Sheep of the sands: sheep, humans, and landscape usage in southern Tunisia

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In May of 2023, I flew from Newcastle in the United Kingdom to Djerba, a city close to the Tunisian border with Libya. Along with a team of talented archaeologists and anthropologists, we then drove south to Tataouine, the southernmost province in Tunisia. For the next two weeks, my task was to travel around the numerous villages in the hinterlands with colleagues and conduct interviews with local shepherds to record their unique husbandry of sheep and listen to them and record their voices and stories about their experiences with the changing landscape in the past two decades. The colleagues who I joined for this particular project were Dr. Anita Radini, an esteemed researcher at University College Dublin and instrumental in the project, Mr. Mabrouk Lazaar, a PhD student and researcher who translated each and every interview we conducted, among countless other researchers whose work is inspiring. This project was also part of a larger project called "Partnership for Heritage", which I was introduced to by Professor Anna Leone of our own Durham University. I could not have done any work without them, and I hope the work I did supports their sustained and exemplary work in the region.

This blog post will briefly cover the goals of my work in May of 2023, as well as the objectives performed to achieve those goals. Outcomes and discussion on how well the project achieved the goals will also be addressed. Further, I will also share some experiences during this work that highlight leadership learnings and the potential impact of this work for all stakeholders involved. But firstly, why was it important to record these stories in Tunisia and interview locals on their sheep usage and why are we there in the first place? That's a good question, firstly we shall start with setting the scene in the region.

In the past few years, severe droughts across the region of southern Tunisia have caused widespread economic and social changes, and while I do not intend to lessen the damage done to other regions, Tataouine has been hit especially hard. There are over half a million sheep in the region alone, and sheep and goat husbandry are a key industry here. Due to the droughts however, herding practices have been forced to change. Local vegetation has suffered, so many flocks must now be supported with imported fodder, which is used at least seasonally. Additionally, because the fodder is imported, it is dry which requires sheep be provided drinking water regularly. Before this, the flocks received all required water through the vegetation they grazed. To acquire water, it must either be imported, which increases operational costs, or pumped out of the ground, which decreases groundwater levels – both bad. When groundwater levels are overexploited, the result can be ecologically devastating and severally hamper the ability of the local region to replenish itself properly even if the droughts disappear. However, because of increasing operational costs and the cost of living generally, local shepherds are pressured to increase the size of their flocks, which then means more fodder and more water exploitation – it's a positive feedback loop with negative environmental outputs. Despite these challenges, the resiliency and determination of the local people is very admirable and inspiring.

The radical change of traditional herding and living practices has signaled an urgent need for archaeologists and anthropologists to record the old practices in case they disappear. Hence, I found myself in southern Tunisia, often in very remote and completely unfamiliar locations, recording the voices of those on the frontlines of a changing world to achieve this goal of recording their practices, but also their perspectives. To achieve this goal, we first had to accomplish several objectives – namely to conduct interviews around the region capturing the shepherds' voice and using well placed questions to understand where food was coming from, what months were animals used for certain things, and where animals were taken throughout the year. Perhaps the largest leadership learning of mine in this project is the importance of listening to people. While I knew this was important before working on the project, during these interviews you could see with your own eyes the importance to some of shepherds that people came out to listen to them when they described their situations. I recall one interview, we were on top of this hill where a large extended family had gathered for an annual shearing of their sheep and goats and when we began interviewing one of the younger men an older fellow came over and started talking and answering our questions as well. Gradually, people rotated in and gave their answer, and you could see and hear the fact that it was important to them to answer our questions. It made me very happy to see the eagerness of the older fellow to answer questions about his animals, you could tell he was glad someone was there to record what he had to say.

Overall, many of the people we interviewed were very kind and gave us more information than we asked. Several instances we were beginning to pack our things to finish the interview, when suddenly the interviewees would spring up and say more about their sheep or something they noticed, and once while we were walking back to our car, two gentlemen we had interviewed ran up to us and said they had more to say because they'd forgotten to say it earlier. Of course, in the ethical way of things, we paid all interviewees for their time and expertise on the subject, but I was shocked by the number of times they would bluntly refuse to be compensated for their time and help. We often had to convince them that they rightfully earned what we offered before they accepted. They showed much humility, and each person was a lesson in it.

The outcome of this work has much potential for future work in the region. Firstly, for 'Partnership for Heritage', there is now a collection of interviews which together cover hours of questions, answers, and personal experiences of shepherds in the region. These interviews can be used to inform the project of potential areas to assist the region in creating sustainable and equal opportunities for economic, social, and environmental development. Additionally, in the long term, there now exists a record of stories and husbandry practices, as well as the personal impact of a changing climate and socio-economic situation in southern Tunisia. There are efforts to produce a sustainable industry involving heritage with traditional weaving practices for instance, but with threat to the sheep, the wool required for this industry can be in great danger.

Throughout this project, it was clear that there are many issues yet to be addressed. There is still work to be done in regard to the imported fodder and ground water issue, as well as rising temperatures that harm animals in the flocks. Additionally, the traditional movement of sheep and goats throughout the landscape has been altered due to recent climate, which impacts not only the product of the sheep, but also the culture and traditions around it, such as seasonality of movement and associate material culture traditions like traditional seasonal vegetation usage.

All of this in turn affects people, and it is people around which Anna's, Anita's, Mabrouk's, and mine's work revolves.