

Libya's Green Mountain Project: Ambitious Plan for a sustainable future

By: Karen Dabrowska

The Green Mountain Project for a sustainable future – implementing the Cyrene Declaration of 2007, is one of the projects to promote and protect Libyan heritage.



Apollonia

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

But for all its faults the former regime must be credited with the Cyrene Declaration of September 2007 when it recognised a significant part of the Green Mountain as a protected zone, with the ancient site of Cyrene (A 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).

For archaeologists this is one of the most enticing regions in the world. Cyrene was a vast Greek city in the 7th century B.C., including temples, gymnasiums and villas with luxurious mosaics. "This place was really, really rich," said Serenella Ensoli, director of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Cyrene, who has been working



Archaeological
remains at Tocra

A canyon in the Green Mountains



on the site for nearly 30 years. She noted that the leader of Cyrene brought the emperor Nero a kilogram of silphium - a medicinal plant that was more expensive than gold. In the 1st century A.D., the city was part of the Roman Empire.

Apollonia was a Greek city which served as a port to nearby Cyrene, but eventually supplanted it as the leading city in Cyrenaica on account of the tedium to bring goods several kilometers inland and 625 meters up the plateau. There was a temple to an unknown

deity which had 11 x 6 columns dating to about 300 BCE which was repaired under Roman rule. Unfortunately this could not be

found as most of the columns appear to have been used in Christian churches and basilicae. Of the port, only a few rocks





remain, which give a reasonable impression of the piers which protected the vital sea trade. The governor's palace appears to have heavy Byzantine overtones. Only about five percent of the city has been explored.

The port of Tolmeitha or Tholmeithah is generally known as Ptolemais after Ptolemy III. The village is located in a beautiful area between the Green Mountain and the sea, about 30 km east of Almerj (Berqa). It was founded as

a port to serve Almerj, after it became a busy commercial centre during the sixth century BC, with goods arriving from the nearby ports, such as Alexandria in Egypt, as well as to export the main produce of the region, like silphium, honey, butter and grains. Tolmeitha rose to fame very quickly and became the capital of Cyrenaica during the 4th and 5th centuries AD.

Historical records show that the port was originally called "Berqa

Port", which also indicates the existence of the site before the Greek invasions, after which it became known as Ptolemais. It

was thought that the city was founded during the reign of Ptolemy III, after his marriage to the local princess Berenice, who



The Green Mountain

Temple of
Zues Cyrene



gave her name to ancient Berenice (Benghazi).

Tokra was an important export port during the Greek period, which

became a busy commercial centre after falling under Roman influence

during the first century BC. The city began to lose its status during

the Byzantine period, and by the time it was taken by Ibn Ala's she was no more.

The Italian colonisers also made their presence felt in the area and recommendations were made to rehabilitate the near-abandoned, Italian-built villages of Tolmeita, Susa and Tocrá, partly in recognition that Ottoman and Italian buildings which 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 Tocrá as a training school for a new generation of Libyan archaeologists and heritage managers.

"I had the privilege to work with Norman Foster and Associates as team archaeologist, to prepare a brief history and a preliminary appraisal of the present status of the most important archaeological

Tocrá Gate



Tocra village



sites in the declaration area and make a series of recommendations for the future”, Dr Paul Bennett, head of the Society for Libyan Studies Mission said in a recent lecture on a new future for Libya’s past.

“The most important products of the work were recommendations for the establishment of protective protocols for archaeology within the development planning process, recommendations for the establishment of protective ‘buffer’ zones for the most important sites in the Green Mountain Area

(Cyrene, Apollonia, Ptolemais and Tocra), for a World Heritage Management Plan to be drawn up for Cyrene and, above all, support for the Department of Antiquities in the form of training, capacity building and funding, to assist them to become a better curator and custodian of Libyan Heritage and an effective archaeological contractor, undertaking high quality fieldwork in advance of development, within a state-funded archaeological service.

“Additional reports were prepared to prevent the building of a new

Underground cistern at Ptolemais



coast road planned to cross the ancient site of Ptolemais; to prevent the bulldozing of the modern town of Shahat, and to put forward a strategy for the surveying of a proposed new Shahat, an area of some 16 sq km to the south of the existing town.

“The Green Mountain Project report was submitted in July 2009 but no official government response was received and the recommendations made in the document were not acted upon. The coast road was stopped, but in January 2011, I was given the devastating news that the

government had decided it would be built after all. The bulldozing of Shahat remained undecided until very recently. The 35,000 people living in the town made their views known and in late 2010 the scheme was shelved. At the same time, the detailed proposal for the new town imaginatively produced by Edward Cullinan Architects was published. Despite continued requests by architects and archaeologists for archaeological survey in advance of full design, and above all construction, no survey work of significance has been undertaken to date”, Dr Bennett said.