



Blue Shield International
The 2nd Libyan Heritage Mission
Mission Report

2. Civil-Military Assessment Mission for Libyan Heritage

By Blue Shield and IMCuRWG

November 12 to 16, 2011

This report is published on the website of Blue Shield Germany:

<http://blueshield.de/libya2-report.html>

1) The final detailed report is now online: http://www.blueshield.at/libya_2011/11-2011/mission_report_libya_11-2011.pdf

2) Eight pictures (including the "famous" hole in the bank safe) taken by Karl von Habsburg are for free use by journalists reporting on this Libyan mission: <http://blueshield.de/libya2-gallery.html>

Objective

The recent conflict in Libya called for emergency assessment missions to determine the cultural heritage situation. After the success of the first mission to the Tripolitanian area, Blue Shield and the International Military Cultural Resources Work Group (IMCuRWG), two organizations involved in international protection of cultural heritage, organized a second mission, to obtain independent confirmation on possible damage and looting, to meet with Libyan officials and to get a first hand impression of the situation. This time the team went to Eastern Libya, Cyrenaica.

Both organizations took advantage of their experiences during the Civil-Military Assessment Mission on the status of Egyptian Heritage, February 12-16, 2011. During that mission, Blue Shield and IMCuRWG managed to get the first independent heritage assessment team into Egypt.

The objectives of the current Libyan missions go beyond mere damage assessment. They also focus on typical post war problems such as illegal digging and illicit traffic of cultural property. An international, timely and independent mission of this kind provides support on the general level while at the same time giving a mid-term perspective. In addition this demonstration of international concern and solidarity will encourage those Libyans who protected their heritage under extremely difficult conditions. Since the Libyan state, civil society and military are in a process of fundamental transformation, it is vital to be in contact with those who are currently responsible for Libya's heritage. This way assistance is given to raise awareness on the protection of cultural property, and international professional support is offered and discussed on a personal and direct level.

Composition of the Mission

The mission was led by 4 main persons:

Karl von Habsburg is President of the 'Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield' (ANCBS) (since 2008). He is a former member of the European Parliament for Austria and has specialized in International Humanitarian Law and Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection. A former Air force pilot, he is still serving in the reserve of the Austrian armed forces as Cultural Property Protection Officer. He is vice president of the Austrian Society for the Protection of Cultural Heritage and a founder member of Blue Shield Austria. Karl von Habsburg is frequent lecturer and author of several publications on the subject of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Military Cultural Property Protection.

Dr. Joris Kila is chairman of the 'International Military Cultural Resources Work Group' (IMCuRWG). He is a researcher at the Institute of Culture and History of the University of Amsterdam. He has been acting chairman of the cultural affairs department at the Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) Group North in the Netherlands, and in that capacity he undertook several cultural rescue missions in Iraq and FYROM (Macedonia). He is author and co-author of several publications on the subject of cultural property protection in times of armed conflict utilizing militarized experts and holds degrees in Art history and Classical Archaeology. He is a reserve Lieutenant Colonel and is regularly asked to advise on Cultural Property Protection issues.

Dr. Thomas Schuler is chairman of the Disaster Relief Task Force (DRTF) of ICOM (since 2005). He was director of the Stadtmuseum Tübingen (1985 – 1992) and of the Schlossbergmuseum Chemnitz (1992 – 2004). He has specialized in Museum Management and Disaster Preparedness and Management. He was lecturer at the Museology Department of HTWK Leipzig and regularly provides training courses for museum staff.

Dr. Hafed Walda Research Fellow at Kings College in London. He has a BA in Classical Archaeology from the University of Benghazi, Libya, an MA from the University of London and also a PhD from University College London. He excavated at Sparta and directed excavations at Leptis Magna for 4 years.

Karl von Habsburg, Dr. Joris Kila and Dr. Hafed Walda went to Libya. Dr. Thomas Schuler coordinated the mission from Germany and did background research.

Political Situation

The 2011 Libyan Revolution developed into an ongoing armed conflict. On February 15, 2011 the "Libyan revolution" started in the context of the Arab Spring with peaceful protests. Anti Gaddafi demonstrations rapidly became more intense and escalated into an uprising across the entire country. A "National Transitional Council" was formed in Benghazi with the goal to overthrow the Gaddafi led government and to hold democratic elections. This council became recognized as the legitimate

representation of Libya and is currently working on the preparation of democratic elections.

With international (air) support provided by NATO the anti Gaddafi forces managed to take over almost all Libyan territory. They were able to count on NATO led air strikes and international financial support in the form of released, previously frozen, cash bank balances. After the capture and demise of Gaddafi on October 20th, only small pockets of resistance, described in Libya as the 5th column, are still active.

Preparatory Work

After it was decided that international armed forces from NATO would support the rebel forces by air, Blue Shield undertook to establish a 'no strike list' of Libyan cultural heritage sites with basic geographical data and coordinates, in order to avoid accidental hits. This information was provided to the Defence Departments of the participating countries some days before the start of the aerial attacks.

Because of the lack of presence on the ground, it was very difficult to obtain independent reports about the condition of cultural heritage in Libya. Therefore it was necessary to send an independent assessment team to make contact with those responsible for Libya's cultural heritage and to check a number of sites. All team members were aware of the sometimes insecure situation. Consequently it was decided that the mission should be small, flexible and conducted by Cultural Heritage Experts with military expertise. After the mission in September to Tripolitania it became clear that a similar mission would have to be conducted in Cyrenaica.

Short Description of the Mission

On the morning of November 12, the team arrived back in **Benghazi**, Libya, from Istanbul. There was one serious problem: there are almost no functioning means of communication in this area.

Dr. Ahmed Buzaian, a very experienced archaeologist, met the team at the airport. He first took the team to a **warehouse** where, at the onset of the revolution, a good part of the archive of the Department of Antiquities (DoA) in Benghazi was hidden for safekeeping during the public unrest. Next stop was the bank, from which the famous **Benghazi Treasure** was stolen. This bank is close to Tahrir Square where the revolution started, behind the building of the former intelligence service. It had been burned down very early in the conflict and many people assume the fire was started in order to rob the treasure – pointing to an inside job. The treasure was never on display and is not entirely photo documented.

It is usually impossible to get access to the bank, but it was opened up especially for the mission. The thieves had drilled a hole from the cashier room right into the safe - through the floor of approximately 70 cm of steel reinforced concrete. The hole was

so small that the thieves had to use somebody extremely small or a child to climb down and get the treasure. It must have been very noisy to drill that hole, and several people must have been involved. The only way for the team to get to the lower level to have a look at the safe door was to climb down through the burned out elevator shaft making their way through piles of soot and debris ([see gallery](#)). The timeline though is shocking: The bank was burned down at the beginning of February while the responsible senior inspector, Youssef bin Nasser, was trapped in Ghadames because of the revolution. It took him 2 months to make his way via Algeria, Tunisia, by boat to Egypt and then over the border back to Benghazi. When he arrived and heard that the bank burned down, he immediately inquired about the treasure. The bank only acknowledged the theft in writing on 25 May. So the exact date of the robbery cannot really be established.

After visiting the bank the team went to Youssef bin Nasser's **office**. There he showed several unprovenanced objects such as pottery and a ceramic figurine, stolen in the area and brought over the border to Egypt where the items were sold. They were bought by a Libyan benefactor, who recognized and returned the items.

The Benghazi **museum** had been torn down in 2006. It was demolished by order of the Libyan prime minister (at the time), supposedly since it was hindering a clear view on the lighthouse. Some of the objects are currently stored in Youssef bin Nasser's office. He has even installed a secure fencing system at his own expense for maximum protection. Another interesting element was that he showed pictures of graves containing mummies from the south of Libya close to the Sudanese border (near Al Khofra). The graves had suffered from looting and vandalization during the revolution.

After a meeting with the DoA controller of Benghazi, Mohammed Attiatallah, the team drove to a Roman settlement area called **Umm al Shuga**, few kilometers from Dariana. The site has been seriously damaged. Before the revolution there had been a massive building programme to create irrigation channels in the area. When the revolution started, the workers deserted the heavy equipment. The tools were taken over by thieves and used to make massive, illegal excavations into a group of settlements. It is likely that nothing was found but the destruction is vast. There are holes, 5 metres deep and 20m by 10m wide, and many Roman walls have been destroyed ([see gallery](#)).

The first destination of the next day was **Tokra**, one of the five cities of the Greek Pentapolis. The **site** was not harmed by the revolution but was used to store (and hide) many materials from the cathedral and the museum in Benghazi. It is important to note that the first Interim Council was created in Tokra at the beginning of the revolution. This council put the protection of the site very high on their agenda. This implies that the local population was again very involved in the safeguarding; a very positive pattern in Libya.

A big threat to the site, particularly the section on the Mediterranean shore, is coastal erosion. The sea has encroached on the archaeological site by 4 meters in the last 20 years.

On the journey from Tokra to Tolmetha lots of Greek and Roman settlements can be seen situated left and right of the street.

In **Tolmetha (Ptolemais)** the **museum** was opened especially for the team, it has not been harmed.

The only damage occurred to the **Polish mission home**. The house is currently occupied by armed squatters. They have not given access to representatives of the Department of Archaeology and have illegally sold several pieces that were in the house. Luckily the objects were recently recovered. It is dangerous to approach the house. The team drove by to have a look. Over the compound wall many pieces originating from excavations on site can be seen lying around in the courtyard. Supposedly there are some important mosaics on the premises but they were not visible to the team.

The team also tried to get information concerning sites in the south of the country. There is encouraging news from specialists who recently visited the Jofra Oases and Djerma. The sites seem to be intact. It is however not possible yet to get any information on Acacus as the security situation in that region is too dangerous to allow a survey.

From Ptolemais the team drove to **Qasr Libya**. Neither the **museum** nor the **site** suffered any damage. It was decided to open up the museum for the first time since the revolution. This necessitated cutting open the metal doors that were welded. Inside is a most beautiful small museum containing mosaics with Christian motives. In addition the church next door was opened. Present in Qasr Libya was also the DoA controller of Cyrene, Nasser Abdu al Jalil, who accompanied the team during the next part of the mission.

The following stop was **Cyrene** (see [gallery](#)). In the "modern" city, a lot of battle damage is visible. A military camp right next to the entrance was the scene of a lot of fighting, which luckily had no immediate effect on the archaeological site. Still many surrounding buildings were burned down. First the team visited a **museum** of which the entrance doors had been welded and specially opened. The spectacular collections of Cyrene are grouped in Archaic, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine departments. In the entrance space is the statue of Venus of Cyrene (repatriated from Italy). The team visited a specially locked small **reserve** that contains some important statue heads and several boxes with coins.

The diligence of the guards at Cyrene has to be particularly commended. They moved away from their families for weeks in troublesome times in order to protect the site. The DoA controller showed great courage. On March 9, at the height of the conflict, he learned of some illegal digging. First he sent out the guards to check the situation but they reported that they could not find anything. The next day he inspected the location personally and ran straight into the looters. They had just dug up a torso and he demanded that they hand it over. The group was composed of eight well armed men and he was alone and unarmed. After an exchange of words the situation became physical and they throttled him until he was unconscious and also stole his phone and keys. Later he called his stolen phone and started

negotiations with the looters for the return of the torso. Alas the stolen objects have not yet been recovered although some of the looters are jail.

On **site** the team visited the famous **mosaic of the 4 seasons** in the Jason Magnus palace. In the days leading to the revolution this was vandalized and 2 of the emblems depicting the seasons were stolen, creating a lot of damage.

The team also visited the **ethnographic collection**, housed in one of the warehouses which again was not harmed.

At the following meeting the controller Nasser Abdu al Jalil explained the **time line**. When the first demonstrations started in neighboring Egypt, the regional members of the Department of Antiquities met to talk about contingency plans. Nothing had, as yet, been foreseen. They decided to remove the archive from the site so the most valuable books and several boxes containing artefacts were brought to a secure and well guarded hiding place. On February 16, the Controller of Cyrene contacted the Director of Antiquities, Saleh al Agaab, for instructions. The Director authorized him to take any necessary measures for the protection of the cultural heritage should communications fail, which was soon the case. The controller instructed the 6 local offices to individually take measures for protection of the antiquities. This happened with varying success. Since the Transitional Government was not able to help them, the guards decided to keep on working without pay and organized that they would get provisions locally. So for 3 weeks the site was guarded by local armed volunteers.

The next morning the team visited the **library** of Cyrene, one of the oldest in Libya, founded 1914. The buildings are in an abominable state but most of the valuable books had been stored safely at the onset of the revolution.

The head of the technical department provided several photos of the vases that have been stolen in **Apollonia**, which was visited by the team next. Apollonia used to be the harbour for Cyrene and is at a distance of roughly 15 km.

The team visited the **museum**, where a break in occurred on 25th July. The looters forced the bars of an office window with direct access to the museum. They had obviously targeted what they were taking since they smashed a show case containing the 4 vases and left a 5th behind.

After that the team visited the on site **warehouse** which contains some of the valuables. Amongst them are some Panathenaican amphorae and the vase that had been in the show case with the ones that were stolen. The warehouse gave the team the impression that it was reasonably safe.

About half the city of Apollonia disappeared in the earthquake of 365 AD and the tsunami that followed. The outline of the harbor can still be seen through the position of some rocks protruding from sea. The site is also very important for underwater archaeology.

A visit to the **temple district of Cyrene** and a stop at the temple of Zeus, which was destroyed 117 AD and later partly rebuilt by Italian Archeologists, rounded up the day.

In the morning the team drove to **Darnah**. This town is not in a good state and looks rather neglected. The city of Darnah got severely damaged during the revolution but the charm of the city center is still amply evident.

The Darnah **museum** is located in a (now) burned out building. The first floor was used as the local tax office and therefore felt the brunt of the revolution. Museums and government offices apparently do not mix well in times of crisis. The museum's archive and its most important objects were brought to a safe place at the beginning of the revolution and the entrance doors to the museum were welded shut. The looters broke a hole in the door and stole a computer and an antique vase. Later the door was welded again.

From the closed museum, the team drove to the **palace of King Idris**. This rather small building is in a desolate state and is occupied by armed squatters who did not allow access. A plan exists to bring the museum to the King's palace. The palace is nevertheless owned by the heirs of King Idris and any new use requires their consent. Gaddafi tended to burn land registers when he wanted to conceal property belonging to the former king's family. He attempted the same in Darnah but the original state was reconstructed from copies of the register.

After returning to the **museum**, the doors were opened with an angle grinder (see [gallery](#)). The inside of the building was a mess. There were burned pictures of Gaddafi, broken show cases, but also some good pieces that were collected by the officials of the Department of Antiquities and brought to a safe place.

Next the team drove to **Ras Hilal** to visit the ruins of an early **Christian church** ca 5th or 6th century. It is in an acceptable condition.

Back in **Al Bayda**, its oldest **mosque Zauia**, was visited. A former school is attached and the local dignitaries would love to see it revived. They would also like to see the mosque listed as cultural heritage site.

On the way back shortly before Benghazi the team stopped at a Roman settlement, **Ten Saluh**, that was damaged by illegal digging prior to the revolution.

In the evening the team received some valuable information. 8 coins from the Benghazi treasure had been offered to a journalist, who informed the authorities. Those coins were later retrieved from the Benghazi market by a DoA official.

In addition, the team had a **meeting** with Professor Abdulla Rhaibi of the University of Benghazi who, 2 weeks before, had visited Sirte to assess the situation at both the museum and the old Islamic site. The site is several kilometers away from the town and had not been harmed. The rest house was slightly damaged and the stores were broken into and part of their content stolen. Currently, work is underway to quantify

the damage. In Ajdabiya, the contents of the museum had been taken by a number of private persons for safekeeping and have subsequently been returned to the controller.

A number of meetings with Libyan scholars concluded the mission to Cyrenaica. There is still a need to visit the cultural heritage sites in the south and in Ghadames. However, there are grounds to believe that they are largely unharmed.

Results

Benghazi

The Benghazi treasure was stolen from a bank vault during the revolution (see [gallery](#)). So far only 8 coins have been recovered by officials from the market in Benghazi.

The archive of the Department of Antiquities was saved and brought to a secure place. The same applies to the content of the Benghazi museum and the cathedral.

Cyrene

A lot of damage inflicted to the modern city during the armed conflict but only minor damage to the site. Some illegal digging occurred during the revolution and some pieces were stolen.

A few days before the revolution, the mosaic of the 4 seasons in the Jason Magnus palace was severely damaged and parts depicting 2 of the seasons were stolen. (see [gallery](#))

No damage to report on the ethnographic collection, the library and the archives.

Darnah

The museum was vandalized but there were few thefts (see [gallery](#)). The palace of King Idris is suffering from the activity of the squatting. The city suffered extensive battle damage but the historic center seems intact.

Qasr Libya

No damage was found.

Ras Hilal

No damage to the early Christian church.

Susa (Apollonia)

Break in at the museum and the theft of 4 important vases took place during the revolution. The site and the storehouses remain unharmed.

Ten Saluh

An early Roman settlement close to Benghazi was damaged by illegal digging prior to the revolution.

Tokra

The site is safe and the stores were used to keep materials from the Benghazi museum and cathedral safe.

Tolmetha (Ptolemais)

The museum was not harmed. There was damage because of the misuse of the Polish Mission House by squatters and the illegal sale of some of its content.

Umm al Shuga

An early Roman settlement close to Dariana was severely damaged by looting (see [gallery](#)). There are no reports that actually something was stolen.

Reports from museums and sites not visited by the team

Ajdabiya: The contents of the museum were removed for safekeeping and later returned.

Al Khofra: Damage to the mummy graves, close to the Sudanese border, was reported.

Djerma: No damage.

Jafra Oases: No damage

Sirte: The site was not harmed; the rest house slightly damaged. The stores were broken into, several thefts were reported but the damage cannot yet be quantified.

Lessons Learned

The mission was necessary and very well received as was demonstrated by the encouragement of Cultural Heritage officials as well as local staff on site.

The mission would not have been possible without the specialized knowledge and the contacts of Dr. Hafed Walda and his communication with the Transitional Government and the specialists and academics in place. In a country with only a very basic political structure, no confirmed government and a tribal- or regional based security system, local contacts are always of special importance. Therefore the fact that Dr. Walda knew most museum and site officials personally helped tremendously in achieving the objectives of the mission.

A basic condition for a successful operation was the willingness of the participants to go and take certain risks without waiting for insurances. Certain disappointment that

other big NGO's and GO's dealing with Cultural Heritage, had not yet managed to send experts or assistance to Libya could be heard from all sides.

Suggestions for the Future

It is important to plan follow up missions to Libya in the near future, since not all areas where damage was reported could be surveyed.

It is indispensable for Libya to deal in the near future with underwater archaeological sites. There is a great wealth of them off Libya's coast and no means, legal or factual for protection.

Libya has to be supported in publishing stolen Cultural Heritage objects in order to stop illicit trade.

It is strongly suggested by the mission that a conference in Libya should be planned for the near future to analyze the security situation at archaeological sites, museums and monuments, and provide strategies on how to deal with emergency situations and create contingency plans using Libyan and Egyptian examples and cases.

Military contacts and training about protection of cultural property are indispensable, this is for instance mandatory under IHL (Hague Convention) and is still not put into practice in many countries. Libya ratified the 1954 Hague Convention and its Protocols. Damage and access problems would have been less if the international community realizes this and would live up to the treaties they sign, not only in word but also in practice. NATO could have been instrumental within their concept of the Comprehensive Approach to provide expertise and logistical support. Maybe they will consider support for follow-up activities via IMCURWG.

Once again the importance of Cultural Heritage to restore national identity and to function as a binding factor for all tribes and factions became apparent. The Libyan cultural heritage and political authorities acknowledged this on more occasions.

Acknowledgements

The mission would like to recognize the support they got from the National Transitional Council, Department of Archaeology, in Libya in these very difficult and tense times.

The mission would also like to recognize the outstanding help by the controllers and staff in the Cyrenaican area. It was also impressive to see the determination of the guards and Tourist police to protect the integrity of all cultural heritage sites against any intruder.

The personal support of Dr. Ahmed Buzaian and his great passion for the cultural heritage of his homeland was a great encouragement. His engagement and contacts made the success of this mission possible.

A great help were the ICOM museums 'Watch List' and the list of cultural heritage sites in Libya established by Cori Wegener and the US Committee of the Blue Shield together with many specialists in the field.

The help of many individuals that the mission met in Libya, as well as those helping with information from abroad, made the success of the mission possible.