

Chair's note: opening access to our resources and our research

By David Atkinson*

Abstract

This second annual note on the Society's activities outlines how we have responded to the ongoing crisis in Libya and our connected inability to work in the region by developing our research activities and facilities in the UK. Our most advanced initiative is our project to catalogue the Society's archive and makes its contents available online. Similarly, we are exploring how we might promote our library and encourage greater awareness and use of this unique resource. Finally, we are providing an increasing range of our books and field reports in Open Access formats via our website. All of this aims to make our distinctive resources more easily available to members, and to wider research communities in the UK and overseas.

هذه الملاحظة السنوية الثانية عن أنشطة الجمعية تضع الخطوط العريضة عن كيفية استجابتنا للأزمة المستمرة في ليبيا وما نجم عنها من عجزنا عن العمل في المنطقة، وذلك من خلال تطوير النشاطات والمرافق البحثية لدينا هنا في المملكة المتحدة. المبادرة الأكثر تقدماً لدينا هي مشروع تصنيف أرشيف الجمعية وجعل محتوياته متاحة على الإنترنت. وبالمثل، فنحن نقوم بالبحث عن كيفية الترويج لمكتبتنا لتحقيق وعي أكبر واستخدام أكثر لهذا المورد الفريد. وأخيراً، فنحن نقوم بتقديم مجال متزايد من كتبنا وتقاريرنا الميدانية في تنسيقات الوصول المفتوح (Open Access) عبر موقعنا الإلكتروني. كل هذا يهدف إلى جعل مواردنا المميزة متاحة بسهولة أكبر للأعضاء والمجتمعات البحثية على نطاق أوسع في المملكة المتحدة وخارجها.

Working on Libya rather than in Libya

The continuing flux and instabilities of Libya in 2017–18 have once more been a source of concern and anxiety for the Society for Libyan Studies. While some commentators suggest that the situation in Libya is not as unstable and fractious as in more recent years, it nevertheless remains deeply worrying. The various tensions across the region, and their impact on civil society, remain a genuine tragedy for the Libyan people. In addition, this precarious situation is tested further by the flows of migrants and trafficked peoples across the region – which generates additional political tensions and worrying accounts of violence and human rights abuses. These ongoing problems mean that the Society remains unable to support sustained research programmes in Libya, and we have once again been forced to pursue other ways to work productively

and usefully in this rapidly shifting, challenging and relentlessly difficult environment.

As a result, the Society has continued to support research *on* Libya, while research *in* Libya remains unfeasible. Awards made through our grants programme have served this end, and our lecture series has also included presentations upon Libyan topics, but where the research was undertaken elsewhere. Another new UK-based initiative was our February 2018 meeting that responded to Libya's contemporary challenges when we hosted the writer Hisham Matar and a discussion of his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Return* (2017). This event was held in collaboration with the Life Writing Centre at King's College London. A substantial audience of over a hundred heard Matar reading from *The Return* and reflecting on the book's representations of contemporary Libya with SLS Council member Wen-Chin Ouyang (School of Oriental and African Studies, London University). All present seemed to agree that this was an excellent occasion and that we should arrange further similar events that address contemporary literature and other accounts of Libya.

Over this last year the Society has also pushed onward with our strategy of developing and reinforcing our presence in the UK's research landscape. I wrote last year about our growing digital presence and this remains a priority. In addition, the Society has used our enforced hiatus from field research to begin reassessing, strengthening and opening up our archive and our library. Our aim is to make these UK-based resources recognised and functioning elements of the UK's research infrastructure. By extension, this strategy should underpin their future and reinforce their potential contributions to further research and to people and groups interested in Libya and its wider region.

First, and as mentioned in my first Chair's notes of 2017, the Society has invested heavily in our archive. This collection spans books, letters, reports, other documents and maps and images about Libya that have accrued over the years. These materials have been held since 2012 at the University of Leicester, but they were largely unsorted and uncatalogued and could not function readily as a coherent research resource. This has now changed thanks to a highly productive alliance between the University of Leicester and the Society. The use of Society

* Chair, The Society for Libyan Studies.

funds has allowed the archive to be slowly sifted, conserved (where needed) and organised. Moreover, the archive is being added to the searchable, online catalogue of the University of Leicester's archives. The SLS section of the catalogue runs to 159 pages, which demonstrates the scale of the work required to organise these materials. There is more work to do, yet what was a largely inaccessible archive is now visible and searchable to anyone with internet access. This unique resource is therefore future-proofed; it also makes a contribution to the UK's research capacity. We are really pleased with this project and we are very grateful to the University of Leicester for their assistance, and to David Mattingly (a past Chair and Council member of the SLS), and Charlotte Roueché (of King's College London and the SLS Council) who have driven this project forward.

Second, we hope to similarly maximise the potential of our library. This is another unique resource and one of the world's leading collections on Libyan matters. It is based upon the personal library of Richard Goodchild, the former Controller of Antiquities in Libya and, later, Professor of Archaeology at the University of London. Many subsequent bequests and donations have built this into an important collection with a significance that we suspect is underappreciated – not least given the rare materials it contains, including Italian work from the colonial period that is often unavailable in Italy or elsewhere. It is housed within the library collections of the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, and it is accessible to members of SOAS and the university, and to members of our society (the catalogue is accessible here: <https://www.zotero.org/libsoc/items>). Nevertheless, we think it deserves a higher profile and we have employed some part-time assistance to assess the range and scope of these materials, and their wider promise as a key resource for Libyan matters. Once this survey is complete, we can evaluate how the library might be publicised so that it finds a wider audience for the good of international research and understanding. Again, this project should enhance the UK's research endeavour and capacity. And again, we owe thanks to Charlotte Roueché.

Third, we aim to develop the Open Access provision of some of our publications and back catalogue. The Open Access and Open Data agendas are sweeping across the research and higher education landscape at present. The theory is that research and knowledge funded, or co-funded, by public money

should be freely available for public use (rather than locked within academic journal websites with paid access, or hidden in often expensive academic books). We are adopting this agenda to make key elements of our research on Libya available to a wider readership. To this end we have made several key books from our back catalogue available on our website at no cost (<http://www.societyforlibyanstudies.org/open-access-ebooks/>). The titles available are all archaeological books at present, but other titles are lined up for further Open Access publication (including some that move beyond archaeology into other areas of our remit). We believe that this Open Access provision helps to share the knowledge that the Society has generated over the last fifty years. We hope it will reach audiences, especially in North Africa and elsewhere, who might otherwise struggle to access this research. Our thanks for this scheme go to Victoria Leitch, our Publications Manager.

These three initiatives have been developed as part of the Society's enduring commitment to Libya and North Africa. This is also work that we can undertake in the UK while we can't work in Libya. Nevertheless, these projects demonstrate our sustained, engaged research in the region and our contributions to the UK's research environment and capacity.

Honorary Treasurer

Philip Kenrick's time as Honorary Treasurer to the Society came to an end in April 2018. Philip had served 10 full years in the role and had promised his wife that he would retire from the role after a decade. He delivered on this promise precisely. This was no surprise given that he delivered on every aspect of his role as Honorary Treasurer precisely, and with extraordinary levels of diligence and care. Philip was a constant, constructive presence in our meetings – always contributing with a clear and cogent position, and with the best interests of the Society prioritised. He kept the accounts meticulously. He also flagged areas of potential concern, and key shifts in the broader landscapes in which the Society operated. Critically, Philip also embodied our institutional memory, with wide-ranging recall of the Society's previous arrangements, agreements and practices. The Society's council, officers and members are, I am sure, extraordinarily grateful for all the time, effort and commitment that Philip has invested. We thank Philip enormously for his support for the Society for Libyan Studies over the last ten years. Alex Wilshaw has now taken over from Philip as the new Honorary Treasurer.