

PNYX

WEEKLY COMMENTARY, RESEARCH, AND REVIEW

June 22, 2018

ISSUE 45

THIS WEEK Moad Musbahi examines the testimonial geography of the south of Libya, a zone that confounds European cartographic tendencies even as the continent worries about, if not for, the people moving through it.—EDS.

THE DARK HOLE OF EUROPE

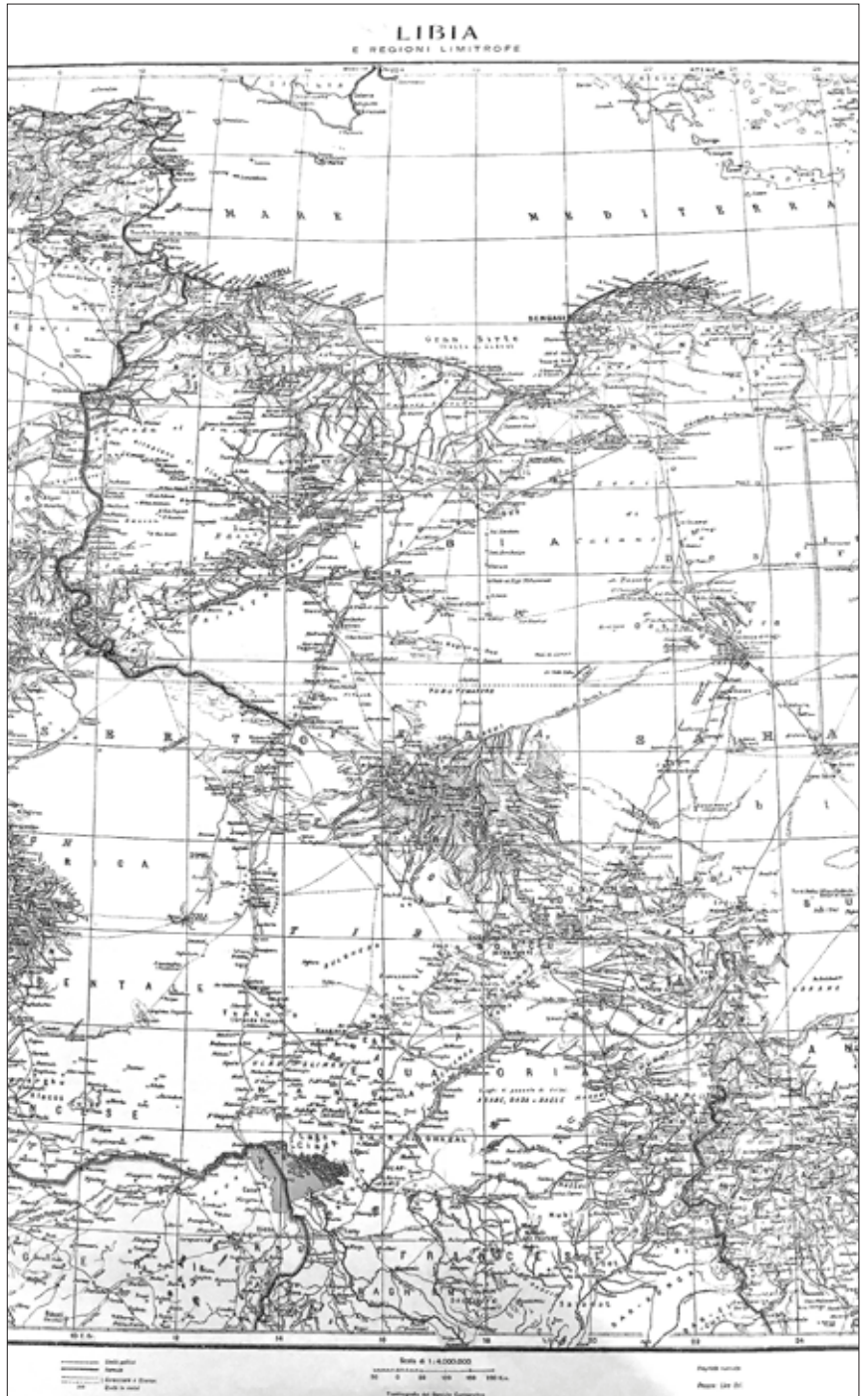
Moad Musbahi

TO SPEAK OF BORDERS is to speak of interiors.

A border begins not with feet on the ground, fences or the military checkpoint, but rather the meter rule, the compass, the set square, and the large tables upon which lies the material support of the border proper—paper. The mark of a pen on this substrate is more decisive than any wall, barbed wire or gate. The subtlety of the point of the pen, the sharpness of the pencil, and their translations into a set of Cartesian points of longitude and latitude have the decisive role in the determination of bodies in space.

To better understand this distinction, one need look at the colonial administration of the late British Empire's cadastral efforts of land deeds and titles. First instanced in the colonies before being brought back to the home counties and shires (a lucid and stellar exploration of which can be read in Brenna Bandhar's *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*), it was the prerogative of two main agencies: the Ordnance Survey and the Land Registry.

The work of these agencies is distinct, a fact mostly evident in the ways in which the sheets of their maps were subdivided. Whereas the Ordnance Survey was interested in the material conditions of topography and other forms of land and material markers, their papers were actually divided along the abstraction of the geometric sheet size and the scale of the survey, containing arbitrary slices of the land through the notation of its territorial form. The Land Registry, whose primary aim was to chart the lines of property, was concerned with a property of land entirely invisible in its





Above: The Sahara makes explicit a mode of perception that is attuned to the territory, providing possibilities that otherwise remain invisible, absent. Photo: author. Overleaf: IGM - Biblio Attilio Mori, 1926.

actuality, yet the means by which their land deed maps were cut were based on the lines of demarcation on the ground. These lines were the representational form of the physicality of roads, cliffs or other territorial markers that interrupted the lines of property and so defined the containment of the map. Thus, the material paper map itself was divided by the materiality of the land it indexed; the immateriality of property read in the materiality of topography.

In the first maps made by these two agencies during the late nineteenth century, an efficient approach was adopted. 'In urban areas the Registry simply took the topographic delineations of the Ordnance Survey as "definite information" so long as they depicted houses with all walls erected' (cf. the evidence of Brickdale in the *Second Report of the Royal Commission on Land Titles and Transfer*). Yet these delineations were not co-extensive—there was a translation made, and great importance given to forms of topography on account of the role they played in the juridical attribution of rights. This privileged a way in which boundaries, borders, were inscribed into the flatness of a piece of paper, rather than through the act of testimony, or what Alain Pottage calls the 'connective medium' of local narratives. First instanced in these urban areas, this same tendency framed an approach in which the rural could then be cast as an image of 'a paper landscape'.

Inherently violent, the logic of land reduced to that of a unit that could be referenced through its topographical representation lead to the invention of the countryside and the dispossession of land held in common. Colonies were made within the same logic, whereby map makers and topographical surveyors, versed in the lay of the (Western) land they had trained on and 'knew', applied this cartographic approach to other non-Western territories and cultural forms. A map by the Italian Institute of Military Geography (IGM), dated 1926, captures a moment of this persistent violence. As if a form of

repression sprung forth, it is a colonial violence that persists to this day, its moment coming just prior to the inscription of the so-called new border of Europe.

A border's cohesiveness depends on its integrity, its continuity, to effectively encircle and demarcate one land from another. Its power only exists without opening, without leakage; the spillage of the map's regions undoes the notion of territory. But topography has a very different meaning in a land whose sands shift, whose seasonal changes and way of life is dependent on intimate local knowledge. These forms of testimonial geography, and connective narratives that are beyond and in excess of the cartographic notional, mark that which is legible as such.

This opening is like the anus of a now-forgotten European history. It disturbs. The passage through it—its penetration—is a continued soreness of a circumstance defined by a hysteria, one that cries of the invasion of this Western continent. The traversing of this Italian/French-inscribed border, by non-French/Italian peoples, is the transgression, committed by a population whose predicament is defined by the asymmetrical distribution of global wealth; a population whose continued practice of exploitation has constructed new forms of migration, new forms of displacement.

Yet even at the psychosomatic level, these issues of migration, of 'displacement', speak to a much larger form of repression. This is an area of land that has continually witnessed and lain host to migrants; migration in non-sedentary social and communal structures has been present since time immemorial, long preceding any notion of a border or line. It has evolved through vastly different and richer forms of placemaking, of homeliness and of 'geography'.

Geography is what is in contestation. The region to the south, known as Fezzan, and that which contains this 'border of Europe', was

never bounded as we see today, with its absurdly geometric straight line. Prior to 1911 its name referred to a more nuanced and ever-evolving testimonial geography (a geography that arises not from simple surveys but a continued verbal and affective negotiation by its inhabitants) that would place it, with great approximation, between the Sudan in the east and the River Niger to the west, its southern limit defined by the seasonal and varied agricultural production of the Sahel, the shores of Lake Chad acting as a checkpoint of economic convergence.

This form of testimonial geography is a culturally inflicted mode of perception, encoded in a system of signs that are in excess of the notational signs of 'modern' cartography. It is a perception attuned to the unique cultural territorial forms that have become incompatible with the modes of statehood and what it necessitates in the form of the accurate cartographic map. The IGM map by contrast acts as the emblematic tool *par excellence* of the state as a singular, identifiable whole.

Thus the problem with Libya is a problem of statehood. This is to say that the state as understood through Westphalian systems of division is opposed to the very means with which life is understood in this region. To uphold colonial lines as a form of sovereignty is not so much to uphold a sense of independence or self-determination as it is to give legitimacy to the ongoing violence that makes migration seem like only a terrible affliction, or the crossing of invisible borders acts of international transgression.

Moad recently completed the project 'West of the Nile' at the AA's Diploma 14. He is currently a recipient of a British Academy and Society for Libyan Studies grant analysing economic interactions in Libya. He contributes regularly to newspapers in Tripoli.