an academic research organisation that addresses Libya, its histories and cultures, and the ways that they inform the present.

The background and context

The Society for Libyan Studies was established in 1969 in memory of Richard Goodchild, and coincidentally the same year that Muammar Gaddafi took control of Libya. For the next four decades our engagements with Libya developed within the broader context of Gaddafi's rule and the particular government structures and processes it generated. We never had a permanent base in the country, but the Society sponsored much fieldwork in Libya and these field campaigns often stretched over years.

The fractured period since 2011 has presented new challenges. Our tradition of sustained fieldwork seasons in the country has ceased. The problems of accessing Libya via reliable transport links, of gathering official permissions, and of guaranteeing security once in the country, make fieldwork impossible. In addition, for academics working in the British university sector, gaining permission to travel to Libya is a stern challenge that many institutions simply will not countenance.

Nevertheless, many of us nurture a clear commitment to the country and a sense of responsibility towards continuing our work on Libya. This new context has therefore forced us to develop different ways of working productively *on* Libya, albeit not *in* Libya. To this end we have generated a series of new initiatives that, taken together, begin to constitute a research strategy that demonstrates our continuing engaged research in Libya, and simultaneously our broader contributions to the UK research endeavour and its research capacity. I cannot outline every element of our collective response to the opaque, difficult and shifting situation in Libya here. I will note that there is much excellent smaller scale, individual research addressing Libyan topics that is undertaken by the

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Society's membership and, in some cases, supported directly by the Society. What I can do, however, is to outline four key themes that convey what the Society is doing in response to the crisis in Libya.

1. *Working to preserve the heritage, antiquities and historic cultures of Libya*

The Society has worked to protect and preserve the heritage and culture of Libya in this period of crisis. We hear regular worrying reports of archaeological sites that, given the lack of a functioning state, are neglected or already threatened or damaged by warfare, looting or unregulated building. While we cannot intervene directly in these processes, we can apply our accumulated knowledge and expertise to the wider context and problems in the hope that we will ameliorate some of the damage and destruction.

Consequently, the Society was very pleased to fund the 'Libyan Antiquities at Risk' initiative that is based at the University of Leicester. This project highlights the current neglect and sometimes destruction of Libya's antiquities and heritage, and particularly funerary sculptures of the Hellenistic, Roman and late Roman periods. It simultaneously works to limit the theft of such antiquities from the field and from ransacked museums, and to stymie the illegal trade in these artefacts. This initiative was established by David Mattingly (University of Leicester), a member of SLS Council, and Susan Walker (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), our former President, and it employed Niccolò Mugnai and Julia Nikolaus (University of Leicester). Key activities have included a May 2016 specialist meeting with significant international stakeholders to highlight and expose the illegal trade in antiquities looted from Libya or exported without permission. The project is also developing an online photographic record of Libyan antiquities at risk. This will outline the provenance and details of these antiquities and, by so doing, it hopes to limit the illegal trade in looted artefacts. Details of the project can be found at: www2.le.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/research/projects/laar-libyan-antiquities-at-risk-1/laar-libyan-antiquities-at-risk. We are pleased to develop this kind of engaged activity that supports the histories and heritage of Libya.

Other members of the Society, including our Head of Mission, Paul Bennett (Canterbury Archaeological Trust), are also advising upon (and sometimes involved in) the emergency preservation of archaeological sites under threat from neglect or development. One such example is the hugely important Haua Fteah site that Paul visited in summer 2017 to ensure its correct backfilling to preserve the site for the future (the post-excavation site would not have been protected properly otherwise). This kind of direct intervention in Libya is rare and difficult at present. We debate their worth and risk at our meetings, and they rely upon the generous cooperation of colleagues and partners in the region. Nevertheless, this is further evidence of our engagement with Libya and our traditional remit despite the problems on the ground.

Finally, the Society is a partner on a British Council 'Cultural Protection Fund' project to train heritage professionals in Libya and Tunisia in sustainable practices for documenting, conserving and managing their heritage. Robust and continuing protection for Libya's heritage needs a cadre of local specialists who are able to identify and respond to problems and threats appropriately. The museums and archaeological infrastructure of Libya have been unable to function in the last few years, and the training of specialists in the field has been hindered. The 'Training in Action' project addresses this problem by generating sustainable training for heritage specialists *from* the region to work *in* the region. In addition, the training takes place in Tunisia and intends to build enduring collaborations and shared methodologies between the two countries and their heritage professionals. It also promises to support the heritage tourism industry in the future. The project is led by Anna Leone (University of Durham, and SLS journal editor), Corisande Fenwick (University College London, and SLS Secretary) and William Wootton (Kings College London, and SLS Council member), with partners including the Department of Antiquities of Libya and the Institut National du Patrimoine de Tunisie. This initiative therefore underpins our long-term commitment to Libya's history and to North Africa more broadly.

Taken together, we think that this activity demonstrates a clear engagement with Libya's heritage and an appropriate intervention in various aspects of its preservation and security at this troubling time. We are aware of the limitations of what we can do and we would prefer to intervene more directly and consistently. Nevertheless, these initiatives are useful responses to the crisis by Britain's foremost collection of experts on Libya and its antiquities, histories and heritage.

2. *Preparing our archive and library for the future*

The Society is using this hiatus in field research to establish our archive and library on a more sustainable, long-term basis.

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We have invested heavily in our archive, which is housed at the University of Leicester. This resource contains a series of papers, reports, photographs and other materials that have been donated to the Society over the years. It outlines the Society's role in the British research engagement with Libya and its histories (some materials also pre-date the Society). The nature and potential of the archive were discussed by Victoria Leitch (SLS Publications Manager) and Julia Nikolaus in *Libyan Studies* 46 (2015). Yet the holdings are not sufficiently ordered, stored and catalogued in a manner befitting a modern archive. This is nobody's fault – least of all the University of Leicester, who generously host the archive for us. Nevertheless, the cessation of fieldwork has allowed us to invest in the preservation of key materials from the archive, and the production of an inventory that will make the archive an accessible and functioning resource. This investment adds clear value to the UK research endeavour and capacity.

We are also exploring how to improve the Society's library. This is housed and accessible at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and as with Leicester we remain extremely grateful to this institution for its support and cooperation over the years. Nevertheless, the current situation in Libya presents the opportunity to redirect resources to preserve some of our more vulnerable holdings. We are also exploring how to realise the potential of our library as one of the world's leading collections on Libyan matters. For example, we hold materials that are inaccessible elsewhere (especially sources relating to the Italian colonial period in Libya) and again this initiative enhances the UK research capacity.

3. *Developing a stronger digital strategy to preserve, disseminate and publicise our work*

We have taken the opportunity to establish an improved digital strategy and a greater digital presence for the Society. This agenda also builds upon the work to improve our archive and library.

A central element of our digital strategy is the planned 'Lybica' digital platform that will digitise key elements of our archive to make it more visible, accessible and more widely used by those studying the archaeologies, histories and cultures of Libya. This scheme connects to the restructuring of the archive outlined above; it will also augment that process. The 'Lybica' project is directed by Charlotte Roueché (Kings College London, and SLS Council) and Corisande Fenwick, and it draws upon SLS research funds that will, hopefully, lever additional funding from other sources.

One resource already established is the online *Heritage Gazetteer of Libya* (www.slsgazetteer.org). This was first published in 2016 and its development continues under the leadership of Charlotte Roueché in collaboration with Kings College London Digital Laboratory. The *Gazetteer* records historically significant locations and monuments in Libya with geodata, and marks each with a unique identifier (that will also link these sites to connected materials in our archive, see above). The materials used to populate the *Gazetteer* were drawn from the *Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania* (Reynolds and Ward-Perkins, 1952, revised 2009), the SLS archives and SLS publications – above all, the archaeological guidebooks by Philip Kenrick (SLS Treasurer) to Tripolitania (2009) and Cyrenaica (with Ahmed Buzaian, SLS Council member, 2013). It thus mobilises our rich history of work on Libya to help develop understanding of the region. Further, it also works to make this knowledge freely available to wider, interested communities.

In a similar fashion we are also continuing to digitise our back catalogue of books to make them available as open-access e-books. This process echoes emerging university-level research policies and national-level research concordats that promote 'open research' and the release of research data and findings to the taxpayers who often funded the research in whole or in part. While our field research has halted, we have developed a rolling programme to digitise various volumes of our research and make these available to all. David Mattingly's *The Archaeology of Fazzan* volumes (1, 2 and 3) are already available at: www.societyforlibyanstudies.org/open-access-ebooks. The three volumes in the *Excavations at Sabratha (1948–1951)* collection will be released in open-access formats in late 2017, and further e-books are in production. We argue that this is an appropriate use of time and resource in this difficult period.

Finally, we have also used this period to revamp our website and to grow our social media presence (via Facebook and Twitter) to develop our profile and disseminate our work. The website management has been a challenge in recent years, but we have made good progress lately and the results are a clear improvement (www.societyforlibyanstudies.org).

In sum, this digital agenda is a further and explicit response to the continuing crisis in Libya. It demonstrates our expertise, our engagement, and our wider contribution to the understanding of the

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region, but it does so in the media appropriate to our times and that will reach a far wider audience than our traditional printed materials ever did.

4. *Broadening the disciplinary and geographical reach of the Society*

Finally, over the last few years the Society has continued to develop a research strategy that extends our reach across regions adjacent to Libya, and that extends our presence into academic disciplines beyond our traditional strengths in archaeology and ancient history. This shift towards wider geographical realms in the Mediterranean and North Africa, and towards cognate disciplines, has long-standing roots in the SLS and was being accelerated before the recent instability in Libya. This move is also reflected by the increasing geographical coverage of *Libyan Studies* (as outlined in the editor's report elsewhere in this issue). Yet the crisis prompted further movement in both these directions.

One such initiative was developed in collaboration with the British School at Rome (BSR). Like the SLS, the BSR is a BIRI institution (the British International Research Institutes are part-funded by the British Academy to coordinate British research in various overseas regions). We worked with the BSR to sponsor two post-doctoral research fellowships on Italo-Libyan relations (between 2011 and 2013). These positions were based at the BSR to exploit the resources that have accumulated in Rome upon Italo-Libyan matters from the colonial period onwards. Barbara Spadaro worked on Jewish subjects between Italy and Libya and the heritage of a colonial past, and Mattia Toaldo worked on interactions between Italy and Libya in 1969–76 and Western responses to the Arab uprisings of 2011. Both subsequently published scholarly contributions in these fields. This collaboration also reinforced the mutual interests of the SLS and the BSR in the histories of the Western Mediterranean. We have also supported other research into modern Italo-Libyan relations through recent research grants. This likewise demonstrates our proactive response to addressing these transnational processes.

At the same time, the Society has widened its geographical remit to foster research on other North African and Mediterranean regions connected to Libya. We awarded a recent grant for research into the contemporary migration crisis, perhaps the most pressing current political issue in the Mediterranean region, and another transnational process in which Libya is embroiled and which requires analysis at a wider scale.

In a similar manner, the Society has broadened its scope to encompass an increasing range of academic traditions. For example, current research awards are held by modern historians, anthropologists, sociologists and human geographers. This wider range of academic subjects reflects the British Academy's agenda to increase the disciplinary coverage of the BIRI organisations, and we are pleased to lead on this agenda.

One final initiative that extends the traditional scope and reach of the Society revolves around making our knowledge of Libya's histories and heritage more accessible to the Libyan people. I mentioned our role as a partner in a project to train Libyan heritage professionals earlier. An additional strategy involves the recent use of World Bank funds to translate Philip Kenrick's *Archaeological Guide to Tripolitania* (2009) into Arabic and, subsequently, to print and disseminate 3,000 copies to heritage organisations, schools and universities in Libya. We are currently finalising plans to do the same with Philip and Ahmed's *Archaeological Guide to Cyrenaica* (2013). The aim is to enable Libyans – and especially the younger generations whose education may have been disrupted of late – to think anew about their extraordinary heritage with the help of these accounts. In this respect, we hope to extend our reach into Libyan society via these additional schemes.

Working on Libya despite the crisis in Libya

In conclusion, these initiatives represent an imaginative, engaged and ethically appropriate response to the Libyan crisis and its impact upon our traditional activities and profile. While we remain shocked and saddened by the situation in Libya, we have been responsive, responsible and creative in developing activities that sustain our contributions to knowledge and to the broader understanding of the country and its wider region.

When the crisis ends we are ready to resume our archaeological field research, but we will continue to support our new initiatives addressing the history and heritage of Libya. Equally, we will sustain our strategy of making our knowledge, publications and resources available via accessible, digital formats. We think that the wider British research community and endeavour will benefit from the recent investment in our archive and library, and from the wider and transdisciplinary research collaborations prompted by the evolving reach of our research funding. Given all this, we argue that we demonstrate the potential evolving roles of BIRI institutes, even in the most difficult contexts such as that presented by contemporary Libya.

Before I finish, I have three comments. First, the great majority of this work was undertaken before

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my time as Chair of the SLS, and the credit should go to the Council members over the last six years and to key members of the Society including Susan Walker and Robert Morkot (University of Exeter) as our previous President and Chair. Along with our long-standing Treasurer, Philip Kenrick, they established, guided and maintained the agendas described above. Second, various universities and other organisations employ many of the people who work voluntarily for the Society. We are a small organisation and we rely on this voluntary labour. We should therefore acknowledge the universities too, especially Leicester and SOAS for hosting our archive and library respectively, and for the invaluable support that this provides. Third, I hope that the wider membership of the Society appreciate and support these developing agendas and the efforts invested in these various initiatives. As your Council, we aim to represent your interests; we hope that you can support our programme in turn.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to fellow members of the Council of the Society who have provided information, perspective and corrections on earlier versions of this note.

Paul Bennett MBE

Our Head of Mission, Paul Bennett, was awarded an MBE in the June 2017 Queen's Birthday Honours list for 'services to archaeology'. Paul has worked on the archaeology of Libya since the early 1970s. He was a director of the Euesperides project (1995–2007), which excavated this ancient Greek city near Benghazi. More recently, he has advised on heritage conservation for the Libyan Government, the Department of Antiquities and the World Bank. This long-term commitment to the country and its people has been augmented by service to the Society for Libyan Studies, where he has served as Chair (2002–2008) and as Head of Mission subsequently. We pass on our congratulations to Paul for this very much-merited award.

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