Society for Libyan Studies grant report:

‘Colonial Science’ and the production of comprehensible territory in Italian Libya

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**Project Outline:**

This research addresses the efforts of the Italian regime and its agencies to assess and record the nature of Italian territories in Libya in the early 1930s through a process they labelled ‘colonial science’. This ‘science’ produced a Italian version of Libya, couched in European epistemologies, that allowed the Italian regime and, they hoped, Italians more widely, to apprehend, understand and generate affiliation with their expanding colonial territory. This process also produced the modern territorial unit of Libya.

The programme coordinated the efforts of Italian archaeologists, anthropologists, geologists, historians, linguists, palaeontologists, cartographers, human geographers and physical geographers and demographers. The *Società Geografica Italiana* coordinated these scientists and academics on behalf of the regime; it functioned as the gatekeeper for the regime’s efforts; and it served as a centre of calculation where the incoming data was collated and archived. The *Società* also engaged with various other organisations involved in producing Libya, including the *Institute Geografico Militare*, the Colonial Ministry, the Education Ministry, the Chamber of Deputies (parliament); the Governor’s offices in Tripolitania and Cirenaica, various branches of the Italian military, the museums sector in Italy and the Italian press and publishing industry.

The research draws upon theories and methods from historical and cultural geography; Science and Technology Studies; postcolonial studies and imperial history. Additionally, it draws upon archival, visual and popular sources, amongst others, to construct the contours of this ‘colonial science’.

**Research Activity:**

Over this last year I have continued to explore how the *Società Geografica Italiana*, Rome, managed and delivered the key surveys of the Fezzan, 1932-1935, and promoted this knowledge as a scientific account of this growing colony.

* This has involved a deep trawl through the *Società Geografica Italiana* archive, Rome, to uncover the processes, priorities and aims of the colonial science programme. This involved working through 37 large files of letters, telegrammes, agendas, memoranda and other managerial documents.
* I have continued to use the *Società Geografica Italiana* photographic archive.
* Plus the *Società Geografica Italiana* library for the academic print culture that reflects the wider Libyan project.
* I have visited the Ardito Desio archive in Testaccio, Rome.
* Further, the press and popular printed culture coverage of Libya has been accessed via the *Biblioteca di Storia Moderne e Contemporanea*, Rome; the *Fondazione Marco Besso*, Rome, and the *British School at Rome* library.
* Research trips were undertaken in October and December 2016, and February, September, October and December 2017

NB! Further trips were waylaid by a demanding new role as Associate Dean for Research, Faculty of Science and Engineering, University of Hull (July 2016 onwards).

I also began a term as Chair of the SLS from November 2016.

These responsibilities (especially the Associate Deanship) made sustained fieldwork difficult to schedule while I adapted to these new demands. This has now calmed down and I should be able to return to more fieldwork on my 20% time allowance for research (although I take my SLS service out of this allowance also).

**Research presentations, 2017:**

* Invited paper: British School at Rome, Rome, February 2017
* Invited paper: Illegalism, Violence and State Avoidance in Libya, Chad and Central African Republic Conference, All Souls College, Oxford, April 2017
* Invited paper: Society of Libyan Studies, British Academy, October 2017

**Forthcoming Research presentations:**

* Wilberforce Institute for Slavery and Emancipation, Hull, March 2018
* International Conference of Historical Geographers, Warsaw, July 2018

**Papers in preparation:**

Working drafts of three papers are emerging:

* One paper, eventually for submission to *Libyan Studies*, was presented in Oxford at Easter (at the *Illegalism, Violence and State Avoidance in Libya, Chad and Central African Republic* conference, April 2017). This paper will outline the overall project to produce a ‘Libya’ comprehensible to Europeans. This also formed the basis of my lecture to our AGM, British Academy, November 2017.
* A second paper will demonstrate how geographers, with their broad interdisciplinary tradition, pulled together other specialists into a synoptic account of the Fezzan. This will go to a leading disciplinary journal such as the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* to demonstrate how these geographical practices were accelerated under late modernity. Some of this paper was presented at the British School at Rome: *Thinking geographically about Fascist Italy* (February 2017), and will be presented at the
* A third paper (in draft stage) explores the internal mechanics of the Fascist state and the spaces that academic researchers sought to carve out within an ostensibly totalitarian regime. This would go to leading Italian studies journal like *Modern Italy* or the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*. It will be presented

**Developing results:**

Below are some of the key themes emerging from the research that will impact upon our wider debates.

*1) The construction of the Libyan state and the nature of Italian expansionism*

The mechanics and processes of organising field science and managing the results are emerging from this research. These processes underpinned the production of ‘Italian Libia’ as a territorial unit. Nothing in the English or Italian literatures develops these themes in a similar way, or to a parallel depth.

*2) Representations of precolonial and colonial Libya:*

The strategies used to represent Libyan regions as Italian territory include cartography, formal surveys and reports, academic writing, popular articles and newspaper reports, and racial theory and the eugenic sciences. They also include images of landscapes, resources, peoples, anthropological topics and the Italian presence in the region.

*3) The role and presentation of ‘science’ in the state-making process:*

The performance of ‘science’ has emerged as a significant theme in this research, as the Italians performed their modernity to local people and to an Italian audience at home.

*4) The nature of academics and scientists in the Fascist state*

One unexpected aspect of the work has exposed the surprising degree of autonomy that academics enjoyed in the Fascist state. Histories of the totalitarian regime suggest that Italians experienced direct control, but three academics saw their disputes accelerated to the ministerial level (2 x Minister of Colonies; 1 x Minister for Education). I will write a short paper on this issue for an Italian Studies journal (Journal of Modern Italian Studies).

**David Atkinson, January 2018**