The LCP and ASOR: a plan for long-term affiliation and sustainability

A little under five years ago, ASOR and the LCP agreed to join forces. We agreed that for five years, ASOR would include the LCP in its list of research projects on the ASOR website, and contribute $10,000/year in support. In return, the LCP would advertise its ASOR affiliation on our homepage, make special efforts to provide research support to ASOR-affiliated excavations, help ASOR in its mission of outreach and international visibility, and contribute to ASOR's longer term goals of expanding opportunities for digital publication and helping to secure the success of the next generation of scholars. Below, I briefly summarize how things have gone over the past five years, the opportunities and challenges ahead, and how this collaboration can continue to our mutual benefit.

The LCP and ASOR from 2016-2021

In 2016, when ASOR sponsorship began, the LCP was five years old. We began in 2011 – an experiment in collaborative, open source resource building, and a gamble that a web-based application devoted to Levantine pottery could find an audience. By 2016, that experiment had stabilized. The LCP had grown to 194 contributors and just over 6000 vessels. We had built one analytical tool – comparisons. Our annual page view count was around 50,000 across some 180 countries.

Since 2016, thanks to ASOR's institutional sponsorship and support of our essential annual running costs, the LCP has become part of our field's scholarly digital landscape. We have focused on building new analytical tools – maps, Light Table, upgraded search – and on reaching out to excavators to expand the amount and quality of information on the site. We held 17 international workshops, from Warsaw to Leuven, Izmir to Nicosia, Ankara to Jerusalem, in which over 600 people participated. These activities produced an explosion of data and site usage. Currently the LCP has 500 contributors, over 12,000 vessels, and in the last year received over 80,000 page views, with representation from every continent and almost every country in the world.

In the months before the world ground to a halt, we had three more workshops scheduled, along with plans to launch two new projects intended to move the LCP towards a future that was both financially more secure as well as more tightly integrated with ASOR. Needless to say, all of this was put on hold. Now we are looking ahead. We hope to re-new these plans, and work with intention to create a true partnership with ASOR.

The LCP and ASOR going forward

At this moment, ASOR and the LCP are at a moment of decision. On the one hand, we have met most of the points of our initial agreement. The LCP provides an open-access digital publication platform that is flexible, expandable, and utile. It is a tool for students and a resource for scholars, since it covers the entirety of the Levant and every historic period, from the Neolithic through the late Ottoman era. In every workshop the affiliation with ASOR has been highlighted, helping with international visibility.

On the other hand, we have largely failed to build a clear, strong integration with ASOR, in both editorial governance and throughout the site's pages. In 2016, when we began our affiliation, we had just completed a full revision of our user interface; one result was that we could not easily turn around and re-do the entire design to make it look more "ASOR"-like. We put the ASOR logo and statement of sponsorship in a prominent position on the home page, and advertised it in the workshops. In retrospect, we should have figured out how to do more (in our defense, we used funds to expand the LCP's computational toolkit). In terms of governance, I did not work to expand the Advisory Board so as to become more enmeshed with ASOR – a lapse that is wholly my fault.

This latter point is the first large goal that we will correct, and soon. Added to that are two more: 1) work over the next 3-5 years towards the realization of two projects that will allow the LCP to

become financially sustainable; and 2) lay the groundwork so that in five years I can hand off the LCP to a new editorial team. I want to see the LCP 'graduate' and continue to function, grow, and serve the field with a new editor in place.

The next five years: what's the plan?

As I write, the LCP is ten years old. From the perspective of a digital project, that's something of a lifetime. From the perspective of an adult it's like any ten year old: still growing. The next five years are crucial: they are a kind of tipping point, a test of our mutual investment in time, effort, and resources. In this time, we will focus our energy and resources towards the three large goals stated above: better integration with ASOR; readiness to 'graduate'; and financial sustainability via the development of two new income-generating projects:

Better integration with ASOR: We will work towards this via a revamped, re-engaged Advisory Board. We will add representatives from ASOR's Committee on Publications (COP) and Committee on Archaeological Policy (CAP), as well as at least two more ASOR board members. We will hold meetings four times/year. The Advisory Board will help identify and follow up on opportunities for site development as well as oversee engagement, expansion, and outreach. The Advisory Board will be especially instrumental in guiding development of the two income-generating projects we plan to launch (see below).

Readiness to 'graduate': It is my plan to hand over the LCP to a new editorial team in five years. Within the next three years, I will work with the chair of the Committee on Publications to craft a process for finding the LCP's next editor as well as a potential assistant editor. A search committee will interview candidates, followed by ASOR's standard procedures: voting and approval by COP, then the ASOR EC, and finally the full board. I will work closely with the new editor and assistant editor so as to ensure a smooth transition. The goal will be to have the new editor and assistant editor in place in five years, when the two income-generating projects have been established.

Financial Sustainability: We will work towards this critical goal by the development of two new income-generating projects: 1) Project Pottery Database Services; and 2) Ceramic Handbooks and Field Guides. Their successful realization can provide an ongoing, sustainable income stream able to support the LCP's annual essential running costs as well as a part-time Editorial Assistant.

Two new projects to generate income
Excavation Project Pottery Database Services. Almost every excavation and survey project builds an in-house data repository. Few manage to bring even a fraction of this data into public view. The LCP can help by providing projects with dedicated site pages and data uploads. Annual costs would be charged for the duration of a project's active field and publication activity. Depending on project size, budget, and quantity of material, this would run between $1000-$2500/year, to cover editorial time and coordinating data submission. Options can be designed to meet specific needs. These could include: bulk upload of ceramic (and potentially other) finds with illustrations; assistance with the LCP's Map and Light Table functions, which allow items to be selected, arranged on plates, and turned into publication-ready figures; stable URLs to be linked to print publications, etc.

I reached out to two excavation directors to explore willingness to make such a commitment to the LCP; both expressed real interest. One benefit they saw is that material would become available while a project is still ongoing. Another is that once the project ends, data remains readily accessible and able to be integrated with new information that comes on to the LCP subsequently. Once on-line, the visibility and utility of material is ensured, along with its continued relevance.

Ceramic Handbooks and Field Guides: The LCP offers an unparalleled platform for collaborative research and publication. A most promising use is as a launch pad for the creation of ceramic handbooks and field guides, in both print and linked digital formats. These would be multi-authored publications that present richly illustrated, handy summations covering specific regions, periods, ware and petro-fabric groups, kiln and workshop sites, etc. Print publications would be extremely useful in the field; digital formats would contain links that allow access to updates on the LCP. Printed handbooks could be periodically revised, as well as designed to be printed on demand.

The development of these two income-generating projects will require us to engineer two new computational components and upgrade two others. The two new components to be developed are bulk vessel upload and an application programming interface (API). The two aspects needing upgrading are the ability to create publication-ready printable page formats, and a re-design of the user interface. Below I describe these along with the LCP's regular annual cost structure.

The next five years: what will it cost?
    The LCP incurs three categories of costs: annual essential running costs; annual cost of an Editorial Intern; and specific, targeted costs for computational engineering. I provide details below. Here let me specify that for the next five years, I will support the targeted engineering costs as well as the annual cost of the Editorial Intern. I ask that ASOR maintain its support of our annual essential running costs.

Annual running costs: The LCP's annual running costs are $10,110.20, and comprise the following:
- Heroku server space and oversight: $240/month = $2880/year
- Prela monthly engineering maintenance services: $570.85/month = $6850.20/year. This covers checks on the following: Github code repository, Heroku, SendGrid, Sentry Application Error Monitoring, SSL, and backup management.
- Sendgrid services for notification emails, password resets: $30/month = $360/year
- AWS image cloud storage: $1.59/month = just under $20/year.

Editorial Intern: the annual cost for an Editorial Intern is about $7500.

New Engineering: In order to support Project Pottery Database Services and Ceramic Field Guides and Handbooks, we need to build two new components and upgrade two others:
- Bulk Vessel Upload to allow the group transfer of data from excel directly to the LCP. This will simplify submission of large quantities of excavation pottery. Development of bulk vessel upload will cost about $30k.
- An Application Programming Interface (API) to enable other software applications to communicate and share data with the LCP, and vice versa. The API will enable linkages with other applications, including historical maps, laboratory databases, etc. In addition, an API will make it possible for mobile, at-large developers to imagine new ways to query and use the LCP, and develop new analytical tools. Development of an API, which includes capacity for versioning and full documentation, will cost about $100k.
- Publication-ready design formatting to make handbook and field-guide publication rapid and seamless. We have already laid the groundwork for this step with Light Table, which allows the compilation and arrangement of figures and text, able to be saved or printed in a .pdf format. Creating a publication-adjacent analogue will cost about $20k.
- A user-interface re-design to emphasize the ASOR affiliation, as well as simplify usage. Redesign will cost about $30k.

The cost of these four new computational pieces will be about $180k. Admittedly, computational engineering, aka software development, is expensive. It's worth noting that in the past five years, the costs of LCP software development totaled $250k. Also worth noting is that this targeted investment, coupled with the institutional steadiness provided by ASOR's support of our annual running costs, has been fundamental to creating this successful open-access digital publication platform, resource, and tool.

In the next five years, overall investment in the LCP will equal that of these last five years. This will comprise the site's essential annual costs of $10,110.20, the cost of an Editorial Assistant ($7500/year), and the four new computational pieces. The last two items together will require $220k. I pledge $150k of this total, via my own research fund of $30k/year. I will seek the remaining $70k from outside sources, including applications to the NEH and ACLS. I ask that ASOR continue its support of our annual running costs.

At the close of this next five-year span, the LCP will be an updated, stable, reliable resource, able to continue full operation with little to no new engineering investment for at least several years. Annual costs will comprise about $11k/year for the site's essential computational functions as well as about $7500/year to support an editorial intern.

The LCP and ASOR: the argument for affiliation

From the beginning, the LCP has been a gamble: a bet that vision, energy, responsive design, and a big up-front financial investment will pay even bigger dividends down the road. Archaeology is a field predicated on such gambles: every project that goes into the field must marshal a similar array of vision, energy, design smarts, and money – all in the hope of generating new, worthwhile finds, ideas, insights, and understandings. As a scholarly organization in its second century of operation, with a mission that includes maintaining fundamental tools of intellectual engagement, helping to disseminate the results of field work to the world, and facilitating the success of the next generation of scholars, ASOR is the most logical sponsor for the LCP.

In return, the LCP brings to ASOR and its members an array of benefits. It provides:

A platform for digital publication. ASOR's Publications Committee has asserted the importance of digital publication and the presentation of raw data in open access digital formats, both of which can be realized with the LCP. Digital publication allows access by researchers worldwide, and sets the stage for new queries that utilize big data sets and new computational and analytical tools. This is a necessary part of the future of archaeological publication; the LCP is ready to help.

A way for researchers to meet Open Access obligations. The LCP also allows scholars to meet their grant-based obligations to publish data in open access forms. While not yet a mandated standard for most US-funded work, Open Access data is required for all Canadian and EU-funded projects. The LCP is an Open Access digital publication that meets agency rules which require publication beyond traditional print venues.

A catalyst for new resources: ASOR affiliation has created resource ripple effects. One example is the new Laboratory for Ceramic Petrography at Tel Aviv University, all results from which are submitted to the LCP. Another is the creation by the Israel Antiquities Authority of an LCP-IAA Editor, whose role is to work with excavators to add pottery from IAA excavations to the LCP – even before that material is published in print. The LCP links will appear in the eventual IAA publications, ensuring mutual ease of access.

Assistance for ASOR-affiliated excavators: LCP interns work with ASOR-affiliated excavators to prepare and submit their pottery to the site. Using the LCP, interns also regularly make connections with material from other sites that excavators had not known about. This has the double benefit of deepening knowledge from excavated material as well as disseminating new information to scholars and students around the world.

Ready access to new information: The LCP provides quick access to new finds and current ideas, and helps American researchers connect with foreign scholars. Most LCP contributors are based in Europe, Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Egypt, and are affiliated with foreign research universities or institutes. They are not members of ASOR, yet their enthusiastic embrace of the LCP helps ASOR members stay abreast of work they would otherwise have a hard time accessing or even knowing about in the first place. Keeping the LCP free and open access is critical; if there was a members-only access policy, we would lose the input of most of these foreign contributors.

An inspiration for new questions, and the tools to answer them: Hard borders, civil wars, intractable terrain – these are facts on the ground across the landscapes of the Levant. Swaths of territory that are invisible or inaccessible today were zones of habitation and connection in the past. Archaeological survey and fieldwork fill in the blanks, allow us to see what was, imagine different realities. This is why we pursue such work; this is one of the best rationales for its value now and in the future. The LCP helps deliver on that lofty promise. Four examples of regions, activities, lives able to be seen, mapped, and linked to a wider world via pottery on the LCP:
- the eastern desert of Egypt: >200 vessels from 25+ already on the LCP with another 1000+ from 200 sites, thanks to integration with the EU/CNRS Desert Networks Project, scheduled for submission this summer.
- the Hauran of southern Syria: >1000 vessels from 50+ sites, dating from 1200 BCE-200 CE, from the Lajāʾ survey (2003–2009), the Qarrāṣa excavations (2008–2011), plus published and unpublished data from the French Archaeological Mission to Southern Syria, thanks to Jérôme Rohmer's 2020 *Hauran VI. D'Aram à Rome. La Syrie du Sud de l'âge due Fer à l'annexion romaine (XIIᵉ siècle av. J.-C. – Iᵉʳ siècle apr. J.C.)*, scheduled for submission this summer.
- Rough Cilicia, Turkey: ~200 vessels from 40+ sites, from Nicholas Rauh's Rough Cilicia Archaeological Survey Project (1996-2011).
- the maritime networks linking northern and southern Cyprus with the northern Levant: 400+ vessels dating from the Middle Bronze – Iron Ages, from Cyprus and sites in Cilicia and coastal Syria, including 250+ vessels from Tell Tweini in northern Syria, excavated by the University of Leuven from 1999-2007.

In sum
The LCP brings disparate, hard-to-find data together, able to be mapped, studied, arranged and re-arranged for connections, ideas, insights. It is worth emphasizing that much of this material crosses borders and links regions that are currently impassible. All appear on the LCP thanks to ASOR's neutrality as an American-based organization. In this way, the LCP helps ASOR frame a vision of the Levant that rises above the current political fray, and enables a new generation to ask and answer new questions, to understand the past – and perhaps therefore also the future – in different ways.