Libya is a hotspot for research into the human past. The Sahara, the largest hot desert in the world, was once green and hosted until a few thousand years ago the biggest freshwater lake on Earth. Some depictions of crocodiles and cattle engraved and painted on the walls of rock shelters in the Sahara date back 9,000 years.

The desert is also a laboratory for investigating links between past climate changes and developments in human history. These include the dispersal of modern humans across Africa about 130,000 years ago, the oldest evidence of milking in Africa around 5200 bc and the establishment of the first Saharan state during the first millennium bc.

Archaeological fieldwork in Libya is at a standstill. Four years after the Arab Spring and the February 2011 Libyan revolution that ended the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, violence remains rife. Recent escalations in fighting have injured and killed people and damaged the nation’s cultural heritage, infrastructure and free press. Libyan monuments have been seriously damaged, including the Karamani mosque, built in 1738 in the capital, Tripoli, and Islamic tombs that date to between the tenth and twelfth centuries at Zuwila, near the west-central town of Murzuq. This, along with concerns about the illicit trafficking of cultural materials, led Irina Bokova, the director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to call for greater protection of Libyan cultural heritage in November last year.

The destruction of archaeological sites in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan — to name but a few other war-torn countries — are part of the same picture: what does not comply with militant revolutionaries’ aims is expendable or must be destroyed.

I have worked in Libya since 1990. My last field trip to the Messak plateau in the

Save Libyan archaeology

Until violence eases and fieldwork can resume, fund research in labs, museums and on computers, urges Savino di Lernia.
Violence and vandalism are destroying archaeological sites across Libya, from ancient cities to prehistoric rock art.

UNESCO World Heritage Site

Threatened heritage: Cyrene, that illustrate the country’s historical diversity. It hosts five UNESCO World Heritage Sites that highlight the country’s cultural and historical significance, including the city-state of Carthage, a Phoenician city-state that became a Roman town during the second and third centuries AD; the town of Germa, which was an influential Roman town during the second century AD; Sabratha, west of modern Tripoli, an influential Roman town during the second century AD; and the Tadrart Acacus mountains, which are rich in prehistoric rock art.

These fragile vestiges of the human past are vulnerable to natural and human threats. Harsh environmental conditions — temperature variations and wind erosion — take a toll on rock art and prehistoric archaeological sites in the desert. These sites are threatened by infrastructure development, reclamation of land for agriculture, exploitation of underground resources such as oil, water, and gas, and vandalism. The same applies to sites in towns and villages, such as the classical cities along the Mediterranean coast and the late-first-millennium BC Garamantian cemetery in the ancient Wadi al-Ajal river valley near the town of Germa.

Leptis Magna, once part of the Phoenician city-state of Carthage, was incorporated into the Roman province of Africa; Sabratha, west of modern Tripoli, was a Phoenician trading post that became an influential Roman town during the second and third centuries AD; and the Tadrart Acacus mountains are rich in prehistoric rock art.

These fragile vestiges of the human past are vulnerable to natural and human threats. Harsh environmental conditions — temperature variations and wind erosion — take a toll on rock art and prehistoric archaeological sites in the desert. These sites are threatened by infrastructure development, reclamation of land for agriculture, exploitation of underground resources such as oil, water, and gas, and vandalism. The same applies to sites in towns and villages, such as the classical cities along the Mediterranean coast and the late-first-millennium BC Garamantian cemetery in the ancient Wadi al-Ajal river valley near the town of Germa.

Leptis Magna, once part of the Phoenician city-state of Carthage, was incorporated into the Roman province of Africa; Sabratha, west of modern Tripoli, was a Phoenician trading post that became an influential Roman town during the second and third centuries AD; and the Tadrart Acacus mountains are rich in prehistoric rock art.

The ancient Greek city of Cyrene is at risk because of nearby construction.

© 2015 Macmillan Publishers Limited. All rights reserved
young Libyan archaeologists and scientists in Cyrenaica — the region where the revolution started — and Shahhat (modern Cyrene).

Partnerships between the Libyan government and UNESCO, with funding from Italy, were forged to strengthen Libya’s research and stewardship capacity in archaeology. Particular attention was given to building the national archive and training Libyan police, customs officers and workers in the antiquities department in the fight against the trafficking of cultural property.

But few initiatives reached the field and now all efforts have essentially stopped. The escalation of hostilities in the past six months has led many foreign embassies to close and international organizations to move to neighbouring Tunisia. Large parts of North Africa are cut off by the civil war in Libya, the Tuareg rebellion in Niger, insecurity in Chad, Algeria and Mali, the presence of al-Qaeda and ISIS militants, and a large and uncontrolled circulation of weapons. International granting bodies such as universities and European and US research agencies have ceased to support field expeditions.

I strongly believe that scientific cooperation is an effective way to bring people closer, increase confidence and make cultures more open to one other.

REKINDLE RESEARCH

Fieldwork is vital to research and central to fundraising in archaeology. But in Libya — and other violence-wracked countries — archaeology as we have practised it has come to an end. Lengthy excavation campaigns will be impossible for years, if not generations. Researchers must imagine a different future based on other methods.

International funding and attention must return to scientific studies of Libyan heritage. Research should focus on existing materials in museums and collections. Granting bodies should give greater priority to research that can be carried out on computers or in the laboratory. Sample analyses of archaeological materials can be done in international labs, where Libyan scientists should work and be trained.

Building an online library of rock-art sites, with the involvement of Libyan students and colleagues from other countries, would help Libyan scientists to overcome their isolation and regain a sense of identity. Museum collections that span from remote prehistory to the Islamic cultures should be digitized and made freely available to a global audience. Unpublished collections held by international teams should also be digitized and shared online. Remote analyses of satellite imagery, for example, has been used to reveal lost Saharan cities (see go.nature.com/8y1gxh).

International cooperation between local and foreign groups working in Libya must be supported. Travel funding and visas for Libyan scientists to work temporarily overseas should be found. And mobility programmes for scientists such as the European Union’s Erasmus Mundus should be exploited — Libya’s application numbers have been historically low. Energy companies and others with commercial interests in Libya should be encouraged to work with local stakeholders to help to train local personnel in scientific research.

Without these steps, archaeological research in Libya, already moribund, will soon die. It would be gravely disappointing and paradoxic if after years of neglect under the Gaddafi regime Libyan archaeological heritage is once again be abandoned. As well as a failure of the 2011 revolution, it would be a missed opportunity for a generation of young Libyan archaeologists — and a tragedy for the safeguarding of monuments and sites of universal and outstanding value.

Savino di Lernia is director of The Archaeological Mission in the Sahara, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. e-mail: savino.dilernia@uniroma1.it