

# Benghazi: Venice of North Africa

ITM London



**In eastern Libya, the dust is settling after the revolution and the development of tourism is on the horizon. The combination of ancient and modern will help to make the bustling modern city of Benghazi a major venue for tourists, a generator for employment, a new source of revenue for the local economy and multiple reasons for local people taking great pride in their city.**

Before the revolution, MEDURB, an architectural and town planning company registered in Beirut and Paris prepared an ambitious plan for the development of the city

located some 2.5 kms apart, were established on a long narrow ridge of fossil dune flanked to the northwest by the sea and to the southeast by a near continuous chain of four lagoons extending northeast to southwest, to connect

Greek and Roman Benghazi



Excavations at the cemetery of Sidi Khrebish

## Master plan for Benghazi



with an outlet to the sea. These lagoons have been gradually infilled by natural processes of silting, but from the Ottoman period onwards by a deliberate policy of dumping and over-building. The infilling of the lagoons is today causing major ground-water problems. The proposed solution put forward by MEDURB and local engineers is to re-form the lagoons by excavation and to landscape them with gardens and public open spaces, to form a 'green lung' for the modern city, and natural southern boundary to the Medina

of Benghazi – the 'Venice of North Africa'.

In a recent lecture, Dr Paul Bennett, head of the Society for Libyan Studies mission described Benghazi as 'A City of Legends'. A future for Benghazi's past will hopefully rest with the inter-linking of other heritage sites to those of Euesperides and Berenice as part of a wider heritage trail.

To the northeast and east of Benghazi, in the suburban districts of Coefir and Suani Osman, are a

rapidly diminishing number of limestone depressions in the floor of the plain, formed naturally by the development of underground water systems. These karst formations known as dolinas, may singly or collectively have been the legendary 'Gardens of the Hesperides' from which Euesperides perhaps derived its name in c. 570 BC. They are remarkable features, often filled with lush vegetation against a backdrop of an arid plain.

According to legend four female guardians, Aegle, Erytheia, Hestia and Arethusa, protected the golden apples given to Hera by Ge, on the occasion of her marriage to Zeus. The guardians, who possessed powers of sweet and enchanting song, were assisted in their duties by a dragon called Ladon. Although the geographer Scylax (4th century BC) places the 'Garden' near the Gulf of Phycus (between Ptolemais and Apollonia) he describes it as: "A place 32m deep, sunk in the



Old Lighthouse



ground and without access, its length and breadth are not less than 350m. Dense trees shade it and include the lotus, apples of every kind, pomegranates, pears, blackberries, vines, myrtles, laurels and ivy.

“Today, the ‘Gardens’ 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”, Bennett emphasised.

A second mythical feature linked to Euesperides and Berenice is the river Lethe. The Greeks believed that the waters of Lethe (oblivion) were drunk by the souls of the dead to forget all they had ever done, seen or heard before.

Although there are a number of possible candidates for Lethe, the best is the Jokh-el-Kebir, 7 kms

east of Berenice. The depression, which is some 350m long and about 10m deep, gives access to a large subterranean cavern where a pool forms the start of an underground river system. It is thought, but has yet to be proven, that the watercourse connects with the Ain Zaiana (the Blue Lagoon), 500m west of the Coefia depressions and into which a freshwater stream is known to discharge. The River Lethe and the Blue Lagoon could therefore

be connected to other sites by a long distance trail.

In addition to the Gardens and Lethe, Euesperides and Berenice are also linked to legendary Lake Tritonis, which the Roman poet Lucan believed was nearby. In mythology, Triton, son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, lived with his parents in a golden palace in the depths of the sea. Triton, with a human body and dolphin tail had a special attribute, a twisted



Sidi Abeid



Street scene

seashell, on which he blew fiercely or gently according to whether he wished to agitate or calm the sea. Triton's favourite abode was the mythical Lake Tritonis.

The location of Lake Tritonis, is unknown, but the Roman geographer Strabo believed that it was near Berenice and that an island with a temple of Aphrodite existed in the lake. A fine statue of Aphrodite was found near the Ain es-Selmani in 1902 (presented to

the Louvre by a Dr Perrod).

As part of the 'greening' strategy MEDURB proposes the creation of an archaeological park at Sidi Abeid, the site of Euesperides, with a picnic area, a historic trail linking together a number of buildings, wells, cisterns, a quarry and tombs all with trail boards in Arabic and English to assist with telling the story of the site.

The south-eastern part of the site

# The road to Euesperides







Town Hall in Benghazi

closest to the open water of the Sebkhah es-Zerriya could become an activity area and an additional picnic area; the open water a boating lake. The south-western part of the site containing a vestige of the sebkhah es-Selmani would be left as a wildlife reserve for the rare species of salt-loving plants that survive there and for the numerous migrant and indigenous species of birds that frequent the place, but with paths laid out for visitors to view the remains of the

Lower City.

At Sidi Khrebish, an archaeological garden is proposed, with improved and conserved buildings (including mosaics destroyed by salt corrosion of reinforced concrete bedding). A new entrance with car park, imaginative and protective landscaping and planting and improved facilities for visitors, including trail boards with text in Arabic and English, will form part of the new arrangement.

The future of Berenice and Euesperides should become a prism through which issues of national heritage management might be viewed as part of a broader vision of training and capacity building for a new generation of archaeologists, curators, conservators and heritage managers. A significant part of the site remains to be excavated and it might be possible to mount training excavations at Sidi Khrebish to enhance the site further as a tourist attraction and as a venue for bringing forward the next generation of Libyan archaeologists and heritage managers.

A new museum dedicated to the

history of the 'City of Legends' and 'Venice of North Africa' should form an essential part of the new arrangement. The museum should be built at Sidi Khrebish, on the footprint of a former Department of Antiquities building and in the shadow of the 'landmark' Italian period lighthouse.

With a pedestrian trail linking Sidi Abeid, and Sidi Khrebish, to other heritage assets of Ottoman and Italian date and a longer trail connecting the cities to a number of legendary sites, Benghazi will have a 'string of pearls' for residents, schoolchildren and tourists to learn about the history and archaeology of the extraordinary city that is Benghazi.

Waterfront

