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Chair's note: a strategy to develop our geographical and interdisciplinary reach, and our potential audiences

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Abstract

The Society for Libyan Studies celebrated its 50th year in 2019 and it boasts a long record of promoting excellent research on Libya and its adjacent regions. Our second half-century will bring new challenges and opportunities. This note outlines our strategy to maintain our focus on Libya while acknowledging that Libya has always been embedded within wider networks of influence, trade and engagement across the Mediterranean and throughout North and Central Africa. We want to acknowledge this broader geographical remit more clearly with a new subtitle for this journal: *Libyan Studies: a Journal of North African and Mediterranean Cultures*. This subtitle also points to the benefits of engaging other academic communities beyond our traditional, core constituencies of archaeology, ancient history and history – not least because a broader engagement with contemporary research will help to maintain the Society's strength, relevance and sustainability. Likewise, we aim to engage more interest from the Libyan and North African diaspora in Britain. These initiatives will build upon our strong foundations to make us more able to respond to the challenges of our second 50 years.

ملاحظة الرئيس : استراتيجية لتطوير امتدادنا الجغرافي و التخصصي ، وجمهورنا المحتمل

بقلم ديفيد أتكينسون

في عام 2019 احتفلت جمعية الدراسات الليبية بعامها الخمسين، و هي تتمتع بسجل طويل في تعزيز البحوث المتميزة حول ليبيا والمناطق المجاورة لها. و سيأتي نصف الثاني من هذا القرن بتحديات وفرص جديدة. تحدد هذه المذكرة استراتيجيتنا لإبقاء تركيزنا على ليبيا مع الاعتراف بأن ليبيا كانت دائماً جزءاً لا يتجزأ من شبكات التأثير والتجارة والمشاركة عبر البحر الأبيض المتوسط و جميع أنحاء شمال ووسط إفريقيا. نريد أن نعترف بهذا المجال الجغرافي الأوسع بشكل أكثر وضوحاً مع عنوان فرعي جديد لهذه المجلة: الدراسات الليبية: مجلة ثقافات شمال إفريقيا والبحر الأبيض المتوسط. يشير هذا العنوان الفرعي أيضاً إلى فوائد إشراك المجتمعات الأكاديمية الأخرى بما يتجاوز مكوناتنا التقليدية الأساسية لعلم الآثار والتاريخ و التاريخ القديم - ليس أقل هذه الفؤاد هو أن المشاركة الأوسع في البحوث المعاصرة ستساعد في الحفاظ على قوة الجمعية وأهميتها واستدامتها. وبالمثل ، نهدف إلى جذب المزيد من الاهتمام من الليبيين والمهاجرين من شمال إفريقيا المقيمين في بريطانيا. ستُبني هذه المبادرات على أسسنا القوية لجعلنا أكثر قدرة على الاستجابة لتحديات الخمسين عاماً القادمة.

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Building on our first 50 years

In late 2019, the Society for Libyan Studies celebrated its 50th anniversary with a day conference with exhibition and reception at University College London (26 October), a reception after a lecture and our Annual General Meeting at the British Academy (5 December) and volume 50 of *Libyan Studies*, which including papers detailing some of the impressive research supported by the Society across our five decades. The two events at UCL and the British Academy offered excellent research presentations. In turn, the special issue of *Libyan Studies* demonstrated the Society's history of sustained and productive archaeological fieldwork programmes that developed at a time when we could access Libya. The special issue also outlined some of the exceptional research publications that resulted from this longstanding field research. Finally, many presentations and reports also noted the invaluable relations with Libyan collaborators and communities that developed alongside our academic research. Together these events demonstrated the value of the Society's contributions to the study of Libya and North Africa, and the sustained goodwill and support that it has generated since its foundation in 1969.

In 2020 we face further flux and challenges and this, my fourth Chair's note, outlines our strategy as we navigate the Society through this rapidly changing context. Of course, our work is stymied by the sobering backdrop of continuing military conflict in Libya and the subsequent suffering of the Libyan peoples. Our Council meetings feature detailed reports from Paul Bennett, our head of mission, on the evolving tragedy in the region. We reproduce his accounts in this journal too. Our collective and personal commitments to the region frame our efforts to sustain the founding purpose of SLS to study Libya and its histories. Yet given this continuing and traumatic situation, the Society has had to develop new ways of working *on* Libya rather than *in* Libya and, as a result, this new strategy has evolved. In the three previous issues of *Libyan Studies* my Chair's note sought to outline how the SLS is evolving to adapt to these shifting political contexts.

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- In 2017 I explained how we have responded to the impossibility of doing field research in Libya by redirecting resources to establish our archive more robustly at its University of Leicester base. We also reviewed and enhanced our specialist library that is embedded within the library of the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. Further work on developing this unique resource is scheduled there when conditions allow. Both initiatives will facilitate future research on Libya and its wider regions, and both secure the material records of the Society's previous research contributions. As ever, we remain very grateful to these University partners for their cooperation.
- The Chair's note of 2018 outlined our initiatives to cement our online digital presence and profile through our website. It also explained how our open access agenda is making classic books from our back catalogue available more widely in digital formats that are free to all.
- Finally, my 2019 note talked about the organisational and funding structure that we are nested within as one of the British Academy's seven British International Research Institutes (BIRI). The British Academy and the UK Government, who provides its funding, are developing a revised agenda for the BIRI and our presence and increased collaboration within this network will nudge us towards more pronounced roles as part of British 'science diplomacy' in a changing world.

As should be clear, these are busy, challenging times for the Society and we face significant changes ahead. My fourth Chair's note outlines how we aim to deliver our remit in Libya and adjacent states by broadening our reach more explicitly to address these neighbouring regions in ways that reflect their long-entwined histories. This more encompassing approach will hopefully prompt further collaboration with researchers in academic disciplines beyond out traditional core areas, with more partners from overseas, and with the other British International Research Institutes and other organisations. Finally, we also hope to connect with potential audiences in the UK who are interested in Libya and adjacent regions. The first such audience are academics and researchers who work on these regions. We aim to attract more applications for our grants, more research collaboration, and more submissions to *Libyan Studies*. A second, broader audience is the public who are interested in the region, with the Libyan and North African diaspora an obvious group. This strategy will therefore expand the Society's reach geographically and develop its audiences.

Encouraging a broader appreciation of Libya and its wider regions

On 30 November 2017 the Society's Council agreed that the title of *Libyan Studies* should be augmented by a sub-title, to produce *Libyan Studies: a Journal of North African and Mediterranean Cultures*. This first development reflects our broader interests across North Africa and adjacent regions. We remain committed to Libya and its histories and we offer support and solidarity to its peoples. But just as the current crisis in Libya is connected to other interests from across the Middle East, the Mediterranean and North Africa, our Society should also address this broader canvas rather than be bound by the twentieth-century construction of the modern Libyan state. Our interests in the past and the present stretch beyond these contemporary borders, and we want to signal more clearly that our journal works across this broader geographical remit equally. We remain absolutely committed to Libya as a central element of our interests, but we need to address the processes that shaped Libya in the past and the present within this expanded regional frame.

Engaging our wider constituencies

Second, we are also using British Academy special funds (its Business Development Funding) to build our constituencies further. As the smallest British International Research Institute, our resources are stretched and we need to develop our membership to make us more sustainable in the future. To this end we have surveyed our potential academic membership across the British higher education and university sector. Our traditional constituency has revolved around the disciplines of archaeology and ancient history, with some classicists, historians of subsequent periods, anthropologists, geographers and political scientists also involved with SLS. Yet other disciplines are under-represented in SLS and there will be researchers working on Libyan and North Africa themes who are unaware of the Society or who believe it to be limited to our traditional core areas. We hope to reach out to these other researchers and draw them into our activities so they can enhance the quality and range of the research we fund and publish. This strategy will allow us to develop our potential as a scholarly society by growing our membership.

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In addition, we have secured further funding to forge stronger connections with the Libyan diaspora in the UK. We normally have British-based Libyans on our Council, plus ties with others working in the UK university sector. We now aim to connect to greater numbers of the Libyan and North African communities. This work is in the planning stage and has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but we hope to hold events to inform these potential members about the Society and its remit. Alongside our growing digital presence, this strategy will help us to reach more of our potential audience and to further grow our membership in a sustainable and representative way.

In sum, as SLS begins its second 50 years, this strategy offers ways to sustain and grow our society. It should build our academic and research constituency and strengthen our profile in this sector. We aim to develop our engagement with various interested publics in the UK. Through these routes our Society could demonstrate its contributions to improved and sustained understanding of this crucial world region, while also expanding our audiences and membership. Together, these initiatives will help SLS to develop further as a contemporary scholarly, research and engagement organisation contributing significantly to understandings of Libya, North Africa and the Mediterranean.

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