



**President's Report
ASOR Board of Trustees
November 24, 2019**

I. I Never Dreamed . . .

In November 2013, at the ASOR meetings in Baltimore, I encountered a former member of the ASOR Board at breakfast, and we sat down together to chat as we ate. As I was, at that time, ASOR President-Elect, it was not surprising that he asked me what my goals were for my presidency.

My answer, I have to admit with some chagrin, was astonishingly unambitious. I replied that I wanted to make sure that what I saw as ASOR's core programs – our Annual Meeting, our publications program, and our fellowships program – continued to succeed and even to thrive. I also had in mind (perhaps a little more ambitiously) that there were a couple of on-going ASOR initiatives that I needed to bring home: the “Building a Foundation for ASOR Campaign,” due to end six months into my presidency, on June 30, 2014, and the efforts of the Ethics Task Force to develop a comprehensive “ASOR Policy on Professional Conduct.” Finally (maybe a little more ambitiously still), I wanted to form an Ad Hoc Strategic Planning Task Force, to develop an update to the strategic plan then in place, which ran only through 2015.

Well, I never dreamed. Already on January 1, 2014, the day my presidency began, I received six separate e-mails about a Program Committee kerfuffle, the first arriving at 8:26 am on that morning of New Year's Day. And almost immediately after that brush fire been put out, Andy pulled me into the throes of a fund-raising effort to bring to closure a challenge campaign, whereby ASOR would qualify for a \$475,000 legacy gift if we could raise \$200,000 from 300 different donors by January 31, 2014. We came down to the wire: we

pulled in the last 92 donors we needed between January 24 and January 31, and I think I talked or wrote to every one of the 92! It was exhausting, and (I found myself thinking) it was only Month 1 of 72.

Then, a scant six weeks later, my attention was drawn to the Notice of Funding Opportunity put out by the US Department of State, which offered \$600,000 in funding to monitor and report on the degradation and destruction of cultural heritage sites in Syria. I gave the OK for ASOR to apply for this funding, all the while thinking that we would never get it, as we had no experience in applying for this sort of cultural heritage funding or doing this sort of cultural heritage work. But I thought it would be good for us to practice putting in these sorts of applications.

You can thus imagine my surprise – indeed, Andy might remember my expletive-laden expression of total shock – when he called me on May 30th to say we had been awarded the grant. You can also imagine how frantically we scrambled that summer to put in place the infrastructure and personnel that we needed to do the work to which we had committed, and we scrambled even more, come September, when the State Department added Northern Iraq (and an extra \$156,000) to the grant’s scope of work. By the way, in the midst of all this, we somehow brought our “Building a Foundation for ASOR” campaign to a successful close, with our generous donors (about 25% of the ASOR membership) contributing a total of \$1,702,000 over three years, a whopping 30% above our original \$1.3 million campaign goal.

It was all a whirlwind, but surely, I thought, things would subsequently calm down: for example, I thought the Cultural Heritage Initiative team would get settled in and get working (and they did, and, in fact, excelled so much in their work that our grant was renewed for a second year), so that I could get back to my much more modest agenda of forming a Strategic Planning Task Force (which I did, in fact, assemble in November-December 2014) and finalizing the ASOR Policy on Professional Conduct (which was, in fact, approved by the ASOR Board, at its April 2015 meeting).

But little did I know that, somehow (I still can’t quite connect all the dots to tell you how this happened), the conversations of the Strategic Planning Task Force, and its reports to the Board, convinced the Board that we needed to undertake a larger review of our “brand” and, especially, how we presented ourselves beyond the world of ASOR. By January 2016, therefore, we had contracted with a branding consultant, C&G Partners, and the Strategic Planning Task Force, which was, by this point, in the final phase of its Strategic Planning work (the 2016-2020 ASOR Strategic Plan was adopted by the Board in April 2016), reconstituted itself as a Branding Task Force and threw itself into discussions about ASOR’s name, its logo, business cards, stationery, the website . . . you name it.

And oh, the website. When the Officers Nominations Committee interviewed me in February 2013, when I was a candidate for the ASOR presidency, they asked me, not unreasonably, to identify what I thought I might bring to the job in terms of strengths and weaknesses. I did identify some strengths, but I was much more eloquent on the topic of weaknesses, claiming (with complete honesty and a little pride) the title of “Luddite” and noting, by way of example, that if the Officers Nominations Committee wanted an ASOR President who was going to redesign the ASOR website, I was not the right candidate.

So, we redesigned the ASOR website. I have to say, moreover, that I think it looks stunning, and it was extremely gratifying to me that I was asked to give a presentation, on ASOR’s behalf, at the CAORC Board meeting in May 2017 on “how to get a website right.”

II. A Few Nightmares

It was nice to have that ego-boost from CAORC at the precise moment when we found ourselves beset by two enormous challenges. First, the US Department of State, despite repeated promises, failed and failed to deliver on the grant funding due January 1, 2017, to cover Year 3 of the cultural heritage work we were conducting on their behalf. This funding finally was released, in May 2017, but the significant lag time between the January 1, 2017, start date and the actual release of funds made a hash of our budget and required us to lay off staff from our Cultural Heritage Initiatives team.

The second, and even greater challenge we faced come Spring 2017 was homelessness, as on March 16, 2017, we heard from our long-time academic host, Boston University, that by May 31, 2017, we needed to vacate the offices at 656 Beacon Street that we had occupied for twenty-one years.

Finding a new home for ASOR had definitely not been on my to-do list back in 2013, when I was nominated and elected as ASOR President. Nor, of course, was it on anyone’s to-do list, and we scrambled. We ended up renting temporary space very nearby – at 650 and 665 Beacon Street – but securing this space was a “down to the wire” endeavor (we signed the lease for 650 Beacon Street on Friday afternoon of Memorial Day weekend, four days before our move-in date the next Tuesday). Securing these spaces was also a stop-gap measure, especially when we learned, on that Friday afternoon of Memorial Day weekend, that the lease for 650 Beacon Street covered only seven months, through December 2017.

Fortunately, that December 2017 lease was eventually extended to June 30, 2018. Still, this lease, and the lease at 665 Beacon Street, were real leases: that is, all of a sudden, after twenty-one rent-free years at Boston University, we needed to pay rent, and at precisely the moment when the State Department hold-up in our Cultural Heritage Initiative funding was wreaking havoc on our budget.

As we all know, this story has had the happiest of endings: in April 2019, we bought a building, the James F. Strange Center in Alexandria, VA, to serve as ASOR's new and permanent home. The building – as those of you who have seen it know – is beautiful, the location is fantastic, and our staff members have proclaimed themselves to be very happy to be working there. We own this building free and clear, moreover: our donors were so generous, and so responsive, that in fifteen short months, we were able to raise the money we needed to purchase the building and, in addition, secure funds to pay for ongoing expenses and maintenance.

That said, the conversations in which the Executive Committee and Board needed to engage to get us to this happy point were some of the most stressful the ASOR Board, in my experience, has had to undertake. Should we rent, buy, or look for another home at an academic institution? Should we leave Boston, and, if so, where, ideally, should our new home be? Having made the decision to buy, can we really raise the money? And where were we to go for the interim, between Boston and buying?

All the while, moreover, the State Department funding that had supported our work of monitoring the degradation and destruction of cultural heritage sites in Syria, Northern Iraq, and (eventually) Libya, and that had benefitted our budget through indirect dollars, was becoming an iffy and iffy prospect. Indeed, that funding stream ceased on December 31, 2018, and our Cultural Heritage Initiatives program has been a little at loose ends ever since, as we search for new funding sources.

III. Tossing and Turning

So, amid all of this, you might ask, what happened to my original goals: that ASOR's core programs – our Annual Meeting, our publications program, and our fellowships program – continue to succeed and even to thrive? The answer, I am happy to say, is that they have thrived, although these programs have also had to deal with significant change, especially the Annual Meeting and the publications program.

Indeed, as of January 1, 2019, ASOR Publications underwent what is probably the most profound change in our publications program since the first volume of our flagship journal, the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* (BASOR), was published in 1919. More specifically, on January 1, 2019, the University of Chicago Press became ASOR's publishing partner, taking on the responsibility for the publication and distribution of our three journals (BASOR, *Near Eastern Archaeology* [NEA], and the *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* [JCS]). We made this move because we were convinced the University of Chicago Press has the expertise and infrastructure to handle publication and distribution better than we were able to, through our “mom-and-pop store” mode of operation, and because

the Press's expertise and efficiencies offer us significant financial savings. Eleven months in, all looks good – as the Board will hear in a report from our University of Chicago publisher, Kari Roane, at our meeting in San Diego.

The Annual Meeting is also about to undergo a profound change in 2021, 2022, and 2023, as we have determined it is not economically or logistically feasible for us to meet with SBL in those three years (SBL is in San Antonio in 2021, Denver 2022, and back in San Antonio in 2023). According to the Board policy passed at its April 2019 meeting, ASOR, in years when it is not feasible to meet with SBL, should meet in a venue that best serves the greatest number of its constituencies. We have discussed what such venues might be with the Program Committee and the Chairs Coordinating Council, and we will also be discussing possible venues during the Board meeting in San Diego. Our task as a Board is to give our Executive Director, Andy Vaughn, and our Director of Meetings and Events, Arlene Press, our best advice, so that they can negotiate contracts for 2021, 2022, and 2023, ideally before the end of 2019.

As for Fellowships, there has been a lot of change here as well, and happier change than I – when I set forth my all-too-modest presidential agenda, back in 2013 – could ever have envisioned. More specifically, when I became ASOR President, in January 2014, ASOR had three endowed funds to support student excavation fellowships: the Platt Fellowship Fund, the Shirlee Meyers/G. Ernest Wright Fellowship Fund, and the then very recently endowed P. E. MacAllister Fellowship Fund. Today, we have doubled the number of our student excavation fellowship endowments, to six: new funds include the Eric and Carol Meyers Fellowships, the Strange/Midkiff Families Fellowships, and the Stevan B. Dana Fellowships. We also can be proud of the many current-use gifts that augment our endowed funds to support student excavation fellowships: the Harva L. Sheeler Excavation Fellowships, the Steinmetz Fellowships for Active/Reserve Military or Veterans, and the student excavation fellowships funded through our Friends of ASOR program.

We have, moreover, tripled the number of endowed grants that support our members' excavations in the field and the related work of site preservation, having added the Joe D. Seger Excavation Grant and (just this year) the Lawrence T. Geraty Community Archaeology Endowment to the funds previously available to excavators through the Charles Harris Excavation Grant. Several other current-use gifts support ASOR members' excavation projects and related work: the William G. Dever Fellowship for Biblical Scholars, the Study of Collections Fellowships, and the Denise L. Gold Excavation Grants.

Overall, the ASOR Endowment, which totaled \$1,423,000 at the end of FY 14, the first year I was in office, has increased today to \$2,056,000, and our overall assets, which totaled \$2,097,000 at the end of FY 14, have a value of \$4,065,000 today. I wish I could take credit for this, but the truth is that we all are the beneficiaries of an excellent stock market and, even more, the beneficiaries of the outstanding fund-raising work of our Executive

Director, Andy Vaughn. Indeed, during all those many nights when I tossed and turned, worrying about State Department funding, the logo, the website, the future location of ASOR's Annual Meeting, the publications partner, and (lots and lots of nights) ASOR's new home, I never once had to worry about how we would pay our bills, or whether we would make payroll, or if we could afford to buy the office supplies or computer equipment or pay for the various professional services that we needed.

Which is to say: whatever the ups and downs of the past six years in terms of initiatives, infrastructure, and programs, ASOR's budget remained balanced and its overall financial position dramatically improved. Thank you, Andy. That's the greatest gift any Executive Director could give to the ASOR President.

IV. Sweet Dreams

So now it is farewell. As I say farewell to the presidency, moreover, we as a Board say farewell to several dear friends who are ending their term of Board service. In particular, I want to say goodbye and express my gratitude to Tim Harrison, who is leaving our Board after (by my count) twenty years of dedicated service, including six extraordinary years as ASOR President and six years in the office of Past President. In November 2014, Tim received ASOR's most prestigious award, the Richard J. Scheuer Medal, for lifetime achievement and professional service, and all of us who served as Board members during Tim's presidency know that no accolade was ever more deserved.

We also say goodbye to Ed Wright, who is stepping down not only from his seat on the Board but also from his position as Development Committee Chair. In addition, Vivian Bull, whose associations with and service to ASOR go back decades, and Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis are concluding their terms as Board-elected trustees, and Hanan Charaf and Heather Dana Davis Parker have come to the end of their terms as Membership-elected trustees. We will miss them all.

As for me: it's been a wild ride, far more eventful than I ever imagined it would be in terms of the initiatives ASOR has taken on in the past six years and the challenges ASOR has faced. But like many wild rides, it's been (mostly) exhilarating, and I am more grateful than I can say for the opportunity the ASOR Board offered me in 2013, when it elected me as ASOR President. My work on ASOR's behalf has been, hands down, one of the greatest experiences of my professional life, and it has been an honor and a privilege to serve.