

Ad Hoc Committee on ASOR's Name
Final Report
8/28/20

Overview

Committee Formation and Charge

The Ad Hoc Committee was appointed by outgoing President Susan Ackerman and incoming President Sharon Herbert in December 2019. Members included: Randy Helm (Chair), Lisa Ackerman, Emily Bonney, Eric Cline, Emily Hammer, Kiersten Neumann, and Eric Welch. The charge was “to consider whether ASOR’s name is still appropriate for the organization and, if not, to recommend to the Board of Trustees a new name, or a modified name, or some selection of new or modified names that ASOR might adopt instead. Any decision to change or modify ASOR’s name would ultimately be made by the Board.”

Process and Timeline

The Ad Hoc Committee (AHC) met by Zoom eight times between January 21 and August 24, 2020. It reviewed past discussions and papers on the subject of ASOR’s name (and particularly the problematic aspects of the word “Oriental”) dating from 1982–2019. From the outset, the Committee members were unanimous in the opinion that the word “Oriental” is no longer useful or appropriate since its meanings and connotations have changed since the organization’s founding in 1900.

Our first objective was to gather feedback from the membership on what direction to move forward in thinking about revising the name. Our first survey, conducted from March 18–28, revealed a striking lack of consensus about ASOR’s name. For example, approximately 41% of members supported changing the original name vs. 45% in favor of keeping it. Approximately 42% did not support the option of retrofitting a new name to the acronym ASOR while approximately 40% favored such an approach. Other options, including new names with new acronyms, or names without acronyms, were offered with similarly divided results. After reviewing the survey results, the AHC proposed five possible names/acronyms to the membership for consideration in a second survey in the first two weeks of July. In what, retrospectively, was probably a misstep, this list did not include an option that retained the ASOR acronym, and also proposed options that included the terms “Near East” and “Middle East.” Membership’s response to this second survey was also divided and a significant number of respondents selected “none of the above,” some expressing a preference for retaining the ASOR acronym in some form or other and others proposing entirely new names. Many also expressed the opinion that the geographical indicators “Near East” and “Middle East” either were or might soon be problematic because they assumed a Western-centric perspective.

Recommendations

After further discussion and consideration, which addressed the results of this second survey as well as the open letter submitted to ASOR and the very different climate in which we find ourselves (with respect to worldwide reckoning with discrimination and social injustice), the AHC agreed that a new name should not include any of the following terms: "Oriental," "Middle East," "Near East," and ultimately recommended that the Board of Trustees conduct a vote of the full membership, with the ballot to include:

Association for Archaeological Research, Cultural Heritage, and Education (AARCHE - pronounced "Ar-kay"), with the tagline "Unearthing the Past from Africa to the Indus Valley"

and *one* of the following:

American Society for Overseas Research (ASOR), with the tagline "Unearthing the Past from Africa to the Indus Valley"

American Schools for Overseas Research (ASOR), with the tagline "Unearthing the Past from Africa to the Indus Valley"

Pros and Cons of Each Suggestion:

AARCHE:

pro: the name is more descriptive of the organization's actual purpose and activities, potentially enhancing recognition beyond academia and our immediate communities

con: it does not retain the ASOR acronym which has a long history and is a well-known brand

ASOR:

pro: the acronym retains the ASOR brand and history

con: the name is somewhat misleading in that "overseas" is not accurate for members and institutions that are based outside the United States, especially our local, in-country colleagues

The AHC recognizes that no option will satisfy all members, and that each of these options has advantages and disadvantages. The AHC also believes that it is crucial that the membership be offered a true choice in the vote on a name. A ballot that tenders only two slightly different versions of ASOR creates the impression of a top-down choice that is not a true choice. What is more, the AHC expresses concern for the term "Schools" which to some evokes an air of exclusivity and connection with elite institutions rather than a tone of inclusivity and reflection of the membership today, which we are hoping to achieve with a new name. We would propose honoring the schools to which ASOR has a historic connection and even those elite institutions that played a role in the success of the organization in its earliest years through other forms such as the website and marketing materials.