

## Notes from Libya

By Paul Bennett\*

### Abstract

'Notes from Libya' is a new regular feature of *Libyan Studies* and follows the reports of the Society's Head of Mission. These reports were previously concerned with the organisation of fieldwork and administrative matters connected to obtaining permissions, visas, and so on, and were recorded in the minutes of the Council meetings. However, they have recently taken on a new form, outlining the alarming developments in Libya, largely focusing on its heritage but also on the political and economic situation, which impacts on the management of Libya's ancient monuments and artefacts. The importance and historical interest of these reports now, however, merit a wider audience and a more formal record, so these accounts are now published in *Libyan Studies*.

تعتبر "ملاحظات من ليبيا" إحدى المزايا الحديثة والدورية لمجلة "الدراسات الليبية". وهي تقوم بمتابعة تقارير رئيس بعثة الجمعية. وقد كانت هذه التقارير معنية فالتاريخ بتنظيم العمل الميداني وأمور الإدارة المتعلقة بالحصول على تصريحات وتأثيرات الدخول وغيرها. وكانت تُسجل في محاضر اجتماعات المجلس. غير أنها أخذت شكلاً جديداً مؤخراً، وذلك بإبراز للتطورات المثيرة للقلق في ليبيا وخاصة التركيز على تراثها بشكل كبير بالإضافة إلى الوضع السياسي والاقتصادي والذي يؤثر على إدارة آثار ليبيا وقطعها الأثرية القديمة. ونظراً لأهمية هذه التقارير الآن وفائدتها التاريخية فإنها تستحق جمهوراً على نطاق أوسع وتسجيل أكثر رسمية، ولهذا سيتم نشر تلك التفاصيل الآن في مجلة "الدراسات الليبية".

### October 2015

Work in the Haua Fteah cave, Cyrenaica, has been very successfully completed by a joint team from the Department of Antiquities, University of Benghazi and University of Sousa, led by Ahmed Emrage. It has not been an easy or straightforward task.

Following the period of training in the UK reported on last year, the first campaign of work at the cave started in May, with the core team of Ahmed Emrage, Fadl Abdalaziz, Akram Warfalli and Moataz al Zwai leasing a house in Sousa. There were two objectives: to sieve by floatation a vast number of samples placed in store at the conclusion of the last official season in 2013 and to complete the excavation and recording of the lowest sediments in the deep sounding of the cave, together with a sequence of deposits at a higher level where excavation remained incomplete. Both areas were

absolutely vital for telling the multifaceted story of the cave, with the added requirement that the recording had to be undertaken in meticulous detail and with great precision, followed by the careful sieving and sorting of bulk samples from each excavated context.

The sediments in store (perhaps as many as 1,500 bags, some of them exceptionally heavy) were organised into contexts, the sieving apparatus assembled and then connected to a water supply (easier said than done when there is no mains water supply). A large tank was acquired to gravity-feed the sieving tanks, bowsers-loads of water were purchased as and when required, and arrangements were made with neighbours for the disposal of sludge 'waste' from the processing. The samples had turned to 'concrete' over the period that they were in store and most of them had to be soaked in a veritable sea of carefully numbered buckets before they could be put through the sieving process. Even then it was necessary to break up bagged sediments with a hammer before the process could begin. An area was then cleared so that sieved sediments could be dried in the sun and bagged, ready for sorting.

At the same time, the cave was prepared for excavation. Tasks included checking that the timber shuttering was sound and in good condition; heavy ladders were put into position to give access to the lowest parts of the excavation, some 16 m below the surface; a generator was serviced, electric lights were rigged and timber chutes were put in place to haul excavated soils to the surface.

A team of five enthusiastic helpers was recruited locally to assist with sieving, sorting and excavation. They were Saad Bu Yadem, Badr Shamata, Asma Sulaiman, Reema Sulaiman and Aiman Al Reefi, and the work was scheduled to be completed in eight weeks.

All went well and good progress was reported for the first two weeks, the biggest challenge being to determine an effective methodology for dealing with the dried sediments. But the project was on track with sieving and sorting taking place in Sousa and the excavation and recording of complex and challenging sediments in the depths of the cave.

However, all of these arrangements were put in place during a deteriorating security situation, with the cave located close to a front line being actively

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contested by the Libyan army and Islamist (IS or Daesh) insurgents based in Derna, 60 km to the east. During week three, while the Libyan army was engaged in fighting on the outskirts of Benghazi, the insurgents, formerly active on the Green Mountain and at some distance from the cave, started an advance westwards along the coastal road. Work in the deep sounding was increasingly interrupted by the sound of distant explosions and gunfire. Even though the noise of warfare drew closer with each passing day, the team decided to keep to their programme and redouble their efforts.

In week four, the Libyan army woke up to the threat. Jets and helicopters began to fly over the cave, clearly indicating a serious escalation in military action and a rapidly deteriorating security situation, with the cave now close to an area being contested by both sides. Explosions, gunfire and even distant shouting were now clearly audible and there were times when the team actively sought shelter within the cave, fearing that Libyan army aircraft might mistake them for insurgents. Work continued into week four, but was finally halted when a local friend, fearing for their safety, rushed to the cave to inform the team that masked men, possibly Daesh insurgents, had been seen entering the cave soon after the team had left the previous afternoon. Our friends rapidly, but reluctantly, collected their materials and left the cave. On their return to base in Sousa, local authority and Libyan army officials issued strict orders for them not to return to the cave until the emergency was over.

It was to take a further two months for the situation to ease sufficiently for the team to return. Then, for a further month and with the assistance of their band of volunteers, the excavation was rapidly completed and the soils and sediments from the cave were processed, sorted and bagged in readiness for export to the laboratories of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in Cambridge.

We owe the team an enormous debt of gratitude for their exceptional work, tenacity and bravery. All four of the core team and their stalwart volunteers believed that their work in the cave and processing soils and sediments at Sousa represented far more than simply completing an important excavation. Rather, they felt that they were making a statement in dark times, that as professionals and student archaeologists they retained faith in the future. They firmly believed that, despite the dire security situation, their efforts to secure the story of this unique site, so important for Libyan, North African and world prehistory and so vital for the next and coming generations to learn about, were worth the

risk. In Ahmed's own words: 'We felt that the work we did in the Haua Fteah cave is the most beautiful evidence that my country is still alive and that Libya will recover soon.'

I am now working with Professor Graeme Barker to obtain a visa for Ahmed to return to the UK with the finds, samples and records obtained during the excavations and from processing the enormous archive of stored materials.

Three thousand copies of the Arabic edition of Philip Kenrick's *Tripolitania (Libya Archaeological Guides)*, funded by the World Bank through its Multi-Donor Trust Fund, are now being circulated within the Department of Antiquities, and in schools and universities, by Mustafa Turjman, Head of Research in the Department. Whilst I extend thanks to Mustafa for his considerable efforts to circulate the books, I am also enormously grateful to Chantal Reliquet of the World Bank and to my colleague Denis Lesage for all their help and support with this important project, which I hope will bring tremendous grass-roots support for Libyan heritage. A consignment of 200 Arabic copies of the *Tripolitania* volume is being held for the Society in Tunis. We have yet to decide how to collect the volumes.

I am also pleased to announce that an Arabic language version of a *Built Heritage Manual* produced by IAU Paris and published with funding from the World Bank's multi-donor fund is now being circulated to government departments, municipalities, universities and others through the Libyan Old Cities Agency.

Following an appearance with others, including Dr Hafeed Walda, as expert witnesses at Westminster Magistrates' Court earlier in the year, I am pleased to inform the Council that at the beginning of September HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) won its case against the importer of a Demeter/Persephone sculpture. The sculpture, found to have been imported to the UK from Cyrene with false documentation, has been impounded by HM Customs and is considered to be the property of the Libyan State. The importer has been given leave to appeal, but this is thought unlikely. As the decision goes to HMRC, costs will be charged against the importer of £50,000. We hope that the sculpture, presently in the care of the British Museum, will be displayed there together with the story of its successful seizure. There is no news as yet about a second, near identical, sculpture that was advertised for sale on the web. Ahmed Hussain and Saleh al Hassi (Aghab) are making enquiries.

More recently, the President reported this incident to John Baines, Chairman of BASIS, and to

Alan Bowman, Vice-President for Humanities at the British Academy. She also handed them an outline of the Society for Libyan Studies' (SLS) project to digitise archival records of funerary sculptures in Libya (Libyan Antiquities at Risk), essentially a catalogue of monuments at particular risk of theft for sale on the illegal antiquities market in the current extremely unstable situation. The President received a very positive response by email from Alan Bowman about this project.

## December 2015

We learnt of the recent death of Professor Nicola Bonacasa of the University of Palermo. Professor Bonacasa was one of the leading Italian academics specialising in Libya. He will be sorely missed by our colleagues in the Department, by members of the Italian Mission to Libya and all other missions working in the country. Condolences were sent on behalf of the Society. A study day celebrating his life and legacy is to take place in early April 2016.

Ahmed Buzaian reported that he had visited western Libya recently; it was impossible to travel to the eastern part of Libya. He met Mustafa Turjman in Misurata, who told him that things are so far under control in Tripoli and Sabratha. He spoke to Hassan Bouhadi, who is controller of antiquities in Sabha. With the help of other Department staff in the Fazzan, Hassan had managed to get material stored there to a safe place. He also spoke to Saleh Aghab, former Director of Antiquities in Tripoli who is now consultant to the new Minister of Culture based in Tobruk and a fledgling Department of Antiquities led by Ahmed Hussain based in Cyrene. Saleh reports continuing and escalating difficulties with illegal development in and around Shahat and even within the World Heritage Site of Cyrene. Despite the best efforts of the Department, and Saleh and Ahmed Hussain's excellent connections within the local community, they have been unable to prevent further illegal developments for housing and agricultural land that are destroying significant parts of the ancient Necropolis of Cyrene. Mohammed Al-Touati and others report that the situation around Al-Bayda is a little better, but Ahmed Buzaian is not optimistic at all.

With work at the Haua Fteah by Ahmed Emrage and his team completed, we hope to obtain a visa for him to return to the UK in the New Year. Although the former campus of the University of Benghazi has been devastated by fighting and it remains unsafe to recommence teaching there, a number of satellite locations have been established for formal education. Having completed his PhD at Leicester University,

Ahmed has been appointed to Benghazi University staff and is now lecturing in various locations, including Benghazi, Al-Bayda, Tocra, Sousa and Derna.

I have discussed the possibility of returning to Cyrene to meet with Libyan colleagues and visit the Haua Fteah to make arrangements for its backfilling. Our friends east and west and other Libyan friends based in the UK believe that it is too soon for such a visit to take place.

We have yet to collect the 200 books destined for the UK from Tunisia (see October above). Although it has been suggested that the British Council might be able to help, the lack of an in-country office (the British Council office on the outskirts of Tripoli was closed many months ago) is making this difficult to achieve.

Having won the court case last September at Westminster Magistrates' Court against the importer of the Demeter/Persephone statue, I remain hopeful that the British Museum will display the object. The President confirmed that she was in discussion with staff of the British Museum for it to be displayed on 3 March to coincide with a Libyan Antiquities at Risk event at the British Academy on that day. The British Museum is extremely positive about displaying the sculpture.

The current situation in the east of Libya has not improved. Daesh forces in Derna are under increasing pressure from the Libyan National Army with one of their brigade leaders having been killed recently. Benghazi reports a period of calm with Daesh forces being routed by the Libyan National Army (this is considered to be wishful thinking on the part of the army). There is still a curfew, but shops are open and are doing brisk trade.

It had been hoped that in October there would be an agreement and the two sides would discuss terms, but Benghazi residents refused to accept the Misratan candidates to the government, as did the Zintanis, so there is no final agreement. On a more positive note, Tripolitanian people in light of recent fighting and regular kidnappings and carjackings, have announced that they are tired of conflict and are prepared to accept any candidates in order to get peace. Similarly, there are accounts of the National Movement for Tuaregs in the south calling on all parties to agree the latest draft to end conflict in the country. However, the worst accounts of kidnapping are in the Sabha and Murzuq area.

A conference was held in Urbino in October in memory of the late Professor Mario Luni. Graeme Barker represented the Society at the conference. I have just returned from Stockholm where I addressed a conference on heritage at risk. The conference was

sponsored by the Ax:son Johnson Foundation, which supports museums worldwide. Papers delivered at the conference are to be published by the Foundation in mid-2016.

I have recently learnt that Her Majesty's Government has given the British Museum £3 million over five years to train 15 Iraqi archaeologists in a range of disciplines. Talking to British Museum staff, I feel there is potential for SLS to approach the Prime Minister's office to remind the PM that he promised post-conflict support for Libya and that to extend this initiative to include Libya would be an excellent way to show this support.

## February 2016

In December 2015, a decision was taken to create a Government of National Accord (GNA), but after only one week, the people of the east – encouraged by General Haftar, head of the Libyan army – decided not to go along with the accord, mainly because they objected to who was to be in the new parliament. Fighting is going on everywhere, mainly in the east around Benghazi and Derna.

Plans for the Libyan Antiquities at Risk workshop in London are going well, but there are great problems with visas for the Libyan delegates and it is hoped that all the efforts to bring the Libyan team to London will succeed.

The SLS successfully approached Abdulrahman Yaklef, Chairman of the Department of Antiquities, and Mustafa Turjman, Head of Research at the Department, for permission to publish a book by Virginie Prevost on mosques in the area around Zintan. Supporting letters were sent by Ahmed Buzaian and Hafed Walda.

## May 2016

Benghazi continues to suffer air strikes and Derna remains a Daesh focal point. Militarily, the west and the south appear to be relatively quiet at the present time, but criminal activity in both areas is widespread.

There are now three governments: a government in the east based in Tobruk, a government in the west based in Tripoli and the new UNESCO-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). Martin

Kobler, the UN envoy to Libya, is pleased with the way things are going. He believes that the government in Tripoli has more or less accepted the GNA, citing that at least five ministries have been established. Others, however, say this is not the case and that there is a lot of opposition to the new government in the west and total opposition from the government in Tobruk. To say that the situation is chaotic would be an understatement. Given time, however, things may change. According to politicians, the situation is promising, but, to the man on the street, this is far from the truth.

Nevertheless, the establishment of a new unity government gives us all a second chance at getting the post-Gaddafi transition right. One has to remember that at the root of Libya's security problems are more serious domestic challenges, such as the economic crisis, a complete lack of meaningful employment for Libyan youth, divisions between east and west and a rise in tribalism and xenophobia, particularly in the east. The situation has been made all the more difficult by European support for militias fighting IS, when greater emphasis should be placed on encouraging support for the unity government and to Libyans being *Libyan first*.

I have been approached by the Prince Claus Fund offering modest grant assistance to SLS and asking for some propositions. We have discussed training and capacity building, but they prefer to put seedcorn funding into schemes that directly protect or improve a heritage asset. I have tentatively suggested that the fund could protect the Haua Fteah cave by assisting with the backfilling of the excavations, thereby securing the long-term future of intact cave deposits.

At the time of writing, I have been invited by UNESCO/ICCROM to attend an 'International Experts Meeting on Safeguarding Libyan Cultural Heritage' workshop in Tunis on 9–11 May. My hope is that this meeting, organised with support from the US Department of State, the US Embassy in Libya and the Department of Antiquities, will yield something positive to hold onto for our Libyan colleagues and for those of us who love Libya.