

Mission Report

Civil-Military Assessment Mission for Libyan Heritage

By Blue Shield and IMCuRWG

September 28 to 30, 2011

Objective

The recent conflict in Libya called for an emergency assessment mission to determine the cultural heritage situation. Since no independent confirmation about damage and looting had occurred thus far, two organizations involved in international protection of cultural heritage, Blue Shield and the International Military Cultural Resources Work Group (IMCuRWG), organized a mission to meet with Libyan officials and get a first hand impression of the situation.

Both organizations were encouraged by the success of the Civil-Military Assessment Mission for Egyptian Heritage, February 12-16, 2011. During that mission, Blue Shield and IMCuRWG managed to get a first independent heritage assessment team into Egypt. (See their online report: http://www.blueshield.at/egypt_2011/mission_report_egypt_02_2011.pdf)

The objectives of this Libyan mission go beyond a 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 providing a mid-term perspective. In addition this demonstration of international concern and solidarity will encourage those Libyans that protected their heritage under extremely difficult conditions. Since the Libyan state, 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 for 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 had 4 main persons involved.

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 as an advisor 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 is regularly offering training courses for museum staff.

Dr. Hafed Walda lectures Roman Art and Architecture as well as Classical Archaeology at Kings College in London. He got his BA in Classical Archaeology from the University of Benghazi, Libya, his MA from the University of London, his PhD from University College London. He excavated in Sparta and directed excavation in Leptis Magna for 4 years.



The mission team in Sabratha 28/09/11: f.l.t.r.: Habsburg, Kila, Walda

Karl von Habsburg and Dr. Joris Kila, supported by 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, as for now, 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 turned more violent 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 is now almost generally recognized as the legitimate representation of Libya.

With international (air) support provided by NATO the anti Gaddafi forces managed to take over almost all Libyan territory so far. They were able to count on NATO led air strikes and international financial support in the form of released previously frozen cash bank balances. Currently only small pockets of resistance by pro Gaddafi forces are still active.

Today's situation on the ground is co-determined by the tribal structure of the country. Military units were often formed based on tribal and regional affiliations. Of great importance for the rebel forces was, the fact that all men received military training including weapons training in school, and arms as a mandatory directive under the former regime. The omnipresent roadblocks are checked by armed men from the neighborhood. Armed forces of the Transitional Council appear to become a real people’s army.



Old town of Tripoli 28/09/11

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 list of Libyan cultural heritage sites with basic geographical data and coordinates, in order to avoid accidental hits. These information were provided some days before the start of the aerial attacks to the Departments of Defense of the respective countries. As no comprehensive list of Libyan museums was available in print or online, in April the ICOM general secretariat provided a detailed “Watch List” comprehending many contact data and coordinates.

Because of the lack of presence on the ground, it was very difficult to obtain independent reports about the situation of cultural heritage in Libya. Therefore it seemed necessary to send an independent assessment team to make contact with those responsible for Libya's cultural heritage and to check a number of the sites. All team members were aware of the very insecure situation: Most diplomatic representations had left the country and most foreigners were evacuated in the beginning of the conflict. Travel warnings were issued. Consequently it was decided that the mission should be small, flexible and conducted by Cultural Heritage Experts with military expertise. Planning of the mission began already early summer, but commenced in earnest only after the cessation of active hostilities in Tripoli. On 20 September2011 detailed planning for the following week started.

Karl von Habsburg and Joris Kila worked closely with Hafed Walda on possibilities to enter the country, while Thomas Schuler was conducting desk research and liaised with academics. At the same time contacts on the political and diplomatic level were activated.

Short Description of the Mission

A number of problems had to be solved concerning official approval from the Transitional Government before the team could travel to Libya, apart from this there were logistical problems concerning travel to and within Libya. The team flew to Djerba, Tunisia, on Tuesday, 27 September and on 28th they traveled by car to Tripoli.

En route, still in Tunisia, huge refugee camps were to be seen, mainly of African workers who had been pushed out of Libya in the framework of the conflict.

After arriving at the border, it took some 2 hours to convince the border guards to let the team pass. The official invitation had to be verified in Tripoli (a difficult thing considering the ‘weak’ communication system). Around the border big amounts of empty ammunition shells lay scattered around and gunshots from, mainly automatic weapons could be heard in the vicinity.

Finally the passports were stamped and the team crossed the Libyan border.

Most impressive was the fact, that there were roadblocks every 3 to 4 kilometers. Inspections were usually passport checks, and were always executed in a friendly mood. The first destroyed houses were found few kilometers from the border in Bukamash and comprised impact damage, caused by firefights, especially with snipers.

Before going to Tripoli the mission decided to visit one of the most important sites in Libya. In the Punic/Roman site of Sabratha there had been positions from Army Brigade 219 that occupied the place from early July until the 17th of August. The revolutionaries decided in several cases not to fight back when provoked by the Gaddafi militia in order to not risk damage to the site.

The main gate was closed, but there were some guards from the Tourist police. During inspection the mission found minor damage from small arms fire on the amphitheatre. There is also some small damage from anti aircraft fire. The biggest damage turned out to be the perimeter fence that was broken down in many places to get a better killing ground for the Army Brigade. Some minor damage was inflicted through the use of heavy equipment on site. Both museums stayed untouched, some offices were looted.

The mission also inspected the so called statue of the lady, whose head was broken off and stolen in 1990, and resurfaced in a Christies' auction in April of this year where it got sold to an Italian buyer. The case is under investigation.

Uniforms and weapons were found on the ground left by Gaddafi military that after getting rid of such items wanted to disappear unidentified in the civilian society.

In the late afternoon the team arrived in Tripoli, for a tour of the old town. Streets were flooded from rain. Several of the monuments such as the Arch of Marcus Aurelius were visited before the team proceeded to the Red Fort containing the National Museum. It was broken in through a side door during the demonstrations on the Green Square, but several fighters from the Misrata brigade took over control fast and averted further damage. Much damage, mainly from small arms fire can be found around the Green Square (now Martyr Square) where heavy fighting took place.

There is an astonishing amount of arms in the street. Everybody carries their AK 47 or other guns, there are still heavy guns and AA guns to be found on street corners and crossings. Several areas in the country also have to deal with minefields.

In the evening the mission met the military commander of the Misrata brigade who had organized the protection of the museum. Currently he is one of the military commanders of Tripoli.

The next morning the mission went to visit the National Museum. It had to be specially opened, and the first thing to see was the empty spaces where the pictures of Gaddafi had been hanging.

After a meeting with members of the museum staff, the mission got a tour of the museum. All the interesting objects had been brought to safety, hidden behind a fake wall, and none of the remainder went missing. The only damages were the already reported damages to some of Gaddafi's cars. Without any contingency planning the museum staff acted out of a gut feeling that proved exactly the right thing. The breaking into the museum was apparently considered an armed visit to look for entrances to Gaddafi's underground system. It seems fair to say that if any valuables would still have been in situ, consequences might have been more grave.

The team also met the acting museum director. He reported about damages to several museums that were regrettably outside the reach of the mission. The director was strongly encouraged to publish photos of missing objects as fast as possible in order to have them recognized in case they would turn up internationally.

Still in the morning the team left for Leptis Magna. Leaving town, the effect of the bombardments was clearly visible. Destroyed ships in the harbor, the military airport obliterated, buildings destroyed by direct hits. But still the accuracy of the surgical strikes was obvious.

Upon arrival, the mission had a meeting with the 'controller', the chief archaeologist in charge. He described how the Gaddafi militia tried to take control over the site and how, through careful negotiations and with the help of the local population this could be averted. The most important pieces were brought into the storage of the administration, and the outside doors welded. It is again proof, that welding is a better protection than locks. The mission was very impressed with the fact that everything worked out well without any

contingency planning. The initiatives the museum staff took were impressive. During the conflict they for instance invited the sheep herders to bring their animals on site (which is normally totally prohibited). This way the shepherds could report anything suspicious on the grounds, which are huge, it also prevented the laying of landmines and booby traps. On other occasions the museum staff contacted members of the Gaddafi militia who they considered trustworthy, to tell them, in case the regime started to crumble, they could become involved in protecting the site. Several of them showed up with their weapons to protect the perimeter thus more or less rehabilitating themselves.

After a visit of the storage rooms and the old museum, the mission checked the ‘new’ museum, that had been built via a local initiative in the nineties since the government showed no interest to support archaeology. Apart from empty shelves several cracks in the walls were found that might be the result of vibrations caused by aerial bombardments in the vicinity.

The mission team can confirm after walking and inspecting the site of Leptis Magna that everything seems unaffected by the armed conflict, although the firing of automatic weapons could still be heard sporadically.



Meeting with the “Controller” of Leptis Magna 29/09/11

After Leptis Magna the mission drove to a military camp not far from the site. It is an old Italian camp and was used by an artillery unit. It is totally destroyed by bombs.

From there the mission went to a mountain top that is overlooking Khums and Leptis. There is a little Roman fort on the top as well as a radar station now totally destroyed by precision bombing. The Roman fort received some damage too. The local archaeologists accompanying the team considered the visit to the top a great moment since they were for the first time able to visit this specific location.

In the evening the mission met with fighters from the Misrata brigade, who had been instrumental in guarding the National Museum.



Soldiers from the Misrata brigade guarding the National bank and the National museum 29/09/11

The next morning the mission drove from Tripoli back to Djerba for the return flight.

Results

Sabratha

In Sabratha, one of the most important sites in Libya, there had been posts from Army Brigade 219 that occupied the place from early July until the 17th of August. They established several firing positions and observation posts.

Some damage from small arms fire on the amphitheatre can be found which is minor. There is also some minor damage from anti aircraft fire. The biggest damage happened to the perimeter fence which was broken down in many places to get a better killing ground for the Army Brigade.



Sabratha: perimeter fence which was broken down in many places 28/09/11

Some minor damage was inflicted through the use of heavy equipment on site. One empty warehouse on site had a broken roof. The militia wanted to have a look inside. One archaeological trench that had been covered was opened, but no damage could be observed. Both museums stayed untouched, some offices were looted.



Sabratha: archaeological trench that had been covered was opened 28/09/11

Leptis Magna

The Gaddafi militia had tried on several occasions to take control of the site, but that had always been averted.

The mission could find no damage on site. The new museum had obtained several cracks in the wall, possibly from shocks of aerial bombardment in the vicinity. No danger of the static could be observed. The storage with the precious pieces from the museum is welded and untouched

Tripoli, National Museum

All the interesting objects had been brought to safety in a secret space, and nothing of the remainder went missing.
There was no organized break into the museum, more of an armed visit to look for entrances to Gaddafi's underground system. The only damage being the often reported one or some of Gaddafi's cars.



Mission team at the National Museum with and Dr. Adel Turkie and Ramadan Shibani 29/09/11

Khums

On the mountain top overlooking Khums and Leptis a little roman fort received some damage, while a nearby radar station was totally destroyed.

Reports from museums not visited by the team

Apollonia:
A break in the museum and 4 amphorae were stolen, probably panathenaican amphorae. The thief was caught, but so far the loot had not been retrieved.

Misrata:
Severely damaged, but it is not known, if pieces are missing. The museum director was kidnapped by the Gaddafi militia shortly before the collapse, his fate is unknown

Ptolomais:
Minor thefts

Tripoli

'Museum of Libya', opened in 2010:
It was 10 days without guards. There was a break in, but the loot was brought back straight after the collapse of the regime.

Overall it can be stated, that there is no evidence of organized looting in the museums or sites.

Lessons Learned

The mission was quite 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. 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 the operation was that the willingness of the participants to go and take certain risks without waiting for insurances. The 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 it off Libya's coast and no means, legal or factual for protection.

Libya has to be supported in the publication of 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 signed 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 Comprehenisve 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 staff in Leptis Magna and in the National Museum. It was also impressive to see the determination of the Tourist police to protect the integrity of all cultural heritage sites against any intruder.

The personal support of Dr. Adel Turkie and his great passion for the restoration of cultural heritage was a great encouragement.

A great help was the list of cultural heritage sites in Libya established by Cori Wegener and the US Committee of the Blue Shield.

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.

Links

The photo documentation of the mission can be found at www.blueshield.at