



November 15, 2009

Dear Fellow ASOR Members:

For the past few years, ASOR has been focused as an organization on establishing the direction and management of its annual meeting, affecting a generational leadership transition, and improving the effectiveness of its existing programs and their administration. We have been busy, and much has been accomplished. However, for ASOR to build on these positive developments, and fully realize the progress that has been made, it is imperative that we also plan and look to the future. Planning is essential if we are to navigate an uncertain future successfully. If done well, it has the potential to position ASOR not just to survive, but to thrive as an organization. Planning helps an organization to clarify its mission, assess its programs and operations, and reaffirm that it is headed in the direction it wants to go as an organization.

Consequently, at its spring meetings in 2008, I was charged by the ASOR Board of Trustees with initiating a strategic planning process. At this meeting, the Board unanimously reaffirmed ASOR's historic mission "to initiate, encourage and support research into, and public understanding of, the peoples and cultures of the Near East", and the key priorities that have guided it as an organization since its inception in 1900. Central to these priorities have been ASOR's emerging identity as a knowledge-based organization, or 'learned society', and a constituency with a shared interest and deep commitment to the study and public understanding of the cultures and history of the Near East. I believe these core values continue to unite ASOR, and will serve us well as we look to the future and develop new strategies and initiatives to better achieve ASOR's central mission as the leading organization committed to the dissemination of knowledge and understanding of the Near Eastern world.

Strategic planning is not easy, and it can engender considerable misgivings and concern, as it has for ASOR in the past. Whether the process should be conducted by outside consultants, or internally, for example, in previous years has generated considerable controversy. While there is more than one way to conduct a planning process, for a membership-based organization, it is important that the process be open and consultative, with clearly stated goals and objectives. I believe it is also integral that we maintain our shared vision as an organization throughout the process, and work to develop a strategic plan that remains solidly grounded in ASOR's mission, and builds on our strengths as an organization, while pursuing opportunities that will further this mission. In light of present economic realities, it is also prudent that a strategic plan be pragmatic and account realistically for the financial and institutional resources available to the organization.

With these concerns in mind, I initiated a consultative process last year with the chairs of ASOR's primary standing committees, charging them to conduct discussions within their committees aimed at examining the critical issues that define their program areas, identifying program priorities, and their primary resource needs. In addition, earlier this year, I convened a strategic planning task force, comprised of Board members Susan Ackerman, James Hardin, Oystein LaBianca, Morag Kersel, P.E. MacAllister, and Carol Meyers, to help me incorporate the results of these committee deliberations, as well as feedback we receive from you as members, and produce a strategic plan for ratification by the Board. This task force has been charged with producing a strategic plan that will be tabled for approval by the ASOR Board of Trustees at its spring meetings in April, 2010.

The task force met in Boston over two days earlier this fall, and has continued its discussions via email and conference call. In addition to the committee feedback, the task force has drawn on the results of a number of feasibility studies commissioned in recent years, as well as position papers and vision statements produced during the recent leadership transition. While in Boston, members of the task force also met with the ASOR staff and held an extended discussion to hear their concerns and incorporate their input into the planning process.

To ensure the broad participation and input of our membership, we have posted a preliminary draft of the strategic plan on the ASOR website in advance of our upcoming annual meetings in New Orleans, and we will have copies of the document available on site. There will be a variety of opportunities at the meetings to provide feedback on this preliminary working document, including at the business meetings of the various standing committees, at the Membership meeting Friday afternoon (4:30-6:30 pm), and during a Round Table session I will chair on Saturday (12:45-2:00 pm). Members are also welcome to provide feedback or raise concerns directly with me, or with any of the members of the task force, during the course of our meetings. Discussion of the working document will also be on the agenda of the Board of Trustees meeting on Sunday. The feedback we receive will be used to guide the task force in formulating a final draft of the strategic plan for approval at the spring board meeting in 2010. The active participation of our membership in these discussions will be critical to the success of the planning process, and I therefore urge you to attend these meetings and express your views and perspectives.

While it is premature to anticipate the final form the strategic plan will take, or to list the specific recommendations it will include, I wish to reiterate, and emphasize, the principles and priorities that have guided the process thus far, and that will continue to guide it to completion. First and foremost, the plan will remain true to ASOR's core mission to serve as a leading organization committed to the dissemination of knowledge and understanding of the Near Eastern world. This core mission will fundamentally structure all proposals or recommendations that are made. In addition, as President, I am committed to a process that is open and consultative, and I will work to ensure that the voices of our diverse constituency are heard, and their concerns incorporated into the planning process. I am also committed to a pragmatic planning process that is grounded in present economic realities, and is realistic in its assessment of ASOR's financial and institutional resources. At the same time, I am confident we can produce a strategic plan that will guide ASOR effectively in the years to come, and build on the accomplishments we have achieved as an organization in recent years. As President, I will be committed to implementing this plan and seeing it through to completion.

Times of transition can be difficult, but they also present opportunities, and it is my sincere belief that ASOR is well-positioned to build and grow in the years ahead. ASOR is blessed with a talented and deeply committed membership, and an increasingly diverse experiential base. Our membership ranks are growing, and there remains considerable capacity for further growth. These are exciting times for ASOR, and as President I look forward to the opportunity to continue working in partnership with you our members, as we seek to navigate through this period of transition. I am confident that we will succeed, and that ASOR will emerge a stronger and more vibrant organization in the process.

Yours sincerely,



Timothy P. Harrison
President