

# Libya: The secret haven of Greek colonies

*Arabic charm, Berber tribesmen, Islamic traditions, Mediterranean coast, pariah in the West. These are some of the tags we can ascribe to Libya when we think about that country.*

Mention the name Ghadafi and one automatically associates it with Libya...

Mention the name Belisarius and you will draw a blank...but 1500 years ago this was a name associated with Libya. In fact before the coming of Islam in the 7th Century AD, northern Libya was a Greek-speaking territory.

I won't bore you with details about the great Byzantine general Belisarius and how he restored Greek rule over North Africa in 533 AD, instead I will give you an overview of the Greek history of Libya...well before the flamboyant uniforms of Ghadafi and his famous female bodyguards.

## Cyrene

Imagine you board a ferry from Mytilene to Crete and upon arrival instead of being greeted by the usual chaos of the Greek port you are greeted by 'foreign'-speaking people who rather than offering you a run down room in a pension for 50 Euros (tourist rates), you are offered a kebab and warm hospitality. People in the ancient world would have been mystified to arrive in a place like Crete or Cyrene in northern Africa to be greeted by non-Hellenes. For in those days, this was a Greek colony!

Whilst I have been known to indulge in mythology and drink the odd Mythos beer, I'm not making this up. The north of Libya was dominated by numerous Greek colonies, with Cyrene being the most prominent.

In 630BC, due to population pressures, the island of Thira (Santorini) sent out colonists under Battus to establish the city of Cyrene - which was to be the most prominent of the 5 cities that would make up the Cyrenaica. According to Herodotus, Cyrene was the

second Greek city established in Africa with Naucratis in Egypt being the first.

Battus (born Aristoteles) became the first king of Cyrenaica. On the advice of the Delphi Oracle, he spent a few years in Libya searching for a suitable place to establish a colony. The Berbers in Libya encouraged Battus to settle the eastern part of Libya and by 630BC, Thira had sent out several hundred people to help establish the new colony.

The port of Cyrene was Apollonia, named after Apollo (Marsa Susa), whilst the rest of the Cyrenaica was comprised of Arsinoe (Tocra), Euesperides (near modern Benghazi) and Barce (Al Marj). The 5 cities were affectionately known as the Pentapolis whilst the name Cyrenaica was officially used until the 1960's to describe the eastern part of Libya.

Cyrene was the birthplace of Eratosthenes the mathematician who calculated the circumference of earth and invented the Leap Day, whilst a number of philosophers lived here including Socrates' pupil Aristippus who founded the School of Cyrene. St Mark the Evangelist was born here as was the Bishop Zopyros who attended the famous Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

## Mythology

The poet Pindar of Thebes tells us that 'Cyrene' was the daughter of King Hypseus Lapiths in Greece. Cyrene fought a lion which had threatened to eat their sheep. This impressed Apollo so much that he took her to Libya and founded a city in her name. A number of ancient myths make reference to Libya, especially the tasks of Hercules.

It should be noted that the reference to Libya in the myths essentially means northern Africa (excluding Egypt) rather than the modern country.

## Alexander and the Ptolemies

The Cyrenaica was ruled as a republic until it was captured by Alexander the Great - there weren't too many places that he didn't capture! After the death of Alexander one of his closest friends, Orphellus, was sent to govern the area in 322BC by Ptolemy. He was



succeeded by Magas, the son-in-law of Ptolemy I, the Greek ruler of Egypt. Like many son-in-laws, Magas proved to be disloyal and soon formed alliances against Ptolemaic Egypt. By 250BC the Ptolemies had regained control of the area, which lasted until the Romans officially annexed the Cyrenaica in 74BC. Thus Greek rule was interrupted for several centuries by toga wearing Romans.

## Byzantine rule

In 533BC, Byzantine general Belisarius marched through the entire north Africa, triumphantly taking region after region in the name of the Greek speaking empire. However, the Cyrenaica was not longer what it had been prior to the Roman period. This was attributed to major earthquakes, decline in trade, a Jewish uprising and other civil rebellions. Synesius, the Greek Orthodox bishop of the 5th Century AD described the Cyrenaica as a shadow of what it had been, essentially ruled by nomads.

Byzantine Greeks helped to restore a sense of order. They built new churches and buildings, whilst the return of stable rule ensured an increase of commerce. However, high taxes meant that the Byzantine administration was not always popular and their inability to work with the Berbers of the south ensured that the potential for economic prosperity was squandered.

## Arabs

In 642AD, after successfully taking Egypt from the Byzantines, the Cyrenaica was taken with little resistance. The Byzantine Empire had been taken by surprise by the strength of the Arabs, who would go on to take all of North Africa by the end of the century.

It is hard to make an accurate assessment of when the Greek character and language in

Cyrenaica was extinguished. However as mosques sprung up and the locals began converting to Islam, it is reasonable to deduce that Hellenism in Cyrenaica must have ended between the 9th - 10th centuries AD.

## Benghazi

Euesperides was founded by Cyrene in 525BC and is part of the Pentapolis. The name was attributed to the fertility of the area which gave rise to the mythological associations with the garden of the Hesperides. Euesperides was surrounded by enemies on every side. Thucydides tells us that a siege in 414 BC by Libyan tribes was ended by chance with the arrival of a Spartan fleet, who were blown off course to Libya on their way to Sicily.

The city had a board of magistrates (ephors) as well as the council of elders (gerontes). The name of the city was changed to Berenice in the middle of the third century BC. Today the city is known as Benghazi and has a population of 1 million people and a Greek Orthodox church which has approximately 50 worshippers.

## Greek ruins in modern Libya

There are few Greek speakers in modern Libya. Whilst you may not hear Greek spoken in the streets as it once was during the period of the

Greek colonists, you will find a number amazing Greek ruins.

At Cyrene located in Shahat on the Mediterranean coast, the ancient Necropolis is spread over 10 km<sup>2</sup>. You will also find two stunning temples of Apollo and Zeus, both in great condition and are amongst the best Greek ruins in the world. The Temple of Zeus is bigger than the Parthenon in Athens. Other ruins you will come across include an ancient gymnasium built by the Ptolemies, and a theatre which could accommodate 1000 people. The entire area of Cyrene is included on the Unesco World Heritage List.

Taking us away from the Cyrene and to the west end of Libya (near Tunisia), you will Sabratha. This site contains an ancient Greek theatre from the second century BC and Justinian's Basilica from the 6th Century AD Byzantine rule. There are probably a dozen Greek churches or sites from the Byzantine epoch that can be found in Libya.

For travellers to Libya, there are a number of tours you can take that will allow you to visit the Greek sites. You need a visa to enter Libya and proof that you are participating in an organised tour to be allowed in.

Libya, like so many places in ancient and medieval times has a 'secret' Greek past. Just follow the path of Battus and I guarantee you will find a trail of former Greek colonies and outposts. Its testament to the amazing history of the Greek 'world.' Whilst the modern day Greek speakers in Ghadafi's Libya are few, the rich history of Hellenism is ever present and unlikely to be extinguished.

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Temple of Zeus in Cyrene