Hammers threaten rock carvings that show a corner of the Sahara was not always a desert. By John Bohannon

It is hard to imagine how dry the desert is until you have gone for a stroll in the Sahara. After a couple of hours’ walk across this lunar landscape, tracking along the steep escarpment of the Messak Settafet plateau, a paste of salt, sand, and sweat forms on every square inch of exposed skin.

Halfway up the slope, picking his way through a giant’s playpen of boulders, Hassan Ahmed Breki stops, unwraps his long, white headscarf, and runs a finger along lines carved into a rock surface. Here, out in the open for all to see, is one of Libya’s national treasures: rock engravings, some possibly dating back 9,000 years or more, created by a mysterious, prehistoric culture.

Rather than barren and desiccated, the valley was once lush and green

As if this weren’t enough pressure, the team’s truck was stuck against the clock to document and protect the most vulnerable areas has taken place here, says team member Kate Devlin, from the University of Bristol, who is working with Hassan. “It’s all about water.”

The desert came back with a vengeance after the last Ice Age, the Sahara was even larger and more inhospitable than it is today. Then, some 10,000 years ago, a shift in climate brought a long-extend drought. One thing unifies the study engravings that could be lost for good. “Mass migration is less possible today due to large populations and national borders.”

Perhaps the best insight we have into the culture of the prehistoric Saharan is in the rock art they left behind. “It is a rich field for the future,” says Barnett. “This is extremely difficult and determining what these images actually meant requires many years of study, if we can ever know.”

But how much time remains for Libya’s rock art? “Oil exploration is a real problem,” says Khalid Abdul Khaliq, director of the nearby Germa Museum. “It has profound relevance to our own future, with climate change forecast for the coming centuries and the developing world particularly hard hit.”

The search for Libya’s ancient pastoral landscape, petroleum, and green weathered, “archaeology and heritage-based tourism will outlast the oil.”