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THE ANCIENT
LIBYAN HERITAGE

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Libya is home to a rich and well-preserved heritage little known outside of specialist networks. Today, the country boasts the remains of all of the civilisations which have settled there since the Stone Age. Among them, the wall paintings of the Acacus - a mountainous region in Western Libya - some of which are as old as 12,000 BC. This site, just like Cyrene, Leptis Magna, Sabratha and Ghadames, is on the World Heritage list. As well as these UNESCO sites, the country also hosts numerous relics, tombs, churches and temples from the Byzantine, Umayyad, Ottoman and Italian eras.

Cyrene was founded in the 8th century BC and is considered as the oldest Greek colony. Today, it is mostly renowned for its numerous marbles, but it also boasts a temple of Zeus bigger than the Parthenon in Athens. But the most iconic of all ancient cities is without a doubt Leptis Magna, located near the city of Khoms.

Originally a Phoenician settlement, the city was integrated into the Roman Empire in the 1st century BC, with many Roman Emperors contributing to its

development. Augustus built a forum complying with the Roman standards of the time and the famous theatre overlooking the Mediterranean was also erected during his reign. Hadrian later gave the city monumental baths, a large part of which still stands today. However, the city's Golden Age really came about during the reign of Septimus Severus. The Emperor, who was a Libyan native, gave the city some of its most sumptuous constructions, such as the new forum and basilica. In addition, he embellished and developed buildings and constructions erected by his predecessors, as evidenced by the major enlargement works on the port and the amphitheatre. During the reign of Septimus Severus, Leptis Magna was a thriving city which became so prominent that it was nicknamed the «Rome of Africa».

Despite its five UNESCO sites, Libyan heritage remains mostly unknown to the general public. This can partly be explained by the fact that tourism was never developed under Muammar Gaddafi as oil money provided enough of an income under his rule. If the mainstream press is starting to talk



about these sites, it is unfortunately to highlight the threat with which they are faced in light of Daesh advances in the Middle East and Africa. To this day, no destructions have been reported despite the group holding the coastal towns of Derna, Sirte and Sabratha. However, the danger remains real, as evidenced by the bomb found in Leptis Magna in June 2015.

The country's heritage is also at risk of illegal trafficking which has become a real business for Daesh and which also presents an opportunity for local looters whose actions have increased since the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. Alerted by the situation, a group of experts led by Vincent Michel, director of the French archaeological mission in Libya, drew up a red list of the country's most at-risk relics in an attempt to protect them and prevent them from being trafficked outside the country. This initiative was a direct reaction to the discovery of Cyrene busts in London, Paris and Geneva.

Protecting built heritage is a complicated task, rendered even more difficult by the ongoing civil war which the country has been engulfed in since 2011. In response to the government's lack of action a group of Libyan volunteers have taken it upon themselves to protect their heritage and in Leptis Magna, you can see them patrolling the site armed with Kalashnikovs. But, however commendable their enterprise, one can only wonder how they would be able to fight off Daesh troops. Libyan archaeologists too are involved in preserving and protecting the country's heritage, but their work is hindered by the lack of financial and logistic support from the government. Left to their own devices, they do the best they can with the limited means at their disposal and, just like their Malian or Syrian counterparts

they have had to come to closing down some museums and hiding relics in order to protect them.

More directly, the country's heritage is threatened by rampant and illegal urban expansion which has grown stronger since the fall of Gaddafi. One of the saddest examples is that of the necropolis of Cyrene which in 2013 saw part of its vaults, sarcophagi and funeral monuments - all built in the 6th century BC - destroyed to make way for housing. Ahmed Hussein, professor of Archaeology at the University of Bayda, tried to prevent these destructions, taking the case to the Culture Ministry, to no avail. Sadly, in the current unsettled climate, these actions go mostly unpunished, as do looting and other acts of vandalism.

Local experts are powerless in the face of damages inflicted on the country's heritage and can only rue the lack of interest from the local population for their national heritage. One of the reasons lays in the fact that, in the current climate, most Libyans have other things to worry about. But the problem also underlines the lack of awareness of the Libyan people as to the value of its heritage. Abdelrhman Yakhla, director of the Archaeology department, regularly hosts workshops in schools to raise awareness among young Libyans with the hope that future generations will take an interest in their collective memory preserved in stone, which in turn might prompt them to act fight for its preservation and sustainability.



Archaeological site of Leptis Magna