

Tripoli and Benghazi: A New Future for the Past

Libya's greatest archaeological treasures have been eroded, compromised and destroyed without record mainly by government-funded development during the Qadhafi era.

Amphitheatre



Despite his optimism of a bright future for Libya's past, Dr Paul Bennett, Head of Mission of the Society for Libyan Studies mission is very concerned that this is still the situation today.

In a recent lecture to society members in London, Bennett emphasised that although there is greater regard for archaeology and heritage assets as potential revenue-earners for tourism and

Susa



Tocra



job creation, nothing has been done as yet to improve the effectiveness of the Department of Antiquities – the curator, custodian and protector of Libyan heritage. And nothing has been done to ensure that heritage assets will not be destroyed without record during new development.

Bennett admitted that as an archaeologist working for many years within a heritage-protecting planning system in the UK, to also

work within a country that did not enjoy those systems of protection has been astonishing and at times heart-breaking.

“I have longed for the opportunity to speak up for a new system and greater investment, and in support of fellow archaeologists in the Department of Antiquities and in the Universities of Garyounis and Al Baida”, he said.

For a number of years now many

Ampitheatre Tolmeita



Apollonia



archaeologists have been highlighting numerous threats to Libyan heritage and the need to protect heritage assets in light of burgeoning development and a general indifference on the part of government and a broad section of Libyan society to archaeological remains and their heritage.

“Most specifically, we have expressed concern about the capacity of the Department of Antiquities to respond to the

challenges of new and often very extensive development and the lack of a credible, logical, predictable and transparent planning system in which mechanisms to protect heritage assets can be established”, Bennett said.

He praised excellent instruments in Law (Law No. 2 (1983) and Law No. 3 (1983 and 1995) for setting out mechanisms for protection. But despite these laws, for

countless years the department has been poorly supported by the Libyan state and is today impossibly positioned to deal with the threats to the country’s archaeological sites and monuments, posed by neglect, even of nationally important ‘flagship’ sites (not one of Libya’s World Heritage Sites has a Management Plan) and posed by developments of all kinds, in the desert, in the rural countryside and in the towns and cities of the country.

Bennett concluded that even

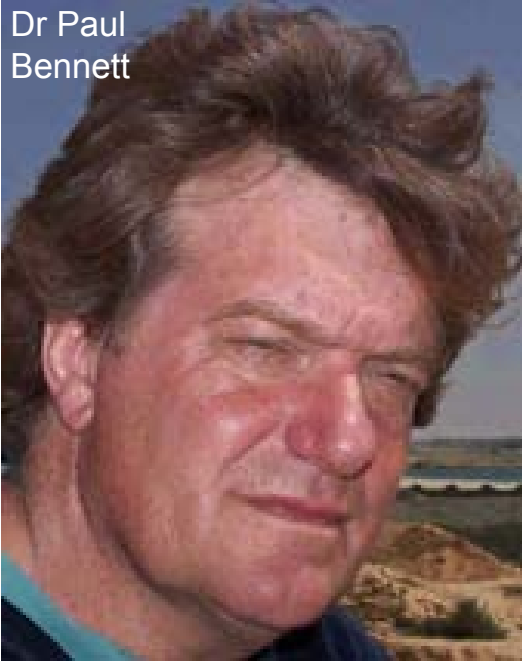
though Libya is free, (“and I rejoice with the Libyan people for their bravery and heroism”) Libyan heritage is still facing a ‘perfect storm’; a poorly trained and equipped Department of Antiquities and a potential ‘tidal wave’ of new development that could sweep away vitally important heritage assets without record, or compromise even flagship sites, whose integrity is in the national interest.

There are four projects that have sought to promote and protect Libyan heritage and support the



Cyrene

Dr Paul Bennett



revitalization of the Department of Antiquities namely: The Green Mountain Project' for a sustainable future – implementing the Cyrene Declaration of September 2007; 'City Code': Tripoli Old City rehabilitation project; The Benghazi Urban Charter' – a 30 year plan for the city of Benghazi and 'A Five Year Strategy for the Department of Antiquity of Libya'. The Green Mountain Project stemmed from the Cyrene Declaration of 2007 when Qadhafi's government recognised a significant part of the Green

Mountain as a protected zone, with the ancient site of Cyrene (a Greek and Roman city) as a centrepiece. The main recommendation was for the establishment of protective 'buffer' zones for the most important sites in the Green Mountain Area (Cyrene, Apollonia, Ptolemais and Tocra).

Recommendations were made to rehabilitate the near-abandoned, Italian-built villages of Tolmeita,

Susa and Tocra, partly in recognition that Ottoman and Italian buildings also formed part of Libyan heritage, but principally to provide new homes for Libyan families and facilities for tourists. A proposal to use abandoned Italian farm and military buildings for tourist use was also put forward together with a scheme to use the site of Tocra as a training school for a new generation of Libyan archaeologists and heritage managers.

Green Mountain



Greek ruins





Old city Tripoli



Historic building in the old city



Ptolemais

Tripoli's old city (The Medina Gadima) is a wonderful, ancient city with a great depth of buried archaeological deposits and a wealth of standing historic buildings. It is an extraordinary state of affairs, that one of the Mediterranean's great cities has never seen a modern archaeological excavation. Its surviving walls and fortifications, gates, ancient street grid, mosques, madrassa, suqs, shops, town houses, smaller houses, hammams, prisons and hospitals, have yet to be fully studied and

their evolution properly understood.

Completed in May 2010, City Code is a reference document, a planning and regulatory tool that also deals with land use, construction, archaeology, architecture and landscaping. Archaeological protocols and procedures form a seamless part of the reference document, including geophysical and physical evaluation, watching brief and excavation in advance of new development, including post-excavation work, archive,

assessment, reporting, finds storage and display. Building assessment, analysis and recording also form an integral part of conservation-led schemes for the repair and refurbishment of historic urban property.

The third project could

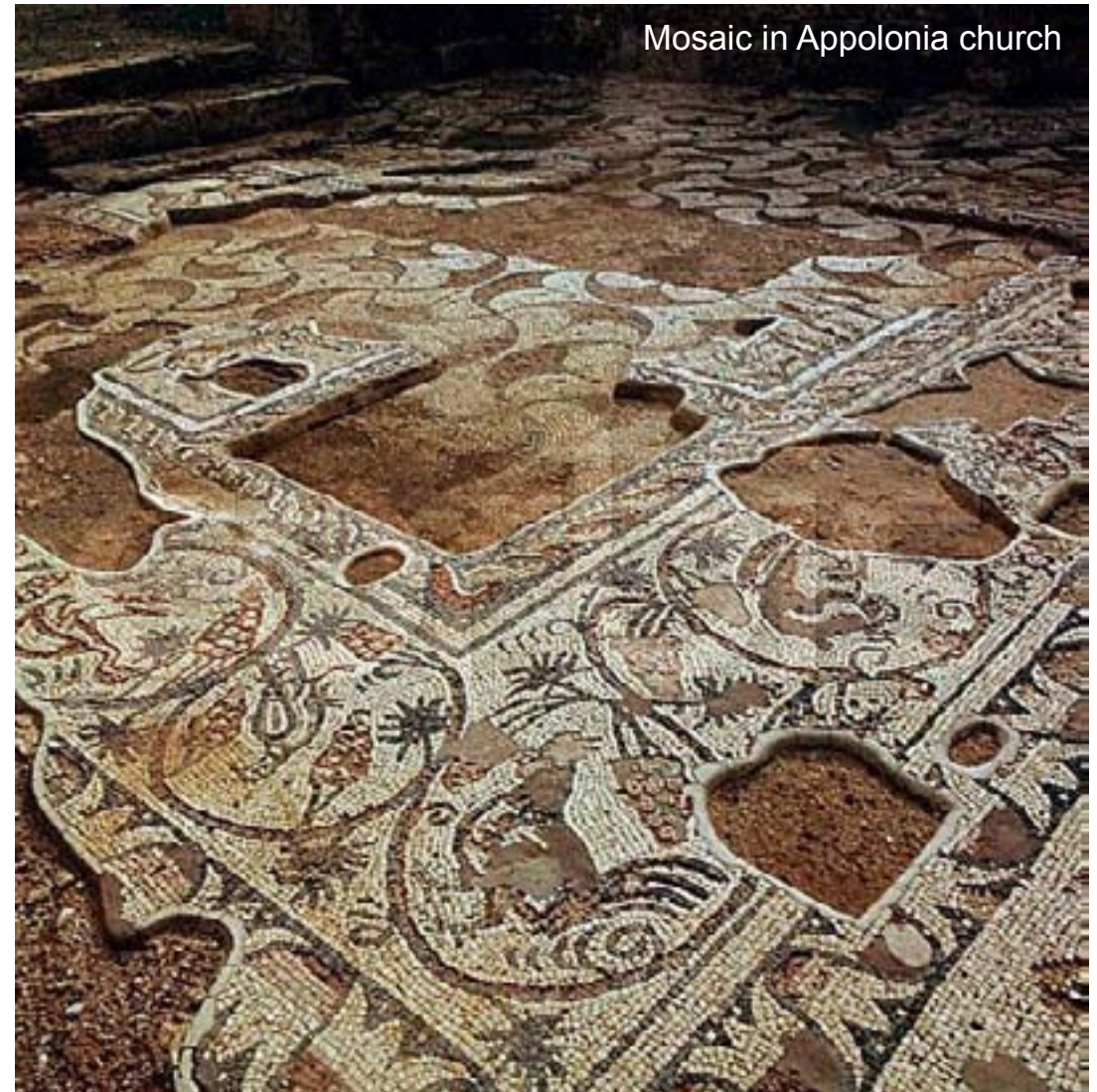
transform Benghazi into the 'Venice of North Africa'. Benghazi is a city of legends, and a future for Benghazi's past could rest with the inter-linking of other heritage sites to those of the Greek cities of Euesperides and Berenice as part of a wider heritage trail.



Modern Benghazi

Sadly the Gardens of 'Hesperides' (ancient sink holes in the limestone bedrock, filled with vegetation) are disappearing fast, in-filled with rubbish or bulldozed and overbuilt, yet they hold vital clues for long-term occupation of this part of the Benghazi plain from the prehistoric period to the present day, and the best of them should be preserved as a heritage resource.

The beleaguered Department of Antiquities could be rescued through an ambitious five-year plan. Bennett compiled the archaeological database, a gazetteer, to



Mosaic in Appolonia church

provide an overview of the diverse nature of Libyan archaeological heritage in the three provinces of the country.

The plan identifies threats to Libyan heritage, sets out a legal

framework for its protection, suggests ways to improve the efficiency of the Department of Antiquities and sets out the desperate need for a Libyan Historic Environment Record (a Sites and Monuments Record for



Libya). Recommendations are also made for the improvement of a representative selection of important sites (Benghazi, Cyrene, Apollonia, Ptolemais and Tocra).

The eternally optimistic Paul Bennett hopes that recommendations set out in the four documents will be taken up by the new government of Libya and that “we will see not just a new future for Tripoli and Benghazi’s past but a new future for the

Department of Antiquities and Libya’s past”.

Paul Bennett, the Director of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust has been working in Libya intermittently from 1972 and since 1996 has visited the country for part of each year. “From earliest days I fell in love with the people and the archaeology of this extraordinary country and it has been a great privilege for me to have learnt something of her history and heritage”.