

LIBYA

Cultural Heritage at Risk due to Unstable Political Situation

Blue Shield Statement, March 14, 2011

Following the recent events in Libya, the Blue Shield expresses its great concern about the safeguarding of the country's invaluable cultural heritage amid the existing turmoil. The Blue Shield deplores the suffering and loss of life this conflict has imposed on the Libyan population.



The ancient site of Cyrene (photos: M. Tacke)

Between 1982 and 1986, five sites in this vast country, bearing witness to the rise and fall of sophisticated cultures stretching from prehistory to Islamic civilization, were chosen to become part of the UNESCO World Heritage List. Three of these sites, Cyrene, Leptis Magna and Sabratha, are evidence of the civilization that flourished in Libya during the Punic, Greek and Roman eras. The prehistoric site of Tadrart Acacus and the ancient city of Ghadames are proof of the importance of heritage sites in this territory.

The ongoing armed conflict in Libya gives reason for concern, not only amongst academics but for everybody concerned with the preservation of cultural heritage, about the vulnerability of cultural institutions, sites and monuments. Especially aerial bombardments and artillery pose a grave danger to fragile cultural sites. Any loss of Libyan cultural property would seriously impoverish the collective memory of mankind.

Libya is a party to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict since 1957, and became a party to the Second Protocol of this convention in 2001. The Hague Convention deals with responsibilities regarding cultural heritage in times of armed conflict and the

danger of its misuse. The Blue Shield is appealing to all parties involved to respect the stipulations of the Convention and to protect our world cultural heritage.

The Blue Shield mission is "to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by armed conflict, natural and man-made disasters". For this reason it places the expertise and network of its member organizations at the disposal of their colleagues working in Libya to support their work in protecting the country's heritage, and if necessary, for subsequent recovery, restoration and repair measures.

The member organizations of the Blue Shield are currently liaising with colleagues in Libya to obtain further inform-



ation on both the situation and on the possible needs and types of help required so as to mobilize their networks accordingly.

The following article from *The Art Newspaper* shows that the country's continued fragile political situation often leaves authorities unable to intervene, even if such major sites as Cyrene, a World Heritage site, are threatened:

Farmers Bulldoze Ancient Tombs at Cyrene to Sell Plots to Developers

Several ancient tombs at a Unesco World Heritage Site in north-eastern Libya have been bulldozed to clear space for a residential complex. Local farmers, who have laid claim to part of the vast necropolis at Cyrene, began demolishing a mile-long section of the site last week in the hope of selling 500 sq. m parcels to real estate developers. Although the proper authorities have been

notified, the country's current fragile political situation has left them unable to intervene.

"Ancient artefacts were thrown into a nearby river as if they were mere rubbish," Ahmed Hussein, an archaeology professor at Bayda University, told *France 24*. He says that around "200 vaults and tombs were destroyed, as well as a section of a viaduct that dates back to approximately AD 200." The ancient Greek colony, which was founded in the seventh century BC, is described by Unesco as "one of the principal cities in the Hellenic world" and its necropolis is considered one of the largest and most varied of its kind. The site is one of Libya's five World Heritage Sites.

"In Libya, customs and practices tend to carry more weight than the written law. This land traditionally belongs to families who live in nearby farms. They have no official documents that prove that they own the land, yet their claims are not contested. Under Gaddafi, these families did not dare try to act on these claims. But now, they have transformed the archaeological site into a construction zone," Hussein says. Locals, he says, are willing to halt the destruction if the government were to offer them other plots in exchange or to pay them for the land.

Emily Sharpe
The Art Newspaper, September 4, 2013

The ancient site of Cyrene before bulldozing (photo: The Art Newspaper)

